

The unraveling of Christianity in America

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THE religious scene in America today is a picture of confusion. And it might not be too Platonic to suggest that the soul of the typical individual harbors this confusion as well. Religion has been reduced to an option, and there are just so many of them nowadays.

We can begin with the unprecedented variety of religious life in America today. It reflects the influx of adherents of non-Christian faiths as well as of Christians from non-Western lands. (Among my students in Toronto, the non-Western Christians seem decisively to outnumber those of European descent.) It's said that 200 languages are spoken in New York City today; just think how many new religious sects there must be as well. The practices of these new sectarians tend to be more fervent, traditional, and particularistic than those of most Americans. The more distinctive they are, however, the greater the pressure toward assimilation--not that of the newcomers to the broader society, but of it to them. In order to be ever more inclusive, official pieties must become ever more vapid.

Among the new denominations, Islam poses the greatest worry. Full integration of Muslims into the life of a liberal society presupposes their adoption of a liberal version of Islam. In America, however, as throughout the Sunni Muslim diaspora, much preaching and teaching are in the hands of the least tolerant of Sunni sects, the Wahabbi. We thus face a global terrorist threat while harboring many recent immigrants steeped in the very sect that inspires the fanatical vanguard of that threat. Here is a case of genuine religious diversity, but it is one that no sensible person would celebrate. Only a hardened optimist could predict its smooth resolution.

As for those Americans long established in the country, they too display a bewildering array of divisions and distinctions. American Christianity is the product of three centuries of accumulated sectarian and ethnic diversity as well as strong homogenizing tendencies. It also reflects four evangelical great awakenings and an indeterminate number of cultural revolutions (here the historians differ) culminating in the Great Non-Proletarian Cultural Revolution that began in the 1960s and has not abated since. Where there is a cultural revolution there will commonly be a culture war, a reaction (perhaps even an equal and opposite one) that will gather steam even as does the revolution itself. So we have had one of those as well, which equally proceeds without sign of abating. American religion displays the scars of all these battles.

As the term "culture wars" implies, the struggle is not religious in the usual sense of the term. It is not being waged primarily over questions of religious doctrine, nor are the battle lines primarily sectarian. Different sides of the debate may predominate within different denominations, but none is simply free of it. In fact, these disagreements have encouraged ecumenism, as both traditionalists and progressives in all denominations have reached out to their counterparts in others. Similarly, traditionalist clergy, who may identify their foe as "secular humanism," seek alliances with secularists, some of whom regard themselves as humanists. In the same manner, secular progressives, while

brandishing the bogey of the supposed threat of religious tyranny, collaborate with avowed believers who are no less "progressive" than they. So this warfare crosses both sectarian lines and that between religion and secularism.

Nor should we forget that only a minority of religious Americans find themselves at either fringe of the cultural spectrum. The sociologist James Davison Hunter suggests that 20 percent of Americans cluster toward each edge, with 60 percent somewhere in the middle, although reliable statistics are hard to come by. It's true that those defining themselves as strongly religious (whatever their denomination), as well as those who attended church most regularly, were more likely to vote Republican in the 2000 presidential election. Conversely, the less fervent and the less punctual were more likely to vote Democratic. The differences were significant but not so great as to indicate political polarization along these lines. There are plenty of churchgoers who vote Democratic.

The mainline

I have called the antagonists in the current struggle "traditionalists" and "progressives." These are terms wholly bereft of meaning outside their particular contexts, and even after we have filled in all the requisite blanks they will likely prove misleading. For one thing, both parties habitually claim to represent the true traditions of America, from which they accuse their rival of departing. There are progressivist readings of American tradition, as there are traditionalist ones, and since the tradition itself has always included a powerful measure of faith in progress, both readings will always be able to claim a certain plausibility. There is by now a long history of progressivism in American religion, which is why it is the progressive churches that enjoy the designation "mainline."

Since the late nineteenth century and the emergence of the Social Gospel, the typical response of the mainline churches to the challenge of secularism has been to capitulate to it. Every one of these churches has been advancing (or retreating) from Christian orthodoxy down the road of secular progressivism. They have not done so without hesitation and confusion, which have sometimes brought them to the brink of schism. Nonetheless, within each of these churches, certainly at the national level, progressivism has eventually prevailed across the board.

This same pattern has obtained, *mutatis mutandis*, even in the Catholic Church. It was slower to embark on this course than the others, for the Papacy spurned "modernism" until after World War II. The Second Vatican Council changed all that. True, papal authority has constrained the church in America, as elsewhere, from giving ground on certain bedrock issues. These aside, it has participated fully in the ecumenical progressivist consensus.

Similarly, within the pastoral realm, the discourse of psychotherapy and personal fulfillment appears to have established itself as thoroughly in the mainline churches as in the lay world. Those who are looking for something different in church than is on offer outside it are increasingly less likely to find it there. Each of these denominations has by

now alienated its more traditionalist members, especially during these recent decades of increasing cultural polarization, and many have voted with their feet.

There is another, opposite danger in the seamless integration of the churches into the forces of social progress. This process raises the question of the "free spirit" and "honest animal" of a democrat who unexpectedly bursts in upon the argument of Nietzsche's Genealogy of Morals.

Does the church today still have any necessary role to play [in aiding the progress of democracy]? Does it still have the right to exist? Or could one do without it? ... Certainly it has, over the years, become something crude and boorish, something repellent to a more delicate intellect, to a truly modern taste.

Once encouraged to conceive Christianity primarily as a buttress for progressive morality, we might come to see it as superfluous. If we welcome religion only because we cherish liberal social policy, why can't our commitment to the policy roll happily along on its own? Of course, the mainline churches have continued to participate in public debate. If anything, they have defined themselves ever more in terms of their social activism. What they have increasingly lacked is anything distinctively Christian to bring to the table.

Thus, mainline religion, despite its efforts to please, has become merely incidental to the lives of so many who continue to profess it. When I was growing up as a Jewish kid in Chicago in the 1950s, America still seemed very Christian. (Our Reform rabbi said it was "Judeo-Christian." We wanted to believe him, but the fists of the Irish kids enforced skepticism.) In retrospect, the country looked more Christian than it was. Today, by contrast, it looks less Christian than it is.

Bobo religion

Conventional wisdom teaches that America remains the most religious of advanced modern societies. I don't doubt that, so far as it goes. I've spent enough time in Europe to take in its spiritual desolation. A wag has said of Britain that its national religion is Sunday shopping. You can tell those most loyal to the old ways because they worship at the Mall of England.

Were it not that Britain's curates at least may be presumed to remain Christians, they would kill for American levels of church attendance. Yet here, just as there, hordes of respectable people worship at their local Starbucks on Sundays. I'm thinking above all of those whom David Brooks has so memorably christened "Bobos"--Bourgeois Bohemians, who endeavor to combine the affluence and stability of the former with the latter's rejection of materialism and conformity. While they weren't looking they slipped into the role of the predominant culture against which any subsequent counterculture must define itself (evangelicals, for instance).

The Bobos are the "new upper class" of postmodern liberal society. If you're too old to be one yourself, your younger brother or daughter or niece is. Brooks puts the best face on his subjects. While they, like their British cousins, are to be found in the aisles of a Pottery Barn on Sundays, they're not ducking out on God. They don't need a church in order to commune with the holy.

Marx once wrote that the bourgeois takes all that is sacred and makes it profane. The Bobos take everything that is profane and make it sacred. We have taken something that might have been grubby and materialistic and turned it into something elevated. We take the quintessential bourgeois activity, shopping, and turn it into quintessential bohemian activities: art, philosophy, social action. Bobos possess the Midas touch in reverse. Everything we touch turns into soul.

Nor is the soulfulness of the Bobos limited to their spending. Brooks devotes an entire chapter to the theme of their "Spirituality." Bobos yearn for Something Higher, Shared, and Meaningful. Unfortunately, this vague impulse is attended by neither commitment nor belief. A Bobo never limits his options, so while he may dabble in a range of sacred practices (taking "helpings from the spiritual buffet table," as Brooks puts it), he can never dedicate himself to any. Brooks cites the real life example of a "26-year-old disabilities counselor, the daughter of a Methodist minister, who describes herself as a 'Methodist Taoist Native American Quaker Russian Orthodox Buddhist Jew.'" (It must be a comfort to her father that she still lists Methodist first.)

At the end of this discussion, Brooks stages a wistful encounter between a "saintly Bobo woman" and the Angel of Death. She is saintly in the Bobo fashion: She has led a life of impeccable Bobotical correctness. He is the dark angel "especially delegated for the Bobos." He is "radiant in an old tweed jacket." He steals upon her unawares, as he does upon so many of us, while she is spending time with her "partner" at their summer place in Montana. Having satisfied himself that her renovation of the old ranch house employed only natural materials, Death decides that she has qualified for heaven. And so ... he just leaves her there in Montana, forever. Bobo heaven consists of eternal life as a Bobo, enacted against the backdrop of a faux-spiritual exurban decor.

The only thing [death] requests is that she redo the floor tiles in the hall, which didn't really work out as nicely as she had hoped anyway. This final resting spot doesn't offer the bliss of salvation. But this is a sensitive, New Age eternity, and every radio frequency is filled with National Public Radio.

If, as Sartre claimed, hell is other people, then surely an eternity of NPR does not rise above the level of Purgatory. Pity the Bobos. Even in seeking spiritual transcendence, they can't do better than the artful simulation of the genuine. Divining this, they too sense that true bliss will always escape them.

In reading Brooks's book, however, we're to recognize that the gentle laugh is on us. "These Bobos define our age. Their hybrid culture is the atmosphere we all breathe. Their

status codes now govern social life. Their moral codes give structure to our personal lives." No sentence on religion follows, but Brooks may take it to be implicit in his statement about morality. In any case, he argues that in a crucial respect the religious temper of the Bobos reflects that of middle-class Americans generally.

A post-Christian nation?

Brooks nods in the direction of Alan Wolfe's *One Nation, After All*. Wolfe's book interprets the results of a survey of 200 "upper middle class and middle class" Americans from across the country. His findings confirm those of the Gallup organization and others that Americans are a religious people (or, at any rate, that they declare themselves to be one). Scratch a mainline Christian, however, and you'll find a quasi-relativist.

Wolfe finds that moderation and toleration "are the bedrock principles of the American middle class." Nothing new here, perhaps, but it's crucial to grasp what ordinary Americans today mean by toleration. "A large number of those to whom we spoke, fear that morality if understood as a set of moral injunctions, can lead to intolerance, an outcome unacceptable to a people as nonjudgmental as middle-class Americans." In place of the right way of life, these middle-class Americans celebrate "difference" as they understand it. You look in vain among them for the firm opinion that anything other than intolerance (an old Christian sin like adultery, for example) is absolutely wrong. "Americans take their religion seriously, but very few of them take it so seriously that they believe that religion should be the sole, or even the most important, guide for establishing rules about how other people should live."

For Wolfe's Americans, as for Brooks's, moral laxity is a way of life, having mysteriously emerged as the fundamental principle of morality itself. Not only do they treat the sinner with charity, but they've become curiously indifferent to the sin.

True, Wolfe studied only a small sample, and his book would have been more accurately titled *One Suburban Upper Middle Class, After All*. Still, other research suggests a similar picture. In a study published in these pages, Stanley Rothman and Amy E. Black report on the business class.

The culture war is not over yet. Despite important cultural shifts, the business elite retains tattered remnants of an older, more traditional morality. However, the direction of change seems clear, and this study may well underestimate its magnitude. After all, our business sample tends to be composed of those in their fifties.... Behind them is a new generation about which David Brooks was clearly writing.

For the broadest confirmation that the "direction of change" is as Brooks and others have divined it, we need only look to the public face of the society. While most Americans may still identify themselves as Christians, their Christianity lacks coattails. In Tocqueville's day, which in this respect lasted until mine growing up in Chicago, not everyone in America believed in Christianity, but everyone deferred to it. No longer. For

the first time in the nation's history, religious opinion does not inhibit society as a whole. I won't bother to document this claim: You too have seen movies or watched television lately. For one moment that told the whole story, go no further than the lewd kiss at the MTV awards between Britney Spears and Madonna. (Which we now hear didn't sell as many records as Ms. Spears had hoped, poor thing.)

So whether or not it makes sense to think of America in terms of "one nation, two cultures," as Gertrude Himmelfarb has argued, there's no question which of these "cultures" is dominant. Christianity, which once pervaded the one culture practiced by the one nation, has slipped to the status of a subculture--we might even say a counter-culture. And the other subcultures, having shaken off Christianity's hegemony, go their own riotous ways.

The evangelical response

But what of evangelicalism, that most redoubtable of secularism's adversaries today? The first thing to grasp is that it is not, as some detractors suppose, old-fashioned. It offers a timely and focused response to the current situation. It adeptly fills the void left by its secularist and mainline rivals. Nor, as other detractors assume, is evangelicalism merely or primarily political, a conspiracy to deny the Democrats control of the White House and Congress by mobilizing angry white male yahoos.

I've always been surprised--I shouldn't have been--when the evangelicals I meet prove to be recovering secularists. They are intelligent, sensitive people who have learned the price of moral laxity the hard way. They will make any sacrifice--for starters, home schooling comes to mind--to save their children from paying this price as they have. Their counterparts can be found among those who have returned from accommodationist versions of Judaism to strict Rabbinic practice. Indeed, the appeal of evangelicalism first became intelligible to me through a novel whose narrator-protagonist is such a Jew: Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Penitent*, a tirade against modern corruption of extraordinary bitterness and power.

What distinguishes the evangelicalism of today from any stripe of premodern Christianity is precisely an all-pervasive awareness of secularism as the deadly alternative. The only religion that my evangelical relatives regard as Satanic is New Age. But it is of all supposed religions the one least distinguishable from postmodernist subjectivism. As the creed of if-it-promises-personal-fulfillment-do-it, it's rather an anti-religion. So if you wish to ascribe it to the Devil, be my guest.

What evangelicalism offers that the mainline churches no longer do is an emphasis on personal redemption, on the one hand, and on strict morality, on the other. The first of these carries no political implications. The second might incline toward support of political conservatism, but then again it might not. (Black churches promote strict morality, yet their churchgoers continue to vote overwhelmingly for Democrats. So too for evangelical and Pentecostal Hispanic churches.) As Himmelfarb has pointed out in her book *One Nation, Two Cultures*, "in one survey, only one-third of evangelicals

identify with the religious right; in another, only one-fifth do.... Evangelicals are more varied, not only theologically and denominationally, but also politically, than the popular image would have it."

Evangelicalism is well-established, of course, and so many who embrace it do so for the most usual of reasons: They have been raised in it. And there are regions of America where it dominates the local culture. Yet never have local cultures been so open to the national one, the images of which bombard them constantly, and never has the population been so mobile. The South in which evangelicalism flourishes is ever less Southern. And evangelicals today correspond to none of the demographic stereotypes of them that secularists cherish. In most respects, their profile mirrors those of the American population at large. As Himmelfarb puts it, "The evangelicals are, in fact, more highly educated than those calling themselves either religious liberals or secularists, and only slightly less likely to have had a graduate education than mainline Protestants."

It would therefore be a mistake to think that the moral and religious issues over which evangelicals dissent from the mainline mask some other hidden agenda. They stand as an impressive reproach to the gross defects of rampant secularism. That evangelicals are increasing in number does not make them any less a counterculture; it attests to their success as one. Like all countercultures, evangelicalism accurately reflects the dominant culture. The further American society lists toward the secularist subjectivist side, the larger the minority that will peel off to shift to the opposite rail.

Will that minority ever become a majority? By one standard of self-description (those who declare themselves to be "evangelical" or "born again"), evangelicals already make up nearly half of American society. Studies applying stricter criteria placed them at anywhere from one-tenth to one-fourth of the population in the late 1990s. Again, it is important to remember that they are anything but monolithic, and will prove ever less so as they grow in numbers.

Perhaps most confusingly, neither are evangelicals themselves immune to the inroads of the mainline from which they seek to distinguish themselves. James Davison Hunter's studies of evangelical divinity students show a marked tendency toward regression to the mean of Protestant religious opinion in America. And then there is the vogue for "Christian counseling," a growth industry if ever there was one. Himmelfarb reports that "evangelicals are divided between those practicing a 'classical' spirituality derived from earlier Protestant and Puritan traditions, and those partial to a 'postmodern' or 'existential' spirituality, which is therapeutic and individualist." Bobos, meet the "Evbos."

No counterculture fully realizes its aspiration to separate itself from the broader culture. I will note, however, one respect in which the evangelicals have failed not just themselves but the rest of us. This is the barrenness of their intellectual life. In many months spent over many years visiting in a pious household, I've not come upon a single evangelical book that rose above mediocrity. On a recent lecturing trip to the South, I met a young evangelical intellectual who had just defected to Catholicism. First among his reasons was the intellectual wealth of his new, much older faith in contrast with the poverty of his

former, much younger one. He disclosed that others of his circle were contemplating the same move for the same reason. It would be unfair to demand of evangelicalism that it produce a St. Thomas Aquinas or Pascal any time soon. Still, it had better develop some avenue of intellectual response to its own most thoughtful young people.

Reason and revelation

The secular side of American thought, too, at its higher levels, has been compelled to acknowledge itself as religious. In posing the question between humanism and theism as one of reason versus revelation, one risks being branded as *passé* in the most advanced secularist circles. This is not because the reigning theorists there will crow that reason has triumphed, but because they take it for granted that its pretensions have been decisively refuted. The earlier John Rawls, he of the *Theory of Justice* (1972), might have seemed to argue that secularist liberalism was the dictate of universal reason. This invested his enterprise with weight, as if he really was participating in the grand style of political philosophy. Later, however, he crumbled on this point, conceding that such liberalism was merely "our" perspective, no more grounded in the truth about things than any previous moral horizon. He thus made his peace with postmodernism.

Richard Rorty, the leading postmodernist liberal theorist, candidly admits that at the end of the day liberalism is a matter of faith, not reason. Indeed, he goes further than this: He concedes that liberalism, once so jealous of its autonomy from Biblical faith, is in fact parasitic upon it. In his essay "Postmodern Bourgeois Liberalism," he describes secularist liberals like himself as "freeloading atheists." They continue to rely on the Judeo-Christian legacy of concern with human dignity despite their rejection of the revealed truth that alone could support this concern.

This twofold admission--that liberalism is merely a faith that remains dependent on an earlier faith, the authority of which it has rejected--should not, claims Rorty, dismay liberals in the least. No rational or coherent alternative to liberalism exists; all "foundational narratives," upon inspection, will prove equally arbitrary and groundless. Thus our allegiance to liberalism progresses from the naive to the "ironic," but the allegiance itself survives this transition unscathed. Through his supposed practice of unprecedented candor, Rorty achieves unheard of feats of having his cake and eating it too. Liberalism of this postmodernist sort pillages the Biblical tradition for everything up to and including its own moral core, while still priding itself on remaining a faith of the atheistic variety.

On the one hand, this development implies a certain rapprochement between secular liberalism and Biblical faith. They no longer glare at one another across the chasm between faith and reason. The younger "faith-based" alternative that liberalism now stands exposed as being can reach out to shake the hand of the older one. It no longer claims to be more reasonable than it; no longer claims to be truer. Just as (from the liberal point of view) Biblical faith had its day which has now passed, today belongs to liberalism. But in days to come, new times will see the emergence of new faiths. On the other hand, precisely by conceding its arbitrary dependence on Biblical faith, postmodern

liberalism keeps its distance from it. It need not face the challenge that the older faith poses to it, because by redefining itself as a faith it thereby evades any such challenge. In the land of the arbitrary, the one-eyed man is king.

For Rorty, God is dead but secularized Christian morality continues. This is precisely one of the scenarios envisaged by Nietzsche in *The Gay Science*: "God is dead, but given the way men are there may still be caves for thousands of years in which his shadow will be shown." True, only 125 of those years have now passed, but on the evidence of Rorty's thought, it's hard to believe that his sort of shadow play still has centuries to run.

But is God dead? The current vigor of evangelicalism in American society gives no answer, any more than does the crypto-atheism of European society. Nor would it be settled should these two spirits change places, with Europeans all professing to be born again and Americans all following the Bobos in seeking the sacred in herbal infusions. To the eye of the believer, the ways of God are mysterious, and it's not within human capacity to infer what future the present conceals.

Nor should any partisan of reason forecast the future with any confidence. In one corner of the American ring today perches a secularism (whether of the Left or Right) that grows ever more dogmatic politically even as it finds itself ever more groundless theoretically. In the other lurks an avowedly traditionalist faith that has yet to produce an important meditation on the tradition it claims to continue. Most Americans are in between. But what does it mean to find yourself between a dying rationalism on the one hand and an inarticulate pietism on the other? Rather than rest on the doubtful laurels of the middling, we should aspire to what rises above it: to a genuine confrontation between reason and revelation that might serve to revitalize both.

The challenge of Islamic terrorism

Our last question lends itself to an epilogue on present dangers. Let's hope that its importance doesn't outgrow the bounds of one. America finds itself in a global struggle that is bound to prove protracted. What are the implications of this conflict for the state of American religion? The future defies prediction, but we can expound certain underlying factors.

Everywhere religion looms larger in war than in peace. When, on Homer's shield of Achilles, Hephaistos crafts his tableau of the whole of human life, the gods make their appearance only in the city at war. The collaboration of war and religion peaks in the special case where the war is itself fought on behalf of religion. America has never waged such a war. Nor, until now, has such a war ever been waged against it. All our previous wars, beginning with the Revolution itself, were post-Westphalian. In none of them has either combatant invoked religion as a *casus belli*.

America thus faces religious warfare for the first time in its national history. With the twist, of course, that this war is religious on their side only. The Islamists cast us as "Crusaders" and "Zionists"--that is, Christians and Jews who as such seek to expunge

Islam. We cast them, however, not as Muslims but as fanatics, which we choose to define as a betrayal of Islam. While they claim to war in defense of their faith, we claim to war in self-defense, but neither against their faith nor on behalf of our own. Insofar as our fight is in self-defense, we need not take our stand on religion. Insofar as our aim is to further fundamental change within the world of Islam, we must not do so.

Of America's previous wars, only the Civil War can be said to have been fought on quasi-religious principles. It is instructive (if otherwise unfair) to compare President Bush's rhetoric with that of Abraham Lincoln, who elaborated a vision of America and its potential for human liberation that was of truly Biblical sublimity. The Civil War required such a vision because it was the most terrible of our wars. It permitted one because the Union admitted of interpretation as a sacred cause, and slavery cried out to be cast as America's original sin that, as such, vindicated the dreadful toll of the war as an expression of God's justice. The enormous task of reconciliation ahead required nothing less than the theological virtue of charity. The war lent itself to presentation as a divine drama--which is to say as a Christian one (non-denominational, of course). As Christ died to make men holy, the soldiers of the Union were dying to make them free.

For Lincoln, the United States was the last, best hope of mankind in an exemplary sense only. He was not minded to go about planting democracies elsewhere in the globe. Ironically, which means fittingly, the sole schemes of this sort to capture his attention were those of the African Colonization Society. The few thousand freedmen who had actually been resettled in Liberia were, of course, Christian. Like other Americans of their day, they saw Protestant Christianity as indispensable to republicanism. Their return to a still heathen Africa was a staged clash of civilizations. It didn't prove a notably successful one.

The American project in Iraq exceeds anything Lincoln could have imagined. By the same token, it both implies and demands the abandonment of the link on which he so relied between liberal Christianity and liberal democracy. For it is crucial to our victory in the forum of world opinion (including, crucially, Muslim opinion) that we not couch our global project as akin to Christianity in any way. Mr. Bush learned shortly after September 11 not to dub his campaign against terrorism a crusade. He could hardly have done worse to call it a jihad.

By its deeds, not merely its words, this administration has exceeded all previous ones in rejecting the dependence of democracy on Christianity. It has adopted the premise that just as Confucianism, historically anything but liberal or democratic, has posed no insuperable obstacle to the democratization of East Asia, so Islam will pose none to that of the Middle East.

This position is so far from that of the Christian Right as to place the administration squarely on the wrong side of the cultural divide. The conservative Christian view is that America has become and remained free only insofar as it has remained Christian, that the Christian backdrop to republicanism is a matter not of historical chance but of vital necessity. As the Reverend Chuck McIlhenny of San Francisco put it to James Davison

Hunter, "The Lord has blessed our nation over the centuries because its cultural heritage was Christian." In rejecting the notion of a "naked public square"--that is, of public culture purged of Christianity--these conservatives implicitly reject naked democracy as a commodity subject to export.

I'm not suggesting that the Christian Right is likely to abandon Bush. On many domestic issues--not least that of "faith-based initiatives"--it has every incentive to continue to collaborate with him. Nor is it likely to overlook that, of all Republican presidents since McKinley, Bush appears to be the most concerned with living a Christian life. All the more ironic, then, that in the most important policy and riskiest gamble of his presidency, Bush has embraced willy-nilly the view that liberal democracy is one thing, Protestant Christianity (or Christianity of any sort, or even Judeo-Christianity) entirely another. He has chosen to present America to the world not as the Christian nation for which his religious supporters take it, but as the universal sponsor of liberal democracy, which as such is impartial in principle as between Christianity and Islam.

Thus must Bush present America not just to the world but to itself. It is said that John Foster Dulles helped desegregate American society by persuading a reluctant Eisenhower to send federal troops to Little Rock lest inaction hand the Soviets a propaganda windfall. Bush finds himself similarly trapped in the glare of global headlights. However trying the struggle with Islamism may prove, whatever sacrifices it may demand, he cannot revive Lincoln's appeal to Christianity, no matter how nondenominational that appeal would be. His religious rhetoric must be "inclusive," anodyne, and sterile. His administration must become America's first genuinely Methodist Taoist Native American Quaker Russian Orthodox Buddhist Jewish (and Muslim) one. And so the challenge of Islamic terror will collaborate with other forces to drive official America to ever greater lengths of secularism or syncretism.