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Jon A. Shields: The Democratic Virtues of the Christian Right

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INTRODUCTION

REPUBLICAN VICTORIES IN THE 2004 elections unleashed yet another wave of reporting that pummeled the Christian Right for compromising democratic values. In an election postmortem, Thomas Friedman of the *New York Times* accused the Right of violating the sacred line between church and state, so much so that it was in effect “rewriting the constitution.”¹ Following his lead, Robert Kuttner, editor of the *American Prospect*, opined that Christians have become even more aggressive in their efforts to undermine the American Constitution, which was a “triumph of reason over absolutism.”² A more tempered and otherwise iconoclastic *New Republic* soon followed with some conventional wisdom. According to its editor, religious conservatives routinely fail to “find nonreligious justifications for their views.”³

The claim that theologically conservative Christians threaten democratic values is not new. In fact, it would be hard to find a more well-entrenched and enduring belief among elite journalists and academics alike.⁴ Yet it is also one of the least-examined beliefs. Despite all of the interest in the Right and culture wars more broadly, we know surprisingly little about the Christian Right. For instance, we do not know very much about what goes on inside Christian Right organizations. This neglect reflects a larger shortcoming in the study of interest groups, since few social scientists have bothered to investigate the internal lives of political organizations. As Lawrence Rothenberg observed in 1992, “Curiously, life inside political organizations has rarely received much attention from contemporary social scientists.”⁵ Even less attention has been devoted to the study of how religious activists actually behave in the public square.⁶ And certainly no systematic attention has been spared to study the central subject of this book, which is how Christian Right leaders shape the public behavior of ordinary Christians.

Careful attention to this subject offers some good news. Drawing on interviews, participant observation, survey data, and movement sources, I argue that scholars and political observers need to reconsider the Christian Right’s contribution to American democracy, regardless of where they align themselves in the larger culture wars.

First, many Christian Right organizations have helped create a more participatory democracy by successfully mobilizing conservative evangelicals, one of the most politically alienated constituencies in twentieth-century America. This has been a startling development. After all, it was

the New Left that emphasized the importance of opening up American democracy to alienated citizens. What is more remarkable, this participatory revival took place in an era in which social scientists have been increasingly anxious about the erosion of civic life. Yet as the ink dried on Robert Putnam's now-famous "bowling alone" thesis, conservative Christians were turning out to vote in record numbers.⁷

In mobilizing Christian conservatives, the Right achieved another important New Left goal. It realigned American parties and public debate around contentious moral questions that animate citizens rather than bureaucratic, technical, or economic issues that tend to bewilder and subdue them. The Christian Right has therefore helped to reinvigorate American democracy and eliminate the end-of-ideology politics that the New Left held in such contempt.

Second, I argue that the vast majority of Christian Right leaders have long labored to inculcate deliberative norms in their rank-and-file activists—especially the practice of civility and respect; the cultivation of real dialogue by listening and asking questions; the rejection of appeals to theology; and the practice of careful moral reasoning. Movement leaders teach these norms because they have strong pragmatic incentives to do so. Public appeals, after all, are most persuasive when they are civil and reasonable. Movement leaders further ground these norms in scripture. For instance, activists are regularly instructed to practice civility because the Gospels command Christians to love their neighbors, and they are encouraged to be honest because God forbids believers from bearing false witness. Likewise, Christian apologetic organizations teach thousands of citizens every year to make philosophical arguments rather than scriptural ones because Paul instructs Christians to give reasons for their beliefs. From this perspective, then, Jesus Christ was not a belligerent moralist. Thus, ignoring deliberative norms is not merely impolitic; it is also unfaithful.

While I argue that Christian activists follow many deliberative norms, I do *not* argue that they are deliberative democrats. Indeed, even if these norms were practiced perfectly (which they are not), the behavior of Christian activists would still fall short of deliberation in the sense that political theorists use the term. This is because some norms are not practiced or taught at all. Most critically, activists are not moral skeptics who hold truths provisionally and quickly abandon beliefs when challenged with counter-evidence; nor are they encouraged to become such skeptics by their leaders. In fact, when activists are educated in the larger debates surrounding their objectives, they become even more confident in their political opinions because this training supplements scriptural truths with philosophical and social scientific evidence.

Therefore, politics pushes Christian activists even further from the moral skepticism that deliberative democrats champion. But this fact may be less a limitation of the Christian Right than of democratic politics itself. After all, there is no evidence that citizens with a Socratic-like moral skepticism, however desirable in theory, ever maintained any real-world social movement. Social movements, whether celebrated or not, all have been driven by strong convictions rather than provisionally held truths. Put simply, a dogmatic resistance to opposing ethical views may be the price of a more participatory democracy. But if Christian activists' democratic education does not bring them any closer to moral skepticism, it still sharpens and expands their thinking. It also raises the level of public debate for the benefit of the vast majority of more ambivalent Americans.

Deliberation is often compromised in another critical respect. While Christian leaders teach new activists how to engage the wider public, they also must mobilize and sustain their moral commitments through passionate and strident exhortations. In fact, some of the harshest rhetoric identified by critics of the culture war has been communicated in the context of mobilization. Like the absence of moral skepticism in the Christian Right, however, the polemical nature of mobilization tactics is more a function of the exigencies of democratic politics than a flaw of any particular movement. It highlights a much deeper tension between the competing ideals of participation and deliberation. Political theorists, especially proponents of deliberation, need to appreciate better the fundamental tension between these two democratic goods.

More troubling to advocates of deliberation are the militant fundamentalists who swelled the ranks of the Operation Rescue and the Moral Majority as well as contemporary fringe groups, such as God Hates Fags, Operation Save America, and Operation Rescue West. Christians in many of these groups do not understand their obligation to love their neighbor in a way that encompasses a political ideal of civility. Instead, they root their activities in a bellicose interpretation of Christianity and embrace tactics consistent with their theology. Many of the most militant activists are extreme Calvinists who believe that because they are the chosen instruments of God's justice, they should break human laws. Such beliefs were especially common among those who bombed abortion clinics and murdered physicians.

Militant Christian activists also tend to regard moderate strategies as politically inefficacious. Thus, radicalism is often self-consciously a reaction against the very deliberative moderation that dominates the Christian Right. Such moderation has often bred uncompromising and violent radicalism at the fringes of social movements. There were "Garrisonians" in the abolitionist movement, axe-wielding temperance crusaders, disciples of Black Power in the civil rights movements, the Weatherman in the New

Left, and eco-terrorists in the environmental movement. Yet radicalism also tends to encourage further moderation within social movements. This has been especially true in the Christian Right, where movement leaders are trying to escape the long shadow of fundamentalists like Randall Terry and Jerry Falwell.

The good news is that fundamentalists are not very good at building political organizations and are broadly unpopular in the Christian Right. Indeed, one reason the Moral Majority never became a broad-based, grassroots organization is that Falwell's brand of politicized fundamentalism was so unappealing to most conservative evangelicals. Today, the few remaining radical organizations are practically without members.

Mistaking such marginal fundamentalists as representative of the Christian Right as a whole prevents us from undertaking a thoughtful assessment of the right or understanding the complex relationship between Christianity and deliberation. Because we have regarded fringe fundamentalists as paradigmatic representatives of the Christian Right, we have assumed falsely that orthodox believers more broadly are a grave threat to a democratic culture that depends on civil and reasonable citizens. The reality is far more complicated: some orthodox faiths shore up deliberative ideals, while others compromise them.

This book's findings should further prompt us to reevaluate the claims of critics who hope to cure American democracy of bitter contentiousness by either marginalizing or transcending moral conflict in the public realm. These views do not account for how the democratic ideals of participation and deliberation play out in political practice. On the one hand, we should not marginalize the very moral questions that engage and connect citizens to larger public causes in our vast commercial and administrative republic. We also need to be more tolerant of the excesses of moral conflict if we value participation. On the other hand, we can also take some comfort in the promise of deliberation in public life. Social movements, whether of Christian origin or not, will never cultivate the kind of moral skepticism political theorists champion, because they are ultimately driven by deep convictions. But such movements are also interested in promoting other deliberative norms far more than most critics have appreciated.

EVALUATING SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Assessing a movement's commitment to deliberative norms is irrelevant, some observers might object, if its goals are unjust. We should therefore consider the main criteria by which political movements can be evaluated. First, they can be judged in terms of their success at mobilizing and politi-

cizing citizens, especially disaffected, marginalized, or disenfranchised ones. That is, how effective are they at increasing democratic participation? Second, we can base our evaluation of social movements on how their participants conduct themselves in the public sphere. For instance, are they civil or hostile? Do they appeal to public reason or make theological declarations? In sum, do they abide by deliberative norms and invigorate political debate? And, third, do the goals of a given movement enhance freedom, justice, equality, or other key political goods? On this basis, most of us laud some movements, such as abolitionism, and condemn others, such as nativism.

The assessment of social movements can shift as the criteria used to evaluate them change. The temperance movement is a good example. Much like the contemporary Christian Right, scholars initially regarded it negatively because its goal was to restrict coercively one feature of America's cultural pluralism. As the historian Jed Dannenbaum noted in his study of the temperance movement, until "very recently" most historians shared the popular stereotype of temperance reformers as "humorless, censorious, arch-conservative Protestants; overbearing fanatical women with hatchets; and as narrow-minded, hypocritical farmers with an intense hatred of cities and their inhabitants."⁸ And, of course, the movement's aims were indeed part of a broader campaign to create a homogeneous Protestant civilization in the face of increasing social heterogeneity. More recently, however, this evaluation has changed radically as feminist scholars have shifted our focus from the movement's goals to its success at increasing women's participation in public life.⁹

Like previous feminist scholarship on the temperance movement, this project shifts our focus away from the Christian Right's policy ends. I inquire instead into its effects on participation and public debate. Focusing the book in this way reveals fresh insights into one of the most significant social movements in American history. It is also a more prudent approach for social scientists to take when evaluating contentious contemporary movements. When moral consensus is lacking on contestable ethical questions, they are perhaps better left to other quarters of the academy, especially philosophy, law, theology, and religion departments. In the abortion debate, for instance, thoughtful intellectuals and ethicists on both sides offer compelling arguments, and it remains an issue that reasonable people disagree about. Meanwhile, there is a broad and enduring public and academic consensus on the first two criteria—almost all of us believe that more participation is good for democracy and that citizens should make civil and reasonable arguments in the public square. Moreover, these virtues become especially important precisely when there is broad social disagreement over the public interest.

In time, of course, it is likely that we will achieve something approaching moral consensus on such issues as abortion, pornography, and gay marriage; and when we do, the Christian Right will be evaluated accordingly. Even if the Christian Right follows the fate of the temperance movement, and we eventually conclude that its goals were misguided or worse, this fact will have to be weighed against the movement's effects on public life.

PASSIONS, INTERESTS, AND THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT

If this analysis is correct, why have scholars and political observers misunderstood the Christian Right? A partial explanation can be found in one of the most enduring, though largely untraced, theories in the history of social science. The general theory I am referring to sharply divides the world of political factions or interest groups between those with narrowly economic concerns and those with noneconomic ones. According to this hard distinction, individuals and groups that seek material goods do so in a calculating, tempered, and instrumental manner, while all other citizens seek merely symbolic or cultural goods and do so in a rash and strident manner. Such zealotry follows from the basic assumption that citizens must be somehow deranged if they actively promote causes over and above their own material self-interest. Thus, various pathological motives have been ascribed to noneconomic interests, including irrational bigotries, religious fervor, and anxiety over ones' challenged status, personal lifestyle, or worldview.

Throughout the twentieth century scholars have developed this theory with religious conservatives in mind. In fact, it is doubtful that the sharp theoretical distinction between noneconomic and economic interests would have developed and survived as it has without the enduring influence of Christianity on American politics. This tradition is obscured by the fact that scholars from a wide array of backgrounds have routinely recast the distinction. Noneconomic factions, for instance, have been described as symbolic, status, expressive, or cultural groups. Meanwhile, nearly all thinkers in this broad tradition, including those as varied as James Madison, Seymour Martin Lipset, Kristen Luker, Morris Fiorina, and Thomas Frank, have found that groups preoccupied by moral rather than economic causes undermine deliberative democracy due to their unrestrained zealotry.

The theoretical division between rational economic interests on the one hand and irrational noneconomic ones on the other has deep historical roots. By the end of the seventeenth century, in fact, the calculated pursuit of political goals was thought to apply to economic interests

alone, because they were regarded as universal, predictable, orderly, and capable of taming the other more unruly passions. As Albert Hirschman has argued, those who were guided by economic interests were “expected or assumed to be steadfast, single-minded, and methodical, in total contrast to the stereotyped behavior of men who are buffeted and blinded by their passions.”¹⁰

These ideas influenced the American founders. According to Thomas Pangle, James Madison regarded economic interests as natural and far more rational than those based on religious or political grounds. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson, Madison wrote, “In addition to these *natural* [economic] distinctions, *artificial* ones will be founded, on accidental differences in political, religious, or other opinions.” Such factions, moreover, will be incapable of seeing the “*erroneous or ridiculous*” grounds of their claims.¹¹ Accordingly, they did not enjoy any real place in Madison’s deliberative republic since he regarded the regulation of economic interests as the “principal task of modern legislation.”¹²

Meanwhile, there was a similar impulse to marginalize moral issues and passions in some of the earliest work by political scientists. Because of the zealous and uncompromising behavior of some political activists, Harold Lasswell suggested in 1920 that they should be marginalized from politics. According to Lasswell, social movements routinely create “fictitious values” and demonstrate that the citizen is a “poor judge of his own interest.” Furthermore, political actors, according to Lasswell, “are notoriously contentious and undisciplined” and glorify those who “stir the public conscience by exhortation, reiteration, and vituperation.” Lasswell concluded, “The time has come to abandon the assumption that the problem of politics is the problem of promoting discussion among all the interests concerned with a given problem.”¹³

It was midcentury sociologists, however, who really stressed the political virtues of economic interests. Not unlike today’s intellectuals, these thinkers looked with great alarm at the moral passions that fueled conservative and religious movements. With the rise of anticommunism in the postwar years, sociologists articulated various versions of what Joseph Gusfield has called “psychological expressivism” and applied them almost exclusively to social conservatives.¹⁴ Seymour Martin Lipset, for instance, routinely drew on a status-movement theory to make sense of McCarthyism. Distinguishing class-based movements from status movements, Lipset argued that the latter “refers to political movements whose appeal is to the not uncommon resentments of individuals or groups who desire to maintain or improve their social status.” McCarthyism, in Lipset’s view, appealed to “common men” and especially low-status fundamentalists and Catholics who felt they had been “victimized by members of the upper classes, by the prosperous, by the wealthy, by the well-edu-

cated.” Conservatism, therefore, allowed such groups “to gain a feeling of superiority over the traditionally privileged groups” and purge their “frustrations.”¹⁵

By 1960 Daniel Bell was equally puzzled by the “new American right wing” and turned to status-movement theory for help. In Bell’s view, traditional conceptions of interest groups as rational and instrumental could not make sense of these new radicals. As he explained, the American right could not be explained by “what had traditionally been called ‘interest-group’ politics.” Only “status politics” could make intelligible the “ugly excesses” and “rancors of McCarthyism.”¹⁶

Even though the theory of status politics did not preclude liberal or secular citizens, it developed with religious conservatives in mind. Lipset explained McCarthyism in terms of a “puritanical morality” that believes in “a fundamental difference between right and wrong.” This morality, Lipset believed, contributed to the “political intolerance” of religious conservatives.¹⁷ Bell also stressed the importance of religion, especially American evangelicalism. As Bell explained, McCarthyism was driven by a “moralism” rooted in “the peculiar evangelicalism of Methodism and Baptism, with its high emotionalism, its fervor, enthusiasm, and excitement, its revivalism, its excesses of sinning and of high-voltage confessing.”¹⁸

Following the lead of sociologists, the historian Richard Hofstadter concluded that in order to understand the crusading zeal of religious citizens, scholars needed to turn to psychology. Only the psychological sciences could explain why citizens “would expend so much emotional energy and crusading idealism upon causes that bring them no material reward,” as well as account for their “emotional intensity” and “massive irrationality.” Like Lipset and Bell, Hofstadter was drawn to status-movement theory. As he explained, “Political life is not simply an arena in which the conflicting interests of various groups in concrete material gains are fought out; it is also an arena in which status aspirations and frustrations are, as the psychologists would say, projected.” Hofstadter further saw the rise of status politics as seriously compromising deliberative ideals. According to Hofstadter, the Right “psychologically stands outside the frame of normal democratic politics” because it “accepts no compromises” and “accepts no half measures.” He further feared an alliance “between Protestant and Catholic fundamentalists, who share a common Puritanism,” a “mindless militancy,” and an “ecumenicism of hatred.”¹⁹

There was a tendency in all this scholarship to believe that elites purposely deranged ordinary citizens by distracting them from their fundamental economic interests. In fact, as early as 1949 intellectuals criticized conservatives for luring citizens away from their true economic interests, a critique that has found new life more contemporarily in Thomas Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas?* Leo Lowenthal and Norbert Guterman’s

1949 *Prophets of Deceit* accused right-wing leaders of avoiding the “material needs” of citizens by focusing on their “emotional frustrations.”²⁰ John Bunzel’s critique of the emerging new Right especially lamented the abandonment of economic concerns for moral issues among America’s working class. In *Anti-Politics in America* Bunzel scolded the Religious Right for not directing its attention “to the area of material needs” and for having “nothing concrete to say about how to confront such urgent problems as unemployment, automation, discrimination, or a host of other society-wide ills.” Like other intellectuals, Bunzel thought the anti-communist preoccupations of the Right were partly the product of disturbed minds. As he put it, the “politics of the right rests on frustration and fear” and speaks “in tones of moral certainties, patriotic pieties, and emotional satisfactions.”²¹

These two diametrically opposite behavioral paradigms—one based on rational interests and the other on irrational motives—emerged again, surprisingly enough, in Mancur Olson’s classic *The Logic of Collective Action*, which more than any other work laid the theoretical ground for contemporary interest-group theory. Olson observed that in stark contrast to economic lobbies such as unions and professional lobbies, a “fanatical devotion to an ideology or leader is common in mass movements.” Olson therefore doubted the ability of rational-choice theory to tell us anything “where philanthropic lobbies, that is, lobbies that voice concern about some group other than the group that supports the lobby, or religious lobbies, are concerned.” When “nonrational or irrational behavior is the basis for a lobby,” Olson explained, social scientists should draw on psychology rather than economics.²²

Following his lead, political scientists sought help from sociologists, who had emphasized the irrational nature of noneconomic groups for years. But instead of rejecting economic theory, as Olson suggested, they adapted sociological insights to rational-choice theory.²³ Political scientists such as Robert Salisbury argued that citizens participated in noneconomic groups only because doing so allowed them to *express* their values and moral convictions. Like the sociologists before him, then, Salisbury argued that while economic interests are preoccupied with acquiring concrete benefits, noneconomic groups are interested in expressing their own values and convictions instead of creating policy change. Salisbury in 1969 defined expressive group action as follows: “Expressive actions are those where the action involved gives expression to the interests or values of a person or group rather than instrumentally pursuing interests or values.”²⁴

Although today’s rational-choice thinkers only occasionally invoke this distinction in an explicit way, they nonetheless tend to regard noneconomic groups as primarily interested in expressing outrage. According to

Morris Fiorina, for example, contemporary culture-war activists are “self-righteous and intolerant, their rhetoric emotional and excessive” and that their rising influence in party politics reveals the “dark side of civic engagement.”²⁵

In large part, this distinction between instrumental and expressive interests reflects the theoretical perversities of rational-choice theory. A core tenet of rational-choice theory, of course, is that citizens will never work for collective benefits unless selective incentives are provided; otherwise political activism is wholly irrational. Selective incentives are any direct benefit to the individual that can be acquired only through political participation. In this case, what would otherwise appear to be irrational behavior is revealed to be rational by the assumption that activists receive “expressive” benefits. Therefore, citizens do not participate in politics because they seek public goods since doing so is irrational; rather, they participate because activism itself is its own end and reward. As Salisbury put it, citizens participate in noneconomic interest groups because they “provide mechanisms for the public expression” of individual values.²⁶

The development of a theory of expressive action represented a rejection of Peter Clark and James Q. Wilson’s more sensible understanding of “purposive” incentives. Clark and Wilson argued that purposive incentives are the intangible rewards that are acquired through contributing to the realization of an important goal.²⁷ The implications of their theory for rational-choice theory were evident. As David King and Jack Walker put it, “[D]esires for purposive benefits are desires for collective goods.”²⁸ But in a rational-choice world, “desires for collective goods” cannot stimulate public action. The dangerous notion of purposive incentives to rational-choice theory was clearly realized by Salisbury. He rejected “purposive benefits or incentives” because they “consist in the realization of supra-personal goals, goals of the organization or group.”²⁹

The parallels between theories of status and expressive politics are interesting. Both schools actually began with the same question—namely, why would anyone act against his or her own self-interest. But whereas status politics allowed sociologists and historians to understand movements that struck them as patently irrational, it allowed political scientists to assimilate irrational movements into a rational-choice framework. Yet all camps denied instrumental rationality since changes in public policy were not the point of political action.

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT AND ITS CRITICS

As the modern Christian Right mobilized, political observers continued to understand religious activists through the troubled social-scientific as-

sumptions and categories developed by midcentury sociology. Some drew explicitly on theories of status politics, while many more argued that Christian politics was shaped by symbolic fights over worldviews. Whatever strand of sociology they drew on, however, all agreed that unlike fights over economic policy, culture-war politics was especially immune to compromise and deliberation. Such politics seemed to serve only as a means of purging passions and airing beliefs, rather than as an arena in which actors strategically labored toward concrete goals.

Perhaps the most important work to draw upon midcentury sociology is Kristin Luker's canonical work, *Abortion and the Politics of Motherhood*. Both because of its remarkable influence and because it argues that politics is symbolic even in the case of abortion, Luker's book demonstrates the enduring appeal of the social science first pioneered by the likes of Lasswell, Lipset, Bell, and Hofstadter. Luker dismisses pro-life activists' own explanation that they were spurred to action by concern over the fetus itself. As she explains, "While on the surface it is the embryo's fate that seems to be at stake, the abortion debate is actually about the meaning of *women's* lives." Luker continues, "[T]he abortion debate is so passionate and hard-fought" because "two opposing visions of motherhood are at war." Abortion is, therefore, only the "tip of the iceberg."³⁰ This perspective is reflected in the very term *culture wars* and is accepted by other important students of contemporary moral conflict, especially in studies of the Religious Right.³¹

Meanwhile, other scholars have again emphasized that a focus on moral or cultural questions distracts us from the really important economic issues. For instance, political scientists Sidney Verba, Kay Schlozman, and Henry Brady lament that American religious institutions have tended to "distort citizen activity" by mobilizing around social issues rather than around "an economic agenda focused on the less advantaged."³² More recently, Thomas Frank's best-selling *What's the Matter with Kansas?* repackaged the theory that economic interests are somehow rational and "fundamental" while noneconomic ones lead to political "derangement." According to Frank, working-class, Bible-belt Americans have been seduced by the Republican Party through "explosive social issues," such as abortion and gay marriage, at the expense of their own economic interests. Frank calls this manipulation the "Great Backlash" since it depended on the mobilization of anger and resentment rather than real, fundamental interests. In Frank's view, then, the newly politicized Christian Right is little more than a "plague of bitterness," a scourge of "public outrage," "cultural anger," and "zealotry." Or, as Frank describes his home state of Kansas even more polemically, "[R]age is a bumper crop here, and Kansas has produced enough fury to give every man, woman, and child in the country apoplexy."³³

A variant of the thesis that conservatives are fighting a symbolic and irrational defense of their own worldview has been given greater force recently by the concept of fundamentalism. Although it is often not well defined, fundamentalism is usually described as a kind of illiberal, anti-modern, dogmatic militancy that cuts across all of the world religions. The sociologist Marsha Jones offers a typical definition: “Fundamentalism . . . is born out of the clash between modernity and traditional cultures.”³⁴

The most serious effort to study fundamentalism, however, is the Fundamentalism Project—a major interdisciplinary undertaking of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences at the University of Chicago. Two of its principal investigators, historians R. Scott Appelby and Martin E. Marty, offer a definition much like that of Jones: “[F]undamentalists . . . are likely to spring up anywhere people perceive the need to fight a godless, secular culture—even if they have to depart from the orthodoxy of their traditions to do it.”³⁵ In the culminating work of this ambitious project, *Strong Religion: The Rise of Fundamentalisms Around the World*, political scientist Gabriel Almond and his colleagues offer a somewhat more developed understanding of fundamentalism as “a discernable pattern of religious militancy by which self-styled ‘true believers’ attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the borders of religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors.”³⁶

Partly because the entire project depends on identifying “family resemblances” between remarkably diverse faiths and traditions, important differences are muted or ignored altogether. The result is that theologically orthodox Christians in America appear to have more in common with Islamic terrorists than they do with other Christians. According to Martin Marty, for example, Christian conservatives and Islamic terrorists embrace similar political strategies: “Al Qaeda and the New Christian Right in America . . . mimic, adapt to, absorb, and exploit many of the strategies, tactics, hardware, lifestyles, and even the rational arguments of the secular forces.”³⁷

Yet *Strong Religion* does open some room for important political departures between Christian and Islamic fundamentalism. Although it argues that “extremist violence” and “intolerance” are “a strong tendency of fundamentalist movements,” they are not “inevitable.” It nonetheless describes the Christian Right as a fundamentalist movement that is primarily composed of uncompromising and even violent xenophobes who operate from an enclave culture. Far from embracing the norms of a pluralistic democracy, conclude the authors of *Strong Religion*, the Christian Right emerged from and is sustained by fear of the disintegrating effects of pluralism itself on a Christian America.³⁸

The theoretical nuance offered by the authors of *Strong Religion* has, in general, been entirely lost on academics and journalists. One common formulation revised Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations' thesis such that all worldwide fundamentalisms are in fact a unified culture or civilization. According to Ellen Willis, the director of the Cultural Reporting and Criticism program at New York University, "[T]he 'clash of civilizations' thesis [is] half right. There is such a clash, but it is not between East and West. The struggle of democratic secularism, religious tolerance, individual freedom and feminism against authoritarian patriarchal religion, culture and morality is going on all over the world."³⁹ The freelance author Barbara Ehrenreich made a similar revision: "There is no 'clash of civilizations,'" but "throughout history" there has been "a clash of alternative cultures." Ehrenreich describes one culture as "represented by the Islamic and Christian fundamentalists" who are "crabbed and punitive in outlook, committed to collectivist discipline, and dogmatically opposed to spontaneity and pleasure," while the other "is more open, liberatory, and trusting of human impulses." We are confronted, then, with a stark choice "between freedom, on the one hand, and religious totalitarianism on the other."⁴⁰

Such views are well entrenched among academics and the media elite. Don Corrigan, a professor of communications, recently called the Christian Right the "taliban wing" of the GOP, while the Cornell University political scientist Sydney Tarrow placed the Christian Right among the "ugly movements" along with Islamic fundamentalism and skinhead groups.⁴¹ Likewise, the *American Prospect* continued a well-established tradition of treating orthodox believers as subhuman: "[T]he Bush administration is plainly eager to construct a Fundamentalist International where part of its base—the overtly Neanderthal wing of the Christian right—mixes with like-minded primitives from reactionary Islam."⁴²

While many liberals have found the temptation to draw parallels between the Christian Right and radical Islam hard to resist, especially in light of the Right's strong support for a preemptive war on terrorism, others argue that Christian conservatives have more in common with secular fascists. The Pulitzer-prize winning journalist Chris Hedges of the *New York Times* is currently on a mission to expose the Christian Right as "totalitarian" and "anti-democratic." In fact, Hedges taught a course one semester on the subject at New York University, where he darkly warned his students, "Right now, we're living in the equivalent of 1910 Germany."⁴³ Meanwhile, John Swomley, a professor emeritus of social ethics at St. Paul School of Theology, called the Promise Keepers "storm troopers." Like Hedges, he emphasizes the importance of exposing the Right: "Any disciplined religious movement can exercise control over government and social organizations if people do not expose it, organize

counter movements, and educate their fellow citizens about the importance of separation of church and state.”⁴⁴

Scholars and the media elite also routinely argue that the political views and actions of the Christian Right are built on a foundation of hatred. Orthodox Christians, in this view, oppose gay marriage and abortion because they hate homosexuals and women. Sara Diamond, a sociologist who has written numerous books and articles on the Christian Right, argues that its campaign against more expansive extensions of gay rights is “aroused by fear and loathing of homosexuals.”⁴⁵ The editor of *Home-Grown Hate*, Abby Ferber, assumes dark motives as well. Ferber introduced the volume by arguing that “women’s bodies and control over reproduction are central to white supremacy.”⁴⁶ Likewise, an article in *Harpers* claimed that the Christian Right was driven “by the gospels of fear and hate,”⁴⁷ while an editorial in the *Washington Post* compared the right to the KKK because it criticized judges for disrespecting Christian ethics.⁴⁸ After George W. Bush’s presidential victory in 2004, yet another *Washington Post* editorial opined that the election went to the Republicans because “fundamentalist preachers” had “viciously” stirred up fear and hatred of homosexuals, leaving “men and women in communities across this country at personal and professional risk.”⁴⁹

Those critics who do not believe Christian Right activists are violent bigots nonetheless assert that they refuse to compromise and moderate their own theocratic designs. The philosopher Fritz Detwiler, for instance, concludes that the Christian Right “intends to bring every aspect of the culture into conformity with its divinely revealed beliefs, values, and strictures.”⁵⁰ Consistent with Detwiler’s view, religious studies professor Jason Bivins argues that the Christian Right is founded on an “antiliberalism” that has “antidemocratic” and “intolerant tendencies.”⁵¹ From an even more critical perspective, political theorist Mark E. Warren finds that the Christian Right does not even enjoy the capacity to “negotiate conflicts with other groups,” and law professor William Simon warns that religious fundamentalism is “explicitly hostile to deliberation.”⁵²

Many of these criticisms have been echoed in a much more general way by prominent and thoughtful intellectuals who charge that the culture wars corrupt American democracy. For instance, James Hunter writes that “the traditions of moral logic” have been distorted by activists’ “rhetorical hyperbole whose main use is to appeal to the emotional predispositions of the listener.”⁵³ Similarly, E. J. Dionne exhorts, “If we are to end the cultural civil war over what has so distorted our politics, we need to begin to practice a certain charity and understanding.”⁵⁴ Furthermore, Morris Fiorina laments that culture warriors are responsible for “hijacking” American democracy because they allow “[a]ngry attacks [to] substitute for reasoned debate.”⁵⁵

Amidst all this criticism, a group of even-handed and empirically oriented scholars whose work, though rarely consulted by most of the authors just described, casts doubt on the reigning view of the Christian Right. The research of scholars such as Clyde Wilcox, Mathew Moen, and Mark Rozell suggests that at least some Christian Right organizations try to moderate their rhetoric and policy objectives.⁵⁶ Especially with the rise of the Christian Coalition, these scholars saw a new generation of Christian leaders who were more willing to compromise, work with others, and tone down their rhetoric. As Rozell describes the political maturation of the right in the 1990s, “The rhetorical appeals are more moderate sounding; the issue-appeals are more broad based; leading organizations express a sincere desire to reach out to as broad and ecumenical a base as possible.”⁵⁷

INTERESTS AND DELIBERATIVE DEMOCRACY

For all the hyperbole in most assessments of the Right, this survey highlights a common social-scientific logic: noneconomic interests compromise deliberative ideals because they are engaged in an inherently irrational, even pathological, defense of symbols, status, cultures, and worldviews.

Of course, there are good theoretical reasons to suspect that Christian leaders might have little interest in deliberative norms. Less appreciated by many social commentators are the very rational incentives that encourage Christian leaders to compromise these norms. After all, movement leaders must excite and sustain the moral passions of activists to build their organizations. To this end, they have a strong incentive to make strident appeals that compromise deliberative ideals, especially in the context of mobilization. Michael Walzer has emphasized a similar point in his critique of deliberative democracy. According to Walzer, however valuable reasoned debate is to a healthy democracy, “[i]ndividual men and women have to be stimulated, provoked, energized, excited, called to arms” if political mobilization is to succeed.⁵⁸ Decades earlier, Reinhold Niebuhr made a similar critique of John Dewey’s rationalistic view of democratic life: “Contending factions in social struggle require morale; and morale is created by the right dogmas, symbols, and emotionally potent oversimplifications.”⁵⁹ They also have little incentive to advocate an open-mindedness to alternative moral views lest they compromise the very conviction that sustains their organizations. Morris Fiorina suggested just this point when he observed that those who become highly active in politics tend to have “*intensely held*, extreme views.”⁶⁰

On the other hand, movement leaders have powerful incentives to discipline and educate the passions of mobilized activists before they practice public advocacy. To be sure, some political activism, such as militant varieties of direct action, actually provides group leaders with a disincentive to encourage deliberation. However, political activities that aim to *persuade* public officials or citizens, such as contacting representatives, writing letters to the editor, participating in school-board meetings, and engaging in informal moral suasion are generally far more efficacious when undertaken by citizens who practice deliberative norms. Therefore, “the passions and the interests,” to borrow Albert Hirschman’s term, is less useful for identifying divisions *between* political groups as it is for highlighting tensions *within* them.

The possible tension between successful organization maintenance and successful activism has gone virtually unnoticed by scholars. One exception is James Q. Wilson, who observed that leaders of voluntary associations are confronted with the difficult task of “motivating indifferent members and controlling militant ones.”⁶¹ Much of this book develops and explores Wilson’s pregnant observation.

METHOD AND OVERVIEW

This book is not a work of political science as that term now tends to be understood in the discipline. That is, it is not a work of normal science in which discrete causal relationships are tested with quantitative data or an experimental design. In such studies, normative questions are often something of an afterthought and approached with caution, if at all. In this book, however, normative questions frame the discussion. From the outset, I am interested in whether or not a particular social movement has undermined or advanced democratic values. Because of the nature of this question, I am less interested in discovering laws of social science and more interested in understanding and describing the Christian Right.

This does not mean that I am uninterested in social science theory. In fact, I engage the social-scientific distinction between economic and non-economic groups as well as consider some of the conditions that shape social movements’ interest in deliberative norms. In addition, I further develop interest-group theory by highlighting the organizational tension between mobilization and advocacy. To what extent this tension holds outside of the Christian Right is a question this study cannot definitively answer. This is the limitation of a case study.

Discovering genuine laws of social science, however, will never succeed unless we know more about politics. In the case of social movements, political scientists know shockingly little about them because they are not

easily studied with the preferred tools of a rigorous methodologist. For example, by using such methods it is difficult to discover how movement elites try and shape the behavior of rank-and-file activists. And we certainly cannot know what activists do and say in the public square with surveys, experimental designs, or formal mathematical models. To answer these kinds of questions, we need to make room for the kind of political anthropology pioneered by the likes of James Q. Wilson, Edward Banfield, and Richard Fenno. The alternative is to abandon such questions altogether as beyond the scope of political science, which was suggested to me by one scholar during my graduate education.

The kind of social science developed by the likes of Wilson and Fenno promises not only to improve social science theory in time. It will also help political theorists hone and revise their theories in response to what we know about the empirical realities of political life. A good example is the literature on deliberative democracy, which this book engages directly. It has elaborated principles that ideally should govern public debate without taking into account the constraints of political life or considering how in real life the democratic ideals of participation and deliberation cannot both be endlessly maximized. That this scholarship has not been attentive to such problems is at least partly because social scientists have done such a poor job of illuminating public life and conducting research that has relevance to political theorists.

The remainder of this book proceeds as follows: In chapter 1, “Democratic Education in the Christian Right,” I examine how Christian Right leaders try to shape the public behavior of rank-and-file activists. Drawing primarily upon interviews with leaders in thirty different Christian Right organizations and organizational materials, I show that most Christian citizens are taught deliberative norms. However, in Chapter 2, “Christian Radicalism,” I also demonstrate the vitality of Christian radicalism especially in the rescue movement where the removal of abortion policy from the legislative to the judicial realm and the militancy of evangelical fundamentalism combined to send waves of violence crashing down on abortion clinics. Although today such violence has greatly abated, a handful of Christian rescuers continue systematically to harass abortion providers. Meanwhile, I also show that strident and belligerent rhetoric is commonly found within mainstream groups as well, especially in the context of mobilization where elites attempt to stir the passions of uninvolved citizens or maintain the morale and energies of committed ones. Finally, this chapter also focuses on the role the media has played in magnifying the most radical and sensational elements of the Christian Right.

But do leaders’ efforts influence the behavior of rank-and-file activists? Chapter 3, “The Varieties of Pro-Life Activism,” sheds empirical light on how Christian activists conduct themselves in public forums, largely by

observing them in their own environments—city streets, abortion clinics, university campuses, and other public places. In addition to observation of hundreds of activists in six American cities, I also draw upon sixty personal interviews, video footage, and over 100 written personal testimonies.

One of the most surprising findings is the relative disinterest in creating spaces for civil dialogue in the pro-choice camp. In chapter 4, “Deliberation and Abortion Politics,” I explore the causes of this discrepancy, and especially highlight how very different strategic incentives in both movements shape their respective investments in deliberative norms.

In chapter 5, “Reviving Participatory Democracy,” I further argue that Christian elites have also had a powerful effect on participation. It is often forgotten that conservative evangelicals have been among the most alienated constituencies in twentieth-century America. This is partly because they feared that political engagement compromised an authentically Christian life. Indeed, while secular critics feared that religion corrupts politics, evangelicals have long held the opposite concern: it is politics that contaminates religion. Drawing upon National Election Studies, this book is the first to trace the gradual assimilation of Christian conservatives into American politics over a broad sweep of time. Using a wide variety of indicators, this method demonstrates that over the course of only a handful of election cycles, evangelical citizens have emerged as among the most engaged, knowledgeable, and sophisticated American citizens. The Right has achieved this success because Christian Right organizations have labored to change evangelicals’ view of politics. Of greatest importance, though, Christian Right organizations departed from the example set by New Left public interest groups and the Moral Majority. Instead, the right returned to a much older tradition established by many religious movements, including the abolitionist, temperance, and civil rights campaigns, by mobilizing through churches.

In chapter 6, “Participation, Deliberation, and Values Voters,” I conclude by criticizing the scholarly and popular view that moral conflict needs either to be marginalized or transcended. Such a view fails to account for the much deeper tension between the democratic ideals of participation and deliberation.