

The Election & the Evangelicals

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SINCE last year's presidential campaign many political observers have expressed deep concern over the growing political power of orthodox Christian groups in this country. According to one election scenario, it was the evangelical TV preachers who played a decisive role in the 1980 election. Not only did they elect Reagan to the Presidency, but, even more alarmingly, they also managed to unseat a number of liberal Senators through a massive, well-financed campaign to brand their targets as un-Christian political sinners. This campaign mobilized the fundamentalist constituency which was so decisive a factor in the conservative tide that swept the nation. And the worst—so the scenario concludes—is yet to come.

This version of recent events, while not entirely inaccurate, contains several crucial flaws. For one thing, it critically misstates the relation between religious beliefs and political attitudes among the evangelicals themselves. For another, it seriously overrates the political strength of organizations like the Moral Majority. And furthermore, it distorts the real meaning of the election results by placing much too narrow and short-sighted a construction on their significance.

Who are the evangelicals? One of their leading periodicals, *Christianity Today*, describes two general categories: "orthodox" and "conversionalist." The orthodox evangelicals are distinguished first by their belief in the literal word of the Bible, and second by their belief that Jesus is divine and the only hope for personal salvation. According to a *Christianity Today* Gallup Poll, taken in 1978, over 40 percent of the adult American population qualifies as evangelical according to orthodox criteria. These are the people commonly referred to as fundamentalists.

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The conversionalist evangelicals differ from the orthodox in having had an explicit religious experience in which they asked Jesus to be their personal savior. These are the "born-again" Christians, and they need not be fundamentalists. A little over a third of American adults qualify as conversionalists by this criterion.

Both the fundamentalists and the conversionalists share a commitment to reaching out with the message of salvation and doing their best to convert others (in accordance with the Greek root of the term "evangelical" which means messenger).

All told, then, there are three criteria for qualifying as an evangelical: belief in the literal word of the Bible; a born-again experience; a commitment to proselytizing activity. Various polls taken in 1980 have found that between 20 and 25 percent of American adults qualify on all three counts. This tallies up to over 30 million adults.

Of these 30 million people, about 10 percent are Catholic, about a quarter are black, and a little more than one-third are male. About half live in the South, and about a quarter in the Midwest. Compared with the total population of the United States, they are somewhat less likely to be college graduates or to be in the upper income brackets, though factors of race, region, and sex account for more of this socioeconomic discrepancy than does the religious variable. Male Southern white high-school graduates who are evangelical, for example, will show about the same economic pattern as male Southern white high-school graduates who are not. Still, the fact remains that white evangelicals have an aggregate economic/educational position slightly below that of the rest of the country. If there is an economic pinch, they are the ones who feel it most.

In the areas of political, economic, and social/cultural attitudes, there are some issues on which the evangelical population differs from its non-evangelical neighbors, and others on which it does not. On general economic and political issues, the evangelicals are themselves substantially split. When asked by a Gallup Poll in August, for example, whether there should be more government programs to deal with social problems—a flag-question for philosophical conservatives—slightly over half the country's evangelicals answered in the

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affirmative. Presented with two other such flag-questions—about support of firearm registration and support of ERA—slightly over half the evangelicals again replied positively. In fact, the poll showed that there was no statistical difference between evangelicals and non-evangelicals on attitudes toward firearm registration and nuclear power plants. Some differences were recorded on support of ERA (53-66), and increased defense spending (78-68), but they were by no means of tidal significance.

One lesson to be drawn from these figures is that the term "evangelical" is rather meaningless when interpreting reactions to general political issues. Blacks, for example, are disproportionately evangelical, comprising from one fifth to one-quarter of the nation's evangelical population. Yet black evangelical attitudes toward the flag-questions differed sharply in the liberal direction from those of their co-religionists. And if the effect of the blacks' religious orthodoxy is submerged by their other life circumstances, then the political effect of the whites' religious orthodoxy cannot be assumed, either. Their other life circumstances must be taken into account as well.

The picture becomes a bit sharper, however, when we come to the area of social and cultural attitudes. The Survey Research Center (SRC) of the University of California once did a study attempting to correlate religious beliefs with attitudes toward the role of the state in economic affairs and toward cultural change, specifically in the area of manners and morals. Members of "fundamentalist" denominations (which include most Baptist groups as well as the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church) were compared with members of "liberal" denominations (Presbyterians and Methodists). In general, the SRC survey found that fundamentalist-church members were somewhat more conservative on economic issues than liberal-church members, although the difference between the two groups tended to flatten out when one adjusted for educational attainment. But in the matter of cultural conservatism, the story was very different. At each educational level, the gaps between fundamentalist-church adherents and others were much greater than in the area of economic attitudes. The overall percentage of cultural conservatives with a high religious commitment was radically larger than the percentage of those with a low religious commitment (62-6).

By the same token, while the total evangelical population is evenly divided on such indicators of political conservatism as state intervention in economic problems, it is fairly united on certain measures of cultural conservatism—especially those directly related to religious belief. Thus, about four out of five evangelicals would require prayers in the public schools and would also bar homosexual teachers from the schools, according to the September 1980 Gallup survey. Only a bare majority of non-evangelicals favor these policies.

WE MUST bear in mind that religious fundamentalism and cultural conservatism have long gone together in this country. Religious identity is, after all, bound up with cultural tradition as part of a total way of life. When the security and status of that way of life appear threatened, its religious and moral content typically become rallying points of defense. Political figures who seem indifferent or hostile to these values will be seen as messengers of wickedness, while those politicians who appeal to them are likely to be invested with an aura of moral goodness.

This has been a recurrent pattern in American history. It was not in 1980 but in 1800 that a pamphlet was published with the ominous title, *Serious Considerations on the Election of a President, and a Voice of Warning to Christians in the Ensuing Election*. It warned that immorality would flourish if Thomas Jefferson were to be elected. Another pamphlet of the period predicted that Jefferson's election would mean "the consequent wonderful spread of infidelity, impiety, and immorality."

A similar note was sounded in a presidential campaign a hundred years later, when William Jennings Bryan ran against McKinley. As James Q. Wilson has noted recently in COMMENTARY,* "Bryan's appeal was as much cultural and moral as economic and political. Fundamentalist Protestants were outraged over the moral decay of urban life . . . Bryan called not simply for a new economic order, but for the purification of society." So, too, in the 1920's the second Ku Klux Klan attracted heavy fundamentalist Protestant support while inveighing as much against immorality as against immigration. As Arnold Rice put it in his history of the KKK: "The 1920's meant 'modernism.' And 'modernism' among other things meant the waning of church influence, the breaking down of parental control, the discarding of the old-fashioned moral code."†

Even more important, "modernism" also meant rapid urbanization and industrialization, which implied in turn that more immigrants would be entering the country and demanding their share of political and economic power. The old world was breaking up and the older established population was losing control. The group most vulnerable to these changes was the fundamentalist Protestants—not because they were fundamentalist, but because they were by region, history, and education the group most rooted in the past, the one with the least capacity for adjusting to change. More significant than their religion and morality was their traditionalism. They were taking a stand against the whole sweep of modernity itself, and all the changes it signified, and in doing so they

* "Reagan and the Republican Revival," October 1980.

† *The Ku Klux Klan in American Politics* (Public Affairs Press, 1962), p. 116.

spoke for many other traditionalists who did not share their particular religious beliefs.

In different forms and under varying circumstances, this reaction has occurred over and over again in American history. It suggests that political orientation is not just an economic question, but is also a matter of mood. Negative political sentiment has often been generated by a sense of imminent deprivation, or diminishing status on the part of a substantial segment of the population.

Clearly, it was while in such a mood that many Americans, most of them not even evangelicals, made their election choices this past fall. Even if their own status was not in question, many voters were registering displeasure at the diminishing status of America itself in the world. They were protesting American humiliation, and not even by another superpower but by a group of petty Middle Eastern despots.

Even the economic issues which dominated the campaign can be seen in this light. For most of us, inflation is more than just a pocketbook issue. It erodes the household budget but it also, more subtly, undermines past achievements. In the same way, the decline in American productivity and the growing superiority of foreign imports over our own products may be seen as issues of national status as much as of economics.

Actually, these issues of status far outweigh the factor of moral backlash that has been the subject of so much worried speculation since the election. Voters in 1980 were certainly expressing revulsion at what they perceived as an assault on traditional moral values. That particular beachhead, however, had been established over a decade before, and the evangelical preachers had been fighting ever since to enlarge it, with no great success. Not until a general backlash mood swept the country, precipitated by such matters as the Persian Gulf and the inflation rate, did the moral issue become an election factor, symbolizing for many the whole downward drift of the nation.

IN ATTEMPTING to ascertain the role of religion in all this, we must bear in mind that frustration over loss of status is concentrated—as it always has been—mainly in that sector of the white Protestant population that is disproportionately evangelical in religious persuasion. This population, as already noted, is much more conservative culturally than the rest of the country. But—except when it feels especially vulnerable or threatened—it is no more conservative politically. Thus, the evangelicals supported Franklin D. Roosevelt heavily in all four elections, they voted for Adlai Stevenson (as Albert Menendez's precinct study shows*) in the same proportion as the rest of the nation—and incidentally in a higher proportion than white non-evangelical Protestants—and they backed Johnson over Goldwater, again in the same overwhelming pattern as the rest of the country. They did not prefer Kennedy

in 1960, but this was largely because of the Catholic issue.

The most drastic defection of the white evangelicals from the Democratic party occurred in the late 60's and 70's, in the era of the counterculture. During this turbulent period their votes for Humphrey and McGovern dropped to around one-third or less. Carter, by contrast, received about two-fifths of their vote in 1976, clearly because he was perceived as one of their own by many small-town evangelicals and white Southerners of similar background.

In sum, the traditionalism of the evangelicals does not impinge on their political orientation except when some aspects of modernity radically threaten their status and security. Then, more than others, they tend to express themselves in terms of outraged morality, which comes to symbolize everything they feel they are losing. But while the terms in which they couch their protest may be somewhat different from those of the rest of the country, they are not alone in their larger sense of loss. Certainly they had a lot of company in 1980.

TO BE SURE, it is precisely this recourse to moralistic expression which gives rise to so much apprehension where the evangelical movement is concerned, echoing, as it does, the language of past right-wing extremist movements. But even more ominous than its moralistic terminology to historians of extremism is the connection frequently made in current evangelical doctrine between morality and political ideology. Jerry Falwell, the head of Moral Majority, makes such a link when he says that "What's happening to America is that the wicked are bearing rule." Christian Voice, another of the evangelical-political groups, makes the tie even more explicitly when it proclaims in its official statement of purpose: "We believe that America, the last stronghold of faith on this planet, has come under increasing attack from Satanist forces in recent years . . . that the standards of Christian morality . . . are now under the onslaught . . . launched by the 'rulers of darkness of this world' and insidiously sustained under the ever more liberal ethic."

What is alarming about these pronouncements is their fanaticism. If a political opponent is just wrong, or stupid, or misguided, he can presumably be dealt with in the marketplace of ideas. But when his political opinions arise from deliberate moral wickedness, as this kind of rhetoric implies, a case can be made that he does not deserve to be in the debate at all. It is only one step from here to a full-fledged conspiracy theory, wherein a cabal of evil men conspires secretly to thwart the popular will. This, of course, is the very model of political extremism waiting only to be completed by the designation of one or another ethnic or

* *Religion at the Polls* (Westminster Press, 1977).

religious group to represent the cabal.

There is every reason for nerves to jump at such an approach to politics. Inevitably, it calls to mind the prototype of European fascism. Closer to home, it recalls groups like the clergymen affiliated with the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920's or the Reverend Gerald Winrod's Defenders of the Christian Faith in the 1930's. Winrod, a fundamentalist preacher whose organization received wide support up until World War II, dwelt on the breakdown of morality in America, denouncing both political parties, though mainly the Democrats, for the country's moral turpitude. In 1938, he entered the Kansas Republican senatorial primary, and received 22 percent of the vote. Much of his animus was directed against the Jews, whom he called "contaminators in the moral realm as well as spoilers in the business field," but he was also strongly anti-black and anti-Catholic.

Today's evangelical groups have made it a point to avoid this kind of hatemongering. Though there is no denying that many evangelicals today are still wary of the Catholics, and have great theological problems with the Jews, and though one may argue further that the Moral Majority's focus on "Christian" values undermines the healthy pluralistic tone of the nation, nevertheless that organization has never even come close to incorporating in its platform the nativism and overt bigotry central to earlier groups. For the Reverend Gerald Winrod to have accepted an award from a national Jewish conclave, as Jerry Falwell recently did, is unimaginable. Indeed, so sensitive is the Moral Majority to Jewish fears that it has requested a "dialogue" with representatives of every major Jewish organization "to make the Jewish community aware that we are not an anti-Semitic group and that we probably are the strongest supporter of Israel in this country."

But it is not just in the absence of overt bigotry that today's evangelical Right has been more moderate than its predecessors. Though its public agenda calls for action on a whole range of domestic and international questions—from socialized medicine to relations with Taiwan and Zimbabwe—its real goals seem to be more limited. One observer, writing in the *Congressional Quarterly*, reports the movement's most concerted lobbying efforts have been the battles for voluntary school prayer and for an amendment restricting federal intervention in private, mainly Christian schools*—important issues, but hardly global in their scope. Another observer, writing in the *National Catholic Reporter*, notes that the real core of the platform is Senator Paul Laxalt's Family Protection Act.† This bill, too, confines itself to fairly narrow questions—prayer in the schools, parental review of textbooks, elimination of tax laws requiring married couples to pay more than singles living together, and a number of other sections concerning gay rights and abortions.

In other words, thus far at least, the activity of right-wing evangelical political groups has centered on moral issues rather than on general political ones. As we have seen, these are the only matters on which the positions of the evangelical political groups have reflected the opinions of the general evangelical population. Whenever attempts have been made to stretch the Christian dimension beyond these specific religion-linked issues, they have provoked internal dissension. When, for example, the Harris Poll of October 6, 1980 asked whether it is impossible to be both a political liberal and a good Christian, both the general population and the white evangelical population disagreed overwhelmingly, as did a number of evangelical leaders.

Some, if not all, of these leaders have themselves been careful to make a distinction between moral questions and political ones. Thus, Carl Henry, a leading evangelical theologian, warns against making the jump from "individual spiritual rebirth to assuredly authentic and predictable public policy consequences. . . ." He reminds his hearers that "equally devout individuals may disagree over the best program for achieving common goals."** Making the same point, an editorial in the most widely read evangelical journal, *Christianity Today*, said: "We get the impression that some evangelical lobbies on the political Right as well as liberal lobbies on the Left want us to believe that theirs is the only true Christian position on all issues. How can a policy board of evangelical Christians without access to vast amounts of intricate political data emerge from a meeting and announce that it has arrived at *the* Christian or moral position on lifting sanctions against Zimbabwe, for example?"††

IF THE right-wing evangelicals are not effective in seriously influencing their coreligionists on general political issues, what is the import of their activity? Perhaps they should be thought of not as evangelical groups but as straight right-wing political groups which happen to have an evangelical bent. Perhaps they are best seen organizationally as a part of the so-called New Right network.

That network includes Richard Viguerie and his famous computer in Falls Church, Virginia; Paul Weyrich and his Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress; Terry Dolan and his National Conservative Political Action Committee (NCPAC);

* Bill Keller, "Lobbying for Christ: Evangelical Conservatives Move from Pew to Polls, But Can They Sway Congress?" *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, September 6, 1980, p. 2627.

† James W. Michaels, Jr., "Conservative Christians Spread Influence, Attract Political Attention," *National Catholic Reporter*, August 15, 1980, p. 8.

** "Evangelists Out of the Closet, But Going Nowhere?," *Christianity Today*, January 4, 1980, p. 21.

†† "Getting God's Kingdom Into Politics," *Christianity Today*, September 19, 1980, p. 11.

and E.E. McAteer and Howard Phillips of the Conservative Caucus. These loosely knit groups had begun to see the usefulness of the "moral issues" to their cause well before the evangelical preachers got into the political business. In an interview in 1976, Viguerie predicted: "The next major area of growth for conservative ideology and philosophy is among the evangelicals." In a speech four years later at the National Press Club, Viguerie described how he, E.E. McAteer, Robert Billings, and Howard Phillips had devised and successfully implemented a plan to move "preachers-into-politics."

In 1978, Warren Billings, former head of the national Christian Action Coalition, which was then a school lobby, impressed both the evangelicals and the New Right when he used the mailing list of the Old Time Gospel Hour (whose minister was Jerry Falwell) to mobilize a massive letter-writing campaign opposing efforts of the IRS to remove the tax-exempt status of Christian schools which were not racially integrated. Wevrich, an Eastern-rite Catholic, helped form the Christian Voice with one of his close associates as its legislative consultant. Billings and Wevrich, along with Howard Phillips, a Jew, helped to establish the Moral Majority, with Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson at its head. (Billings was at one time both the executive director of the Moral Majority and Wevrich's deputy at the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress.*)

While the sheer amount of time and money expended by this New Right apparatus may indeed have had some practical political consequences, especially in primaries and in targeted congressional districts where name-recognition was a factor, it is important, in attempting to understand the 1980 election, not to overstate that effect. Perhaps the most striking case in point is the results of the presidential vote itself. One of the consistent messages of the politicized preachers was that their evangelical constituency should vote for Reagan. But according to the New York Times/CBS election day poll of voters as they left the booths, a slightly smaller percentage of born-again white Protestants (61 percent) than of other white Protestants (63 percent) actually voted for Reagan. A comparison of the 1976 and 1980 votes indicates as well that Carter lost less support among his fellow born-again Protestants than among others. In the election-day study, he retained a larger proportion (82 percent) of white evangelicals who said they had voted for him four years earlier than of other white Protestants (78 percent). This was true of the South as well (where the proportions were 86 percent to 76 percent). The drop-off in Carter's support among Catholics and Jews was somewhat greater than among the born-again.

RESULTS of the Senate elections cast further doubt on the assumption that the politicized evangelical groups and their New

Right allies had much impact on the outcome. NCPAC, as we know, targeted five Northern liberal Democratic Senators—Bayh, Church, Cranston, Culver, and McGovern—and all of them except Cranston were defeated for reelection. But the decline in their vote was *almost identical* with that of the Democratic senatorial candidates in eighteen non-targeted states in the North. The average vote for the five liberal Senators fell from 54.5 percent in 1974 to 48 in 1980; the Democratic senatorial vote in the eighteen other Northern contests declined from 55 percent to 48. As Ronald Roberts, a staff member on the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee, has pointed out, there were conservative victories in states like Wisconsin and New York, where the New Right and the politicized evangelicals were not very active, and liberal victories in states on New Right target lists, like California and Missouri.

It is harder to evaluate the impact of the political/religious Right on House races, given the large number of candidates involved, and the difficulty of measuring the effort actually expended in the various local constituencies. But it may be noted that NCPAC officially endorsed candidates in 103 contests, 57 of whom lost compared to 46 who were elected, a result which parallels closely the party distribution for all 435 House seats.

Strikingly enough, a number of Republican candidates who were supported by fundamentalist groups believe that they were not helped, and may even have been harmed, by these allies. James Abnор, who trounced George McGovern in the South Dakota senatorial race, denies that New Right groups were influential in the state and has even complained to the Federal Election Commission about the unauthorized use of his name by NCPAC. Charles Grassley, who defeated Senator John Culver in Iowa, also feels that the activities of the New Right groups had nothing to do with his success. An aide to Steven Symms, victor over Frank Church of Idaho, told the press that NCPAC had actually helped Church by making "erroneous charges" against him, emphasizing that "if anything, groups such as NCPAC probably hindered Steve Symms." Dan Quayle, who defeated Birch Bayh in Indiana, argued publicly late in the campaign that "New Right groups might cost the Republicans the election" in a number of states.

Statewide opinion surveys reinforce these judgments. In Indiana, polls show that the public had little familiarity with NCPAC slogans, and surveys taken for Symms in Idaho supported the claim that NCPAC, on balance, hurt him by a few percentage points.† Similar conclusions have been

* L.W. Davis, "Conservatism in America," *Harper's*, October 1980, pp. 21-26.

† See Bill Keller, "New Right Wants Credit for Democrats' Nov. 4 Losses but GOP, Others Don't Agree," *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*, November 15, 1980, pp. 3372-3373.

reached by Arthur Miller, a study director of the University of Michigan's Survey Research Center. Basing his judgment on interviews with 10,000 people, Miller believes that the impact of fundamentalist groups on the election outcome was much exaggerated. So too does Louis Harris who argues that the right-wing moralists actually hurt rather than helped the GOP cause, since "the country has moved slightly to the conservative side in opposing nearly all new government regulatory measures on economic matters, but has not moved at all to the Right on the social issues that are such an emotional concern to the die-hard right-wing conservatives."[•]

So far as the specific role of the TV preachers goes, that too seems to have been overestimated. A national Los Angeles *Times* survey in early September found that, among the half of the nation's evangelicals who watch or contribute to TV preachers, there was about a 3-to-2 majority favoring a constitutional amendment to ban abortion. Evangelicals who do *not* watch or support the TV preachers were evenly split on that question. In each group—the TV-watching and the non-watching evangelicals—three out of five agreed that the ERA was an attack on the American family. Interestingly enough, on general political issues, the watching and non-watching evangelical groups were equally agreed (3-1 in both cases) that the Vietnam war was *not* a noble cause and that the U.S. should maintain its informal relations with Taiwan instead of upgrading them, as advocated by candidate Reagan and organizations such as the Christian Voice and the Moral Majority.

Finally, a survey taken among "likely voters" by NBC News and the Associated Press in early October found that when interviewees were asked whether an election recommendation by a member of the clergy would "make you more likely to vote for that candidate, less likely to vote for that candidate, or wouldn't make a difference;" only 3 percent replied "more likely," 8 percent said "less likely," and 88 percent answered, "no difference." Only 3 percent reported having "been asked by a member of the clergy to vote for a specific candidate in this fall's election."

It remains, of course, true, that the area in which the Republicans gained strikingly, the South, is the one in which evangelicals are strongest. But the region has been moving away from the Democratic party ever since 1948, to the point where, by 1981, the GOP holds eleven out of the twenty-two senatorial seats in the once Confederate states. These changes reflect a process of party realignment by Southern whites as they react to the conflict between their dominant economic, cultural, and racial values and those of the national Democratic party.

WHAT all these findings seem to indicate is that the efforts to mobilize a religious constituency for political purposes in

America had no measurable effect on the 1980 elections. Instead, the available evidence appears to sustain the thesis that the electoral swing toward conservatism and the emergence of a political evangelical movement were parallel developments which may have been mutually reinforcing rather than related to one another as cause and effect.

The political evangelical groups worked hard at increasing turnout, an activity which was particularly important in the South where less educated evangelicals have relatively low voting records. But the seeming success of such work did not create the Republican landslide. Rather, it reflected the country's conservative political swing, which occurred among all groups—and more, as we have seen, among non-evangelicals than among born-again.

To fail to acknowledge that the growth of support for the GOP and conservatism is a consequence of general social processes is to give groups like the Moral Majority more credit than they deserve and to run the risk of self-fulfilling prophecy. If politicians become convinced that the Moral Majority is a decisive force in American life, they are more likely to treat it as such, just to be on the safe side. A more important danger of overestimating the Moral Majority's role is that it can serve to blur the meaning of what *has* happened. For many liberals, who cannot quite believe that the American people, blue-collar and all, have turned conservative of their own free will, it would seem preferable to believe that some sinister manipulative force is at work which has turned large segments of the population into robots. But this is self-delusion—the facts state otherwise.

In attempting to keep the Moral Majority in perspective, it may be useful to acknowledge that moral backlash is not necessarily a pejorative term. If it "belongs" to the evangelicals, this is because other organized religious groups have not claimed it, which may explain why fundamentalist churches, in recent years, have been growing at a 2-percent annual rate while mainstream churches have been declining at 1-percent-per-annum. Only 40 percent of the adult population attends church regularly as of 1980, the lowest figure recorded since pollsters started inquiring about this subject.

In spite of this decline, however, it is important to remember that with the exception of Ireland, America is still the most religious country in the Western world. In 1977, a sample of youth between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four were asked by Gallup affiliates in different countries whether religion should be "very important" in life. Over 40 percent of the Americans interviewed answered affirmatively, as against less than 10 percent of respondents from Japan, Germany, France,

[•] Louis Harris, "Reagan Leading as Election Heads into its Final Hours," *ABC News-Harris Survey*, November 2, 1980, p. 2.

and Great Britain respectively.* Nor are these views limited to the young. Gallup surveys of the entire population have shown that Americans generally are more likely than are the residents of twelve other developed countries to consider religion important. A larger proportion of Americans (94 percent) report a belief in God, and—even more strikingly—the only two countries in which a majority said they believed in “life after death” were the United States (71 percent) and Canada (54 percent). Less than two-fifths of the French, West Germans, and Scandinavians shared this belief.†

Traditional religious belief, moreover, need not be connected to actual church attendance. A 1978 Gallup survey indicated that 41 percent of the American people are unchurched. But while there are doctrinal differences between those who do and those who do not attend church, 76 percent of the unchurched reported that they pray to God and hold to traditional values. Nine out of ten, in both the church and the unchurched groups, said they would welcome more traditional family ties than now exist. About the same percentage in both groups said they would also prefer more respect for authority in society.

Given such statistics, the interesting problem is not to account for the revival of backlash moralistic politics, but rather to explain its relative weakness. Part of the explanation undoubtedly lies in the fact that despite the recent rise in membership in orthodox churches, they still have considerably fewer members today than in the 1920's

and 1930's. And this decline is linked with numerous structural changes in American society which have weakened the base of the fundamentalist-traditionalist forces. The ranks of farmers in America have fallen greatly since the 20's and 30's, and so has the proportion of small-town residents. At the same time, the number of people engaged in pursuits which require advanced education has increased substantially.

The Americans who “turned Right” in the last election did not ~~agree~~ agree with the Moral Majority or New Right programs. These Americans were not supporting specific political solutions any more than they usually do. They wanted a government that would more demonstrably reflect their mood: a more assertive America on the world scene, and on the domestic front a serious campaign to fight inflation and refurbish American industry. That is the extent of their political conservatism.

Contrary to some allegations, they are not now captive to any political movement, fundamentalist or otherwise, extremist or otherwise. They are shopping. But the attention of these Americans will not be regained by ^{political} forces which are more preoccupied with advancing their own conspiratorial explanation of events than with formulating a compelling pragmatic solution to genuine moral

* *Public Opinion 1978* (Scholarly Resources, 1980), p. 339.

† *Public Opinion*, March/May 1979, pp. 38-39.

and political problems.