October 2004

Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Hugh Urban (---.cohums.ohio-state.edu)
Date: 10-06-04 10:51

Amidst the inane, pointless distractions of Swift boat veteran accusations and National Guard memos, Bruce Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush" is a breath of fresh intellectual air in our discussions of politics, religion and the November election. As someone who has followed Lincoln's work on Bush, 9-11 and the Iraq over the last three years, I have been consistently impressed by his ability to provide fresh and penetrating insights into subjects that have been treated ad nauseum (and often very badly) by the mainstream media. Lincoln's analysis has also grown even more nuanced and sophisticated since his first publications on the subject, such as Holy Terrors. This short essay also demonstrates Lincoln's ability to write for a more popular, non-academic audience -- a skill that more academics need desperately to learn if we are to have any significant impact on the larger social and political world around us.

The points I found most valuable in the "Bush Theology" piece are the following three: First, I like the way Lincoln clearly traces the evolution of Bush's theology from his initial born-again experience and calling to Presidency to the Manichaean war against evil and teleological view of history that emerged after 9-11. Second, Lincoln does a fine job of dissecting the multiple theologies, or rather piled-up layers of theology, in Bush's public statements, showing the tensions and apparent contradictions between them. And finally, he also makes a persuasive argument that there is a significant disjunction or slippage between the well-crafted statements supplied to Bush by his speech-writers and his rather crude off-the-cuff remarks, such as "the people who did this act on America...are evil people...They're flat evil..." As Lincoln aptly put it, Bush has a knack for transforming his speech-writers' "subtle instruments of persuasion into clumsy parodies of themselves."

However, while I greatly enjoyed this article, I was left with several lingering, unanswered questions. The first of these concerns Lincoln's assertion that Bush's statements reflect, not simply the naïve convictions of an unschooled believer, but a "sophisticated theology" that expresses a surprising degree of complexity. This leaves the reader wondering: Just where does this "sophisticated theology" come from? Is it simply a rhetorical flourish added by his speech-writers? Is it evidence of influence from Dominion Theologians who call for a political system ruled by genuine Christians? Is it just another campaign strategem planned by Bush's ruthlessly brilliant advisor, Karl Rove? Or is it instead a kind of Christian mask painted over a deeper, largely non-religious, economically and politically-motivated agenda promoted by others within the administration, such as Cheney, Wolfowitz and the Neoconservative faction? My own suspicion would be the last of these possibilities, or perhaps a complex combination of all of the above. Lincoln briefly hints at this in his final paragraph, where he mentions the "tough-minded neo-conservatives who share Leo Strauss's cynical view of religion as unfit for elites but useful in swaying the masses." Yet, probably because of his intended audience, Lincoln does not address this question in any detail in this piece. Many like myself will be left wishing that he had.

This is an important point, it seems to me, because Bush does have many powerful and influential supporters in
the Christian Right. Among them are Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed, who have both recognized Bush as the new head of the Christian Right in America; and Tim LaHaye, co-author of the best-selling Left Behind series of apocalyptic fiction and founder of the highly secretive Center for National Policy (at which Bush spoke while campaigning in 1999). Is Bush’s political agenda the same as or influenced by theirs? Or are he and his speech-writers simply using the terminology of the Christian Right strategically in order to appeal to that particular audience? Lincoln here seems to imply the latter; yet many of Bush's supporters appear to assume the former.

Second, Lincoln argues persuasively that there are multiple theologies at work in Bush's public statements -- theologies that pile up much like his multiple rationales for the war in Iraq. However, where Lincoln sees these multiple theologies as inconsistent and in conflict with one another, I would argue that this ambiguity or theological fuzziness is perhaps intentional. In his religiosity, as in many aspects of Bush's persona, there seems to be a kind of "skillful use of obscurity" or a "strategic ambiguity" -- perhaps analogous to what Carl Pope and Paul Rauber call Bush's "Strategic Ignorance" when it comes to environmental policy. As Craig Unger observed in "House of Bush, House of Saud," Bush has been such an effective candidate in large part because he serves as a sort of "Rorschach test" that can be read in many different ways by many different factions who see in him what they want to see. It seems likely that Bush's murky and multiple theologies work in a similar way, by allowing many different kinds of Christians -- from extremist Dominion Theologians to avid readers of the Left Behind series to moderate Catholics, to even non-religious conservatives -- to see in him the kind of strong moral character they want to see. To some, he is simply a man of strong values and sincere commitment; to others he is the new leader of the Christian Right in America with a sacred mission to retake our government from the secular humanists, gays and abortionists; and to still others, such as readers of Left Behind, he is leading the ultimate war of good against evil that will destroy Babylon and prepare the way for Christ's return for the new Millennium. Far from a nest of tensions and contradictions, this ambiguity would seem to be one of Bush's greatest strengths as a public persona.

In any case, I enjoyed this article and look forward to reading others' reactions, as well as seeing its impact on a broader audience.
individual salvation in Arminian terms, thus its conditionalism. At the same time, Americans began to transfer the Calvinist understanding of salvation to the nation itself. Thus, we as a nation are elected by God and are thus the inevitable instrument of God’s will on earth, yet the working out of that salvation depends on those individuals who choose to become saved and thus come to see their own lives and that of the nation in the context of God’s plan for America and humanity. I agree that the two understandings of salvation are not logically consistent but they do present a coherent view of the self and nation to which conservative Christians and the Christian Right would be drawn.

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Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Sarah Iles Johnston (---.homenet.ohio-state.edu)
Date: 10-07-04 11:55

I would like to comment on Lincoln’s and Urban’s remarks about the evolution (or increasing muddiness) of Bush’s theology.

All theologies are at best only heuristic models, developed as they were by clergy and scholars. Individual, on-the-ground systems of belief typically are so filled with contradictions and multi-layered inconsistencies that we can scarcely call them systems at all. For better or for worse, they are bricolages. Bush’s tangled collection of beliefs is just par for the course, I suspect.

The important difference between his system and everyone else’s is that his has much higher visibility. This has two ramifications. First, higher visibility lends his system authority, but second, that authority in turn lends his system a false unity. Urban may be right that Bush’s advisors take advantage of the “ambiguous,” “fuzzy” nature of his system to attract different kinds of Christians, but beyond that, I would suggest, the system as a whole implicitly reassures listeners that their own, similarly variegated systems of belief are valid, coherent and without need of examination. More than ever then, under Bush’s administration belief has been encouraged to play out its well-worn function of excusing all things and covering all deficits, including those that are internal to the belief itself.

If, in some fantasy world, we had a president who was a skilled theologian, capable of developing and articulating theologically coherent arguments, we would at least be able to evaluate and where necessary disagree with conclusions reached by those means. Under the current situation, those who oppose Bush are reduced to objecting, more vaguely, that he relies on religious beliefs at all—-a much more amorphous complaint and one that puts complainers in the strategically unfortunate position of appearing to be anti-religious in general.
Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Ira Chernus (---.colorado.edu)
Date: 10-08-04 13:11

Bruce Lincoln's article is most stimulating and opens up new directions for important research. However, in principle there is no reason to assume that Bush's theological positions are necessarily contradictory, or that his inarticulate off-the-cuff remarks are evidence of insincerity. To establish those claims, we must have documentary evidence of his personal religious commitments or beliefs. In the absence of documentary evidence, we cannot go much beyond intelligent speculation about these matters.

So far, all we have is very fragmentary evidence from interviews, which can be quite unreliable. Bush's own words available to us thus far all come from documents intended for public political consumption. This need not mean that they mask or contradict his genuine commitments. It just means that we have no way of knowing, yet. The big problem is that the relevant personal documents may never become available, due to stricter secrecy practices and increased reliance on email that may be electronically disappeared. At best, we will probably have to wait twenty or thirty years to get the necessary evidence to draw any persuasive conclusions. Perhaps by then a one-term president from the early 21st century won't be interesting enough to warrant such scholarly scrutiny.

Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Date: 10-08-04 16:19

I very much appreciate all of the above comments, which are all intelligent and help expand the discussion. However, I would just to first respond briefly to the last point made by Ira Chernus.

Chernus suggests that there is insufficient evidence for us to do more than speculate about the true nature of Bush's theology. Here I would say two things in Lincoln's defense: first, this is just one short piece that Lincoln has written on the subject. It was written for a very specific audience and with spatial limitations, and he has fleshed out these arguments with more detailed evidence in other places.

Second, Lincoln is not trying to "get inside Bush's head" to find out what he "really believes." He is simply looking at what Bush has written and said publicly, precisely because those statements ARE meant for public consumption. That's exactly the point -- this is the narrative the administration is trying to persuade us to believe about Mr. Bush. And that does, I think, represent a piled-up hodge-podge of incoherent theologies of the sort that Lincoln describes. But as I said above, that very ambiguity and lack of specificity does, ironically, seem to work to Bush's political advantage.
Many thanks to Prof. Urban for his insightful comments. As for the two general issues he raises:

1) One can only speculate about the source of the sophistication in Mr. Bush's theology, since the prime evidence for this exists in texts that are the end product of a collaborative process, the authors and nature of which are largely shielded from public view. My best guess is that the words that come through the President's mouth on formal occasions are only his in part, which is to say that he gives initial instructions, possibly reviews drafts, and signs off on the final speech, accepting responsibility for it. In-between, many people contribute words and ideas. Surely his chief speechwriter, Michael Gerson, who holds a degree in Theology from Wheaton College, is one major contributor. Karl Rove and Karen Hughes, top advisors to the President, also surely participate. Beyond that, suggestions are probably culled from a good number of sources, including Ralph Reed, who is now on the President's staff, but I have no inside information and can only speculate. Consultation with influential outsiders like Pat Robertson, James Dobson, and Tim LaHaye probably does take place, but I would resist the suggestion that the President's agenda is identical to theirs. Rather, there is some affinity, complementarity, and process of negotiation. On some points, agreement is easily reached; on others, the outsiders want concessions of one sort or another and Mr. Bush wants their support. Haggling follows, and official pronouncements represent his attempt to secure maximal support at minimal cost, the cost here taking the form of lip service in the first place, appointments and policy decisions in the second.

The notion that Robertson, et al. are running policy seems simplistic and far-fetched to me, although they have a seat at the table and a voice in the process, on some issues quite an effective one. Urban also raises the spectre that a group of entirely different sort -- Messrs. Cheney, Rumsfeld, Wolfowitz, et al. -- are really the authors of policy and that the President's religious rhetoric is a 'mask' of sorts thrown over their evil machinations. This again strikes me as too simple, although I am quite certain that the voice they have in the formation of policy is very powerful, indeed. As I see it, Mr. Bush is neither puppet nor mask, but the connective tissue that brings together a neo-conservative (and in some cases, paleo-conservative) set of advisors inside his government and an evangelical electoral base. The former has little interest in religion, except as a means to win support for their desired ventures; the latter has enormous interest in religion, but might well resist foreign adventures launched for other reasons (geopolitics, oil, post-Cold War ambitions, etc.). The structural genius of Mr. Bush and his writers is to rephrase the neo-conservative agenda in a religious idiom, then to perform that text with real conviction (or, at a bare minimum, the semblance thereof).

2) I'm quite taken with Professor Urban's suggestion that the ambiguities I identified may be intentional, rather than accidental. Certainly that view is consistent with Mr. Bush's desire to reach and convince as many religious voters as possible, irregardless of the religious differences among them.
This is a very helpful observation, both for the historic depth it provides and for its analytic utility in the present. I'm better versed on the latter than the former, so let me respond to that side only.

I do think there's a contradiction in the strands of religiosity that Mr. Bush has sought to assemble, but it's a contradiction that can be blurred or contained, and it's advantageous for him to do so. It's for that reason that I tried to identify and stress the tensions and disconnects in his rhetoric. The move from individuals as saved or chosen to a nation that holds the same status and plays the same role is surely attractive to those who understand themselves as both patriots and Christians. But the question of what it takes to be a Christian and what it takes to be a Christian nation can become thorny. Thus, the greater are the demands for Christian belonging, then the smaller is the number of true Christians and the lesser the Christian identity of the nation. If conversion (becoming 'born again') is an arduous process, then those experienced it can view themselves as an elite, while viewing others, including the state (or 'the government'), as lesser, deficient, or fallen. Conversely, if the whole nation is Christian or even God's darling, it is more difficult to maintain that the born-again hold any special status or are entitled to any special voice. One can try to have it both ways, of course, but only by eliding three contradictions. The first is that between individual and collective models of salvation; the second, between salvation through faith and salvation through works; the third, between views of the nation as a) in need of salvation or b) the instrument through which others are saved.

I can't agree that Mr. Bush's performance is "par for the course," although I find the contrast between theological systems and theological bricolases helpful. The former, as Prof. Johnston observes, are usually the product of professionals, often working collectively; the latter are the slapdash affairs with which ordinary individuals muddle through. The problem is that Mr. Bush's pronouncements are the result of prolonged, very conscious labor by very skilled professionals, some of them speechwriters, some political operatives, and some theologians or church leaders. His staff is fully capable of producing a coherent, systematic theology, if that's what they wanted to do. The results show that this is not their goal and one must assume that the speeches they write represent the realization of the goals they have. The problem thus becomes reading backwards -- and reading with as much skill, savvy, and critical acumen as we can muster -- to infer the purposes that these texts are designed to serve.

Johnston's second point is extremely well taken. Those who wish to oppose the President are often put in the uncomfortable (and counter-productive) position of seeming opposed to religion in general. I therefore think it is particularly important that those who have professional expertise in the study of religion and/or institutional commitments to its practice speak up when they feel Mr. Bush is using religious rhetoric and postures in ways that are flawed in any fashion: contradictory, disingenuous, simplistic, manipulative, and so forth.
This criticism goes too far and not far enough. If I'm being charged with having treated the President unfairly, I really don't think that's the case. I've not claimed to know what he believes in his heart of hearts and since I don't know that, I can't really claim to know that he says things other than those he really believes. One can -- and in practice, one does -- speculate about the sincerity of other human subjects, but it's very hard to be sure.

Chernus seems to think that documents exist somewhere that can or do reveal the heart of hearts, but this seems wrong to me. Belief is a matter of interiority and one never has access to another's interior. We thus never deal with belief per se, only with expressions or performances of belief, which may be insincere, disingenuous, self-deluded, or simply guarded and partial. Comparing one document to another lets one identify inconsistencies and there are conclusions that may legitimately be drawn, but nothing lets one say that a given document perfectly represents 'real' beliefs, while another deviates in some measure.

My discussion was based on the words that come through Mr. Bush's mouth, not what lies in his soul. Those words, moreover, are only partially his. In effect, what I study is the public pronouncements of the chief of state, as crafted by the apparatus he heads. That this composite entity is very interested in religion is clear enough as is the fact that it speaks about religious issues in ways that are complex, conscious, careful, and calculated, but also somewhat contradictory. Such a conclusion follows from study of the words themselves, the chronology of their appearance, and the process of which they are the product; it does not require, desire, or claim to have been inside anyone's head.

I very much appreciate Lincoln's thoughtful responses to all of the above comments.

I just want to respond briefly to Lincoln's comments on the first of my two question/criticisms of his article. Here I was simply pointing out the fact that Lincoln had not really addressed the question of where Bush's theology comes from. I sincerely doubt Bush that himself is smart enough to construct a "sophisticated" anything, much less a theology. I was certainly not suggesting that Pat Robertson or Tim LaHaye were actively involved in the formation of his theology -- though I do think their vision of religion in the political domain does need to be taken into serious consideration. Nor was I trying to reduce it to a kind of empty religious superstructure pasted over deeper political interests. Rather, I was simply trying to prod Lincoln to be more specific about his interpretation, which he left fairly ambiguous in this particular article, but which he stated
more clearly in his last comments.

I think Lincoln's point that Bush represents sort of the "connective tissue" that helps hold together the political agenda (esp. of Cheney and the Neocons) and the base of popular support (the Christian Right) is an excellent one. To me, this really hits the nail on the head.

Thanks for the excellent conversation.

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Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Sarah Iles Johnston (<---.homenet.ohio-state.edu)
Date: 10-11-04 19:47

I agree with you, Bruce. Or rather, I think there is a plausible scenario that takes in both of our views. What's happened, I suspect, is that Bush came up with a muddled theology all on his own but that his advisors have been quite happy to make it even more muddled and thereby more useful.

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Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Lily Chumley (<---.spc.uchicago.edu)
Date: 10-14-04 10:47

Regarding the suggestion that Bush's theology-of-history is a veneer constructed by neo-conservative (secular) staff to conceal neo-conservative (secular, political-economic) goals- an instrument of the most instrumental of instrumentalists- is it possible that neo-conservatism itself contains a theory of history that verges on the theological, a theory of history that dovetails with evangelical/biblical expression in part because it shares presuppositions (and origins) with it? I have heard some neo-cons talking about the need to create "free" markets and "free" societies all over the world, a project that is strange because, like the theology of history Bruce Lincoln so adeptly describes, the outcome of total freedom is supposed to be inevitable. This attitude reminds me of Jensen (the CEO)'s speech to Howard Beale in "the Network" (which I have copied below just because I am amazed that it is available with only 45 seconds of searching on the internet). Perhaps someone who knows more about neoconservatism than I do could comment on whether this is true, or where I could look to find out more about neoconservative philosophy/theologies of history.

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The all-consummate corporate pitchman and business magnate Arthur Jensen, an ex-salesman, summons
Beale into his imposing conference room ("Valhalla"): "They say I can sell anything. I'd like to try to sell something to you." In one of the best-acted scenes in the film, Jensen devastates Beale with an evangelical lecture - a hypnotic, spell-binding, convincing, God-like speech about the facts of international business and commerce - the corporate mentality. He describes the unimportance of individuals and the overarching omnipotence of currency as the center of the universe:

You have meddled with the primal forces of nature, Mr. Beale, and I won't have it, is that clear?! You think you have merely stopped a business deal - that is not the case! The Arabs have taken billions of dollars out of this country, and now they must put it back. It is ebb and flow, tidal gravity, it is ecological balance. You are an old man who thinks in terms of nations and peoples. There are no nations! There are no peoples! There are no Russians! There are no Arabs! There are no Third Worlds! There is no West! There is only one holistic system of systems, one vast and immane, interwoven, interacting, multi-variate, multi-national dominion of dollars! Petro-dollars, electro-dollars, multi-dollars, reichmarks, rins, rubles, pounds and shekels! It is the international system of currency which determines the totality of life on this planet. That is the natural order of things today. That is the atomic, and subatomic and galactic structure of things today. And you have meddled with the primal forces of nature, and you will atone! Am I getting through to you, Mr. Beale? You get up on your little twenty-one inch screen and howl about America and democracy. There is no America. There is no democracy. There is only IBM, and ITT, and AT and T, and DuPont, Dow, Union Carbide, and Exxon - those are the nations of the world today. What do you think the Russians talk about in their councils of state - Karl Marx? They get out their linear programming charts, statistical decision theories and mini-max solutions and compute the price-cost probabilities of their transactions and investments just like we do. We no longer live in a world of nations and ideologies, Mr. Beale. The world is a college of corporations, inexorably determined by the immutable by-laws of business. The world is a business, Mr. Beale. It has been since man crawled out of the slime, and our children will live, Mr. Beale, to see that perfect world in which there's no war or famine, oppression or brutality. One vast and ecumenical holding company, for whom all men will work to serve a common profit, in which all men will hold a share of stock, all necessities provided, all anxieties tranquilized, all boredom amused. And I have chosen you to preach this evangel, Mr. Beale.

Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Hugh Urban (---.col.wideopenwest.com)
Date: 10-14-04 19:27

I think Lily Chumley raises an interesting point -- namely, that the market has itself assumed a religious status as a kind of totalizing and unquestionable ideology that we increasingly take for granted as simply the way the world works. There have been several things written on this subject: Thomas Frank's book: "One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism and the End of Economic Democracy;" David Loy's article, "The Religion of the Market" (JAAR 1997), among others.

However, it seems to me that the Neocons have added a new twist to -- or perhaps reaction against -- the sort of general market theology that pervades most of American politics, both democratic and republican. Whereas the neoliberal market theologians seem to believe in a global utopia created by breaking down
national borders and opening up markets everywhere, the Neocons have a very clear ideal of American imperialism or "benevolent hegemony," in which our superior American values guide and structure the global economy. The invasion of Iraq is a perfect example of this in action. We "bring freedom" to Iraq, while at the same time insuring that our oil flow remains steady and giving no-bid contracts to our companies like Halliburton to rebuild the country we've just decimated. It's "free market," but only if "freedom" is defined in our terms.

On the Neocons, generally, the best book out there now is Halper and Clarke's "America Alone: The Neoconservatives and the Global Order"

Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Joseph Morales (---.broadviewnet.net)
Date: 10-15-04 07:04

I find the content useful for framing an analysis of religion and its relation to social policy (i.e., Bush and the agendas of the Christian Right). However, what about race? Surely, whiteness has played a role in the formation and propagation of such Manichean discourses. Are representations of good and evil in the global context color-blind? How should we understand the formation of Bush’s global project? Mr. Bush states, “And we believe that freedom is the Almighty's gift to every person in this world. It is the basic belief of the American system.” Are the American system and its so-called message of freedom to the world an enterprise without a possessive investment in whiteness? I would like to know more about the historical formation of Mr. Bush’s theology (e.g., the racial formation of capitalism and its conceptions of freedom and good/evil).

Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Precept (---.dial.telus.net)
Date: 10-16-04 01:50

"One is forced to conclude that Mr. Bush’s theology – also his deployment of same – is less systematic than pragmatic. Although he fosters the impression that his policies are grounded in deep religious conviction, reality is often the reverse."/b> Bruce Lincoln

"Reality is often the reverse"; is a true a statement of fact as is seen in the rigid social structure that states built on religious fundamentalism adopt to the exclusion and or very little tolerance of an opposite point of view on any matter. In fact a religiously based dogma for the running of a secular state will always find reason to oppose views deemed anti-religious. And somewhat like the cliche of one disenfranchised, reference will always be made by using God as the basis and or justification for any action; no matter how universally unacceptable.
"Vague notions and attractive phrases like “compassion,” “evil,” “history,” or “freedom” are given rhetorical, sometimes even intellectual coherence by his staff. Mr. Bush may resonate to some of the ideas and some of the language they prepare for him, but for the most part he uses these to justify policies that have already been decided on quite other grounds. Preemptive wars, abridgements of civil liberty, cuts in social service, subsidies to churches, and other like initiatives are not just wrapped in the flag; together with the flag, they are swathed in the Holy."

Bruce Lincoln

Your above observation makes my point. By using cliches associating God with the designs of purely human decisions, the religiously driven promote their own agenda while rubber stamping God on everything with their own God created rubber stamp.

"Many of those responsible for shaping these policies are tough-minded neo-conservatives who share Leo Strauss’s cynical view of religion as unfit for elites, but useful in swaying the masses."

Bruce Lincoln

An irony of maximum proportions; and a blatant error on the part of those who use God for their own ends... using God in a way God describes as evil; when those who proport to use God as basis for their guiding the masses; use God; but only for their own selfish desires for power and influence.

"To Mr. Bush falls the task of securing broad support for this team’s agenda from his fervently evangelical base. It is not an easy business, and it requires all the linguistic skill, theological ingenuity, and tactical acumen his staff can muster. The apparent sincerity with which Mr. Bush displays his convictions while delivering their lines is a significant piece of his own, very real genius. It is also the condition of his success. We saw it on display at the Republican Convention. And we will see if it gets him through the elections."

Bruce Lincoln.

It must be noted that since religious fundamentalism of any sort depends on a base; as is Christianity in Most of North America and as is Islam in most of the middle east; as such any, mounting the soapbox of Christianity; whether of evangelical fundamentalism in the case of Mr. Bush or re Roman Catholic Christian values; as is the case of Mr. Kerry....that the religious following and support will accrue to the leader deemed the more sincere by those who themselves are steeped in the religious stupor taught by the advocates of the one leader or the other, is a foregone conclusion.

This is not a new practice. Mohammed of Islam converted his followers to Islam using violence in the name of religion. Mohammed justified thievery by invoking Allah as his accomplice in malfesiance. More than a billion of living humanity and countless billions of humanity now dead, believed Mohammed, following him then and now.

Those who see the gullibility of the masses as a way to fame, power and influence, do just like Mohammed; and only need to feed the hungry desire of the masses for anything to coerce support for self serving desires. But they themselves would have "not anything" to do with serving God, as God desires to be served.
Be advised that it is God Himself who says that any who worship Him must worship Him in "Spirit and in Truth". God also says..."Not everyone that says Lord, Lord; will enter His Kingdom". Which makes the point that those who use God's name in ways other than in "Spirit and in Truth" do only usurp the name of God...and to their folly.

precept
What is his real motive?

Because so many lives have been impacted, one can not help but wonder when Bush characterizes the war as a fight between Good and Evil:

Why did he really lead the country to a pre-emptive invasion of Iraq?

In regard to domestic issues, his references to faith-based initiatives make me wonder:

Why does he support legislation that further disenfranchises the poor and benefits the wealthy?

I agree that given the skill set of the individuals with whom Bush consults and upon whom he relies in presenting his personae, there is a machine at work whose aim, pernicious or not, is to generate public support for the president. This is the dynamic that is fascinating to me and I wonder at the effectiveness of their particular kind of religiously suggestive rhetoric.

This occurred to me while listening to Howard Dean interview with Terry Gross on Fresh Air. Dean mentioned that in the North East, it is common for people to feel uncomfortable talking about religion in public because many consider religious feelings to be a private matter. He mentioned this as a contrast to what he experienced in the south.

John Kerry seems to share that discomfort, and yet there is constant pressure put upon him to express some kind of faith. I am curious about the use of the kind of rhetoric employed by George W. Bush, and whether there has ever been a moment when such a distinctively Southern religious expression has had success on a national scale.

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Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Bruce Lincoln (---.uchicago.edu)
Date: 10-17-04 16:36

Morales and Sullivan have identified a very important dimension to this question, but one that I begged for several different reasons. First, I'm not certain how you can do more than speculate about 'real' motives in this case, where those motives are shrouded not only in the normal ways (human interiority being ultimately unavailable to outside inspection), but by a powerful apparatus designed to hide and deny them. Second, while I'd be happy to speculate when talking informally among friends, the purpose of my article (originally published in The Christian Century) was to reach those who disliked Mr. Bush on other grounds, but found his religiosity appealing. I tried to find a voice and approach that would let me argue that there was more -- or perhaps less -- to his pious postures than is apparent at first glance, but I didn't want to be shrill, insensitive, or biased from the outset. Therefore, I stuck strictly to his public pronouncements and held back from speculating.

In addition to Mr. Sullivan's demand that we ask why the President has made the various policy decisions he
has, I would begin by citing John DiIulio, who resigned in disappointment and anger as director of the faith-based initiative. Mr. DiIulio was quoted as saying that with the Administration "everything, and I do mean everything, is political." As I put things together, there are several constituencies Mr. Bush actively cultivates as his electoral base: the wealthy, white southern males, and the evangelical. All of these trouble me, but the last most of all, for in focusing on them, he has given enormous influence to a group that is among the most loyal and the most easily manipulated once their loyalties have been enlisted.

Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Richard Nance (---.wanarb01.mi.comcast.net)
Date: 10-19-04 14:27

Mr. Sullian's request for motives betrays a laudable concern with justification. This administration is, of course, not particularly worried about providing justification for its statements and actions.

As Bush himself said in 2002 during an interview with Bob Woodward,

"I'm the commander, I do not need to explain why I say things. That's the interesting thing about being the President. Maybe somebody needs to explain to me why they say something, but I don't feel like I owe anybody an explanation."

For Bush, to explain oneself and attempt to justify one's actions and statements is unnecessary. I do what I do, I say what I say, and I don't need to specify reasons for my actions and statements--to you or to anyone.

But, of course, there's a difference between *providing justification* and *being justified*. One of the truly chilling aspects of the current administration is that they do not seem to have noticed this distinction. I'm not sure that this administration is at all concerned about *being justified*.

Consider the following short excerpt, taken from Ron Suskind's article "Without a Doubt," The New York Times Magazine, October 17, 2004. (The 'I' is Suskind himself):

"In the summer of 2002, after I had written an article in Esquire that the White House didn't like about Bush's former communications director, Karen Hughes, I had a meeting with a senior adviser to Bush. He expressed the White House's displeasure, and then he told me something that at the time I didn't fully comprehend -- but which I now believe gets to the very heart of the Bush presidency.

The aide said that guys like me were "in what we call the reality-based community," which he defined as people who "believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." I nodded and murmured something about enlightenment principles and empiricism. He cut me off. "That's not the way the world really works anymore," he continued. "We're an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you're studying that reality -- judiciously, as you will -- we'll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that's how things will sort out. We're history's actors . . . and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.""
Sullivan's questions ("What is Bush's real motive?" "Why did he really lead the country to a pre-emptive invasion of Iraq?") suggest the charitable assumption that the administration would wish to count itself as members of the "reality-based community" of reasoned discourse. Suskind's revealing story suggests the opposite: the administration isn't concerned with such trifling matters as "evidence" or "justification." Empires have no need of reasons.

Reply To This Message

Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Bruce Lincoln (---.uchicago.edu)
Date: 10-19-04 19:31

This passage Nance quotes is revealing and chilling, but also provides some basis for hope. Those who act without reflection may make history for a time, especially if they possess massive power. But they also make huge mistakes in judgment, which result from their lack of reflection and could be prevented had they taken time to reflect, discuss, and reconsider. Those mistakes contain the seeds of their undoing, wrought by others who also take action in history: action that reveals and takes advantage of their adversaries' errors.

Reply To This Message

Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Hugh Urban (---.col.wideopenwest.com)
Date: 10-19-04 20:08

I would like to add another point that builds on all of the above comments, and particularly the last one by Nance and Lincoln's response thereto. One key point that none of us has addressed in this discussion is the critical role of the media in the coverage of the Bush administration and in the presentation of his pious public image to the American public. The main reason that Bush can get away with saying outrageous things like "I'm the commander, I do not need to explain why I say things..." is because the corporate media has basically forsaken any kind of critical stance with regard to this administration and is letting them get away with outrage after outrage without any serious discussion.

I think this is a result of two major shifts in the American media: 1) First, the rapid consolidation of all media outlets within the last two decades. In 1983, there were roughly 50 corporations that ran all the media outlets in the US. Today, there are basically 5 (Disney, Viacom, GE Bertelsmans, and Fox). 2) Second, the radical politicization of some of those media outlets, particularly the rabidly right-wing FOX under the guidance of fanatical ideologue Rupert Murdoch, whose corporate tentacles extend through hundreds of newspapers, TV stations, magazines, book publishers, etc.... If you haven't yet seen "Outfoxed" go see it. I force my students to watch it, in order to counter-act the societal and intellectual cancer that is Fox News (or that "other fake News
All this is extremely relevant to Lincoln's article, I think, because the corporate media has demonstrated an overwhelming, astonishing, outrageous and inexcusable failure to critique Bush's use of religious rhetoric. Let's face it: If Clinton had said God called him to be president and told him to invade another country, we would have locked him away and/or burned him at the stake. And yet Bush can get away with the most astonishing, often frightening appeals to divine authority without the press even batting an eyelash.

It is deeply disturbing.

Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Henry Sullivan (---.dsl.emhrl.ameritech.net)
Date: 10-20-04 10:43

I appreciate the comments regarding my statements about motives. Hugh Urban’s last point brings me back to the other concern that I raised which, was related to the support that Bush is able to generate through his image as a born again Christian and the statements that build upon that image.

One of the books that current events have compelled me to re-read is Edward Said’s Culture and Imperialism, because he discusses the impact that the Empire narrative has on those who benefit from that empire’s exploits. Such narratives seem to be based on emotions, and seem to play on the vulnerable and insecure feelings of the audience. Given the status of conservative Christianity in the U.S., we should not be surprised, although we have the right to be disappointed, in corporate media’s inability to at least examine Bush’s religious rhetoric. He gets away with despot-like statements (“I do not need to explain why I say things”), and that is frightening, but he has, from the beginning of his political career, used the type of god language that makes the idea of Manifest Destiny so disturbing. But let’s face it Manifest Destiny is a concept that is part of the mythology of America, and the type of religious belief that Bush expresses has the same kind of untouchable status.

I have a hunch that even those in the corporate media community who are bothered by many of Bush’s religious statements are reluctant to confront him on them because they recognize the danger in alienating viewers. Even viewers that do not personally subscribe to the conservative Christian mindset generally have a kinship to it through relatives (particularly older relatives) and so challenges to statements based primarily on an emotional appeal run the risk of seeming harsh.

It bothers me that corporate media in this country has relinquished the role that it professes to serve in our society, but I am more disturbed by the reservoir of religiously oriented imperialist sentiment that seems to run throughout our citizenry. We occasionally hear criticism of the notion of Iraq adopting a legal code based on Sharia, but is it so difficult to imagine the Bush administration and the Republican leadership in Congress attempting to shift our understanding of law from something derived through a mundane process to something ordained by God?
Reply To This Message

Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Jon Stokes (---.dsl.chcgl.ameritech.net)
Date: 10-22-04 22:36

Prof. Lincoln,

(Thanks for the wonderful essay, and for giving the U of C community the chance to respond to it. My apologies for the length of my response, but I think that the comments/criticisms offered below will help to buttress some of your main arguments by rendering a bit more understandable a theological contradiction that can appear to be mystifying.)

Near the end of his essay, Lincoln points out an apparent contradiction between GWB's initial evangelical theology of personal, individual, contingent salvation and his later theology of history as a process of "gradual world-perfection, in which the Creator's goals are achieved through the collective actions of a chosen nation."

Lincoln has certainly identified a theological contradiction in Bush's public theological statements, and it's likely that this contradiction can be traced in part to the collaborative process that has produced these utterances of the course of the past few years. But the fact that Bush's public theology is something of a "horse designed by committee" doesn't fully account for the contradiction that Lincoln points out. I think there's a little more to the story.

My own experience of evangelical Christianity is that both of these contradictory theological strands--the individualist and the collectivist--not only tend to exist side-by-side within the same community (and even within the same individual), but they also tend to reinforce each other.

Modern evangelical Christianity's peculiar and apparently schizophrenic juxtaposition of an individualistic theology of personal salvation with a collectivist theology of community salvation (where "community" is various defined as one's church, one's nation, etc.) can be traced to the interaction of two cultural/theological sources: 1) the modern notion of the "individual" as the primary locus of identity, a notion that's very much tied up with the Protestant Reformation and with Protestant theological critiques of Catholicism; 2) the pre-modern, strongly collectivist orientation of the set of texts from the ancient Mediterranean world that evangelicals take to be central and authoritative.

Evangelicals are generally quite comfortable with drawing on either or both of these sources when they're asked to frame issues theologically. Often, the choice depends very much on context and audience. For instance, if you're "witnessing" to a lost soul, perhaps a friend or relative, then you'd probably want to stress the personal dimension of salvation by telling that person that if they "accept Jesus as their Lord and personal Savior" then they can have a one-on-one relationship with the Creator of the Universe. On the other hand, it's not uncommon for evangelical pastors to call a whole church, town, or nation to collective repentance, taking as their model the prophets of the Hebrew Bible who called Israel to collective repentance.

So when it comes to formulating and articulating theologies of salvation, evangelicals are equipped with two
sources on which they can readily draw: a collectivist set of sacred texts and a set of modern notions of the individual which stem in part from a recent tradition of individualist interpretations of those same sacred texts. A skilled evangelical can deploy the rhetorical and theological tools offered by either of these sources in a variety of rhetorical contexts and in a manner that suits his or her rhetorical goals, which can range from an individual call to conversion to the construction of a totalizing narrative that encompasses all of human history.

I originally had planned to include in this post some discussion of how these two theological strands manage to live together quite comfortably in evangelical culture, but I've cut it for reasons of length. To summarize briefly, though, the key concept is "group predestination," in which, regardless of any rhetoric about a "personal savior," an individual's salvation functionally becomes a matter of their membership in a group that is as a whole predestined for salvation at the end of history (i.e. when the true Church goes up on the "rapture" as the "Bride of Christ"). Accepting Jesus as one's "personal" savior is the way that one joins the community for whom Jesus is the collective savior. Thus in the absence of any ability to discern the "thoughts and intents of the heart," the evangelical is nonetheless able to judge whether a person is or is not "saved" by that person's ability to and willingness to signal their identification with the in-group using exactly the kinds of "winks and nods" that Lincoln reads in Bush's theologically inflected speeches (i.e. "You shall know a tree by its fruits").

Jon

Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Precept (--.--.di.al.tel.us.net)
Date:   10-23-04 14:13

Jon Stokes wrote:

> Accepting Jesus as one's "personal"
> savior is the way that one joins the community for whom Jesus
> is the collective savior. Thus in the absence of any ability to
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> kinds of "winks and nods" that Lincoln reads in Bush's
> theologically inflected speeches (i.e. "You shall know a tree
> by its fruits").
> >
> > Jon Stokes

Religion--the "affair of state" is the reality of US political life. Mr. Bush is only being a good politician and capitalizing on the universally accepted premise for the very existence of the United States of America.
Not any politician, liberal democrat or neo-conservative republican will in any way question having God as an integral part of "money" the love of which as stated in the Bible, "is the root of all evil". Any politician wishing to gain majority affection must play the religious card. While it is true that identification with the "whole" as in the whole Christian religiously based mind set of the US populace....The whole nation celebrates "Thanksgiving"...The whole nation identifies with "God bless America"...both in word and in song.....The whole nation celebrates the birth of Jesus...The whole nation identifies with the pain and suffering of Jesus..as can be seen in the response to the recent movie..."The Passion of the Christ"....Why else would not the whole nation view favorably a president that identifies with the very interests they themselves see as important to age old traditions. And if such a president identifies himself as "God-chosen" why would such a population with such a mind set even think to question whether their president was only being manipulative. 

Fact is; the support of a president with such an horrendous record in just about every category of responsible government..that he can get support from conversatives and liberals alike despite his obvious major failures; is testament to the hardcore Christian religious base to which Mr. Bush appeals right accross party lines.

It is this Christian religious base that belongs to the "right group" who will see to it that "their" religious agenda on which they imply the United States was founded, is imposed....This base will never allow their projected moral values to be compromised by the likes of those who would ignore the moral issues they perceive as germane to the continued deriving of "blessings on America". This is not a group to be taken lightly. Just visit any state of the union on a Sunday...a national holiday that impacts profoundly all other religions; making them also observe the Sunday blue laws, whether voluntarily or involuntarily so.

A wily politician is Mr. Bush; but the very God he purports to be his backer; at one time backed the Assyian king Nebuchadnezzar!

Re: Comments and questions on Lincoln's "The Theology of George W. Bush"

Author: Bruce Lincoln (---.uchicago.edu)
Date: 11-01-04 14:28

In many ways, Stokes is more knowledgeable than I am about the way evangelicals navigate the varied sources, spheres of interest, and inclinations of their theology, and I find his remarks quite helpful. By way of further observations, I would simply point out that most groups, like most individuals, are able to tolerate a certain amount of dissonance, even contradiction in their beliefs, and manage them through practices of compartmentalization, occasion- and goal-specific selectivity, blurring, and denial. I suspect that evangelicals are no more guilty than others on these accounts, but successful politicians are probably more so.
I returned to the public forum today in search of some useful information or points of view for a project I am working on. It is a disappointment to me that virtually all of the content of commentary on the theology of President Bush is exemplary of "me too-ism" in reference to condemning his position, after first engaging in predetermine-results speculation as to what that actually may be. A Martian reading this would see a unanimity beneath the slight differences in negative critique which would lead him or her to believe that the president represents approximately zero percent of educated opinion in this country. Really, most of this is cheerleading for a political position in opposition to George Bush, not theological analysis. I wonder how self-selected this sample may be, attracting as it has more commentary than most other monthly topics, and whether some actual balance may be out there somewhere. This selection is an opposition-party fest, not an exchange of ideas, and hardly what a historian and scholar like Professor Marty could have had in mind. If in future this period is seen as a time of "failure of the elites," I suspect that a basic cause will have been the academic fashion of the monoversity.

The theology of George W. Bush

Ok...I read through some of this tripe. First, I don't think Bruce Lincoln's position is bad as the previous posting suggests, and I think it offers some important insights, such as the president's deliberate ambiguity—which goes along with his own view of himself as pulling together and mediating the various factions within the Republican Party. What is also clear is that the responding writers are so far Left that they have not a clue as the real grief that the President catches from the Christian Right for being as "inclusive" as he actually is. In fact, if the president has erred in any fashion, it has been to the Left, and not to the Right, as he tries to appeal to the centrist and liberal wings of his own party. The ginger treatment of Airport Security issues in the wake of 9/11, the resistance to allowing air marshalls to carry concealed weapons (a standard and effective practice successfully adopted by El Al decades ago), and the President's reluctance to secure the Mexican border against illegal entry (an idea supported by probably 75% of the American public, and especially by the Reagan Democrats and the Independents) all demonstrate errors of conviction to the Left, not the Right.

The responding writers hate the President so much (for the three successive electoral drubbings they have suffered at the hands of his campaign organization) that they are incapable especially of recognizing that much of the public discomfort with President Bush right now derives from the fact that he has simply not been tough enough on a couple of critical issues, as noted above. And this resistance to really hard-right motives probably stems from the President's heartfelt Christianity.

One of the really interesting aspects of this entire discussion is that the President of the United States is not being asked to deal effectively with the issues dealt to him by history and chance, but that he is being held up to a very esoteric standard of theological critique--a standard that has been applied to no other president, not even the pious and sanctimonious Jimmy Carter, or to FDR, who, when asked about his beliefs, responded
"Why, I am a Christian and a Democrat." Yet no one asks about the theology of the man who in all probability deliberately set up Pearl Harbor for the devastating attack that brought the US into WWII (Robert Stinnett, Day of Deceit). And no one asks about the theology of the inept Carter, whose antipathy toward the military brought about the disastrous hostage rescue attempt, and whose political naïveté brought about the rise of the Ayatollah Khomeini, the archetypal Islamo-fascist.

Indeed, most Christians at any level do not have a sophisticated theology, and they should not. Christianity is about faith, and not theology. The apostle Paul warned his converts away from the trap of theological speculation, and rightly so. Jesus himself never asked anyone to adhere to a particular theology, and left us with a series of commandments, teachings and the example of his life and sacrifice. So why should the current president be treated like a boob on the assumption that he does not have a complex theology? In the end, these questions are answered by the previous posting, namely, that the liberal monoversity simply hates the president and is engaging in a bit of feel-good groupthink here in trashing this man.

Don Schley
It seems to me there is another fundamental issue that has not really come up in this already very interesting discussion -- namely, the apparent contradiction between Bush's claim to intense piety and the astonishing record of lies, dissimulation and obsessive secrecy that pervades virtually every aspect of his administration.

On this point, I am deeply torn. I agree with Lincoln that Bush does appear to be a man of deep and sincere religious conviction. He really does seem to believe the vapid, convoluted, often nonsensical theological statements that come out of his mouth. And remarkably enough, that seems to be a great strength in the eyes of his largely white evangelical base.

Yet at the same time, we cannot get around the fact that this is frankly one of the most lying, dissimulative, secretive, downright fraudulent presidencies in history. From the stealing of the election through the criminal machinations of Jeb Bush, to the refusal to release Reagan's and Bush I's records (as well as W's own Texas gubernatorial records), to the blatant lies used to justify the Iraq war, to the stealth war on the environment, these guys, as John Dean observed, seem to dissemble as a matter of policy. There have been numerous serious studies of Bush's dissimulations: David Corn's "The Lies of George W. Bush," John Dean's "Worse than Watergate," John Nichol's "Dick: The Man Who is President" to name but a few of several dozen.... I don't think we need any more evidence that these guys are systematic, consistent, perhaps pathological liars. And more than that, they are willing to lie about things that have led to the unnecessary deaths of 1108 American soldiers and now between 13000 and 15000 innocent Iraqi civilians.

So my question is simply: How do we reconcile these two (apparently) contradictory aspects of Bush's agenda: the man of intense religious conviction and compassionate conservatism on one side, and the man of intense secrecy, deception, lies, and human slaughter on the other?

As far as I can tell, there are only a few possible solutions to this theo-political conundrum:

1. Bush does not really know what the hell is going on, but is living in an insulated fantasy world in which America is still God's beacon of freedom to the world. Meanwhile, other more sinister figures like Cheney are actually running the show behind Bush's smiling, pious façade. This seems to be John Nichol's analysis in "Dick: The Man who is President."

2. Bush's public display of piety is not in fact as sincere as it appears, but is as fictional as his military career and many others aspects of his persona.

3. Bush's brand of religiosity is similar to that of others in the Christian Right, such as Falwell, Swaggart, Robertson, etc. who are also well-known for their lies and misdeeds, but somehow manage to rationalize that to themselves and their believers as necessary to God's plan.
4. We really have entered a postmodern era, in which there no longer is any depth or "truth" beneath the surface image, and Bush is merely a simulacrum or "mannequin of power," in Baudrillard's sense.

Personally, I go back and forth between these possibilities, particularly between numbers 1, 3 and 4. The second seems less likely to me. I just don't think Bush is smart enough to be that duplicitous. He can barely pull off one convincing identity, much less two.

But I would welcome any other alternative possibilities that Lincoln or others might suggest.

---

Re: piety and lies: contradiction or continuity?

Author: steve campagna-pinto (---.lsanca54.dynamic.covad.net)
Date: 02-15-05 01:06

Bush lies in order to advance an agenda that he is certain is consonant with God's plan. It is a type of rhetorical just war, which you note in solution #2. Lying becomes a form of the sacrifice of the innocent (the truth) that is justified by belief in the resurrection (ultimate truth). Living in a world largely dominated by the Devil, this is a necessary --- and a gracious --- way of transforming such a world.

This is not a matter of intelligence, though I wouldn't underestimate Bush --- this is one of the big mistakes liberals make. Rather, it is the result of a type of training for a world that is evil which Bush has received from advisers over the years since his conversion. His heart has been sanctified, his belief is joyous and true, and thus he confronts those outside his circle of faith as sinful and in need of the correction available through the implementation of the Word in the world. If this involves deceit, misdirection, and secretiveness, so be it. This helps to explain the coded biblical language of his speeches: he is speaking to two different groups, one the community of believers, the other everyone else. And even if we are all convinced that he lies as a matter of policy, he gets away with it. Bush is only a contradiction and a liar to those who hold a different view of what religious conviction means. Again, look to his speeches. He spoke of crusades, and invokes Manichean dualism regularly because this is how he views the world. And his courage and greatness (he imagines) come from fighting evil on direct orders from his Father in heaven. The real answer to your conundrum is most fully found in Bush's prayer life --- to which we have no access, but from which his most important visions and values come.
a terrifying possibility

I just finished reading Seymour Hersh's new book, "Chain of Command," which inspired me to add just one brief additional comment to response to Lincoln's article. Hersh ends his book with a truly brilliant observation:

"There are many who believe George Bush is a liar, a President who knowingly and deliberately twists facts for political gain. But lying would indicate an understanding of what is desired, what is possible, and how best to get there. A more plausible explanation is that words have no meaning for this president beyond the immediate moment, and so he believes that his mere utterance of the phrases makes them real. It is a terrifying possibility."

I think this wonderful analysis applies equally to Bush's religious statements. I doubt very much that he has any real understanding of the sanctimonious words he is uttering, whether supplied by his speech-writers or by his own sluggish brain. I doubt that he has any interest at all in the sorts of theological contradictions that Lincoln points out. But he utters them forcefully and with conviction, and for him and for his largely uncritical audience, that seems to be all that matters. Meanwhile, the ones with the real power in this administration -- Cheney, in particular -- carry on their cynical, aggressive and greed-driven activities behind the smirking facade of this self-righteous chuckle-head.

It is indeed terrifying.

Re: a terrifying possibility

I'm less cynical than Hersh and Urban, but only slightly less so. I'm willing to grant that Mr. Bush has some convictions, and suspect that this is one of the things that lets him perform conviction so convincingly. I do, however, think his convictions are of relatively modest proportions and that he's glad to amplify them by mouthing phrases prepared by trusted members of his staff. This explains the gap between his formal speeches and his impromptu remarks. The latter are a very impoverished version of the former, revealing that he only half-understands what it is he's supposed to believe. Such core as there is, as I understand it, goes back to his conversion experience of the mid-1980s when he accepted Jesus as savior, stopped drinking, and turned his life around. Conceivably, he lies even about that, and there's no way to be absolutely certain. But I'm inclined to accept his sincerity on this one point, and I do think it gives him faith in faith. The further one moves from
these points, the more suspicious I become that neither the words, nor the convictions that Mr. Bush mouths have solid grounding in the man himself.

Re: a terrifying possibility

Date: 10-11-04 17:49

Lincoln has made an important point here. However, Hersh is not suggesting that Bush is simply lying; rather, the more disturbing possibility is that Bush does not even possess the intelligence or critical skills to understand the implications of the things he's saying. As far as I can tell, he lives in an extremely protected environment, isolated from actual information about how badly things are going. He probably really does believe most of what he says; and I do not doubt the sincerity of his religious conviction or his belief that God really wanted him to be president and invade Iraq. But increasingly, it seems evident that reality is breaking through and beginning to crack his strange fantasy world... Nowhere was this more apparent than in the first debate, where Bush really looked as if he were about to implode as he faced the stunning contradictions between his fantastic beliefs and the reality of the disasters in Iraq and at home.