

whose evolution he had an opportunity to observe as a White House insider.

Indeed, outsiders, like those of us who opposed the Iraq War and the entire Freedom Agenda—based on our understanding of history and a deconstruction of the public statements and news reports on the invasion—will be struck by this testimony. McClellan confirms that Bush and his aides hoped that the war on terrorism, and by extension the war in Iraq, would serve to advance the Republican agenda and cement Bush's place in history. Officials in the administration, he writes, "deliberately chose to ignore the facts when assembling the case for war" and even worse, "they knowingly dissembled in order to make the case appear stronger than it was." They used deception to cover up their efforts to mislead the American people. The American media, in turn, was "too deferential to the White House and the administration" over the decision to go to war and failed in its duty to make the public more aware before the invasion "of the uncertainties, doubts, and caveats that underlay the intelligence" about Iraq.

So why didn't you resign from your job, Scotty? Despite the disillusionments, McClellan, thanks to his own form of the "Great Twitch," was able to continue working for George W. Bush. He inserted himself into the "permanent campaign" of Washington—"a breeding ground for deception and a killing field for truth" dominated by the "philosophy of politics of war." Manipulating sources of public approval, politicizing the governing process, and tearing down opponents by employing distortion and misrepresentations are part of the job. And the job is a lot of fun. You get to work with the Leader of the Free World and other important people. You travel around the world on Air Force One and meet foreign leaders. You're an eyewitness to history. And you rationalize to yourself that perhaps you are "making a difference."

But at some point you discover that the costs outweigh the benefits. The story of George W. Bush and the story of

Scott McClellan are also, in one sense, one story. McClellan's epiphany happened in July 2005, when he discovered that what he had told the White House press corps two years earlier—that Rove, Cheney, and Scooter Libby, Cheney's chief of staff, were not involved in the leaking of classified information about Valerie Plame, the former CIA operative and wife of Joe Wilson—was untrue. McClellan was used by leading White House officials as part of a campaign to discredit Wilson, who had challenged the administration's reasons for going to war in Iraq.

It was the "defining moment in my time working for the president, and one of the most painful experiences of my life," McClellan writes. "I had unknowingly passed along false information. Five of the highest-ranking officials in the administration were involved in my doing so: Rove, Libby, Vice President Cheney, the president's chief of staff, Andrew Card, and the president himself." Upon learning this, he felt "constrained by my duties and loyalty to the president and unable to comment. But I promised reporters and the public that I would someday tell the whole story of what I knew."

In *All the King's Men*, the disillusioned young aide chose to admit responsibility for his association with his boss after seeing "many people live and die." McClellan considered telling the truth only after he became a victim of the administration's deception. In fact, he determined to expose the truth only after Bush and his aides decided that McClellan's role in their manipulation of the American media and public had damaged his credibility as a spokesman and fired him.

That McClellan is now able to get back at them and profit from doing so demonstrates that he has mastered the rules of the "permanent campaign." After all, he had great teachers. ■

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[*Rapture Ready!: Adventures in the Parallel Universe of Christian Pop Culture*, Daniel Radosh, Scribner, 320 pages]

## On This Rock

By Peter Suderman

THE BACK FLAP of *Rapture Ready!: Adventures in the Parallel World of Christian Pop Culture* notes that author Daniel Radosh is a regular contributor to *The New Yorker*, a former writer at *Spy* magazine, and a resident of Brooklyn. Given this résumé, it's hardly surprising that, on the book's second page, he informs the reader that he is a New York liberal. Radosh spends much of his book's 300-odd pages reminding readers of this fact—snarking at opponents of gay marriage, expressing concern at the freedoms that might be lost in an anti-abortion regime, and worrying that a teenage rock fan's religious convictions might lay a "path to creationism and abstinence education." He even goes so far as to admit—without irony—to having "secular elitist" friends.

This makes the worldly and with-it Radosh quite the outsider as he dives into the decidedly un-hip universe of Evangelical pop culture—a world that is, above all, determined to be neither secular nor elite. That Radosh openly filters everything he sees through the lens of his own class means that his book is often as revealing about the mindset of the secular and urban elite as it is about Evangelical culture.

Nevertheless, *Rapture Ready* largely succeeds as a guide to the variegated world of spiritually inflected pop. Radosh goes in expecting uniformity, but quickly learns that there is no such thing as a singular Christian culture. The world he encounters is sprawling and self-contradictory, defined by no particular politics or ethos. Some of his subjects are simply in business; others are determined artists. Some view conversion as their primary goal; others downplay their commitment to proselytizing.

The breadth and variety of Christian pop culture, as well as its purveyors and consumers, is reflected in the individuals Radosh meets and interviews throughout the book. We encounter—to name only a few—a glow-stick wielding Mennonite DJ who throws raves in churches; an environmentally obsessed freegan indie rocker who eats exclusively from dumpsters and schedules his days around grocery-store disposal patterns; a pair of creation-science ideologues; a spiritual horror novelist; and a man who runs a Christian wrestling association. Radosh exhibits genuine interest in the particulars of their lives and pursuits, delving into the details of, say, the wrestler's feelings about violence and the novelist's frustration with the sensitivities of his Christian audience. Radosh may not succeed in combating the idea that pop-obsessed Evangelicals are a strange bunch, but he humanizes them all the same.

He paints complex portraits of modern, spiritually engaged Americans struggling to define their faith and its role in the world at large and is at his best in these encounters, proving himself a keen observer. He is skilled at teasing out the truths and contradictions of his subjects, many of whom he describes with lyrical precision. Take, for example, Radosh's description of Ken Hamm, a leading creationist who runs the group Answers in Genesis:

Ham is a somber, imposing figure. Born and raised in Australia, he speaks in a clipped, heavily-accented baritone that conveys a combination of boundless suspicion and macho authority. His hooded eyes and lycanthropic chin-curtain beard complete his aura of Old Testament prophet.

The book is replete with similarly vibrant, impressive passages. More often than not, his prose is equally felicitous when engaging with ideas. "If science is the search for answers, creationism is the elimination of questions," is his succinct summation of creation sci-

ence's anti-intellectualism. Upon witnessing yet another altar call—the invitation for nonbelievers to come forward and become Christians—cap off a Christian event, Radosh writes that "the fetishization of the altar call as a single moment of victory seems to obscure the need for the hard work that it must take to bring somebody to a genuinely meaningful faith."

Still, there are times when he allows his cultural proclivities to get the best of him. At an abstinence conference, he notes that the hotel has been made to look like a fantasy Victorian town, complete with a miniature indoor river and lovingly recreated shops and houses. He

RADOSH CATALOGUES THE "JESUS JUNK" ON OFFER. THERE ARE GOSPEL GOLF BALLS, BIBLE-BELIEVING SUPERHERO ACTION FIGURES, FAKE TATTOOS, KAZOOS, AND SCRIPTURE-BEARING BREATH FRESHENERS CALLED TESTAMINTS.

writes, "It was a perfect little world that did not, in any meaningful way, exist"—a too clever literary touch that Radosh was unable to resist. At the same conference, he picks up a "clean sex quote and joke book" and on finding a handful of jokes on women's liberation adds, "I checked the copyright date. It said 2004." He seems to be shocked that, even in modern America, some men still joke—cleanly—about feminism.

Similarly, the personal style of reporting in the book leads to occasional unevenness. At one point, he finds himself engaged in a heated, serious dispute with an anti-IVF activist. (Radosh's children were conceived through IVF.) At another, he conducts an absurd mock-interview with aging Christian skater Stephen Baldwin, of the famous Baldwin brothers, using passages clipped entirely from Baldwin's book. Does Radosh intend to be observer, participant, or researcher? It's never quite clear. The book has great range, but does not always maintain a consistent tone.

What he lacks in focus, however, Radosh makes up for in curiosity and

civility. Faced with a procession of Bible-thumping wrestlers, heavy metal acts, and armor-of-God-clad superheroes, the easy route would be ridicule. Certainly, the Christian marketplace is overrun with deserving products. Radosh visits a conference for Christian vendors and catalogues the "Jesus junk" on offer. There are Gospel Golf Balls, Bible-believing action figures (invented by the man who gave the world G.I. Joe), fake tattoos, kazoos, and, somewhat famously, scripture-bearing breath fresheners called Testamints. Far from the sacred and the profane, we are in the land of the sacred and the silly.

Applying a veneer of religiosity to such products is absurd. Their creators insist, however, that their keychains and assorted knick-knacks are heaven-sent tools for spiritual growth. Understandably, Radosh cannot help but crack wise when encountering these oddities and their sellers. (Seeing two sets of Bible-passage birthday cards, he quips, "Sometimes God gives two people the same idea, just to watch them fight it out.")

Stephen Baldwin aside, he resists easy mocking and cruelty and is willing to engage some of the most preposterous characters—Bibleman, anyone?—in challenging and thoughtful dialogue. Sometimes he judges their ideas, but rarely, if ever, does he judge the people behind them. True, his quips occasionally betray a hint of a sneer, but he clearly works to tamp down this tendency. The Evangelical world may be unfamiliar, but Radosh seems determined to treat it with respect.

This is not to say that the book is free of bias. On the contrary, it is explicitly presented as a product of the author's individual cultural and political milieu;

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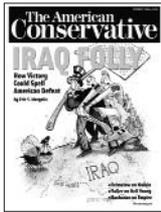
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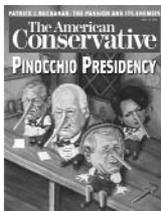


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he calls his work "personal and idiosyncratic rather than comprehensive." On the blog he has set up for the book, he explains that he writes from "an outsider's perspective."

That Radosh regards this alternative cultural landscape as largely foreign is to be expected. What is more telling is how he seems to view it as invisible—he describes it as having been "completely off [his] radar"—and, at least at the start, as somewhat insignificant, except as a "covert delivery mechanism for conservative ideology." Evangelical Christians, he assumes, are disconnected from reality and obsessed with politics. Their beliefs on everything from evolution to sexual purity lack credibility. They are unwilling and possibly unable to engage with the obvious truths of modernity.

It is undeniably true that many of this country's Christians are out of touch with the educated urban liberalism that Radosh represents—what many consider the American "mainstream." Yet Radosh's reporting shows that the universe of Christian pop culture—its books and music, its gimmicks and gifts, even its popular science—is often as pervasive and popular as anything in the larger secular world. Christian books regularly top bestseller lists when they are counted; Christian rock increasingly winds up on pop charts; polls consistently show that various forms of creationism are believed by a majority of the public.

The question then arises: Who is really out of touch? If anything, the Evangelicals Radosh meets seem interested in reaching out beyond their own familiar worlds, and the diversity of political opinion among believers puts lie to the myth of Evangelicals as a monolithic conservative political block. It is undoubtedly true that Christians seem excessively concerned about the threat of secular culture. But how many secular books and magazine articles in recent years have warned of impending theocracy, the Christian menace to secular society? When it comes to insularity and suspicion, the Christian world and its resolutely secular counterpart seem to have quite a bit in common.

Indeed, it's worth noting that Radosh approaches his project much as the Christians he meets approach theirs: through the lens of his personal and cultural identity. Being Jewish, he is naturally sensitive about anti-Semitic slights, and, being liberal, he is resistant to religious notions about abortion, homosexuality, and evolution. He hopes his words will prove meaningful to Christians, yet it is clear he is writing primarily for his own culture and class.

It's not surprising, then, that he appears most comfortable around the Christians who most resemble him: liberal, urban, educated, and steeped in alternative culture—the Evangelical secular elite. In particular, he seems to take to Jay Bakker, the tattooed, punk-rock-loving son of the famously disgraced Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker. These days, Jay runs a church that operates out of a bar in Brooklyn. He smokes and curses, expresses regret at the power of the Christian Right, and preaches acceptance of homosexuals. He is one of the book's most sympathetic characters.

Not only does Radosh latch on to modernist Christians like Bakker, he finishes the book by calling on his secular counterparts to be more open to them and their ideas, believing that, if allowed greater prominence in secular culture, they would prove a "moderating force" in Evangelicalism. Aware that this notion may seem counterintuitive, he frames his alliance with what he calls "Christian moderates" as an act of good will, tolerance, and inclusiveness. And in some ways that's right; certainly, he refrains from obvious attacks and imparts dignity to his subjects.

Yet for all the respect he shows, his evenhandedness only goes so far, and it undoubtedly carries an undertone of self-interest. It's hard not to see his final call as a strategy to persuade Christians to become more liberal, more urban, or to put it bluntly, more like him. Secular elite or not, Radosh has issued a brief for conversion—an altar call of his own. ■

*Peter Suderman is editor of Doublethink Online.*

[Thinking Politically: Essays in Political Theory, Michael Walzer, Yale University Press, 333 pages]

## Against Abstraction

By Gerald J. Russello

DEEP INTO THIS wide-ranging collection, Michael Walzer, long an editor of *Dissent* and one of the leading philosophers of the Left, addresses the question of dirty hands in political action. His essay, first presented as a lecture in 1971, is eerily evocative of current debates over civil liberties and legitimate government interference.

Walzer considers what should be done to a government official who takes some immoral action—torture, say—for reasons of state. After acknowledging that as a rule politicians are “a good deal worse, morally worse, than the rest of us,” and that political power always implies the threat of violence, Walzer finds the dirty-hands question presents a paradox. Conventional wisdom holds that no one “succeeds in politics without getting his hands dirty. . . . For sometimes it is right to try to succeed, and then it must also be right to get one’s hands dirty. But one’s hands get dirty from doing what it is wrong to do. And how can it be wrong to do what is right?”

Machiavelli and Max Weber, in their different ways, each responded to this core problem, but their solutions prove unsatisfactory to Walzer. They both rejected a common moral code for political life: Machiavelli because he believed good men can learn how not to be good (and be rewarded for it), Weber because he placed moral judgment in the hands of the ruler rather than those of the community. Walzer draws instead on Albert Camus. He concludes that sometimes unjust acts can be committed for the public good. We should not, however, condone those acts, nor reward their perpetrators, even when we accept them as necessary. We might, Walzer

notes, “see to it that fewer lies were told if we contrived to deny power and glory to the greatest liars,” even if the punishment of political bad actors can only be left to the “priest or confessional.”

“Political Action: The Problem of Dirty Hands” gives some sense of why current ideological labels have become meaningless at best or at worst tools of ideologues. In our present-day debates over proper political action, the subtlety and range of the Western intellectual tradition disappear. Instead, we get on the one hand the jingoism of the movement Right and neoconservative ideology, for whom the national-security state and the war against terror justify any enormity. On the other, we have the America-hating provinces of the Far Left, for whom any national action is by definition illegitimate. Both sides hurl moral absolutes without a sense of the realities of political life or the contradiction of a democracy that elects leaders whom the voters know will commit acts that, in other circumstances, would be condemned as unjust. Walzer steers clear of both extremes, without conceding that there are any easy answers.

*Thinking Politically*, edited by David Miller, a political philosopher at Oxford, will not repackage Walzer as a conservative—the respectful references to Marx would detract from the force of such an argument—but it may bring to light some previously unnoticed similarities between Walzer and conservatism. Although not trained as a political scientist, Walzer has for much of his career focused on the central questions of modern political theory, in a host of books on subjects ranging from just-war theory to social criticism and political philosophy. He is perhaps best known for his affiliation with the so-called communitarians during the 1990s. This ill-fated alliance, from which Walzer has distanced himself, was once thought of as the “third way” of American politics, harmonizing individualism and community. But it failed largely because of its own internal contradictions. Liberal communitarians never seemed to understand that communities did not have to

be liberal, and as for conservative communitarians—well, there really weren’t any. The conversation was conducted almost entirely within the range of acceptable opinion running from moderately liberal to leftist. The communitarian debate, such as it was, served the same purpose as the promotion of neo-conservatives as the only face of the legitimate Right, narrowing the political debate to a variety of views, all compatible with liberalism.

Walzer’s own intellectual profile puts him on the social-democratic side of the spectrum. He is somewhat suspicious of an abstract individualism. But he is no follower of John Rawls or his epigones such as the legal theorist Ronald Dworkin. In an essay included here, “A Critique of Philosophical Conversation,” Walzer pinpoints the problem with the overrated Rawls. In his long, tedious *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls expresses his idea of the “veil of ignorance,” behind which we would all become social democrats. This philosophical structure is revealed by Walzer for what it is: “[w]hat we hear from behind the veil of ignorance is really a philosophical soliloquy. The argument does not depend on any exchange of views; if we in turn step behind the veil we will simply agree.” Of course, we cannot step behind the veil. Each of us is bound up in his or her own culture, history, and family background. Those are the things that make us human, and must be addressed if we are to develop a working political system. To his credit, Walzer recognizes this flaw in the theories of his fellow liberals.

Walzer’s 1983 book, *Spheres of Justice*, was therefore something of a watershed in liberal theory. Liberalism, at least of a certain kind, had up until then argued for separation between public and private based on the need to protect individual rights. A citizen has certain rights, and the state, where power is concentrated, protects those rights. Walzer’s idea is different. His separation is a true pluralism in which, in Miller’s words, “a society [is] made up of different spheres, each of which preserves its autonomy and counterbalances the rest.” State