

Mere disagreement hypertrophies into a cosmic battle that must decide the fate of the universe.

For all his striving for theoretical sophistication, Goldberg manages to come off as something of a philistine. He treats the great philosophers less as thinkers than as figurines to be arranged on a chessboard, each capable of one or two moves. Thus Herder stands for nationalism, Hegel for the divination of the State, William James for the denial of truth, John Dewey for social engineering, Nietzsche for nihilism, and so forth. (Oddly, Goldberg reserves his most curt disdain for those theorists, such as Joseph de Maistre and Carl Schmitt, who faced the truth the most fearlessly.) These names do not lend *Liberal Fascism* gravitas so as much outweigh it with an importance it cannot bear.

To be fair, Goldberg did not come up with his ideas about liberalism on his own. He is a quintessential second-generation conservative, a man who grew up in the movement and chose to make his career within it. Nearly all the authors in the movement's recommended reading list—Richard Weaver, Eric Voegelin, Robert Nisbett, Allan Bloom—appear in *Liberal Fascism's* footnotes. Not surprisingly, the silliest and most extravagant arguments in his book are also the most conventional, at least to anyone familiar with the ideology of movement conservatism.

Indeed, *Liberal Fascism* reads less like an extended argument than as a catalogue of conservative intellectual clichés, often irrelevant to the supposed point of the book. Here you will read that Rousseau conjured all the evils of the modern world, that the influence of the Frankfurt School is destroying traditional values, that closet Nietzscheans are spreading the disease of moral relativism, and that Deweyan faith in “planners” is corroding our liberties. Intelligent liberals will not cry foul at *Liberal Fascism* so much as groan. They were not fixed in these formulated phrases before and they will not be so fixed now.

Goldberg does at times display a blush of shame. He qualifies his conclu-

sions to the point of taking them all back, insisting that he does not actually mean to say that liberals are dangerous totalitarians. He grants that some of his points are trivial and others may appear outrageous, so that nothing he says should be taken as both true and interesting at the same time. He claims that movement conservatives also suffer from the totalitarian temptation, so that we are “all” fascists now. Why then link liberalism in particular with fascism? Here Goldberg is surprisingly candid: because, he argues, liberals do it to conservatives all the time.

He's right, of course. Many liberals do impute nefarious designs to conservatives. With just a modicum of restraint, Goldberg could have written a very good book. “Look,” he could have said, “Fascism’ has no meaning today, but, in any case, not only does conservatism owe nothing to fascism, but, historically, conservatives in America generally opposed fascism while liberals and leftists often were sympathetic.” Instead, lacking even the excuse of ignorance, he chose to sling the term “fascism” around as casually as the most vulgar leftist. It does not speak well of Goldberg that, by his own admission, he wrote his first book not to enlighten but to exact revenge.

Liberal Fascism completes Goldberg's transformation from chipper humorist into humorless ideologue. Perhaps it was hubris that made him do it. The last important book by a conservative was Allan Bloom's *Closing of the American Mind* in 1987, whose ideas had been in circulation for many years before. Goldberg may have convinced himself that by penning yet another disquisition into the “true nature of liberalism,” he could become the first movement conservative in a generation to write something lasting. In the end, he succeeded only in recycling 60 years worth of conservative movement bromides. ■

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[*The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*, A.J. Jacobs, Simon & Schuster, 400 pages]

Living Literally

By Peter Suderman

A.J. JACOBS HAS A PROBLEM with seriousness. No matter what his topic, he's compulsively glib. It's like a tic, a joker's Tourette's. Try as he might, he just can't help it.

In his latest book, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*, the paragraphs prance nicely along in prose as clean and efficient as a Crate & Barrel showroom, and nearly all finish with a droll remark, a pop-culture allusion, a snarky (though rarely cruel) observation.

For Jacobs, an editor at *Esquire* and a former TV critic for *Entertainment Weekly*, the world—or at least his minor misadventures within it—is nothing if not amusing. Sometimes he tries to hold it in, but even when resisting he can't help but tack on a nudge and a wink. After taking a road trip with his wife, he writes, “I'm proud to say I had absolutely no urge to make a double entendre when we passed Intercourse, Pennsylvania, which I see as a moral victory.” He might have avoided making a crude remark at the time, but in retrospect he couldn't let the moment go by without some attempt to exploit its comic potential.

The book opens with Jacobs describing the attention he received for the long, unkempt beard he grew while writing the book. “Strangers have come up to me and petted my beard, like it's a Labrador Retriever puppy or a pregnant woman's stomach,” he writes. Before the first page is finished, he's referenced ZZ Top, Steven Seagal, and Gandalf from *Lord of the Rings*, which is about as high-brow as the book ever gets.

Jacobs calls himself a memoirist, and while that's somewhat accurate, it might be more apt to say he practices the journalistic equivalent of trick-shot pool. There's little at stake in any of his projects, and the situations are all carefully and purposefully designed, but they're entertaining all the same. For his first book, *The Know It All*, he read—and quipped—his way through the entire *Encyclopedia Britannica*. This time out, he's chronicling a year spent following each and every rule in the Bible as literally as possible. Yes, that means every single rule, or at least all of those that are within legal bounds. (No homosexuals are put to death, but he does hire an intern as a slave.)

Each month of his quest is given a chapter, which is then divided into daily entries that tend to revolve around attempts to follow a single rule, like the obligation to play a harp or the commandment to wear tassels on his clothes. Like his first project, the concept seems designed to provide Jacobs with an opportunity to engage in silly antics, meet up with a sitcom-ready cast of oddballs, and, mostly, crack wise at the Bible's more peculiar passages.

Jacobs's penchant for frivolity might at first seem to make him an unsuitable candidate to explore the culturally fraught topic of Biblical literalism. As with any hot-button issue, views on the matter vary greatly, but it's a safe bet that few think of the topic as light-hearted. At a time when angry young men turn up on nationally televised debates demanding to know whether presidential candidates will swear that every word in the Bible is literally true, when Biblical interpretation comes up in deciding what to teach in schools, when political commentators cite Biblical authority on what limits the government should place on scientific research, it's not unreasonable to wonder what is to be gained from anyone so slavishly devoted to the flip.

Certainly, those expecting piercing insights into current political topics will be disappointed with the book. Jacobs, a lifelong liberal New Yorker, goes to a creationist museum, attends a meeting

of gay-friendly evangelicals, and visits Jerry Falwell's church, but these excursions, like almost everything in the book, are played as genial comic episodes. The author deserves credit for his unwillingness to engage in malicious stereotyping. From Falwell's followers to the Amish, he humanizes and sympathizes with even the quirkiest people. His lack of malice, however, only goes so far, and is, in fact, a signal of his wider refusal to engage with any difficult or unpleasant issue.

Although Jacobs's book steps gingerly around the culture war's obvious flashpoints and seems to want to make peace between the religious and secular worlds, it is revealing in other—almost certainly unintentional—ways. Jacobs, an affable upper-middle class New Yorker fully steeped in the city's cultural and political consensus, is an effective representative of a secular urban set baffled by the Bible and its devotees. This group has managed to avoid almost

any exposure to serious religious belief and views it partially with suspicion, partly with anxiety, but mostly with amusement.

Jacobs makes no secret of his religious ignorance, and, in typical fashion, makes light of it, describing himself as "Jewish in the same way the Olive Garden is an Italian restaurant." He has no beef with religion, but never saw its use:

It's not that my parents badmouthed religion. It's just that religion just wasn't for us. We lived in the 20th century, for crying out loud. In our house, spirituality was almost a taboo subject, much like my father's salary or my sister's clove habit.

This is a perfect encapsulation of the modern secular mindset, in which religious faith—at least the kind that actually influences one's thoughts and deeds—is a relic, as archaic as living in mud huts or hunting for one's own food. But in a world where faith is still

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an integral part of so many lives, it's an attitude bound to lead to both uncertainty and curiosity. So it's no surprise when Jacobs anxiously asks, "Is my blindness to spirituality a huge defect in my personality?"

That the question is posed in the language of self-help is telling, for it is this spirit that guides Jacobs's project and is also its fatal flaw. Like so many of his secular contemporaries, the author sees religion as part résumé item, part personal-improvement project. As he goes to bed after the first night, he "wonders whether or not [he] took a step toward enlightenment," as if Biblical devotion might substitute for Yoga class.

It is made clear throughout that his main goal is self-gratification. Jacobs continually tells us how good his project makes him feel. Daily prayer, he says, makes him "feel more connected." In order to meet his obligation to pay tithes, he gives money away to charity over the Internet and writes, "when confirmation

pings in, I feel good." The virtues he finds following the Bible's rules are the same as those might find in a new diet or exercise regimen. Jacobs is so devoted to the ongoing quest for personal fulfillment and individual comfort that he never stops to question his underlying premises.

The project's very design belies his misunderstanding. Only the arrogance of modern secularism would be so dismissive as to assume the Bible might be reduced into a series of easy-to-follow rules—or that anyone could actually follow them. Yet for Jacobs, the idea that it should all be simple and straightforward seems self-evident. Early on, he finds himself frustrated with his task and writes that he "hopes all will become clearer." Later on, he complains that the Bible is written in "mysterious code." His goal is "to live the ultimate Biblical life: Or more precisely, to follow the Bible as literally as possible," yet he is never aware that the two are not remotely the same thing.

Jacobs clearly sees his project as something of a lark, and would protest any attempt to saddle it with culture-divide baggage. Please don't read too much into this, his every witticism seems to imply. As much as he might shrug off any suggestion that he's written anything but an amusing book of little consequence, he clearly wants it to be something more—though not too much more.

In addition to the bevy of quips and quirks, almost every entry comes equipped with a tidy lesson. While volunteering at a soup kitchen, he learns to control his anger. He avoids checking the Amazon sales ranking of his previous book in order to curb his arrogance. He finds comfort, if not true communion, in the ritual of scheduled prayer. It's a clever rhetorical game, shucking off responsibility for diving too deep on one hand while trying to conjure up the illusion of meaning on the other. But the lackluster lessons he claims to have learned are barely fit for the next collection from *Chicken Soup for the Soul*.

It is, to be blunt, a thoroughly lame vision of religion. Jacobs envisions God as some sort of divine Oprah, or maybe

just an apolitical Garrison Keillor, telling cute stories and dispensing bite-sized nuggets of life wisdom.

Jacobs comes across as a thoroughly decent, smart, capable, and, yes, quite funny individual with an admirable lack of malice. Yet his insistence on always playing jester has led him to write a book that reveals a deep trepidation toward the idea of spiritual duty or engagement. Religion, he decides, is perfectly fine, even pleasurable and invigorating, in the way that constructive hobbies can be, so long as it never becomes too much of a commitment.

Flying back from the creationist museum, Jacobs mulls over what he's seen. He tries to reconcile his favorable impression of the curators with his dismal view of their project. "All that creativity and enthusiasm—it seems like such misplaced energy," he writes.

And yet the same could be said for him. His frivolity is more than a penchant for jokes; it's also a sort of denial. After a year of intense Biblical immersion, of prayer and reading and pilgrimage, the best he can come up with are a few platitudes about the comforts of ceremony, the power of thankfulness, and a vague feeling that "there is something transcendent, beyond the everyday." So much for transcendence.

What it all means, or what it requires of anyone, isn't clear because to define it with any clarity would be asking too much. He cheerfully admits to having developed his own "cafeteria religion," one that conveniently allows him to remain agnostic. It's a depressingly shallow conclusion. One's instinct is to catch a train up to the Upper West Side and find Jacobs, grab him by the shoulders, and say, "That's it? That's all? You spent a year reading and living the most influential and important book in human history and all you got out of it were self-help bromides and a few cute stories? You're not serious, are you?"

No, he's not. He never is—and that's too bad. ■

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[*They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons*, Jacob Heilbrunn, Doubleday, 289 pages]

The Long Fuse to the Iraq War

By Philip Weiss

IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE a title more overdue than *They Knew They Were Right: The Rise of the Neocons*. Ever since neoconservatism's chief contribution to world betterment, the Iraq War, began losing its luster, its adherents have gone into a kind of hiding, and the media has given them cover. Former Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, one or both of whom are neoconservatives, have suggested that the word is an anti-Semitic epithet. Others try to avoid it entirely: when Bill Kristol, who was definitely once a neoconservative, was hired by the *New York Times* as a columnist, the paper called him a "conservative" and said his father Irving Kristol, one of the movement's founders, was a leader of "modern conservatism."

Jacob Heilbrunn asserts that neoconservatives have so far gotten away "scot-free" with planning the greatest foreign-policy disaster since Vietnam. And so his book will call them to account. Not quite.

Heilbrunn achieves one important chore: a forthright social narrative of the neocons as a Jewish movement. Tracing ideological currents in the Jewish community from the 1940s to the 1970s, Heilbrunn, a journalist who himself flirted with neoconservatism, describes how the neocons were propelled by resentments against WASP elites—the men who had ignored the Holocaust, they felt, and "frozen out" Jews from the establishment. It would be hard to overemphasize Heilbrunn's accomplishment. There has been endless prevarication about the fact that

neoconservatism is an element of the Jewish experience, even from liberal Jews. Yet Heilbrunn will have none of it. He says that neoconservatism is "intimately linked with the memory of the Holocaust and the allies' failure to save the Jews during the war" and notes that a "peculiar amalgam of intellectual rigor and ethnic resentment ... lies at the heart of the neoconservative outlook."

And here's the topper: a "lifelong antipathy toward the patrician class among the neocons ... prompted them to create their own parallel establishment."

The sociological insights in his story are often exciting. Neocon godfather Norman Podhoretz had "the classic Jewish experience with the WASP elite" but became a "social climber" himself Heilbrunn says. The other godfather, Irving Kristol didn't at first take the late Allan Bloom seriously. Bloom told Heilbrunn that his relationship with Kristol got "easier" once Bloom, like Kristol, had wealth. The neocons didn't like Kissinger because he was *hoffjude*, "a

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court jew of the WASP foreign policy establishment." They didn't like Zbig Brzezinski because he was Polish and the neocons suspected him of Pale-era anti-semitism.

Boiling resentment meant very little without a political program. The neocons got that in the late 1960s. And not surprisingly, the issues had a Jewish character. "With the trial of Adolph Eichmann in Jerusalem, the 1967 war, and the rise of black anti-Semitism in the United States, neoconservatism was born," Heilbrunn writes. So now Brzezinski was resented because he was against the Israeli settlements in the West Bank, and McGeorge Bundy because he wanted to push Israel to make a peace agreement with the Palestinians.

Neoconservative ideas might have been confined to small magazines, but the neocons stunned themselves in the 1970s by gaining traction in American political life—through the offices of Washington Sen. Henry Jackson (whom a Saudi ambassador called "more Jewish than the Jews"). With Jackson's support, the neocons staged their first great victory, pressuring the Soviet Union to free Jews. After Daniel Patrick Moynihan won his New York Senate seat with "strong Jewish support" in 1976, the neocons had a second home.

At that time, of course, they were Democrats. Martin Peretz, the once left-wing editor of *The New Republic*, was so shaken by the Left's friendliness to the Palestinians, that he provided access in his pages to hawks, and became "a major force in the mainstreaming of neoconservative ideas." Douglas Feith, an architect of the Iraq disaster, tells Heilbrunn, "I grew up in a liberal Democratic Jewish household." Again Israel was key. At the age of 15, two years into the Israeli occupation of the West Bank,

Feith wrote a precocious letter to the *New York Times* attacking the State Department policy in the Middle East. "It is appalling the State Department can be so blind to historical precedent as to call for a withdrawal from the captured area." Captured, not occupied.

Israel-centrism made the neocons lousy wardheelers. They turned against Jimmy Carter on foreign policy, and so helped to elect Ronald Reagan in 1980. Not one to slight the power of his subjects, Heilbrunn says that had they not spurned Carter, he might have been re-elected. Neocons came back to the Dems in 1992, again over Israel. George H.W. Bush—"a scion of the WASP establishment"—was "acting like Jimmy Carter when it came to Israel." Knocking off the