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The World Turned Upside Down: Jimmy Carter, the Rise of the Religious Right, and the “Peculiar Glory” of the Baptists

Randall Balmer

If America's evangelicals in the mid-1970s had knocked on the door of central casting in search of a political candidate they could support, they would probably ask for someone with political experience but who was not part of the Washington culture that had been so tainted by Richard Nixon and the Watergate scandal. A Democrat from the South would probably be a good choice, and a Baptist – someone who recognized the importance of the First Amendment and the separation of church and state – would solidify that candidate's credentials as someone who understood that the Christian faith had flourished in the United States precisely because the government had stayed out of the religion business. And if central casting offered a candidate who was also openly pious, unafraid to talk about his evangelical conversion, and who regularly taught Sunday school, evangelicals might have pinched themselves.

Jimmy Carter, the one-term governor of Georgia, fit all of those criteria. His positions and policies, moreover – his concern about poverty and the environment, his support for public education, his passion for human rights, and his quest for a less imperial foreign policy – were consistent with those of nineteenth-century evangelicalism, which invariably took the part of those on the margins of society. And it is certainly true that

Carter attracted many heretofore apolitical evangelicals, Southerners especially, to his 1976 campaign.

Indeed, Jimmy Carter's appearance on the national scene in the mid-1970s jolted American evangelicals out of their political somnolence. The Scopes trial of 1925 had prompted a hasty retreat on the part of many evangelicals, fundamentalists especially, from the arena of public discourse; the ignominy of the Scopes trial had convinced them that the larger culture was both corrupt and corrupting. Beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, evangelicals threw themselves into the enterprise of constructing their own subculture, a vast and interlocking network of congregations, denominations, Bible camps, Bible institutes, Christian colleges and seminaries, publishing houses, and missionary societies – all in an attempt to shield themselves, and especially their children, from the depredations of the larger world.¹

The evangelical subculture of the twentieth century was marked by a kind of otherworldliness, the legacy of a doctrine called dispensationalism, or dispensational premillennialism, which many American evangelicals had adopted in the latter decades of the nineteenth century.² Dispensationalism divided all of human history into discrete ages, or dispensations, and posited that we now stood on the cusp of the final dispensation when all of the apocalyptic prophecies in the Book of Revelation would be fulfilled. This doctrine had enormous social implications for evangelicals. Whereas most evangelicals earlier in the nineteenth century had been postmillennialists (Jesus would return to earth after the millennium, the one-thousand years of righteousness predicted in Revelation 20), those who subscribed to premillennialism held a very different view of society. Postmillennialism had provided the engine for social reform during the antebellum period, animating such causes as temperance reform, abolitionism (in the North), prison reform, public education, and equal rights for women, including the right to vote – all in the expectation that evangelicals could construct the kingdom of God on earth (more particularly, here in America) by dint of their own efforts.

With the adoption of dispensational premillennialism late in the nineteenth century, however, evangelicals took a different view. In the wake of urbanization, industrialization, and the influx of non-Protestant immigrants, this world was not getting better, they came to believe, witness the squalid tenements of America's cities, teeming with labor unrest. The world, in fact, was getting worse, evangelicals insisted, in preparation

for the imminent return of Christ. Dispensational premillennialism, then, absolved American evangelicals from the task of social amelioration. Because Jesus was returning to earth at any moment, this world was doomed and transitory and utterly beyond redemption. The best a believer could do was to ensure her own salvation, secure as many other conversions as possible (especially family and friends), and await the second coming of Christ.³

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Premillennialism won the allegiance of America's evangelicals in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, and the political corollary was obvious: If Jesus was returning at any moment, why bother with politics? It would be like rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. Besides, the realm of politics was tawdry and specious; it demanded compromise, and the gospel, in the view of many evangelicals, was uncompromising. This ethic of non-engagement with the larger world permeated American evangelicalism for much of the twentieth century. Many evangelicals refused even to vote, so that by the early 1970s evangelicals were not involved in politics, certainly not in any organized way.

This is the context for the emergence of the former one-term governor of Georgia as a national figure in the mid-1970s. Jimmy Carter won election to the Georgia state senate in 1962. He lost his first bid to be governor in 1966 but won election on his second try, in 1970. Because Georgia law at the time barred incumbent governors from seeking reelection, Carter began to cast his eyes on higher office, and he has often stated that the parade of presidential aspirants who stopped by the governor's mansion left him less than overwhelmed. "I met Richard Nixon, Spiro Agnew, George McGovern, Henry Jackson, Hubert Humphrey, Ed Muskie, George Wallace, Ronald Reagan, Nelson Rockefeller, and other presidential hopefuls," Carter wrote in his campaign autobiography *Why Not the Best?*, "and I lost my feeling of awe about presidents."⁴ With the assistance of his advisers and guided by Hamilton Jordan's famous 1972 eighty-page

memorandum outlining a strategy, Carter announced his improbable quest for the Democratic nomination in December 1974. His tireless, grassroots campaign, especially in Iowa and New Hampshire, thrust him into the top tier of contenders for the nomination, and his repeated promise that he would “never knowingly lie” to the American people struck a chord with a populace weary of Nixon’s endless prevarications.⁵

Carter’s declaration at a campaign event in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in March 1976 that he was a “born again” Christian sent every journalist in New York to his rolodex to figure out what in the world he was talking about. But America’s evangelicals understood full well, and the fact that a major candidate for president refused to shrug off that label persuaded them of his sincerity. But equally important to Carter’s identity was his status as a Baptist, and he was committed to what Francis Wayland, nineteenth-century Baptist and president of Brown University, called the “peculiar glory” of the Baptist tradition. “I believe in the separation of church and state and would not use my authority to violate this principle in any way,” Carter wrote in 1977.⁶

Indeed, Jimmy Carter’s approach to religious liberty and freedom of conscience stood squarely in the tradition of such Baptist luminaries as John Smyth, Thomas Helwys, Roger Williams, John Clarke, Isaac Backus, John Leland, Francis Wayland, E. Y. Mullins, George Washington Truett, and many others. The genius of the Baptist formula lay in its recognition that church and state should remain separate lest the faith be compromised by its association with the political order. “For men’s religion to God is between God and themselves,” Helwys wrote in 1612. “The king shall not answer for it. Neither may the king be judge between God and man.”⁷ Roger Williams sought to protect the “garden of the church” from the “wilderness of the world” by means of, in his words, a “wall of separation.” And it is worth remembering that the Puritans did not share our romantic notions about wilderness. For them, the wilderness was a place of darkness and danger, where evil lurked. Williams’s concern, then, was that the faith would become sullied and compromised and trivialized by too close a conflation with the state.

Jimmy Carter, a devout and lifelong Baptist, was well aware of these dangers, and he also understood that his faith was, above all, a personal matter. In the course of his 1976 run for the presidency, the Carter campaign was obliged to answer many questions about the candidate’s faith and his religious conversion a decade earlier.

“Governor Carter has indicated that while he was in the midst of a political campaign several years ago, he came to a point of personal crisis,” one of the campaign’s form letters read. “During that time, he became willing to surrender his life to Jesus Christ as Lord, an experience he has referred to as being ‘born again.’ That commitment gave him a new understanding of life. Since that decision, he has sought to follow Jesus Christ in his daily life. He sees his Christian faith as being more important to him than anything else.”⁸

If Carter’s religious conversion was unexceptional to America’s evangelicals, his understanding of the Baptist tradition was anything but simplistic; it was nuanced and well-informed. He recognized that there was nothing whatsoever in the First Amendment that prevented him – or anyone else – from allowing his religious views to influence his policies. In a private letter dated July 7, 1977, Carter allowed that believers “must share in the correction and prevention of the political and social mistakes of others by active involvement as Christians in shaping public ethical standards and public policy.”⁹ But he also acknowledged, consistent with the mandates of a multicultural and religiously pluralistic society, that his voice was merely one among many. Even the vaunted “bully pulpit” of the presidency properly had its limits. “You and I both subscribe to the doctrine of the separation of Church and State,” the president wrote to Robert L. Maddox, a fellow Baptist who later served as religious liaison in the Carter White House, “and I trust that you and others who are not restrained by Constitutional limitations will continue to provide leadership in spiritual affairs.”¹⁰

This sense of restraint also governed Carter’s position on abortion, which has remained remarkably consistent from the early 1970s until the present. “While I am personally opposed to abortion,” the campaign’s form letter read in 1976, “I cannot in good conscience support a Constitutional amendment that would force all Americans into the same value judgment as mine.”¹¹ The Democratic nominee held to this position, even in the face of sustained pressure from the Roman Catholic bishops late in the 1976 campaign. Carter’s 2005 book, *Our Endangered Values: America’s Moral Crisis*, demonstrates his consistency. “As president, I accepted my obligation to enforce the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court ruling,” Carter wrote, and at the same time attempted in every way possible to minimize the number of abortions.”¹²



By now, well into the twenty-first century, the story of the rise of the Religious Right, the loose coalition of politically conservative individuals, congregations, and organizations, is well known. On January 22, 1973, the United States Supreme Court handed down its landmark *Roe v. Wade* decision that effectively struck down all laws banning abortion until “viability,” the point at which a fetus could survive outside the womb.

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The Roman Catholic Church had been arguing against legalized abortion for a very long time, but sheer outrage at the *Roe* decision had the effect of rallying evangelicals to the antiabortion cause.

For most of the twentieth century, evangelicals, especially those in the North, had been content to exist within the safety of their subculture, this network of institutions they had constructed in earnest following the Scopes trial of 1925. The subculture functioned as a kind of bulwark against the corruptions of the larger world, and evangelicals’ wholesale adoption of dispensational premillennialism late in

the previous century effectively absolved them from concerns about social amelioration. Although many evangelicals, including Billy Graham, railed against “godless Communism” during the cold war, their fixation with the imminent return of Jesus rationalized their lack of interest in the present world. “Believing the Bible as I do,” Jerry Falwell declared in a famous sermon, “Of Ministers and Marches,” in 1965, “I would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else – including fighting Communism, or participating in civil-rights reforms.”¹³

Dealing with the victims of systemic discrimination and racist violence was one thing, however, but the plight of those poor, defenseless babies was another. The *Roe* decision of 1973 shook evangelical leaders out of their complacency; even though their own congregants did not want them involved in political matters, the urgency

of the *Roe* ruling compelled them to action. They were willing to assume the risk of alienating their own constituencies because of the greater moral imperative of fighting the scourge of abortion.

These leaders of the Religious Right looked for ways to justify their sudden, albeit reluctant, plunge into politics, so they began to refer to themselves as the “new abolitionists,” an effort to align themselves with the nineteenth-century opponents of slavery. The political activism on the part of these evangelical leaders was initially viewed with suspicion by rank-and-file evangelicals, but they quickly were persuaded of the moral urgency of fighting abortion. “We were simply driven into the process by *Roe v. Wade*,” Falwell declared in an interview with CNN, broadcast on the day of his death, “and earlier than that, the expulsion of God from the public square.”¹⁴

The scenario about the rise of the Religious Right I have just rehearsed is compelling and familiar. It’s also a work of fiction, which I call the abortion myth. The only factual elements of the preceding story are the quotations from Jerry Falwell, the self-designated use of the term “new abolitionists,” and the Roman Catholic Church’s longstanding arguments against abortion. As early as the Iowa precinct caucuses in 1972, the bishops were urging their communicants to support candidates who favored making abortion illegal.

Evangelicals, especially Baptists, however, took a very different view of the matter in the early 1970s. Meeting in St. Louis, Missouri, during the summer of 1971, the messengers (delegates) to the Southern Baptist Convention passed a resolution that stated, “we call upon Southern Baptists to work for legislation that will allow the possibility of abortion under such conditions as rape, incest, clear evidence of severe fetal deformity, and carefully ascertained evidence of the likelihood of damage to the emotional, mental, and physical health of the mother.”¹⁵ The Southern Baptist Convention, hardly a redoubt of liberalism, reaffirmed that position in 1974, the year after the *Roe* decision, and again in 1976.

When the *Roe* decision was handed down on January 22, 1973, W. A. Criswell, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention and pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Texas, expressed his satisfaction with the ruling. “I have always felt that it was only after a child was born and had a life separate from its mother that it became an individual person,” one of the most famous fundamentalists of the twentieth century declared, “and

it has always, therefore, seemed to me that what is best for the mother and for the future should be allowed."¹⁶ While a few evangelical voices, including Christianity Today magazine, mildly questioned the ruling, the overwhelming response on the part of evangelicals was silence, even approval; Baptists, in particular, applauded the decision as an appropriate articulation of the line of division between church and state, between personal morality and state regulation of individual behavior.¹⁷ "Religious liberty, human equality and justice are advanced by the Supreme Court abortion decision," W. Barry Garrett of Baptist Press wrote.¹⁸

If the Roe decision was not the precipitating cause for the rise of the Religious Right, however, what was? The catalyst for the Religious Right was indeed a court decision, but it was a lower court decision, *Green v. Connally*, not *Roe v. Wade*. In the early 1970s, the federal government was looking for ways to extend the provisions of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the landmark legislation that Lyndon Johnson pushed through Congress and signed into law during the summer of 1964. The Civil Rights Act forbade racial segregation and discrimination, and in looking for ways to enforce that law the Internal Revenue Service ruled that any organization that engaged in racial discrimination was not, by definition, a charitable organization and therefore should be denied tax-exempt status and, furthermore, that contributions to such institutions no longer qualified for tax-exemption.

On June 30, 1971, the three-judge District Court for the District of Columbia affirmed the IRS in its *Green v. Connally* decision. "Both the courts and the Internal Revenue Service have long recognized that the statutory requirements of being 'organized and operated exclusively for religious, charitable, . . . or educational purposes,'" the court ruled, "are subject to the requirement that the purpose of the trust may not be illegal or contrary to public policy."¹⁹ Although *Green v. Connally* addressed the case of a segregated school in Mississippi, the ramifications of the ruling were widespread. On November 30, 1971, the IRS sent a letter to private schools that engaged in racial discrimination advising them that, if they persisted in their racial policies, they would no longer be tax-exempt.

Because the ruling was "applicable to all private schools in the United States at all levels of education," a fundamentalist institution in Greenville, South Carolina, Bob Jones University, stood directly in the crosshairs. Founded in Florida by arch-fundamentalist Bob Jones

in 1926, the school had been located for a time in Cleveland, Tennessee, before moving to South Carolina in 1947. In response to *Green v. Connally*, Bob Jones University decided to admit students of color in 1971, but the school maintained its restrictions against admitting unmarried African Americans until 1975. Even then, however, the school stipulated that interracial dating would be grounds for expulsion, and the school also promised that any students who "espouse, promote, or encourage others to violate the University's dating rules and regulations will be expelled."

The Internal Revenue Service pressed its case against Bob Jones University and on April 16, 1975, notified the school of the proposed revocation of its tax-exempt status. On January 19, 1976, the IRS officially revoked Bob Jones University's tax-exempt status, effective retroactively to 1971, when the school had first been formally notified of the IRS policy.

Bob Jones University sued to retain its tax exemption, and conservative activist Paul Weyrich saw an opening. Weyrich had been fighting for conservative causes going back to Barry Goldwater's failed bid for the presidency in 1964. He sensed the electoral potential of enlisting evangelical voters in the conservative crusade, and he had been trying throughout the early 1970s to generate some interest from evangelical leaders on matters like abortion, school prayer, pornography, and the proposed equal rights amendment to the U.S. Constitution. "I was trying to get those people interested in those issues and I utterly failed," Weyrich recalled in the 1990s. "What changed their mind was Jimmy Carter's intervention against Christian schools, trying to deny them tax-exempt status on the basis of so-called de facto segregation."²⁰



Just as it is tempting to believe the abortion myth, the retrospective accounts of Falwell and others that the *Roe v. Wade* ruling had goaded them into political activism, so too it is tempting to conclude that their activism was motivated solely by racism. Falwell himself, after all, had loudly protested *Brown v Board of Education*, the landmark decision of the Supreme Court on May 17, 1954, that mandated the desegregation of public schools. In a sermon entitled "Segregation or Integration: Which?," Falwell declared: "If Chief Justice [Earl] Warren and his associates had known God's word and had desired to do the Lord's will, I am quite confident that the 1954 decision would never have been made." Falwell stated

his conviction that school "facilities should be separate. When God has drawn a line of distinction, we should not attempt to cross that line."²¹

Falwell, a Southerner, like many of his confrères in the leadership of the Religious Right, had been an acknowledged segregationist for much of his life. He referred to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 as "civil wrongs," and in 1966 he started his own school to circumvent the Brown ruling; the local newspaper, the Lynchburg News, described Lynchburg Christian Academy as "a private school for white students."²² Falwell himself confessed to racist attitudes. "It took me several years to get segregation flushed out of my soul," he told an interviewer in 1983.²³

Although the Bob Jones case caught the attention of evangelical leaders, I do not believe that the primary motivation for the galvanization of evangelicals was racism. Rather, they saw themselves as defending what they considered the sanctity of the evangelical subculture from outside interference. Weyrich astutely picked up on those fears. "What caused the movement to surface was the federal government's moves against Christian schools," Weyrich reiterated in 1990. "This absolutely shattered the Christian community's notions that Christians could isolate themselves inside their own institutions and teach what they pleased." For agitated evangelicals, Weyrich's conservative gospel of less government suddenly struck a responsive chord. "It wasn't the abortion issue; that wasn't sufficient," Weyrich recalled. "It was the recognition that isolation simply would no longer work in this society."²⁴

Weyrich's emphatic dismissal of the abortion myth and his underscoring of evangelical attitudes about their own subculture comport with my own recollections. As I was growing up in evangelicalism in the 1950s and 1960s, I recall the visits of a succession of presidents of various Bible colleges and Bible institutes. They were raising money and recruiting students, and one of their mantras was that their institutions did not accept federal money; therefore, the government could not tell them how to run their shops, who they admitted or not, who they hired or fired.

Green v. Connally changed that. Evangelical leaders, prodded by Weyrich, chose to interpret the IRS ruling against segregationist schools as an assault on the integrity and the sanctity of the evangelical subculture. And that is what prompted them to action and to organize into a political movement. "What cause the

movement to surface," Weyrich reiterated, "was the federal government's moves against Christian schools," which, he added, "enraged the Christian community."²⁵ Ed Dobson, formerly Falwell's assistant at Moral Majority, has corroborated Weyrich's account. "The Religious New Right did not start because of a concern about abortion," he said in 1990. "I sat in the non-smoke-filled back room with the Moral Majority, and I frankly do not remember abortion being mentioned as a reason why we ought to do something."²⁶

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More recently, still another conservative activist, Grover Norquist, has confirmed that the Roe v. Wade decision did not factor into the rise of the Religious Right. "The religious right did not get started in 1962 with prayer in school," Norquist told Dan Gilgoff of U.S. News & World Report in June 2009. "And it didn't get started in '73 with Roe v. Wade. It started in '77 or '78 with the Carter administration's attack on Christian schools and radio stations. That's where all of the organization flowed out of. It was complete self-defense."²⁷

The Bob Jones case found its way all the way to the Supreme Court in 1982, when the Reagan administration argued on behalf of Bob Jones University. On May 24, 1983, however, the Court ruled 8-to-1 against Bob Jones; the sole dissenter was William Rehnquist, whom Reagan later elevated to chief justice of the Supreme Court. The evangelical defense of Bob Jones University and its racially discriminatory policies may not have been motivated primarily by racism, and I do not believe it was. Still, it is fair to point out the paradox that the very people who style themselves the "new abolitionists" to emphasize their moral kinship with the nineteenth-century opponents of slavery actually coalesced as a political movement effectively to defend racial discrimination.

And how did opposition to abortion become part of the Religious Right's agenda? Francis Schaeffer, an evangelical philosopher who ran a community and study

center in Switzerland, saw abortion as one consequence of a troubling cultural shift away from the mores of evangelical Christianity and toward what he reviled as “secular humanism.” Schaeffer viewed abortion as the inevitable prelude to infanticide and euthanasia, and he wanted to sound the alarm. He did so through his writings and lectures, but he also teamed with C. Everett Koop, a pediatric surgeon, to produce a series of five films, collectively titled *Whatever Happened to the Human Race?* These films, directed by Schaeffer’s son, Frank, found a wide audience among evangelicals when they appeared in 1979. Although Francis Schaeffer died in 1983, and Frank Schaeffer now claims that his father was appalled at the machinations of Religious Right leaders, the films, together with a companion book by the same title, served to introduce abortion to evangelicals as a moral concern.²⁸

The bi-elections the previous year, 1978, provided some evidence that abortion might have some traction for conservatives as a political issue. The race for the United States Senate seat in Iowa pitted the incumbent Democratic senator, Dick Clark, against a lesser-known Republican challenger, Roger Jepsen. Pollsters and pundits believed that Clark would cruise easily to reelection. The final Sunday before Election Day, however, pro-life activists (nearly all of whom were Roman Catholics) leafleted church parking lots. Two days later, in a plebiscite with a very low turnout, Jepsen narrowly defeated Clark.²⁹

The actual decision by leaders of the Religious Right to embrace abortion as a political issue, however, was rather more prosaic. According to Weyrich, once these evangelical leaders had mobilized in defense of Bob Jones University, they held a conference call to discuss the prospect of other political activities. Several people suggested possible issues, and finally a voice on the end of one of the lines said, “How about abortion?” And that, according to Weyrich, was how abortion was cobbled into the agenda of the Religious Right – in the late 1970s, not as a direct response to the January 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision.³⁰

Norquist also corroborates this. After asserting that the formation of the Religious Right was an act of “self-defense,” he continued: “It was then that the Protestants looked around and said, ‘Now, what’s this abortion issue that Catholics have been yapping about?’ And the Protestants go, ‘You’re right – we should not be killing babies.’ And they linked arms with the existing Right to Life movement, which was not getting traction.”³¹

Another element of Paul Weyrich’s statement merits closer examination. Looking back on the formation of the Religious Right, Weyrich insisted that opposition to abortion was not the precipitating cause behind evangelical political activism. His alternate explanation reads as follows: “What changed their mind was Jimmy Carter’s intervention against Christian schools, trying to deny them tax-exempt status on the basis of so-called de facto segregation.”³²

Here, Weyrich displays his genius for political maneuvering and chicanery. The Internal Revenue Service had initiated its action against Bob Jones University in 1971, and they informed the school in 1975 that it would revoke its tax exemption, which it did finally on January 19, 1976. Jimmy Carter was still running for the Democratic nomination when Bob Jones University received that news, and he was inaugurated president on January 20, 1977, precisely one full year and a day after the IRS finally rescinded the school’s tax-exempt status. And yet, according to Weyrich, it was “Jimmy Carter’s intervention against Christian schools” that precipitated the rise of the Religious Right.

As president of the United States in the final years of the 1970s, Carter was dealt a bad hand – the Arab Oil Embargo and the concomitant energy crisis, high interest rates, the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the Iranian hostage situation – and it is a hand that, in many respects, he played badly. But he also fought against some lavishly funded, highly organized, and fiendishly deceptive opponents who would do almost anything to undermine him. Weyrich’s attribution to Carter of the IRS action against Bob Jones University provides a case in point. Even though the action was consummated a full year before Carter even took office, when Gerald Ford was still president, Weyrich succeeded in pinning this unpopular action on the Democratic president and using it to organize a movement to deny him reelection in 1980.

One of the many paradoxes surrounding the Religious Right, of course, is that evangelicals had helped sweep Carter to victory in the presidential election of 1976. His rhetoric about being a “born again Christian” had energized evangelicals, many of whom had been resolutely apolitical until the mid-1970s. His improbable run for the presidency, his candor about his religious convictions, and his promise to restore probity to the White House resonated with many Americans. But no group responded more enthusiastically than evangelicals themselves. Many of them registered to

vote for the first time in order to cast their ballots for the Sunday-school teacher from Plains, Georgia, and even televangelist Pat Robertson later boasted that he had done everything short of violating FCC regulations to ensure Carter's election.

Not all evangelicals were enthusiastic about Carter, however. Tim LaHaye insisted that he had been suspicious from the beginning.

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Once they had galvanized as a political movement, leaders of the Religious Right claimed that Carter's unwillingness to outlaw abortion provided a compelling reason to work against him, but that was a retrospective judgment because evangelicals did not embrace abortion as an issue until the late 1970s, in preparation for 1980 campaign.

Paradoxically, Jimmy Carter expressed – and acted upon – his moral reservations about abortion long before the formation of the Religious Right, long before those who emerged as its leaders said a word publicly about the issue. Carter was governor of Georgia when the Roe v. Wade decision was handed down. “Georgia had a very strict law (I favored it) which was stricken down by the Supreme Court,” Carter explained in a handwritten letter to a woman in Springfield, Massachusetts, in 1975. “Subsequently we passed an abortion law as conservative as permitted under the current ruling.” He went on both to reiterate and to expand his position: “I do not believe it is feasible nor advisable to pass a special constitutional amendment regarding abortion, & I would not permit any more liberalizing of the current law if possible for me to prevent it.”³³

Early in his tenure as president, Carter's mediating position was put to the test. In July 1977, Carter expressed his support for the Hyde Amendment, which forbade the use of public funds to finance abortions, thereby angering a number of women in his administration. Margaret “Midge” Costanza, the White House assistant for public liaison, sent a memorandum asking the president to reverse his position and push for public funding for abortions. Costanza wrote that “those who have called me hope that you will reconsider your position and support the use of Federal funds for abortions when

‘medically necessary.’” The president's notation in the margin was as emphatic as it was cryptic: “No.” Costanza went on to contest Carter's statement that neither the states nor the federal government “should be required to finance abortions.” “As the Supreme Court ruling does not preclude the States from funding abortions,” Costanza wrote, “it was hoped by many women's groups that the question of government support for abortion could be successfully raised on a State-by-State basis.” Carter's gloss: “If I had this much influence on state legis[latures,] ERA would have passed.” Finally, at the end of the document, the president wrote: “My opinion was well defined to U.S. during campaign. My statement is actually more liberal than I feel personally.”³⁴



In an era of American history riddled with paradox, perhaps the largest paradox of all was that many of the people who organized to expel a Baptist from the White House in 1980 were themselves Baptists, or at least claimed to be: Jerry Falwell, Ed McAteer, James Robison, Adrian Rogers, Tim and Beverly LaHaye, among many others. In the process, however, they betrayed the foundation of their own tradition by advocating such policies as public prayer and the teaching of creationism in public schools, taxpayer vouchers for private schools, and the display of religious sentiments in public places.

These so-called Baptist leaders of the Religious Right unleashed an assault on the First Amendment itself, using rhetorical tactics reminiscent of the Confederate attacks against the United States Constitution during the Civil War.³⁵ Just as leaders of the Confederacy had criticized the Constitution for including no reference to the deity, so too the leaders of the Religious Right pointed out that the phrase “separation of church and state” did not appear in the Constitution. “It is time for religious people to stop being intimidated by the liberal's cry of ‘separation of church and state,’” Cal Thomas declared on the radio program Moral Majority Report, “a phrase that does not appear in the U. S. Constitution, but which does appear in the Soviet Constitution.”³⁶

In order for this disingenuous reasoning to have any legitimacy, however, you would have to demonstrate that the phrase “separation of church and state,” which derives from Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut, in 1802, is not a reasonable summation of the First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” Certainly,

Jefferson himself, who drafted the Constitution, thought it captured the essence of the First Amendment. And the notion of church-state separation itself originated with the “wall of separation” metaphor articulated by Roger Williams, founder of the Baptist tradition in America.³⁷

Other considerations came into play at about the same time. The conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention coincided with the rise of the Religious Right; the formation of Moral Majority and the election of Adrian Rogers as president of the Southern Baptists both occurred in 1979. Baptists in both the ecclesiastical and the political arenas discarded the venerable Baptist principles of soul liberty and liberty of conscience in favor of the rhetoric and policies of majoritarianism. In politics, they argued that the United States was a “Christian nation” because, they said, most of the founders and a majority of citizens were Christians. In church matters, the systematic appointment of conservatives to denominational agencies and seminary boards of trustees soon allowed those conservative majorities to purge anyone who dissented from what the majority defined as orthodoxy.³⁸

Politically conservative activists quickly recognized the electoral potential of Baptists generally and, in particular, the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. With the collusion of Baptist leaders themselves, these activists helped to turn many rank-and-file Baptists against Carter, one of their own. Baptist principles of respect for the rights of minorities and the separation of church and state fell by the wayside. A fund-raising letter over Falwell's signature in March 1980, for example, recounted his visit with Carter at the White House. “As we talked with him,” Falwell wrote, “we were shocked to hear him say that he would absolutely never sign a bill that would restore voluntary prayer back into the schools!”³⁹

A handwritten letter from Dallas to the Carter White House put it more directly. “Start looking for a new job,” a Baptist layman wrote to Robert Maddox, Carter's religious liaison, in August 1980. “The moral majority is going to put you and President Carter type of Christians out of a job. How in the world can you guys claim to be Christians and adhere to the whole counsel of God? Any staunch Christian would not support gays, would not support the ERA which contradicts God's plan for women and would support voluntary prayer in the school. You guys are real bummers. You don't even deserve to be called Baptists.”⁴⁰ Contrast that sentiment with those of E. Y. Mullins. “While we have no sympathy with atheism

or agnosticism or materialism,” the distinguished Baptist theologian wrote in 1923, “we stand for the freedom of the atheist, agnostic, and materialist in his religious or irreligious convictions.”⁴¹

No longer the persecuted minority of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Baptists of the Religious Right were prepared to jettison their birthright in the pursuit of political influence. Consider the case of Wallie Amos Criswell, longtime pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas and former president of the Southern Baptist Convention. In 1960, during the heat of the presidential campaign, Criswell declared: “It is written in our country's constitution that church and state must be, in this nation, forever separate and free.” Religious faith, the redoubtable fundamentalist declared, must be voluntary, and “in the very nature of the case, there can be no proper union of church and state.” Twenty-four years later, however, on August 24, 1984, during the Republican National Convention, Criswell changed his tune: “I believe this notion of the separation of church and state was the figment of some infidel's imagination.”⁴²

Falwell's turnaround had been equally dramatic. In 1965, the very day of Martin Luther King's march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, Falwell delivered perhaps the most frequently quoted sermon of his career, “Of Ministers and Marches,” where he declared that he “would find it impossible to stop preaching the pure saving gospel of Jesus Christ, and begin doing anything else.” In a subsequent sermon, however, delivered more than a decade later, Falwell was singing a different tune. “The idea that religion and politics don't mix was invented by the Devil,” he declared, “to keep Christians from running their own country.”⁴³

More important, Falwell's acolytes at Moral Majority joined the chorus. “Keep in mind that civil rights are only for those who believe differently than [sic] conservative religious people,” Cal Thomas declared on Moral Majority Report. “The First Amendment is only for those who would like to curse God and publish pornography and Santa you may worship and believe in, but Jesus? Forget it.”⁴⁴

As the Religious Right gained organizational strength and began to exercise its electoral muscles, conservative activists drew evangelicals into their web. “The kind of judges who have been on the bench until now have given us forced busing, abortion on demand, more protection for criminals than for their victims,

free expression for pornographers but not for school children who want to pray," Weyrich, architect of the Religious Right, complained on Falwell's radio program Listen America Report.⁴⁵ Weyrich also sounded a ringing endorsement of Chilean dictator Augusto Pinochet over Falwell's airwaves, and he warned darkly in September 1986 that, "If the Democrats win the Senate the very liberal Senator Clayborn Pell of Rhode Island would become chairman of the Foreign Relations committee which would make Communist leaders around the world rejoice."⁴⁶

Weyrich's right-wing "orthodoxy" knew no limits, and Falwell was happy to oblige by providing access to his media empire. "Many professing Christians do not translate conservative theology into conservative politics," Weyrich lamented in another broadcast. "It would be far better, for example, to elect a non-believer who shares your family, national and economic values than to elect a professing believer who does not." He went on to suggest that those listeners concerned about gun control should consult "either the National Rifle Association in Washington or Gun Owners of America in northern Virginia for voting records."⁴⁷

Weyrich also crusaded against women's rights and for the death penalty, positions clearly at odds with those of nineteenth-century evangelicals who sought to accord equal rights, including voting rights, to women and who introduced the notion of a "penitentiary," a place of rehabilitation. "States that have the death penalty such as Illinois should enforce it," Weyrich intoned. "And states that don't, ought to adopt it."⁴⁸



A time-traveler from, say, the 1930s or even the 1830s who dropped in on American society in the 1970s might be forgiven for believing that the world had turned upside down. The visitor from the 1930s would be astonished to see a relative political neophyte, Jimmy Carter, mounting a credible campaign for the presidency, all the while touting his credentials as a born-again Christian. And he might be even more surprised to learn that evangelicals themselves, who had gone into hibernation during the late 1920s and throughout the 1930s, were organizing into a political movement.

The visitor from the 1830s would find the politics of this new political movement incomprehensible. The evangelicals of the 1970s, the spiritual descendents of antebellum evangelicals, were propagating an

agenda utterly at odds with that of nineteenth-century evangelicalism. Whereas earlier evangelicals had pushed for women's rights, including the right to vote, the Religious Right opposed the feminist movement and the proposed equal rights amendment to the United States Constitution. Whereas antebellum evangelicals had pushed for the abolition of slavery, the Religious

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Right defended the racially discriminatory policies at places like Bob Jones University. Whereas nineteenth-century evangelicals had sought the rehabilitation of prisoners ("penitentiary"), the Religious Right pushed relentlessly for capital punishment. Whereas evangelicals in the nineteenth century had been among the earliest supporters of public education as a seedbed of democracy and as a way to assist those on the lower rungs of society, the Religious Right sought to vitiate public education by supporting taxpayer vouchers for private and religious schools.⁴⁹

Most puzzling of all to our time-travelers would have been the behavior of Baptists in the 1970s and beyond. The First Amendment proscription against religious establishment was a Baptist idea, and throughout American history Baptists from Isaac Backus and John Leland to George Washington Truitt and James Dunn have been watchmen on the wall of separation between church and state. With the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention in 1979 and the rise of the Religious Right the same year, many Baptists abandoned their vigilance and even sought actively to erode the barriers between the "garden of the church" and the "wilderness of the world."⁵⁰

The Rise of the Religious Right in the late 1970s, its disregard for Baptist tradition, its cooptation by right-wing interests, and its pandering after power provide an important lesson about evangelicalism and about faith in general. The widespread attempt on the part of the Religious Right to compromise the First Amendment – by means of faith-based initiatives, public prayer in public schools, the use of taxpayer vouchers for religious schools, emblazoning the Ten Commandments and other religious sentiments on public places – all of

these efforts, most of them perpetrated by those who claimed to be Baptists, represent a betrayal of Baptist principles, particularly the “peculiar glory” of church-state separation.⁵¹ These actions ultimately serve to undermine the faith by identifying it with the state and by suggesting that the faith needs the imprimatur of the government for legitimacy.

The most egregious example of recent years was the Roy’s Rock caper in Alabama. Roy S. Moore, an attorney who worked as a professional kick-boxer in Texas and a cowboy in Australia, won local acclaim for hanging a hand-carved wooden plaque emblazoned with the Ten Commandments in his circuit courtroom in Gadsden, Alabama. Running for office as the “Ten Commandments Judge,” Moore translated his notoriety into election as chief justice of the Alabama Supreme Court, and on the evening of July 31, 2001, he installed a two-and-a-half-ton granite monument emblazoned with the Decalogue in the lobby of the Judicial Building in Montgomery.

Because Moore had steadfastly refused any other religious representations in that space, the Southern Poverty Law Center, the American Civil Liberties Union, and Americans United for the Separation of Church and State filed suit. After Myron Thompson, federal district judge, ruled (correctly) that the granite monument represented a violation of the First Amendment’s establishment clause and must be removed, one of the protesters screamed, “Get your hands off my God!” One of the commandments etched into that block of granite, I suspect, had something to say about graven images, but the entire incident illustrated anew the dangers of trivializing or fetishizing the faith by associating it with the state. The overwhelming lesson of American religious history is that religion has flourished in the United States as nowhere else precisely because Americans have observed Roger Williams’s dictum that the church should remain separate from the state, lest the “garden of the church” be overcome by the “wilderness of the world.”

The “peculiar glory” of the Baptists is their conviction throughout American history that religion always functions best without the imprimatur of the state, at the margins of society and not in the councils of power. That does not mean, as Jimmy Carter and legions of Baptists through the centuries have recognized, that people of faith should not make their voices heard in the arena of public discourse. But when the faith panders after political power or cultural respectability, it loses its prophetic edge. Consider the case of white-middle-class

mainline Protestants and the ecumenical movement in the cold war era that led to an enervation of mainline Protestantism. These Protestants were so intent on political and cultural influence that they stood with, rather than against, the prevailing culture of the 1950s.

The danger for the faith, as Baptist historian Walter Shurden has argued, is “a shallow patriotism, where citizenship is confused with discipleship.”⁵² Thomas Helwys and Roger Williams counseled long ago that believers must distinguish between patriotism and pietism in order to maintain the integrity of the faith. Shurden’s warning for Southern Baptists applies to mainline Protestantism as well as to all religious groups. “When a denomination gets large and powerful and courted for political reasons,” he writes, “the bells of freedom ring fainter and flatter.”⁵³

The corrective to mainline Protestantism’s pandering for power in the 1950s and 1960s, ironically enough, was the resurgence of evangelicalism, which coincided with the improbable rise of Jimmy Carter, a Baptist, from obscure governor of Georgia to president of the United States. Now, three decades after the rise of the Religious Right, it is evangelicalism itself, having neglected its own noble legacy of nineteenth-century political activism and sold out to right-wing interests, that stands in need of renewal. I can think of no better place to start than a renewed allegiance to the “peculiar glory” of the Baptists, a commitment to the separation of church and state, an affirmation that the faith functions best from the margins and outside the councils of power.

End Notes

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- 8 Form letter, Pre-Presidential 1976 Presidential Campaign, Urban Affairs Desk – Tom Tatum, Subject Files, Box 280, File: Protestants [1], Jimmy Carter Library.
- 9 Letter, President Carter to Steve Thomas, July 7, 1977, "Religious Matters," Box RM-1, WHCF-Subject File-General, Jimmy Carter Library.
- 10 Letter, President Carter to Robert L. Maddox Jr. [prior to his appointment to the White House], October 3, 1978, "Religious Matters," Box RM-1, WHCF-Subject File-General, Jimmy Carter Library.
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- 12 Jimmy Carter, *Our Endangered Values: America's Moral Crisis* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2005), 72.
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- 14 Quoted in Max Blumenthal, "Agent of Intolerance," *The Nation*, May 16, 2007.
- 15 Annual of the Southern Baptist Convention (Nashville, Tenn.: Executive Committee, Southern Baptist Convention), 72.
- 16 Quoted in "What Price Abortion?" *Christianity Today*, March 2, 1973, 39 [565].
- 17 "Abortion and the Court," *Christianity Today*, February 16, 1973, 32 [502].
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- 42 W. A. Criswell, "Religious Freedom and the Presidency," *United Evangelical Action* 19 (September 1960), 9-10; quoted in Richard V. Pierard, "Religion and the 1984 Election Campaign," *Review of Religious Research* 27 (December 1985), 104-105.
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- 44 Cal Thomas, transcript, Moral Majority Report, January 30, 1984.
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- 47 Paul Weyrich, transcript, Listen America Report, September 9, 1986, MOR 3-1, Folder 2, Liberty University Archives.
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- 50 For an extended treatment of Baptist attempts to undermine the First Amendment, see Randall Balmer, *Thy Kingdom Come: How the Religious Right Distorts the Faith and Threatens America* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), chap. 2.
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- 52 Walter B. Shurden, "Baptists at the Twenty-First Century: Assessments and Challenges," in *Turning Points in Baptist History: A Festschrift in Honor of Harry Leon McBeth*, ed. Michael E. Williams Sr. and Walter B. Shurden (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2008), 307.
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