

The vital center

by [Gary Dorrien](#) in the [May 24, 2000](#) issue

*The Emphatic Christian Center: Reforming American Political Practice*, by Kyle A. Pasewark and Garrett E. Paul

The middle ground, treasured as the key to every election, has dubious associations. Words such as opportunistic, lukewarm, compromising and vacuous cling to it. Populist political commentator Jim Hightower observes that the middle of the road is home to yellow stripes and dead armadillos. Revelation 3:15-26 observes more ominously, "I know your works; you are neither cold nor hot. I wish that you were either cold or hot. So, because you are lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I am about to spit you out of my mouth."

Kyle A. Pasewark and Garrett E. Paul are middle-grounders who take such warnings to heart. Pasewark, a student at Yale Law School, has been a theology professor at several liberal arts colleges; Paul is a religion professor at Gustavus Adolphus College. Both are Lutheran moderates who call for a different kind of centrism from the hollow, spineless, opportunistic and, above all, vacuous middle ground that they perceive in contemporary American politics and religion. They are not the kind of centrists who won't defend their own side in an argument. Neither do they argue, in the mode of former Colorado Governor Richard Lamm or the late Massachusetts Senator Paul Tsongas, for an energetic form of middle-ground accommodationism. Rather, they vigorously argue for a centered Christian ethic that asserts its own principles, claims its rightful place in the public square and affirms the attainment of power as a social good.

*The Emphatic Christian Center* began as a 1994 *Christian Century* article that bemoaned the polarization of American politics and religion, especially as evidenced by Newt Gingrich's then-ascendent "Contract with America." But shortly after that, extremism fell out of fashion. Americans quickly grew tired of the politics of polarization. This could have been a good thing, the authors observe, but polarization gave way to an exhaustion and apathy which set the stage for the reelection of President Clinton, the epitome of vacuous-center opportunism.

The authors take pains to establish that "emphatic Christian centrism" is something quite different. They reject the polarizing politics of the established left and right wings in politics and religion, but not in the name of triangulating accommodation. "A center that sees its task as nothing more than brokering compromise between political extremes is a vacuous center that, ironically, worsens the very polarization it hopes to ameliorate," they contend. "A true center, an emphatic center, is defined not by the compromises it makes, but the positions it takes; not by the principles it sacrifices in the interest of compromise, but by those that inform its very being." It is centered in defined Christian commitments, and it centers the politics of the entire left-to-right spectrum. The regnant center, vacuous to its core, enables the recurring cycle of polarization and exhaustion, but a strong and emphatic center could reinvigorate American politics and religion by "calling the political wings back to their truest insights."

Pasewark and Paul begin by reviewing the often-desultory "religion and politics" literature. They distinguish among inclusionists (who argue that religion has a rightful role to play in American public life) and universalist exclusionists (who want to exclude religion from public life because religion isn't universal) and particular exclusionists (who want to exclude religion from public life because it causes conflicts). James Madison, John Dewey and John Rawls make their usual appearances, in the company of numerous others. Pasewark and Paul keep their distance from various ostensible allies in the first group, though I think they exaggerate their differences from Catholic neoconservative Richard John Neuhaus. The authors miss entirely Neuhaus's important insistence that religious groups must not advocate public-policy positions or seek electoral victories on the basis of reasons that they exclude from public debate.

Pasewark and Paul rightly criticize exclusionists for repeatedly treating religion as inherently irrational; they contend that, at its best, religion is comprehensive in its grasp and capable of self-criticism and self-transcendence. It is not enough for inclusionists to make a case that "religion" is needed in public life, they argue; what is needed is advocacy of the kind of religion that ought to be valued in public life. Pasewark and Paul correct some of Neuhaus's majoritarian-sounding statements, but fail to acknowledge that their basic contentions about comprehensive breadth and depth, capacity for self-transcendence and the value of normative religion are all Neuhaus themes. Their idea of good religion is very different from his on specific issues, but they share some key principles with him.

While eschewing the language of "third way" politics, the authors pursue the customary third-way tactic of identifying essential similarities between their conflicting antagonists. American Christianity persistently reduces Christianity to the service of a freedom-worshipping ideology, they argue. American conservatives sacrilize individualism and free-enterprise economics; American liberals sacrilize individualism and the rights of personal freedom in the sphere of morality and culture. Both groups reduce God to a single metaphor. "The right exuberantly refers to a stern and righteous Father who has showered America with blessings--especially liberty--but losing His patience with America for its sins and now on the verge of withdrawing His blessings; meanwhile, the left usually refers tentatively to a vague, amorphous Love which can set us free to be the people we were meant to be, and which ought somehow to inspire us to be more loving."

Religious fundamentalism and right-wing politics are beyond the pale for Pasewark and Paul. The God of the right, they observe, is the God who wields power without love (except for God's love for conservative Christians); on social issues, "it appears that the only thing of which Christian America has to repent is not having been tough enough on liberals, homosexuals, feminists and welfare recipients."

Pasewark and Paul are even more saddened by mainstream Protestantism and Catholicism. The God of liberal Christianity, they argue, has been sentimentalized to the point of perfectly harmonizing with the desires and perceived psychic needs of bourgeois consumers. God stands for unfailing acceptance, support and encouragement. The authors allow that liberal Christianity acquires an edge in its liberationist forms, but liberation theology has done little to recover the two essential qualities of good religion. It is rarely self-critical or self-transcendent, and it has not even tried to recover the wholeness of the Christian vision.

What it does recover is the exclusive notion of God as a partisan power, sometimes with vengeful qualities. Liberation theology, say the authors, speaks of God "in terms that recall the Christian right: a righteous God of judgment (but rarely a Father) who fights for the poor and oppressed." When it breaks from the bourgeois sentimentalism of liberal Christianity, the religious left indulges an even more sinister sentimentalism. Like Marxism, the authors contend, liberation theology often demands all manner of unfairness and infringement of rights in the name of ultimate justice.

To Pasewark and Paul, *Sojourners* editor Jim Wallis offers a prime example of the latter phenomenon. Wallis makes compassion the chief test of good politics and reduces God to the metaphor of love, but he also attacks the Christian right with "venomous" rhetoric that demonizes his opponents. Having installed himself as a spokesman for compassion, Wallis "violates the limits of political discourse he sets for others." Pasewark and Paul lament that the icons of the religious left--feminism, gay and lesbian rights and liberation theology--are virtually immune from criticism in nonfundamentalist theology.

This leaves the emphatic Christian center with the daunting task of renewing American Christianity from within by engaging the world with its own comprehensive, critical and fruitful form of the gospel message. Pasewark's training and commitments prevail in the book's formulation of that message. The book's theological exemplars are Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and Langdon Gilkey. Not coincidentally, Gilkey studied under Niebuhr and Tillich, and Pasewark studied under Gilkey. This section also draws heavily on Pasewark's book *A Theology of Power*, which expounded his view of power as communicative efficacy, not domination or control. In the realist spirit of his exemplars, Pasewark views lack of power as an impediment to justice and therefore as an evil to be opposed by Christian ethics. He and Paul hold out for a "centered" theology that takes the mythic truths of Christianity--especially original sin--very seriously, though not literally.

The book's concluding section applies its theological vision briefly to questions of poverty, education, the family, sexual violence and the environment, reserving some its sharper judgments for the latter issue. Pasewark and Paul denounce the religious-conservative tendency to deny that the world's ecological crisis is important; they charge that the writings of prominent ecoliberals, especially Sallie McFague, are woefully short on scientific substance; and they get more ecological mileage than Niebuhr ever imagined from Niebuhr's perception that human beings are both in nature and out of it.

*The Emphatic Christian Center* makes a forceful case for the cogency of social-ethical theology in the Niebuhr/Gilkey mode, albeit with a less generous tone that one might have hoped for. Much of it has the tone of a disapproving lecture, and ample sections are filled with "isms" that contend with each other and become the subject of active verbs. Seeking to invigorate and chasten, the book does so impressively, but these qualities exhaust its range of feeling, aside from occasional hints of irony and a current of nostalgia for the days of Reinie and Paulus. For a book

that makes such strong claims for the superior cogency and efficacy of its position, its ending is surprisingly lame. Though the authors declare that the discussion of Christian center infrastructure is the book's most important section, this discussion barely covers two pages.

Niebuhr and Tillich commanded national audiences, Pasewark and Paul state, and before it became so vacuous, liberal Protestantism commanded impressive institutions. But now the old outlets for centrist Christianity are drying up and very few new ones are being created. The Christian left believes that power is evil, the mainstream church leadership is too vacuous to contend otherwise, and the Christian institutions through which Niebuhr made his fame have either eroded or been surrendered. Though disposed to blame the present generation of mainline Protestant leaders for the churches' woes, the authors do admit that even Niebuhr would not have been an influential figure in today's cultural environment.

If Pasewark is to live out the book's message, he tells us, he must leave behind the "self-contained" world of religion and theology to place himself "in a better position to practice the kind of power described in the book." With appreciative regard for the books he wrote and cowrote in the world of religion and theology, I wish him well.