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A Culture War Against Christianity

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Throughout The Great Divide, the authors attack, critique, and seek to denigrate the beliefs and values of conservative Christians. Using the oldest and most unfounded canards ever thrown at evangelicals, John Sperling and his friends present Christian believers as unintelligent, uninformed, hate-filled, backward, and dangerous.

As the authors divided the fifty states into “Metro” and “Retro” designations, the link between conservative Christianity and what the authors describe as Retro values was immediately clear. “The religious divide is perhaps the most profound of all the major determinants of political affiliation,” they observed. “On one side are the observant Christians, a majority of whom are members of conservative evangelical and often fundamentalist churches, together with conservative Catholics and Mormons. Here, the Southern Baptists have the largest footprint. They are joined in their conservative beliefs by evangelicals of other denominations: Congregationalist, Lutheran, Methodist, Presbyterian, and Assemblies of God. This group is overwhelmingly Republican. On the other side of American religious life are those who are members of moderate or progressive Catholic and Protestant churches in all the denominations. They are joined by Jews, Buddhists, members of other non-Judeo-Christian faiths, by the less observant of all persuasions, and finally by the seculars. Members of this group tend to be Democrats, but many are moderate Republicans.”

The Great Divide's authors want to sound an alarm that will awaken the secular left and the Democratic Party to the peril represented by conservative Christians. At the same time, the authors recognize the fact that conservative Christian churches and denominations are growing, while liberal denominations are quickly fading. As Sperling and his coauthors explain, “the more rigorous a church's teaching is and the more demanding the church is of its adherents, the faster it will grow.” Furthermore, “This is especially the case when a church demands of its adherents that they proselytize. This is evidenced by the worldwide presence of Southern Baptist and Mormon missionaries. Conversely, the more progressive a church's doctrine and the less it demands of its adherents, the faster it will decline.” That conservative churches are growing and liberal ones declining is hardly news, but in The Great Divide, this analysis serves as a dire warning of potential growth in evangelical influence.

As Sperling sees it, that would be an unmitigated disaster. After all, evangelicals—together with all their “Retro” friends—are backward, uneducated, rural, and unsophisticated. Theirs “is the land of the nuclear family and not the land of cohabiting, unmarried, hetero, or same-sex couples, or of the young seeking cultural excitement in the large Metro cities.” Retro Americans are “God, Family, and Flag folks,” who are “retarding” the nation's development. According to the authors' fanciful analysis, conservative Christians are unified in rejecting everything from evolution and the scientific method to public health services, public parks, and concert halls. Fundamentalist and evangelical Christians are to be opposed and seen as dangerous because they see “the Bible as inerrant and as a guide to both private and public life.”

Taking the argument further, the authors explain: “Consequently, they reject the rational, scientific approach to the development of public policy that has characterized American politics since the nation’s founding. In place of these Enlightenment values, they have chosen irrationality and biblical prophecy.”

Do these people actually know any conservative Christians? Will an assault like this from the secularist left be condemned by liberals who claim values of “tolerance” and acceptance?

The condescension demonstrated so graphically in this project is seen especially in the cultural and scientific put-downs the authors pitch at conservatives. According to *The Great Divide*, Metro America is filled with sophisticated secular people who have enough common sense to believe in the scientific method and to settle all questions of public policy according to simple “rationality.” Meanwhile, we conservatives might as well be sitting on a stump in rural America, picking our teeth while trying to figure out which scientific theory we should oppose now. Who, ask the authors, could ever doubt this? Metro America “almost always excels” in matters of education and science.

This worldview clash, according to Sperling’s analysis, explains how Americans can be so divided over questions such as embryonic stem cell research, abortion, and same-sex marriage. Just listen to Sperling and his colleagues explain the difference between Metro and Retro Americans on these issues. Metro Americans are “religious moderates and seculars, Democrats, and moderate Republicans who are committed to excellence in education and science; who want the arts to flourish; who are accepting of differences in ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation; and who want a clear division between church and state.” How does this play out in terms of public policy? “These moderates are in favor of women’s, gay, and workers’ rights. Their congressional representatives support affirmative action, public education, childcare, and other services needed by working parents, as well as progressive taxation. They oppose tax cuts for the wealthy that undercut progressive taxation, and they oppose subsidies and tax shelters favoring industry, especially the extraction and financial industries, whose contributions to [President George W.] Bush and the Republican Party provide the financial foundations of Republican power.” Retro Americans, on the other hand, are blamed for the nation’s “high levels of social and economic class disparities” and virtually every other social ill. As if such a statement were necessary, the authors conclude: “In our opinion, Retro values, economic organization, and distribution of political power do not represent what is best for America.”

Even so, Sperling is afraid those Retro values are exactly what America is getting. President Bush is blamed for being “one of the most divisive presidents in our history.” Likewise, “the Radical Right path of God, Flag, and Family now being blazed by President Bush and the Republican Party is leading all of America back to Retro rather than forward to Metro America.”

The authors leave no doubt as to where this path will lead. “Pursuit of policies based on a fundamentalist God, that use the flag to divide patriots from traitors, and to present the ‘traditional family’ under the guidance of the husband with a stay-at-home mom as the American ideal can never unite America. If America is ever to be a true United States, it will be united with the Metro values of inclusion, respect for science and rational discourse, and policies designed to provide physical, economic and social security for all families, both the 20 percent of the ‘old traditional families’ and the 80 percent of ‘new traditional families.’ These are the values that will undergird a united America that can provide for all its citizens.”

This analysis combines imbecility with audacity in a breathtaking mix of hatred and class warfare.

The man behind all this is a case study in the intersection of big money and crackpot politics. John Sperling, age eighty-three, made billions in the business world, founding the nation’s largest for-profit educational enterprise, the University of Phoenix. As he told *USA Today*, his real intention is to convince Democrats that they must abandon any plan to create a coalition that would include cultural conservatives and mainstream Americans. Instead, he wants the party to shift left—far left. “It seems pretty clear to me that the Democrats had better stop trying to be all things to all voters and concentrate on a base for themselves,” he concluded.

Sperling has found himself in controversy before. His University of Phoenix—no longer under his control—has been controversial from the start, opposed by various accreditors and the academic mainstream. He is also known for funding research into cloning. Several years ago, he hired a team of scientists in an unsuccessful attempt to clone his dog, “Missy.” Even though the so-called “Missyplicity Project” failed, the researchers were finally successful in cloning a cat. The resulting firm, Genetic Savings and Clone of Sausalito, California, now offers to clone other cats at a charge of fifty

thousand dollars per animal.

Speaking of his current project, Sperling told The New York Times that his work should be seen as a “position paper” for a “reformation” of the Democratic Party. “What we set out to do was produce the first coffee-table political book that would hope to be widely read by people who never read political books,” he said.

I think Americans can be assured that this book will land on very few coffee tables and will be read by even fewer people. John Sperling and his associates demonstrate throughout this book that they have no idea where most Americans stand on the issues of the day. They attempt to paint all those who defend the sanctity of human life and oppose same-sex marriage as backward fundamentalists representing some kind of extremist fringe. That kind of idea has been thrown around since the start of this debate, but the landslide vote for a constitutional amendment defending traditional marriage in Missouri is absolute proof that the vast majority of Americans will not support same-sex marriage and will not buy into anything close to John Sperling’s liberal utopia.

Furthermore, The Great Divide is itself marked by a bizarre extremism. What in the world are Americans—conservative, liberal, or otherwise—to make of a sentence like this? “Biblical inerrancy means the refusal to accept the fact that humans are animals and, like other animals, will overcome all barriers to mate and bear offspring, and also that, like other mammals, a certain percentage of their number will be homosexual”? The true nature of the agenda promoted by these authors is clear in their celebration of what they describe as “our present urban, suburban, eclectic, multiethnic, multireligious, and multi-gendered society.” What on earth is a “multi-gendered” society? The book also presents a truly radical vision of the separation of church and state—a division which would strip conservative Christians of any voice at all in national policy and public debate. Misreading history, contorting the law, and offering confused and erroneous analysis, these authors have put together a perfect babble of confusion even as they address some of the most significant issues of the day.

John Sperling’s Retro vs. Metro analysis is secularism on speed. His open antipathy towards grassroots Americans is simultaneously sad and revealing. This book represents a true regression from rational discourse, even as its authors worship what they describe as rationalism. The Great Divide, along with John Sperling’s Retro/Metro advertising campaign, may be remembered in the future as nothing more than an odd and inconsequential blip in the 2004 political season. On the other hand, it might represent something far larger and more ominous. Time will tell.

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