

Lift High the Cross, by Ann Burlein

reviewed by [Peter Powers](#) in the [March 22, 2003](#) issue

Ann Burlein opens her book by quoting Virgil Griffin, Wizard of the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Griffin exhorts others to embrace a racist politics not for the sake of power, but for the sake of the powerless: "I'm not in this organization for Virgil Griffin. I don't fight the courts in Washington, D.C. and other states to win my rights; I want to win rights for that little boy right there. If you don't stand up and demand your rights, and get in the streets and fight for them, they will have no rights. Your children, your grandchildren, nor mine will have no rights!"

Burlein's sharp insight is that the insidious politics of the racist right employs the very ideals and political rhetoric that most Americans readily embrace. An assistant professor of religion and philosophy at Meredith College, Burlein makes her case by comparing two groups: Scriptures for America, a white supremacist organization run by Pete Peters, and Focus on the Family, the well-known conservative evangelical ministry headed by James Dobson. She examines the ways in which both groups deploy a politics of nostalgia and of the body to motivate their adherents.

This politics of the body encompasses both the individual body envisioned as a temple of the Holy Spirit and the national body politic envisioned as God's temple in need of cleansing. Thus, both Peters and Dobson invoke the same biblical image to call Christians to articulate their concern for their children by embracing the romance of male protectionism. In this dangerous and deceitful age, the story goes, men must protect the innocence of their families by taking the country back from the secular humanists who, since the 1960s, have been using pop culture to surreptitiously reprogram the sexual and gender mores of young people. This reprogramming is part of a conspiracy to annihilate all memory of Christianity from the national body politic.

The power of this narrative is evident everywhere, whether in heated editorials about teaching evolution in schools or in the spectacle of congressional representatives trying frantically to be caught on television saying the Pledge of Allegiance. The familiarity of this rhetoric suggests the great strength of Burlein's

book. Her work points to "the fears and aggressions, silences and desires that circulate through what is best in people, their highest ideals and deepest hopes."

This recognition, wherein we hear our own deepest hopes being mouthed in contexts we might otherwise detest, was pointed to by Jeffrey Kaplan in the preface to his definitive *Encyclopedia of White Powers: A Sourcebook on the Racist Right*: "If this finding could be given a name, it would be this: the shock of shared humanity. And in truth, this bothered me greatly. How could such people be so much like us? And why would this seem so obvious to me, and so opaque to the wider culture and the academic world alike? Surely I felt, the problem must lie with me."

This kind of self-questioning expressed by authors or provoked in readers is perhaps the surest sign of significant work. As our comfortable modes of perception are disrupted, new possibilities for living may emerge. Burlein's book provokes such disruption, showing the ways in which our high ideals concerning God, family and country readily lend themselves to pernicious ends.

But Burlein may be taking her argument too far when she uses it to critique familial intimacy and the rhetoric that accompanies it. For instance, she emphasizes the ways in which "domestic training orients people toward perceiving familiarity as the precondition of intimate connection" and argues that "such affective discipline provides a crucial condition of possibility for a right-wing politics that seeks to reproduce a national body politic that perceives homogeneity as the precondition for entering into the imagined community we call the nation."

For Burlein the solution to this seems to be the displacement of familial intimacy with alternative forms of intimacy. I remain skeptical, especially when Burlein seems to suggest that placing a high value on children and family tends toward fascism. Arguments for racial or gender justice often invoke a rhetoric of valuing and protecting families and children. Arguments against gender and sexual discrimination take the form of recognition within difference: "These, too, are our (or somebody's) children." Moreover, racial and gender discrimination exist as easily among persons practicing alternative forms of intimacy as among those who do not.

Forms of intimacy of many kinds, it seems, can lend themselves to high ideals and hopes as well as to the most pernicious forms of violence. In short, by reaching so far Burlein forgets the premise of her introduction, that similar values and rhetorics can achieve very different political ends.

Nevertheless, this overreaching shouldn't diminish the value of the critique that Burlein makes of conservative forms of Christianity, especially when it comes to racial politics. Her work raises pointed questions about why conservative American Christians fare so poorly when it comes to racial reconciliation, whether in terms of theology, cultural mores or political rhetoric. On this score, the world of conservative evangelicalism has often seemed on the side of the family, but not on the side of the angels.