

Stain of sanctimony

by [Mark Krupnik](#) in the [September 13, 2000](#) issue

*The Human Stain*, by Philip Roth

*The Day After: A Retrospective on Religious Dissent in the Presidential Crisis*, by Gabriel J. Fackre

Philip Roth's powerful new novel takes place during the time when news of Bill Clinton's misconduct with White House intern Monica Lewinsky dominated dinner parties and casual conversations. Roth tells the story of a professor of classics who is drummed out of his job by a pack of faculty jackals. The author wants to make vivid a parallel between the scapegoating that destroys a professor and the scapegoating that all but destroyed a president. The persecutors are politically correct, which in the context of American higher education is left-liberal or "progressive." But for sanctimonious intolerance there is not much to choose between the haters on the left and those on the right.

Roth's hero-victim is one Coleman Silk, an African American who has passed for white as a dean and professor of classics at Athena College in western Massachusetts. Roth's point of departure is replete with ironies that will require the whole of his narrative to work through. Five weeks into a new semester, Silk, in the course of taking attendance in a class, inquires about two students who are on his list but who have never shown up. He asks whether they are really "spooks," meaning, "Are they for real or are they ghosts?" Silk doesn't intend any harm by the word and is certainly not using it as a term of derision for blacks. As fate would have it, however, the two absent students are African-American, and the faculty is scandalized by what they take to be Silk's racism. In due course the errant professor is brought to his knees by a cabal of the politically correct together with other members of the faculty who hate him for more directly personal reasons.

Reviews have praised *The Human Stain* for its narrative inventiveness and its characterization of Silk. But the reviews haven't paid sufficient tribute to Roth's rhetorical power in giving vent to his savage indignation toward the people who are always ready, in his view, to crush anyone who seems not to have hewed to the current party line.

Impassioned rhetoric in literature always carries a risk. It may be a sign, as Yeats warned, that an author is using his will to do the work more appropriately done by the imagination. Still, I was exhilarated by the energy and intelligence of Roth's counter-rage. He writes with scarifying fidelity of the summer of 1998, when "Bill Clinton's secret emerged in every last mortifying detail." How perverse that those who demanded ever more in the way of public "accountability" can have been so insensitive to the degree to which he had already been shamed, which so much exceeded what any modern president had been made to suffer for his misdeeds. One thinks how easily Ronald Reagan got off for his administration's involvement in the Iran-contra deal, a much more important violation of public trust than Clinton's dalliance with Lewinsky. But of course Reagan's misdeeds did not involve sex, and in America there is no immorality like sexual immorality.

Roth nearly overwhelms the reader with long sentences in which he recalls "the summer of an enormous piety binge, a purity binge" when the revelation of every last detail of Clinton's folly "revived America's oldest communal passion, . . . the ecstasy of sanctimony," and when there were "in Congress [and] in the press" the great hypocrites, "the righteous grandstanding creeps, crazy to blame, deplore, and punish," all of them infected with what Roth, quoting Nathaniel Hawthorne, calls "the persecuting spirit." For example, William Buckley, a man always pleased to emphasize his religiosity, proposed that in the Clinton crisis impeachment might not be enough. "When Abelard did it," Buckley reminded readers, "it was possible to prevent its happening again."

*The Human Stain* appears in the same year as a little book, *The Day After*, by Gabriel Fackre. Fackre's book reminds us of the way certain religious educators contributed to the madness. Roth isn't likely to have known about this group, but they are very relevant to his animadversions. Fackre reprints a document that appeared on the Internet as a "Declaration concerning Religion, Ethics, and the Crisis in the Clinton Presidency."

One of the things that upset these enemies of Clinton most, and continues to vex Fackre, was their belief that Clinton was using religion for political ends in seeking to persuade the nation of his contrition. With their great powers of divination, the signers of the Declaration affirmed their certainty that Clinton was being insincere. And, in any case, feeling bad or saying "I'm sorry" wasn't enough. A president had to be held "accountable." Certain public consequences of his wrongdoing were necessary for a full repentance. These religious critics left undefined what, precisely,

they wanted. Were they urging more rites of presidential shaming? Resignation? Imprisonment? Castration?

There is one thing that the authors and signers of the Declaration seemed to take for granted. It never seemed to them worth considering why this sinner-president should have felt the need to go through the motions of religious repentance before an entire nation. Why did Clinton arrange that Presidential Prayer Breakfast on September 11, 1998? The signers of the Declaration were sure that the whole thing was politically motivated, designed to provide him with religious cover for his moral misdeeds. But the more important and verifiable fact is that the president did put himself through such a mortifying public ritual of apology.

My explanation is that only in America might one expect to see the nation's leader submit himself to such a public performance of religious contrition. Religion and American politics don't take place in separate spheres. Rather, politicians more and more are going in for the ritual performance of religious acts. They are allowing their discourse to be colonized by a moralism more appropriate to the pulpit than to the soapbox. No doubt religion does have a place in American politics, but not as a politics that, if explicitly stated, would prove unpalatable to most Americans.

Nowadays no one in the United States can be a credible presidential candidate or effective president who has not convinced the people that God is running with him. The Christian belief of FDR, Eisenhower, Kennedy and Nixon was taken for granted, but it was not a major focus of their presidencies. But now more candidates than not are serious religious believers and not at all shy about making that known. That change has not always been for the better. Just compare George W. Bush's appeal to Jesus as his favorite philosopher with Reinhold Niebuhr's religiously based--and intellectually cogent--anticommunism in the late 1940s and '50s. Religious affirmations have by no means been limited to the Republicans in the current campaign. In accepting the Democratic Party's nomination for vice president, Joseph Lieberman, an Orthodox Jew, outbid all the other candidates in the number of times he invoked God.

The contributors to the Declaration are notably more tough-minded in their application of religious ideas than is the current Republican candidate for president. But they have contributed to the present political culture, in which moralism counts for more than specific policies that might feed those who are not fed by the sanctimony of politicians and some of their spiritual leaders. These days we are getting all too much pious "flapdoodle," as Mark Twain used to call it.