



Caught Up In The Rapture

"Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between church and State."

— Thomas Jefferson, Letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, 1 January 1802

There's this offbeat HBO television series called "Six Feet Under," which centers on the life experiences, both comedic and tragic, of the Fisher family of morticians. Each episode opens with the death of some stranger who ends up, somehow, figuring into the storyline.

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Episode #41, "In Case of Rapture," commences with the death of Dorothy Sheedy, 40 years young, who is described as "a devoted member of the First Baptist Church of Los Angeles."

Our story begins with two workers who are busy filling up inflatable sex dolls with helium, so that they can be used for a display at an adult film awards show. After clowning around with inhaled helium, the two gents begin to transport the inflatable dolls, secured under a net in the back of their pick-up truck. Preoccupied for a moment with an X-rated adult magazine, they stop short to avoid hitting a skateboarder. The sudden stop, however, loosens the net; unbeknownst to the workers, the dolls start floating upward toward the sky.

Coming from another direction, Sheedy is driving her car, with its "I Brake for the Rapture" bumper sticker. She's listening to a Christian radio broadcast on marital relations, uttering "Praise the Lord," as she nods her head in agreement with the talk-show host. Suddenly, Sheedy stops her car. She can hardly believe the sight before her eyes. Seeing the dolls floating toward the heavens, she mistakes them for actual angelic human beings, heaven-bound, as

part of the foretold Rapture, when Christ removes all the right-believing Christians from the Earth to spare them the onslaught of the End of Days. It's a little piece of religious eschatology, justified by certain Protestant sects with references to books of the Old and New Testament.

"Oh My Lord, Sweet Jesus," Sheedy exclaims. She cannot contain her joy as a witness to the heavenly vanishing. Moving toward the imagined Rapture, her arms outstretched toward the clouds, she walks into the road, and gets hit—and killed—by an oncoming car.

At the funeral home of the Fishers, her widower husband appears to fully accept his wife's death as the Will of God. Clearly, her time had come.

And yet, I couldn't help but feel as if I were watching an allegory about an *America* whose time has come, an America that is so caught up in the rapture of religion that it is headed for the same fatal impact.

The Cultural and Political Impact of Religion

Religion has been an important cultural and political force since before the inception of the American republic. Indeed, among the American settlers were the religiously persecuted who fled their native lands in search of the right to worship, free from the interfering hands of the state. As it happens, some of them tried to establish their own religious tyrannies, but the

cosmopolitanism of the New World market economy burst forth, dissolving the vestiges of theocracy wherever they existed.

The early American Christian settlers could never have dreamed that in this atmosphere of freedom, houses of worship would be fruitful and multiply. In 2004, estimates of weekly church attendance vary wildly. Some place the figure at 75 million; others believe that it is nearly double that. Either way, once we adjust the numbers for non-Christian denominations, it is clear that tens of millions of people are committed to some kind of religious observance and that the United States remains a profoundly *religious* society. Of course, the freedom of its religious heritage is protected because of an equally profound *secular* commitment to the separation of church and state. That very doctrine was enunciated so that no religious group could establish monopolistic control through the apparatus of the state. In America, there would be no laws establishing a state religion, and no laws prohibiting people from practicing (or not practicing) the religion of their choice, provided that such practice did not infringe upon the individual rights of others.

Religion has been an omnipresent factor in American *political* culture. As Murray Rothbard has argued, ethnoreligious conflict has long impacted on the ebb and flow of American politics, influencing even the shape of political parties. In his essay, "The Progressive Era and the Family,"¹ Rothbard wrote that the battle between pietist and liturgical Christians was often at the heart of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century political controversies. The pietist doctrine essentially rejected the "creeds of various churches or sects" and any "obedience to the rituals or liturgies of the particular church." For the pietist, the experience of being "born again" is paramount; it is a "direct confrontation between the individual and God, a mystical and emotional conversion in which the individual achieves salvation." Pietists, especially of the evangelical variety, were deeply dedicated to the belief that

[s]ince each individual is alone to wrestle with problems of sin and salvation, without creed or ritual of the church to sustain him, the evangelical duty must therefore be to use the state, the social arm of the integrated Christian community, to stamp out temptation

and occasions for sin. ... In particular, sin was any and all forms of contact with liquor, and doing anything except praying and going to church on Sunday. Any forms of gambling, dancing, theater, reading of novels—in short, secular enjoyment of any kind—were considered sinful. ... Evangelical pietism particularly appealed to, and therefore took root among, the “Yankees,” i.e., that cultural group that originated in (especially rural) New England and emigrated widely to populate northern and western New York, northern Ohio, northern Indiana, and northern Illinois. The Yankees were natural “cultural imperialists,” people who were wont to impose their values and morality on other groups; as such, they took quite naturally to imposing their form of pietism through whatever means were available, including the use of the coercive power of the state.

Drawing from the insights of social historians, those who created a “new political history” based on an analysis of ethnoreligious sociology, Rothbard contrasts pietism with the “liturgical” tradition, embodied in Calvinism, Lutheranism, and Catholicism. The liturgicals had “a much more relaxed and rational” notion of sin, and were more apt to organize a formal church to participate in its liturgy and sacraments.

Over time, the political parties reflected the split between pietists and liturgicals. Whereas the more laissez-faire oriented, nineteenth-century Democratic Party attracted liturgical voting blocs, Whig and Republican voters were predominantly evangelical pietists, making war on liquor, immigration (especially *Catholic* immigration), and private, parochial schools. The pietists were the driving force in the state establishment of public schools as a means to impose civic virtue. The Republican Party was soon constituted by both pietist social reformers, who advocated government intervention to impose evangelical values, and business interests who advocated government intervention to impose federal regulation on unruly states, as well as tariffs, land grants, and subsidies. The pietist-business alliance was mutually reinforcing; it spurred a Progressive movement—generally dating from the end of the nineteenth century till the outbreak of World War I—which united industrialists, scientists, social workers, academics, and technocrats, in an attempt “to control the material and sexual choices of the rest of the American people, their drinking habits, and their recreational preferences.”

Rothbard emphasizes that “all the facets of progressivism—the economic and the ideological and educational—were part of an integrated whole. The new ideology among business groups was cartelism and collectivism rather than individualism and laissez faire, and the social control over the individual exerted by progressivism was neatly paralleled in the ideology and practice of progressive education.”

With the onset of world wars and depressions, the Democratic and Republican parties soon became mirror images of one another, in terms of their common support for the interventionist agenda. But, in many ways, today’s Republican party—which has long boasted of limiting the size of government—has returned to its evangelical pietist and interventionist roots. Indeed, George W. Bush, who, as a child, attended Presbyterian and Episcopalian churches, later experienced a “reconfirmation” of faith—he has never used the phrase “born-again”—to become a Methodist, perhaps the most strongly pietistic of Protestant denominations.

As Bill Keller explains, Bush is a thoroughgoing pietist, for whom “religion is more a matter of the heart than the intellect.”² There is no doubting the President’s sincerity; his piety has provided him, says Keller, with “a profound self-confidence once he has decided on a course of action. ... This has been most conspicuous since Sept. 11 in the way he has talked about his mission to make the world safe for democracy. Some listeners take it as presumptuous, messianic, even blasphemous.” Keller maintains, however, that Bush is not part of some vast right-wing conspiracy; indeed, organized Christian evangelical movements, like the Moral Majority or the Christian Coalition, have withered since the 1980s, when Ronald Reagan first courted their political allegiance.

But Keller actually misses the point. Such movements are no longer on the fringes of American culture because they have become *mainstream* pop cultural forces to be reckoned with, and therefore, much more powerful in their political impact. Bush has always recognized this because he is in sync with his religious constituents. It is no coincidence that Bush named Jesus as his favorite political philosopher during the 2000 Presidential campaign, and that “[t]he more traditionally religious that people say they are, the more often they pray and attend worship services, the more likely they are to vote for Bush” in 2004.³ As David Brooks writes: “A recent Pew survey showed that for every American who thinks politicians should talk less about religion, there are two

Americans who believe politicians should talk more.”⁴ (It still sounds like the makings of a Bush victory to me—though I’m writing this essay at the end of June 2004.)

God is Hip

Throughout American cultural history, there have been many so-called spiritual surges, “Great Awakenings,” which had huge political implications. Today, another spiritual surge is taking place. As Walter Kirn puts it, that surge is *absorbing* pop culture: “Christianity doesn’t compete with pop culture,” says Kirn. “It is pop culture.” In many respects, this new awakening has been a reaction to the secular left’s nihilistic relativism, one that rejects the very possibility of moral certainty. “Just as postmodernism in the arts seemed to be winning acceptance from the masses,” Kirn writes, “a recycled premodernism has emerged that rejects ambiguity and ambivalence for the old Sunday-morning certainties.”⁵ The premodernists—who are now characterized as “fundamentalists,” though they are a pietist offshoot—have adopted the “populist, media-savvy” techniques of a thoroughly modern age to get the message out.

These fundamentalists genuinely understand the nature of mass marketing. From the sale of “Jesus is My Homeboy” T-shirts to the creation of alternative churches in coffee bars and warehouses to the publication of slick magazines and updated, modern Bible translations, fundamentalists of various stripes have tapped into pop culture and its new technologies to spread the gospel.⁶ They have even attracted niche subcultures with such organizations as the Christian Tattoo Association, which includes over 100 member shops. Some Christian bands now embrace punk and goth styles, while others put the *Rap* in Rapture: yes, there are even rap artists who underlay Christian-themed poetry with phat hip hop beats. While the rest of the music industry has seen a decline since the events of September 11, the Christian music market has had a 13.5% increase—perhaps a reflection of the very search for meaning that such a horrific tragedy has engendered. “God is everywhere you look in pop culture these days,” observes Carolyn Callahan—in holiday cards, board games, toys, and periodicals.⁷

Christian merchandising is a \$4.2 billion industry, which includes a \$100 million video game business. The Christian book market is particularly lucrative: Evangelist Rick Warren has sold 15 million copies of his book, *The Purpose-Driven Life: What on Earth Am I Here For?* There are even Christian *diet*

books that sit alongside Atkins and South Beach manuals: *The Maker's Diet* helps you to lose weight by eating just like Jesus. From number one best-selling books such as *The Da Vinci Code* to "Joan of Arcadia" on television and "Bruce Almighty" on the silver screen, God is Hip and Hot.

A blockbuster film such as "The Passion of the Christ"—which was condemned initially as "anti-Semitic" by some critics—has now grossed nearly \$400 million. That figure does not include director Mel Gibson's cross-promotional merchandising efforts—sales on such items as metal replica crucifixion nails and thorn-adorned necklaces and bracelets. The extremely violent content of the film seems to have inspired some churches to more realistically dramatize the redemption through most precious blood. Some of these dramatizations express forcefully a wrath for the secular "pagan" symbols of the Easter holiday. As the Associated Press reports, in one instance, at

Today editorial brands 'hypermodern individualism.'"⁹

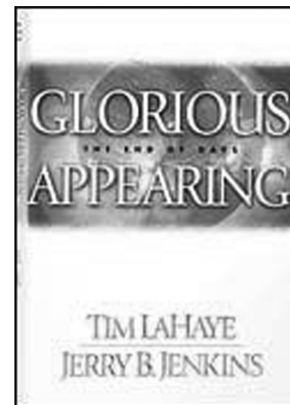
One thing that might prevent full political cooperation between these groups is the fact that many Protestants still view Catholics—who reject the Rapture—as "apostates." Indeed, in the ever-popular *Left Behind* book series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins, a Catholic cardinal actually assists the Antichrist.

Will You Be Left Behind?

The 12-volume LaHaye-Jenkins work—from its first installment, *Left Behind*, to its action-packed finale, *Glorious Appearing: The End of Days*—now qualifies as the best-selling Christian fiction book series of all time. Nicholas D. Kristof reports that the series has already sold in excess of 60 million copies in the past nine years.¹⁰ (Fans of Ayn Rand take note: Rand's book sales have been impressive—probably around 20

TV series. Kirk Cameron, who was a teen idol in the hit television sitcom, "Growing Pains," portrays journalist Buck Williams in the two films. The story begins in the Middle East, as the Jews return to Zion, heralding the Second Coming of the Lord. The world is teeming with Revelation-like events: endless war, rioting, crime, suicides, famine, and pestilence. A full-scale sneak air attack against Israel is mysteriously defeated by an unidentified force. Soon thereafter, people disappear spontaneously from planes, buses, and cars, all over the planet. The vanishings signal the beginning of the rise of the Antichrist.

That Antichrist is Nicolae Carpathia, the Slavic-sounding President of the United Nations, who extols the virtues of the global village and who leads a consortium of UN delegates to take control of the world's food supply, while centralizing global currency, and all major media. Through these actions, the UN becomes the focus



an Easter show in Glassport, Pennsylvania, children were traumatized as the actors whipped the Easter bunny and crushed Easter eggs on stage. Performers declared: "There is no Easter Bunny." One 4-year old child cried hysterically, asking his mother "why the bunny was being whipped." "It was very disturbing," said another parent. The youth minister at Glassport Assembly of God said that they were only trying "to convey that Easter is not just about the Easter Bunny. It is about Jesus Christ."⁸

Far more disturbing, however, is the fact that traditionally opposed Protestant pietists and Catholic liturgicals have moved toward a kind of political consolidation. Laurie Goodstein argues that evangelicals and conservative Catholics "have forged an alliance that is reshaping American politics and culture." Both of these groups flocked to see the Gibson film, sensing a common "losing battle against secularism, relativism and a trend that the *Christianity*

million total copies of her collected works and all translations over the past sixty years—but this figure *pales* in comparison to the LaHaye-Jenkins series.)

Kirn characterizes the *Left Behind* series as a "pulp epic," which stretches "the biblical apocalypse into a never-ending twilight battle whose cliffhanging plot points are worthy of Spider-Man comic books." Inspired by the notion of the Rapture, the books tell the story of what happens to those who are "left behind," once that first group of believers are taken up into Heaven's protection. The trials and tribulations follow until the Second Coming of Christ, who returns with his angelic armies in a Battle of Armageddon that destroys the nonbelievers.

The first two books of the series were adapted for the big screen by Cloud Ten Pictures, which is also readying an animated version of the first film and a *Left Behind*

of evil in the modern world—proof positive that we can't dismiss fundamentalists as crazy, *per se*.

Carpathia seeks universal disarmament as a means of undermining those who are threats to his reign. He heralds the coming "seven years of peace," made possible by a treaty between Israel and its enemies. Carpathia plans to rebuild the Temple of Jerusalem, as he rises above religious divisiveness, proclaiming unity and telling the world that there is no heaven or hell, "just us." "Ours is the kingdom and the glory, forever and ever," he announces. "God is Us. We are God."

Those who are left behind from the initial Rapture form a "Tribulation Force" (the subtitle of the second film) to save the remaining Christians from the Antichrist. Carpathia persuades Rabbi Ben Judah, the leading authority on rabbinical teaching and ancient scriptures, to ready

an announcement in Jerusalem that the Messiah has come—and that Carpathia is He. But Ben Judah goes to the Wailing Wall with Buck Williams, to meet the Witnesses who testify that Jesus is the one, true Messiah. In front of a worldwide audience, Ben Judah asks for forgiveness for having doubted Christ and tells the world that Jesus fulfills all “109 prophecies” to qualify as the Messiah, whose Second Coming is imminent. Carpathia cuts the transmission of this Jew for Jesus ... and the apocalyptic worldwide battle is taken to the next level.

As the credits roll to close the first film, Christian music artist Bryan Duncan joins the girls of the British band ShineMK to perform a soulful duet of the title song, “Left Behind,” featured on the CD of the movie soundtrack; it’s got a bass-driven dance beat, bathed in synth lines, with a fiery electric guitar solo. It certainly had my feet tapping:

*The damage that it's doin'
Is leading to forever
These are the final days*

*And we will find atonement
In that very moment
When our souls are captured,
raptured away*

*I'm searchin' my heart, I'm searchin'
the sky
I'm fallin' on His mercy and know
I'm gonna fly.*

[Chorus]

*I've been watchin' I've been prayin'
When it calls me I'm not stayin'*

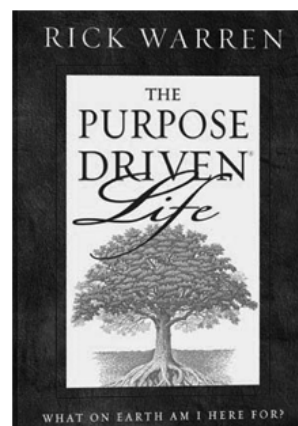
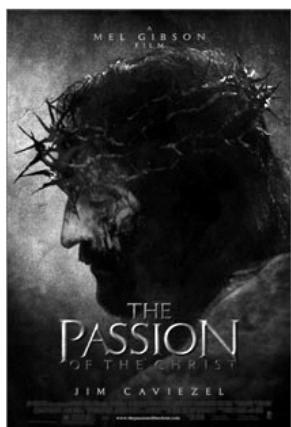
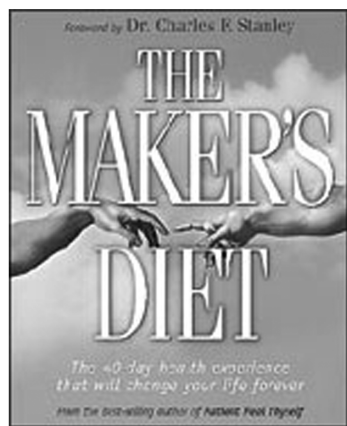
[Chorus]

As Fulbright scholar Amy Johnson Frykholm points out, the book of “Revelation is impossible to read ... without a coherent

Ultimately, the *Left Behind* series is not simply a religious narrative. It is a *political* one. Glenn W. Shuck, author of *Marks of the Beast: The Left Behind Novels and the Struggle for Evangelical Identity*, argues persuasively that “the novels have less to do with escaping and more to do with *remaking* the modern world” (emphasis added).¹² It is the kind of “remaking” that Friedrich Hayek would have characterized as thoroughly rationalist or “constructivist” in its political implications.

George W. Bush and the Remaking of the Modern World

For all his libertarian rhetoric, the late Ronald Reagan was the first mainstream Presidential candidate to tap into the rise of evangelical Christian fundamentalism as a political force. In the end, however, Reagan paid lip service to his Moral Majority constituents. But this made for a very unstable conservative coalition: religious fundamentalists were



*You might think I'm crazy
But I've been feelin' lately
I'm standin' on the edge of
somethin' ready to break
More and more I hear it
Something in my spirit
Telling me we're closer than ever to
that day*

*The sky will open up, every knee
will bow
The Revelation's comin', so let me
tell you now*

[Chorus:]

*When it comes down
I've made up my mind
I know that I will not be left behind
I see all around, the signs of the
times
I know that I will not be left behind.
A firestorm is brewin'*

narrative.” The *Left Behind* series provides readers with a contemporary “narrative, which they can then place back on Revelation.” Still, Barbara R. Rossing has argued that the books are based on questionable interpretations of the Bible that were put forth by the independent evangelical fundamentalist John Nelson Darby some 200 years ago. It was Darby, Rossing maintains, who invented the Rapture and the notion of a two-stage process in the Second Coming of Christ.¹¹ (Interestingly, the Marxists, whom Rothbard once derided as millennial eschatologists, posit a similar two-stage process in the Coming of Socialism. Ironically, such Marxists gave truth to the proposition that “true believers” could be present even in atheistic ideologies.) Many Christian fundamentalists, however, have long claimed that the Rapture has scriptural roots in such books as Revelations, Daniel, Thessalonians, Corinthians, and Job.

sitting side-by-side with “libertarian” conservatives, who were more interested in the Gipper’s promise of less government economic regulation than in his stance on school prayer or abortion.

George W. Bush, however, has virtually dropped Reagan’s libertarian rhetoric, while embracing a far more pronounced pietistic ideology. He proclaims his support for “faith-based initiatives” in social programs and a Constitutional amendment defining “marriage” in strictly heterosexual terms, while opposing stem-cell research and abortion rights. His administration has engendered huge budget deficits, an expanding welfare state, and a massive Wilsonian nation-building project in Iraq. (Ironically, Woodrow Wilson himself was a deeply religious man, whose father was a theologian; like Bush, Wilson’s religious views were a driving force in his political career.) Some commentators have noted that Bush went “into Iraq as if on a religious

mission. He even called it a 'crusade' before aides reminded him that the actual Crusades were attempts by Christians not to liberate the oppressed, but to drive every last Muslim out of the Holy Land."¹³ As Nancy Gibbs remarks, Bush's "Christian triumphalism" is a serious component in his "case for war[which] now rests less on high-fiber geopolitical arguments than on the suggestion that the 3rd Infantry Division be used as an instrument of God's will to share the gifts of liberty with all people. ... Over the past nearly three years, Bush has appeared to invoke a divine mandate as he promises to 'rid the world of the evil-doers,' ... [though] he explicitly rejects the notion that he is waging a holy war."¹⁴ Bush even told journalist Bob Woodward, author of *Plan of Attack*, that, prior to the invasion of Iraq, he was very "emotional," and "prayed" to the Almighty to protect the troops and minimize the loss of life. "Going into this period I was praying for strength to do the Lord's will. ... I'm surely not going to justify war based upon God. Understand that. Nevertheless, in my case I pray that I be as good a messenger of His will as possible..."

The Bush administration has thus become a focal point for the constellation of two crucial impulses in American politics that seek to remake the world: pietism and neoconservatism. The neocons, who come from a variety of religious backgrounds, trace *their* intellectual lineage to social democrats and Trotskyites, those who adopted the "God-builder" belief, prevalent in Russian Marxist and Silver Age millennial thought, that a perfect (socialist) society could be constructed as if from an Archimedean standpoint. The neocons may have repudiated Trotsky's socialism, but they have simply adopted his constructivism to the project of building democratic nation-states among other groups of warring fundamentalists—in the Middle East.

Bush clearly believes that it is his role as President to change not only American culture but the tribalist cultures of nations abroad in the direction of democratic values. In an interview with *Christianity Today*,¹⁵ he asserts that

the job of a president is to help cultures change. The culture needs to be changed. ... from one that says, "If it feels good, do it, and if you've got a problem, blame somebody else" ... to a culture in which each of us understands we're responsible for the decisions we make in life. I call it the responsibility era. ... I said that when I was governor of Texas. As a matter of fact, I've been saying that ever since I got into politics.

This is one of the reasons I got into politics in the first place. Governments cannot change culture alone. But I can be a voice of cultural change.

This "cultural change," according to Bush, must begin "with promoting—taking care of your bodies to the point where we can promote a culture of life." It is from this essential principle that he derives his "position on abortion," and his advocacy of "the faith-based initiative," which "recognizes the *rightful relationship between hearts and souls and government*" (emphasis added).

Throughout American cultural history, there have been many so-called spiritual surges, "Great Awakenings," which had huge political implications. Today, another spiritual surge is taking place. As Walter Kirn puts it, that surge is absorbing pop culture: "Christianity doesn't compete with pop culture," says Kirn. "It is pop culture." In many respects, this new awakening has been a reaction to the secular left's nihilistic relativism, one that rejects the very possibility of moral certainty. "Just as postmodernism in the arts seemed to be winning acceptance from the masses," Kirn writes, "a recycled premodernism has emerged that rejects ambiguity and ambivalence for the old Sunday-morning certainties."

Got that? For Bush, the role of government is to help construct "a culture of life" that protects the rights of fetuses and politically-funded religious social organizations. Whatever happened to the principle that the singular role of government is the protection of an actual human being's rights to life, liberty, property, and the pursuit of happiness?

Bush grasps, of course, that "Government can hand out money, but it cannot put love in people's hearts or a sense of purpose in people's lives." Drawing on the lessons he learned in his own struggles with substance abuse, perhaps, he often tells people:

If you're a drunk, sometimes a psychologist can talk you out of it, but generally it requires a higher power. If you change your heart, you change your behavior. And government must recognize that those heart changers are an important part of changing society one soul at a time. So the faith-based initiative recognizes that there is an army of compassion that needs to be nurtured, rallied, called forth, and funded, without causing the army to have to lose the reason it's an army in the first place. I mean, one of the real challenges we've had, of course, is to say

to the faith community, "Come in, the social service money is available for you and oh, by the way, you can keep the cross on the wall or the Star of David in your temple without fear of government retribution." I think we're getting there. I mean, this is a cultural change in government too, by the way. It's been a mighty struggle to convince people of the wisdom of the policy. ...

Finally, government has got a responsibility to support and nurture institutions ... foster institutions that provide hope and stability. That's why I took the position I took on the

sanctity of marriage. I believe it's a very important issue for America. I think it—marriage—has worked. It's the commitment between a man and a woman. That shared responsibility is the cornerstone—has been the cornerstone—will be the cornerstone for civilization and I think any erosion of that definition by itself will weaken civilization as we have known it, and as we hope to know it. ...

For a man who once campaigned against the Clintonistas' penchant for nation-building, Bush seems to have made the building of nations and the building of cultures a full-fledged state enterprise. Bush's maxim—that "[t]he role of government is to help foster cultural change as well as to protect institutions in our society that are an important part of the culture"—is an attempt to use politics as a cultural and religious tool.

Thus, for Bush, "it is incumbent upon this powerful, rich nation to lead," not only to take on the "enemies of freedom," but to take "on those elements of life that prevent free people from emerging, like disease and hunger." America must "feed the world" and provide "more money for

HIV/AIDS" at home and abroad. "We are a compassionate country," he says. But this is the kind of altruistic "compassionate conservatism" that thinks nothing of forcing taxpayers to sacrifice their wealth to achieve the President's activist political agenda. It is quite revealing that, during his tenure, Bush has drawn lessons from the most activist Presidents in history: Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, and Franklin Delano Roosevelt who, Bush asserts, "gave his soul for the process" of taking America out of the Depression and into a world war against authoritarian tyranny.

Bush's pious political mission has had its critics—even among the standard-bearers of traditional conservatism, who decry the project of nation-building and who reject the idea of using the federal Constitution as an instrument of social policy and, thus, an infringement on states' rights. At Ronald Reagan's funeral, his son, self-described atheist Ron Reagan Jr. expressed some of his own concerns: "Dad was also a deeply, unabashedly religious man," said Ron. "But he never made the fatal mistake of so many politicians: Wearing his faith on his sleeve to gain political advantage. True, after he was shot and nearly killed early in his presidency, he came to believe that God had spared him in order that he might do good. But he accepted that as a responsibility, not a mandate. And there is a profound difference." When people suggested that he'd taken a cheap shot at the President, Reagan Jr. told NBC's Chris Matthews: "What I find interesting about it is that everybody assumes that I must be talking about George W. Bush, which I find fascinating and somewhat telling. If the shoe fits... I think [Bush has] used religion to make his case for—a lot of things, including Iraq. This is their administration," he declared. "This is their war." Slamming those in the administration who try to piggyback on his father's political legacy, Reagan Jr. admonished: "If they can't stand on their own two feet, well, they're no Ronald Reagans, that's for sure."¹⁶

Concluding Thoughts

A few caveats are in order. In this discussion, I have not made any broad claim about religion, *per se*, as a corrupting social force. Nor have I indicted people's *right* to worship or voice their religiously inspired political beliefs as they please. We live in a historical moment when people are searching desperately for guidance in the face of terrorism and war. That there are legitimate *secular* alternatives to religion, which might provide us with spiritually uplifting answers, does not obscure the fact that religion exists. It is not about to wither

away anytime soon; it is not about to be wiped out as "the opiate of the masses." It will continue to provide many individuals with the emotional fuel they require to make sense of life's tragic circumstances.

Moreover, this discussion is not meant to indict any particular religion or sect. That some pietists have endorsed government intervention does not mean that all pietists are "evil." Even in today's culture, pietists are not the only religious group wreaking havoc with American politics. And there are many *other* non- (or anti-)religious ideological groups trying to ram their particular social agendas down the throats of the American people; some of these groups are notably *secular* and *left-wing*. That's just the nature of the society in which we live, a society where government's *raison d'être* is not the protection of individual rights, but the dispensation of privilege. That governmental role has had the effect of *multiplying* the number of groups engaged in internecine competition for political or social benefits, and these groups will be inspired by any number of religious or secular ideological doctrines.

That our focus here has been on the indecent impact of religion on politics, however, does not mean that religious people are incapable of being decent. The lessons of the Old and New Testaments, with their select stories of human redemption and human dignity, have had a measurable positive impact on many good and moral individuals. That supreme atheist, Ayn Rand, once said that religion had long monopolized "the highest moral concepts of our language," such notions as "exaltation," "worship," "reverence," and the "sacred," all of which speak to legitimate, *this-worldly* human needs.¹⁷ She readily affirmed the importance of certain religious doctrines to the evolution of the ideas of individualism and freedom, and celebrated individuals such as St. Thomas Aquinas for acting as the Aristotelian progenitor to the Renaissance.

Interestingly, Rand herself counted a Biblical work of historical fiction as among her favorites. She regarded *Quo Vadis?* by Henryk Sienkiewicz as one of the greatest novels ever written. She reminded one of her readers "that the biggest fiction sellers of all times (and the surest recipe for a bestseller) have always been religious novels with a good story (*Ben-Hur*, *Quo Vadis?*, *The Robe*)—and that *The Fountainhead* is a *religious* novel [insofar as] it gives to . . . readers . . . a sense of faith, courage and moral uplift."¹⁸

In this sense, even nonbelievers can appreciate the religiously inspired literature and art that is among the most passionate

in the Western canon. (And anyone who is a fan of the epic film, "Ben-Hur," as I am—or who thinks that Mario Lanza's rendition of "I Walk With God" is, indeed, a "religious" experience . . . would understand what I'm trying to convey here.)

But this is all somewhat beside the point. The issue is not spiritual or aesthetic uplift. The central issue is that more and more Americans are enraptured by a religious sensibility that is becoming increasingly influential on popular culture and on domestic and foreign policy. *Religion is being used by the representatives of government and politically constituted groups as a statist tool for the remaking of the modern world.* And therein lies the danger.

The Founding Fathers—most of them deist in their religious orientation—understood the supreme importance of the *separation of church and state*, even if they sought the entitlements of rights and revolution on the basis of the "laws of nature and of nature's God." For those of us who understand the equally important *separation of economy and state*, it is clear that the erosion of these principles has led to the erosion of the very rights for which the Founders fought.

It will take nothing less than an intellectual and cultural revolution to rediscover—and implement—these sacred political principles that stand at the core of the distinctly *American* imagination.

Notes

1. See www.lewrockwell.com/rothbard/rothbard28
2. "God and George W. Bush," *NY Times*, 17 May 2003.
3. Nancy Gibbs, "The Faith Factor," *Time*, 21 June 2004.
4. "A Matter of Faith," *NY Times*, 22 June 2004.
5. "God's Country," *NY Times Magazine*, 2 May 2004.
6. John Leland, "Christian Cool and the New Generation Gap," *NY Times*, 16 May 2004.
7. "Heaven Knows God is a Hit," *New York Daily News*, 11 April 2004.
8. "Easter Show Ain't Very Bunny for Kids," *New York Daily News*, 9 April 2004.
9. "The 'Hypermodern' Foe: How the Evangelicals and Catholics Joined Forces," *NY Times*, 30 May 2004.
10. "Jesus and Jihad," *NY Times*, 17 July 2004.
11. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 16 April 2004, B16.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Jack Mathews, "Wooden Horse Sense," *New York Daily News*, 30 May 2004.
14. "The Faith Factor," *Time*, 21 June 2004.
15. 24 May 2004 <www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2004/121/51.0.html>.
16. *Dateline* interview with Chris Matthews, NBC-TV, 18 June 2004.
17. "Introduction to the Twenty-fifth Anniversary Edition," *The Fountainhead*.
18. *Letters of Ayn Rand*, 11 December 1945, 251.