

Keys to the Kingdom: Conservative Protestantism as an Organizational Field

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This essay makes two linked claims. The first is that conservative Protestantism in the United States is best understood as an organizational field: a social context characterized by distinct forms of sense-making and formal and informal organization. I argue that the imagery of the field illuminates features of conservative Protestant political action that are obscured by more conventional approaches to religion and politics, which tend to focus on religious “actors,” whether individual or organizational, “mobilizing” to further their “interests.” The field metaphor encourages analysts to bracket these relatively easily observable phenomena in order to see the meaningful context in which conservative Protestantism’s people and organizations define themselves and their interests. More attuned to the forest than to the trees of American religious activity, a field-level orientation facilitates both large and subtle analyses of the relationship between religious and political action in the United States.

My application of insights from organizational theory to the sociology of religion is hardly novel. The boundaries between organizational and religious studies in sociology have become quite blurry over the last decade, as students of religion have cleverly exploited the toolkits developed by colleagues who are much more likely to study business than religious phenomena. At the same time, however, sociologists of religion often have gotten snagged in the same methodological barbed wire that prevents organizational theorists from making the most of their own largest insights, namely, a penchant for quantification that obliges them to prioritize “actors,” whether individual or organizational, over contexts. This essay is an admittedly modest and preliminary attempt to move the level of conceptualization on issues of religion and politics simultaneously upward toward more theoretical abstraction, and downward, into the particular cultural strata on which contemporary conservative Protestants pursue their varied individual and

collective ambitions.

The essay's second claim is that Robert Wuthnow's (1994) notion of "producing the sacred" provides powerful insight into how political entrepreneurs both within and beyond the field exploit the organizational fertility of conservative Protestantism. Opposition to abortion is perhaps the most prominent item on a very short list of beliefs that are sufficiently shared and compelling to large numbers of this field's inhabitants that they are willing to engage in coalitional activity across significant theological and affectional divisions to express it. I suggest that conservative Christians use abortion and a handful of other politically controversial issues to produce the sacred and so care about them in deep, emotional, often extra-rational – in a word, religious – terms. Entrepreneurial leaders both within and beyond conservative Protestantism recognize the sacred character of these beliefs and encourage believers to take political action to protect them. When these entrepreneurs are successful, they transform essentially religious commitments into effective political strategies.

In a sense my purpose here is to suggest an explanation for something that we already think we know, namely, that over the last twenty-five years the Republican party has capitalized on the moral commitments of religious conservatives in order to garner votes. While the fact of this political accomplishment is widely recognized, its organizational and cultural mechanics remain poorly understood by social scientists. I suspect this is because the tools with which social scientists have attempted to understand them have not, however ironically, been sufficiently sensitive to the religious character of conservative Christianity.

My work here seeks to redress this trouble, and it proceeds as follows. I first briefly review what we might call the "organizational turn" in the sociology of religion. This is

important, since religion scholars' embrace of organizational theory in recent years takes us much of the way toward appreciating the impressive organizational capacities of conservative Protestantism. Nevertheless organizational sociology's most profound insights have escaped empirical scholarship in the sociology of religion. American sociology's common equation of quantification with empirical rigor has meant that, with only a few exceptions, we have relegated our empirical assessments of religious culture to those traces of it that we can count with individual- or organization-level data. But culture works on the forest and the soil as well as on particular trees, even though these other levels of cultural reality tend to be harder to model quantitatively. In the second section I sketch out some of the most prominent features of conservative Protestant culture at these other levels of empirical reality, elaborating on an earlier effort to describe the conservative Protestantism as an organizational field (Stevens 2002). Specifically I focus on three features of conservative Protestantism as a distinctive realm of meaning and action. Conservative Protestantism proffers distinctive goals of action, forms of organization, and ways of talking about goals, organization, and the larger world that set it apart from secular society but also render it amenable to a wide range of innovative internal collaborations. Savvy insiders with political ambitions and a few wise secular politicians have been able to exploit conservative Protestantism's remarkable organizational fertility in recent years, which is why the conference for which this essay has been commissioned is being convened in the first place. Appreciating just what these political entrepreneurs have exploited requires specifically religious analytical tools, and in the third section I show how Wuthnow's notion of the producing the sacred helps us see how commitment to a few key beliefs holds diverse members of an otherwise anarchic organizational field together. Throughout, I rely on

my earlier study of the home education movement (Stevens 2001), recent empirical scholarship by many other social scientists, and even a bit of my own experience as a child in a conservative Protestant household to fill out the admittedly schematic and tentative picture I am drawing here.

Sociology of Religion's Organizational Turn

The classical sociologists of religion were sensitive to the organizational dimensions of their subject. Though his thesis about the origins of modern capitalism in Protestant northern Europe proved historically incorrect (Aho 2005), Max Weber's insights about the deep affinities between Protestant Christian subjectivity and the temperamental requirements of bureaucratic modernity continue to enjoy impressive scholarly attention (Gorksi 2003). A student of organizations might crassly read Emile Durkheim's entire corpus on religion as an elaborate statement on the organizational utilities of the sacred: those things that people regard as transcendentally and unarguably valuable are the meaningful and emotional stuff that makes groups out of mere populations (Durkheim 1995 [1912]). These founding insights were long obscured, however, by two developments in post-WW II American sociology. The first, as Paul DiMaggio explains in an exceptionally cogent (1998) essay on religion and organizational theory, was the rise of Parsonian functionalism, which encouraged a view of culture as a more or less coherent, societal-wide meaning system analytically distinguishable from social structure. Religion was relegated to the cultural side of the culture/structure divide, where it was said to provide comforting assurances about humankind's place in the cosmos while meso- and micro-levels of meaning were worked out through supposedly secular institutions: the school, the state, the family, the economy. The homogenization of culture into a coherent totality and its conceptual divorce from

structure created conditions for the brilliantly mistaken secularization thesis, which held that the rise of scientific and bureaucratic rationality inevitably desacralized the cosmos, pulling it into the purview of unsentimental observation, prediction, and control (Berger 1967).

The preceding paragraph more or less summarizes the approach to religion that I was taught as a fledgling sociology major in the fall of 1984, at Wheaton College, a place whose very existence was evidence of the problems inherent in mid-twentieth century sociological approaches to the sociology of religion. A small liberal arts school in suburban Chicago, Wheaton is only the most prominent of a non-trivial number of religiously founded colleges which defy the secularization thesis, remaining explicitly dedicated to the vitality and relevance of religious faith in the modern world. Alumni and friends of the college proudly call it the evangelical Harvard or, in jest, *the New Jerusalem*. Wheaton's very existence reveals the error of mid-century conceptions of culture as homogenous, societal-wide norms and values. Wheaton is proud of its cultural distinctiveness and even today obliges its students to distinguish themselves culturally. One's signature on a pledge to abstain from smoking cigarettes, consuming alcohol or illicit drugs, engaging in extramarital sex, or gambling is a requirement of matriculation. Wheaton's very existence, as a vital hub linking intellectual, administrative, and socioeconomic elites from throughout the conservative Protestant universe, defies the conceptual segregation of culture from social structure in much post-WW II American sociology.

By the time I entered graduate school in the late 1980s, the sociology of religion was well on its way to catching up with Wheaton College. 1988 saw the publication of Robert Wuthnow's benchmark *Restructuring of American Religion*, which conceived of religious phenomena as fundamentally organizational and, as its title indicates, amenable to material as well as ideational

dynamism. At about the same time other students of religion were discovering rational-choice, organizational-ecological, and neo-institutional theories and applying them to American religious life (Finke & Stark 1992; Iannacone 1992; Chaves 1996), while social historians were developing renewed appreciation for the founding place of religious beliefs and organizations in the development of the modern U.S. political order (for a review see Hall 1998). Just why the social-scientific study of religion took this organizational turn when it did has yet to be fully understood, but it almost surely had something to do with the obdurate fact the United States did not conform to the predictions of secularization theory. Depending on which data one consulted, somewhere between 25 and 50 percent of Americans attended religious services weekly. The vast majority of Americans believed in God; fully a quarter of the population could be described as conservative Protestant (Greeley & Hout 2006; Woodberry & Smith 1998; Hadaway, Marler & Chaves 1993). Making better sense of all of this religiosity became more important to social scientists with the ever more apparent fact that religious conservatives were developing muscle in American politics generally and the Republican party in particular through the 1980s and 1990s (Wilcox 1996; Himmelstein 1990; Klatch 1987). At the same time, the impressive flowering of cultural sociology and of cultural approaches within organization theory created friendly conditions for sociologists of religion near the center of the discipline. Intellectual traffic between sociologists of religion, culture, and organizations has been steady ever since.²

Among the most significant contributions of this organizational turn has been the recognition that religious organizations provide a wide range of utilities to their members. These

²Good evidence of this is the collection of papers aptly titled *Sacred Companies: Organizational Aspects of Religion and Religious Aspects of Organizations* (Demerath, Hall, Schmitt & Williams 1998), as well as the plurality of scholars assembled for this conference.

organizations provide amenable contexts for meeting life partners, raising children, and sustaining durable marriages (Edgell 2006; Wilcox & Wilcox 2004; Davidman 1993). They provide deep emotional satisfactions difficult to obtain by other means (Griffith 1997). They are the primary places for many to enjoy the pleasures inherent in producing and consuming music and other art forms (Chaves 2004). They provide havens from oppressive social conditions and resourceful mechanisms of collective action for members of disadvantaged groups (Morris 1984).

Despite the intellectual fertility of the approach, however, viewing religious organizations as vehicles for the production of individual and collective utilities has come at a significant price. It has encouraged scholars to conceive of religious organizations primarily as means by which preexisting kinds of social actors seek to solve preexisting problems and pursue preexisting desires (to find a spouse and have children, or have deep emotional experiences, or make music, or mobilize for effective political action, for example), rather than as sources of novel subjectivities and preferences. The notion that religions might actually produce and sustain distinctive kinds of people and preferences has been given relatively less attention through the organizational turn, as sociologists of religion have tended to accept the presumption of the larger discipline that religious “actors” – whether individual or organizational – can be analytically distinguished from their actions and, indeed, from religion itself. This is unfortunate because, as I hope to show below, the most powerful insights of both organizational sociology and the sociology of religion come only when actors, actions, and preferences are seen as consequences of religion.

The Organizational Field of Conservative Protestantism

An organizational field is a cluster of organizations that are linked culturally and sometimes instrumentally. A field is comprised of “those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services and products” (DiMaggio & Powell 1983, p. 143). Fields are fundamentally cultural. As W. Richard Scott explains, the field concept “connotes the existence of a community of organizations that partakes of a common meaning system and whose participants interact more frequently and fatefully with one another than with actors outside the field” (Scott 1994, pp. 207-208 [quoted in Scott 1995, p. 56]). Legitimate goals, logics of action, and modes of belief and talk that may be taken for granted in one field may be unknown or even unintelligible on another.

Sociologists of religion often have invoked the notion of the organizational field to describe conservative Protestantism, exploiting the notion’s capacity to reveal distinguish organizational goals, forms of collective action, and cultural beliefs peculiar to this sphere of U.S. society (e.g., Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004, 1999; Smith 1998). However they have tended to model the field in terms of populations of persons (Smith 1998) or of religious organizations (Ammerman 2005; Chaves 2004, 1999). This operational move is not incorrect so far as it goes: fields are of course populated by the people and organizations who inherit and sustain them. But fields and the parties inside of them are not the same thing. In much the same way that an ideology has an existence independent of the people who believe it and the texts in which it is specified, organizational fields have legitimate subjectivities, goals, and logics of

action and belief that have characteristics independent of those who pursue their lives through them. When organizational fields and the parties who inhabit them are operationalized as one and the same thing – as they often are not only in the study of religion but in organizational studies more generally – the essentially cultural character of the field notion is greatly diminished. “Field” becomes a summary statement for a bunch of people or organizations which have certain features, rather than determinate of those features in the first place. Remaining open to at least the possibility of generative causal relationships between fields and their inhabitants requires that we distinguish them analytically. This is why I write about conservative *Protestantism*, not conservative Protestants or their organizations, here.

As I have explained in more detail elsewhere (Stevens 2002, 2001), the field of conservative Protestantism may be characterized by its distinctive combination of three factors: expansionist goals; an organizational form called the ministry; and particular ways of talking about faith and the world which both demarcate the outer boundaries of the field and facilitate cohesion and collaboration within it. I briefly elaborate on each of these features of conservative Protestantism here.³

Expansionist goals: Conservative Protestantism is evangelistic. The expansion of the ranks of the faithful is not only a legitimate but primary goal of religious activity in the field. Conservative Protestantism literally commands its members to spread the good news of salvation to all people. Beyond saving souls, the faith also encourages its believers to be salt and light on this Earth, bringing not only the word but also the ethic of Christianity to the secular world

³These three features are hardly exhaustive of the things which render the field of conservative Protestantism distinctive from the surrounding society; they are, however, components of the field that are key to its recent fate in U.S. politics.

around them. Conservative Protestantism additionally is expansionist in pro-natalist terms. The faith encourages its believers to be fruitful and multiply, and supports an elaborate discourse on the raising of Godly children (Wilcox & Wilcox 2004; Stevens 2001).

The ministry form: Conservative Protestantism features a distinctive model of legitimate organization, the *ministry*. Not necessarily a church and not quite (or not only) a business, a ministry is a pyramidal form administered with a mix of charismatic and bureaucratic authority. A ministry can purvey just about any good or service. It can be a religious day school, a Bible study program, a publishing house, or a recording studio. It can be an evangelistic effort at home or abroad, a medical charity, or a political advocacy group. In order to be a legitimate ministry it must have a religious purpose, but that purpose may be evangelistic, instructional, or reformist.

Ministries are characterized by a distinctive organizational form that mixes charismatic and bureaucratic elements into a potent syncretism. Ministries typically are capped by a single person with exceptional organizational and communicative gifts; especially in its early years, the ministry is closely identified with this one individual. As the leader and his endeavor accumulate resources and followers, though, they adopt more rationalized administrative structures. Tasks come to be distributed throughout ranks and offices rather than between persons. Even as they rationalize, however, ministries tend to maintain the prominent visibility of their charismatic founders. A nominal blurriness between founders and their organizations can go on for years and may even outlive the founder.

As with bureaucracy and charisma, money and mission can mix potently in ministries as long as their leaders maintain a normatively acceptable balance of financial solvency and religious service. Conservative Christians understand that their causes must be supported

somehow. God provides for those He calls into full-time service, but it is understood that He does so through the financial contributions of other believers. Additionally (and often to the misunderstanding of secular observers), it is acceptable within this field to run a ministry as a for-profit business, as long as there is no hint of deception about the arrangement.

Devoting one's career to a ministry is very heartily encouraged in conservative Protestantism. It is regarded as a sacrificial and even a selfless act (paradoxical in light of the fame enjoyed by founders of successful ministries), a bending one's own will to the will of God. Starting a ministry or working for one are not simply two among many occupational goals. In the value system of conservative Protestantism, working full-time for the Lord is an especially noble endeavor.

Ways of talking: Conservative Protestantism is characterized by particular ways of talking about, and thereby making sense of, the world. It can take some time for untutored outsiders to even hear the Conservative Protestant patois, since it shares so much with standard American English. Listen closely, however, and in time you will hear some of its signal words and phrases. The previous three paragraphs of this essay are peppered with them: the metaphors of salt and light are from the New Testament gospels, the instruction to be fruitful and multiply a common quotation from the first chapter of Genesis. Use of the term *believer* to describe a conservative Christian is common nominal device, as is the name *Lord* for God and the capitalization of the pronouns referring to Him. A unique deployment of standard English is to use the phrase *the world* to describe everything outside the conservative Protestant social universe. This is a tradition which famously divides the world in two: on one side is God's kingdom of believers, on the other is "the world," a largely secular, disorganized, and ill-directed place.

The patois can be a very powerful means of signaling one's membership in the kingdom, or at least one's familiarity with it. This is something the Republican party leadership shrewdly surmised in recent years, as has been amply documented by David Kuo (2006). Those who have ears to hear the conservative Protestant patois often were rewarded in the public appearances of George W. Bush during his two presidential campaigns. Most of Bush's major stump speeches were written by Michael Gerson, a graduate of Wheaton College and by many accounts a virtuoso at the craft of poetic signaling to Bush's religious base. By invoking the conservative Protestant patois, the Bush campaign was marking deference to a vast cultural universe.

As important as such signaling is for performing respect and facilitating political commerce, conservative Protestant language does much more than that. As the anthropologist Susan Friend Harding explains in her ethnography of Virginia's most famous ministry and its leader, *The Book of Jerry Falwell: Fundamentalist Language and Politics* (2000), conservative Protestant language constructs a subjective reality in which good and evil are always distinguishable and pretty much absolute; in which Godly leaders can legitimately mark the divide between Godliness and sinfulness by reading and preaching the Bible carefully; and in which the hierarchical organization of divine command among God's people is deeply legitimate. In my own ethnographic study of the U.S. home education movement (Stevens 2001), I learned that conservative Protestant home schoolers' easy use of the term *leader* and their celebration of leadership as an honorable thing contrasted sharply with the organizational sensibilities of left-libertarian home schoolers, who tended to view hierarchical organizational forms as pollutants to their conceptions of what an ideally democratic, grassroots homeschool movement should look like. Disagreement about whether the designation of official leaders was an honorable thing did

much to split the homeschool movement in two.⁴

These three features of conservative Protestantism are not entirely unique to it. Roman Catholicism, for example, also is an expansionist faith. However Catholicism has tended to make expansion of the Church a task of its clerical bureaucracy, while conservative Protestantism assigns much of the job of saving souls to the rank-and-file faithful. Judaism is a pro-natalist tradition and also has rewarded individual religious entrepreneurship, but it has not historically been evangelistic toward non-Jews. And of course all religious traditions have their own distinctive discursive systems. It is not the particular cultural elements but their specific content and combination that make conservative Protestantism (and perhaps any religion) a unique organizational field. Within that field certain kinds of goals, actions, and meanings are reasonable that would be nonsensical or even heretical elsewhere, as I hope to illustrate with the following two examples.

In the late 1960s my mother, Lola Stevens, responded to a notice that appeared in the bulletin of her home church, a small conservative Baptist congregation in the heart of California's notoriously liberal Marin County. The notice had been posted by Moishe Rosen, a young evangelist who had converted to Protestant Christianity after many years as an orthodox Jew. Rosen was looking for volunteers to help him with his fledgling ministry to Jewish people

⁴Far behind our colleagues in linguistics, anthropology, and the humanities, sociologists have only begun to appreciate the power of language to make the worlds it also describes. But we have been making headway on this front in recent years. Perhaps the most provocative sociological advance in this area has come from Charles Tilly, whose elegant, book-length essay *Why?* (2006) explains how the work of crafting legitimate reasons for things is the bridge connecting cultural and political interests. Francesca Polletta's recent study of the narratives everyday citizens crafted in Internet exchanges about how to commemorate the 9/11 calamity is an excellent example of empirical work in this nascent line of analysis (Polletta 2006).

in the San Francisco Bay area. My mother, one hundred percent *goy* and fresh in from the Midwest, with a workaholic husband and few friends in her new hometown, was eager to make connections with fellow believers. Her recollection of those first months of helping out Moishe Rosen has the character of an early semiconductor firm success story. Rosen was running his operation, whose official name was Jews for Jesus, out of his Corte Madera garage, taking whatever financial and in-kind help he could get; my parents, who between them had both time and cash to spare and two *hearts for Christ*, as evangelical Christians often put it, were among the handful of early believers who supplied Rosen with some of both; Rosen's operation subsequently moved to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury neighborhood – no doubt partly because of the area's low rents but also in order to be at the epicenter of the era's countercultural ferment. All these years later, Jews for Jesus still retains a Haight-Ashbury address, a hippie cachet, and regular financial support from my mother. And it has grown, with satellite missions in eight U.S. cities and in ten other countries. Its self-stated mission is “to make the messiahship of Jesus an unavoidable issue to our Jewish people worldwide.”⁵

Even this brief and admittedly anecdotal account reveals that Jews for Jesus exhibits some of the defining features of conservative Protestantism's organizational field. Its fundamental purpose, to convert Jews to evangelical Christianity, would be unthinkable or even heretical in other contexts. In the world of conservative Protestant Christianity, however, this goal is not only reasonable but noble. If one is pursuing it honorably and honestly, as my parents believed Moishe Rosen to be doing, one can reasonably ask for volunteers to stuff envelopes for the cause on weekday afternoons and solicit monthly checks from gainfully employed fellow

⁵www.jewsforjesus.org/about/. Accessed 30 March 2007

believers. The organizational form Moishe Rosen deployed to win Jewish souls to Christ, the ministry, does evangelism like a church, is structured like a franchise firm with a central headquarters and regional branches, and pays its bills entirely through donations. As a ministry it can be wildly successful at achieving its goals without generating a single penny of profit, and in fact it would earn the suspicion of its supporters if it paid its employees too well or ran with more than a minimal financial surplus.

If we wished to place Jews for Jesus within a typology or a census of similar organizations we likely would do so by thinking of it as what evangelicals and religious scholars often call *parachurch* concerns – organizations which either support churches or pursue religious goals outside of the congregational form. Categorizing and counting Jews for Jesus as an organization of a certain type, however, would tell us nothing of the conditions that enabled it to come into being in the first place. Categorizing and counting would give us little purchase on the distinctive goal and form of Jews for Jesus, or on the incentives that drove my mother to spend her spare time volunteering for a ministry rather than some other kind of charity. Only by viewing the field of conservative Protestantism as constitutive of goals, organizational forms, and ways of valuing does the origin of Jews for Jesus become understandable.

However exotic an organizational creature Jews for Jesus may be to outsiders, it is hardly the most innovative concern to be built within conservative Protestantism. Jews for Jesus' variant on the goal of evangelism, saving Jews, is novel, even unique in conservative Protestantism, but the organizational vehicle deployed to pursue that goal – the ministry form – is pervasive throughout the field. Over the years my parents have written regular checks to many other ministry organizations, among them: Campus Crusade for Christ International, which

evangelizes and nurtures believers on college campuses, Medical Teams International, which sends Christian medical professionals abroad for short-term service in underdeveloped countries; and Exodus International, whose mission to convert homosexuals to Christ and to either abstinence or heterosexual monogamy.

Because the field of conservative Protestantism is a cultural context and not a population, it is amenable to distinctive avenues of organizational innovation. Ambitious upstarts can abide by the norms of the field to create new organizations of an established kind, as Moishe Rosen and his supporters did with Jews for Jesus; or, if they are especially skilled (and determined, and lucky), they can tweak the norms to create novel forms, whether for established purposes or for new ones (cf. Fligstein 2001; Clemens 1997).

Consider, as a second example, the case of Michael Farris, who was a private attorney and a father of four who, in 1983, in partnership with a like-minded lawyer and with the financial backing of a Christian businessman, founded the Home School Legal Defense Association (HSLDA) out of his Olympia, Washington home. Home education was a rare and questionably legal activity at the time. Stories about Farris and his wife, Vicki, educating their own kids at home in violation of state education law had made the Seattle newspapers the previous year. Few at the time would have predicted that home education would quickly grow into one of the largest education movements in recent history, but Farris and his colleagues' foresight soon proved prescient.

At its heart HSLDA is a legal-services insurance company. For a per-household annual fee of approximately \$100, families receive full legal counsel if they are ever confronted by law-enforcement or social-service agencies for reasons related to home education. HSLDA is

registered with the Internal Revenue Service as a 501 (c)(5) not-for-profit. Of course this does not prevent HSLDA from having a lot of revenue. In 2000 the organization claimed 60,000 dues-paying members and over 50 employees. In addition to its legal services division, HSLDA also supports the National Center for Home Education (NCHE), a legally independent entity that lobbies routinely on issues related to home education in Washington, D.C. HSLDA also provided much of the organizational and financial raw materials for the founding of Patrick Henry College, a conservative Protestant school with a specific mission of service to Christian homeschooled young people. Its chancellor is Michael Farris. Patrick Henry welcomed its first entering class in the fall of 2001.⁶

Throughout its history the U.S. homeschool movement has spanned the significant cultural and organizational divide separating the organizational field of conservative Protestantism from the rest of the larger society. This ecological fact makes the homeschool movement an excellent site for examining the organizational mechanics of conservative Protestantism, because it has obliged Farris and his compatriots on the “Christian” side of the homeschool movement to consistently mark and explain who they are and whom they serve.

HSLDA publicly describes itself as a “Christian organization,” though its services are available to homeschool families regardless of their religious affiliation. As the HSLDA web site explains:

...HSLDA’s mission is to protect the freedom of all homeschoolers. Although our officers and directors are Christians, HSLDA membership is not limited to religiously based homeschoolers....We have no agenda to make all home-based classrooms religious

⁶ See Stevens 2001 for a more detailed examination of HSLDA and its organizational progeny.

or conservative. Our primary objective is to preserve the fundamental right of parents to choose home education, free of over-zealous government officials and intrusive laws. We do put on a national conference annually and invite the board members of state organizations with whom we have worked for many years. Most, if not all, of those organizations have Christian leaders, but many serve all homeschoolers regardless of religious affiliation, as we do.⁷

In the course of my fieldwork among home schoolers I learned that invitations to those conferences were regarded as marks of honor in the regional homeschool associations with the word *Christian* in their names. Within homeschool groups which publicly heralded the *diversity* or *non-sectarian* nature of their memberships, however, HSLDA and its varied activities were sources of considerable suspicion and even anger. This is because HSLDA and its leaders were able to exploit the vast riches of conservative Protestant America – its hundreds of thousands of households of potential homeschoolers, its countless church basements and sanctuaries and gymnasias available for homeschool meetings and group recreation days, its myriad parachurch organizations willing to offer all sorts of in-kind support toward the cause of a nominally *Christian* home education movement. Those home schoolers who did not call themselves *Christians* in the conservative Protestant sense often felt marginalized by the very success of HSLDA and its leader, Michael Farris, unquestionably the contemporary homeschool movement's most accomplished organizational entrepreneur.

Farris and his accomplishments are illustrative for purposes here because they are only

⁷www.hslda.org/about/default.asp, accessed 1 April 2007.

understandable as products of a distinctive social context. It does not diminish Farris or his accomplishments to point out that they are creatures of an organizational field that encourages and rewards innovation; in which service to the Lord, earning an income, and accumulating celebrity are not incompatible goals; and in which it is not only legitimate but honorable to create a ministry which combines conservative Protestant theology, child education, school founding, and political activity in a novel syncretism.

Producing the Sacred

The people and organizations inhabiting the organizational field of conservative Protestantism are a dazzlingly varied lot. This may strike secular outsiders as an overstatement, given many mainstream media and social-scientific depictions of religious conservatives as predominantly white, Republican, working- or middle-class, and disproportionately exurban and rural. But the variations conservative Protestants themselves talk about the most do not show up on these coarse demographic dimensions. Conservative Protestants talk and disagree a lot about how to interpret scripture; about the proper relationships between husbands and wives, parents and children, church elders and congregants, families and public schools, human beings and the environment, religious faith and state politics; about how God's people ought to make the Biblical ethics of justice and grace and war and peace manifest in the contemporary world. Fine-grained survey and ethnographic research picks up on some of these more subtle variations (e.g., Greeley & Hout 2006; Edgell 2006; Lichterman 2006; Moone 2004; Smith 1998; Rozell & Wilcox 1996; Stacey 1991), but the overall media and scholarly pictures of conservative Protestants are not nearly as complicated as the reality behind them.

The wide ideological diversity within conservative Protestantism creates formidable challenges for anyone within or beyond the field who wants to mobilize it around any particular cause. To say this is not to contradict the arguments I made in the previous section. Conservative Protestantism is an especially fertile ground for organizational entrepreneurship, but it also is anarchic. It has a great many prominent leaders and a few large organizational players, but no dominant ones. This is a Protestant tradition, in which individuals are presumed to enjoy unmediated relationships with the divine. God is presumed to lay different burdens and callings and insights on different hearts. While leaders of proven integrity can legitimately command the deference of those below them within the hierarchies of particular religious organizations (especially in the ministries those leaders themselves have founded), believers always are free to leave one ministry for another or to attempt to grow ministries of their own. That conservative Protestantism is as organizationally anarchic as it is organizationally fertile is one of the field's great paradoxes, and something that few secular social scientists and politicians fully appreciate.

Those few politicians who do appreciate it have disproportionately been members of the Republican party. Many scholars date the birth of the "new," politically engaged Christian right to the founding of the Moral Majority in 1979. A ministry of Jerry Falwell, head pastor of the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, Moral Majority was an innovative effort to mobilize conservative Protestants as voters in sufficient numbers to sway elections. As is well known, the Moral Majority's agenda was heavy with oppositions to liberal social reforms: legal and easily accessible abortions, the Equal Rights Amendment, and civil rights protections for lesbians and gay men. Although sociologists and political scientists continue to debate the extent

to which the Moral Majority and a few other large ministries were instrumental in determining election outcomes in the 1980s and 1990s (e.g., Kuo 2006; Brooks & Manza 2004; Brooks 2002; Layman 2001; Wilcox 1996), there is wide agreement that the Moral Majority and its alters ushered in a whole new era of politically demanding and mobilized religious voters.

To claim that opposition to legalized abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, and civil rights for homosexuals is what propelled large numbers of religious conservatives into politics is to state the obvious. Just why these issues so inflame the passions of conservative religious people is, however, a puzzle whose solution continues to elude full explanation. It is certainly not for a lack of trying. Attempts to explain the political mobilizations that Beisel (1990) collectively describes as “moral panics” have been numerous and often widely acclaimed as classics in academic circles. The panics have been explained as symptoms of underlying class and status-group antagonisms (Beisel 1998; Gusfield 1963); as last-ditch responses to secular modernity for those who are on its losing end (Page & Clelland 1978); and as exotic responses to generic social-structural dilemmas, such as the enduring contradiction between work and parenting for contemporary women with children (Luker 1985; Ginsburg 1998; Stacey 1991).

While such analyses certainly provide useful insight, they also (and perhaps inadvertently) undermine the potential for religion itself to be generative of political action. Politically expressed religious convictions become symptoms of the “actual” causes beneath them. So Anglo-Protestant anxieties about a loss of social and cultural privilege in the face of a rising tide of Catholic immigrants becomes the generative engine of the temperance movement (Gusfield 1963); opposition to the teaching of evolution in public schools becomes a symbolic effort to reassert the integrity of a ruralist, communal way of life (Page & Clelland 1978); the

pro-life movement becomes an assertion of the legitimacy of full-time motherhood and domesticity in the wake of the gender integration higher education and the labor force (Luker 1985); and conservative opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment is the result of a combination of liberals' arrogance and conservatives' profound misunderstanding of just what social changes the ERA actually would have wrought (Mansbridge 1986). In short, expressed religious convictions of conservative activists become something to be explained through recourse to other, irreligious, dimensions of analysis. Religion itself ceases to be a legitimate source of explanation.

However useful this analytic move has been for the social sciences over the last twenty-five years, its critical insights have failed to disabuse religious conservatives of their religious convictions. One way that social scientists' critical understanding of religiously-motivated political activism might move forward, then, would be to take the religious aspects of political motivation more seriously than we typically do. The notion of the organizational field, coupled with a sociologically robust conception of the sacred, enables us to do that.

As Emile Durkheim explained long ago, sacred things are linchpins holding large systems of belief and practice together (Durkheim 1995 [1912]). Those things that a group calls sacred are regarded as transcendentally valuable. They are kept immune from close scrutiny and instrumental valuation precisely because commitment to their transcendent importance undergirds the legitimacy of myriad social relations built in light of them. So for example, among many conservative Protestants the literal, factual inerrancy of the Bible is sacred. Since many of conservative Protestant faiths posit the Bible as God's revealed word to human believers, and since believers are presumed to enjoy unmediated access to God through his

revealed word, then the Bible has to be literally and factually true. If it were not, an entire system of religious beliefs and the social relations predicated on them would have to be rethought: the infallibility of the divine; the unmediated access common individuals have to divinity through their own readings of the Bible; the ability of an otherwise mute and invisible God to provide clear instructions to his people and their earthly leaders (for illustrative ethnographic accounts see Harding 2000; Boone 1989; Ammerman 1987).

The brilliance of Durkheim's analysis of the sacred is that it is applicable to virtually all systems of human meaning and social organization, whether or not they are explicitly called religious. For example, the sociologist John Meyer and his colleagues have developed a rich literature on the sacralization of the autonomous, rights-bearing individual as the ideological linchpin of the modern nation-state. Modern states are built around an explicit ontological commitment to the fact that humanity is comprised of *individuals* who are bearers of inalienable rights of self-determination. If modern representative democracies are to function legitimately, ontological status of the rights-bearing individual has to be absolute. If it were not, an entire system of beliefs and social relations predicated on them would have to be rethought: the Enlightenment dream of individual human freedom; the democratic organization of collective governance; the notion that individuals can rightfully demand things from formal authorities; the presumption that certain forms of authority and discipline can be sub-optimal, or wrong (e.g., Meyer, Boli & Thomas 1994; Boli-Bennett & Meyer 1978).

As Robert Wuthnow amply explained in *Producing the Sacred*, these linchpins of belief are not knowable independent of human action to vivify and maintain them. Bible believers devote considerable effort to vivify and maintain the factual and literal inerrancy of the Bible as

God's inspired word, for example. Rich traditions of theological scholarship, housed in numerous seminaries and colleges and represented in countless exegetical texts, confirm for believers the integrity of their ontological commitment to Biblical inerrancy. Elaborate speech norms specify how one "reads" rather than "interprets" the Bible, and how the same text can inspire different readings in wildly different times and places (Harding 2000; Boone 1989; Ammerman 1987). Special symbols and rituals mark the Bible as different from other books. It may frequently be described as *God's Word*; it may be printed on special paper and encased in an expensive binding; it may be kept separate from other books in one's home; it may be consulted daily. Similarly, rich traditions of legal and philosophical scholarship, housed in numerous universities and institutes and represented in countless exegetical texts, instantiate our deep ontological commitment to the existence of inalienable, individual human rights. Elaborate speech norms specify how one "reads" rather than "interprets" documents such as the U.S. Constitution and the Bill of Rights, and how the same text can inspire different readings in different times and places. Special symbols and rituals mark such documents as different from other texts. They may be given their own temples near important seats of government; schoolchildren may be taken on pilgrimages to view them.

While the specification of all those things which are held sacred within conservative Protestantism is well beyond the scope of this essay and the expertise of its author, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that those issues which have proved to be enduring ideological commitments for conservative Protestants have a sacred component, and that the political efforts entailed in protecting those commitments are labors of sacralization. Thinking about the political activism of conservative Protestants in these explicitly religious terms has several utilities. First,

it enables us to better appreciate the depth and duration of some conservative Protestants' political struggles: their stubborn commitment prohibiting abortion and for slowing the accrual of civil rights for gay men and lesbians; their enduring and creative efforts to normalize creation theories of natural origin; their adamant disdain for research with human stem cells. If we hypothesize such commitments as efforts to maintain the sacred, then a novel dimension of analysis opens up. Commitments that seem irrational or at least puzzlingly immune to secular critique become newly comprehensible. Political action on behalf of these commitments is revealed not simply as political but also as religious.

Second, thinking about conservative Protestant political actions as efforts of sacralization suggests why different issues on the cultural-conservative political agenda generate variable constituencies of religious people. For example, conservative Protestants and Roman Catholics consistently are in agreement in their opposition to abortion, suggesting a shared sacralization of prenatal life that crosses the boundary of conservative Protestantism's organizational field. Conservative Protestantism and Roman Catholicism are distinguished by quite different doctrines about the moral status of various forms of birth control, however. This is a religious difference that arguably has had considerable impact on recent U.S. political history. There is a strong, enduring, and incrementally successful anti-abortion movement in this country, but activism around the prohibition of birth control has been considerably weaker and more episodic. There is much more agreement among conservative religious people about the immorality of the so-called "morning-after pill" (which many regard as a form of abortion), than there is about the immorality of condoms or conventional oral contraceptives. Such differences strike many secular observers as irrational or even downright absurd: why isn't abortion itself understood as a

form of birth control? why are technologies which terminate pregnancies at a point when they are merely a cluster of cells regarded as abortifacients? When viewed as religious differences rather than technical or scientific or merely nominal ones, varied stances on such issues seem less strange.

Third, thinking about conservative Protestant political involvement as religious work clarifies why the list of issues that ignites broad-based mobilization within the field is relatively short. Opposition to abortion, civil rights for homosexuals, and sex education, together with efforts to maintain the symbolization of religious belief in the public sphere (whether through the teaching of creations in public schools or in the display of religious imagery such as the Ten Commandments) are among the few commitments sufficiently shared and compelling to create politically formidable voting blocs of religious conservatives. Efforts to coalesce conservative Protestants around other issues, such as environmental protection, have been much less successful.⁸

In a thoughtful 1993 article for policy review, none other than Ralph Reed himself complained that what he called the “pro-family movement” had yet to develop a sufficiently broad political base or a sufficiently diversified issue portfolio. “Though blessed with leadership, strong grassroots support, and enormous financial resources,” Reed conceded in his introduction, the pro-family movement

has not yet completely connected its agenda with average voters. The pro-family movement still has limited appeal even among the 40 million voters who attend church

⁸See for example the recent *New York Times* editorial, “Evangelical Environmentalism,” 10 March 2007, p. A26.

frequently, identify themselves as evangelicals or orthodox Roman Catholics, and consider themselves traditionalists on cultural issues.

The rest of Reed's essay was devoted to outlining how the pro-family movement might widen its strength and influence. He encouraged religious conservatives to "develop a broader issues agenda," since the current movement had "limited its effectiveness by concentrating disproportionately on issues such as abortion and homosexuality."

These are vital moral issues, and remain an important part of the message. To win at the ballot box and in the court of public opinion, however, the pro-family movement must speak to the concerns of average voters in the areas of taxes, crime, government waste, health care, and financial security (Reed 1993:31).

Reed may have taken his cue from an earlier chapter in U.S. religious history, specifically the late nineteenth century, when the ethical capacity of American religion, coupled with its organizational fecundity, spawned many of the schools, settlement houses, and social-service organizations that were the engine of Progressive-era social reform (Hall 1998). Yet the broad-based issue agenda Reed called for fifteen years ago has yet to materialize among conservative Protestants. Just why this has been the case is a complicated question that would be poorly served by a single explanation, but the enduring narrowness of the issues to which conservative Protestants are passionately committed is certainly compatible with the notion that only a few contemporary political issues are considered sacred by these voters.

Conclusion

We would do well to respect the power of those sacred commitments, which can be so strong as

to supercede other deeply institutionalized norms of moral conduct. A few people have killed or maimed abortion providers in the name of those commitments, after all. Many more have devoted their entire careers, forsaking more lucrative lines of work, to pursue them. Countless others have taken stands like the one my father did when, in 1992, he spoke up in a public forum of his medical colleagues at the Oregon Health Sciences University, in support of the state's pending Ballot Measure 9, a voter referendum that would have formally denied certain civil protections to homosexuals, and said publicly that he supported the ballot measure even with the full knowledge that his own son was a gay man. We do a great disservice to our understanding of such actions, and disrespect those who take them, if we see them merely as irrational, or as symptoms of underlying anxieties that actors themselves do not fully understand, or as the sad result of cunning politicians exploiting the emotional capaciousness of archaic faiths.

By virtually any measure of the beliefs and actions of its citizens, the United States is among the most religious nations in the modern world. Americans' inextinguishable religiosity has defied the tidy predictions of secularization theory, obliging social scientists to develop new ways of making sense of religious faith and the practices that instantiate and flow from it. The explosion of novel empirical and theoretical insight in the sociology of religion has been one intellectually positive result. Few would disagree, however, that academic sociology retains its secular presumptions. This is precisely as John Meyer and his colleagues would predict. According to them, faith in an essentially secular modernity is itself a religion and academic social scientists are part of its priesthood (Meyer, Boli & Thomas 1994).

In this essay I have tried to show those aspects of conservative Protestantism that make it a distinctive cultural world. Using the imagery of the organizational field, I have argued that we

should think of conservative Protestantism not as a population of persons or organizations, but rather as a cultural context in which certain kinds of persons and organizations are born and flourish. This move enables us to better consider religious commitment as its own causal force in American political life.

Secular critics might read my claim that much conservative Protestant political action is religious as further evidence that these people need to be stopped, and quickly. To some of those for whom the doctrine of separation of church and state is a sacred thing, the notion that conservative Protestants are bringing their religious convictions directly into the political arena might simply be one more reason to squelch them. I hope not. I would prefer that the impressively accruing successes of conservative Protestants in the American political arena might encourage social scientists to reconsider their own orthodoxies about the supposed distinction between religious and other forms of political action, and to see their own political commitments as at least partly religious, too. Were we able to do that, we might have a more inclusive, open-ended, and honest conversation about the proper role of religious faith in American politics than we currently do.

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