

that is nowhere to be found in the camp of nonbelief.)



Do the majority of Bible-carrying Christians actually want the theocracy that secularists accuse them of so coveting? Citing survey data in his book *American Evangelicalism: Embattled and Thriving*, Christian Smith of the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill notes, “Evangelicals are much more likely than any other group to believe that Christian morality should be the law of the land.” Mainstream evangelicals, usually represented by groups such as the National Association of Evangelicals, representing 45,000 churches, however, usually swear this is not the case. The sociologist Alan Wolfe, who has studied them extensively, says that they “accept the separation of church and state” and America’s “culture of toleration,” and while this may seem counterintuitive (or incomprehensible) to many among the secularly religious, I tend to agree. Not all Evangelicals, in fact few Evangelicals, conform to the blue-state stereotype which depicts them as demented Jesus-campers hellbent on bringing about the apocalypse.



Evangelicals explicitly acknowledge the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture. But implicitly they ascribe infallibility and inerrancy to their own interpretive endeavors. The oft-heard evangelical exhortation, “*It’s in the Bible!*” tacitly arrogates uncanny powers of accuracy to its exhorter. The statement of the theologian Alister McGrath, “Scripture when rightly interpreted leads to Christ,” illustrates the scandal. Who defines “rightful” interpretation? Who gets to decide if Christ-proximity has been achieved?



This brings us to the role of secularists in American public life. A very large part of contemporary American secularism consists of church/state separatists who are believers; a very small part is made up of nonbelievers. The very small part, however, is so raucous that in the popular

imagination the relative sizes of the two constituencies have been inverted. Secularism itself has come to be associated with brash godlessness. Yet politically mobilized atheists and agnostics number only a scant few million—chump change, as far as electoral coalitions go.

How, I wonder, could the Democrats associate themselves with a constituency of nonbelievers who are not only wildly unpopular in every red state in America but deliver little in terms of ballot-box

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payoff? The party is now asking itself the same questions. Escorting nonbelievers politely but firmly to the wings of the stage (if not the door) appears to be the new strategy. Emboldened by the triumphs of faith-on-their-sleeve-wearing candidates in the 2006 midterm elections and determined not to repeat the mistakes of 2004, Democratic presidential front-runners are confidently and creatively letting the Scriptures sing out. Senator Barack Obama, for one, may just have the best Scripture game in town. So polished is Obama that he can arrogate to himself the ombudsman-like role of distinguishing proper from improper citation. In a 2006 address he chastised those on the right who advanced sectarian and simplistic readings. “So before we get carried away,” he asserted cheekily, “let’s read our Bibles. Folks haven’t been reading their Bibles.”

Senator Hillary Clinton, for her part, will never give a major speech without quoting the Bible or rehearsing her narrative of faith. Already in March 2006 she lambasted Republican immigration legislation: “It is certainly not in keeping with my understanding of the Scriptures. This bill would literally criminalize the Good Samaritan and probably even Jesus himself.”

Later, David Klinghoffer would conclude, in *The National Review*: “2008 will likely prove to be the year of the Bible.”



The present election year, then, is a good time for secularists to engage in soul-searching and introspection. An analogy: One positive development (depending on how you look at it) that emerged from the retreat of the fundamentalists after Scopes nearly ninety years ago was the eventual rise of mellower, less bellicose evangelicals in the forties and fifties. If atheists and agnostics

were to undertake a similar hiatus from public affairs, it could give them an opportunity to regroup, rethink, calm down, and reemerge as a more politically savvy version of themselves.

In truth, atheists and agnostics could learn a lot from evangelicals. They lack what these Bible-carrying Christians possess in abundant supply: dynamism. Nonbelievers are also short of political leaders, a state of affairs not unrelated to their lack of grassroots political infrastructure. Moreover, their writers as well as rank and file have become excessively entangled with the Democratic Party and liberalism, in contrast to evangelicals, who in the past decade finally diversified their membership across the political spectrum and are no longer perfectly synonymous with the religious right.

Successful campaigning for the presidency is partly about building coalitions. It is extremely difficult to do this with a partner who insists on referring to all others in the coalition as mentally deficient. The antireligious screeds of such best-selling authors as Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Richard Dawkins have not translated into any sort of political movement or momentum. So relentless are these books in their denunciation of all forms of religious belief, one wonders how long the secularly religious will be able to tolerate their snarling, underper-

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