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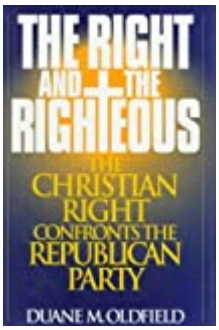

Duane Murray Oldfield. *The Right and the Righteous: The Christian Right Confronts the Republican Party.* Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1996. x + 283 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8476-8190-7.

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American Politics and Conservative Christian Politics

One of the most interesting developments in American society and politics over the last quarter of the twentieth century has been the surprising rise of the broad social phenomenon known as religious conservatism, a phenomenon which encompasses elements of numerous religious traditions in the United States. Duane Oldfield presents in *The Right and the Righteous* a sympathetic and fair-minded account of the political rise of the most prominent and, to some, the most threatening element of this social movement, the Christian Right. Reading like a revised Ph.D. dissertation, the book explores, in the author's words, "the Christian Right's strengths and weaknesses, the partisan political terrain on which it operates, and the development of its relationship with the Republican party" (p. 8). Specifically, Oldfield argues the following thesis:

A central theme of this book is that the Christian Right is not a transitory phenomenon. It has survived, and will continue to survive, the repeated death sentences pronounced by outside observers. The movement is deeply rooted in the American social structure, drawing its strength from a vibrant, well-politicized religious constituency and from that constituency's impressive organizational infrastructure (p. 1).

The Christian Right, he argues more succinctly, is "a deeply rooted but limited political movement, one that is likely to be with us for a long time to come" (p. 229). Beyond building upon scholarly and journalistic accounts of the events under examination here, the author conducted over seventy interviews with Christian Right activists and other supporters and opponents of the movement, and "attended the 1988, 1989, and 1994 meetings of the National Religious Broadcasters convention, the 1989 Conservative Political Action Conference, the 1988 Washington for Jesus events, state and county Republican party conventions, and the 1988 and 1992 Republican National Conventions" (p. 11). He also immersed himself in Christian radio, movement literature, and televangelism.

The book consists of a general introduction, six substantive chapters, and a brief conclusion. In Chapter One, Oldfield sets out the religious history which underlies the contemporary Christian Right. His account is articulate, but breaks no new ground not covered by George Mars-

den, James Davison Hunter, and other prominent scholars in this field. Chapter Two seeks to put the religious history into theoretical perspective by arguing that the Christian Right can be understood as a rational response to real social conflicts rather than as a reflection of status anxiety. "A status politics approach to the Christian Right," Oldfield says, "fundamentally misinterprets the movement's motivations and prospects for success" (p. 36). Whatever anxieties and fears religious conservatives exhibit, Oldfield argues, the Christian Right presents a rational response to real social changes. This is of course an important claim, but unfortunately Chapter Two sounds somewhat like the obligatory and ill-fitting theoretical-framework portion of a dissertation. In a similar vein, Chapter Three looks briefly at the recent history of the American party system in terms of Albert Hirschman's concepts of exit, voice, and loyalty, but it does not offer a great deal to the analysis at hand. In Chapter Four, Oldfield returns to the history of the Christian right, focusing on its emergence and the development of its relations with the party system through the mid-1980s. Chapter Five, which appears to be the heart of the book, examines in microscopic detail the 1988 presidential campaign of Pat Robertson, its strengths and weaknesses, and its effects on the Christian Right's relations with the Republican party. Chapter Six explores Christian Right activism in party politics at the state level, its influence in the 1992 and 1994 elections, and the Christian Coalition.

There are, I would suggest, three general themes buried in the extensive descriptive and historical detail the reader finds in this book. First, as I noted already, Oldfield argues that the Christian Right is a real phenomenon; rather than a reflection of status anxiety, it is a rational response to disquieting events. Second, as a response to disquieting events, the Christian Right, according to Oldfield, is an essentially defensive movement. In his words: "The Christian Right's constituency was spurred to mobilize, in large part, by its growing inability to isolate itself from disturbing trends in the broader culture" (p. 55). Those trends include "the dangers posed by abortion, pornography, educational bureaucrats, and homosexuals, with all these perceived problems linked to the denial of our nation's Christian roots and the rise of a secular humanist worldview" (p. 6). Even apart from any action taken by government, the increasing nationalization of American society, with the penetration of heretofore isolated communities by both "good" and "bad" aspects of modern life, has upset the sheltered existence of conservative faith communities.

As Oldfield writes: "In the last few decades the American evangelical subculture has found it harder and harder to isolate itself from troubling aspects of the broader culture. As their subculture has been invaded, many evangelicals have been moved to political action" (p. 42). The immediate spur to such political action has been the perception among conservative Christians that the federal government, and especially federal courts, have laid siege to their traditional way of life. The most prominent actions seen as attacks on that life include the federal government's move against segregation and the Supreme Court decisions banning organized school prayer and permitting legalized abortion. Thus, according to Oldfield: "Increasing governmental regulation and the intrusiveness of the mass media are part of a more general trend toward the nationalization of American politics and culture. As national culture and politics become more homogenized, maintaining local or regional subcultures becomes more difficult" (p. 62). "What threatened evangelicals was not simply their inability to isolate themselves but the fact that the forces that were intruding upon them were hostile to their values" (p. 63).

The third general theme in the book is the essentially limited character and potential of the Christian Right. First, Oldfield argues that the diversity of evangelicals limits their ability to work together: "The Christian Right must also deal with the problems created by intra-evangelical religious differences. Evangelicalism is a broad and diverse movement. This diversity is a source of strength but it also can make political mobilization difficult" (p. 32). Second, he emphasizes that the very language of evangelical theology poses an obstacle to extending their political alliances:

Evangelicals today face a serious political dilemma. A large constituency with a distinct set of political interests, they nonetheless have difficulty gaining a hearing within the broader society. The language evangelicals utilize to express their interests, although central to the identities of those within the movement, undercuts acceptance of their positions among outsiders (p. 30).

Third, the doctrine of premillenialism both works against political involvement by evangelicals and strikes outsiders as disturbing. In Oldfield's words: "The problem faced by the Christian Right is that the messages necessary to mobilize movement resources, to evoke enthusiasm, donations, and volunteer effort from its core constituency, are likely to alienate the voters beyond that core" (p. 82).

The final aspect of the limited character and potential of the Christian Right, according to Oldfield, is the

complex relationship which has developed between politically active evangelicals and the Republican party. "The Christian's Right's abiding concern with the defense of subculture values," Oldfield writes, "is critical to an understanding of the movement's political role and, in particular, its relations with the Republican party" (p. 68). Specifically: "The social issue concerns are not those of the Republican party a whole; defense of subcultural family values underlies the movement's differences with other elements of the party" (p. 68). Christian Right activists ascribe much more importance to religion, are much less willing to compromise in the interest of coalition-building, and are of generally lower socio-economic status than more traditional Republicans. "The Christian Coalition and other movement groups have brought the Christian Right's mobilization within the GOP to a new and higher level in the 1990s. But their activism within the party has not been without problems. The social and cultural gaps that separated Robertson activists from the rest of the party in 1988 have not gone away" (p. 192). Nevertheless, the Republican party and the Christian Right now stand, Oldfield maintains, in a symbiotic relationship: "While the GOP has come to depend upon the movement's ability to mobilize evangelical voters, the Christian Right needs the Republican party as a vehicle to form the broad-based coalitions the movement is incapable of forming on its own" (p. 215). All Christian Right activists, he argues, face the challenges of "uniting an evangelical base, making the most of organizational resources, and reaching out to build alliances beyond a base constituency" (p. 126). The limited potential of the Christian Right, by Oldfield's account, lies in the difficulty of accomplishing the first and last of these factors even as it excels at the second.

Within the descriptive detail of its account of the Robertson campaign and the rise of the Christian Coalition, *The Right and the Righteous* hints at two issues of particular interest. First, Oldfield presents a nice case study of the way in which political parties, in the age of independent individual political entrepreneurs, are open to penetration by outside groups. As he writes: "In many ways party changes have worked to enhance the Christian Right's potential for voice. As established local party leaders lost their hold over the nomination, openings arose for outsiders" (p. 81). In the case of the Christian Right, the consequence is well known: "As of the fall of 1994, an estimated eighteen state Republican parties were under Christian Right control; the movement was a 'substantial' force in thirteen more. The Robertson campaign, and the broader social movement it embodied, has fundamentally reshaped the Republican party" (p. 185). Oldfield does not focus clearly on this issue in the study of political parties, but the reader can find a useful source in his account.

The second issue of particular interest is an important one but is one for which Oldfield, who certainly was free to write the book he chose to write, provides only the barest hint. This is the issue of whether "the social issues" advanced by the Christian Right potentially provide the basis for the classic cross-cutting cleavage which could realign the parties in the manner discussed by James Sundquist in *The Dynamics of the Party System*. Oldfield writes: "On the issues identified as of particular importance to the evangelical subculture in Chapter Two–the family, traditional conceptions of sexual behavior and of gender roles, abortion, and, to a lesser extent, racial conservatism and paramilitary nationalism–the parties had by 1980 taken clearly opposing positions" (p. 111). More to this theoretical point, he states later in the book: The 1992 Republican convention and platform illustrated a deepening of the trend discussed in earlier chapters:

> the long-term realignment of the parties on the social issues of concern to the Christian Right. The parties used to be silent on issues such as abortion and gay rights. Slowly these issues have worked their way into the party platforms, the parties staked out less equivocal positions on them, and those positions now offer the public quite distinct alternatives (p. 206).

Thus, he says, "If it was not clear already, the 1992 platforms and conventions firmly established the Republicans as the party of social issue conservatism and the Democrats as the party of social issue liberalism" (p. 207). Focused instead on his micro-level account of the Robertson phenomenon and rise of the Christian Coalition, however, Oldfield goes no further in addressing the provocative theoretical and political issue he raises inadvertently. *The Right and the Righteous* is a competent, adequate book in its own terms, but its real contribution would be to lead the author to explore elsewhere the broader party-system question his narrative raises in passing.

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