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The Christian Right

by Susan Neiman

The U.S. election will be decided far from the glitter of New York and the bureaucracies of Washington held in suspicion by so many Americans. Politicians are touring the heartland, and knowing that flattery is the simplest form of seduction we can expect more speeches like this one, made to the residents of a small town in North Carolina:

„It is a place where people had big smiles, big hearts, where people took care of each other, people went to church on Sunday and after church families visited. People cared above all about Fridays and highschool football, things that make a difference, and God and family and flag and country. And those are the values that John and I intend to restore to this country's leadership.“

It's only the last sentence that will cause some readers surprise. For this was not a speech made by Republicans intent on marshaling their troops, but John Kerry speaking of John Edwards' home town. Both of them know that the last election was swung by evangelical Christians, whose votes put Bush within half a million of those won by Gore, making it easier for the Supreme Court to decide the election in Bush's favor. Different polls give different results, but something between 16% (Fox) and 53% (Time) of adult Americans identify themselves as evangelical Christians, who are awaiting the imminent return of Jesus and the apocalyptic upheavals described in the New Testament.

89% of all Americans say they believe in heaven; 72% in the devil and hell (though only 4% believe they are headed in the latter direction). Even those who prefer a more conservative estimate of the evangelicals' numbers know that their political power is much greater than their sheer magnitude. Hundreds of millions of dollars have enabled their think-tanks to develop shrewd long-term strategies, training young journalists and grassroots organizers, placing their authors in prominent talk shows, lobbying Congress in ways that cannot be ignored. Even their websites are streamlined and superbly professional. Individual Congressmen are all rated according to an index that keeps track of their positions on controversial questions like abortion or gay marriage, and before important votes they are deluged with mail intended to show massive popular support for right-wing positions. Donald Hodel, who was both secretary of energy and of the interior during the Reagan administration, recently wrote that „The fact is that without the hard work and votes of millions of Christians who have chosen not to be silent, there would be no Republican majority in both houses of the U.S. Congress, no Bush presidencies, few Republican governors, and a small handful of statehouses in Republican hands.“ However simplistic the left may regard the evangelicals' world-view, it has yet to develop a political organization with anything resembling their sophistication and scope.

What sorts of policies do the evangelicals want? In the forefront of discussion are all the domestic issues that come under the rhetoric of „family values“. This has nothing to do with the European concept of *Familienpolitik*, in which policies regulating maternity and paternity leave, subsidies for families with large numbers of children, or organization simplifying the combination of work and childcare arrangements. On the contrary. Evangelicals defeated the Equal Rights Amendment, which would have written gender equality into the Constitution, and insured that the U.S. was one of the few countries in the world that failed to ratify the treaty of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Evangelicals want to ban abortion, gay marriage and pornography, and make contraception unavailable to minors. At a local level they are often successful in rewriting school textbooks to argue that evolution is only one

Selected Texts and Interviews

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theory among others, and that Creationism - the Biblical account of the origins of life - receive equal time in the classroom. Not nearly as numerous, but also influential, are the Reconstructionists, who aspire to replace civil with Biblical law. The hardliners among them would punish homosexuality, adultery and blasphemy with death by stoning, and lesser offenses with slavery. The chances of instituting a Christian version of the Shariah in, say, Georgia, are virtually nil. Nevertheless, according to William Martin, professor of religious studies at the University of Texas, soft evangelical groups maintain many informal ties to the hardliners, „as if this is what they would like, but recognize it to be politically unfeasible, even damaging“. The Christian right's influence on foreign policy is even more troubling. Under Reagan, the fundamentalists pushed for support for apartheid in South Africa and right-wing dictatorships in Central America, but had little effect elsewhere. Today they are the dominant force behind the hostility to international agreements like the Kyoto treaty, and most significantly, behind U.S. policy in the Middle East.

The political fortunes of the evangelicals have gone up and down, but with the election of George W. Bush they clearly soared. Bush's initial primary victory over Republican moderate John McCain was the result of concerted lobbying by the Christian right, who recognized the younger Bush as one of their own in ways his father, a staid Anglican, never was. During presidential campaigns, fundamentalists determine their support for candidates according to their responses to questions like „What arguments would you give the Lord to gain entry through the gates of heaven?“ The elder Bush lost support through what the fundamentalists view as a classic wrong answer: „I've been a good man and I've done my best.“ The younger Bush, at home with evangelical codes, had no trouble rattling off the right answer: „I know we're all sinners, but I've accepted Jesus Christ as my personal savior.“ Asked to name his favorite philosopher, Bush named Jesus, and his conversion from alcoholic n'er do well to faithful politician has been often described, most neatly by himself: „Right now I should be sitting in a bar in Texas and not in the Oval Office. There is only one reason that I am in the Oval Office and not in a bar. I found faith. I found God.“

Unlike many other politicians, who appealed to the evangelicals while campaigning and disappointed them while in office, George W. Bush has continued to work the codes ever since. Many argue that the use of the word „crusade“ shortly after 9/11, which so provoked Muslim fears, was by no means the result of insensitivity and incompetence but a deliberate appeal to fundamentalist beliefs that war against the unbelievers is part of God's plan. After criticism Bush's later use of evangelical rhetoric was more circumspect, but major speeches included references to things like „the wonder-working power...of the American people“. This sounds bombastic but innocuous to outsiders; insiders recognize the reference to beloved hymns praising „the wonder-working power in the Blood of the Lamb“. Nor is Bush, or his speechwriters, alone in the administration. Many of his most trusted advisors - most prominently Condoleezza Rice and John Ashcroft - as well as major congressional figures like Tom Delay, Trent Lott, and Jesse Helms - are part of the fundamentalist movement.

Most differences between the policies of the two Bush administrations can be traced to these differences. Asked recently if he ever consulted his father for policy advice, George W. avoided a direct answer by saying „I consult my heavenly father.“ His answer implies an unusual conception of accountability. He feels answerable neither to the electorate, nor to *Meinungsträger*, nor even to his own father, but only to the Lord Himself - and his judgement of his own success or failure hangs finally on how it plays at the Last Judgement, where Bush's soul will be weighed to see how well it fit into the divine plan. This conception of accountability fits in with what State Department's Bureau of Intelligence and Research Greg Thielmann calls „a faith-based intelligence attitude: we know the answers, give us the intelligence to support the answers.“ Such an attitude allows Bush to remain untroubled by the mounting evidence that all the reasons given for attacking Iraq were false. Having decided that Saddam was evil, he views the question of which piece of evidence proved Saddam's guilt as the sort of technical triviality that interest only lawyers and other pedants.

Many Americans find all this no less *unheimlich* than do Europeans. Martin tells of an encounter during a bookstore signing in Houston. „How much time do you think we have left?“ asked the bookstore owner as the evening grew near. Eager to go

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home Martin looked at his watch, and the thinning crowd, and said hopefully „About a quarter of an hour“. „That soon?“ replied the owner in a panic-stricken voice. A little questioning revealed the misunderstanding: while Martin was awaiting the end of the booksigning, the owner was awaiting the end of the world. She told Martin that he was the first person she'd ever met who didn't believe we were living in the last days. „Of course I couldn't have been,“ says Martin. „She's an educated woman. But at that point I realized that the U.S. is as divided as if we were riding every morning on two train tracks that never meet.“

Just how divided is revealed by the phenomenally successful book series *Left Behind*. Now totaling some 14 volumes - not counting the children's versions and the movie - the books have sold over 60 million copies since the first volume appeared in 1995. But despite their appearance at the top of the New York Times bestseller list, they were virtually unnoticed by non-fundamentalist Americans until discussed last fall by Joan Didion in the influential *New York Review of Books*. Since then, mainstream media attention has turned to them, but while the books are a favorite of U.S. soldiers in Irak and middle-aged housewives in the South and Midwest, very few of their readers - 6% - live in the media-influential Northeast. This is regrettable. Although the books are *flott geschrieben*, it's doubtful that non-fundamentalist readers will find a reason to read the whole series, but anyone seeking to understand evangelical mentality should read at least one. The books are a description of the last days of humankind. While full of all the trappings of contemporary life - airplanes, voicemail and laptops all play significant roles in the plot - the story is lifted straight from *Revelations*. It begins when millions of good Christians are lifted straight to heaven in a moment called the rapture, disappearing without warning and leaving neat piles of clothes, eyeglasses, hearing aids and pacemakers behind them. They have been rewarded for their faith by being spared the seven years of tribulations that will proceed the Second Coming, in which famine, plagues and wars follow upon each other in the battle against the AntiChrist meant to test the souls of those left behind. Those who remain steadfast will be saved. While the emphasis is on faith, the books haven't abandoned evidence entirely, though their conception of it hardly resembles Karl Popper's. What counts for fundamentalists is the correlation between Biblical prophecy and current events. As he watches history unfold in ways that can be interpreted in tune with the descriptions of St. John's Apocalypse, the initially skeptical hero comes to regret his scoffing, and begs Jesus to save him and his Stanford-educated daughter. (His pious wife and church-going younger son have already disappeared in the Rapture.) In view of recent events in Irak some of the details in the books are so chilling that one must ask whether their influence is merely subcutaneous. The AntiChrist, for example, is a charming multilingual European whose promises of perpetual peace make him the Secretary General of the United Nations - whose headquarters he promptly moves to that classic locus of sin, Babylon. This is no accident. Long mistrusted as a hotbed of Marxism, secular humanism and feminism, the U.N. is anathema for a subset of fundamentalists known as Dispensionalists. For them, a world government with unified law and currency is part of the AntiChrist's program - hence the introduction of the euro a sign that the end is near.

Dr. Tim LeHaye, coauthor of the series, believes there are „at least 20 reasons“ to think this generation will witness the end of history. One of them is the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. For the final days are said to begin with the Jews' return to the Holy Land, and the fundamentalists view all the subsequent turmoil in the Middle East not as trouble but as confirmation of prophecy. Intermittent war in the Middle East is just what the Bible predicted - and not until the Jews reclaim all of greater Israel can the complete prophecies be fulfilled, opening the way to Jesus' return. That the Jews, along with other unbelievers, will join the ranks of the eternally damned after fulfilling their mission, is simply part of providential design.

„There is little question that U.S. policy towards Israel is shaped much more by the evangelicals than by any other single voice,“ said former U.S. Ambassador to the OSZE Sam Brown at a workshop on the subject at the Einstein Forum. „The U.S. Jewish community - historically the most important voice with regard to U.S.-Israel policy - had been deeply split. Many politically progressive Jews were active in Peace Now and there was an active pressure on the government of Israel from its friends for a peaceful solution. But facts on the ground have little or no impact

on the views of the so-called Christian Zionists." With characteristic skill and patience, the latter have been organizing for several decades. The first Christian-Likud alliance was forged with Menachem Begin in 1977, and thousands of Christian Zionists have traveled to Jerusalem to meet with Sharon. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the result of such organizing is that „Advocates for Israel", who once looked to liberal Democrats as the bulwark of U.S. support, now find equally conspicuous support from Christian Republicans they once suspected of intolerance or even anti-Semitism. That shift is having far-reaching consequences. More than any other factor, it explains why there has been so little pressure from a Republican White House on Israel to curb its crackdown on Palestinians."

Neither in Europe nor the U.S. do many say it openly, but events of the last several years seem to confirm the myth of a Jewish conspiracy powerful beyond anything dreamed of by the authors of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion. The U.S. continues its support for the hardest-line Israeli government in decades - in the face both of increasingly volatile rage among Muslims and increasing concerns about justice in the rest of the world. Doesn't this prove the strength of the Jewish lobby working behind the scenes in the Congress and in the offices of the current administration? - Perle and Wolfowitz notwithstanding, there are fewer Jews in the Bush administration than there were in the Clinton administration. Jews make up 2% of the American population - and only 20% of these voted for Bush. By contrast, the most conservative estimates of the number of fundamentalist Christian voters remain at 16%. You do the math.

„This government's support of the Israeli right has nothing to do with the Holocaust," says Betty Sue Flowers. „That's the past. This is about the future, namely the kingdom of heaven. Jews are only important as part of God's plan for getting Christians there - and Palestinians aren't even on the radar screen." A poet and former English professor who now directs the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library in Austin, Flowers grew up in small-town Texas and watched the fundamentalist movement develop at close range. Originally a mainstream Methodist, her mother joined the fundamentalist wing of the church when the movement split. Flowers' critique is sharp. „With large mortgages on church buildings, the clergy is under pressure to compete for members. If they lose too many members, the bank forecloses and they lose the building." What is it that draws crowds to fundamentalist preaching? „Leni Riefenstahl could answer that," replies Flowers. „Some people like to feel their blood being stirred even as it's curdling. It keeps them awake, I suppose." She is particularly scathing when describing the attitudes with which fundamentalists are taught to approach the world at hand. „The idea is that life is a test and a vale of tears. Loving the world gets you snared in it. It's an economic model. If I have a great time here I may not get to heaven, whereas if I suffer enough - or at least look like I'm suffering - then I deserve heaven. Which is why the fundamentalists hate Clinton so deeply, despite his Arkansas Baptist roots. Clinton's *joie de vivre* drives them crazy." Theologian Geiko Müller-Fahrenholz, who spent many years in the U.S., confirms this kind of description, and warns that it should be taken seriously: in a world of nuclear weapons, the Armageddon envisioned by the fundamentalists is indeed within reach. „What bothers me deeply as a Christian," said Müller-Fahrenholz in Potsdam, „Is the cynical acceptance of the death of Creation, as if all living things were contaminated by evil and needed to be purified in world-consuming fires. The nihilism of it, clothed in pious triumphalism!"

Of course fundamentalist Christians need not always be dour. Anybody who has ever heard black gospel music knows how its message can seem life-affirming, as anybody who remembers the Civil Rights Movement knows that evangelical Christianity can also fuel progressive hopes. Membership in a fundamentalist Church is no guarantor of political orientation; both Clinton and Carter were raised as southern Baptists. But the vast majority of white fundamentalists hold extremely conservative views - and support politicians whose views mirror theirs, regardless of personal faith. In 1980, for example, they put their numbers behind Ronald Reagan, a divorced Californian film star who rarely went to church, rather than the born-again Jimmy Carter who taught Sunday school in rural Georgia. However John Kerry and John Edwards try to appeal to their world, it is unlikely that fundamentalist voters will cross to the Democrats. Indeed, many voters who are skeptical of Bush's economics and the war in Irak describe themselves as undecided - due to concerns about moral issues such as abortion.

The gap between political reflection and the focus on individual morals among such voters may seem enough to give the word „morality“ a permanently bad name, but anyone wanting to understand American culture must attend to it - and see how little has changed since the days of Henry James. What unites Americans of all political persuasions is an unabashed commitment to individual morality - at least in principle, and occasionally in practice. Such a commitment has led Bush, for example, to refuse to take part in „the petty untruths of the politician“. According to his former speechwriter David Frum, Bush refused to pre-record a radio speech from the White House which began with the words „Today I am in California“. „But I'm not in California,“ Bush broke off in exasperation; his trip was scheduled for the following day. - Such a commitment to individual truth-telling will seem grotesque in view of the casual attitude towards honest use of evidence surrounding the war in Irak. But moral philosopher Peter Singer argues for taking Bush seriously. Doing so allows us to understand why so many Americans revere him as a man of simple moral decency. Far too simple, argues Singer in *The President of Good and Evil*; Bush's refusal to pre-record a California speech while prevaricating about the evidence for weapons of mass destruction shows a man whose moral development stopped at the most conventional level - in the schema of Harvard psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg, the rigid adherence to fixed rules typically reached by young teenage boys.

But take away the simplicity and the apocalyptic religious world-view, and you have the commitment to moral directness shared by Whitman and Emerson and Thoreau, King and Morrison and Dylan. It's a directness that is uniquely American, and leads to the uniquely American hope that the world need not be taken as one finds it, but can be remade anew. This is one reason why Robert Kagan's characterization of Americans and Hobbesians and Europeans as Kantians represents a radical reversal of earlier history. Both in its perception of itself and in the eyes of others, America has always been the country of the ideal, the place to take a holiday from Realpolitik. To be sure, it's an attitude that is fraught with dangers, and European longing for American innocence and hopefulness has never been free of condescension. When not accompanied by the commitment to humility and nuance, the commitment to individual morality can end on the *Scheiterhaufen*.

The Inquisition burned its victims so as to save their souls from hell. Its executioners could proceed in good conscience, convinced they were acting in their victims' best interests: who wouldn't prefer to burn once, quickly, than to roast forever? The modern day fundamentalists are not so kind. As the *Left Behind* series progresses to the apocalypse itself, the writing gets bloodier: Jesus appears and has only to speak for the bodies of unbelievers to be ripped open. Christians have to drive carefully in order to avoid „hitting splayed and fileted bodies of men and women and horses.“ Reviewing the most recent volume *Glorious Appearing*, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof writes „If a Muslim were to write an Islamic version of *Glorious Appearing* and publish it in Saudi Arabia, jubilantly describing a massacre of non-Muslims by God, we would have a fit. We have quite properly linked the fundamentalist tracts of Islam with the intolerance they nurture, and it's time to remove the motes from our own eyes.“

When reflecting on the transatlantic alliance and the current U.S. government, Europeans would do well to keep their eyes open.



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