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One nation under God: the influence of the Religious Right on the American elections

Inez Schippers

The truth is, politics and morality are inseparable. (...) And as morality's foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related. We need religion as a guide.

-President Ronald Reagan, August 1984¹

The differences between Europe and the United States are numerous and vary from popular culture to architecture and cuisine. The most significant distinction however might be the high level of religiosity still present in American society. In Europe the influence of religious institutions in the public sphere has diminished due to developments in the second half of the eighteenth century. The Enlightenment, the subsequent French Revolution, and the Industrialization have caused Europe to gradually secularize from this period onward.

Already in 1912 the French sociologist Emile Durkheim described this secularization process in his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912):

Industrialized societies are characterized by functional differentiation, where specialized professionals and organizations, dedicated to healthcare, education, social control, politics, and welfare replaced most of the tasks once carried out exclusively in Western Europe by monasteries, priests, and churches.²

The United States proved to be an outlier regarding this theory, since up until this day it remains one of the most religious countries in the developed world. According to a 2007 *Newsweek* poll ninety-one percent of the

¹ Speech by President Ronald Reagan: *Remarks at a Dallas ecumenical prayer breakfast* (Dallas, Texas, USA, August 23, 1984).

² Emile Durkheim explained in: P. Norris and R. Inglehart, *Sacred and secular: religion and politics worldwide* (Cambridge 2004) 9.

American adults believe in God and eighty-two percent of this group identifies itself with Christianity.³

Throughout the twentieth century this high level of religiosity in American society inevitably influenced politics and the population's political preferences. This article will focus on a conservative and popular segment of the American Christian population and its political preferences: the Religious Right. This influential but at the same time unpredictable group plays an important role in American politics. In light of the upcoming presidential elections this article will specifically elaborate on the influence of the Religious Right on the elections throughout the past century. Is it true that the support of this group automatically goes to the Republican Party, as we might assume? Or does history show a different pattern? The article will end with a cautious prediction of the upcoming presidential elections. Will the Mormon candidate Mitt Romney be able to successfully gain the much needed electoral support of the Religious Right?

The religious foundations

Over the years, the views of the American, mostly white, Evangelical Protestants have been represented by numerous conservative political organizations. These are the organizations that make up the foundation of the so called Religious Right. Whereas the name may suggest otherwise, the Religious Right is not a solid organization. It is made up of many different theological denominations and its influence and popularity has varied greatly throughout the twentieth century.

Other than in Europe, religion in the United States might best be described as a 'market model'. This has resulted not only in a high level of religiosity but also in a large number of denominations. Assuming that the demand for religion is more or less constant it could be said that:

Where a free religious marketplace exists, energetic competition between churches expands the supply of religious 'products', thereby mobilizing religious activism among the public.⁴

³ B. Braiker, 'God's numbers', *Newsweek*, March 30, 2007.

⁴ Norris and Inglehart, *Sacred and secular*, 95.

In Europe, on the contrary, churches are often subsidized by the state. This takes away the competitive element and it means the supply side does not have to try as hard to survive. It is this competitive element which creates gaps and differences between the large variety of American churches, many of them unknown in Europe. This rivalry is also partly responsible for the difficulties within the Religious Right. A short overview of the history of this movement will shed light on both the different components and the developmental process needed to understand the movement.

The two religious movements providing the foundation for the Religious Right are Fundamentalism and Pentecostalism. Though both emerging in the early twentieth century, the Pentecostals did not get involved in politics in the first decades of its existence. The political mission of the Fundamentalist movement, on the other hand, quickly emerged in opposition to the rising influence of the theological modernists. The debate in which they engaged was dominated by the discussion about Darwin's Theory of Evolution and the accompanying question of how the church should deal with new scientific discoveries, which were at variance with the Bible.⁵

Fundamentalism is based on three main principles: premillennialism, dispensationalism, and the conviction that the only way to know God's will is to study the Bible. Premillennialism is a popular idea in the United States which describes what will happen in the earth's last days surrounding the second coming of Christ. The popularity of the romanticized translation of this story in the *Left Behind* book series, written by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, shows that a large group of Americans is at least interested in the premillennialist theory. The series, including the graphic novels and the children's versions, has sold at least 62 million copies by the year 2004.⁶

The second element of the Fundamentalist ideology is dispensationalism. This can be described as the belief that history has been divided into different eras during which God dealt with humans under different covenants. It is this ideology that especially causes the most disputes between the Fundamentalists and the Pentecostals, thereby undermining the potential unity of the Religious Right in the 1980s.⁷

⁵ C. Wilcox and C. Larson, *Onward Christian soldiers? The Religious Right in American politics* (Colorado 2006) 29.

⁶ I. H. Anderson, *Biblical Interpretation and Middle East policy: the promised land, America, and Israel, 1917-2002* (Gainesville 2005) 42.

⁷ Wilcox and Larson, *Onward Christian soldiers?*, 31.

The third important element is the idea that the only way to know God's will is to study the Bible. Arising from this idea is the politically charged issue of creationism. Many Fundamentalists believed that the earth was created on the 25th of October 4004 B.C., a date established in 1654 by James Ussher, Church of Ireland Archbishop of Armagh. This, of course, as opposed to Darwin's Theory of Evolution which was winning ground in the early years of the twentieth century.⁸

In addition to preaching these fundamentals, the movement also emphasized the importance of separatism. It was important for Fundamentalists to keep their distance from the impure world which included Christians who did not live according to their regulations. In order to avoid contact with this 'other side' of the country, the Fundamentalists separated themselves by sticking to their own churches and creating their own communication network.⁹

Despite the popularity of the Fundamentalist movement in the early twentieth century, there was also room for the rise of another movement: the Pentecostals. As opposed to the Fundamentalists, the Pentecostal movement did not so much stress the literal interpretation of the Bible, but rather the central power of the Holy Spirit in their lives. The name of the movement can be traced to the biblical description of the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured onto the disciples. Under influence of this Holy Spirit the disciples were capable of speaking in tongues to make sure that people from all over the world could understand what they were saying. Speaking in tongues generally involves one or more members of a congregation speaking in what the non-believer would consider to be gibberish. In Pentecostal belief speaking in tongues, or glossolalia, is seen as a special religious gift or an additional blessing. Other religious gifts include faith healing, prophecy, and being 'slain in the spirit'.¹⁰ Those 'gifts' were one of the reasons for the Fundamentalist establishment to kindly reject the Pentecostal movement, though the two do share an unconditional belief in the Bible and both reject modernism. The main reason for the rejection, however, was a dispute on dispensationalism as both movements disagreed about which era from the dispensationalist theology was in effect at the time. This difference created great hostility between the two groups, though in politics this dispute did not show until the 1980s. Until then the

⁸ Wilcox and Larson, *Onward Christian soldiers?*, 32.

⁹ Ibidem, 32-33.

¹⁰ Ibidem, 33.

Fundamentalists formed the backbone of Religious Right activity. From the beginning their sermons were primarily related to everyday life which made it easy for the pastors to mobilize the believers for political action. The early Pentecostal churches, on the other hand, did not involve themselves in politics as their focus lay on the spiritual experience.¹¹

Influencing politics before the 1980s

In the period surrounding the Civil War, Evangelical Protestants were an animating force in American politics. Whereas they had greatly contributed to the growth of antislavery sentiment in the Northern states prior to the war, the post-war period saw them stimulating the Southerners to maintain the slave economy. In the decades following the war, Evangelicals sided with a variety of movements designed to purify American politics and society from corrupting influences such as currency reform, women's suffrage, regulation of corporate abuses, etc.¹²

Due to growing urbanization, developments in the field of science and technology and high birthrates in predominantly non-protestant immigrant communities in the period after World War I, Evangelical Protestants felt they were beginning to lose their role as a major cultural force in American society. Whether or not the influence of these developments was ever as widespread as the Evangelicals suspected them to be, they did cause a furious defensive response in an attempt to preserve their Christian values. This resulted among other things in the second era of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) and in the twenties this nationwide social movement grew to five million members, drawing heavily on white Evangelical Protestants. The aim of the KKK was to maintain the moral hegemony of white Protestantism, rejecting those whom they believed to be sinners such as blacks, Catholics and Jews.¹³

In the 1920s the religious energy of the Fundamentalist Evangelical Protestants spilled over into politics. Their main cause, besides the restriction of the sale of intoxicating liquor, was the prohibition of the teaching of the modernist Theory of Evolution in public schools. The anti-

¹¹ Wilcox and Larson, *Onward Christian soldiers?*, 33-35.

¹² K. D. Wald and A. Calhoun-Brown, *Religion and politics in the United States* (Oxford 2007) 207.

¹³ Wald and Calhoun-Brown, *Religion and politics*, 208.

evolutionary crusade reached its climax with the Scopes Trial, also referred to as the Great Monkey Trial. In this trial William Jennings Bryan, 'a Democratic presidential candidate who held leftist-populist economic views but who had ties to the Fundamentalist [Christian] leadership',¹⁴ took the stand to defend his Fundamentalist view of evolution. His opponent in this law suit was John Thomas Scopes, who was accused of teaching the Theory of Evolution in public schools. Initially, Scopes was convicted but as the conviction was later overruled by the state Supreme Court, the Fundamentalists eventually lost. However, the trial turned out to have an unexpected outcome; many textbook publishers, in order to prevent future controversy, removed the Theory of Evolution from their text books after the trial. Hence, the Fundamentalists seemed to have reached their goal after all.

After the Scopes Trial and the failed attempt to establish prohibition, Fundamentalists and other Evangelicals disappeared for a period as active participants in the political arena. This is now referred to as the 'great reversal.' Their sympathies, however, remained with the Democratic Party.¹⁵ Cracks in this alliance only started to show as late as the 1960s, when the Democratic Party nominated the Catholic John F. Kennedy for the presidential elections, which gave a large number of white, churchgoing southern Protestants ample reason to make a switch to the Republican Party. When in 1964 senator Barry Goldwater was nominated as the opponent of President Johnson in the elections, the Religious Right continued to support the Republican Party. Most likely it was not Goldwater's religious background that had gained their support. Goldwater came from a Jewish-Episcopalian background and he did not often attend church. It was his anticommunist rhetoric and his emphasis on conservative social values that had cultivated the favor of the Religious Right. It is interesting to note that despite Goldwater's landslide defeat, his candidacy appears to have galvanized large groups of Evangelicals who had previously stayed outside the political arena.¹⁶

Despite the decline in their active political involvement, the religious conservatives serving as the target constituency of the Religious Right continued to build a communal infrastructure throughout the sixties and seventies. Bible colleges, Christian bookstores, specialized magazines and

¹⁴ Wilcox and Larson, *Onward Christian soldiers?*, 31

¹⁵ Wald and Calhoun-Brown, *Religion and politics*, 210.

¹⁶ Ibidem.

newspapers, and later on radio and television programs and stations started to flourish as well, which made it possible for the Fundamentalist, Pentecostal and Evangelical denominations to expand their audiences.¹⁷

The Religious Right after the 1980s

After the previously described period of relative political quiescence, a new Fundamentalist Religious Right emerged in the late 1970s. The main cause of this third wave of activity was the presidential candidacy of Jimmy Carter in 1976. Carter, a born-again Southern Baptist, was a deeply religious man and he publicly called on Evangelicals to let go of their distrust of politics. His strategy seemed to work; Carter managed to motivate large numbers of white Evangelicals to take part in the elections. This success functioned as an inspiration for conservative leaders who realized that the Fundamentalists and other Evangelicals could become an important voters block if they managed to turn this groups' political action into support of Republican candidates. To this end, the conservative leaders provided resources to help form Fundamentalist groups of which Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority would attract the most attention.

The Moral Majority was the first Religious Right organization with the ability to mobilize conservative Christians to register and vote, and to make them vote for socially conservative candidates during the elections. Its leader was Jerry Falwell, a Baptist Bible Fellowship pastor who had managed to change his Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia from a small thirty-five member church into a mega church with more than 15,000 members. When Falwell passed away on May 15, 2007, various influential American newspapers paid attention to his death. The obituaries gave an interesting overview of his contribution to the Religious Right movement since the 1980s. They emphasized his importance for the Religious Right movement and his political influence. He was described as the person who defined the movement's political agenda and established its ties with the Republican Party. The obituary in the *New York Times* stated:

Mr. Falwell went from a Baptist preacher in Lynchburg to a powerful force in electoral politics, at home in both the millennial world of

¹⁷ N. T. Ammerman, *Bible believers: Fundamentalists in the modern world* (New Brunswick 1987) cited in: Wilcox and Larson, *Onward Christian soldiers?*, 40.

Fundamentalist Christianity and the earthly blood of the political arena.¹⁸

Falwells move into the politics was triggered by a contested decision of the Supreme Court in the case of *Roe versus Wade*. This case legalized abortion in the first trimester of pregnancy, in response to which, and other social issues Falwell founded the Moral Majority in 1979. Abstention from politics was no longer justifiable in this era, Falwell stated. This was one of the reasons for the return of religious Fundamentalists into American Politics.

With his organization, Falwell aimed at 'uniting religious conservatives from many faiths and doctrines by emphasizing what they had in common.'¹⁹ However, Moral Majority built its organization primarily through pastors in the Baptist Bible Fellowship (BBF), generally an intolerant group of people who took a hostile position to Catholics, Pentecostals and many other Christian denominations. Therefore, the majority of the members of the movement had a Baptist background.²⁰

The call from President Carter for a more active Evangelical participation in politics did not pay off for him or for the Democratic Party. As described previously, as soon as conservative leaders noticed the political potential of the Fundamentalist Protestants they immediately attempted to get them to support the Republican candidates. This was a cleverly calculated effort made by the Republican party, which had realized that they needed to shift their focus if they wanted to grow out to be the largest party. For a long time the party had only been associated with a militaristic foreign policy and economic measures supporting the wealthy upper class Americans.

In the five decades prior to the 1980 elections, the Republican Party had only come out on top in four out of twelve presidential elections and they controlled Congress only two out of 24 sessions.²¹ By investing in the Fundamentalist Christian ideology, it became possible for the Republican Party to bring millions of new voters to their side who, due to their income

¹⁸ P. Applebome, 'Jerry Falwell, founder of Moral Majority and activist preacher, dies at 73', *The New York Times*, May 16, 2007, A1.

¹⁹ Applebome, 'Jerry Falwell', C15.

²⁰ Wilcox and Larson, *Onward Christian soldiers?*, 40-41.

²¹ S. Zunes, 'The influence of the Christian Right in U.S. Middle East policy', *Middle East policy* 12.2 (2005) 73.

level, would normally not choose to support the Republican Party.²² Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority was one of the instruments used by the party to mobilize this new voters group. These organizations had the ability to promote a right wing political agenda on their own radio stations and television networks as well as in their churches. An example of the potential outreach of this network are the sermons of Jerry Falwell which were broadcasted as a show named the *Old Time Gospel Hour* on more than 300 television stations.²³

The Evangelical organizations fanatically campaigned for Ronald Reagan in the run-up to both the 1980 elections as well as for his reelection in 1984. Ronald Reagan was portrayed as a defender of traditional and conservative Judeo-Christian values, whereas his Democratic opponents were described as driving forces of secular humanism which attempted to ruin American society and its values. The Republican tactic seemed a great success. Since Reagan was elected president in 1980 the party has won five out of eight presidential elections. The Republican influence in the House and the Senate has also significantly improved.

Although it was often implied by Falwell that the Evangelicals had provided Reagan's victory margin, this has been contested in various articles, since the figures did not seem to back these claims.²⁴ However, even though it is difficult to say whether only religious reasons underlie these developments, Reagan and his politics definitely appealed to Evangelical and Fundamentalist Christians. This appeal was reflected in the voting behavior of 22 million conservative Christians 'who shifted from a pro-Democratic 56-43 percent margin in 1976 to an 81-91 percent Republican sweep in 1984.'²⁵

The success of the Moral Majority lasted until the mid-1980s. After various financial scandals Falwell declared that he had accomplished his goal of being a conservative leader. He had put the Christian electorate on the map and despite the fact that not all of the items on his agenda had

²² Zunes, 'The influence of the Christian Right', 73-74.

²³ Wilcox and Larson, *Onward Christian soldiers?*, 41.

²⁴ A. H. Miller and M. P. Wattenberg, 'Politics from the pulpit: religiosity and the 1980 election', *Public opinion quarterly* 48.1 (1984) 312-313; S. M. Lipset and E. Raab, 'The election and the Evangelicals', *Commentary* 71.3 (1981) 30.

²⁵ E. Stephens, *U.S. policy towards Israel: the role of political culture in defining the 'special relationship'* (Sussex 2006) 39.

been achieved, Falwell disbanded his Moral Majority. However Falwell remained active in American politics until his death in 2007.

Falwell was succeeded as the unofficial leader of the Religious Right by another televangelist: Marion 'Pat' Robertson, a charismatic preacher who spoke in tongues and healed by faith. These religious gifts made him popular among a wider range of denominations such as, the previously mentioned Pentecostals. However, he failed to gain Fundamentalist support in the 1988 Republican primaries because of his Pentecostal leanings. His campaign was quite successful but in the end he lost from George Bush sr. However, the campaign did give Robertson the opportunity to make his point. The Christian Right should no longer stay on the sidelines and only offer their support to the candidate of their choice. No, they should actively participate in the political process and become active members of the Republican Party.²⁶

Through Robertson's tactics, a Christian voter block emerged on the verge of the 1990s, of which the Republicans gratefully made use, as the election of George W. Bush in 2000 illustrates. After the Clinton presidency, a Republican president was of the highest priority for the Christian leaders, and Bush jr. was a candidate who could put an end to the reforms in the field of women rights, emancipation of homosexuals and the relaxed laws on abortion.

During his campaign Bush often emphasized the importance of religion and especially his own religious views. It seemed that he did not only see the presidential elections in 2000 as a political project but also as a biblical mission.²⁷ Various sources, therefore, carefully state that Bush has the Right-Christian electorate to thank for his (narrow) victory. But as mentioned previously in the article, it is difficult to pinpoint the role of religion in a process in which other, for example social economic factors, also play an important part. Nevertheless it is clearly warranted to stress the importance of the Evangelical vote in the 2000 elections and especially during Bush's reelection four years later.

²⁶ M. Goldberg, *Kingdom coming: the rise of Christian nationalism* (New York 2007) 14-16.

²⁷ K. Philips, *American theocracy: the peril and politics of radical religion, oil, and borrowed money in the 21st century* (New York 2006) 182-193.

Conclusion and a peek into the future

This historical overview of the Religious Right shows a loosely organized movement which has changed shape various times in the past century. The success of the Religious Right has come and gone and its influence is difficult to determine. In the book *Religion and Politics in the United States* Kenneth Wald and Allison Calhoun-Brown state that:

Considered as a mass movement, the Christian Right has succeeded in harnessing most white Evangelical Protestants to the GOP [Republican Party, ed.] at election time (...) they have become the most pro-Republican of all the major religious traditions and are considered the base or core of the contemporary party in elections.²⁸

However, the transformation of the Republican party cannot be entirely ascribed to the Religious Right. It is probably better to say that they intensified changes that were already under way. Organizations such as Moral Majority have stimulated people to make their choice between presidential candidates depending on moral issues. In the past decades, the Republican candidates for their part have become 'skilled at raising cultural issues that stimulate Evangelical Protestants to participate.'²⁹ Their support is, however, not unconditional and depends on the Republican candidate. In the most recent elections, conservative Christians had a profound distrust of the Republican candidate John McCain. Even his tactical choice of the extremely conservative Sarah Palin as his running mate was not sufficient to convince the entire Evangelical rank and file of the party. McCain's support for stem cell research, his vote against the banning of the gay marriage and his ambivalent attitude toward Falwell and Robertson³⁰ have probably made him lose an important portion of his Religious Right electorate. It is unlikely that these conservative Christians voted for the Democratic Party but if the Republican candidate is not conservative enough for their liking they simply stay home on Election Day.

²⁸ Wald and Calhoun-Brown, *Religion and politics*, 229.

²⁹ Ibidem, 230.

³⁰ F. Bruni, 'The 2000 campaign: the Arizona senator; McCain apologizes for characterizing Falwell and Robertson as forces of evil', *The New York Times*, March 2, 2000.

In the upcoming 2012 elections the Republican Party will probably face a similar problem. The Mormon candidate Mitt Romney will represent the Republican Party in the elections but he struggled to achieve this position. For months during the primaries it remained unclear who would be the Republican candidate. Although Romney was one of the favorites from the start, his archconservative Catholic opponent Rick Santorum managed to win many Christian, conservative states, thereby emphasizing Romney's weakness. The conservative Republican voters distrust Romney. Firstly, because of his religious beliefs; Mormons are unpopular among other Christian denominations because they are sometimes considered to be a cult or a sect. It is a noteworthy fact that a majority of the conservative states voted for Santorum. Secondly, when Romney was the governor of Massachusetts between 2003 and 2007, he often took a liberal stance toward the moral issues important to the Religious Right such as abortion, gay marriage and health care. Although his attitude has changed during his preliminary campaign, he might swing back toward the middle once he has to take the stand against Barack Obama. Hence, the role the Religious Right will play in the upcoming elections is difficult to predict. Will they go for the Mormon Republican Mitt Romney or will they stay home on Election Day?