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How do you measure the influence of evangelicals on public life? Ask a culturally conservative Christian if America is a Christian country and you're apt to hear a series of complaints about sexual permissiveness, sexually explicit media, gambling, gay rights, abortion, divorce, and other alleged ills of our Godless, sinful culture. From this perspective, the assertion that we are a Christian country is a form of wishful thinking. Ask a secularist if America is a Christian country, or an increasingly religious one, and you'll hear a different series of complaints about government funded sectarianism, references to God in official documents and proclamations, or the Supreme Court's increasing hostility toward separation of church and state. From this perspective, it's wishful thinking to regard America as excessively secular.

These conflicting responses don't simply reflect conflicting perspectives and agendas. There is no short answer to questions about the power of the religious right, from any perspective. Its influence on policy and law can be quantified with relative ease: at least we can catalogue the allocation of public funds to sectarian groups, the rise of creationism in public schools, and other markers of conservative Protestantism in government. But the religious right's influence on American culture is harder to assess, particularly in light of our general cultural complexity. Consumerism and the mass media may unite us, but American culture still reflects contradictory strains of Puritanism and libertarianism, conformity and individualism, freedom and authoritarianism, rationalism and superstition, religiosity and secularism. While, we can identify dominant social trends they are never singular. That's what makes this country interesting. It's culturally diverse and conflicted; you can find some truth in many opposing complaints from secularists and evangelicals.

Let's start with the secular lament: There's no question that the country has been in the midst of a religious revival for some 15 years. The culture of disbelief that Stephen Carter famously attacked in his best-selling book of the early 1990s was actually a small, relatively insignificant sub-culture; indeed if secularists were dominant, if the premise of his book had been true, it would never have been a bestseller. By the 2000 presidential election both democrats and republicans were advertising their Godliness, as Al Gore along with George Bush stressed his personal relationship with Jesus. Right and left, conventional wisdom proclaimed religious belief essential to virtue. It was, by the way, interesting to hear virtue-crats qualify their routine equation of religion with virtue after the faith-based initiative of September 11<sup>th</sup>. Some quickly began distinguishing between bad religions and good.

In the U.S., Christianity is naturally considered as one of the good religions – if not the very best - so in general the American public doesn't seem to regard the religiosity of the Bush Administration and the church/ state partnerships it favors as even remotely theocratic. I suspect many people associate theocracies with the official adoption of religions they don't like. Similarly, the deadly fanaticism of Islamic fundamentalism doesn't seem to have aroused public anxiety about fundamentalism in general; instead, the public seems more likely to worry about Islam in particular and people from Islamic countries. A closely divided Supreme Court is increasingly inclined to allow state sponsorship of sectarian activities, as its 2002 decision upholding the channeling of tax dollars to religious schools showed. There's no question that secularists are right when they complain the constitutional wall between church and state is crumbling.

In the realm of law and policy, the Christian right enjoys clearly increased power. It's not exercised through previously prominent interest groups like the Christian Coalition or the Moral Majority. Instead the perspectives and concerns of right-wing Christians have been incorporated into the Republican Party leadership. So while its organizations appear to be in decline, the Christian right has more political power than ever. You don't need lobbying groups to petition the government when your cohort runs the government. Moreover, Pat

Robertson and Jerry Falwell were divisive, nasty, nutty figures who often embarrassed conservatives with their unapologetic extremism; George W. carefully promotes an image of religious tolerance. Under his leadership, right-wing Christianity seems more likely to be associated with compassionate conservatism than mean fundamentalism.

So Christian conservatives now help shape a broad range of government policies, especially on the domestic front, in the areas of science, social policy, and social services. The president repeatedly refers to the power of faith to cure social ills, and examples of sectarian policy making, or grant-making abound. The Bush Administration was not deterred when its legislative proposals for funding sectarian social services were initially rejected by Congress (because of opposition to provisions exempting publicly funded religious organizations from federal anti-discrimination law.) What the Administration could not accomplish by legislation it began to accomplish by fiat: federal rules for housing, community service, and substance abuse programs were re-written to provide federal funding of sectarian religious groups, even if they engage in employment discrimination. We're also seeing an increase in government funded sectarian social engineering, aimed at combating such sins as divorce and pre-marital sex or extra-marital sex. In Florida, for example, a state public health agency has distributed an AID's education pamphlet consisting largely of bible verses and references to Jesus.

It's possible, therefore, to substantiate the secularist complaint about the increased influence of the Christian right on law and policy. But it's also important to acknowledge that the political success of the Christian right is not unmitigated by failure. In June, 2003, the Supreme Court struck down laws against same sex, sexual relations, observing that gay people "are entitled to respect for their private lives." (In a dissent that will resonate with the Christian right, Justice Scalia complained that the Court "has largely signed on to the so-called homosexual agenda.") In previous years, the Court has struck down laws prohibiting indecency on the Internet, as well as a ban on virtual child porn and the practice of officially sanctioned student prayers at high school football

games. These rulings represent significant political defeats for the religious right. So does its repeated failure to pass a constitutional amendment allowing official prayer in public schools; so do decades of state and federal civil rights laws prohibiting sex discrimination in higher education and the workplace.

While the Christian right has enjoyed a mixed record of success in the sphere of law and policy, in the cultural sphere, it has suffered some prominent failures. Only a pathologically paranoid secularist would imagine the Christian right dominates American culture. While Christians are still in the majority, their dominance is challenged by the growth of other world religions, not to mention splits within their own ranks – both political and theological - and not to mention New Age, which the Vatican recently felt the need to critique. And, while the Christian right has obtained significant government sponsorship for its sermonizing, Americans don't generally practice what it preaches.

Whether you focus on the divorce rate, the relative success of the gay rights movement and feminism, sexual activity among young teens, as well as older ones, the growth of the gambling industry, the persistence of the porn industry, prostitution, recreational drug use, sex and violence on prime time tv, or the ubiquity of half naked women on city streets every summer, you'd be hard pressed to characterize popular culture as a product of Christian conservatism. For all the money spent on abstinence only sex ed, for example, some 20% of teens have had sexual intercourse before their 15<sup>th</sup> birthdays, according to a recent report. As the Christian right has discovered, it's easier to obtain political power, even in a pluralistic country, than it is to eradicate sin.

So when you consider American culture – the entertainment culture in particular – the complaints of conservative Christians about excessive secularism are not unrealistic. They have reason to feel besieged by culture, just as non-Christians are apt to feel besieged by Christmas. Secular liberals may scoff at their tirades against the sexual revolution or sexual explicitness in the media; we may dismiss them as Puritans – but we might also sympathize with the sincere concern of some about their prospects for salvation. Conservative Christians are

apt to fear that, once captured by popular culture, their children will go to hell, quite literally. Personally I don't believe in hell, or censorship; or abstinence only sex ed; I'm simply pointing out that calls for censorship and the official adoption of sectarian moral codes shouldn't simply be dismissed as meanness or narrow-mindedness. Conservative Christians who feel threatened by popular culture should not be dismissed as delusional.

But complicating the cultural divide is a growing Christian entertainment culture. It's most evident in Christian rock, some of which crosses over - and has merited a parody in the online humor magazine *The Onion*. "Bassist Unaware Rick Band Christian," a 2003 article in *The Onion* proclaimed: "Brad Rolen, the new bassist for Pillar of Salt, remains oblivious to the fact that he is in a Christian rock band, sources reported Tuesday. 'Pillar's great, said Rolen, 22, who is unaware of his bandmate's devotion to Christ ... I've only been with these guys for three months but I feel like it's the perfect fit for me.' " He does go on to complain, however, that he's having trouble finding groupies: " 'Whenever I ask them to come back to the bus with me, they say, 'I can't do that - that's not right.' I'm like, 'Come on this is rock and roll.' "

Pop Christian literature has crossed over as well; its commercial appeal has been confirmed by the hugely popular *Left Behind* series - mass market Christian thrillers that offer a story of the story of the final days. You can find pop Christianity in best-selling self-help books, especially those that preach the gospel of success. (Self-help books have long combined secular strivings for success and self-improvement with religious faith, in various forms.) You can read Christian computing, car, and travel magazines. You can laugh at or with Christian parodies of Christian culture. Stephen Bates reviewed this phenomenon in an excellent December 2002 article in *The Weekly Standard*. He characterizes the Christian retail trade as a "\$4 billion dollar a year business with bestsellers and grammys and trademark lawyers."

This industry seems to have begun, Bates suggests, as a kind of Christian separatism. Disgusted with secular pop culture, the Christian right created its

own. But it's success has obscured where Christian culture ends and mainstream secular culture begins, especially if you're in the aisles of Wal-mart. Is the marketplace changing Christianity or is Christianity changing the marketplace? God knows. Bates notes that the Jesus market includes both separatists and integrationists – performers and merchandisers who confine themselves to Christian audiences with explicitly scripture laden messages – and those who peddle a softer version of Christianity, palatable in the mainstream. Think of the difference between Pat Robertson and George W. Bush. The President is the Christian right's most successful crossover pop star.

Wal-mart may be its most powerful marketer. With 100 million customers per week, and highly ideological retailing policies, Wal-mart exerts powerful influence on pop culture. It is notorious for selling only “clean” or cleaned -up versions of pop music, book, and films; and, according to the New York Times, Wal-mart and other discount chains now account for “more than 50% of the sales of a best-selling album, more than 40% for a best-selling book, and more than 60% for a best-selling DVD.” The *Left Behind* series owes its phenomenal success partly to Wal-Mart's marketing.

The effect of national chain stores and media conglomeration on cultural and political diversity has long been a concern for writers, artists, and civil libertarians. Corporate media tends to be cautious and centrist (when not downright conservative,) and as the culture moves to the right, the media moves with it, exacerbating our rightward trend. This is all good news for conservative Christians, since the right wing in this country leans toward sectarianism, or at least against secularism.

Still, we should never underestimate the power of sin and hypocrisy, or the allure of social freedom – the right to define vice and virtue for yourself and choose between them. When an avowed absolutist like Bill Bennett disagrees with fellow virtue-crats about the morality of gambling, even he has to admit that notions of virtue and vice may be relative. If we can all agree that murder is wrong, we will still disagree about the morality of abortion, same-sex marriage,

or pre-marital sex, among other issues. It's hard to imagine many Americans ever consistently practicing what the Christian right preaches. Besides, the religious impulse itself can be difficult to channel. It can send people to yoga class or channeling sessions as often as it sends them to church. It creates saints out of pop stars, as pop culture sanctifies celebrities. At its most hysterical and extreme, celebrity worship turns Elvis into a Jesus figure and Graceland into a shrine. Even in its more moderate form, the cultural obsession with celebrities can inspire quasi-spiritual quests - positing fame and fortune as a holy grail. You can see the curious mix of materialism, the desire for fame, and religiosity on *American Idol*, where the contestants thank God for getting them on tv; you'd think he had nothing better to do.

I suppose secularists might consider our amen culture a victory for religious conservatives, but I'm not sure they would. This is religion infected with secularism. This is religion that equates doing good with doing well and doesn't quite focus on saving souls. This is religion that can justify self-centeredness, exhibitionism and virtually any form of worldly ambition. If it sanctifies such circuses as *American Idol*, it poses no threat to other less "wholesome" reality tv shows like *The Bachelor*, or *Married by America*, which give viewers the thrill of watching half-clothed real people engaging in sexual foreplay on tv, just like actors in prime time. The kind of religion that flourishes in the marketplace is amorphous, adaptable, ceremonial; it's banal, undemanding "In God We Trust" religiosity, which, in some ways, undermines religion more effectively than secularism.

I doubt a right-wing Christian moral code will ever dominate American popular culture. Women are not going to retreat from the workplace into the kitchen anymore than they are going to cover their hair and hide their bodies in public. Gay people are not going back into the closet. People are not going to stop gambling or enjoying sexually explicit media. Teenagers are not going to stop having sex. Married couples are not going to stop committing adultery. And, even if abortions become generally illegal once again, women will not stop having them. No one will be stoned for any of these offenses.

I suspect that in the end, even Christian merchandising will have a greater effect on politics than pop culture. In other words, it will be likely to effect how people vote more than how they live. This is not exactly good news.

The primary threat facing secularists and liberals is not the rise of a traditional theocracy that turns a conservative Christian moral code into law. It's not the reversal of the Sexual Revolution or the end of social permissiveness. It's not even the allocation of government funds to sectarian social programs, although I'm not dismissing the dangers and indignities these pose to thousands of people.

The most serious threat we face is not conservative Christianity but conservative ecumenism. What worries me more than the ideological purists on the religious right are the pragmatists. What worries me are the compromises that right wing Protestants are willing to make in order to acquire and maintain power. What worries me is the President's crossover appeal. It is, in part a tribute to the individualistic, therapeutic religiosity that unites born again Christians with non-sectarian 12 step groups. George Bush made friends with Jesus while recovering from alcoholism, as innumerable other Americans made friends with other higher powers in recovery. Whether or not they are Christian, graduates of 12 step groups may recognize a fellow traveler in Bush.

The president's cross-denominational appeal also testifies to alliances formed during the 1990s between conservative Protestant, Catholics, and Jews. (Someday conservative but assimilated Muslims may join with them.) Secularism was their common enemy; conservative Christians and Jews were also drawn together by common concern about Israel. This new conservative ecumenism was exemplified by the selection of Joe Lieberman as a democratic vice presidential candidate in 2000. Lieberman ran on platform of personal piety, having won the vice presidential slot because of, not in spite of his religious beliefs. Secularized Christians who rarely attend church are electable nationally,

but not Jews who never go to shul. Orthodox people of different faiths are apt to feel more threatened by the secular state than by church/state partnerships.

So while we need to defend religious freedom and separation of church and state vigorously, I urge you not to become fixated on the dangers posed by evangelical Christians. Worry less about the evangelical influence on public life and more about the power of conservative ecumenism and the political threat it poses. Don't exacerbate that threat by picking fights over trivial ceremonial pieties strongly supported by large non-sectarian majorities. I imagine that religious conservatives thank God for the lawsuit over "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance. If it doesn't result in a Supreme Court ruling affirming the constitutionality of official references to God, it may well result in a constitutional amendment that erodes prohibitions on establishing religion. The religious right is probably salivating at the prospect; consider the usefulness of an "under God" Amendment as an organizing tool. Religious conservatives have chosen power; secularists ought not consign themselves to purity.