

Appendix

Decoding the Rhetoric of the Religious Right

*The atomic bomb is a marvelous gift that was given
to our country by a wise God."*

—PHYLLIS SCHLAFLY IN *MOTHER JONES*

I FIRST WROTE ABOUT EVANGELICALISM AS A “subculture” in the mid-1980s, and one of the characteristics of a subculture is that it has its own language and mores, its own values, and even, as in the case of evangelicalism, its own constellation of celebrities. The Religious Right (arguably a subculture within the evangelical subculture) also has its own jargon, a coded language that may be confusing to those outside the movement. I offer here a brief glossary as an aid to understanding some of the rhetoric commonly used by the Religious Right.

CHRISTIAN

When leaders of the Religious Right (and evangelicals generally) use the term *Christian*, it has a considerably narrower meaning than it does for the larger population. The Religious Right identifies a Christian as an evangelical believer, one who has had some

kind of conversion experience. More important, the term excludes many others who think of themselves as Christians, including Mormons, most mainline (theologically liberal) Protestants, and nearly all Roman Catholics, although the reflexive exclusion of Catholics from the designation *Christian* has abated markedly over the last several decades, in large part because of their cooperation with the Religious Right on political causes. Usually, however, when a leader of the Religious Right mentions *Christians* or *Christian schools*, he is referring specifically to evangelical Christians or to evangelical schools.

JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Whenever someone talks about the *Judeo-Christian tradition* or *Judeo-Christian values*, I strongly advise that you check for your wallet and carefully count your change; the odds are better than even that she or he is trying to pull something over on you. The *Oxford English Dictionary* first noted the appearance of the term in 1899, and as various scholars have demonstrated, the term *Judeo-Christian* became popular in the 1930s in opposition to the waves of fascism then engulfing Europe. Contrary to appearances, however, the primary effect of the term was exclusion rather than inclusion; that is, by enlarging the bounds of religious acceptability beyond Protestantism to include Catholicism and Judaism in the 1930s, this newly coined Judeo-Christian tradition sought to exclude all others—practitioners of Asian religions, Mormons, pentecostals, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the like—from the realm of "American" religion. More importantly, what was once a relatively

progressive term in the 1930s evolved over several decades into a phrase that, in the hands of the Religious Right, has become a synonym with “Christian nation.”¹

Leaders of the Religious Right frequently invoke “the Judeo-Christian tradition” as a way of pressing their argument that this “Judeo-Christian tradition” deserves a place of honor in American society, even to the point of excluding most other religious expressions. No one would deny that most of the founders considered themselves Christians; Jews certainly were present in eighteenth-century America, but they did not play a significant role in framing the government of the new nation, and the notion of any meaningful alliance between Jews and Christians would not have occurred to either group. The other rhetorical purpose of using the term *Judeo-Christian* is to suggest, somewhat misleadingly, that American Jews support the agenda of the Religious Right. While it is true that the leaders of the Religious Right occasionally line up some conservative rabbi to lend his name to a letterhead or even to address a Religious Right gathering, few American Jews lie awake at night worrying about whether or not the Ten Commandments are posted on the walls of American courtrooms.²

GAY LIFESTYLE

For leaders of the Religious Right, the term *gay lifestyle* connotes their belief that homosexuality is volitional rather than genetic. Although most of the scientific and medical research does not support this position, the Religious Right persists in arguing that individuals *choose* to be homosexual and that, conversely, they can

choose not to be homosexual. Several organizations supported by the Religious Right—Exodus International, for instance—seek to “cure” gays and lesbians of their homosexuality. They often cite examples of individuals who have been “delivered” of their gay and lesbian orientations and who now live happily in heterosexual relationships, having renounced the “gay lifestyle.” The record, however, is at best uneven. Many “ex-gays” have relapsed, including several prominent leaders of the “ex-gay” movement. Ralph Blair, an evangelical psychotherapist and founder of Evangelicals Concerned, a support group for gay evangelicals, insists that in all his years of practice, he has never encountered any homosexual who has been “cured” of his or her homosexuality.

GAY AGENDA

Although the origins of this phrase are not entirely clear, Anita Bryant is probably the person most responsible for advancing the notion of a *gay agenda*. Bryant, a former Miss Oklahoma and second runner-up Miss America in 1959, became enraged when the Metropolitan Dade County Commission in Florida passed an ordinance requiring that qualified homosexuals be hired as teachers in parochial and private schools. Bryant responded with a campaign in 1977 to repeal the measure, crusading under the banner of her newly formed organization, the Save Our Children Federation (later renamed Protect America’s Children). Bryant argued that homosexuality was a sin and that if gays and lesbians were allowed to flaunt their “deviant lifestyles,” then the American family and the American way of life would disappear. “Homosexuals cannot

reproduce—so they must recruit,” she warned. “And to freshen their ranks, they must recruit the youth of America.” And what better recruiting ground than schools?

The notion of a “gay” or “homosexual agenda” has become a rhetorical staple for other leaders of the Religious Right, who imply a carefully planned strategy that supposedly unites all gay-rights groups into some kind of sinister cabal. In 1996, for instance, Ralph Reed warned against efforts by “the organized liberal gay lobby to seek affirmative government promotion of their lifestyle by granting minority status to gays or teaching homosexuality to children in the schools.” Early in 2005, James Dobson of Focus on the Family denounced the use of a cartoon figure, SpongeBob SquarePants, in a video because he was concerned “about the way in which those childhood symbols are apparently being hijacked to promote an agenda that involves teaching homosexual propaganda to children.” The Religious Right also warns that, in addition to the strategy of “recruiting” schoolchildren, the “gay agenda” seeks to undermine marriage with its push for same-sex unions.³

JUDICIAL ACTIVISM AND STATES’ RIGHTS

When I attended “Justice Sunday” at Highview Baptist Church outside of Louisville, Kentucky, on April 24, 2005, I heard a lot of rhetoric about *judicial activism* and *states’ rights*. The purpose of the rally, attended by a couple thousand evangelicals and carried by closed-circuit television to other churches across the country, was to press the Senate to forswear filibusters on judicial nominations,

thereby paving the way for the confirmation of several of George W. Bush's more ideological appointments to the federal bench and, eventually, to the Supreme Court. A succession of speakers, including Charles Colson, James Dobson, and Bill Frist, majority leader of the Senate (who had voted in favor of a filibuster against one of Bill Clinton's judicial nominees) railed against the use of the filibuster and decried the "judicial activism" being perpetrated against the interests of the Religious Right. "You have a court that is out of control," Dobson lamented, citing the Supreme Court's rulings against prayer in schools, the *Roe v. Wade* decision, and the ruling of lower courts against the posting of the Ten Commandments in public buildings.

The case against "judicial activism" in the rhetoric of the Religious Right goes something like this. Unlike state legislators or members of Congress, federal judges are appointed for life and, for that reason, are not directly accountable to the people. "Activist judges," however, take it upon themselves to review, and occasionally to overturn, laws passed by the elected representatives of the people. Although this is precisely the function assigned to the judiciary under the Constitution's balance-of-powers provisions, the Religious Right worries in particular about "judicial activists" reversing legislation against same-sex unions, for example, on the grounds that such restrictive legislation violates the "equal protection under law" provision of the Fourteenth Amendment. When spokesmen for the Religious Right castigate "judicial activism," they often cite the example of the Warren Court, with its *Miranda* ruling (requiring police to apprise suspects of their rights), or the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954, which mandated the desegregation of public schools.

A corollary to the Religious Right's condemnation of "judicial activism" is the assertion of states' rights. The argument here is that individual states should be able to decide matters for themselves without interference from the federal government. But this, too, is coded language, the vocabulary of racism and segregation in decades past.⁴

Until the federal judiciary stepped in, state courts and legislatures in the South routinely frustrated justice for lynching victims and for civil rights activists. Members of the Ku Klux Klan and other white supremacist organizations, such as the White Citizens' Councils, operated with impunity because they knew that the chances they would be prosecuted by local officials were negligible and that they would be convicted by a local jury were even smaller. The murderers of Emmett Till in Money, Mississippi, to cite one example of many, were acquitted by a white jury within minutes, even though the two men readily, even gleefully, admitted their crime several weeks later. George Wallace, governor of Alabama, invoking the principle of states' rights, refused to admit African Americans to the University of Alabama; one of the prominent planks in his platform when he ran for president in 1968 was states' rights. Only when the federal government stepped in (including "activist judges") were civil rights protesters able to gain any ground in their struggle for racial equality.

Tony Perkins, the principal organizer of "Justice Sunday," is well familiar with the coded language of "judicial activism" and "states' rights." Perkins was elected to the Louisiana House of Representatives in 1996, the same year he managed the U.S. Senate campaign of his friend Woodie Jenkins. In the course of the campaign, Perkins purchased a mailing list for \$82,500 from David

Duke, the former grand imperial wizard of the Ku Klux Klan who had run twice for statewide office. In 2001, Perkins addressed the Louisiana chapter of the white supremacist Council of Conservative Citizens, the successor to the White Citizens' Councils, which had mobilized against Martin Luther King Jr. and civil rights activists during the struggle for civil rights. Perkins's own campaign for the U.S. Senate in 2002 was dogged by questions about his associations with Duke. He now heads the Family Research Council, one of the most powerful and prominent organizations of the Religious Right.⁵

Finally, when leaders of the Religious Right complain about judicial activism, they never mention *Bush v. Gore*, the Supreme Court decision that threw the disputed 2000 election to George W. Bush.

THE RHETORIC OF MARGINALITY

This is not so much a phrase as a rhetorical ploy, one that the Religious Right has exploited brilliantly for the past three decades. Leaders of the Religious Right persistently portray themselves and their followers as under attack by a variety of enemies—liberals, the Supreme Court, the American Civil Liberties Union, the “mainstream media,” environmentalists, the “gay agenda,” and any number of adversaries, real or imagined. “They are reluctant political actors,” Ralph Reed said of politically conservative evangelicals. “Their way of life and their values are under assault.” For better or worse, we live in a culture where the status of victim carries with it a certain cachet. That fact has not been lost on the leaders of the Religious Right.⁶

Despite the huge number of evangelicals in America and despite the overwhelming political muscle of the Religious Right—they now control all three branches of the federal government—leaders of the Religious Right continue to propagate this language of victimization. We are under siege, they warn. Our values are being attacked. Rick Scarborough repeatedly invokes the specter of “the judicial war on faith,” and Tony Perkins warns that liberals are “determined to shut down the conservative movement in 2006 with a broad and relentless offensive—*against almost every value you and I cherish.*” The accuracy of these protestations is questionable, but the rhetoric of marginality is undeniably effective in rallying support within the ranks of the Religious Right.⁷