

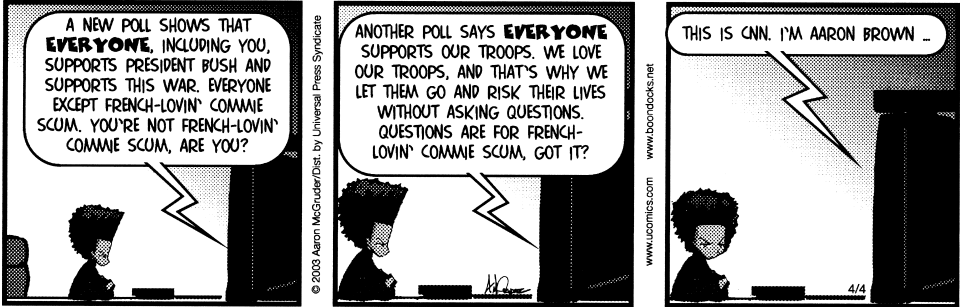
1

ON (NOT) ARGUING ABOUT RELIGION AND POLITICS

In the spring of 2003, during the American invasion of Iraq, my friend Michael attended a peace vigil. As he stood quietly on a street corner with other participants, a young man leaped very close to his face and screamed: “Traitor! Why don’t you go to Iraq and suck Saddam’s dick?” Michael was taken aback by the vehemence with which the insult was delivered as much as by its indelicacy. Why, he asked, does disagreement make some people so angry?

This is and is not a rhetorical question. That is to say, it is a question about rhetoric, and the question requires an answer. In *A Rhetoric of Motives* Kenneth Burke asserts that “we need never deny the presence of strife, enmity, faction as a characteristic motive of rhetorical expression” (20). But in America we tend to overlook the “presence of strife, envy, faction” in our daily intercourse. “Argument” has a negative valence in ordinary conversation, as when people say “I don’t want to argue with you,” as though to argue generates discord rather than resolution. In times of crisis Americans are expected to accept national policy without demur. Indeed, to dissent is to risk being thought unpatriotic.

Inability or unwillingness to disagree openly can pose a problem for the maintenance of democracy. Chantal Mouffe points out that “a well-functioning democracy calls for a vibrant clash of democratic political positions. If this is missing there is the danger that this democratic con-



The Boondocks © 2003 Aaron McGruder. Dist. By Universal Press Syndicate. Reprinted with permission. All rights reserved.

frontation will be replaced by a confrontation among other forms of collective identification” (*Democratic* 104). When citizens fear that dissenting opinions cannot be heard, they may lose their desire to participate in democratic practices, or, to put this in terms congenial to Mouffe’s analysis, they may replace their allegiance to democracy with other sorts of collective identifications that blur or obscure their responsibilities as citizens.

Something like this seems to have happened in America. Members of a state legislature flee the state’s borders in order to avoid voting on a bill that will gerrymander them out of office. Other legislatures are unable to cooperate well enough even to settle on a method of deliberation. Authorized public demonstrations are haunted by the possibility of violence. Media pundits tell us that “the nation” is “polarized.” Citizens do not debate issues of public concern with family, friends, or colleagues for fear relationships will be irreparably strained in the process. Joan Didion suspects that we refrain from discussing current events because “so few of us are willing to see our evenings turn toxic” (23). Didion writes that some issues, such as America’s relations with Israel, are seen as “unraisable, potentially lethal, the conversational equivalent of an unclaimed bag on a bus. We take cover. We wait for the entire subject to be defused, safely insulated behind baffles of invective and counterinvective. Many opinions are expressed. Few are allowed to develop. Even fewer change” (24). Clearly this state of affairs threatens the practice of democracy, which requires at minimum a discursive climate in which dissenting positions can be heard.

Discussion of civic issues stalls repeatedly at this moment in American history because it takes place in a discursive climate dominated by two powerful discourses: liberalism and Christian fundamentalism.¹ These two discourses paint very different pictures of America and of its citizens’ re-

sponsibilities toward their country. Liberalism is the default discourse of American politics because the country's founding documents, and hence its system of jurisprudence, are saturated with liberal values. The vocabulary of liberalism includes commonplaces concerning individual rights, equality before the law, and personal freedom. Because of its emphasis on the last-named value, liberalism has little or nothing to say about beliefs or practices deemed to reside outside of the so-called public sphere. Indeed, in the last fifty years American courts have imagined a "zone of privacy" within which citizens may conduct themselves however they wish, within certain limits (Gorney 135–39). Fundamentalist Christians, on the other hand, aim to "restore" biblical values to the center of American life and politics. If they have their way, Americans will conduct themselves, publicly and privately, according to a set of beliefs derived from a fundamentalist reading of the Judeo-Christian religious tradition. One might say, then, that the central point of contention between adherents of these discourses involves the place of religious and moral values in civic affairs: should such convictions be set aside when matters of state policy are discussed, or should these values actually govern the discussion?

Because most Americans subscribe at the very least to the liberal value of individual freedom, the increasing popularity and influence of Christian fundamentalist belief has created debate, often acrimonious, on many issues of current public concern: abortion rights, prayer in school, same-sex unions, and censorship, as well as more explicitly political practices such as taxation, the appointment of judges, and the conduct of foreign policy. And even though the variety of fundamentalist Christianity I will here call "apocalypticist" is professed by a minority of religious believers in America, its adherents' vocabulary and positions have indeed begun to influence policy developed in civic spheres (see chapter 5). Furthermore, terms and beliefs invented within this discourse ("family values," "partial-birth abortion," "judicial activism") have entered common parlance—the discursive realm from which rhetorical premises are drawn.

I forward the ancient art of rhetoric as a possible anodyne to this situation, in the hope that rhetorical invention may be able to negotiate the deliberative impasse that seems to have locked American public discourse into repetition and vituperation. I hope to demonstrate that the tactics typically used in liberal argument—empirically based reason and factual evidence—are not highly valued by Christian apocalypticists, who rely instead on revelation, faith, and biblical interpretation to ground claims. We thus need a more comprehensive approach to argument if Americans are

to engage in civil civic discussion. Rhetorical argumentation, I believe, is superior to the theory of argument inherent in liberalism because rhetoric does not depend solely on appeals to reason and evidence for its persuasive efficacy. Since antiquity rhetorical theorists have understood the centrality of desires and values to the maintenance of beliefs. Hence rhetorical invention is better positioned than liberal means of argument to intervene successfully in disagreements where the primary motivation of adherents is moral or passionate commitment. Susan Jacoby provides a compelling description of the role played by passion in the maintenance of belief and of the difference it makes in terms of persuasiveness: "In August 2003, when federal courts ordered the removal of a hefty Ten Commandments monument from the Alabama State Supreme Court building, thousands of Christian demonstrators converged on Montgomery. . . . They were not only outraged but visibly grief-stricken when the monument was moved out of sight. It was, one demonstrator said with tears in his eyes, like a death in the family. Secularist civil libertarians who had brought the lawsuit, by contrast, spoke in measured objective tones about the importance of the First Amendment's separation of church and state" (364). I hope to establish that deeply held beliefs are so tightly bound up with the very bodies of believers that liberals' relatively bloodless and cerebral approach to argument is simply not persuasive to people who do not accept liberalism or whose commitment to liberalism is less important to them than are other sorts of convictions.

I need to say up front, however, that rhetoric is not a magic bullet. A rhetorician can make no promises when it comes to changing minds, particularly those of people who are invested in densely articulated belief systems. Usually people invest in such a system because it is all they know, or because their friends, family, and important authority figures are similarly invested, or because their identity is in some respects constructed by the beliefs inherent in the system. Rejection of such a belief system ordinarily requires rejection of community and reconstruction of one's identity as well. Hence the claim I make in this book for the efficacy of rhetoric is limited: it will work better in the present climate than liberal argumentation because it offers a more comprehensive range of appeals, many of which are considered inappropriate in liberal thought. In order to be of use in a postmodern setting, however, the conceptual vocabulary of rhetoric must be rethought. If this can be accomplished, rhetoric can become a productive means of working through issues that concern citizens.

American Liberalism and the Second Coming

Mouffe and Ernst Laclau define hegemony as “the achievement of a moral, intellectual and political leadership through the expansion of a discourse that partially fixes meaning around nodal points. Hegemony . . . involves the expansion of a particular discourse of norms, values, views and perceptions through persuasive redescrptions of the world” (qtd. in Torfing 302).² A discourse that achieves hegemony in a given community is so pervasive there that its descriptions of the world become thoroughly naturalized. Furthermore, its conceptual vocabulary literally “goes without saying”—that is, its major terms are seldom subjected to criticism. Liberalism has enjoyed hegemonic status in American discourse since the early nineteenth century. Apocalypticism has an even longer history in America, but it has never achieved the hegemonic status enjoyed by liberalism or by mainstream Christianity, for that matter. I will argue that at this moment in history, however, a version of Christian fundamentalism, driven by apocalypticism, is in hegemonic contention with liberalism because it motivates the political activism of the Christian Right. The considerable political and ideological successes of this faction have rendered the terms and conjectures of liberalism available for examination and possible redescription. In democracies a serious challenge to a hegemonic discourse is likely to create uneasiness and rancor because ownership of the master terms of political discourse, and hence of political and cultural power, is at stake.

Liberalism emerged as a set of political beliefs and practices in company with capitalism during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.³ According to Anthony Arblaster, the fundamental values of political liberalism are freedom, tolerance, privacy, reason, and the rule of law (55). In an American context equality should be added to this list. There are many varieties of liberalism, among them the classical liberalism of Mary Wollstonecraft; the utilitarian liberalism of John Stuart Mill; the welfare-state liberalism of Franklin Roosevelt; and the contemporary merger of liberalism with free-market capitalism in the ideology called “neoliberalism,” exemplified by the centrist politics of Bill Clinton (Lind). Welfare-state liberalism is no longer influential in American politics; Senator Ted Kennedy, who supports subsidized health care for all Americans, is a lonely avatar on the national level. Nonetheless, surveys establish that most Americans still support welfare-state liberal programs such as Social Security and Medicare. More important from a rhetorician’s point of view, America’s founding documents are saturated with liberal principles. Hence children

and adults who apply for citizenship are exposed to liberal beliefs while becoming acquainted with America's civic lore. Not the least notable assertion in that lore is that "all [citizens] are created equal." The necessity of placing brackets in this famous line points up the fact that exclusions were endemic to Enlightenment liberalism. Despite this, the liberal values of equality and liberty are the most inclusive political values ever incorporated into a polity, and they have been used repeatedly since the nation's founding to extend civic and civil rights to previously excluded groups (Condit and Lucaites). Liberal beliefs permeate our judicial system, as well as our daily talk about "freedom," "equality," "privacy," and "rights." That is to say, bits and pieces of liberal ideology still circulate widely in public discourse in the form of commonplaces, and it is on the level of common sense that liberalism (still?) enjoys hegemonic status.

I am aware of course that liberalism is ordinarily contrasted to conservatism. However, nonreligious conservatism is a minority discourse in America, as is illustrated by the cases of neoconservatism and libertarianism. Our national politics has moved to the right since the 1970s because of a powerful alliance forged during that decade between conservative political activists and apocalyptic Christians (Diamond, *Spiritual* 56–60). The social agenda that motivates the religious Right is of little interest to economic conservatives, but their acquiescence to it was required in order to amalgamate a voter base that was sufficiently extensive to elect conservatives to office. While this collaboration has not been entirely free of ideological strife, it has achieved astonishing results in elections at all levels. Moreover, some of its slogans and typical patterns of thought have now become commonplace. An example can be found in the morphing of the term *liberal* itself; the term used to refer to someone who espoused welfare-state political positions and/or who believed that moral and social behavior was a matter for individuals to decide. But *liberal* can now be wielded as a term of opprobrium, meaning something like "free-thinking, immoral elitist."

Like liberalism, Christianity is a hegemonic discourse in America, as is demonstrated by the fact that it is difficult for non-Christians to remain unaware of Christian belief and practice. Church bells ring in nearly every American neighborhood on Sunday mornings, and during periods of Christian celebration, such as Christmas and Easter, every mall and many homes are decked out with images and symbols evoking these commemorations. In a study undertaken in 2001 more than three-quarters of the Americans surveyed identified themselves as Christians.⁴ Of course

there are many varieties of Christian belief. In America most Christians are Protestants, although a significant minority (25 percent) of those who identify themselves as Christian are Roman Catholic. The variety of Christian belief in which I am interested here typically flourishes among conservative Protestants called “evangelicals” or “fundamentalists,” although apocalypticist beliefs may be held by mainstream Protestants and Roman Catholics as well.⁵ As we shall see, scholars and pundits do not agree about how many people can accurately be called “conservative Christians.” Here I accept Christian Smith’s careful estimate: about 29 percent of the American population so identify themselves (*Christian* 16). Here the term *apocalypticism* signifies belief in a literal Second Coming of Jesus Christ, an event that is to be accompanied by the ascent of those who are saved into heaven.⁶ Apocalypticists believe that this ascent, called the “Rapture,” will occur either prior to or during the tribulation, a period of worldwide devastation and suffering. Finally, at the last judgment, evil will be overcome and unbelievers will be condemned to eternal punishment. I argue that this theological scenario founds a political ideology, a set of political beliefs subscribed to by millions of Americans who may or may not accept as literal truth the end-time prophecies announced in the Christian Bible. Domestically this politics favors the infusion of biblical values into American law and maintenance of the patriarchal nuclear family. Its foreign policy is aggressively nationalist.

The phrase “liberal Christian” is not an oxymoron. Many of America’s founders were practicing Christians, and yet they based the Constitution of the United States on the Enlightenment principle of natural human rights. In his study of America in the early nineteenth century Alexis de Toqueville claimed that Christianity actually reinforced the liberal values that inform America’s founding documents, noting that Christianity held “the greatest power over men’s souls, and nothing better demonstrates how useful and natural it is to man, since the country where it now has widest sway is both the most enlightened and freest” (1: 290–91). However, Randall Balmer argues, against de Toqueville, that there is no “mystical connection” between religion and politics in America. In his opinion the disestablishment clause of the First Amendment, barring the institution of a state religion, has in fact insured maintenance of political stability. Balmer writes that a “cornucopia of religious options” has “contributed to America’s political stability by providing an alternative to political dissent” (*Blessed* 39). In other words, potent beliefs that could threaten liberal democracy regularly drain off into religious enthusiasm. Balmer’s example

is the emergence of the Jesus movement out of the political turbulence of the 1960s.

The relation of apocalypticism to conservative Christian political activism is complex. On its face apocalypticism would seem to obviate an interest in politics. Someone who believes that she is at any moment about to be snatched up into heaven is unlikely to be interested in earthly matters. Charles Strozier remarks, for example, that “democracy is not well grounded in the lives of . . . Americans . . . who believe in the Rapture” (120). Nevertheless, public figures who are associated with Christian political activism, such as Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell, do hold apocalypticist beliefs, and apparently they do not find it difficult to reconcile the two. Such reconciliation became easier during the 1980s, when interpreters of biblical prophecy modified the apocalyptic narrative in order to suggest that political involvement was necessary in order to hasten the advent of the end time (see chapter 4). Nor does subscription to conservative Christian beliefs necessarily entail either conservative politics or political activism. Based on his survey of evangelical opinion, Christian Smith concludes:

Evangelicals are often stereotyped as imperious, intolerant, fanatical meddlers. Certainly there are some evangelicals who exemplify this stereotype. But the vast majority, when listened to on their own terms, prove to hold a civil, tolerant, and noncoercive view of the world around them. . . . The strategies for influence of evangelical political activists and those of ordinary evangelicals are obviously worlds apart. The former can be alarmist, pretentious, and exclusivist. The latter emphasize love, respect, mutual dialogue, taking responsibility for oneself, aversion to force and confrontation, voluntaristic ground rules of engagement, and tolerance for a diversity of views. Clearly, many of the evangelical political activists who are in the public spotlight do not accurately represent the views and intentions of their supposed constituency. (The fact that they are largely self-appointed, not elected, with little accountability to the grassroots majority may help to explain this.) Yet many outsiders make little distinction between the two, and the masses of ordinary evangelicals around the country remain misunderstood, their views thought of as no different from those of Randall Terry, James Kennedy, Pat Buchanan, and other evangelical leaders of similar persuasion. (*Christian* 48)

In fact some fundamentalist Christians still adhere to the policy of withdrawal from worldly matters that was widely adopted after the Scopes trial in 1925 (Carpenter). Nancy Ammerman points out that prior to the 1980s “pastoring churches and establishing schools had long been the more

likely strategies of people who called themselves fundamentalists. Not all saw politics and social change as their mission, and many had discounted such activities as useless, even counterproductive” (“North American” 1). Ammerman also notes that “the name ‘fundamentalist’ is not necessarily synonymous with ‘conservative,’ because it is possible to accept fundamentalist Christian beliefs, such as the Virgin Birth or the Resurrection, while seeking naturalistic rather than supernatural explanations for them” (“North American” 2). Some fundamentalist and evangelical Christians in fact hold liberal political beliefs. Spokespersons for this position, such as those who write for *Sojourners.com*, regularly express dismay about the agenda and tactics of the Christian Right. In addition, subscription to the political agenda forwarded by the Christian Right can be justified on nontheological grounds. That is to say, conservative Christian voters who support this agenda may do so for reasons that have little direct correlation with apocalypticism: they may wish to protect their families from what they see as a decline in moral values, for example.

Despite this long list of qualifications, it remains true, as Sara Diamond points out, that “the evangelical subculture . . . is like a big ocean in which the Christian Right’s activist fish swim—and spawn” (*Not by Politics* 11). Diamond, who has studied the Christian Right since its origin during the 1970s, claims that apocalypticism is one of the “ideas” by means of which the movement “sustains its fervor” (*Not by Politics* 197). That is to say, apocalypticism does ideological work by offering intellectual sustenance to political activists. I will argue that apocalypticism does more than this: it actually connects political activity to Christian duty. The apocalyptic flavor of dominion theology—the belief that Christians can hasten the Second Coming by creating a Christian kingdom here on earth—motivates Christian activists to convert unbelievers (Detwiler 105–11). But it also motivates them to alter the ideological underpinnings of American democracy, and for a radical few, apocalypticism rationalizes a desire to overturn the U.S. Constitution and its associated body of law as well. Concerned Women for America, a Christian organization that claims to have over five hundred thousand members, states its mission as follows: “to protect and promote Biblical values among all citizens—first through prayer, then education, and finally by influencing our society—thereby reversing the decline in moral values in our nation” (<http://cwfa.org>). The desire to convert all citizens to “biblical values” could hardly be made more explicit. Beverly LaHaye, the founder and former chair of this organization, is an apocalypticist. Her group’s determination to “influence society” and “reverse the decline

in moral values” is a direct challenge to liberalism and, arguably, to liberal democracy itself. Frederick Clarkson writes that “such views are the rule, rather than the exception in Christian Right circles. Patricia Hoffman, who is a leader of both the Christian Coalition and Concerned Women for America . . . has written that ‘separation of church and state is a bogus phrase. Our country was founded on Biblical principles and we need to turn back to God and His precepts’” (17). And a small group of Christian intellectuals—called reconstructionists—has articulated an explicit plan for replacing liberal democracy with theocracy (Clarkson; Martin). They hope to pave the way for this possibility by the pursuit of theonomy, the replacement of American law with biblical law. George W. Bush’s proposal in 2004 to add an amendment to the Constitution forbidding same-sex marriage is an example of the will to theonomize, however cynical its politics. Apocalypticism rationalizes all of these desires by reassuring Christian activists that their work will be rewarded when they are raptured. Their assurance that dissenters will suffer horribly during the tribulation may be equally attractive to believers.

In his study of “Christian anti-liberalism” Jason Bivins claims that “self-consciously Christian protests” against the state’s perceived “lack of moral authority have been proliferating since the 1960s” (2). Bivins defines “political religion” as “action conducted in political spaces or contexts for explicitly religious reasons” (6). In his view liberalism presents several difficulties to politically committed Christians insofar as it “is associated with representative democracy, has tended to privilege individual over collective rights, favors negative liberty (freedom from coercion) over positive liberty (freedom to participate in politics in active, constructive ways), and seeks to protect moral and religious pluralism by separating public from private realms of society, keeping the public free from contentious moral or religious beliefs that are regarded as threats to political stability. . . . By divesting public life of moral and religious participation, liberal political order in the United States lacks a moral orientation” (3).

The category “Christian anti-liberal” includes Catholic activists Daniel and Phillip Berrigan, whose pacifist agenda must be anathema to apocalypticists. Nonetheless, conservative Christian activists take up all of the specific complaints against liberalism listed by Bivins. One of these is liberalism’s elevation of individual rights over the good of the group. “Family values” is of course an important commonplace within the preferred politics of conservative Christianity, and this “focus on the family,” to borrow a phrase from James Dobson, posits a superior moral status for the nuclear family.

The hierarchical privilege awarded to the family trumps any individual rights to which husbands, wives, or children might lay claim. Adherents to this ideology are antifeminist, and they reject as well legal and social practices they define as endorsing the rights of individuals over those of the family unit—divorce, sex education, and abortion, for example. Another complaint against liberalism centers on its negative view of liberty. Tim LaHaye, husband of Beverly LaHaye and coauthor of the popular *Left Behind* novels about the end time, claims that freedom from coercion by church or state produces citizens who are committed to nothing but the pursuit of their own happiness (LaHaye, *Battle*; LaHaye and Noebel, *Mind Siege*). And Christian reconstructionists argue that positive liberty can only be achieved through acknowledgment of the primacy of God's will (Barkun, *Religion* 200–209). A third complaint involves the liberal distinction between public and private spheres, which confines religious belief and practice to the latter realm. This distinction frustrates citizens who wish to participate in politics for religious reasons or to lend a religious cast to public proceedings or venues. Resistance to the distinction emerges in arguments over prayer in school or display of the Ten Commandments in civic settings.

I realize that my concern about esoteric theological matters may seem overblown and that I may seem to overestimate the power and abilities of a small group of intellectuals and a somewhat larger group of activists who are committed to an ideology that seems bizarre when measured by the standards of secular politics. However, the Christian Right is currently packing the judiciary and legislative bodies at all levels with like-minded believers in an effort to establish God's kingdom on earth, an eventuality that some among them believe will hasten the advent of the apocalypse. Since the 1970s religiously conservative Christians have mobilized at the grassroots, often working through established churches in order to elect politicians who are sympathetic to their positions on family values and other social issues. Their work has achieved stunning results. In 1994 conservative Christians awarded the Republican party a majority in Congress for the first time in many years. In 2000 Republicans gained the presidency and held majorities in both houses of Congress as well, something that had not happened since 1952. Kevin Phillips estimates that in the 2000 election “roughly 55 percent of the people who voted for George W. Bush were Armageddon believers” (242). (“Armageddon” refers to the prophesied battle between Christ and Antichrist that is to occur on the plain of Megiddo during the end time.) Phillips wonders if Bush's support among apocalyp-

tists was as pervasive as it seemed: “could 75 to 80 percent of the believers in Armageddon have voted for Bush? So it appears” (242). Phillips’s conjecture seems confirmed by the election of 2004, in which Bush won 79 percent of the evangelical vote.⁷ Once again, not all evangelicals are apocalypticists. But even allowing for this distinction, it seems that activists who believe in the imminence of the end time can exert considerable political muscle.

The Ethics of Fundamentalisms

Hegemonic discourses construct and inform community experience to such an extent that their assumptions seem natural, “just the way things are.” The very inarticulateness of hegemonic belief is a source of its power. In *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* Thomas Franks argues that belief in capitalism runs so deep among populist conservatives that they literally cannot see how it damages their lives. Franks’s representative Kansans blame “the government” or “liberals” for falling wages and rising prices, all the while electing politicians who regularly betray their economic interests in favor of policies favored by corporations and wealthy citizens. One such citizen is Rupert Murdoch, whose Fox entertainment empire dispenses the news programs that conservatives watch, as well as the quasi-pornographic entertainment that the Christians among them claim is offensive. Contradictions like this are apparent to unbelievers like Franks, who can subject them to criticism because he is no longer informed by the ideologies that give rise to them. But believers have little incentive to examine their beliefs unless they encounter critical discourse that they can both hear and grasp. Indeed, adherents’ response to criticism indicates the degree to which the belief systems to which they subscribe can be characterized as fundamentalist.

William Connolly defines fundamentalism as “a general imperative to assert an absolute, singular ground of authority; to ground your own identity and allegiances in this unquestionable source; to define political issues in a vocabulary of God, morality, or nature that invokes such a certain, authoritative source” in which believers ground their “identity and allegiances” (*Ethos* 105). Connolly points out that any belief system, including liberalism, can be adhered to with fundamentalist intensity. This can occur when the fundamental ideals motivating a system of beliefs (God, nature, reason) are protected by “a set of political strategies” that define “every carrier of critique or destabilization as an enemy marked by ex-

actly those defects, weaknesses, corruption and naivetes” that believers feel they are “under an absolute imperative to eliminate” (*Ethos* 105–6). In other words, fundamentalist adherents of ideologies project vices defined by their preferred system of belief onto those who adhere to other systems. True believers in American super-patriotism, for example, characterize dissenters as traitors to the ideals they value most: nationalism and capitalism.⁸ Hence the aptness of McGruder’s cartoon: dissenters are “French-lovin’ commie scum.”

Fundamentalism is of course a kind of foundationalism. By pointing this out I do not mean to resurrect the foundationalist/antifoundationalist argument that troubled scholars in many disciplines during the 1980s (Fish, *Doing*). But I do not want to lose sight of an important point that was made during that debate. Ideological foundations are exclusive only if they are taken to be noncontingent—that is, if they are taken to apply noncontextually or universally. This holds no matter whether foundations are called “transcendental signifieds” (Jacques Derrida), a “metaphysical dream” (Richard Weaver), “rational man” (the Enlightenment), or “first principles” (Aristotle). Theoretically every belief system depends from some principles, values, experiences, desires, or habits of knowing. To that extent every belief system is foundational, and hence antifoundationalism is not coherent unless it is read as a critique of belief systems that posit universal or noncontingent foundations.

Elizabeth Minnich argues that belief systems that take a given starting point as universal must also assume that any being whose subjectivity is not legitimated by that starting point is of secondary or lesser worth. In patriarchy, for example, the identification of subjectivity with masculinity effectively marginalizes women. When a metaphysics informs a politics, those who are marginalized by its foundational ideal or ideals can be constructed by policy as invisible or worse, as worthy of subjugation and defeat (58–59). Minnich treats antifoundationalism as a rational position, but I think it is, finally, an ethical preference. Those who espouse it obviously value contingency and inclusion over certainty and exclusion.⁹ And anyone who wants to mount an offense against a fundamentalism must do so by evaluating the status and treatment of its ideals within the system of beliefs those ideals create and validate. To attack a fundamentalism on the ground that it is not rational is to apply a standard that is valued in some belief systems and not in others; to treat rationality as universally binding is, willy-nilly, to fall into yet another fundamentalism. In the present intellectual climate, informed as it is by scientific and liberal rationalisms, it is

unfashionable to argue that the maintenance of belief depends upon evaluation. But as a rhetorician I am not loathe to argue from value.

When foundations are held to be primary, noncontingent, and non-negotiable, then systems of belief stemming from them become fundamentalisms. All ideologies are held by their subscribers to be preferable to the available alternatives—there is not much point in being a liberal if you don't think that freedom and equality are better values than whatever else is out there. Environmentalism remains a foundationalism even when its central ideal—preservation of Earth's natural systems, say—is taken to trump all other ideals (freedom to travel how and where one likes, for instance). For environmentalist belief to become fundamentalist, preservation of Earth's systems must be treated as preferable everywhere and for all time. A fundamentalist environmentalist might argue, for example, that Earth's systems were in pristine condition prior to the evolution of humankind and that we should therefore strive to return the planet as close to that condition as possible (even in this outlandish example fundamentalism becomes a warrant for mass extinctions). But in any fundamentalism an ideal or ideals must also be considered nonnegotiable. This returns us to Connolly's definition: defenders of fundamentalisms do not evaluate the ideals that drive them; were they to do so, they would risk discovering incoherence and other flaws. Rather, they invest their energy in protecting those ideals from assault by unbelievers. In the present political context, then, the term *fundamentalist* delineates a particular strategy (and tone) that permeates defenses of political and religious belief systems: a desire to preserve one's own founding beliefs from threat at any cost. Typically this is accomplished either by rendering opposing claims unworthy of consideration and/or by excoriating the character of people who disagree with one's founding claims. Fundamentalist liberals tend to employ the first option, while fundamentalist conservatives tend to take the second route—although both groups can, and do, resort to either tactic.¹⁰

The Goals and Strategies of Christian Fundamentalism and Liberalism

The minimal religious goal of Christian fundamentalism is the achievement of personal salvation. Apocalyptic Christians who believe that salvation can result from human effort also accept the conversion of unbelievers as a moral and sacred duty, and those who are politically inclined want to bring American legal and political practices into line with their religious

beliefs. And as I note above, radically conservative Christians accept and proselytize theonomy—the belief that biblical law should become the law of the land. As Connolly’s analysis suggests, apocalyptists depict those who dissent from these programs as opponents. In more extreme versions of this ideology dissenters are characterized as evil.

Today few rhetors speaking for the political Right will openly admit that exclusivity drives conservative ideology just as surely as it marks rightist political practice. A cleavage between “us” and “them” motivates contemporary conservative rhetoric, a cleavage starkly articulated in Christian fundamentalism as an absolute difference between the saved and the unsaved. This difference is meant literally within fundamentalism, but it circulates as a figure in conservative discourse where, it must be admitted, much more is made of postulated differences between men and women, whites and blacks, straights and gays, than in other contemporary political discourses. Contemporary Christian rightist discourse relies upon and fosters a hypersensitivity to the hierarchic dichotomies it characterizes as absolute, and its more extreme varieties pose significant danger to those whom it caricatures as inhabiting the reductive identities it assigns, such as “Jew” or “homosexual” (Barkun, *Religion*; Cohn, *Warrant*; Herman). Many rightists now speak and write as though they accept a firmly marked dichotomy between good and evil, although they may be ignorant of the apocalyptic cosmology from which the distinction derives. For example, the title of a book by conservative commentator Sean Hannity is *Deliver Us from Evil: Defeating Terrorism, Despotism, and Liberalism*, as though each of these practices were equivalent to the others, and as though all were evil.

For their part liberals want to preserve the brand of liberal democracy developed in America during the Enlightenment. They hope to achieve this by creating consensus about contested issues, and they forward reason and tolerance as means of securing agreement. The elevation of empirically based reason as a preferred source of argumentative premises devalues appeals to tradition, authority, or desire, exactly as was intended by early liberal thinkers who were anxious to end the epistemological dominance of religious belief. Bruce Lincoln notes that Enlightenment thinkers “struggled to replace a well-established regime of truth with one of their own creation, whose methods, standards of expertise, problematics, authority structures, and institutional centers were still emergent. The older hegemon has ‘faith’ and ‘revelation’ as its epistemological watchwords, theology and doctrine as its prime discourse, orthodoxy and salvation as

its goals, the church as its chief institution. Against this, the philosophes made ‘reason’ their rallying slogan and ‘enlightenment’ their goal, while polemically redescribing their adversaries’ concerns as ‘idle superstition’” (57). When liberals tout their version of reason as the only authentic source of argument, clearly they face the ethical risk of excluding the arguments of those who prefer to legitimate claims in other ways.

Liberals sometimes feel that religious fundamentalists are intolerant because the latter refuse to adopt their preferred, rational approach to negotiation and adjudication of disagreements. But liberals can be equally intolerant when they refuse to negotiate their demand that argument be rational in their sense of that term (see chapter 2). And while tolerance ordinarily restrains liberals from characterizing those who oppose them as enemies, their acceptance of reason as a primary mode of argument nonetheless devalues any appeal to divine authority. Hence liberal argumentative strategy discounts the very grounds from which Christian fundamentalists mount claims and proofs. Christian fundamentalists are irritated in turn not only by rejection of their primary authority but by liberals’ refusal to prioritize arguments according to their quality, or, more precisely, to measure the worth of arguments against a standard. They are of course aware that liberal values saturate American political and judicial discourse, and their experience with the legal system has repeatedly demonstrated that the values they are asked to adopt while deliberating public issues are part and parcel of the very ideology they reject. Stanley Fish discusses a lawsuit brought by born-again Christians against a public school reading program, the aims of which were to expose children to a variety of points of view. Fish notes: “It was the contention of Mrs. Frost and the other parents who joined in her suit that the free-exercise rights of their children were infringed when they were required to study views that contradicted and undermined their most cherished convictions” (*Trouble* 156). In other words, these parents resisted the liberal desire to instill tolerance in children. Ironically they based this claim on an appeal to yet another liberal principle—the free exercise of religion enshrined in the First Amendment. The case was decided against them, according to Fish, because the judges involved failed “to understand . . . that the distinction between exposure and indoctrination is an artifact of the very liberalism Vicki Frost rejects” (*Trouble* 157). For the petitioners seeing is believing; if children are “exposed” to non-Christian values, their beliefs will perforce be contaminated by those values.¹¹ In this case, then, the petitioners appealed to a principled intolerance of difference, a value that is not easily

grasped within commonsense liberalism, where tolerance is often thought of as “the way things are.”

Clearly the preferred argumentative strategies, as well as the ultimate goals, of liberalism and apocalypticism are wildly incompatible. Would-be theonomists or theocrats cannot possibly succeed in realizing their goals without severely altering the American Constitution and its attendant body of law. Like liberals, I too wish to preserve democracy, and hence I am not in sympathy with the goals of a theology-driven fundamentalism whose proponents desire to abrogate religious and other freedoms embedded in the Constitution. Despite its failings, liberalism may be the best politics we are likely to get in the near term. The liberal values of freedom and equality are responsible, historically, for the inclusion of groups whose members were once not admitted to citizenship. In my opinion liberalism is superior to other currently available political discourses that legitimate exclusion by means of rigidly policed hierarchical dichotomies, if only because history shows that liberalism allows rectification of its typical exclusions. However, this should not stop us from trying to adapt liberalism toward a political model that enables disagreement without necessarily incurring incivility, intimidation, or violence.

The Blurring of Public and Private Domains

In *The Politics* Aristotle claims that in a democracy the relations obtaining among members of an *oikos*, or household, are dictated by nature (I.2). The Greek *oikos* was constituted by a citizen’s family, slaves, and estates. In Aristotle’s Athens, that most misogynist of cultures, women were quite literally confined within the relative privacy of the household. Slaves, that is, those who were deemed unable to “foresee things needed” and who were thus considered unfit to rule, were also deemed “by nature” to belong within that sphere (I.2; Neel). According to Hannah Arendt, ancient Greek thinkers argued that the *oikos* was quite different from the *polis* insofar as nature dictated establishment of the former; specifically nature decreed that humans band together in common shelters for protection, nutrition, and communion. Hence true freedom could be had only through participation in the affairs of the *polis*, which “knew only equals, whereas the household was the center of the strictest inequality. To be free meant both not to be subject to the necessity of life or the command of another *and* not to be in command oneself. It meant neither to rule nor to be ruled” (Arendt 30).

In *On Rhetoric* Aristotle delineates three sorts of issues that are appropriate for consideration by citizens acting within a democratic *polis*: what the community should do (deliberative rhetoric), what has been done in the past (judicial or forensic rhetoric), and what actions deserve communal praise or blame (epideictic rhetoric) (I.3.1358a–b). Some issues raised in the deliberative arenas delineated by Aristotle are economic in the modern sense insofar as they concern the allocation of revenues to acts such as making war (I.4.1359b). But the deliberative discussions carried on by citizens were not confined to economic questions alone. They also reflected on issues having to do with maintenance of the community—as Aristotle puts it, citizens deliberate about “war and peace, national defense, imports and exports, and the framing of laws” (*Rhetoric* I.4.1359b).

In the modern period the ancient distinction between public and private was reinscribed to locate deliberation about the economy—as newly defined by capitalism—wholly within the so-called public sphere.¹² Eighteenth-century liberal accounts of the public/private distinction retained Aristotle’s gender politics but rewrote the class of slaves so that it included those whose labor produced profit without their achieving access to capital—that is, workers. Issues concerning capitalists were available for public discussion, but issues that interested women, slaves, and the poor were excluded from civic arenas by the operative definition of “citizen” as “white male property owner.” And in another departure from classical political thought, a second liberal gesture relocated epideictic—argument about values—within the purview of private individuals, effectively rendering ethical discourse off-limits to civic discussion (see chapter 2). Today disagreements about values reach an impasse in part because liberals consider values to be private matters. Hence they are reluctant to discuss moral issues in civic settings, preferring to debate only those issues that are supposedly amenable to reason and that are thus, by definition, suitable for public discussion. Conservative Christian activists, on the other hand, unabashedly appeal to moral and religious values no matter the site in which their arguments are made.

Aristotle configured the *agora*, the site where citizens assembled to discuss issues, as the sole civic arena. Liberalism has followed suit by imagining that civic debate occurs in institutions sponsored by the state—legislatures and courtrooms—and in the press. But civic debate has always occurred elsewhere—around hearths and kitchen tables, for example. And in recent years issues formerly considered to be private—such as the appropriate configuration of families—have emerged as topics suitable for

discussion by legislators and judges, thanks to the political efforts of the Christian Right (Berlant). In other words, the liberal distinction between public and private is difficult to maintain (Warner, *Publics*). In this book, then, the term *civic arenas* is meant to include dinner tables, street corners, break rooms, classrooms, church basements, pubs, women's clinics, dentists' offices—wherever people debate issues of state policy and civic conduct.

Toward Political Agonism

Chantal Mouffe asserts that democracy must be preserved despite the failings of liberalism. Even as she credits liberalism as the belief system that made modern European and American democracies possible, she is concerned that its goal of consensus is both unrealizable and dangerous to the preservation of democratic practices. Mouffe points out that this goal actually reduces or hides altogether the realm she calls “the political”: “To envisage politics as a rational process of negotiation among individuals is to obliterate the whole dimension of power and antagonism . . . and thereby completely miss its nature. It is also to neglect the predominant role of passions as moving forces of human conduct. Furthermore, in the field of politics, it is groups and collective identities that we encounter, not isolated individuals, and its dynamics cannot be apprehended by reducing it to individual calculations” (*Return* 140). That is to say, the political is about power: its acquisition, generation, and maintenance. Because of this we must not discount the role played by desire and other passionate commitments in political activity. In this arena powerful individuals do emerge and act, but their actions are governed by beliefs and desires that are communal, that are generated by and within the political.

The political is not the same thing as politics, which Mouffe defines as “the attempt to domesticate the political, to keep at bay the forces of destruction and to establish order” (*Return* 141). Politics has to do with making decisions that entail choices between two or more possibilities, decisions that cover over the antagonism between and among positions. In liberal politics this process is called “compromise” or “reaching consensus,” terms that valorize the fact of agreement at the same time as they elide the exclusions required to reach it. In a democracy each articulated possibility will be constructed by (and will construct in turn) constituencies of partisans and opponents. A president offers war as a possible solution to a perceived threat; the articulation of this possibility constructs adherents

and dissenters. In response to the president's proposal other citizens generate different strategies, such as sanctions, assassination, peacekeeping by a neutral party, and so on; these possibilities construct partisans, dissenters, and yet other possibilities in turn. That is to say, political discourse is generated by means of metonymy—chains of arguments related by difference rather than identity. Perhaps we can find a way out of the current ideological impasse, then, by foregrounding difference. Mouffe in fact uses Jacques Derrida's concept of difference to argue that the primary relation of the political is antagonism: "One of Derrida's central ideas is that the constitution of an identity is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the resultant two poles—form/matter, essence/accident, black/white, man/woman, and so on. This reveals that there is no identity that is self-present to itself and not constructed as difference, and that any social objectivity is constituted through acts of power. It means that any social objectivity is ultimately political and has to show traces of the exclusion which governs its constitution, what we can call its 'constitutive outside'" (*Return* 141). The "constitutive outside" of a polity such as the United States, obviously, is all other states. "The French," "the Israelis," "the Iraqi people" in part construct American citizen-identity insofar as they are "outside-us." But clearly "insides" and "outsides" can be constructed within states as well, among groups whose beliefs, goals, and tactics differ. James Morone points out that "the boundary separating a privileged us from a less reliable them" appeared very early in American history, and it "would not evaporate" despite liberal egalitarian hopes: "That line got constructed not simply out of birth and rank but out of convictions about grace, about moral superiority" (47). In other words, one line of distinction between "us" and "them" commonly used in America has always had a religious coloring.

Mouffe's concern is that the "violent hierarchy" inherent in the political may become constructed as a friend/enemy relation: "in the domain of collective identifications, where what is in question is the creation of a 'we' by the delimitation of a 'them,' the possibility always exists that this we/them relation will turn into a relation of the friend/enemy type. . . . This can happen when the other, who was until then considered only under the mode of difference, begins to be perceived as negating our identity" (*Return* 2–3). The super-patriotism generated by the events of September 11, 2001, constructed America as a nation of like-minded patriots, a tightly knit "we" whose identity was threatened by an enemy whose actual location in the world shifts alarmingly from Afghanistan to Iraq, from Iran to

Palestine to Syria, to North Korea and back again. The “enemy,” the negating opposite of “us,” can reside within our midst as well, in the persons of Arab Americans and war protestors.

Liberalism forgets or erases the we/they relation that necessarily informs the political. Liberal rhetorical theory assumes that all members of a democratic polity will be willing to examine and weigh contending positions in a rational fashion, aiming for compromise where this is possible and settling for tolerance where it is not. Clearly, apocalypticism is a direct challenge to this belief. Mouffe points out that political legitimacy is not any longer grounded on rationality in contemporary democracies (as if it ever was); rather, hegemonic discourses become so because someone in power takes or once took them to be legitimate (*Democratic* 100). This link between legitimacy and power remains in place only as long as a hegemonic discourse successfully fends off contenders. The limits of any hegemony, then, are defined by sufficiently powerful antagonistic beliefs that contest its primacy (Laclau and Mouffe 122–27). Put another way, the borders of a hegemonic discourse are defined by the limits of its power to interpellate adherents, to police their desire to accept or defect. That its critics on both the Left and the Right are now able to see that liberalism is an ideology rather than a fact of nature suggests that its hegemony faces a significant challenge.

Given the antagonisms that exist at the borders of hegemonic discourse, Mouffe calls for discursive strategies that can rewrite the friend/enemy relation so that those who differ are conceptualized as adversaries rather than enemies: they are “no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but as . . . somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question” (*Democratic* 102). The effect of such a reconceptualization, she hopes, would be to “legitimate opponents,” that is, always to keep in mind that their claims are legitimate within the borders of the hegemonies to which they subscribe and that their antagonism toward “us” and our ideals is such that it can never be resolved solely by rational means. To treat opponents as adversaries—as people who maintain agendas that compel them as forcefully as our own compels us—is not easy: it requires that participants “undergo a radical change in political identity. It is more a sort of conversion than a process of rational persuasion” (Mouffe, *Democratic* 102). Mouffe uses *conversion* here in the sense given it by Thomas Kuhn, who argues that “adherence to a new scientific paradigm is a conversion” (Mouffe, *Democratic* 102). However, the religious overtones carried by this term cannot be lost on her.

Acceptance of one's opponents as legitimate adversaries requires a change in subjectivity, a change in orientation toward antagonistic discourses, and an attitudinal change toward those with whom one disagrees. The difference between this model of politics, which Mouffe calls "agonistic pluralism," and liberal democracy is that in the former "the prime task of democratic politics is not to eliminate passions from the sphere of the public . . . but to mobilize those passions towards democratic designs" (*Democratic* 103). The mobilization of passions, I submit, is a task for rhetoric. Indeed, Mouffe herself appeals to "the great tradition of rhetoric" as a means of accomplishing this task, citing the work of Chaim Perelman and Lucie Olbrechts-Tyteca as exemplary (*Return* 130).

I want to complicate Mouffe's discussion of political agonism by reading it alongside an ethical stance toward the political derived by Janet Atwill from her study of preclassical rhetoric. According to Atwill, the Older Sophist Protagoras argued that the political art "consists of two qualities," *aidos* and *dike*, generally translated "respect" and "justice" (210). As is typical of archaic Greek thought, these concepts indicate reflexive relationships among members of a polity: Atwill notes that "respect toward others is inextricably tied to the respect one can expect for oneself" (211). What this means is that politics (and rhetoric) must turn on respectful relationships wherein everyone is willing to address, and be addressed by, an other (Lyotard). Respect requires justice because, as Atwill puts it, "good faith efforts are difficult when the stakes and resources of each party are unequal" (212). Just relations between and among opponents are also difficult to establish when the argumentative goal is consensus, when everyone begins with the knowledge that the positions taken by some or all must be eroded or even forgotten if deliberation is to succeed. Indeed, the achievement of consensus can simply mean that the most powerful interests managed to silence all other parties. On the other hand, one of the great achievements of liberal argument is that it does acknowledge the necessity of respectful address to others, unlike authoritarian (and unjust) discourses that refuse to do even this much. According to Atwill, "because purely authoritarian discourse is concerned solely with strengthening an already rigid position, it is an almost ceremonial rejection of a relationship" (212). What is missing from America's civic discourse at this moment, then, it seems to me, is a willingness to acknowledge difference while remaining open to the necessity of respectful address to others and to their positions. This does not mean that any party to an argument must ever or always "cave," as my

students might say. Rather, all parties must understand that an unwilling caving in of any party to an argument diminishes all other parties.

The accounts of the political I have briefly reviewed here are idealist. They carve out difficult paths to walk, particularly in a time and place where citizens' discursive responses to events are generally manufactured for them by government and the media. But ideals show us what is possible. One of the functions of rhetoric since ancient times has been to envision the available argumentative possibilities (Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II.19. i–xiv). Since most of the major disagreements that currently circulate in American political discourse arise from conflicts between liberal and apocalypticist approaches to argument, it seems imperative that some means be found that can address their differences. I appeal to rhetoric at this juncture not because I think it is another foundationalism that can solve all disagreements whatsoever. Far from it. But as I have said repeatedly, rhetoric does have a major advantage over liberal strategies of argument insofar as it is able to address ideological and emotional claims as well as rational ones. I hope to show that well-prepared rhetors can find openings within situations where disagreement occurs, openings that can help participants to conceive of themselves and their relation to events in new ways. To my mind this is at the very least an improvement over the current ideological impasse, to which Americans typically respond with anger or silence.