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REFERENCES


1 Traditional explanations of the Religious Right in the United States have often been guided by its sudden rise in 1980 and feelings of disapproval. Daniel Williams, professor of history at the University of West Georgia, published a welcome new contribution to this body of literature by placing this phenomenon in a much longer historical context. His well-written and careful book depoliticizes what is often viewed as a negative influence in American politics, and thus avoids the emotional connotations.

2 The common view is that conservative Christians rebelled against the liberal sixties, which abolished school prayer, liberalized abortion, and forced integration. This would have energized them to rise from their political slumber and hijack the Republican Party. Only partly true, says historian Williams in a candid argument. Conservative Christians had been active in politics long before. In the 1920s the battle lines between modern and traditional Christians were drawn. The second group abandoned the Democratic Party when it nominated a Roman Catholic candidate. However, they were far from ready to exclusively join the Republican Party. They had too many ties to the Southern Democrats and were far from unified. During World War II, the separatist fundamentalists in the North reconnected again and had rediscovered their confidence in the military force of federal government. These two developments set the stage for the realignment.

3 Williams aptly describes how after World War II two developments—a religious and a political one—prepared the way to the exclusive relationship between Republicans and conservative Christians. A growing self-awareness of the neo Evangelicals prepared the first move in the 1940s and 1950s. This revitalization did not immediately lead to a
strong power bloc, because of internal (fundamentalist) disagreements about the inerrancy of scripture and the civil rights issue. In the 1960s their priorities changed, because they realized that secularism was a greater danger to the alleged Christian character of the nation than a Catholic president. Simultaneously, the vigor of the Civil Rights period evaporated and allowed the Southern and Northern faction to reunite.

At the political side, Republicans successfully reeled in conservative Christians in their Cold War rhetoric, which cleared the way for more strong moral language in contested issues. When the Democratic Party took a left turn, the Republicans moved right and entered the South to build a new powerbase. Since the South was Bible Belt area, the Republican leaders had to learn a religious way of talking politics. Simultaneously, Evangelicals and Fundamentalists realized that the Republican Party was their natural ally. Despite disappointments and disagreements, they had and have no other place to go. Similarly, the Republican Party could not afford to lose the Christian Right’s support, which would give it 40 per cent of the vote. Thus a political wedlock came into being. The novelty of Williams’ research is the careful reconstruction of a century of political-religious interaction, which led to this amazingly strong marriage. They were anti New Deal, but very patriotic, moving towards a form of Christian nationalism. Theological ideas about the end-times and political pressure of the Cold War gave them a sense of urgency and clashed with the perceived obstacles in the Kennedy years. Kennedy’s election brought the various factions together because they feared Democratic domination.

Perhaps the crucial chapter is the one on the 1960s. It gives a sophisticated analysis of the growing God-gap between the two parties, which was far from a solid opposition. In this decade a number of changes brought Evangelicals together. Many Baptists agreed that the ban on school prayers was a farce and that the schools could do without this often empty ritual. Federal civil rights measures caused a second regional division among traditional Christians. Southerners supported Goldwater in frustration with their loss of autonomy caused by civil rights legislation. Northern Evangelicals supported the Johnson initiatives. Only when the South gave up its resistance to the civil rights act, the conservative Christians could act as a voting block. Vietnam, sex education, and the increased concern for America’s future opened Evangelicals up for Nixon’s promise of law and order. They feared secularization but also expected renewal. They shared the conviction that sound morality at home would create strength abroad. Evangelicals had been on the lookout for a candidate whom they could embrace and Nixon courted them openly. The promising combination however, was less stable than foreseen, as Billy Graham found out, when he had to pay a high price for this attachment to Nixon when the Watergate scandal boomeranged on his prestige.

Williams describes how the unification among fundamentalists and Evangelicals resulted in a growing split between believers and non-believers. This new alignment diminished the middle ground and fanned polarization. A key example was that originally many Baptists supported abortion rules for therapeutic reasons, but later, when they had embraced the idea that politics was needed to save America, they converted to a radical rejection. The great enigma of this period is that Jimmy Carter, Mr. Evangelical, could not tie the evangelical vote to the Democratic Party, even though Gerald Ford was too liberal for the average evangelical. Carter’s combination of personal piety and liberal policy could not charm his fellow believers, because during his presidency an ideological underpinning took root: secular humanism was the arch
enemy and had to be fought on all fronts: in the schools, where “neutral” values actually undermined parental authority and traditional religion; in politics, that often pressured these changes; in gender and sexual relations, which campaigned for “unnatural” equality (forcefully supported by President Carter); and culture in general. More and more evangelical groups joined the fight. The focus centered around abortion, especially when conservatives won the leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention and found a bridge to Catholics. A smart mobilization campaign generated a strong voting bloc. Though internal dissent and exclusivist views continued to trouble the direction and cohesion, the idea of a liberal victory in 1980 spurred their efforts to elect Ronald Reagan.

The lack of a political philosophy undergirding political action fit into the American political system. The leaders spent most energy in organizing, not in critically thinking through political issues. They did not adopt any of the political ideas of their former champion William Jennings Bryan about sharing power and protection of the weak. Evangelicals spent much more energy in mobilizing than in thinking through the issues. This opened the door for ludicrous radical proposals which undermined their power. For example, the failed candidacy of Robertson hurt the religious right, and they became a minority again. The Christian Coalition moved the Republican Party to the right, but in the long run could not keep this loose coalition together. A substantial part of its constituency doubted the wisdom of its close involvement in politics, while others radicalized even further. The conclusion is that the conservative Christians were moved by fear rather than hope.

The main contribution of this well-balanced, persuasive and beautifully written book is that it proves that the making of the Christian Right was not the result of single factors such as the Christian Coalition or of Jerry Falwell, but the outcome of a long tradition of shifting coalitions, expectations, and disappointments. Why did Evangelicals enter the political arena in the 1970s? Because they had outgrown the mainline churches and self-confidently could shape a political bloc, with new causes and handsome means, both in funds and in a broad all-media subculture. New regulation for raising money aided the conservative PAC’s, which trained other groups in fundraising techniques. The new leaders fanned the distrust of the federal government and connected various issues. The desire to clean up America was larger than the desire to stay separate and pure. It were the Evangelicals who sought out Reagan for this task and he responded well.

There are only some minor points to take up with the text. The author shows how presidential candidates like Nixon, Ford, and Carter lost or gained political support from the Evangelicals and it would have helped to know what the candidate gained or lost at the other, liberal, side of the spectrum. In Carter’s case, he did not want to give up the liberals in his party, because they might likely flee to Edward Kennedy. Such an account could have added to the understanding of how political strategies increased the divide. One paradox remains: while Evangelicals fostered a strong belief that sound personal morality of a candidate was necessary for healthy policies, it remains odd that Nixon and Reagan, who were so far removed from the evangelical ideal, continued to be their favorite sons.

Finally, a more explicit political analysis of the development of new pressure groups, such as the populists, prohibitionists, and Catholic voters, could have connected this development of the Evangelicals in the larger story of dissent in American political
history. But that hardly counts as a criticism. Researchers should be grateful that they have a solid and careful volume like this which can be the basis for new connections.

AUTHOR

HANS KRABBENDAM

Roosevelt Study Center, Middelburg, the Netherlands