

Fear not: An alternative to the politics of fear

From the Editors in the [June 14, 2005](#) issue

The politics of fear has hardly abated since 9/11, or since last fall's election, which was largely a contest of convincing voters about who could best "kill the terrorists." A simple spin down the radio dial shows how fear is alive and well. AM radio offers a string of preachers—who claim to speak for all Christians—pouring invective on those who disagree with them about abortion, homosexuality, war, evolution, gun control and the role of government. These preachers and radio hosts call out the troops, marshaling them to swamp their elected representatives with phone calls and letters on this or that issue on which, we are told, faith or freedom hinges.

In this context, even descriptions like the paragraph above may tend toward being inflammatory—another effort to strike fear in the heart of Americans. Exposés of right-wing Christian America are often hardly less apocalyptic than the pronouncements of the radio preachers citing Revelation. The sky is falling, the new brown shirts are taking over, our beloved republic is being conquered by fundamentalists who are as crazy as al-Qaeda zealots. A recent set of articles in *Harper's* describes evangelical leaders such as Ted Haggard, leader of the National Association of Evangelicals, and James Dobson, president of Focus on the Family, in alarmist, almost panicked tones. The goal of such clarion calls is clearly the marshaling of another set of troops to take back America.

The religious movements *Harper's* laments are worthy of the strongest critique. Yet at times the magazine seems to fear religious faith itself as a motivating factor or intellectual template for action—as if anyone who acts on faith has made a step toward embracing the swastika. The writers' high level of fear blinds them to the many faith activists who have worked for agendas now taken to be "progressive"—Martin Luther King Jr., Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Dorothy Day, to name just a few. And fear blinds them to the rigidity of their own ideological demand that people have to be secular in order to be reasonable.

It's been said that the most common command in the Bible is "Fear not." It's a command voiced repeatedly by Jesus, and voiced by the angel at the annunciation. When God's presence with humanity is palpable, it takes away fear—fear of enemies, fear of the future. Sin abounds and distorts, to be sure, and it must be named and resisted. Yet the future, whatever else it may bring, holds the eschaton, and the full kingdom of the crucified and risen God in which enemies are changed into friends and it is no longer possible to sin. Those who live in light of that end must resist efforts to terrify others in order to heighten their own power. So be not afraid.