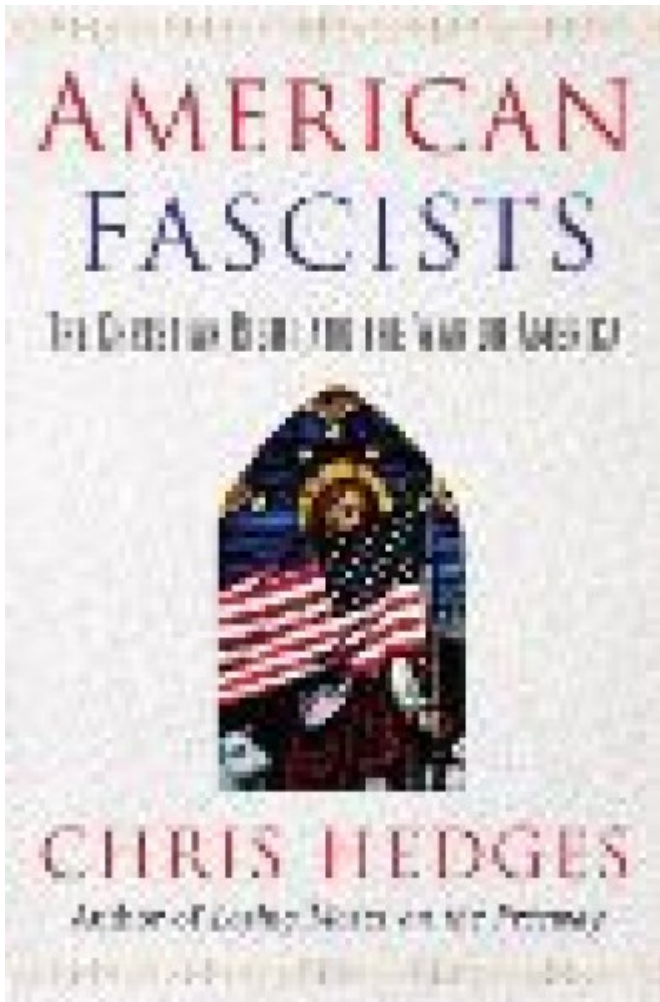


American Fascists

reviewed by [Todd Shy](#) in the [April 17, 2007](#) issue

In Review



American Fascists: The Christian Right and the War on America

Chris Hedges

Free Press

Your fundamentalist grandmother is unwittingly abetting a tyrannical conspiracy. That neighbor down the street with his bumper stickers and *ichthus* accessories may

not be a Nazi-style ideologue, but he could be a theocrat on the sly. The dentist who caps your teeth and homeschools his children would, in the blink of an eye, strip your gay brother of his constitutional rights and maybe put him in jail for sodomy.

We rightly bristle at such stereotypes, but Chris Hedges is convinced that we should take fundamentalist threats much more seriously than we are accustomed to doing. In a book whose title is as incendiary as its tone, Hedges wants to rouse a passive left to be more muscular in its opposition to intolerant religion. Only the next national emergency, Hedges is convinced, stands between democracy as we know it and a government under the influence of fascist-style dominionists (Hitler, as every high school student learns, first gained power democratically). Time not for peace, then, but swords. “The attempts by many liberals to make peace,” he writes, “would be humorous if the stakes were not so deadly. These dominionists hate the liberal, enlightened world formed by the Constitution, a world they blame for the debacle of their lives. They have one goal—its destruction.”

This vision inverts the alarmism of the fundamentalists Hedges fears. To the sympathetic reader, it is simply a matter of fighting fire with fire. But to people who have any sympathy at all with conservative religion, even if they don't share its convictions, the claims seem wildly overstated. As Hedges speaks of a “movement,” for example, he gives the impression that it is something more unified than is ever the case with heirs of the Reformation: “War is the final aesthetic of the movement.” “Despair is the most powerful force driving people into the movement.” Christian converts are “those propelled into the movement.”

Critics of the religious right often use terms like *well organized*, *tightly knit* and *well financed* to suggest a dangerous conspiracy, but people aren't being driven into a movement; they are finding themselves or recovering themselves in a local church, a small group or Bible study, a conference or retreat—in all of which personal piety and relationships are the decisive facts. The resulting earnestness, Hedges acknowledges, gives the appearance of fascism and “gives the mass movement its air of honesty, sincerity and decency.” Supposedly, though, these seemingly decent believers, in thrall to charismatic leaders, would support a theocratic takeover more recognizable to Joseph Goebbels than to John Wesley.

Hedges is right in saying that there is a damaging, dangerous tendency among certain conservative believers to demonize critical thought and to seal off their members in a “hermetic world” intellectually. But he is wrong in contending that

there is a widespread and “calculated destruction of individual conscience” and that the “ruling elite of the movement, the James Dobsons and Pat Robertsons,” assume “a divine right to rule.” A conspiracy on the scale that Hedges describes *would* require a fascist-style organization, and one much deeper than the ad hoc ties that unite North Carolina Baptists, Fort Lauderdale Presbyterians and the New England chapters of Campus Crusade for Christ.

Moreover, there is something anachronistic in the language Hedges employs. “Divine right to rule” suggests old fears of Jesuit plots and Enlightenment critiques of institutional religious power more than it does the authority of Dobson and Robertson. The religious right’s authority is vulnerable, not impervious, as Jim Bakker, Ted Haggard and others have discovered. It drifts on a medium of charisma and trust.

Hedges wonders what, in the event of another catastrophic attack, “will prevent these preachers from calling for the punishment, detention and quarantining of gays and lesbians—as well as abortionists, Muslims and other nonbelievers—to safeguard the nation?” The answer is that, if nothing else, their own need for credibility, their dependence on public resonance and persuasiveness, and the deep populism of the tradition itself will restrain them. Hedges sees fundamentalist demagoguery as a mask for takeover and treason. But the conservative Protestants he fears are the heirs less of theocrats than of revivalists. And for all the showmanship and excess, revivalist traditions as a whole cultivate a democratic temperament, even when charlatans claim to speak in their behalf.

The real problem with *American Fascists* is that, for all his empirical work, Hedges never seems to understand what would make a person cling to the ideals of fundamentalism or evangelicalism. Why, he wonders, would a believer persist in seeing an American-style fascism as an ultimate good? Hedges identifies a shutting-down of self-examination and sees conversion as “the process of deconstructing an individual and building a submissive follower.” Desperation alone explains the conservative and bellicose piety that results.

Hedges misses something in that summary. Whereas conservative Protestants are theologically and politically hard on others, they remain psychologically hard on themselves. Away from the megapulpits and TV lights, it’s hard work emotionally to remain a conservative Christian—self-examination is heightened, not closed off, and people who stop experiencing an inner struggle tend to stop going to conservative

churches. That self-correcting, self-critical aspect of the tradition restrains, in the long run, what Hedges sees as a blind-crusader mentality.

This isn't to say that religion-stoked intolerance and religious-style malice shouldn't be opposed and denounced. They should, and with energy. But liberal critiques especially are blunted by caricature because the atmosphere of liberalism is openness—not infinite openness, not openness without discrimination, but a kind of default openness that fights for freedoms though it is never sure exactly where that fight will lead. Liberals don't owe patience to fascists, but they do owe it to their own ideals to develop a different kind of polemic.

Equating religious conservatives with Nazis returns the insult of conservatives who see in every liberal a communist. It should be a hallmark of liberals that they understand those they criticize even if their critics don't return the favor. Hedges insists that religious conservatives are beyond the reach of argument. Is their experience beyond the reach of empathy?

In an attempt to call attention to the neglected importance of religious belief in politics and culture, books like *American Fascists*—and there is a rash of them—overstate the clarity and consistency with which individuals internalize conservative beliefs. It is as if the grandmother and the neighbor and the homeschooling dentist feel in only two dimensions. But no one feels in two dimensions. The fundamentalists' pose of certainty doesn't help; indeed, it can be menacing. But the flipside of certainty isn't necessarily hypocrisy. It can also be volatility, division, ambivalence, shame, ambition, surging feelings, compassion, affection, need—the whole spectrum of internal life that even inconstant liberals would recognize if they glimpsed it.