

How religious right is Rick Perry?

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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The conventional wisdom is that the Republican primary race's frontrunners are now Mitt Romney, Michele Bachmann and Rick Perry. Jon Stewart [thinks](#) this analysis is unfair to Ron Paul, who placed second to Bachmann in the Ames Straw Poll on Saturday. While Paul's libertarian ideas helped fuel the Tea Party, Stewart dismisses Bachmann and Perry as "Moral Majority in a tri-corner hat."

This aside from Stewart echoes Andrew Sullivan's [claim](#) that Bachmann and Perry's prominence amounts to a "Christianist takeover" of the GOP primary, evidence that small-government conservatism continues to be pushed out by a more religious variety, as he argued in *The Conservative Soul*. Of course, the rise of the Tea Party makes that 2006 book seem less than prescient.

The Tea Party's energy is primarily antitax and antigovernment. A lot of Tea Partiers are also religious conservatives, but not because the movement was infiltrated by the almighty religious right. It's because economic and social conservatism have a lot more [genuine overlap](#) than many commentators think.

Enter Michele Bachmann, who's had little trouble positioning herself as a leader on both fronts.

But what about Perry? We've heard a lot about him since he announced his campaign Saturday: [Is](#) he or [isn't](#) he smart enough to win? Is he [just like George W. Bush](#), or does he just [seem that way to non-Texans](#)? And is he the hardcore religious-right type some would have us believe?

Perry's been aggressively [reaching out](#) to conservative evangelicals, even sponsoring a [prayer-themed political spectacle](#) in Houston.

But while this could be read simply as an existing prayer warrior's splashy jump to a national stage, it also smacks of trying too hard--as if Perry hopes that all the religious conservatives who just started paying attention to him will assume he's always shared their priorities.

It isn't clear whether he has.

Erica Grieder [makes a strong case](#) that Perry is far more motivated by economic causes than by social ones. And his ideas about the role of government and federal spending are pretty wild. Most campaign books are about courage and resolve and the American dream; Perry's is about how basically [everything the federal government has ever spent money on is unconstitutional](#).

Mainstream conservative economists revere Milton Friedman; Perry says that acting on Friedman's ideas would amount to [treason](#).

Yes, Perry talks the religious-right talk. Every serious national Republican candidate in my lifetime has done this. But while Perry presents plenty of causes for alarm, it's not at all clear that his religious views [deserve a top spot](#) on this list.