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Review: 'God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right'

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God's Own Party: The Making of the Christian Right. By **Daniel K. Williams.** New York: Oxford University Press, 2010. viii + 372 pp. \$29.95 cloth.

There has been no end of predictions that the demise of the Religious Right is imminent. Over the past three decades proof of its impending collapse has included the televangelist scandals, Pat Robertson's failure to secure the Republican presidential nomination, the election and re-election of Bill Clinton, and the emergence of "young" evangelicals who refuse to toe the Religious Right line (this one keeps popping up). The latest version involves the notion that economically-focused libertarians of the Tea Party will inevitably find themselves in heated conflict with evangelical and fundamentalist social conservatives, thus challenging the power of the Religious Right in the Republican Party (never mind the extensive overlap between the two groups).

While Daniel Williams' *God's Own Party* was published just as the Tea Party phenomenon was emerging, this lively book makes clear it is foolish to take seriously predictions that the Religious Right will soon fade into obscurity. As the author observes in the introduction, the "Christian Right of the late twentieth century [is] not a passing fad," primarily because – here's the book's thesis – whatever defeats conservative Protestants in America may endure, they "cannot turn back from either their Republican partisanship or their political campaigns" (9).

God's Own Party supplants William Martin's *With God on Their Side* as the best general study of the Religious Right, providing a fast-paced but detailed narrative from the 1940s through the 2008 election. My only substantive criticism is that the introduction and the marketing misleads the reader into thinking that the book extends its historical reach into the 1920s. While Williams is right to suggest that the origins of the Religious Right date back to the early fundamentalist movement's campaign to secure the "preservation of a Christian moral order in American society" (13), the book's treatment of these years is thin, with only five pages devoted to the 1920s and 1930s.

It is easy to forgive *God's Own Party* for promising more than it delivers, given the post-1940 narrative is chock-full of valuable historical insights. Take, for example, Williams' argument that while conservative Protestants withdrew from the public arena in the 1930s, all this changed with the onset of the Cold War. Evangelicals and fundamentalists aggressively contributed to the anticommunist frenzy: the National Association of Evangelicals (formed in 1942) called for "the enactment of legislation protecting the nation . . . from the menace of Communism"; the Church League of America "collect[ed] files on suspected communists . . . to sell to investigators and employers" (19); most important, evangelical superstar Billy Graham preached virulently anticommunist sermons in which he asserted that "the American government was engaged in the work of the Lord when it opposed the Soviet Union" (23).

While in the 1950s evangelicals and fundamentalists agreed on the communist menace, they disagreed on civil rights, with evangelicals less opposed to the dismantling of the Jim Crow apparatus than were fundamentalists. But by the mid-1960s these divisions disappeared, as evangelicals shrank from the Black Power movement and joined with fundamentalists in enthusiastic support of the Vietnam War. In the process both groups became increasingly identified with the Republican Party. While much emphasis has been placed on Ronald Reagan's role, Williams nicely establishes that Richard Nixon was the pathbreaker, scheming with his aides to "lock up the Protestant vote for Republicans." Graham's endorsement of Nixon's re-election was crucial, but H. R. Haldeman went further, even suggesting (apparently to no avail) that "members of the Committee to Re-elect the President (CREEP) . . . work with the staff of . . . Campus Crusade for Christ" (98-99). All of this was part of Nixon's machinations, frighteningly documented in Rick Perlstein's *Nixonland*, to divide the country into "us" and "them" (a division which theologically and politically resonates with fundamentalists and evangelicals.) While the Watergate scandal short-circuited Nixon's effort, Williams perceptively observes that "if it had

not been for Nixon's evangelical 'silent majority,' [Jerry] Falwell's task of mobilizing a 'moral majority' might have been much more difficult" (103).

In chapters 6-10 Williams provides a wonderfully detailed summary of the ever-tightening alliance of the Religious Right and the Republican Party in the final three decades of the twentieth century. This is familiar ground, and there is too much to discuss here . . . although I must point to his astute observation that Pat Robertson's failed bid for the 1988 Republican presidential nomination was crucial in persuading conservative Protestants that they suffer under "governmental and societal oppression" (223). While such a notion is improbable to many Americans, it has become the prevailing trope of the Religious Right, and so its origins are worth noting.

God's Own Party ends with "Capturing the White House," an excellent treatment of the George W. Bush years. From the beginning the Religious Right was fully behind Bush. Two moments cemented their allegiance to the president. First, there was 9/11, which allowed evangelicals and fundamentalists to reprise their role as the most militaristic defenders of America; as *Christianity Today* put it in the fall of 2001, "Religious terrorism is the communism of the 21st century [and] Christians have a unique and vital role to play" (254-255). This was followed by Bush's 2004 endorsement of the Federal Marriage Amendment (which would make same-sex marriage unconstitutional). But while evangelicals and fundamentalists were thrilled, and their votes were crucial to Bush's re-election, his administration failed "to pass even one socially conservative bill during the president's second term" (263). That Bush (like others before him) did not deliver, combined with Barack Obama's successful 2008 presidential campaign, led pundits to proclaim that (young) evangelicals were abandoning ship and the Religious Right was dying.

Polling data revealed, however, that "most evangelicals remained loyal to the GOP, ensuring their continued dominance in the party" (275). There is no evidence this loyalty will end any time soon, given that, as Williams rightly concludes, "conservative Christian leaders still have faith that, with the help of God and the Republican Party, they can restore a Christian moral order to the nation" (276).

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