

Leftward Christian Soldiers

With a new generation of leaders preaching social justice over cultural concerns, the Religious Right may not remain an automatic Republican constituency.

By Darryl Hart

WITH WOUNDS STILL FRESH from the midterm elections, conservative supporters of the Republican Party now have to endure the salt of electoral analysis. One theory has it that the GOP lost because it went too far in accommodating the Religious Right. In fact, in analysis written well before the elections, pundits complained about the evangelical takeover of the Republican Party. Andrew Sullivan in his book, *The Conservative Soul: How We Lost It, How to Get it Back*, argues that someone like John McCain is incapable of receiving the Republican nomination for president in 2008 because the Religious Right dominates the party's infrastructure. So too in his recent book, *American Theocracy*, Kevin Phillips alleges that evangelical Protestantism increasingly defines the GOP coalition and its constituents.

But the rush to blame Republicans for playing with spiritual fire actually misses a much more compelling story: the growing erosion of evangelical support for the GOP. If current trends continue, baby boomer evangelicals may be the first generation of white Protestants in U.S. history to abandon the Republican Party. In the 2004 election, 78 percent of evangelical Christians voted for George W. Bush, and just 22 percent voted for Kerry. In the recent midterm elections, 28 percent voted for Democrats—not a huge gain, though with 40 percent claiming to be dissatisfied with the direction of the country, they should scarcely be considered an automatic constituency.

The typical way of explaining evangelical support for the GOP is by following the trail of right-wing Protestant ideologies spawned by the fundamentalist controversy of the 1920s and hostility to the New Deal prior to World War II. The old Christian Right included such hardliners as Gerald Winrod, who in 1938 ran for the Senate in the Kansas Republican primaries and Carl McIntire, the notorious Presbyterian fundamentalist radio personality. Their outspoken opposition to the culture of vice associated with alcohol, the teaching of evolution in public schools, and later their fierce hostility to Communism defined fundamentalist Protestant politics. A large helping of teaching about the end of human history added to the apparent harshness of the old Christian Right's politics and gave evangelicals the boldness to read domestic affairs and international relations as signposts on the road to Christ's return.

What energized the Religious Right of the late 1970s and early 1980s, however, owed less to a belief in a cosmic contest between the forces of good and evil than to the older Anglo-American outlook that associated the faith of God-fearing American Protestants with the health of a free and virtuous society. Even though white Protestants were divided after the 1920s along conservative and liberal theological lines, both sides of the evangelical-mainline division preferred an American society dominated by WASP culture.

Before 1970, thanks to the efforts of traditional Protestants, the United

States was a generally family-friendly place. Schools included prayer and Bible reading, abortion was illegal, federal officials were not threatening to bus children to a school in another neighborhood, and domesticity was still the ideal for women. All in all, the so-called Protestant establishment, although theologically suspect from an evangelical perspective, maintained exactly what would draw the Religious Right of Jerry Falwell and company into the arena of national politics—standards of public decency and a nation that needed a religious foundation for its domestic and foreign affairs.

Mark A. Noll's summary of Protestant political convictions in the Progressive era explains just how much the political agenda of the post-1970 Religious Right meshed with that of the so-called liberal Protestant establishment. The University of Notre Dame historian writes:

Protestants in the progressive era relied instinctively on the Bible to provide their ideals of justice. ... They were reformists at home and missionaries abroad who felt that cooperation among Protestants signaled the advance of civilization. ... [T]hey continued to suspect Catholics as being anti-American, they promoted the public schools as agents of a broad form of Christianization, and they were overwhelmingly united behind prohibition as the key step toward a renewed society.

Obviously, some of these concerns needed to be adjusted within the coalition of conservatives that Ronald Reagan patched together. The Religious Right never seriously entertained prohibition as a policy, though it did find an outlet for virtue politics in the war on drugs. In addition, the Religious Right engineered a variety of ways to educate its children—either through Christian day schools or homeschooling—to compensate for the Supreme Court's rulings that stripped prayer and Bible reading from public schools. Furthermore, the Religious Right reconsidered its hostility to Roman Catholics once the latter, led by a pope who helped to defeat Communism and defended the culture of life, appeared to be equally concerned about preserving a Christian America.

Even so, the political instincts of the Religious Right bear remarkable similarity to those of the old Protestant Establishment. In fact, as Noll has also shown implicitly in his magisterial book, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*, the Religious Right is indebted to the Christian republicanism of the Founding Fathers that assumed liberal democracy could only exist if the people are virtuous and that the only source for civic virtue is true religion. White American Protestants have never really questioned this understanding of national purpose.

Of course, the Religious Right was not simply a repeat of the enlightened Protestantism that informed the American founding. After World War II, evangelicals also supported free markets, limited government, and strong national defense. As the University of Wisconsin political scientist Robert Booth Fowler points out, born-again Protestant leaders like Carl F.H. Henry and Billy Graham defended free markets and balanced budgets and opposed Communism along with domestic policies that might increase the size of America's fed-

eral government. Evangelicals' defense of freedom was so strong that they regarded labor unions as antithetical to the culture of enterprise that made America great. Even so, evangelicals were cautious about America's prospects. They feared the effects of secularization and warned that materialism and hedonism threatened America's God-blessed status. Post-World War II evangelicals were also suspicious of the kind of social engineering implied by the welfare state.

But for baby-boomer evangelicals, the ideology of free markets, small government, and civic virtue has become stale and predictable. Evangelical irritation with the politics of the GOP's Greatest Generation can even turn vehement as it did recently with Randall Balmer's book, *The Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America*. According to the Barnard College religious studies professor, the purpose of the Religious Right's grasping for power amounts to "an expansion of tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans,

bad. He writes sarcastically that he must have been absent from Sunday school the day the lesson included Jesus' teachings about securing "greater economic advantages for the affluent," depriving the poor "of a living wage," and despoiling the environment by "sacrificing it on the altar of free enterprise."

Balmer's liberal self-righteousness did not emerge in a vacuum. As early as 1973, a group of young evangelicals drafted a little publicized statement entitled "The Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern." In the wake of campus unrest, rioting in America's cities, and disgust with the war in Vietnam, the younger academics who signed the declaration appealed to the general ideal of "social righteousness." The prescriptions were slim in a statement of less than 500 words. In fact, the Chicago Declaration's purpose appeared to be more an effort to confess evangelical complicity in America's sins than a proposal for solving the predicaments America faced. The best the drafters of the declaration could do was insist that

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the continued prosecution of a war in the Middle East that enraged our long-time allies and would not meet even the barest of just-war criteria, and a rejiggering of Social Security, the effect of which, most observers agree, would be to fray the social-safety net for the poorest among us." He argues that the Religious Right also threatens American public schools by seeking to replace "science curricula with theology, thereby transforming students into catechumens." For Balmer, the Religious Right's distortion of the gospel is just as

God requires social justice from nations that claim to be righteous. This involved defending the social and economic rights of the poor and oppressed, deploring "the historic involvement of the church in America with racism," and condemning "the exploitation of racism at home and abroad by our economic system." For Calvin College historian, Joel A. Carpenter, the Chicago Declaration signaled a "radical shift" within the evangelical movement because it altered the insistence that churches should avoid meddling in pol-

itics by countering with social justice as “one of the central callings of all Christians.”

Jim Wallis, the founding editor of *Sojourners* magazine, made a career out of the themes articulated in the Chicago Declaration. A graduate of Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in the suburbs of Chicago, Wallis challenged the bourgeois sensibilities of born-again Protestants both in his writings and by forming a kind of Christian commune in inner-city Washington, D.C. Wallis’s aim was to break down the walls that divided blacks and whites, poor and middle-class, cities and suburbs. For him it was insufficient simply to provide for the poor and hungry. Evangelicals also

tive” on the family, sexual integrity and personal responsibility, and “progressive, populist, or even radical” on race, poverty, and war.

As much as mainstream media tend to portray the evangelical Left as a minority position among a largely red-state constituency, the sentiments of the Chicago Declaration and the arguments of Wallis have gained legitimacy within established evangelical institutions.

Wallis’s attempt to square the difference between the Left and the Right was exactly what the National Association of Evangelicals proposed in its 2005 statement, “For the Health of a Nation: An Evangelical Call to Civic Responsibility.” The NAE’s manifesto was longer than

gained notoriety with his book, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (1977). Like Wallis, Sider was convinced that middle-class Christians needed to change their patterns of conspicuous consumption and work for the reform of social structures that cause poverty. Equally important to Sider was the idea that fighting hunger and poverty was a duty the Bible demanded of all Christians. His influence on “For the Health of the Nation” was particularly evident in the section on poverty. Rather than viewing the poor through the lens of charity or welfare, the NAE statement treated it as a matter of economic justice. Accordingly, the statement called upon Christians to “shape wise laws pertaining to the creation of wealth, wages, education, taxation, immigration, health care, and social welfare that will protect those trapped in poverty and empower the poor to improve their circumstances.”

Not as official as the NAE statement but perhaps more influential is the recent activity of Rick Warren’s P.E.A.C.E. initiative. The Hawaiian-shirt wearing southern California Baptist pastor is the author of the best-selling *Purpose Driven Life* (2002). Rather than using his profits to buy more Tommy Bahama merchandise, Warren has admirably but also naïvely started a organization to “mobilize 1 billion Christians around the world into an outreach effort to attack the five global, evil giants of our day. . . spiritual emptiness, corrupt leadership, poverty, disease, and illiteracy.” According to Warren, no government “can effectively eradicate” these afflictions. That leaves the church to do it. Although Warren’s implicit distrust of the state suggests that the left-of-center humanitarianism of evangelicals could find an outlet other than big government, his assigning to the church tasks typically reserved for the modern state will

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needed to identify with the poor because Jesus did. In his first book, *Agenda for a Biblical People* (1976), Wallis drew a line between those who were merely supporters of “establishment Christianity” and practitioners of biblical faith. More recently, Wallis has added vitriol against the Religious Right to his calls for social justice. In *Who Speaks for God?: An Alternative to the Religious Right* (1996), he argued, à la the Chicago Declaration, that evangelical Protestantism had been “hijacked” by political conservatives and reduced to an ideology, thereby silencing Scripture’s prophetic voice. In his most recent book, *God’s Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn’t Get It* (2005), Wallis presented what he understands as a biblical case for social justice as a third way between the Religious Right and the secular Left. Wallis’s triangulation involves being “conserva-

the 1973 Declaration because of the effort to propose specific policies. But the sentiments were similar and suggested that the evangelical soul had been captured by what was once a fringe expression of born-again discomfort with conservative politics. The specific policy initiatives included perennial Religious Right favorites such as religious liberty, families, the sanctity of human life, and human rights. But thanks to the influence of the evangelical Left, three new policy initiatives also made the cut: “justice and compassion for the poor,” environmental protection, and the “restraint of violence.”

One reason for the proposals had to be the influence of the evangelical activist, Ron Sider, who was part of the group that drafted the Chicago Declaration and also participated in writing “For the Health of a Nation.” An evangelical Anabaptist with pacifist leanings, Sider

likely have the effect of prompting American evangelicals to demand that the United States help the church in accomplishing these ends. In which case, the political convictions of limited government, free markets, and strong national defense will become even less meaningful to born-again Protestants enthralled by Warren's dog-good-purposes than they already are, especially if liberal politicians can begin to speak comfortably about faith.

The reasons for this generational shift among evangelicals are varied and complex. Certainly, much of the current discomfort with the Religious Right stems from opposition to the war in Iraq. Balmer's rhetoric is telling:

The torture of human beings, God's creatures—some guilty of crimes, others not—has been justified by the Bush administration, which also believes that it is perfectly acceptable to conduct surveillance on American citizens without putting itself to the trouble of obtaining a court order. Indeed, the chicanery, the bullying, and the flouting of the rule of law that emanates from the nation's capital these days make Richard Nixon look like a fraternity prankster.

For Balmer, putting up with his parents' support for Tricky Dick was bad enough. George W. Bush's presidency makes support for the Right unthinkable.

Related to this rejection of Bush is the flakiness that afflicts the generation spared the hardships and sacrifices demanded of their parents who endured the Great Depression and fought totalitarianism. Having grown up with little pride in America, its institutions, and political traditions, and finding it difficult to accept the realities that come with growing up, evangelical baby

boomers have no compass for discerning a way to stay on a politically sensible path while replacing their fathers' Oldsmobiles with their own Land Rovers.

But arguably the most important consideration for understanding boomer evangelicals' distaste for conservatism is the defeat of Communism. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union not only stood for an ideology at odds with America's unique blend of liberal democracy and Christianity. It also convinced born-again Protestants of the necessity and virtues of free institutions, market capitalism, and a strong military. Just as anti-Communism held together the post-World War II patchwork of libertarians and traditionalists, it also explained born-again Protestants' relatively easy absorption into the conservative movement. But with the destruction of the Berlin Wall, the barrier to sentiments like those of the Chicago Declaration also came down, and the generation of conservative Protestants led by such figures as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson is

giving way to the era of Jim Wallis, Rick Warren, and Ron Sider.

In the 1970s, concerns about declining standards of social morality and decency made evangelicals seem like a natural Republican constituency. But biblical standards of morality have a way of nurturing interest in biblical standards of social justice. Where the older generation of evangelicals reads the Bible for its application to sex and family relations, younger evangelicals are turning to holy writ for guidance on war, hunger, and poverty. These boomers' interpretations of Scripture can be questioned. But the irony remains that once the Religious Right let the genie of Bible-based politics out of the bottle of American conservatism, they may have unleashed a force that Republicans will find impossible to harness. ■

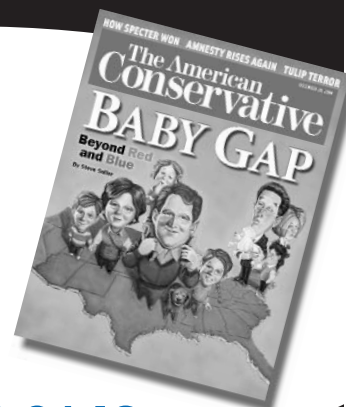
Darryl Hart is Director for Partnered Projects at the Intercollegiate Studies Institute and the author of A Secular Faith: Why Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State.

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Arts & Letters

FILM

[*Dreamgirls*]

Drama Queens & Showstoppers

By Steve Sailer

BROADWAY MUSICAL composers can't seem to come up with catchy tunes anymore, so Hollywood has turned to singers' biopics, such as recent Oscar-winners "Walk the Line" (Johnny Cash) and "Ray" (Ray Charles), so audiences can still leave the theater humming the hits.

Unfortunately, musical career arcs generally lack fresh drama. The genre's standard plot sees the struggling young prodigy get a quick lesson in how to sell a song from a veteran Svengali, after which he ascends to superstardom during a montage. In Act II, the singer struggles with his "inner demons," which predictably turn out to be drugs or drink.

It doesn't help that filmmakers have been oddly averse to honesty about why we idolize outstanding singers. "Walk the Line," for example, implied that Cash became a legend because of the emotional trauma of his younger brother's death. Likewise, when Hollywood finally makes "The Shaquille O'Neal Story," we'll no doubt learn Shaq grew up to be a 7'1" NBA center because his beloved pet dog got run over.

What made Cash unique, however, was that bass-baritone voice with which he would thrillingly rumble, "Hello, I'm Johnny Cash." Joaquin Phoenix, a fine actor but a mere baritone, couldn't match it.

In contrast, "Dreamgirls," the deservedly crowd-pleasing film version of the 1981 Broadway musical, demonstrates the storytelling advantages of making stuff up. A highly fictionalized account of Motown's Supremes (renamed the Dreams), it refreshingly puts conflicts over voices and looks at the center of this story of three Detroit high-school friends who become the biggest American pop group of the 1960s.

"Dreamgirls" adds operatic resonance to the real-life squabbles between Diana Ross and Florence Ballard over who would sing lead in the Supremes by assigning the Ballard character an Aretha Franklin-sized vocal talent, along with an Aretha-sized girth. To cross over to the white audience, however, the music mogul based on Motown's formidable Berry Gordy (Jamie Foxx of "Ray") promotes the thinner looking (and sounding) ingénue over the more authentically African-American powerhouse. (Ironically, the actual Diana was much darker than Flo, whose nickname was "Blondie.")

The film's producers made this Aretha conceit plausible by auditioning 783 singers before deciding upon Jennifer Hudson, a former "American Idol" contestant with overwhelming pipes and presence, whose rendition of "And I'm Telling You I'm Not Going" tops even Jennifer Holliday's storied 1981 version.

Beyoncé Knowles, former lead singer of Destiny's Child, the most successful girl group since the Supremes, is bland in the thankless Diana Ross-like role. Technically, she's the villainess, but her dialogue is too nice to make her a diva you love to hate. Beyoncé's best acting has come during the publicity tour as she throws heavily publicized snits worthy of Miss Ross over the accolades her co-star Hudson has been garnering.

While "Dreamgirls" appeals primarily to girls, it has enough male star

power that guys will find it a tolerable date movie. Eddie Murphy is entertaining as a bumptious soul singer modeled on Marvin Gaye and Jackie Wilson. Little-known Keith Robinson, whose biggest role had been the Green Power Ranger in that bizarre kids' TV series, is suave as the Smokey Robinson-style songwriter.

The 1981 musical was composed by Henry Krieger, written by Tom Eyen, and directed by Michael Bennett ("Chorus Line"), three homosexual white men. (The latter two died of AIDS.) Fortunately, the film adaptation's writer and director Bill Condon, author of the screenplay of 2002's "Chicago," resists the temptation that has overwhelmed the musical stage in recent decades to, as Mel Brooks observed in "The Producers," "Keep it mad / Keep it glad / Keep it gay!" Although another white gay, Condon respects the overwhelming heterosexuality of Motown too much to inject the usual self-absorbed homosexual themes that have transformed Broadway in the half century since its peak in the 1950s from American culture's Great White Way to our Slight Gay Way.

And Condon is surprisingly frank about the tragic social irony that, although Motown's music did much to make whites like blacks more, the Motor City itself began crumbling once blacks took control.

"Dreamgirls" is quite a success, but only within the limitations of the post-"Cabaret" era of musicals without great scores. This is an age of marvelous female singers such as Hudson but not of songwriters worthy of them. Even "And I'm Telling You" turns out to be more of a showcase for Holliday/Hudson than a melody you'll remember for long. ■

Rated PG-13 for language, some sexuality, and drug content.