
Nick Salvatore, Cornell University

Publication Date
4-2008

Abstract
[Excerpt] In January 2004, before a black church congregation in New Orleans, President George W. Bush commemorated Martin Luther King's birthday with a spirited promotion of his faith-based initiatives. Appropriating the slain Civil Rights leader's profession of faith, Bush proclaimed his ultimate purpose was to change "America one heart, one soul, one conscience at a time." He emphasized voluntary action by citizens (four times he extolled them as "the social entrepreneurs") and he consistency denigrated the role of government but for one critical function: providing "billions of dollars" to faith-based social-service groups. Proclaiming the values of the Christian Bible as a "universal handbook," the president preached — for he was in the pulpit that day — that "faith-based programs only conform to one set of rules," and do not take "inspiration ... from bureaucracy." Insisting that this policy was no threat to the Constitutional separation of church and state, Bush criticized Congress for its "fear [of] faith-based programs that interface and save lives." The task, he acknowledged, was enormous: "we're changing a culture," he exclaimed, by harnessing "the great strength of our country, which is the love of our citizens."

The President's language that day has worried many Americans, religious or not. Bush's evangelical approach to public policy, to change (did he mean save?) hearts, souls, and consciences, and his disdain for governmental regulation in favor of a faith-guided oversight, led many to conclude that democracy's Constitutional protections had been undermined. Following Bush's re-election this concern intensified, reaching a crescendo in the months preceding the 2006 midterm elections. During that period at least twelve books appeared, written by non-academics for a popular audience, on the theme of contemporary religion and American political culture. Many received considerable attention, as the authors traveled the nation, signing books as they garnered local media coverage. These books, six of which are discussed in this essay, reveal the major contours of America's debate over religion in political life.

Comments
Suggested Citation

Required Publisher Statement
© Cambridge University Press. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.
The author provides a clear and thoughtful discussion of the intent of our Founding Fathers, and why a theocracy, which is what we have in effect (but see my review of Tempting Faith, which may destroy the blind faith of the right in the Bush-Cheney regime), reduces religious freedom and tolerance. Indeed, the author blasts Senator Lieberman (I-CT) for his constant use of religion to justify laws and positions. On page 234 he states that the extreme right fears information while sensitive people of faith welcome information. This is a really fine book, it says what needs to be said about the tax evasion and inappropriate political activities of the extreme right. Vote on Review. Click Here to Vote on Review at Amazon Faith, politics, and American culture [Review of the books Letter to a Christian nation, Pity and politics: The right-wing assault on religious freedom, faith and politics: How the “moral values” debate divides America and how to move forward together, The compassionate community: Ten values to unite America ISBN o 307 26577 3. Barry W. Lynn, Piety and Politics: The Right-Wing Assault on Religious Freedom (New York: Harmony Books, 2006, $24.00). Pp. 261. ISBN O 307 34654 4. Senator John Danforth, Faith and Politics: How the “Moral Values” Debate Divides America and Flow to Move Forward Together (New York: Viking, 2006, $24.95). Pp. 238. One of the most right-wing members of the House, Arizona Republican Trent Franks, proposed an amendment to the National Defense Authorization Act that would, in fact, have made a law respecting an establishment of religion. Franks, a staunch defender of President Trump’s executive orders restricting travel by Muslims, sought to require Secretary of Defense James Mattis to “conduct two concurrent strategic assessments of the use of violent or unorthodox Islamic religious doctrine to support extremist or terrorist messaging and justification.” Ellison also raised concerns about the message that adoption of the amendment would send at a time when American Muslims already face violence and discrimination: Rep.