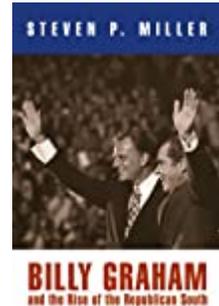




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The Political Soul of Billy Graham

Even during his early career in the 1950s and 1960s, Billy Graham already had a cottage industry of writers and scholars interested in his theological orientation, popular appeal, and broader social impact. Additional biographies and studies of Graham—some laudable, some critical, some well researched, others not—have appeared at a regular pace since then, making Graham one of the twentieth century’s most written-about religious figures. Given his popularity as a book topic, it is reasonable to ask: what more is there to write about him?

Into this crowded field steps historian Steven P. Miller with his *Billy Graham and the Rise of the Republican South*. Miller’s treatment of Graham is required reading for anyone wishing to make sense of Graham, his native region, and the modern South’s political restructurings. It is Miller’s emphasis on Graham’s politics that separates his book from the pack. In contrast to the literature’s tendency to portray Graham as an apolitical—or reluctantly political—figure, Miller casts Graham as an important political actor, one who helped to bring evangelicalism into the political mainstream and, in so doing,

contributed to the restructuring of regional and national politics.

According to Miller, Graham’s politics rested on a religious ethic that Miller terms “evangelical universalism.” Evangelical universalism “centered on the individual soul and will” and was “predicated on the universal commonality of divinely created humans.” Likewise, it affirmed acquiescence “to the ultimately inscrutable realm of ordained legal authority” and advocated social change and racial harmony as only possible through “the conversion of individual souls” (p. 44). Though a decidedly heaven-centered ethic, it also inspired Graham’s career-long advocacy of what Miller calls “the politics of decency,” a set of political views roughly equivalent to the gradualist racial politics of the Eisenhower administration, the “law and order” position of Richard Nixon, the “color blind” proclamations of southern suburbanites, and the “post-racial” economic visions of Sunbelt boosters.

Miller historicizes these religious and political sen-

sibilities by showing how they intertwined with the South's racial history after World War II. Though Graham initially allowed segregated seating at his crusades in southern cities, his move toward holding desegregated crusades after 1953 both displayed the evangelists' rethinking of segregation at the altar and Jim Crow generally. Though certainly a bold move, Miller insists that Graham's actions should be interpreted in the context of evangelical universalism. "Graham's general unwillingness to discuss the race issue beyond the levels of individual decency and Christian neighborliness," Miller avers, "limited the impact of his early desegregated crusades" in affecting racial change in the early postwar South (p. 33). Still, for white moderates concerned about how to move the South toward peaceful desegregation or worried about capital investments in the region, Graham moved toward a type of regional leadership, "offering a third way between immediate equivocation and massive resistance" (p. 38).

The *Brown* decision in 1954 was a turning point for Graham, formally ushering him onto the national political stage and increasing his public standing as a representative of racial moderation. Graham's close ties to the Eisenhower administration were quite natural given the former's approval of the latter's gradualist approach toward desegregation and his "law and order" position during the 1957 standoff with segregationists in Little Rock. In addition, Graham's warm relationship with southern boosters, in Little Rock and in other southern cities like Atlanta, Birmingham, and Charlotte, signaled his involvement in the business culture of the early Sunbelt. Tracing out this part of Graham's career—his easy endorsement of image-conscious and money-conscious boosters—is perhaps one of Miller's most important contributions. Evangelicalism has not figured into many accounts of the rise of the Sunbelt's political economy, and yet Miller demonstrates that Graham's evangelical universalism both justified and forwarded the purposes of Sunbelt development. Graham's crusades brought big bucks to local economies and also reaffirmed the booster class's preferred interpretation of themselves and their cities, namely that they were "beyond" the racial conflicts of the Jim Crow past and progressing toward a future where social rank depended solely on the merits of one's effort in the freewheeling Sunbelt marketplace. Like the urban civic leaders and suburban moderates detailed in recent books by Kevin Kruse and Matthew Lassiter, Graham and his boosters heralded a new form of politics in the South, corresponding to the "color blind" conservatism that emerged in full force during the anti-

busing fights and anti-affirmative action movements of the 1970s. As Miller notes, Graham's collaborations with southern boosters and "the brand of faith and the social ethic Graham voiced in his visits to southern crisis spots" suggest an "additional, evangelical route to color blindness" that historians have not yet studied in full (p. 180). For Miller, the famed "Graham-Nixon alliance" offers another way to tour this religious road to the Republican South.

Richard Nixon is as much the focus of Miller's book as Graham, and for good reason. Graham and Nixon were, in many ways, kindred spirits in the late 1960s and especially during the 1972 presidential campaign. Both attempted to speak for and to a "silent majority" of conservative Americans by offering a political perspective that saw Martin Luther King, Jr.'s civil rights activism as lawful, orderly, and morally necessary while condemning "extremists" on both sides of the segregation issue. Racial moderation was the key to Graham's spiritually inflected "southern strategy," which emphasized a divine impetus for "law and order" alongside defenses of individual rights, patriotism, and evangelical piety. These views were in high relief as Graham campaigned for Nixon among regional religious leaders during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a time when each city crusade in the South also doubled as "another kind of march" for those behind the region's Republican turn (Nixon knew as much, attending several crusades). That this appeal to individual conscience did not encourage more a comprehensive or active government role in addressing the legacies of Jim Crow was the point. Emphasizing the gospel's power to transform society soul by soul fit neatly with the silent majority's laudation of individual rights and their concerns about the federal state's involvement in social and racial policy. By crusading for Nixon, then, Graham became "a distinctive voice in many parts of the South, one that resonated with a brighter side of Nixon's southern strategy, the side of John Connally rather than of Jesse Helms" (p. 154).

Watergate embarrassed Graham as much as it destroyed Nixon's reputation, and Graham certainly "attempted to use Watergate to announce his exit from the political arena" (p. 195). In the late 1970s, Graham's profile had lowered in regional and national politics, but, as Miller argues, "[p]opular portraits ... have exaggerated the nature of his depoliticization" (p. 201). Indeed, throughout the 1980s, Graham remained a quiet advocate for the basic tenets of the Christian Right's moral conservatism, particularly as "gender matters supplanted racial ones as politically viable starting points for assail-

ing liberal policiesâ (pp. 204-205). Simultaneously, Graham distanced himself from Ronald Reaganâs most vocal and divisive supporters in the Christian Right, preferring to focus on evangelism and his own public reputation. âBy altering his stances on some issues and his tone on others,â Miller writes, Graham successfully recast himself as a preacher first and a politico last, thus âdisassociating himself in the popular imagination from his own political leaningsâ (p. 217). Miller does not let Graham off the hook, however, concluding that âGraham may have decried the tone of politicized conservative Christianity, yet he had assisted the Christian statesmen who most benefited from that same phenomenon.â As such, âhis legacy speaks to the endurance of a broad evangelical conservatism ... without which the full history of the modern American conservative movement cannot be toldâ (p. 218).

Millerâs research base is impressive and thoroughly documented by copious footnoting. Nary a manuscript, article, or book related to Graham or his political associates and rivals went untouched. Millerâs gift for clear, fluid, and precise prose also makes his book a readable page-turner. Whether his arguments are completely convincing will probably depend on whether one accepts Millerâs initial premise. Miller casts Graham as âa serious [political] actor and, at times, as a powerful symbolâ (p. 11). But this begs the question: did Graham actually move the white South into the Republican ranks or merely symbolize and justify their changing loyalties

for them? Miller asserts that Graham did both, but his evidence for this is more convincing at certain points in his narrative than at others. For instance, Graham was undoubtedly instrumental in making the Sunbelt myth of boosters *and* a symbol of that very myth. Miller documents this fact in startling and convincing detail. But was Graham vital for convincing white southerners of the sanctity of the Republican Party? That conclusion requires a greater leap of faith. Did not more direct pressures—such as facing federal pressure to desegregate their communities, schools, and businesses—provoke white southerners to reconsider their faith in the Democratic Party and postwar liberalism? Without much documentation from rank-and-file white southerners about their affirmation of Grahamâs spiritualized âpolitics of decencyâ—or their affinity for Nixon and Reagan as a result of Grahamâs efforts—Graham seems more like a symbol of their political hopes and desires than a catalyst for them.

Still, Millerâs book is a welcome addition to the current spate of scholarship on politics in the modern South. In complex and fascinating ways, religion mattered to the rise of the Republican South, and especially to the âsilent majorityâ of moderates that recent histories have cast as the source of conservative politics in the region and nation. Future inquiries into such matters will undoubtedly profit from considering Millerâs original take on the political soul of Billy Graham.

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