

Jerry Falwell, the Rise of the Moral Majority, and the 1980 Election

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Jerry Falwell, the leader of a movement called the Moral Majority that arose in the late 1970s, was mad and he was going to let everyone know it: “We’re fighting a holy war,” he said at his Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia in 1980. “What’s happened to America is that the wicked are bearing rule. We have to lead the nation back to the moral stance that made America great...we need to wield influence on those who govern us.”¹ Falwell was spearheading a coalition of conservative, evangelical voters angered about a variety of social issues and other ills that plagued America.

The Moral Majority

The Moral Majority was the term given to a political action group that consisted mainly of evangelical Christians that sought to influence public policy. Officially formed in 1979, this group wielded considerable influence in American politics, especially after the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980. The following paper will provide insight as to how and why the Moral Majority became a force in American politics, the main policy goals of this movement, and its accomplishments in the Reagan administration. The formation and growth of this movement can be mainly attributed to the conservative backlash against the many upheavals of the 1960s, but the 1970s provided the main issue, the legalization of abortion, that stoked the movement’s grassroots activism. Throughout this decade, other related issues—such as women’s liberation, the gay rights movement, the sexual revolution, secularism in schools, and fears of social disintegration—also provided fodder for evangelical and fundamentalist Christians. They saw these disturbing trends as the moral decline of the nation, the possible formation of a modern-day

¹ Eileen Oginitz, “Evangelicals Seek Political Clout,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 3, 1980.

Gomorrah in America, and a general departure from what they believed used to be a God-fearing nation: America used to be exceptional because it trusted in God; now, with many people supporting “anti-family” legislation and becoming more tolerant of open “sinners,” America was heading down a different track, and evangelical Christians sought to change those trends. These individuals, largely uninvolved and unorganized in politics prior to 1970, found the Moral Majority an important vehicle in which to advance their agenda. In supporting conservative candidates in the election of 1980, Moral Majority sought to elect those who would pass key items on their agenda; however, the 1980s ended with the main goals of the movement unachieved.

Rationale and Historiography

This paper will explore main leader of Moral Majority, Jerry Falwell, and offer a detailed analysis of the issues that triggered their mobilization, with a key emphasis on abortion, gay rights, and women’s liberation. Following an exploration into each of the aforementioned, the paper will then analyze the inroads that the Moral Majority made in the Reagan administration, and the extent that the demands of the movement were realized through legislation. This is a relatively new topic for historians. It has only been recently that historians have begun to uncover the turbulent 1970s era. In this particular field, the leading voice is arguably Michael Sean Winters, the first historian to write a conclusive biography of Jerry Falwell, who passed away only very recently. The Moral Majority and the rise of the religious right is of considerable interest to historians for many reasons. Chief among them is the influence that evangelicals have had on American politics; many wonder how this voting demographic came to prominence. Another is the 40th anniversary of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, which takes place in 2013; abortion was the leading factor in the formation of the Moral Majority, as this paper will clearly demonstrate. Finally, a growing group of historians now believe that enough time has passed since the 1970s to fairly and competently address the movements, events, and key figures of the decade, and the Moral Majority certainly fits that billing. A contemporary, fresh, and relevant topic, there is little historiography to consider. However, it is

this author's hope that this essay will be part of a growing community of scholars' efforts to analyze the efforts, influence, struggles, and successes of the Moral Majority and Jerry Falwell.

Leaders of the Movement and Original Goals

The Moral Majority was a political organization that was intent on engaging the culture in the 1970s and responding to a host of societal ills through legislation. Moral Majority leaders and members feared that the 1960s and 1970s, which had seen dramatic changes and reversals from traditional Christian values in everyday life and politics, were pivotal in triggering moral and social decline for the country. The organization lobbied to end abortion, reinstate school prayer, re-establish traditional gender roles for men and women, defeat the Equal Rights Amendment, quash special rights for gays, and help the country get back to its roots. Tamney and Johnson note that it was “committed to making Fundamentalist morality into law.”² Led by an evangelical Christian (Falwell), a Catholic (Paul Weyrich), and a Jew (Howard Phillips), it represented in its plurality of leadership the mission of the organization: a Christian, a Catholic, and a Jew putting aside their religious differences in order to clean up the country.

Jerry Falwell, the leader of Moral Majority, was an evangelical Southern Baptist pastor highly influential in mobilizing the movement despite an upbringing that would tend to point to a different direction for his life. Falwell was born in 1933 in Lynchburg, Virginia to a father who was agnostic; his grandfather was an atheist. In 1956, at the age of 22, Falwell founded the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, where he served as pastor. First and foremost, Falwell was a preacher. From the time he founded his church, all of his activities flowed from his efforts to build it. TRBC built a home for alcoholics, a haven for unwed mothers, and established a television ministry at the urging of Falwell. He came to believe that political involvement was necessary to ensure that the church would thrive: if the United States was in steep moral decline, the church would see few new members. Thomas Road Baptist Church became the prototype for the modern mega-church, with the institution providing childcare,

² Joseph Tamney and Steven Johnson, “Explaining Support for the Moral Majority.” *Sociological Forum* (Spring 1988): 235.

schools, sports leagues, and job training seminars for its members.³ Other notable accomplishments of Falwell's include the founding of Lynchburg Christian Academy in 1967, Liberty University, a Christian liberal arts university in Lynchburg in 1971, and the co-founding of Moral Majority in 1979.

Falwell was a conservative, evangelical, fundamentalist Christian who represented many people in the Moral Majority. Although all of the organization's supporters were not religious, most of them shared the same root, core beliefs of Falwell. Hence, a core understanding of evangelism and fundamentalism is essential in understanding Falwell and the ordinary Americans that made up the Moral Majority. It is a good practice to clarify some of the key differences between evangelism and fundamentalism, as many people often use these terms interchangeably to describe the same group of voters or people. First, fundamentalist Christians believe that the Bible is the infallible, inerrant Word of God; they see the Scriptures as literally true and do not use it merely for understanding and inspiration. There is certainty and clarity to fundamentalism in that all of life's answers are found in the Bible if you know where to look. In some regards, fundamentalism conforms easily to parts of American culture, yet is countercultural in other parts.⁴ Fundamentalism is not intellectually curious, yet is morally rigorous at the same time: it has high expectations for those who practice it. Evangelism, on the other hand, is not quite as stringent in its expectations, as its main goal is winning souls for Jesus Christ. Michael Scott Winters notes in his book, *God's Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right*, that all fundamentalists are evangelicals, because they believe in the inerrancy and mandates of the Bible and its teachings to convert the lost; but evangelicals are not all fundamentalists. Some evangelicals might turn to the Scriptures for inspiration and meditation, yet not share the fundamentalist belief that everything is literally true. Jerry Falwell was an evangelist, as his main thing was the Bible and his main goal was "trying to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to bear on his culture. He built institutions to carry out his work."⁵ All of Falwell's activities were centered on converting lost souls

³ Michael Sean Winters, *God's Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the Religious Right* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), 1-15.

⁴ Winters, *God's Right Hand*, 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

to Christ. But Jerry Falwell tapped into believers of all stripes: fundamentalists, fundamentalist evangelicals, and simply evangelicals. Winters notes that Falwell's ability to connect with these believers was a strong political achievement, as he sought to "reach beyond his fundamentalist colleagues and tap into the conservative minds of evangelicals. Falwell continually reached out to conservative evangelicals who were not fundamentalists, and to conservative Catholics and Jews as well."⁶

Ascension of the Moral Majority

Although the roots of Moral Majority lay in the 1960s, the 1970s saw Jerry Falwell and the movement explode in scope, power, and clout in American politics and media. The statistics are staggering. For example, Paul Wilcox notes that many evangelical Christians and other religious conservatives benefited dramatically from an increase in media during the 1970s. Christian conservatives "continued to build infrastructure — Bible colleges, Christian bookstores, and specialized magazines and newspapers. Christian radio and television programs began to proliferate, leaving fundamentalist, Pentecostal, and evangelical preachers with a wider audience."⁷ The growth of media coincided with the rise in the Moral Majority.

In addition, Falwell's rise mirrored the upswing of the Moral Majority: By the end of the 1970s, his television program had expanded beyond a regional market to appear on 373 stations, more than Johnny Carson's *Tonight* show. Church membership at his Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia increased from fewer than 10,000 to over 17,000 in the 1970s. Falwell saw his staff at the church swell from seventy to over one thousand by the end of the decade.⁸ Throughout the decade, Falwell began the task of appealing to these evangelical and fundamentalist voters that became an integral part of Moral Majority:

⁶ Winters, *God's Right Hand*, 5.

⁷ Clyde Wilcox, "Laying Up Treasures in Washington and Heaven: The Christian Right in Evangelical Politics in the Twentieth Century and Beyond," *OAHS Magazine of History* 17 (January 2003): 26.

⁸ Daniel K. Williams, "Jerry Falwell's Sunbelt Politics: The Regional Origins of the Moral Majority," *Journal of Policy History* 22 (April 2010): 133.

Falwell knew his own views and knew that those views were shared by millions of Americans who had become disengaged from American public life. Falwell led them into the public square, articulated a coherent rationale for their involvement in politics, and made them the largest and most organized constituency in the contemporary Republican Party. He baptized the American Right.⁹

Falwell's own personal experiences are similar to other evangelical Christians who become active in politics: in the 1960s, it seemed they were dead but, in the 1970s, they awoke. For example, Falwell certainly was not happy with the U.S. Supreme Court ruling that school prayer was unconstitutional, and he made his views known. He wrote of the decision, "When a group of nine idiots can pass a ruling down that it is illegal to read the Bible in our public schools, they need to be called 'idiots.'" Undoubtedly, Falwell was upset with the decision, but no major political changes occurred. Christian conservatives may have agreed with Falwell when he denounced the Supreme Court, believing that it was waging a war on Christians with "power unlimited," and was "exercising that power against God almighty," but they did not organize. Sharon Overcast agreed: "Politics always was labeled as dirty, as something to stay out of. People are starting to wake up."¹⁰ Disgusted with the social and moral decline of America, depravity, and a turning away from God, "Falwell decided to break with his prior aloof stance toward politics, which had been symptomatic of fundamentalism's cultural exile from mainstream culture throughout most of the twentieth century."¹¹ Along the way, he brought evangelical and fundamentalist voters, such as Sharon Overcast, along with him in the formation of the Moral Majority. Falwell organized and energized these voters, turning them into an active constituency and core group that emerged as a powerful segment of the Republican Party voting bloc.

Even if social and religious conservatives were frustrated by events such as these, it was not until the coming decade that they became a major political force. The 1960s provided the roots for the movement, but the 1970s was the decade that resulted in the true political organization, mobilization, activism, and awareness within the religious community for the Moral Majority and other conservative religious organizations that focused on social issues. The main event, the *Roe vs. Wade* decision in 1973,

⁹ Winters, *God's Right Hand*, 11.

¹⁰ Oginitz, "Evangelicals Seek Political Clout," *Chicago Tribune*, January 3, 1980.

¹¹ Winters, *God's Right Hand*, 5.

catapulted Falwell from being a sideline commentator to an active player in politics. Al Mohler, a Southern Baptist leader, mentioned that “overturning that decision became (and remains) the preeminent political task of social conservatives.”¹² Many religious conservatives, like Falwell, would later identify the *Roe* decision as the critical issue that awakened them from long political slumber after largely being inactive in the 1960s. As Falwell put it, “...the decision by the Supreme Court legalizing abortion-on-demand did more to destroy our nation than any other decision it has made.”¹³ Mohler later called the 1973 *Roe* decision, the “stick of dynamite that exploded the issue.” For evangelicals, *Roe v. Wade* was truly explosive in that it legitimized abortion into national law, a practice deemed offensive, barbaric, savage, and a violation of God’s precious handiwork here on Earth. It is reasonable to suggest that many Christians, who believed that humans are created in the image of God, could no longer remain quiet after 1973, and thus saw the political realm as the only recourse for reversing the Court’s decision. Not only did *Roe vs. Wade* provide a “wake-up call” to Falwell and religious conservatives, it also resulted in later mobilization and activism on two other closely related areas: gay rights and “women’s liberation.” Rights for gays and women were closely tied to the abortion issue as “family issues.” If women could get an abortion, no longer did they need a man to take care of them. No longer would they be confined to the kitchen, household, or local PTA meeting. Their newfound independence could result in a full-frontal assault on the traditional nuclear family, which many conservatives believed to be the way God desired the family structure to look like. The abortion issue was absolutely pivotal in garnering evangelical support for socially conservative organizations against subsequent issues such as gay rights and women’s liberation.

¹² Al Mohler, quoted in Seth Dowland, “Family Values and the Formation of a Christian Right Agenda,” *Church History* 78 (September 2009): 610.

¹³ Jerry Falwell, quoted in Seth Dowland, “Family Values,” 10.

Coalition of Common Interests

It is worthwhile to explore how socially conservative organizations such as the Moral Majority become such a force politically in the 1970s. One major reason is that Christian voters of all stripes (Catholic, Protestant, and smaller denominations), similar to the leadership of Moral Majority, focused more on their similarities rather than their differences in the 1970s. Throughout much of the twentieth century, Catholics and Protestants were at odds with each other politically, often taking opposing viewpoints on a wide variety of issues. Wilcox mentions that “evangelicals in the United States are divided into distinctive theological groups - fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and neo-evangelicals- and throughout most of the twentieth century there was considerable hostility between these groups.”¹⁴

However, in the 1970s, and especially after *Roe vs. Wade*, these groups put aside their differences. The response was not immediate, as there were still several reasons for evangelicals to be cautious about criticizing the decision. First, many Catholics saw the abortion issue as a “life” issue, and many Protestants did not want to ally themselves with Catholics on this issue. They were nervous about any political or religious alliance. Secondly, many social conservatives in the southern United States seemed to agree with the Supreme Court, which had invoked the Fourteenth Amendment in protecting private decisions from the public sphere, with no government interference.¹⁵ However, after theologian Francis Schaeffer called for Christians to fight back and engage the culture, many more Protestants felt comfortable allying with Catholics on the abortion issue.¹⁶ Schaeffer meant that Christians should feel not shy away from engaging the culture of depravity; they should not be content to allow rampant immorality in the country. A monumental issue such as abortion was tantamount to infanticide. Evangelical voters could not, and should not, allow murder of unborn children.

After Jerry Falwell threw his support to the pro-life movement, he was not without criticism. Certainly not all of the evangelical, conservative community liked the fact that he was waging an alliance

¹⁴ Wilcox, “Laying Up Treasures,” 23.

¹⁵ Seth Dowland, “Family Values,” 611.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 612.

with Catholics. In fact, the president of Bob Jones University criticized him for an “unholy alliance” with Catholics, to which Falwell responded that “I am indeed considered to be dangerous to liberals, feminists, abortionists, and homosexuals, but not to Bible-believing Christians...this time preaching would not be enough...[it] was my duty as a Christian to apply the truths of Scripture to every act of government.” Many Christian conservatives agreed with this assessment.

Rather than focus on internal conflict, Protestants and other religious conservatives needed to unite to achieve a far greater purpose: outlawing abortion and other government attacks on the family. Falwell wrote, “those of us in the leadership of Moral Majority are aware of the vast theological issues that separate Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Mormons, etc.” However, such issues were not the point. Falwell realized, that in order to be effective in the political arena, the cooperation of the aforementioned groups was necessary to defeat abortion. He concluded that the Moral Majority was not about discussing theological arguments, doctrinal issues, or trying to bridge the gap between Protestant denominations in the public light. He acknowledged that Moral Majority was “not fighting to unite any of these factions. We are fighting to maintain the religious freedom of this nation.”

“Family” Issues Appeal to Christians and Others

Falwell united evangelical Christians and religious conservatives under a common cause, “the family.” Under this umbrella of “saving the family,” the core agenda of Moral Majority evolved to include opposition to: abortion, civil rights protections for gays and lesbians, and the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment. The MM supported: return of prayer to public schools and tuition tax credits for religious schools.¹⁷ “By portraying abortion, feminism, and gay rights as a tripartite assault on the family, the Christian right connected a pervasive sense of America’s decay to issues that resonated with evangelicals.”¹⁸ Falwell and the Moral Majority went to great lengths to convince voters of all stripes that their fight was one to restore moral sanity. Ever aware of being labeled theocratic zealots, the leaders of

¹⁷ Wilcox, “Laying Up Treasures,” 26.

¹⁸ Dowland, “Family Values,” 627.

Moral Majority were quick to point out that they were standing up for the family, which they asserted was the rock and cornerstone of society. Falwell wrote that “the family is the fundamental building block and the basic unit of our society, and its continued health is a prerequisite for a healthy and prosperous nation. No nation has ever been stronger than the families within her.”

Such desires to promote positive family values in government, according to Falwell, should know no theocratic bounds and should not be merely a religious agenda: it was a moral imperative. The Moral Majority cleverly couched language in a way that would allow non-religious voters and social conservatives to feel the movement was credible. There were many social conservatives whose main agenda was not motivated by their religious beliefs. By appealing to family issues and labeling gay rights, feminism, and abortion as attacks on it, they appealed to a wide variety of individuals and dismissed notions that their goal was to install a theocracy in America. They participated in watchdog “pro-family” activities such as preparing “morality ratings” on every member of Congress, television shows and documentaries attacking homosexuality and abortion, and a national voter registration drive designed to appeal to voters on family values issues.¹⁹

In the 1970s, the Moral Majority developed language that appealed to an ever-broader constituency of Americans. Dowland notes, “Over the course of the 1970s...ministers connected defense of the traditional family with opposition to abortion, feminism, and gay rights.”²⁰ Such rights, to those in the MM, attacked the tried and true social order that had persevered for generations. According to the Moral Majority, who could possibly be anti-family? In addition, it was this return to moral sanity that was trying to restore America from the upheaval of the recent past. Rather than speak out directly against gays, feminists, and abortionists, they often delivered the same message shrouded in “pro-family” terms. For example, Moral Majority leaders “defined traditional families as those with two heterosexual parents...this carried significant appeal among conservatives in the wake of the 1960s.”²¹

¹⁹ Ben Stein, “The War Over What We’ll See on TV,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 22, 1981.

²⁰ Dowland, “Family Values,” 607.

²¹ *Ibid.*

Many of these conservatives were, indeed, not religious, which offers insight to the broad appeal that this language and movement carried. They wanted simply a return to a moral country after the turbulent 1960s, were tired of groups making noise, and saw the Moral Majority as the group that would cure these ills. Dowland further states:

Critics of the Christian right called its agenda narrow-minded and divisive, but the genius of the movement was to frame opposition to abortion, feminism and gay rights as “defense of the family.” By the end of the 1970s, the Christian right had devised rhetoric that made liberal reformers enemies of the family...opposing abortion, feminism, and gay rights in the view of the Christian right, would benefit many Americans.”²²

Equal Rights Amendment Fight

The first major confrontation and mobilization of the religious right in the 1970s came with the debate over the Equal Rights Amendment. Falwell warned that the ratification of this amendment “could sanction homosexual marriage, send mothers and girls into combat, and generally injure the dignity of the traditional family.” Williams notes that the battle over the amendment was fierce, describing the proposed Equal Rights Amendment as “a piece of anti-family legislation that feminists, unisexualists, secular humanists, and others” had thrust upon them. Not only that, but it was also a “satanic attempt to destroy the biblical concept of the Christian home.”²³ What was so offensive about this amendment? On paper, it would appear to be an ordinary document that makes an attempt to bridge the gap between men and women. The main portions of the proposed amendment appear below:

Section 1. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.

Section 2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.

Section 3. This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.

But, to many evangelical Christians like Falwell, the Equal Rights Amendment was a secret government attack on the biblical basis for a “true” family. Government intervention in something so sacred could have disastrous implications. According to this particular Christian worldview, the natural order called for

²² Dowland, “Family Values,” 608.

²³ Williams, “Sunbelt Politics,” 139.

a nuclear family with two heterosexual parents. The father would work, the mother would care for the children and the house chores; both would work hard to ensure that proper moral values were instilled in their children. In this worldview, there was great diversity in the traditional gender roles of each parent; each role was critical and essential to the upbringing of the offspring. According to many religious conservatives, “the Bible delineated clear distinctions between men and women...in conservatives’ minds, feminists’ rejection of gender essentialism challenged the created order. God had ordained certain roles for men and women, and the ERA threatened them.”²⁴ However, changes to the Constitution such as the Equal Rights Amendment could pose serious problems for this natural order. For example, conservatives feared that the Equal Rights Amendment would usher in a broad variety of changes that would upend the traditional order, such as government-funded daycare and paternity leave, actions they believed would denigrate and impede a woman’s primary responsibility for rearing children.²⁵

The complaints came fast and fierce, not only by Falwell, but by many other religious organizations and foundations. The “Family Manifesto” declared that “male and female were established in their diversity by the Creator...and extends to psychological traits which set natural constraints on gender roles...the role of the male is most effectively that of provider, and the role of the female one of nurturer.”²⁶ Phyllis Schlafly, the founder of the Eagle Forum and politically conservative activist, wrote that ERA would be the “first anti-family amendment in the Constitution...[it would] protect bigamists, legalize prostitution, and defang rape laws...the social and political goals of the ERAers are radical, irrational, and unacceptable to Americans.”²⁷ Schlafly also coined the acronym, STOP ERA, in which she admonished the federal government to “Stop Taking Our Privileges.”

²⁴ Dowland, “Family Values,” 623.

²⁵ Williams, “Sunbelt Politics,” 139.

²⁶ Dowland, “Family Values,” 620.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 621.

Gay Rights Fight

Closely related to the fight against expanding women's rights was the Moral Majority's fight against "special privileges" for gays. In November 1977, over 20,000 people descended upon Houston, Texas to celebrate International Women's Year and outline goals for women for the next decade. This conference, sponsored by the federal government, largely stemmed from the United Nations, which had proclaimed 1975 to be International Women's Year. This original "year" was later extended to a ten-year period. Presidents Ford and Carter had offered their support for states to celebrate International Women's Year, and Congress appropriated \$5 million to finance state meetings and the national conference. Most of these state meetings were held in the summer of 1977, with the national conference taking place in November.

Conservatives, already flummoxed by the federal government sponsoring and funding programs that came from the unpopular United Nations, were especially suspicious over the ultimate aims of the meetings. The primary task of the national conference was to "formulate and pass a National Plan of Action...ranging from better enforcement of existing laws...demands for a national health security system, full employment, peace, and disarmament."²⁸

At the National Women's Conference in Houston in November, feminists ratified an alliance with homosexual rights groups. Throughout the state meetings held earlier in the year, feminist organizers thought that "the prominence of lesbians within the women's movement, along with the intolerance that homosexuals faced in American society, demanded that they support gay rights."²⁹ Conservatives had slightly tolerated feminism in the early 1970s, but the feminist decision to ally their cause with the gay rights movement all but nixed whatever support evangelicals had for the women's liberation movement. Dowland further argues, "conservatives hoping to rally evangelicals against feminism could hardly have

²⁸ Jo Freeman, "The National Women's Conference in Houston, 1977," <http://www.jofreeman.com/photos/IWY1977.html> [accessed April 4, 2013].

²⁹ Dowland, "Family Values," 624.

scripted a better scenario. Feminism had linked itself with gay rights.”³⁰ Although evangelical Christians may have tolerated feminism in the early 1970s, the link with gay rights made that impossible. Falwell agreed. Just two years away from officially launching Moral Majority, he offered his opinions on the movement for homosexual rights: “Though they claim to be another poorly treated minority, homosexuals are involved in open immorality as they practice perversion...they are not a minority any more than murderers, rapists or other sinners are a minority. Since they cannot reproduce, they proselyte.”

In addition, Falwell believed the government had no business endorsing the movement, because the church could do a better job of taking care of these social issues. This belief, which gained traction throughout the religiously conservative community in the 1970s, stated that private solutions were better than government programs. It expressed serious doubt that the federal government could handle societal ills and echoed arguments that fiscal conservatives had made during the 1950s and 1960s about the free market: “Let us train pastors to meet the needs of the segments in the same way the government is attempting to do it. I think we’re better equipped to do it than they.”

Falwell, and later the Moral Majority, used language that cast gay rights as an attack on the family. Just as feminism and the Equal Rights Amendment could result in undesirable federal legislation such as government-mandated paternity leave, gay rights could have the same negative consequences. Falwell spoke of homosexuals having no shame; they were not accepted by mainstream society, so their only recourse was to prey on the young. Dowland notes that “the portrayal of homosexuals as pedophiles allowed the Christian right to link gay rights with abortion and feminism as yet another example of the government’s attack on the family.”³¹ Religious conservatives, already suspicious of public schools in general for reasons ranging from the banning of school prayer to the teaching of evolution, now feared what might happen if gay rights became commonly accepted. Moral Majority commentator Charlie Judd argued: “there are absolutes in this world. Just as jumping off a building will kill a person, so will the spread of homosexuality bring about the demise of American culture as we know it.”

³⁰ Dowland, “Family Values,” 624.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 627.

Protestantism, Nationalism, and Patriotism

Falwell also equated patriotism and serving one's country with being pro-family and supportive of morality in politics. He organized "I Love America" rallies in 1976 to celebrate the nation's bicentennial, but it was also likely a response to America's failure in Vietnam and Falwell's way of reassuring the nation that there were plenty of patriotic folks left that still supported their troops and government. Along the way, he warned voters across the political spectrum that the success of America was largely dependent upon its trust and faith in God. Falwell claimed that America had prospered because it had been a God-fearing nation, worked hard, and lived according to Biblical teachings and practices. Although the United States may have had flaws in the past, surely they had been corrected. Thus, Falwell warned Americans during 1976, "if God lifts his hand from America, it's all over, and if America loses her freedom, the free world is gone. America should bless the world."³² Appealing to the image of the Protestant work ethic, Falwell also warned of a growing dependency on the federal government. Along the way, he was quick to criticize federal welfare programs, which seemed to reward laziness for those who refused to work. Falwell argued that "federal welfare checks went to bums who wouldn't work in a pie shop eating the holes out of donuts."

Furthermore, the nation's economic crisis was linked to America abandoning its moral clarity and strong sense of work and commitment; that is, inflation and economic woes in the mid-1970s were mainly due to welfare spending, Falwell believed. "Because of the heavy taxation demanded for the support of a sick and unbalanced welfare program, the very heart is being cut out of the business community. The government seems to be committed to taxing the successful businessman right out of business."³³ Thus, according to Falwell, it was secular humanists who refused to live and work according to biblical principles that were responsible for the regulations and increased taxes on hard-working Protestants that were trying to start a business and make something for themselves.

³² Williams, "Sunbelt Politics," 138.

³³ *Ibid.*, 137.

Electing Reagan

As the election of 1980 moved closer, Moral Majority sprang into action, mobilizing politicians and religious leaders to help support their platform. The movement boasted a wide variety of accomplishments and energy to influence the election. “We’re going to change the country,” Utah senator Orrin Hatch declared.³⁴ The Moral Majority boasted a political war chest worth millions of dollars by the summer of 1980. It opened offices in Washington D.C. and, in just one year, gained 83,000 new addresses for its mailing list. “It’s like the blacks said in the 1960s,” Falwell said. “And this time, we’re going to win.”³⁵ The Religious Roundtable, created to assist pastors in spurring their congregations into voting for pro-morality and pro-family candidates, sponsored a meeting of 15,000 conservative pastors in the summer. Evangelical activists, taking a page out of the union and civil rights playbook of mass mobilization, approached the 1980 election as they were conducting a battlefield mission. These activists began a national voter registration drive, informed potential voters of the morality ratings of each candidate, formed moral action committees in churches, used telephone banks to contact voters, and provided transportation to the polls.³⁶ Such efforts were similar to the voting drives and activism that unions and civil rights leaders had used in the past.

Less than three months before the election, the Moral Majority threw its support behind Ronald Reagan. Although Reagan was not the perfect conservative, he was better than Carter, who had not accomplished significant legislation or executive orders to appease the evangelical community. Bruce Buursma wrote that the Moral Majority was pinning its hopes on Ronald Reagan in the presidential election. The Moral Majority, Christian Voice, and other religious political organizations hoped that they could have a “real” evangelical, social conservative on which they could depend in the White House — Carter was not sufficient. Rather, the man they “regard as a Moses who will lead them out of the

³⁴ Bruce Buursma, “A New Crusade,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 31, 1980.

³⁵ Jerry Falwell, quoted in “A New Crusade,” *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 31, 1980.

³⁶ Buursma, “A New Crusade,” *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 31, 1980.

wilderness of unrighteousness, is Ronald Reagan.”³⁷ However, on the campaign trail, Reagan treated the Moral Majority with a bit of discomfort and awkwardness. He was largely silent about how his Christian worldview affected his beliefs on policy. Later, it was revealed that Reagan donated less than 1 percent of his income to religious causes, which came up short of the common 10 percent tithe that is encouraged of churchgoers. In the minds of Moral Majority leaders and evangelical voters, though, Reagan might not have been their perfect candidate, but at least he was not Jimmy Carter. Paul Weyrich, one of the leaders of Moral Majority, staunchly defended the rationale behind the support of the religious right: “We have to make a choice between a person who may be less than perfect but who supports the values we believe...in that case, we come down on the side of Ronald Reagan.”³⁸

Ronald Reagan was elected in 1980, and Falwell and Moral Majority quickly sprang into action to influence his presidency. After Reagan’s election in 1980, Falwell trumpeted: There’s no question that Moral Majority and other religious right organizations turned out multiplied millions of voters.”³⁹ However, others were not so sure, and Winters puts it best: “While there is some debate about whether Reagan could have won without the votes of the millions of evangelical voters Falwell energized and organized, there is no doubt that the moral concerns that mattered to Falwell and his voters became an integral part of the Reagan Revolution.”⁴⁰ Other conservative leaders proceeded with caution. Although delighted that many liberal senators on their “hit list” had been voted out of office, they warned voters that their crusade to return the nation to moral sanity was from over. James Robison, a television evangelist from Texas, said that “if these people who have taken a stand go back to sleep, we’re in trouble. Now is the time to stand firm.”⁴¹ He further exhorted the president to fill his Cabinet and inner rankings with Godly men. If he refused to do this, Reagan would be confined to the ranks of mediocrity. Paul Weyrich was also happy that Moral Majority had taken a big first step, but he took time to “warn the

³⁷ Buursma, “A New Crusade,” *Chicago Tribune*, Aug. 31, 1980.

³⁸ Paul Weyrich, quoted in Bruce Buursma, “Moral Majority: Crusade Has Just Begun,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 6, 1980.

³⁹ Falwell, quoted in Bruce Buursma, “Moral Majority,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 6, 1980.

⁴⁰ Winters, “God’s Right Hand,” 4.

⁴¹ Bruce Buursma, “Moral Majority,” *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 6, 1980.

Moral Majority that they shouldn't expect anything from a Reagan administration. They're going to have to fight for everything they get."⁴²

Caution and Optimism in the Reagan Administration

But even amidst concerns and warnings from professors and onlookers, conservative Christians were overjoyed at the election. Haberman notes that, after the election, evangelical voters who had supported Reagan and the Moral Majority believed "...they finally had a President who would advance their agenda of eliminating abortion, reinstating school prayer, and getting government off the backs of private schools."⁴³ Experts on religion in public affairs, such as Dr. Martin E. Marty of the University of Chicago, however, postulated that the religious right could be in for a major disappointment with Reagan: "I can't picture the President catering to them...as the campaign wore on, Reagan put more and more distance between him and the religious right."⁴⁴ Dr. Marty's words proved prophetic. In 1981 after taking office, the Reagan administration sent indirect missives and hints towards the Moral Majority, meaning that their first aim was to be the economy. President Reagan did not want to "waste" precious political capital appeasing social conservatives. He had more important items on his agenda, such as cutting taxes and getting serious about fixing the economy.

In Reagan's early presidency, he focused on economic issues rather than social issues, frustrating leadership in the Moral Majority but giving them little choice but to sit and watch. Sure enough, throughout 1981, Reagan "did not pursue any of the important social issues like abortion or school prayer because his first priority was getting his tax cuts passed."⁴⁵ Conservatives, however, were not wasting any time, either. They targeted homosexuality in San Francisco and sought to criminalize it. In the spring of 1981, Moral Majority planned "boycotts of sponsors of what it considers offensive shows...what they

⁴² Weyrich, quoted in Bruce Buursma, "Moral Majority," *Chicago Tribune*, Nov. 6, 1980.

⁴³ Aaron Haberman, "Into the Wilderness: Ronald Reagan, Bob Jones University, and the Political Education of the Christian Right," *The Historian* 67 (Summer 2005): 241.

⁴⁴ Martin E. Marty, quoted in Bruce Buursma, "Moral Majority," *Tribune*, Nov. 6, 1980.

⁴⁵ Aaron Haberman, "Into the Wilderness," 228.

want to do is to cleanse television of everything that they consider an abomination in the eyes of God.”⁴⁶ Not content to wait for Reagan, the Moral Majority also sought to curb abortion rights right away by gearing up support for an anti-abortion bill in Congress. Falwell realized that the only way to overturn *Roe vs. Wade* was by constitutional amendment, a very difficult task given the political landscape in 1981. However, he thought of another way to circumvent the tough political task: an antiabortion bill called the Human Life Bill that would state that life begins at conception and that a fetus is a living person. Although the bill never became law, Falwell and the Moral Majority felt that the political winds on Capitol Hill were shifting in their favor, possibly enough to demand Reagan’s attention. Margolis noted that the antiabortion movement was growing more sophisticated and politically clever, including moderate Congressional Democrats who supported a “Pro-Life Caucus.”⁴⁷

The anti-abortion fight was far from over, but Moral Majority sought other ways to advance their agenda. If Congress could not pass a Human Life Bill, then perhaps they would consider a constitutional amendment if Reagan would throw his support behind it. This was wishful thinking on behalf of the Moral Majority, however. Throughout 1982 and 1983, “Reagan repeatedly demonstrated that he was not going to push for the Christian Right’s agenda with the same strength as he gave to tax cuts and increased military spending.”⁴⁸ A prime example was the Senate debate over two anti-abortion constitutional amendments. Predictably, the proposed amendments never came to a vote, and it “was the last serious attempt within the Reagan administration to enact a constitutional amendment to overturn *Roe*.”⁴⁹ Throughout the early years of the Reagan administration, other events would jolt the Moral Majority and provide a glimpse of the difficult political climate involved in achieving its policy goals.

The school prayer issue, which had provided such frustration for Falwell and other Christian conservatives in the 1960s, returned to the forefront in 1982 and 1983. Evangelical leaders and religious conservatives sought to reinstate prayer in public schools, and they wanted Reagan to throw his support

⁴⁶ Stein, “The War,” *Chicago Tribune*, Feb. 1981.

⁴⁷ Jon Margolis, “The Abortion Struggle on Capitol Hill,” *Chicago Tribune*, March 22, 1981.

⁴⁸ Haberman, “Into the Wilderness,” 250-251.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 251.

behind the Congressional bill. However, Reagan refused to play ball and jeopardize political capital that could cost him tax cuts. In a display that was seen by many as political theater, a Reagan ally in the Senate submitted a constitutional amendment to reinstate organized prayer in public schools. Although the Senate Judiciary Committee held hearings, President Reagan stayed out of the fight. He did not use the “bully pulpit” of the presidency to exhort the passage of the amendment. When the Senate voted, it fell eleven votes short of passage.

Reagan never again pursued an anti-abortion or a school prayer amendment for the rest of his administration.⁵⁰ Ralph Reed lamented, “Religious conservatives had been rolled by the White House and didn’t even know it.”⁵¹ Others close to the political drama unfolding in Washington knew it, too. The social issues of the Religious Right had married them to the Republican Party, but the fiscal wing of the party dominated public policy due to the ongoing economic situation — the economy took precedence over societal issues that so far had resulted in political gridlock in Washington. William Martin claimed that many on the Religious Right looked to Reagan as their savior, but in the end, “they needed him more than he needed them, and both he and the Religious Right knew it.”⁵² If Reagan would not appease the Moral Majority by supporting their platform and advancing legislation, they had few other options on the right or left.

Even the relationship between Falwell and Reagan was called into question. Falwell later wrote that he considered Reagan to be a great friend but, early in Reagan’s presidency, the president’s actions suggested that Falwell had reason to be upset with the man the Moral Majority had helped elect. In spring 1981, President Reagan nominated liberal justice Sandra Day O’Connor to the Supreme Court. O’Connor had been denounced by many Christian Right leaders because of her support for the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and her vote for abortion rights. President Reagan, before making the nomination official, contacted Falwell beforehand, telling him that O’Connor was a decent conservative and exhorting the Moral Majority leader to refrain from any public comments until the Senate hearings were

⁵⁰ Haberman, “Into the Wilderness,” 252.

⁵¹ Ralph Reed, quoted in Haberman, “Into the Wilderness,” 252.

⁵² William Martin, quoted in Haberman, “Into the Wilderness,” 253.

over. Falwell said nothing, but Moral Majority leadership issued statements against her. However, there was little that the movement could do. Even after Cal Thomas, a Moral Majority leader, appeared on *Nightline* to oppose O'Connor, Falwell promptly admonished him that having access to the President was more important than an issue such as this.⁵³

As painful as these setbacks were for the Christian Right to stomach, it was another case that threatened them most directly. Many Christian primary, secondary, and post-secondary institutions had been set up in the 1960s and 1970s, most of which received government funding. After the civil rights movement resulted in legislation such as the Voting Rights Act, Civil Rights Act of 1964, and Title VII, however, discrimination was barred. Yet, institutions such as Bob Jones University, a Christian institution, continued to discriminate on the basis of race. Its claim was that just as the Bible delineated clear distinctions among the sexes and gender roles, the same held true for the races. According to this belief, any institution had the right to discriminate on the basis of race in order to keep the races separate. However, its tax-exempt status was threatened by the Internal Revenue Service in the late 1970s under the Carter administration.⁵⁴ The IRS began revoking the tax-exempt status of many schools that had formed as a backlash against the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decision.

The Christian Right had believed Reagan when he mentioned in official campaign literature that he disagreed with the IRS having the power to revoke the tax-exempt status of these schools. The Christian Right believed that Reagan's election to the presidency in 1980 signaled the beginning of a decade where abortion and pornography would be prohibited, organized prayer returned to the schools, and, perhaps most importantly, Christian schools could operate free of IRS harassment.⁵⁵ In January 1982, the Justice and Treasury Department reversed the IRS revocations of tax-exempt status for Bob Jones University. Immediately, the uproar was fast and fierce, and Reagan eventually capitulated after a wave of attacks on his administration that implied that he was promoting racial discrimination and at the

⁵³ David John Marley, "Ronald Reagan and the Splintering of the Christian Right," *Journal of Church and State* 48 (Autumn 2006): 858.

⁵⁴ Haberman, "Into the Wilderness," 240.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 235.

taxpayers' expense. The uproar "caught Reagan and his staff completely off guard as they scrambled for solutions."⁵⁶ Reagan then tried to politically maneuver around the backlash, submitting legislation to Congress to prohibit tax exemptions for educational institutions discriminating on the basis of race. This maneuver was Reagan's decision to "seek a Congressional ban on tax exemptions for racially discriminatory schools represented a clear slap in the face to the Christian Right."⁵⁷ The legislation, which ultimately made it to the Supreme Court, was upheld with only one justice dissenting. These political setbacks forced the Moral Majority and Christian voters to come face to face with an unsettling thought: Politics was a lot messier than they realized, and victory was nowhere certain even with the candidate of their choice.

Summary

In summation, the Moral Majority specifically and Christian Right generally grew in unprecedented scope during the 1970s. The Moral Majority became politically active, voted socially conservative candidates into office, formed a "hit list" of ungodly ones, and pinned their hopes behind Ronald Reagan for the highest office in the land. However, the political realities of a Democrat-controlled Senate, Reagan's conscious choices to work on economic issues, and a pluralistic electorate virtually guaranteed that their goals would be very difficult to meet. Although many in the Christian Right were thrilled with Reagan's election in 1980, the realities quickly became obvious that Reagan was not the proverbial knight in shining armor for which they had hoped. That said, Reagan's many appointees to the federal bench and general support of "family values" did help lay the foundation for expanding influence of religious conservatives in decades to come. In summation, Haberman argues that there were painful lessons learned all around and that by the time that Moral Majority dissolved in 1989 and Reagan left office, the movement's main goals remained unattained:

By the end of his administration, however, its agenda remained largely unfulfilled, in no small part because Reagan himself put forth only token effort to advance its cause...in the Bob

⁵⁶ Haberman, "Into the Wilderness," 244.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 245.

Jones case and elsewhere, the Christian Right did not have the political clout to compel Reagan to move its agenda forward.⁵⁸

Recent data indicates that the voters mobilized by Moral Majority now may shift political parties, further placing the long-term effects of the movement in question. Although three-quarters of evangelical Christians have sided with the Republican Party since 1980, recent data indicate that may be changing. A study published by Relevant Magazine in 2008 indicated that young voters cared about much more than abortion and gay rights. Relevant founder and publisher Cameron Strang said of the results:

"Young Christians simply don't seem to feel a connection to the traditional religious right. Many differ strongly on domestic policy issues, namely issues that affect the poor, and are dissatisfied with America's foreign policy and war. "In general, we're seeing that twenty something Christians hold strongly to conservative moral values, but at the same time don't feel that their personal moral beliefs need to be legislated to people who don't agree with them. It's an interesting paradox, and is creating clear division between this generation and the religious right."⁵⁹

What this means for the aftermath of the Moral Majority remains to be seen. Due to the lack of scholarship on the long-term effects of the Moral Majority, it is difficult to reach a definitive conclusion on the impacts that the Moral Majority has had on modern-day politics. We cannot say, for example, that the uproar caused by the highly publicized debate between the Catholic Church and the federal government over providing contraception in the spring of 2012 had anything to do with the Moral Majority. However, it is reasonable to suggest that the Moral Majority mobilized Christian voters for the first time and made politics a priority for the Church. In doing so, it also brought a new political force into the arena, the evangelical voter, which was heavily courted by the Reagan, George H. W. Bush, Clinton, and George W. Bush administrations. Future scholarship has much to offer in this emerging field, particularly in the debate about the long-term impact of the Moral Majority. Was this a movement that fizzled out in the late 1980s and took many evangelical Christians with it, or was it only the beginning of the growing clout of the evangelical community? How effective was Jerry Falwell's "empire," Liberty University, in preparing the next generation for engagement in politics? How do the current "culture wars" playing out in contemporary politics mirror those that Falwell fought in the 1980s? How effective

⁵⁸Haberman, "Into the Wilderness," 235.

⁵⁹ Cameron Strang, "New Data Reveals Political Opinions of Young Christian Voters," *RELEVANT Magazine*, January 2008.

was Falwell and the Moral Majority in impacting national politics? These questions are only a starting point for future historians to consider, but future scholarship will indeed help us better understand the immediate and long-term impacts of this political action group. With any luck, we will be able to fairly assess the movement, its leaders, and the societal and political ramifications of it.

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