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Chapter 7

Religious Non-Affiliation: Expelled by the Right

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Abstract: For the past century the bulk of *white evangelicalism* has been tightly linked to a very conservative politics. But in response to social and cultural changes in the 1960s and 1970s, conservative white evangelicalism organized itself into the *Christian Right*, in the process attaching itself to and making itself indispensable to the *Republican Party*. While the Christian Right has enjoyed significant political success, its fusion of evangelicalism/Christianity with a particular right-wing politics – which includes white nationalism, hostility to immigrants, unfettered capitalism, and intense homophobia – has driven many Americans (particularly, young Americans) to *disaffiliate* from religion altogether. In fact, the quantitative and qualitative evidence make it clear that the Christian Right has been a (perhaps the) primary reason for the remarkable rise of the religious “nones” in the past three decades. More than this, the Christian Right is, in itself, a sign of *secularization*.

This would seem to be the season of triumph of evangelical Christians. Despite a nearly continuous series of assertions from scholars and political commentators that the Christian Right (which can usefully be thought of as the evangelical Right) was dead or nearly dead or soon to be dead,¹ over the last four decades it has proven to be the most reliable constituency in the Republican Party. At the national level the elections of Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush were evidence of their clout, but the great pay-off came in 2016, when 81% of white evangelicals supported Donald Trump for president, thus ensuring his election. Trump filled his cabinet with

conservative evangelicals, including Ben Carson, Betsy DeVos, Rick Perry, Mike Pompeo, Jeff Sessions, and, of course, Vice President Mike Pence. Christian Right leaders such as Robert Jeffress of the First Baptist Church of Dallas and Jerry Falwell, Jr. of Liberty University routinely find themselves on the national stage, excusing or minimizing what many see as Trump's racism, misogyny, and sexual immorality while simultaneously proclaiming Trump's achievements as the man to make America Great and Christian again. Finally, and thanks in good part to the influence of the Christian Right, one of America's two major political parties opposes LGBTQ rights, bristles at feminism, denies climate change (and/or the role of humans in climate change and/or the negative effects of climate change), and resolutely ignores structural racism and the misery of those at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder.

Add to these political triumphs the fact that for decades scholars of American religion (most famously, Dean Kelley, in his book *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*²) have made the case that evangelical churches were immune to the numerical free fall that has afflicted mainline Protestantism since the 1960s. In fact, American evangelicalism has been exhibit A in the case that the United States is the exception to the secularization that has swept the rest of the Western world.

All this to say that American evangelicalism would seem to have won the day. And yet, as Robert P. Jones and Daniel Cox have noted in *America's Changing Religious Identity: Findings from the 2016 American Values Atlas*, while “white evangelical Protestants were once thought to be bucking a longer trend, . . . over the past decade their numbers have dropped dramatically.” The percentage of Americans who are white evangelicals has shrunk dramatically in the last decade, from 23% in 2006 to 17% in 2017. In the same 11 years white mainline

Protestants dropped from 18% to 13% of the population, while white Catholics dropped from 16% to 11%.³

Not only are Americans rapidly disaffiliating from religion, but they are also rapidly disaffiliating from evangelicalism in rapidly increasing numbers. Not to put too fine a point on it, the conviction that evangelicalism is the bulwark against religious nonaffiliation in the United States has simply proven to be wrong. And so, we are left with an apparent conundrum. On the one hand, the Christian Right is triumphant, with its president in the White House, and with the Republican Party in its thrall. On the other hand, the numbers of white evangelicals are rapidly shrinking, in proportions similar to non-evangelical Protestants and Catholics: political success, but religious failure.

What is so interesting about this situation is that it is not, actually, a conundrum. Instead, it seems these two phenomena, evangelical political success and the shrinking of white evangelicalism, are related. That is to say, the Christian Right, specifically, its success in conflating evangelicalism/Christianity with conservative culture war politics, appears to be a primary factor in the shrinking of white evangelicalism in particular and religious disaffiliation in the United States in general. But we can go further than this. The Christian Right is not simply a major contributor to secularization in the United States. It is itself a sign of secularization.

Evangelicalism and Political Conservatism

The story of evangelicalism and the Christian Right⁴ has its origins in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. In these years, a constellation of ideas challenged traditional Protestant understandings of the Bible and Christianity. Darwinism raised questions about the Genesis story of creation (six days?), God's role in the creation process, and the nature of human beings. Historicism (also known as higher criticism) treated the Bible as a historical document,

highlighting the Bible's inconsistencies and errors while also raising questions about the supernatural origins of the biblical text. The Social Gospel de-emphasized the importance of the fine points of Christian doctrine, instead emphasizing that true Christianity involved living out Jesus' teachings and working for social justice.

Many Protestants had no trouble adjusting to some or all of these ideas. But some Protestants were horrified. In response, conservative theologians developed the doctrine of biblical inerrancy, which holds that the Bible contains no errors, and that it is factually accurate in everything it teaches, including what it says about history and science. Biblical inerrancy swept through conservative Protestantism, and with it a second set of ideas, apocalyptic premillennialism, that held that the Bible is also accurate in what it says about the future. In its most popular version, apocalyptic premillennialism claimed that if you read the strange biblical books of Daniel and Revelation "literally," you learn the following: that the world and the church is becoming increasingly decadent; that as the "end times" are approaching, the Jews will return to Israel; that at the beginning of the "final days," Christ will come in the air (i.e., "the rapture") to retrieve the true Christians; that the antichrist will then reign over the earth for seven years (i.e., "the tribulation"); and, finally, that Christ and the true believers will return to slaughter the enemy hordes (including Jews who have not converted) and establish the millennial kingdom of God.

It is important to note that, besides establishing that the Bible is literally accurate even when it comes to predicting the future, and besides establishing that history will end in ghastly violence on a global scale, apocalyptic premillennialism also establishes that the Social Gospel is absolutely unchristian. Social reform efforts are not only worthless, despite the best efforts of misguided humans, the world will not improve, but they invite the expansion of an increasingly

powerful government that would inevitably suppress religious expression. More than this, an emphasis on social reform detracts from the primary task of saving souls from eternal damnation. As a result, the true task of the Christian is to obey the Bible, get others to do the same, and reject government proposals designed to help the poor and advance racial equality.

A series of Bible and prophecy conferences ensured that by the turn of the century, millions of American evangelicals held to biblical inerrancy and apocalyptic premillennialism. The publication of the *Scofield Reference Bible* (1909; 2nd ed. 1917) and *The Fundamentals* (12 vols., 1910-1915) further embedded these ideas in the evangelical consciousness, in the process advancing the culture war notion of an America divided between true Christians holding to orthodoxy and an enemy that had or was in the process of abandoning the faith. However, there was not yet a movement. Then came the Great War. For many of these conservative Protestants, Germany's devolution into barbarism, which is how U.S. government propaganda encouraged them to understand Germany, was due to Germany's widespread acceptance of Darwinian evolution and historicist explanations of the Bible. More than this, evangelicals holding to apocalyptic premillennialism saw the British capture of Jerusalem in 1918 as thrilling evidence that the end of history was in sight, as it meant that the Jews could start returning to historic Israel.

In May 1919 these conservative evangelicals were horrified by the fact that liberal ideas almost destroyed western civilization. Energized by the postwar Red Scare and its anti-radical witch hunt, evangelicals were thrilled that they the faithful were on the right side of history. They gathered in Philadelphia to create the World's Christian Fundamentals Association (WCFA). Led by the Baptist firebrand, William Bell Riley, this organization embarked on a crusade to do the following: establish biblical inerrancy and apocalyptic premillennialism as the standard for

Christian faith; rid American Protestantism of liberal ideas and pastors; cleanse American public schools of Darwinian evolution and other dangerous ideas; and, return America to its former status as a Christian Nation. In a very real sense, the modern Christian Right has its origins here, with the creation of the fundamentalist movement among American evangelicals.

But the fundamentalist crusade of the 1920s did not go well. For one thing, while the fundamentalists were quite successful in fomenting “controversies” in major Protestant denominations, they failed to capture control of even one of these religious bodies. Their campaigns among Northern Baptists and Presbyterians, which is where they concentrated their efforts, did not result in the establishment of fundamentalist creedal statements and did not achieve the removal of theological liberals and moderates from mission posts, seminaries, and churches.

As it became clear that these denominational efforts were not going well, conservative evangelicals quickly turned to politics, pressuring state governments to rid public schools of evolutionary teaching. In 1925, Tennessee passed the Butler Act, which made it illegal “to teach any theory that denies the Story of Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible, and to teach instead that man has descended from a lower order of animal.” Science teacher John Thomas Scopes, with the support of the American Civil Liberties Union, challenged the law. Scopes was convicted, but many or most of the reporters covering the Scopes Trial (much more a media circus than an actual trial) shone an unfavorable light on the fundamentalists and their crusade to “right America.” The ridicule encouraged many scholars and journalists to conclude that, despite the trial’s outcome, fundamentalism was an embarrassing case study of cultural ignorance that would soon vanish from the American scene.

They were wrong. Not only did states (primarily in the South) continue to consider anti-evolution legislation, but the fundamentalist movement thrived and expanded at the local level, with churches (some of which were independent, some of which were part of newly-emergent fundamentalist denominations) nourished by a network of Bible institutes, mission agencies, publishing houses, and radio stations. Still, the taint of backwardness acquired in the Scopes Trial remained. In response, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, some (not all) of these fundamentalists renamed themselves, borrowing from their heritage to call themselves “neo-evangelicals,” or, in time, “evangelicals.”

While the nineteenth-century evangelical movement was noted for its commitment to abolitionism, women’s rights, and other social reform efforts, “neo-evangelicals,” notwithstanding the name change, remained firmly committed to political conservatism and opposed to the Social Gospel. In fact, in the decades after the Scopes Trial, the commitment to political conservatism intensified. Not only were fundamentalists appalled by the New Deal and the establishment of the “welfare state” as an unwarranted intrusion into the workings of capitalism, but many read it through apocalyptic lenses that suggested Roosevelt and company were working to put into place an all-powerful state that served as a harbinger of the Antichrist’s one world government.

The Cold War only heightened these anxieties, with Christian America faced off against atheistic communism, and with an ever-present threat of nuclear warfare that fit almost seamlessly into the end-times scenarios of apocalyptic premillennialism. While the political and cultural turmoil of the 1960s and 1970s moved a small minority of evangelicals leftward, most fundamentalists and evangelicals remained firmly on the right side of the political spectrum. To quote from *Righting America*, they “decried the antiwar protests and the civil rights movement,

opposed . . . the expansion of the New Deal, adamantly condemned the ‘sexual revolution’ and feminism, attacked [the] U.S. Supreme Court [for] prohibiting institutionalized school prayer and legalizing abortion, and blasted the Internal Revenue Service’s efforts to remove tax-exempt status from Christian schools that discriminated on the basis of race.”⁵

In short, in the decades after World War I, many or most American evangelicals were staunch and reliable and sometimes quite vocal political conservatives. But they had not yet been galvanized into an organized political movement; most important, they had not yet been attached to one particular political party. This changed in the late 1970s, when political operatives connected with the Ronald Reagan presidential campaign intentionally and aggressively worked to mobilize these politically conservative evangelicals into a reliable Republican voting bloc. This process of “politicization” began with Jerry Falwell and his “Moral Majority,” which certainly played a role in the election and re-election of Ronald Reagan.

Over time the Christian Right became a sophisticated political force, with a host of national organizations such as the Christian Coalition, Concerned Women of America, and Focus on the Family that were enthusiastically supported by a network of evangelical churches, schools, and the like. Both the confirmation of Clarence Thomas as Supreme Court justice in 1991 and the election of George W. Bush as president in 2000 owed much to the aggressive efforts of this political network. By the beginning of the 21st century, the Christian Right had established itself as the most significant constituency within the Republican Party.

So, it is that, beginning in the 1980s and continuing to the present, evangelical leaders and pastors have publicly and aggressively melded their religious identities and their political identities. They have made it quite explicit that to be a Bible-believing Christian necessarily means that one is on the right edges of the political spectrum, holds ultra-conservative views on a

variety of political topics, and is staunchly Republican. Regarding all of this, and particularly the fusing of Protestant evangelicalism and the Republican Party, it is important to understand that this marks something of a change. Yes, conservative evangelicalism has been linked to conservative politics since the early twentieth century and, especially, since the 1919 founding of the World's Christians Fundamentals Association. Yes, fundamentalists did not retreat from politics or political concerns with the demise of their 1920s crusades. That said, there was also some sense that politics was a second-order priority, given that (until the 1960s and 1970s) America was "safely Christian," and given that what mattered most of all was saving souls from the fires of hell.

So while it was presumed that the right religious commitments would also mean the right political commitments, it was not made to be an absolute necessity. This was the evangelicalism of my childhood and youth. While I chafed at the political commitments held by the vast majority in my evangelical church and at my evangelical college, while I could not bear the predominance of anti-civil rights, antifeminist, pro-war, and pro-Nixon sentiments, I also was not made to feel as if my left-of-center politics necessarily rendered me unchristian. To give a specific example, at Campus Crusade's Explo '72 in Dallas, described on the cover of *Life* magazine as "The Great Jesus Rally," there were young evangelicals such as myself who chanted "Stop the War," and there were literature tables where one could gather antiwar material and sign petitions calling on the United States to get out of Vietnam. While we were a tiny minority, easily absorbed by the sea of conservative evangelicals, I think it is fair to say that we were seen more as weird curiosities, and less as antichristian pariahs, for opposing GOP orthodoxy.⁶

But since the 1970s, the relationship between (much of) white evangelicalism and conservative politics has seen a significant discursive shift, with the emergence of a Christian

Right that insists that Bible-believing Christians will necessarily vote Republican, and that true Christianity entails, even consists of, adherence to a particular form of conservative politics. It should go without saying that this involves much more than simply the desire to overturn *Roe v. Wade*. Key components of Christian Right political ideology include:

- a virulent opposition to same-sex marriage and transgender accommodations, so virulent that spending a few minutes on some evangelical websites suggests that the focus on combating the LGBTQ “menace” verges on obsession.⁷
- a fear of and antipathy toward immigrants combined with a desire to “tighten the borders,” all of which is reflected in the 2018 Pew Research Center Religious Typology, which reveals that “fully two-thirds” of “God-and-Country Believers” (who are disproportionately evangelical) say “immigrants are a threat to American values and customs, the largest share of any group.”⁸
- a commitment to maintaining White America in the face of changing demographic realities, a commitment that owes much to the fact that (as noted by historian Seth Dowland) its “identity [was] forged in the contexts of Jim Crow segregation.” This has been manifested both in the widespread support of white evangelicals for Donald Trump and an unwillingness to recognize the pervasive nature of institutional racism (which has led black evangelicals to question their identification as “evangelical”).⁹
- a deep-seated Christian nationalism that is, to quote the historian John Fea, “rooted in nostalgia for a bygone [and mythologized] Christian golden age,” and that, according to a 2018 *Sociology of Religion* article by Andrew Whitehead, Samuel Perry, and Joseph Baker, is the best explanation for why white evangelicals voted for Donald Trump.¹⁰

All of this is within the framework of the “culture war,” with the binary logic that this entails. True Christians are on the right side of this war, defending a set of particular religious and political views; on the other side of this war, holding dissenting views, is the not Christian or unChristian or antiChristian enemy. To adopt terminology used by social theorists Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, spokespersons for the Christian Right have created a hegemonic discourse by articulating “chains of equivalence,” in which one set of “truths” is set in an antagonistic and absolute opposition to a set of “untruths.”¹¹

Christian Right and Religious Nonaffiliation

It is not a stretch to say that many or most white evangelicals in the United States have been convinced that there is a necessary and inseparable connection between Christian commitments and conservative political commitments. But it should not be surprising that many political moderates and liberals have been similarly persuaded that to identify as Christian is to identify as an intolerant right-wing culture warrior. And many of these political moderates and liberals, particularly those who have had weak attachments to religion and religious institutions, have been so convinced that they have disaffiliated from religion altogether.

Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, who have done the best work¹² on this topic,¹³ make clear that the “political backlash” in response to the Christian Right fits very well with the evidence that the younger the generational cohort, the more likely individuals are to claim “no religion” when asked for religious preference. In seeking to explain why succeeding generations have proven to be increasingly disaffiliated from religion, the authors discovered that attitudes about sexuality (particularly regarding premarital sex and homosexuality), recreational drug use, and autonomy (i.e., valuing thinking for oneself as opposed to valuing obedience) are the primary predictors of the differences between cohorts when it comes to religious preferences.¹⁴

In this assessment, Hout and Fischer are building on Robert Putnam and David Campbell's observations in *American Grace* (observations that are also based on analysis of the General Social Survey data) that "those millennials whose views on homosexuality are more tolerant are more than twice as likely to be religious nones as their statistically similar peers who are conservative on homosexuality."¹⁵ All of this suggests that the "religiously-inflected . . . politics of personal morality"¹⁶ are what has alienated liberals and moderates, and, with each generation, in increasing numbers. In short, and as the authors observe in their conclusion:

Once the American public began connecting organized religion to the conservative political agenda—a connection that Republican politicians, abortion activists, and religious leaders all encouraged . . . —many political liberals and moderates who seldom or never attend services quit expressing a religious preference when survey interviewers asked about it. New calculations here . . . not only confirm the correlational pattern but go further to support the inference that political backlash is actually causing some of the religious disaffiliation.¹⁷

Hout and Fischer are careful to couch their 2014 conclusions in the form of inference. But as reported in a 2018 *American Journal of Political Science* article, "Putting Politics First: The Impact of Politics on American Religious and Secular Orientations," David Campbell et al. put this inference to the test. In the most fascinating part of their study, the researchers provided respondents with fictional articles about an invented congressional race in another state. In the control articles, there are no references to religion, but in the other articles evangelical religious references are added. As the authors observe, if it is correct that (much of) white evangelicalism's tight connection to the Republican Party is producing a good portion of the religious disaffiliation in contemporary America, "then when Democrats are exposed to a Republican candidate who is associated with religion, they will become more likely to identify as Nones." This is particularly the case given that many Nones are "liminals" who may or may not

think of themselves as having a religious identity depending on the context.” The results of their experiment combined with their analysis of Secular America Survey data are striking:

The close association of religion and the Republican Party creates cognitive dissonance among Democrats. Many Democrats resolve the dissonance by becoming Nones. Further, the mingling of religion and partisan politics leads to polarization, as Republicans and conservatives grow increasingly religious and Democrats and liberals become more passively and actively secular. Importantly, these processes take shape only when voters perceive the mixture of religion and politics, particularly in the GOP—the causal mechanism proposed, but to date untested, in the literature.¹⁸

Boston University’s Stephen Prothero, writing for *Politico* in early 2018, does not hold back in driving home the significance of this argument:

The [author’s emphasis] most significant development in American religion in recent years is the shocking rise of the religiously unaffiliated . . . who now account for roughly one quarter of all Americans. This increasing distance from religious institutions is accompanied by increasing distance from religious beliefs and practices . . . There are many reasons for this decline in religious believing and engaging. But the most important in my view is the increasing identification of the Christian churches with right-wing politics.¹⁹

What makes this argument particularly significant from a scholarly point of view is that while social scientists have long understood that religion affects political behavior, they have not taken seriously the notion that the influence could go the other way (i.e., politics affects religion). As Paul Djupe, Jacob Neiheisel, and Anand Sokhey point out in a 2018 article in the *American Journal of Political Science*, “scholars have largely characterized religion . . . as an ‘unmoved mover’ . . . At the very least, religion has typically been treated, almost without question, as independent of the political process.”²⁰ The argument (made by Hout and Fischer, as well as others)²¹ that the Christian Right (or, political backlash produced by the Christian Right) is a primary reason for the rapid increase in religious “nones” upends this scholarly consensus. The notion that the effects could go both ways, that religion affects politics and politics affects religion, has serious ramifications for our understanding of both politics and religion.

Djupe et al. add nuance to Hout and Fischer's argument by arguing that it is important to distinguish between congregational disaffiliation and religious disidentification, i.e., leaving a congregation as opposed to asserting that one has no preference when it comes to religion (see Baker in this volume). Focusing on congregational disaffiliation, and making use of national and local election data sets as well as the 2012 *Portraits of American Life Study*, the authors argue that the Christian Right is indeed "driving congregants out of the pews, which certainly jells with familiar narratives."²² But the question remains: what sorts of pews, that is, what sorts of churches, are these congregants leaving? Not surprisingly, for an individual to disaffiliate from a church in reaction to the fusing of religion with conservative politics, the church in question would most likely be one in which the Christian Right agenda, in one way or another, is being promoted by church leadership and/or an influential cohort of church members. That is to say, the sort of churches that would produce congregational disaffiliation because of the Christian Right would most likely be evangelical churches.

As Djupe et al. discovered in their research, "*the Christian Right drives out those who disagree with the movement those [often marginally connected congregants] who disagree with the movement and are likely to experience disagreement in their congregations—that is, evangelical Republicans [authors' emphasis].*"²³ Interestingly, and also not surprisingly, the notion of congregational disaffiliation fits well with the argument that the Christian Right is driving people to disidentify with Christianity. Once people are disconnected from their congregation, they are then more likely to respond to Christian Right pronouncements equating religion with right-wing politics by taking the next step to express themselves as having no religious preference at all.

This argument is an excellent reminder that the Christian Right is not simply pushing non-evangelicals into religious nonaffiliation. The Christian Right is also causing great turmoil within white evangelicalism itself. Over the past five decades, there has existed a small but persistent “evangelical left.” Best exemplified by Jim Wallis (who was deeply involved in protesting the Vietnam War at the aforementioned Expo ’72)²⁴ and *Sojourners* magazine, these left-leaning evangelicals have consistently argued that American evangelicalism needs to jettison its political conservatism and return to its nineteenth-century roots, in the process emphasizing the teachings of Jesus and progressive social reform. But as the contemporary Christian Right has tightened its grip on white evangelicalism, the evangelical left has become increasingly active in its efforts to “save” evangelicalism.

Perhaps the best example of this is the Red Letter Christians (RLC), a name taken from the fact that in some Bibles the words of Jesus are in red. This organization was founded in 2006 by Tony Campolo and Shane Claiborne and includes evangelical left luminaries such as Wallis and William Barber. According to the organization’s description of itself:

The goal of Red Letter Christians is simple: To take Jesus seriously by endeavoring to live out His radical, counter-cultural teachings as set forth in Scripture, and especially embracing the lifestyle prescribed in the Sermon on the Mount . . . What we are asserting, therefore, is that we have committed ourselves first and foremost to doing what Jesus said.

As a sign of an increasingly aggressive approach, in April 2018 the RLC held a “Red Letter Revival” in Lynchburg, Virginia, near Liberty University, where “they organized to pray against ‘toxic evangelicalism,’ and to offer a spiritual challenge to Liberty President Jerry Falwell, Jr.”²⁵

It is possible that the RLC, *Sojourners*, and related organizations and publications may be keeping some individuals inside the evangelical fold. Nevertheless, the bleeding continues apace. Returning to a point made at the beginning of the chapter, over the past decade white

evangelicalism has been shrinking at rates similar to mainline Protestantism and Catholicism. Making use of Public Religion Research Institute data, Daniel Cox notes that approximately one third of white Americans raised as evangelicals leave their faith; more than this, “about 60 percent of those who leave end up joining another faith tradition, while 40 percent give up on religion altogether.”²⁶

The departure from evangelicalism is even more striking among the young, with 39% “no longer identify[ing] as such in adulthood.” Put another way, white evangelicalism is aging. And the numbers are dramatic. As reported in *America’s Changing Religious Identity*, as of 2016, the median age of white evangelicals was 55, with 30% of white evangelicals over the age of 65. Only 11% of white evangelicals are between the ages of 18 and 29 (the same percentage holds true for white Catholics, while 14% of white mainline Protestants are under the age of 30). Only 8% of American adults between the ages of 18 and 29 are white evangelicals. In “Are White Evangelicals Sacrificing the Future in Search of the Past?” Cox argues that this aging of white evangelicalism is directly related to the fact that “nostalgia seems to be animating much of white evangelical politics.” The nostalgic politics of the Christian Right is leading evangelicals further and further “away, politically and culturally, from the American mainstream” when it comes to matters of sexuality, and particularly when it comes to the young. As Cox argues:

While it is difficult to draw a direct connection between the numerical decline of white evangelical Protestants and their increasing isolation on sexual morality, the views of former evangelical Protestants provide some important clues. Analysis of a 2014 Pew study finds that former white evangelicals are far more likely than current white evangelicals to favor same-sex marriage (60 percent vs. 24 percent) and believe that society should accept homosexuality (67 percent vs. 32 percent). They are also substantially younger.²⁷

Young evangelicals may be fleeing, but conservative evangelical leaders are not wavering when it comes to matters of sexuality. Instead, they are doubling down. In August 2017

the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (an organization that promotes the notion that men are to exercise “headship” over women in the home and church)²⁸ released the Nashville Statement. With over 150 original signatories—including Christian Right stalwarts such as James Dobson, Paige Patterson, Tony Perkins, and James Robison, as well as later signers such as Ken Ham – the statement begins with a lament that “as Western culture has become increasingly post-Christian,” it has rejected the idea that “our true identity, as male and female persons, is given by God.” In response, the Nashville Statement affirms “divinely ordained differences between male and female,” rejects homosexual marriage as well as “homosexual or transsexual self-conception,” and—employing the binary logic of the culture war—blasts Christians who differ with them on these issues: “The approval of homosexual immorality or transgenderism is [not] a matter of moral indifference about which otherwise faithful Christians should agree to disagree.”²⁹

In an October 2017 *Christian Science Monitor* article, tellingly entitled “Amid Evangelical Decline, Growing Split Between Young Christians and Church Elders,” reporter Harry Bruinius quotes Denny Burk, president of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, as describing the Nashville Statement as: “A line in the sand . . . A person may follow Jesus, or he may pursue sexual immorality . . . One path leads to eternal life, and the other does not.” But the Rev. Corey MacPherson, evangelical chaplain at Colgate University, had a very different take on the statement:

Look at the timing, my goodness, what was it, a week after Charlottesville? There are all these other issues going on in our world, issues of justice and reconciliation, which are at the heart of Christianity, and here is a statement that isn’t about reconciliation at all. Younger Evangelicals, especially, they just don’t want to be a part of that – that’s not what they want to be associated with.³⁰

“That’s not what they want to be associated with.” In *American Grace* Putnam and Campbell, in a discussion of the rapid and stunning disaffection from religion on the part of youth in the United States, explained that by the early 21st century, young Americans had come to view religion “as judgmental, homophobic, hypocritical, and too political.”³¹ *American Grace* appeared in 2010. Six years later Donald Trump was elected president, thanks in great part to white evangelicals. Not only has the Christian Right tied itself to him, but as of April 2018, white evangelicals were more supportive of Trump than ever, with one poll finding that they gave him a 75% favorability rating. All this despite, to quote PRRI’s Robert Jones, “revelations of taped boasts of sexual assault during the 2016 campaign, moral equivocation about white supremacy . . . [and now] two alleged extramarital affairs.”³² As *Washington Post* columnist Jennifer Rubin observed, “At a time when a great many evangelical conservatives have abandoned any pretense of concern for ethical behavior or religious values in exchange for political influence and power . . . the state of religion continues to slide.”³³

For a vivid example of religion’s slide in the age of Trump, see what Rod Dreher (author of *The Benedict Option*) had to say about a September 2017 lunch meeting he had with conservative evangelicals. After discussing his book at some length, Dreher asked them what they thought about the “Nashville Statement” (which Dreher supports). He was stunned when they informed him that it was “a pastoral disaster,” thanks in good part to “The Trump factor: so many white Evangelicals voted overwhelmingly for Trump that they surrendered the ability to speak with moral credibility on anything having to do with sexuality”:

A couple of people in college ministry were at the table. They said it is impossible to overstate how alienating the enthusiastic support their parents gave to Donald Trump was to their students. A number of college students have left the church over it . . . For a lot of them, their parents’ backing of Donald Trump made everything they had been taught as kids about Christianity a lie . . . Listening to these pastors and laypeople talking about the Trump effect on younger Christians was quite sobering to me. An older pastor said that it

is impossible to separate the Nashville Statement from the massive support white Evangelicals gave to Trump. Impossible to separate, I mean, in the mind of the young: ‘All they see is a bunch of leaders of a movement who voted for a sexually corrupt man like Donald Trump who are now trying to take a public stand on sexual morality for gays. It’s totally hypocritical to them. I don’t know how the Nashville drafters and signers didn’t see this coming.’³⁴

The quantitative and qualitative evidence strongly support the argument that the Christian Right has been a primary reason for the remarkable rise of the religious “nones” in the United States since the 1990s. And while it may be too early to say with certainty, it is very easy to imagine, the above anecdote suggests as much, that the post-2016 data will reveal that the Christian Right is driving even greater numbers of Americans to declare that they have no religious preference. Whether or not “irony” is the right word to apply here, one cannot escape noticing that a movement that so stridently opposes the secularizing of America is actually helping to accelerate this secularization.³⁵

Christian Right and Secularization

The mounting evidence that the Christian Right is a significant driver of religious nonaffiliation in the United States leads to one final point, and that has to do with the hotly contested thesis that (to oversimplify the formulation) modernization in the West corrodes religious faith and practice. For the past three decades, critics have used the United States, a modern Western nation with high levels of religious participation, as the counterexample that decisively undercuts the secularization model (see chapter 13). As David Voas and Mark Chaves point out in a 2016 *American Journal of Sociology* article, “the state of American religion is not the only evidence that critics marshal against the secularization thesis, but the religious situation in the United States often, perhaps always, plays a key role in the criticism.”³⁶ But as Voas and Chaves go on to argue, the past four decades of data regarding religious adherence in America (summarized nicely in this volume’s introduction) makes it very clear that the United States is, in

fact, not an outlier among Western nations. On the contrary, the United States confirms the secularization thesis for two reasons:

First, American religiosity has in fact been declining for decades, and second, that decline has been produced by the same generational patterns that lie behind religious decline elsewhere in the West: each successive cohort is less religious than the preceding one. Taken together, these two facts mean that recent trends in religiosity are remarkably similar throughout the Western world, including the United States.³⁷

This would seem a compelling argument. But Hout and Fischer point out that the increase in religious nonaffiliation has not been accompanied by a substantial increase in agnostics and atheists; in fact, not only do many of the “nones” believe in God and life after death, but according to the 2012 data, 37 percent of the religiously nonaffiliated pray at least once a week, with 22 percent praying daily. More than this, the fact that it is the Christian Right that is driving much of religious nonaffiliation in the United States is, according to Hout and Fischer, at odds with traditional secularization theory, which stipulates “religion’s irrelevance, not its prominence, as the mechanism for waning identification.” In other words, religion remains quite relevant in the United States, even as people move away from religion. For Hout and Fischer, it is this polarization, and not secularization, that “affected religious preferences,” as “people expressed either a strong preference for a specific religion or none at all.”³⁸

Expanding on this point, Landon Schnabel and Sean Bock have argued that, while they agree with Voas and Chaves that there has been a “steep downward trend in *average* religiousness,” the fact is that “only moderate religion has declined, and that the intensity of American religion is persistent and exceptional.” Instead of religion becoming irrelevant in America, what we have is “the polarization of religion in the United States.” According to Schnabel and Bock, as “American religion has become increasingly politicized,” thanks in great

part to the Christian Right, the “backlash appears to be emptying the more moderate categories of American religion.”³⁹

Are Schnabel and Bock correct? Does the ongoing relevance of the Christian Right in the United States, its significant role in creating religious polarization and thus its significant role in producing religious “nones,” undermine the notion of American secularization? While it is beyond the scope and purpose of this chapter to address the merits of this particular assertion, it is striking as to what this argument leaves out. That is, there is no attention here to the nature, the substance of the Christian Right itself.

One way some secularization theorists have responded to the apparent anomaly of American religiosity has been to suggest, as Voas and Chaves point out, “that American religiosity is somehow not as religious as it appears to be.”⁴⁰ This argument goes back five decades. In his 1966 work, *Religion in Secular Society*, Bryan Wilson noted that “whereas in England secularization has been seen in the abandonment of the Churches . . . in America it has been seen in the absorption of the Churches by the society, and their loss of distinctive religious content,” as “religion has placed its common values at the service of the political and social institutions of the nation”; the following year Stewart Luckmann (in *The Invisible Religion*) observed that there had been “a radical inner change in American church religion,” in which it had become “more ‘modern’ . . . by undergoing a process of internal secularization.”⁴¹ Writing in the 1960s, Wilson and Luckmann focused their attention on mainline Protestant churches. But as Steve Bruce noted at the end of the century, internal secularization had also come to conservative Protestantism: “as the conservatives have . . . become more affluent, they have also lost a great deal of what made them distinctive . . . the psychologized gospel of ‘positive thinking’ that was anathema to conservatives in the 1950s and 1960s is now well established in fundamentalist and

Pentecostalist circles, and much of the behavioral distinctiveness that marked those groups off has also gone.” (163) Praising Bryan Wilson’s prescience, in 2011 Bruce observed that:

It is easy to be misled by the continued popularity of religious rhetoric and suppose that Americans are as religious as ever they were. In addition to the evidence of church decline, we need to appreciate the extent to which the content of American Christianity has been secularized.⁴²

Wilson, Luckmann, and Bruce made these observations decades and years before the 2016 election, in which Donald Trump (misogyny, racism, sexual immorality, and all) becomes president thanks in great part to the support of white evangelicals who apparently not only have abandoned their (to quote Bruce) “behavioral distinctiveness,” but have given up applying their Christian faith to their politics (except in the very narrow sense of opposing *Roe v. Wade*). As evinced by their willingness to ignore the ongoing scandals of the Trump administration, much of white evangelicalism in America has become fused with the white nationalist Republican Party of Donald Trump. It is very easy to document that the Christian Right is the most significant constituency in the Republican Party. But as many, many commentators along the political spectrum have pointed out, and agonized over, it is much harder to delineate what makes the Christian Right Christian, or religious.

There is a great deal of evidence that the Christian Right is playing a significant role in driving people to disaffiliate from religion. Whether we explain this phenomenon as contributing to secularization or to polarization does not change the fact that the Christian Right is a sign of secularization. Not to put too fine a point on it, the Christian Right is itself powerful evidence for the secularizing of America.

Conclusion

So how should we think about the fact that the Christian Right – itself a sign of secularization – is clearly a significant factor in driving people into religious nonaffiliation? As a

scholar of American evangelicalism, I appreciate what one might refer to as the unmasking of the Christian Right, and the clarity with which we can now understand (much of) white evangelicalism. As noted above, for the past century the bulk of white evangelicalism in America has been tightly linked to a very conservative politics. But in response to the 1960s and 1970s – in response to movements in behalf of civil rights, women’s rights, and gay/lesbian rights, and in response to increasing religious pluralism and Court decisions in behalf of the separation of church and state – conservative white evangelicalism organized itself into the Christian Right, in the process attaching itself and making itself increasingly indispensable to the Republican Party. In the days of Jerry Falwell, Sr. and the Moral Majority, the claim was that this was all about Christian values, all about rescuing America from sinking into a morass of immorality. So, for example, the Christian Right’s aggressive campaign against President Bill Clinton was explained as an attack on his egregious sexual sins and in defense of a now-bygone virtuous Christian America. But now, with the Christian Right’s enthusiastic support of Donald Trump – led in part by Jerry Falwell, Jr. – their cover is blown. We can now see (some of us had already seen) that the Christian Right is not about personal morality and Christian/religious values, but is instead about a particular right-wing politics – a politics in keeping with the history of fundamentalism – involving white nationalism, hostility to immigrants, unfettered capitalism (which includes a disinterest, at the least, in global warming), and intense homophobia.

So as a scholar, I appreciate the clarity that we now have about (much of) white evangelicalism, the clarity about what the Christian Right is all about, and the clarity about the fact that the Christian Right is but one more sign of the secularizing of America. That said, it is of course true that one could argue that it is not just (much of) white evangelicalism and the Christian Right that has been unmasked. One could argue that Christianity itself has been

unmasked, that the above values – white nationalism, homophobia, and the like – are actually Christian (maybe even religious) values. Certainly many of those who abandon religion because of the Christian Right have come to something like this conclusion. And I get it. It makes sense to me. If I thought the Christian Right = Christianity, or Christian Right = religion, I would want nothing to do with it, either.

But as a person of faith, I understand Christianity to be something else. I understand it to be centered in the Gospels, in the message (stated quite clearly in Matthew 25) that in the end we are to be judged on how we treat our brothers and sisters, on how we treat “the other.” So while I appreciate the clarity with which we can now see (much of) white evangelicalism, I am also saddened by the fact that the secularizing of America occurs in part because the Christian Right has been so successful in articulating what it means to be Christian.

Endnotes

¹ The assertions about the demise of the Christian Right just keep coming. Note, for example, this quote from 2017: “It turns out that the electoral power of the religious right had been overstated. This became clear when the GOP received, in Bush’s words, ‘a thumpin’ in 2006.’ . . . The zenith of the religious right is apparently behind us.” George Hawley, *Demography, Culture, and the Decline of America’s Christian Denominations* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017), 79. Of course, at some point in the future predictions of the Christian Right’s demise will most likely come true.

² Dean M. Kelley, *Why Conservative Churches are Growing: A Study in Sociology of Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1977).

³ Robert P. Jones and Daniel Cox, *America’s Changing Religious Identity: Findings from the 2016 American Values Atlas* (Washington DC: Public Religion Research Institute, 2017), 7, 20.

⁴ This historical section, which draws from the “Introduction” in Susan Trollinger and William Vance Trollinger, Jr. *Righting America at the Creation Museum* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2016), 2–6, summarizes and builds upon the best scholarship on American fundamentalism. For a full discussion of much of this literature, see “Suggestions for Further Reading” in Trollinger and Trollinger, *Righting America*, 313–316.

⁵ Trollinger and Trollinger, *Righting America*, 6.

⁶ “Rallying for Jesus,” *Life* 72(June 30, 1972): 40-45; David Swartz, “The New Left and Evangelical Radicalism,” *Journal for the Study of Radicalism*, 3(2009): 60.

⁷ Regarding Ken Ham and Answers in Genesis, see: William Vance Trollinger, Jr., “A Pinched Social Ethic,” July 16, 2018, <https://rightingamerica.net/a-pinched-social-ethic>.

⁸ Pew Research Center, “The Religious Typology: A New Way to Categorize Americans by Religion,” August 29, 2018, <http://www.pewforum.org/2018/08/29/the-religious-typology>. See also: Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2016), 111-146.

⁹ Jones, *End of White Christian America*; Seth Dowland, “American evangelicalism and the politics of whiteness,” *Christian Century*, June 19, 2018, <https://christiancentury.org/article/critical-essay/american-evangelicalism-and-politics-whiteness>; Chris Ladd, “The article removed from *Forbes*: ‘Why White Evangelicalism Is So Cruel,’” March 12, 2018, <https://www.politicalorphans.com/the-article-removed-from-forbes-why-white-evangelicalism-is-so-cruel>; Trollinger and Trollinger, *Righting America*, 184-191; Campbell Robertson, “A Quiet Exodus: Why Black Worshipers Are Leaving White Evangelical Churches,” *New York Times*, March 9, 2018; Melani McAlister, “A Kind of Homelessness: Evangelicals of Color in the Trump Era,” August 7, 2018, *Religion and Politics*, August 7, 2018.

¹⁰ John Fea, *Believe Me: The Evangelical Road to Donald Trump* (Grand Rapids MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2018), 9; Andrew L. Whitehead, Samuel L. Perry, and Joseph O. Baker, “Make America Christian Again:

Christian Nationalism and Voting for Donald Trump in the 2016 Presidential Election,” *Sociology of Religion*, 79(Summer 2018): 147–171.

¹¹ Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (New York: Verso, 2001), 134–145; Trollinger and Trollinger, *Righting America*, 149.

¹² Regarding the following discussion, thanks much to Zach Spidel for his assiduous research into the social scientific literature on religious nonaffiliation.

¹³ See the introduction for a thorough discussion of Hout and Fischer’s work.

¹⁴ Michael Hout and Claude S. Fischer, “Explaining Why More Americans Have No Religious Preference: Political Backlash and Generational Succession, 1987–2012,” *Sociological Science*, 1(2014): 433-438.

¹⁵ Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2010), 127.

¹⁶ Hout and Fischer, 437.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 443.

¹⁸ David E. Campbell, Geoffrey C. Layman, John C. Green, and Nathanael G. Sumaktoyo, “Putting Politics First: The Impact of Politics on American Religious and Secular Orientations,” *American Journal of Political Science* 62(July 2018): 559, 564.

¹⁹ Stephen Prothero, “Billy Graham Built a Movement. Now His Son is Dismantling It.” *Politico*, February 24, 2018, <https://politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/24/billy-graham-evangelical-decline-franklin-graham-217077>.

²⁰ Paul A. Djupe, Jacob A. Neihsel, and Anand E. Sokhey, “Reconsidering the Role of Politics in Leaving Religion: The Importance of Affiliation,” *American Journal of Political Science* 62(January 2018): 161.

²¹ See also: Joseph O'Brian Baker and Buster Smith, "None Too Simple: Examining Issues of Religious Nonbelief and Non-belonging in the United States," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 48(2009): 719-733; Stratos Patrikios, "American Republican Religion? Disentangling the Causal Link between Religion and Politics in the US," *Political Behavior* 30(2008): 367-389; Stratos Patrikios, "Self-Stereotyping as 'Evangelical Republican': An Empirical Test," *Politics and Religion* 6(2013): 800-822; Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*.

²² Djupe, Neiheisel, and Sokhey, "Reconsidering the Role of Politics," 162.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Swartz, "New Left and Evangelical Radicalism," 60.

²⁵ Tony Campolo and Shane Claiborne, "What is RLC?" <https://www.redletterchristians.org/what-is-rlc>; Jack Jenkins, "At 'Red Letter Revival,' Leaders Give Voice to Evangelicals on the Margins," *Religion News Service*, April 9, 2018, <https://religionnews.com/2018/04/09/at-red-letter-revival-leaders-give-voice-to-evangelicals-on-the-margins>. Conservative evangelical leaders strongly denounced the RLC as not evangelical and not truly Christian: Albert Mohler, "The Briefing," *Albert Mohler*, April 12, 2018, <https://albertmohler.com/2018/04/12/briefing-4-12-18>; Ken Ham, "Should We Sacrifice the Gospel on the Altar of Social Justice?" [answersingenesis.org](https://answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/2018/04/23/should-we-sacrifice-gospel-altar-social-justice), April 23, 2018, <https://answersingenesis.org/blogs/ken-ham/2018/04/23/should-we-sacrifice-gospel-altar-social-justice>.

²⁶ Daniel Cox, "Are White Evangelicals Sacrificing the Future in Search of the Past?" *fivethirtyeight.com*, January 24, 2018, <https://fivethirtyeight.com/features/are-white-evangelicals-sacrificing-the-future-in-search-of-the-past>, 4.

²⁷ Jones and Cox, *America's Changing Religious Identity*, 11, 20-21. Cox, "Are White Evangelicals Sacrificing the Future in Search of the Past?" 1, 4-5.

²⁸ Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “The Danvers Statement,” November 1988, http://www.churchcouncil.org/iccp_org/Documents_ICCP/English/17_Male_Female_DistinctiveD_A&D.pdf.

²⁹ Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, “The Nashville Statement,” August 29, 2017, <https://cbmw.org/nashville-statement>.

³⁰ Harry Bruinius, “Amid Evangelical decline, growing split between young Christians and church elders,” *Christian Science Monitor*, October 10, 2017.

³¹ Putnam and Campbell, *American Grace*, 121.

³² Robert P. Jones, “White Evangelicals Can’t Quit Donald Trump,” *The Atlantic*, April 20, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/04/white-evangelicals-cant-quit-donald-trump/558461>.

³³ Jennifer Rubin, “The Religious Right Isn’t Doing Much for Religion,” *Washington Post*, December 15, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/wp/2017/12/15/the-religious-right-isnt-doing-much-for-religion/?utm_term=.cca66456a2e9.

³⁴ Rod Dreher, “Is the Nashville Statement a Surrender?” *The American Conservative*, September 6, 2017, <http://www.theamericanconservative.com/dreher/is-the-nashville-statement-a-surrender>.

³⁵ To give but one example of the Christian Right’s obsession with the secularization of the West, here is Answers in Genesis CEO Ken Ham: ““It’s clear there’s a spiritual war going on throughout the West . . . as the Christian and even-nominal biblical influence wanes . . . Young people are evangelized in the religion of naturalism and evolution every day in government-run schools, and many churches have put little effort into equipping young people to trust the Bible and stand boldly for truth. Even worse, many churches have encouraged compromise with evolutionary ideas and have twisted God’s Word to try to fit with today’s secular worldview.” “Less than 5% of Australian Freshmen Are Creationists,” September 01, 2018, <https://answersingenesis.org/the-word-of-god/less-5-australian-freshmen-are-creationists>.

³⁶ David Voas and Mark Chaves, “Is the United States a Counterexample to the Secularization Thesis?” *American Journal of Sociology* 121 (March 2016): 1518.

³⁷ Voas and Chaves, 1520.

³⁸ Hout and Fischer (2014), 424, 429–432.

³⁹ Landon Schnabel and Sean Bock, “The Persistent and Exceptional Intensity of American Religion: A Response to Recent Research,” *Sociological Science*, 4(2017): 686, 697.

⁴⁰ Voas and Chaves, 1519. It should be noted that the authors go on to argue that, whether or not “American religion is in some sense internally secularized,” the data in and of itself unequivocally demonstrates “the United States is not a secularization counterexample” (1520).

⁴¹ Bryan R. Wilson, *Religion in Secular Society* (Harmondsworth, Middlesex, UK: 1966), 121, 138; Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society* (London: Macmillan, 1967), 36–37.

⁴² Steve Bruce, *Religion in the Modern World: From Cathedrals to Cults* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 163; Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defence of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 165.