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"Evangelicals and Religious Dissenters: Secular Elites as Moral 'Other'"

In the discourse of much contemporary public Protestant Evangelicalism, there is an interesting set of claims that at least on the surface appear to be contradictory. The first claim is that the United States is, and has been since its inception, a "Christian nation." This idea has been used, particularly by leaders of political 'Christian Right" groups, to justify many public policies that explicitly inject Christian religious content and symbols into public social life. This can be called a "majoritarian" understanding of the role of religion in politics and public life (Williams and Demerath 1991) as it is comfortable with religious expressions that are representative of the country's majority, even though they might make members of religious minorities uncomfortable or put them at a disadvantage.

On the other hand, evangelicals at both the elite and grassroots levels often claim that contemporary American society and culture are dominated by a secular, and sometimes even "anti-religious," elite that makes Christians themselves an embattled minority. At one time in national history evangelicals openly associated this elite with shadowy forces of international Jewry – and that this claim had public resonance is evidenced by the long history of markedly higher levels of anti-Semitism among

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conservative Protestants than among many other groups of Americans (e.g., Glock and Stark 1966; Jaher 1994).

More recently, the suspicion has moved more pointedly toward "secular" elites, who espouse a philosophy of "secular humanism." One easily discernable manifestation of this concern appears in the recent plethora of books recounting attacks on American morality, Christian values, and even Christians themselves, by elites that usually include the American Civil Liberties Union, Hollywood, higher education and its "political correctness" or "multi-culturalism," and other types of "social engineers" (D. Limbaugh 2003: jacket cover; see also Folger 2005; Kennedy 2003; Kupelian 2005; Sears and Osten 2005). This claim went high profile during the winter holiday season of 2005 when a number of conservative leaders and media stars (such as Fox News' Bill O'Reilly) decried what they called a "war upon Christmas" lead by "American Civil Liberties Union lawyers, professional atheists, and Christian haters" (Gibson 2005: jacket cover). O'Reilly regularly refers to his opposition as "SPs" – secular Progressives.

One might ask how one can be an embattled minority in a country that is overwhelmingly Christian? This seems particularly curious as evangelical religious expressions have become ever-more popular in public American culture. Professional athletes regularly proclaim their faith and gratitude, with Bible Study and prayer sessions regular occurrences in many locker rooms and crosses and Bible references added to clothing, tattoos and uniforms. Christian music, television, and movies flourish as cultural industries, to the place where formally independent companies have become profitable enough to be snapped up by large corporations (Brown 2002). And, of course, the ruling politicians in the Republican political party proudly and widely display their

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evangelical faith, but notably, those running for national office from either party are certain to parade their religious commitments.

It is tempting to dismiss the construction of evangelicalism-as-embattled as little more than the mobilizing rhetoric employed by movement entrepreneurs who are gearing up the foot soldiers of the culture wars for public purposes. It can be difficult to continue to galvanize collective action if movement members think that victory has been achieved. Thus, the rhetoric may be used cynically in such occasions by those trying to keep their political organizations vibrant. No doubt that is sometimes true. But it is theoretically unsatisfying to have to attribute motives, particularly base motives, as the primary explanation for a social phenomenon. It smacks of the conspiracy theory that animates many of the concerns with "secular elites." And whatever the motives of evangelical leaders who may use such rhetoric, an elite-motive explanation is silent about why such talk might resonate with many rank-and-file average Americans who think of themselves as evangelicals. "Mobilizing rhetoric" can only be useful if someone is actually mobilized to action. And given the ubiquity of both the claims listed above, and the number of books that publishing businesses must think they can sell, there must be someone buying – at least some of it.

Thus, I argue in this chapter that the paradox of the simultaneous claim to dominant majority and embattled minority status reveals some deeper truths about American evangelical culture and worldviews that are relevant to understanding evangelicalism's public postures. Something in the claim that America is a Christian nation – and in the *simultaneous* claim that evangelicals face a certain peril in the country – touches something very central to American evangelical self-understanding and

identity. Moreover, it is significant how much of this rhetoric is directed at "secular" elites rather than competing religious faiths and their people, such as Catholics, Jews, or Muslims. The "nativist" rhetoric of decades past was often cast in religious categories, in which Catholics or Jews were perceived as the dangerous "other" (Higham 1963; Bennett 1988; Shea 2004); this was often true even into the second half of the 20th century (see Blanshard 1950). While there are noticeable lapses of the public religious code of tolerance and inter-religious acceptance (such as Someone Smith's 1980 comment about Jews or Franklin Graham's 2001 comments about Islam) the most obvious demons in the contemporary evangelical pantheon are the "seculars." This, too, is significant to the rhetoric's appeal.

This chapter will parse both sides of this evangelical paradox – the claim that America is a Christian nation and that contemporary Christians are persecuted – and then explore the cultural, ideological, and political strands that weave these ideas into a coherent worldview for the contemporary evangelical mindset.

America as a Christian Nation

To say that "America is a Christian nation" can mean several things. That the European colonies in North America that went on to become the United States were founded by Christians is not disputed, by both defenders and critics of the national Christian mythology. And many of those founders, whose culture and religion placed a significant stamp on colonial culture beyond their own region, viewed the American settlement as "an errand into the wilderness" in which they would build a "city on a hill" that would be to God's glory (e.g., Miller 1956). Both critics and defenders alike can

point to the tremendous influence of New England Puritan culture on the culture of what became the United States, to the extent that their Calvinism is the source of many aspects of what seems like generic American civil religious thinking and belief (e.g., Bellah 1967; Kelly 1984; Reichley 1985; Wald 2003). So, not only was America overwhelmingly composed of Christians (even Protestants for over a century), it was not a stretch to say that a Protestant Christian worldview was indelibly stamped on the national identity. As numerous observers have pointed out, Evangelicals for a significant period of American history – up to the turn of the twentieth century – assumed themselves to be the moral guardians of the nation (Marsden 1980; Penning and Smidt 2002:19; Smith 1998: 4).

It continues to be a sheer demographic fact that an overwhelming majority of Americans identify themselves as Christian (about 80% is the best estimate); even though current immigration is bringing more non-Christians to these shores than ever before, it remains the case the most immigrants are Christian – led by Mexican Catholics and Korean Protestants. So, if one wants to adopt a majoritarian perspective, and there is of course a deeply resonant reflex to live by the "will of the majority," it remains demographically the case that the United States is a Christian nation.

But certainly in the past, and for many evangelicals presently, the idea of the U.S. as a Christian nation means more than the majority responses to the identification variable on social surveys. The implications are that aspects of American society and culture – including for many its politics and economics – are particularly represented in Christian expressions, or vice versa, that evangelical Protestantism expresses something central about American identity and destiny.

Many, of course, recognize that religion generally, and evangelical Protestantism specifically, does not have the place in American live they once did. For some evangelicals, and for some liberals, the story of American history is the story of public, established religion, such as those founded in the New England and Southern colonies, retreating in the face of an advancing pluralist and often secular society. For many evangelicals this may be a declension narrative, as a righteous community goes astray (see Sacvan Bercovitch on the jeremiad). For many liberals and secularists, this may be a "progress" narrative that understands religion as differentiating into the private sphere of personal and family commitments, as modernity ushers in a secular age of science, reason, and social diversity and a pluralistic public sphere becomes religiously neutral (see Shea 2004). That these narratives tell different stories does not mean they are mutually exclusive in the culture, as many Americans seem to be able to find a certain amount of truth in both declension and progress trajectories simultaneously.

A perhaps more implicit, and certainly more politically significant, meaning of the idea of America as a Christian nation is in the notion that the U.S. has a "covenanted" relationship with God. While there is no one universally accepted understanding of this phrase, generally the idea is that the U.S. is God's chosen nation, charged with bringing God's Kingdom to realization here on earth, and blessed with a certain prosperity as long as it is faithful in that charge (Williams 1999). Unlike many elements of American political and religious culture, there is a clear corporatist dimension to this belief. The nation as a body politic is responsible for this mission, and suffers as a whole for transgressions or wandering from the way.

This covenanted idea was clearly built deeply into the Puritan vision of building a society in the New World. In the same way that they thought of themselves as "new Hebrews," the Puritans imagined their entire community responsive and responsible to God, as the Jews were in their covenant after the Exodus. While modern individualism, abetted by the religious individualism that developed in pietist traditions in the American frontier, has diluted this notion for many, there are clear elements in conservative Protestantism that find it a reasonable way of understanding America in the world (Handy 1984). Moreover, it is not at all uncommon to find evangelical Protestants who assume that our nation's collective forsaking of the Christian path is the cause of many of our national social problems. For some, as Smith (1998) points out, this may be a purely pragmatic interpretation – Christian morals, ethics, and beliefs "work" in terms of keeping marriages together, raising healthy children, and the like. But any national-level disaster, such as the 9/11 attacks or Hurricane Katrina, always produce some interpretations of the event as a sign of God's wrath for his nation and people going astray.

Thus, the restoration of Christianity to prominence in the public square is an important element in the worldview of many conservative Protestants. One type of conservative theology that holds to this idea is termed "reconstructionism" (Martin 1996: 353-55; see, for example, Kennedy and Newcombe 2003) – built on the idea that a religio-political Christendom should be reconstructed in the U.S. There is a perhaps apocryphal story regarding this public, policy-oriented idea of the country as a Christian nation. At the National Governors' Conference in 1992 Mississippi governor Kirk Fordice was reported to have referred to the U.S. as a "Christian nation." A colleague

added gently, that didn't he mean a "Judeo-Christian" nation. "If I meant that," Fordice reportedly replied, "I would have said that." Christian Reconstructionism and its ideological cousins perhaps get more of their share of press than they have actual adherents, but it is not unreasonable to be concerned about the implications of these ideas for a pluralistic society. Reconstructionism does take the idea of a Christian nation to its (theo)logical conclusion.

Christian Smith (2002) is one noted scholar who maintains that the portrait of Evangelical America as committed to a "Christian America" is overdone, and that portrait too often relies on the texts and books of a minority of clergy or politicized, activist "Christian Right" organizers. According to Smith, this ignores both the views – and the wide variety of views – that his research finds among ordinary lay evangelical Protestants. Indeed, he finds a small minority that deny that the U.S. ever was a Christian nation, and a minority that are fairly sanguine and optimistic about the country's future because it is still a Christian nation that is not in any particular spiritual crisis (2002: 22-4). But more important, Smith finds a wide range of understandings about, and attitudes toward, what a "Christian America" actually means. There is a general suspicion of political power among many evangelicals, and hence a Christian Right-inspired capture of the institutions of government does not appeal to many on those grounds. On the other hand, many believe that the basic principles of American government, culture, and society are basically aligned with, and informed by, "Christian" principles and values (2002: 29-35). In general, Smith finds evangelicals to be marked by the basic tolerance and civility that characterize American society as a whole, and thus a state-based Christianity violates their sense of pluralism. Even Williams and Blackburn (1996) who

interviewed Operation Rescue anti-abortion activists, often found reluctance among their respondents to endorse the idea of a complete fusion of church and state.

As noted above, Smith faults studies that only look at the writings of religious elites as misrepresenting many of the views of among the rank-and-file laity. Similarly, Smith faults studies that rely only on survey questionnaires for data, as they often get superficial readings of "attitudes," or frame the research problem in such as way that it shapes the answers discovered. When doing interviews and surveys with evangelical laity, Smith finds evangelicals to be politically like many other Americans, and distinctly non-triumphalist. David Harrington Watt (2002) goes even deeper into local realities by doing ethnography in three churches he characterizes as composed of "Bible-carrying Christians." Watt, an academic and liberal Protestant, finds much in common with the people he spends his time with, regarding their attempts at integrating their lives and their faith, and in many ways their attempts at resisting what they consider the destructive aspects of modern culture and the economy.

But Watt also finds a significant degree to which the Bible-carrying Christians he studies treat social power and its imbalances as "natural" and part of God's order. The ways in which some might believe that women or gays and lesbians are disadvantaged in society, are just part of the way God has created and ordered His world. Further, Watt finds a consistent tendency for parishioners to defer to the authority and opinions of their clergy, even if those are considerably at odds with some of the principles of contemporary democracy (2002: 111-12). Their deference to religious authority figures has interesting implications – studying evangelical elites may not be so distorting.[1]

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[1] Bartkowski's (2004) ethnographic study of the Promise Keepers makes some similar points. He notes that the "populist character of American evangelicalism precludes the monopolization of cultural

Likewise, Williams and Blackburn (1996) found an easy acceptance among evangelical anti-abortion activists that they were privileged to understand certain truths and that their faith should inform social policy. Indeed, when Williams and Blackburn tried to probe the implications of their religiously informed political positions for a pluralistic society – by asking what their ideas of biblical truth guiding social policy meant for others who did not share their views – some respondents did not grasp the question. Several respondents answered and that others had little choice but to accept the reality of their truth – that it was an ontological reality (not their phrase) that guided all people, whether they chose to recognize it or not. Thus, one was free to recognize and accept the truth or not, but there was little concession that different worldviews could represent alternative truths about God's plans for humankind and social life.

In sum, while there may be great diversity among the millions of Americans who claim an evangelical Protestant faith – and why shouldn't there be given the diversity of humans and the elasticity that often accompanies the term "evangelicals" – it also does not seem to be too much of an overstatement to say that many American evangelicals believe that their nation is or should be deeply and thoroughly permeated by the Christian faith and they are basically comfortable with that.

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production by elite conservative Protestants" (2004: 145-6). Williams (2001) argued that, in particular, the Promise Keepers were/are a movement of tremendous internal diversity, abetted by a loose organizational style, a reliance on local congregations, and a focus on religious revivalism rather than policy or political outcomes. Nonetheless, Bartkowski's Promise Keepers themselves expend considerable energy on the elite leadership's messages – even if they come to different understandings, elite messages often frame their considerations.

Evangelicalism as Persecuted Minority

a.   evidence from evangelical elite writings and political discourse

        - citations from books by CR and other conservative writers
        - evidence that secularists and secular humanism is specific oppressor
        - significance of public discourse and rise of conservative media 'echo chamber'

b.   evidence from surveys, other laity opinion, and social science literature.

        - Smith (1998. 2002) interviews
        - work on Promise Keepers; Operation Rescue (Williams 1996; 2001; 2002)

Evangelicals and Religion and Political Tolerance

One way to understand the evangelical worldview (as with any worldview) is to view it as a collection of symbolic boundaries that serve to distinguish those within the group (or subculture) from those outside it. Almost every social group creates and maintains its collective identity at least in part by comparing and contrasting itself to other groups. Thus, group identity is largely *relational* – it may be centered in particular ideas, rituals, or ascribed characteristics, but those features are socially meaningful only because they serve to align or make distinct one group from others. 'Who we are' and 'who we are not' are key features of any group's ability to define itself. Whether one couches the theoretical field in the classic sociological language of "reference groups," or adopts the Bourdieuian language of "distinction" and *habitus*, this basic insight remains. Further, empirical studies of politics and social conflict show how often competing groups mobilize themselves around a definition of their enemy – and rivals demonize each other with remarkable similar terms. Thus, to say that collective identity largely emerges and is defined in relation to others is well established.

For evangelical Protestants, most of whom are the religious descendants of Calvinists or Anabaptist Pietists, in-group and out-group distinctions are crucial because they are so easily theologized as the differences between the "elect" and the non-elect (for Calvinists) and the "saved and the "unregenerate" (for pietists). Social distinctions become overlaid with religious distinctions, making the normative evaluation of in-group and out-group that much clearer. Thus, distinctions are heavily moralized, but also figure religiously in making the evangelical subculture what it is. That evangelical Protestants may show less religious and political tolerance may not at all be related to simple prejudice or a lack of education, but may instead by a constituent part of what separates them from "the world" and an important tool in maintaining their own subcultural vitality. Intolerance may be problematic for a pluralist public culture, but it is not necessarily damaging or dysfunctional for them (see Smith 1998).

While not limited to evangelicals, Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann (2006) show how thoroughly a religiously informed sensibility helps to shape American collective identity. Compared to a number of racial, ethnic, and religious groups, Edgell et al. found that atheists were more likely to be viewed as the moral 'other' – that is, survey respondents thought atheists were least likely to "share their vision of American society" (2006: 217). Even fairly high profile groups often portrayed as the ultimate 'other' for middle America – homosexuals and Muslims – were more likely to rate higher on both public and private acceptance than were atheists. As the Edgell et al. data were not limited to evangelical Protestants, it is not them alone driving the results. But the importance of religiosity to American culture – and to many Americans' definition of who truly is American – is notable.

For evangelicals, the boundaries separating themselves from others are both important, and potentially problematic. If one pursues an evangelical faith, one is committed to the idea that others can be, potentially, a convert. Christianity has an inherent universalism in it message, with the idea that the non-Christian can and should be brought into the fold. Thus the boundaries between the godly and the secular are always tenuous, and those among the former have certain responsibilities for reaching across them to the latter. In fact, Smith (1998) actually credits this conversionary impulse as a major motivation for the creation of contemporary evangelicalism after World War II. Many evangelicals had grown weary of the purist separatism of fundamentalist forms of Protestantism, and saw the impact of that "faithful remnant" approach as leading to highly insular communities. Thus, evangelicalism, as it is today, was built on the idea that those among the saved need to constantly be reaching out to those who are not.

However, 'the world' is tempting and those within the community of saints are always in peril of backsliding from the narrow path. Thus, even more than followers of rival religious traditions, those who have slipped away from the faith are a threat to the evangelical religious community. And if one begins with the assumption that America is a Christian nation, those who are secular or agnostics/atheists are, at least figuratively, back-sliders.

[OTHER ISSUES TO DEVELOP]

- evangelicals and the issue of 'relativism' – in biblical methods, in social/moral life
- the slippery slope from liberal religion to secularism and no religion
- the threat of losing boundaries to subcultural identity]

Evangelicalism and the Significance of 'The Word.'

One of the great issues of the Reformation, and something that continues to inform Protestant-Catholic differences, was the status of the Bible in informing and justifying the faith of ordinary Christians. The Catholic tradition, while taking Scripture as the word of God, also places great stock in Church doctrine and traditions, which are the result of the systematic application of human reason and faith. For many Protestants, by contrast, *sola scriptura*, "by Scripture alone," is the only legitimate religious authority from which truth may be derived. This focus on the Word accompanied a de-emphasis on liturgy and ritual, and the spread of literacy and printing-presses that could put copies of the Bible in more of the faithful's hands. In addition, Reformation faiths put a great emphasis on sermons – in distinction to the often brief homilies that define the Catholic mass, and Protestant religiosity was also marked be songs (Pettegree 2005). All these religious forms emphasized the Word and its transformative power, in contrast to "high church" approaches to tradition and ritual.

This emphasis on Scripture is still apparent among Evangelical Protestants, and found consistently in survey and interview data with ordinary American laity who identify with evangelicalism. For example, as Greeley and Hout (2006) note, evangelicals (the "Conservative Christian" in their book title is in practice a reference to evangelical Protestants) are in many ways "heirs to the Reformation" in their constellation of beliefs and practices. Greeley and Hout find evangelicals to be much more likely than mainline Protestants or Catholics to subscribe to a literal interpretation of Scripture, to believe in the natural depravity of humans and the harshness of God

toward evil, and to report that they have no doubts about the truth of their faith (2006: 22, 28-29).

In his widely cited study, Christian Smith (1998: 23) divides "evangelicals" from "fundamentalists" among Protestants. Despite this division, he finds that both groups are significantly more likely than Mainline Protestants, Liberal Protestants, or Catholics to view the Bible as "literally true." Similarly, both groups are more likely than the others to view human nature as "sinful." Evangelicals (and, interestingly, to a lesser extent fundamentalists) are also more likely to hold that there are absolute standards of morality and that it is the Bible, rather than "church teachings" or "human reason" that informs them "how God wants them to live" (Smith 1998: 23-25).[2]

In sum, almost all studies find that evangelicals treat Scripture with great seriousness, and that it is one of the great markers between them and others, others who are either religious persons or the non-religious. Again, considering the relational aspect of collective identity, the importance of biblical inerrancy becomes clear:

> "Conservatives are . . constrained to denounce [Mainline Protestants] for their
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> questioning of the authority of the inspired word of God in the Bible. If they give
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> that up, they believe they will be no different from other "compromisers" with
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> Darwin and modernity. One either accepts Genesis as written word-for-word, or
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> the game is lost." (Greeley and Hout 2006: 12).

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[2] To offer a bit of what might be called "reverse confirmation," Demerath and Williams (1992: 341-3) found that Catholics were much more likely to have their views on the legality of abortion influenced by "church teachings" than were non-Catholics. Thus, a consistent survey finding is that Evangelicals are highly committed to biblical inerrancy, and still show consistent differences with other Christians in that regard.

Evangelicals take "the word" seriously – they believe in the potentially transformative power of messages. If cultural messages do not reflect Christian ideas and values, they can have seriously negative effects on those hearing them. Thus, if a culture has too many secular messages – and those who control cultural industries are not "people of faith" – the damage can be substantial.

This is one of rationales behind the evangelical antagonism to popular culture and media. To defend, as many liberals do, popular culture as a "marketplace of ideas," is to assume that truth can be discovered collectively over the long run, as people use reason and argument to sort through various types of information. Truth is emergent and communal, and may involve mis-steps along the way. If truth is revealed, and revealed to individuals through their personal relationship with Jesus, and if a mis-step can lead to error than gives in to temptation or involves sin, the marketplace is an unacceptable risk. Further, thinking of ideas for sale in a market could imply that whatever is most popular is *ipso facto* most likely true.

In this light, evangelical objections to school curriculum, popular books, and other parts of contemporary culture makes more sense. There is a clear recognition of the difference between their cultural meaning systems and those of 'the world,' and a clear recognition that evil is tempting and cunning. Raising children so that they also become full members of their Christian community is a considerable task, and the costs of wandering or back-sliding is significant.

Thus, the sense that major cultural industries – Hollywood and the academy to name two significant ones – are controlled by secular people makes those elites dangerous beyond their numbers.

[ISSUES TO DEVELOP]

- liberal religion, moral relativism, secularism, the importance of doubt and certainty
- education and the next generation

Conclusions: Evangelical Protestantism and Secular Culture

Using a variety of data – from survey data, to interviews, to public documents, to secondary literature – I have explored the relationship between Evangelical Protestants and "non-religious" others such as secularists, agnostics, and atheists. These two are groups often thought to be on the opposing poles of the "culture wars" dichotomy, and they have an array of symbolic boundaries and identities arrayed between them. These boundaries have in many ways become theologized and politicized, and this has a number of implications for evangelicalism's approach to public political and cultural life.

There is little direct data that – at the level of public opinion – evangelicals have any more antipathy for secular people than they might have for other groups (although Edgell et al do provide some suggestive findings about 'atheists' as a particular group in the American social landscape). However, there are a number of other indicators that do indeed suggest that many evangelical Protestants find those with no religious particularly threatening. "Secular humanism" is often arrayed as the specific ideological threat that is oppressive to evangelical and a threat to their children. Secular media and those that control those industries are often portrayed as enemies of American culture and a nefarious force in the nation's politics. It may be that evangelicals now feel constrained not to level public attacks against members of rival religious groups – that anti-Catholic or anti-Muslim prejudice is not acceptable in public discourse and evangelical political

leaders avoid it. But they fact that such a taboo does not seem to apply to seculars – and there seems to be at least some sector of the evangelical population that seems to have an insatiable appetite for books that criticize secularists as America's most dangerous enemy – suggests that evangelical culture is finds its particular *bete noir* in the ranks of seculars, agnostics, and atheists.

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