

5-2012

# Review: Darren Dochuk's 'From Bible Belt to Sun Belt'

William Vance Trollinger

*University of Dayton*, wtrollinger1@udayton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst\\_fac\\_pub](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub)



Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

## eCommons Citation

Trollinger, William Vance, "Review: Darren Dochuk's 'From Bible Belt to Sun Belt'" (2012). *History Faculty Publications*. 26.  
[https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst\\_fac\\_pub/26](https://ecommons.udayton.edu/hst_fac_pub/26)

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History at eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of eCommons. For more information, please contact [frice1@udayton.edu](mailto:frice1@udayton.edu), [mschlange1@udayton.edu](mailto:mschlange1@udayton.edu).

*From Bible Belt to Sun Belt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism.* By Darren Dochuk. (New York, W. W. Norton, 2011. xxiv + 520 pp. \$35)

In *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt*, Darren Dochuk cogently observes that there is “a general tendency in political history to treat religion as an historical agent that pops up for a short time, makes some noise, surprises some people and scares others, but then suddenly disappears again to wait for its next release” (p. xxii). As a result, when it comes to the Religious Right, there has been a scholarly obsession with trying to explain its “sudden” emergence in the 1970s (an enterprise that often includes predictions of its imminent disappearance).

Eschewing this “jack-in-the-box” (Jon Butler’s phrase) approach to religion, Dochuk argues that the roots of the Religious Right go back to the Great Depression, when large numbers of Southerners began making the trek to California, bringing with them a “plain folk” gospel and creating an alternative world of neighborhoods, schools, and churches. After World War II these southern transplants—their evangelicalism moderated in the California environment—coalesced to form a powerful movement in behalf of untrammelled capitalism and militaristic anti-communism, a movement bolstered by Christian colleges (most particularly, Pepperdine University, which became a “command center” of the nascent Religious Right). Soon these “Sunbelt evangelicals” were changing American politics, helping “win the governorship for Ronald Reagan in 1966, the South for Richard Nixon in 1972, and ultimately the country for Reagan’s Republican Party in 1980” (p. xxi).

A pivotal point in Dochuk’s narrative comes in 1945–1946, when a peculiar old age welfare scheme (\$30 scrip weekly to every

unemployed Californian over age fifty) was resurrected. At this time California's southern evangelical transplants were equally suspicious of "corporate capitalism and the bureaucratic state" (p. 80), and this "Ham and Eggs" proposal provided an alternative to "the industrial unionism and progressive liberalism that animated the Left, and the strident antistatism that energized the Right" (p. 92). The arrival of the rabidly anti-Semitic Gerald L. K. Smith in behalf of the Ham and Eggs helped convince Social Democrats that this proposal was the manifestation of reactionary, fundamentalist religion. The result was violent confrontations between the two groups and the defeat of Ham and Eggs. More importantly, this conflict ensured that southern evangelicals in California would choose the Right and its "united Christian, conservative front" over a Left that "sympathized with their economic plight but vilified their religion" (p. 101).

In Dochuk's telling, we have here the roots of the Religious Right, and there is no question that the American Left has savaged those with religious commitments, to its own detriment. But the Left's failure is not nearly enough to explain why American evangelicalism has been so *easily* captured by right-wing corporate capitalism, militaristic nationalism, and the prosperity gospel. That is to say, how do we get from antebellum evangelicalism, with its plethora of socially progressive reform efforts, to the contemporary and reactionary evangelicalism of Sarah Palin, Michelle Bachmann, and the Tea Party? Darren Dochuk's impressive *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt* greatly advances our understanding of the Religious Right, but there is much more historical work to be done.

*University of Dayton*

WILLIAM VANCE TROLLINGER, Jr.