

Fundamentalism: US style

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In November, eighty-four per cent of all white evangelical Protestants who voted cast their ballot for George W. Bush, the Republican Party's candidate for US president. Although he lost the popular vote by half a million votes, Bush managed to move into the White House with a razor-thin margin of Electoral College votes.

Now that they have demonstrated that they were the party's foot soldiers, what will these evangelical right-wingers demand? Will they be able to implement their "family values" agenda? Will they be able to ban all abortion, limit divorce, prevent civil rights legislation from being extended to gays and lesbians, pass "parental rights" laws, institute prayer in public schools, eliminate sex education and multicultural curricula, and curtail the range and images accessible in books and the media?

Even before he was sworn into office, Bush announced his cabinet choices. These nominations were sent to the US Senate, which must "advise and consent". All were quickly approved, only John Ashcroft being grilled for a week before he too was confirmed (58-42) as attorney general. The appointment places in charge of the Justice Department a man who as a state attorney general fought against a voluntary public school desegregation plan. He will also have the President's ear in the selection of federal judges.

Ashcroft is a member of the Assemblies of God, a predominantly white Pentecostal denomination

with 2.5 million members in 12,000 churches throughout the United States. Pentecostalism, born at a revival meeting in Los Angeles in 1906, emphasises direct personal experience of the Holy Spirit through ecstatic worship, miraculous healings and speaking in tongues.

Ashcroft grew up in Springfield, Missouri, headquarters of the Assemblies of God. His father headed the church's education division. The town also hosts a Bible college that a number of well-known TV preachers, including Jim Bakker and Jimmy Swaggart, attended. However, Ashcroft received his college education at elite Yale University and attended the University of Chicago's law school.

Ashcroft is a lay preacher who composes and sings gospel music. In his memoirs, he describes his faith as his compass and his core. He maintains that it is the role of government to "legislate morality". He has opposed homosexuality, abortion, pornography, needle exchanges for drug addicts and ending the police practice of stopping African-Americans more often than whites ("racial profiling"), and he voted to end federal support to the National Endowment for the Arts. He also supported toughening mandatory minimum sentencing laws and opposed efforts to end the disparity between penalties for crack and powder cocaine. (The white middle class is more likely to use powder cocaine, and the penalty is several times less severe than for crack, which is often the drug of choice in the black community.)

While in the US Senate, Ashcroft led the Republican fight to block President Clinton's appointments to the federal judiciary. Most controversial was his role in killing the 1997 District Court nomination of Ronnie White, an African-American state Supreme Court Justice from his home state. On the Senate floor, Ashcroft claimed that White would push the law in a "pro-criminal direction" because White, who favours the death penalty, rendered a decision in favour of a defendant because he believed the man did not have competent trial counsel. Misrepresenting opponents and violent personal attacks are a hallmark of the radical right.

Long a favourite son of the Christian right, Ashcroft received more political money from religious groups and clergymen than any other senatorial candidate in the 2000 race. However, he was defeated for re-election by a man who was killed in a plane crash three weeks earlier. From the moment of Ashcroft's defeat, Bush and his vice president, Dick Cheney, began receiving phone calls from conservative religious leaders promoting Ashcroft's candidacy for attorney general. Dr. James C. Dobson, president and founder of Focus on the Family and a syndicated radio preacher, described Ashcroft as a national resource.

During the confirmation hearings, Ashcroft repeatedly assured his questioners that he would enforce laws that he opposed and specifically pledged that he would not petition the US Supreme Court to overturn the 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalising abortion. That statement stunned both his supporters and those who have found him, on other occasions, single-minded in his determination to carry out his agenda.

Although there was no dancing or drinking in the governor's mansion while Ashcroft served two terms as Missouri governor, he wasn't known as a firebrand conservative who tried to dismantle state government. Rather, he governed from the political centre and collaborated with the Democratic-controlled legislature. Chris Kelly, a state judge and former Democratic state senator, told the New York Times, "He's one of the most clever politicians I ever met ... He knew the pulse of the electorate. And he didn't become public about positions unless he thought he could win. He was not a risk taker."

Like other members of the Bush cabinet, John Ashcroft is the fox that has been put in charge of the chicken coop. Spenser Abraham, the new head of the Department of Energy, as a senator voted to abolish the department. Gail Norton, the new Interior secretary, is a friend of the oil industry. Many

of the appointees are recycled Reagan and Bush appointees, and well represented are those who waged the Gulf War a decade ago.

The rise of the Christian right

In the cultural upheaval of the 1960s and 1970s, while millions of Americans opposed the war and marched for desegregation and women's right to full equality, many others found inspiration in the certainties of their Christian religion. In 1976 a Gallup Poll found one-third of all US residents had experienced a conversion, or a process of being "born again". The same poll found about half of all Protestants and about a third of all Catholics believed that the Bible was "to be taken literally, word for word"

Almost sixty per cent of the Protestants and forty per cent of the Catholics were evangelical, that is, eager to recruit others to their beliefs. This evangelicalism is not limited to the printed word, but has led to the establishment of Christian radio and TV, much of which is controlled by the Christian right. In 1986, three of the top eleven Christian shows were hosted by right-wing evangelicals: Pat Robertson's 700 Club, Jerry Falwell's The Old Time Gospel Hour and Jim Bakker's show. [1]

A survey conducted in the late 1980s found that among the "baby boomer" generation (people born between 1946 and 1963) one-third accepted the biblical version of creation over evolution and agreed that "temptations are the work of the devil". Most considered themselves "moderate", but thirteen per cent classified themselves as "fundamentalists". It is this latter grouping that is the cohesive core we can identify as the Christian right.

"Born again" Christians, for all the institutions they have built, still live in the contemporary world and face the same stresses, conflicts and culture the rest of us do. In fact, evangelicals have a slightly higher divorce rate than the general population. And although the religious right opposes abortion under any circumstances, one out of six women having an abortion considers herself a "born again" Christian.

A recent book by former vice president Dan Quayle and Diane Medved, *The American Family: Discovering the Values that Make Us Strong*, reveals one of the main mechanisms through which the Christian right are able to demand repressive legislation as the solution to behaviour in which they themselves engage. The authors highlight a divorced mother who "did not want or foresee" her divorce. She wasn't a woman pursuing a fast-track career, but one who "expected to play the traditional role, to raise her children and create a home for a husband of whom she was proud". Because she had good intentions (unlike feminists, who want husband, children and an exciting career), her divorce shouldn't be held against her. But others who divorce are guilty of selfishness and bad intentions, and that's why divorce should be re-stigmatised.

The repressive morality that characterises the Christian right is based on an illusion of an ideal US family life that never existed. [2] Life never existed in the uncomplicated way it was portrayed in the TV shows of the 1950s or in some glorious golden era of the past. Yet the illusion is powerful and the solution is simple: legislate morality.

Scandals have also revealed evangelical ministers and politicians such as Newt Gingrich as having engaged in extra-marital affairs. In one well-publicised case, a conservative politician and member of the Christian Coalition was forced to admit that he had molested his stepdaughter for several years. How does the Christian right deal with the messiness of this behaviour? The main reaction is to be a bit ashamed at the moment but quickly to forget about it.

Of course, within the religious right there is always a role for the repentant sinner. The anti-abortion

movement has organized in a compelling way evangelical women who have had abortions. They convincingly testify to the guilt and regret they feel, and explain their behaviour as the result of pressure-whether from boyfriends, husbands or abortion doctors. They are never individuals who made a decision but always victims of another's desires. These women testify at various legislative hearings and organise groups for "post-abortion healing".

It is important to keep in mind, however, that there is a world of difference between the Christian right and the Nazi-type Aryan Nations or other white supremacist and anti-Semitic movements. While they may quote the same apocalyptic biblical texts and even share some of the same bizarre conspiracy theories, they are bitter opponents. For the most part, fundamentalist Christians in the United States are rabidly pro-Zionist.

Cultural upheaval and US Protestantism

US historians have identified earlier periods in which revivalism arose during other social upheavals. [3] The "First Great Awakening" developed in the 1740s as the stable New England townships faced challenges when the younger generation was forced to leave in order to acquire new land. The new Christianity was Methodist and Baptist. It had a more personal commitment to Christ and a greater emotional life than the Puritan brand. The revival took on elements of being a religion of the oppressed as it launched a critique of social superiors and demanded the right to make sense of one's own life.

The "Second Great Awakening" (1800-1830), led by itinerant Baptist and Methodist lay preachers, was fuelled by the constantly expanding frontier and the new social relations people had to forge in facing hardships. The countryside was sparsely settled, so the extended "camp meeting" became the site where services and Bible classes were organised. As was true with the first awakening, a characteristic of the meetings was the bodily manifestation of conversion: crying, screaming, shaking and rolling.

Protestantism was transformed from being a religion in which the individual was so sinful as to be helpless before God to one in which the individual could choose to respond to God's offer of salvation. The ethnic composition of the country was also changing as Irish and German immigrants rapidly replaced the overwhelmingly English population of the colonial period. For these evangelists, improving the world and winning souls were part of the same perfectionist project. Thus northern evangelicals were very much in the forefront of the anti-slavery campaign. As a result, by the mid-nineteenth century, the Baptist church had split into an anti-slavery northern church and a pro-slavery Southern Baptist Convention. After the Civil War the Southern Baptist Convention clung to its prewar views, and as a consequence African-Americans organised their own independent Baptist churches.

Beginning in the 1840s, but especially between the 1870s and 1919, evangelism's major political campaign was temperance. Alcoholism was a widespread social problem. Women were in the forefront of temperance because a married woman's inability to control even her own earnings meant she had no way to protect herself and her family if her husband drank up their income. Founded in 1874, the Woman's Christian Temperance Union became a mass organisation of women campaigning primarily for temperance and the right to vote. At one time it had thirty-eight departments to coordinate its wide range of activities, from visiting prisoners and the "shut-in" sick to advocating labour rights and rights for married women. Many feminist abolitionists and suffragists were strong supporters of temperance, and scores of suffragists began their political life as WCTU activists.

The temperance movement itself comprised both progressive and conservative evangelists. But adoption in 1919 of a constitutional amendment banning alcohol did not solve the social and economic problems of alcoholism. The amendment was repealed in 1933, and the campaign has gone down in history as a case where legislating morality failed.

In response to the country's growing industrialisation and urbanisation in the late nineteenth century, a new form of Protestantism arose: fundamentalism. Its roots were in the populist movement, but it, like many nineteenth century populists, conservatised quickly. The conflict between the modern world and fundamentalism is perhaps most dramatically encapsulated by the 1925 Scopes trial. John Scopes, a biology teacher, was prosecuted and found guilty of having taught Darwinian evolution in high school science classes.

This brand of conservative Protestantism proudly defined God's chosen people as white Anglo-Saxons. Early fundamentalist preachers such as Billy Sunday were convinced that US social and political structures were superior because they had been built by God's chosen.

Following World War II and the onset of the Cold War, this fundamentalist religion identified communism as the atheistic anti-Christ of the future apocalypse. Leading fundamentalist preachers combined an attack on communism with a criticism of liberal Protestants as closet communists, even supplying names and information to the House Committee on Un-American Activities. The evangelical right's attack on "one world government" proved handy during the years of anticommunist fear-mongering, but such formulations collide with the needs of the corporate US today.

Along with an even greater emphasis on reading the Bible, fundamentalists have been preoccupied with pinpointing the end of the world. There are a variety of opinions about when and how Christ's second coming will occur, but most believe God has divided human history into several ages. We are living in the final stage, in which current events like earthquakes, tornadoes, floods, wars, political crises and social decay are all warnings from God. For the believer, there is only a limited time in which to convert others.

For almost a hundred years, some preachers have been predicting the exact date of the millennial event. There is a range among those who believe the end of the world is around the corner, those who believe that Christ will return only after a theocratic kingdom has been established and those who view the millennium as simply a time in which unbelievers will become more receptive. Many conflicting interpretations of the world's end revolve around events in the Middle East. Both the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and the 1967 Six Day War, in which Israel seized East Jerusalem and the West Bank, have been viewed as signs that the end is near.

For the fundamentalist there will be an Armageddon, an all-out war between the forces of good and evil, in which, in the end, good will triumph. Closely tied to Armageddon is the notion of the Rapture, in which all truly born-again Christians will ascend into heaven with Jesus. Where the Rapture fits into the battle is another source of theological controversy.

The majority (Baptists and Pentecostals) support a pre-millennial scenario in which they will be snatched up into heaven before the coming of the anti-Christ, while post-millennialists believe that the faithful will have to endure suffering along with the unbelievers. For the post-millennialists-who advocate Reconstructionism or "dominion theology"-the task is to establish a theocracy on earth to prepare for Christ's return. In this kingdom murder, adultery, incest, homosexuality, witchcraft, unrepentant juvenile delinquency and even blasphemy should be punishable by death.

Since the 1950s, the more moderate Protestant denominations have declined as the theologically

conservative ones have grown dramatically. Part of the reason for this growth of fundamentalism is its aggressive proselytising. Fundamentalism claims to have answers to the alienation and isolation of modern capitalist society and the changing role of the family. Within fundamentalism there are supportive institutions in which one's family can flourish while outside there are only chaos and conflict. This siege mentality fuels a political activism driven by the need to accomplish one's work before the millennium brings such possibilities to a close. Fundamentalists view themselves as a beleaguered group under attack by the establishment, which stands before them as a Goliath to their David.

Between 1971 and 1990, evangelical churches gained six million new members while mainline Protestant churches lost about 2.6 million. However, the evangelical churches that are the fastest growing are those which are the most adaptive, with worship services that use popular rock music, have casual dress codes and cater to youth, newlyweds and singles. Mark Shibley, a sociologist of religion, concluded that these are growing because they have become more like the surrounding culture, not less. [4] These evangelicals are undoubtedly a less supportive subculture for the Christian right than the more fundamental evangelical ones.

What the Christian right want

Christian fundamentalists are backed by a whole range of institutions and organizations, from private schools and home schoolin networks to Bible institutes, colleges, radio and TV programs, publishing houses and legal centres dedicated to advancing conservative agenda. The Christian right demand that society accept and conform to their notion of what it means to be a good family and a good citizen in God's kingdom. It is a social, political and religious movement that wants the government to regulate traditional hierarchical relations between men and women and between parents and children. It sees the role of the state as to enforce "moral" (that is, their ideal of sexual) behaviour.

Poverty, for example, is not seen as a moral issue but as the result of individual bad luck or bad behaviour. Because the Christian right view hierarchy as natural and positive, they are not bothered by inequalities of wealth and power. According to Sara Diamond, who has followed the evangelical right for years, the Christian right can be considered partly oppositional and partly system-supportive. They are oppositional to mass culture, and this explains why the United States has such sharp culture wars. But they glory in the US past and back its economic system. Yet this provincial nationalism does not coincide with the corporate US globalisation project, and this gives the Christian right's alliance with the Republican Party a tenuous character. [5]

One of the big problems in society today, according to the Christian right, is a lack of religion. In 1980 Tim LaHaye, a founder of the Moral Majority, published *The Battle for the Mind*. Widely circulated, this book explains that there is a vast conspiracy involving Hollywood movie producers, Unitarian churches, the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Organization for Women and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. These opinion-shapers are out to harm Bible believers because they deny God's sovereignty. That is, moral conditions become worse because people attempt to solve their problems independently of God. It is these "secular humanists" who are causing the problem.

Fixing the problems of society, then, requires the "moral majority" to get involved in the electoral process and take charge, either as candidates or as workers assisting the right kind of candidates.

The Christian right began to coalesce around opposition to *Roe v. Wade* and passage of a federal Equal Rights Amendment, which would have extended equal constitutional rights to women. Central

to their organisation, too, was their reaction to the proposal by President Carter's Internal Revenue Service commissioner, Jerome Kurtz, that any private school formed or expanded in the years following a desegregation order would have to prove it was trying to integrate, or lose its tax-exempt status. The Christian right saw Kurtz's proposal as a declaration of war. Two of the earliest organisations of the Christian right-the Moral Majority and the National Christian Action Coalition-grew out of the networks of fundamentalist churches affiliated with private Christian schools.

While white evangelicals voted for the "born again" Jimmy Carter in 1976, in the 1980 election two-thirds voted for Reagan. Two key events helped to mobilise the network of evangelical political activists. In April 1980 Pat Robertson, whose 700 Club TV program was becoming increasingly political, Bill Bright, from Campus Crusade, Demos Shakarian, of the Full Gospel Businessmen's Fellowship, and John Gimenez, pastor of the Rock Church in Virginia, organised a day-long and officially non-partisan Washington Rally for Jesus that drew 200,000 "born again" Christians. That August, Ed McAteer of the Religious Roundtable (and founder of the Moral Majority) organised a National Affairs Briefing to coincide with the Republican Convention. It was a platform for Reagan, who commented that Kurtz's proposed IRS regulations would "force all tax-exempt schools-including church schools-to abide by affirmative action orders drawn up by-who else?-IRS bureaucrats". The briefing, attended by 15,000, was more like a revival meeting.

The Christian right developed from an existing leadership of strong personalities who were connected to fundamentalist churches and schools and had been involved in local political fights. For example, Robert Grant developed his skills by leading a group of California preachers to back the unsuccessful anti-gay Briggs initiative, which would have allowed public schools to ban openly gay teachers. His organisation was the first to issue "moral report cards" rating candidates. These cards were issued at church on the Sunday before election, often outrageously misrepresenting the opposition's record.

Another tactic the Christian right employed was to develop a "hit list" of members of Congress they felt were particularly anti-Christian, anti-family or anti-traditional values. In November 1980, as a result of the combined efforts of the New Right and the Christian right, two million new voters went to the polls. White fundamentalists accounted for two-thirds of Reagan's lead, and twenty-three of the twenty-seven targeted members of Congress lost their seats. They were replaced by a new breed of Republican legislators, including Alfonse D'Amato of New York and Dan Quayle of Indiana.

The Christian right and the Reagan revolution

Shortly after the elections, the Family Protection Act was introduced into Congress by a group of conservatives, led by Paul Laxalt, a Republican from Nevada who had been Reagan's campaign manager. This omnibus bill restricted abortion and gay rights, watered down sex discrimination laws, restricted the food stamp program and gave tax advantages to families in which the mother stayed at home. The bill never made it out of committee, but from that experience supporters learned a valuable lesson-that legislative changes are best proposed one at a time.

The Christian right didn't get much from the Reagan and Bush tenure. Instead they were drawn into supporting right-wing military regimes in Central America. Not only did the Christian right identify with these regimes because they carried out their repression under an anticommunist banner, but right-wing evangelicals such as Guatemala's Rios Montt led the military command. The Christian right mobilised their constituency through their publications and media programming, justifying death squads in Guatemala and El Salvador and terrorist contras in opposition to the Sandinista government of Nicaragua. They were so eager to collaborate with the White House in this

anticommunist crusade that the battle for family values was relegated to state and local fights.

However, the local skirmishes had important national repercussions. These included defeat of the federal Equal Rights Amendment (only thirty-five of the necessary thirty-eight states ratified the amendment before the deadline) as well as hundreds of legislative restrictions on abortion.

Anti-abortion activism

During the 1980s, grassroots anti-abortionists developed several dozen clinics that advertised themselves as abortion referra services and offered free pregnancy tests. While the women waited for their results, they were forced to watch a presentation about how dangerous abortion supposedly is. The staff were prepared to manoeuvre pregnant women by scaring them with false stories about the dangers of abortion, by becoming their confidants, by lying or even by breaking laws into completing their pregnancy.

Several women filed lawsuits, and the clinics were forced to cease their false advertising. Today a network of about 3000 "crisis pregnancy centres", advertising as abortion alternatives, rely on their powers of persuasion and limited help: offering free pregnancy tests, legal and medical advice, adoption information and infant and maternity clothes. At least a third are operated by two umbrella organisations, one Catholic and one Protestant.

But if one section of the anti-abortion movement was willing to put energy into manipulating pregnant women, and another, larger grouping lobbied to restrict abortion at the state level, still another strategy that evangelicals pursued in the 1980s was direct action.

As soon as abortion was legalised in 1973, anti-abortionists developed a series of harassment tactics, including picketing hospitals and clinics, where the bulk of all abortions are performed, and harassing clinic personnel following them home, distributing flyers to their neighbours, or picketing their homes. Joseph Scheidler, a Catholic from Chicago, developed the tactic of "sidewalk counsellors", people who would attempt to talk any woman walking into the clinic out of having an abortion. Before abortion was legalised and throughout the 1970s and early 1980s, most anti-abortion demonstrations were organised by the Catholic Church.

But the founding of Operation Rescue by Randall Terry, a graduate of the Pentecostal Elim Bible Institute and a used car salesman, in 1986 changed that. By 1990, *Time magazine* estimated that anti-abortion activists were two-thirds evangelicals and one-third Catholic.

The "rescues" began in Binghamton, New York, where Terry and six others were arrested after locking themselves inside a clinic. Following ten days in jail, Terry was on a mission to spread the "rescues" across the country. The Christian right's media featured these actions, and by September 1988 Terry announced that "child killing" dropped twenty per cent at one abortion "mill" and a local crisis pregnancy clinic experienced a fifty per cent increase in clients.

Operation Rescue gained national publicity in the summer of 1988 with its four-month siege of Atlanta, during which more than 1200 were arrested. Staged because the Democratic Party's national convention was in town, the action galvanised clinic blockades across the country. But the publicity also sparked pro-choice mobilisations and injunctions to bar the "rescuers" from blockading and entering clinics. Between 1988 and 1990, there were more than 400 blockades. In 1991-93 the number fell to 170, although there was an increase in incidents of property damage, hate mail and harassing phone calls. Finding the strategy of mass arrests difficult to sustain and having lost a lawsuit brought by the National Organization for Women, Operation Rescue activists switched to a "No Place to Hide" campaign, targeting doctors who performed abortions.

With medical schools training fewer doctors to perform abortions, Terry explained to the press that “the doctor is the weak link”. The campaign developed “Wanted” posters that contained a photo of the doctor and detailed his/her daily activities. Given the rhetoric about doctors being “baby killers”, the inevitable happened-in March 1993 Michael Griffin shot and killed Dr. David Gunn outside a Pensacola, Florida, clinic. Over the next year, four more clinic personnel were killed, and the Christian right have been debating violence ever since. However, the murders and public reaction to them prodded Congress into passing the Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act in 1993. Although doctors who perform abortions are usually forced to take elaborate precautions to ensure their safety, since public opinion reacted sharply against the murders and clinic violence was made a federal offence, attacks on clinics have slowly declined.

Scandals and campaigns

One might have concluded that the Christian right had peaked. Its leaders, having tasted power, had not kept up the pressure to legislate their agenda. By 1987-88 several key leaders were mired in a series of scandals. First, Pat Robertson’s run for president in the Republican primaries earned him a \$25,000 Federal Election Commission fine for raising campaign funds a year before he declared his candidacy. On the campaign trail, his more kooky statements were widely reported: the government should encourage higher birth rate in order to save “our culture and our values”, no atheists could work in his administration, and Cuba was housing missiles aimed at the United States. Secondly, the 1988 campaign coincided with press revelations of bizarre preacher scandals. Oral Roberts announced that if he did not receive \$8 million in donations within two months, God would call him home. Then Jim Bakker admitted that he had cheated on his wife. (It turned out to have been a rape.) Jim and Tammy Bakker’s PTL Satellite Network-the first 24-hour network to broadcast Christian programming to all of North America-had its tax-exempt status revoked because of financial improprieties, and Jim Bakker ended up serving time in jail. The long, drawn-out scandal highlighted the Bakkers’ high living as well as exposing a fight between Bakker, Jerry Falwell and Jimmy Swaggart for control of PTL. In true soap opera fashion, Pat Robertson even accused Vice President George Bush of leaking the sex scandal-to which Bush replied by calling him crazy.

If that hadn’t been enough, a fellow Assemblies of God preacher with photographic evidence blackmailed Jimmy Swaggart into appearing on national TV to confess his habit of soliciting prostitutes.

Less publicised during that period but undoubtedly more personally traumatising was the implosion of “shepherding”-a practice among some 150,000 evangelicals who wanted to give their whole lives to their faith. In this network of churches, ministers exercised total authority over their disciples, who were told whom to marry, how husbands were to treat their wives, how families were to allocate their money and so on.

But if the fundamentalist preachers looked like scoundrels and Pat Robertson’s campaign, after spending \$26 million, arrived at the Republican Convention with only 120 delegates, those who rushed to write the epitaph of the Christian right were wrong-they were about to reinvent themselves.

Developing strategies and expertise

At President George Bush’s inaugural celebration in January 1989, Pat Robertson met Ralph Reed, a 27-year-old political campaigner just finishing his doctorate at Emory University, and invited him to join him in starting a new organisation. By 199 Reed and Robertson announced that the Christian

Coalition had 25,000 members and 12 state chapters. They intended to focus on local politics. Reed pointed out to Christianity Today that "most of the issues that concern conservative Catholics and evangelicals are primarily determined in the city councils, school boards, and state legislatures".

Although the Christian Coalition exaggerated its numbers, it did create a network of local activists, and through its annual Road to Victory conferences trained its members in the nuts-and-bolts techniques of organising. The Coalition stressed working at the precinct level to get a majority of Christian conservatives elected as delegates to their state Republican parties. At the 1991 conference, Christian Coalition field director Guy Rodgers explained the advantages of generally low voter turnout: Among all eligible voters, only sixty per cent are registered and only half of those vote. If only thirty per cent vote, the Christian right can win with scarcely more than fifteen per cent support. The trick is to use phone surveys to locate the maximum number of "correct" voters (cross-checking voter lists with church lists) and get them to the polls. This labour-intensive approach to voter mobilisation includes distributing voter guides at church the Sunday before the vote and calling targeted voters on election day to remind them to vote.

The Christian Coalition also encouraged its members to work within other conservative organisations. Most important has been the Concerned Women for America, founded by Beverly LaHaye in 1979. She organised women into prayer chapters to oppose passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and then become "kitchen table lobbyists". In 1991 they worked hard to win Clarence Thomas' confirmation to the US Supreme Court, cheering him on when he arrived in the Senate hearing room to testify. They also lobbied for Congressional passage of the Defense of Marriage Act, which allows states to deny the legality of gay marriages (1996). The organisation sponsors *Beverly LaHaye Live*, a daily half-hour radio show, and publishes a monthly newsletter highlighting the grassroots work that chapters develop.

Another leading organisation is the Family Research Council, headed by Gary Bauer. He was a domestic policy adviser for Reagan and served as undersecretary in the Department of Education. By the mid-1990s the council had a mailing list of 250,000, a staff of seventy and a budget of \$10 million. Bauer's FRC works closely with Dr. Dobson's Focus on the Family. The two organisations provide members of Congress with research on "pro-family" issues.

Although Pat Robertson endorsed Bush a year before the 1992 election, Pat Buchanan, a former speech writer for Reagan and a Catholic with extensive ties to the evangelical right, launched a primary run that showed how an aggressive right populist campaign could pay off. He won thirty-seven per cent of the New Hampshire Republican primary and twenty to thirty per cent of the vote in two dozen other state primary races. In his speeches he attacked civil rights and anti-discriminatory legislation as being "special" rights for minorities, but also spoke about economic issues, outlining a nationalist agenda that identified "illegal immigration" and Mexico and Asia, where US corporations were transferring work, as the source of the problem.

A week before the convention opened, Vice President Dan Quayle blamed rising urban violence on illegitimate pregnancies and denounced TV's Murphy Brown character for being pregnant and unmarried.

The first night of the convention heard a speech by Pat Buchanan. He challenged those educated in Christian truths and Judaeo-Christian values to recapture America's culture from "the new barbarism". He declared that in Houston (site of the convention) there was "a religious war going on for the soul of America". Following his speech were prime-time speeches by former drug czar William Bennett, Marilyn Quayle and Pat Robertson-who charged Bill Clinton with having "a radical plan to destroy the traditional family and transfer many of its functions to the federal government". The TV viewer was left with the distinct impression that the Christian right had taken over the party.

An estimated 47 per cent of the delegates described themselves as “born again” Christians. Of the 2000 delegates, 300 were members of the Christian Coalition. They secured, over the objection of other delegates, a party platform demanding a ban on all abortions, opposing civil rights for gays and lesbians, calling on the government to stop the sale of pornography and to condemn “obscene” art. The platform also endorsed school prayer and home schooling and opposed making contraceptives available in public schools.

Bush’s defeat that November was widely perceived as a rejection of that religious war. But without the support of the Christian right, Republicans would have suffered an even greater defeat-according to Reed, evangelicals provided forty-six per cent of Bush’s total vote. The Christian Coalition distributed forty million voter guides (a sixteen-page tabloid-sized newspaper) to 246,000 churches.

The Christian Coalition and its allies were also busy that year with state measures. Colorado voters narrowly approved a state referendum denying equal rights protections to homosexuals (since overturned by the Supreme Court) and defeated a state equal rights amendment in Iowa. During the campaign Pat Robertson sent out a fundraising letter calling the measure part of a larger feminist agenda that encouraged women to “kill their children, practice witchcraft, and become lesbians”.

The Christian right saw Bill Clinton as a target worth pursuing. As soon as he announced his intention to remove the ban on gays in the military, they flooded Congress with letters and phone calls and got him to back off. Gary Bauer’s Family Research Council played the major role in following Clinton’s nominees for surgeon general. First up was Dr. Joycelyn Elders, a feisty African-American doctor who had worked with Clinton when he was governor of Arkansas. After her confirmation, the council relentlessly dogged her and exposed her willingness to discuss sex education. When she answered a question about masturbation, the Christian right went wild, distorting her comments and creating such a fuss that Clinton accepted her resignation. Bauer went after Clinton’s subsequent nominee, Dr. Henry Foster, an African-American obstetrician and gynaecologist, who was a strong supporter of Planned Parenthood and had performed more than 100 legal abortions. When the FRC’s exposure of the number of abortions Foster had performed did not sink his nomination, the council then circulated reports that Foster, who had served on Alabama’s medical board, had not objected to the infamous Tuskegee Project, which used black men as unknowing subjects in a study of untreated syphilis. While Foster denied any knowledge of the project, the seriousness of the charge turned public opinion against him. Thereafter, the Clinton administration left the post vacant.

The Christian right worked hard to defeat Clinton’s health care plan. Although the drive to torpedo the plan was led by Republican legislators, the Christian Coalition called its campaign against health care reform its number one 1994 legislative priority. Reed pledged to spend \$1.4 million on radio and newspaper ads. The Christian Coalition also distributed thirty million postcards to be mailed to members of Congress from their constituents. The postcard, picturing a doctor vaccinating a child while her mother looked on, said, “Don’t Let a Government Bureaucrat in This Picture”.

The health care campaign was an opportunity for the Christian right to demonstrate that they have the capacity to work around issues somewhat more mainstream than their usual agenda. Their leaders recognised that they could become power brokers in Republican politics at the national level only if they could maintain a large voting bloc. Thus they cannot appear to be too dogmatic. Ralph Reed’s 1993 article, “Casting a Wider Net”, outlined what the Christian right had to do to expand their agenda and seek allies. He raised the possibility of a working alliance with Catholics and African-Americans around parental rights issues. In the spring of 1993 the Christian Coalition, Catholic hierarchy and some parents of colour ran a slate of candidates, many of whom won, in hotly contested New York City school board elections. The issue that galvanised that alliance was the

introduction of a gay-positive curriculum in the elementary grades.

While not withdrawing their opposition to abortion and homosexuality, Reed argued, the Christian right have to speak to the concerns of the average voter on all topics. Certainly the Christian Coalition's campaign against Clinton's attempt to reform health care, while not exactly speaking to the needs of the average voter, did represent the direction Reed felt necessary if the Christian right were to move into the mainstream.

Reed also understood that African-Americans are members of evangelical Protestant churches, and share with white evangelicals many similar views on abortion, homosexuality and prayer in public schools. But the problem with building a working alliance is that African-Americans do not believe that the US past was a golden era for their ancestors. Furthermore, they realise that the Christian right are fundamentally racist, having been born in reaction to the desegregation of public schools. As a result, the voting profiles of the two groups are dramatically different. In the 2000 election, eighty-four per cent of white evangelicals voted for Bush, but only eight per cent of African-American evangelicals did.

The Christian right in the Clinton era

The Republican Party, with much help from the Christian right, was able to defeat some of Clinton's earliest and most important proposals and held up or torpedoed his appointments. As the 1994 mid-term elections approached, Vic Fazio of California, chair of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee, held a press conference and attacked the "fire-breathing Christian radical right" Dr. Joycelyn Elders also denounced the right; in response eighty-seven Republican members of Congress called for her resignation Clinton, in a telephone interview with a St. Louis radio station, blasted right-wing radio and TV broadcasters, specifically naming Jerr Falwell and Rush Limbaugh as sources of a "constant, unremitting drumbeat of negativism and cynicism". But it was a campaign that had nowhere to go because Clinton would not debate their agenda and in fact outmanoeuvred them by appropriating much of it

The 1994 elections were an incredible breakthrough for the Christian right. They probably mobilised four million activists and reached fifty million voters. Exit polls revealed that about twenty-five per cent of those who voted were white evangelicals, seventy per cent of whom voted Republican. Congressional candidates backed by the Christian Coalition won fifty-five per cent of their campaigns and fully twenty-five per cent of the elected first-term representatives were members of evangelical churches.

The Republican agenda was the "Contract with America". In his 1996 book *Active Faith*, Ralph Reed details the behind-the-scenes negotiations that went into developing the Contract. Reed raised three proposals: a tax cut for families with children, parental choice legislation and a permanent ban on all taxpayer funding of abortion. Newt Gingrich explained that he wanted the Contract to be signed by all incumbent Republicans in Congress and therefore "abortion and other contentious issues would have to wait". Reed reluctantly agreed, if the Republicans would move quickly on the tax cut and would agree to work on the social issues after their first 100 days in office.

In early 1995, Reed announced that the Christian Coalition would spend a million dollars on media and grassroots lobbying for the Contract. He was already anticipating that pro-choice Republicans would try to alter the party's anti-abortion plank at its 1996 convention and wanted the Republican leadership to remember the role the Coalition played.

In addition, Reed unveiled the Christian Coalition's policy agenda as "ten suggestions" not "ten commandments" for the new Republican majority in the House. These included a ban on late-term abortions, the elimination of the Department of Education, an end to government funding of the

National Endowment for the Arts as well as the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and passage of a "religious equality" amendment to protect student-led school prayer. Some leaders of the Christian right denounced Reed's attempt to make the Coalition seem mainstream. Gary Bauer and Patrick Buchanan said the agenda should back a full-scale human life amendment and not just settle for a symbolic ban on late-term abortions, which represent less than two per cent of all abortions. Ultimately Congress did vote the ban in 1995 and again in 1996, but the bills were vetoed by Clinton.

Buchanan's primary campaign in 1996 succeeded in energising the activist Christian right. His economic nationalism and religious moralism spoke to the economic insecurity of the US working class. He opposed NAFTA and talked about plant shutdowns. Rare is the US politician who addresses class issues. But Buchanan's culprit was always the government, Mexicans, feminists or environmentalists, not the economic system. After winning the New Hampshire primary and a Republican caucus in Louisiana, Buchanan's campaign levelled off with vote totals of twenty to thirty per cent. Once again, the leadership of the Christian right supported his opponent, in this case Bob Dole.

The Republican Party wanted to avoid, at all costs, a repeat of the 1992 convention. Buchanan agreed not to speak during the prime-time period of the convention but promised there would be "no peace in the valley" if the anti-abortion plank was altered or if Bob Dole chose a pro-choice running mate.

Reed boasted that about one-third of the 1996 Republican Party delegates were associated with the Christian Coalition, but pro-choice prime-time speakers muted their presence for the TV audience. Disciplined enough not to complain about the exclusion of Pat Buchanan and Pat Robertson, the Christian right wore anti-abortion hats and buttons and crowded around "radio row", where right-wing radio commentators held forth. But had a floor fight been necessary to preserve the anti-abortion plank, delegates were fully prepared and hooked up via computers and cellular phones.

Despite the fact that Bob Dole spoke at the Christian Coalition's Road to Victory conference, the Dole-Kemp ticket drew lukewarm support from the Christian right. Only two-thirds of this base voted for Dole, and twenty to twenty-five per cent voted for Clinton. Clinton won so much of their vote because he swung to the right, snatching their rhetoric and some of their proposals.

Do they have a future?

With two decades of organising experience, and having won some clear victories, the Christian right nonetheless feel dissatisfied with their lack of results. They have become the backbone of the Republican Party, but they are confined, constantly told to behave themselves and unable to achieve what they want. Abortion, however circumscribed by restrictions, is still legal. Now they have to come to terms with the fact that one of their own people is US attorney general, but holding office after having pledged himself not to seek opportunities to challenge *Roe v. Wade*. The ranks of the Christian right must be asking themselves: what kind of "power" is this?

Further hampering the Christian right is the fact that their big initiative in the November elections failed. They built something of a working alliance with Catholics and at least a section of the religious Jewish community on school voucher initiatives in California and Michigan. These would divert a specific amount of public education funds to parents placing their children in private schools. They tried to reach out to African-American parents on the basis that since many urban public schools are in a state of crisis, vouchers would provide them with an alternative. But the Michigan and California initiatives were resoundingly defeated, and as a result President Bush has

dropped the word, while still hoping to salvage the concept of partial privatisation of the public school system.

In fact, the 2000 election did not mark the ascendancy of the Christian right but rather their incorporation into the Republican Party as a strong but disciplined junior partner. They are now captive of their mainstream strategy because playing their hand too aggressively would bring about a public backlash.

Yet the Christian right have been able to pick themselves up from defeats and scandals before because they have a plethora of organisations, institutions, publications, media, personalities and strategies. They oppose gay rights legislation and convert gays out of their “lifestyle”. They oppose abortion under any circumstance but propose legislation to restrict abortions (thereby allowing those not restricted to continue). If one issue isn’t moving ahead, it can be put on the back burner and another moved front and centre. If things aren’t going well at the national level, they can refocus on the local. But the judgmental attitude that the problems we face are all the result of individuals not putting God at the centre of their lives will continue to flourish until the left can offer a solidaristic agenda.

Interestingly enough, in the 2000 election Pat Buchanan, who ran outside the Republican Party, received only half the votes cast for Ralph Nader, who ran as the Green Party candidate. These were the two candidates who talked about the economic problems the US working class faces today, Buchanan talking from a right populist platform and Nader from a left populist one. Of all the candidates, Nader was the one who could attract thousands to his rallies. It’s clear that as the US ruling class seeks to impose its brand of globalisation upon the world, resistance has begun. And it is doubtful that the agenda of the Christian right can find much resonance in that struggle.

Notes

1. Steve Bruce, *Pray TV: Televangelism in America*, Routledge, New York, 1990.
2. As Stephanie Coontz so clearly revealed in her book, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap*, Basic Books, New York, 1997.
3. In painting with a wide brush, I am leaving out the religions of the indigenous people and of the slaves. Although most slaves were “Christian” by 1800, their Christianity was entirely different from the status quo Christianity of the slaveholder. Theirs focused on the story of Moses and the Israelites’ struggle to escape from slavery.
4. Quoted by Sara Diamond in *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right*, Guilford, New York, 1998.
5. I recommend the work of Sara Diamond, from whom much here has been borrowed. Diamond’s books on the Christian right include *Not by Politics Alone: The Enduring Influence of the Christian Right*, *Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements and Political Power in the United States*, *Spiritual Warfare: The Politics of the Christian Right* and *Facing the Wrath: Confronting the Right in Dangerous Times*.

P.S.

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