

## **AMERICAN FASCISTS**

### **The Christian Right and the War on America**

I grew up in a small farming town in upstate New York where my life, and the life of my family, centered on the Presbyterian Church. I prayed and sang hymns every Sunday, went to Bible school, listened to my father preach the weekly sermon, and attended seminary at Harvard Divinity School to be a preacher myself. America was a place where things could be better, if we worked to make them better, and where our faith saved us from despair, self-righteousness and the dangerous belief that we knew or could carry out the will of God. We were taught that those who claimed to speak for God, the self-appointed prophets who promised the Kingdom of God on earth, were dangerous. We had no ability to understand God's will. We did the best we could. We trusted and had faith in the mystery, the unknown before us. We made decisions, even decisions that on the outside looked moral, well aware of the numerous motives, some good and some bad, that went into every human act. In the end, we all stood in need of forgiveness. We were all tainted by sin. None were pure. The Bible was not the literal word of God. It was not a self-help manual that could predict the future. It did not tell us how to vote or allow us to divide the world into us and them, the righteous and the damned, the infidels and the blessed. It was a book written by a series of ancient writers, certainly fallible and at times at odds with each other, who asked the right questions and struggled with the mystery and transcendence of human existence.

There was no alcohol in the manse where I grew up, indeed my father invested huge amounts of energy in a Quixotic attempt to shut down the Glass Bar, the one bar n town and railed against the drinking in the VFW Hall. We did not work on the Sabbath. I never heard my father swear. But coupled with this piety was a belief that as Christians we were called to fight for social justice. My father took an early stand in the town in support of the civil rights movement, a position that was highly unpopular in rural, white enclaves where Dr. Martin Luther King was one of the most hated men in America. A veteran of World War II, he opposed the Vietnam War, telling me when I was about 12 that if the war was still being waged when I was 18 he would go to prison with me. And to this day I carry in my head the rather gloomy image of sitting in a jail cell with my Dad. Finally, because his youngest brother was gay, he understood the pain of being a gay man in America. He worked in the later part of his life in the gay rights movement, calling for the ordination and marriage of gays. When he found that my college had no gay and lesbian organization he brought gay speakers to Colgate. The meetings led to gay and lesbians confiding in him that they felt uncomfortable coming out of the closet to start an open gay and lesbian organization, a problem my father swiftly solved by taking me out to lunch and informing me I had to form the organization. When I went into the dining hall for breakfast, lunch and dinner the checker behind the desk would take my card, mark off the appropriate box, and hand it back saying “faggot.” This willingness to take a moral stand, to accept risk and ridicule, was, he showed me, the cost of the moral life.

The Bible informed his life, as it has informed mine, but it never occurred to him to treat it as the literal word of God. The writers of the book of Genesis, who wrote

about the creation of the world in seven days, knew nothing, he told us, about the process of creation. They believed the earth was flat with rivers above and below us. They wrote that God created light on the first day and the sun on the fourth day. Genesis was not written to explain the process of creation. It was written to help explain the purpose of creation. It was written to help us grasp a spiritual truth, not a scientific or historical fact. And this purpose, this spiritual truth, is something the writers did know about. It is why Genesis is worth reading, indeed why the Bible stands as one of the great ethical and moral documents of our age. The Biblical writers have helped shape and define western civilization. Not to know the Bible is, in some ways, to be illiterate, to neglect the very roots of much that has informed our philosophy, art, architecture, literature, poetry and music. It is to fall into a dangerous provincialism, as myopic and narrow as that embraced by those who say everything in the Bible is literally true and we do not need any other kind of intellectual inquiry. Doubt and belief are not, as Biblical literalists claim, incompatible. Those who act without any doubt are frightening. “There lives more faith in honest doubt,” the poet Alfred Tennyson noted, “believe me, than in half the creeds.”

This was my faith. It is a pretty good summary of my faith today. God is inscrutable, mysterious and unknowable. We do not know or understand what life is about, what it means, why we are here and what will happen to us after our brief sojourn on the planet ends. We are saved, in the end, by faith, faith and trust that life is not meaningless and random, that there is a purpose to human existence, and that in the midst of this morally neutral universe the tiny, seemingly insignificant acts of compassion and blind human kindness, especially to those labeled our enemies and strangers, sustain the

divine spark, which is love. These small acts of compassion, for they can never be organized and institutionalized as can hate, have a power that lives after us. It is deeply subversive to all totalitarian creeds, which seek to thwart love outside of the small circle of believers, for it recognizes and affirms the humanity of the other, an affirmation which undermines the absolute control of totalitarian masters. Those who struggle to live the moral life and are able to sacrifice for others, even at great cost, stand as constant witnesses in our lives to this love, even long after they are gone. In the gospels this is called resurrection.

Faith presupposes that we cannot know. We can never know. Those who claim to know what life means play God. These false prophets, clutching the cross and the Bible, offer, like Mephistopheles, to lead us back to a mythical paradise and an impossible, unachievable happiness and security, at once seductive and empowering. These self-appointed prophets, who saturate the airwaves, ask us to hand over moral choice and responsibility to them. They will tell us they what is right and wrong in the eyes of God. They tell us how to act, how to live and in this process they elevate themselves above us. They remove the anxiety of moral choice, the fundamental anxiety of human existence. This is part of their attraction. They give us the rules by which we live. But once we hand over this anxiety and accept their authority we become enslaved. They become idols. And idols, as the Bible never ceases to tell us, destroy us. This is the battle underway in America. Should those who have raised themselves to the status of idols, men who preach that they know the will of God and can build a Christian America, achieve the power they seek America, as we know it, will be destroyed.

I saw enough of the world over the past two decades -- for although I graduated from seminary I was not ordained and worked in Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and the Balkans as a foreign correspondent -- to grasp that men and women of great moral probity and courage arise in all cultures, all nations and all religions to challenge the oppressor and fight for the oppressed. I also saw how the dominant religions of these nations were often twisted and distorted by totalitarian movements, turned into civic religions where the goals of the movement or the state became the goals of the divine. The wars I covered were often fought in the name of one God or another. All, in fact, mocked the faiths they purported to defend.

America and the Christian religion have no monopoly on goodness or saintliness. God has not chosen us as a people above others. Our religious beliefs are as flawed and imperfect as all religious beliefs. But the best of American democracy, and the best of the Christian religion, embodies important values, values such as compassion, tolerance, a belief in justice and equality. America is a nation where all have a voice and a say in how they live and how they are governed. That we have never fully achieved these goals is a given, but our health as a country is determined by our steadfastness in striving to attain them.

These values, democratic and Christian, are being dismantled by a movement that has appropriated the language and moral arguments from evangelicals and American patriots. But they are distinct from traditional evangelicals in that they seek to use religion as a route to political power. This movement, properly called Dominionism or Christian Reconstructionism, believes that American Christians have been mandated by God to rule. It has many similarities with classical fascist movements. What the disparate

sects that make up this movement share is an obsession with political power. A decades-long refusal to engage in politics at all following the Scopes trial, which in 1925 upheld the right of John Scopes, a high school biology teacher, to teach the theory of evolution, has been replaced by a call for Christian “dominion” over the nation and, eventually, over the earth itself. Dominionists preach that Jesus has called them to build the kingdom of God in the here and now, whereas previously it was thought that we would have to wait for it. America becomes, in this militant biblicism, an agent of God, and all political and intellectual opponents of America’s Christian leaders are viewed, quite simply, as agents of Satan. Under Christian dominion, America will no longer be a sinful and fallen nation but one in which the Ten Commandments form the basis of our legal system, Creationism and “Christian values” form the basis of our educational system, and the media and the government proclaim the Good News to one and all. Aside from its proselytizing mandate, the federal government will be reduced to the protection of property rights and “homeland” security. Some Dominionists (not all of whom accept the label, at least not publicly) would further require all citizens to pay “tithes” to church organizations empowered by the government to run our social-welfare agencies, and a number of influential figures advocate the death penalty for a host of “moral crimes,” including adultery, sodomy, apostasy, blasphemy and witchcraft. The only legitimate voices in this state will be Christian. All others will be silenced.

The traditional evangelicals, those who come out of Billy Graham’s mold, are not necessarily comfortable with the direction taken by the Dominionists, who now control most of America’s major evangelical organizations, including nearly all Christian radio and television stations and denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention. But

Christians who challenge Dominionists, even if they are fundamentalist or conservative or born-again, are ruthlessly thrust aside. The marriage between these religious radicals and the neo-conservatives, who seek to unfetter corporations and remove the federal government from the task of regulating industry or taking care of the poor, has seen the movement make huge inroads into the legislative, executive and finally judicial branches of American government. They stand poised to reshape and refashion American society.

If they succeed, however, it will not be due to their ruthlessness and mendacity, or their callous manipulation of the people they lure into their movement, many of whom live on the margins of American society. It will be because of the moral failure of those who understand them yet fail to confront them. The leading American institutions tasked with defending tolerance and liberty, from the mainstream church, to the great research universities to the Democratic Party and to the press have failed us. This is the awful paradox of tolerance. There arise moments when those who would destroy the tolerance that makes an open society possible can no longer be tolerated. They must be held accountable by those institutions tasked with maintaining the free exchange of ideas, mutual respect, liberty and tolerance. They must be denied the right to demonize whole segments of American society as manipulated by Satan and worthy only of conversion or eradication. They must be made to treat their opponents with mutual respect and acknowledge the right of a fair hearing, even as they are free to disagree with their opponents. This passivity in the face of the rise of the Christian Right threatens the health of the republic. And the movement is picking off the last remaining obstacles to their systems of indoctrination, mounting a fierce campaign to defeat hate crimes legislation, knowing that the courts could apply it to them as they spew hate talk over the

radio, television and internet about immigrants, gays, lesbians, liberals and all those they brand as “secular humanists.”

Despotic movements harness the power of the modern communications to keep their followers locked in closed systems. If this long, steady poisoning of the civil discourse within these closed information systems is not challenged, if this movement continues to teach neighbor to hate neighbor, eventually the civil society in America will collapse. The Christian broadcasters, along with Christian schools and colleges, are indoctrinating and inciting followers, in the name of Christ and American values, to tear apart the nation. They preach, in short, civil war.

Karl Popper, in the first volume of *The Enemies of the Open Society*, writes of this paradox of tolerance:

*Unlimited tolerance, he says, must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. In this formulation, I do not imply, for instance that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be most unwise. But we should claim the right to suppress them if necessary by force; for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to rational argument, because it is deceptive, and teach them to answer arguments by the use of their fists or pistols. We should therefore claim, in the name of tolerance, the right not to tolerate the intolerant. We should claim that any*

*movement preaching intolerance places itself outside the law, and we should consider incitement to intolerance and persecution as criminal, in the same way as we should consider incitement to murder, or kidnapping, or to the revival of the slave trade, as criminal.*

The Christian Right has no religious legitimacy. It is a mass political movement. It ignores the core values of the Christian religion, summed up by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount, and the core values of American democracy. They are, as the Rev. William Sloan Coffin points out, not Biblical literalists, as they claim, but “selective literalists,” choosing the bits and pieces of the Bible that conform to their ideology and ignoring, distorting or making up the rest. The Rapture, for example, the cornerstone of their end time eschatology, is not in the Bible. They skip over the uncomfortable Biblical defense of the institution of slavery, including in the letters of Paul. The four Gospels alone are filled with contradictions, with two gospels saying Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist and Luke asserting that John was already in prison. There are three separate and different versions of the Ten Commandments that are often at odds with each other (Exodus 20, Exodus 34, and Deuteronomy 5). There are long sections of the Hebrew scripture where tribal hatreds and calls for vicious acts of vengeance, including the genocidal extermination of opposing tribes and nations, are extolled as virtues. Those captured in battle in the Hebrew scripture were usually executed and their women forced into sexual bondage. God, turning on the Egyptians, transforms the Nile into blood so the Egyptians will suffer from thirst and then sends swarms of locusts and flies to torture them along with hail, fire and thunder from the heavens to destroy all plants and trees. God orders

the firstborn in every Egyptian household (Exodus 11: 4-6) killed so that all will know “that the Lord makes a distinction between the Egyptians and Israel.” (Exodus 11:7). The killing does not cease until “there is not a house where one was not dead.” Amid the carnage God orders Moses to loot all the clothing, jewelry, gold and silver from the Egyptian homes (Exodus 12: 35-36) and when it is all over God looks at the rampage and says smugly: “I have made sport of the Egyptians.”

A literal reading of the Bible means the reinstatement of slavery coupled with the understanding that the slave master has the right to beat his slave without mercy since “the slave is his money.” (Exodus 22:20). Children who strike or curse a parent are to be executed (Exodus 21:15). Those who pay homage to another god “shall be utterly destroyed.” (Exodus 22:20). Women who are menstruating are to be considered unclean and all they touch while menstruating becomes unclean (Leviticus 15: 19ff) The blind, the lame, those who have a mutilated face, those who are a hunchback or a dwarf or have a defect in sight or an itching disease or scabs or crushed testicles cannot become priests (Leviticus 22:16-22). If you blaspheme God you shall be executed (Leviticus 24:16). And “if a spirit of jealousy” comes upon a man, he can order his wife to drink poison. If the woman dies, she is guilty. If she survives, she is innocent (Numbers 5:11ff). Women, throughout the Bible, are subservient to men, often without legal rights. [[footnote: Many of these examples were compiled by Bishop John Shelby Spong in his book *Rescuing the Bible from Fundamentalism*}}

There are moments in the Bible where God is a petty, cruel and bigoted tyrant who delights in mass slaughter. Some of God’s commands, especially in the Hebrew

Bible, are repulsive. God is seen as glorifying war and brutal acts of retribution and vengeance. But Jesus is not immune. Jesus, in words that make liberal Christians squirm, makes it clear that those who do not follow Him will suffer the torments of hell, cast into outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. (Matthew 25:30). The hatred of Jews pervades the Christian Gospels, with John writing that the Jewish people loved darkness more than light, for their deeds were evil (John 3: 18-20). Jews, he went on, were the children of the devil, who was the father of lies (John 8:39-44). Jesus calls on his followers to love their enemies and to pray for their persecutors, (Matthew 5:44), a radical concept in the Roman Empire. He says we must never demean or insult our enemies (Matthew 5:22). But then we read Jesus calling his enemies “a brood of snakes” (Matthew 12:34) and “son of vipers” (Matthew 15:26).

There is enough hatred, bigotry and lust for violence in the pages of the Bible to satisfy any tyrant bent on justifying cruelty and violence as being Biblically sanctioned. Religion, as H. Richard Niebuhr knew, is a good thing for good people and a bad thing for bad people. And these are bad people. But the suppositions of the Biblical writers, who understood little about the working of the cosmos or the human body, are so fanciful and the accounts so wild that even Biblical literalists reject them. God is not, as many writers of the Bible believed, peering down from us through little peep holes in the sky called stars. And the “selective literalists” can not have it both ways. The Bible is either all true, an impossibility given that it frequently is at odds with itself, and its most bizarre edicts must be obeyed, or it must be read in another way. Liberal Christians, who can cherry pick the Bible to create a Jesus and God that is always loving and compassionate, have to face the fact that there are also hateful passages in the Bible that bolster the rage,

self-aggrandizement and intolerance of the Christian Right. These passages have been used to sanctify persecution in the past, whether during murderous reign of the emperor Constantine, The Inquisition or the Salem Witch Trials. What is heretical is not that such passages exist, but that they are taken out of context and used to give sacred authority to hateful political and social creeds.

Once the Bible is no longer literally true, and by selecting and rejecting what they want the Christian Right has admitted as much, we are free to read the Biblical writers for their wisdom about human existence, which is often profound, and reject those Biblical writers who use their interpretation of God to countenance hatred and violence.

Plato and Aristotle not only defended slavery but often attacked Athenian democracy, but this does not mean they should not be read for their penetrating insights into political systems and ethics. Sigmund Freud understood little about love, viewed religion as infantile regression and colored nearly every human motive through the lens of human sexuality, but at the same time Freud gave us one of the most powerful windows and vocabularies into the workings of our subconscious. The Bible was written by numerous people over hundreds of years with wide and often varying agendas, some of which were morally indefensible. But within its pages are powerful passages that help illuminate our own lives and our place before the mysteries of human existence. The Bible, even with all its quirks and contradictions, its moments of madness and hatred, its mythologies of suns being halted in the skies, 90-year-old women giving birth and men rising from the dead, informs my life. It is what led me to write this book. I too struggle, like the writers of the Bible, to understand. I too often get it wrong. But it is the honesty

of the search, the doubts and the reverses, the mistakes and regrets, the effort to stand up and keep trying that ultimately defines belief. It is not the certainty and self-righteousness, the tired and opaque cliché that “Jesus is my personal Lord and Savior.” This humility before the unknowable makes possible self-criticism, self-awareness, self-possession and self-reflection. It makes possible a diverse human community.

Dr. James Luther Adams, my ethics professor at Harvard Divinity School, told us that when we were his age, he was then close to 80, we would all be fighting the "Christian fascists."

The warning, given to me 25 years ago, came at the moment Pat Robertson and other radio and televangelists began speaking about a new political religion that would direct its efforts at taking control of all institutions, including mainstream denominations and the government. Its stated goal was to use the United States to create a global, Christian empire. It was hard, at the time, to take such fantastic rhetoric seriously, especially given the buffoonish quality of those who expounded it. But Adams warned us against the blindness caused by intellectual snobbery. The Nazis, he said, were not going to return with swastikas and brown shirts. Their ideological inheritors had found a mask for fascism in patriotism and the pages of the Bible.

He was not a man to use the word fascist lightly. He was in Germany in 1935 and 1936 and worked with the underground anti-Nazi church, known as The Confessing Church, led by Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Adams was eventually detained and interrogated by the Gestapo, who suggested he might want to consider returning to the United States . It was a suggestion he followed. He left on a night train with framed portraits of Adolph

Hitler placed over the contents inside his suitcase to hide the rolls of home movie film he took of the so-called German Christian Church, which was pro-Nazi, and the few individuals who defied them, including the theologians Karl Barth and Albert Schweitzer. The ruse worked when the border police lifted the top of the suitcases, saw the portraits of the Fuhrer and closed them up again. I watched hours of the grainy black and white films as he narrated in his apartment in Cambridge.

He saw in the Christian Right, long before we did, disturbing similarities with the German Christian Church and the Nazi Party, similarities that he said would, in the event of prolonged social instability or a national crisis, see American fascists, under the guise of religion, rise to dismantle the open society. He despaired of liberals, who he said, as in Nazi Germany, mouthed silly platitudes about dialogue and inclusiveness that made them ineffectual and impotent. Liberals, he said, did not understand the power and allure of evil nor the cold reality of how the world worked. The current hand wringing by Democrats in the wake of the election, with many asking how they can reach out to a movement whose leaders brand them "demonic" and "satanic," would not have surprised Adams. Like Bonhoeffer, he did not believe that those who would fight effectively in coming times of turmoil, a fight that for him was an integral part of the Biblical message, would come from the church or the liberal, secular elite.

His critique of the prominent research universities, along with the media, was no less withering. These institutions, self-absorbed, compromised by their close relationship with government and corporations, given enough of the pie to be complacent, were unwilling to deal with the fundamental moral questions and inequities of the age. They

had no stomach for a battle that might cost them their prestige and comfort. He told me, I suspect half in jest, that if the Nazis took over America "60 percent of the Harvard faculty would begin their lectures with the Nazi salute." This too was not an abstraction. He had watched academics at the University of Heidelberg, including the philosopher Martin Heidegger, raise their arms stiffly to students before class. Adams also reminded us that American intellectuals and industrialists openly flirted with fascism in the 1930s. Mussolini's "Corporatism," which created an unchecked industrial and business aristocracy, appealed to many American industrialists at the time who saw it as an effective counterweight to the New Deal. In 1934, Fortune magazine lavished praise on the Italian dictator for his defanging of labor unions and his empowerment of industrialists at the expense of workers.

Adams, finally, told us to watch closely what the Christian Right did to homosexuals. He has seen how the Nazis had used "values" to launch state repression of opponents. Hitler, days after he took power in 1933, imposed a ban on all homosexual and lesbian organizations. He ordered raids on places where homosexuals gathered culminating with the ransacking of the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin . Thousands of volumes from the institute's library were tossed into a bonfire. Adams said that homosexuals would also be the first "deviants" singled out by the Christian Right. We would be the next.

The ban on same sex marriages, passed by eleven states in the last election, was part of this march towards our door. A 1996 federal law already defines marriage as between a man and a woman. All of the states with ballot measures, with the exception of

Oregon, had outlawed same sex marriages, as do 27 other states. The bans, however, had to be passed, believers were told, to thwart "activist judges" who wanted to overturn them. The Christian family, even the nation, was under threat. The bans served to widen the splits tearing apart the country. The attacks on homosexuals handed to the foot soldiers of the Christian Right an easy target. It gave them a taste of victory. It made them feel empowered. But it is ominous for gays and for us.

Two decades later, even in the face of the growing reach of the Christian Right, his prediction seems apocalyptic. And yet the powerbrokers in the Christian Right have moved from the fringes of society to the Executive branch, the House of Representative, the Senate and the courts. The movement has seized control of the Republican Party. And now hold a majority of seats in 36 percent of all Republican Party state committees, or 18 of 50 states, along with large minorities in 81 percent of the rest of the states. Forty-five Senators and 186 members of the House of Representatives earned between an 80 to 100 percent approval ratings from the three most influential Christian Right advocacy groups - The Christian Coalition, Eagle Forum, and Family Resource Council. Tom Coburn, the new senator from Oklahoma, has included in his campaign to end abortion: a call to impose the death penalty on doctors that carry out abortions once the ban goes into place. Another new senator, John Thune, believes in Creationism. Jim DeMint, the new senator elected from South Carolina, wants to ban single mothers from teaching in schools. The Election Day exit polls found that 22 percent of voters identified themselves as evangelical Christians and Bush won 77 percent of their vote. The polls found that a plurality of voters said that the most important issue in the campaign had been "moral values."

The movement is making a huge push to seize control of key states, including Ohio where the Secretary of State, Ken Blackwell, has become the poster child for the movement. He is lauded and feted at rallies run by the Christian Right, including by a group called Patriot Pastors who have adopted as their symbol the cross superimposed on the American flag. When I attended a rally in Dayton, where Blackwell was present, a chorus sang militant hymns and patriotic songs while the crowd watched pictures of the war in Iraq. Blackwell must, as a political candidate, maintain the fiction of the separation of church and state, dodging his intent to build a theocratic, Christian government, while at the same time sending out a stream of coded reassurances to his radical base. He has posted on his web site a list of twenty requirements for people of “high-character.” He helped make Ohio a State of Character, part of a movement within the Christian Right that has spread to other states as well as cities and towns. He has put funding and resources aside to train citizens and leaders on how to be people of character. He sends out to all potential candidates forms to fill out to declare they are persons of character and posts the names of those who abide by the request on his web site.

But woven into the twenty point list, which deftly eschews all religious terminology, is a blueprint for an authoritarian state, one where questioning power is unpatriotic and only those with “high-character,” as rigidly defined by Christians like Blackwell, have the right to lead and be heard. Individualism, the right to privacy, the belief that other political viewpoints and moral systems have value, are all attacked as disruptive to social cohesion.

In the section titled *UNITY* followers are told:

*High-character people strive to build relationships that foster oneness among others who are bound with them to a common promise, vision, mission or purpose.*

*Ethical organizations seek uniformity in their people's shared character ethics and unity among their otherwise richly diverse people. Without a persevering commitment to shared character ethics, there is no hope for sustainable unity. (Observable Virtues: reconciler)*

In section 7, titled *ACCOUNTABILITY*, it talks about how to enforce this unity:

*High-character people scrutinize themselves and welcome the scrutiny of others. Ethical people acknowledge that human nature compels us toward independence. Our preference for independence results in isolation from one another. Isolation breeds temptation to unethical conduct. Ethical people resist this chain reaction by adopting transparent life- and work-styles that invite inspection. Ethical people place themselves in relationships that motivate self-examination and encourage constructive critique from others, particularly those they serve. (Observable Virtues: an open, upfront, disclosing spirit)*

Point 14, titled *HONORING AUTHORITY*, is a reminder that without moral guides people of “high-character” can go astray and deviate from the ethical standards imposed from above:

*All people are imperfect, requiring boundaries for behavior. High-character people willingly yield to the authority of those who are charged with upholding those boundaries. Ethical people help shape and then abide by the legitimate laws, rules and boundaries established by legitimate authorities and strive to live within those boundaries for the betterment of all people. When those given authority violate conscience- convicting ethics, ethical people take ethical action to restore ethical authority. (Observable Virtues: yieldedness)*

And towards the end of the list, with point 19, under a heading titled “Our Ability to Change,” there is a section titled *SUBMISSION TO TRUTH*:

*Truth transforms people only when we submit to it. Truly high-character people cannot not transform. Eventually everyone ultimately confronts the power of truth. When confronted by the truth, ethical people are convicted to replace or “put off” their unethical behavior by pursuing and “putting on” ethical beliefs; unethical people do not. This ongoing ‘replacement-lifestyle’ of ethical people produces the enduring evidences (or proofs) called virtues.*

All the points make, in essence, the same point. People of “high-character” give over all authority, for moral and political decisions, to leaders who tell them what is true

and what is right. All must, if they have “high-character,” invite scrutiny by these leaders, by the organs of the state and by their neighbors. These tenants are the cornerstone of the police state, the state where all are told to watch for social and political deviants, where there is only one orthodox truth, where all dissent is heresy, where people who are not of “high-character,” people who do not submit and do what they are told, are not allowed to contaminate the public domain. Those of “high-character,” those who abide by these moral tenants, become servile, afraid, bound to the tasks laid out by their leaders, willing to be punished for failing to achieve the moral standards and goals imposed by the state and ready to denounce those around them. It is the antithesis of the message Jesus preached in the Gospels.

President Bush must further these important objectives, including the march to turn education and social welfare over to the churches with his faith-based initiative, which has handed hundreds of millions of tax payer dollars to these churches, as well as chip away at the wall between church and state with his judicial appointments, if he does not want to face a revolt within his core constituency.

“Hope has two beautiful daughters,” Augustine wrote. “Their names are anger and courage; anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are.”

Anger, when directed against those who would abuse the weak, preach bigotry and injustice, trample on the poor, crush dissent and impose a religious tyranny, is a blessing. Read the prophets. But because so many of our liberal institutions are bankrupt, bought off by corporate dollars and no longer willing to accept, in religious

terms, that heretics exist, the goal is to appease the very people who openly call for our destruction. The liberal church stumbles along, muttering creeds they no longer believe, trying to peddle a fuzzy, feel good theology that distorts and ignores the Bible as much as the Christian Right. The Christian Right is not always wrong about liberals, in fact the movement voices much of our most prescient social criticism. They understand the ills of American society even as they use these ills to plunge us into tyranny. They grasp the hollowness, timidity and hypocrisy of the liberal church. The Christian Right attacks “cultural relativism,” the creed that there is no absolute good and all value systems have equal merit, even as they benefit, in a final irony, from those who tolerate them in the name of cultural relativism. The most potent opposition to the movement will rise, I expect, from within the evangelical tradition. The movement fears Christians who have remained loyal to the core values of the Gospel, who delineate between right and wrong, who are willing to be vilified and attacked in the name of a higher good and who have the courage to fight back. Most liberals, the movement has figured out, will stand complacently to be sheared like sheep, attempting to open dialogues and reach out their hands to those who spit venom in their face.

We must begin to support those isolated groups and individuals who at some cost are fighting back, the clergy and rabbis who have banded together in Ohio to challenge in court the tax exempt status of the mega-churches that peddle this ideology and promote “Christian” candidates, the independent judges, such as the Republican-appointed judge in Dover, Pennsylvania who banned the teaching of Creationism in the public school because it is mythology not science, as well as Cardinal Roger Mahony, the head of the Archdiocese of Los Angeles, the nation’s largest, who called on Catholics to be prepared

to defy the current efforts in Congress, backed by the Christian Right, to make it a felony to shield or protect or offer support to illegal immigrants. The bill before Congress, H.R. 4437, would expand the definition of “alien smuggling” to theoretically include working in a soup kitchen, driving a friend to a bus stop or caring for a neighbor’s child. It would make mercy, compassion and charity for the least among us a federal crime.

In Mark Twain’s book *The Adventures of Huckelberry Finn* it ends with Huck facing the moral dilemma we face, whether to pay homage to a false moral code or damn ourselves in the eyes of many by opposing it.

*So I was full of trouble, full as I could be; and didn't know what to do. At last I had an idea; and I says, I'll go and write the letter - and then see if I can pray. Why, it was astonishing, the way I felt as light as a feather right straight off, and my troubles all gone. So I got a piece of paper and a pencil, all glad and excited, and set down and wrote:*

*Miss Watson, your runaway nigger Jim is down here two mile below Pikesville, and Mr. Phelps has got him and he will give him up for the reward if you send. Huck Finn.*

*I felt good and all washed clean of sin for the first time I had ever felt so in my life, and I knowed I could pray now. But I didn't do it straight off, but laid the paper down and set there thinking - thinking how good it was all this happened so, and how near I come to being lost and going to hell. And went on thinking. And got to thinking over our trip down the river; and I see Jim before me all the time: in the day and in the night-time, sometimes moonlight, sometimes storms, and we a-floating along, talking and singing and laughing. But somehow I couldn't seem to strike no places to harden me against him, but only the other kind. I'd see him standing my watch on top of his'n, 'stead of calling me, so I could go on sleeping; and see him how glad he was when I come back out of the fog; and when I come to him again in the swamp, up there where the feud was; and suchlike times; and would always call me honey, and pet me, and do everything he could*

*think of for me, and how good he always was; and at last I struck the time I saved him by telling the men we had smallpox aboard, and he was so grateful, and said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he's got now; and then I happened to look around and see that paper.*

*It was a close place. I took it up, and held it in my hand. I was a-trembling, because I'd got to decide, forever, betwixt two things, and I knowed it. I studied a minute, sort of holding my breath, and then says to myself:*

*"All right, then, I'll go to hell" - and tore it up.*

I do not deny the right of these Christian radicals to be, to believe and worship as they choose. But I will not engage in a dialogue with those who deny my right to be, who de-legitimize my faith and denounce my struggle before God as worthless. All dialogue must include respect and tolerance for the belief, worth and dignity of others, including those outside the nation and the faith. When this respect is denied it is no longer a difference of opinion. It is a fight for survival. This movement seeks, in the name of Christianity and American democracy, to destroy that which it claims to defend. I do not believe that America will inevitably become a fascist state or that the Christian Right is the Nazi party. But I do believe that the Christian Right is a sworn and potent enemy of the open society. Its ideology bears within it the seeds of a religious fascism. In the event of a crisis, in the event of another catastrophic terrorist attack, an economic meltdown or huge environmental disaster, the movement stands poised to ruthlessly reshape America in ways that have not been seen since the nation's founding. All Americans, not only those of faith, must learn to speak about this movement with a new vocabulary, to give up passivity and to defend tolerance. The attacks by this movement on the rights and beliefs of Muslims, Jews, immigrants, gays, lesbians, women, scholars,

scientists, those they dismiss as “nominal Christians” and those they brand with the curse of “secular humanist” is an attack on all of us, on our values, our religious freedoms and our democracy. Tolerance is a virtue, but tolerance coupled with passivity is a vice.