

The Renewal of Religion and Democracy in America

Religion, particularly Christianity, has been under attack by the right for several years. Similarly, democracy has been weakened by the failure of enough citizens to be knowledgeable about policy and by failures of the political system. These two crises are closely linked.

Given the perception that the religious right is religious, it might be more accurate to say that one kind of religion is being attacked by another. Religiosity has always been a threat to a broader, more tolerant, intelligent, and understanding kind of religion. The founders of the nation were men of the Enlightenment which—however incomplete as to wealth, sex, and race—embraced Deism, a handy way to deal with God while using science. In Deism, God kicks things off and retires to the sidelines while humans—at that time, some men—exercise free will. Deism was part of a larger effort, building on the example of Rhode Island, to create an informal civic religion to allow many otherwise intolerant religions to live together and build a nation.

The Catholic-Protestant-Jew amalgam took a long time to work, and can blur into a religiosity that enables imperialistic nationalism. The important point, however, is that the American system has never been secular. Church and state may be institutionally separate, but informally they are necessarily and intrinsically intermixed. The real questions have always been, what kind of religion and what kind of state? The great hope has been that a truer understanding of religion would lead to better politics.

An intolerant religiosity now threatens not secularism, but the kind of religion that can transform the world. It is difficult to define such a broader religion; perhaps I mean a broad, vague, “civic” religion supported by specific “religious” religions. It could even include secularism, which is itself a kind of religious belief. It does not matter too much if God is the creation within time, or is some entity outside it, if there is faith in the goodness of creation and love for each other. Getting more specific could be a problem, as debate could get in the way of finding common ground. Such a religion would support democracy as its political consequence.

The new religiosity is similar to some revivals of the past, but complex. Creationism is clearly anti-scientific, but “intelligent design” can be seen as not against science, but more about how some feel about what science is describing. Many problems, which also overlap into popular culture, need to be overcome. Abortion rights have been a long-running issue, with homophobia against gay couples arriving more recently. “Christian” support for Jewish settlement of Palestinian lands is not only non-Biblical and wrong, it is bizarre. Anti-environmentalist fundamentalists hoping the rapture will carry them to heaven need to read Revelations 11:18: God should “destroy those who destroy the earth.” Support for the Iraq war—based on flimsy pretexts for aggression, causing tens of thousands of unnecessary deaths, and in violation of international law—is clearly against any religion of love and peace. Fear defeats faith.

On many issues the religious right must be distinguished from the Christianity it purports to embrace. While the media can't see them, millions of religiously committed people are appalled by the new religiosity and trying to do something about it. Their moral values are a democracy of meaningful elections, international cooperation, economic freedom, environmental quality, and social compassion.

As the religious spills into the political, I struggle to explain the reelection of Bush. I can't help but think a major reason was the poor information and understanding of policy by average citizens, based on lack of education and interest in politics. As a result, poor coverage by the mass media and self-selective exposure to propagandistic media create perceptions wholly at odds with reality.

Perhaps the most prominent of these false perceptions is the notion that Iraq had something to do with terrorism. It didn't then, but it does now, because of how the invasion strength-

ened the terrorists. Justifications for war which seemed to me and many others as completely fallacious at the time have proven to be fallacious over and over again since then. (If your enemy is in the mountains of Pakistan, don't attack Baghdad.) Yet Bush was able to use the blow-back he created to justify his policies. Colin Powell, a victim of power and group think if there ever was one, can redeem himself only by becoming the McNamara of the Iraq war. He knew enough facts. He knew the importance of enough force to achieve the mission and of an exit strategy. Somehow the lessons he claimed to have learned from Vietnam did not stick.

The Daily Show, America's most popular fake news, nailed the media problem [from FAIR, *Extra!* 17:6, December 2004 p. 8]:

The media's refusal to call a distortion a distortion or to question a source's credibility has received little criticism from most journalists, and a spirited defense from some. However, criticism has sprung up in some prominent non-journalist circles. Reacting to the media's "he said/she said" reporting in the Swift Boat Veterans episode, Comedy Central's Daily Show (8/23/04) ran a parody of the coverage with anchor Jon Stewart grilling "reporter" Rob Corddry: Stewart: Here's what puzzles me most, Rob. John Kerry's record in Vietnam is pretty much right there in the official records of the U.S. military, and hasn't been disputed for 35 years. Corddry: That's right, Jon, and that's certainly the spin you'll be hearing coming from the Kerry campaign over the next few days.

Stewart: That's not a spin thing, that's a fact. That's established.

Corddry: Exactly. Jon, and that established, incontrovertible fact is one side of the story.

Stewart: But isn't that the end of the story? I mean, you've seen the records, haven't you? What's your opinion?

Corddry: I'm sorry, "my opinion"? I don't have opinions. I'm a reporter, Jon, and my job is to spend half the time repeating what one side says, and half the time repeating the other. Little thing called "objectivity"—might want to look it up some day.

Stewart: Doesn't objectivity mean objectively weighing the evidence, and calling out what's credible and what isn't?

Corddry: Whoa-ho! Sounds like someone wants the media to act as a filter! Listen, buddy: Not my job to stand between the people talking to me and the people listening to me.

Here's a summary of the best ideas I've found for the debacle: Polls show that most voters were traumatized by 9/11 and thought the country was now safer. 49 percent trusted only Bush to handle terrorism, and voted for him. Bush increased his support among married white women and non-college-educated whites fearful about terrorism. Bush could sound good only to people lacking enough facts, a triumph of style over substance. Iraq at 27 percent topped voter concerns; then economy, 14 percent; and moral values (particularly gay marriage), 9 percent. The intensity of these issues edged out low opinions of Bush, closeness to Democrats on other issues, and an effective Democratic ground campaign.

There was a huge increase in turnout, jumping from 51 percent in 2000 to 61 percent. In Florida, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, Kerry won most urban and suburban counties while Bush won exurban and rural votes. Frequent church-goers increased their turnout a bit, but non-goers increased even more, actually reducing the importance of the "religious" vote. Kerry improved support for Democrats from young voters, professionals/post-graduate education, college educated women, single women, and other blue state constituencies. Kerry failed to respond quickly and aggressively to Bush attacks, failed to attack Bush strongly and consistently, and failed to articulate his policies in a way more average voters could understand. He often ran behind other Democrats in key states. In Colorado Ken Salazar's defeat of Coors showed that a Democrat with a rural message can win. In sum, Bush's revitalization of the Reagan coalition

produced only a narrow winning margin—in Ohio, for example, about 2 percent.

The America people are now implicated in Bush policies: a quagmire in Iraq; reduced national security in the name of increasing it; decreased and still decreasing taxation for those already most benefitting from the economy; crippling fiscal deficits with increasing debt burdens on future generations, a decline of the dollar, and a shift to the Euro as a reserve currency; military waste; a rampant, comprehensive anti-environmentalism; a contempt for international cooperation, science, human rights, civil liberties, and the rights of women; unprecedented secrecy; and squeezing down on domestic policies that help those most disadvantaged. There is nothing conservative about these policies. The American people lack the sophistication voters in a super power should have, to elect a government consistent with the values they claim to have.

If there is any silver lining, it is that Bush, the neocons, the religious right, certain corporations, the Heritage/Cato message machine, and the Republicans will have to deal with the mess they have made. Their influence will wane as problems get worse and moderate Republicans in Congress come under pressure from constituents. How do you wage war with collapsing National Guard recruitment and ballooning deficits? The US would not be the first empire to overextend itself and go into eclipse. Countervailing power will assert itself over time: a network led probably by the European Union with support from other areas, the UN system, and American progressives—including progressive business.

The fact that Bush won on security issues should not obscure the fact that progressives mobilized as never before in my lifetime, with an explosive use of the internet and Republican-level fund-raising, creating a base for influence that can help turn the tide. Eleanor and I went to Reno to campaign for Kerry. I doubt we did much good, but it was exciting to see the people and the energy at the headquarters.

While it is essential for citizens to be more knowledgeable about policy, renewal also requires dealing with failures of the political system. Over the decades until about 1970 America was becoming more democratic, but since then institutional reform has stagnated. Voting does not conform to international standards. Candidates are often elected by pluralities, not majorities. Campaign finance by the rich, when combined with voter ignorance about policy, distorts elections to favor specialized interests.

The reforms needed are simple: fair balloting, instant runoff voting, public finance of campaigns. The balloting in Ohio and elsewhere, while perhaps not enough to change the outcome, was unfair; the details being debated as I write. (In Ohio the state official in charge of the election was also state chair of the Bush campaign, echoing the Florida problem four years ago.). We need same-day registration, adequate supplies of ballots, a paper trail, better training of poll workers, and civil rights enforcement. San Francisco recently implemented instant run-off, elected candidates by majority vote, and avoided an expensive, low-turn-out run-off election. Arizona and Maine have successful “clean money” campaign finance sharply reducing the role of special interests and empowering candidates to spend time with voters, not raising money. These polices could revitalize democracy and even lead to the next big reform, one person one vote.

A progressive conservatism requires civic education, less over-reliance on the military, more cooperation with other nations, vertical and horizontal tax equity, balancing the budget in times of economic growth, internalizing external costs, conservation for a sustainable economy and the quality of life, reducing US oil dependency, tough love social policies, more realistic education reform, universal health care, and protecting income security in old age. It requires bringing Christianity to the “Christians.” The energy for reform must spring from religious commitment—increased citizen interest in the public interest and caring about the nation beyond a self-interested or sectarian perspective. That commitment supports a progressive conservatism. It could be called liberalism.

Sherman Lewis, January 5, 2005