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

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

SOULED OUT: RECLAIMING FAITH & POLITICS AFTER THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT
By E. J. Dionne Jr.
Princeton University Press, 251 pages, $24.95

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

He always gets asked “the God questions,” Mr. Huckabee complained to Liane Hansen of National Public Radio, when he’d rather be talking about public policy: “I was a governor ten and a half years and led in education, rebuilding our road system, health care [and] never really
governed with a sense of religious fervor. I run for president and that’s all people want to talk
about.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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