

## Keys to the Kingdom: Conservative Protestantism as an Organizational Field

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Conservative Protestantism is not a social movement. It is a social context in which numerous movements are nurtured and supported. The pro-life, creationist, homeschool and defense-of-marriage movements, not to mention Republican party political mobilization, are only the most well-known causes sustained in this context. This paper will explain how and why conservative Protestantism is such fertile ground for social movements.

Social scientists have tended to apprise conservative Protestantism either as a religion, best assessed with theoretical tools built for specifically religious phenomena, or as a bundle of beliefs, best assessed through individual-level survey data. Such approaches limit understanding of conservative Protestantism in ways that are unfortunate for political analysis and for social theory. I argue that an adequate understanding of conservative Protestantism in the U.S. requires that we view it as a constellation of organizations that cohere through a common culture, organizational sensibility, and dense network ties. In the language of organizational sociology, conservative Protestantism is an *organizational field*.

Viewing conservative Protestantism as an organizational field facilitates an ecumenical view of what we might call religious “firms.” The conservative Protestant world includes not only churches but also schools and colleges, publishing houses, television and radio stations, seminar programs, retreat centers and camps, myriad for-profit small businesses, and social movement organizations of many kinds. Citing a range of recent scholarship in the sociology and political science of religion, this paper will sketch the material and cultural mechanisms through which this vast population of firms coheres.

The recent cultural turn in organizational sociology also facilitates better understanding of how conservative Protestant beliefs and organizational practices are – and are not – related. On the one hand, and contrary to much popular wisdom, conservative Christians do not adhere thoughtlessly to particular religious dogmas, nor do they blindly follow their leaders. On the other hand, conservative Protestantism is characterized by clear if largely informal rules about organizational governance and cooperation. Citing a range of scholarship in the sociology of religion, this paper will sketch how these rules simultaneously facilitate inter-firm cooperation within conservative Protestantism and limit cooperation with parties beyond it.

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