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Right still reads Falwell's playbook

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 1, 2012

President Ronald Reagan shakes hands with the Rev. Jerry Falwell, right, during a convention of National Religious Broadcasters on Jan. 30, 1984, in Washington. (AP Photo/Ira Schwarz)

Analysis

Religion in America has long been prominent in the public square, but it is only recently that the primary face of religion in political discourse has been the face of conservative evangelical Christianity. The outsize role of conservative evangelicals in the Republican Party nominating process attests to the success of a group of conservative pastors such as the Rev. Jerry Falwell, the Rev. Pat Robertson and others in representing the views of their adherents and bringing their flocks to the polls.

At the time of the American founding, there were a variety of religious accommodations in the different states. The Congregational church remained established by law in Massachusetts and Connecticut well into the 1800s. (The First Amendment prohibition against an established religion did not apply to the states until the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment after the Civil War.) In the Southern states, Americans had grown accustomed to an Anglican establishment during the colonial era, but most states chose disestablishment during the Revolutionary generation. Two states, and only two, Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, had long histories of religious tolerance.

In the antebellum period, the fight against slavery was born in the Christian churches. In the late 19th and early 20th century, such efforts as the YMCA and the temperance movement developed to inculcate Christian values, with a decidedly anti-Catholic emphasis. The Social Gospel movement, and the advent of the historical critical method of biblical studies, swept many churches of the Reformation, provoking a reaction in some circles that came to be known as fundamentalism. Fundamentalism denounced the Social Gospel movement and other efforts at social reform, but it largely kept to itself throughout most of the 20th century, building a vast network of churches and schools that were separated from the cultural mainstream.

In the 1960s, the most prominent religious figures in American life all hailed from the political left. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. led the civil rights movement, became a vocal critic of the Vietnam War, and died in Memphis, Tenn., where he had gone to fight for better wages for that city?s sanitation workers. The Berrigan brothers -- Dan a Jesuit and Philip a Josephite priest -- were among the most famous antiwar protesters. William Sloane Coffin, chaplain at Yale University in New Haven, Conn., and subsequently senior minister at Riverside Church

in New York, was a reliably lefty voice in the public square. In 1970, Jesuit Fr. Robert Drinan sought and won a seat in Congress on an antiwar platform, becoming the first Catholic priest to serve in Congress. He won re-election five times and was among the most visible progressive religious figures in America.

In 1979, Falwell formed the Moral Majority with the expressed purpose of organizing conservative Christians, registering them to vote and educating them about the issues the group thought most pressing. To justify his march into the public square, Falwell had to overcome the traditional Baptist belief in ?the spirituality of the church,? which held that the proper role of religion was to save souls and not to concern itself with ?the externals.? Falwell believed that America was beset by moral decline, as evidenced by legalized abortion, the sexual libertinism of the counterculture, and the spread of pornography and sex education in the schools. The final straw that broke the camel?s back was a 1978 decision by the IRS regarding the tax-exempt status of racially segregated Christian academies. It was one thing to let the mainstream culture pursue un-Christian ways, but quite another when the federal government sought to change the rules of the road for private Christian schools. Conservative Christians saw this as a direct attack on the fundamentalist subculture that merited a response.

The Moral Majority sought to craft a political message that was open to non-fundamentalists by rooting itself in shared moral precepts rather than in doctrinal concerns. The group articulated a four-part agenda. The Moral Majority was pro-life, though it never opposed the death penalty and actively supported the Reagan administration?s militaristic policies in Central America. It was pro-family, by which it meant opposed to gay rights, sex education in the public schools, and the Equal Rights Amendment. Antigay fundraising appeals consistently garnered the highest rate of return. The organization was ?pro-moral,? opposed to pornography, the drug culture, and all manner of sexual libertinism. Finally, the group proclaimed itself, in contradistinction with those who had protested the Vietnam War, to be ?pro-American,? firmly supportive of the Reagan administration?s arms buildup and, most importantly, celebrating America as a nation with a divinely ordained mission.

At the time, and subsequently, most political observers focused on evangelical concerns about the so-called ?social issues? like abortion and gay marriage. But, in fact, it was this last of the four agenda items that has had the most profound impact on U.S. politics. Falwell and his colleagues developed a specifically religious language of American exceptionalism. When you hear Newt Gingrich discuss the American founding as a religious event, or hear Mitt Romney dismiss President Barack Obama as a European-style socialist, or hear Sarah Palin deliver one of her ?Gee, whiz, aren?t we the most blessed nation on Earth? speeches, they are all reading from the Falwell playbook.

Ignoring the influences of the Enlightenment, or of key Greek and Roman classics, or of the Country Whig ideology in Britain on the American founding, this religiously rich view of America?s birth and ongoing, covenanted exceptionalism has had two principal consequences, one on politics and one on the Christian churches. First, American politics are seen as a battle between the God-fearing and the godless, those who recognize what is for fundamentalists and other conservative Christians the self-evident, divinely rooted call to American greatness, and those whose views are a bit more sophisticated and less jingoistic. This paints political opponents as betrayers of the American creed, as heretics and/or traitors, those who seek to undermine the country from within.

The second, and more frequently overlooked, consequence of Falwell?s brand of American exceptionalism is that it reduces the Christian faith to a prop for Americanism. Religion became synonymous with patriotism.

Just as Falwell?s career was, in part, a reaction to liberal clerics before him, there has been a counterreaction to conservative evangelical politics, although it was a long time coming. As late as 2004, Sen. John Kerry seemed allergic to discussing religious values and how they shaped his views. In Ohio, when a staffer wanted to

organize an event directed at Catholic swing voters in that quintessential swing state, the upper management of the Kerry campaign famously said, ?We don?t do white churches.? Kerry lost the Catholic vote and the presidency. In 2008, the Obama campaign mounted the most significant and successful outreach to religious voters any Democrat had managed in three decades. Once in office, his relations with religious voters have not been as well-managed or successful. He will have to prove himself again to that segment this year.

The GOP nomination appears to have come down to a contest between Gingrich, who embodies the kind of absolutist certainty that earned Falwell his place in political lore, and Romney, whose relatively moderate political past demands that he find new ways to appeal to conservative white evangelicals. Both men will likely continue to paint the American founding as a distinctly religious event and America as a nation uniquely called by God to greatness. Some would call that bad religion and worse history, but it still makes for good politics among the American right that Falwell baptized.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics on his Distinctly Catholic blog on the *NCR* website, at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic. His latest book, *God?s Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right*, has just been published by HarperOne.]

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