

Downside UP

A Voice of Contemporary Political Economy

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(This is the second of what will be three articles on religion and politics in American society. The May issue outlined the development of the two primary religious ideologies and the culture wars that have grown out of them. This article introduces four other ideologies, explains how they interact with religion, and considers their combined impact on domestic political issues. The third article, perhaps not to be published until the fall, after I recover my intellectual energy and spend lots of time with my grandchildren, will focus on the mindsets which more broadly shape attitudes towards civil liberties, the environment, and foreign policy.)

It Really Is About Religion, Part II: Struggling for the Soul of a Nation

The United States is at war with itself. It is a war of culture, religion, and politics based not on what people think but what they believe.

At its heart, it is a religious war based on two broadly divergent Protestant interpretations of God's expectations of human beings as expressed in the Hebrew/Christian Bible. One, what I have labeled the "Evangelical" perspective, is of clarity and certainty, focusing on certain passages taken as "commandments" from the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible (notably Leviticus and Genesis) and the New Testament (notably Paul, the Gospel of John, and Revelation). It has especially to do with salvation and with gender, sex, and sexuality. It focuses on each individual's "personal" relationship with God and calls for all people to be "born again" in a moment of accepting Jesus as their Lord and Savior. It foresees salvation and entrance into the Kingdom of Heaven as the promise of repentance and acceptance.

The other perspective, what I have labeled the "Mainline" perspective, attends to salvation through the life and teachings of Jesus in the parables, stories, and instructions of especially the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). The most important passages are those, on the one hand, commanding followers to love their neighbors, even their enemies, and take care of the poor, and, on the other hand, warning of the difficulties ahead for the rich ever getting into the Kingdom of Heaven. While also concerned about individual salvation, these Christians tend to recognize more of a commitment to community as well as self, and, in the Enlightenment tradition, face an uncertain future, never knowing whether their efforts will be adequate -- indeed, aware that no human being can know exactly what God really expects.

The percentage of the US population which could, even broadly, articulate, define, or explain either of these perspectives, is surely well under fifty. It likely

includes only those who attend Sunday School not just formal church services. But those who could describe or identify with one or the other of these perspectives covers most of the population, extending out to infrequent church-goers, non-church-goers, and people of other faiths who on various issues associate with the two dominant Protestant groupings. In this extension of belief, the diversity is huge, from all kinds of Roman Catholics and Jews to Mormons, Quakers, Muslims, and atheists (yes, not even they can live outside the culture). (See last month's issue for elaboration of the above three paragraphs.)

These core beliefs, moreover, are overlaid with many other ideologies, the most important of which I would suggest are individualism (along with freedom and democracy), capitalism, nationalism (with patriotism and expansionism), and racism. Since the Civil War, it has been reasonably argued, as Ralph Nader does now, that the two political parties in the United States have generally accepted these ideologies and, like "Tweedledum" and "Tweedledee," only differed along the fringes of their policies. (1) With respect to individualism, capitalism, nationalism, and even racism, this may today be more true than ever. As evidenced by their political parties, all Americans appear to share a broad consensus of common values.

Not so with respect to their religious values. Here, Americans have long been divided and, since the 1980's, as Evangelicals have gained major political strength, the openness – and bitterness -- of the divide has become more apparent. With fewer and fewer Southern Democratic conservatives and Northern Republican liberals, the two parties are more unified within and more divided between. And they are split not only over the "values" issues of "God, guns, and gays" that Republicans use to beat up Democrats. They differ fundamentally on a whole range of domestic political issues from taxes and Medicare to the environment and corporate regulation, even civil liberties and foreign policy.

The purpose of this series of articles is to describe and explain this religious/political divide. In part I, summarized above, I described the beliefs and evolution of the two major groupings, and the mindsets which have now taken hold and compete for the American soul. In the remainder of this issue, I will outline the other ideologies I have referred to above and how they interact with the two Protestant-dominated mindsets. I will describe how the Republican/Evangelicals are now trying, just like their Mainline counterparts did for 200 years, to use the government to impose a very different agenda: to reduce personal freedoms related to sex, sexuality, and gender, impose a specific religious perspective, and limit the social and economic role of government. In Part III of this series, I will focus on the two mindsets as they impact civil liberties, the environment, and foreign policy.

American Ideologies: Individualism, Capitalism, Nationalism, and Racism

Individualism is readily perceived as the most pervasive American ideology. Famous visitors as early as Alexis De Tocqueville (Democracy in America (1835)) noted it. Individualism underlies Americans' genuine commitment to freedom and democracy. It underlies – and in part was created by – Protestantism in both its Evangelical and Mainline versions. It is inextricably tied to capitalism and the ideology of capitalism. It is invoked both on the “right” to keep the government “off the backs” of individual Americans and their businesses, and on the “left” to use government to protect individual Americans from the excesses and abuses of corporations grown too large and powerful.

Of all the other ideologies, besides Evangelical and Mainline Protestantism, the most dynamic, emerging well before Independence, was capitalism. Centered in the North, it was locked, before the Civil War, in contest with a predominately Southern (but still in part capitalist) ideology of slave-based plantation agriculture. The Civil War marked not only the end of formal slavery, but also the triumph of the capitalist model of development. With the South out of the Union in 1861, a Northern dominated Congress was at last able to raise tariffs to a level which did not simply raise revenue but protected domestic manufacturers from European, and especially English, competition. The abolition of slavery was in turn a triumph of not only Mainline Protestant ideology but what emerging capitalist ideology called “free labor” – meaning labor to which capitalists had no obligation and were free to hire, fire, and pay as little as possible.

The “Compromise of 1876,” under which Union troops withdrew from the South, left the old Southern elite free to reinstate a system of racial domination short of slavery in exchange for the elite's acceptance of a thoroughly capitalist (and Northern dominated) economic system. Even as they waved the Confederate flag at every election, the Southern elite eagerly joined the program as junior partners, using Northern capital, providing raw materials to Northern industry, and initiating Southern industrialization.

Steeped in an aristocratic (“cavalier”) military tradition, the Southern elite also adopted the nationalist ideology of expansion. Far from isolationist, the United States was, from its earliest days, an eager internationalist where internationalism served American interests. George Washington may have warned of “entangling alliances” but he was talking about those which would get the United States involved in European wars. For he also spoke of a “rising American empire” modeled on the English empire. (The colonists originally wanted equal partnership in that empire and only separated from it when they couldn't even get a vote in it.) Thomas Jefferson, in turn, whined about the loss of his model of a small agrarian state, but himself doubled the size of the country by negotiating the Louisiana Purchase, and sent the fledgling US Navy all the way to the Mediterranean to defend American mercantile interests against the “Barbary pirates.”

In fact, capitalism is as hard to separate from nationalist expansionism as it is to separate from individualism. The pre-Civil War era brought not only the Louisiana Purchase but the taking of half of Mexico and a continued genocidal

assault on the American Indian (racism again). (2) After the Civil War, American industrialization (behind a wall of tariffs) coincided with the gradual subjugation of Latin America into a de facto American Empire. By the twentieth century, the United States was regularly sending troops to occupy Caribbean area countries, and in the rest of Latin America also challenging the English Empire for economic domination. World War I finalized the US economic takeover of Latin America and opened the door to a worldwide dominance achieved by the end of World War II.

Historians dating back at least to Max Weber in the nineteenth century have pointed out that the Protestant ethic in general, with its emphasis on individualism and the individual's relationship to God, supported, and was in turn supported by, the capitalist emphasis on individual accumulation of wealth. The interaction, from the Puritans on down, has more than once slipped over into an assumption that the very fact of wealth was itself prima facie evidence of God's blessing and one's likely salvation. Similarly, as in other empires intent on justifying their conquests and exploitation, God was on "our" side. God uniquely blessed our actions, and our success was itself all the evidence necessary to prove God's blessing.

Just as Mainline Protestantism, holding the reins of political power, both supported industrial capitalism and bore the burden of critiquing it (e.g. Progressivism), Mainline Protestantism bore the burden of both justifying conquest -- and protesting it. The Civil War and World War II look pretty good on the morality scale but not so President McKinley's justification for conquering the Philippines to "Christianize" his "little brown brothers" (who were already mostly Catholic and whose leadership supported the US attack on Spain in exchange for Philippine independence). I think it is no coincidence that the most interventionist presidents of the early twentieth century were Progressives right out of the Mainline tradition -- Teddy Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, each with a vision of instructing and benefiting inferior peoples. (See Downside Up, 2003, III.1, "Latin Americanizing the World," III.4, "Our Country, Right or Wrong," and III.5, "Unknown War/Unknown Patriot.")

In short, by the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century, individualism, capitalism, nationalism, and racism were neatly interwoven with Protestantism, and especially Mainline Protestantism, in the fabric of American beliefs. Until quite recently, fundamental challenges to these beliefs have been few, weak, and/or easily compromised. From the "left," there were Populists at the end of the nineteenth century and "Wobblies" into the twentieth. Socialist Party presidential candidate Eugene V. Debs got six per cent of the popular vote in 1912. But even the Great Depression of the 1930's, as great a threat as it represented at the time, failed to shake the system. Franklin D. Roosevelt, a mainstream, patrician, Democrat, was able to steal the left's thunder with a thoroughly capitalist system establishing Social Security, a minimum wage, the right to unionize, "welfare," and, in general, a much expanded notion of government action to alleviate the worst effects of capitalism without abolishing it. The means of production and distribution remained overwhelmingly in the hands and control of private capital.

Clearly in the Mainline Protestant tradition, Roosevelt and his “New Deal” well represented the broad ideological consensus which dominated the country up until the 1960’s. In the 1960’s and 1970’s, out of the Mainline communitarian tradition itself there emerged first a challenge from the left: the civil rights movement, opposition to the Vietnam War, women’s rights, the consumer and environmental movements, and the “counter-culture.” It raised up individualism against racism, questioned nationalism as imperialism, and called once again for new limitations on the excesses of – but definitely not the abolition of – capitalism. From the “right,” there appeared, largely in reaction, out of the long-observed Evangelical tradition, a quite different challenge. It reasserted the values of not only Evangelical Protestantism, but also a more nineteenth century individualism, capitalism, nationalism, and, to a certain extent, racism. It is the roots of this second challenge which are now bearing political fruit in the New Republican Party.

Based upon a widely-shared American ideological foundation, Mainline Protestantism long dominated the American political agenda. On the same foundation, Evangelical Protestantism has built an alternative agenda and succeeded in defining a new struggle for the American soul. This is a religious struggle which now defines the bitter divide of American politics.

Now the Evangelicals: Domestic Policy

Clearly, the Evangelicals have a different mindset. Mainline Protestants have an Enlightenment kind of uncertainty about a largely unknown God in a vaguely imagined future. Evangelicals are brimming with confidence and certainty about a God they know well who will judge them sooner rather than later in predictable circumstances on terms they also know well. Mainline Protestants have, however haphazardly and contradictorily, a fundamental commitment to the general welfare (written into the Preamble to the Constitution). Evangelicals understand God’s salvation as depending both on their individual responses to specific commandments to oppose well-defined evils and on their being born again in Christ. Mainline Protestants are called to tend to a community of all people. Evangelicals are called to save all who will join their community. Both views are Bible-based. But there the similarities end. (3)

Domestically, there seems little doubt about the consequences for social policy and programs of Evangelicals taking control of the government. While uplifting the importance of spiritual rebirth, they have almost ignored the importance of their neighbors’ material well-being. “Feeding the hungry” has become a charitable exercise in personal fulfillment and a demonstration of one’s love for Jesus. (4) Forget about government programs for the needy. Don’t worry about how first world countries are the major cause of third world hunger or how hungry people have time to think about God at all. There is no questioning of equal opportunity, no problem with a society characterized by the most uneven distribution of wealth and income in the entire industrialized world. That’s a

Mainline Protestant concern. Personal salvation is what counts and it is available to all equally just for accepting God's offer of it.

From there, it is no stretch from Evangelical belief to anti-government rhetoric. Florida's (Catholic) governor, Jeb Bush, faces no contradictions in talking about the actual abolition of government: "There would be no greater tribute to our maturity as a society than if we can make these buildings around us empty of workers; silent monuments to the time when government played a larger role than it deserved or could adequately fill." (Inaugural Address, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, Tallahassee Democrat, posted to the paper's web page, Jan. 7, 2003. I have quoted this in earlier issues. I do so again because it so starkly says what the new radical Republicans in Washington, D.C. would never dare say out-loud to the American people – who believe in government and have no idea of the real aim of the New Republican leadership to destroy it.)

Capitalism and Evangelicalism

Applied to economics, Evangelical belief implies radical, unfettered capitalism. Free the individual to pursue wealth as we are already free as individuals to seek salvation. No taxes? Why do you need taxes if you don't believe in government programs. In fact, government should do little more than defend the country from foreign enemies and protect us from theft and violence. Unequal and under-funded schools? Educate yourself. Regulation of food and drug production? An infringement on one's economic freedom. Health care? Why would we tax some Americans to provide health care for other Americans? Anti-trust legislation? We value free enterprise without government regulation; if some are strong enough to succeed more than others, that's the American – and God's -- way. The list can go on and on. There is a reason why the New Republican Party must be dragged into a drug benefit for Medicare. It only does so in order to pre-empt the Democrats and not reveal its true colors to the American people. So the final bill is a hopelessly costly and confusing bill whose most outstanding feature is a prohibition on the government using its collective buying power to lower drug prices for seniors.

The New Republican Party has created what media commentators often find a strange alliance between corporate capitalism and Evangelical religion. Isn't it corporate capitalism which is constantly running over the line into corporate corruption? Isn't it profit-seeking capitalism which promotes so much sex on TV, all in the interest of selling products. Isn't it corporate capitalism which pays wages so low that mothers must work and even families with both parents employed can often not provide a minimum standard of living?

What the media people do not realize is that the Evangelical-corporate alliance requires neither corporate support for the Evangelical social agenda nor Evangelical support for the corporate agenda. The two agendas are just not very often in conflict. So long as the Evangelicals don't mess with sexism and racism in the marketplace where labor and goods need to move freely in a fast-moving,

globalizing world, the corporate folks can certainly live with deregulation and low taxes. Prayer in the schools and abortion are just not that important.

In turn, so long as the corporate world supplies funding, through the Republican Party, for the Evangelical agenda, and the party's leadership promotes what Evangelicals care most about, Evangelicals can live with a few slips in morality and corporate indifference to the values agenda. They might even live with civil rights for homosexuals. The individualist Evangelical view of salvation does not per se determine an anti-government, unfettered capitalist political position, but it leaves an ideological opening for that position. In the New Republican Party, the ideologies of unfettered, nineteenth century, capitalism and Evangelical Protestantism cohabitate much more easily than many pundits seem to think – or most Mainline Protestants would suppose.

Mainline Protestants just don't get it. For them, the Evangelical/Republican agenda is a moral, religious, and social disaster about to happen. God calls Mainline Protestants to a very different place. At some level, obviously varying greatly among individuals, they know that charity is never enough to meet the needs of the poor. They know that government is essential to meeting those needs. They know that programs like Social Security, Medicare, and Head Start do work and that the problem with social programs in the United States is not that they have tried to do too much but that they have tried to do too little. Mainline Protestants believe that those with the most should be expected to give the most.

They see and are horrified that their country is already, out of their own failures and the opposition of the Evangelical right, a country hard to be proud of. It is the richest in the world but, among the major industrialized countries, the one with the highest infant mortality rates, the most unequal distribution of wealth and income, the highest abortion rate (resulting from the lowest sex education and contraception rates), the most people in jail, the most people undernourished, the most people living in poverty, the lowest life expectancies, the most expensive but least effective health care, the least equal educational opportunity. And it is all exacerbated by a racism which for minorities pushes all these statistics down to the level of many third world countries.

Now the Evangelicals: the Values Agenda

For Mainline Protestants, to put the Evangelicals in charge of the government is not just to undermine the Mainline social gospel agenda, but to put in place an Evangelical social values agenda. **This has in fact nothing to do with pro-government or anti-government.** Jeb Bush's words are a smokescreen for strong government action against abortion, gay rights, and the right to die. This is evidenced by the governor's on-going attempt in Florida to keep alive (after 14 years) a brain-dead woman against the wishes of her husband. It is evidenced by Attorney General John Ashcroft's efforts (stopped by the courts) to overturn the law passed by Oregon voters to allow assisted suicides for the terminally ill (under which the rate of such deaths has declined). An Evangelical triumph is

about replacing loving thy neighbor and caring for the poor with “God, guns, and gays,” a catchy alliteration referring to Republican Party advocacy of unregulated gun ownership, public prayer, and hostility to a variety of issues related to sex, sexuality, and gender.

Most of the Evangelical/Republican position is based, often awkwardly, upon what are taken as literal, irrefutable, immutable, and unequivocal commandments of God. The Bible is clear, Evangelicals say: homosexuality is a perversion, women cannot be ministers (or often, even lay leaders) of the church, sexuality is suspect, and abortion is murder. Every Christian should do everything possible to oppose these evils and promote true Christian values. The point is not that anything like all Mainline Protestants are on the other side of all these issues. The problem for them is that the absoluteness of the Evangelical position runs against the grain of a Mainline Enlightenment Protestantism emphasizing uncertain knowledge of God’s Word, evolving understanding of the Bible, and a path to salvation which only God can know.

Parts of the values agenda are easier to understand than others. All of those related to sex, gender, and sexuality are greatly reinforced by an increasingly militant Catholic hierarchy which has clearly joined the Evangelical/New Republican political alliance. But this does not include the gun issue. I have never seen the Bible invoked to justify opposition to gun regulation – although I imagine it has been so invoked somewhere. I attribute this issue’s dynamism to society’s broader commitment to individualism and freedom, values shared by all Americans, and the rural and Southern roots of the Evangelical/New Republican leadership – backed by the National Rifle Association.

Republicans never openly speak against equal rights for women in society as a whole – any more than they do against equal rights for African Americans. Yet, the heavy Evangelical influence in the New Republican Party, along with the roots of the party and the Evangelical impulse in rural and Southern parts of the country, has to bring into question the party’s commitment to either women’s or African American rights. It is very hard to imagine any Evangelical ever supporting civil rights protections for homosexuals, much less state-sanctioned same sex unions. Abortion is a permanent and unrelenting target. Prayer in the public schools is as high on the agenda as sex education is low, and “faith-based” social programs must be the payback to Mainline Protestants for all those years that they dominated the social and political agenda.

In Search of God’s Word: Text and Context

All of these Evangelical/Republican positions are terribly contentious and are so at least in part because they are based on what their proponents contend is a literal, irrefutable, immutable, and unequivocal reading of God’s Word as contained in the Bible. This explains the ferocity of both Evangelical political advocacy and Mainline resistance. For that reason, the basis of the Word requires some explanation. The explanation which follows is in the tradition of exploration, interpretation, and continuing reform and revelation characteristic

of Mainline Protestants, but goes well beyond what most Mainline Protestants have been exposed to and should not be generalized to them. At the same time, it is based on the work of scholars of whom some would go further than I do. In the end, what follows is my explanation which I would not hang on anyone else.

All ideologies are modified – often transformed – when passing from one culture to another. French capitalism is different from US capitalism is different from Japanese capitalism will be different from Russian capitalism. Spanish Catholicism was so transformed in its sixteenth century American Indian context that anthropologists and historians have a word to describe the process: syncretism, referring to the mutual integration of cultural patterns into something quite different from the originals.

Missionaries – apostles, proselytes – always face difficult choices when trying to convert people from other cultures. Do they hold fast to every tenet, every dogma, every form of their religious tradition and risk making few converts? Or do they sort out core beliefs from the dross of their own culture, accept possibly parallel forms from the society in which they are working, or even incorporate local beliefs into an evolving variant of the broader religious tradition?

Jesus's world was already caught up in a confluence of religions which likely influenced the changes and additions he made to the Judaism he inherited. Even more, after his death, his followers were faced with the serious question of whether their mission was only to Jews, was to include gentiles, or would be primarily to gentiles. (In the beginning, their Jesus sect was but one of many such groups within Judaism.) There was much in Jesus's message to appeal to gentiles, especially to Greeks in a world dominated by Greek culture. Paul, who, in the first century, was responsible for the great expansion of Christianity into the Greek-influenced world, was constantly struggling with – and modifying – his message to different cities – as expressed in his many letters to the Romans, Corinthians, et. al. It was Paul who decided that neither male circumcision nor commitment to Jewish dietary laws was required before gentiles could become Christians.

Similarly, as, over the first century CE, the gospels were written, the story of Jesus's life changed. Just within the synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke, there are significant differences in the story of Jesus's birth, death, trials, and resurrection. Mel Gibson's The Passion is controversial for its portrayal of the Jews, common people in addition to the leadership, as more responsible for Jesus's death than the Romans. Gibson went overboard to fabricate scenes portraying Pontius Pilate as a near-innocent intimidated by the Jewish crowds. But the gospels really did, over time, as each was published, shift the blame from Rome to the Jews. According to distinguished scholars like John Dominic Crossan, a frequent spokesperson for the "Jesus Seminar," this is no coincidence. As the Jesus sect gradually gave up on transforming Judaism and turned to converting the Roman world, the gospels' portrayal of Roman responsibility for Jesus's death was, to say the least, softened, and the blame shifted to the Jews. (5)

The importance of all this for understanding Christianity is that when I emphasize matters of translation, interpretation, and cultural context, I am not engaging in some religious version of post-modernism where there are no truths, no absolutes, no fundamental values -- where all meaning is contextual. I am not altering text so much as trying to restore text which has been altered by context -- the opposite of the post-modernist approach. The Bible does not come directly from God, word for word, but is rather the best efforts of (on the whole) good people trying to express their understanding of God's Word in writing. The Hebrew Bible/Old Testament cannot carry the same weight as the New Testament. Jesus himself was trying to modify Judaism. The words of Jesus have to carry more weight than those of his interpreters, whether they be first century or twenty-first century.

The problem starts with the fact that there is no record of Jesus ever writing down anything and, when he did speak, he apparently did so often in the parables, analogies, and stories handed down to us in writing by others. So, understanding Jesus's message is like peeling an onion. One has to peel down, as best one can, to the core of his words recorded closest to his own lifetime, with all the understanding possible of the culture in which he was speaking and the meaning of the words he was using. The work of his later followers in interpreting and writing about his life and teachings is important. The decisions made at Nicea in 325 about the Christian canon (meaning the officially accepted texts of the Bible) are not necessarily to be thrown out just because they were made by a group of entirely rich, male bishops appointed by the Roman emperor who, on political grounds, demanded that they agree on a single set of doctrines among many then contending. (6)

But if we are talking about Christianity, what Jesus said must be most important, the first three gospels -- the synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke -- must be given the greatest Biblical weight, other texts must be recognized as sometimes better revealing what Jesus had to say than just those contained in the Nicene canon, and twenty-first century interpretations using newly discovered texts may be more valuable than some other interpretations made much earlier but often without the newly discovered texts.

The Values Agenda in Question

Considering text and context, therefore, there is much to question about the Evangelical/Republican agenda. For example, women are indeed generally, but not entirely, presented as second class citizens in the Old Testament -- exceptions including Naomi, Ruth, Deborah, and others. Paul is also often quoted from his letters (to the Romans, Corinthians, et. al.) to the detriment of women's rights. But a lower status for women is a whole lot less clear when the reader focuses, as Mainliners tend to do, on the synoptic gospels and the life and teachings of Jesus himself.

There is plenty of scholarly work out now questioning whether some of what Paul said about women was not added to his letters later on. Certainly, he was

writing not to create universal doctrine but to help local churches deal with local issues. Jesus treated women with remarkable equality – speaking to them in public was alone, in those times, an extraordinary sign of his respect. There is no question that the Nicean canon excluded many of what can well be seen as equally (or more) legitimate manifestations of the Word, including the gospel of Mary Magdalene.

The canon itself never says that Mary Magdalene was a prostitute but only a “woman of the city” who was cured of possession by seven demons (which may have been depression or epilepsy). In the middle ages, the Church perverted the text to make her a “prostitute.” But in fact, she was the author of a full-fledged gospel which the bishops at Nicea likely knew of and, along with tens if not hundreds of other texts, rejected. In the canonical Bible itself, she was the first to discover Jesus absent from the tomb, the first to see him resurrected, and the one who brought the resurrection to the other disciples. Indeed, St. Augustine called her “the apostle to the apostles.” (7)

In light of my focus on the core of Jesus’s teachings, historical context, and evolving interpretation and understanding, the passages upon which the Evangelicals base their condemnation of homosexuality are to be questioned. For readers who want to read for themselves, the passages most commonly cited are Genesis 19:1-29; Leviticus 18:23 and 20:13; I Corinthians 6:9-10; I Timothy 1:9-10; and Romans 1:26-27. About these I would say: (1) All of them are talking about activities and behaviors far different from loving, consensual, committed relationships between people of the same gender in the twenty-first century. (2) The Leviticus passages come from what is known as the Holiness Code of ritual purity, many of whose other rules Jews as well as Christians have ceased to observe. (3) The Corinthian and Timothy passages depend on highly variable, problematical, and controversial translations of two Greek words, and, along with the Genesis passage, refer to forced sexual relationships which Mainline Protestants would join Evangelicals in condemning.

The Romans passage from Paul may be condemning acts contrary to one’s nature and thus heterosexual people who engage in homosexual acts, but not homosexuality itself. Paul and other Jewish Christians regarded homosexual acts as ritually unclean but not necessarily sinful. They did condemn exploitive sexual relationships as sinful, including those between men and boys, just as those Christians who accept homosexuality would today.

Finally, and again, there is no record of Jesus saying anything about homosexuality. Since his life and teachings are the guide for Christians and he spoke clearly of many other sins, one could appropriately conclude that his not mentioning homosexuality means that he did not consider it a sin. (8)

The bottom line with all these citations of text is that far from the absolutely clear and “literal” meaning the Evangelicals allege them to have, their meaning is often uncertain, their context ignored, and their interpretation skewed to the inclinations of the interpreter. The New International Version of the Bible used on the Evangelical web site I found (<http://wbsa.logos.com/> -- What

the Bible Says About...) is more a paraphrase than a translation. The most scholarly versions, the Revised Standard and New Revised Standard, are not even offered among the many choices for What the Bible Says About. There are innumerable passages throughout the Bible which the Evangelicals themselves ignore – including explicit rejection, by Jesus himself, of divorce. There are no passages about abortion.

Most of all, considering we are talking about people who claim to be Christians, there are no passages from Jesus supporting any of the Evangelical claims. It is a stark contrast with the Mainliners and their emphasis on “the most important commandment” to love thy neighbor, and the rich having as much chance of getting into heaven as “a camel through the eye of a needle.”

Prayer in Public Institutions: the Agenda Gone Too Far

The above said, the Evangelical/New Republican values agenda is for the most part an essentially secular set of programs based on a religious perspective, and, in that sense, no different from what Mainline Protestants have advocated for 200 years.

The one that is different is the demand for prayer and other religious practices in the nation’s public institutions, from social programs to football games. Prayer in the schools is something Mainline Protestants imposed when I was growing up (the Puritan/Congregational/United Church of Christ version of the Lord’s Prayer in Massachusetts, for example). But that was then, the Evangelical/Republican plan is now, and it is, even more, an attempt to impose a state of mind – indeed a religion -- on public life. It is not about the product of individual religious conviction; it is about religion itself. It is religious tyranny. That prospect was the main reason why the people of the new United States demanded in the 1780’s that a Bill of Rights, with the First Amendment granting freedom from state-imposed religion, be added to the Constitution. There was so much diversity in society that no religion could be placed above any other without contradicting the principles of individualism, justice, and equality. As is surely evident from the zeal with which public prayer is pursued throughout the “Bible Belt,” this part of the agenda is not about religion; it is about Evangelical religion. (9)

It is bad enough at those public meetings we all attend where there is no specific religious identity to the group but tradition calls for a brief prayer before the meal or the business. In front of Muslims, Jews, and various unknowns as well as Christians, you can be sure that if the person giving the prayer is an Evangelical, she or he is going to make it sectarian, ending with something like “in the name of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.” I cringe with embarrassment. I know the Evangelicals see it as their working to save non-believers. To me, it is insensitive at best, but even more a measure of the arrogance which justifies imposing one person’s religion on another. In practice, it is a rude way to exclude those who do not believe as you do. I was raised with these words of Jesus: “*And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and*

pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.” (Matthew 6:5-6)

It is one thing to advocate strongly in the world for a particular religion. It is one thing to believe that those who do not follow this religion will go to Hell. It is one thing to use the government to create or destroy social programs as your religious principles dictate. It is quite another thing to use the government to impose your religion itself on other citizens. What concerns me most about the rise of Evangelical political power in the United States is neither their hostility to social programs I support nor their values agenda I find offensive. It is their mindset. It is their arrogance, their certainty, their attempt to impose on me and everyone else the truth that they alone claim to know but cannot know. It violates the whole idea of an individual and personal relationship with God upon which Evangelical as well as Mainline Protestantism was originally founded.

This difference in mindset is irreconcilable with any other faith, not just Mainline Protestantism. To claim to know what God wants is not only to deny another's freedom to think and choose, but, more outrageously, to claim to know the Mind of God – what only God can know. It is the most fundamental of heresies. I thank God for the opportunity to look “through the glass darkly” in search of what may be many different paths to God's Kingdom. In the end, having no questions and knowing all the answers sounds to me like Hell.

(1) Tweedledum and Tweedledee are the silly twins in Lewis Carroll's Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There, and a nursery rhyme by an anonymous author. The names originally came from a poem On the Feuds Between Handel and Bononcini by John Byrom (1692-1763):

*Some say, that Signor Bononcini,
Compared to Handel's a mere ninny;
Others aver, to him, that Handel
Is scarcely fit to hold a candle.
Strange! That such high dispute should be
'Twi'x Tweedledum and Tweedledee.*

The famous 19th century political cartoonist, Thomas Nast, was the first I know to apply the terms to the Democratic and Republican parties.

(2) I do not use the word “genocide” lightly or loosely. As opposed to apartheid and segregation, I use this word to apply to a deliberate policy intended to wipe out a people. From the Connecticut Puritans' assault on the Pequot Indians in the 1630's to Indian removal in the 1830's to full scale war by the likes of Generals Sherman and Sheridan, US policy was genocide.

(3) I want to emphasize again that I am talking about patterns and generalizations. No one fits perfectly into any broad generalization, no matter how carefully structured. I have, for example, been struck by the challenges facing the Catholic Democratic candidate for president. Committed to doing good through government social

programs but often full of uncertainty about how to do it, pro-choice against his church hierarchy, struggling with how to be both patriotic and internationalist, he is an easy target for Republicans who want to label him “Mr. Flip-Flop” when running for political office. In this, he reminds me of Jimmy Carter, the quintessential Mainline Protestant, stuck in a Southern Baptist tradition gone amuck, trying to conduct a moral foreign (and domestic) policy.

(4) As another example of how the groups I am talking about are far from monolithic, I have some way-out Evangelical neighbors who are selling their house (for a very large profit) so they can support nine more orphans they have adopted in Haiti. I may not regard this as a very effective response to worldwide exploitation of the rich by the poor, but I recognize their commitment to all of God’s Word. Similarly, the Presbyterian Hunger Project of my own denomination is run by people who well understand the reality of exploitation of third world peoples by first world countries, but the thrust of the program is feel-good self-satisfaction.

(5) A must read for everyone is Crossan’s scholarly In Search of the Historical Jesus or his much more readable, Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography, written for a broader audience. For a review of Gibson’s movie and the historical and interpretive issues, also read Jon Meacham’s excellent “Who Killed Jesus?” in the February 16, 2004, issue of Newsweek, pp. 45-53.

(6) In the fourth century when the bishops met, there were perhaps hundreds of texts and many varieties of Christianity. It was Constantine who wanted ONE variety for his empire. After that, everything else became “apocryphal” and “heretical” – giving us 1700 years of inquisitions.

(7) There are many sources for these three paragraphs above and others. I owe much of what I say to my wife who has read more than I have on the issues. See Crossan, cited above, and also: The Feminine Face of Christianity and The Woman with the Alabaster Jar by Margaret Starbird. The Gospel of Mary, edited by Karen King, and Mary Magdalen: Christianity’s Hidden Goddess by Lynn Picknett. I am especially grateful to Dr. J. Earl Thompson for his perspective, his insights, and his generosity of spirit in helping me develop my ideas in this article as well as last month’s.

(8) I am entirely responsible for the above paragraphs on homosexuality and the Bible, but am grateful to the Rev. Marjorie Lane Marsh for her assistance in helping me understand better the ideas I want to convey.

(9) Has anyone thought about what would happen if a prayer amendment to the Constitution were actually passed? There would then have to be some kind of equal opportunity to pray unless we also want to repeal the First and Fourteenth amendments. (Let’s not go there right now!) Shall we have the State decided whose prayers are legitimate and whose are not? How can we have one religion’s prayers without having those of all, including Muslims, Hindus, Black Panthers, and Covens? This dilemma much concerned the people of the era of the American Revolution. The alternative is what the Evangelicals want: their prayers only.