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The Decline, Transformation, and Revival of the Christian Right in the United States.

Peter Dobkin Hall
John F. Kennedy School of Government
Harvard University
April 2007

I have remarked, that the American clergy in general even excepting those who do not admit religious liberty, are all in favor of civil freedom; but they do not support any particular political system. They keep aloof from parties and from public affairs. In the United States religion exercises but little influence upon the laws and upon the details of public opinion; but it directs the customs of the community, and, by regulating domestic life, it regulates the state (de Tocqueville 1945, ___).

Democracy in America offers an idealized portrayal of the role of religion in politics in which churches supported religious toleration, kept aloof from politics, and had little influence on public opinion. We would never guess from his account that the country was in the midst of a second Great Awakening of religion – one that, in little more than two decades, transformed it from one in which barely one in ten of its citizens were “churched” to being one of the most religious nations on earth (Finke & Stark 1992). We would never guess that the nation was at the beginning of an epoch of reform in which social and political movements like temperance and abolitionism, both faith-based in their origins, would revolutionize both the methods and motives of political action.

Any account of the role of the “Christian right” in public life has to begin in the ante bellum period since it was in the half century preceding the Civil War that churches were forced, on the one hand, to accept disestablishment – their legal and constitutional displacement from government – and, on the other, to discover their place in a religious marketplace driven by the preferences of believers rather than the authority of the clergy. These fundamental conditions have continued to shape the role of religion in politics and to determine the success and failure of various strategies of engagement.

Framing our efforts to understand today's "Christian right" in an appreciation for the importance of persistent historical conditions enables us to be more circumspect in our judgments than we might otherwise be inclined to be. Because few social scientists are either evangelical or politically conservative, we may be inclined to focus our attentions on those aspects of conservative religious activism that we find most threatening to our own beliefs and the institutions we value – rather than taking a longer and broader view that might lead us to quite different perspectives and conclusions. For example, we might admire the courage of the reformers who helped to end slavery and to expand women's rights in the United States, while deploring contemporary social movements that endeavored to enforce the Sabbath, prohibit drink, suppress vice, discriminate against Roman Catholics, and regulate the poor. But history requires us to accept the fact that, in many instances, the same people who promoted the reforms we approve also embraced the ones we deplore. Further, while we approve of universal civil rights as a secular legal and constitutional good, we are inclined to overlook the indisputable historical fact of their common origins in the beliefs and actions of religious groups. Finally, we need to appreciate the extent to which movements that started out as narrow and sectarian have, over time, demonstrated the capacity to expand into broader more inclusive civic coalitions – and visa versa.

This paper does not explore the decline, transformation, and revival of the "Christian right" as a problematic – and possibly deplorable – aspect of contemporary public life. Rather, it seeks to trace the evolution of the kind of evangelical Protestantism generally considered to constitute the core of today's Christian conservatism from its early nineteenth century origins. In doing so, I am less interested in constructing a narrative account of the political activities of a particular group of Protestant sects than in showing how a relatively unchanging set of religious beliefs and practices have produced very different kinds of public activism, depending on social, economic, and political contingencies.

Discovering the "voluntary system": Lyman Beecher and the Origins of Evangelical Activism

In 1826, Connecticut evangelist Lyman Beecher was called to the pulpit of the Hanover Street Church in Boston. His appointment was, in effect, a declaration of war

on the city's religious establishment. For half a century, Boston Congregationalism had been drifting from the fiery tenets of revealed religion towards more liberal and permissive sentiments that emphasized good works over the deep faith of the spiritually reborn.

This drift was perceived to have powerful political implications. It affected the control of important public institutions like Harvard College and its faculty appointments. It influenced the control of congregations and their extensive landholdings. It shaped public morality, determining the legality of forms of recreation and entertainment, as well as the strictness with which the Sabbath was observed.

Conflict over these issues was rooted in a deeper feeling among religious activists like Beecher that nothing less than the future of the republic itself was at stake. "If we do fail in our great experiment of self-government," Beecher would declare a decade later,

our destruction will be as signal as the birthright abandoned, the mercies abused, and the provocation offered to beneficent Heaven. The descent of desolation will correspond with the past elevation. No punishments of Heaven are so severe as those for mercies abused; and no instrumentality employed in their infliction is so dreadful as the wrath of man. No spasms are like the spasms of expiring liberty, and no wailings such as her convulsions extort. It took Rome three hundred years to die; and our death, if we perish, will be as much more terrific as our intelligence and free institutions have given to us more bone, and sinew, and vitality. May God hide me from the day when the dying agonies of my country shall begin! O, thou beloved land! bound together by the ties of brotherhood and common interest and perils, live forever -- one and undivided! (Beecher 1835, __).

For Beecher and his fellow activists, the future of the republic depended not only on the vitality of religious communities, but on their capacity to actively shape public values through creating or controlling civic institutions. For them, the religious struggle was also a political and cultural one.

By the time of Beecher's call to Hanover Street, Massachusetts was already deeply split between evangelical trinitarian and rationalist unitarians factions. The trinitarians, who drew their support from farmers and, in the cities, from artisans and laborers, were becoming alarmed by the decline of public and private morality and the

destruction of traditional forms of community and economic life. The unitarians, who enjoyed the patronage of the educated business and professional elites and those elements of the middle classes that shared their values, took a more *laissez-faire* attitude towards the emerging urban and industrial order. Looking to Europe as a model, they favored the growth of secular institutions and activities. Because these differences in outlook and interests not only cross-cut the population, but also the Commonwealth's congregations, conflict between the factions played out both at the ballot box and in battles for control of local parishes.

"When I came to Boston," Beecher would write many years later, "evangelical people had no political influence there, and in civil affairs those who joined them had but little chance. All offices were in the hands of Unitarians -- perhaps a Baptist occasionally; hence, as young men came in from the town, there was a constant stream of proselytes to them" (Beecher 1866, __). He began forming a cadre of young activists:

I invited Marvin to come to see me in Sheafe Street. Explained to him the operation of political patronage. The whole influence of Unitarianism a poisonous bribery. I said, "What do you think of that?" "I think it must be stopped, or we shall be stopped." "My opinion is, we can stop it. There must be ten men in our Church -- you one -- that can assemble in a confidential meeting, and make such arrangements as will do it." I named twelve to bring to me. He did. I explained to them, and said, "You may exert a power that shall be felt throughout the United States. There is a set of smoking loafers who have been in the habit of attending primary meetings, and having it all their own way. Our people don't go. The cause of God is abandoned just here -- the cause of souls. They come streaming into this city from all directions to be perverted. Now organize a society. Go to primary meetings; go to this and that man, and persuade them to go and do up the business" (Beecher 1866, __).

This group, the "Hanover Association of Young Men," began meeting monthly and, under Beecher's guidance, formed "committees on various important matters relating to state of city and things needing to be done." They launched an attack on lotteries, energetically lobbied the legislature, and got a law passed banning them. They

got up a petition to sweep off the booths for ardent spirits on the Common on public days. They got Channing's name, and the deputy-governor, and supreme judges, and lower judges, merchants, and carried into the city council the largest number of signatures ever known before that time to any such document. It failed the first year, but carried the year following. The next public day there was not one of the booths, and they have never been put back since (Beecher 1866, __).

They then moved on to more general moral reform projects, writing letters to the newspapers, agitating for the enforcement of the “blue laws” on Sunday work and recreation, and keeping an eye on such problematic groups as “the colored population,” the Irish, and sailors.

The success of Beecher’s efforts was dramatic. Within a year, four similar groups of evangelical political activists had been formed within the city of Boston. His activities alarmed some of his contemporaries. Unitarian leader William Ellery Channing, writing anonymously in the *Christian Examiner* in 1829, warned against the power of voluntary associations in language that suggested that he had Beecher and his allies in mind. While conceding that associations could do many good things, he feared their tendency to

accumulate power in a few hands, and this take place just in proportion to the surface over which they spread. In a large institution, a few men rule, a few do everything; and if the institution happens to be directed to objects about which conflict and controversy exist, a few are able to excite in the mass strong and bitter passions, and by these to obtain an immense ascendancy. Through such an Association, widely spread, yet closely connected by party feeling, a few leaders can send their voices and spirit far and wide, and, where great funds are accumulated, can league a host of instruments, and by menace and appeals to interest, can silence opposition. Accordingly, we fear that in this country, an influence is growing up through widely spread Societies, altogether at war with the spirit of our institutions, and which, unless jealously watched, will, will gradually but surely encroach on freedom of thought, of speech, and of the press. It is very striking to observe, how, by such combinations, the very means of encouraging a free action of men's minds, may be turned against it. . . . We are persuaded that by an artful multiplication of societies, devoted apparently to different objects, but all swayed by the same leaders, and all intended to bear against a hated party, as cruel a persecution may be carried on in a free country as in a despotism. Public opinion may be so combined, and inflamed, and brought to bear on odious individuals or opinions, that it will be as perilous to think and speak with manly freedom, as if an Inquisition were open before us.

“We say not that all great Associations *must* be thus abused,” he continued.

We know that some are useful. We know, too, that there are cases, in which it is important that public opinion should be condensed, or act in a mass. We feel, however, that the danger of great Associations is increased by the very fact, that they are sometimes useful. They are perilous instruments. They ought to be suspected. They are a kind of irregular government created within our Constitutional government. Let them be watched closely. As soon as we find

them resolved or even disposed to bear down on a respectable man or set of men, or to force on the community measures about which wise and good men differ, let us feel that a dangerous engine is at work among us, and oppose to it our steady and stern disapprobation (Channing 1829, __).

Sensitive to such criticisms, Beecher evidently encouraged his activists to keep their sectarian ties under wraps. Writing of their victory over the lotteries, Beecher crowed, “Nobody ever knew where that movement came from. They never knew what hurt 'em” (Beecher 1866, __). Recounting their success in vanquishing the liquor dealers, he gloated, “they never knew where *that* came from either.” This seems to have been a strategic decision, based on his understanding that success in the political arena required a capacity to form alliances beyond the boundaries of his denomination. Fifteen years earlier, in his first experiments with the “voluntary system” while promoting temperance reform, he had urged that “the attention of the public . . . be called up to this subject” and that “ministers, and churches, and parents, and magistrates, and physicians, and all the friends of civil and religious order, unite their counsels and their efforts, and make a faithful experiment, and the word and the providence of God afford the most consoling prospect of success” (Beecher 1866, __). His experience since then had confirmed the wisdom of the civic over the sectarian approach to political mobilization.

The tension between the *sectarian* motive to galvanize and mobilize a narrow base of disciplined followers for the purpose of strengthening and building the influence of a particular religious community, and the *civic* motive to form ecumenical alliances across sectarian lines in order to achieve secular ends is a recurrent one in the history of evangelical political engagement. Beecher seems to have tried to have it both ways: publicly, his activism served broad civic purposes; privately, it served as a demonstration of how the faithful could influence public opinion and legislation.

Although unquestionably successful in its impact on the secular civic domain, it is far from clear whether Beecher’s activism advanced his sectarian purposes. Harking back to the time before disestablishment in Connecticut, Beecher recalled that

ministers had always managed things themselves, for in those days all the ministers were politicians. They had always been used to it from the beginning. . . . On election day . . . all the clergy used to go, walk in procession, smoke pipes, and drink. And, fact is, when they got together, they would talk over who should be governor, and who lieutenant governor, and who in the Upper House, and their counsels would prevail (Beecher 1866, __)

Arguing for the efficacy of his “voluntary system,” Beecher wrote,

They say ministers have lost their influence. The fact is, that they have gained. By voluntary efforts, societies, missions, and revivals, they exert a deeper influence than ever they could by queues, and shoe-buckles, and cocked hats, and gold-headed canes. . . . The great aim of the Christian Church in relation to the present life is not only to renew the individual man, but also to reform human society. That it may do this needs full and free scope. The Protestantism of the Old World is still fettered by the union of the Church with the State. Only in the United States of America has the experiment been tried of apply Christianity directly to man and to society without the intervention of the state (Beecher, 1866, 253).

But was increasing the political influence of the clergy the same as advancing the sectarian interests of particular churches? Put another way, did engaging in inclusive ecumenical coalitions for the sake of civic effectiveness, risk displacement of its spiritual goals? Beecher and his allies would have undoubtedly argued that education, health, and public order – all secular goods – were necessary preconditions to making people receptive to God’s Word (on this, see Hall 2006). They would have further insisted, as good Calvinists in the Edwardsian tradition, that the work of salvation could only be done by God – the most churches could do was to help prepare believers for God’s grace. But these arguments were not universally accepted, even in Congregationalist circles: Beecher’s opponents suggested that his emphasis on secular reform represented an abandonment of the Calvinist belief in salvation through faith alone and an embrace of a “doctrine of works.”

Nonetheless, for the quarter century between 1815 and 1840, there seems to have sufficient consensus among the various evangelical factions for Beecher and other leaders to form an “evangelical united front” of voluntary associations that were amazingly successful both in rechurcing Americans through their revivals and transforming the moral basis of public discourse (Foster 1960). But it is far from clear whether the success of secular voluntary associations like temperance groups translated

into religious gains. In *Democracy in America*, De Tocqueville cites the temperance movement as a prime example of the remarkable power of voluntary associations:

The first time I heard in the United States that a hundred thousand men had bound themselves publicly to abstain from spirituous liquors, it appeared to me more like a joke than a serious engagement, and I did not at once perceive why these temperate citizens did not content themselves with drinking water by their own firesides. I at last understood that these hundred thousand Americans, alarmed by the progress of drunkenness around them, had made up their minds to patronize temperance. They acted in just the same way as a man of high rank who should dress very plainly in order to inspire the humbler orders with a contempt of luxury. It is probable that if these hundred thousand men had lived in France, each of them would singly have memorialized the government to watch the public houses all over the kingdom (De Tocqueville 1945, ___).

Neither in this passage, nor in any of his observations on voluntary associations, does he mention the role of churches in driving their formation. This suggests that while religion may have played a major role in the proliferation of voluntary associations, the associations themselves did not – contrary to Beecher’s expectations – produce a revival of religion.

Finally, in surveying this early episode in religious activism, we have to assess whether Beecher’s efforts can be classified as liberal or conservative, politically and religiously. Theologically, Beecher, as a pillar of the “New Haven Theology” which elaborated Jonathan Edwards’s ideas far beyond their Calvinist roots, was considered a liberal by Congregationalists and Presbyterians of his own time. The most theologically conservative of these, the “Old School” Presbyterians, actually tried Beecher for heresy and, in 1837, purged those sympathetic to his ideas from the church’s General Assembly (Ahlstrom 1972, 466-468). Politically, Beecher and his associates are harder to label. While the inclusive and non-denominational thrust of his revivalism, as well as his openness to the role of women in the church and his opposition to slavery, would certainly place him among the political progressives of his time, his social agenda, particularly his anti-Catholicism, sabbatarianism, and prohibitionist stands, place him among the conservatives. Certainly his political methods, which in their disciplined manipulativeness and mean-spiritedness resonate disturbingly with those of today’s Christian Conservatives, seem far from liberal in spirit.

The "Heyday of Sectarianism," 1840-1870

The years between 1837, when the "evangelical united front" was shattered over theological differences between liberal and conservative Presbyterians, and the economic crisis of 1870s, which forced Protestants to begin engaging the challenges of an urbanizing America, have been called a "sectarian heyday" (Ahlstrom 1972, 472). The "Old School" / "New School" split among the Presbyterians and Congregationalists was only one of many fissures in the national Protestant community. As the slavery crisis deepened in the 1840s, Baptists, Methodists, and Presbyterians schismed. Lutheran and Reformed churches split over issues of language and evangelical methods. New sects emerged, including the Seventh Day Adventists, the Disciples of Christ, the Mormans, and others.

The fierceness of disagreements between these sects was painfully evident both during and after the Civil War, as Christians, individually and institutionally, rushed to offer their services to the Union. The civic / "liberal" Protestants, led by Unitarians and Congregationalists, established the United States Sanitary Commission, a government-chartered nonprofit organization "charged with the duty of methodizing and reducing to practical service the already active but undirected benevolence of people toward the army" focusing its efforts on "the prevention of sickness and suffering among the troops" and the "wisest method which the people at large could use towards the comfort, security, and health of the army" (Brockett 1863, 35-36). The Commission's nonsense approach was suggested by the tone of its initial communication with the government, requesting recognition and support of its efforts. Its founders, an elite group elite clergymen, physicians, lawyers, businessmen, and military officers requested the appointment of

a mixed Commission of civilians distinguished for their philanthropic experience and acquaintance with sanitary matters, of medical men, and of military officers, be appointed by the Government, who shall be charged with the duty of investigating the best means of methodizing and reducing to practical service the already active but undirected benevolence of the people toward the Army; who shall consider the general subject of the prevention of sickness and suffering, among the troops, and suggest the wisest methods, which

the people at large can use to manifest their goodwill towards the comfort, security, and health of the Army (United States Sanitary Commission 1861, __).

The Commission stressed the importance of professional training and organizational discipline in managing its volunteers. It proposed Commission to finance its operations by mobilizing the networks of volunteers whose efforts had supported evangelical activities for the previous half-century.

The Sanitary Commission's professionalism, bureaucratic proceduralism, and emphasis on scientific rather than sentimental approaches to the relief of suffering brought it into conflict with the United States Christian Commission, an organization whose primary purpose was to act as a clearing house for religious activities in the armed forces. The Christian Commission, grounded in the more theologically conservative and sectarian factions of evangelical Protestantism, started out with narrowly religious purposes. "From the beginning," its chronicler noted, "the army was recognized as a field for evangelical effort" (Moss 1869, 81). The Commission's object, as stated in its 1863 "Plan of Operations," was "to promote the spiritual and temporal welfare of the brave men who now are in arms to put down a wicked rebellion" in the following ways:

1. By furnishing to them religious tracts, periodicals and books.
2. By aiding in the formation of religious associations in the several regiments.
3. By putting such associations in correspondence with the Christian public.
4. By cultivating, as far as possible, the religious sympathies and prayers of Christians in their behalf.
5. By obtaining and directing such gratuitous personal labor among the soldiers and sailors as may be practicable.
6. By improving such other opportunities and means as may be in the providence of God be presented.
7. By furnishing, as far as possible, profitable reading, other than religious, and, wherever there is a permanent military post, by establishing a general library of such works.

8. By establishing a medium of speedy and safe intercommunication between the men in the army and navy and their friends and families, by which small packages of clothing, books, and medicine, can be forwarded, and mementoes of social affection can be interchanged. (Moss 1869, 111)

The Commission's proposed efforts were not greeted with much enthusiasm. "There was at first occasional friction with both the military and medical officers," its chronicler noted. "The surgeons. . . were hardly favorable to the presence among their patience of men who had neither professional training nor experience, and whose only recommendation was the earnest desire to do good (Moss 1868, 124-125). Its agents were barred from many military facilities and only strenuous Commission lobbying with Congress and top officials in the executive enabled it to operate with any degree of freedom.

The mainstream religious press was likewise "by no means forward to recognize and assist the Commission." When asked to explain its reluctance, the editor of the *Independent*, a widely circulated monthly run by the New Haven Theologians, said that "when the Christian Commission was first formed, and before it came under its later management, many excellent men in this city and elsewhere had only a partial confidence in it. As a consequence neither Mr. Beecher [Henry Ward Beecher, son of Lyman] nor myself felt inclined to give it the support of the *Independent*" (Moss 1869, 118).

The reasons for this lack of support were both ideological and pragmatic. Ideologically, the frankly sectarian and proselytizing thrust of the Christian Commission's activities obviously offended the scientific professionalism of the Sanitary Commission's leaders. Its loose organization and dependence on poorly supervised volunteers rather than trained salaried agents, combined with its emphasis on the relief of individual suffering, ran counter to the Sanitary Commission's concern with the prevention of suffering and the role of its efforts in contributing to the efficiency of the military effort.

More practically, the Sanitary Commission viewed the Christian Commission as a competitor in its fundraising efforts. Because both groups depended on the

fundraising activities of clergy and women volunteers, they inevitably came into conflict. In the fall of 1862, the Cincinnati Branch of the Commission, with the apparent support of the St. Louis and Indianapolis branches, directly challenged its policies of centralized financial administration and nationally coordinated distribution of goods and services. The westerners, doubtless more sympathetic to the more theologically conservative variants of evangelical Protestantism, desired more individualized, personal, and charitable approaches to relief activities. The central office successfully crushed this mutiny, but not without leaving an enduring legacy of ill-feeling between the civic and sectarian factions.

Products of the unbridled sectarianism unleashed by the break-up of the “evangelical united front” and the slavery debate, these Civil War era tensions within the Protestant community profoundly shaped the involvement of religious activists in Reconstruction and in the reform of urban charities in the 1880s and 1890s.

Determined to create northern-style civil societies in the South, the radical Republicans, working through the military and the Freedman’s Bureau (or, as it was officially known, the Bureau of Freedmen, Refugees, and Abandoned Lands), was established to include distribute rations and medical supplies, establish schools and aid benevolent societies in setting up schools and churches, administering confiscated lands, and levying justice in all cases concerning freedmen. The government proposed to economically empower the freedmen by redistributing to them property confiscated from ex-Confederates and, using revenues derived from these lands, to make available to private voluntary agencies buildings, transportation, and protection to whom it entrusted the task of training and educating the freedmen. This open invitation to religious and other voluntary agencies to take on this monumental task inevitably sparked conflicts between the civic and sectarian Protestant factions.

Early in 1865, two of the major freedmen's societies, the New York National Freedmen's Relief Association and the American Union Commission, together with elements from New York's Women's Central Relief Association, a branch of the United States Sanitary Commission, consolidated themselves as the American Freedmen's and Union Commission (New York National Freedmen's Relief Commission, 1866, 14). This

brought together the eastern elite liberal protestant -- primarily Unitarian and Congregationalist -- elements that had been closely allied with the Sanitary Commission. (It was led by such men as Yale professor Leonard Bacon, the "pope" of New England Congregationalism, Francis G. Shaw, New York Unitarian philanthropist and reformer -- and father of Union martyr Robert Gould Shaw and charity organization leader Josephine Shaw Lowell --, and Bostonian Edward H. Hooper, a lawyer and financier who would soon be elected Treasurer of Harvard).

Despite their pleas for cooperation between the rival freedmen's societies and for a Christian but "unsectarian" emphasis in their education and relief efforts, the associations that had been closely tied to the Christian Commission -- the American Missionary Association, the Methodists' Freedmen's Aid Society, the Baptists' Home Mission Society, and the Quakers' Friends' Association for the Aid and Elevation of the Freedman -- resisted consolidation efforts. As one Methodist minister put it, "Methodist hands should have handled Methodist funds, and been appropriated to pay Methodist teachers, to found Methodist schools, and carry on a work for which the denomination should have due credit" (quoted in Swint, 1967, 13).

While the sectarians looked to the church as the central institution of reconstruction, the civic Protestants looked to the school house. "What method will best promote the cause of popular education and pure religion in the South?" asked an editorial in *The American Freedman* addressing "Christian philanthropists."

The necessity of both is almost universally recognized. Neither can take the place of the other. Education unsanctified by religion issues in infidelity and anarchy. Religion unenlightened by education begets superstition and despotism. The school-house without the church produces China; the church without the school-house, Italy; the church *and* the school-house, Republican America.

How to combine these two is an important problem. There are two possible solution. The religious denominations may undertake the double work. They may plant the parochial school by the side of the church; they may teach at once the rules of arithmetic and the lessons of the catechism, the laws of grammar and the doctrines of theology. Such a system give parochial schools. On the other hand, the various religious denominations may assume as their peculiar province the work of religious instruction. To that they may confine themselves, while the whole community unites in a common effort for the education of the masses, not only in secular knowledge, but in those precepts of morality and teachings of Christian religion in which all agree. This system is the common-school. It is the almost universal system of Protestant Republicanism. . . . (American Freedman 1866, 94-96).

“The education of the South, especially of the Freedmen,” the editorial continued,

is a truly religious work; none the less so because it is undenominational. Cousin rightly says, “The less we desire our schools to be ecclesiastical, the more they ought to be Christian.” Called to this work not only by the claims of country and of humanity, but also by the voice of God, recognizing it as His work, entering upon it in humble trust on Him, aiming by it to render the subjects of our education better fitted to be not only citizens of the Republic but children of our Father in heaven, we desire the more that our schools may be truly Christian because they are uneclesiastical. For this purpose we aim to commission only teachers possessing the spirit of true religion, by which we do not mean persons of any particular doctrinal views, but such as are attracted to the work, not by curiosity, or love of adventure, or its compensation, but by a genuine spirit of love for God and man; for this purpose our schools are opened with such general religious exercises as our experience in the North proves it practicable for all Christians to unite in; for this purpose in all the schools instruction is afforded in the fundamental duties of the Christian religion as inculcated in the command, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and soul and strength, and thy neighbor as thyself;” no less for this purpose do we jealously maintain their unsectarian character, not allowing the peculiar tenets of any particular denomination to be taught in the schools.

The civic Protestants’ efforts to promote cooperation failed, as did the whole reconstruction effort, as federal aid was pared away and resurgent white terrorist groups drove “Gideonites” of both persuasions out of the South. The legacy was a deepening split between the two major evangelical factions that would profoundly affect their approaches to the challenges urbanization in the North.

Dwight L. Moody and the Rise of “Big Tent” Evangelicalism

It is hard to imagine that anything short of a national catastrophe could have overcome the intense conflicts among Protestant evangelicals in the decade following the Civil War. The Panic of 1873 and the four year depression that followed was such a catastrophe: 18,000 businesses failed; unemployment soared to an estimated 14%; wage cuts and deteriorating working conditions sparked strikes and massive civil disorders. Compounding the crisis were major shifts in American social and religious demography: between 1850 and 1880, the number of foreign-born in the United States doubled; the majority of the immigrants were Roman Catholics who, as they became citizens, supported the corrupt political machines that increasingly dominated urban politics.

As the crisis deepened following the Panic, Protestant America, whatever its internal disagreements shared a growing sense of being besieged by the forces of "rum, Romanism, and Rebellion." This perception of a shared threat would become the basis for a new set of alliances and coalitions that would reunite the Protestant factions and give rise to their resurgence as an effective political force.

Initially, the Protestant factions responded to the crisis on the basis of their theological dispositions and their experience during the war and reconstruction. The civic Protestants used statistical surveys to frame problems and trained experts, and the commission form of organization to address them. They were less concerned with relieving individual suffering than with the worthiness of relief recipients, regarding "indiscriminate" and "sentimental" charity as a major cause of poverty. The sectarians, in contrast, embraced the "rescue mission" model of poor relief, offering religious services as a precondition for dispensing food and shelter and, more broadly, in spiritual regeneration through revivalism as the key to the prevention of poverty and the redemption of those who had fallen into it.

A sense of how profoundly these approaches differed is suggested by this 1874 report on "Pauperism in New York" presented to the American Social Science Association's Conference of Public Charities. The initial response of the wealthy to the depression, the report stated, was generous, compassionate -- and indiscriminate.

Despite warnings of the experienced, soup-kitchens and free lodgings were opened, by public and private means, with the utmost liberality, in various portions of New York last winter, and enormous sums were contributed by private citizens for these popular benefactions. Before the winter was over, however, most of those engaged in them regretted, without doubt, that they had ever taken part in these kindly but mistaken charities. The reports of competent observers show what were their effects. The announcement of the intended opening of these and kindred charities immediately called into the city the floating vagrants, beggars, and paupers, who wander from village to village throughout the State. The streets of New York became thronged with this ragged, needy crowd; they filled all the station-houses and lodging places provided by private charity, and overflowed into the island almshouses. Street-begging, to the

point of importunity, became a custom. Ladies were robbed, even on their own doorsteps, by these mendicants. Petty offenses, such as thieving and drunkenness, increased. One of the free lodgings in the upper part of the city, established by the Commissioners of Charities, became a public nuisance from its rowdyism and criminality (American Social Science Association 1874, 18-19).

The well intended generosity of the "sentimental" philanthropists -- by which the writer clearly meant the sectarian Protestants and the Roman Catholics -- threatened to create a permanent class of paupers.

No one could have walked the streets during the past winter without being struck with what is very humiliating, -- the observation that this city is rapidly traveling in the track of the worst capitals of Europe, in the direction of abundant street paupers. Many of them are of the fancy kind, made up for effect, purely spectacular, intended to operate upon the generous sympathies of the people at the moment. . . . I find that one society, admirable in its principles and organization, whose operations extend over the whole of the city, states in its printed report that there were 20,000 persons, impostors, in this city living by the misdirected charity of the city. We have the Commissioners of Charities and Correction to look after paupers and criminals,--a most unfortunate grouping,--who expend \$1,250,000 per year. We have the Commissioners of Emigration to attend, with certain restrictions, to those who come to our shores, who expend over \$600,000 per year. There is more than \$1,750,000 per year. But take the 20,000 who are living by fraud and imposture. These people live very comfortably. It is very low to put their living at a dollar per day. That makes over \$7,000,000 a year going into the hands of the most degraded and corrupting class in the community. What is our reward? These clever cunning, degraded people, despise and laugh at us, and think that our very Christianity is something that only gets hold of people who are a little soft in the brain. . . (American Social Science Association 1874, 28-29).

In the emerging debate between the civic and sectarian evangelicals, a man like Dwight Lyman Moody would, on the face of it, certainly have sided with the sectarians. Born in rural western Massachusetts in 1837, Moody moved to Boston as a teenager to work in his uncle's shoe store. As a condition of employment, his uncle made him agree

to regularly attend a local Congregational church and its Sunday school. "The Bible was not a familiar book to the new student," writes his biographer (Moody 1901, 39). "I can truly say," recalled his teacher,

that I have seen few persons whose minds were spiritually darker than was his when he came into my Sunday-school class; and I think that the committee of the Mount Vernon Church seldom met an applicant for membership more unlikely ever to become a Christian of clear and decided views of Gospel truth, still less to fill any extended sphere of public usefulness.

Moody's agnosticism gave way to an emotional conversion experience. "I remember the morning on which I came out of my room after I had first trusted Christ," Moody recalled.

I thought the old sun shone a good deal brighter than it ever had before--I thought that it was just smiling upon me; and as I walked out upon Boston Common and heard the birds singing in the trees I thought they were all singing a song to me. . . . It seemed to me that I was in love with all creation (Moody 1901, 42).

Moody moved to Chicago in the fall of 1856, where he became an active member of the Plymouth Congregational Church. He began teaching young people and, using business methods (such as issuing stock) to promote it, soon was in charge of the largest Sunday school in the city. In 1860, he decided to abandon his business career and to give himself full time to Christian work. He became involved with the YMCA., which in these early years, was a non-denominational Protestant missionary enterprise. With the outbreak of the Civil War, his YMCA connection led to deep involvement with the United States Christian Commission, which the Y's had played a central part in organizing. At the end of the war, on his return to Chicago, Moody became head of the city's YMCA and began a lay ministry in the Illinois Street Church, an independent nondenominational congregation he had organized.

Moody's approach to his religious work was unusual in an era of intense sectarianism. He not only eschewed proselytizing for any one denomination, he was willing to reach out to any Christian -- even to Catholics. Early in his career, when his Sunday school students were harassed by "the lower class of the Roman Catholic element," Moody paid a call on Bishop Duggan. "Your zeal and devotion are most

commendable in behalf of these people," declared the Bishop, "and all you need to make you a great power for good is to come within the fold of the true church." "Whatever advantage that would give me among your people," Moody replied, "would be offset by the fact that I could no longer work among the Protestants." Moody asked the Bishop if he would be allowed to pray with Protestants if he became a Roman Catholic. "Yes," the Bishop replied, "you could pray with Protestants as much as ever." "Would you," Moody asked, "pray with a Protestant?" The Bishop replied that he would.

"Well, then," replied Mr. Moody, "I wish that you would pray for me now, that I may be led aright in this matter." and forthwith knelt where they had been standing in the hall. The Bishop and Mr. Moody both prayed.

The result of that short conference was a cessation of all further annoyance from the Roman Catholic element in the city, and a lifelong friendship between the two men (Moody 1901, 71).

Moody's willingness to use the intensely personal and emotional missionary and revivalist methods of the sectarians, aggressive business methods of financing and promotion, all framed a broadly civic ecumenical spirit enabled him to transcend the divisions that were tearing the country and its cities apart during and after the war, would prove to be an astonishingly powerful combination.

Dwight L. Moody's 1878 New Haven, Connecticut revival illustrates the effectiveness of this strategy (Dastin 1975). On the face of it, New Haven seemed an unpromising place for a religious revival. Surely Yale, where the critical Biblical scholarship that would be anathema to levangelicals was already taking root in the Theological Department, where pioneer political economist (and Episcopal priest) William Graham Sumner had begun teaching immensely popular courses in political economy using the "irreligious" writings of Herbert Spencer (and, at the same time, introducing his students to the unscriptural evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin), and where archaeologist Othniel Marsh was already deeply engaged in unearthing and displaying the fossil record that substantiated Darwin's challenge to scriptural accounts of Creation, would have spurned this poorly educated uncredentialed Midwestern ex-shoe salesman-turned itinerant revivalist, as would the Congregational and Episcopal congregations which dominated the religious life of the city's Protestants.

In fact, Moody was welcomed to the city by a broadly representative committee of clergy chaired by Yale's president, the eminent moral philosopher Noah Porter. His revival was bankrolled by an interdenominational committee composed of New Haven's wealthiest and most prominent businessmen and philanthropists. And the tabernacle where tens of thousands of men and women flocked to worship over a three month period was erected on the New Haven Green, the Elm City's central civic space.

Not only was the revival an astounding success, whether measured in terms of the number of people who came to worship or the number of congregations that endorsed it, it also led to a long and close relationship between Moody and Yale. He would send two of his sons to the college. The muscular Christian student leaders of Dwight Hall, Yale's YMCA and the platform for university social service, would, for a generation, make regular pilgrimages to Moody's home in Northfield, Massachusetts to hone their piety and make the acquaintance of evangelical leaders from throughout the world. And the city's wealthiest businessman, president of the New Haven Clock Company and father of legendary Yale football coach Walter Camp, would become the lead donor to and lifelong senior trustee of Moody's Northfield Academy.

One of the reasons for Moody's success in drawing together the warring Protestant tribes is suggested by a religious census of the city undertaken after his 1879 visit (Collins 1886). The census was conducted by a young clergyman, John C. Collins, who may have been in Moody's employ. Collins found that of the 46,114 New Haveners over four years of age, 40,593 identified themselves as church-goers. Of these 17,918 were Roman Catholics, 1,046 were Jews and 2,694 belonging to no denomination -- in other words, nearly half the city's churchgoing population was non-Protestant. In the course of canvassing from door-to-door, Collins gathered facts about the religious experiences and preferences of every household in the city. These became the basis for efforts to rechurch the unchurched:

[The names and addresses of] those who did not care what denomination they attended, were given to all the pastors who had contributed. My idea was, that with all the pastors and as many of the church members as could be enlisted by the pastors, in any denomination going after some one who had certain denominational preferences and a like effort being made in the case of a non-church-goer who had no denominational preferences, they would make his life miserable until he went to church (Collins 1886, ___).

Although Collins conducted his census in 1880, he did not present his findings publicly until 1886, when Moody convened his first "Convention of Christian Workers of the United States and Canada" -- the first of the legendary Northfield Conferences --, launched to provide training for Christian leaders. Collins was first managing director of the International Christian Workers Association and went on to found the Boys Clubs of America (Yale University 1922, 200).

If New Haven's business and religious leaders were willing to transcend their differences and embrace Moody's non-denominational revival on the basis of their impression that Protestantism was threatened by rum, romanism, and rebellion, Collins's census both lent substance to their fears and offered them a way of countering the threat: a new kind of "big tent" evangelicalism that fostered "unsectarian" cooperation and, at the same time, remobilized Protestants as a political force against vice, crime, and the other evils associated with urban life. But the "big tent" evangelicals did more than pursue a restrictive and controlling conservative social agenda. They also understood that poor urban populations, especially the young, needed alternatives to the wicked temptations of the city streets if they were to be redeemed. This became the cornerstone of the social gospel both as a theological stance and as a set of urban institutions. The YMCA, in which Moody was a major figure, took the lead in offering recreational and educational activities to young people, regardless of religious affiliation, in the hope that these would be a portal to more serious religious commitments.

Although historians of the Progressive movement have minimized or ignored the role of religion in the political and institutional response urban industrialism, the fact is that, especially on the local level, it probably did more to transform the moral agenda that assured progressivism's success than any number of muckraking articles by crusading journalists. One measure of this are the sales of social gospel tracts like Charles M. Sheldon's *In His Steps – What Would Jesus Do?* First published in 1896, the book has sold more than 30 million copies and ranks as the ninth best-selling book of all time.

The novel tells the tale of a Midwestern congregation's dramatic encounter with poverty which poses for every member the question "what would Jesus do?" As members of the congregation ponder this question, individually and collectively, examining their lives and occupations in the light of Scripture, each is transformed and, taken together, transform their community. The railroad executive provides a cafeteria so his workers will not have to eat lunch in saloons – then resigns his position because he could not stomach the company's violations of the Interstate Commerce law. The gorgeous choir singer gives up her comfortable church job to sing at revival meetings in the slums. The editor of the daily newspaper stops running advertisements for liquor and tobacco and coverage of morally questionable entertainment, and stops publishing its Sunday edition. He then dramatically transformed the paper's editorial policy. "The editor of the News," he wrote

has always advocated the principles of the great political party at present in power, and has heretofore discussed all political questions from the standpoint of expediency, or of belief in the party as opposed to other political organizations. Hereafter, to be perfectly honest with all our readers, the editor will present and discuss all political questions from the standpoint of right and wrong. In other words, the first question asked in this office about any political question will not be, "Is it in the interests of our party?" or, "Is it according to the principles laid down by our party in its platform?" but the question first asked will be, "Is this measure in accordance with the spirit and teachings of Jesus as the author of the greatest standard of life known to men?" That is, to be perfectly plain, the moral side of every political question will be considered its most important side, and the ground will be distinctly taken that nations as well as individuals are under the same law to do all things to the glory of God as the first rule of action (Sheldon 1896, __).

The news became a crusader for municipal reform. The college president plunges into Christian political activism. "I confess with some shame," he told the minister,

that I have purposely avoided the responsibility that I owe to this city personally. I understand that our city officials are a corrupt, unprincipled set of men, controlled in large part by the whiskey element and thoroughly selfish so far as the affairs of city government are concerned. Yet all these years I, with nearly every teacher in the college, have been satisfied to let other men run the municipality and have lived in a little world of my own, out of touch and sympathy with the real world of the people. 'What would Jesus do?' I have even tried to avoid an honest answer. I can no longer do so. My plain duty is to take a personal part in this coming election, go to the primaries, throw the weight of my influence, whatever it is, toward the nomination and election of good men, and plunge into the very depths of the entire horrible whirlpool of deceit, bribery, political trickery and saloonism as it exists in Raymond today (Sheldon 1896, __).

He was as good as his word, assuming leadership of the forces of reform in the city.

Maxwell, the minister, “watched with growing wonder the results of that simple Promise” – to do as Jesus would do – “as it was being obeyed in these various lives. Those results were already being felt all over the city. Who,” he asked himself, “could measure their influence at the end of a year?” The result was, as the ensuing chapters suggest revolutionary:

The whole country had watched the progress of the pledge as it had become history in so many lives. . . . Already there had begun a volunteer movement in many churches throughout the country, acting on their own desire to walk closer in the steps of Jesus. The Christian Endeavor Society had, with enthusiasm, in many churches taken the pledge to do as Jesus would do, and the result was already marked in a deeper spiritual life and a power in church influence that was like a new birth for the members (Sheldon 1896, __).

The movement spread across denominational lines and beyond the churches into faith-based charities like the settlement houses. At the end of the book, the protagonist, Rev. Henry Maxwell, is invited to a Chicago settlement house to discuss what he had started.

There were invited into the Settlement Hall, meeting for that night men out of work, wretched creatures who had lost faith in God and man, anarchists and infidels, free-thinkers and no-thinkers. The representation of all the city's worst, most hopeless, most dangerous, depraved elements faced Henry Maxwell and the other disciples when the meeting began. And still the Holy Spirit moved over the great, selfish, pleasure-loving, sin-stained city, and it lay in God's hand, not knowing all that awaited it. Every man and woman at the meeting that night had seen the Settlement motto over the door blazing through the transparency set up by the divinity student: "What would Jesus do?" (Sheldon 1896, __).

A graduate of Phillips Andover (1879) and Brown University (1883), Sheldon, author of *In His Steps*, is a good example both of the pervasiveness of Moody's “big tent” evangelicalism across the community of Protestantisms and the extent to which his scripturally-based activism linked the social gospel to politics and social reform. It also makes clear the extent to which the conservative social agenda of the time – with its crusades against drink and prostitution – was also embraced by people like the

settlement house reformers, who many consider to be the progenitors of modern liberalism.

While the imperative to emulate Jesus did not produce the revolution Sheldon predicted in his novel, it seems fair to say that the political mobilization of the evangelicals in a context that enabled them to form effective alliances across denominational and political lines undoubtedly played an important role in the success of progressivism, which by 1912 had come to entirely dominate national political life (with all three major candidates, Roosevelt, Taft, and Wilson, publicly identifying themselves with its central tenets). This civic phase in the evolution of evangelical Protestantism was, however, drawing to a close.

The End of Big Tent Evangelicalism and the Revival of Sectarianism, 1920-1970

Many factors contributed to the disintegration of evangelical unity in the early twentieth century. Some were intrinsically religious, such as the death of charismatic unifying leaders like Moody, the institutionalization of religious communities into bureaucratized denominations, the increasing difficulty of reconciling a commitment to scriptural inerrancy with science, particularly Darwinism, and the inherently sectarian tendencies of the religious marketplace. Others were extrinsic, including a revival of political nativism in response to the continuing influx of immigrants, racism sparked by the migration of southern blacks to northern cities, and deepening concern among social conservatives about growing secularism and immorality in public life. While the liberal elements in the evangelical coalition of the pre-World War I years shared many of the racist and nativist convictions of their conservative brethren, these became increasingly difficult to sustain with the liberals growing involvement in practical reform politics. There were political issues – like prohibition – on which there was broad consensus across the evangelical spectrum. There were others – like the rights of organized labor and the teaching of evolution – on which accommodation became increasingly difficult.

Certainly the most serious source of disagreement – and the one that shaped the religious landscape for the rest of the century and into the current one – was between the “fundamentalists” and the “modernists.” The fundamentalist split from the evangelical mainstream did not occur because of any dramatic event. Rather, its

emergence was a gradual process of conservative dismay with the erosion of old beliefs in biblical inerrancy, the Virgin Birth, Jesus's atonement for our sins, Christ's bodily resurrection, and historicity of Christ's miracles. Challenged by critical biblical scholarship and by science, particularly Darwinism, theological conservatives grew increasingly unhappy with the influence, particularly in the seminaries and universities, of churchmen who went to far in accommodating their beliefs to these modern ideas. Beginning in 1876, a mixed group of Presbyterian, Baptist, and Episcopal clergy began holding annual conferences for Bible study and fellowship. But the lines of battle between conservatives and modernists would begin to be clearly drawn in 1894, when church liberals demanded revisions in the Westminster Confession, the credo of orthodox Calvinism. The modernists efforts mobilized the conservatives who, in 1910, decisively affirmed the "Five Points" of faith regarded as fundamental to Christian orthodoxy.

The conservative Presbyterians' counter-revolution had broad appeal to leaders in other denominations who shared their unhappiness with theological modernism and the increasingly secular character of American life, particularly among the Southern Presbyterians (who had split from the main body of the church before the Civil War) and the Southern Baptists. It also sparked struggles in the Methodist and Episcopal churches. Ultimately, the strongholds of fundamentalism would be the Southern Baptists and new non-denominational evangelical congregations throughout the country.

At the outset, the fundamentalists were a militant movement, both within and beyond the realm of religion. Along with other evangelicals, they supported Prohibition and censorship, opposed birth control, and promoted other efforts to regulate morality. But they split from the moderate evangelicals over such issues as the teaching of evolution. These efforts culminated in the infamous 1925 "Monkey Trial," in which a Tennessee biology teacher, John Scopes, was prosecuted for violating the Butler Act, a state law which forbade "teaching any theory that denies the story of Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and [teaches] instead that man has descended from a lower order of animals." Recognizing the opportunities for publicity, both sides hired stellar legal talent, the fundamentalists being championed by William Jennings Bryan, three-

time Democratic presidential candidate and Secretary of State in Woodrow Wilson's first term, and famed trial attorney and outspoken freethinker, Clarence Darrow.

Though Bryan has been characterized as a Bible-beating ignoramus both by contemporary journalists and by fictionalized portrayals like *Inherit the Wind*, he in fact is an exemplary example of a "Big Tent" evangelical. Though personally devout, he championed the leading progressive reform movements of his time – corporate regulation, progressive income taxation, anti-imperialism – while also embracing the traditional social conservatism – prohibition and all – of the Protestant evangelical mainstream. Before 1920, this range of beliefs was typical of American evangelicals; after 1920, evangelicalism in its political manifestations had broken into factions that embraced one strand or the other. Moody's successors followed a similar trajectory: in the 1920s, the Moody Bible Institute became an institutional pillar of fundamentalism.

"Because they loved their denominations -- often unduly -- and wished to preserve them from liberal inroads," wrote Sydney Ahlstrom of the beginnings of fundamentalism, "their resort was not in new schemes of scriptural interpretation but in shoring up old schemes; not in new doctrines, but in official confessions and the writings of their own church fathers" (1972, 812-813). Ahlstrom's observation calls attention to the fact that, though fundamentalism was a theological perspective shared by a number of faith communities, it was weakened organizationally by its sectarianism, which prevented it from building effective coalitions among the like-minded.

Though the fundamentalists in the aggregate commanded large numbers of adherents, they were weakened by their sectarianism and their weak organizational bases. While the Presbyterians had embraced modern denominational structures, the largest fundamentalist group, the Southern Baptists, were no more than a loose confederation of congregations, with no central authority; and many fundamentalist churches, as noted, were independent congregations. Numbers of adherents meant little in terms of public influence if the fundamentalists could neither be forged into strong denominational bodies nor effectively build alliances within and beyond the religious world. Rather than drawing together at the end of the first World War, as Ahlstrom has

noted, the peace merely assured conservative Christians that "theological and ecclesiastical warfare would be resumed with even greater vehemence" (1972, 816).

Conventional wisdom often characterizes the political stance of religious conservatives after the mid-1920s as a withdrawal "to rural and small-town America" and into "a rigidly patriarchal and puritanical subculture of their own" (quoted in Wuthnow 1988, 134). In fact, though they had set aside expectations of being able to redeem the major denominations or impose their moral views on the nation as a whole, conservative evangelicals remained politically potent in states and localities, particularly in the South, where their numbers enabled them to flex their political muscle without having to form coalitions and alliances with other groups. They succeeded in getting anti-evolution laws debated by legislatures in fifteen states -- though only Arkansas and Mississippi ended up enacting them. Under pressure from the fundamentalists, many states remained "dry" after the passage of the Twenty-Second Amendment in 1933, and many more permitted towns and counties the power to forbid the sale of alcoholic beverages. They successfully spearheaded efforts to impose censorship on the movie industry.

The conservatives early and effective use of new technologies like radio, which enabled them to reach out to mass audiences, suggests that fundamentalists and other religious conservatives had not entirely forsaken their ambitions. But their anti-modernism, anti-intellectualism, political conservatism, and quarrelsome factionalism ultimately stood in the way of their becoming a national political force during the 1920s and 1930s (Hoover & Wagner 1997; Abrams 2001; Hangen 2001; Fore 2007).

The Cold War and the Origins of Christian Right, 1941-

America's assumption of leadership of the "free world" during and after the second World War would both transform the major political concerns of American religion and alter the relation of religious groups to one another. Positions on foreign and military policy and on such domestic issues as civil rights and federal government power took the place of conflicts between liberal modernism and fundamentalism and their social agendas.

Recognizing the need for conservative evangelicals to overcome their pervasive disunity in order to begin to counter the liberal denominations ability to speak with a unified voice – through the Federal (later the National) Council of Churches -- on major public issues, the conservatives began organizing their own umbrella organizations. The first, Carl McIntire’s American Council of Christian Churches, organized in 1941, explicitly excluded adherents or affiliates of the major ecumenical bodies – the World Council of Churches, the National Council of Churches, and the World Evangelical Fellowship – from membership. In response, a group of conservatives who wanted a less divisive fellowship, organized the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) the following year.

The leaders identified with the NAE set about creating a network of new organizations that would help give evangelical Protestantism a genuinely national identity. These included the National Religious Broadcasters Association (1944), the Evangelical Foreign Missions Association (1945), the Commission on War Relief (1944), Youth for Christ (1944), and a host of other entities that began to tie together the scattered nodes of evangelic commitment and rally them to unified action. These groups were tied to a variety of educational institutions, some old, the Wheaton College (1860) and the Moody Bible Institute (1886), and some new, like Fuller Theological Seminary (1947). These organization-building and networking activities, combined with the energetic and widely publicized international “crusades” led by Billy Graham, brought “neo-evangelicalism” to the forefront of public attention. Graham’s charisma, his political moderation, and his willingness to overlook the theological disagreements that had for so long factionalized evangelicals brought him support from both conservative and mainline Protestants.

To say that Graham and the evangelicals he represented were politically moderate requires some qualification. Because the Cold War had silenced some of the most outspoken liberal Protestants – wiping out in a stroke what remained of the Christian socialist and social Gospel enclaves --, Graham’s outspoken anti-communism, which would have seemed extreme in the 1940s, became part of the national consensus, both within and beyond the world of religion by the 1950s. His anti-communism brought him close to politicians like Richard Nixon, who he supported against Roman

Catholic John F. Kennedy in the election of 1960. On the other hand, Graham's position on civil rights was well ahead of the views of his followers and, indeed, most of the American public. As early as 1952, he had desegregated his revivals, declaring that there was no scriptural basis for segregation. He supported school desegregation and claimed Martin Luther King as a friend. Like Beecher and Moody, he could simultaneously hold very conservative and very progressive views.

Graham and the NAE only represented one element, albeit an increasingly powerful one, in the still factious evangelical world. The more extreme elements, which shared many of the neo-evangelicals' theological views, but differed with them politically, became active and nationally prominent. The Christian Crusade, organized by Texas evangelist Billy James Hargis, was a leading religious broadcaster, and close ally of Senator Joseph McCarthy (for whom he wrote speeches), General Edwin Walker (a leader of the ultra right-wing John Birch Society), and Barry Goldwater. The California-based Christian Anti-Communist Crusade, organized by Australian evangelist Dr. Fred Schwartz, warranted major media coverage in the early 1960s for its "mass meeting anti-Communism" which attracted thousands to rallies throughout the country ("Crusader Schwartz" 1952).

The theological and political moderation and capacity for coalition-building that made Graham and the neo-evangelicals so effective inevitably brought them into conflict with more conservative and doctrinaire leaders like the Rev. Bob Jones. Although Jones backed his early revivals, when Graham sought broad ecumenical (and inter-racial) support for his 1957 New York crusade, Jones denounced for consorting with groups that had not embraced the Five Points of Faith deemed essential to orthodoxy by fundamentalists (Turner 1997, 179-183).

This split probably had less to do with doctrinal differences than political ones, particularly over matters of race. By 1957, the civil rights struggle was fast becoming the central issue in American public life. Only three years earlier, the United States Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* had declared racial segregation unconstitutional and ordered the integration of the nation's public schools. The

following year, Rosa Parks initiated the Montgomery bus boycott. In 1957, the year Jones and Graham split, President Eisenhower sent federal troops into Little Rock Arkansas to compel the integration of the city's public schools. Politically conservative southerners, backed by the region's white religious leaders, would initiate massive resistance, closing down public school systems rather than integrate them and creating a segregated infrastructure of private nonprofit, often religious, schools to educate the white youth.

Resistance to integration would be the bellwether for a broader political mobilization by conservative Christians that would eventually mature into the Christian Right of the 1980s. Not only would it finally convince conservatives of the necessity for alliance-building as a precondition for political effectiveness, it would also help them overcome their deep-seated hostility to the use of nonprofit organizations to achieve their ends. Not only had conservative evangelicals been doctrinally resistant to using secular voluntary associations (preferring to pursue collective goals through government or through their congregations), outside the Northeast and the upper Midwest, state corporation and charities laws placed many legal barriers in the way of establishing charitable entities and, in some cases, prohibited them entirely (on this, see Zollmann 1924 and Hall 2007). As Lyman Beecher had discovered a century and a half earlier, secular voluntary associations – or nonprofit organizations, as we call them today – could be very powerful and persuasive instruments in the hands of the faithful. They would become essential to the grassroots mobilizations that would make the Religious Right a driving force in the conservative revolution of the late twentieth century.

Turning Conservative Christians into Christian Conservatives: The Southern Strategy, the Reagan Revolution, and the Rise of the Religious Right, 1970-2004.

The political mobilization of conservative Christians did not occur because evangelicals and their leaders sought broader public influence. They were forced into an activist stance by a national government that was, after 1945, less “federal” and more “central” and directive. The expansion of national government was, ironically, in large part a product of America's post-war leadership of the anti-communist world – a stance

that the conservatives heartily endorsed. Leadership of the free world not only required a strengthening of the institutions of national government (including active roles in economic planning, manpower education and training, and social welfare), but also – for the sake of our international prestige – bringing long established social practices into line with professed national values.

It is doubtful that the U.S. Supreme Court imagined, when it embraced the incorporation doctrine – by which the fundamental rights guaranteed in the federal Constitution were deemed to apply to the states – that it understood the extent of the revolution they were effecting in American government (Friedman 2002, 203-207). Elements of the theory had been in place since the nineteenth century, when the Fourteenth Amendment, with its due process and equal protection clauses, intended to force the conquered South to respect the rights of free Blacks, was enacted. But, in the decades that followed, conservative jurists was circumscribed incorporation almost to the point of rendering meaningless the notion that, when it came to fundamental civil rights, federal law should trump states' rights.

Although the Justices decided to apply the Bill of Rights to the states via the Fourteenth Amendment, they did so incrementally, as cases came before the court in which raised constitutional issues. First presided over by Chief Justice Frederick Vinson (1946-1953), a southern Democrat appointed by Franklin Roosevelt, and subsequently by Earl Warren (1953-1969), a California Republican appointed by President Eisenhower over a quarter century beginning in 1947, the court decided a series involving church-state separation, race relations, civil rights, and reproductive rights that conservative Christians would view as threatening to their values and ways of life. With the U.S. Constitution as the law of the land, the peculiar practices of the South and other fundamentalist enclaves – such as racial segregation and religious instruction in public schools -- could no longer be tolerated.

The first major church-state case to come before the court was *McCullum v. Board of Education* (1948). It involved a challenge to an Illinois school district in which a consortium of Jews, Catholics, and Protestants had been permitted to offer voluntary classes in religious instruction on school property during school hours. The court voted

by 8 to 1 that the practice violated the Establishment Clause and declared it unconstitutional. In 1962, in *Engel v. Vitale*, a case involving the recitation of short voluntary prayers at the beginning of the school day in New York's schools, the court ruled that the practice constituted an establishment of religion. This was the first of a series of cases in which the Establishment Clause was used as the basis for outlawing publicly sponsored religious activities of all sorts, including from prayers and hymns at school athletic events, nativity displays in public parks, and religious symbols in courtrooms. In 1963, in *Abington School District v. Schempp*, the court ruled Bible reading over a school intercom system illegal. In 1968, in *Epperson v. Arkansas*, the court ruled that state statutes banning teaching of evolution constituted an illegal promotion of a religious viewpoint.

Landmark church-state rulings did not cease with the retirement of Earl Warren. Under Republican appointed Chief Justice Warren Burger (1969-1986) and William Rehnquist (1986-2005), the series of rulings strengthening the "wall of separation" continued. In 1971, in *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, the court attempted to codify its approach to church-state questions by positing a three-part test for determining if an action of government violated the church-state boundary. In 1980, in *Stone v. Graham*, the Court banned the posting of the Ten Commandments in schools. In 1985, in *Wallace v. Jaffree*, it found "moments of silence" unconstitutional "where legislative records reveal that the motivation for the statute was the encouragement of prayer." In 1987, in *Edwards v. Aquillard*, it banned state laws requiring the teaching of "creation science." In 1989, in *Allegheny County v. ACLU*, the court found that nativity scenes in public buildings violated the Establishment Clause. In 1992, in *Lee v. Weisman*, it ruled it unconstitutional clergy to perform nondenominational prayers at public school graduations. In 1994, in *Board of Education of Kiryas Joel Village School District v. Grumet*, a case involving ultra-orthodox Jews the court decided that the funding of a school district designed to coincide with the boundaries of a religious group was an unconstitutional aid to religion.

These decisions not only outraged conservative Protestants, but observant Jews and Catholics as well. The federal government, acting through the courts, appeared to be determined both to drive religion out of public life and to turn public institutions –

particularly the schools – into instruments of secularization. The breadth of unhappiness with the court’s rulings would supply unlikely allies for the conservative Protestants as they began to mobilize politically. By the mid-1970s, a new conservative alliances was being forged between evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants, Pentecostals, Mormons, Roman Catholic traditionalists, and Orthodox Jews – an alliance which, observes Godfrey Hodgson, occupied “the strategic center of public life in America” (Hodgson 1996, 169).

Supreme Court decisions on reproductive rights strengthened this growing conservative coalition. The direction of the court’s thinking was evident well before its landmark rulings on contraception and abortion. In 1961, in a reproductive rights decision upholding state bans on contraception, Justice John Marshall Harlan issued a dissenting opinion which would guide the court for decades to come. “The full scope of the liberty guaranteed by the Due Process Clause,” he declared

cannot be found in or limited by the precise terms of the specific guarantees elsewhere provided in the Constitution. This “liberty” is not a series of isolated points pricked out in terms of taking property; the freedom of speech, press, and religion; the right to keep and bear arms; the freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures; and so on. It is a rational continuum which, broadly speaking, includes a freedom from all substantial arbitrary impositions and purposeless restraints” (Poe v. Ullman 1961).

In 1965, in *Griswold v. Connecticut*, the court rejected the state’s ban on the sale and use of contraceptives on grounds that it violated a right to privacy – which, because it was an implied right not mentioned in the Constitution, opened the court to charges of judicial activism (which would become a major theme in the conservative attack on Big Government). The notion of a right to privacy became the legal foundation for the court’s decision in *Roe v. Wade* (1973), which legalized abortion in the United States.

From the standpoint of religious conservatives of the 1960s and 1970s, when sexual promiscuity, homosexuality, drug use, and pornography seemed to be running rampant, these decisions and the secular culture they endorsed seemed designed to destroy the values and lifestyles they embraced. Affirming the right of mothers and daughters to make their own reproductive choices – and enabling them to do so not only to reproduce, but for pleasure – was seen as an assault not only on traditional

morality, but on the very foundations of family life. It was not merely that the judiciary was willing to permit unheard of degrees of personal freedom, but seemed intent on forcing secular values on people of faith. Again, this threat was broadly felt across the range of religious conservatives and traditionalists, Protestant Catholic, Jewish, and Mormon.

The activist federal courts were not even willing to allow the nonprofit sector – the domain the conservatives were beginning to find so useful as a refuge from liberal secularism – to remain secure from government intrusion. Until the 1970s, the government had been extremely permissive in granting tax-exempt status to organizations that satisfied its broad definition of “charitable.” As a result, over the years, a host of charitable, educational, and religious institutions came to enjoy the benefits of charitable status (including exemption from corporate, sales, and real estate taxes and deductibility of donations) while practicing racial, religious, and gender discrimination. These included the thousands of whites-only private schools set up throughout the South to avoid integration.

In 1970, the IRS, which had previously permitted charitable institutions to practice discrimination, finally took cognizance of the implications of 1964 Civil Rights Act and reversed its policy, ruling that “a private school not having a racially discriminatory policy as to students is not ‘charitable’” as defined by the Internal Revenue Code (United States 1971). Specifically, the agency argued that “an institution seeking tax-exempt status must serve a public purpose and not be contrary to established public policy.” Since non-discrimination had become public policy, discriminating institutions could no longer be deemed tax-exempt.

The government decided to pursue this policy by targeting one of the most prominent fundamentalist institutions in the Bible Belt – Bob Jones University – founded by pioneer radio evangelist Bob Jones, Sr. Although the University proclaimed that it “denied admission to applicants engaged in interracial marriage or known to advocate interracial marriage or dating,” the IRS ruled in favor of its application for tax-exemption in 1942. In November of 1970, the IRS notified the University that it planned to revoke its exempt status. The University promptly sued the government. The case

worked its way through the courts, producing a variety of contradictory opinions. In 1974, the Supreme Court affirmed the Court of Appeals decision favoring the University (Bob Jones University v. Simon 1974), ruling that there was no evidence that its policies had produced “irreparable injury.”

In 1975, the IRS again warned the University that its exemption was in jeopardy – and claimed nearly \$500,000 in unpaid unemployment taxes. In 1978, the District Court ruled against the IRS on grounds that its claim violated the University’s First Amendment rights. The government appealed to the Supreme Court which, in a case involving the University and the Gouldsboro Christian Schools, upheld the IRS. “It would be wholly incompatible with the concepts underlying tax-exemption,” declared the Chief Justice Burger, writing for the majority

To grant tax-exempt status to racially discriminatory private educational entities. Whatever may be the rationale for such private schools’ policies, racial discrimination in education is contrary to public policy. Racially discriminatory educational institutions cannot be viewed as conferring a public benefit within the above “charitable” concept or within the congressional intent underlying Section 501©(3).

“The government’s fundamental, overriding interest in eradicating racial discrimination in education,” it continued

substantially outweighs whatever burden denial of tax benefits places on petitioners exercise of their religious beliefs. Petitioners’ asserted interests cannot be accommodated with that compelling governmental interest, and no less restrictive means are available to achieve the governmental interest.

Though Justices Brennan, White, Marshall, Blackmun, Stevens, Powell, and O’Connor – with only Rehnquist dissenting, Powell wrote a concurring opinion which not only undercut the conceptual foundation of the majority opinion (that tax-exemption was conditioned on organizations supporting public policy), but also would prove over the long term to be the basis for a conservative reinterpretation of the basis for tax exemption.

“I am troubled by the broader implications of the Court’s opinion,” Powell wrote. “The Court states

Charitable exemptions are justified on the basis that the exempt entity confers a public benefit – a benefit which the society or the community may not itself choose or be able to provide, or which supplements and advances the work of public institutions already supported by tax revenues. . . . The institution’s purpose must not be so at odds with the common community conscience as to undermine an public benefit that might otherwise be conferred.

“Applying this test to petitioners,” he continued, “the Court concludes that ‘[clearly] an educational institution engaging in practices affirmatively at odds with [the] declared position of the whole government cannot be seen as exercising a ‘beneficial and stabilizing [influence] in community life. . . and is not ‘charitable’ within the meaning of Section 170 and Section 501(c)(3).”

“With all respect,” Powell went on

I am unconvinced that the critical question in determining tax-exempt status is whether an individual organization provides a clear “public benefit” as defined by the Court. Over 106,000 organizations filed Section 501(c)(3) returns in 1981. It would be difficult indeed to argue that each of these organizations reflects the views or the “common community conscience” or “demonstrably. . . [is] in harmony with the public interest.” In identifying these organizations, largely taken at random from the tens of thousands on the list, I of course do not imply disapproval of their being exempt from taxation. Rather, they illustrate the commendable tolerance by our Government of even the most strongly held divergent views, including views that at least from time to time *are* at odds with the position of our government. We have consistently recognized that such disparate groups are entitled to share the privilege of tax exemption.

“Given the importance of our tradition of pluralism, [the] interest in preserving an area of untrammelled choice for private philanthropy is very great,” Powell concluded. “A distinctive feature of America’s tradition has been respect for diversity. . . . It is the essence of our democratic system.”

It would take a political revolution to make Powell’s defense of the tax-exemption as a basis for dissent and diversity keystone of the conservative legal revolution. As late as 1997, the Supreme Court would still be handing down decisions, like the ruling that overturned the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (*City of Boerne v. Flores* 1997) – a 1993 law that sought to expand the reach of the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment to exempt religious bodies from anti-discrimination, employment, zoning, and other laws that “substantially burdened” religious exercise. Backed by a

broad coalition of religious groups – including the mainline denominations – the Act, if upheld, would have reversed the long series of court decisions that had, over the previous half-century, stripped religious bodies of their privileged status under the law. The broad support for RFRA was an indicator of how successfully the Christian conservatives were becoming in building coalitions to support their views. Powell's views would eventually be incorporated into the Supreme Court's ruling in *Boy Scouts of America v. Dale* (2000), which upheld the right of the Scouts to discriminate against gays on grounds of freedom of association.

Ultimately, reversing the juggernaut of secularism depended on political engagement, which not only meant getting Christian voters to the polls, but getting Christian candidates on the ballot, creating organizations that could lobby and advocate for Christian positions, and turning the evangelicals' already considerable media power to political purposes.

The political mobilization of religious conservatives was driven by a number of forces. One was the Republican Party's "southern strategy," the plan, drafted in the late 1960s by Nixon strategist Kevin Phillips, to take advantage of southern whites' resentment at integration and the political enfranchisement of Blacks to enlist them as members of the G.O.P. The strategy did not make explicit reference to mobilizing religious constituencies, nonetheless, it created an opening for Christian conservatives who were looking for ways of making their influence felt.

Chief among these was conservative activist Paul Weyrich, a protégé of Colorado beer tycoon Joseph Coors, who became the first head of the Heritage Foundation – a think tank established to "formulate and promote conservative public policies based on the principles of free enterprise, limited government, individual freedom, traditional American values, and a strong national defense." With the intention of recruiting Christians to the conservative cause, Weyrich brought to the Foundation Christian Voice, a conservative organization which promoted grassroots political action, including voter registration drives, rating candidates and office holders for morality, and teaching political organizing techniques.

In 1978, the success of Christian Voice led to a struggle for control between

between those who opposed broad transdenominational alliances and those who favored them. The Voice's founder, Dr. Robert Grant, claimed that led by men like Weyrich, a non-observant Jew, and three Catholics (Terry Dolan, Richard Viguerie, and Howard Phillips), the "Religious Right was a sham." Weyrich, Dolan, Viguerie, and Phillips left the Christian Voice and recruited televangelist Jerry Falwell to found the Moral Majority Coalition. Using political action committees and its outsized media presence, the organization played an important role as an enthusiastic backer of Ronald Reagan's presidential candidacy. The Coalition, promoting an agenda which included outlawing abortion, opposing homosexuality, promoting family values, and censoring media promoting "anti family" agendas, mobilized Protestants and conservative and traditionalist groups to the cause of conservative revolution.

As the end of Reagan's second term approached, the Rev. Pat Robertson, another successful televangelist, wanting to secure the Christian conservative's influence in the Republican Party, launched a campaign for the 1988 presidential nomination. Though the effort failed, he used his campaign machinery to create a new Christian mobilization organization, the Christian Coalition. Hoping to "take over the Republican Party from the bottom up," Robertson worked closely with other religious activist groups, including James Dobson's Family Research Council, Phyllis Schlafly's Eagle Forum, and Focus on the Family. Led by Ralph Reed, the Coalition flourished during the Clinton years and took credit for playing a prominent role in the Republican sweep of the congressional elections of 1994. Because of its electioneering activities, the Coalition lost its tax-exempt status in 1998 and, saddled with huge tax penalties, declined in influence.

We should not measure the success of Christian conservative activism by the fate of the particular groups that promoted its agenda – but, rather, by the evident capacity of contemporary religious activists to continuously create new organizations and, more importantly, to build and sustain an institutional infrastructure of schools, colleges, think tanks, media outlets, advocacy groups, and foundations supporting their agenda – what Lyman Beecher in the 1830s would have called the "evangelical machinery."

By this latter measure, this latest episode of religious political activism has, up to this point, been a singular success. Moreover, despite some setbacks, the Christian Right – with the help of the self-proclaimed born-again George W. Bush -- has succeeded in placing its adherents in key positions at every level of local, state, and federal government. Successful strategies of building alliances with conservative Catholics and Jews have assured, as the recent Supreme Court decision on “partial birth abortion” suggests, that it is no longer necessary for conservative evangelicals to occupy key positions in order to institutionalize their agenda. Five conservative Catholic males on the court can promote the evangelicals’ “pro-life” views as effectively as the evangelicals themselves.

Perhaps more significantly, like the earlier episodes of evangelical unity, the current one’s most enduring influence may not be on politics, but on the hearts and minds of Americans. Between 1790 and 1840, the perfectionism of the evangelicals not only led Americans to embrace social reform as a major form of political activism, but the voluntary association – rather than the political party – as an important instrument of social and political influence. Between 1870 and 1920, inclusive “big tent” evangelicalism – perhaps for many of the wrong reasons – produced the social Gospel, the notion that the Godly and materially privileged and, ultimately, government had an affirmative obligation to promote social and economic justice. This deep values change, a sharp departure from *laissez-faire* liberalism, helped to give rise to the progressive and liberal political movements that dominated public life in America for much of the twentieth century.

There is reason to believe that today’s Religious Right may have a similarly enduring impact. The debate over welfare reform in the 1980s and 1990s was framed not by age-old concerns about welfare fraud and the culture of poverty, but by a deeper shift in values. Liberal social welfare policies had sought to alleviate poverty by changing the *conditions* under which the poor lived: housing projects were built; education and job training programs sought to prepare the poor for the workforce; government monies underwrote programs of aid to the needy. The War on Poverty, despite billions of dollars spent, seemed to have no impact on the persistence of poverty.

Inspired by their conservative religious beliefs, Christian conservatives like Marvin Olasky critiqued liberal social welfare policies, arguing that redeeming people from poverty required changing not their external conditions, but their values and beliefs (Olasky 1992). Olasky and other Christian conservatives argued that society needed to be changed from the inside-out rather than from the outside-in. However naïve posterity may judge these views to be, they had an undeniable impact not only on public welfare policies, but, more importantly, on the way the public thought about poverty, dependency, and disability.

Conclusion

Is the current prominence of the religious right an anomaly – a departure from the Tocquevillian model in which “religion exercises but little influence upon the laws and upon the details of public opinion”? Or is it a stage the historical process in which religious groups, struggling to negotiate the tension between sectarian purity and the compromises necessary for public influence in market democracies, are approaching the apogee of doctrinal compromise for the sake of worldly power?

The history of Protestant political activism reviewed in this paper suggests that the latter is true. Again and again, beginning with Lyman Beecher and the “evangelical united front” of the pre-Civil War decades, with Dwight Moody’s remarkable unification of factious Protestants into an “evangelical big tent” between 1870 and 1920, and finally, with the rise of the contemporary Christian right, we’ve seen periods in which religious communities could overcome their sectarian impulses to build the broad coalitions and alliances necessary for political effectiveness – only to fall back between these periods into divisive episodes of sectarianism and political impotence.

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