

# CHAPTER 5

## THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

*Why do conservative religious voices, which make a minority of the religious population, get so much of the attention in our culture?*

### KEY TERMS

- American exceptionalism
- Biblical inerrancy
- Complementarianism
- Dispensationalism
- Neoliberalism

### OBJECTIVES:

- Understand the similarities and differences between Evangelical Christianity and Christian Fundamentalism, as well as how they are connected to the religious right.
- Understand the key role that religion has played, and continues to play, in American politics, and how this affects the general public.
- Understand how the religious right uses conservative ideology to implement their religious beliefs into politics and, thus, the everyday life of all Americans.

### INTRODUCTION

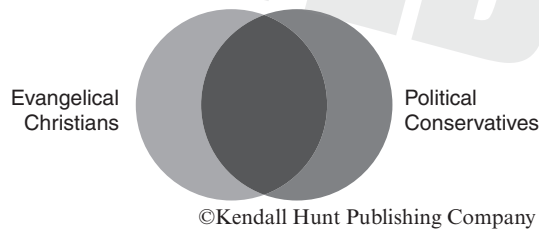
As we have read in other chapters, religion as an institution can never be understood in isolation from other social institutions. The messiness and complexity of the real world mean that religion both impacts how other institutions, such as the family, and the economy work and, as we have seen, is impacted by these institutions. How is religion shaped? At different points in history, the importance we place on religious ideas, the importance of particular religions, the ways in which we interpret sacred texts and make use of them, the significance of special rituals . . . all of these things have changed from time to time and from culture to culture. Thus, we know that not only religion contributes to how we act and view the world around us, but the world outside of religion also contributes to how we act and view our own religion.

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In particular, we have seen in the United States an increasingly visible intertwining of religion and politics. Each has helped to shape the other. Most notably, this has occurred on the conservative end of the religious and political spectrum. Of course, religion has long been a part of politics in this country, but it has recently taken on unprecedented significance. This allows us, as sociologists, an opportunity to examine this phenomenon, so we can better understand the forces that bring religion and politics together, under what circumstances, and to what effect.



There is no doubt that the combination of both evangelical and fundamentalist Christianity and conservative politics has been a force to be reckoned with in shaping our world today. But conservatism in the government and conservatism in religious institutions have not always been so bound up with one another. This is a recent phenomenon. We might tend to assume that they have always shared a significant amount of overlap with one another as they do now, but in fact, it has only been in the past 30 to 40 years that the two have become as tightly woven together as we see them today.



It is during this period (the recent past) that we see the emergence of what we now call the Christian Right. The Christian Right refers to the large group of people, from ordinary church members to professional lobbyists, media personalities, and

congressional leaders, who actively promote a conservative Christian agenda in the halls of government. Further, we describe some of the ways the Christian Right works to accomplish their goals as well as, of course, discussing what some of those specific goals include. But first, we begin with a little history. . .

## CHRISTIAN EVANGELICALISM AND CHRISTIAN FUNDAMENTALISM: SOME BASICS

In order to understand the ways the Christian Right developed, it is helpful to understand the evolution of conservative Christianity that can be described as either evangelical or fundamentalist. The two terms, evangelical and fundamentalist, describe a similar strain of Protestant Christianity, but they are not exactly the same.

Evangelicalism describes the brand of Christianity that is more conservative theologically and politically than the brand of Christianity we call the mainline. Two of the most important theological characteristics of evangelicalism are:

They believe in **biblical inerrancy**, which means that the Bible is the true word of God and is without any errors.

In order to receive everlasting life, one must repent of one's sins and accept the Lord Jesus Christ as one's savior. Personal salvation is critical, and one must be "born-again." The experience of being born-again is oftentimes a central point in an evangelical Christians' biography and sense of personal identity. Because of the requirement to be born-again, evangelical Christians also emphasize the importance of proselytizing or spreading the word in order to convert people who have not been "saved."

**Biblical inerrancy** The idea that the Bible is the literal word of God, is completely factual, and contains no errors



Additionally, evangelicals tend to hold onto traditional views of family. Fathers and husbands are expected to be leaders in the household, decision-makers, and breadwinners. Wives and mothers are expected to be nurturing and care-giving supporters of their family, community, and their churches. Children are expected to be obedient.

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**Complementarism** The view that women and men are essentially different and thus have separate but equal and necessary roles to play.

Their view of gender relations is called **complementarianism**. That is, drawing from Biblical justification, they argue that women and men complement each other but are not the same as one another in terms of the roles God has in mind for each of them. Feminists, mainline Christians, and other groups point out that this complementarianism viewpoint is misleading in part because women are never afforded a “role” that accords them any substantial institutional or social power.

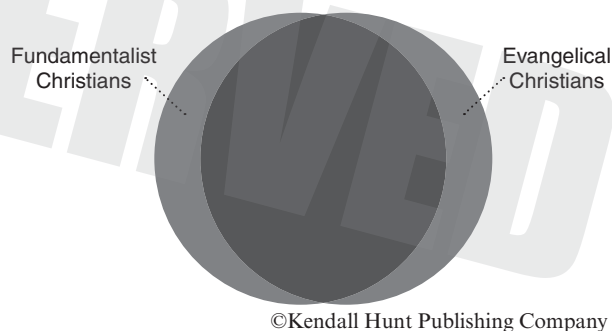
Evangelical Christians also maintain a strict sexual ethic. They view homosexuality as unequivocally sinful, so same-sex relationships are forbidden. Premarital sex is frowned upon, divorce is highly discouraged, and “no-fault” divorce is not an option in some communities.

These beliefs are coupled with actions that encourage significant community investment and religious devotion and study. Social life tends to revolve around one’s church, and one is expected to pray and read the Bible on a regular, if not daily, basis.

Earlier, we said that Christian evangelicalism and Christian fundamentalism are similar but not the same. That is because Christian fundamentalism can be understood as a kind of subset of Christian evangelicalism. Remember that evangelicalism when compared to beliefs and practices of mainline Christians is more conservative. We might place the two on a continuum.



Christian fundamentalists believe in similar values and ideas as evangelicals but are even stricter and more conservative. But if we were to make a Venn diagram on how fundamentalism and evangelicalism are related, it might look like this:



You will notice that there is a great deal of overlap between fundamentalism and evangelicalism, but there is an area where the two do not overlap. Where they overlap, fundamentalism and evangelicalism share a conservative and traditional view of people’s roles and the importance of being born-again.

However, where they do not overlap, where they differ, is primarily in two areas. First, fundamentalists believe in Biblical inerrancy, but they also believe that the Bible is not metaphorical but rather can be read in a very literal manner. This, in fact, is what

describes fundamentalists in any religion. Second, fundamentalists have a specific belief about the final book in the Bible—the Book of Revelation, something we will discuss next. Before we get to that, however, let us look at the sociocultural roots of American Christian fundamentalism.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON FUNDAMENTALISM

Christian fundamentalism can be traced back to German Biblical scholars who, in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, began asserting that the Bible was a product of human authors. These scholars took a historical approach to studying the origins of the Bible. In short, through careful historical and archaeological investigation, the Bible had multiple authors. The discovery of ancient texts revealed that there are multiple early translations of both the Old Testament and the New Testament, and depending on the source, some books were included and others were left out.

These scholars concluded that humans intervened at all stages of the process in creating the Bible as most Christians know it today. In other words, multiple recorded passages from different origins would end up in today's Bible. Other people had to



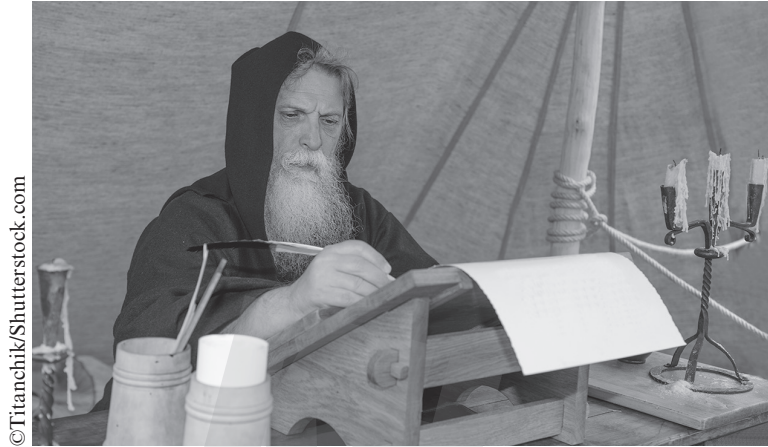
translate those passages into Hebrew and Greek. Then other people had to edit the passages and decide what to include and what not to include. Then still other people had to take those passages and combine them in order to create whole books in the Bible. Finally, still other people had to decide what books would make up the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The scholars that examined these stages in the making of the Bible concluded that the Bible is a human product and not one that emerged from a divine source.

Therefore, the way people should read and interpret the Bible ought to be read as a human created story. The scholars were by and large not arguing that the Bible was not a sacred text, only that it could not be understood as the literal “word of God.”



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As you might imagine, calling into question the divine provenance of the Bible caused a furor for some people. Some American Protestants expressed their concern that people would begin to question the divinity of Jesus, for instance, or the importance of the Israelites in God's plan. This growing number of people in the United States who emphatically denied the interpretation of the Bible as human-made would eventually coalesce into the group we now refer to as Christian Fundamentalists.



They were not called fundamentalists until the early 1900s though. What solidified the movement and helped give its name was the publication of a series of pamphlets calls "The Fundamentals: A Testimony of the Truth" that appeared beginning in 1910. These publications asserted that the Bible was of divine origin, that Jesus was "God-made man," that prayer could bring about real-life changes, as well as quite a few other claims. Among those other claims is an idea that is vital for anyone wanting to fully understand the motivations and values of Christian fundamentalists, and that is the topic of our next section.

Millenarianism is the belief that significant, history-changing events take place every 1,000 years. It is important to note that millenarianism is not unique to Christian fundamentalism and that there are quite a few groups who adhere to various kinds of millenarianism. However, what is unique to Christian fundamentalism is the kinds of millenarianism that support their belief system.



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throughout the book. Just to name a very few of the examples, there are seven seals to be broken, seven trumpets that announce the seven bowls poured on the earth, and a seven-horned lamb with seven eyes.

At some point, following multiple battles, plagues, and all assortments of trials and tribulations, the dragon is cast into a bottomless pit, Christian martyrs are resurrected from the dead, and Jesus Christ would reign for 1,000 years.

Given the allegorical nature of the stories in the Book of Revelation, it is not surprising that there have been countless different interpretations of all of the book's characters, events, and locations. Christian fundamentalists view the book as a prediction for how the world will end and when Jesus will return. Many fundamentalist (as well as evangelical) Christians believe that the world is in a heightened state of disorder and turmoil, and this indicates that we are nearing the apocalyptic end of the world. In general, the present state of the world in their eyes is such that they wish to hasten its end in order to also hasten the return of Christ and return to a peaceful world order.

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### Dispensationalism

The idea that God has divided history into well-defined eras of time.

Related to Christian fundamentalists' interpretation of the Book of Revelation is their belief that history can be divided up into epochs or long periods of time called dispensations. **Dispensationalism**, then, describes the belief that history is divided into various dispensations. According to one interpretation by fundamentalist Christians, we are in the final dispensation prior to Christ's return. Some fundamentalists have even argued that there is evidence for this even in the first book of the Bible: Genesis. They interpret the story of God's creation of the world as taking place in millennial dispensations. According to Genesis, God created the world in six days and on the seventh, he rested. Some fundamentalists popularized the idea that if one day in God's perspective is 1,000 years from a human perspective, then we can date the beginning of the world to a little before 4,000 BCE (Aldridge, 2013: 121). The day God rested? Well, in this view, it is right around the corner.

As we said, the Book of Revelation is an important feature that contributes to fundamentalist Christians' ideas about the world and their place in it. There is another



popular interpretation of the book that sees the world in a state of chaos, turmoil, and sin, but in order for the dispensation to end (signaling Christ's return), it is necessary to establish a more Godly state of the world. So, some believe that Christ will return only after a millennium in which a Christian-dominated society has "paved the way." These fundamentalist Christians, therefore, are motivated to establish a world that matches their Christian moral values and belief system. One means of accomplishing this is through political action, and their aim is to establish the United States as a solidly Christian nation, which we will discuss as follows. However, before we do that, let us discuss some of the sociological characteristics of fundamentalist Christians.

## **FUNDAMENTALISM IN THE 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY**

If you do not identify as a Christian fundamentalist, the word "fundamentalist" might bring to your mind a number of different images or associations. Some people automatically think of fundamentalists as being extremists. Some might have other stereotypes that come to mind. Interestingly, contrary to some generalizations that portray fundamentalists as uneducated, southern, and rural, the fundamentalists in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were highly educated and lived in big cities in the northeast and midwest (Bendroth, 2012). They included many intellectuals and scholars who offered an opposite account of what their opponents were saying.

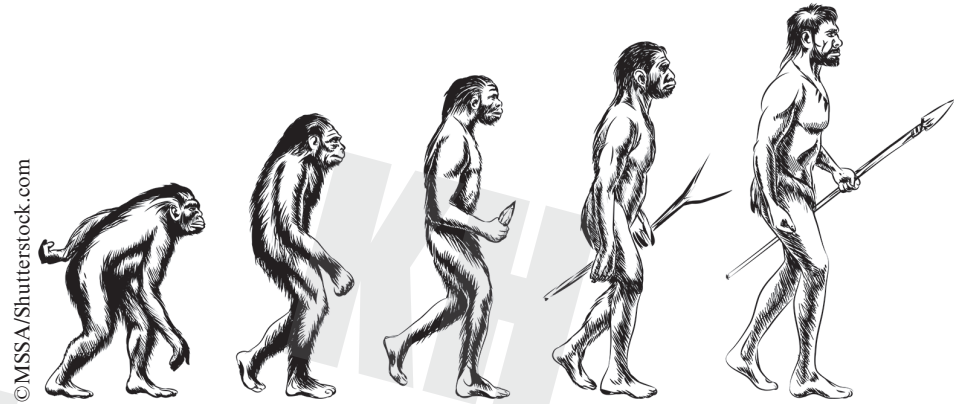
During the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Christian fundamentalists were not as stigmatized as they are in many social circles today. They merely represented a sizable group of people who shared particular viewpoints and religious ideas. Neither



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disparaged nor placed on a pedestal, theirs was just more or less accepted along the continuum of religious perspectives and beliefs. That changed, however, with an important court case that captured the widespread attention of Americans.



In 1925, the Scopes Trial, sometimes referred to as the Scopes Monkey Trial, a teacher in Tennessee was sanctioned for teaching evolution (which was against the law to do so in public schools there at the time). Christian fundamentalists were particularly strident against the teaching of evolution. The court case drew media frenzy, and fundamentalists were pilloried in national press as simple-minded. Such widespread derision contributed to the weakening of the visibility and prominence of Christian fundamentalism for a number of years. Fundamentalism was seen as antiscience and antimodernity.

While fundamentalism waned, mainline American religious participation was quite high. The United States saw a rise in church membership and financial giving. In fact, some historians called this post-World War II increase in religious involvement as the second great religious revival.

So even though the First Amendment in the Constitution protects freedom of religion (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion . . . [nor] prohibiting the free exercise thereof”), many Americans did not balk when the separation of church and state grew a little less separate. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “In God we trust” was a phrase that was added to money. Additionally, the Pledge of Allegiance was established (which, of course, included the phrase “under God”).

Still, Christian fundamentalism had taken backseat for many years following the Scopes trial but began to emerge again as a popular movement in the 1960s and 1970s. This was due in part to what some believed was a corruption of American society and a flagging interest in biblical teachings. The “pill” was approved as a form of contraception in 1960. For many people, the introduction of the pill foretold a period of immorality and lasciviousness since it freed women up to having more control over their bodies and their sexual behavior. In 1962, the Supreme Court ruled that prayer in public schools was unconstitutional. In 1963, *Time Magazine* featured a prominent cover that merely contained the phrase: “Is God Dead?” and this fueled fears that America was “losing its way” as more people were questioning their religious beliefs. Also, in 1963, John F. Kennedy was assassinated.



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Throughout the 1960s, civil unrest was a ubiquitous sign of the times given the fight to end segregation and racist Jim Crow laws. The U.S. military escalated its involvement in Vietnam throughout the early part of that decade. In the mid-1960s, the hippie was popularized. The Black Panther Party formed in 1966. In 1968, both Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy were assassinated. In 1967 and 1968, there were numerous riots in large urban cities that resulted in millions of dollars of damage and destruction and not a few human casualties. In 1969, the Stonewall Riots took place, an event that served as the impetus for the gay rights movement.

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The Manson murders took place also in 1969. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was high on everyone's radar. In 1973, the Supreme Court legalized abortion (*Roe v. Wade*). In 1974, President Nixon, facing impeachment at the time, resigned from office.



This period was a tumultuous one for America, no matter how you look at it. It was a time of tragic loss, but it was also a pivotal time for a renewed drive toward equality and social justice. For fundamentalist Christians, it served as a call for action and thus began a resurgence in fundamentalism.

### FUNDAMENTALISM AS IT IS LIVED TODAY

Nancy Ammerman is probably the best-known sociologist to explore Christian fundamentalism. In her book *Bible Believer: Fundamentalists in the Modern World* (1987), she outlines some characteristics of fundamentalists today. The most central factor



that distinguishes fundamentalists from other forms of religious traditionalism or conservatism is the belief in the Bible as inerrant. This means that they believe the Bible was not merely inspired by God but the Bible represents God's word. Thus, the Bible does not contain any errors and is not open to interpretation. Equally important, the Bible is to be understood literally.

Additionally, fundamentalists tend to see the world in very "black-and-white" terms and have a low tolerance for uncertainty. In fact, Ammerman notes, religious fundamentalism grows when there are events or occurrences in society that threaten people's sense of stability and security. Her observation of this is evident when we look back to the times when the popularity of Christian fundamentalism surges. You will recall from earlier in this chapter that the first time is when Biblical scholars question the belief that the Bible is the divine word of God and instead assert that it is a human creation. The second time fundamentalism saw an increase in growth was following the tumultuous 1960s and early 1970s.

Fundamentalists believe God has a plan for everyone and that people can relate to God as though their relationship is contractual. In other words, fundamentalists believe that, for example, "If I do this, God will do that" (Ibid., p. 41). Thus, when fundamentalists sin, they believe they will be appropriately disciplined, and when they repent, they will be forgiven. If one believes in Christ as their savior, God will grant them eternal life. This last belief, that repenting of one's sins and taking the Lord as one's savior, is imperative. Thus, evangelizing is an important activity, and it emphasizes the importance of witnessing to others and working to convince others to accept Jesus as their savior.

While the inerrancy of the Bible and the view that it should be taken literally are vital to Christian fundamentalists today, a second central aspect has to do with the view of the "end times." Specifically, many fundamentalists subscribe to what is called "dispensational premillennialism." Recall that a dispensation refers to a certain period of time and we are, it is believed, in the final dispensation prior to Christ's reign. Because this is thought to be the final dispensation, many fundamentalist Christians feel an urgency to convert as many nonbelievers as they can.

This view of the end of the world is evident in the popularity of the *Left Behind* book series by the authors Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins. In it, the authors describe how the end times unfold. First, the rapture takes place when Christians, both those still alive and those who are deceased, are brought up to Heaven. The eponymous "left behind" are forced to live in a world of disorder and disarray. Some of those left behind choose to repent and be born-again Christians, and they become the protagonists of the 16 book series in which they try and take down a world leader who is in fact the Antichrist.

Because the Book of Revelation is so important, the interpretations different groups of evangelicals and fundamentalists have of Revelation also have pertinent sociological effects. For instance, among those who argue that we should understand the Bible in a literal manner, some see the story of Adam and Eve as evidence for women's subservient role to men in society. According to the book of Genesis, Adam was created first and Eve was made out of a rib from Adam. Adam the first of the male species, therefore, from the very beginning has a kind priority and status. Strengthening this view regarding sex and gender, you may be familiar with the story detailing how it was Eve who first ate from the forbidden tree of knowledge. She then passed the

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fruit of the tree to Adam and thus gave rise to the “fall of man” or the “original sin.” According to the story, this is the reason why women suffer pain during childbirth.

Remember that some fundamentalist Christians interpret the stories in Revelation as suggesting that Christ will return only after the present world has been transformed into one that has been morally purified. If one adheres to that view, that too will influence one’s view on sex and gender. Eve (who symbolizes the more general category of “women”) is ultimately responsible for the original sin. Many Christians believe, therefore, that we are born into sin and thus must repent of our sins and be saved. While we will discuss this in more depth in Chapter 7, in this view, men are implied to be rational and reasoning. Women are emotional and impulsive and a temptation to men. Subsequently, men should generally be the ones in control and are better suited to the work of leadership and guidance.

Another consequence of according centrality to the Book of Revelation and interpreting the present era as one in which we are closing in on the end times is also reflected in international politics. The state of Israel has a special role to play in the end times, so the Christian Right advocates that the United States do what it can to support Israel (even at the expense of Palestinians’ struggle for equality and independence). As one sociologist writes: “[D]espite their widespread anti-Semitism, dispensationalists have raised much money to help right-wing Jewish extremists reclaim the Temple Mount in Jerusalem from the Muslims who have their holiest, centuries-old shrines on the site” (McGuire, 1992: 48).



Similarly, for those who believe that we are in the final dispensation, Christians must work to prepare the way for Jesus’s second coming. That means that more Christians ought to be represented in the halls of power. The Christian Right, then, should actively work toward electing fundamentalist and evangelical Christians to public office. Further, we will discuss how the Christian Right has been able to coalesce into an identifiable social movement that has quite a bit of power when it comes to shaping the U.S. government and its policies and legislation.

## THE RISE OF TELEVANGELISM

Certainly, one of the major contributors to Christian fundamentalism's popularity has to do with religious leaders' ability to convey their messages to a wide audience. Television served that function well, though, as we shall see, not without some significant complications. So, let us begin here by discussing what made the rise of televangelism possible in the first place.

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) oversees the rules that regulate television stations and their broadcasts. Early on, the FCC mandated that television channels must include programming that bolstered the "public interest." Networks frequently offered free programming to mainline Protestants, Catholics, and Jews. However, in 1960, the FCC ruled that television stations could use paid programming that would still count toward their expectation that channels include public interest programming, more conservative and evangelical religious organizations began broadcasting their own shows.



Among the early "adopters" was the evangelical preacher Billy Graham, whose preaching would eventually reach prime time on the major networks. Later, the advent of cable television was an important contributor to the rise of televangelism—most notably when Pat Robertson developed his own network, the Christian Broadcasting Network, which with cable could be broadcast nationwide. Similarly, another evangelical station, the Trinity Broadcasting Network, began airing its shows in 1973.

These developments opened the door for a whole host of charismatic preachers. Jim and Tamme Faye Bakker, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggart, and Oral Roberts took on heightened visibility because of their television shows, and taken as a whole, they represent the origins of the phenomenon of televangelism that took place in the 1970s and 1980s. While estimates regarding how many people tuned in to this programming on a regular basis to these televangelists, conservative numbers

counted viewers in the millions. Recall that prior to this period, most religious television shows were produced by Catholics and mainline Protestants. However, in the 1980s, 90% of religious television shows were evangelical and fundamentalist (Allitt, 2003). Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians clearly leveraged their newly granted access to the airwaves to their advantage.

While televangelists proved to be quite effective at spreading their messages to millions of people, some of them bore the brunt of increasing scrutiny by a growing public. This is because many of the television shows included extensive pleas for donations from viewers. However, the use of the millions of dollars that flowed into these shows was at times misused, mismanaged, and even exploitative. The scandals involving Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker make this fact apparent.

The Bakkers were notorious for the way they sought financial contributions from TV viewers. “Tammy had the gift of being able to weep at will and sometimes, appearing to be emotionally transported by her interviews with born-again guests, let the tears flow freely. Her mascara was so heavy that it mixed with the tears flowing down her cheeks, creating a Gothic web of black tracks. Nothing made her weep more than a falling-off and donations, and nothing seems so well calculated to bring forth more cash than another bout of sobbing” (Allitt, 2003: 192). So, Tammy Faye was very successful at increasing her program’s revenue from contributions by the show’s viewers. However, it was later discovered that many of the donations coming in were being used to support a lavish lifestyle of Rolls Royce cars, fur coats, yachts, and mansions. It was also discovered that Tammy Faye had sought professional treatment for drug addiction and her husband had been carrying on a long sexual affair with a secretary and had been photographed with prostitutes. Jim Bakker was later accused of fraud and served a six-year prison sentence.

In a similar scandal, Oral Roberts, who had his own television ministry, told viewers in 1987 that unless his viewers donated \$8,000,000 to his ministry, God would “call him home.” In other words, he pronounced that God would end his life unless that money flowed in from his viewers. As a result of his plea, his ministry received over \$9,100,000.

## TV BECOMES POLITICAL

Televangelist became synonymous for “scoundrel” to many Americans following these scandals. However, at the same time, the medium of television also helped religious leaders to mobilize a significant portion of the American population around conservative religious issues.

Jerry Falwell, for instance, began his political group the Moral Majority in 1979. Pat Robertson formed the Christian Coalition 10 years later. They, alongside other “born-again” politicians, preachers, and lobbyists of the Christian Right, began aligning themselves with very conservative-minded Republicans—the first one being Ronald Reagan. In part, this was due to Regan’s designation of the Communist USSR as the “Evil Empire,” which had connotations that tied the country to the book of Revelation’s discussion of the Antichrist. This resonated strongly with conservative Christians who believed the Soviet Union to be “godless” since Communism and religion were incompatible.



Pat Robertson, the televangelist from the show *The 700 Club*, went on to run for president of the United States on the Republican ticket. While he did well in early primaries leading up to the Republican convention, in the end, he did not receive enough support to get the official nod as the Republican nominee. That position went to George Bush, Sr., himself a self-identified born-again Christian.



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Television also helped coalesce religious viewers around specific issues. Abortion was and continues to be an important issue for the Christian Right. Yet, following the Supreme Court's decision on *Roe v. Wade*, most of the activists crusading to have the decision overturned were Catholics and not evangelicals and fundamentalist Protestants. It was only when the matter got publicized on fundamentalist Christian television programs (notably, Jim Bakker and Tammy Faye Bakker's show *Praise the Lord (PTL)* and Pat Robertson's *The 700 Club*) in the 1980s that abortion became more widely associated with the Christian Right (Allitt, 2003). Operation Rescue was founded in 1987 as a formal activist and lobbying movement that was established by the Christian Right to try and abolish abortion. Operation Rescue successfully bridged Catholics with conservative Protestants to create a coalition that staged many well-attended protests and marches.

The fact that abortion is inherently related to a woman's body contributed to deliberations over women's agency and control as well as over women's roles with regard to the family and home. Thus, the ERA of 1972, which was supposed to guarantee the women's equality, also came into question by fundamentalist Christians who saw the ERA as contributing to upsetting the "natural" place of women as homemakers, mothers, and dependents (on their husbands). Phyllis Schlafly was a conservative Catholic who espoused reversing ERA. Her work resonated with many in the Christian Right who favored the biblical teaching, "Wives be subject to your husbands" (Ephesians 4:22). Schlafly helped contribute to the fact that the ERA failed to make it through all of the necessary channels in order for it to become a law.

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The Christian Right also began mobilizing around other issues as well in the political arena, notably the teaching of creationism in schools and the inclusion of public prayer in schools. Since fundamentalists argue that the Bible is inerrant and literal, the first book in the Bible, Genesis, should be read as factual and scientific. Advocates lobbied school administrators and state legislators and successfully have been able to get creationism included in some states' school curriculum so that evolution and creationism are presented as competing theories.

The desire to teach creationism rather than evolution, combined with the Supreme Court's rulings against Bible reading and school prayer in public schools, has led to two major trends in K-12 education. First of all, there has been a significant rise in the number of private schools founded by and managed by evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. The historian Patrick Allitt estimated that during the 1960s and 1970s, there were, on average, two new such schools created each day (2003). However, more recently, fundamentalist and evangelical Christians have been at the forefront of the homeschooling trend and now comprise the majority of those households in which homeschooling can be found.



The organizations Focus on the Family and The Family Research Council are also products of the Christian Right. Both had fought hard against the legalization of same-sex marriage in the more recent past. They also support traditional gender roles (something we discuss more fully in Chapter 7).

The Christian Right has proven quite effective at placing issues of morality at the center of political dialogue. What used to fall squarely in the domain of religious institutions (e.g., values pertaining to sexuality and the role of the family) are increasingly becoming part of our political institutions. This has created a strong divide in American politics.

The sociologist James Davidson Hunter famously describes this in his book: *The Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991). He has convincingly argued that there are now basically two dominant political views: on one side, people whose religion is used to support and legitimize their perspectives and beliefs. They are

The Christian Right's view that the United States is especially blessed by God, or is his "Chosen Nation," is part of what we call **American exceptionalism**. Just as the phrase implies, it is the belief that the United States is special, unique, and somehow better than other countries, usually for some inherent or divine reason. This kind of exceptionalism also works to help some in the Christian Right make sense of tragic events. For instance, both Jerry Falwell and James Dobson argued that 9/11 was a punishment for America's sins—most prominently among those "sins" included the legalization of abortion and the increasing tolerance of Americans of persons who identify along the LGBTQ spectrum.

The belief that the United States is unique, special, and blessed by God.





As we have seen, Christian Right organizations have proven to be highly instrumental when it comes to who is elected into political office. Indeed, they were crucial in George W. Bush's back-to-back presidential electoral wins given their endorsement of him. Thus, the Christian Right not only has grassroots, or ground-level influence, but also their influence reaches to Washington, DC, and beyond. What this reveals is that not only religions have the power to shape people's entire belief systems, behaviors, and morality, but they also can affect politics, legislation, and the economy. Ironically though, members of the Christian Right are strong advocates of small government, a topic to which we now turn.

## NEOLIBERALISM

**Neoliberalism** The ideology that values laissez-faire-style government and emphasizes individual agency.

**Neoliberalism** refers to the current dominant economic ideology. While “liberal” is at the root of the word “neoliberal,” it does not refer to a progressive economic agenda. “Liberal” in neoliberal is not synonymous with the Democratic political party. Liberal, in this usage, refers to the liberalism of the 1700s during which Adam Smith and other political economists advocated for a laissez-faire style of government in which the state played little role in the lives of citizens. Thus, one can easily see the ideas of conservative politicians today who are proponents of small government. While many Democrats are proponents of a neoliberal society, it has largely been the domain of Republicans who see “big government” as a problem and who work toward fewer restrictions and regulations on the free market: for example, lowering restrictions on trade barriers and making it possible for American companies to relocate to other countries where it is cheaper to operate and employ labor.

There is an additional characteristic of neoliberalism though that impacts the ways in which citizens view themselves and others. In a neoliberal era, emphasis is placed on the freedom of the individual. Citizens are encouraged to think of themselves as completely free to map out the futures of their lives. The ability and where-withal of individuals to bear the fruits of hard work and realize the American Dream



are exaggerated. Many people, as a result, believe that anyone can pull themselves up by their “bootstraps” and become wealthy or successful. Indeed, studies demonstrate that Americans still believe this and the consequences can be dire—for instance, think how often the poor are blamed for their poverty while the wealthy are seen as moral, disciplined, and hard working. Such perceptions overlook the role of social structures that limit certain people while giving a leg up to others.



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Neoliberalism, because it is an economic ideology that emphasizes laissez-faire, or reduced governmental presence in individuals’ lives, has also led to another phenomenon that is relevant to the sociology of religion. Because of widespread support for a reduction in the kinds of provisions and subsidies that have provided assistance to our most vulnerable people in society, religious institutions have had to increasingly step in. Indeed, President George W. Bush passed a series of domestic policies that reduced government aid to the impoverished and offered incentives to religious organizations to take over the role the government had previously played with respect to that aid. These “faith-based initiatives” created some controversy over the separation of church and state at the time, but some form of this policy continues to the present. Faith-based initiatives have really taken to the fore in neoliberal era in which people believe that the government is too large and that “local congregations could do a better job than welfare bureaucrats” and in which the morality of the local churches could draw on that to provide social support and social services (Farnsley, 2007).

It is important that sociologists untangle these intersections between religion and other social institutions, in this case, politics, from time to time. It is not the case that we need to be able to see the “corrupting” influence of one on the other, as so many people would be inclined to see. Rather, it is important because understanding these connections is a vital part of the sociological project.

It is true that the institution of religion does not exist in a vacuum, but it is just as true that the forces that shape religion do not occur randomly. In fact, we find that the very same *types* of processes that led to an intersection among conservative religion



and conservative politics in the United States in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century are the same *types* of processes that are always at work when we see these two institutions come together.

Periods of high social tension and turmoil, an increase of diversity, and a mistrust in dominant social institutions are recipes, in other words, for the emergence of a conservative religious ethic that creates a similar set of politics. There is nothing inherently Christian about this process in general. Other cultures, with other dominant religious systems, experience much the same dynamics with different specific religious justifications.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Compare and contrast Evangelical Christianity and Christian Fundamentalism. Give at least two examples for each from the chapter.
2. How does the religious right view gender roles? Does this have an effect on Americans who do not share the same values? How?
3. What does the religious right believe about homosexuality? How has this belief penetrated American Politics and thus the lives of all Americans?
4. Explain Millenarianism. How do Fundamentalists, and some Evangelicals, use this ideology to promote furthering religious doctrine? (think social structures)
5. Consider Fundamentalism. What generally comes to mind when you see/hear that term? According to the chapter, what is one surprising historical fact about Fundamentalism?
6. Explain the difference between creationism and evolution.
7. What was the political role of televangelism?
8. Is Neoliberalism an ideology in alignment with “liberal” politics? Why or why not?