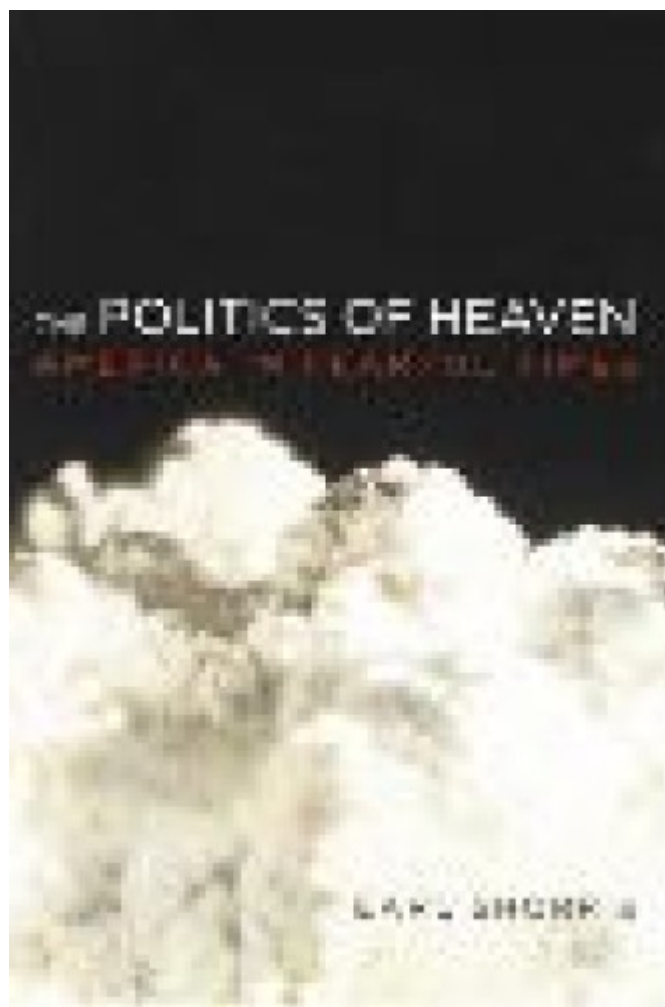


The Politics of Heaven: America in Fearful Times

reviewed by [Anne Blue Wills](#) in the [July 15, 2008](#) issue

In Review



The Politics of Heaven: America in Fearful Times

Earl Shorris

Norton

Earl Shorris loves democracy. A contributing editor at *Harper's Magazine*, he has written about Native Americans, Latinos, corporate culture, markets and education, examining all in the light of his ferocious devotion to democracy's flourishing. He has also devised the Clemente Course in the Humanities, which promotes humanistic liberal education for poor people as a way to a better life.

The focus of Shorris's life's work explains the fervor of *The Politics of Heaven*. The book explores the politics of fear and all the ways it is promoted by America's new "national political movement," a "confluence" of impulses that discourages dissent and compassion and that functions without a single leader, headquarters or manifesto. Shorris refrains from giving this movement a name in order to sidestep invidious "sloganeering," but the movement should, he writes, "have a name that includes or implies fear, death, racism, and capitalism, those being its key components. This discussion of naming comes only after 241 pages. Shorris wends his way through a prologue, 14 obliquely titled chapters and an epilogue, marking threats to democracy at every turn.

Writing against a culture of fear and in favor of democratic dialogue, Shorris has produced a book that will anger its targets and alienate potential sympathizers. To him, America's new political movement thrives on "fear without end"—a fear of mass death that has since the atomic blasts of World War II panicked citizens across the political spectrum into isolationist hyperindividualism. It touts "security" but only because its power derives from fear, and it offers protection only sparingly.

Generalized security was the aim of Social Gospellers and of Franklin Delano Roosevelt, whom Shorris lauds as their secular prophet. The current movement aims at "security for the fittest," those economically, politically, ethnically, even religiously advantaged persons within its privileged circles. It jealously maintains its own prerogative against that of poor people, children, immigrants, gays and lesbians, nonwhites and non-Christians. Living in constant fear of death by terrorist cataclysm, Americans sympathetic with the movement indemnify their eternal personal safety by offering good works to these unfortunates as lucre in exchange for salvation. The poor in this economy serve only as means to the movement's heavenly ends. In a country of such fearful self-regard, Shorris observes, "This is the loneliest time."

Predictably, given Shorris's progressive leanings, he finds the movement against democracy curling root and tendril into places like the Reagan administration, the Bush White House, Grover Norquist's group Americans for Tax Reform, Billy Graham's crusades and the Southern Baptist Convention. It also has unexpected allies, such as Bill Clinton, who reorganized (Shorris would say gutted) American welfare to satisfy moderates and conservatives, and Al Gore, who has proclaimed his environmental work a moral crusade.

In the book's most concise chapter, "Rivers," Shorris describes what holds all of these actors together: an ability to interpret the Constitution in a way that quashes American individualism. When that happens, he writes:

the country comes under the control of something other than a compromise between political parties; it falls into the grip of a political movement [with] the capability to overthrow the limitations of gradualist democracy. Then the movement can amplify what it wants the country to hear and lower the voice of dissent by shouting down the strident dissenters and silencing the others through manipulation and fear. At that point what began as a movement may become a coup.

Shorris sees us at the tipping point, about to lose our grip on the American quintessence.

Shorris traces the movement's philosophical and religious roots to work by two 20th-century interpreters of Plato and Aristotle, Leo Strauss and Alasdair MacIntyre, respectively. Strauss influenced William Kristol, Alan Keyes, Allan Bloom and Paul Wolfowitz to disdain democracy as akin to mob rule. MacIntyre's book *After Virtue* (1981) promoted a distrust of the modern bureaucratic state. In Shorris's view, Straussian and MacIntyrean currents combine with contemporary American fears to produce citizens surrendered to concentrated federal power. Relieved of hard choices about civil liberties and social welfare, they are more focused on hyperlocal issues of personal material and spiritual welfare.

The Politics of Heaven offers an impassioned jeremiad, not a careful sociological or historical analysis of U.S. religion and politics. The book's value—and its central danger—arises from Shorris's oracular intensity. He dares, as would a prophet or a poet, to concretize faint connections, but he also ignores important facts and telling ironies. The book's opening signals its disparate modes: Shorris begins with John

Donne, circles around to the 14th-century plague, leaps to the 20th-century destruction of Hiroshima, then goes back to English religious wars and the Puritan flight to the “New World.” The trip leaves the historian in me breathless. But my inner poet feels strangely at home, even buoyed. Indeed, in the face of spectral fear, poetry may be exactly what we need.

Yet even poets should convey compassion and connection. When Shorris denounces the irrationality of the movement’s religious impulses, he forgets that. “Many Americans now see themselves again through the works of Jonathan Edwards, walking on a thin crust above the fires of hell,” he writes; “the house of the Lord is an unsmiling place, a waiting room in which it is all too easy to keep one’s feet warm. They do not think it is a time for laughter.” Here and elsewhere he lambastes a straw man, Menckenesque Calvinism, for its role in the movement. Shorris repeatedly characterizes Calvin and his descendants as “dour” and “grim.” The Puritans “sat in unadorned churches and listened to sermons spoken in flat voices, intoned, as cold as the breeze from Satan’s wings in Dante’s last, worst, deepest circle of Hell.” Had Shorris indicted movement religionists for bad interpretations of the Reformed tradition, he might have generated his yearned-for dialogue with those who continue, in good faith, to find value in that tradition.

Reformed theology arose not from some grasping insistence on the paucity of God’s mercy among human beings; it emerged from a humble acceptance of humans’ inability to transcend lived limits of knowledge and death. The Reformers saw God revealed in scripture and in the incarnation, uniting power and mercy, giving sin both its day and its due. If Shorris wants to stir a counterconfluence to work against the national political movement—especially if he hopes to appeal to a nation steeped in the habits of religious belief—he must recognize those resources, temper his hotly antireligious rhetoric, and speak both honestly and empathetically.

Shorris does find some religious resources for contesting the movement in unexpected places—namely in the Social Gospel tradition and in centrist, ecumenist religion. His fondness for the Social Gospel gives pause; the movement for “Christianizing the social order”—revolutionary, even scandalous, at the end of the 19th century—seems today retrograde in matters of gender, ethnicity and class. But Shorris connects with the Social Gospel’s attention to economic well-being. He can adopt its project as his own without having to talk of conversion, salvation or heaven, as he imagines the movement’s grim religionists do. (He passes over a more obvious and more recent antimovement antecedent—the civil rights

movement—probably because its leaders preached a unified message of total transformation.)

Quite late in the book Shorris also proposes that the mainline denominations, along with “liberal Catholics, and Jews,” can “form a bulwark against the advance of the movement.” Shorris credits the large, white mainline denominations with preserving a kind of Christianity that may help the country move out of the current fear-based political movement into something more democratic. It has been a while since the mainline has been anyone’s hero, so it is surprising to see it portrayed thus here. If Shorris’s mainline readers are steely enough to hang on through his book’s melancholy meanderings, they will receive this quiet reward. Now the task will be to accept the daunting challenge offered by this unlikely champion.

As Christians the one thing we are surely called to in fearful times is to resist despair. We know fear, of course: the scriptures witness to Jesus’ own fear. But we follow him when we use our fear to fuel compassionate action. We love others, as Roberta Bondi has written, as God loves them—into connection. We keep firmly in mind that Jesus taught his disciples to pray that God’s will be done on earth as in heaven. He taught them to ask each day for what they needed, and to ask for forgiveness and for the spirit to forgive. And so we pray that human ways will reflect God’s ways. Such a politics of heaven, far from discouraging real care for others, calls forth our active mercies in this time and this place.