

## Article

# Producing the Christian Right: Conservative Evangelicalism, Representation, and the Recent Religious Past

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**Abstract:** This essay explores how conservative evangelical Protestants have been represented by both sociologists and journalists of American religion through the narrative of the “rise of the Christian Right” beginning in the late 1970s. By exploring both popular and academic analyses of conservative Protestantism as understood through terms such as “the Christian Right” and “the Electronic Church”, one is able to identify a set of intellectual assumptions that characterize the study of American evangelicalism and politics in the recent past. In particular, this essay suggests that studies of conservative evangelicalism as understood through “the rise of the Christian Right” tend to reveal as much about their interpreters as they do their respective evangelical subjects. The essay first identifies what these barriers and limitations are by exploring the social scientific literature on conservative evangelicalism at the time. It then foregrounds news reports and academic studies of “the Christian Right” in order to connect journalistic and academic inquiries of the conservative Protestant to the emergence of the evangelical. It then suggests a number of historical and methodological avenues for future research on American evangelicalism and politics that foreground self-reflexivity, interdisciplinarity, and the close reading of conservative texts.

**Keywords:** politics; religion; Christian Right; history; evangelicalism; theory and method; journalism; culture wars



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In 1979, sociologist R. Stephen Warner published an article in the pages of *Sociological Analysis* titled, “Theoretical Barriers to the Understanding of Evangelical Christianity”. Warner’s goal was to illustrate the various “theoretical barriers” that inhibited sociological appraisals of evangelical Christianity in the United States. “The term “evangelical”, itself, is often misunderstood”, Warner observed. “Although it is widely used, especially with the ascendancy of an evangelical to the Presidency, it is seldom defined” (Warner 1979, p. 1). Then-president Jimmy Carter had made the term “evangelical” nearly ubiquitous by the late 1970s, but this socio-cultural ubiquity seemingly came at an ironic conceptual cost: understanding of evangelicals themselves. In other words, evangelicals were seemingly everywhere, but no one knew who they were. The collective effect of Warner’s biases, he argued, was a simple if not drastic one: the “discounting of the phenomenon” itself, the evangelical.

Warner’s analysis was reinforced by novel social scientific polling data and journalistic accounts of evangelicals in mainstream periodicals and newspapers.<sup>1</sup> Both *Newsweek* and *Time* devoted multiple pages of text to the newly emergent “evangelical” in American public life following Carter’s unprecedented declaration of being “born again”. Perhaps more importantly, they devoted their covers to the emergence of American evangelicalism with headlines such as “Back to that Old Time Religion” and “Born Again! The Evangelicals”. The author of the latter *Newsweek* piece, religion journalist Kenneth Woodward, noted that

<sup>1</sup> As scholar of religion Chad Moore illustrates in his analysis of the Christian Right and its three origin narratives, newspapers like the *New York Times* contributed stories and reports to a larger collective archive that served as a foundation for subsequent studies of conservative evangelicalism. Over time, this archive of analysis and observation has helped to re-narrate “the rise of the Christian Right” framework up to the present. For Moore, journalist Kenneth A. Briggs’ coverage of the 1980 presidential election serves as the paradigmatic example of such reporting on conservative evangelicalism. For more, see [Moore \(2020\)](#).

“religion” was going to be a significant factor in the 1976 election. More importantly, he decided to quote a little-known editor-in-chief of Third Century Publishers named Rus Walton. Little did Woodward know what impact his and others’ reporting would have on America’s collective introduction to the evangelical in American public life. “The evangelical Christian community is a sleeping giant”, Walton declared. “There are between 40 and 50 million evangelical fundamentalists in the US. If even one-tenth of them become active in politics—wow!” The numbers were too unbelievable to ignore. The story practically wrote itself.

### 1. Making the Evangelical, Making the Christian Right

The significance of the articles cited above is twofold for the following analysis: they reached a wide audience of mainstream readers, and they helped establish a pattern of what I refer to as *statistical hyperbole* when it came to estimating the number of conservative Protestants willing and able to head to the ballot box on Election Day, or watch a given program on “the Electronic Church”.<sup>2</sup> Woodward’s decision to quote the publisher spoke to a journalistic willingness to believe and accept the subject’s terms of his own definition. Woodward was not paid to be critical, or to apply a hermeneutic of suspicion to his informant, per say. Other news outlets were reporting similar numbers.<sup>3</sup> What reason was there to doubt them? The subjects they described were self-evidently out of place in electoral politics, but there were so many of them. Some wondered why, and arguably still do.

As part of this Special Issue on New Directions in the Study of American evangelicalism, this article’s contribution illustrates a more intentional commitment to self-reflexive questions in the study of American evangelicalism in general, and conservative Protestantism in particular. For example, how has knowledge been produced about evangelicals by academic and journalistic study in the post-World War II era?<sup>4</sup> Where does such knowledge come from? And why? Terms and categories such as “the Christian Right” are not self-evident, but rather are products of contestation and boundary maintenance. In other words, scholars of American evangelicalism have not only contributed to the study of American evangelicalism by describing its history, theology, membership, and popular practices, but they have also contributed to the formation of the subject itself— the evangelical. Placing Woodward’s mainstream reporting alongside Warner’s scholarly observations about the conceptual shortcomings of sociological investigations of American evangelicals illustrates the peculiarity of evangelicalism itself in the academic imagination as a subject of study: one that is at once everywhere, and nowhere, at the same time. One could argue that it was evangelicalism’s ubiquity in late 1970s America that necessitated the very theoretical barriers first identified by Warner in his scholarly article, specifically the academic tendency to see evangelical life as synonymous with, or reducible to, conservative electoral politics in the public square.

Warner’s initial warnings and observations in *Sociological Analysis* are important to consider because they represent one of the earliest attempts to subject academic analysis of evangelicals to critical, self-reflexive critique. The theoretical barriers Warner identified bring much needed attention to the fact that scholars bring their own methodological assumptions about conservative religious subjects to their respective studies. For scholar of religion Walter Capps, the Christian Right is a unique analytical subject of investigation. “What one finds worthy of praise within the movement is also indicative of where

<sup>2</sup> In short, *statistical hyperbole* suggests that both journalists, sociologists, and historians at the time tended to use one another’s numbers as justification for their own. In other words, if one article used fifty million viewers or voters as an estimate, others would follow suit. Such estimates were usually based on the most recent Gallup poll, but even these were not entirely accurate. In fact, Gallup Jr. soon became *the* source of information about evangelicals as the *Washington Post*, *US News and World Report*, and the *New York Times* started looking to him for the latest data. For sociologist of religion Robert Wuthnow, “the year of the evangelical was the most notable instance to date in which polling played a major role in defining a significant feature of the religious landscape” (98). For more on this point, see Wuthnow (2015).

<sup>3</sup> For more on these numbers and how journalists estimated televangelist viewership, see Martin (1981).

<sup>4</sup> For more on knowledge production and the Christian Right, see Shupe and Bromley (1984).

one stands. For the inquirer, such analytical work is also a kind of hermeneutical self-examination. The subject called the New Religious Right works this way since it tends to force a disclosure of the interpreter's own sense of values. Thus, interpretations of the movement may or may not convey reliable information and valuable insight about the movement" (Capps 1990, p. x). In this sense, the following analysis foregrounds continuity in the recent past when it comes to how scholars and journalists have studied their respective subjects because many of the barriers still remain operative.<sup>5</sup>

This does not mean that all studies of conservative evangelicals, or "the Christian Right", possess such analytic tendencies.<sup>6</sup> Far from it.<sup>7</sup> What it does mean, however, is that academic analyses of American evangelicals must become part of the subject of analysis itself if the larger sub-field is to progress beyond its assumed set of assumptions about conservative social actors in the public square. In other words, it is far from coincidental that analytical frameworks such as status politics, first applied in studies of American conservative Protestants in the 1950s, have been reapplied to conservative evangelicals in the twenty-first century.<sup>8</sup> Moving forward, new directions in the study of American evangelicalism must include questions of methodology that foreground *how* evangelicals have been studied in addition to more traditional studies of *who* they are. In other words, *how* the Christian Right has been portrayed through academic studies of conservative evangelicals is as important as *who* such individuals literally *were* in the public square. In many respects, to study one was implicitly to study the other: the Christian Right stood in for conservative evangelicalism, and vice versa.

Foregrounding ubiquity in the study of evangelicalism, alongside scholarly warnings about how best to study such a subject, illuminates what I hope to document in the following analysis: the lead up to and generative moment that produced both the "rise" of the "Christian Right" narrative, and the category of the Christian Right itself. This narrative would appear in both American public life through the work of journalists, and the academic profession through peer reviewed articles and monographs.<sup>9</sup> The category assisted the narrative's traction by reminding its readers and viewers that conservative evangelicals were a serious threat to American public life due to their seemingly newfound political aspirations. In other words, the "rise" narrative was a product of both analytical inquiry and investigative analysis of conservative Protestantism in general, and American evangel-

<sup>5</sup> For more on these continuities, ones that can be found in both journalistic and academic studies of conservative Protestantism, see Rolsky (2020). For social theorist and historian Sondra Farganis, the relationship between the academy and print media is a symbiotic one. "Those of us who are in academia have looked increasingly to journalism to do the kind of empirical work on the underlying causes of the social transformations that have given rise to the culture wars. Regrettably, academia is no longer prepared to do the footwork. In the same way, we have looked to the media to give voice to the voices that academia often doesn't want to listen to". For more, see Conason (1993).

<sup>6</sup> Three recent studies of American evangelicalism illustrate the analytical assumptions outlined in this article: Du Mez (2020), Butler (2021), and Stewart (2020). Each text deploys a largely monocausal explanation for the vitality of their respective conservative subjects: toxic masculinity, racism, and a Christian nationalist thirst for power, respectively. While Stewart's text is the most willing to acknowledge the fact that even within the Christian nationalist movement there are many voices and political visions of the public square, the hyperbolic title leaves little to the imagination. There is little to no need to "sound the alarm" when it comes to the "rise of the Christian Right". In many respects, scholars have written this rise into existence themselves. Analyses offered by Du Mez and Butler foreground singular social and cultural causes of white evangelical depravity, either in its gendered or racialized expressions. Toxic masculinity and racism define 21st century evangelicalism, as well as its 20th, 19th, and even 18th century forbearers. All three texts help produce knowledge about "the evangelical" through their respective analyses as well as their rather hyperbolic titles. As argued in this article, such exaggeration has been part and parcel of journalistic and academic analyses of conservative evangelicalism since at least the 1970s upon its "discovery" by both the media, and academia. For more on this discovery and inability to anticipate such changes in the public square, see Harding (2017).

<sup>7</sup> For more on how scholars have "framed" the Christian Right, see Shields (2011). For Shields, there is a polemical tradition of analysis that tends to foreground stereotypes over empirical observation. "By stressing the significance of religious orthodoxy, Progressives and postwar liberals helped lay an intellectual foundation for new analytical categories that further distorted the way observers saw religious conservatives. After the reality of a thriving Christian Right confirmed the old belief in the unifying power of Christian orthodoxy, it was but a short step for social scientists and journalists to posit that all orthodox believers (whether Muslims, Christians, or Jews) shared important affinities" (636).

<sup>8</sup> For more on status politics and American conservatism, see Bell (1955).

<sup>9</sup> For a related study of discursive tendencies in the study of conservative Protestantism, see Watt (2017). For Watt, the term antifundamentalism can be defined as "a set of conversations (literal and figurative) that began in the 1920s and that have continued into the present". Watt goes on to argue that those who took part in such conversations "were also trying to assess the threats that fundamentalists pose to human progress" (p. xiii). I contend that scholars of religion have also treated conservative evangelicals similarly: namely, as aberrations to a narrative of public life driven by notions of secular progress and ethical enlightenment. For more on this point, see Harding (2017).

icalism in particular.<sup>10</sup> It also functioned as an interpretive fiction of the most convincing sort.<sup>11</sup> From its very beginnings, “the Christian Right” gave disparate but related events and phenomenon a coherence often far removed from the experiences of conservative evangelicals, fundamentalists, and Pentecostals on the ground.<sup>12</sup> It also connected different but related strands of conservative Protestantism under a single description: the Christian Right. Beginning with Warner’s observations, this article illustrates how conservative evangelicals have been represented through narratives and categories built to describe reactionary social actors in the public sphere beginning in the late 1970s. It also illustrates how knowledge about the Christian Right itself was produced. As such, categories like the Christian Right have said less about who “they” *were*, and more about how “they” were *represented*: the evangelicals.

For the sake of clarity, the following analysis differentiates between evangelical, evangelicalism, and “the evangelical”. This is a purposeful interpretive move to identify the terminological slippage inherent in the study of American evangelicalism itself— one that hides the conditions of its conceptual consistency across the larger fields of American religious history and American religious studies.<sup>13</sup> As I’ve argued elsewhere, categories such as “the Christian Right” often functioned as metonyms for conservative evangelicals and their collective mobilization in the public square (Rolsky 2019). Less a reflection of objective reality, “the rise” of the Christian Right narrative instead illustrated Warner’s theoretical barriers in real time, including the assumption that conservative evangelical subjects were ultimately destined for the dustbin of history due to their regressive intellectual tendencies. “The problem was not lack of aggregate attention”, argues historian Stephen Miller, “but lack of sustained focus. Each portrait of a new ‘wave’ of Christian Right activism—whether the year was 1980, 1988, 1994—confused persistence with recurrence” (Miller 2014, p. 95). In time, both journalists and scholars eventually settled upon a series of categories that did more to reinforce their own assumptions about conservative subjects than it did to document those newly minted “born-again” voters and their electoral aspirations. As a result, a “sudden emergence” narrative came to define conservative actors in the public square to the detriment of both scholars and journalists alike.<sup>14</sup>

The first part of my argument will return to Warner in order to demonstrate the initial conceptual shortcomings of academic studies of American evangelicals. Next, both journalistic and sociological studies of “the Christian Right” and “Electronic Church” will be used to illustrate how evangelicals were examined and studied as subjects of academic and journalistic inquiry. In other words, it explores how knowledge was produced *about them*, and why.<sup>15</sup> Lastly, I will suggest topics for future analysis that foreground the study of American conservatism by focusing on the machinations of the New Right and its expert application of marketing and direct mail to evangelical electoral politics. Conservative evangelicals did not simply appear in the public square as single-issue voters. In many ways, they were a reflection of a burgeoning conservative media machine that transformed

<sup>10</sup> A representative sample of primary sources of the early 1980s on “the rise of the Christian Right” for this analysis include *US News and World Report*, *Presbyterian Outlook*, *Christianity Today*, *The Christian Century*, and *The New Yorker*.

<sup>11</sup> For more on the role of interpretive fictions in American religious history, see Butler (1982). It is far from coincidental that Butler composed his argument when he did. In light of his critical yet empathetic stance towards evangelicals and evangelical history, one could argue that the events of his time may have shaped his interpretive gaze on the past. Amidst the rise of yet another yet different interpretive fiction, “the Christian Right”, Butler may have witnessed in real time the ways in which a discourse gathers around a particular object in the world. In many respects, a similar study could be done to Butler’s to great effect when it comes to mentions of “the Christian Right” in US history textbooks at both the K-12 and collegiate levels. Not unlike the Great Awakening, “the Christian Right” as interpretive fiction gives more than a decade of time a uniformity that does not necessarily match the ebb and flow of the historical record at the time. For more on how media attention and reporting constructed narratives around conservative evangelical organizing and events, see Hadden (1980).

<sup>12</sup> For more on how reporting on the Religious Roundtable National Affairs Briefing in particular, an event that is often included in narratives and histories of the Christian Right, see Hadden (1980). For Hadden, the reporting said very little about what actually took place at the meeting.

<sup>13</sup> For a laudable interdisciplinary study of conservative American evangelicalism written from outside the discipline of American religious history, see Connolly (2008). For more on the obscured conditions of evangelicalism and its creation, see Modern (2015).

<sup>14</sup> For more on this narrative, see Moore (2020).

<sup>15</sup> In this vein of inquiry, I will be following the lead of American religious historian Kristin Du Mez in asking, “How have scholars imagined evangelicalism? To what ends? And which imaginings have wielded power in the academy, and why?” (For more, see Du Mez (2019).

otherwise disinterested communities into vibrant constituencies of support and encouragement. I also suggest that the scholarly moniker “new” when applied to the emergence of conservative movements in the public square is less illustrative of conservative evangelicals themselves, and more revealing of the theoretical barriers first identified by Warner in the late 1970s.

## 2. A Return to Warner: Theoretical Barriers Identified

In order to identify the intellectual parameters that contributed to the production of “the Christian Right” and the narrative of its rise, it is instructive to return to Warner’s admonitions about the state of sociological study of American evangelicalism in the late 1970s. Warner described three different factors that contributed to what he identified as theoretical barriers to the understanding of evangelical Christianity.<sup>16</sup> Put simply, Warner described three types of cognitive biases that informed academic habits of thought: class, liberal, and evolutionary. Each one shaped the degree to which intellectual investigation could successfully study, and thus understand, its subject fully.

For Warner, much of the sociological work at the time was limited to a particular set of assumptions about evangelicals themselves, thereby helping to produce ideas about “the evangelical” in American public life. “Sociologists who speak of mainline liberal lay believers with respect and fellow-feeling treat evangelicalism as if they were witnesses to a bizarre spectacle. It is as if evangelicals were denizens of the zoo”. Warner went on to describe the class, liberal, and evolutionary biases at the heart of his theoretical barriers. “These preconceptions are: (1) that evangelicalism is a lower-class phenomenon; (2) that evangelicalism is politically conservative; (3) that evangelicalism is retrogressive historically” (Warner 1979, p. 3).

Not unlike contemporary analyses and news reports that assume a largely conservative political subject when examining American evangelicalism in the public square, Warner observed a series of correlations that if left to themselves, soon became the stuff of social fact. The most insidious correlation, or theoretical barrier, linked religious orthodoxy and political conservatism together. At first, such an association was rather pliable, appearing here and there in political and sociological studies such as those authored by the likes of Daniel Bell and Richard Hofstadter in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>17</sup> Over time, the linkage grew stronger due to further sociological and historical investigation.

In addition, magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek* added their own support to such correlations, especially when they quoted little-known editors of conservative publishing houses. “These empirical generalizations have been hypostatized to the status of theoretical constructs”, Warner argued, “so that the correlations have come to take on the appearance of identities”. Due to such analytical constructs, “the evangelical” had little choice but to be conservative and reactionary in the academic imagination moving forward. “If evangelicalism is perceived as *by definition* the religion . . . that leads them away from relevant solutions to modern problems, then the middle-class sociologist who wishes to study the relevant mainstream of contemporary religiosity may safely ignore it: hence the logic of the unconscious dismissal of the evangelical” (Warner 1979, p. 4).

As Warner contended, once such correlations became the stuff of actual evangelical identities, scholars could acknowledge the ubiquity of the born-again Christian without actually having to confront the subject itself. Once *Time* and *Newsweek* began adding their own commentaries to this already robust sociological tradition, which included newly formulated Gallup poll surveys saying that “half of all Protestants—and a third of all Americans—say that they have born again”, upwards of 50 million adult American were thought to be evangelical in both practice and theological lifeway virtually overnight. As

<sup>16</sup> Following Warner’s article, two response pieces were published by *Sociological Analysis* authored by sociologists James Davison Hunter and Nancy Ammerman. Both largely agreed with Warner’s observations. For more, see Hunter (1981) and Ammerman (1982).

<sup>17</sup> The most notable work in this regard is Bell (1955), which includes chapters by Hofstadter, David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, Peter Viereck, Talcott Parsons, and Seymour Martin Lipset. This text is now in its third edition, which was published in 2017 by Routledge. The newest edition includes an introduction written by political scientist David Plotke titled, “The Success and Anger of the Modern American Right”.

a result, evangelicals became the stuff of the front page as well as the latest nationwide poll despite being dismissed by sociologists and historians as lower-class subjects who possessed regressive tendencies in a constantly modernizing world. At once everywhere and nowhere, “the evangelical” came to define much of the academic and journalistic work that would emerge in between 1975 and 1982 as Carter’s blunders began to pave the way for Reagan’s ascent to the White House. For historian D.G. Hart, there was more to this sociological work and its abundance than met the eye.

“Part of what changed was the emergence of evangelicalism as a force in American electoral politics. Equally if not more important was a new generation of social scientists, many of whom would claim to be evangelical or to have grown up evangelical”, Hart contends. “For these academics, the public prominence of evangelicals was a gold mine. Almost overnight they possessed an insider’s perspective on one of the hottest topics in social science” (Hart 2004, p. 65). In this sense, evangelicals themselves were contributing to the social scientific pursuit of “the evangelical” alongside the discipline of political science and its requisite polling data. Evangelicals were becoming the new hot topic to study in both the academy and in mainstream media such as *Time* and *Newsweek*, but this work was unfolding within the constraints of Warner’s theoretical barriers, or cognitive biases, all at the same time. “The work of these sociologists and political scientists deserves closer scrutiny”, Hart contends, “as another important piece in the construction of evangelicalism” (Hart 2004, p. 6).

As I read Warner, part of the reason why evangelicals slowly became “the evangelical” in the public eye was because their collective introduction to American public life took place through the prism of conservative electoral politics. No one forced Woodward to quote the Third Century editor who uttered the words of the sleeping giant, but they ironically resonated with the polling data assembled by Gallup and others in the late 70s that spoke to the untapped resource that evangelicals were fast becoming in the public imagination. Carter’s declaration of his born-again experience on the way to the White House further cemented the theoretical construct in the developing sociological literature on American evangelicalism, thereby correlating conservative politics with evangelical identity. “What has happened here”, Warner concluded, “is that the authors have so reified the theological-political conservatism correlation that the political attitude has become a proxy for the theological and in fact the theological is technically ‘reduced’ to the political. Thus, in the absence of data, the authors conjecture that it is the political rather than religious stance of mass evangelists that is the source of their appeal (Warner 1979, p. 6)”.

Despite the fact that Jimmy Carter may have been initially supported by American evangelicals more broadly based on his willingness to speak to and from his born-again experience, his faith-sake soon became associated with conservatism in general and Republican politics in particular. Most scholars have explained this transition using the actions of Carter himself and how he framed issues of “family values”. As historian J. Brooks Flippen argued, Carter’s public religiosity both confused the American public, and angered those on the nascent “Christian Right”. “If the Religious Right” was a top-down movement, Carter had set the stage for its movers and shakers”, Flippen argues. “He had proved the perfect foil. By the end of the Carter era, no doubt existed that Washington’s political world had shifted, the Washington for Jesus rally only one of many indicators. Carter returned to Georgia, continuing to live his life according to the dictates of his own religious conscience” (Flippen 2011, p. 23).

Not unlike the public reception of Carter’s “Crisis of Confidence” speech, his Presidential born-again sensibility was often misunderstood as weak willed at best, and downright dangerous for “the family” at worst. Carter’s public religiosity was not one defined by its robust, overly male persona, but was arguably prophetic in nature, and as a result overly unpopular with the American people. This would have dire consequences for the Democratic Party moving forward as it arguably began its seemingly perpetual public relations battle against the largely conservative idea that they are “godless” secular humanists looking to destroy America. “The modern Religious Right had arrived”, Flippen concludes

in his introduction to *Jimmy Carter, the Politics of the Family, and the Rise of the Religious Right*. “Indeed, the Carter administration had baptized it” (Flippen 2011, p. 23).

The confluence of sociological correlation, ideological reification, and American electoral politics in the 1970s laid the groundwork for how evangelicals would be studied in both the academy and the public square writ large moving forward. Ironically, such scholastic scrutiny would have the opposite effect once set against its initial intellectual intentions: to understand American evangelicals and the “rise of the Christian Right” as academic subjects like any other. In other words, instead of building a scholarly apparatus that elucidated “the evangelical” in public life, scholars and journalists instead ostracized their evangelical subjects in the name of scholarly inquiry. This particular interplay between social ubiquity and scholarly obfuscation lays at the very heart of how evangelicals have been studied in American public life. “The reification of the theology-politics correlation and reduction of the theological to the political tendency has as its extreme conceptual expression the consequence of denying the authenticity of the other-than-liberal religiosity”, Warner concluded in his seminal 1979 piece. “In sum, for so long have politically liberal sociologists looked toward theological liberals as a constituency for social justice that they cannot take the theological conservative seriously” (Warner 1979, p. 7). No better example illustrates Warner’s perceptive observations than the greatest interpretive fiction of them all: “the Christian Right”.

### 3. Conservatism, Politics, and the Christian Right

“The Christian Right” has been an assumed part of the religio-political landscape of American public life since at least the mid-1970s. As explored above, one of the first academic studies of a close conceptual relative, the “radical right”, was edited by sociologist Daniel Bell beginning in the mid-1950s with subsequent editions published in the 1960s, 1990s, and 2000s, respectively. Studies both historical and sociological almost too numerous to count have been published alongside and since Bell’s collection, which included commentary from Richard Hofstadter, Nathan Glazer, David Riesman, Talcott Parsons, and Seymour Martin Lipset. A variety of intellectual and conceptual frameworks were used by the various authors in an attempt to study the conservative mind and understand its behavior in the public square. In many respects, it was in this particular collection that Warner’s theoretical limitations first began to find analytical traction in both academia, and the wider journalistic public. Terms like “status anxiety” and chapter titles such as “The Dispossessed” spoke to a people unnerved by modernity, and resentful of its various mores and wares. “Social groups that are dispossessed invariably seek targets on whom they can vent their resentments”, Bell himself observed in the opening chapter, “targets whose power can serve to explain their dispossession . . . what lends especial rancor to the radical right of the 1960s is its sense of betrayal not by its ‘enemies’ but by its ‘friends’.” (Bell 1955, p. 3).

The collection initially came together in a faculty seminar on political behavior at Columbia University. Bell and others were attempting to understand conservative political behavior by taking stock of what the social sciences had to offer at the time. The intellectual tablet upon which such a reinvigorated vision would be carved went by a single word: McCarthyism. Sociologist Seymour Lipset coined McCarthy’s supporters the “radical right” in *The Radical Right* in 1954. In fact, it was the first time the phrase had ever been used in print. McCarthyism was a “species” of status politics for Lipset and Hofstadter, an explanation that foregrounded both social displacement, and newly attained positions of social influence in the very same conceptual apparatus. For fellow sociologist Alan Wolfe, this particular collection on conservative subjects in the public square was itself a product of a series of assumptions. “The success of the right . . . has something to do with the failures of the left, and as part of the liberal consensus the authors of *The Radical Right* were unable to critically examine themselves. In three cases, specifically, did unexamined liberal assumptions fail to account for the eventual longevity and political success of the right” (Wolfe 1981, p. 8). Like Warner, Wolfe identified three factors that

tended to compromise the analytical strength of a given social science study of conservative evangelicalism: the prosperity hypothesis, the extremism disposition, and “the emphasis upon status politics”.<sup>18</sup>

Extremism defined these subjects of academic inquiry for Bell and his colleagues, but not conservatism per se. Yet, the two became inextricably linked in both the popular and academic imaginations due largely to such analyses. There was a “congruence” of thought for Bell that defined both the seminar and the edited collection that would embody its best intellectual aspirations. This “new conceptual analysis”, as he described, sought to capture an otherwise eclectic subject despite its seemingly radical nature and anti-enlightenment sensibilities. While it would take upwards of twenty years for “the evangelical” to formally emerge in American public life in the mid-1970s, the foundations of its study found much of its theoretical inspiration in the arguments of *The Radical Right: The New American Right*: especially the moniker “new”. How could such a regressive social subject of the public square, one seemingly so anxious about its immediate future, also be one born a new generation after intellectual generation? The answer, by now, seems to be obvious: As those who have arguably feared such subjects the most have been the ones setting the terms of its intellectual consumption. If anything could describe Bell’s congruence of thought from his moment to the present, it is this.

As alluded to above, there has been no shortage of works on “the Christian Right”, “the Religious Right”, or “the Radical Right” since the publication of Bell’s collection. In fact, one could label such intellectual production one of the academy’s most prolific cottage industries along historical, sociological, and religious studies of “religion” itself. While the above terms seem to speak to different social subjects and political constituencies, and at times they most certainly do, by and large the terms have more in common than we might actually think in the public imagination. Academic studies of “the Christian Right” tend to break down along discipline: History, Sociology, Political Science, and Religious Studies. The studies of Bell and others foregrounded the historical and sociological questions that would guide much of the social science literature up until the late 1970s when they were joined by their colleagues in political science and the print media writ large.

In other words, if studies of “the Christian Right” helped get a certain sociological study of religion off the proverbial ground, then it also assisted journalists in their quests to give the public what they wanted: more reporting on evangelicals, and thus, “the evangelical”. “The initial exploration of evangelicals came from University of Virginia sociologist James Davison Hunter, himself a graduate of Gordon College, an evangelical liberal arts institution in Massachusetts”, argues historian D.G. Hart. “A student of one of the sociology of religion’s masters, Peter Berger, Hunter used evangelicalism more as a way to apply his mentor’s theories than to do justice to one of the most visible religious movements of the late twentieth century. Indeed, Hunter established the early social scientific line on evangelicals, regarding them as a seven-point underdog in their contest with modernity” (Hart 2004, p. 66).

The theoretical through line connecting Bell to Hunter to Warner were the very barriers Warner had identified in his article in *Sociological Analysis* back in 1979. The evangelical was of a lower social class, regressive in thought and behavior, and beholden to reactionary tendencies that placed them in direct opposition to the inevitability of modernity. While studies of evangelicals themselves characterize much of the ongoing literature and existential identity of the field of American religious history, fewer studies exist that ask how and why such evangelicals have been represented in the ways that they have. Interdisciplinary work certainly exists alongside the more traditional historical and sociological accounts, including Linda Kintz’ and Julia Lesage’s edited collection *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right* published in 1998, but much less work has explored what one would call conditions of religious possibility as explored in *The Rise and Fall of the Religious Left: Politics, Television, and Popular Culture in the 1970s and Beyond*. In other words, what intellectual interests

<sup>18</sup> For more, see Wolfe on sociological method and the study of the Christian Right (1981).

influence which questions are asked of evangelical subjects in a given historical moment? More importantly, why, as Hart argues, are such subjects oftentimes used as leverage for other less academic and more polemical purposes? One of the most helpful studies in these regards was published in 1992 by titled, *Search for the American Right Wing: An Analysis of the Social Science Literature, 1955–1987* by historian William B. Hixson Jr. It is arguably the only monograph to date that examines *how* evangelicals have been represented in the social science literature.

Unlike other historical studies of similar subjects, Hixson focused his meta-analysis on the theoretical trends and patterns that tended to guide the disciplines of history and sociology in their collective pursuit of what he called the American right wing. Hixson used five themes as respective parts to organize the sixteen chapters of his study. In order, the parts read as follows: “The Sources of McCarthyism”, “The ‘Radical Right’ of the Early 1960s”, “The Wallace Constituency”, and “The ‘New Right’”, and “The American Right Wing in Perspective”. His individual chapters investigated the work of many of the authors already mentioned, as well as their theoretical approaches, including Hofstadter, Bell, and Riesman. His concluding chapters foregrounded the work of Seymour Lipset and political scientist Michael Paul Rogin in particular as a way of drawing attention to their differences in scholarly approach.<sup>19</sup> The motivation of Hixson’s study of the American right wing, as straightforward as it is elegant, is one that I share in my own studies of “the evangelical” and “the Christian Right” here. “We are confronted . . . with a body of scholarship that because of the importance of its subject matter deserves to be *investigated*, that because of its bulk needs to be *summarized*, and that because of the controversies it has produced requires the closest possible *critical analysis* (my emphasis)” (Hixson 1992, p. xii).

Hixson’s study is an indispensable addition to the larger literature on “the Christian Right” in general, and “the evangelical” in particular, because it highlights how Warner’s initial warnings have manifested over and across a given historiographic period of time. For Hixson, much of what appeared in the pages of *The New American Right* bore a striking resemblance to the theoretical claims made only years earlier by critical theorist Theodor Adorno in the pages of his and others’ foundational study *The Authoritarian Personality* published in 1950.<sup>20</sup> “Having read and read closely the scholarly literature on the American right wing for over a decade, I have come away impressed with the relative narrowness of the debate, with the way researchers tended to ask essentially the same questions about what kinds of individuals joined right-wing organizations or supported right-wing candidates” (Hixson 1992, p. xxi). Hixson’s observation about the limitations of the sociological literature on the right-wing allows us to see into what made Bell’s “congruence of thought” possible over a significant amount of time: scholars were asking the same questions and using the same methods of inquiry generation after generation after generation.

Of particular interest for my purposes is Hixson’s concentration on the data and studies of “the New Right” and its interactions with the Moral Majority and “the Christian Right” during the late 1970s and early 1980s. Such associations have similarly been taken at face value for generations by historians, scholars of religion, sociologists, political scientists, and journalists. The usual story goes something like this: an unholy alliance, forged between “the New Right” and “the New Christian Right”, made possible Ronald Reagan’s ascent to the White House based on the general viewership of “the electronic church” and Reagan’s ability to connect with a variety of conservative voters. His assurance that while members of the Republican Party could not necessarily endorse him, but that he most certainly “endorse you and what you’re doing”, resonated across time and space virtually overnight by making Reagan the preeminent favorite to win the presidential nomination.

<sup>19</sup> For more on Rogin and his interdisciplinary work, see Rogin (1988). His corpus deserves greater scholarly engagement by both historians, political scientists, and sociologists of religion. His first scholarly article, published in 1966 in the pages of *Public Opinion Quarterly*, explored the relationship between George Wallace, the middle class, emotion, and notions of backlash. Another study of similar material can be found in Bivins (2008).

<sup>20</sup> For more on this study, see its latest iteration: Adorno et al. (2019). The introduction by philosopher Peter Gordon is a must read for those interested in Hixson’s emphasis on critical analysis.

Hixson's analysis of scholarly appraisals of the American right wing brings into question the degree to which this alliance actually resulted in more conservative support for Reagan on the ground. My own exploration of conservative media and reporting at the time suggest a similar conclusion. In this sense, were sociologists and journalists partly responsible for creating a largely overblown sense of support for Reagan by "the Christian Right" and the Moral Majority? How did Warner's theoretical barriers shape such studies in real time? And what did conservative sources at the time observe about the relationship between Reagan, electoral politics, and "the Christian Right?"

"In the early 1980s, a significant number of social scientists, including not only those studying religion but those studying voting behavior as well, would examine various aspects of this evangelical resurgence and explore its political implications", argues Hixson. "With relatively few exceptions . . . they would focus on the characteristics of the evangelicals who were being mobilized rather than on the process of mobilization itself" (Hixson 1992, p. 227). This type of mobilization was the result of the tireless efforts of conservative political consultants such as Paul Weyrich, Richard Viguerie, and Howard Phillips. These individuals are instrumental to the story of the American right wing generally considered less for their individual suggestions about abortion or race, and more for their willingness to re-think the form of coalition politics on behalf of a resurgent conservatism unwilling to adhere to traditional political parties.<sup>21</sup>

Part of that story of mobilization included how ideas about individuals like Jerry Falwell and organizations like the Moral Majority shaped the electoral prospects of conservatism writ large in the name of a Reagan presidency (Fitzgerald 1981). What has arguably not been considered to this point in the historiography is the degree to which print media and academic analyses at the time helped to produce these ideas almost in real time. Drawing from documents spanning both the popular and the professorial, the following primary sources illustrate how anti-evangelical sensibilities and habits of thought shaped reporting at the time, and how such assumptions continue to shape contemporary analyses of American evangelical politics in general, and "the evangelical" in particular.

#### 4. Describing the Protestant Right in Real Time

In May of 1982, writer Tina Rosenberg authored a provocatively titled article, "How the Media Made the Moral Majority". Responding to the notion that by the early 1980s someone like Falwell had been "overcovered" by the media, Rosenberg argued that such over-coverage was actually part of the problem because such reports actually obscured its subject matter instead of elucidating it for the American public. Drawing from the likes of *US News and World Report* and *The Washington Star*, Rosenberg contextualized the reporting on Falwell "as part of a pattern of exaggerations, distortions and oversimplifications that has characterized most of the press coverage of Falwell and the Moral Majority". "What should have been portrayed as a relatively new social and political development of modest size and power", Rosenberg observed, "was transformed into a nearly invincible juggernaut that seemed to be on the verge of overwhelming American life" (Rosenberg 1982, p. 27). It did not matter whether you thought of Falwell as the harbinger of the end, or a new beginning for conservative Protestants. For Rosenberg, "he and his movement have been the beneficiaries of one of the biggest hype jobs in recent memory" (Rosenberg 1982, p. 28). The particular conditions of such a "hype job" were not only shaped by the theoretical barriers first identified by Warner, but also by a concerted effort to discredit conservative evangelical activism in the public square. "In retrospect, the attempt to link all extremists as possessing a similar outlook on the world represented an attempt by sociological liberals to define the scope of legitimate political discourse in America" (Wolfe 1981, p. 10). For Rosenberg, the intellectual equation was a simple if not predictable one: "Falwell has

<sup>21</sup> Scholar of religion Anthea Butler's *White Evangelical Racism: The Politics of Morality in America* is a welcomed example of a study that examines the impact of Weyrich on the formation of the Christian Right. For more, see Butler (2021).

been the beneficiary of a phenomenon with which political journalists should be especially familiar: what's described as powerful often ends up being powerful".

Rosenberg contended that journalists had been mesmerized by a figure literally beyond their comprehension. Only a kind of ritualistic reporting could domesticate Falwell and his organization for the masses largely on the terms of the journalists themselves. There were three figures at play in this particular equation: the press, liberals, and the Moral Majority. Only by taking account of all three could an interested observer, or a sociologist of American religion and politics, truly understand the degree to which such interactions cultivated an idea of "the evangelical" in and through the public sphere and its various means of dissemination. Otherwise referred to as the "News Hole Trinity", Rosenberg described the delicate yet efficient process through which Falwell would assume his mantle as "the Darth Vader of American politics". Falwell's significance to Rosenberg and her fellow journalists "has been to fill a need for the press, a need to find a symbol of a new phenomenon that reporters aren't comfortable with".

"The result", she argued, "is participation in a peculiar kind of symbiotic ritual. This ritual helps explain how the Moral Majority has burrowed its way into the American imagination. Falwell wants attention, liberals want an ogre, and the press wants a good story" (Rosenberg 1982, p. 29). The triangulation Rosenberg identified spoke to the dependence of spectacle on the interconnectedness of its onlookers: liberal, conservative, or otherwise. I've chosen to identify such a theoretical calculus as evidence of analytic tendencies in the recent American past because it has anything but scholarly intent as its end goal. In other words, to assume the existence of "the Religious Right" is to depend on such a history of reporting of conservative subjects that were deemed unfit for democratic life, yet were nevertheless the perfect subjects of a headline or magazine article. The end result of such patterns of reporting and consumption wrote itself, quite literally. "Unfortunately", Rosenberg admitted, "trying to categorize the resurgence of religion in America has led to a kind of oversimplification that can be very destructive of rational political and social analysis" (Rosenberg 1982, p. 33).

Long before he composed his well-received monograph *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* in 1996, historian William Martin authored a lesser known article for *The Atlantic* titled "The Birth of a Media Myth"<sup>22</sup> Published under the television section of the periodical, Martin argued that the pollsters and social scientists responsible for tallying the number of people watching a given program of the "Electronic Church" had made a grave error in their reporting. Not unlike "the Religious Right", the term "Electronic Church" was one largely invented by outside observers to the phenomenon in order to explain its political significance to the viewing public. Martin's opening image foregrounded the supposed reach of the "the Electronic Church" as understood through its academic interpreters.

"Starting in the predawn hours of each Sunday morning, the largest religious gathering in America takes place, drawing almost 130 million people to their radio and television sets". Rather than using his own words to begin his piece, Martin instead quoted from minister Ben Armstrong's *The Electric Church* published in 1979. At the time, Armstrong was the executive director of the National Religious Broadcasters, a largely conservative organization built to better represent evangelical interests in the public square through both public and purchased airtime. Martin's opening reference served two purposes: to set the tone of his critical piece, and to illustrate how conservative sources could not be taken at their proverbial word. A year later, Martin contends, *The New York Times* ran a series on the "Electronic Church" that quoted Armstrong's figures without any critical appraisal or concern. Similarly positioned periodicals such as *The Wall Street Journal*, *New York Magazine*, and *U.S. News and World Report* authored their own respective pieces echoing Armstrong's figures with those of their own. Even men's magazines such as *Penthouse* and *Playboy* got

<sup>22</sup> For more, see Martin (1981, 1996). It is interesting to note that Martin's afterword in his 1996 publication is titled, "A Permanent Fixture on the American Political Landscape" in reference to his subject, the Religious Right.

in on the action in estimating the audience of “the Electronic Church” to be somewhere between thirty and sixty million viewers. “Though few reporters claimed to know any Falwell supporters personally”, Martin wryly remarked, “they were sure the woods and towns and cities were full of them” (Martin 1981, p. 7).

Martin was later joined by liberal Protestant figures such as National Council of Churches Director of Communications William Fore, *The Christian Century* editor James Wall, and American religious historian and University of Chicago professor Martin Marty in echoing the overblown numbers in sources such as *TV Guide* and *The Christian Century*, respectively. Wall’s comments were particularly noticeable to Martin who recognized an all too familiar theoretical influence in his analysis. Wall’s quoting of a number around 100 million viewers was not unusual, but his reliance on past histories was. Included within parentheses, Martin told his readers that “Wall’s editorial, ironically, was based on Richard Hofstadter’s essay ‘The Paranoid Style in American Politics’” (Martin 1981, p. 10). Despite the almost thirty years that separated Wall’s editorial and the publication of *The Paranoid Style in American Politics* in 1952, very little had changed in the public analysis of conservatism in general and the American right wing in particular. “Claims such as these would be understandable if we had recourse to nothing more substantial than faith”, Martin contended, “Fortunately, we can do better”. After combing through both audience and academic surveys, as well as data provided by Nielsen and Arbitron, Martin came to the following conclusion in light of the numbers cited by his numerous colleagues. “The results are remarkably uniform, and the conclusion to which they point is that the audience estimates cited above . . . have one feature in common: they are all absurd” (Martin 1981, p. 10).

Martin’s conclusions about how many were actually consuming programming from “the Electronic Church” could not have been more different from those by Rosenberg and others. Demographically speaking, however, Martin’s research reinforced the assumed idea of who was watching, and from where. “This audience is primarily female, over fifty, working and lower class and true to stereotype, likely to live in rural areas, towns, and small cities in the South and Midwest. It is also composed almost entirely of believers, most of whom are members of conservative Protestant churches” (Martin 1981, p. 11). Once Martin dived into the numbers, which examined audience data from ten syndicated television ministries including those of Oral Roberts, Robert Shuller, Jerry Falwell, Jimmy Swaggert, and Ken Copeland, he was able to offer the following about how many were actually watching a given program. “A figure of seven to ten million seems fair. Perhaps two to three times that many watch the programs on an occasional basis, an estimate that squares with a Harris Poll survey placing the audience for television preachers at approximately 23 million”.

Not only were these figures well below those reported on a national scale seemingly in perpetuity, they were also indicative of the analytical assumptions elucidated thus far that looked to both exoticize and criticize the very same subjects of study: namely evangelicals themselves and their conservative viewing habits. Martin concluded that numbers mattered far less than the “symbolic function” that such programming served in the public square. “As evangelicals notice that virtually all the religion on radio and television is their kind of religion, that the secular media are fascinated by it, and that liberal Christians are panicked by it, their confidence is buoyed, and their hearts cheered. They realize that they are no longer a beleaguered, backwater minority but a significant and thriving part of mainstream American Christianity” (Martin 1981, p. 16).

By the mid-1980s, sociologists had begun to reevaluate their respective studies of conservative Protestantism in light of both their colleagues’ studies as well as those investigative reports composed for magazines and newspapers.<sup>23</sup> One pertinent study titled *New Christian Politics* (1984) examined the latest interpretations and descriptions of conservative

<sup>23</sup> One of the best studies composed at the time of conservative evangelicalism was Francis Fitzgerald’s “A Disciplined, Charging Army” published in *The New Yorker* on 18 May 1981.

evangelicalism in hopes of, as sociologist Phillip E. Hammond noted, “sending us back to the theoretical drawing board” (Shupe and Bromley 1984, p. xiv). Of particular importance was the editors’ introductory chapter provocatively titled, “Interpreting the New Christian Right: A Commentary on the Substance and Process of Knowledge Creation”. As a whole, the collection’s purpose was to critically examine the sociological literature on the New Christian Right in order to determine how knowledge about the movement came into being. “The process by which our understanding of the New Christian Right has unfolded reveals at least two things about contemporary social science”, Shupe and Bromley argued. “Its relative inability to anticipate even major social trends and its routine processing of knowledge about movements once they have been recognized” (Shupe and Bromley 1984, p. 8). For both authors, the process through which social movements became entities, or news stories, was a fairly predictable one.

“Social scientists frequently ‘discover’ even important social trends only after there are substantially under way . . . These ‘discoveries’ should probably be more appropriately termed ‘rediscoveries’ since none of these problems or movements is particularly new. Periodically, for one of a variety of reasons, we are forced to pay attention to them once again”. For the purposes of this analysis, “one of a variety of reasons” was the ascent of Ronald Reagan to the oval office following Jimmy Carter’s born-again presidency. From there, news reports and social scientific studies followed in an attempt to ascertain the exact threat of the New Christian Right to American public life. This process of “rediscovery” followed three stages for Shupe and Bromley: the construction stage, the reassessment stage, and the institutionalization stage. During the first stage, social scientists track the degree to which social movements over exaggerate their size through various forms of media. At the time, this type of *statistical hyperbole* was referred to as “evangelistically speaking”, a euphemism referenced by the authors to describe how conservative social actors attempted to bring attention to their respective social causes through the media. As part of a “natural history of the reaction to social movements”, the three steps outlined by Shupe and Bromley illustrated the truly imbricated nature of conservative Protestant activism, and the ways in which it is studied and reported on.

The second step describes the reassessment stage. “Initially, sensationalism feeds on itself; media coverage mushrooms once reporters have decided that there is a ‘story’. The sheer volume of coverage and the competition for additional news distort the scale and meaning of ongoing events . . . in this second stage, an outpouring of literature which responds to the movement typically occurs” (Shupe and Bromley 1984, p. 10). Relatively few sociological studies besides the ones referenced here have taken up this question about knowledge formation and the Christian Right. This collection is particularly valuable because it was one of the first academic studies to seriously investigate the degree to which claims about the size and influence of such a movement could be trusted. It also asked questions about the role that journalists and social scientists played in the creation of their respective conservative evangelical and fundamentalist subjects. The end result of such intellectual scrutiny was the formation of a “field” of study, one that seemed to possess its own reasons for existing in the first place. For Shupe and Bromley, however, this could not be further from the truth because with such a field came “experts who provide interpretations of the New Christian Right to the public and private organizations that are responsible for regulating public arenas of interest to it” (Shupe and Bromley 1984, p. 12).

Overall, the analysis seemed to have backfired. Martin’s earlier observation spoke to the fact that despite the overly critical intent of journalists and liberal sociologists, the collective effect of their work had emboldened an otherwise marginal presence in the public square. In this sense, the production of both “the Christian Right” and “the Electronic Church” can be traced directly back to the modes of consumption and analysis that characterized most popular and sociological treatments of conservative evangelicals dating back to the 1950s. Regardless of the source, reports on conservative Protestants emphasized the numbers of viewers in an attempt to bring attention to a troubling subject. Instead, such sources ended up bringing into existence the very thing they most likely

abhorred: “the evangelical” and her regressive presence in American public life. “In sum”, argues intellectual and writer Earl Raab, “the traditionalism of the evangelicals does not impinge on their political orientation except when some aspects of modernity radically threaten their status and security. Then, more than others, they tend to express themselves in terms of outraged morality, which comes to symbolize everything they feel they are losing. But while the terms in which they couch their protest may be somewhat different from those of the rest of the country, they are not alone in their larger sense of loss” (Rabb 1981, p. 26).

### 5. Where Do We Go from Here?

For political scientist Michael Lienesch, the study of conservatism has been as turbulent as its subject matter. “In the United States, conservative religious movements are the meteors of our political atmosphere”, Lienesch observes. “Awesome and unpredictable, they streak across the skies in a blaze of right-wing frenzy, only to fall to earth cold and exhausted, consumed by their own passionate heat. This, at least, is the conventional view, called up repeatedly during the decade of the 1980s to explain the phenomenon of Christian conservatism, what came to be called, more or less interchangeable, the “New Christian Right”, the “New Religious Right”, the “New Religious Political Right”, or, more simply, “the religious right” (Lienesch 1993, p. 1). Lienesch is on to something here in his willingness to acknowledge the overlap between academic scholarship and the broader public writ large. He is also correct in acknowledging the epistemic glue that has held such terms together in the liberal imagination for over half a century: the “new” of “the New Religious Right”. To this point, scholars have consistently marked such conservative movements as “new” in an attempt to mark their contributions to American electoral life. On the surface, such a theoretical move seems to signal a willingness to understand something novel in the public square. Underneath, such monikers arguably reveal a deeper dependence on the habits of thought first outlined by R. Stephen Warner including an “evolutionary bias”.

“Perhaps the most impenetrable of the theoretical barriers is the view that evangelicalism is historically passe”, argues Warner. “Ours is a world, the argument goes, of unbelief or of disenchantment . . . from the point of view of the secular sociologist, our contemporary world is in the cognitively privileged position of no longer requiring or being susceptible to supernatural belief. If this is so, then not evangelicalism but liberalism is extrapolated to be the faith of the future” (Warner 1979, p. 7). Seen from within such a framework, anything resembling conservative religiosity comes as passe as best, and anathema at worst, to the liberal democratic order. Such a framework also influences how journalistic accounts of American evangelicalism present their subjects to the reading public. As Tina Rosenberg pointed out over thirty years ago, a pernicious calculus produced an image of “the evangelical” fit for the dustbin of history, one that gave liberals an ogre, and journalists a good story. It also gave conservatives themselves a champion to get behind in Jerry Falwell and his Moral Majority. The irony at the heart of Warner’s barriers is that they end up producing the very thing feared the most: an unruly, regressive subject prone to deplorable behavior. “Rather than supposing that we already have the key to the explanation of evangelicalism in the older notion that it meets the needs of the socially downtrodden . . . we must at the beginning suppose that there are authentic religious yearnings that it is meeting for ‘everyman’ in the modern world” (Warner 1979, p. 9).

The first step in this new theoretical direction is to acknowledge that conservative operatives were moving to leverage persons of conservative faith well before Jimmy Carter uttered his born-again words. Instead of reducing “the evangelical” down to his or her conservative politics, it will be more productive to focus on how conservative Protestants themselves have been organized into constituencies built to make Republican coalitions possible. Reifications are not permanent structures of the religio-political landscapes, yet they have overdetermined sociological and journalistic analysis to the detriment of its conservative subjects since at least the 1970s. Mobilization did not take place in a vacuum—

far from it. Yet the longer the moniker “new” is ascribed to conservative movements in the recent and distant past, the longer the social scientific profession will reproduce the theoretical barriers first identified by Warner in the pages of *Sociological Analysis*.<sup>24</sup>

Closely related to this step is a renewed scholarly attention to the roles that New Right consultants, political operatives, and direct mail advertisers have played in shaping popular conservative sentiment in real time based on the most divisive social issues of the day: guns, abortion, sexuality, and race. Despite the fact that the Civil Rights movements of the 1960s was one of the most profound examples of how a social movement could leverage religion in the public square (read as progressive Christianity and Judaism) against systemic racial oppression, it also set the conceptual agenda for how conservative operatives such as Paul Weyrich and Richard Viguerie could leverage the same traditions in their conservative garb against the very same communities of faith. “To fail to acknowledge that the growth of support for the GOP and conservatism is a consequence of general social processes”, argued Earl Raab, “is to give groups like the Moral Majority more credit than they deserve and to run the risk of a self-fulfilling prophecy” (Rabb 1981, p. 28). Echoing points initially made by Rosenberg, Raab elegantly concludes with the argument that this paper has attempted to prove: that scholars and journalists have been responsible for producing the very subjects that they are seeking to understand and in some ways discredit. In this case, “the New Christian Right”, “the Religious Right”, and “the Electronic Church”.

Building on the first step, a second step would explore the general processes suggested by Raab by asking how such seemingly disparate groups of individuals could come together under such sociological monikers. In an attempt to work past the theoretical barriers identified by Warner that continue to influence academic work to this day, a broader consideration of what could be deemed “anti-establishment” tendencies in American public life would be a productive analytical start.<sup>25</sup> “The Americans who ‘turned Right’ in the last election did not by any means agree with the Moral Majority or New Right programs. These Americans were not supporting specific political solutions any more than they usually do. They wanted a government that would more demonstrably reflect their mood: a more assertive America on the world scene, and on the domestic front a serious campaign to fight inflation and refurbish American industry”, argued Earl Raab. “That is the extent of their political conservatism” (Rabb 1981, p. 30).

Taking a cue from Raab’s insightful observations, scholars of American evangelicalism should foreground the extent to which such sentiments and feelings undergird present and past movements of conservative ascendance in the public sphere. Scholar of communication Robert Horwitz has published a monograph in this very intellectual and theoretical trajectory titled, *America’s Right: Anti-Establishment Conservatism from Goldwater to the Tea Party*.<sup>26</sup> Applying an interdisciplinary method to the subject of American conservatism in general, and what he calls *anti-establishment conservatism* in particular, Horwitz contends that today’s Republican Party is nothing like yesterday’s GOP. “Twenty-first-century conservatism has moved far beyond even the “Reagan Revolution” of small government, lower taxes, and a respect for tradition. Contemporary American conservatism practices a politics that is disciplined, uncompromising, utopian, and enraged, seeking to ‘take back our country’” (Horwitz 2013, p. xi).

In addition to taking an interdisciplinary approach to the subject of American conservatism, Horwitz also examines those who established the scholarly study of conservative subjects in the first place. Chapters on the intellectual legacy of historian Richard Hofstadter contextualize his mid-century commentary in order to better understand our own moment of political and intellectual ferment and calamity. Applying and adjusting such theories in light of our present, Horwitz argues that today’s conservative movement can be best understood as a fusionist project that has wedded a stern economic libertarianism

<sup>24</sup> For more on how this phenomenon relates to contemporary politics in general, and the rise of Donald Trump in particular, see Harding (2017).

<sup>25</sup> For more on how Warner’s theoretical barriers appear in today’s op-eds on white American evangelicals, see Rolsky (2020).

<sup>26</sup> For another brilliant interdisciplinary analysis of American conservatism, see Peck (2019).

with an even more visceral socially conservative traditionalism under the umbrella of the New Right. Taking a page from Horwitz's study, scholars of American religion and politics should be more willing to adopt his "anti-statist statism" as a category of analysis moving forward that best captures how conservatism writ large has undercut confidence in the public good by eroding confidence in America's governing institutions. "Politics for anti-establishment conservatism is, for all intents and purposes, Manichean, a life and death struggle between good and evil", argues Horwitz. "My use of religious metaphors is, plainly, by design, for a convinced, intransigent, faith-based style of politics that has become characteristic of contemporary American conservatism, one that seems to attack the very notion of a public good" (Horwitz 2013, p. 9).

## 6. Conclusions

The study of American conservatism and evangelical Protestantism is at a theoretical crossroads. Down one path leads common sense-driven analyses that take their evangelical subjects largely at their deplorable words. White support of Donald Trump since 2015 has arguably led to an analytical "whitening" of American evangelicalism rarely witnessed before in the scholarly guild. Any and all moral compasses once claimed by the very same evangelicals have been utterly corrupted by their collective support of a reality television star destined for the highest office in the land. Both op-eds and scholarly monographs have taken advantage by arguing that white evangelicals have both "corrupted" a faith and "fractured" a nation.<sup>27</sup> Little have scholars realized that such "whitening" is largely the result of their own analyses and scholarly appraisals of a once lauded academic subject: one that continues to give the field of American religion much of its historical credibility as an academic field of study within the humanities and social sciences.

My study has taken a decidedly different intellectual path by attempting to reveal the extent to which this particular historiography has depended upon a particular set of theoretical assumptions that have their origins in the 1970s with the "rise of the Christian Right" and the birth of "the electronic church". In many ways, academic inquiry has come at the expense of cultural ubiquity as monograph after academic monograph continues to be published on conservative evangelical subjects and their regressive physiological makeup. The habits of mind and theoretical assumptions that have produced such studies have hopefully become clearer over the course of this analysis. If not, then I fear that the field is doomed to repeat the mistakes of old, or should I say, new, once again.

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<sup>27</sup> For more, see Du Mez (2020).

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