

## Old-time Religion By Harvey Cox

In the spring of last year, President Bush flew to Calvin College in Grand Rapids, Mich. Because of its conservative religious reputation, his advisers thought it would be a safe and friendly place, but the visit did not turn out as expected. He was greeted by a petition, signed by a third of the faculty, and a large student demonstration. Both denounced the invasion of Iraq as not meeting the classical Christian criteria for a just war.

Indeed, as the president has tried to shore up support among religiously conservative voters in preparation for this fall's congressional elections, returning to such issues as a constitutional amendment banning same-sex marriage, he has found himself grappling with a new challenge. Evangelical Protestants are becoming increasingly concerned about a wide range of issues—the Iraq War, the environment, torture, and poverty, for example—which put them at odds with much of the Bush agenda.

This interest in what are often considered “liberal” issues marks the rise of a younger and more moderate leadership among evangelicals. Paradoxically, these new leaders are more “religious” than the old guard of the religious right. The difference, one could argue, is that they are more concerned about actually following Jesus, who had much to say about violence and the poor, but said nothing about gays or a strong military, and who was put to death by torture. The appearance of these new social concerns means that something important is afoot in the vast evangelical community of America. It is simply no longer accurate to identify “evangelical” with “religious right.”

To those familiar with American religious history, this development will not come as a surprise. Christians who are theologically conservative have not always been politically right wing. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, evangelicals were in the forefront of such progressive movements as abolition and women's suffrage. And African-American churches, it bears mentioning, have always been theologically conservative and politically progressive.

Historically, the main worry of the most theologically conservative Protestants, who began calling themselves “fundamentalists” in 1912, was religious, not political. They wanted to preserve such orthodox beliefs as the virgin birth, the resurrection of Jesus, and the inerrancy of the Bible against what they called “modernism,” which included the critical historical study of the Bible and the theory of evolution. But these same people were often left-leaning populists and progressives in the political arena.

The best known self-styled “fundamentalist” of the late 19th and early 20th century was the three-time Democratic candidate for president William Jennings Bryan. Bryan is remembered today mainly for his role in the Scopes “monkey trial” in 1925, the last year of his life. But even then, Bryan remained a progressive fundamentalist. (No

biblical literalist, he believed that the seven days of creation mentioned in Genesis might refer to very long eons. “The Bible is about the rock of ages, not the age of rocks,” he remarked, slyly ribbing the literalists.) Bryan's positions on public policy issues were almost the complete opposite of those of today's religious right. His famous “cross of gold” speech at the 1896 Democratic convention in Chicago brought crowds to their feet with its stinging attacks on Wall Street. He was so suspicious of militarism that he resigned from Woodrow Wilson's cabinet before World War I to protest what he saw as that president's undue belligerency toward Germany.

Some historians believe that after the ridicule poured on them during the Scopes trial American fundamentalists retreated in humiliation and almost disappeared. This, however, is a mistaken picture and makes it hard to explain their powerful rebirth after World War II. Where had they been? And how did they get where they are today?

The fundamentalists had not disappeared. During the 1930s and 1940s they simply regrouped, and began to form a nationwide religious counter-culture made up of thousands of independent churches, Bible institutes, summer camps, conference centers, radio ministries, and revival services. They advised their people to “come out and be separate.” Since society at large was so obviously plunging toward judgment and destruction, they usually eschewed any political involvement. Why patch up a ship that was doomed to sink anyway? The kind of reforms Bryan once advocated now seemed pointless to them. The best one could do was to save as many individual souls as possible.

But in 1940, a rift emerged among religiously conservative Protestants, marking a major change in the American religious landscape. An influential group under the leadership of the Rev. Harold Ockenga of Boston's Park Street Church formed the National Association of Evangelicals. Its purpose was to draw a sharp line not just against “modernists,” but also against fundamentalists. These evangelicals held many of the same beliefs as fundamentalists, but there were important differences. Evangelicals firmly believed in the religious and moral authority of the Bible, but most did not consider it a dependable source for geology or history. The main point of contention, however, was that evangelicals did not want to withdraw from the larger society; they wanted to engage it. Longing for a rebirth of Protestant Christian influence on American culture, they went public.

If Bryan had been the most visible American purveyor of evangelical Christianity in the decades before his death in 1925, beginning in the early 1950s that mantle was passed to the Rev. Billy Graham. Starting as a raw-boned Tennessee fundamentalist, Graham matured over the next decades. He soon became the icon of the evangelical movement, but much more than that as well. Year after year, polls showed him to be the most respected religious leader in the country. As he shook off the hard shell of his early years, however, he also reaped scorn and abuse from fundamentalists for cooperating with “liberal” denominations and Catholics in his many crusades; for insisting that his audiences, even in the South, should not be segregated; and, later, by calling for the abolition of nuclear weapons.

But alongside Billy Graham's coupling of evangelical theology with a broad social outlook, a narrow and contentious new kind of evangelicalism was also emerging in America. When a little-known Baptist preacher and self-styled fundamentalist named Jerry Falwell, at the urging of conservative Republican campaign specialists, organized what he called The Moral Majority in the late 1970s, the religious core principles of the original fundamentalist movement were nowhere in sight. One heard little about theological issues like the virgin birth or even the inerrancy of scripture. This was an explicitly political movement.

Anything but an advocate of “come out and be separate,” Falwell welcomed Catholics, Jews, and even Mormons, if they shared his political and moral convictions. His agenda was provoked not by religious heresy, but by what he and his followers described as a frontal assault on the traditional values of American society.

Some of the voices in this new and politically charged “moral fundamentalism” took the battle to the streets and, like Randall Terry, founder of Operation Rescue, were arrested blocking abortion clinics. Now the enemy was no longer theological modernism, but a series of court decisions that banned prayer and Bible reading in public schools, legalized abortion, and reached a climax here in Massachusetts with the approval of gay marriage. Indeed one preacher called the fight over same-sex marriage not just another skirmish but the “battle of Gettysburg.” “If we lose this one,” he remarked, “we lose the culture war.”

At first the alliance Falwell forged with the most conservative wing of the Republican Party paid off handsomely for both partners. The religious right mobilized perhaps millions of voters for Republican candidates, and in turn, beginning with Ronald Reagan, Republican office holders rewarded the movement's leaders with briefings, phone calls, and access to the highest level of the administration, including the Oval Office. Even though by the 1990s Falwell's Moral Majority had faded, it was succeeded by Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition and James Dobson's Focus on the Family. Both are also driven by explicitly political agendas.

In recent years, however, the political alliance Falwell originally stitched together has been fraying. Republicans in office have not achieved the results on abortion, school prayer, marriage, and other cultural issues that the religious right expected. In May of this year, speaking about support for Republican congressional leaders in the midterm elections, and possibly in 2008, James Dobson grumbled, “I think there's going to be trouble down the road if they don't get on the ball.”

Meanwhile, a series of missteps and embarrassments—the religious right's heavy-handed intrusion into the Terry Schiavo case, the intemperate statements by Falwell (who attributed 9/11 to God's judgment on America for its gays and feminists) and by Pat Robertson (who advocated the assassination of the president of Venezuela on his nationwide television program), and the criminal investigation of Ralph Reed, the former director of the Christian Coalition—appear to have driven more moderate evangelicals away from the old religious right.

But as the religious right begins to lose its former vitality, something else has begun to emerge in the American evangelical world that could have even longer-lasting significance: the reappearance of a politically progressive evangelicalism.

The spirit of Bryan and his like is being born again. Some of this change is powered by the amazing growth of mega-churches throughout the country. These congregations, often 15,000 to 20,000 strong, are mostly evangelical in style if not in substance. Their preachers generally steer clear of controversial doctrinal questions and concentrate on practical spiritual advice for day-to-day living. Joel Osteen, pastor of the mammoth Lakeside mega-church in Houston, is more likely to preach on how to avoid procrastination than on abortion or homosexuality. Like other mega-church pastors, Osteen knows how to market his product, and has found that many younger people are simply not drawn by antigay preaching or by the other hot-button cultural issues so favored by the old religious right.

Last February, many evangelicals responded enthusiastically when Rick Warren, pastor of the immense Saddleback church in California organized a coalition to safeguard the environment based on explicitly evangelical religious beliefs, such as God's command to human beings to be faithful stewards and to nurture and care for the earth. Both Falwell and Robertson have refused to sign on.

The new face of American evangelicalism is not confined to the mega-churches. It is also appearing among younger evangelicals, like the ones attracted to Jim Wallis's Call to Renewal movement; in smaller, more traditional congregations; and among evangelical student groups on secular college campuses. It is especially evident on many Christian college campuses, like Calvin College, which handed Bush such a rude surprise last year. In April of this year the vice president of the National Association of Evangelicals, and other prominent evangelical leaders, joined with more theologically liberal church figures and with Jewish and Catholic leaders to issue a strong public condemnation of torture based on shared religious principles. Though not naming names, the statement was clearly critical of the current administration's policies.

One reason the future may belong to these new evangelicals is that they take the life and teaching of Jesus more seriously than the religious right, which bases its positions not on the gospels, but on what they call "traditional values" and "family values." But Jesus himself had little to say about family values; rather, he emphasized love of neighbor, and even of the enemy. And he often criticized the "traditional values" of his own time so harshly that the anxious guardians of those traditions viewed him as a menace.

To be sure, the old religious right is not dead yet. Its coffers are crammed with millions of dollars. It controls hundreds of radio and TV stations. It still exerts influence, especially on judicial appointments. Nonetheless, we may be witnessing the last hurrah of the old generation of fundamentalist and evangelical religious

spokesmen. They can no longer speak with any assurance that they will be heard by all of the people once considered a faithful following.

What is happening in American evangelical Christianity is both a changing of the guard and the emergence of a younger constituency with different ideas. This does not mean they will all vote for Democrats, with whom they still disagree on several matters, but that they are concerned about a much wider range of issues. The progressive social impulse of early 20th century evangelicalism appears to be making a comeback in an America sadly in need of a vision that is both spiritually vital and politically forward looking.

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