

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

Divine Politics

THE SOURCE: "The Sword of the Lord: How 'Otherworldly' Fundamentalism Became a Political Power" by George Marsden, in *Books & Culture*, March–April 2006.

SO PERVASIVE IS THE INFLUENCE of the Religious Right on contemporary American politics that it is sometimes hard to remember that the deep involvement of evangelical Protestants in politics dates only to the 1970s. Earlier in the 20th century, a few prominent preachers campaigned against alcohol or communism, but as a group, evangelists were largely inert politically. Mainline Protestants criticized them endlessly for their inward-looking emphasis on conversion and the private practice of faith.

According to George Marsden, a historian at the University of Notre Dame and author of *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (2nd ed., 2005), it was the South's gradual integration into the American mainstream that propelled fundamentalists into public life. Until the mid-20th century, the fundamentalism preached by Southern Baptists and other evangelicals fit snugly into a "custodial" role in insular Southern culture, allowing them to ride herd on public morality. The turmoil of the civil rights era all but guaranteed that any evangelical forays onto the national political scene would be tainted by charges of racism, but other developments were already pushing believers from their provincial cocoon. Marsden cites a massive migration that occurred from the 1930s through the '50s, when white Southerners carried their values

north and west across America. Evidence of its effect can be seen in the breakthrough success of Billy Graham's 1949 Los Angeles crusade, in the grass-roots support for Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign, and in the successful California gubernatorial run of Ronald Reagan in 1966. "From that time on," writes Marsden, "it would be difficult to find an aspect of renewed religious and cultural militancy of the emerging Religious Right that did not have a major southern component."

Something still held back the fundamentalists' political tide, however. In 1965, a young Jerry Falwell delivered a sermon titled "Ministers and Marchers" in response to growing calls to respond to antiwar demonstrations: Evangelical Christians must "preach the Word," Falwell exhorted, not "reform the externals." It was not until the late 1960s and early '70s, says Marsden, that "changes in standards for public decency, aggressive second-wave feminism, gay activism, and challenges to conventional family structures" spurred evangelicals to greater political engagement. (Evangelical opinion on abortion, he notes, remained divided until the late 1970s.) Perhaps inspired by the crusade of Phyllis Schlafly (a Catholic) against the Equal Rights Amendment during the early 1970s, and disillusioned by "born again" President Jimmy Carter, whom they had supported, fundamentalists finally flexed their political muscle in 1979 with the founding of Falwell's Moral Majority.

As fundamentalists asserted themselves, it was precisely their character as moralizing "outsiders," says Marsden, that allowed them to rail against America as the new Baby-

lon while simultaneously proclaiming it God's chosen nation. Their historical experience kept America's fundamentalists from following in the path of other militant religious groups, such as Islamists. The Baptist tradition from which most American fundamentalism springs has always stressed separation of church and state. And in America's revolutionary period, Protestants were closely allied with the national cause, unlike the status quo religious groups of Europe, for example. Thus, while American fundamentalists are not especially more pacific than their Islamic counterparts, because of their unique historical experience they are perfectly comfortable with exhorting their nation to act as "an agency used by God in literal warfare against the forces of evil." It's a slippery, complicated path, and Marsden ends with a reminder that the Bible is filled with cautionary stories about mixing political power and influence with "unambiguous moral obligations."

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Ungodless Nation

THE SOURCE: "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society" by Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann, in *American Sociological Review* (April 2006).

IN AN ERA OF INCREASING religious tolerance, only one group of Americans approaches something like pariah status: atheists.

In a survey of more than 2,000 people, nearly 40 percent said that atheists, much more so than Muslims and homosexuals, did not agree "at all" with their vision of American society, report Penny