

God and Country: An Introduction

*W*hen the press interpreted the exit polls from the 2004 national election in the United States, it argued that Americans had overwhelmingly voted for “values.” “Values,” it turned out, was a euphemism for religiously inflected social conservatism, embodied specifically in the opposition to abortion and same-sex marriage. Although later analysis of the polling data raised questions about the accuracy of the press’s heat-of-the-moment interpretations, the language of “values” nevertheless stuck. Yet the most important dimension of this story is not that “values voters” had purportedly (and albeit narrowly) won the day. The more profound narrative to be told here is how the euphemism, “values,” came to be produced and circulated, linking a particular stripe of Christian theology (framed as “religion” *tout court*) to a set of claims about morality and ethics and a root narrative about American democracy. This deeper story concerns the historically embedded character of contemporary debates over the religious and the secular as they infuse social and political life in the United States. It also concerns the concerted political efforts of conservative religious organizations, political groups and individuals, and grassroots Christians to transform American society by rendering it “biblical.”

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The contributors to this special issue of *differences* are not, of course, the first to examine the intersections of Christianity, politics, and culture in the contemporary American scene. Indeed, several important journalists have been at the forefront of documenting and critically analyzing the impact of conservative Christian activism and thinking on governmental policy and on efforts to reshape American culture and politics to align ever more closely to a biblical vision. These same journalists have also charted the terrain of an emergent and distinctive biblically based Christian culture that operates in a kind of parallel universe that is essentially separatist in its orientation to the society as a whole. The work of writers such as Michelle Goldberg, Kathryn Joyce, Esther Kaplan, and especially Jeff Sharlet has been critical for our understandings of the politics and theologies that shape these movements.¹

In addition, former allies of the Christian right have recently offered insider insights into the stakes involved in these theo-political activisms. In 2006, for example, David Kuo, a former deputy director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, published a political memoir, *Tempting Faith*, offering a searing critique of the relationship between the White House and the “faith community,” accusing the former of opportunism, hypocrisy, and bad faith, and the latter of falling into the temptation embodied in the promise of large infusions of government funding into their churches and organizations. In the same year, Damon Linker, the former editor of *First Things* (an opinion journal founded and published by Richard John Neuhaus, one of the leading conservative Catholic theoreticians of the Christian right project [see Wills]), published *The Theocons: Secular America under Siege*, an insider’s history of the Catholic side of a story so often told in terms of Protestant evangelicalism and fundamentalism. Meanwhile, old-guard Republicans, like former party strategist Kevin Phillips, have also raised alarms over what they view as a hijacking of their political party by religious interests, as Phillips did in his 2006 bestseller, *American Theocracy*.

Meanwhile, scholars of American religion and culture have also explored the deep appeal of conservative Christianity, especially as it produces a critical counterpoint to the discourses of feminism and other liberatory movements.² Indeed, understanding conservative Christianity requires careful attention to its gender ideologies, its idealized notions of the patriarchal family under attack by feminists and homosexuals, and its utopian visions of a return to an imagined domestic past equally “biblical” and “American.” But the phenomenon of framing the crisis of modern social life in terms of binary oppositions and fantasies of return to a lost

time of equilibrium and reciprocity (if not “equality”) is not unique to conservative Christian activism in the United States. As Mino Moallem has eloquently argued in quite a different context, the ideological opposition that has been produced between “fundamentalism” and “feminism” is actually a global phenomenon—and a phenomenon that is distinctly modern, with the two terms operating as mirror images of each other. Moallem’s analysis focuses especially on the figuration of “Muslim fundamentalism” over against “Western feminism,” but her broader theoretical insights can offer some fruitful and suggestive pathways for analyzing the rightward turn of Christianity at this particular historical moment.

The matter is not, however, reducible only to questions of gender and sexuality, as foregrounded as they may be in much conservative Christian discourse. Other rhetorics of difference also routinely emerge in the study of conservative Christianity: for example, in her groundbreaking ethnographic study, *Lift High the Cross*, Ann Burlein has shown how some elements of right-wing Christianity operate symbiotically with discourses of racism and white supremacy. And of course, Islam stands in forcefully and ubiquitously as the sine qua non figure of religious otherness for Christians seeking to reestablish America’s Judeo-Christian heritage, as any cursory survey of right-wing Christian rhetoric makes all too clear. Other scholars have sought to explore the remarkable adaptiveness of right-wing Christianity to the most current modes of cultural dissemination, tracing the highly effective mediatization of right-wing Christianity, a process only amplified by technological innovations and the spread of media culture as a whole (Kintz and Lesage; Hendershot). And recent ethnographic work, such as Tanya Erzen’s critically important *Straight to Jesus*, offers a window onto a complex world where individuals caught in the crossfire of the culture wars—in this case, evangelical Christian gay men and lesbians struggling to rationalize their religious convictions and their sexual desires—negotiate complicated truces, which come to be written onto their very bodies, intimate relationships, and understandings of self.

Into this already rich discussion of the impact of conservative Christianity on politics and culture comes this special issue of *differences*, which brings together the work of scholars working in a range of fields and specializations, all interested in the intellectual underpinnings of conservative Christian activism in contemporary U.S. culture.

The issue begins with a reinterpretation of the legal history of “secularism” in American culture: whereas the received tradition locates the secular turn in the post-World War II era with Supreme Court rulings barring religious education, prayer, and Bible reading in public

schools, lawyer and religion scholar James McBride places it a century earlier, in the Supreme Court's resolution of the contested will of a wealthy Philadelphian who saw disestablishment and religious tolerance as key to America's mercantile success.

Biblical scholar Erin Runions examines the strange-bedfellows alliance between neoconservatism, which privileges the state of exception, or what Agamben has called a form of lawlessness sanctioned by law, and far-right Christian Dominion theology, which sets as its primary goal the literalization and application of biblical law.

Lawyer and religion scholar Kathleen Skerrett explores the emergent work by some conservative Christian legal scholars to translate Catholic natural law theory into secular terms, a move especially relevant to legal debates around same-sex marriage, in an effort to render religiously inflected modes of legal argument immune to court challenge.

Randall Styers, also a religion scholar and lawyer, analyzes recent Christian defenses of the death penalty, arguing that such apologia—which can go so far as defending the execution of innocents—reflect an underlying Christian theology of sacrificial atonement.

Qualitative sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein examines the emergent activist coalition between feminists and evangelical Christians around the forced sexual labor of women and girls. Bernstein draws upon her ethnographic work with feminist and evangelical antitrafficking activists, situating the contemporary coalition-building in a historical trajectory that looks back to earlier alliances between Christians and feminists against commercial sexuality.

Finally, my contribution, as a feminist historian of Christianity, analyzes the emergence of Christian identity politics in contemporary U.S. culture, especially the growing reliance by conservative and right-wing Christians on accusations of religious persecution in political debate. I argue that this rhetorical gesture braids together the Christian martyr story—a narrative as old as the religion itself—with the American jeremiad tradition and post-1960s-style identity politics, grounded in narratives of innocent suffering and woundedness. The result is a highly effective rhetorical strategy for closing down political exchange by characterizing all opposing viewpoints as threats to Christian religious freedom.

Progressive thinkers have increasingly raised the specter of “theocracy” in analyzing the current state of affairs in U.S. politics; *God and Country* offers readers a series of case studies for critically assessing such claims.⁵

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Notes

- 1 See Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming*; Kaplan, *With God on Their Side*; Joyce, "Arrows for the War"; and Sharlet, "God's Senator," "Inside America's Most Powerful Megachurch," "Inside Christian Embassy," "Jesus Plus Nothing," "Sex as a Weapon," "Through a Glass, Darkly," and *Jesus Plus Nothing*.
- 2 See Griffith, *God's Daughters and Born-Again Bodies*; and Kintz, *Between Jesus and the Market*.
- 3 In addition to the books and articles included in the works cited, excellent analysis can be found on various Web sites. Two especially important ones are *The Revealer: A Daily Review of Religion and the Press* (www.therevealer.org) and *Talk to Action: Reclaiming Citizenship, History, and Faith* (www.talk2action.org).

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