

American Polytheism

The Religion and Society Debate

2 — February 19, 2007

Much of today's media coverage of religion identifies its subject matter by referring to the number of Americans who attend church, or to the Jewish observance of holy days, or to the Muslim practice of praying five times a day. Church, synagogue, or mosque—that's the religion tag. Then, since many Christians who attend church regularly also happen to be politically conservative, the media identifies them with the "Christian right." Positions that "right-wing" Christians take on political issues such as abortion, or interpreting the Constitution, or marriage, are then viewed as expressions of Bible-believing fundamentalists. This, in part, is what Jeff Sharlet does in a recent and provocative essay in *Harper's Magazine* (December 2006) on "how the Christian right is reimagining U.S. history."

There are at least two major problems with this approach, however. First, many Bible-believing Christians, like Jimmy Carter, are not part of the Christian right. And second, what the political right does with religion and politics does not necessarily qualify as Christian.

Consider a recent piece by George F. Will (*Washington Post*, 2/11/07) in which he expresses sympathy with a new book on *Ronald Reagan* by John Patrick Diggins. Diggins, who is enthusiastic about Reagan, argues that Reagan's god was the god bequeathed to America by Ralph Waldo Emerson, not by the Bible. Diggins contends that in effect "Reagan's religion 'enables us to forget religion' because it banishes the idea of 'a God of judgment and punishment.'" Emerson's and Reagan's god is good and therefore humans are good. A good god couldn't have created evil; consequently, we and our desires must be good. Therefore, no American leader needs to "suggest that the public has shortcomings and should engage in critical self-examination." Americans should be optimistic about the future. For example, "Reagan said that the people never start wars, only governments do." Under Reagan, according to Diggins, "Americans could live off government and hate it at the same time." They could (and still do), as I would put it, love America while holding government suspect. With this religious spirit of goodness and freedom, Reagan, says Will, "frequently quoted [Thomas] Paine's preposterous cry that 'we have it in our power to begin the world over again.'"

Now, we know that many conservative Christians turned enthusiastically to Reagan and away from the born-again Carter. Yet this cannot be explained in terms of

the degree of Christian orthodoxy of the two presidents. To make sense of American public religiosity, in other words, we need to look at what Americans—including many American Christians—believe about the god (or gods) of America and not first at what they believe about Jesus Christ.

Yet how can any Christian accept such a dualism of religions—serving an American god in public who may be at odds with Jesus Christ? Can it even be done? My friend, Joe Loconte, with whom I radically disagree at this point, offers one familiar way to do it. “The Church,” he explains, “aims to create a spiritual community grounded in the law of love. The State seeks to maintain justice in a secular society that rejects the divine law.” (“The Ghosts of Appeasement,” a lecture published by the John Jay Institute for Faith, Society and Law—www.johnjayinstitute.org). Never mind that Jesus told his followers that they cannot serve two masters and that the totality of their lives should be oriented by the love of God and the love of their neighbors as themselves. Never mind that Jesus claimed that all authority in heaven and on earth (not just spiritual authority) had been given to him. Is it perhaps the case that Christians have found room for American gods in the vacuum they have created by trying to confine Christ’s authority and love to a spiritual community?

I must be quick to say that I do not belong to the pro-appeasement, be-nice-to-fascists camp that Loconte sets up in his lecture as the foil for his support of the stay-tough-America war against terrorism. My disagreement with him does not arise from within the polarized alternatives he presents in his speech. His polarity works only so long as one accepts the privatization of Christian love so that the American military is free to do un-spiritual and nasty things to defend the world from evil. As Loconte puts it, “Biblical realism does not seek to make the ethics of the Sermon on the Mount a road map for U.S. foreign policy” But it is precisely this kind of dualism—all too prevalent among Christians of both liberal and conservative stripes—that cuts off any possible consideration of a deeply biblical, seriously Christian approach to politics and government.

How will we ever be able to assess from a Christian point of view what is on track or off track in the work of government if we insist at the outset on making one or both of two errors? The first is to assume that America’s god is the God of the Bible. The second is to assume that Jesus Christ puts the work of politics and government in the hands of America’s god.

James W. Skillen, President
Center for Public Justice