

Theocracy Alert

Moral victory: Religious exploitation, and the new American creed

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"Our moral perils are not those of conscious malice or the explicit lust for power. They are the perils which can be understood only if we realize the ironic tendency of virtues to turn into vices when too complacently relied upon; and of power to become vexatious if the wisdom which directs it is trusted too confidently." —Reinhold Niebuhr

In the Beginning . . .

December 23, 2004—I remember it as though it were yesterday. I was a young engineer fresh from a successful and heady seven years in the manned lunar expedition program called Project Apollo.

Along with thousands of other American engineers, scientists, pilots, and technicians, people accustomed to working in relative obscurity, we had found ourselves suddenly at the center of the universe. And though Albert Einstein had already proven that everything and anything can rightfully be considered the center of the universe, I'm speaking less prosaically. For a young man in the morning of his career, or an old man at its dusk, and today I can speak with knowledge of both circumstances, Project Apollo was that something we would remember the rest of our days. Physics aside, Apollo simply was for a time the center of the universe of men. Anyone who had the great good fortune and talent to be a part of it, would be changed for the experience, and changed for the better. Such harmless vanity is simply human nature. We are all of us creatures who delight in success however small might be our part in its achievement. Self-esteem is critical to our well being as humans. On Apollo it made us all work harder and with more passion than any work I've known since. Contributing to Project Apollo, and earning the trust and respect of project engineers older and wiser than I, and ultimately that of the astronauts themselves, gave this and so many other young Americans a special kind of self-confidence. Few have had such an opportunity so early in their lives and careers. Fewer still might have accepted it, for failure would have haunted all our days, and with each new moonrise, our nights as well. It's been said that experience doesn't change a person, but make him more of what he already is. Perhaps that is so. Think of the challenges you have faced in your own life. Think of how your responses to them tempered or softened you, contributed to, or somehow affected your social, intellectual, and perhaps, spiritual growth and attitudes. Reflecting upon ones life can be a rewarding or a painful exercise. Yet it is a thing from which we cannot hide. As Socrates observed, "An unexamined life is not worth living." Extreme? Perhaps. But keep these concepts of self top of mind. Remain mindful of self-confidence, self-esteem, and, not incidentally, self-worth as you read on.

Of course, even the best of good things must come to an end. So it was with Apollo. But at its close, when few outside the program really cared about silly-appearing moonwalks anymore, I was one of a relatively small group of Earthlings who had learned the empirical science of orbital mechanics and knew about sending moving pictures home from space. In our seven years of transmitting and receiving them, all of America had seen those pictures. All of the world would see those pictures evolve over time from grainy, hardly discernable monochromatic images to full color, full motion, high-resolution renditions worthy of National Geographic. Yet, in the mid-Seventies, and the end of manned missions to other worlds, those of us still with the civilian sector of the US Space Program were developing more pragmatic concerns about its future and our own. We'd all be looking for work soon. As for me and my own future,

the ability to send moving pictures back from space seemed an esoteric skill at best, a skill wholly devoid of commercial value and now, with no new worlds on the trip sheet, it was becoming boring as well. I grew restless.

As things turned out, I was one of the lucky ones. I could stay on at the aerospace plant where we'd built the Lunar Lander. But with the program essentially over, I would have to transfer back to jets, back to reconnaissance flight test where I'd started out, but in 1975, I and just about every other American had had his fill of warplanes. Also, I came to realize that I'd lost my young man's taste for dangerous work. I was a husband and father now, and that was a convenient excuse to rationalize my growing yellow streak. I needed a change. I needed another kind of job, and we were in another stupid recession that the equally stupid TV economists never saw coming, yet dished out advice about to the credulous masses. Some things never change. Some jobs don't need a skill or a record of success to prevail. Unlike the unforgiving field of flight test, TV seemed full of such performance-free jobs. But I was an engineer, not a TV economist. I'd learned about video technology flying Air Force reconnaissance in the Arctic, transferred it to a civilian career. It was the technology that revealed the Russian missiles in Cuba, and kept tabs on the Russian bombers poised like coils to spring from Siberia if things in Cuba went awry. It was that same video technology in civilian dress that had allowed us to see the moon walks. But in its private-sector application, the application known as commercial broadcast television, video was used shamefully. Commercial television it seemed was a medium created by our collective genius only to have it exploit our collective stupidity . . . at least stupidity enough to buy the junk they were continuously peddling from its screens. A career in broadcast television engineering held little allure.

I was offered a job with the State Department's Voice Of America propaganda arm, went through all the loyalty and security checks only to turn it down - twice. I tried teaching college for a time, but found myself too young and selfish to be satisfied by teaching others what I still wanted to be doing myself. But where? Who in the world needed a guy whose skill was sending movies back from space?

The answer came in a completely unexpected phone call.

Home Box Office was something I'd never heard of before that call came in out of the blue. Home Box Office. HBO? What's that? I asked the eager-sounding "head hunter" on the other end of the phone.

Next thing I knew I was sitting in a mahogany clad room high in the Time-Life Building on Rockefeller Center in New York City. This was no airplane factory. Elegant perfect women glided by, sylphlike and intimidating. All the men were dressed in white shirt and tie. I was too, of course. Yet, hidden beneath my jacket, was the only short-sleeved white shirt in the room. How impractical of them, thought I. It's high summer. Why wear long sleeves only to roll them up? Don't these guys get it? I'd found another world, it seemed, right here on Earth.

Otherworldly or not, TV and motion pictures was the world in which I would spend the next 30 years of my engineering career. But first I had to get through this interview, or meeting or whatever it was. Eventually, I was led to a private corner office where I was introduced to yet another of the a long-sleeved executives. His sleeves were not rolled, but terminated in silver cuff links: obviously a big shot. To my amazement the guy wanted to send movies—real Hollywood movies - back from space. Looking beyond his obvious lack of industrial fashion sense, I told him he was nuts. Then I told him why he was nuts. He dismissed my unqualified psychoanalytic opinions, but listened intently to my technical ones. To my surprise, he offered me a job. To my further surprise, I took it. So much for lofty ideals and even loftier opinions. I was in the stupid television business, and in it to stay.

Six months later, our antenna hoisted 22,300 miles above the Earth by a converted Atlas Delta missile, HBO, was sending movies back from space. It was an idea that caught on quickly in the private sector. With a single satellite in space, TV signals—in the case of HBO, movies—could be received at every single inch of the United States mainland. There would be no 1,500 foot towers (which as a pilot I'd always hated), no million watt transmitters, and no 100 mile contour limits of the sort that barricade traditional "terrestrial" broadcast signals. Nothing of the sort would impede our little 5-watt transmitter in the sky. Borne upon a satellite channel whose power was equal to but that of a night-light bulb, one signal

from space could blanket the entire continental US and most of populous Canada. It was pure brilliance on the part of those long-sleeved executives—practical physics and military technology now put to private and peaceful use. No mind-numbing commercials, and no numb-minded censors either. I liked it here. This wasn't stupid. This was cool. This was way cool. Funny, isn't it, how we're able to abandon even strongly held opinions when our self interest is better served by forming new ones?

Firmly ensconced in HBO's fledgling engineering department, and with our early successes a matter of technical record, I suddenly found myself being invited to speak at seminars on how to do this TV from space thing. Ironically, I was teaching again, albeit in a different venue. Over the next couple of years I would visit all 50 states. But it was a tutorial for TV execs in the Deep South that would remain an event apart from all the others. Though I was a speaker, I was still new to the entertainment business, so I knew no one in attendance. But my talk had gone well; the college teaching experience was paying off, so there would be no problem finding eager dinner companions among so large an audience.

Descending the podium, I had noticed but a single empty chair in the entire room. Taking it, I found myself at a table of strangely egalitarian folk. They were gentle in manner. They welcomed me expansively. They introduced themselves. To my delight, they spoke less of arcane technology than they did of their fellow man and their responsibilities toward humanity that such technology could help them fulfill. I listened, interested, noting that they all had that sort of deliberate not quite real Dixie accent that I'd learned to recognize in actors when playing Southern characters before the camera. But why here? Their names—remarkable in retrospect, but hardly noteworthy at the time—were Jimmy Swaggart, Paul Crouch, Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker, Pat Robertson, Robert Tilton, and a guy named Billy Batts. I was present, I know now, at American Televangelism's Big Bang, or if you prefer, its Genesis. Big league Fundamentalist Christian TV Evangelism was born at that table that day.

These seemingly gentle folk were fairly voracious in their acceptance of this new way to spread The Word, nationwide. Worldwide! They were there to learn of a new way to propagate their version of the Gospel Of Jesus Christ. They conversed in Biblical quotes, nodding their heads in profound understanding, "Amen, brother," so on. The experience seems a bit surreal now. It was not. They were there to buy satellite antennas and anything else they would need to fulfill their self-proclaimed mission as Christ's revisionist vicars on Earth. They each seemed to have a little licensed religious TV station of their own somewhere in the US, and if they hooked that signal to the satellite, they would not only be able, but mandated to have that signal carried by another hot, new medium: cable television. That mandate would come from a little known federal communications law known as the Must Carry Rule. It was little known to you and me, perhaps, but well known to the budding televangelists. These seemingly innocent people, and the equally innocent seeming circumstances that brought us together would change the lives of everyone at that table in the decades to come. And that in turn would affect the world in a way none of us could have imagined. Because, and though I had no way of knowing it, America was about to take its first step on a 30-year journey to the Dark Ages. Today we know it only as the 21st Century. When looking back upon it, history will prove less kind.

From this butterfly effect, would grow e-piety's perfect storm. It was the mid-Seventies. Our culture had been reeling from the narcotic excesses of the Sixties and the sexual intemperance of the Seventies. The divorce rate was the highest it's ever been in our nation's history. The entire concept of nuclear family was under siege as never before in America. It seemed as if everything familiar was changing. And while most Americans were blessed with moderate appetites, self-disciplined behaviors, and a measure of common sense, and thus well suited to social change, many others were not. To so many of our repressed and simplistic countrymen and women every new experience in this brave new age, however intuitive, however mundane, seemed an epiphany. So, while most Americans also managed to remain relatively unaffected by the willingly-acquired excesses that characterized the period, many others could not.

America had also just emerged from a decade-long war of unspeakable horror, and dubious purpose. Thanks to a still-relevant news media, a mandatory draft, and casualty rate topping 200,000 (58,000 KIA), Vietnam affected all aware Americans. To avoid the draft, countless young Americans married in haste and conceived unloved children in order to gain deferment. Millions more enrolled and remained in colleges though they would not ordinarily have done so but for the student deferment. (No fewer than 12

deferments were granted to chicken hawks Dick Cheney (5) and John Ashcroft (7) alone!) Since the college deferment required actually going to college and studying something, the experience exposed millions of commonplace minds to the volatile philosophies of extraordinary—and quite often revolutionary—thinkers for the first time in their personal, and America's societal history. One way or another, every American, regardless of family, background, intellect, or social circumstance shared in the war's trauma and was made to look upon, and confront its distasteful significance. Drenched in this cascade of social and moral upheaval, vast numbers of Americans were driven to the edge. Many more went over that edge and found comfort only in denial or in excess, or both. Be it drugs, sex, alcohol, violence, or all of the above, there was a measure of comfort and escape to be found in the sensual distractions of excess, and it was available and beckoning from wherever one turned.

Indulgence would yield a temporary comfort, and when the millions who over-indulged came crashing back to reality, many needed comforting of another kind. They needed reform, and some degree of certainty in what seemed an even-more-uncertain society than that which they had attempted to escape. They needed someone or something to which they could turn for advice, direction, strength, and inspiration. For those who survived the fall physically but not emotionally, there arose a need for some mortal contact, someone who would not consider them failed humans, someone or something to show them the way back. Or, more simply stated, millions and millions and millions of Americans needed a new addiction to wean them from and obviate the mental scars left by their old addictions of war and sex and drugs, and social transgression, and violence, and confusion, and behavior outside the limits of their operant conditioning. Instead of assessing and accepting their memories, so very many Americans needed forgiveness for their actions. Those among the multitudes lacking the resolve to accept and assess and repair their assaulted psyches, those lacking the strength to pick themselves back up (and their numbers were legion) needed something more. They needed an emotional crutch.

What people need, people tend to find. If they don't find it by themselves, there are always those willing to provide it . . . usually for a price. In this case, it appeared literally right before their eyes. Salvation, forgiveness, aggrandizement, self-esteem, courage, moral superiority, all of it was beaming to them right from heaven itself, and onto their television screens. Satellite delivered televangelism was born on that day back in 1975. I watched it hatch. Suddenly it was everywhere. There was never a time in modern history when it was "needed" more. From the flickering boxes in America's living rooms came the siren call to her desperate multitudes. "Hey you out there in TV land, whatever you've done, and to whomever you've done it, no worries. Put down that bottle, throw away that needle, stop punching your wife, whatever. All is forgiven . . . or can be. In fact, you can instantly become superior to those infidels who've not found the light and The Way and have done so much to degrade you for so long. Just listen to me, then send cash, check, or money order to the address on your screen. You'll be the best there is, brothers and sisters, the best there is. Trust Jesus. Trust me. Send a check. Halleluiah!

Given that so very many of "Christian" fundamentalism's contemporary American adherents believe that they have failed in the eyes of those who follow more moderate religious or societal paths, and given the widespread genetic proclivity toward belonging, they also needed something more extreme than rational theology to light their way back from the abyss. They needed to be a part of something so extreme, so strident that it would also provide them the psychological wherewithal to dismiss their moderate fellows' judgments of them. That would require a system of beliefs and strictures so rigorous, so abstemious that it would also serve to obviate or at least trivialize the beliefs and behaviors of their moderate Judeo-Christian counterparts, and those of enlightened liberal practitioners of any religion and religious thought, thus discrediting those they saw as their mortal judges and despicable scholarly elites, their betters. Once again, they needed an escape from reality. They needed a mind fix.

There is but one major creed that has offered such impenitent forgiveness, even aggrandizement for simply having rejected ones past transgressions and accepting its tenets. There is but one creed that associates itself so closely with an Anglo-Protestant American heritage, despite that no such identity ever existed. (Nature abhors a vacuum. The vacuum left by most Americans' ignorance of their own country's relatively brief history, is a vacuum easily filled by myth. Any student of American history knows well that many of the Founders were religious, but none publicly fundamentalist Christian. References to God, not to Jesus, prevail in their writings. The crafters of our Republic were brilliant men. But few would dispute

that the three greatest geniuses among them were Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and Alexander Hamilton. Franklin and Jefferson were professed deists, Hamilton a homosexual. From where does the religious Right's claim to their legacy stem? It stems from imagination. Because it simply never was. Religion was a part of the beautiful fabric of early America, not its foundation. The plurality of the US Constitution superceded the singularity of the Mayflower Compact.) There is but one creed that stimulates intolerance while proclaiming inclusiveness based on its very antithesis. And finally, but most critical, there is but one creed that bases its fundamentalism on an absolutely literal interpretation of a Bible it considers absolutely flawless. Yet the Bible passed down through the ages is largely a fabrication. It is laced with revisionist scripture and distortions of convenience that the most serious of religious scholars have found to be at best, only 18 percent historically factual.[1] At best.

Thus, proximate attribution to the approximate Word is the rough equivalent of a 21st century airline or ship's captain using 14th century maps, and only 14th century maps, by which to navigate and presuming them to be inviolate.

I'll take the bus.

By exploiting this widespread proclivity to believe, the Bible has become a convenient vehicle through which unscrupulous interpreters can derive a creed, a creed which, if accepted with a zealot's fervor, would forgive anything—absolutely anything—one might have inflicted upon himself or his fellow man, woman, child, beast, vegetable or mineral in the past, and do so sans active or substantive non-monetary penance. It is a creed that is conveniently blind to any dichotomy between intolerance and forgiveness, theocracy and democracy, benevolence and vengeance, faith and political corruption. That is the creed that encourages one to be born again, the Evangelical Creed of Biblical literalism. Or what is alternately called rightist, conservative, Evangelical, fundamentalist Christianity. So ill conceived and distorted is this ostensibly “literal” acceptance of oft revised, translated and interpreted scripture, that serious Biblical scholars now consider it fabrication in the interest of self-servitude and the exploitation of mind-cure. Noted Biblical scholar and psychologist Edmund D. Cohen postulates that, “Cast free from its Biblical moorings, Christianity came to denote anything good or wholesome in American life.”[2] Inventing religions of convenience is characteristic of men, not the province of man.

Nonetheless, and as usual, legions of credulous, disillusioned, disconnected Americans fell victim to fundamentalism's lure. Weather the adherent fancies a turban, a topknot, or a Stetson, religious extremism serves a purpose no different from drugs when it becomes a crutch. Religious extremism has become the simplistic answer for far too many of our countrymen's mortal problems. For its “Christian” adherents, the answers to all life's problems are found between the Bible's covers. There is no need to actually indulge in the human attribute of reasoning. Intellect is fabricated through rote memorization of scripture. But were it all that simple. Unfortunately, as with most other forms of extremism which abdicate thought to dogmatic obedience, fundamentalism is also the source of so very, very many more problems than it ever has solved, or ever will solve.

Recall now, the earlier references to self-esteem, the vacuum it leaves when it is absent or destroyed through self-destructive living, excess, compulsive-obsessive behaviors, inflicted or accepted abuse.

Anyone who would have been addicted to sex, drugs, and anything but rock and roll, was a candidate for addiction to whatever else suited his or her self-depreciated fancy. Anyone who needed forgiveness for the harm he'd done to himself or to others, could find it here. Christianity—but especially this strange, highly selective, but very heady new simplistic form of it—was an addiction about which they could even feel good. They could even feel better than anyone else. They could garner immense self-esteem, however ill placed. That rush was, and is to this day, a first in so many disturbed lives. In fact, lets throw in faith healing of the most desperately ill while we're at it. What's the harm?

The ensuing decades would see the easily led, easily addicted, easily persuaded, easily frightened, abused, downtrodden, secret-harboring, pain ridden—in short, vulnerable—masses drawn to the flickering images of these fire and brimstone preachers on their cable televisions and they would be

converted by the millions, by the tens-of-millions. They would belong. All is forgiven. All is well, or will be shortly. All. Absolutely all. Oh, by the way, don't forget to send the check.

If these words seem harsh, I simply make no effort to disguise my disdain for those who would exploit the vulnerable, nor will I soft-peddle the obvious abuse by so many of a system of government created to, among other things, tolerate and protect religious freedom. The abuse of that trust by so many televangelists, and the further misuse of the public electromagnetic spectrum to exploit the irrational, credulous, impressionable, desperate, and weak who believe them is an especially vile form of TV indecency. But don't look for any scrutiny by our current Federal Communications Commission. Bush stooge and FCC Commissioner, Michael Powell, will be too busy looking for bare breasts to keep the citizenry's pathetic popular mind from realizing that he's destroying public interest protections such as the station ownership cap. That cap remains the only barrier to the continued expansion by the pious parasites of televangelism. Powell is bent on destroying that cap in the special interest of his owners.

False Prophets / Real Profits

Keep in mind that we're speaking of Christianity, albeit an extreme form, but Christianity: a belief in the divinity of Jesus as Christ, as God the Son, and in His teachings and principles upon this mortal coil.

Keep in mind, too, that we're speaking of the Old Testament as well, of the introductory scriptures themselves, the scriptures to which many Evangelicals adhere dogmatically, the fundament, Genesis 2:16-17, the garden, the forbidden fruit. The Bible virtually begins with God's admonitions to man on the virtues of moderation, the perils of excess. It is the first admonition to Adam . . . the first! Yet, somehow, today's Biblical literalism seems to yield to interpretation at such uncomfortable junctures as Genesis. The flesh is, after all, weak. So on, so forth, ad infinitum.

As you read further, please remain mindful that Jesus in his Earthly manifestation owned virtually nothing. Such modesty must have set a poor example to TV evangelists. They own a lot of things. Boy, do they own a lot of things. They want to own a lot more. Michael Powell will soon allow them to do just that.

Need an example of how lucrative is the televangelist business? Several examples? Easy.

Most of you know of a religious TV show called the "700 Club." It was founded by presidential candidate, gay basher, and TV evangelist extraordinaire Pat Robertson. It got its name from Robertson's admonition to his initial 700 rural viewers to send him a donation of \$10 each. That was the estimated cost of operating his fledgling "terrestrial" TV show. Ten years after Pat Robertson made his modest \$7,000 request, and with his channel now being carried by satellite, he had 26 million regular viewers across the country. Operating revenues had grown to a staggering \$145,517,000 annually in the US alone.[3] Today the "700 Club" is carried in 66 countries. Robertson and his Christian Coalition purport enormous influence in American politics. This lofty pulpit allowed Robertson to predict that Armageddon would arrive in 1982. This prospect would of course leave faithful viewers with no practical need for such things as green bananas, nor incidentally, their retirement savings, but that's just speculation by this jaded writer. When, despite Ronald Reagan's best efforts, the world failed to end, it didn't matter much to Robertson's flock, no one was complaining or seeking a refund, instead they were told to thank Jesus. They did. Later, Robertson actually had his television crews preparing to televise the Second Coming. That was in 1990. Why would Robertson believe that he and he alone knew this? Are the TV crews still on location? Where might that be?

Eventually, his lackluster performance as a prophet led Robertson to abandon prediction in favor of the safer and more politically potent practice of hindsight. For example, he has recently proclaimed credit for George W. Bush's "re" election. However dubious a distinction that might be, Bush believes him, so little else matters. As such we can expect Robertson's influence to increase in these four dismal years ahead as Bush continues distributing our US Treasury's contents to his friends, and promotes his "Faith Based Initiative" program. Initiative indeed.

Robertson is not alone. Fabulous wealth and power would be visited upon many of this new breed of high-tech missionaries, and now it seems they and their fiscally less impressive sycophants are everywhere one turns. There is no admission prerequisite to the salvation club, and no barrier to moral superiority. All one need do is buy it at the two-for-one sale that's always going on. (Call the number on your screen). State it aloud with some reference to Jesus, wave your hand in the air, and back the rapt gestures with cash, check, or money order, and you're on the Heavenly Express. But don't forget that check. God don't save no deadbeats. The tax-free American dollar is still worth plenty in heaven.

Another dinner companion that fateful night was Paul Crouch. Like Robertson and Jesus, Crouch, the televangelist, and story telling founder of Trinity Broadcast Network (TBN), started out with virtually nothing. Using a rented studio in southern California and a set made from his living room furniture and shower curtain, Crouch went on the air from Burbank. He claims that later, in 1975 to be exact, he was visited by God one night. God projected a map of the United States on Paul's ceiling, and told him about satellite technology. God went on to tell Paul Crouch how the satellite (No, not the moon. God forgot to put batteries in that satellite. We're talking modern here.) would allow him to broadcast to all those cities all across America.

Thanks to God's little slide show on Paul Crouch's ceiling, Paul would have no further need of his living room sofa and shower curtain as a set. In fact, today he sits upon a golden throne in a velvet-curtained studio, all of it generously funded by the \$126,000,000 in annual donations from his faithful viewers in satellite television land.[4] I often wonder why Paul Crouch came to that seminar at all. Why listen to dopes like me babble on when God Himself had already told Paul about satellite television? Funny how Crouch never mentioned his nocturnal visit from God. It would have been great dinner conversation. Because, except for that smelly guy I always see at the corner of Hollywood and Vine, I've never met anyone who's been visited by God.

Yet another of these people is Robert Tilton. Tilton was flying high with his TV ministries beaming forth from Texas or Oklahoma to America's living rooms, thus pulling in \$800,000 per month in donations. But an industrious dumpster-diving reporter would find thousands of prayer requests, intended for the preacher's attention, in that dumpster unopened and unread except to extract the checks and cash enclosed. The story got to ABC-TV and put a temporary crimp in Reverend Tilton's style. He's back on the air again though, and doing just fine.[8] Today's media takes no notice.

There were more. Everyone remembers Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. We all of us endured their spectacular public implosion, so I won't drag it out here. But they, of course, had a TV ministry too. They called it Praise The Lord. Its letters, like those of TBN, were PTL. Remember PTL? It was not long, however, before their intemperately flamboyant lifestyle had the FBI wondering whether PTL stood for Praise The Lord, or Pass The Loot. They found out. When Bakker went to jail, Jerry Falwell took over the ministry. Falwell would shortly be accused of swindling his new flock out of \$73 million in a bond scheme.[5] Falwell also claims credit for Bush "re" election. Only history will decide which was the more heinous offense.

Of the seven people at that fateful dinner table, most would be embroiled in scandals. They would stand accused or proven guilty of behavior violating their very admonitions and those of their professed god. One would be indicted for fraud, another convicted, two would be involved in extramarital affairs with prostitutes and another accused of sexual harassment by a same-sex employee.[6] The preacher accused of this laying on of hands would pay that employee nearly half-a-million dollars to keep his silence. Another would enter drug rehab. One I would personally witness attempting to pass a worthless check for \$2,000,000 worth of satellite equipment and services. Nice bunch.

Yet they prevail. One multi-millionaire not mentioned previously, is Armenian-born preacher Benny Hinn. Clad in a strange, cassock-emulating Nehru suite, Hinn is a player's player.

An Elmer Gantry style faith healer, to this day Hinn has been unable to show concrete admissible physical evidence of having healed anyone of anything at any time, anywhere. No problem. (Though he has not yet been able to reattach the slugger's ear, Hinn does accept credit for curing Evander Holyfield's

heart problems. While most overly muscular athletes simply stop taking steroids to accomplish this, Holyfield credits Benny Hinn with his miraculous recovery.) But to the point, Hinn takes a salary of \$500,000 per year for his medical miracle work. That's actually modest by many standards. But there's no malpractice premium, and it's taxable. His ministry, however, takes in \$80,000,000 a year in donations. He says the donations go back into the ministry, but Hinn refuses to join the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability. (Ministers such as Billy Graham are members in good standing, but membership requires revealing one's finances.) Hinn does not make any apologies. "I don't need gold in Heaven," Hinn says, "I got to have it now." Benny Hinn owns several homes, including his multimillion-dollar residence in Dana Point, California. He travels in a \$7 million Gulfstream jet between \$2,000 a night hotel rooms. He rarely quotes from Genesis 2:16-17. He's apparently getting it now.[7]

In fact, nearly all of them are. These TV preachers prevail and flourish regardless of their obvious transgressions against their own, and their gods' admonitions. And why wouldn't they? All they have to do is go back on the air, shed a few tears, promise to be good, proclaim their love of Jesus, and everyone believes them, starts crying, hugging one another and writing checks again. Like the battered wife who believes the "never again" lies and keeps going back for more, America is a society ever more driven by faith and the dependencies which rationalize it. We're constantly told what a good thing faith is. Yet Webster's defines faith as a belief in something for which there is neither evidence nor proof. What makes that a good thing? Imagine if the Justice Department operated on such a premise. They could jail whomever they wanted to jail, for whatever reason they chose, with neither evidence nor proof of wrongdoing . . . oh, they've already started doing that? Sorry. My mistake.

We are the most religious advanced society on earth today.[9] A recent poll showed that 59 percent of Americans consider God and religion very important in their everyday lives. Compare this to Italy's 23 percent, or to Japan's and France's 12 percent and you start to get the picture. Surprising, isn't it? It doesn't change much between the oceans either. While we might fondly consider ourselves socially and economically more similar to our progressive northern neighbors than we do those to our south, the similarities begin and end with language. Mexicans answered the same question with 57 percent of them saying that religion plays a very important part in their lives. That compares tightly with the 59 percent of Americans, while only 30 percent of Canadians considered this to be so. Thus, with the most moneyed country in the world publicly proclaiming its citizens' faith—or more simply stated, their eagerness to believe things without supporting evidence—it's no wonder the preachers of prey find their way to our shores, while their bank accounts remain offshore. It's no wonder they have become ever wealthier in material things, ever more revered by their faith-filled-flocks. They prevail and have been joined by many others, with doubtless many more yet to come. In Isaiah 1:18, the Bible tells us—and them - exactly why: "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow."

Despite their record of apparent hypocrisy, scandal, and evident deceit, the televangelists prevail, and have become ever more powerful a political force in a no-longer secular US government. The empire of influence—real or perceived—has been built by the TV preachers on the faith, fortunes, and fealty of the credulous, desperate, terrified. That it has been founded upon and in violation of the American Creed is of no concern to them or their history-oblivious flocks. Now, it is welcomed and even nurtured by one of the most irrationally faithful among them. In their poster boy of the moment the fundamentalists have found a man who believes the world is doomed to destruction in our lifetime, so take what you can get, and throw the wrapper in the river. And what's worse, with his return to power, the idiot-king seems bent on fulfilling that false prophecy of doom himself if only to prove it correct. I am speaking of course of extremism's repentant, born again Christian fundamentalist and reformed party animal, deserter, tooter, boozier, stock manipulator, and president, George W. Bush.[10, 11, 12, 13]

It's important to know that Bush recently said, "If you want to understand me, you got to go to Midland Texas." I did. What I learned there is this. George W. Bush bottomed out in Midland, Texas, in the mid-Eighties. But in doing so, he was by no means alone. Midland, Texas, in the Eighties was filled with failed oilmen. Not even the competent ones could make a go of it then. The town was wracked by suicides and drunkenness as a result of its one and only industry going bust. When one does not have work in Midland, there are few alternatives to idleness. One alternative is drink. The other is Church. Among troubled men the alternatives often proceed one to the other, and in that order. When George W. Bush,

despite his background of incalculable privilege, found himself just another drunken and failed oilman in Midland, he had run his string full out. Cocaine had failed him, business had failed him, drink had failed him. He had called himself the Bush family's black sheep. Small wonder. Despite being the fortunate son of the incumbent vice president of the United States, the fortunate heir to a fortune his grandfather, Prescott Bush, had amassed as a banker to such luminaries as Adolph Hitler, despite massive investment from the bin Laden family in his Arbusto oil business, George could not make a go of it.[14, 15] He couldn't find oil in Texas. There was little left for the hapless drunk but God. Midland might have run out of customers, and George might have run out of other people's money, but God was everywhere here, still is despite the town's economic upturn.

Skip Hedgepeth, a contemporary in the Midland Men's Community Bible Study group explains Bush's epiphany thus, "Hard times have a way of making people draw closer to God. When we're faced with troubles, we realize we're not in charge of everything. So we start looking for a power greater than ourselves to help us in our troubles."

While most of us realize we're not in charge of everything at about 3 months of age, it takes others a bit longer. For them, there's God. So, in the fall of 1985, his cocaine and alcohol abuse no longer a viable escape, his Arbusto Energy company now just plain busto, George W. Bush joined the Midland Men's Community Bible Study Group. Here he would be introduced to daily Bible readings and the emotional security found through hugging other men, crying, and dogma. To the surprise of few who knew him, George's addictive personality was about to take control of his ever-smaller brain yet again.[16]

In Evangelical Christianity, George W. Bush found a culture supporting non-judgment and unearned forgiveness of one's past deeds. This is known as Motivated Belief. Further, Evangelicals quite deliberately separate themselves from moderate Protestants by their belief in the Bible's absolute unerring accuracy as the written word of God. Unless God has continually edited it vicariously, that stands in stark contrast to logical and rational religious belief and learning. It stands in equal contrast to Anglo-American concepts of jurisprudence. It profanes science. But it thrives because it serves a purpose, and that purpose is self-delusion. It has no place in enlightened government or philosophy, yet today it dominates America's. It is the primary reason Bush won or stole this election despite his abysmal performance as president these last four years, and it is the primary reason that he, just like the tainted televangelists who sent their legions of faithful lemmings out to vote for their born-again miscreant, can get away with just about anything in the conditioned minds of his and their followers.

The point of all this is simple. After all, if these American "value voters" cannot find it within themselves to ignore the mountains of evidence and *forgive* their very leaders of dastardly deeds, and do so unconditionally, how can they expect to be forgiven themselves? Yet there is a sinful dichotomy at play here. They will forgive one another, but condone the vengeance-killing of 100,000 Iraqis without evidence that any of these slaughtered men, women, or children were guilty of anything—anything other than being different, that is. To me, such inconsistent beliefs as forgiveness and vengeance, sanctifying life while taking it indiscriminately, do not pave the way to Heaven. Such beliefs are the road to Hell. Unfortunately we're all on it together and the kooks are driving.

To Bush and his ilk, life, despite its being a gift from God, is trivialized as nothing more than a dress rehearsal for the afterlife. Here you make your mistakes, and here you correct them in order to achieve salvation. The misused concept is emphasized in the New Testament, and called upon often by preachers, ". . . he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved." In the Evangelical interpretation, it's not where you start, it's where you finish after you've finished. This removes the fear of "salvation doubt" if believed with vigor and absolution. To the literalists, the Bible teaches that everyone should be judged only after they've died. Consider how sainthood is ascribed but posthumously. Only thus are mortals afforded full opportunity to repent and be saved. However, inconsistent in this interpretation is how the Religious Right's dogmatic adherents, such as George W. Bush, deny other potential or wayward Christians this chance by their vindictive actions. Bush sent 152 convicts to the death chamber in five years as governor. That's a record. Nearly all called themselves Christians. Were they given the opportunity to "endure unto the end," and achieve repentance by their actions, or was Bush better suited to determine their temporal end than was God? While the wholesale execution of prisoners

is an extreme example, to Bush's mind, it seems once you're born, you're kill fodder for a greater good independent of your past deeds. He spent as little as four minutes deciding who lives and who dies. In this context then, once again, consider the bloodbath that is Iraq. When and where did Jesus Christ teach this stuff to anybody? Simple. He did not. Mortal men of purpose made it up. Mortal men find purpose by acting on those beliefs.

Sigmund Freud writing in his 1927 postulation, *The Future Of An Illusion*, says of conservative Christians, "Their acceptance of a universal neurosis spares them the task of constructing a personal one." Can there be a better explanation of why fear is so liberally used in our theocratic government's message today? Can there be any doubt as to whom they are speaking?

As Americans, as members of what was so recently called the most advanced society in human history, should we not be looking forward? Why then do we reward those who always look backward for guidance, backward to a time and place and a circumstance that never existed but in their fantasies and the imagination of those who foist such false ideas about America's religious heritage upon them? The Evangelists' version of That Old Time Religion is, in reality, a very new concept. But unless we're about to start burning witches again, and offering our daughters into slavery, it's just another bill of goods they've sold themselves . . . sold being the operative word.

As a culture, we will be made to understand the perils of blind faith and of retrospection without reference, perils we've already loosed on a more rational world. It has never been stated more succinctly than wherein Proverbs 29:18 observes how, "Without vision the people perish." Yet by its very definition, blind faith is without vision. Could there be a more profound misinterpretation of scripture than that manifest by this administration and the fundamentalist sycophants who've not only rewarded its crimes, but assured their continuance? They ask us to have faith while they take the lives of our young in exchange for oil. They ask us to have faith because if we were intelligent or courageous enough to demand evidence we would ask them why they've embarked upon an illegal war with no plan for termination; a daily slaughter of Iraqi innocents within their own homes, a slaughter devoid of honest objectives or reasonable justification; a daily desecration of the most holy of places without concern for mortal suffering or divine retribution; a national security plan that breaks the bank while obviating national security; a financial deficit with no plan for recovery; a Social Security privatization plan with no vehicle for funding it other than robbing an entire generation of retirees and borrowing \$2 trillion from foreign nations; a headlong rush to deny the weak among us aid and comfort in violation of Christ's teachings; a national economic model equal to that of the second worst economy in the hemisphere, Argentina; a policy of spend and borrow that will leave our children bankrupt and beholden to the children of other nations; an energy policy leading to fatal global climate change with no plan for counteraction or survival of the human race; a collapse of the U.S. dollar on world markets with no plan for recovery; a spiraling national debt with no ability to repay so much as its interest without selling our country to the Chinese at wholesale; and finally, the deliberate and pointless alienation of the 6.4 billion people who did not vote for George W. Bush but whose lives will be affected by his actions and to whom we will owe trillions of the US dollars our children must repay.

Summary

Satellite television today allows the majority of those billions and billions of foreigners to see America and her government's actions in her people's name. This has never before been so. We've always known that power corrupts. But corrupt leaders have been able to shield themselves from the world's view in past generations. They've often been able to do so long enough to amass great wealth and power at the expense of their peoples before running off. But they cannot do so any longer, not with impunity. America's actions affect the whole world. Today, the entire world is watching us. They're nervous. Their multitudes will not allow their "values" to cloud the truth unfolding before their very eyes on the planet they are willed by God to share with us, the "superpower." For the moment, we've abdicated our nation to delusional screwballs. Many nations have done this before. They already "get it." We don't. The world will not follow our lead. They will bankrupt us this time. This time they can.

Conclusion

We've examined but a few of the shortsighted, self-serving and visionless prospects for our America under its current irrational, faith driven "leader." He recently told us that "God is guiding our nation." So I guess Bush has delegated even that task to faith.

Call it charm, lunacy, ignorance, stupidity, or just call it what it is, policy, Bush's attributes work wonders with many Americans. As one wag put it, "I like Bush 'cause he's as dumb as me."

Bush's style appeals to what the TV ministers call their "Value Voters." So, let the exit polls be damned, the Evangelicals carried the day for their poster boy. If they didn't, they at least gave the Republican crooks who own this president a plausible vehicle to which they might attribute the otherwise inexplicable vote counts in this year's national election. They have changed our country into something its founders never intended it to be, a virtual theocracy, and they did it through abuse of the very system first designed to prevent it.

Though 30 years ago they had no substantive national influence, today, by their own literally incredible estimate, born-again Evangelicals represent 38 percent of voting age Americans. This year they appeared in record numbers casting, according to Barna Research, an estimated 53 percent of the total vote. That's a majority however you cut it. Their votes went overwhelmingly to George W. Bush and his anti-gay, anti-science, anti-pluralist, anti-social, anti-secular, anti-Earth, backward-looking, blind faith agenda.

Evangelicals have been convinced that they were the spoiler in this election. They equate Bush's victory with their infantile ideas about morality. They think they exhibited free will, imposed it upon the Liberal infidels by sending the Bush numbers over the top. In reality all they did was fall for the Republican line the same way they fall for their TV preachers' baloney. They responded as a herd. As always, it'll cost them. That's expected, and it's old news. What's really troubling is this. The TV preachers have shown the manipulators in the Bush administration how easy it was to use the credulous masses, to direct them to ends that most would consider outrageously stupid at the very least. The faithful herd will now be led to the slaughter, double crossed, deserted, and robbed of something they consider valuable, as have so many others the Bush administration has used and discarded during these four graceless years. Perhaps they deserve it. Perhaps we all do. For, after all, haven't the rest of us, those who so fondly consider ourselves enlightened, behaved no better? Have we not silently and passively ignored the empirical evidence of exit polls? [17, 18] It was these very exit polls which caused my source to hear one White House official exclaim, "We're being creamed," before it miraculously changed in their favor.[19] Have we not ignored the mathematical improbability that nearly every error uncovered accrued to Bush's advantage? The laws of probability demand that multiple random errors trend toward even distribution, but only if they are truly errors. Are we questioning the electronic "news" media's absence from this story? Nope. So, having seen all this before, are we not, therefore, accepting the nearly impossible results of this election on blind faith?

Blind faith is not a plan for any society's future survival; neither is it cognition worthy of the fully developed human mind. Blind faith is just a pretty mask that hides the ugly face of ignorance. Today, America wears that mask, and it does not represent the moral or ethical or religious "values" of its most rational citizens. Neither is it fooling anyone but other Americans.

It is said that of all God's creatures, only humans can deliberately consider any but their immediate future. Humans and humans alone have the power of mind to appreciate the implications of their present actions upon their long-term future and the welfare and survival of their children. Despite these unique gifts of mind, we are told and apparently believe that 59,054,087 Americans voted to continue a dismally failed presidency. Despite that presumably cognitive understanding, despite that ability to anticipate disaster, another estimated 80,000,000 voting age Americans chose to stay home on Election Day altogether. They chose not to vote. One can only ponder upon what kept them away from the polls, and what might be the values they consider important, but not important enough to get them get out of their easy chairs in the interest of saving their lives. There is but one conclusion to be drawn from these disparate behaviors.

America has suffered a crisis of intellect. We are become a people no longer adequate to the rigors of sustaining an ethical and equitable democracy.

As Thomas Paine said at America's birth, "A people gets the government it deserves."

Oh, well. God save America! Her citizens, it seems, are all watching television.

Footnotes

Please have no faith in anything you've read here. Unless and until you check the facts for yourself, that's all they are, some stranger's written words. The following references are provided to start you on that road - or as an aid to sleep, whichever you prefer. (DS)

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