

## BOOKS

[*Heroic Conservatism: Why Republicans Need to Embrace America's Ideals*, Michael J. Gerson, HarperOne, 292 pages]

# The Gospel According to Gerson

By Kara Hopkins

IF YOU RECOGNIZE Michael Gerson's name, it's because he wasn't very good at his job. The second task of a speechwriter is to make an ineloquent boss sound like he's channeling Cicero in his own accent. The first is to disappear.

But Gerson isn't one for the wings. The profile writers' darling wasn't content to script a president; he wanted to shape policy—and claim credit. In the opening scene of his new book, *Heroic Conservatism*, Gerson recalls a November 2002 Oval Office meeting about a plan to spend \$15 billion to fight AIDS in Africa—“the largest health initiative to combat a single disease in history.” Predictably, the money men were opposed, but then the president asked his scribe's opinion. “If we can do this, and we don't,” Gerson recalls himself saying, “it will be a source of shame.” *U.S. News & World Report*—the speechwriter's former employer charitably declined to name its source—published Bush's reply: “That's Gerson being Gerson.”

Gerson being Gerson gushes on about the “humanitarian conspiracy”: “I saw one of the high points of political idealism in modern history: an American president, out of moral and religious motivations, pledging billions to save the lives of non-citizens. ... here was the living, dancing evidence of what ambitious moral, effective government can accomplish.”

His book is an ode to that grand vision, as unencumbered by modesty as the author's White House tenure was. It bids to couple Christianity and conservatism in the service of great good, but in so doing diminishes both.

Gerson seems an unlikely hero: describing Bush, he writes, “He was athletic, outgoing, likeable—I was none of these things.” He acknowledges “a certain seriousness and moral intensity,” “debilitating shyness,” and discomfort with small talk—traits well-suited to the writer's garret but ill-fit for a revolutionary.

He's also an unlikely conservative: his earliest political experience was representing Jimmy Carter in a high school debate, and, when asked by the *New Yorker* to name his favorite president, he praised FDR, Truman, Kennedy, and Wilson before mentioning Reagan—“to some extent.”

But that is what heroic conservatism is about: moral fervor meets global ambition. Perhaps the former senses its prickliness—its tendency to joyless parochialism—and longs to widen its confines. The latter may perceive instability in its enthusiasm and want a tether. Together they make a potent pair—and a dangerous one.

Gerson goes on:

I am convinced that the bold use of government to serve human rights and dignity is not only a good thing, but a necessary thing. I believe the security of our country depends on idealism abroad—the promotion of liberty and hope as the alternatives to hatred and bitterness. I believe the unity of our country depends on idealism at home—a determination to care for the weak and vulnerable, and to heal racial divisions by the expansion of opportunity.

It's easy to see how from the same expansive pen flowed presidential promises to “end tyranny,” “spread freedom,” and “break the reign of hatred.”

Discerning a conservative pedigree is more difficult, for the defining instincts of the Old Right—its preference for

particular community, its caution against chasing utopia, its keen sense of the limits of politics—don't cloud his vision. Not that Gerson is deterred. He avows, as if the saying makes it so, “I am a conservative,” even offering a Burkean rationale that would pass muster with most keepers of the flame: “because I believe in the accumulated wisdom of humanity—a kind of democracy that gives a vote to the dead—expressed in the institutions and moral ideals we inherit from the past.” But then he takes a decidedly radical turn, for the “moral ideals” Gerson has in mind—“liberty, tolerance, and equality”—echo the Jacobins' own, and our pact appears to be with every inhabitant of the planet. “Our nation cherishes freedom, but we do not own it,” he wrote in a text Bush delivered from the deck of the *USS Ronald Reagan*. “While it is the birthright of every American, it is also the equal promise of the religious believer in Southern Sudan, or an Iraqi farmer in the Tigris Valley, or of a child born in China today.”

Thus the villains in Gerson's morality play aren't liberals, for whom government programs are only improved by global scope, but realists. He condemns them for “offer[ing] no millennial goal to pursue in foreign policy—neither international order, nor democratic peace.” But he sees their stock falling. With the zeal of a man who has found his moment, he exults, “After the shock of 9/11, the Republican Party—the party of realism and caution—had become the party of idealism, action, and risk.”

Those wild tendencies allowed the war on terror its global reach, but it was Gerson's brush that simultaneously made it a study in black and white. The worst of worlds combined. Where the exercise of force should have been constrained, we got a crusade, unchecked by just-war dictates or historical implausibility. And where the shadowland of conflicting interests and ancient grievance should have been afforded wide estate, we drew rigid dichotomy instead.

Where Bush begins and Gerson ends is unclear—and inconsequential. They share the same lens.

In describing the president, Gerson notes his “obsession with discipline and self-mastery.” That’s characteristic of someone determined to keep addictive demons at bay. It’s also common among a certain kind of convert—one who views Christianity as a moral code designed to make bad men behave.

Many a Puritan pulpit has reinforced that notion, but it isn’t a redemptive construct—the essence of the Christian faith. As the German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer argued, the Edenic temptation—to eat from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil—was not doing evil, the antidote to which would be doing good, but usurpation of the Providential prerogative to discern between the two. Thus the Christ of the New Testament healed on the Sabbath—in apparent violation of Mosaic law—to illustrate what Bonhoeffer called the Gospel’s “outrageous demand”: that Christian ethics move beyond the claim to know and enforce absolute good and evil. He wrote, “The Law empowers sin, not just because it causes the evil in us to be revealed, but also because it spawns self-righteous ‘good.’” To be merely good is to align oneself with conscience alone—an impoverished stand-in for divine initiative.

But this is precisely the goal Gerson intends—at least for his movement: “Traditional conservatism has a piece missing,” he writes, “a piece shaped like conscience.” With that installed—“compassionate conservatism” in Bushian shorthand—the administration could claim a perverse divine right to judge whole nations. Democracy and human rights become substitute salvation. Thus the war on terror could be sold in the most moral terms: “We will rid the war of this evil.” The original text of what may stand as Bush’s most famous phrase designated Iran, Iraq, and North Korea a fairly forgettable “axis of hatred,” but Gerson substituted “evil” for, the *New Yorker* reported, “its more theological resonance.”

Shortly after Gerson began scripting Bush, reporters noticed Biblical phrases creeping into the presidential rhetoric

and wrote, with cryptologist’s glee, that Bush was sending coded messages to his Christian base. The truth was more perverse. As Presbyterian minister Fritz Ritsch noted, when Bush alluded to the hymn “There’s Power in the Blood” in a State of the Union text, he spoke of the “wonder-working power” not of the “precious blood of the Lamb” but of “the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people”—the world’s substitute saviors. Similarly, the president referred to the U.S. as “the light of the world,” which the “darkness” has been unable to put out—a clear invocation of John 1:1-5. As evangelical pastor Gregory Boyd pointed out, “In this paradigm, what applies to Jesus (“the light of the world”) can be applied to our country, and what applies to Satan (“the darkness”) can be applied to whomever resists our country. *We* are of God; *they* are of the Devil. *We* are the light; *they* are the darkness. Our wars are therefore ‘holy’ wars. With all due respect, this is blatant idolatry.”

Fired by the same false gospel, Gerson now offers a sequel: with evil on the run, we must turn our attention to discerning and doing good.

After hearing Bush’s messianic Second Inaugural Address, Peggy Noonan reminded, “This is not heaven. It’s earth.” But having assigned his country responsibility for judging the world’s evil, Gerson must lay its redemption on America’s shoulders.

Far from burdening, the prospect cheers him. Gerson’s formative spiritual experience, as he describes it, has a mirthless quality: “I was raised in Presbyterian churches that held to a cold but serious Calvinism, more focused on intellectual rigor than emotional expression or liturgical beauty. I suspect that all these traditions have left their impact. Religion was taken seriously in our home...”

By contrast, his do-good gospel—that “living, dancing evidence of what ambitious moral, effective government can accomplish”—animates his noble impulses and elevates his prose. Bonhoeffer called this “joyous

secularism”—the snare of “Christians who view the role of government as helping God to establish the Kingdom of God on Earth.”

That isn’t to say that social justice isn’t a Christian concern. But Gerson is more stirred by abolitionists and activists like William Wilberforce and Martin Luther King Jr., and the sweeping social change they wrought, than he is by Christ’s own model, which was conspicuously short on political impact and long on individual acts of mercy. He implies that his giants—poverty, AIDS, illiteracy, genocide—are too big for hand-to-hand combat. Thus the Biblical call to “do unto the least of these”—the hallmark of which is personal sacrifice—must be replaced by government programs—the wellspring of which is coercion. If this constitutes an act of worship, it honors a failed god.

“Compassionate conservative” has become a kind of epithet—with good cause. But Michael Gerson is a man moved by suffering. He surveys the world and sees “a drowning humanity.” He’s grieved by oppression, angered by injustice, and captures his frustration with enviable fluency. But in casting for an outsized champion—indeed the Almighty himself has been weighed and found wanting: “these are not unfortunate facts of history,” Gerson writes, “they are violations of God’s intended order”—the Heroic Conservative forgets that his political and spiritual creeds privilege the quiet and reward the meek. There’s a reason Russell Kirk called for “prudent restraints upon power and human passions.” We see but through a glass darkly.

The rubble of our heroic mission to democratize the Middle East stands testament to the power of unintended consequences. But Gerson cannot see it as ruin. The same hubris that drove America to rid the world of evil now stalks this equally abstract drive to do good—and the best intentions don’t diminish the blowback inherent in any global scheme.

“Show me a hero,” F. Scott Fitzgerald said, “and I’ll write you a tragedy.” ■

[*Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, by John Gray; Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 229 pages]

## Getting Lost on Utopia Highway

By R.J. Stove

TO PRAISE A WRITER on American foreign affairs for being adult might seem a backhanded compliment but for the obvious puerility of so much written in this field. Mark Steyn, David Frum, and Michael Ledeen are not necessarily the names that first spring to mind in considerations of serious reasoning for grown-ups. It does credit to John Gray, London School of Economics professor and regular *New York Review of Books* contributor, that he takes political dogmas seriously and, above all, is not constantly engaged in screaming down his opponents.

While Gray's main preoccupation in his new book, *Black Mass: Apocalyptic Religion and the Death of Utopia*, is the Iraq imbroglio, in its American and (more unusually) its British aspects, he avoids—as his title and subtitle make obvious—the entire “what one apparatchik told another apparatchik” method illustrated by, for instance, Bob Woodward's *Plan of Attack* and James Mann's *Rise of the Vulcans*. Nor is his principle interest geostrategic scrutiny. He concerns himself, instead, with the history and prehistory of the fantasizing that has animated the Bush-Blair imperium: how it arose and how it laid successful siege to otherwise rational minds.

As a concise blocker-in of intellectual backgrounds, Gray warrants, at his best, being likened to Isaiah Berlin, although in accordance with his subject, his overall picture is darker. He owes much (maybe too much) to the surveys of Norman Cohn, the British chronicler of

demonology who died only weeks before Gray's book arrived in the mail. Nevertheless, Gray admits the crucial distinction, which Cohn blurs, between even the most crackpot of medieval Christian millenarians—such as Joachim of Fiore in the 12th century—and their modern counterparts. Whereas the former, as Gray notes, “believed that only God could remake the world, modern revolutionaries imagined it could be reshaped by humanity alone.”

Forming a bridge between medieval and modern apocalyptic lunacies stands Gray's account of life—if life it can be called—in the proto-Jacobin, proto-Marxist, proto-*Playboy* city-state ruled during the 1530s by John of Leyden, who devised a new calendar, abolished private ownership, and implemented polygamy. This supplies some comic relief, an element not otherwise conspicuous in this volume, though it does crop up again on page 42. It seems that Stalin thought New Soviet Man might be created by way of New Soviet Primate. Yes, in Uncle Joe's Georgia, women were officially impregnated with ape sperm. (Goodness knows whether these pregnancies resulted in live births, but if they did, that would explain lots about journalism.)

When dealing with comparatively recent times, Gray asks the simple and resonant question: “How did Utopia—once found mainly on the Left—come to power through the Right?” Some notion of Gray's expository gifts may be gathered from the fact that he even makes Leo Strauss intelligible, a feat usually conceded to have been beyond Leo Strauss himself. (Dwight Macdonald's verdict on Alger Hiss describes Strauss admirably: “The cuttlefish can take lessons from our author in how to obscure an issue.”) It is hard to withhold a certain perverse admiration for a guru who attained as cultic a following as Strauss did without having bothered to elucidate what his own religious views were or if he held any such views at all. Gray avoids over-easy identification of Strauss with neocons—after all, Strauss

never imagined that Zanzibar could be forcibly democratized by next Tuesday at the latest—but the common ground between them remains. Both Straussianism and neoconservatism appeal primarily, in 2007, to those whose desire to be In The Know outweighs any piffing loyalty to sane traditions. Moreover, both offer the specific charms of a world where the plebs can be fobbed off with mere surface meanings while the Big Kahunas feast on Gnostic fantasies of their own creation: fantasies in which Plato's *Republic* somehow becomes an attack on utopianism and Baghdad becomes as law-abiding as Burlington, Vermont.

Gray is just as lucid on writers who, unlike Strauss, condescend to intelligibility. Locke, Voltaire, and such “Counter-Enlightenment” (Berlin's term) figures as Joseph de Maistre and J.G. Herder all get considered. (A passage of Maistre's serves as Gray's chilling epigraph: “This is an abyss into which it is better not to look.” / “My friend, we are not free not to look.”) He devotes particular attention to F.A. Hayek, which is perhaps a polite way of saying that he tars and feathers him. Hayek furnished, in his *Constitution of Liberty*, a vaguely social Darwinist explanation for British institutions' survival. “Unfortunately it was as a theorist of the free market that Hayek achieved influence. ... As an account of the emergence of the free market [his explanation] is the opposite of the truth. ... Reinventing the market meant curbing spontaneously evolved institutions, such as trade unions and monopolistic corporations. This could be done only by a highly centralized state.” Michael Oakeshott famously, but not famously enough, said of Hayek's worldview: “A plan to resist all planning may be better than its opposite, but it belongs to the same style of politics.” As Gray aphoristically comments: “The free market became a religion only when its basis in religion was denied.”

The situation is worse still when we consider Thatcherism's gulf between statist reality and capitalist rhetoric.