

The Bible is *back*. Well, sort of. There is more Bible thumping in politics today than, let's say, in the days of the Nixon administration. And Bible-carrying Christians lead the nation in the categories of grassroots political organizations, well-funded special interest groups, and manifestos posted on the Web.

Some of the nation's most contentious public debates now feature participants who claim biblical warrant for their views. Appeals to Scripture are evident in controversies over the environment, immigration, abortion, stem cell research, gay rights, public school curricula, the treatment of the poor, and foreign policy, to name but a few. These appeals are typically made by religious special interest groups. "*It's in the Bible!*" they exclaim. And if it's in the Bible, so goes the logic, then local, state, and federal lawmakers must take swift and immediate measures.

In the secular-liberal mindset, those who subscribe to this line of reasoning are categorized under the catchall rubric of

writes Jeffrey Siker, "has so clearly perceived his calling in such epic biblical terms." In the immediate aftermath of 9/11 President Bush quoted from the books of Psalms, Matthew, and Romans. And upon being asked to name his favorite philosopher or thinker, Bush famously responded, "Christ, because he changed my heart."

But it is not the case that America is turning into "Bible country" or that the Constitution has become subservient to the book of Revelation. Three formidable constraints limit Scripture's ability to directly influence domestic and foreign policy. The first is that pesky First Amendment. The second is the hard labor, past and present, of civil liberties groups in the judicial trenches. The third is a large stock of moderately religious Americans—those whom I refer to as the "secularly religious"—who simply will never tolerate an established religion.

"Secularly religious" may seem like an oxymoron to some, but to conceptual-

conservative Christians."

How could this be, you may ask?

Simply this: Were secularism to disappear, were all the secularists to be raptured into the air, the conservative Christian voting bloc would rapidly relearn an old lesson: it is nearly impossible to get one Protestant denomination to agree on what the Bible says, let alone dozens of them. You see, the Scriptures consistently fail to illuminate policy debates because the Bible is too clear and coherent political deliberation as sleet, fog, hail, and flash floods are to highway safety. Groups who live by the Bible have rarely shown any sustained ability to tame this scriptural chaos. Achieving consensus on the proper interpretation of the unruly Holy Writ has been more the exception than the rule. "Evangelicals," writes Martyn Percy, "have shown themselves to be prone to persistent and damaging schisms." Evangelicals and their literalist precursors have failed to reach accord about what the Bible mandates regarding the divine right of kings, Sabbath laws, slavery, political action, the environment, whether poverty or abortion is Jesus' priority, and what the end time will look like.

My surmise, then, is that the more the Good Book would become capable of actually influencing the judicial and legislative activities of our government, the more the coalition of Bible-carrying Christians would unravel. Ironically, secularists, especially all those fire-breathing atheists, serve as the unwitting glue that holds all the divergent parts of the Christian Right together. Only common fear and hatred of state-sponsored godlessness could send so many diverse Christians, with such freighted historical relations, running into one another's arms.

This is not to say that proponents of the wall of separation should relax and pay no attention to First Amendment adjudication. Perhaps a more subtle strategy might be in order—one that gives potentially antagonistic religious groups fewer opportunities to unite against the common enemy of "secular humanism." At the same time, a more Machiavellian approach might craftily maneuver different denominations and religions to explore their own inevitable differences of opinion. (Of course, this strategy presupposes a political leadership

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"red-state people." Yet the truth is that a surprisingly large number of blue-state types have identified an actionable liberal agenda on the pages of Scripture. Such was the case, for instance, when the interfaith group Network of Spiritual Progressives recently took out a full-page advertisement in the *New York Times*. There they demanded that the nation's leaders put an end to the war in Iraq, apologize to the United Nations, and "confess wrongdoing" in the spirit of 2 Chronicles 7:14.

There is also the tendency of high-profile politicians, such as President George W. Bush, to incorporate Scripture into their rhetoric. "No other President,"

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ize secularism *exclusively* as nonbelief is to misunderstand the term itself. A secularist can be (1) a nonbeliever in favor of rigid church/state boundaries or (2) a believer in favor of rigid church/state boundaries. Secular believers comprise a significant, albeit rarely discussed, political constituency. Their ranks include, among others, liberal Catholics, Jews, and Muslims, most of whom adhere to what I call Professor Berlinerblau's Law: *Religious groups with little or no chance of establishing their own religion as the religion of the state will strenuously oppose, on principle, all efforts to establish a religion of the state.*

Yet should the three lines of defense—the First Amendment, civil liberties groups, and the "secularly religious"—somehow fail to stave off theocracy, I believe that another group would rise to the occasion: "nonsecular