

help them to see the broader picture in a lot of areas where they don't see it."

There is even speculation—dismissed by the minister—that Flake imagines himself New York City's mayor. And, in an indication of how fluid things are, the pundits can't even decide on which ticket he would run. "If Flake runs as Republican, that will be the most interesting thing to happen in NYC politics in living memory," says Mollenkopf. Jim Sleeper, author of *Liberal Racism*, ponders a race with Floyd Flake on the Democratic line and Puerto Rican Herman Badillo, another advocate of conservative-identified solutions and a Giuliani protégé, on the Republican line.

Flake still considers himself a Democrat, and indeed a good friend of Clinton, behind whose re-election campaign he rallied reluctant black clergy. He doesn't think Gore is the man to transform the educational debate, but thinks Bradley (with whom he worked when both were on their respective banking committees) might, since Bradley isn't going to get much teacher union support anyway and since he has been slightly more open to charter school and voucher experiments. And Flake is working the full terrain from center to right: He's a fellow at Brookings as well as the Manhattan Institute. As for his introduction of "homeboy" Bush, he says it was made clear that he was introducing him, not endorsing him.

Flake never explicitly told me what the Democratic Party needs to do to appeal to people like him, but several things come to mind. He wants to call a halt to broad, meaningless promises, and replace them with detailed action plans that can be achieved with limited resources. He wants the party to stand up to its constituent parts—like teachers' unions—and start demanding results. He wants to see more government funding and pushing for innovation and entrepreneurship on a local level. And he wants the Democratic Party not to come asking for backing unless it is prepared to win.

Many who disagree with his *pas de deux* with the GOP tend to accept his analysis. "It's legitimate to question whether in [the] long run his stands are good for his parishioners," says Jerry Hudson, executive vice president of 1199/SEIU, Health and Human Services Union. "But what has the black community gotten out of walking in lock step with the Democratic Party?" Few would challenge Flake's gospel of self-help and individual responsibility. Liberals sneered at the Million Man March, but it resonated with a lot of people, including the sorts of people who attend Allen church.

Not many peers will go on the record to criticize him, and indeed, most seem to like Flake a lot personally. Great liberals like Democratic Congresswoman Maxine Waters in California remain good friends; Waters even wrote a blurb for his book *The Way of the Bootstrapper*. Flake thinks his endorsements are understood to be about bringing goodies home, not about trying to lead the troops into the Republican camp. Parishioners agree. "Sometimes the media think that black people are kind of



Former congressman Floyd Flake crossed party lines to endorse Republican Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's re-election in 1997.

homogeneous in their political views, which they're not," said Alan Sturgis, a psychotherapist who is a new church member.

So what, finally, does the Reverend Floyd Flake represent? To those who have studied the role of black churches in politics and social services, much here is familiar, but with an unusually adroit execution. In part, Flake stands for equal opportunity pork-barrel—a savvy black community leader doing what it takes to survive in an era of Republican rule. Although Flake's operation

contrasts with the antipoverty empires of the 1960s, particularly in its embrace of such Republican and New Democrat themes as bootstrap capitalism, personal responsibility, and school vouchers, it also still depends heavily on traditional public investments in infrastructure, housing, and social services. In that respect, Flake's operation is not so different from Adam Clayton Powell's. What's really new is the tactical alliance with Republicans like D'Amato, who know how to play the game.

The game is good for Flake and his parishioners, but perhaps risky in the long run, in that New York Republicans are atypical in their fondness for public outlay. Nationally, of course, D'Amato, Pataki, and Giuliani are elements of a party that stands for drastic cuts in funding for public improvements, housing subsidies, and social services on which Flake's paradise is partly built. D'Amato, for example, was succeeded as banking chairman by Senator Phil Gramm. Flake may know how to lean both ways on this partisan tightrope, but if his associations make it safe for more black parishioners to vote Republican, he becomes the agent of a partisan alignment beyond his own control. On the other hand, if Democrats fail to recognize that black urban voters are now substantially middle class and looking for more than welfare handouts, they become accomplices in this partisan shift.

As he drove me to the subway station through Jamaica, which in 1984 was considered a middle-class community in decline, Flake radiated pleasure in the way the area has been stabilized. "We've developed \$50 million in projects," he said. He pointed out Allen church's bus company, which grew out of a need to rent a few buses for trips into a for-profit venture with six "scenicruisers" and a number of smaller buses. Allen is revitalizing a modest commercial strip opposite the church, buying stores one at a time. And as we passed York College, Flake pointed out the \$200-million Food and Drug Administration testing facility opening on campus, which he believes will strengthen the applied-science component of the curriculum, further enhancing employment opportunities for neighborhood kids. "That's what Georgia Tech does," he said. "When I got to Congress, I realized I wanted what those southern congressman were getting." And he got it. Or, more precisely, Al D'Amato got it for him. ♦

Rachel Tsutsumi provided additional reporting for this article.

file church + state

PROGRESSIVE POLITICS AND, UH, . . . GOD

BY RICHARD PARKER

When I tell politically progressive friends that I've started teaching a course at Harvard about religion's impact on American politics and public policy, I usually face one of two responses.

The first is an awkward silence—and a quick change of subject. The second is also awkward but comes with an anxiously knowing, usually sotto voce, "So you're doing abortion and the Christian right—that sort of thing, yes?" When I explain that, no, in fact I'm devoting only a week of the course to the religious right and that I barely mention abortion, it's usually back to awkward silence again—and the search for a new subject.

In the right mood, I'm sympathetic to my friends' reactions. After all, what comes to mind when someone mentions religion and politics nowadays? Aren't Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Gary Bauer, anti-abortion picketers, and anti-gay marchers probably the first images? Or is it perhaps Bill Clinton, lachrymose at a Washington prayer breakfast last year, earnestly "repenting" his affair with Monica? More recently, what about the House Republicans voting that schools post the Ten Commandments in answer to gun violence? Or the discomfiting sudden embrace of religion by this year's crop of presidential candidates and their minions?

It's not a list designed to warm progressive hearts. But as I've come to discover, it's far from all we need to know or care about American religion. Contrary to what many may think, religion is alive and well in America—and a good deal of what it says and does is strikingly progressive.

Of course, religion has been ever present in American life. Alexis de Tocqueville was hardly the first to point to its centrality to our civic life and politics, and even Karl Marx saw we were unique in this respect. "America," he wrote, "is pre-eminently the country of religiosity," with, he admitted, "a fresh and vigorous vitality."

No one who reflects even for a moment on abolition, suffrage, temperance, the Progressive era, or various utopian, labor, and reform movements—or, more recently, on civil rights, the Vietnam era, or the 1980s' battles over Central America and nuclear weapons—can miss the vital role of religious leaders, visions, and communities in each of these transformative struggles.

But what about today?

Here's what surprises a lot of my progressive friends:

**CONTRARY TO
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In Los Angeles, you'll find the progressive religious tradition alive in Clergy and Laity United for Economic Justice (CLUE), a coalition of ministers, priests, and rabbis that proved decisive in getting the city's landmark living-wage ordinance passed in 1997.

Since then, CLUE has been working with local labor unions to organize low-wage workers in hotels, airports, and restaurants. Last spring CLUE won local celebrity—and a key victory for workers

at posh L.A. hotels—by organizing a march down Beverly Hills' Rodeo Drive in the midst of Easter week and Passover. As bystanders gaped from behind the store windows of Fendi,

CYNTHIA VON BUHLER



give ye them to eat. and
he said unto them
Lords
He said unto them
And he commanded the
disciples to sit down on the grass
and to break the five loaves. and
they did so. and they all looked
up into heaven. and he blessed
and brake. and gave unto
them to eat. and

Armani, and the like, 150 rabbis, Catholic priests, and Protestant ministers in full flowing robes filed down the street. At the head of the procession, they carried a 25-foot-long banner declaring "ALL RELIGIONS BELIEVE IN JUSTICE." "Shoppers froze in their tracks," one participant remembers, and local TV and radio crews converged on the scene. The procession stopped first in front of two hotels that had agreed, after a long struggle, to sign the new union contract. Here they deposited bowls filled with milk and honey—biblical symbols of the promised land—along with baskets of Easter lilies. But to a hotel that refused to sign the new contract, they instead brought bitter herbs, the Passover symbol of slavery. Within three weeks, all the targeted hotels signed hefty new contracts with their workers.

You'll find that same sort of dynamism in the Greater Boston Interfaith Organization (GBIO). At its founding meeting last year, nearly 5,000 people heard inner-city black Pentecostal ministers, suburban Unitarian and Episcopalian clergy, a rabbi, an imam, and Boston's Archbishop Bernard Cardinal Law, all preaching a new era of multiracial, multi-ethnic, faith-led urban renewal. Nearly 100 congregations, union locals, and community groups have now begun working together to improve low-income housing, city schools, and job conditions for new immigrants.

In Washington, D.C., a progressive evangelical group called Sojourners regularly challenges conservative evangelicals on issues ranging from income, gender, and racial equality to support for organized labor and the environment. Four years ago, the group—which had existed for a quarter of a century—launched an organizing project named Call to Renewal. Across the country, Call to Renewal has come into dozens of communities at the invitation of local church groups (and even politicians) to stop gang violence, foster urban renewal, help secure jobs for minority youth, and fight drug abuse. Evangelicals have a long tradition of concern for the poor, notes the Reverend Emory Searcy, national field organizer for the group. But to Searcy, a black Baptist minister, too many evangelicals "got hijacked by the right" in recent years. "We're just asking them to recapture their own history."

Over on Capitol Hill, as part of an international, multi-denominational campaign, the religious alliance Jubilee 2000/USA is pressing Congress to cancel the foreign debts of the world's poorest countries. The group takes its name from the Old Testament example of the Jubilee Year, when debts were to be forgiven and slaves set free. It is endorsed by an impressive list of prominent religious leaders including Pope John Paul II and South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu. Jubilee 2000/USA has also reached out to add endorsements from the AFL-CIO and the U.S. Conference of Mayors. The Jubilee 2000/USA movement was highly visible and influential in the recent Seattle WTO protests.

In the midst of the Reagan era, the Catholic Church was a powerful voice for social and economic justice, and made influential declarations about nuclear weapons.



Working out of offices at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine on New York's Upper West Side, the National Religious Partnership for the Environment (NRPE) has been pressing churches and synagogues to take up global warming, toxic pollution, rain forest destruction, and ecological sustainability as part of their everyday ministry. And not just by "having guys with collars at a press conference," insists Paul Gorman, the group's director. With \$10 million from the Pew Charitable Trusts, Nathan Cummings, MacArthur, and other foundations, NRPE is trying to make each denomina-

tion's teachings about the environment integral to what is preached from its pulpits, what is taught in its Sunday schools and seminaries, and what guides its institutional behavior. (One of the group's offshoots, for example, is an organization that helps churches buy electricity from environmental sound sources, in states that

are deregulating it. With sly humor, the group calls itself Episcopal Power and Light.)

Not far away, over in East Brooklyn, a number of mostly black and Hispanic activist ministers and laypeople working together as the Nehemiah Project have raised millions in loans from their local churches and national denominations to build or rehabilitate nearly 5,000 units of low-income housing over the past 15 years. The group's success is now being copied by new Nehemiah Projects in other cities around the country.

Faith-based groups from Delaware to Georgia are helping to organize thousands of mainly black and Latino workers in the enormous, low-wage poultry-processing industry. This is an industry, according to the Department of Labor, in which 60 percent of plants regularly violate wage and hour laws and workers who try to join unions are routinely harassed or fired. Working together as the Poultry Justice Alliance, these groups use well-publicized local rallies and prayer vigils (as well as lobbying pressure brought by their national denominations) to help the industry's workers secure basic labor rights. The Poultry Justice Alliance, in turn, is just one of nearly four dozen local faith-based groups in 25 states that coordinate their efforts on behalf of workers in sweatshops, nursing homes, and the hotel industry through the Chicago-based National Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice.

America's Catholic bishops—mainly through their Catholic Campaign for Human Development—contribute between \$10 million and \$20 million a year to grass-roots progressive groups around the country, working on everything from inner-city community renewal in Chicago to tenant organizing in California. And millions more flow each year from Catholic orders like the Maryknolls and Jesuits as well as mainline Protestant denominations and liberal Jewish groups. One guidebook for progressive activists, for example, lists nearly eight dozen major religious funding sources that might support their work.

In short, there's a great deal going on in America's religious

life that liberals should know more about—and support. Yet the fact is we often do neither.

GOD AND COUNTRY

Garry Wills thinks that the ignorance of liberals and intellectuals generally about American religion reflects a deeper blindness. In *Under God*, he's blunt about his views:

The learned have their superstitions, prominent among them a belief that superstition is evaporating. . . . Every time religiosity catches the attention of intellectuals, it is as if a shooting star has appeared in the sky. One could hardly guess, from this, that nothing has been more stable in our history, nothing less budgeable, than religious belief and practice.

The charge has a decided edge to it, but if you look at Gallup's nearly half a century of polling data about Americans and religion, it's not hard to see why Wills feels the way he does. According to Gallup:

- ◆ Nine out of 10 Americans say they've never doubted the existence of God.
- ◆ Eight out of 10 Americans believe they'll be called before God on Judgment Day to answer for their sins.
- ◆ Seven in 10 say they're current church or synagogue members.
- ◆ Four in 10 say they worship at least weekly (six in 10 say at least monthly) as members of a religious congregation.

All this cuts against the confident belief many once held that religion in the United States was in terminal decline, thanks to the secularizing forces of urbanization, industrialization, scientific explanation, and consumer culture.

To be sure, the 1960s and 1970s saw a drop in America's religious membership as part of a general decline of confidence and participation in civil society, which Robert Putnam has described, with some alarm, as a loss of the nation's "social capital."

Mainline Protestants—Methodists and Presbyterians, particularly—lost about a quarter of their members from the 1960s through the 1980s. Catholicism suffered its own decline among Americans of European descent but compensated with a dramatic inflow of Hispanic members. Jews lost significant portions of their religiously active population, though arguably many have found new sources of Jewish identification through Israel and the memory of the Holocaust.

By the early 1990s, however, those declines had not only stopped; they had begun to reverse themselves—led by the same baby boomers who had earlier abandoned organized religion. David Roozen of Hartford

Seminary, surveying Americans born between 1945 and 1954, has found that regular church attendance among these boomers rose dramatically, from 33 percent in 1975 to 41 percent in 1990, and it appears to be rising still.

But if Americans remain overwhelmingly religious, our faiths still come in a rainbow of colors. Roughly a quarter of Americans tell pollsters they're mainline Protestants, another quarter that they're fundamentalist Protestants, and a quarter that they're Catholics. About 10 percent are black Protestants, 2 percent are Jews, 2 percent are Mormons, 1 percent are Orthodox Christians, and another 1 or 2 percent identify with "other religions"—mostly Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. (Barely one-tenth of Americans say they have no religious identity.)

At first glance, of course, those numbers make America an overwhelmingly Christian country—more Christian, in fact, than India is Hindu, Israel is Jewish, or Latin America is Catholic. However, that massive "Christian majority," as the Christian right likes to call it, is—and always has been—deeply and fractiously divided. What's more, the divisions aren't just liturgical or theological. There are also sharp—and long-enduring—differences in the political and social beliefs of the denominations.

Political analyst Kevin Phillips's latest book *The Cousins' Wars* traces the origin of the divides among progressive, liberal, and conservative Protestant denominations all the way back to the English Revolution, then follows its recurring patterns through the American Revolution and Civil War.

In America's post-Civil War period, science and industrialization led to new divisions as well as the deepening of older ones, as the defeated South—still home today to the majority of America's fundamentalists—hardened into religious as well as political conservatism.

Meanwhile, mainline Protestants openly embraced not only religious ecumenism but the idea that science was reconcilable with religious belief. That openness in turn fueled support for the Social Gospel movement, which was central in popularizing the reformist idea of government during the Progressive era.

Likewise, modern Catholic interest in liberal politics and public policy can trace its own genesis to the nineteenth-century encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, to Father John Ryan's turn-of-the-century work on living wages, and to Vatican II in the 1960s. In the midst of the Reagan era, the Catholic Church's powerful voice on social-justice issues was epitomized by the U.S. bishops' influential and prophetic declarations on economic justice and nuclear war.

**There's a great deal going on in
religious life that liberals should know
more about—and support.**



FAITH AND PROGRESSIVISM

Over the past 20 years, that history has been largely forgotten in our alarm over the Christian right. Yet it takes only a casual reading of major denominational teachings to see just how consistently progressive the faiths of

millions of Americans remain—especially when compared to Democratic Party platforms, policies, and presidents in the last 30 years.

Here, for example, is an excerpt on “The Economic Community,” from the core faith teachings of the 10-million-member United Methodist Church, the largest of America’s mainline Protestant denominations:

We claim all economic systems to be under the judgment of God no less than other facets of the created order. Therefore, we recognize the responsibility of governments to develop and implement sound fiscal and monetary policies that provide for the economic life of individuals and corporate entities, and that ensure full employment and adequate incomes with a minimum of inflation. We believe private and public enterprises are responsible for the social costs of doing business, such as employment and environment pollution, and that they should be held accountable for these costs. We support measures that would reduce the concentration of wealth in the hands of a few. We further support efforts to revise tax structures and eliminate governmental support that now benefit the wealthy at the expense of other persons.

The document goes on to call for limits on the rights of private property, support for collective bargaining, the advancement of more meaningful work and leisure, and an end to the celebration of consumerism. It also endorses specific measures to help migrant labor, limit gambling, break up corporate monopolies, and increase various forms of “work-sharing” and decentralized management on the job.

Or consider recent statements by the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., addressed to its three million members. The church’s 1996 General Assembly sought, as one commentator put it, “nothing less than a full-scale assault on poverty at home and abroad, endorsing the provision of national health care, increases in the minimum wage and job-training programs, more investment in housing and education, an increase in U.S. international aid, and the development of a comprehensive plan to revive city life in the United States.”

In the midst of the Republicans’ “Contract with America” and President Clinton’s cynical embrace of “triangulation,” the Presbyterians went on to explicitly condemn the “large amount of negative campaigning, neglect of the worthiness of the political vocation, and . . . the undue influence [of moneyed interests] in the election process.” They called on local clergy to speak out on behalf of “our historical commitment to working for economic justice, peace and disarmament, racial and civil rights. . . .”

The 2.5-million-member Episcopal Church is as explicitly unconservative as its larger Methodist and Presbyterian brethren, in some cases even more so. Its most recent national convention, for example, condemned Clinton’s welfare reforms, urged new public support for migrant laborers,

Mainline Protestants and Jews are twice as likely as fundamentalists to donate to a party, serve in some public leadership role, or belong to politically engaged nonprofits.



pressed for strict gun control and the abolition of nuclear weapons, and called for a new trial for Philadelphia death-row prisoner Mumia Abu-Jamal. It also committed the church to supporting local “living-wage” campaigns and launched a comprehensive study of “the theology of work” to begin redressing not only the material but also the moral and civic inequalities that have emerged in the past three decades.

The 60-million-member Catholic Church—its stance on gender and abortion notwithstanding—is no less progressive than these mainline Protestant denominations on a host of social and political issues. The U.S. Bishops’ pastoral letter “Economic Justice for All,” written a decade ago, for example, is still a benchmark statement. More recently, the Catholic Church was the leader among the religious groups that fought Clinton’s welfare reform bill and was deeply critical of its implications for social justice generally.

Millions of Americans are committed to these progressive organizations or to others that in social teachings are like them (the United Church of Christ, American Baptists, evangelical Lutherans, and several black Baptist and Methodist denominations as well as the smaller Unitarians, Quakers, and Reform Jews). Yet perhaps the most intriguing feature of this entire progressive wing of American religion is its invisibility to those not part of it.

The reasons for that invisibility aren’t always easy to disentangle. Partly it has had to do with the increasing postwar secularization of the nation’s elites, both in the universities and the press. One study of the elite Washington press corps, for example, found that 86 percent seldom or never attended religious services.

Equally important has been the mental redrawing of the important identity coordinates in American life, especially since the 1960s. Religious affiliation (in particular, denomination) historically served as a distinctive marker of one’s location in America’s social structure, as documented most famously by H. Richard Niebuhr’s *Social Sources of Denominationalism*.

After World War II, a new spirit of ecumenism and the softening of denominational and religious borders—most celebrated in Will Herberg’s 1950s classic *Protestant, Catholic, Jew*—set the stage for what Sydney Ahlstrom, in his Pulitzer Prize-winning history of American religion, has called the “coming of post-Protestant America.”

In this world, especially since the 1960s, gender, race, and sexual preference have taken on new defining importance—and have powerfully submerged the older coordinates of religion, ethnicity, region, and class. Redressing the inequalities associated with the newly ascendant categories has become the defining mission of liberals and progressives alike.

MISREADING THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

Ever since the rise of, first, Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority in 1979 and, then, Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition, many liberals, in their ignorance, have assumed American religion in general has turned conservative. Why, some have argued, haven't religious progressives created their own version of the Christian Coalition? It's a question that misreads what the Christian right has (and hasn't) accomplished—and why.

First, the secular changes of the twentieth century—especially in the years since World War II—have deeply threatened fundamentalists but have had no parallel effect on the liberal denominations. Fundamentalist Protestants draw on a belief in Biblical inerrancy, the emotional reality of imminent salvation, and a deep-seated suspicion of science and government because they compete with religion for authority. All these views, though, are generally alien to mainline Protestant, Jewish, and, in somewhat different ways, Catholic belief.

Second, religious progressives have long engaged the political system. As Princeton sociologist Robert Wuthnow and others have repeatedly found, mainline Protestants and Jews, for example, are typically twice as likely as fundamentalists to donate to a party, speak publicly on civic matters, serve in some public leadership role, or belong to politically engaged nonprofit groups.

There's another issue when it comes to replicating the presumed success of the religious right. Recent polling research suggests that rather than generating a dramatic rise in the ranks of religious conservatives, it is more likely that the Christian right found itself in effect free-riding as traditionally conservative southern voters became Republicans—a realignment that owed more to the civil-rights positions of Lyndon Johnson and Martin Luther King, Jr., than to the organizing abilities of Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson.

Importantly, recent press accounts of the Christian right's viability suggest it is facing real—potentially fatal—problems after a 20-year run. As a *New York Times* article on the Christian Coalition reported this past summer,

The coalition is hobbled by a \$2.5 million debt, the departure of most of its experienced leaders and so much turnover in local leadership that it has strong affiliates in no more than 7 states, down from the 48 it claimed last year, according to its staff.

And now even its prior assertions to such widespread strength are in doubt. Former national leaders . . . said in interviews that the coalition, as critics have long suspected, never commanded the numbers it claimed. . . .

The coalition, these former leaders say, distorted the size of its base by keeping thousands of names of dead people, wrong

addresses, and duplicates on its list of supporters; printed millions of voter guides that the coalition leaders expected would never be distributed, and hired temporary crews to look busy in the mail room and phone banks to impress reporters and camera crews.

"We never distributed 40 million guides," says Dave Welch, the coalition's former national field director. . . . State affiliates took stacks of them to recycling centers after the election. . . ."

People can reasonably disagree about whether the whole Christian-right phenomenon has peaked and is now in decline—or has merely gone underground to focus on state and local politics, as some believe. It's worth noting, though, that both Paul Weyrich and Cal Thomas—major figures in the movement—now argue publicly that, in fact, the Christian right's two decades of efforts have "failed" and the time has come for its supporters to refocus primary attention instead on traditional evangelical concerns.

Meanwhile, America's progressive religious community goes on—for the most part ignored by those who like to think of themselves as progressive but who have no connection to the nation's religious world. Of course, one can't count all the members or leaders of these churches and synagogues as avid supporters of their denominations' official views—far from it. In truth, like the Democratic Party or any labor union, progressive religion finds that large numbers of its constituents are indifferent, even sometimes hostile, to the voices of their leaders.

Yet the central fact remains: In an era when progressive voices seem few in number, when many progressive organizations struggle to meet payrolls, let alone advance agendas, America's progressive religious world represents a large body of committed and caring human beings—deeply bound, out of their own understanding of the connection between justice and the divine—who seek a world most of us could generously affirm.

Like the rest of us, they struggle with their own limitations, their own internal conflicts and weaknesses. Yet time and again at crucial moments in American history, these same communities have risen up to resist abuses of human dignity and justice in the world around them.

Tocqueville, back in the 1830s, clearly saw this feature of American religion already alive and thriving—and he approved. "Religion in America," he shrewdly reported, "takes no direct part in the government of society, but it must be regarded as the first of their political institutions." At the end of the twentieth century—on the eve of a new millennium—there's a lesson in the Frenchman's canny insight that many of us have yet to understand. ♦

**At crucial moments in American history,
religious communities have risen up to
resist abuses of human dignity.**



LET THEM EAT RATES

Ever since George W. Bush announced that he subscribes to something called “compassionate conservatism,” people have been trying to figure out just what this slogan really means. There are two broad possibilities. The first is that conservatism is inherently compassionate, in which case the adjective simply points out one of conservatism’s lesser-known qualities. (The descriptive function of “compassionate,” in this case, would be the same as that of “tough-actin’” in “tough-actin’ Tenactin”—i.e., not to imply the existence of a weak-acting Tenactin but rather to accentuate a quality already present in the basic product.) The second possibility is that “compassionate” conservatism actually differs from garden-variety right-wingery (in the way that, say, Diet Coke differs substantively from regular Coke).

“I’d probably pick the first one,” says Larry Lindsey when offered a choice between the two possibilities. He ought to know. As chief economic adviser to Bush, a notoriously empty vessel, Lindsey has perhaps the largest role in defining “compassionate conservatism” and, hence, in defining the fiscal policy of the Republican Party in the post-Clinton era.

Lindsey’s résumé does not reflect the usual career path of a man seized by a concern for improving the lot of the poor. Lindsey received his economics Ph.D. at Harvard, where he was a protégé of the prominent conservative (and onetime Reagan chief economic adviser) Martin Feldstein. After leaving Feldstein’s tutelage, Lindsey went to work for Ronald Reagan’s Council of Economic Advisers. He subsequently served as a domestic policy adviser to President Bush, was appointed a governor of the Federal Reserve, and has since hung his hat at the American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, a conservative think tank. Lindsey, in short, has spent most of his adult life in the company of white guys in dark suits who have a passion for reducing taxes and government.

HE MEANS WELL, BUT LAWRENCE LINDSEY, GEORGE W. BUSH’S TOP ECONOMIC POLICY ADVISER, EPITOMIZES THE FALLACY OF “COMPASSIONATE CONSERVATISM.”

BY JONATHAN CHAIT

Yet there have always been signs of soft-heartedness in Lindsey that belie his establishmentarian conservative background. Brad DeLong, a former Clinton adviser who taught with Lindsey at Harvard, recalls an incident in which Lindsey stuck up for the graduate assistants in his department. Harvard had a rule limiting graduate assistants to teaching one class per semester. This regulation was in place ostensibly to protect the grads from a heavy work load but, in practice, spared Harvard from paying for their health insurance. Lindsey fought for the health insurance.

But Lindsey is not one of those conservatives whose generosity of spirit is limited to those with whom he comes into daily contact. He has spent an extraordinary amount of time (for a Beltway Republican, anyway) thinking about the condition of the non-rich. He is working on a book examining whether markets work in inner cities. During his tenure at the Federal Reserve, Lindsey delved into the Community Reinvestment Act, a measure designed to force banks to provide loans to poor neighborhoods, and he surprised community activists with his support for the notion. “If you want a guy who actually is a compassionate conservative, it’s Larry Lindsey,” says Richard Medley, a Democratic Wall Street investment adviser who knows him.

Lindsey’s sensibility is reflected in the tax proposal Bush unveiled in November. The compassionate premise in Bush’s plan is that even the poor face high “marginal” tax rates. As they earn more, they lose the benefits of the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC). So, in the worst case, a worker with a very large family whose job-related income goes from, say, \$20,000 to \$35,000 could face a “tax” (in the form of lost EITC benefits) of close to 50 percent on the increase, almost what a millionaire pays.

Lindsey wants to reduce the marginal tax rates faced by low-income workers. This is the quintessential compassionate conservative issue: an interest in tax cuts that benefit the country club set but are also aimed at what Lindsey calls “the waitress who makes \$25,000 a year.” It is also a brilliant political