

## CLASS 12

### The Christian Right

- Political Divisions in Religion
- Catalysts of the Religious Right
- 'Moral Majority'



## Political Divisions in Religion

- In the decades that followed the Modernist-Fundamentalist divide, conservative groups were more successful in appealing to the middle and lower classes of America.
  - The Southern Baptist Convention grew by over 1 million
  - Pentecostal Church membership grew by around 60%
- Their anti-intellectual preaching and reputation more easily translated into a convincing interpretation of every day life.
  - By 1942, *The Old Fashioned Gospel Hour* radio program drew over 10 million listeners worldwide to hear preaching and religious hymns.



## Political Divisions in Religion

- Meanwhile, older Mainline churches mostly failed in retaining their membership during the era. Liberal theology proved more difficult to create daily and family values.
- In addition, World War II and revelations of Hitler's atrocities against European Jews gave pause to the Modernist principle of humanity's inevitable progress.
- In the late 1940s, The post-WWII 'baby boom' led to a resurgence in church-goers on both sides of the theological divide, and greater efforts for ecumenism.
  - National Association of Evangelicals (1942)
  - National Council of Churches (1950)



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“[The NCC] marks a new and great determination that the American way will be increasingly the Christian way, for such is our heritage...Together the churches can move forward to the goal – a Christian American in a Christian world.” – Henry Knox Sherrill



## Political Divisions in Religion

- In many ways, efforts of both sides brought stability to denominational Christianity, though their impact was still diminished in American culture.
- However, with that stability came neglect of declining traditional values:
  - Television brought rampant commercialism into the family home in the 1950s
  - The Sexual Revolution of the 1960s
- While some conservative Christians argued against these moral issues, most Mainline churches took up other social causes for race, gender and class equality.
- Thus, the theological divide over issues of Science and Bible grew wider as each side began to align itself with particular political ideologies.



## Political Divisions in Religion

- Billy Graham
  - Graham came to prominence in 1949 when newspaper magnate Williams Randolph Hearst decided to publicize his preaching tour in Los Angeles.
  - The 'revival meeting' was held in circus tents and was so well attended that it lasted eight weeks instead of the scheduled three.
  - Graham's simple and straightforward call for personal conversion based on the depth of human sin and need for a savior convicted many people.
  - Seeing himself not as a theologian, but as a simple 'preacher of the gospel,' Graham is a direct successor of revival preachers in the U.S., especially George Whitefield.



## Political Divisions in Religion

- The preaching career of Graham was defined by his ‘Crusades’ which drew huge crowds in stadiums and arenas all over the world. In addition, He was especially popular due to his use of radio and television to broadcast his message
- It is estimated that over his lifetime, Graham was heard by more than 2.5 billion people.
- While his basic message of conversion of the individual soul resonated with evangelicals, Graham also did not shy away from speaking about major political issues of the day, especially against Communism and racial segregation.



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“The evangelist must not hedge on social issues; the cost of discipleship must be made plain from the platform. Social sins, after all, are merely a large-scale projection of individual sins and need to be repented of by the offending segment of society – Billy Graham



## Political Divisions in Religion

- While extreme members of both liberal and fundamentalist groups publicly disagreed with Graham, he refused to take a sectarian stance, cooperating with churches of various theological stripes, and accepting any and all who would profess faith in Christ, regardless of their church affiliation.
- Graham parlayed his popularity into a role as 'spiritual advisor' for a number of U.S. Presidents, most prominently Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon.
- Graham was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1983 and appeared on Gallup's list of the Top 10 'Most Admired Men' in America a record 61 times.



## Catalysts of the Religious Right

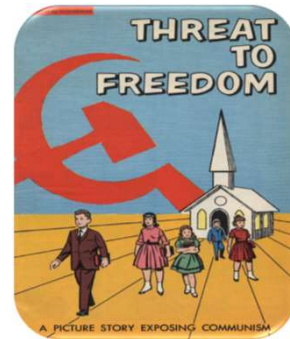
- Though Graham's Christian message transcended theological lines, this did not produce any type of reconciliation of the diverging faith-based political ideas. His more lasting impact as a Christian who dabbled in the political arena set up later figures to attempt to use politics for religious means.
- In the 1970s and 1980s, a political movement known as 'The New Religious (or Christian) Right' came to prominence. The movement aligned itself with conservative Christian values.
- 3 main sets of events in the decades prior triggered this movement...



## Catalysts of the Religious Right

- 1) In the aftermath of World War II, many Americans translated the existential threat to America by Soviet Russia into religious language about protecting Christian values.
- The 'Cold War' became a battle of good v. evil, the God-Fearing v. the Godless, freedom v. oppression.
  - The distinctive feature of American life that made it superior to Soviet Communism was Religion.

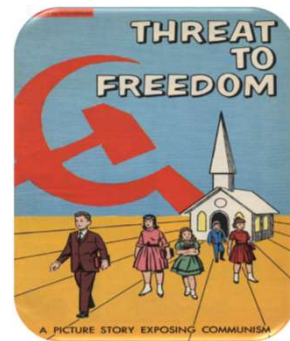
"Either Communism must die or Christianity must die, because it's actually a battle between Christ and Anti-Christ"  
– Billy Graham



## Catalysts of the Religious Right

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"Without God, there could be no American form of Government, nor an American way of life. Recognition of the Supreme Being is the first—the most basic—expression of Americanism. Thus the Founding Fathers saw it, and thus, with God's help, it will continue to be." – Dwight D. Eisenhower





## Catalysts of the Religious Right

- 2) A series of national court decisions which indicated that American cultural values were now in outright opposition to conservative Christian values.
- 1<sup>st</sup> Amendment issues of church and state came back to the judicial forefront. Between 1945 and 1985, the U.S. Supreme Court heard more cases dealing with church-state issues than in the previous 175 years.
  - The most important of these were in the realm of education. Cases ranged from the appropriateness of teaching 'creationism,' to whether parochial schools could use public transportation for students.
  - 1962, *Engel v. Vitale* forbade school boards from composing prayers for students.
  - 1963, *Abington v. Schempp* made ritual Bible reading and the Lord's Prayer unconstitutional.



## Catalysts of the Religious Right

- The most impactful case which set American values against Christian values was *Roe v. Wade* in 1973, which legalized early-term abortions as a medical procedure for the health of the mother.
- Interestingly, outcry from Christians against the ruling was not universal. In fact, some Protestants who saw this as a 'Catholic issue' were silent, or even accepting, of the decision.

"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," he said, "and it has always, therefore, seemed to me that what is best for the mother and for the future should be allowed." – W.A. Criswell, former President of the Southern Baptist Convention



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- It was not until the late 1970s, when abortion rates had doubled since *Roe v. Wade*, that conservative politicians raised the issue as a developing moral crisis.



## Catalysts of the Religious Right

- 3) The Presidency of Jimmy Carter became a major disappointment to many conservatives who saw his policy conflict with his profession of faith.
  - Carter was elected in 1976 on the strength of the evangelical commitments. He was a church-going, professing ‘born again’ Southern Baptist who taught Sunday School.

“Newsweek June 7th said about this candidate ‘His allusions to his personal relationship with Jesus Christ are considered bad form.’ Brethren if there is anything we need – whether it is bad form or good politics – is a man who is more proud of his faith in Christ than any political aspirations he might have...and it would certainly be improper for me to call that man’s name, but his initials are the same as our Lord’s...” – Bailey Smith, Keynote Speaker of the 1976 Southern Baptist Convention





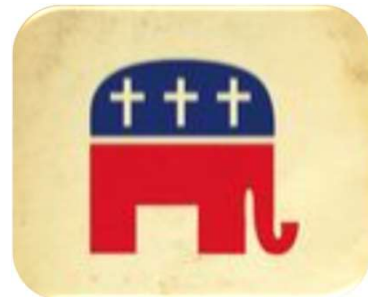
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- Carter was elected in 1976 on the strength of the evangelical commitments. He was a church-going, professing 'born again' Southern Baptist who taught Sunday School.
  - But during his presidency, it became clear that in matters of political policy he more liberal, with a strong commitment to human rights (including abortion rights), and separation of church and state that restricted tax-exempt status for many private Christian colleges (e.g. Bob Jones University)
  - As a result of these events, Christian leaders and socially conservative Republican political strategists joined forces in efforts to bring evangelical Christian values back to the forefront of American culture.



## 'Moral Majority'

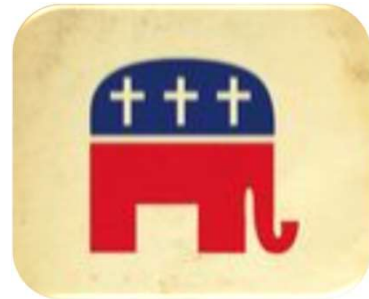
- In the 1970s & 1980s a number of Christian-based political organizations were formed, including the Christian Coalition of America, Focus on the Family, and the Christian Voice but the most impactful organization was 'Moral Majority,' founded by Southern Baptist pastor and televangelist Jerry Falwell.
- Formed in 1979, Moral Majority was created to promote socially conservative political policy, endorse candidates for public office, and mobilize Christians to vote along religious ideological lines.
- Moral Majority used grassroots efforts to register church members to vote. In 5 years, over 8.5 Million evangelicals were registered through MM efforts.



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“We have a three-fold primary responsibility: Number one, get people saved; Number two, get them baptized; and Number three, get them registered to vote.” – Jerry Falwell



## ‘Moral Majority’

- The agenda of the Moral Majority and other Christian political activist groups was defined by social issues such as abortion, school prayer, homosexuality, pornography and the spread of secular values.
- With its ties to the Republican Party, its agenda also was shaped by other Republican-led measures such as spending on national defense, school vouchers and tax cut policy.
- Falwell became a prominent advisor for Ronald Reagan, and groups like Moral Majority are credited with getting Reagan elected President twice, including defeating Jimmy Carter in 1980.



## 'Moral Majority'

- Reagan, a Hollywood actor by trade, quickly became the darling of the Christian political movement, publicly proclaiming devotion to the Bible, and proposing a constitutional amendment to restore prayer in schools.
- Moral Majority's direct impact on American politics was short lived. By the end of the 1980s, donations to the organization decreased dramatically, possibly because Christians saw less of a national crisis with Reagan in office.
- Falwell retired, and the group formally disbanded in 1989. Nevertheless, the strong ties between evangelical Christians and the Republican Party last into the modern day.



## Review Questions

A) What made Billy Graham so popular? How would compare the effectiveness and content of his preaching with other revival preachers in American history?

B) Why were Supreme Court decisions against school prayer disheartening to Christians? How did the perceived 'moral decline' of the nation lead to Christian involvement in politics?

C) What was ironic about evangelical alignment with Ronald Reagan in the 1980s? What does it say about their perception of America that they backed Reagan and not Jimmy Carter?

