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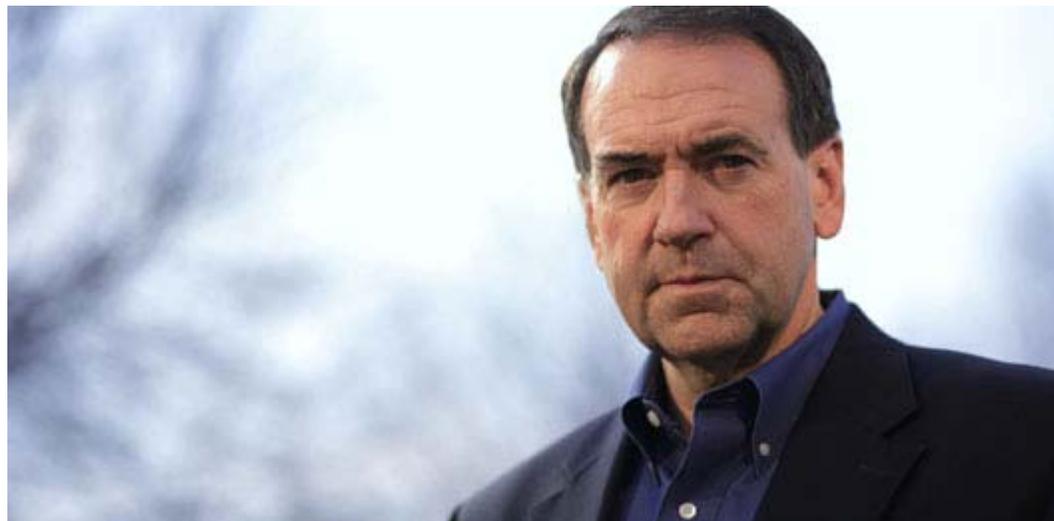


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## Requiem for the Religious Right (and a Primer for Progressives)

BY **GLENN C. ALTSCHULER** | 11:52 AM FEBRUARY 19, 2008 | TAGS: O2 MIKE HUCKABEE



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Mike Huckabee—the shape of things to come?

### SOULED OUT: RECLAIMING FAITH & POLITICS AFTER THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

By E. J. Dionne Jr.

*Princeton University Press, 251 pages, \$24.95*

“I hope we can answer the alarm clock and take this nation back for Christ,” Mike Huckabee, a Baptist minister, proclaimed in 1998. Ten years later, Mr. Huckabee remains committed to a fundamentalist agenda on abortion, evolution school prayer and gay marriage. But his tone—and tactics—have changed.

He always gets asked “the God questions,” Mr. Huckabee complained to Liane Hansen of National Public Radio, when he’d rather be talking about public policy: “I was a governor ten and a half years and led in education, rebuilding our road system, health care [and] never really

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governed with a sense of religious fervor. I run for president and that's all people want to talk about."

Mr. Huckabee is not alone in concluding that the relationship between religion and politics in the United States is changing. According to E. J. Dionne Jr., a syndicated columnist for *The Washington Post* and the author of *Why Americans Hate Politics* (1991), "the era of the religious Right is over." A liberal and a Catholic, Mr. Dionne believes Americans are ready to rethink religion's role in public life. In *Souled Out*, he argues—as Barack Obama did in *The Audacity of Hope*—that religion should not be relegated to the private sphere, as long as its partisans do not "absolutize" politics, and as long as they use arguments that are relevant to those who don't share their theological assumptions.

Democrats, Mr. Dionne insists, can attract churchgoing Americans with policies, grounded in religious traditions of social and economic justice, that address war and peace, poverty, the organization of work, and our collective responsibility for the old, the young and the sick.

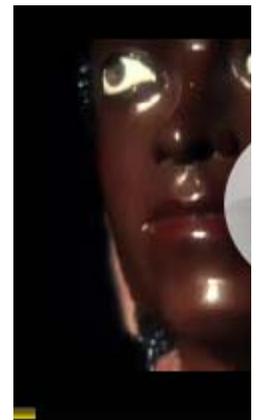
Recognizing that "it's much easier to scream across barricades," he provides a political primer for politicians who want to reclaim the center. Pragmatic, programmatic and preachy, *Souled Out* is a work in progress. Mr. Dionne may be premature in giving last rites to the conservative evangelical movement. But at its best, his book provides new ways of talking about religion and public policy—just in time for liberals laboring to be "born again."

DESPITE THE PARTISAN polarization of the past three decades, Mr. Dionne demonstrates, a majority of churchgoing Americans remain in the middle of the road. Attracted to what David Brooks calls "flexidoxy"—a hybrid of flexibility and orthodoxy—they are, at once, individualists and communitarians, committed to egalitarianism, upward mobility, property ownership and market capitalism constrained by concerns for the common good. In 2004, these moderates—along with the evangelical base—reelected George W. Bush. "Findings from the 2004 network exit polls among voters who took middle-of-the road positions on cultural issues show that 38 percent of those who thought abortion should be legal in most cases voted for Bush, as did 52 percent of those who supported civil unions." So did one-third of those who believed the federal government should play a more substantial role in solving problems—and 16 percent of those who thought the president deferred too much to large corporations.

Moderates and independents, including Latino Catholics and Rust Belt Reagan Democrats, are up for grabs in 2008. They might trade an elephant for a donkey, Mr. Dionne suggests, if liberals use faith-inflected rhetoric to forge links between personal and social responsibility. Democrats should remind voters that although the rate of abortion has declined since 1981, recourse to it is still closely tied to income. Allocating resources for adoptions, health care, child care, housing, and sex education, then, will save far more fetal lives than legislation banning "partial birth" abortions or mandating parental consent.

Mr. Dionne urges Democrats to give at least two cheers for capitalism before redefining "the moral economy." They should make the case—drawing on the encyclicals of Pope John Paul II and Protestant Social Gospellers—that the "free market," especially in its global form, does not automatically produce just outcomes. All too often, it disrupts family, work and neighborhood, and punishes individuals who have done nothing wrong. By linking "social justice" with "social renewal," Mr. Dionne maintains, Democrats can attract committed Christians worried about moral decline, a decadent popular culture and government programs that sap the character and will of recipients.

Whether the Christian Right is "growing impatient with narrow agendas," Democratic candidates would do well to heed E. J. Dionne's plea that they remember—and draw on—"the spiritual sources of their own dreams." After all, he concludes, the central goals of American liberals—"to lift up the poor, feed the hungry, shelter the homeless, care for the sick and challenge injustice—have biblical roots and religious sanction."



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Magical thinking, religious authoritarianism, sectarianism and xenophobia continued to be widespread throughout the period. Only fifty miles from Europe's largest capital city, the inhabitants of Tring drowned a husband and wife for "witchcraft" in 1751. We refer to this period as the Enlightenment, however, in part because such practices were in decline. (The Tring incident was to be the last of its kind). So what characterized Enlightenment thought? There were two main drivers: rejection of authority and an enthusiasm for the benefits of trade. The rejection of blind faith in authority "whether its source was monarchical, aristocratic or clerical" was central to Enlightenment thought.