

Review Essay

Faith, Politics, and American Culture

NICK SALVATORE

Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006, \$16.95). Pp. 96. ISBN 0 307 26577 3.

Barry W. Lynn, *Piety and Politics: The Right-Wing Assault on Religious Freedom* (New York: Harmony Books, 2006, \$24.00). Pp. 261. ISBN 0 307 34654 4.

Senator John Danforth, *Faith and Politics: How the “Moral Values” Debate Divides America and How to Move Forward Together* (New York: Viking, 2006, \$24.95). Pp. 238. ISBN 0 670 03787 7.

Jonathan Miller, *The Compassionate Community: Ten Values to Unite America* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006, \$24.95). Pp. 243. ISBN 1 4039 7408 X.

Lauren Sandler, *Righteous: Dispatches from the Evangelical Youth Movement* (New York: Viking, 2006, \$24.95). Pp. 254. ISBN 0 670 03791 5.

Jeffrey L. Sheler, *Believers: A Journey into Evangelical America* (New York: Viking, 2006, \$24.95). Pp. 324. ISBN 0 670 03802 4.

In January 2004, before a black church congregation in New Orleans, President George W. Bush commemorated Martin Luther King’s birthday with a spirited promotion of his faith-based initiatives. Appropriating the slain Civil Rights leader’s profession of faith, Bush proclaimed his ultimate purpose was to change “America one heart, one soul, one conscience at a time.” He emphasized voluntary action by citizens (four times he extolled them as “the social entrepreneurs”) and he consistently denigrated the role of government but for one critical function: providing “billions of dollars” to faith-based social-service groups. Proclaiming the values of the Christian Bible as a “universal handbook,” the president preached – for he was in the pulpit that day – that “faith-based programs only conform to one set of rules,” and do not take “inspiration ... from bureaucracy.” Insisting that this policy was no threat to the Constitutional separation of church and state, Bush criticized Congress for its “fear [of] faith-based programs that interface and save lives.”

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The task, he acknowledged, was enormous: “we’re changing a culture,” he exclaimed, by harnessing “the great strength of our country, which is the love of our citizens.”¹

The President’s language that day has worried many Americans, religious or not. Bush’s evangelical approach to public policy, to change (did he mean save?) hearts, souls, and consciences, and his disdain for governmental regulation in favor of a faith-guided oversight, led many to conclude that democracy’s Constitutional protections had been undermined. Following Bush’s re-election this concern intensified, reaching a crescendo in the months preceding the 2006 midterm elections. During that period at least twelve books appeared, written by non-academics for a popular audience, on the theme of contemporary religion and American political culture. Many received considerable attention, as the authors traveled the nation, signing books as they garnered local media coverage. These books, six of which are discussed in this essay, reveal the major contours of America’s debate over religion in political life.

None of these authors was more vehemently opposed to religious influences, indeed to the continued existence of religious faith, than Sam Harris. In his brief broadside, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (written in response to criticism of his previous book on faith²), Harris purports to “arm secularists” to confront religion and its influence on American public policy. Evolutionary biology, he argues, suggests that religion among “prehistoric humans” may have helped them “to socially cohere.” But that was then. In an analogy indicative of the tenor of his entire argument, Harris writes, “There is, after all, nothing more natural than rape.” But if rape also once provided “evolutionary advantages for our ancestors,” it, like religion, now has no place in civil society. Harris is committed to “eradicating religion, even the most progressive faiths” which inevitably “lend tacit support to the religious divisions in our world.” Harris’s approach, as fellow atheist James Wood noted in a recent review, relies on dramatic, outrageous quotes by a few evangelical leaders, all the while assiduously avoiding a deeper, more meaningful engagement with fundamental issues of theology and philosophy.³ A solipsistic pamphleteer, Harris differs in political purpose, but his style closely mimics the thoughts offered as self-evident truths by George W. Bush.

Three of the books under review are far more thoughtful about the role of religion, and specifically the Christian right, in American civic life; and each strongly supports the maintenance of a clear line between church and state. Two of the authors are attorneys and ordained Protestant ministers (although neither currently lead congregations), the third is an observant Jew, and two of them have won state-wide election to public office. The issue of religion in American life is indeed far more complicated than either Bush or Harris acknowledge.

Reverend Barry Lynn emphasizes the importance of the Constitutional separation between church and state. A strong advocate for freedom of speech, particularly the

¹ The speech is accessible at www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2004/01.

² Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004).

³ Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, viii–ix, 87, 90; James Wood, “The Celestial Teapot,” *New Republic*, December 18, 2006, 30.

free exercise of religion, Lynn rejects faith-based initiatives as unchristian and undemocratic: they ignore the social causes of poverty and pressure those in need to “adopt rigid forms of ultraconservative Christianity” (125). Similarly, he considers as ahistorical and unconstitutional calls to turn America into a Christian nation, and would banish from political discourse any Biblical justifications in support of public legislation. While these positions are consistent with liberal thought, other components of his core message fit less comfortably. In rejecting any governmental regulation of religion, Lynn develops an anti-statist argument protective of individual freedom and of religion itself, a philosophical position dear to conservatives. In a more confusing manner, he repeatedly asserts that separation of church and state does not therefore strip public life of “a vibrant religious voice” – a position in tension with his desire to banish Biblical language from politics. Indeed, it is not religious expression as such that he decries but rather theocracy, with its governmentally applied pressure to conform to certain beliefs and practices.

John Danforth is a minister, a lawyer, a former attorney-general and senator from Missouri, and Bush’s ambassador to the United Nations. The son of a wealthy family, reared in the tradition of Protestant liberalism, Danforth also opposes the Christian right. Danforth staunchly supports gay men and women in their unions, but stops short of endorsing gay marriage. He supports stem-cell research, but is more ambivalent concerning abortion: a fetus is not a person, he argues, but “at some level it is human life” (84) and thus subject to legislative regulation. He rejects the assertion of a constitutional right to privacy – the legal foundation for abortion since the *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973 – even as he decries the Christian right’s use of this issue to gain influence within the Republican Party. Danforth is a centrist who believes Christians should be reconcilers, not dividers, who urged voters in the 2006 elections to reject the radical “values” approach of the right.

Does Danforth’s reconciliation compromise basic principle? What saves his argument, ironically, is his effective use of Christian faith to counter the Christian right. Danforth sharply criticizes the right’s assumption that it knows God’s will. Drawing on Protestant thinkers such as Reinhold Niebuhr and Karl Barth, Danforth emphasizes that no one can ever be certain that he acts with God on his side. But the faith tradition can bring the humbling awareness that while struggles to implement values derived from faith “always fall short of the goal,” it is that very “self-doubt [that] makes it possible to be reconciled with one another” (53).

Jonathan Miller, at age thirty-eight twice elected state treasurer of Kentucky, is an observant Jew, a Democrat in a state that twice gave George Bush majorities, and a Harvard graduate. He seems an unlikely candidate to bring calm to the roiled debate over America as a Christian nation. But in *The Compassionate Community* Miller holds that religious and democratic values can inform public policy in ways that respect constitutional principals. He begins with the famous story of the learned rabbi, Hillel the Elder, who, when challenged by a nonbeliever to teach the entire Torah while standing on one foot, stated, “What is hateful to you, do not do unto your neighbor. That is the whole of the Torah; all the rest is commentary. Now go and learn it.” To this Miller adds Jesus’ New Testament teaching to love God wholly and one’s neighbor as oneself. Stirring ideals, one might say, but hardly guidelines for political discussion, let alone policy.

Miller's book and public career suggest otherwise. He emphasizes ten core American values (including work, responsibility, family, faith, and justice) grounded in both democratic and Judeo-Christian traditions. He weighs these values and their policy implementation against his core personal and political belief: self-interest, spurred by unchecked human greed, is morally offensive and contributes to profound social problems. To cite but one example, Miller turns the right's slogan of "family values" toward his alternative, "valuing families." He points to three destructive forces that weaken family ties: the sharp reduction in government social programs, the "economics of self-interest" and its tax policy, and the necessity in many working- and middle-class families for both parents to work. Miller does not reject the idea of individual responsibility – it is a foundation of his vision – but he argues cogently that to assert only that duty is a blueprint for failure.

Miller will upset some liberals with his acknowledgment of religion as a positive social force, for his insistence on personal responsibility, and for his kinship with the more centrist wing of the Democratic Party associated with Bill Clinton. But Miller raises hard issues that bedevil real people. Alternatives exist, but advocates must recognize, Miller insists, that many voters are repelled by liberalism's avoidance of values not technologically driven and bureaucratically implemented. Miller understands that many Democrats who voted for Bush in 2004 did so, as one explained, because Bush "has values, and even though I agree with little of what he believes, at least I know what he believes."⁴ One might well disagree with the political implications of such an approach, or question the substance of the values attributed to Bush. But as a guide to comprehending the social and cultural context of much contemporary political behavior, to take such attitudes seriously is an indispensable starting point.

To do so, however, requires more knowledge of the religious activists than any of these four books provide. From them alone we would not know the extent of the conservative Christian movement (some 25 percent of adult Americans between 1972 and 2004), or that *Left Behind*, a sixteen-volume fictional series grounded in fundamentalist visions of Armageddon and the return of Christ, has sold well over sixty million copies since 1995. Most importantly, we would be unaware of the staying power of this contemporary movement whose roots in the 1930s and 1940s slowly blossomed in the following two decades, and then bloomed into a major public presence after 1972. To know who "these people" are is to grasp some of the deepest and most pervasive themes in the American experience.⁵

What first impresses is the sheer variety. Jerry Falwell, the founder of the Moral Majority, in fact, shares his faith with a younger tattooed, pierced, grunge-loving musician and evangelical activist – and with skateboarders on the half-pipe, surfers, self-proclaimed Christian cowboys, and many others. Lauren Sandler and Jeffrey L. Sheler capture aspects of these complex layers in a movement too many see as an undifferentiated whole.

⁴ Miller, *The Compassionate Community*, 5.

⁵ See Andrew Greeley and Michael Hout, *The Truth about Christian Conservatives: What They Think and What They Believe* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006); Gina Piccalo, "Bible-Based Mysteries," *Post-Standard* (Syracuse, NY), January 7, 2007, "Stars," 7 (originally published in the *Los Angeles Times*).

A self-described “unrepentant Jewish atheist” and editor at *Salon*, the web-based magazine, Sandler describes well the “shared faith” among evangelical youth that “links people who would otherwise never be caught dead at the same high school cafeteria table” (130). She opens with a vignette concerning “Heather,” a high-school senior depressed over a failed affair, who accepts conversion at a Christian rock concert. Heather postpones college to enroll in a year-long program at the Honor Academy, a Christian training school in Texas. While Heather’s story reveals the outlines of the dense institutional structure of an alternative, evangelical culture, Sandler nevertheless treats that conversion as but skillful emotional preying on the vulnerable. She has a harder time, however, discounting the choice of Sarah Dietz, a more mature woman. Dietz and her husband, Ted, are active members of the Mars Hill evangelical congregation in Seattle, which has grown from a few hundred members to over six thousand since 1999. Culturally liberal and theologically conservative, Mars Hill adherents preach a critique of American consumer culture, its obsession with self and sex, the dominance of “corporate tyranny” and sweatshop labor, and looming environmental crises, while avidly awaiting the coming apocalypse. But Sarah troubles Sandler. Now in her mid-thirties, Sarah cares for the children and the home, hosts a weekly Bible study group, is active in a thick church network of women’s groups – and accepts the Biblical injunction for women to submit to their husbands. A decade earlier, Sarah held a job, was deeply involved in the Seattle music scene, and was an enthusiast of the feminist psychologist Carol Gilligan.⁶ Sarah acknowledges that she would like to return to school but accepts without obvious difficulty that her role within family and church does not allow for that at present. Anything but bitter, Sarah explains her choice in “the language of difference feminism,” underscoring the sisterhood that forms among women “who celebrate their domestic roles and talents as offered from God ... as part of his ‘perfect plan’” (68).

Sandler oscillates between an appreciation for the community this evangelical faith has engendered and a belief that faith itself is brainwashing, a search for a “liberation from the liberation” as defined in the 1960s. Sandler remains shocked as she absorbs how experimental societies like Mars Hill exploded across America “into a megachurch that is rolling back the achievements of the sixties generation” (68). Her book recognizes that evangelical Christianity is “a grass roots movement grown up,” but her reporting far surpasses her understanding. A more insightful guide to the evangelical movement is Jeffrey Sheler.

Long the religion editor for a national news magazine and himself an evangelical enthusiast in his youth, Sheler combines excellent reporting with a keen historical sensibility. He astutely analyzes core evangelical beliefs and presents a brief, credible history of Christianity from Luther to Falwell.⁷ Through his eyes readers meet a wide variety of evangelicals: Bishop John Gimenez, a former drug addict and prisoner who accepted Christ at age thirty-three in 1963, and now heads a Virginia church with over 3,200 members and six hundred affiliated congregations worldwide; James

⁶ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

⁷ See Joel Carpenter, *Revive Us again: The Reawakening of American Fundamentalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) for a detailed history of post-1925 fundamentalism.

Dobson, the leader of Focus on the Family, a politically active Republican-affiliated national group; students at Wheaton College, the intellectual flagship of the evangelical movement; Rick Warren, successful author and pastor of one of the largest churches in the nation; and evangelicals from throughout the country who sponsor rock concerts, aid the poor, and build homes for the indigent in Mississippi and Guatemala. The thread that laces these activities into a whole is their sense of mission central to the common faith.

This idea of mission is complex, and cannot be reduced to simply proselytizing for conservative political causes. The imperative to spread the gospel, the “good news,” to nonbelievers is the irreducible core of this evangelical mission. At times, it can take interesting turns, as when an enthusiast reaches out to nonbelievers in the words of Bob Dylan’s “You Gotta Serve Somebody,” conveying simultaneously a faith vision and a potent critique of American society. Mission also carries the charge to be compassionate, to reach out to those in need with concrete material support. When Rick Warren’s book *The Purpose-Driven Life* became a bestseller (twenty-five million hardback copies sold since 2002), he and his family inverted the Biblical injunction to tithe by returning 90 percent of the royalties to the church. With that he funded a global project, the PEACE Plan, an acronym for “planting” churches, equipping local leaders, aiding the poor, caring for the sick, and educating the next generation. Warren’s commitment to a social gospel includes controlling global warming and eradicating AIDS.

The third aspect of the evangelical mission, transforming the nation’s culture, has received quite critical attention, particularly those groups that became, in effect, adjuncts to the conservative Republican movement. But the recent decline of the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition, Sheler suggests, underscores the long-term difficulty of maintaining “a regimented political organization” among evangelicals, for the commitment to mission ultimately overrides narrow political proselytizing. Certain “hot-button” issues still rally many but, Sheler argues, evangelicals are not primarily driven by political considerations. He explores at length the work of Richard Cizik, the Washington lobbyist for the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), a coalition with thirty million affiliated members. Cizik does not seek to create a Christian nation but rather, within a pluralist framework, to find the balance between that “evangelistic impulse” and “the biblical mandate to try and transform the culture for the common good.” While there remains room enough for disagreement over the definition of these terms, the 2004 “Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility” indicates the NAE’s intent. That document forcefully called for environmental protection, social programs to aid the poor and working families, defense of human and religious rights worldwide, and opposition to abortion and embryonic stem-cell research, the last two core positions for most evangelicals. The key to the NAE’s position, Sheler writes, is a commitment to discourse and decision-making within the contours of American political traditions.

Fervent evangelical belief in political life is not a new phenomenon in the American experience, for its roots extend back at least as far as the first Great Awakening in the 1740s. Its varied influences across the intervening centuries have created, for better and for worse, some of the perspectives that mark Americans as Americans, even after accounting for the diverse impacts of continued immigration, technological change, and growth into economic prowess. It has fueled struggles to

abolish slavery, to win for women the right to vote, and to end segregation, even as it has never relinquished its overriding, faith-based, moral vision. That so many contemporary evangelical groups owe their origins and/or growth to the Jesus Movement that grew out of the 1960s counterculture underscores again how deep their grounding is in American life. Even as it seeks to effect a common good, to critique and transform the culture, evangelism is itself transformed by that culture. It is that cultural dialectic, within a framework that respects, if does not join with, a particular faith belief, that needs understanding and, to be sure, political engagement. To dismiss this movement as an aberration or to reduce its purpose to the utterances of its most inane spokespeople may provide some with immediate gratification, but will diminish one's ability to comprehend the continued complexity of the American experience.