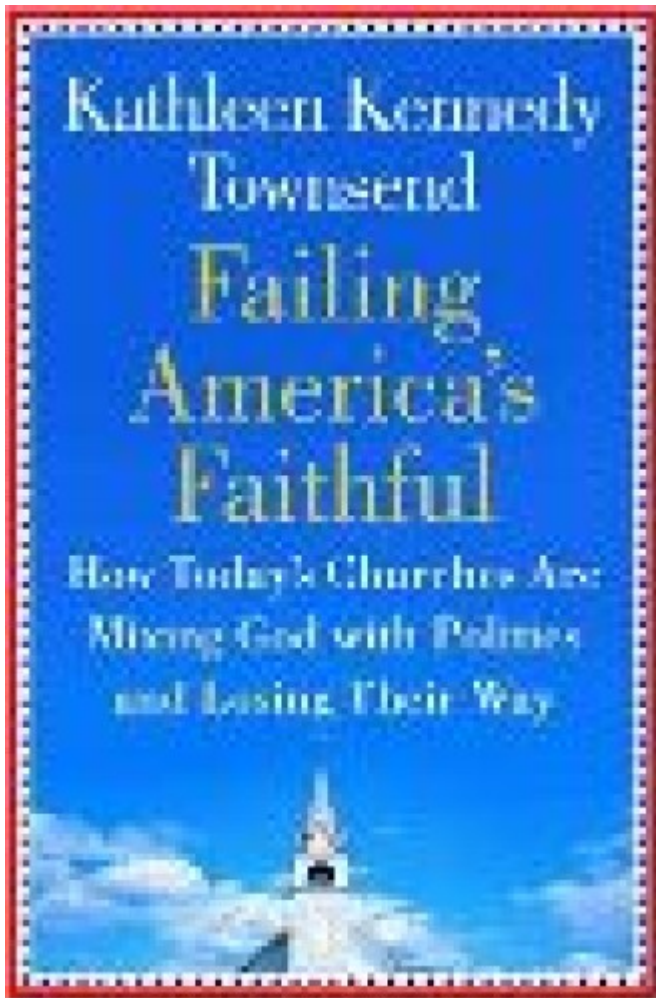


Failing America's Faithful

reviewed by [Walter Brueggemann](#) in the [February 12, 2008](#) issue

In Review



Failing America's Faithful: How Today's Churches Are Mixing God with Politics and Losing Their Way

Kathleen Kennedy Townsend
Grand Central

There are now scores of books dealing with the right-wing takeover of the church in the United States—enough that my editor suggests that they form an identifiable genre. That takeover has resulted in large part from the financing and strategic planning of the Institute on Religion and Democracy, but there is a broader design at work, and to some degree the takeover has happened by default.

Among the many works in this genre, *Failing America's Faithful* merits particular attention both because of its thesis and because of who its author is. Townsend's thesis is that the current sorry state of the U.S. church's positions on public issues has developed mostly by default—because of the neglect of faithful preaching, teaching and biblical interpretation.

Townsend is the oldest child of Bobby and Ethel Kennedy, the oldest grandchild of Joe and Rose. Her narrative account, offered with journalistic lightness and energy, attests to both her rootedness in religion and her practical engagement with the issues. She was the lieutenant governor of Maryland but was defeated in her race for governor, defeated—among other factors—by the efforts of the religious right. Thus she brings to her narrative deep involvement in political reality as well as well-informed theological passion.

Townsend's analysis of the church situation in the United States rings true for this reviewer. She observes how conservatives in the church—backed by the “theological vision” of Ronald Reagan—have privatized religion and reduced it to a moralism of prohibition that has resulted in the “total neglect of communal responsibilities.” In turn, liberals have embraced a secularism that refuses to connect faith and public issues—or they are incapable of making the connections and so settle for an easy moral relativism. She suggests that liberals, whose primary passions she shares, might acknowledge that conservatives are “correct on some issues,” and she asks, with rhetorical flair, “Would it be wrong to draw some moral lines in the liberal sand?” Townsend then vigorously calls for a spiritual awakening that will reconnect what has been rent asunder.

What I find most arresting in the book is Townsend's attentiveness to the deep Catholic nurture she received in her childhood home. Even allowing for what may inescapably be a “promotional propensity” for her father, she offers moving descriptions of what it was like to be nurtured in a family of serious piety and devotional practice. While Bobby surely was a wheeler-dealer on many fronts, what

comes across here are the habits of faith and practice that sustained Kathleen and her family through multiple losses. Theirs was a “proletarian, populist, democratic” faith.

Townsend grew up with parents who often quoted Luke 12:48, “To whom much is given, much is expected,” from which came the imperative, “Give something back.” Her book has a rich Catholic texture to it, and Townsend is clearly a Vatican II Catholic, instructed by Maryknoll priests and most especially by nuns: “Priests were Republicans, and nuns Democrats,” she writes. In her undergraduate thesis on abortion she reflected that, given the hardness of the church, she is “pro-conscience.” She obviously laments the reactionary turn of the Catholic Church since Vatican II:

The more one realized that the Church’s dictates were coming from an all-male and technically celibate hierarchy that never had to worry about a mouth to feed or the joy of sex and its value for married couples, the more it seemed that this Church, while founded by God, was run by men who seemed more interested in their own traditions of power than in the needs of those they served. There was simply no way that Catholics could sustain the massive families that had once been the norm. And there was simply no way that Catholics who participated in the liberations of the feminist and sexual revolutions could adhere to the teachings of a Church that seemed so reactionary.

From this basis of personal faith deeply grounded and overtly available in practice, Townsend reviews the strong tradition of Catholic teaching concerning social justice that is rooted in Pope Leo XIII’s 1891 encyclical *Rerum Novarum*, a teaching that neoconservative Catholics blatantly disregard. She has a keen sense of how such teaching permeates church theology—so much so that the inaugural address of John F. Kennedy was “among the most overtly religious addresses since, perhaps, Lincoln’s Second Inaugural.” And this even though, as Townsend observes, her uncle “was not a deeply religious man.”

Townsend also takes up the “progressive Protestant tradition,” about which she is not as well informed but from which she offers a recital of bold saints who have readily, easily and courageously practiced faith in the public domain. In this discussion she contrasts the roles of Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, Tony Campolo and Bill McKibben with those of Cal Thomas, Tim LaHaye and Pat

Robertson—a juxtaposition that leads to her judgment that “the American Protestant community” as a whole “has dropped its commitment to social justice, dealing a terrible blow to our country’s efforts to come to the aid of the people and families the Bible demands we help.”

Toward the end of the book, Townsend offers her opinion of where the Catholic Church went wrong on sexuality, reviewing the disastrous sequence of Vatican statements that cluster around the 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*. In a chapter called “Moses Didn’t Have a Bake Sale,” she meditates on Matthew 25 and names people (including Allan Tibbels of Habitat for Humanity, low-cost-housing developer James Rouse, and David Beckman of Bread for the World) whose work represents exceptions to the church’s preference of charity to justice. In her final chapter she discusses the work of anti-death penalty activist Helen Prejean, Jeannine Gramick of New Ways Ministry and Ron Sider of Evangelicals for Social Action, reminding readers that the truth of the gospel is news in the world.

Most remarkable is a conversation Townsend reports having with Rick Warren. She explains that he had been reading the Bible, but until shortly before their conversation, “he hadn’t been reading *my* Bible”:

And as Rick Warren acknowledged in referring to himself, but aptly describing the tendency of many evangelicals, he just missed all those biblical passages that call on us to fight for justice, to care about the poor, the sick, the stranger.

He had just missed the crucial passages in the Bible! But inspired by the AIDS work of his wife, Kay, he began reevaluating his beliefs. It was a life-changing experience. The result of that transformation is that Warren has begun to include public dimensions of justice in his message. Previously he had simply lacked the interpretive categories through which to make the connections.

That is as far as Townsend will go. But the testimony she offers, from the dinner-table talk of the Kennedys to the conversation with Rick Warren, is a compelling one. Though the matter is complex, I conclude from her manifesto that the church—Catholic and Protestant—should have known better. We have treated public justice as though it is an exotic add-on or something reserved for kooky liberals. This is a default in pastoral leadership that has failed to show the truth that public justice issues are the warp and woof of scripture and of the gospel.

This book appears at the moment that some conservatives are catching on to these primary claims of the Christian tradition. It would be ludicrous indeed if liberals were now to fail to make the connection between faith and justice. Maybe ludicrous, but it would not surprise Townsend, who calls all her fellow believers, conservatives and liberals, to the reality of faith. As she knows well, and as her father surely knew before her, the health of society depends on such faithful witness in word, in deed and in policy.