

3 | October 2008

Washington Office

OCCASIONAL PAPER

Shared Values

A Free Market of Religion in the United States of America—A Blessing and a Curse

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This essay was commissioned by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

Heartfelt thanks to the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung for generously supporting the project “Wertewelten” (“Shared Values”)!

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Introduction

Exploring shared values

During my time as a member of the German Bundestag’s Foreign Affairs Committee, I have often visited Poland and the USA. In both countries, over the last several years, the political arena has been the site of vehement values debates. Conflict over the right kind of values has often been polarizing to a degree that would seem to express a deep division within society.

In Germany, of course, we also have these values debates. But here at home they do not seem to move society in the truest sense of the word, as happens in the United States or Poland. That may be one reason why so many people in Germany often misinterpret the way Americans debate family values or how Poles quarrel over the politics of history. Above all, the fact that religion plays a large role in the values debates both of Poland and the US seems to have triggered real unease among many of my fellow German politicians. That discomfort is certainly not a good foundation for mutual understanding and estimation.

Similar values – similar behavior?

When the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung offered to have me develop a project for them, one thing was clear: I wanted to explore the “worlds of shared values” in the USA, Poland, and Germany. The fascinating question was whether similar values were at stake in these three countries’ values debates. Are we looking at other values, or is this simply a case of giving a different emphasis and interpretation to presumably similar values? And finally: What influences do all these values debates have on politics and policy in each country?

Dealing with the enemies of values

The open “society evoked” by Karl Popper is confronted by two “new enemies” today: On the one hand, there is a progressive loss of formative, identity-shaping, experienceable public spirit within society. On the other hand, our societies are threatened by forces that are not interested in negotiating a common foundation of values but prefer instead to validate their own canon of values that completely questions our open, pluralist society. These forces of counter-modernity use what the sociologist Ulrich Beck has called “fabricated incontrovertibility”¹ to refuse taking part in the negotiations that are constantly redefining what it means to modernize society.

How do societies in Germany, Poland, and the USA deal with forces that cannot bear pluralistic diversity? Or, to put the question differently (and better): How should pluralism be configured so that it is bearable for people in our contemporary world?

We need to learn from one another

This political essay is just one subjective snapshot of these different “worlds of shared values.” It is not an empirical investigation. But it is also an attempt at approaching societal developments that certainly do influence political action both inside and outside these different countries. And so I hope that this highly personal essay lets me get at least a little closer to gaining some insight that will facilitate political communication between governments and societies: What can we learn from one another? How can we get to understand each other better?

I wrote these words because I could not shake the feeling that in Germany there are too many prejudices

1 Cf. BECK, 1993, see Bibliography – especially the chapter “Gegenmoderne meint hergestellte Fraglosigkeit” (“Counter-modernity means fabricated incontrovertibility”), pp. 100–110.

and gaps in knowledge when it comes to the nexus of religion, values debates, and politics in the U.S. But in the United States there are also prejudices and stereotypes about the Godless Europeans. That is why my essay is also an attempt to offer Americans a German or European perspective on their values debates, a perspective that I hope will show how even in Old Europe there is an interest in and openness toward developments in U.S. society.

This text, which is concerned with the United States, is the first part of a larger essay that will be followed by three additional sections (on Poland, Germany, and a comparison among the three countries). If the essay should succeed in triggering debates in the sense of a productive discourse, or at least in serving as a helpful contribution to such debates, I will be extremely pleased.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I should like to thank Pia Bungarten from the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. It is no exaggeration to say that this essay would not exist without her.

In the U.S., I also received outstanding support from Almut Wieland-Karimi and her team at the Ebert Foundation office in Washington, DC. I wish to thank Ambassador J.D. Bindenagel from De Paul University in Chicago for his magnanimous cooperation and hospitality. I would like to thank all my interlocutors mentioned in the Appendix, especially Prof. Marcia Pally, Jeffrey Verhey, Jörg Lüer, and Basil Kerski, for the many ways they stimulated this project. My greatest thanks for everything goes to my wife Dagmar and our children Marie and Mattias.

In God we trust...

Whoever looks into values debates in the U.S. cannot avoid dealing with religion. In no other country in the so-called Western World do we find politics so deeply penetrated by faiths. In hardly any other country, however, do we simultaneously find such a high degree of religious freedom and such high esteem for belief – regardless of which religion. This may astonish many Europeans who, caught as they are between prejudice and misinformation, see the U.S. owing to the growing influence of the so-called Christian Right and their support for the

incumbent President George W. Bush, on the way to an irrational, theocratically tinged Apocalyptic Empire.

No, our American friends are not heading down this path. On the contrary: American society is highly ambivalent. It's possible, of course, that some of the thought patterns of the evangelicals could become a serious problem for the rest of humanity if they were ever really to enter unfiltered into the official doctrine of an American administration. But things are not going to get to this point, because sectarianism, in the kind of free market of faiths we find in the United States, is not capable of commanding a majority there.

How this free market in religiosity functions, which part of it is both a curse and a blessing, and what kind of influence all this may be seen to exercise on current values debates in the U.S. are things I will address in the following chapter.

Thanksgiving United

It's November 23, 2006, my last day in the United States after nearly four weeks of research on the Shared Values project. I am sitting by myself in the office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Washington, DC. The city looks abandoned, no cars on the streets, and not a soul in view. Maybe once every hour a human being comes into view on the street: homeless people who, like the last survivors of a great catastrophe, sidle through the capital of the earth's only remaining superpower.

This is not Washington's cinematic Armageddon we are experiencing here, no final hours shortly before the collision of a giant meteorite in some Hollywood movie. It is Thanksgiving. On this day, anyone who has a home is at home. The machinery of American capitalism, which otherwise is running around the clock, seems to have stopped for 24 hours. It is a feeling that almost threatens to become certitude for me as I try to get a taxi to drive me to Dulles airport. On this day, a service that heretofore seemed like no problem at all, 365 days in the year and around the clock, becomes a nerve-wracking adventure. Thank God, it has a happy end! We are, after all, in America.

How is it possible for a national holiday to unite a country that harbors what are perhaps the greatest and most contradictory differences inside any society? How can it be that on Thanksgiving almost every American,

regardless of whether they believe in God or not, celebrates a holiday that seems to have such a self-evidently quasi-religious character, so that many Europeans mistake it for a Christian harvest festival?

The answer is simple: Thanksgiving's success comes from how completely American it is! It is embedded in an American faith that, while making use of religious thought and speech patterns of Christian origin, nonetheless makes room for all religions and beliefs, even explicitly including those who don't believe in God. It is a fascinating phenomenon that many describe as a civil religion.

Let me illustrate this thesis using the Thanksgiving-day advertising section of the *Washington Post*, an outstanding article in the same issue, and a brochure from the American Jewish Committee:

In spite of it being Thanksgiving, Jackson Janes, Director of the American Institute for Contemporary German Studies at the John Hopkins University in Washington, DC had not forgotten me: On the way to the airport I received his text message drawing my attention to an article on Thanksgiving in the *Washington Post* by Newsweek editor Jon Meacham, an article that "could certainly be very helpful for you..."

But before I get around to reading said article, something else immediately strikes me: Today's edition of the *Washington Post* seems to weigh as much as a turkey. There were countless pages from special supplements and ads about the grand shopping day after Thanksgiving: On this day almost all stores open much earlier than usual, at a very un-Christian time. They frequently offer super special promotions and bargains that are only valid before nine o'clock in the morning. After a day of contemplation, in other words, whoever wants to, can surrender to mindless consumption! One might almost conclude that the machinery of American capitalism had stood still for just 24 hours so that it could gather the strength necessary to get right back on track the day after. But ultimately this temptation to wallow in Mammon's filthy lucre is

a trivial symptom accompanying the same kind of consumer society we might also find in Europe. Much more important for the meaning of Thanksgiving, however, in the sense of the holiday's values and social cohesion, is the thing that makes this day the ultimate American holiday:

A holiday that is "religious without being sectarian, with room for the nonreligious to simply pause and celebrate our common humanity" is how Jon Meacham got to the point about the secret of Thanksgiving's success in his brilliant article² in the *Washington Post*.

The American President who proclaimed Thanksgiving as a national holiday in 1863 was not baptized and never belonged to a church. And yet many an average European might suspect that it was George W. Bush who authored the proclamation President Abraham Lincoln addressed to his fellow citizens.

In spite of the heavy burdens of the Civil War, the wealth of the fields' harvest and the riches brought out of the mines had yielded such abundant blessings, the President wrote in his proclamation to the people, "that they cannot fail to penetrate and soften the heart which is habitually insensible to the everwatchful providence of almighty God."³ Lincoln went on to explain: "... nor hath any mortal hand worked out these great things. They are the gracious gifts of the most high God."⁴

When Abraham Lincoln published these words in his October 1863 proclamation introducing Thanksgiving as an official national holiday, the Union was already in the third year of a gruesome Civil War. Many Northerners were suffering from the war's privations and had started to move away from Lincoln just one year before the next Presidential election. At this point Lincoln had to fight for every vote. Facing this situation, he wanted to create in Thanksgiving a national holiday that would let the maltreated Union of the Northern states close ranks and cement their unity. Yet how can Lincoln use such religious language if his aim is to reach as many Americans as possible?

2 Cf. MEACHAM, 2006, see Bibliography. Whoever has a special interest in the origins of American civil religion would be advised to consult Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers and the Making of the Nation* (New York, 2006).

3 See, for example, this reprint of the proclamation at the National Park Service web site http://www.nps.gov/history/history/online_books/source/sb2/sb2w.htm.

4 Ibid.

Here we find Lincoln skillfully using the “American faith” (what Meacham, using Christian language, calls the “American Gospel”), this unique “edifice of civil religion” that, to this day, has succeeded in holding together this “nation of diversity.” The President may speak about the “Almighty” who has richly endowed the people with the bounties of nature. Yet which God he has in mind, whether the God of the Jews, the Christian Trinity, or an all-purpose Creator God, is something he deliberately leaves vague. And with the formula about reaching even “the heart which is habitually insensible to the ever-watchful providence of almighty God” (whatever kind of Divinity that might be), Abraham Lincoln makes it clear that he is neither excluding nor trying to convert the “non-believers”, but rather that he merely wants to warm them to what he can only describe as bounties of land and nature “so extraordinary” that they must be “Divine”. The religious roots of Thanksgiving from a Christian tradition became so general and, in the truest sense of the word, so inclusive, that even someone who is not religious would avoid feeling snubbed or excluded, and also not one religion or denomination could claim this national holiday exclusively for itself. This fundamental principle of the American faith needs to be understood if we are to avoid the danger of completely misunderstanding the values debates taking place in this country today.

The history of Thanksgiving shows that, up to the present day, generations of Americans not only accept the semi-religious construction of this national holiday, but also that, quite independently of their respective personal beliefs (whatever these may be), this is also something to be celebrated. It speaks for itself that the best publication on Thanksgiving I saw came from a liberal Jewish organization rather than from one of the evangelical Christian associations.

I’m visiting New York for the first time. And I am having my first breakfast in this wonderful city on a sunny November morning with Ann Schaffer, director of the American Jewish Committee’s Arthur & Rochelle Belfer Center of American Pluralism. Ann gives powerful expression to the cardinal importance of protecting minorities in a pluralistic society, and to the inextricably coupled values of diversity and tolerance, which require constant

advocacy; for a Jewish organization, Ann explains, it was especially important after September 11, 2001 to intensify this commitment by seeking inter-faith dialogue with Muslim organizations. This, too, is America.

The kind of service that Ann and her colleagues at the Belfer Center of American Pluralism are actually performing for their country, and which Ann has been trying to communicate so powerfully, really becomes clear to me the day after our conversation when I find a small brochure from her Belfer Center at the AJC as a Thanksgiving supplement to the *New York Times*. Americas Table is the name of the essay, and its subtitle gets to the point about the meaning of Thanksgiving: “Celebrating our diverse roots and shared values.”

The primer is meant to be read as a story about Thanksgiving, before the turkey arrives on the table, just as we might read a Christmas story at home before handing out presents on Christmas eve. The story is a tale about the journey everyone has taken from different backgrounds, and how one finds oneself (or one’s ancestors) on the way to America, “drawn by the promise of a better life,” how everyone is just one part of America’s journey and therefore belongs to a family, that everyone shares responsibility for the direction the country is taking, that it’s important to believe in fairness, and that one needs to live in hope and rely on one’s faith. But the story is also about the need to work for a more just America, about how diversity is good, and how everyone can claim a place at the “American Table.” The dark sides of the American Dream, such as slavery or the destruction and persecution of Native Americans, are also mentioned. Every one of the story’s eight pages faces a portrait of a U.S. citizen. There are seven non-Jews and one Jewish woman, one African-American, and one Native American woman. An Irish-American Catholic priest, recounting his youth in a brief biography, says: “All of that religion stuff was foreign to us.” He is followed on the net page by Norman Mineta, who tells about how he saw his father, born in Japan, crying the day after the Pearl Harbor attack: “He couldn’t understand why the land of his birth was attacking the land of his heart.” Some rationally minded Central European might find all this laid on a bit thick or even kitschy. But in our own debates in Germany about a “Leitkultur” (or mainstream culture) I have yet to

see a contribution as positive and enthusiastic as this, a statement that, without wagging a scolding finger, really hits the mark about commitment to our common values.

The AJC published this primer the first time on Thanksgiving after September 11, 2001. Yet it did not do this on its own, but together with organizations like the National Council of La Raza and the Islamic Supreme Council of America. To Ann Schaffer, incidentally, it goes without saying that the AJC would cooperate on questions of diversity and minority rights with an organization that is on the other side of disputes about threats to Israel. The question of whether this kind of cooperation on some issues in spite of disagreements on others could be found in Germany is one I would probably not, as a rule, care to answer in the affirmative.

“Is, then, Thanksgiving a trifle, or the most solemn tribute a people can render to a God?” asks John Meacham toward the end of his article on Thanksgiving in the *Washington Post*. I can only concur with the answer he gives in the article’s penultimate sentence: “The genius of America is that we are free to believe either – or something in between.”

Reconciling freedom and religion – an American masterpiece

This shaping of a kind of freedom both for and from belief has made it so that no other country on the planet was able to give rise to such a variety of religions, denominations, and faith communities (representing every imaginable kind of belief and “non-belief”) and, by and large, living peaceably alongside one another. The course for this development was set quite early. The First Amendment to the Constitution of the United States reads:

*Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*⁵

While Christian churches and the powerful in 18th century Europe were still more or less bound to each other as rulers of their countries, the fathers of the U.S. Constitution set a clear signal in 1791 for liberating religion from the state and (vice versa) the state from religion: In the first of the initial ten amendments making up the Bill of Rights they created a highly symbolic separation of church and state and a foundation for real religious freedom. They did not do this because of some aversion to religion or faith. They knew, rather, that only religious freedom could stabilize the new state and promote national unification.

Even before the period when the United States was founded, the colonies were inhabited by the most diverse assortment of immigrants of different religious persuasions. Many of them had already made their way to the Promised Land because they were subject to discrimination against their beliefs in Europe. But others emigrated for precisely the opposite reason, because they wanted to escape religious tutelage or discrimination as unbelieving freethinkers. A purely republican constitutional text without any reference to God would have polarized as much as a constitution with an exclusively Christian Character. (So, although the Founders appealed to divine Providence and Nature’s God in the Declaration of Independence, there is not a single mention of God anywhere in the U.S. Constitution or its amendments.)

With the founding of the United States there thus emerged what Thomas Jefferson in 1802 called the wall of separation between church and state in America. This institutional wall was necessary in order to create a reliable framework in which, despite the close relationship between religion and politics that was able to develop, at no time (not even today) could this relationship threaten religious pluralism or minority rights. The prominent place of this separation between church and state in their Constitution gave American citizens the secure feeling that zealous fundamentalists would not be able to merge with the state any more than liberal despisers of faith could use the power of the state to kill off religion and faith. At another place in this chapter we shall describe how things nevertheless got to the point where,

5 *The Constitution of the United States* (US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 2003)

over the last 30 years, there has been a growth both in the number of Americans who have gotten the creeping feeling that religious zealots have actually taken over the government and in the number of other Americans who believe that they and their faith are being threatened by a campaign of Godless liberals.

The question remains as to why it is precisely in America that religion is so deeply rooted in society and enjoys such enormous influence on politics. For Marcia Pally, professor at New York University's Steinhardt School, "central to the popularity of religion in the US is precisely its American qualities." In the New World the church did not occupy a dual role as both a worldly and spiritual power. The First Amendment to the Constitution blocked that from the outset. The distance from the state thereby achieved, kept churches out of the struggle for power within the state. Inquisition, oppression, support for undemocratic rulers, corrupt entanglement in the state apparatus, all these negative sides to the role of Christian churches on the old continent do not apply to churches and religious traditions in the U.S.

Freed from the burden of being mortgaged to a religious establishment, churches, denominations, and faith communities took shape that (with the possible exception of the Catholic Church) were completely able to develop from the bottom up in the spirit of their congregation members' needs and that were not bound to any directives from above. This made possible that unique interpenetration of faith of every kind with the American way of life. The principle of autonomy and emphasis on the individual that predominates in economic life shows up here in the approach emphasizing how everybody can find a personal relationship with Jesus, without need of higher authorities. The primary question is not whether the capitalist economic system might be un-Christian, but rather whether the individual person in this system behaves in a way that is "Christian." We find American skepticism about higher authorities and an anti-intellectual attitude (acting instead of theorizing) reflected in the attitude of many Christian churches in the U.S. to the effect that anybody, even without an official church and without trained theologians, is capable of finding access to the Bible entirely on his own. It is not decisive what rank or training a member of the clergy has, but rather

how persuasively he or she can preach, which sounds a lot like the American self-made personality.

In this way, belief became individualized. But it was not privatized. For the indisputable dark sides of the American way of life, such as massive poverty or the constantly menacing imponderables emanating from a brutal competition for jobs and social recognition not cushioned by a welfare state, practically called out for community and solidarity. This task often fell to religious communities alone. Whoever is always on the move, leaving his native home and always needing to prove himself anew, can often only find in a community of believers the human devotion, solidarity and assistance, and also the meaningfulness we human beings, as social creatures, ultimately cannot dispense with.

In this way most churches and religious communities succeeded in harmonizing America's harsh everyday life with the requirements of faith, without questioning the Bible as their highest authority. No established state churches, no church taxes, a high regard for belief as such but not for any particular majority church – these were the developments that created a kind of people's church. To this day, people in America vote with their feet about the attractiveness of a religious community:

Whoever needs to find a new home because of the labor market can also look around for the congregation that suits him after moving to his next job. But if loyalty to a particular congregation is not so decisive as having a very personal tie to Jesus Christ, then it is not such a big deal to change not only one's congregation within a given denomination, but also to join a new church in an entirely different denomination. Conversely, this also means that a congregation offering little in the way of spiritual and social welfare will get smaller attendance and thereby also less money for the work it does.

This free market of faiths did and does not, of course, take place secretly and coyly in a back room, but rather openly in the great public market square. Thus, religion has played and continues to play an important role in the public sphere and, by extension, in politics as well. There is a reason why this role is so outstanding: Given the popular down-to-earth, anti-elitist work churches do, work that is anchored in the "American faith" and also unburdened by the dark sides of their sister churches in

Europe, most churches and religious communities in the U.S. have earned a good reputation and high esteem within American society.

And so Jon Meacham can assert in the aforementioned Thanksgiving article in the *Washington Post*: “Jefferson’s wall metaphor... is between church and state, not between religion and politics. Because politics is about people, religion will forever be a force in public life...”

Apparently, many people in Germany do not make this distinction between separation of church and state, on the one hand, and the permeation of religion and politics, on the other. Perhaps it is because of our state churches and the widespread attitude that religion is a private affair that we cannot draw such a clear-cut distinction between these two constellations.

Whereas, among us in Central Europe, the Church not only stands for the promulgation of the word of God and practiced neighborly love, but also is frequently identified with historical memories of rigid structures, injustice, domination, and compulsion, in America a kind of new beginning was achieved. America had new churches, free of subordination to the state, and people who were freed from the compulsion to remain lifelong members of the church into which they were born. Its believers could affirm democracy and pluralism that was not in opposition to their personal beliefs and the views of their respective churches.

Religion in the U.S. consequently became less of an opponent and more of a motor of democracy and freedom. American society was thus able at an early stage of its development to reconcile freedom and faith. Whoever believes that this was also what Europeans experienced over the last 200 years needs to be reminded how (with the exception of a few truly committed men of the cloth) the official churches behaved toward the labor and democratic movements in our country. As is well known, even the Second Vatican Council, which reconciled the Roman Catholic Church with the modern democratic state, finally took place in the not-so-distant past.

Who would dispute that religious enthusiasm in the U.S. had also had a dangerous dark side? In certain regions of America, heretics (including in some cases Catholics) were oppressed, and there are even some cases of witch-hunts. And even today the hostility to which biology teachers (some of whose careers are threatened) are exposed as they try to pass on to their students the valuable insights of Charles Darwin is reminiscent of a witch-hunt. I shall take a look at these dangers arising from fundamentalist intolerance and reality denial later on.

But first I’d like to delineate the pluralistic and freedom-affirming character not only of American civil religion, but also of the religious and faith communities that have developed underneath its roof, so as to show how America’s widespread religious faith is also an inherently positive social force. If many politicians refer to God or things divine, this alone is no proof of severity in religious belief, narrow-mindedness, or traditionalism. Anybody giving credible testimony to his faith in the U.S. need not be a zealot; he could also be somebody presenting his message in a form that, in the country with the most believers in the Western world, reaches the hearts of the people much better than any economic or philosophical argument.

It is worthwhile listening carefully so as to discern whether expressions of the American faith refer to something that is abstractly divine, to a personal faith underlining the speaker’s credibility, or whether intolerant Christian zeal is in play when we hear an American politician say things that sound too religious to our European ears. But this requires sensitivity to the religious and empathy for the fundamental principles of American civil religion.⁶ That many Europeans lack these qualities and rush to pronounce a negative judgment on the religious side of American society is our problem, not America’s. It is true that there is at least as much ignorance about our cultural and political peculiarities in the U.S. but pointing this out does not contribute in the least to solving this problem of intercultural communication.

⁶ A very clear and lively introduction to American civil religion for German readers is provided by the chapter “Zivilreligion in Amerika” in Prof. Rolf Schieder’s book *Wieviel Religion verträgt Deutschland* (see Bibliography).

“We have lost a moral compass in our life”

The Vice President of B’nai B’rith International, Daniel S. Mariaschin, is a pro when it comes to convincingly representing the concerns of an organization that is one of the most important and successful of international Jewish NGOs. I can see this as soon as we meet to talk about “Shared Values” in his Washington office. Before I can even get in a proper question, Daniel Mariaschin is off and running:

In politics it is usually the case that universal values, such as human rights, are affirmed in the abstract. But when things get concrete, he continued, these values rapidly lose their political validity. I’m a politician, Mariaschin told me, but as a representative of an NGO he could speak bluntly. I ought to take a look at how the West is behaving on the Darfur question, and then I’d know what he means. And so we have quickly moved away from the general topic of values and arrived at one of his NGO’s concerns, human rights violations in Darfur. Concretely and with determination, he’s gotten right to the point – we’re in America.

The conversation was quite impressive and, of course, we eventually got around to my questions about “shared values.” And then, almost at the end of our conversation, he asked me a question: “Have you noticed how the relationship between children and their parents is usually portrayed in most American television comedies?” No sooner had Mariaschin posed the question than he gave me his answer: “The children are smart and clever, but the parents are fools that the children make fun of, or at best they are deplored for their adorable simple-mindedness.” How are we supposed to hold family values up high when television portrays parents so disrespectfully as moronic types? People need values as a guideline for their lives, so they know how to recognize and observe boundaries. And then, with a sigh, he came to his harrowing conclusion: “We have lost a moral compass in our life!”

Daniel Mariaschin, an educated and cosmopolitan man who really cannot be suspected of being an evangelical zealot, has gotten right to the point of what so many values debates in the U.S. (just like the ones we have in Germany) are all about: They are about wanting to preserve what has given us a foothold and an orientation. There is a feeling of having been rolled over by a

kind of modernization that has torn down sacred boundaries, that makes everything relative out of what once seemed irrefutable because of how it once provided people with an orientation. What’s been disoriented is the compass for life. And it is characteristic for Mariaschin to see that what is in danger is something the vast majority of Americans take very much to heart: the family, as the last refuge in a raw market economy.

Yet in the land of the American Dream, in which the individual’s hard work is the ultimately rewarded, people are not questioning the system or calling for the state to intervene. At issue are the virtues of every single individual, his personal life style, moral steadfastness, moral clarity. And this is supposed to be based on reliable principles.

It seems plausible that, in a country with so many religious people, debates about what needs to be safeguarded would not revolve around some model of the welfare state, but more around Christian values. The moral compass for many Americans is their belief in God and what they see as God’s will. When these people have the feeling that a life in accordance with God’s will and the values resulting from that will are threatened by other people who lack moral clarity, they see this as an existential danger to themselves and society. We also find this reaction to modernity in Europe. Among us, the people who react this way do not, as a rule, express themselves using religiously based patterns of thought or language dressed up in religious terms. In the U.S. values debates that are going to reach as many people as possible always use a religious and/or civil-religious language. Yet, apart from the form of expression they take, the anxieties and wishes of people in the U.S. and among us are very similar.

When the “Indians” decided to stop putting up with the “Swedes”

Values debates with a religious touch are simply part and parcel of the United States. Yet it is something entirely different, of course, when these debates turn into a regular “Kulturkampf”, a culture war in which many evangelicals who’d prefer having nothing to do with politics (since, from their point of view, politics is immoral) suddenly are turned into enthusiastic political activists. This is a development with a variety of causes, to which I

will return later, that began at some point in the 1960s. But it certainly gained momentum in the Reagan era, when the Christian Right supported the President. The high point was perhaps reached in 2004 when an optimally organized bloc of evangelicals, almost three fourths of whom voted for Bush, secured the reelection of George W. Bush. What proved decisive was not only that these supporters acted like a united bloc, but also that by 2004 they had grown to become almost a quarter of all registered voters. What motivated highly devout people not only to abandon their reservations about political commitment, but then to move in the opposite direction, to become players that are highly committed and, as one sees in the case of Bush, extremely successful in the political arena?

This is the very question that comes up in a small discussion round at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation office in Washington with the great sociologist Prof. Peter L. Berger. The answer is quite simple, Berger says: "You could describe the United States as an Indian society with a Swedish cultural elite." The Swedes are a rather secular people living in the spirit of the Enlightenment, and about the only feelings they can summon up for the highly devout Indians (to many Hindus in India, it would be unimaginable to abandon one's faith) is pity or even contempt. The Swedes regard themselves as better educated, more modern, and this makes it legitimate for them to disregard the backward views of the pious Indians, Berger explains, adding this succinct remark: "Yeah, and at some point the Indians decided to stop putting up with the arrogant Swedes!"

We in Europe have always viewed the many often European-minded elites on the East Coast or in California's major cities (who to this day constitute major parts of the political establishment) as the American mainstream, in spite of the successes of Reagan and Bush. This fits nicely into our image of things, because these American 'Swedes' closely resemble us Europeans. Our view of the Indians – meaning the majority of average Americans – was and remains cloudy. This also explains why many Europeans no longer understood the world (or, more accurately, his own world) when the silent majority was transformed into a Moral Majority that stormed the liberal establishment with its severely religious-conservative

agitprop. When the Indians went on to win this siege of the establishment, this just made Europe's philo-Swedes even queasier.

Thus, the political scientist Manfred Brocker sees it as a "paradox of liberal theory and practice in the USA" that America's demands for a separation of the religious and political spheres, culminating in what amounts to a "purge" of religion from the public sphere, would end up "achieving the exact opposite of what it intended in a society as intensely religious as America's."⁷

As a result of political decisions made at the federal level or in the states, partly confirmed by Supreme Court decisions in the 1960s and 1970s, it was not only evangelical Americans who got the impression that government was trying to fight religion, to ban it from society's public arenas, and force it into the private sphere (e.g. by getting rid of the custom of public school prayer) while at the same time supposedly marginal groups, like the gay rights movement, were gaining access to a public sphere closed to those who professed belief in God. Against this background, charismatic religious leaders from the conservative part of the evangelical spectrum succeeded in mobilizing the anxiety of many people who saw this development and other rapid social changes (the end of racial segregation, women's liberation, the movements of the 1960s etc.) as a danger to their country's moral compass. They marshaled this anxiety behind an authority that remains to this day the highest one for most Americans: behind God, God's will, and the concomitant and irrevocable values of life and family.

At this point I would like to make it clear how happy I am that the civil rights, feminist, and many other social movements in the U.S. repeatedly denounced and fought injustices like segregation and the suppression of women, injustices that were often cynically legitimated by many conservative Americans on ostensibly Christian grounds. And I would also emphasize that many Americans supported the cause of the civil rights movement as something morally justified based on their own profound sense of being Christian. Yet in the end too many liberals, whom we in Europe would call "liberal leftists," made things too simple with their blanket attempt to ban strict religiosity from the public sphere as un-modern and folkloristic. Taking the arrogant view that it would suffice in

7 BROCKER, 2004, see Bibliography.

modern America to let religion eke out an existence in private back rooms as a relic of times past, they defied the silent majority to come out of its sulking corner and step into the political arena. What may have been hip in the metropolitan areas of the East Coast or in California unleashed a storm of indignation elsewhere in the country, especially in the Bible Belt of the South but also in the Midwest. For this reason we might characterize the approach of many representatives of the liberal elite, who would prefer solving the problem of religious conservatism by pushing religion out of the public sphere instead of trying to maintain a permanent public dialogue, as one of the major reasons for the development of the Christian Right into a significant, well-organized, and influential force.

This perception of what happened is shared by a large majority of Americans, including the less religious among them. Thus, in 2006 an opinion survey conducted by the Pew Forum came to the following revealing conclusions:⁸

69% of those surveyed agreed that liberals went too far in their attempt to drive religion out of schools and public administration. On the other hand, the same survey showed 49% answering yes to the statement that conservative Christians also went too far in their attempt to impose their religious values on the country. It is also noteworthy that, in comparison to the previous year's survey, the number of affirmative answers was higher for both questions.

To simplify greatly, one could say that what the religious American popular soul saw as an overly far-reaching banishment of religion from the public sphere was followed by the attempt of the Christian Right to conquer the very space from which they were supposed to be ushered out, mainly the sphere of politics.

Does learning from the Christian Right mean learning how to win?

For Professor Clyde Wilcox at Georgetown University, the Christian Right has developed into a professional social movement, roughly comparable to the Civil Rights movement. Yet many people, especially in Europe, are

surprised to learn not only how successful this movement has been in acquiring political influence, but also how it has registered significant growth in members over the last three decades, while concurrently mainline churches have been losing members.

There are, in other words, two aspects to the putative success story of the evangelicals: There is the personal side, which speaks to more and more believers, and the political dimension, which points to an enormous mobilization capacity for recruiting voters, candidates, and lobbyists to further evangelical interests using the mechanisms of the U.S. political system.

Here I want to explore the political mobilization aspect, although this is hard to separate from the personal religious aspect. How could the churches and organizations of deeply religious Americans, who tended to shy away from politics heretofore, come to dominate so many values debates so successfully that liberal forces were often thoroughly put on the defensive? And above all: How did the Christian Right succeed so clearly in gaining political influence?

Here is the short version of the answer: By professional organization at the grassroots level, combined with their mobilization of this well-organized base when it came to nominating sympathetic Republican candidates in highly religious states, the Christian Right proved much more effective in exercising direct influence on decisions on Capitol Hill than any other social movement. For the strategic brains of the Christian Right were able to appeal much more strictly to an authority who, as far as their adherents were concerned, stood over and above everyone and everything: to God!

Chuck Cunningham, former director of voter mobilization for the Christian Coalition, one of the most important organizations of the Christian Right, gave the gist of this strategy when he said: "You don't change policies on abortion by changing politicians minds, you change policy by changing politicians."⁹

And this is precisely what the organizations of the Christian Right did, rather successfully, within the Republican Party. In the Bible Belt states, but also in the Midwest, nobody who wants to be a Republican candidate for Congress or the Senate can afford to bypass them.

8 PEW RESEARCH CENTER: "Many Americans Uneasy with Mix of Religion and Politics," survey August 24, 2006 (on the web at: <http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=153>).

So it is not surprising that the number of representatives in Congress who call themselves evangelicals has jumped significantly, from 10% in 1970 to 25% in 2004.¹⁰ Interestingly, however, most Europeans hardly give Congress a look, fixing their gaze instead on the White House, when they talk about the growing influence of religion on politics in the U.S.

Yet it is not just at party primaries that the believing masses are mobilized. A change in campaign finance regulations allowing only “small” individual contributions for election campaigns at the national level was something the Christian Right, with its optimal organizational capacity, was able to use to its advantage. The Political Action Committees (PACs) they controlled acquired and bundled individual contributions at the local level to support their favored candidates. For anybody who wants to prevent a liberal opponent of pro-life values from fulfilling God’s will is going to contribute eagerly to a candidate who is one of us. And so, here too, the direct line connecting the Christian Right to believers has paid off. Finally, the same pattern can be seen at work in direct lobbying on legislative procedures. Any Congressman who needs the votes of the Christian Right to get reelected will react with great sensitivity when, before a roll call, he receives hundreds of e-mails from his electoral district discreetly alluding to how constituents are planning to ponder carefully continued support for their representative if he dares to think about voting against the holy values of family and the protection of life. Josef Braml calls this capacity of the Christian Right to mobilize its base in the political arena at any time the “permanent campaign.”¹¹

In spite of the growing number of evangelical Christians in the U.S., one could say that the secret of the Christian Right’s increasing influence does not rest on their membership growth but on the expertly handled mobilization of their base. This does not just apply to high-level politics. Even when it comes to questions like what local school committees decide about teaching sex education or evolutionary theory, there are highly motivated and well-organized evangelical parents who shape

the debate in a way that is often highly emotional and ultimately successful for their cause.

At this point the inevitable question must be posed as to why it is the evangelical Christians, of all people, who are so well-organized, and why they, and not mainstream Christians, are the ones who are so committed and highly organized. The widespread European prejudice that the evangelicals are a group of fundamentalist backwoodsmen who can simply be bossed around by the functionaries of the Christian Right is colossal nonsense! Only a few of the evangelicals are fundamentalists. The whole Christian Right scene is extremely heterogeneous. And yet: No group has operated so successfully as a bloc in the American political arena over the last several years as have evangelical voters. How is this possible?

On a gorgeous November morning, I stood on a side street directly behind Union Station in Washington, DC, in front of the house representing the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), the largest evangelical Christian denomination in the U.S. I have an appointment with Barrett Duke. He is Vice President for Research and Director of the Research Institute of The Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission at the SBC. Duke vehemently denies (not just for himself, but also for his spiritual comrades-in-arms) the charge that he might be a religious zealot. There should always be, he says, a reasonable balance between personal convictions and sympathy for others, even with respect to those who have a different opinion. And then, with a worried look, he explains that American culture is in great trouble. There are ideological conflicts dividing the country.

For Barrett Duke the fault line in this division is clear: It runs between “absolute personal freedom” and “personal responsibility.” It is not a matter of forcing any religion on the country, but rather of defending core values. Of course there are some issues that bind together more than others. And for Christians the “sanctity of life” is the decisive issue. In plain and simple words, without pathos or zeal in his voice, Barrett Duke describes how he and his co-religionists meet their “personal responsibility” before God. At the end of our conversation, we both are as-

9 Quoted by WILCOX, 2005, p. 17, see Bibliography.

10 Cf. RUSSELL MEAD in *Foreign Affairs*, Nr. 5, Vol. 85, p. 37, see Bibliography.

11 Cf. BRAML, *Amerika, Gott und die Welt* (2005), pp. 65-68, see Bibliography. This book is highly recommended as an introduction to the origins and methods of the “Christian Right.”

tonished to realize that there are actually a number of common values shared by the German Social Democrat Dietmar Nietan and the Southern Baptist Convention operative Barrett Duke. Both of us are Christians. As Duke escorts me to the exit and we are engaged in small talk about our families, he blurts out “Those are Biblical names!” when he hears that my children’s names are Marie (Mary) and Mattias (Matthew). “Of course, Biblical names!” I reply.

The question as to why the Christian Right has such great penetrating power in the political arena in spite of its membership’s significant heterogeneity, was partly answered by these remarks of Barrett Duke:

First: The legitimation that ostensibly comes from acting according to God’s will. In the previously cited survey conducted by the Pew Forum, 78% of Mainline Protestants and 72% of Catholics say that the will of the American people should be decisive when it comes to legislating even if this means a conflict with the contents of the Bible. The evangelicals see this differently! 63% of them want the Bible to have more influence on legislation than the will of the American majority. What believing Christians see as the incontrovertible and unquestionable authority of God’s will – the personal calling to follow unerringly God’s will on all matters, including decisions about values – serves as a legitimation for the Christian Right that requires no further scrutiny. Whoever has God on his side is always right.

Second: The Christian Right stands for moral clarity. When the sanctity of life is at stake in the abortion question, there can be no either/or, only a clear-cut position. Even the attempt made by the mainstream churches to incorporate changes in society, to make arrangements with modernity somehow, is often regarded as just wishy-washy by highly religious people seeking a clear orientation. By contrast, the moral clarity of the evangelicals when it comes to defending conservative values, and especially the sanctity of life and the family, is readily accepted by many of the faithful as an attractive counterproposal to an unsettling kind of modernity.

Third: The Christian Right sees itself as the keeper of the Grail of the American faith, which is important not just for evangelicals, but also for the overwhelming majority of Americans. Barrett Duke can credibly say that he and his Southern Baptist Convention are not interested

in forcing their Christian faith on all Americans. He wants to imbue society with the values that he and his fellow Christians, appealing to God, claim to represent precisely because they are thoroughly original American values, not just for evangelicals but for many other U.S. citizens as well. In Germany, too, there are many conservatives who fear national decline because, allegedly, German virtues like industriousness, discipline, punctuality, and decency no longer count. Yet nobody here at home would ever get the idea of trying to give these German virtues a religious justification.

But these three points are only part of the answer to the question of why this movement possesses such a power to mobilize. Legitimation deriving from God certainly is important in a country where faith continues to play such a huge role. And it is not just Americans who prefer, in such large numbers, the clear orientation provided by moral clarity. For me, however, three additional points are indispensable when it comes to explaining the Christian Right’s unique capacity for mobilization: a) a common threat perception, b) a common enemy, and c) their strategic coalition with the right allies inside the Republican party.

a) A common threat: As mentioned a few lines earlier, the Silent Majority of many religious Americans began in the 1970s as a self-styled defense against the attempt of the liberal elite to push religion out of the public sphere. Yet the decision to abandon political abstinence and throw themselves headlong into the dirty business of politics was only possible because the spokesmen of the Christian Right succeeded in convincing many of their highly religious fellow-citizens that “Godless liberals” wanted to suppress them in the free exercise of their belief. Two core achievements of the American nation seemed to be in danger: freedom of belief and the family as the nucleus of a strong nation. Thus, to this day many evangelicals cite the equal protection and religious freedom provisions of the American Constitution (which have historically protected minorities) in their fight against having their offspring learn about evolutionary theory in school or take sex education classes that tell them the facts of life instead of just preaching abstinence.

Paradoxically, it is often in the very heartland of the Bible Belt that many evangelicals feel threatened by the

hosts of the “Godless liberals” – in places where the evangelicals form the majority of the population, and where if anybody might feel the need to start a minority protection program, it would be the biology instructors who are trying to teach evolutionary theory. Even if this feeling of being threatened seems unfounded according to any objective criteria, the rule that applies here is: Perception is reality! Whoever sees himself threatened in his cultural core is capable of being motivated and mobilized in a wholly different way from someone who, while he may disapprove of some social development, does not feel immediately threatened.

b) A common enemy: In my conversations with evangelical Christians I noticed that it was one thing for them to have a clear-cut position on a political issue like abortion, but quite another thing when it came to implementing this position. Many do indeed recognize a woman’s right to self-determination and the personal hardship of what may be a terrible situation in her life for which she may not be responsible. They would never, of course, approve of abortion publicly, but many an evangelical Christian is certainly capable of showing sympathy – even if perhaps only furtively – for a certain kind of abortion story.

Yet on one point all the adherents of the Christian Right seem to be united: They all agree on the need to fight the decadent “Godless liberals” who allow almost everything and stand for nothing. There is something almost inevitable about how the common threat perception described above also calls for a common enemy! And it is this very enemy (one is almost tempted to see the Antichrist standing before one’s spiritual eye) that seems to be the tie that binds the entire spectrum of the evangelicals – starting with fundamentalists on one end, moving through otherwise affable religious zealots in the middle, but also including thoroughly tolerant believers at the other end – to the ballot boxes. It is this adversary that mobilizes the whole gamut of the faithful at Republican primaries and important local, state, and national elections.

When there is an acute threat from an obvious enemy, one dare not hesitate too long, one dare not discuss

one’s own doubts, one needs to act! This “fabricated incontrovertibility” as a distinguishing feature of “counter-modernity” requires “empowerment via enemy images,” as Ulrich Beck has said. “Enemy images have the highest priority among conflicts; they trump class conflict. The stage and institutionalize the grand incontrovertibility of counter-modernity with an existential force – they are the either/or that silences all questions.”¹²

c) The ingenious coalition: The Christian Right was able to organize things so that its own adherents had legitimation, motivation, and a capacity to mobilize. Now all it needed was a political vehicle. This was provided, of course, by the GOP, since the skeletal structure of the Republican party was more conservative than the Democrats and uninfected by the virus of left-wing liberalism. In spite of their successes in organizing their own people, the evangelicals needed a coalition partner that was strategic, influential, and potent, and it found all these qualities in the GOP. And just as elegantly as they had overcome their earlier abstinence from politics, the evangelicals threw their religious-populist and protectionist views on economic and social welfare policy overboard in order to form an unbeatable interest coalition with the business wing of the GOP. The alliance with extreme free market forces in the GOP was an ingenious move on the political chessboard. As early as the Reagan era these forces were highly influential, as they are today under George W. Bush. And so, as Anatol Lieven has put it, there was a merger of “the two elements combining to produce [the American] system”: capitalism and religion.¹³

Through their lobbying networks, the Internet, advertisements, books, magazines, and think tanks, the Christian Right and the Business Right fed their shared mindset into the GOP and into American society at large. Doing this costs hundreds of millions of dollars each year. No problem for the New Right, for in this alliance there is no shortage of cash.

Does this mean that learning from the Christian Right means learning how to win? That was the question posed at the start of this section. If by this we mean an effective mobilization of a social movement’s base in order to influence both the policies and nominating

12 BECK, 1993, p. 132, see Bibliography.

13 Cf. LIEVEN, 2004, p. 7, see Bibliography.

process of a political party, then the question has to be answered with an unequivocal “Yes.” However, if the question were how much was the Christian Right really able to change national politics, the answer would have to be fair-to-middling. The sometimes almost hysterical perceptions of some Europeans who talk about American politics being captured by tricky religious zealots are misleading.

Overall, Americans have tended to become more tolerant over the last several years as demonstrated in their attitudes toward homosexuals. Even in most evangelical families, women go to work out of sheer economic necessity. There are still many states in the U.S. with liberal abortion laws, and even George Bush has never attempted to undermine this with a national initiative. And so Clyde Wilcox comes to the sobering conclusion that the Christian Right had much less success achieving its political goals than any other social movements, such as the Civil Rights movement, feminists, or even gays and lesbians.¹⁴

By citing Wilcox’s conclusion, it is not my intention to marginalize the successes of the Christian Right or even create the impression that one need not take this movement seriously. But to demonize them using stereotypes, as many Europeans do today, is something I regard as wrong and even dangerous. To learn something from and about the evangelicals, including the Christian Right, means at least to become a little smarter.

When the revolution devours its elders –
of the pitfalls of “innovative” fundamentalism

Many Americans are deeply convinced that their American civilization is the freest and best in the world. And so one of the reasons for the success of the Christian Right is their highly professional and effective use of the mechanisms of American democracy to further their interests rather than question the system. Ultimately, the “mentality” inherent in this strategy also highlights why the evangelicals have become so attractive for many Americans: They represent unshakeable and optimistic faith in American democracy, in the American way of life.

If the Christian Right has played the existing rules of the political arena like a virtuoso for its own aims, the missionary success of the evangelicals rests on the skillful way they have availed themselves of American mainstream culture in the free marketplace of American religiosity instead of rejecting that mainstream. Hence, many elements of the so-called American way of life (such as its orientation toward consumption, individualism, and pop culture) do not present obstacles on the way to becoming an orthodox evangelical.

To be sure, whoever preaches the preservation of traditional Christian values as a bulwark against modernity while simultaneously helping himself to selected social mechanisms and cultural aspects drawn from that very modernity will be under constant pressure to bring his traditions into harmony with the new realities. For Professor Alan Wolfe, director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College, this means: “If they want to effectively disseminate their religion message, evangelicals will have to adopt to the culture surrounding them rather than withdrawing from it”.¹⁵

Whoever wants to reach lots of Americans on a long-term basis needs to adjust his sectarian ideas to the mainstream culture, which means that these ideas will ultimately lose more and more of their sectarian character. Thus, there have been no significant efforts so far on the part of the evangelicals and their allies on the Christian Right to abolish Sunday shopping, which is common throughout the United States. Implementing the Lord’s commandment to rest on the seventh day, in opposition to a favorite Sunday activity of many Americans, would be perceived by the latter as a restriction on their freedom. When it comes to protecting Sunday as a day of rest by force of law, our churches in Germany are certainly more anti-modern than most American evangelicals.

Recently, my friend Jeffrey Verhey told me about his visit to one of the famous mega-churches, the Saddleback Church in Orange County. Its preachers are opposed to abortion and homosexuality. Yet their Sunday sermons and thousands of small open discussion circles are not concerned with inspiring the masses to fight the culture wars against the “Godless liberals;” they are more preoc-

¹⁴ Cf. WILCOX, 2005, p. 19, see Bibliography.

¹⁵ WOLFE, 2005, p. 24, see Bibliography.

cupied with practical guidelines for living. In the worship service Jeffrey attended, the sermon revolved around the question of how my personal faith, my very personal relationship with God, can help to overcome difficult family problems. Following the sermon there were pointers referring to appropriate self-help literature that could be purchased immediately in the campus bookstore of this mega-church (which was also open for business on Sunday).

This kind of concrete self-help and a package deal offering to bundle together religious services, shopping, leisure time, and child care is something Dr. Rainer Prätorius, professor of public administration at the University of the Bundeswehr in Hamburg, calls an attractive Religiosity Cafeteria. It is used by religious multiplexes like Saddleback Church to connect to people as they are – with whatever lifestyle habits and personal needs for advice and assistance they may have as they try to manage their lives in the often harsh American reality. This is something that, as a rule, the mainstream churches are no longer able to do to the same extent. Jeffrey Verhey's conclusion after visiting Saddleback Church struck me as plausible: "Old-Time Religion has lost, but religion hasn't died. Rather, New-Time Religion has adapted and made its peace with modern times."

This self-engagement with modernity, this fine-tuning that adjusts the message to people's needs, and this way of operating within rather than against the system represents a kind of innovative fundamentalism. Accordingly, the battle lines for evangelicals and the Christian Right have definitely shifted over the last several years. While abortion and gay marriage no longer have the same mobilizing character they had in previous years, debates within the evangelical camp have increasingly started to turn on the issue of climate protection.

The "low-threshold" package supplied by the "religious experience worlds" described above, which offer religious self-help without subordinating religious experience to permanent and durable structures, harbors the danger that members can be lost as quickly as they are gained if they should happen to find a better offer somewhere else. Such a "reorientation" might then also have

negative consequences for the "mobilization capacities" of the "Christian Right" described above, thereby weakening its political "capacity for intervention."¹⁶

So far, to be sure, it is hard to discern any diminishing influence of the Christian Right on the GOP. Yet my description of the mechanisms of change in America's free market of religiosity has hopefully clarified the kind of dynamic that inheres within this highly important social subsystem of the United States. And so the evangelical revolution might develop in a direction where, at the end, this revolution would be less likely to devour its new children than gobble up its elders.

Morals are the first thing, food follows on?
(With apologies to Brecht)

When, in conversation with representatives of Latino organizations like La Raza, I raise the subject of the growing minority of Latinos who are supporting George Bush and the Republicans, I get two particularly interesting responses:

"When my strictly devout mother has to decide between abortion and social justice, then she votes for the politician who's against abortion." That is how one of my conversation partners explains why many Americans (not just Latinos) make voting decisions that comply with their values but go against their economic interests. The second answer is equally noteworthy: Many voted for George W. Bush in 2004 because he was one of us.

Earlier in this essay I already noted that the Christian Right joined forces with free market forces in the Republican party even though it is globalized capitalism that stands in the way of much that the Christian Right wants to preserve, such as the classic family values. Although Ronald Reagan's policies clearly diminished middle class incomes in favor of the rich and super-rich, he was enthusiastically re-elected by many of those who lost out owing to these policies.

When they have to decide between a candidate who can stimulate the economy but goes against their views on moral questions and a candidate who probably cannot improve the economy but agrees on moral questions, ac-

16 Cf. PRÄTORIUS, 2006, p. 162, see Bibliography.

ording to a Gallup poll of registered voters from November 2003, 55% of Republicans would opt for the economically incompetent but morally irreproachable candidate. Among Democrats, the figure faced with this hypothetical choice would still come to 38%.

How is it possible that the ideal of the rational voter who votes primarily based on his economic interests does not seem to function among Americans of faith in quite the way as is claimed by the academic promoters of the rational voter model?

My thesis is that the evangelicals, with everything they offer in the way of personal salvation (as described above), have succeeded in creating a new cultural milieu at a time when traditional milieus are in a process of dissolution, and that the binding force of this new religious identity is stronger among its adherents than their identities based on class or even ethnic origin.

Whoever is one of God's Elect and defending God's work against the Godless literally cannot buy the argument that he would be better off economically under the policies America's liberals propose. Belief in God and the belief that one, or at least one's children, can ultimately fulfill the American Dream by hard, honest work leading to upward social mobility – these beliefs certainly have a stronger pull on a not insignificant minority of Americans than any kind of *Realpolitik*. Interestingly, this seems to have been overlooked for a long time by many Democratic electoral strategists. The protagonists of the Christian Right, in any event, have long promoted the anti-Brechtian slogan “Morals are the first thing, food follows on” (i.e. – “Values Matter Most”), and in so doing they have clearly been more successful.

Now I should like to follow up on that earlier statement of some Latinos who say that George W. Bush is one of us. At first glance this statement seems rather puzzling, since George W. Bush is neither Latino nor Catholic, as are the overwhelming majority of Americans of Latin American origin.

Whoever looks at the documents of President Bill Clinton and George W. Bush's official speeches will see that Clinton quotes the Bible more often than his successor. And yet there is this important difference: George W.

Bush talks more often and more clearly about his personal faith. These public avowals, when coupled with moral clarity (at least on the rhetorical level), have given Bush an inestimable bonus of trust among many religious Americans.

For Nancy T. Ammerman, professor at Boston University, this behavior should not be underestimated: “Whatever other issues or interests may be at play in any given election, people really do vote for people they recognize as being like themselves to the extent that an Evangelical identity has become a salient political identity, being born again counts.”¹⁷

The pendulum swings back –
of the New Old Center

Yet whoever makes the highest moral demands on his candidates while simultaneously fixating on politicians who are one of us is taking a high-risk gamble that puts his credibility at stake whenever his candidates become ensnared in morally reprehensible scandals, or simply there are no available candidates with a common touch to nominate at primary season. And, over the last two years, these very spirits that the Christian Right has conjured up in its frenzy of self-suggested moral superiority have come back to haunt the movement.

In the mid-term elections on November 7, 2006, to be sure, the Christian Right was able to mobilize evangelical voters to back Republican candidates again in overwhelming numbers. Yet this time it wasn't enough to prevent a Democratic electoral victory. And this happened even though there was not even a real leftward lurch in the electorate. All the same, the Republicans did not succeed in reaching their grand strategist Karl Rove's goal of creating a permanent structural majority for the GOP with the aid of evangelical voters. There were many reasons for this backlash against the backlash. One of the most decisive was Iraq. Americans were certainly fed up with the Bush administration's disaster in Mesopotamia. Yet there were additional reasons for this electoral outcome, and these are of particular interest for our observations about religion and values debates.

17 Cited in AMMERMAN, 2006, see Bibliography.

In spite of their slogan that “Values Matter Most,” this time the Christian Right was unable to use abortion and gay marriage as forcefully as they had in earlier campaigns to mobilize many believers, including evangelicals, to vote their way. These issues had simply been used up. If there was a moral issue that moved lots of voters in the 2006 mid-term elections, it was corruption. Yet to the horror of many strategists for both the Christian Right and the Republicans, the moral cudgel was turned against them, to the advantage of the Democrats. Sex scandals involving leaders of the Christian Right and a swamp of corruption surrounding the White House and the Republicans shattered the faith (strained to the point of credulity) that many religious people in the evangelical camp once had in their leader’s purported moral superiority on both spiritual and political questions. Pride goeth ...before a fall!

And even the certainty that one of use is always to be found on the Republican but never on the Democratic side can founder completely if the Democrats are clever about picking their candidate. This time the party of the blue states sent fewer freethinking liberals into the race, preferring instead seasoned religious candidates who were more conservative on certain moral questions. Thus, the governorship of Ohio was won not by the strict Pentacostal Republican Ken Blackwell, a man after the fancy of the Christian Right, but by the Democrat Ted Strickland, a Methodist pastor from one of the mainstream churches. The striking thing about this campaign was not so much Strickland’s victory but the fact that he had managed to poach seriously in the voting bloc of Ohio’s most religious citizens. While only 35% of the voters who attend church at least once a week had picked John Kerry two years earlier, Strickland managed to convince 49% of this group to vote for him.

In spite of these developments, a well-organized bloc of evangelical voters persisted, even if it may have started to wobble a bit. At over 70%, the hard core of evangelicals remains Republican, in spite of all the scandals. But the decisive trend is that the Democrats have made inroads against the Republicans among all other electoral groups. Thus, in 2006 the Democrats were ahead of the Republicans among all religious voting groups outside the evangelicals. For the first time in years, a clear majority of Catholics were voting Democratic again.

Up until the time of the 2006 election, the Christian Right had been heavily touting their “values matter most” slogan. Only among the hard core of evangelicals could this method of unquestioning loyalty to the Republicans be maintained; for everyone else, including thoroughly religious Americans, the realistic political balance sheet on the second Bush administration was negative and sobering, reason enough for anyone to stop being impressed by the permanent campaign of propaganda about the decline of American values.

The Christian Right had lost the integrative power with which it had previously been able to capture many Catholics and mainline Protestants in several previous elections. In so doing, it had not (as already emphasized) imparted a leftward lurch to the mid-term electorate; instead, what happened was that more and more religious Americans saw their interests and even their values in better hands with Democratic candidates. Many Americans had simply gotten their fill of the permanent culture wars bluster of so many Republicans and their supporters among the Christian Right. Most Americans are pragmatic and not ideological.

Scandals in their own ranks including Republican corruption, the Iraq disaster, and more authentic religious candidates among the Democrats were not the only circumstances indicating that the Christian Right had already overshot the high water mark of its power and political influence.

For many Americans, on the one hand, the Christian Right had simply gone too far in its attempt to imprint its political doctrine of faith on the majority. On the other hand, these Americans are also not interested in electing any politicians who tend to split the country instead of uniting in hard times. The American Dream is not just about conservative values, as it appears to many a European observer, it is also about community and inclusion.¹⁸ Whoever gives up on the value of inclusion in this country of such great regional, ethnic, cultural, and religious diversity, as many Republicans, driven by the Christian Right, have done, cannot succeed in the long run. Reconciliation instead of division is an important concern for the majority of Americans.

In the meantime, many important elected officials within the GOP have come to a similar conclusion. Republican John Danforth’s recent book, for example, stim-

ulated a great deal of attention.¹⁹ As former Senator from Missouri and U.S. Ambassador at the United Nations, this ordained minister of the Episcopal Church had acquired a reputation as a committed conservative. Danforth, who is also an outspoken opponent of abortion, uses his book to settle scores with the evangelicals. Ultimately, he writes, the alliance of convenience with the “Christian Right” is going to damage his party and the country, because he sees the religious conservatives disseminating dogmatic intolerance. Christian faith, in Danforth’s view, is supposed to reconcile people with each other. However, he concludes that the manner in which the Christian Right and sections of the Republican party conduct the debate on moral values is bound to split the country rather than unite it as it faces the major challenges of the future.

It is Saturday evening, November 4, 2006. I am sitting in a large church in a working-class neighborhood of Cleveland, Ohio. A young man, somewhat gangling in appearance, approaches the microphone. No sooner has he started to preach than the hall is in a clamor. He talks about his life, and about why all the values of the American Dream mean so much to him. “When thousands of American men and women work hard every day and are rewarded at the end of the month with starvation wages that aren’t enough to feed their family, I ask you: Is that American? Is that the fulfillment of our values about the family as the nucleus of our nation?” No sooner has he posed this rhetorical question than he is greeted with a resounding “No!” from the entire hall. And so he marshals one rhetorical question after another until the hall comes to a boil. And then comes the decisive passage: “They can’t have leased out our great American values just for themselves. We have values, too! WE are the true fighters for a free and just America!”

“Yes, that’s exactly right! Yes, that’s how it is!” comes the echo from the hall. “Then let us hold our heads high and fight for our American dream! Tell the people they can all do something on Tuesday to move this dream forward!” These are the words that end a speech that is

more than a sermon. It was also a speech tearing down the GOP, although the word “Republican” was not even mentioned.

The man who was celebrating the American Dream and its values on this evening was Barack Obama. He was preaching “reconciliation instead of division” so authentically and convincingly that it was impossible not to get carried away. I was just as enthusiastic as the roughly 2000 other people in the hall. There was this feeling: Yes! We can!

That Barack Obama has become an almost Messianic-like political figure just 18 months after this Cleveland appearance certainly has something to do with how he preaches the American faith like nobody else. This has been accurately characterized by as “Obama’s sacralized version of the United States of America” by Jonathan Raban.²⁰

When one compares the American faith presented by Barack Obama with the image of a secular conservative like John McCain, it becomes clear how hard it will be for the Christian Right, in spite of Obama’s disastrous remarks about guns and religion, to present the Republican Presidential candidate to its base as the legitimate successor to George W. Bush, as a guardian of Christian values and crusader against the “Godless liberals.”

The fate of Republican Presidential candidate Mike Huckabee, a popular preacher from the Southern Baptist Convention, was also telling. With his authentic stance on moral issues, he was acting in line with the expectations of many young grass-roots evangelicals. Yet his populist approach to economic and social welfare policy became a problem for him. As governor of Arkansas, Huckabee had raised taxes in order to finance community welfare projects but this made him extremely unpopular with the Business Right inside the GOP. So it is no surprise that many top officials from the establishment of the Christian Right did not support Huckabee.

Even with Huckabee as a Vice Presidential candidate, it would be hard for John McCain to count on the kind of

18 Discrimination against African-Americans and persecution and discrimination directed against Native Americans profoundly contradict the “American Dream” of community and inclusion! This is certainly more than just a “terrible exception.” Nevertheless, on systemic grounds – the subject at hand is contemporary values debates, not historical criticism – I will not be exploring this in greater detail, though I do not wish by any means to downplay this dark side of the “American Dream”!

19 DANFORTH, *Faith and Politics*, 2006, see Bibliography.

20 Cf. RABAN, 2008, see Bibliography. [See also Raban, “The Church of Obama: How He Recast the Language of Black Liberation Theology into a Winning Creed for Middle-of-the-Road White Voter,” <http://www.thestranger.com/seattle/Content?oid=479778>.]

unconditional support and mobilization George W. Bush received from the evangelical camp. McCain just wasn't and isn't one of us.

This much, therefore, is already apparent: Regardless of who succeeds Bush in office, it is more than unlikely that the forward march of the evangelicals, with their growing influence on concrete policies, will continue once the Bush era has ended.

As indicated a few pages earlier, this also has something to do with how the Christian Right, for all the major influence it acquired inside politics, has not produced tangible and clear-cut changes in concrete policy using that influence. This rather sobering balance sheet has made many evangelicals question whether their influence in the GOP has had a lasting impact on government in Washington, or whether they have in fact been exploited by the Republicans as a useful voting bloc.

It was for this reason that a book by the evangelical activist David Kuo, former deputy director of the office of faith-based initiatives in the White house, created such a stir. Bush and the entire White House were cynically abusing religion for political purposes, Kuo asserts. People in the White House just made fun of many of the leading figures from the Christian Right that Bush brought into office with him. In substantive terms, according to Kuo, the Bush administration hardly did anything to implement the agenda of the Christian Right. Kuo response was rather revealing when asked in the CBS broadcast *60 Minutes* if this instrumental way of treating religion might not be morally wrong, he replied: "I feel like it was more spiritually wrong. You're taking the sacred and you're making it profane. You're taking Jesus and reducing him to some precinct captain, to some get-out-the-vote guy."²¹

Regardless of whether Kuo is right or wrong on each point, he articulates an attitude that has recently been on the minds of many anxious evangelicals. Perhaps, some evangelicals are wondering if they had ventured too far out into the political arena so that they are now forced to experience how what was holy (and to which Christians had wanted to render homage) has now become abused

for the sake of things quite "unholy," even profane, in the dirty business of politics.

In one policy area the desire of many evangelicals to be released from the clutches of the Republicans and commit to a clear and principled political position has become especially evident: climate protection. Early in 2006 the Vice President of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), Reverend Richard Cizik, caused a stir within the evangelical camp. Cizik, a major supporter of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush as well as a clear-cut opponent of abortion, came out in favor of putting environmental and climate policy at the center of evangelical Christians' political agenda.

The political explosiveness of this demand should not be underestimated. For, unlike the situation with regard to moral issues, a wholesale involvement of evangelicals on behalf of God's Creation in the realm of climate protection (Creation Care) would engender a debate that would not stop at instrumental questions about the most effective policies for safeguarding the climate and environment. And this could prove to be the very detonator that might blow up the historical alliance between the Christian Right and the Business Right. This would be a nightmare for those strategists of power politics both within the Christian Right and in the GOP. Accordingly, reactions to the Cizik initiative among some evangelicals and Republicans were panicky.

In a letter to the leadership of the board of the NAE, Paul Weyrich, James Dobson, Gary Bauer, and other representatives of the Christian Right and their conservative allies accused Cizik of abusing the issue of global warming in order to shift the evangelical movement's attention and esteem away from moral issues (like the sanctity of life, the integrity of marriage, or teaching abstinence from pre-marital sex) and toward environmental policy. In a surprising move, however, the NAE board almost unanimously backed Richard Cizik (with just one opposing vote). And Cizik added fuel to the fire: He warned against letting politically motivated considerations take priority over matters of faith. Evangelical Christians should be primarily concerned with what the Gospel says, accord-

21 CBS, "60 Minutes" from October 15, 2006.

ing to Cizik, and not with the question of whether it's better to jump onto a particular political bandwagon. For Cizik, therefore, the debate about the relative importance of climate change within the evangelical agenda was ultimately part of a much larger debate about how evangelicals should define themselves in the future, and about who was ultimately entitled to speak for the movement. This was strong stuff.

For E. J. Dionne Jr., Senior Fellow at the Brookings Institution and a columnist for the *Washington Post*, Cizik's statements are tantamount to a "New Reformation" within the evangelical movement. Many evangelical Christians might be about to board a new train, one whose future course would be set by the far-reaching demands of their faith rather than by the political agenda of any one party.²²

The evangelicals are bound to remain a major political and social force in the United States for a long time to come. But the developments described here clearly show that even their power is finite. In the long run, no ideologically fixated politics can command a majority in the United States. At the end of the day, the pendulum swings back in the direction of a new center, which was always the same as the old one.

"Let Justice Roll" –
invoking God's help for a living wage

It has gotten cold in Cleveland on this first Saturday in November 2006. At eight in the morning we have a breakfast appointment with Reverend Dr. Paul H. Sherry. Dr. Sherry used to be President of the United Church of Christ. Yet now he is dedicating himself wholeheartedly to coordinating a nation-wide action alliance with the lovely name "Let Justice Roll". It is a Biblical maxim from the Prophets, "Let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream"²³ it says in the Book of Amos; a Biblical saying for a broad alliance fighting to establish a living wage everywhere in the United States. Three days later, as some states hold referenda on the minimum wage, the alliance will score a major victo-

ry. Well over three thirds of voters in these states will vote for an increase in the minimum wage.

"Faith and Community Voices Against Poverty" is the slogan of the Let Justice Roll campaign. Reverend Sherry had succeeded in forging a broad-based coalition out of different religious and secular grass-roots groups war on behalf of a common goal. When Sherry talks about his struggle for a living wage it is immediately apparent that the moral aspects, versus considerations for economic and social welfare policy, are at the forefront of his argument.

In much the same way that many evangelicals talk about their campaign against abortion and gay marriage, Sherry emphasizes that his fight for a living wage is a question of morality. "The driving force of our campaign is a moral issue. Your job should keep you out of poverty, not in it," he tells us. There are many hundreds of passages in the Bible dealing with social welfare values, Sherry continues. Whoever wants to live responsibly before God, Sherry says, must also integrate his convictions gained from faith into his daily actions.

This is how Sherry legitimates his own position: by invoking divine will and moral clarity and by safeguarding the belief that every American, if he puts in a hard day of honest work, should also be able to feed himself and his family with his labor's wages. The moderate Paul Sherry for his supposedly leftist political project is using the exact same pattern of argumentation that the evangelical Barrett Duke has used to inculcate his family issues. Religion is not just the driving force behind conservative or reactionary politics; it can also motivate progressive movements.

Andrea Nahles, recently elected as a vice-chairperson of the SPD, is delighted when her Bundestag colleague Niels Annen (like Nahles, on the party's left wing) immediately sends a Blackberry message conveying our impressions of this successful alliance for a higher minimum wage in the United States. "Come back quickly; you're needed more over here than in America to implement the minimum wage," is her reply, which made perfect sense in November 2006. For at that very moment, it was far

²² Cf. DIONNE, 2007, see Bibliography.

²³ AMOS, 5.24.

from certain whether, on the other side of the Atlantic, Germany's then-serving Labor Minister would adopt and act on Paul Sherry's views about the minimum wage, as represented by Andrea Nahles and the German trade unions.

But the interesting question is not whether Reverend Sherry then had a clearer position on the general issue of the minimum wage than Franz Müntefering (Germany's Social Democratic Labor Minister, and Vice-Chancellor, at the time). What was decisive for the success of the Let Justice Roll campaign was the fact that, on the basis of a religiously highlighted moral argument, it was possible to organize a broad coalition for a highly political issue, a coalition embracing both pious believers and rather more secular folk. In the United States, religion continues to have a cultural dimension that often lends itself better to organizing social alliances than intellectual kinds of arguments.

This societal phenomenon of basic convictions that happen to be value-driven is not something that deserves to be mothballed, especially not by European Social Democrats, with the usual intellectual arrogance that so often greets first principals whenever they turn out to have a "religious background." This attitude is especially misguided among proponents of that variety of rational leftist *realpolitik* who are less concerned with values than with sheer functioning. By now, everywhere in Europe this purely rational-functional style of politics seems to have reached its limits, as has been demonstrated by the electoral defeat of the PvdA (the Labor party) in the Netherlands, or by the collapse of the SPD's Agenda 2010 (the German Social Democrats' welfare reform program).

Reverend Sherry, in any event, had success mobilizing the broad center of society with his value-driven campaign for a living wage. And Reverend Cizik, invoking God's Creation on behalf of climate protection, was certainly able to reach more people than he had with his previous campaign for pro-life values. Perhaps the evangelical Christian Cizik is getting an unexpected (from a European perspective) ally:

*"Al Gore certainly did not discover the environmental issue. What he did discover and began to exploit was it power to create meaning, structure and politics. ...To put it pointedly, someone like Al Gore replaces status and class consciousness, faith in progress or doom ... with the 'humanistic project of saving the environment'.... Socially conservative, religious and emancipatory ideals unite in him and ally in a 'new deal' that would have seemed pure dreaming only a short while ago...."*²⁴

This quote from the sociologist Ulrich Beck is not part of a commentary on Al Gore after he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2007; it comes from Beck's 1993 book *Die Erfindung des Politischen* (English-language edition: *The Reinvention of Politics*, 1997). In German politics today, there really ought to be more people who understand what Ulrich Beck already wanted to tell us 15 years ago.

Is there a golden mean between relativism and fundamentalism?

A GOP Presidential candidate who can't exactly be described as heading a Christian Right dream ticket. A real competition between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama revolving around the question: Who truly represents the most genuine American faith throughout the land? And then there is Reverend Cizik from the National Association of Evangelicals, who seems to be fighting side by side with Al Gore for climate protection and against the "business wing" of the Republican party. Even religiously insensitive secular minds seem to have recognized by now that the great game of religion and politics in the United States has somehow started to move in another direction, and that the cards are being reshuffled. But where is the country now headed on this journey? Back to the center? And if that's the destination, what will this new center look like?

For my purposes, the famous sociologist of religion Prof. Peter L. Berger has given a wise and answerable answer, one every politician should consider, to the ques-

24 BECK, 1993, p. 145, see Bibliography. [The English edition is Ulrich Beck [translated by Mark Ritter], *The reinvention of politics : rethinking modernity in the global social order*. Cambridge, UK : Polity Press; Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997.]

tion of how a reasonable center might be gauged: It needs to be located somewhere in the middle ground between relativism and fundamentalism.²⁵

For Berger, relativism and fundamentalism are two sides of the same coin. Both are the products of the permanent modernization process to which all societies are more or less subjected in a global world. Whether via the Internet or by way of one of the satellite dishes that can now be found in almost every village on the planet, people are showered (to a degree previously unimaginable) with information, plans on how to run their lives, and all kinds of cultural models. All these impressions relativize much of what people initially received in the way of traditions self-evidently passed on to them in the course of their lives. This process of relativization increasingly undermines a self-evident and therefore unquestioned orientation.

Initially, this relativization of everything and everyone had the advantage of liberating people from the absolute truths of fundamentalism. People can recognize the dark sides of their culture because they can now become acquainted with alternatives and compare these with their own way of life. Yet this liberation from the paternalism of unquestioned dogmas also has its price, of course: If one gets into the spirit of modernity and starts questioning and comparing everything, the logical conclusion is to take leave of traditional certainties that had offered a clear orientation without the poison of eternal doubt. One must then keep reconstructing one's one worldview (and the orientations that ensue from it) over and over again. The dilemma is obvious: The price of liberation from self-evident truths is loss of certainties.

The almost indescribable pluralism that characterizes our modern world is not only capable of having a liberating effect; it can also cause disorientation. Two extreme reactions to modernity are relativism and fundamentalism: Both, in my view, ultimately refuse to meet the requirement that we keep shaping the modernization process by repeatedly forcing ourselves to make decisions in accordance with an ethic of responsibility. At first glance, relativists can seem to be modern in a very liberal

fashion. They elegantly process the above-mentioned loss of certainties by proceeding from the assumption that there are no certainties any longer. What's decisive is the end result. You just need to see all sides. Don't get pinned down prematurely – leave all options open. Why should I be bothered by yesterday's prattle? Subordinating yourself to some God and his imaginary will is yesterday's news. Who is not familiar with these variations on everything is relative and anything goes? There is not much room here for boundaries that a consistent, value-driven kind of behavior would automatically set for oneself. Neoliberalism, which subordinates everything to one particular value, (mainly that of economic success) strikes me as a pithy expression of this kind of relativism.

Goaded by this kind of indifference to (and contempt for) the divine, fundamentalists take up arms against modernity from the diametrically opposed position. To the indifference of the relativists, to their attitude that there are no longer any certainties in today's world, the fundamentalists counterpose the other extreme: a claim to absolute truth. Whoever questions this truth incurs guilt. For religious fundamentalists, most everything is imaginable, just not questioning their faith. Every other belief becomes an assault on God. Here we find the kind of "fabricated incontrovertibility" Ulrich Beck has identified. Whoever wants to defend this "fabricated incontrovertibility" against "self-evident certainty" has a hard time in our modern world. If only because of global information and communication technologies, nobody anywhere can be secure against what Peter L. Berger has called "cognitive contamination from the world of the non-believers." Therefore isolation and intolerance often do not suffice in safeguarding one's Paradise. It is precisely at this point that we find the fork in the road leading some to decide that perhaps they need to treat the others as enemy combatants.

I argued above that the truly substantial and concrete political triumphs of the Christian Right have been held in check, even with George W. Bush in the White House. Nevertheless, one should not underestimate the kind of destruction that can be wreaked by a *Kulturkampf*

25 Cf. BERGER, PETER L.: "Between Relativism and Fundamentalism" in *The American Interest*, Nr. 1, Vol. 2, 2006, see Bibliography.

This outstanding article and Prof. Berger's lecture "Die Würde des Menschen ist unantastbar" ("Human dignity shall be inviolable"), delivered at the Friedrich Ebert Foundation in Berlin on Dec. 11, 2007, are the basis for the following remarks on the subject "Relativism and Fundamentalism".

against everything liberal. If, for example, there is a city with an evangelical majority where the non-evangelical citizens do not dare speak up for fear of being ostracized on issues such as modern sex education in their children's schools, the open society is put at risk. Or just think about some universities in the United States where students and professors who express highly critical positions on current Israeli policy have to reckon with massive harassment from evangelical student organizations.

The irreconcilability in the permanent battle between religious zealots and certain liberals, who one might almost characterize as religion haters, shows how American politics needs to be responsible about maintaining social pluralism and integrating those on the margins. At a time of ever-faster innovation cycles in an unfettered global capitalism that keeps destroying more old certainties than any new ones it might create, this is certainly a Herculean task. For Peter L. Berger this situation requires a "politics of mediation." This kind of politics needs both to confront every kind of fundamentalism as well as resist the temptations of relativism to avoid conducting discursive social debates. First and foremost, this can also mean adopting or defending a point of view, even if there is a threat that it will be proven wrong or fail the test of majority appeal in a public debate. In an era of spin-doctors and aligning one's own politics toward public opinion polls, this would certainly be close to revolutionary. Having no clear political view should, in my view, be denounced as much as the other extreme of permitting only one political opinion.

Not only in the United States but also everywhere in the world the point is to conduct a value-driven discourse. The point is to negotiate norms that, when they have been worked out democratically, would also have to apply to all members of a society. This also means demanding from all social groups that they participate in the discourse. In my view, this requires "non-believers" to make a discursive advance payment stipulating that they will admit religious arguments and not take the *a priori* view that religion and progress are incompatible opposites. Believers must be expected to have their beliefs and religious traditions questioned. In a highly stimulating article

in the *American Interest*, Walter Russell Mead has aptly described how the combination of religious freedom and religious diversity in the Anglo-Saxon world has allowed religion to move from dogma to dynamo in a way that has promoted progress without making societies like the United States more secular.²⁶ In Germany, too, there are signs of new approaches to a dialogue about religion and values but these are harder to find in politics.

On February 19, 2004, 14 months to the day before his election to become Pope Benedict XVI, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger met in Munich with one of Germany's most important philosophers: Jürgen Habermas, who has said of himself that he represents a philosophy of post-religious reason. Their joint conversation – or, to put it more aptly, the discourse between these two thinkers – revolved around the question of the "pre-political moral foundations of a liberal state."²⁷ Later in this essay I will explore this discourse more comprehensively.

It is interesting to observe how, over the last several years, Jürgen Habermas has been reflecting more and more about religion as a philosophical subject. Concern among Habermas's adherents that their master might some day become a thoroughly religious person is certainly unfounded, yet it is noteworthy how somebody like Jürgen Habermas, of all people, has come to write that religiously motivated positions have a legitimate place in the public discussion of politics. Habermas asserts that, without a new dialogue with religion, practical reason would lose the backing it urgently needs from the history of philosophy so that it won't fall into despair about its own good rationales in light of the developments associated with a derailing modernization. Although he certainly does this in a different manner from Peter L. Berger, Habermas is also calling for a serious discourse within the diverse pluralism of modernity. He, too, is looking for that golden mean between relativism and fundamentalism. His rationale for the necessity of such a discourse is certainly striking: "The motive behind my preoccupation with the issue of faith and knowledge is the wish to mobilize modern reason against the defeatism that broods inside it."²⁸

26 Cf. RUSSEL MEAD, 2007, see Bibliography.

27 The initial texts of Habermas and Ratzinger that the two discussed are documented in a book that is well worth reading: HABERMAS, JÜRGEN and RATZINGER, JOSEPH. *Dialektik der Säkularisierung*, 2005, see Bibliography. English translation: *Dialectics of Secularization*, 2007.

28 HABERMAS, JÜRGEN. "Ein Bewusstsein von dem, was fehlt," 2007, see Bibliography.

Appendix

Interlocutors

What I learned in order to write this political essay is based on many conversations and interviews I was able to conduct over the last 18 months with numerous people in the United States, Poland, and Germany. As important as the written word (in the form of books, essays, and articles) may be, it doesn't come close to the profundity of an open conversation if one's objective is not just finding facts, but also figuring out how people feel.

In this spirit I should like to thank the following conversation partners for their important contribution to this paper:

Rabbi Andrew Baker,

Director of International Jewish Affairs of the American Jewish Committee (AJC), Washington, DC.

Prof. Peter L. Berger,

Director of the Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs (CURA) at Boston University.

James D. Bindenagel,

former Ambassador, Vice President for Community, Government & International Affairs at De Paul University, Chicago.

Pedro G. Cavallero,

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David Masci,

The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in Washington, DC.

Prof. John J. Mearsheimer,

Professor in the Department of Political Science, University of Chicago.

Frank Mecklenburg,

Director of Research of the Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

Bruce L. Overton,

Office of the General Counsel of the Millennium Challenge Corporation, Washington, DC.

Knut Panknin,

Program Officer, FES Office, Washington, DC.

Prof. Marcia Pally,

Professor for Multilingual and Multicultural Studies at New York University.

Bobby Polito,

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Harry J. Seigle,

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Timothy S. Shah,

Senior Fellow, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in Washington, DC.

Reverent Paul H. Sherry,

former President of the United Church of Christ, Coordinator of the anti-poverty program of the National Council of Churches in the United States of America, New York.

Emily D. Soloff,

President of the Chicago Chapter of the American Jewish Committee (AJC).

Saul Solorzano,

Executive Director of the Central American Resource Center (CARECEN), Washington, DC.

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Almut Wieland-Karimi,

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Mauricio Vivero,

Executive Director of Ayuuda, Inc., Washington, DC.

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Title photo:

Speaker of the House of Representatives Nancy Pelosi in the U.S. Capitol in Washington, DC

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Layout: www.pellens.de

Photos: dpa Picture Alliance, Pellens

Printing: automated graphic imaging

Translation: Jeremiah Riemer

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Printed in USA, 2008