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## **The Great Awakening** *The Absolute and the Political: a polemical look at the fringes of the US electorate*

When on November 3 the election results seemed to still hang in the air, and everyone expected a drawn-out recount of Ohioan votes I went to the Library of Congress to get a reading card. And to *volens volens* meet a “value voter”.

The middle-aged, white, female employee who was taking my photo for the card, asked me what I thought about the election results. Not waiting for an answer, she turned to me waving the freshly printed card dry and said in a soft but enthusiastic tone: “You also think that the President is going to make it, right?” Her question was quintessentially rhetoric as she was beyond doubt on the imminent reality and the whole-hearted desirability of such an outcome. As she asked this rhetoric question her voice trembled with joyful expectation and her eyes lighted up with a glow that transcended the somber surroundings of a basement office. Her expression seemed altogether alien to the dullness usually associated with politics. It was the glow of mystic union and certainty, something I had so far only seen in people drugged by fresh love or house music.<sup>i</sup>

Certainly not in an ordinary participant in the democratic political process.

The quasi-religious experience of certitude in salvation hardly ever enters the realm of politics, and to an European classical Centrist with a grave concern for responsible foreign policy and a searing interest in sustainable domestic policies it appears blatantly unintelligible how George W. Bush would qualify for the Olymp of charismatic and visionary leaders. Not to speak of the exclusive club of outright Saviors.

More generally, religion often seems to engender even an apolitical trait in many of its most devote followers. It is in the world's religions that we find rooted most of the movements of forsaking mundane interests and renouncing active social life. Hermits, monks, mystics and religious scholars dedicate their life to a search for insight and fulfillment that they believe no earthly being or institution can grant them. Macchiavelli and Marx accused Christianity of taking the people's eye off the ball of worldly matters and active republican involvement.<sup>ii</sup>

The American historical experience, in particular, abounds with groups that fled the oppressive combination of state and religion and dedicated their attention to the piety of the community, creating their new Jerusalem in the small scale of their parishes. In this tradition of a pluralistic search for redemption, and inspired by the Enlightenment the Founding Fathers were anxious to make the pursuit of happiness an individual right in all its aspects, spiritual and temporal, separating state and church.

While this separation of spheres may well have helped to prevent the massive delegitimization and sinking into oblivion that religion experienced in Europe, it has not kept the United States from experiencing awkward moments in the always ambiguous relationship between the Political and the Religious. Several of the sects that came to the United States in a quest to freely practice their beliefs had millenary aspects and a holistic view of salvation that called for an active remaking of the world to prepare it for the last days. The land itself has repeatedly been described as the new “City upon a Hill” (John Winthrop) or the land of the lost tribe of Israel with whom Jesus has made a new covenant (Book of Mormon), and is often at least semi-earnestly dubbed “God's own country”. A supposedly universal American ideology has been described as the “civil religion” and holds, for instance, the nebulous notion of “American exceptionalism” with strong religious overtones. Various waves of “Awakenings” have riveted the American people, and thrust the role of their more moral view of the world into the political sphere. Christian missionaries called upon the state to help them open the doors to China for proselytization, and the Temperance movement exerted public pressure on states to fight the evil that they considered to stem from alcohol. The strength of political rhetoric in the United States lies not least in its lack of fear of pathos in sounding like a sermon.

And yet, the recent presidential election may well mark a watershed in the historic evolution of the American electorate and the way it is perceived by the political parties that battle for its votes. Right or wrong, the conventional wisdom that has emerged in the post-election analysis and that can be expected to shape the campaigning strategies of the parties in the years to come is that a single set of voters and issues carried the day for Bush. Evangelical Christians and their conception of public decency.

This is particularly surprising as Evangelicals had so far been among the most apolitical of voter groups. Deeply concerned about what they believe to be a predominant decadence of morals, and focused on the spiritual base of every act of life, they traditionally stood away from politics that they despised as entangled in worldly sin. Among the righteous few, the deviant behavior of the wider society around them was what they saw politics cater to and encourage.

Political organizations like the United Nations or the European Economic Community<sup>iii</sup> take a

prominent role as leading contenders for the Antichrist in some eschatological interpretations of Evangelicals, and social security numbers were feared to be the “numbers of the Beast”. Profoundly suspicious of government institutions which many considered to be irrespective and unresponsive at best, and inimical at worst to their value system and style of life, the preferred path had been to seek political reclusion. Paranoid doomsday claims of right-wing commentators reflect a fear that is felt widely in their ranks: “If you believe that recent years of uncivil behavior are burdensome, imagine the likelihood of a future in which all bizarre acts are the norm, and a government-booted foot stands permanently on your face.”<sup>iv</sup> Their commitment to home-schooling is an illustration of the fear of corrosive government influence that permeates these groups. In contrast, the attempts of some Muslim parents to keep their daughters from co-ed swimming instruction or class excursions - a topic that is featured at center-stage in European discussions on integration - look like a minor nuisance. The policy of choice, therefore, was one of minimizing points of contact. Abstaining from voting, not to speak of active involvement in party politics, was only a logical consequence for anyone who is first and foremost a disciple rather than a citizen, and has nothing to expect from a morally corrupted society around him but all to hope for from the savior of the chosen few.

These few had grown in number, but so far all attempts at targeting them had remained unconvincing, and could not mobilize their votes in a decisive manner. They had remained a marginal phenomenon in American electoral strategies.

The genius of Karl Rove's political instincts lies in the simple but not necessarily evident recognition that an inversion of classical campaign strategy might yield electoral victory given the changes in the American electorate: rather than try to win the election in the center, his strategy was winning it at the electoral edge, at the fringes of American society. Since the religious right presented a so far untapped constituency that had traditionally abstained from politics and one that was deemed structurally unattainable for the Democratic Party, energizing it would radically change the political equation in favor of the Republican party. Turning it out to vote had to be the goal. Particularly as this fringe was far from being a fringe by numbers.

According to a Zogby poll, 23% of Americans claimed that their religion influenced their voting “very much”, and 20% actively want to see social policies shaped by religion.<sup>v</sup> A study by the Annenberg Center for Public Policy reports that evangelical or born-again Protestants make up between 40% and 50% of the electorate in many Southern states and more than a quarter of the electorate in important Mid-Western states such as Ohio, Iowa, Indiana, Michigan or Minnesota.<sup>vi</sup> Therefore, this new campaign focus could even afford to come at the expense of independent voters and classical, centrist Republicans.

In this light, the energizing of the evangelical political base was revolutionary.

And in its revolutionary nature it has a predecessor and historical parallel in the politicization of Shiite Islam that helped bring about the Iranian Revolution of 1979.

### *The Iranian Precedent*

The Iranian Revolution had been the initial event in giving “Political Islam” a bad name in Western minds, and turned Shi'ism into a synonym for theocratic rule and revolutionary religious zeal. Synonyms that only a few years earlier would hardly have sprung to anyone's mind.

In the schism that befell Islam after the death of the prophet Mohammed, the Shi'a (*Schi'at Ali* = the Party of Ali) asserted that secular and religious rule was to be unitary (in a caliphate), and an exclusive prerogative of the direct descendants of the prophet via his daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali ibn Abi Talib. Ever since the claim of Ali's second son Husain to the Caliphate had been defeated in the battle of Kerbala in 680, the Shi'ite demand for unitary power spiritual and temporal in direct lineage of the prophet Mohammed had been de facto defeated. From then onward, the Shi'a had to endure a political rule, at times even foreign, that however religiously obedient it claimed to be was illegitimate according to their beliefs. Any ruler was in fact an usurper of a power. The following descendants in the lineage of Ali and Husain could not effectively obtain the caliphate but were nonetheless Imams (highest religious authority) to the Shi'a. After the 12<sup>th</sup> and final Imam went into occultation and is in hiding until the end of times, even an unitary religious leadership had been lost and until he will return as the Mahdi, there could be no-one laying legitimate claim to either religious or secular superior leadership – and even less so to unify both aspects in his person. Or – in a different light – since all governments were equally illegitimate no political party could seriously attempt to monopolize a religious backing for their claim to power. This prerogative was to be left for the returning Mahdi.

All being inherent usurpers, in the eyes of the Shi'a no ruler could lay an *a priori* morally better pretense to power than his contenders. None could make a more authoritative demand for obedience, Shi'ites were therefore free to be equally obedient or disobedient to any political leader. They should in any case focus on a virtuous life as prescribed to them by the Qu'ran and the teachings of the Ayatollahs they sought to follow and emulate. In the public sphere, religious authorities thrust their energies mainly towards social activism, needed to mitigate and heal problems the secular authority would not address or had actually caused.

This classical Shi'ite view of the world finds a loose Christian equivalent in a medieval theory of rule of separate powers that derives from Jesus' demand to "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's." (Mk 12:17)

And yet, politics and political rule have, of course, continued over the centuries in Shi'ite areas in a pragmatic sense. Shi'ism was not, neither did it seek to be a unitary political force in the political landscape of Persia/Iran. In 1905-11 the so-called Persian Constitutional Revolution was mainly an anti-feudal reaction led by secular political interests, the clergy did not take power. A secular and western-style nationalist politician like Mossadegh could rise via parliament to the post of prime minister and enjoy wide-spread popular support. What was so revolutionary about the Iranian Revolution in 1979 was not that popular unrest swept the Shah from his throne but that in the opposition to the monarchy Shi'a Islam had become a political force, and had understood to put a cleric at the center of the wider opposition movement: Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. This stood in contrast to 1905-11, and indeed centuries of politics in majority Shi'ite Iran.

It had been mainly the rabid and sweeping attacks that the Shah led against traditional Islamic culture combined with gross corruption and cronyism but not accompanied by an economic development for broader layers of society which evoked an opposition that framed its protests in terms of traditional values and morality. And it was in the end, a direct libelous attack on Khomeini in the official press, which precipitated a series of escalating protests that led to the overthrow of the Shah. The credibility of Shi'ite clerics had been instrumental in giving their criticism weight in society. This is in particular true for Khomeini, whose long-standing and vociferous opposition to the Shah, and his personal history of exile had led him to eminence, while not in fact being the highest authority in Shi'ism. Still, for the eventual launch into the political sphere it was decisive that not only the poor but increasingly also middle classes, and bazaar shop owners in particular, took the dissident clerics and the terms of their criticism as their frame of reference in political opposition to the monarchy. It was the full frontal assault on traditional values that permitted this religious frame of reference to eventually emerge as dominating political and economic worries in the eyes of many Iranians.

Nonetheless, while hardly anyone would have contested the role of clerics in denouncing the regime, their transformation into a political force was highly disputed. Not only by liberal and leftist forces that were violently ousted, but also against the background of Shi'ite teaching itself. This re-launch of religion into the political sphere was so controversial that Khomeini did not even enjoy the support of a majority of Shi'ite clerics for his theory of the rule of religious authorities - *welayat-e faqih*. Internal critics were excluded from the regime's structures and confined to house arrest. The most prominent example of these dissidents is Grand Ayatollah Ali Montaseri, who had earlier been designated successor by Khomeini himself but then espoused the more classic vision of a distinct spheres of leadership.

Framing opposition in religious terms provided prominence and following for clerics, and Khomeini in particular, forming a formidable power base. But without his extremist vision of theocratic rule, a

personal *Wille zur Macht*, and talent for ruse and power intrigues, Iran would in all likelihood be a different country today. In brief, Khomeini installed the Islamic Republic in the current totalitarian form less because of Shi'ism but rather despite Shi'ism.

Like Evangelicals, the Shi'a had been characterized in its outlook on religion by an otherworldly focus, with the hope of the return of the Savior who will order all things and lead to eternal life and happiness his followers. They were a constituency of latter days rather than of election day.

But once in power, Khomeini was looking to prepare Iranian society for these latter days by putting in place a regime that held a totalitarian outlook to the aspects of life it felt necessarily to control. The classical frontline in the struggles for modernity, the line between the private and public spheres, shifted back to a more narrow range for private life. It is here, that the faultlines become evident, which an entry of religion into politics throws up: the faultlines between the Absolute and the Political.

### *The Absolute and the Political*

A self-described “fundamentalist”<sup>vii</sup> in the United States had traditionally not been politically very active. He holds to traditional conceptions of morality and sin, and believes that the truth and authority of Scripture are completely sufficient to furnish him with a perfect guide through life. He looks for the return of Christ, not the reform of the world.

While in the 1980s the Christian Coalition of Pat Robertson had already represented an attempt of the religious right to advance their social policy issues via the Republican Party, to many staunchly conservative evangelicals this had begun to look like a pact with the devil that was not yielding enough to make it acceptable. They were becoming frustrated with the incrementalism of politics, the compromises in favor of centrist positions that candidates like Bob Dole would espouse to win a broader appeal. The classical political equation in American party politics did not work in favor of fundamentalists. Washington was only second to New York as a modern day equivalent of sinful Babel for many on the Protestant right. The Hill was Gomorrah to Greenwich Village's Sodom.

This was understandable from their point of view, as they identified the modern American state and its institutions with an attitude that was actively secular at best, and atheist at worst. And it is *atheism* that born-again Christians consider to be their principal foe – the worst religious vice and blasphemy. 92% of evangelicals view the impact of atheism as negative, a percentage that significantly exceeds that of Islam (71%) or Buddhism (76%).<sup>viii</sup>

Worlds collided. Whereas any religion has the claim to absolute truth inherent in it, politics in democratic institutions is the art of the possible via compromise and purposeful concessions. A religion that relinquishes its claim to absolute truth betrays the hopes of its followers, and its very purpose as post-rational system of all-explanation and all-consolation. Politics that uphold a claim to absolute truth betray the need to respect the relativity of freedom and becomes eminently dangerous. This gap of purpose and constraints is hard to bear for those who feel deeply imbued with a divine mission, and is certain to bring frustration. To overcome this frustration something has to give. Either the political ambitions of religious absolutists or the limits of democratic politics.

The frustrations of the processes in a democratic polity, even more so when this polity is basically a two-party system, are what have kept the majority of fundamentalist Christians away from these affairs. This is why the massive flocking of the Christian right to the ballot boxes implies revolutionary changes in their outlook on the trade-off between the Absolute and the Political in American politics. Like the Shi'a under the Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi's efforts at imposed westernization, the Christian right feels under constant attack in their value system. The infamous litany from abortion to gay marriage is what they identify as a full-frontal attack on their conception of right and wrong. It may well be their problem to feel so easily offended and be obsessed with the lives of others; at any rate, this preoccupation has served to mobilize and energize their forces.

An illustration of the sea-changes that this camp of the U.S. electorate has undergone is the figure of James Clayton Dobson, an Evangelical Christian psychologists and radio show host who had made a name with books that attacked anti-authoritarian doctrines of education, and built the “Focus on the Family”-organization based in Denver, Colorado. It is currently the organization on the Christian right with the mightiest financial clout, and has a mailing list of over two million subscribers. After the victory of President Bush on November 2, 2004 Dobson has been energetically jockeying to position himself as the leading outside whip for rapidly implementing staunchly conservative social policies. He publicly called for punishing and sidelining moderate Republicans. When Republican Senator Arlen Specter indicated that as head of the Senate's Judiciary Committee he would block appointments of judges to the Supreme Court who were intent to overturn the legality of abortion, Dobson cried out that “he must be derailed”,<sup>ix</sup> and organized protest. Democratic Senator Patrick Leahy was labeled a “God's people's hater”<sup>x</sup> by Dobson, an indictment that sounds eerily like Khomeini's fatwa against Salman Rushdie.

“Dobson is now a Republican kingmaker. Surprisingly, though, this isn't a role he's traditionally sought or relished. An absolutist disgusted by the compromises of politics, he sneers at those who place 'self-preservation and power ahead of moral principle.’”<sup>xi</sup> A right-wrong mindset that morally

overcharges issues is bound to have a hard time coping with the procedures that were designed to allow the representation of a society that is pluralistic in its outlook and interests, and permit policy-making while preserving individual freedom. Liberal democracy aspires to take along all its citizens. The evangelical blend of Christianity is all about the “rapture” of the righteous Christian few and the sufferings of the “tribulation” for the sinful rest.

So far, this notion of precious exclusivity had shaped the outlook on cooperation with other forces in the religious sphere, and even more so instigated suspicion for involvement in the political sphere. Fundamentalism in Christianity, just like in other religious traditions, intentionally resists identification with the larger religious group in which it originally arose, on the basis that fundamental principles upon which the larger religious group is supposedly founded have become corrupt or displaced by alternative principles hostile to its identity.

This formation of a separate identity is deemed necessary on account of a perception that the religious community has surrendered its ability to define itself in religious terms. The "fundamentals" of the religion have been jettisoned by neglect, lost through compromise and inattention. Fundamentalist movements are therefore founded upon the same religious principles as the larger group, but the fundamentalists more self-consciously attempt to build an entire approach to the modern world based on strict fidelity to those principles, and to preserve a distinctness both of doctrine and of life. This strict fidelity finds its primary object in the original sources of the religious tradition, the holy texts, which are considered to be accessible in their unadulterated sense.

For religious fundamentalists, sacred scripture is the authentic word of God. Fundamentalist beliefs depend on the twin doctrines that God articulated His will precisely to prophets, and that we also have a reliable and perfect record of that revelation, which has been passed down to our day in an unbroken chain of tradition. Since Scripture is the word of God, no one has the right to change it or disagree with it. Such a notion stands in head-on contradiction to the Bismarckian notion of politics as the art of the possible, which itself is a humbling realization central to the workings of democratic politics. For these require flexibility of interpretation, shifting emphasis and nuanced discourse as the keys to compromise. Political discourse is an open-ended process or it *is not* at all. Politics cannot be absolute, and if only for the mere reason that the power any form of government may wield is never absolute – power always has to face reality, complex and reluctant.

After the frustrations of traditional politics, George W. Bush must have appeared like a Savior, indeed. Not only did he openly – some may see it as obnoxiously holier-than-thou and hardly piously humble – confess his faith as one of their flock. The relevance of his public demonstration of faith to Christian

conservatives is not to be underestimated. For many among them this appears as a valiant act of defiance of what they consider to be a dominant anti-religious public and media sphere. A Norwegian correspondent came in shock from a Bush rally: “People said 'amen' when he spoke. It was chilling to see who are his followers.”<sup>xii</sup> Bush also sent out signals all throughout his first term in office and the reelection campaign that he not only understood and sympathized with their agenda but would actively work to implement it. His stubborn reference to “not having a litmus test” for Supreme Court appointments during the televised debates was a thinly veiled message that he would nominate “pro-life” judges. With the ambiguities gone, Evangelicals could now go to the polls in good faith, and say, as for instance some in Ohio did, having cast their ballots: “I voted for Jesus.”

Since Jesus won, those Evangelicals with a penchant for social activism now feel emboldened, having seemingly left the valley of political frustrations. Victory has plunged some into a drunkenness with can-do enthusiasm that has revived their absolutist spirits.

Reverend Bob Jones III, president of the evangelical Bob Jones University in South Carolina where the Biology Department's mission in teaching is “defending the Bible's account of creation”<sup>xiii</sup>, and a rabid anti-Catholic, wrote in his congratulatory letter to President Bush:

“ We the people expect your voice to be like the clear and certain sound of a trumpet. Because you seek the Lord daily, we who know the Lord will follow that kind of voice eagerly. Don't equivocate. Put your agenda on the front burner and let it boil. You owe the liberals nothing. They despise you because they despise your Christ. Honor the Lord, and He will honor you.”<sup>xiv</sup>

This absolutist enthusiasm is soaked in a perception of outright hostility. In a sort of projection, the hatred and contempt zealous Evangelicals feel for those estranged from the right God, they encircle themselves in a mindset of exclusiveness and self-victimization, portraying others as mortal enemies of their Lord. This paranoid mindset breeds the feeling of an existential threat – their way of life is at stake, an issue that is not negotiable. The current grip on political predominance, then, is a unique chance to wage this existential fight in order to settle accounts in favor of fundamentalists, before power slips from their hands.

Vilifying its opponents as so morally corrupt to the bone, is a characterization that is self-serving as elevation of their own mission. Moreover, it is a denigration of the political opponent to the status of ideological-civilizational enemy. The line between the two is decisive. The opponent is legitimate and can be argued with, the enemy is inherently hostile and must be destroyed.<sup>xv</sup> This portrayal symbolically casts an entire group of the electorate out of the common ground, and thus prepares the

ground for and justifies a de facto expulsion from the privileges of common citizenship. Once this irreconcilably dichotic *Weltanschauung* has been inhaled long enough, it is no wonder when we see “*Declarations of Expulsion*” being published by emboldened conservatives:

“When they tire of showering conservative victims with ideological mud, liberals promote the only other subjects with which they feel conversationally comfortable: Obscenity and sexual perversion. It's as if the genes of liberals have rendered them immune to all forms of filth. (...) [The 'red' states may adopt] a specific constitutional amendment to kick out the systemically troublesome states and those trending rapidly toward anti-American, if not outright subversive, behavior. (...) the process of elimination must begin now, for the need of societal detoxification has waxed so overwhelmingly clear.”<sup>xvi</sup>

It does not take a German to notice that describing a part of the population as alienated from the supposed true national self and as actively spreading subversion, which calls for “societal detoxification” already has an entry in the *Dictionary of Inflammatory Political Rhetoric*: fascism.<sup>xvii</sup>

The Absolute and the Political is a dichotomy that cannot be healed by fusion but needs to be bridged by coexistence in their relevant spheres. With respect to the insertion of religion in politics at the example of Iran, the German-Iranian scholar Navid Kermani has made this point clear:

“This momentum of an absolute – and even violent – claim can only be preserved in a secular frame. If someone says 'That, which I believe is the absolute truth!', he can assert this only if this assertion has no political consequences, if it remains his private opinion. However, as soon as a head of state expresses something of this nature it will lead to a totalitarian regime.”<sup>xviii</sup>

### *Reaganomics of the Soul*

The social engineering approach to policy inherent in many notions of activist politics is alien to most strands of religion who preach to their followers and use appeal and incentives to promote virtuous life. Within them, however, they hold the kernel of the absolute claim which is tempting to be put into place absolutely, thrust upon others. Religious awakening movements, in particular, often spring up as reactions (or should one say antitheses) to perceived moral corruption and a society suffering from vice. With the enemy in sight they are a sign of their times and resolute in their desire to actively fight what they consider the evils in their environment. Fixated on these evils they turn to whatever arms they can find in their fight for morality, and the instruments of state are more than welcome in their arsenal. For it is only with the force that lies in means of coercion that they can hope to take the shortcut to a righteous world. Savonarola's "Christian and religious Republic", Robespierre's

*Terreur*, the Prohibition movement, and Saudi-Arabia's "Committee to Prevent Vice and Promote Virtue" all took the same approach to an eradication of vice: outlaw it.

They fight the symptoms rather than the causes of societal ills. They go after the supply-side of immorality rather than pursuing the more tiring and trying demand-side approach. They are all, in short, apostles of *Reaganomics of the Soul*.

This supply-side approach, ironically, is neither a prevention of vice nor a promotion of virtue. It merely and sadly is a rancid obsession with the superficial artifacts of virtue and vice. And thus irredeemably bigot. Virtue cannot be decreed and policed. The sustainable alternative would call for those strenuous old ways of living an example, spreading the gospel as a guideline for self-determinedly making the right choices, one sinner at a time. Or in more political terms: a societal approach, which creates a set of self-enforcing social norms.

This, of course, is too roundabout for the absolutist mind eager to see pious order imposed, as Bob Jones III's encouragement for a moral-political agenda illustrates:

"Undoubtedly, you will have opportunity to appoint many conservative judges and exercise forceful leadership with the Congress in passing legislation that is defined by biblical norm regarding the family, sexuality, sanctity of life, religious freedom, freedom of speech, and limited government. You have four years—a brief time only—to leave an imprint for righteousness upon this nation that brings with it the blessings of Almighty God. (...) Pull out all the stops and make a difference. If you have weaklings around you who do not share your biblical values, shed yourself of them. Conservative Americans would love to see one president who doesn't care whether he is liked, but cares infinitely that he does right."<sup>xix</sup>

Just as after 1979, the policy objectives of the extreme right imply blurring the lines of public and private, a distinction that current Iranian reformist theologians believe is central to revive in order to evade the oppressive form of reactionary-minded Islam equipped with the instruments of state.

In 1979 and in 2004 the political victory had been the result of a coalition of diverging interests allowing the leaders to unite enough forces to come to power, trying to dissipate fears that they would cater only to the demands of the religious right. And yet, President Bush has conspicuously kept up hopes of turning not only politics but the state into an instrument of advancing the fundamentalist moral-political agenda. He believes he has "earned political capital", and announced that he will spend it, since that is his style.

It would be outrageous to suggest that Bush intends to overturn the American democratic system and

remake it into a theocracy,<sup>xx</sup> but he has hinted at the strong will to install a Republican version of the “Council of Guardians of the Revolution”: a strong and - thanks to gerrymandering – persistent majority of far-right Republicans in Congress, and a Supreme Court that after the appointments falling to the president in the next four years will have a strongly conservative outlook for decades.

Earlier versions of *Reaganomics of the Soul*, have failed disastrously and at high cost to their societies. Jean Calvin's harsh Republic of Mores in Geneva and the bloody heaven that Friar Girolamo Savonarola erected on Florence's earth with its infamous Bonfire of the Vanities, went down in civil unrest.<sup>xxi</sup> The tumultuous end of both of these attempts of public morality engineering, and the excesses that followed it are a sign of their fatefully failure to understand the complexity of human nature that does neither fit nor stand too rigid and righteous a frame.

Prohibition is a lively illustration of how a strict imposition of a state-led fight against the signs of vice creates anxious efforts to escape this intrusion of public control to a sphere of private morality. Falling well short of its objectives, the campaign for dictated decency will only create a backlash of indulgence in deviance.

Any account of today's Iran abounds with examples of how society is fully engaged in pushing back and extending the limits between private and public, and have already crossed from the small escapes of freedom within one's home to the rebellious overt demonstration of little infractions of imposed morality by showcasing the signs of pop culture. Parties, music, clothing. And drugs. These are patterns of societal resistance that Prohibition had brought out in America before, and could be seen all over the Soviet Bloc before it came tumbling down.

There is one lesson that the apostles of morality should have learned for their own good. Any attempt to impose strict and unitary criteria of public morality via instruments of the state rather than generating self-enforcing ethical constraints via a process of socialization is doomed. If anything it will bring about a delegitimization of even rudimentary and otherwise uncontested values as they become politicized. Doublespeak and double-life creates a schizophrenic society and a polity full of neuroses. At worst they slowly erode the fabric of societal order and interaction altogether, leaving merely a mildewed façade of robotic behavior in public.

It usually falls to moderately religious or political exponents of the movement to wrest the endeavor from the hands of the zealots to save it from suicide.

Again, the example of Iran should be instructive enough in proving that “a state that defines itself by its religion, appears to be in all cases the most reliable means of the destroying its most sacred

values.”<sup>xxii</sup> Politics, then, is the big temptation for religion to take the short-cut to a world in God's image, and the one force that guarantees the corruption of any religion that gives in to its charm.

### *Selective Christianity*

It hardly falls to a Catholic agnostic to lecture others on their faith. And yet, it strikes me as worth of public mention how decidedly selective the Christianity of some on the religious right in the United States has become. They describe themselves as devout disciples of Jesus but chose to ignore His insistence on tolerance and 'love thy neighbor' over an obsession with sin and deviance of others they hate and despise. They look to the scriptures for guidance they can cling to phariseeically by the letter rather than the spirit. They want to take more than one eye preemptively rather than turning the other cheek. And out of all books of the Gospel, the good news of hope and salvation to the world, they delve into the cryptic Book of Revelations,<sup>xxiii</sup> the delusional prophecies of fear and doom. In policy terms, they want to discriminate for sexual orientation among the flock of the good shepherd, throw the first stone at the abortion clinic employee instead of assisting single mothers, and have the sanctity of life stop at the doors of the death row.

Manichaeic, and eschatological in its desire to do God's job on earth, there is a word for this mindset. A word that the religious right should care more about than prophets of secular millenary ideologies who wanted to hasten the end of history: blasphemy.

And yet, the religious right is not monolithic. Some of its members are at the heart of many works of compassion, reaching out to their neighbors within and beyond the borders of the United States. They are in the first place devout adherents of their version of Protestantism, and many are probably more common-sensical and moderate than those who derive political capital from claiming their faithful following. The congregations can redeem their good name by restraining those who pretend to speak in their name and represent their values. Although it seems more likely that the best hope for a return to the United States of its liberal beginnings rests in renewed estrangement of absolutists of values with the political process, America's self-acclaimed value voters now have an opportunity to speak out against the extremism of their notables.

The times when the led could hope to get away with merely blaming their leaders are long gone.

- i Although Catholicism is rife with rites, at least the version practiced at the parish where I had served as mass servant did not aim at or produce ecstatic experiences of faith.
- ii Marx' "opium of the people"-charge has been an instant classic, and cf. Niccolò Macchiavelli, "Discourses on Livy", H.C. Mansfield & N. Tarcov trans., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; p. 131
- iii To anyone in his right mind this might seem grossly ridiculous, but a leading interpretation of the "Book of Revelations" among Protestant fundamentalists in the 1970s had been that the EEC with its then seven members would be the new Roman Empire (after all its treaties were signed in Rome) that would become the Kingdom of the Antichrist or *seven-headed Beast*. Hal Lindsey, co-author of the still hugely successful book series "Left Behind" was a chief promoter of this notion.
- iv Mike Thompson, "Declaration of Expulsion: A Modest Proposal. It's Time to Reconfigure the United States", *Human Events - Online. The National Conservative Weekly*, Posted Nov 3, 2004, <http://www.humaneventsonline.com/article.php?id=5652>
- v [http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m4021/is\\_1\\_26/ai\\_112532362](http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m4021/is_1_26/ai_112532362)
- vi [http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004\\_03\\_evangelical-table\\_09-27\\_pr.pdf](http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/naes/2004_03_evangelical-table_09-27_pr.pdf)
- vii Fundamentalist is here used in the sense of self-identified adherents to a religious movement that calls for a return to their vision of the truthful origins of the broader religion, and gives primary importance to keeping close to the holy texts. That "fundamentalist" has now acquired a negative connotation might not be propitious to objective discussion but can hardly be surprising, and might well be considered as very much self-inflicted by fundamentalist groups.
- viii [http://www.religioustolerance.org/reac\\_ter18a.htm](http://www.religioustolerance.org/reac_ter18a.htm)
- ix [http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/week\\_2004\\_11\\_07.php#003951](http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/week_2004_11_07.php#003951)
- x [http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/week\\_2004\\_11\\_07.php#003956](http://www.talkingpointsmemo.com/archives/week_2004_11_07.php#003956)
- xi Michael Crowley, "James Dobson. The religious right's new kingmaker.", *Slate*, Posted Friday, Nov. 12, 2004, at 12:00 PM PT; URL: <http://slate.msn.com/id/2109621/>
- xii <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A63813-2004Oct26.html>
- xiii <http://www.bju.edu/academics/cas/science/biology/index>
- xiv Robert Jones, Jr. "Letter to President Bush", URL: <http://www.bju.edu/letter>
- xv The German political philosopher Carl Schmitt has gained notoriety with his treatment of the topic, e.g. in: Carl Schmitt, "The Concept of the Political", transl. George Schwab Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996. Note that Schmitt marks the assertion of the primacy of State over Religion (by the 1648 Westphalian Peace) as the precondition for the notion of the legally protected "iustus hostis" rather than the ideologically opposed "inimicus", and hence for controlling and limiting war. (Not at all times, though, is it clear whether he believes this to be good.)
- xvi Mike Thompson, "Declaration of Expulsion: A Modest Proposal. It's Time to Reconfigure the United States",
- xvii Due to valid analogies of exclusionary politics, some reference to Islamist fascism are not too far-fetched. See for example the *takfir* of Salafist radicals in Islam, i.e. declaring all those not adhering to their narrow vision of Islam to be infidels. They thus redefine the *Umma* to be constituted exclusively of themselves, which in turn allows them to consider them void of rights and valid objects of hatred and attacks. This is one background for the current attacks on regular Iraqis by insurgents, and was particularly evident in the 1990s' Algerian Civil War.
- xviii BR Alpha (ed.), "Dr. Navid Kermani im Gespräch", *br alpha forum*, München: Bayerischer Rundfunk; aired: 22.06.2004; URL: [http://www.br-online.de/alpha/forum/vor0406/20040622\\_i.shtml](http://www.br-online.de/alpha/forum/vor0406/20040622_i.shtml) (translation: B.Wahler)
- xix Robert Jones, Jr. "Letter to President Bush", URL: <http://www.bju.edu/letter>. An interesting question is, of course, what the "biblical norm" on religious freedom was. The god of the Old Testament was pretty angry at those who fell off the right track, and made a point out of venting this anger.
- xx But then again, the first four years of his administration have held some examples of outrageous political radicalness that would not be justified for a non-elected, court-appointed president.
- xxi Interestingly enough, the obsessions of religious moralizers have remained the same: one of the first acts of Savonarola's republic was to make sodomy, previously punishable by fine, into a capital offense.
- xxii BR Alpha (ed.), "Dr. Navid Kermani im Gespräch"
- xxiii In the fourth century, St. John Chrysostom and other bishops argued against including this book in the New Testament canon, chiefly because of the difficulties of interpreting it and the danger for abuse. It has always been a notorious favorite among doomsday sects.