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The God Gulf–Nicholas Kristof Strikes Yet Again

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Nicholas Kristof just can't help himself. An op-ed columnist for The New York Times, Kristof is writing about Christianity once again. As before, his article reveals far more about himself than his subject.

In "The God Gulf," Kristof warns that "church going Republicans" and "secular Democrats" are increasingly divided over the issue of faith. "A new Great Awakening is sweeping the country, with Americans increasingly telling pollsters that they believe in prayer and miracles, while only 28 percent say they believe in evolution. All this is good news for Bush Republicans, who are in tune with heartland religious values, and bad news for Dean Democrats who don't know John from Job."

Those two sentences reveal Kristof's fanatical fascination with evangelical Christianity. In another recent column, Kristof related his shock that more Americans believe in the virgin birth of Christ than in the theory of evolution. From his social location in the editorial offices of The New York Times, this is absolutely inconceivable. It is as if Kristof has been told that a majority of Americans believe in the Tooth Fairy and deny the existence of gravity.

So far as Nicholas Kristof is concerned, a lack of support for the theory of evolution is a sign that America is going religiously insane. The rejection of evolution is heresy among the cultural elite, who scratch their heads in amazement that millions of Americans do not share their secular outlook. The stark reality that a majority of Americans claim to believe in prayer and miracles is enough to send Kristof and his peers running to break the glass on the religion alarm.

Kristof's animosity toward religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is reflected in his opening sentence: "Religion may preach peace and tolerance, yet it's hard to think of anything that—because of human malpractice—has been more linked to violence and malice around the world." This isn't the first time Kristof has made such an argument. Nevertheless, the most murderous regimes of the twentieth century were those most fanatically opposed to Christianity. Communist regimes in the Soviet Union, China, and Cambodia claimed hundreds of millions of victims. Hitler's anti-Christian ideology led to the ovens of Dachau. Just what kind of history has Kristof been reading?

In reality, Kristof is not so much concerned about the past but the present. He warns that the sudden and dangerous outbreak of religion in America's public life is especially volatile during a campaign year. He calls on citizens to brace themselves "for a new round of religious warfare and hypocrisy at home." Kristof appears to be falling into something like a fit of secularist paranoia. Over the past several months, he has released a series of articles that betray his basic mistrust—if not outright disparagement—of conservative Christians.

Last March, Kristof wrote a column entitled, "God, Satan, and the Media." Kristof took that opportunity to call his fellow secular journalists to task for their ignorance of the vast unknown people known as evangelical Christians. Like an explorer who has just discovered some new and exotic tribe, Kristof excitedly described conservative Christians as if his fellow secular journalists should be expected never to have met a Christian believer. "Evangelicals have moved from the fringed to the mainstream," he warned, explaining that President Bush cannot be understood apart from his Christian convictions. Yet, "I can't think of a single evangelical working for a major news organization."

Simultaneously, Kristof advised that evangelical influence is to be both opposed and feared. "I tend to disagree with

evangelicals on almost everything,” he insisted, “and I see no problem with aggressively pointing out the dismal consequences of this increasing religious influence.” Creatively, he packaged his prediction of the “dismal consequences” of evangelical influence with a call for journalists to stop sneering at conservative Christians. Does this man ever look at himself in the mirror?

Just a few months later, Kristof was back on the op-ed-pages of *The New York Times* advising readers that America must be understood as distinct from the rest of the world, largely because of its stunted secularism. In Kristof’s view, “the most fundamental divide between America and the rest of the industrialized world” is faith.

Later, Kristof argued that this rise in religious conviction can only be understood because of an irrational backwardness that infects religious believers. At this point, he cited belief in the virgin birth as evidence of anti-intellectualism—which is only confirmed by the fact that so many of the same people reject the theory of evolution.

Kristof is an ardent internationalist who earned a law degree at Oxford University on a Rhodes Scholarship and has covered international affairs for the *Times*. In his view, President George W. Bush represents a radical departure from the foreign policy establishment that framed America’s understanding of the world for generations.

Repeatedly, Kristof has pointed to President Bush’s Christian faith as the explanation for his views on foreign policy and national defense. In an earlier column, Kristof suggested that President Bush would go to war in Iraq because he was driven by a “messianic vision” to reorder the Middle East.

Nicholas Kristof has become a parody of himself, and a caricature of secular journalism at its worst. He inhabits a world in which Christian conviction is as foreign as herding sheep. He acknowledges that the cultural elite—including the editors and reporters of *The New York Times*—inhabit a very different world and share almost nothing of the Christian beliefs held by a majority of Americans. Those who clean the offices at the paper’s building are far more likely to express Christian conviction than those who do the writing. After all, the journalists and editors went to better schools.

Journalist Cullen Murphy explains that members of the media elite “do not represent a broad cross-section of the American people.” He says of his colleagues: “They are professional skeptics. They are also by and large irreligious, and if they have a sectarian affiliation at all, it is nominal.” This point is affirmed by Peter Brown of the *Orlando Sentinel*, whose research indicated that journalists were much less religiously committed than the people in their markets. As Brown lamented, “Many journalists will acknowledge that there’s a big demographic difference, but they say it doesn’t affect coverage. I don’t think that’s true.”

In his most recent column, Kristof warns that Christianity is likely to be a weapon of political warfare in the upcoming presidential race. Nevertheless, Kristof has come to the begrudging conclusion that President Bush’s Christian convictions are genuine. “After talking to Mr. Bush’s long time acquaintances, I’m convinced that his religious convictions are deeply felt and fairly typical in the U.S.” Fairly typical? This columnist for *The New York Times* seems just to have discovered the fact that his secularism is out of line with the convictions of America’s mainstream culture, and that President Bush actually holds those incredible beliefs Kristof associates with Christianity.

In a fascinating and convoluted argument, Kristof points to Vice President Dick Cheney’s Christmas card as an example of what he fears about the intersection of religion and politics. According to Kristof, the Vice President’s card “symbolized all that troubles me about the way politicians treat faith—not as a source for spiritual improvement, but as a pedestal to strut upon.” What is Kristof so upset about? The Vice President’s card featured a quotation from Benjamin Franklin: “And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire cannot rise without His aid?”

This sent Kristof into secular apoplexy. In Kristof’s view, “Mr. Cheney’s card wrenches Ben Franklin’s quotation from its context and upends the humility that Franklin stood for.” This is, to say the least, a selective example that is itself wrenched out of context. Indeed, the Benjamin quotation could be read as calling for the very humility Kristof finds to be absent.

The columnist’s selective outrage over this Christmas card raises an even larger question: Did Kristof expect the Vice President’s Christmas card to be an exercise in systematic theology? We can be certain that such a Christmas card from a Washington official would have sent Nicholas Kristof into an even higher orbit of anxiety.

To be fair, Kristof also criticizes Howard Dean's awkward "grasping for faith" in order to impress Christian voters. It is as if even the most secular of candidates is not safe. According to Kristof, Dean's effort to repackage himself as a Christian is "tasteless." Believe me, coming from The New York Times, that's intended to cause serious hurt.

In writing these three remarkable columns, Nicholas Kristof serves to inform American evangelicals about how we are seen by the cultural elite. Conservative Christians are seen as anti-intellectual, cultural regressive, and dangerous to the body politic. America is in grave danger, Kristof would warn, unless something can be done to marginalize the influence of this unwashed mass of humanity that believes in the virgin birth and miracles, but rejects evolution. To his fellow journalists, Kristof sends out an alarm: Do not sneer at these people, but do everything you can to marginalize their influence.

Oddly enough, one has to wonder where Nicholas Kristof has been for the last several decades. After all, in 1976 Newsweek magazine proclaimed "The Year of the Evangelical." Conservative Christians were recognized as instrumental in the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980, and have been credited or blamed for wielding political power and influence ever since. After all, the rise of what secular journalists have called the "New Religious Right" is hardly a recent development.

Evidently, Kristof's eyes have just been opened to the existence of America's theological tribe. With the excitement of an anthropologist on the hunt, Kristof is running back to tell his colleagues what he has found. He believes that Christians are sincere about their faith—and that is precisely what troubles him.

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