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THEY SAID IT

America is a deeply religious society even in its secularism. Its atheism, its agnosticism, above all its human-rights hedonism can be seen as a form of religious sectarianism--or, more precisely, of paganism. For when the tide of conventional belief ebbs away, the incoming surge deposits strange objects, often relics of a distant past, on the shore.

Paul Johnson, "God and the Americans," *Commentary*, January 1995.

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"CRACKERQUIDDICK" AND THE CULTURE WARS.

There seems to be a little confusion among the political class about the nature of the current presidential campaign and its likely long-term effect on what has come to be known as "the culture wars." As we note in our companion piece today, in last Thursday's *Wall Street Journal*, the columnist Daniel Henninger declared an end to the culture wars, writing that "this week the Democrats sued for peace."

Now, we don't mean to pick on Henninger, though given that he shows up in both pieces this week, it is no great secret that we disagree him. But Henninger is hardly alone in blowing this one. The fact of the matter is that the supposition that the culture wars are over and that the good guys have won is pretty common these days, with analysts, strategists, politicians, and various pundits all agreeing that the overt invocations of God by Democrats in this campaign are *de facto* evidence that the "values voters" of 2004 have at long last been acknowledged as a critical political voting bloc. As Henninger wrote, both Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama showed up at Messiah College's "Compassion Forum" last week, and "God and faith were everywhere...." He continued:

Some bloodless analysts have said for several years that Democrats had to say this to win because, you know, a lot of people "go to church." And yes, what candidates seeking votes say may be false, faked or fantastic. What remains is the fact that these two, in competition for votes, have conferred political legitimacy and respect on this swath of America.

Set aside the controversies over the name-brand religious-right leaders. Whatever one calls these people – Reagan Democrats, the religious right, values voters – their main beef was not with the election returns but with the manifest evidence that the big-city elites thought their beliefs and their lives were stupid. That is what died this week.

You'll forgive us, we hope, if we are a bit more skeptical than Henninger and others who believe that the Democrats, after forty years of waging war against religion, claim suddenly to have found it. For starters, we are not quite as ready to dismiss the possibility that some politicians would invoke religion purely for the sake of garnering votes. As we noted in the aftermath of the 2004 campaign, in which "values voters" swung the election for Bush, the Democrats have no choice now but to discuss God and faith openly and sympathetically, lest they continue to lose close contests to "weaker" candidates. As the grammatically challenged Speaker of the House (then-Minority Leader) Nancy Pelosi put it immediately following the 2004 vote, "we don't demonstrate it clear [sic] enough [but] Democrats are faith-filled."

But even if we are wrong, and even if Henninger and the rest are right that Democrats are expressing true religious faith and true devotion to and acceptance of piety and the supernatural in American politics, we still can't help but wonder "so what?" This campaign, this revival of religio-political discourse on the left, and even this contention that the left has given up its war against conventional culture are all redolent of an argument we have been making for more than a decade now, one in which we have consistently noted that mere invocation of morals does not in and of itself indicate an acceptance of or even an acknowledgement of the legitimacy of traditional values, particularly traditional American values.

Contra Henninger et al., we are of the opinion that the true nature of the Democratic establishment's views on and attitude toward traditional American principles can be found not in the candidates' professions of faith before large audiences on the campaign trail, but in the less fulsome words they have for the nation and its values behind closed doors, in the company of only those who share their prejudices and pride. Specifically, we have in mind here the comments made two weeks ago by Barack Obama while courting rich liberals in San Francisco.

When Obama called the folks of rural Pennsylvania "bitter" and claimed that they therefore cling to guns, religion, and rejection of "the other," he was

not exactly breaking new ground. This mixture of contempt and pity has been the standard leftist response to "traditionalists" for at least a quarter century now. Indeed, as the inimitable Mark Steyn reminded us this weekend, Obama's "Crackerquiddick" comments are, in many ways, simply a more sophisticated, more politically correct version of the left's dismayed and disdainful reaction to the news that the "values voters" had secured President Bush's reelection, a reaction perhaps best exemplified by Keith Reade, a left-wing columnist for the London *Daily Mirror* who in 2004 wrote the following pre-cursor to Obama:

Were I a Kerry voter, though, I'd feel deep anger, not only at them returning Bush to power, but for allowing the outside world to lump us all into the same category of moronic muppets. The self-righteous, gun-totin', military-lovin', sister-marryin', abortion-hatin', gay-loathin', foreigner-despisin', non-passport ownin' red-necks, who believe God gave America the biggest d*** in the world so it could urinate on the rest of us and make their land "free and strong."

It only makes sense that Obama would direct his broadside against "traditionalist" voters at rural Pennsylvanians specifically; after all, today's Pennsylvania primary is the first in six weeks and the one that may, at long last decide the nomination. Still, in doing so, he leapt headlong into dangerous waters and took on far more than merely the voters of rural Pennsylvania. Those rural Pennsylvanians whom Obama dismissed just happen to be emblematic of the broader traditionalist spirit in America, as are the rural voters of Kentucky, Ohio, West Virginia, and about a dozen or more other locales throughout the mid-Atlantic and especially in the Appalachians. The rural, blue-collar voters of this region are, in many ways, the proto-American traditionalists. They hunt. They pray. They serve. They work. They fight. And they have done it all for centuries.

The following passage, taken from an April 2004 piece published by *The Wall Street Journal*, is, we believe, an excellent explanation of the importance of this region and its people to the broader American experience.

The Scots-Irish are derived from a mass migration from Northern Ireland in the 1700s, when the Calvinist “Ulster Scots” decided they’d had enough of fighting Anglican England’s battles against Irish Catholics. One group settled initially in New Hampshire, spilling over into modern-day Vermont and Maine. The overwhelming majority--95%--migrated to the Appalachians in a series of frontier communities that stretched from Pennsylvania to northern Alabama and Georgia. They eventually became the dominant culture of the South and much of the Midwest.

True American-style democracy had its origins in this culture. Its values emanated from the Scottish Kirk, which had thrown out the top-down hierarchy of the Catholic Church and replaced it with governing councils made up of ordinary citizens. This mix of fundamentalist religion and social populism grew from a people who for 16 centuries had been tested through constant rebellions against centralized authority. The Scots who headed into the feuds of 17th-century Ulster, and then into the backlands of the American frontier, hardened further into a radicalism that proclaimed that no man had a duty to obey a government if its edicts violated his moral conscience.

Matched with this rebelliousness was a network of extended family “clans,” still evident among the Scots-Irish, built on an egalitarianism that measured a person by their own code of honor, courage, loyalty and audacious leadership. Noted Scottish professor T.C. Smout

said it best when he observed that these relationships were “compounded both of egalitarian and patriarchal features, full of respect for birth while being free from humility.” They demanded strong leaders, but would never tolerate one who considered himself above his fellows. Andrew Jackson, the first president of Scots-Irish descent, forever changed the style of American politics, creating a movement that even today is characterized as Jacksonian democracy.

The Scots-Irish comprised a large percentage of Reagan Democrats, and contributed heavily to the “red state” votes that gave Mr. Bush the presidency in 2000. The areas with the highest Scots-Irish populations include New Hampshire, Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, the Carolinas, Georgia, Alabama, northern Florida, Mississippi, Arkansas, northern Louisiana, Missouri, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Colorado, southern Ohio, Illinois, Indiana, and parts of California, particularly Bakersfield. The “factory belt,” especially around Detroit, also has a strong Scots-Irish mix.

The Scots-Irish political culture is populist and inclusive, which has caused other ethnic groups to gravitate toward it. Country music is its cultural emblem. It is family-oriented. Its members are values-based rather than economics-based: they often vote on emotional issues rather than their pocketbooks. Because of their heritage of “kinship,” they’re strangely unenvious of wealth, and measure leaders by their personal strength and values rather than economic position. They have a 2,000-year-old military tradition based on genealogy, are the dominant culture of the military and the Christian right, and define the character of blue-collar America. They

are deeply patriotic, having consistently supported every war America has fought, and intensely opposed to gun control....

It is worth noting, we believe, that this analysis of America, its values, its development, and the role played by the Scots-Irish immigrants is entirely consistent with other, more scholarly analyses of the development of Anglo-American democratic capitalism. Among others, Max Weber, the sociologist and soothsayer of the bureaucratic state, is perhaps best known for his sociology of religion and for his contention that Protestantism, and specifically Calvinism (the religion of Scots-Irish) provided the cultural and philosophical foundations for the development of post-medieval democratic capitalism.

It is also worth noting, we think, that the above analysis suggests precisely why Obama and the rest of the New Left appear so out of touch with and so exasperated by these rural descendants of and collaborators with the Scots-Irish. We are hardly the first to note this, but Obama's now infamous comments about the voters of Pennsylvania not only reflect the Democratic Party's decades-old condescension to and dismissal of "values voters," but also demonstrate the Party's supreme arrogance in its presumption that any voters who would reject the liberal sirens' song must simply be too stupid, too naive, or too easily manipulated to know what is best for them. The ultimate expression of this presumption came in the form of Thomas Frank's, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, an embarrassingly telling book published after the 2004 election that purports to explain what is wrong with red-state voters that would compel them to vote over and over again against their own "true" interests and against the party that best represents them on the "real" issues.

You will notice that according to this description of the Scots-Irish, they tend to be "values-based rather than economics-based" and to "vote on emotional issues rather than their pocketbooks." To these voters, the cultural issues *are* the real issues, the important concerns that reveal how a candidate will behave on other matters. Contrast this both with Frank, who

thinks that concentration on such issues is indicative of something being "wrong" with voters, and with Obama, who whined in last Wednesday's debate that cultural issues are essentially "manufactured issue[s] that our politics has become obsessed with [sic]." Clearly, both men believe that the issues that animate traditionalist voters are unimportant. They and their party can't seem to figure out why these voters don't care about the *real* issues, the issues that they think are important, and that they think all smart people would think are important as well.

Finally, we think it is worth noting that the author of the above analysis is also the author of a highly acclaimed and well received book on the subject, *Born Fighting: How the Scots-Irish Shaped America*, which is a paean to the Scots-Irish, to their effect on American life, and to the politically incorrect "redneck" culture of which they are very much a part. This man is also a well known and well respected novelist, an exceptionally talented onetime columnist, a graduate of the Naval Academy, a Marine veteran of the Vietnam War, a onetime Assistant Secretary of Defense for Reserve Affairs, and the former Secretary of the Navy under Ronald Reagan. He is also the current junior Senator from the Commonwealth of Virginia, *Democrat* James Webb.

Webb, of course, is a recent convert to the Democratic Party, leaving the GOP in 2006, in part in protest against the Iraq War, and in part because he saw an opportunity to win a Senate seat. Webb is also a brilliant, fascinating, and strange – very strange – man. In 1979, he wrote a highly controversial piece titled "Women Can't Fight." While serving in the Reagan administration he adamantly and publicly refused to shake hands with Senator John Kerry, whom he considered a traitor who had maligned his fellow Vietnam veterans. He has loudly and proudly defended Confederate soldiers, who, he has written, fought more for sovereignty and liberty than for slavery. And just six years before becoming his general election challenger, he rather enthusiastically endorsed former Virginia Governor George Allen in Allen's run for the Senate.

Yet Webb is now mentioned by some of his party's most prominent leaders and most ardent media supporters as "the perfect choice" to be Barack Obama's running mate in the general election campaign against John McCain. Webb would, the theory goes, not only mitigate some of Obama's notable weakness on national security and defense matters, but would bring the Scots-Irish and rural voters to the ticket, making it virtually unbeatable. As Webb himself put it in the conclusion to the aforementioned 2004 *Wall Street Journal* piece: "the greatest realignment in modern politics would take place rather quickly if the right national leader found a way to bring the Scots-Irish and African-Americans to the same table, and so to redefine a formula that has consciously set them apart for the past two centuries."

But that's not going to happen. It's just not. For starters, there is no chance whatsoever that the left-wing of the party, that which is populated by the anti-warrior Moveon.org types, is going to support for Vice President a man whose two greatest pursuits have been the defense and the celebration of American soldiers, i.e. those who "performed their duty," and the defense and the celebration of Confederate soldiers, i.e. those who "performed their duty – as they understood it – under circumstances too difficult for us ever to fully comprehend," as Webb eulogized them in his famous 1990 speech at the Confederate Memorial.

Additionally, there is, we believe, little chance that the men and women whom Webb has long celebrated would follow him into the Obama camp, certainly not after the Reverend Wright debacle and Obama's declaration of hostility to such voters. As elections analyst extraordinaire Michael Barone has pointed out, those Jacksonians who remain Democrats are overwhelmingly hostile to Obama's candidacy and have been voting overwhelmingly against him, which is to say "for" Hillary Clinton, and that was *before* Crackerquiddick.

More to the point, this demographic group – whether you call them Scots-Irish, Jacksonians, the Religious Right, or simply the white, working class – will have one of their own at the head of the opposing ticket.

As the son and grandson of four-star admirals, John McCain may not exactly be blue collar or working class, but he is Scots-Irish, he is part of a military family that can trace its roots back to the Revolutionary War, and he, probably better than any politician in recent memory, has actually lived a life premised on the virtue of "duty." The idea that these voters would leave McCain to vote for Obama simply because he brought McCain-lite onto the team seems to us wildly unrealistic.

And this brings us back to the culture wars, to religion, and to the belief that Democrats can win over the nation's rural and religious voters simply by professing their personal faith in God. We just don't get it. In our opinion, Hillary and Obama can wax euphoric all they want about God, and faith, and how many times the Holy Spirit walked with them at sunset, and it's still not going to make a damned bit of difference to the outcome of the culture wars. What these Democrats, Daniel Henninger, and the others seem to have missed is that this alleged "religious" clash really isn't about religion at all. And nor is it about God. It is about values.

John McCain is quite likely the least religious candidate left in this race. But that doesn't really matter, since his values are those that are most in line with "traditional" values. A little more than a decade ago, we began discussing what we called a great "Clash of Moral Systems," a clash that dominates Western Civilization today and that has always, in some form or another, been a crucial factor in Western history. Not to oversimplify, but as we've noted many times before, in its current manifestation, this clash pits the traditional Judeo-Christian moral code against what can be called the "post-Modern" moral code. And as it turns out, professions of personal religiosity are only marginally correlated to adherence to the traditional moral code. Or in other words: just because the two current standard-bearers of the post-Modern moral camp couch their appeals to voters in overtly religious – and even Christian – terms, that does not in any way mean that they share the values of "traditionalist" voters.

Indeed, the secularization of this clash of moral systems and the related presumption that this is simply a matter of religion vs. the secularism are developments of a fairly recent vintage, dating roughly to the early 19th century. Prior to that, as the eminent British historian Norman Cohn so ably demonstrated, the clash always took place in a religious context and pitted traditionalist Christianity against religious “reformers.” That this clash would once again manifest itself in explicitly religious terms in an American election is hardly surprising, given that America alone among Western nations has managed to preserve its religious heritage.

But one should not be fooled. The religious framing of this debate does not mean that the culture wars are won or that the left has admitted defeat. If anything, in nominating Obama, the American left has declared war anew and has quite clearly demonstrated that it not only thinks that the traditionalists are backward yahoos who have no understanding of what is really important, but that it is willing to take its electoral chances without them.

Michael Kinsley once famously wrote that a “gaffe” is when a politician inadvertently says what he really thinks. When Obama called the rural voters of Pennsylvania “bitter” he said what he really thinks just as surely as John Kerry said what he really thinks when he “joked” that America’s soldiers are stupid. Obama may be a Christian. And Kerry may have been a sailor. But that doesn’t mean that either one of them have any respect or admiration for Christian conservatives or the nation’s fighting men and women. “Those people” think, feel, act, and pray differently than do the Democratic elites. And despite surface appearances, the Democrats don’t really care.

A LULL IN THE CULTURE WARS?

Now, we would have to disagree with the contention by Daniel Henninger in last week’s Wall Street Journal column entitled “Hillary and Obama in Small Town” that the Democrats have “sued for peace in the culture wars.” In matters such as this, we tend to believe,

with T.S. Eliot, that the struggle between good and evil is eternal and, as such, features neither lost causes and nor gained causes.

Moreover, to those who believe, with Henninger, that the heathens have left the field of battle, we would point out that HBO comedian Bill Maher, a self-described atheist, who depicts organized religion as a “neurological disorder,” and created quite a stir last week by calling the Catholic Church the “Bear Stearns of organized pedophilia,” is still so beloved by much of the American public that something called “Comedy Central” lists him as number 38 on the list of “Greatest Standups of all Time.”

We do, however, agree with Henninger that it was a bad week for the bad guys. For starters, both Hillary and Barack felt it necessary to publicly affirm their faith before the God-fearing, gun-toting folks of rural Pennsylvania while attending a “Compassion Forum” at Messiah College, which embraces the “evangelical spirit rooted in the Anabaptist, Pietist and Wesleyan traditions of the Christian Church.”

Now fifty years ago, publicly declaring one’s belief in God would have been no big deal for any American politician to do in any section of the nation. But it is no small thing for both leading Democratic contenders to do so in this day and age, given the extent to which the elites within their party have, over the past several decades, become hostile to the very notion of religion.

At the very least, it was a body blow to these elites, who make no secret of the fact that they agreed with Ted Turner when he said that Christianity is a “religion for losers,” and that the *Washington Post* was correct when it described the Christian right as being made up largely of the “poor, uneducated, and easily led.”

Now, only God can judge the sincerity of Hillary’s and Barack’s witness, but those of us who believe that a healthy future for the United States depends entirely on the continued strength of its moral foundations can take some comfort in the fact that both individuals recognized that to do less than firmly assert their

religious faith would be to risk losing the support of a substantial enough portion of their own party to cost them the nomination.

In fact, Mrs. Clinton was not content to simply affirm her faith in general terms, with a wink to the noisy atheists in her party. She strongly drove the point home that she was “one of them,” a Christian with traditional roots whose religious instruction did not include claims, unsupported by scripture, such as the contention that “whitey” had created AIDS as a means of killing black people.

Besides asserting that “faith is everything that makes life and its purpose meaningful as a human being,” when Mrs. Clinton was asked to share some of the occasions during which she had “actually felt the presence of the Holy Spirit,” she enthusiastically replied: “I have had the experience on many, many occasions where I felt like the Holy Spirit was there with me as I made a journey.... You know, it could be walking in the woods. It could be watching a sunset.”

One cannot help but wonder what Maher and his ilk must have thought when Mrs. Clinton, a fellow traveler of the orthodox left for many decades, went “down to the river,” figuratively speaking of course, with the Christians of Cumberland County, where George Bush received 64% of the vote in 2004.

And how intense must have been the angst felt by the folks at the Anti-Defamation League, who became so distressed at Joseph Lieberman’s frequent references to his faith during the 2004 election that they publicly warned him of their belief that “there is a point at which an emphasis on religion in a political campaign becomes inappropriate and even unsettling in a religiously diverse society such as ours.” Or the members of the various liberal groups who, during the nomination hearings for the appointment of John Ashcroft for the post of Attorney General publicly questioned whether his Christian faith would interfere with his ability and willingness to enforce the laws of this nation.

There was, of course, a time when the radical left wing of Democratic Party might have cut Hillary a little slack for making such remarks, choosing to believe that she was simply playing the tune that the befuddled Christians wanted to hear. Or, at the very least, they would have understood that, as president she would not allow the beliefs of a pre-enlightenment cult of superstitious fools to govern her actions, but would, when push came to shove, “do the right thing,” in accordance with those who believe that morality is relative and that religion is, as Marx so delicately put it, the opiate of the masses.

But it’s not at all clear that the radical leftist community will give her that break today, especially given the release last week of a tape made early last spring of Mrs. Clinton criticizing the positions of the ultra-left wing of her party on national security and foreign policy positions. In case you missed it, this is what she had to say to a small group of supporters, shortly after her Super Tuesday losses to Barack.

Moveon.org endorsed [Sen. Barack Obama] – which is like a gusher of money that never seems to slow down. We have been less successful in caucuses because it brings out the activist base of the Democratic Party. MoveOn.org didn’t even want us to go into Afghanistan. I mean, that’s what we’re dealing with. And you know they turn out in great numbers. And they are very driven by their view of our positions, and it’s primarily national security and foreign policy that drives them. I don’t agree with them. They know I don’t agree with them. So they flood into these caucuses and dominate them and really intimidate people who actually show up to support me.

Needless to say, this did not set well with the “netroots” crowd. Eli Pariser, MoveOn’s executive director, was quoted in the LA Times as saying that Mrs. Clinton’s “attack on our members is divisive at a time when Democrats will soon need to unify to beat Senator McCain.” He added that the organization’s

“3.2 million reliable voters and volunteers” will play an important part in the Democratic coalition in November and, as such “deserve better than to be dismissed using Republican talking points.”

Markos Moulitsas, founder of the Daily Kos and widely recognized as one of the bull goose loonies of the radical left, added the following: “Well, for a campaign that has morphed into nothing but Republican talking points, it shouldn’t come as any surprise. I’m curious though, what part of our foreign policy approach doesn’t she agree with? The ending the war in Iraq part? I’d like more details on that one.”

As we’ve said before, we don’t have a dog in this fight. But the whole thing looks to us like Mrs. Clinton is trying to take a page out of John McCain’s book, who has spurned the most radically conservative wing of his party in hopes of gaining strength in the all-important center. But, in our opinion, even if this might have been a successful strategy for Hillary early on, it is too little too late now to save her chances.

She may win the Pennsylvania primary and even a few other contests this summer, but the fact is that she is going to show up at the Democratic convention in Denver in late August with fewer pledged delegates than Barack, and the powers that be within the Democratic Party are simply not going to dump the black guy in favor of the white girl, with both the “netroots” crowd and the African-American community crying “foul” in the background. It won’t happen.

The big question now is not whether Hillary still has a legitimate chance to win, but what she and Bill and her coterie of followers will try to do to win in a less honorable fashion, and if this fails, how they will attempt to sabotage Barack’s chances of beating McCain in the general election. Losing the nomination would be bad enough, but having to wait eight years for another shot at the gold ring would be intolerable to the Clinton crowd.

In the meantime, the culture wars will continue with no great champion on either side. The radical right will stick with Obama, of course. He may be Christian, but given that he could stomach the fanatical ranting of his “spiritual adviser” the Reverend Jeremiah Wright for so many years is a strong indication to them that he can be extremely flexible when it comes to dogma, indeed, there’s a chance that he could be as crazy as they are.

The Christian right has no choice either. It’s McCain or nobody. So it’s possible that the culture war will quiet down for a while, lending credence to Henninger’s forecast of peace. To which we would respond as Charlie Brown did when, after losing another baseball game and being told by Lucy that “you win some and you lose some,” responded, “That would be nice.”

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