

CAPITAL COMMENTARY

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Religiously Political Conservatism

George F. Will, drawing from what he considers “the best political book in years” (John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge’s *The Right Nation*), writes in a recent column that “the emotions underlying conservatism’s long rise [in America] include a visceral individualism with religious roots and anti-statist consequences” (*Washington Post*, 10/10/04). According to Micklethwait and Wooldridge, religiosity is what “predisposes Americans to see the world in terms of individual virtue” and to be skeptical of government.

This is why American Christians ought to be conservatives, right? And doesn’t it also mean that in today’s culture Christians should vote for the evangelical and politically conservative George W. Bush rather than for the politically liberal John Kerry, who happens to be Catholic?

Regardless of how you choose to cast your vote on November 2, to presume that religiously political conservatism harmonizes with Christianity is a serious mistake. Nancy Pearcey exposes the error of this presumption in her new, and now best-selling, book, *Total Truth: Liberating Christianity from Its Cultural Captivity*. Political conservatives should read it closely and carefully.

The individualism to which Will refers grows from what Pearcey exposes as the unbiblical modern assumption that individuals are autonomous creators of their social relationships. That belief in autonomous individualism is the root of the social-contract theory of government that Americans have thoroughly absorbed. Too many Bible-believing Christians have mistakenly identified true faith with individual conversion and personal piety often in opposition to both ecclesiastical and governmental institutions.

When evangelical Christians identify their faith only with heart, soul, and church experience, they allow the rest of life—“secular life”—to be located outside the realm of personally authentic religion. This mindset, writes Pearcey, constitutes the now-familiar “two-story” concept of truth. Christian truth belongs in the upper story of private piety oriented toward salvation

beyond this world, while secular, scientific “truth” holds for the lower story of public life.

“Perhaps the greatest tragedy,” writes Pearcey, “is that many evangelicals in the eighteenth and nineteenth century failed to recognize what was happening. Having embraced a two-story concept of truth, they assumed that political philosophy was a lower-story ‘science’ that could be pursued apart from any distinctively Christian perspective.”

The mystery, however, is how these pious evangelical Christians, with a two-story concept of truth, came to believe so strongly that a secular, “lower-story,” individualistic, contract-theory of government is compatible with Christianity. Pearcey highlights part of the answer, which is that evangelical Christians baptized “visceral individualism” (Will’s words) as part of true Christianity.

Another part of the story is that a vast majority of American Christians adopted as part of the true faith that God had superintended the creation of the American republic as a new Israel—God’s chosen nation. Soul salvation might be individualistic and oriented toward heaven beyond, but social-contract individualism with anti-statist consequences was baptized into the civil religion of Americanism. In other words, American evangelicals may have locked their individual piety in a private upper story, but they also sacralized lower-story Americanism as the civil-religious truth that fits hand in glove with their piety and trust in Christ’s heavenly salvation.

On both counts this two-story view of life distorts biblical Christianity, which is neither individualistic nor civil-religious. It allows for neither a social-contract view of government nor the identification of America as God’s chosen nation.

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