George W. Bush, the "Faith-Based" Presidency, and the Latest "Evangelical Menace"*

(ジョージ・W・ブッシュ、「信仰に基盤を置く」大統領と現在の「福音主義の脅威」)

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In March 2003 *Newsweek* pronounced George W. Bush's presidency the "most resolutely 'faith based' in modern times."[1] This judgment is plausible enough to merit serious consideration but is self-evidently true only if modern times are said to begin on January 20, 1989, when George H. W. Bush succeeded Ronald Reagan as president. Unfortunately, there has been relatively little scholarly examination of the question. Rather, a facile stereotype of a "faith based" presidency has become conventional wisdom among Bush's friends and foes alike, as well as within the ostensibly neutral news media.

On the one hand, theologically and politically conservative Protestants have rushed to claim the President as one of their own in books and interviews. There is an "entire subculture" concerned with Bush's religion, observes Stephen Mansfield, a member of the subculture in good standing. Along with fellow evangelicals David Aikman and Paul Kengor, Mansfield has written an adulatory religious biography of the President.[2]

Liberal and radical critics have also emphasized the influence of Bush's faith on his policies but they are appalled. Phillip Roth worried about living under Bush's "ministry." Ralph Nader calls Bush a "messianic militarist" who rejects the separation of church and state. The *New York Review of Books* indicts him as the point man leading an "evangelical menace," a point elaborated in its pages by Bill Moyers, who apparently has just discovered that millions of Americans accept premillennial dispensationalism, and Gary Wills, who adds that Bush's "fringe government" also embraces conservative Catholics. Liberal Protestant critic Bruce Lincoln of the University of Chicago Divinity School compares Bush's absolut-

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ism to Osama bin Laden's, and polemical journalists Kevin Phillips and Esther Kaplan accuse him of experimenting with "theocracy." Perhaps no one goes further than Ron Suskind, who claimed in the *New York Times Magazine* that faith induces Bush and many of his aides to ignore earthly reality in most significant respects.[3]

Those who view Bush as an exceptionally religious president leading an extraordinarily religious administration typically stress four points. First, Bush experienced a religious conversion in his early forties that he credits with changing his life. Subsequently, asked to name his favorite philosopher during a debate with fellow Republican presidential contenders in 1999, Bush cited "Christ, because He changed my life"; he also prays often and every day reads both the Bible and reflections from Oswald Chambers' inspirational book, *My Utmost for His Highest*.[4] Second, in prepared speeches and spontaneous remarks, Bush often says that he seeks and receives God's guidance as president. Third, some of his major appointees, including former chief speech writer Michael Gerson and former Attorney General John Ashcroft are evangelicals or pentecostal Protestants. Fourth, in his positions on gay rights, abortion, birth control, evolution, and stem cell research, Bush has taken pains to cultivate the Protestant theological conservatives who have been a reliable part of the Republican coalition for twenty years. Opening the federal pork barrel to these theological conservatives, Bush created a White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and sought wide ranging legislation to facilitate their quest for government contracts.

In this article I argue that Bush swims within the mainstream of presidential religiosity—even recent presidential religiosity—though his cultivation of theological conservatives clearly places him on the right side of that stream. Since my perspective is less lurid (or inspirational) than the prevailing conventional wisdom, I will conclude by suggesting why Bush's fairly ordinary religiosity has attracted so much attention and anger.

We must begin with a brief survey of variety, change and continuity in presidential faith. For my purposes, presidential modern times start with Theodore Roosevelt but a few backward glances will be necessary. Whatever their personal doubts, ethnocentric biases, or moral lapses, every president since TR has celebrated citizen participation in all faiths deemed legitimate (a category that enlarged over time). TR did so despite his private flirtation with agnosticism. Venerable misunderstandings to the contrary, Woodrow Wilson was a theologi-

cally liberal social gospeler who privately ridiculed fundamentalists, regarded love of Jesus as sufficient doctrine, hailed the Bible as a spur to social reform ("the people's book of revelation") and thought God rarely intervened in human affairs (though his own election looked like an exception to this rule).[5]

Franklin D. Roosevelt was the founding father of modern, tolerant civil religion as well as the father of modern economic and political—though not cultural—liberalism. Since contemporary political liberalism is more secular than Roosevelt's version, his religiosity is acknowledged primarily by conservative Republicans like Newt Gringrich and Ralph Reed. Roosevelt's personal faith was simple, slightly eclectic, and unreflective. An Episcopal vestryman, he also enjoyed a Baptist sermon. Although the term "Judeo-Christian tradition" was only starting to come into use, the pluralism that this phrase represented was the kind of religion FDR urged on the country. Here ideals and political interest merged, as the President drew the overwhelming majority of Catholics and Jews into the famous "Roosevelt coalition." The religious revival that began during World War II was amply represented in Roosevelt's speeches. His radio address announcing the D Day invasion was a long prayer of his own composition.[6]

The fifth Great Awakening that lasted from World War II until at least the early 1960s was both energized by the Cold War and helped to energize it. The first five presidents of the Cold War era differed considerably in their personal faith. The list includes Harry Truman, a Baptist committed to a sturdy separation of church and state; Dwight D. Eisenhower, a belated Presbyterian who avidly promoted civil religion; John F. Kennedy, an agnostic Catholic who nonetheless stood with God against atheistic Communism; Lyndon Johnson, a combination womanizer and spiritual searcher; and Richard Nixon, an Protestant pro forma Protestant. All more-or-less hoped that God blessed America but none regularly ended speeches with the expectation that He unambiguously did so. On the contrary, closer to Lincoln than to Wilson, all professed to view the Cold War as a test of American faith and character. Even so, it was Nixon who marked the return of *overtly* partisan religiosity in the White House as part of his mobilization of "Square America."[7]

In 1976, as many voters sought an affirmation of American virtue after the Indochina War and Watergate scandal, the major parties nominated the most devout pair of candidates since William McKinley and William Jennings Bryan in 1896. Carter, the victor that year, is a sophisticated "born again" evangelical and competent lay theologian, as president he prayed often, kept a Bible on his desk

in the Oval Office, worked behind the scenes in Southern Baptist Convention affairs, and talked about his own faith in the process of urging Communist leaders to embrace the American conception of religious freedom. He accepts Darwinism but thinks the evolutionary process was "not all an accident." His 1979 "Crisis of Confidence" speech implied in some passages that Americans no longer deserved to have God on their side.[8]

Ronald Reagan had no doubts on that score and began the habit of ending speeches with, "God bless America." Despite his alliance of convenience with Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and other leaders of the new Christian right, Reagan never placed a Right-to-Life Amendment or restoration of prayer in public schools anywhere near the top of his agenda. Even so, by 1984 theologically conservative whites had become the most reliable mass constituency in the Republican coalition. As is often the case, penetrating Reagan's vagueness is no easy matter, but he may qualify as the most religiously eclectic of modern presidents. The son of a Protestant mother and Catholic father, he developed into a New Age combination of Eisenhower and Johnson. Along the way he showed interest in B'hai, astrology, the Shroud of Turin, and premillennial dispensationalism; his public musings on the last of these, partly inspired by Hal Lindsey's tract, *The Late, Great Planet Earth*, prompted fears among some militant secularists that he might launch a nuclear war in order to advance Jesus's return. On the contrary, he felt God had saved him from an assassin's bullet in order to peacefully end the Cold War. [9]

President George H. W. Bush offered no musings on Bible prophecy, though he might have done so in his zealous cultivation of the Christian right if he had thought he could get away with it. He continued the practice of publicly asking God to bless America, as did Bush's successor, Bill Clinton, the latest president to combine womanizing with spiritual searching.[10]

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Anyone seriously attempting to place the younger Bush in this context of presidential religiosity faces methodological and empirical problems ignored by most commentators. Above all, Bush has never given a sustained interview in which he was asked serious questions about his religious beliefs.

What does Bush think about biblical inerrancy or premillennial dispensationalism? Is the Antichrist alive in Europe and will Jesus return in his own lifetime? Less provocatively, what did Bush mean when he called Christ his favorite philosopher? Jefferson, Lincoln, Wilson, and Carter could have answered this ques-

tion intelligently. A host of social gospel clergy from Walter Rauschenbusch to Martin Luther King, Jr. *did* answer it intelligently.

None of the prominent journalists with regular access to the president knows enough or cares enough to ask such questions; evangelicals and fundamentalists probably sense that the answers would not fit their needs. Equally important, the White House clearly does not want Bush to answer such volatile or complex questions. Mansfield, Aikman, and Kengor were not granted interviews with Bush despite their enthusiasm for him. Bush's advisers probably fear that he might say, as he did to a Jewish reporter while running for governor of Texas in 1994, that Jesus is the only way to Heaven. Or (as I think is clear from what we know) enough of the pre-conversion Bush may survive to poke a little fun at sanctimonious religion. If he did so, Bush would share a trait with Wilson. Perhaps Bush's advisers fear above all that he could say nothing substantive about matters of faith. In this respect, Bush would not differ from FDR. Quite possibly, however, Bush would sound inept rather than charming while explaining his simple faith. In 1994 he was asked the difference between the Episcopal Church he attended as a boy and the Methodist Church he joined after marrying Laura Welch. Services at the former were "repetitive and very ritualistic"; at the latter, they were "lower key. We don't have kneeling." Then he added, "And I'm sure there is some kind of heavy doctrinal difference as well, which I'm not sophisticated enough to explain to you."[11]

Whether this answer reveals obliviousness, charm, self-deprecating humor or a combination of all three (my view) depends on the disposition of the listener. Still the empirical problem remains. Beyond a few off the cuff remarks by Bush himself, there is little reliable information on his inner faith; most of it comes in the form of remarks by political aides or evangelical leaders with vested interests in the subject. A partial exception is a series of conversations secretly taped by Doug Wead, an evangelical political activist and now former friend, when Bush was governor of Texas, but these deal with religious politics rather than doctrine. Bush's copious formal statements relating to religion are as stylized as those of previous presidents. The same can be said for the campaign "autobiography" published in 2000, which bears the title of a Methodist hymn, *A Charge to Keep*. His strategy for dealing with the Christian right will remain a matter of inference at least until the future opening of what is usually called the Religious Matters section of the White House Central File.

Given these difficulties, writers addressing Bush's religion recycle the same

limited material and tell essentially the same story with varying degrees of enthusiasm or alarm. I will now retell it here with neither enthusiasm nor alarm but, in the process, will raise some critical questions.

Born in 1946, Bush grew up amid the ordinary religiosity of the '50s awakening. His family attended Presbyterian and Episcopal services in Midland and Houston, Texas, and his father sometimes taught Sunday school. Bush was an Episcopal altar boy in Houston and then endured the muscular Christianity and compulsory chapel of Phillips Andover Academy. He never drifted away from religion entirely and seems never to have had a crisis of faith. Yet, as Bush famously observed while running for president, "When I was young and irresponsible I was young and irresponsible." This phase of his life, marked by heavy drinking, arrests for driving under the influence of alcohol, and recreational use of marijuana and perhaps cocaine, lasted at least from his matriculation at Yale in 1964 until the mid-1980s. At minimum, the heavy drinking continued after his marriage in 1977, the birth of his twin daughters in 1981, and an intermittently successful business career following his father's election as vice president. In 1978 the routinely religious Bush lost a race for the House of Representatives to a Democratic who touted his own piety and virtue.[12]

According to Bush's semi-official conversion narrative, the turning point was a discussion with Billy Graham while walking on the beach at the Bush family compound at Kennebunkport, Maine, in 1986. Yet Bush had been moving toward a heightened religious commitment before then. In the early 1980s Laura had nudged him toward a Bible study group in Midland, Texas. While he often cracked jokes at these sessions, by 1984 he was sufficiently moved to discuss his spiritual state with a visiting second rank evangelist, Arthur Blessitt. Bush was "not sure" of his relationship with Jesus and doubted that he would go to Heaven if he died at that moment. At roughly the same time one of Bush's Midland friends was "born again." Then, as Bush recalled in the semi-official narrative, the "great man" Billy Graham "planted a mustard seed in my soul" that grew into a full acceptance of Jesus.[13]

Changes in behavior followed but took some time. As late as 1992, Rev. James Robison, a founder of the New Christian Right and associate of the Bush family, thought Bush lacked seriousness. Bush began trying to curb his drinking in the early 1980s, fearing that he might embarrass his father, Ronald Reagan's vice president. Sometime shortly after his walk with Graham, he apparently stopped drinking completely. Religious faith alone did not rescue him from the edge of

alcoholism, but there is no reason to doubt Bush's conviction that faith *kept him* sober.[14]

The conversion rendered him no more introspective or scholarly and perhaps only slightly less cocky. The comparisons with Carter are instructive. After his spiritual rebirth, Carter expanded his study of religion, including theology and higher criticism. By all accounts, Bush finds inspiration in Bible stories without worrying about their philosophical implications, let alone the inerrancy of the text. In 2001 Bush joked to a Presidential Prayer Breakfast (a Washington institution since the Eisenhower administration), "Faith teaches humility. As Laura would say, I could use a dose myself." He has admitted to "doubts," confessed to "pride," and prayed for "patience." After Carter's conversion, he defined pride as the "number one sin" and tried to fight his own arrogance (with mixed success). Bush's conversion rendered him less confrontational and he now prays for "patience," but he seems no less sure of himself.[15]

A self-described born again Christian in 1988, Bush wooed evangelicals and fundamentalists on behalf of his father's presidential candidacy. He grew increasingly comfortable with their vocabulary. Doug Wead served as his guide. George H. W. Bush assiduously cultivated the Protestant right, and the alliances he made helped to assure the Republican nomination over Senator Robert Dole and pentecostal televangelist Pat Robertson. Yet conservative Protestants—and cultural conservatives generally, never felt enthusiastic about the elder Bush. In 1992, many of them supported Pat Buchanan's challenge to the President's renomination. At the Republican National Convention that year, Buchanan was granted prime time to declare a "cultural war" on liberals. His targets included Bill and Hillary Clinton, and his message was echoed (also on prime time television) by Rev. Robertson. This display of cultural combat cost the elder Bush moderate votes in November. Whatever his political aspirations at that point, the younger Bush undoubtedly learned the dangers of associating too closely with religious conservatives and their core issues.[16]

Political aspirations could not have been too far from George W. Bush's mind in 1994. Only two years later he was elected governor of Texas. Since his spiritual rebirth, Bush had met frequently with prominent Texas clergy, most of whom were evangelicals. One of their chief concerns was allowing religious groups to received state funds for social services without diluting their religious message. As Marvin Olasky, their foremost ideologist, argued, inclusion of an explicitly religious message increased the success rate of programs to uplift the

poor or rehabilitate prisoners. As evidence, Olasky cited the conservative side of the social gospel movement from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Although Bush conferred with Olasky, historical arguments probably impressed him less than his own experience with alcohol as well the testimony of the men and women who dispensed or benefited from such programs. His administration implemented an aspect of this "charitable choice" in the Texas prison system. That is, prisoners could choose, ostensibly without coercion, to receive education and training from "faith-based organizations."[17]

While militant secularists react in horror, conservative Protestants point with pride at Bush's statements that in 1999 Bush felt a "call" from God to run for president in 2000. These passing remarks, usually made to clergy, probably mean less than either side supposes. He may have been thinking about a presidential candidacy while still a candidate for Texas governor in 1994. During his second inaugural in 1999, Rev. Mark Craig preached a sermon urging those present to take up the challenge of high moral leadership. Perhaps the sermon did stir Bush to consider a call to presidential candidacy—though he could have heard the voice just as clearly from countless pundits after his easy re-election the previous November. According to Rev. Robison, Bush told him "I've heard the call. God wants me to run for president."[18]

It is no insult to Bush's faith to recognize that he was already a skilled politician who knew how to cultivate prominent conservative clergy who stood culturally to his right. According to Wead's tapes, he thought it "bad for Republicans to be kicking gays." Framing the issue for Robison, Bush planned to emphasize that he, too, was a "sinner" who therefore could not condemn the sins of others. Moreover, Bush understood that the story of his transition from carouser to Christian was, as he said in atypical Yiddish, "part of my schtick"—loosely translatable as "my special thing."[19]

No major Democratic presidential contender in 2000 could plausibly lay claim to the conversion schtick. Furthermore, the Democrats had faced escalating problems on the religious front since the 1960s. As issues related to religion proliferated and served to energize the devout, the white portion of the party became increasingly secular. Not only had the Democratic party been hospitable to secularists since its founding, but it had also recently lost many northern ethnic Catholics and southern evangelicals. School prayer and abortion aside, these voters considered the Democrats insufficiently nationalistic and excessively helpful to blacks. Moreover, the impeachment of President Bill Clinton for lying about

sexual encounters with a much younger woman energized religious moralists and partisan hypocrites alike.

Democrat nominee Al Gore at least looked immune to charges of infidelity and sacrilege. He had been a faithful husband since the days when Bush was still young and irresponsible. A spiritual searcher, he had recently settled in as a moderate evangelical southern Baptist. He participated in a religious fad of the day, wearing a "WWJD" pin—a shorthand for Charles Sheldon's social gospel question "What would Jesus do?" Gore's vice presidential choice, Senator Joseph Lieberman, was a "modern Orthodox" Jew visibly more moralistic than George W. Bush.[20]

Bush's strong support among conservative Protestants helped him to defeat maverick Senator John McCain (Republican of Arizona) for the Republican nomination. In the biggest religion-related flap of the primary season, Bush spoke at Bob Jones University even though that fundamentalist school barred inter-racial dating on theological grounds. During the fall campaign he sounded ecumenical. Like Reagan, he favored equal time for both evolution and "intelligent design" in public schools on grounds of fairness, a stand he subsequently reiterated as president. He assured a television interviewer, "I don't pray for votes." Above all, he cited his faith as a source of "compassionate conservatism." On election day, when Bush lost the popular vote but won in the electoral college, he outran Gore by 20% among voters who frequently attended religious services. He also seems to have won 25% of the vote among openly gay voters.[21]

According to David Frum, a Jewish former speech writer, the Bush White House is suffused with the "culture of modern Evangelicalism." Cabinet meetings begin with prayer, Bible study groups gather each week, and, in Frum's account, even mild profanity is scorned. Frum overstates the case. Although Bush begins each day by meditating on Bible passages or other inspirational material, he does not participate in the religious study groups. Bush no longer refers to himself specifically as a "born again" or "evangelical" Christian. He retains his pre-conversion conviviality and penchant for sarcastic humor. There is no evidence that Bush enjoys telling off color stories (as Reagan did), tolerates carousing by his closest aides (as Carter did), or often uses barracks language (as Eisenhower did, at one point allegedly blurting out, "God dammit, we forgot the prayer" after a cabinet meeting had started). He may or may not still refer to political adviser Karl Rove as "turd blossom"; they do share fart jokes, however. Whatever the precise reality, the Kennedy and Nixon administrations, in which the F-word

echoed often as noun and verb, seems as distant as Jefferson's deism (though Bush himself has not entirely abandoned the word in private).[22]

Bush's relations with his wife and children also show that he is less the goody goody than his evangelical spiritual biographers suggest. His daughters Jenna and Barbara, who do not appear to have been raised in a dour or especially disciplined home, enjoy a social life typical of upper middle class twenty-somethings. They both drink alcohol, dance at night clubs, and hold hands with their significant others, the last a practice acceptable at evangelical Wheaton College but not at fundamentalist Bob Jones University. In May 2005 First Lady Laura Bush warmed up a press dinner with a joke about an attempt by her husband the rancher to milk a male horse. As conservative columnist John Tierney wrote, this was probably the "first joke told in earshot of a president involving him and a horse's phallus." At least it was the first such joke to reach the *New York Times*. Nor is political toughness absent from Bush's private conversation. According to Ron Suskind, he told some of his less pious supporters, "I'm going to be real positive when I keep my foot on John Kerry's throat."[23]

Not surprisingly, Bush's inner spiritual life is hardest to chart. Shortly after his second inaugural, he said, "I don't see how you can be President—at least from my perspective how you can President—without a relationship with the Lord." What exactly is the relationship and how does he know—or sense—what God wants him to do? Daily meditations on Oswald Chambers's *My Utmost for His Highest* probably intensify his feeling that Jesus is his personal savior but Chambers's central message elevates this spiritual connection far above *any* worldly activity. Although the President prays often, the process remains obscure. Asked by a journalist if prayer worked, Bush responded, "Brother, if you have to ask, you just don't get it." In the final analysis, insofar as a "theology" of George W. Bush can be pieced together from existing sources, he can be described as a moderate evangelical and advocate of a politically conservative version of the social gospel.[24]

Many—perhaps most—of Bush's statements about the relationship between church and state could have come from any contemporary president. The government must "protect the great right of people to worship—or not worship—as they see fit," he has said. Nor should secular Americans be judged less patriotic than those who believe in God. Yet worship is Bush's preferred option. Consciously or inadvertently echoing of one of Eisenhower's famous quips, White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card explained, "The President doesn't care what

faith it is as long as it's faith."[25]

Nonetheless, Esther Kaplan is probably correct when she concludes that the religious right exerts an "unprecedented level of influence" in Bush's administration. No single Christian right organization currently holds the prominence of the Moral Majority during the early 1980s. Whereas Reagan advertised—and sometimes exaggerated—his connection with new Christian right clergy like Jerry Falwell, Bush has kept his distance. Yet this lack of publicity seems to mask increased influence. Rank-and-file theological conservatives are now an unshakable part of the Republican base. This constituency, like others, has received its rewards. Particularly in areas dealing with abortion and birth control, Bush has appointed many more militant evangelicals and fundamentalists than Reagan did. Furthermore, after the al-Qaeda attack of September 11, 2001, formerly restrained evangelicals have grown more strident in proclaiming the United States a Christian or Judeo-Christian nation. No one illustrates this trend better than Billy Graham's son Franklin, who seems close to the President.[26]

In areas of greatest concern to religious conservatives, the Bush administration has mixed symbolic stroking, embarrassed concessions, shrewd politics, and enthusiastic support rooted partly in the President's "theology." Symbolic stroking included a Christmas proclamation unambiguously affirming the virgin birth of the Son of God. The same can be said of Bush's well orchestrated signing of legislation allowing the Terri Schiavo case to reach the Supreme Court. The President attempted to mollify both Christian conservatives and less devout swing voters in his decision to fund *some* embryonic stem cell research. While Bush still declines to "bash" gays and has appointed some openly gay officials, he has also made a series of embarrassed concessions to conservative Christians. Unlike Clinton, he neither appointed a White House liaison to gay and lesbian groups nor issued statements marking gay pride events. During the summer of 2003, the Supreme Court decision in *Lawrence* v. *Texas*, which struck down a ban on sodomy, elicited minimal comment from the White House. In February 2004, however, Bush endorsed a constitutional amendment defining marriage as the union of a man and a woman. And a sensible policy of AIDS prevention has been hampered by conservative mid-level appointees who endorse abstinence instead of condoms.[27]

Addressing the annual March for Life in 2002, the President called opposition to abortion a "noble cause." Reagan spoke similarly to the same group, yet the issue seems to be much more visceral for Bush. In one of his first actions, he

reversed Clinton's reversal of Reagan's ban on the use of federal funds to support international family planning programs that offered even abortion counseling. His mid-level executive branch appointees also appear to be more zealous in enforcing this "gag rule" than were their counterparts in the Reagan era; here, too, sexual abstinence is the preferred method of birth control. Subsequently, Bush signed the Born Alive Infants Protection Act and a ban on partial birth abortions, which had been vetoed twice by Clinton. Rev. Falwell attended the latter signing ceremony. Above all, Bush's appointees to the federal bench have joined other judicial conservatives in chipping away at *Roe* v. *Wade*. All of these policies were predictably controversial.[28]

The bitter controversy over Bush's "faith-based initiative" was surprising, especially to the White House. After all, many Democrats, including Bill Clinton and Al Gore, agreed in principle that "faith-based organizations" (FBOs) should be able to compete for government social service contracts. Indeed, diverse religious charities were already receiving millions of federal dollars to serve the poor overseas. But, as the leading conservative expert on the subject, political scientist, Stephen Monsma notes, these FBO's operating abroad were "doing work that no one is eager to do." At least as important, foreign beneficiaries were ineligible to vote in American elections.[29]

Since the late 1940s, the Supreme Court has tried in a series of murky and even incoherent decisions to define the relationship between church and state under the First Amendment. The confusion was probably inevitable given the inherent tension between the "free exercise" clause and the "establishment" clause. In one area, however, Supreme Court doctrine was fairly clear until the mid-1980s. Government funds could not be spent for "pervasively sectarian" purposes. For example, religious charities providing a shelter to the poor could not try to convert them. By 2000, however, the Supreme Court had loosened this standard to allow religious groups to seek government funds on a "neutral" basis.[30]

Although these recent decisions were handed down by a divided court and left many questions unanswered, they provided an opening for strongly sectarian groups to seek legislation guaranteeing them access to federal contracts on the same basis as other social service organizations. Several bills were introduced in 2001 with the support of the Bush administration. In short order opposition arose from expected and unexpected quarters. Militant secularists discerned a dangerous breach of the "wall" between church and state. According to the *New York Times*, the faith-based initiative was the "center piece" of a Republican

campaign directed to that end. In addition, many liberals viewed the plan as a potential pork barrel for Protestant theological conservatives who, enriched and grateful, would cleave even more tightly unto the Republican party. Perhaps, too, social service contracts would draw some African-American clergy into the fold. Indeed, for many congressional Republicans, these tactics were a chief purpose of the legislation. But some principled evangelicals feared that a closer association with the government might limit their freedom of action or corrupt their faith. A few worried—quite correctly—that the legislation would allow witches and others holding unconventional religious beliefs to compete for federal funds on the basis of their social service expertise.[31]

The attacks by al-Qaeda on 9/11, 2001, pushed the faith-based initiative to the legislative back burner. In 2003 Congress passed a watered down bill that merely allowed tax payers in lower brackets to deduct charitable contributions. By executive order, however, Bush established an Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) in the White House as well as seven departments and agencies.[32]

In practice, Bush's faith-based initiative has combined symbolic stroking with a small pork barrel for religious conservatives. Bush Democrat John Dilulio, the first director of OFBCI, quit after less than a year convinced that the administration was more concerned with conservative political correctness than with social service. His successor, H. James Towey, has shown no such qualms. Funds have gone to groups affiliated with the President's supporters, including Franklin Graham, Pat Robertson, and James Dobson. For fiscal year 2005, roughly $2.1 billion, or slightly less than 11% of social service expenditures for seven departments or agencies, went to FBO's. Depending on accounting technicalities, this sum was not much higher, and may have been slightly lower, than the amount awarded two years earlier. As had long been the case, most of the money went to mainstream organizations like Catholic Charities, United Jewish Communities, and Lutheran Social Services. African-American churches fared poorly, in part because many lacked the facilities to sponsor social programs. In several cases the courts have been forced to resolve whether or not funded FBOs crossed the murky line into unconstitutional soul saving.[33]

Liberal complaints about Bush's foreign policy, including its religious aspect, have been less coherent than their critique of his domestic proposals. At various turns he is presented as a dupe of Jewish neoconservatives, a tool of Saudi Muslims, and an evangelical zealot conducting a religious war against all Muslims.

Esther Kaplan summarized one branch of liberal conventional wisdom when she denounced the "religiously inspired war" in Iraq. This lack of coherence derives in part from liberal divisions about that war, the center piece of Bush's foreign policy. In addition, Democrats are loath to admit that several features of his foreign policy—moralistic rhetoric, unilateral military action, and pre-emptive attacks on countries posing no immediate threat—fit into an old bipartisan pattern. Indeed, some of his favorite shibboleths predate the creation of American political parties. Bush likes to say often that freedom is God's gift to humanity. This claim has ample precedent in speeches by FDR and Eisenhower, among others, as well as the second sentence of the Declaration of Independence.[34]

Bush's foreign policy statements since 9/11 have both highlighted certain aspects of his faith and infuriated opponents who consider him a religious extremist. In declaring war on al-Qaeda and on a much more amorphous phenomenon called international "terrorism," Bush used the rhetoric of unambiguous moral judgment. Those responsible for the attacks of 9/11 were "evil-doers," and those countries that were not with the United States fell into the category of "against us," he declared. The decision to overthrow Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq was also painted in moral terms though strategic considerations were said to loom at least as large. Bush prayed about these decisions, as he reported to several foreign leaders. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas interpreted Bush as saying that God had told him to go to war against Iraq and, earlier, against al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. The White House denied that he had said any such thing. In public, Bush explained his prayers and ascribed responsibility for the Iraq War to himself rather than to God. He had prayed for the safety of American troops, minimal casualties in general, and the wisdom and "strength to do the Lord's will." He also told Bob Woodward, "I'm surely not going to justify war based on God. Understand that."[35]

Whatever the merits and flaws in Bush's policies, and however much now closed White House files may someday reveal greater nuance and flexibility toward the world, Bush's moralistic rhetoric hardly places him outside of the American presidential or foreign policy tradition—especially in times of war. David Frum helped to write Bush's "evil-doers" speech in September, 2001, and shared responsibility with Michael Gerson for the description of Iraq, Iran, and North Korea as an "Axis of Evil" in the 2002 State of the Union address. In both instances, Frum drew rhetorical motifs from FDR's speeches, including his call for a declaration of war against Japan in 1941.[36]

The role of evangelical speech writer Michael Gerson in giving voice to Bush's foreign policy positions is especially revealing. Trying to reassure critics, Gerson quipped that the President was not reading Tim LaHaye's dispensationalist novels for his Mideast policy. Asked in March 2006 if "prophetic Christians" had convinced him that the Iraq War was a sign of the coming Apocalypse, Bush responded, after a long pause, "I haven't really thought of it that way. I guess I'm a more practical fellow." Gerson says that Bush's worldview is "kind of marinated in the American ideal." As the premier chef in charge of marination, Gerson admires and draws on the inspirational and religious rhetoric of FDR, JFK, and Harry Truman. According to Gerson, the President does not assume that God is on the American side but rather, like Lincoln, hopes that the United States is on God's side. It appears, however, that Bush has no more doubts on this score than Reagan.[37]

While liberals assailed the President's excessive international moralism in 2002, Protestant theological conservatives issued their strongest criticism ever because Bush seemed soft on Islam. Oblivious to international realities, Pat Robertson and Franklin Graham denounced Islam as an inferior religion, and Jerry Falwell went so far as to call Muhammad a "terrorist." Yet Bush never wavered. Much as Presidents Polk and William McKinley pointedly repudiated anti-Catholicism while leading their country into battle against Mexico and Spain respectively, Bush repeatedly denied that the United States was at war with Islam. Much as Polk and McKinley appointed Catholic emissaries, and Polk also authorized the first Catholic military chaplains, Bush sought out moderate American Islamic leaders and hosted a Ramadan dinner at the White House. Clearly he wanted to avoid nativist outbreaks at home as well as damage to Muslim holy sites in Afghanistan and Iraq. At his most hyperbolic, Bush declared, "Islam means peace." Like Christianity, of course, Islam does not mean peace always and everywhere. Nonetheless, Bush's commitment to tolerance stands as his best public action relating to religion.[38]

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Insofar as the 2004 presidential campaign was "infused with religion," as the *Washington Post* observed at the time, most of the overt infusion came from secular liberal critics of President Bush and conservative religious critics of Democratic nominee John Kerry rather than from the candidates themselves. Among secular liberals, *New York Times* columnist Frank Rich placed the "all seeing" Bush outside of the ecumenical tradition of presidential civil religion. Al Gore

said Bush's "brimstone" religion paralleled Muslim fundamentalism in Saudi Arabia. Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., wanted debate moderators to ask the President how his religious beliefs fitted with his invasion of another country (though the nationalistic answer would have perplexed Bush no more than Polk). An internet satirist envisioned a Bush campaign ad directed against a peace-loving social gospel Jesus, with biblical quotations showing Him soft on crime, terrorists, and welfare loafers.[39]

Conservatives sounded less witty but were much better organized. The Republican National Committee (RNC) sponsored a website, kerrywrongforcatholics.com, largely a compendium of Kerry's statements supporting *Roe* v. *Wade*, embryonic stem cell research, and partnership rights for gays. Republicans more conservative than the RNC, including Ralph Reed and Senator Sam Brownback (Republican of Kansas), distributed the David Mansfield-influenced biographical DVD crediting Bush with the "moral clarity of an old-fashioned biblical prophet."[40]

The Republicans learned lessons from 1992, when George H. W. Bush lost important swing votes because Pat Buchanan, Pat Robertson, and their fellow cultural warriors were prominently represented at the National Convention. None was given an opportunity to proclaim at "culture war" at the 2004 convention. Nor did President Bush attend the premier of his life story on DVD, perhaps sensing that one of the sponsors, Senator Brownback, would use the occasion to demand "victory" in this alleged war. While reiterating his opposition to abortion and gay marriage as well as his straddle on embryonic stem cell research, Bush himself declined to place these issues in the context of a "culture war." His Christian right allies sponsored referenda in eleven states—including Ohio—with the understanding that these ballot initiatives would pull theological conservatives to the polls. In the religious realm, Bush's campaign looked less like his father's in 1992 than like Hoover's in 1928, when religious issues were shrewdly distanced from the formal Republican effort.[41]

The Roman Catholic Kerry faced a more complicated, if not necessarily a more difficult set of challenges than John F. Kennedy faced in 1960. Since the national mourning for Kennedy in 1963, which included a televised Latin Mass, no respectable public figure could *in principle* question the right of a Catholic to serve as president. By standard estimate, doubts about this issue cost Kennedy 1.5 million votes in 1960. Nonetheless, Kennedy had several advantages unavailable to Kerry. First, although not very devout, Kennedy more or less sounded like a "cultural Catholic." Moreover, even his lapses into Anglophilic elitism seemed

classy to co-religionists who were not quite first class citizens, as well as to moderate Protestants haunted by memories of Joseph McCarthy reign as the foremost Catholic politician. Second, although open clashes between Catholics and Protestants probably increased during the "fifties," especially over the question of federal aid to education, the areas of conflict were small enough to be smothered in invocations of Cold War patriotism and affirmations of the separation of church and state. Kennedy was a master of both. And the Democrats smartly promoted a vote for Kennedy as a vote for tolerance.

Kerry is much more devout than Kennedy was. When pressed to discuss the matter in 2004, Kerry described his faith as "strong," mentioned his youthful service as an altar boy, and remembered praying and carrying a rosary while fighting in Vietnam. Apparently he continues to carry a rosary and wear a crucifix. But Kerry had to be pressed to go beyond the ritualistic "God bless America" that has ended speeches by most presidential contenders since the Reagan era. Reticence may have derived less from the quality of Kerry's faith than from his political situation. Unlike Kennedy, Kerry faced an array of religion-related issues—notably abortion and gay rights—that no serious presidential contender would have considered discussing in 1960. Nor would any mainstream journalist have asked about them. Furthermore, both Democrats and Catholics were divided among themselves about such issues. Thomas Jefferson might be proud that the party he founded still contained a large secular constituency, perhaps the largest secular constituency per capita since Jefferson was president. But Democrats also depended heavily on African-Americans, by plausible estimate the most religious group of people in the industrial world. Kerry exuded no cultural Catholicism whatsoever. Insofar as voters cared about his ancestry, only cosmopolitans already in his camp were impressed by the fact that his Jewish grandparents outnumbered his Irish grandparents two to one. Worst of all, Kerry differed with the Catholic Church on the public issues most commonly associated with it—opposition to artificial birth control, abortion, and gay sex. These issues probably did mean more to bishops—and certainly to Pope John Paul II—than did their condemnation of "unjust" wars and repudiation of economic exploitation. Only a handful of bishops urged the excommunication Catholic politicians, including Kerry, for standing by *Roe* v. *Wade*, but none at all suggested excommunicating politicians for endorsing the Iraq war.[42]

In their second debate, Bush unambiguously affirmed the "culture of life" while Kerry opposed restrictions on abortion rights, including bans on "partial birth"

abortions. Probably reflecting the changed mood of the Democratic base, he did not say, as Carter had put the matter bluntly, that he personally considered abortion "wrong."

Bush won with a greater number of Protestant religious conservatives going to the polls than had been anticipated by anyone except, perhaps, Karl Rove. Kerry lost the Catholic vote. There followed a grotesque debate among politicians and pundits about the role of "moral" issues in determining the results. A large minority of Democrats have decided that their party must at least look and sound less secular. Some go further, contending that their social gospel faith is morally superior to Bush's version of Christianity. Whatever Jesus would do about this controversy, it certainly inhibits a dispassionate analysis of the role of religion in Bush's administration.

* * *

As I have argued here, Bush adheres to a moderate, eclectic evangelical Protestantism akin to Reagan's and Carter's, though he lacks Reagan's curiosity and Carter's religious knowledge. Moreover, neither his domestic "faith-based initiative" nor his international religious moralism fall outside of the religious mainstream. Only in his ties to the Christian right, a stronger part of the Republican coalition than during the Reagan era, does Bush's presidency qualify as the "most resolutely faith-based in modern times" (to recall *Newsweek*'s phrase). Appointees from this constituency exert significant influence on issues relating to abortion, gay rights, AIDS, and birth control.

My mixed verdict is less likely to triumph in public discourse than joyous celebrations of unprecedented piety in the Oval Office or panicky denunciations of incipient theocracy. Leaving aside the possibility that my analysis might be wrong, there are three reasons for my skepticism about its prospects. First, as I have argued elsewhere for decades, exaggerated fears of an "evangelical menace" have been a central feature of the liberal worldview since the 1920s. Second, not only do few influential journalists bother to master technical issues—and the impact of religion on American life is one such technical issue—but they almost never let go of a gimmick that has caught on. Accordingly, Ron Suskind's notion of Bush's "faith-based presidency" oblivious to reality in most respects seems well on its way to becoming canonical, much as James Fallows's analogously myopic piece on Carter's "passionless presidency" still dwells in the hallowed halls of conventional wisdom. Third, no tactic is older in American politics than associating opponents with their most peculiar supporters—so-called extrem-

ists. Republicans and Democrats share a vested interest in promoting rival visions of a "culture war" despite—or because of—this country's relatively narrow political and cultural spectrums. The United States is not Iraq, Lebanon, or the former Yugoslavia, and the supposed culture war is only the latest of many shouting matches out of which have emerged changing versions of an "American way of life."

I am not optimistic but maybe scholars can do better than politicians and pundits.

Notes

1. Howard Fineman, "Bush and God," *Newsweek,* 10 March 2003, 5.
2. *Washington Post,* 16 September 2004; Paul Kengor, *God and George W. Bush* (New York: Regan, 2004); David Aikman, *A Man of Faith: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush* (Nashville: Word, 2004); Stephen Mansfield, *The Faith of George W. Bush* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Eyal Press, "Closing the 'Religion Gap,'" *Nation,* 30 August/6 September 2004.
3. Roth quoted in Press, "Closing." Nader quoted in Kengor, *Bush,* 300. "The Evangelical Menace," the title announced on the cover, is explored in Bill Moyers, "Welcome to Doomsday," *New York Review of Books,* 25 March 2005, 1, 10; Gary Wills, "Fringe Government," *New York Review of Books,* 6 October 2005, 46-50; Esther Kaplan, *With God on their Side: George W. Bush and the Christian Right* (New York: New Press, 2005), 39, 276; Kevin Phillips, *American Theocracy: The Peril and Politics of Radical Religion, Oil, and Borrowed Money in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Viking, 2006), especially Ch. 5-7; Ron Suskind, "Without a Doubt," *New York Times Magazine,* 17 October 2004, available at <http://www.brandon.multics.org/stuff/suskind2004without.html>.
4. James Reimann, ed., Oswald Chambers, *My Utmost for His Highest* (updated edition, Grand Rapids: Discovery, 1992).
5. The best single source on presidential religion is Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Lindner, *Civil Religion and the Presidency* (Grand Rapids: Academie, 1988).
6. Pierard and Lindner, *Civil Religion,* Ch. 7; Ralph Reed, *Active Faith: How Christians Are Changing the Soul of American Politics* (New York: Free Press, 1996), 53-55.
7. Pierard and Lindner, *Civil Religion,* Ch. 8-9; Paul Conkin, *Big Daddy from the Pedernales* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), 195-96.
8. Leo P. Ribuffo, "God and Jimmy Carter," in Ribuffo, *Right Center Left* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1992), 214-48; Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005), 24-25, 49, 52-56.
9. Ribuffo, "God and Carter," 243-44. For an account of Reagan and Bible prophecy—from the perspective of a frightened liberal—see Grace Halsell, *Prophecy and Politics: Militant Evangelists on the Road to Nuclear War* (Westport: Hill, 1986), 40-50.

10. On God and country in the 1992 election, see Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, *Whose Broad Stripes and Bright Stars: The Trivial Pursuit of the Presidency 1988* (New York: Warner, 1989).
11. David Aikman, *A Man of Faith: The Spiritual Journey of George W. Bush* (Nashville: Word, 2004); Mansfield, *Faith*, 54, 95. As a historian, I would like to hear about the religious beliefs of presidents and presidential candidates; as a citizen, I'm not so sure.
12. Aikman, *Man of Faith*, Ch. 1-3; Mansfield, *Faith*, Ch. 1-3.
13. Mansfield, *Faith*, 66-69; Aikman, *Man of Faith*, 73-78; Kengor, *Bush*, 22-26.
14. Mansfield, *Faith*, 73-79.
15. "Openly Religious to a Point," *Washington Post*, 16 September 2004; George W. Bush, "Faith Can Change Lives," in Aikman, *Man of Faith*, 206-07.
16. Jack W. Germond and Jules Witcover, *Mad as Hell: Revolt at the Ballot Box, 1992* (New York: Warner, 1993), 410-12.
17. Aikman, *Man of Faith*, 100-16; Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion* (Washington: Regnery, 1992).
18. Aikman, *Man of Faith*, 108-09; Mansfield, *Faith*, 106-08.
19. *New York Times*, 20 February 2005.
20. On the WWJD fad, see Staci Simmons, "WWJD?" in E. J. Dionne and John DiIulio, Jr., *What's God Got to Do With the American Experience?* (Washington: Brookings, 2000), 88-89.
21. Aikman, *Man of Faith*, 135; "Openly Religious to a Point"; Press, "Closing the 'Religion Gap,'" 11; *Washington Post*, 3 August 2005; *New York Times*, 3 August 2005; Kaplan, *God on their Side*, 161.
22. David Frum, *The Right Man: The Surprise Presidency of George W. Bush* (New York: Random, 2003), 3, 17; Aikman, *Man of Faith*, 25, 86; Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 186; *Washington Post*, 8 October 2006.
23. *New York Times*, 3 May 2005; Suskind, "Without a Doubt," 12.
24. *Washington Star*, 22 January 2005; Kengor, *Bush*, 162. Kengor (63) judges Bush "much more a liberal Methodist than an inflexible fundamentalist."
25. *Washington Times*, 22 January 2005. Card cited in Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Believer," *New Yorker*, 13 and 20 February 2006, 64.
26. Despite a tendency toward hyperbole, Kaplan, *With God*, gives a good account of these trends.
27. *Washington Post*, 23 December 2005, 21 March 2005; Kaplan, *With God*, 151, 160-61. Astutely running against the conventional wisdom, political scientist John C. Green notes that Bush must manage a coalition in which many elements "do not see eye to eye with religious conservatives" (*Washington Post*, 9 October 2005).
28. Kaplan, *With God*, 129, 142, 219-20; Kengor, *Bush*, 93-94.
29. Stephen V. Monsma, "Faith-Based NGOs and the Government Embrace," in Elliott Abrams, *The Influence of Faith: Religious Groups and U. S. Foreign Policy* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 212.
30. Norman Redlich, "The Religion Clauses: A Study in Confusion," in Herman Schwartz, ed., *The Rehnquist Court: Judicial Activism on the Right* (New York: Hill & Wang, 2002), 99-114.
31. *New York Times*, 26 April 2005.

32 *Washington Post*, 10 March 2006. For this story in detail, see Amy E. Black, Douglas L. Kooperman, and David K. Ryden, *Of Little Faith: The Politics of George W. Bush's Faith-Based Initiatives* (Washington: Georgetown UP, 2004).

33. *Washington Post*, 10 March 2006, 20 October 2005, 8 October 2006; Kaplan, *With God*, 39-59.

34. Kengor, *Bush*, 116, 318; Kaplan, *With God*, 273.

35. Kaplan, *With God*, 8-9; Mansfield, *Faith*, 34-37; Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 86.

36. Frum, *Right Man*, 137-38, 233-34.

37. *Washington Post*, 12 December 2004; *International Herald Tribune*, 20 March 2006; Goldberg, "Believer," 58, 64.

38. Mansfield, *Faith*, 137-42.

39. "In Election Season, IRS Sits in Judgment," *Washington Post*, 9 October 2004; David Remnick, "The Wilderness Campaign," *New Yorker*, 13 September 2004, 67; Frank Rich, "Now on DVD: The Passion of the Bush," *New York Times*, 3 October 2004.

40. "John Kerry: Catholic Issues Overview," <http://kerrywrongforcatholics.com>, 9 October 2004; "A Senator's Call to 'Win This Culture War,'" *New York Times*, 1 September 2004; Rich, "Now on DVD."

41. "Now on DVD"; Kaplan, *With God*, 280.

42. "Kerry and Religion: Pressure Builds for a Public Discussion," *New York Times*, 7 October 2004.