

THEOLOGY AND THE POSITION OF PASTORS ON SOCIAL ISSUES: CONTINUITY AND CHANGE SINCE THE 1960s*

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A 1987 follow-up study of pastors of six Protestant denominations in Oregon reveals that theologically based differences on various controversial issues were more pronounced than they had been in 1962. Three factors appear, however, to mitigate the effects of the increased divergence of views. For one thing, the scope of conflict is narrowed because many of the issues of chief concern to the members of one camp are of less concern to members of the other. Another mitigating influence is the tendency of liberals and conservatives in theologically heterogeneous denominations to moderate their views in the interest of harmony. A third factor is the continuing existence of common concerns, such as alleviating world hunger. An examination of the issues that have recently mobilized theological conservatives demonstrates that their resistance to cultural innovations is selective and that they have abandoned or neglected several causes they once championed.

LOOKING BACK

As my long career in sociology draws to a close, I have returned to an interest I first developed when I studied American history in high school, namely, the relation between religion and politics in the United States.

Back then, when I was just fifteen, my interest centered on religion and politics in the years before the Civil War. But I went on to have some intense experience in Methodist youth work and I began browsing through contemporary church periodicals, and as a result, I got interested in the religion and politics of my own time. This experience made me very much aware of the theological rift that had developed within Protestantism between liberals and conservatives, and I wondered whether this rift extended beyond the realm of theology.

We know now, of course, that it does, but in the 1940s and '50s the linkage between theological commitment and position on an array of public issues was not clear. The famous voting studies by Lazarsfeld and Berelson (1948, 1954) had shown that Catholics and Protestants tended to differ in political party preference, and that this difference could not be totally explained by the influence of education, occupation, and income, which were the factors thought to be responsible for political choice. But the prevailing opinion was that within Protestantism, socioeconomic status determined political outlook and that influences stemming from religious cultures themselves had no impact except perhaps among a few small fringe movements (AllinSmith and AllinSmith, 1948).

In the winter of 1960, I had an opportunity to include some items on a questionnaire that our sociology graduate students at Oregon were constructing as part of their training in

methods of survey research. I decided to play my hunch that the theological culture of the churches people participate in is associated with the political choices they make. We found that among regular churchgoers, people who attended conservative Protestant churches were more likely to be Republicans than people who attended liberal churches. The differences were small, especially when controls were run for socioeconomic factors, but all the comparisons were in the predicted direction. I wrote my findings up and they were published in *Public Opinion Quarterly* in the spring of 1962.

THE OREGON CLERGY STUDY OF 1962

A few months before that article appeared, Albert W. Wardin, Jr., a graduate student in history, asked me for help with a questionnaire he proposed to send to the Baptist clergy of Oregon to gather data for his dissertation on the history of the Baptists in that state since the Civil War.

I persuaded Wardin to let me include some political items on his questionnaire. He warned me that on theological issues Oregon Baptists were preponderantly conservative, so in order to have enough liberals I sent a similar questionnaire to the Methodist clergy of Oregon. Our overall response rate was 75 percent.

The results of that 1962 survey were really quite striking. Theological commitment was associated with the position pastors took on all eight of our measures of political outlook, and on some of these measures the relationship was extraordinarily strong. For example, among pastors affiliated with the Conservative Baptist Association, 90 percent preferred the Republican party. Among Methodists who considered themselves theologically liberal, the figure was only 42 percent. On the issue of capital punishment there was a spread of 82 percentage points between the attitudes of the Conservative Baptists and the Methodist liberals. It seemed clear that the religious cultures under investigation did have a political as well as a theological component.

When our Oregon clergy data were collected in 1962, sociologists were still talking about the homogenization of American religion and its irrelevance to fundamental social issues (Berger, 1961). No one was writing about "culture wars" or the "restructuring of American religion." But within a very short time, it became obvious that homogenization and irrelevance were not the whole story, that American religion was still diverse and that this diversity had moral and political implications. In 1963 clergy marched at Selma, in 1965 Glock and Stark published their path-finding chapter on the "new denominationalism," and by 1967 the liberal clergy's protests against the Vietnam war were on the evening news. So by 1966 and 1967, when my two articles on the Oregon clergy study appeared, sociologists were receptive to the findings. They were soon replicated and extended by Jeffrey K. Hadden (1969), Jeffries and Tygart (1974), Harold Quinley (1974), and many others. In those times, the clergy activists were mainly on the left. But any lingering skepticism about the potential for right-wing militancy among religious conservatives was dispelled when the new Christian right emerged in the late 1970s.¹ And no one doubts any longer that the divergence of outlook between liberals and conservatives marks the biggest fault line within American Protestantism.

INCREASING POLARIZATION: THE OREGON CLERGY STUDY OF 1987-1988

How much has that fault line widened since our clergy study of 1962? On what issues are the Protestant clergy most divided? Are factors at work to counteract the polarizing trends that James Hunter (1991) and Robert Wuthnow (1987) have written about? In an effort to find out, a graduate student and I did a twenty-five year follow-up study of the same clergy populations that Wardin and I had studied years earlier. In the fall of 1987 we again sent questionnaires to the Baptist and United Methodist clergy of Oregon. And this time, in order to obtain an even wider range of theological views, we also surveyed pastors of the United Church of Christ and the Presbyterian Church (USA). Our overall response rate was 80 percent.²

It should come as no surprise that the same basic relationships between theology and political outlook showed up again in the 1987 study. We also discovered that the theological climate among the Methodists and Baptists had not changed much since 1962. The American Baptists had become a little more liberal, but the Methodists had become a little more conservative, and the Southern Baptist and CBA pastors had hardly changed at all. They were just as solidly conservative as they had been 25 years earlier, and they were just as solidly Republican.

It should also come as no surprise that we found greater evidence of polarization on the basis of theology in 1987 than we did in 1962. Of the eight measures of political outlook that we used in the original study, only attitude toward capital punishment yielded really extreme differences between liberals and conservatives. But as everyone knows, since 1962 numerous new issues have emerged on which liberals and conservatives take opposing stands. In addition to the eight original measures of political outlook, we added a host of new ones, including such issues as abortion, school prayer, gay rights, the ERA, use of inclusive language in worship, the sanctuary movement, and aid to the Nicaraguan contras.

In an effort to discover what the most polarizing issues were, I constructed an index by summing the percentage differences between theological liberals and conservatives on the two extreme responses for each item.³ For reasons that will become clear later on, I controlled for denomination.

Table 1 presents the twenty items with polarization scores greater than 80. At the top of the list are two items with a score of 173, only 27 points lower than the maximum possible score. They are political party preference and capital punishment, the two most polarizing issues on the 1962 survey. In third place is the use of inclusive language in worship, with an index score of 166, only one point higher than the fourth-place item, the inerrancy of Scripture. Laws prohibiting discrimination against gays and lesbians occupies fifth place, with a score of 163, and the advertising of condoms on television closely follows it. Among the other items on the list of twenty are voluntary school prayer, tuition tax credits, aid to the Nicaraguan contras, the personal return of Christ, and how the pastor would react on discovering that a parishioner is in a stable gay or lesbian relationship.

Table 1
Scores of Items on the Polarization Index

<u>Issue</u>	<u>Score</u>
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1. Political party preference	173
2. Capital punishment	173
3. Use of inclusive language in worship	166
4. Inerrancy of Scripture	165
5. Abortion if mother can't support child	164
6. Laws protecting gays and lesbians	163
7. Advertising condoms on TV	161
8. Stable gay or lesbian relationship	160
9. Star Wars program	157
10. Aid to the Nicaraguan Contras	148
11. Living out of wedlock	147
12. Tuition tax credits	142
13. Christianity the only true religion	138
14. Nuclear disarmament	137
15. Equal Rights Amendment	136
16. Sale of alcoholic beverages	131
17. Laws against explicit sex in the media	126
18. Voluntary school prayer	123
19. Personal return of Christ	114
20. Affirmative action	114

To a person from another culture, this might seem a most puzzling array of items. What connection, she might ask, does advertising condoms on television have to do with the personal return of Christ? And what logical connection is there between biblical inerrancy and preference for the Republican party? But for those in the know -- for "members" in the ethnomethodological sense -- this is an entirely meaningful array of items, and -- depending on how partisan you are -- there is an unambiguously "correct" position for each item.

There seem to be three interlocked motifs in this list. The first involves issues concerning the truth of distinctively Christian teachings, issues that were at the heart of the liberal-fundamentalist controversy in the early decades of the 20th century. The second motif involves the issues of sexuality and the proper role of women that have mobilized religious conservatives since the 1970s. Conservatives identify these issues with the integrity of the traditional nuclear family and the left identifies them with individual liberty and human rights. The third motif involves issues of national policy, which conservatives frame in terms of the nation's submission to God and his commandments and liberals frame in terms of the nation's commitment to justice, inclusiveness and the dignity of life. In 1962, political party preference and capital punishment were the only issues of this sort that sharply divided the Oregon pastors. By 1987, a host of related issues divided them, including school prayer, tuition tax credits, and nuclear disarmament. It was not possible to include on the survey all the issues on which religious liberals and conservatives might disagree but, if I am right about the three motifs on which they are apt to disagree most vehemently, studies using different items should find that the greatest degree of polarization is on issues involving one or more of these three motifs.

TWO AGENDAS

The finding that in 1987 theological liberals and conservatives were sharply divided on so many issues supports Hunter's and Wuthnow's thesis concerning the increase of polarizing

tendencies in American religion and culture over the past thirty years. But our data also contain evidence of factors that counteract these tendencies to some degree. In my reports of the 1962 findings I speculated that two such factors are at work. The 1987 data strongly support this speculation and reveal that a third factor also helps mitigate the effects of polarization.

The first factor was pointed out to me thirty years ago by Mary Ellen Juilfs, an undergraduate assistant who was reared in evangelical circles and had keen insights into the culture of conservative Protestantism. I had been having trouble making sense of the fact that in the 1962 Oregon clergy study, a great many theologically conservative pastors failed to take a conservative stand on most of the controversial public issues on our questionnaire. The liberals tended to line up firmly on one side of an issue, but the responses of the conservatives were much more scattered. In short, although liberals and conservatives did differ on all these issues, there was of polarization. Juilfs told me, in effect, that "Theological liberals are interested in the social gospel. They are much less unified on theological they are on social issues. Theological conservatives are mainly interest in theology. They're much more unified on theological issues than on social short, the agendas of theological liberals and conservatives are like tectonic plates that tend to slide past each other rather than to collide head-on. On social issues, e.g., political party preference and capital punishment, they did in 1962, but on most others they did not. I thought Juilfs was right, and I her insight in my 1967 article on pastors and public issues. The fact theological liberals and conservatives tend to be preoccupied with different lessens to some extent the conflict between these two camps. Recently, and Jackson Carroll's study of seminary faculty has elegantly demonstrated the accuracy of this insight (1992).

The 1987 Oregon clergy findings also demonstrate its accuracy. When we the pastors to tell us what social issues they had preached on during the year, we found the liberals were much more likely than the conservatives to preach on nuclear disarmament and other peace and justice issues, and were much more likely to preach on advertising condoms and abortion. Among United Church of Christ pastors, for example, over percent had preached on apartheid and aid to the contras, whereas less than of Conservative Baptist pastors had done so. Although theologically and conservative pastors were more divided on public issues in 1987 than 1962, the issues they chose to emphasize in preaching reflected the fact that attached different weights to these issues.

A close inspection of response patterns on many of the items on the index of reveals a similar pattern. Because the items differed in the number of response categories they provided, in some cases it was necessary in constructing the index to merge two categories into one. Had we not done so, however, several of the five-category items involving peace and justice issues would not have appeared on the index. These include affirmative action, nuclear disarmament, aid to the contras, and President Reagan's star wars program. In each case, theological liberals tended to respond that they were "strongly" in favor or "strongly" opposed, whereas theological conservatives tended to say that they are "mildly" opposed or "mildly" in favor. The only five-category items on which roughly equal proportions of liberals and conservatives have strong views are capital punishment, the use of inclusive language in worship, discrimination against gays and lesbians, the Equal Rights Amendment, and school prayer.

The same basic pattern emerged from my research on the pronouncements that Presbyterian General Assemblies have adopted on social issues since the 1920s (Johnson,

1990). One thing that struck me about the heated controversies that have broken out at those Assemblies since the late 1960s is that they have not tended to center on peace and justice issues in general, or over strictly economic issues, but only on issues that conflict with the agenda of theological conservatives.

In 1988, for example -- which is the final year I read the General Assembly Minutes -- the liberals that tended to dominate the various standing committees and task forces won floor votes with little or no controversy on issues such as giving money to the National Sanctuary Defense Fund, endorsing the Guatemalan bishops' paper on land reform, praising the United Nations for its championing of human rights, and calling for immediate comprehensive sanctions against South Africa. What mobilized conservatives were issues of sexuality and national security, and it was only on these issues that they were able to muster sufficient strength to defeat liberal initiatives or to modify them substantially.

The 1987 clergy data also suggest that theological liberals continue to be more fully attuned to national politics than the conservatives are. The recent political mobilization of evangelicals has not entirely overcome an earlier tendency among many of them to avoid involvement in partisan politics. In the 1987 survey, the liberal pastors were considerably more likely than the conservative pastors to answer "yes" when asked whether there was anyone in public life they could enthusiastically support for president of the United States in 1988. Not surprisingly, the liberals' favorite candidates were virtually all Democrats and the conservatives' were virtually all Republicans, but in view of the prominence in 1987 of Pat Robertson, Jack Kemp, William Bennett, and other political favorites of the religious right, it is noteworthy that more than half of the theologically conservative pastors were unable to name anyone whom they could warmly endorse for president. Despite the fact that conservatives in the sample outnumbered liberals by about six to four, Jesse Jackson received more endorsements for president than did Pat Robertson.

DENOMINATIONS MATTER

A second factor that moderates polarizing tendencies among theological liberals and conservatives seemed to emerge from the 1962 data. This is a factor that operates within denominations, or rather within certain denominations.

In analyzing the 1962 data I noticed that theologically conservative Methodists were in general a bit less conservative on controversial issues than were the theological conservatives in the three Baptist denominations. And on those issues that revealed the sharpest differences between the two theological camps, theologically conservative American Baptists tended to take more liberal stands than did their counterparts among Southern and Conservative Baptists. In other words, pastors' views seemed to be influenced by a denominational factor that operated independently of their own theological position.

I was not able to check on whether this factor also operated among theologically liberal pastors because all the liberals were Methodists and all the Baptist pastors were theologically conservative. But I speculated that where there is diversity within a group of people with a strong sense of identity, there is also a tendency to avoid painful and costly confrontations. Opposing factions may form, but ordinarily there will be a large "center," where compromises are fashioned and clashing viewpoints are softened and muted. If this is so, then a theologically conservative pastor who belongs to a denomination in which most pastors are liberal is likely to moderate his or her conservatism on various issues in the

interest of good relations with colleagues. Conversely, where conservatives prevail, liberals will tack to the right. It also follows that liberals will be most strongly and consistently committed to a liberal social agenda in denominations where most of their colleagues are also liberals. And the same pattern, in reverse, will hold among conservatives.

In my two published reports of the 1962 findings I hypothesized that the strength of the relationship between pastors' theology and their position on controversial issues varies inversely with the proportion of their denominational colleagues who have opposing theological views. If this is true, then among pastors with denominational ties, denominations still matter, and these ties should moderate internal polarizing tendencies.

This moderating pattern was clearly evident in the 1987-1988 data. On none of the twenty items appearing on the polarization index were the greatest differences between liberals and conservatives found within a single denomination. In virtually every case the greatest differences were between theological liberals in the most liberal denomination and theological conservatives in the two most conservative denominations. The former body is the United Church of Christ and the latter are the Southern Baptists and Conservative Baptists. Among United Methodist, Presbyterian and American Baptist pastors the theological liberals were less liberal on almost any given issue than were their counterparts in the United Church of Christ, and the conservatives were less conservative than their counterparts among Southern and Conservative Baptists. And among liberals, Methodists tended to be more liberal on controversial issues than Presbyterians, who tended in turn to be more liberal than American Baptists. The same pattern, in reverse, showed up among theological conservatives. Finally, the highest proportion of "not sure" responses was concentrated in the most theologically heterogeneous denominations. What is more, this pattern also characterized the responses of pastors to the *theological* issues that have most severely divided liberals and conservatives. For example, United Church of Christ pastors who label themselves theological liberals tend to take more consistently liberal stands on specific theological questions than do liberal pastors affiliated with the United Methodist and Presbyterian Churches.

It now becomes clear why, in constructing the polarization index, I controlled for denomination. In virtually every instance, the highest degree of polarization was between pastors of the United Church of Christ and Conservative Baptist or Southern Baptist pastors. In other words, the greatest difference of opinion was between people who ordinarily have little interaction with one another. Pastors' views do seem to be influenced by the proportion of theological liberals and conservatives within their denomination. Table 2 illustrates this pattern by presenting responses to the item that asked pastors how they would react on discovering that a member of their congregation was involved in a stable gay or lesbian relationship.

Table 2

How Pastors Would React on Discovering that One of Their Members Was Involved in a Stable Gay or Lesbian Relationship (in percent, by theological position and denominational affiliation)

Denomination	No objection	Might approve	Disapprove	N
Theology		in principle	in some cases	

UCC				
Liberal	64	32	4	28
*Conservative				
UMC				
Liberal	51	37	12	98
Conservative	5	13	82	39
PCUSA				
Liberal	37	42	21	76
Conservative	2	10	88	51
ABC				
*Liberal				
Conservative	0	3	97	30
SBC				
*Liberal				
Conservative	0	0	100	84
CBA				
*Liberal				
Conservative	0	0	100	136

*This denomination contains too few pastors in this theological category to calculate percentages.

It is certainly true that since 1962, many theologically heterogeneous denominations have experienced heightened conflict on social issues between theological liberals and conservatives. It is also true that no major splits have yet resulted, and quite a few issues that have come to a head in national assemblies have been settled -- tentatively at least -- by artful compromises. A comparison of the 1987 and the 1962 Oregon clergy data also suggests that in mainline denominations threatened with polarization over social issues, many pastors have decided to place less emphasis on such issues in their sermons. In all four denominations for which comparisons can be made, pastors were less willing in 1987 than they were in 1962 to touch on social problems in sermons. The decline is especially pronounced among United Methodists and American Baptists, which are theologically heterogeneous denominations. A similar pattern emerges on the matter of whether sermons should propose specific solutions to social problems. If these findings can be generalized, then there is less preaching today about social issues within the theologically heterogeneous "mainline" denominations than there was three decades ago. This change may not fit the requirements of a prophetic faith, but it probably helps keep the peace.

COMMON GROUND

The 1987-1988 data suggest that yet a third factor may counteract polarizing tendencies among Protestant liberals and conservatives. This factor is the extensive heritage that both camps share. To use biological terms, these two species still share a great deal of DNA, a fact often obscured by the recent tendency to focus on the differences between them. When we examined the social issues the Oregon pastors most commonly dealt with in their

sermons during the preceding year, we found they had nothing to do with the issues that divide liberals and conservatives. Table 3 presents the eight issues on which more than half of all pastors have preached. Heading the list is world hunger, which 76 percent have touched on in a sermon. In second place is drug abuse, with 61 percent preaching on it. Among the other issues on which over 50 percent of all the pastors have preached are the homeless, alcoholism, and the needs of the elderly. Perhaps liberals and conservatives put different "spins" on these issues in their sermons, but the topics themselves are not part of the public controversies between liberals and conservatives, and it is these social concerns that church-goers are most likely to hear about on Sunday morning. Not only do liberal and conservative clergy have different agendas, they also have a common agenda to which they pay a great deal of attention.

The data contain other evidence of a shared agenda. The Oregon clergy is sharply divided on the issue of homosexuality, but no polarization of opinion was evident on the question of whether it is permissible for church members to be sexually active with a number of partners or to have an affair with someone else's spouse. On these matters the liberals tended to be a little more permissive than the conservatives, but on the whole both parties continue to uphold traditional norms that condemn promiscuity and promote marital fidelity.

The pastors are also divided on the issue of abortion, but only one of the three abortion items on our questionnaire produced a difference of opinion severe enough to qualify for inclusion on the index of polarization. This item concerned the legitimacy of abortion if the mother is unable to support the child. On the other hand, although virtually all the theological liberals strongly approve of abortion to save the mother's life, only a small fraction of theological conservatives can bring themselves to oppose it in any degree, e.g., only 19 percent of Conservative Baptists. Conversely, although conservatives are strongly opposed to abortion for any reason the mother might have, most theological liberals are reluctant to support abortion strongly in such cases -- e.g. only 18 percent of United Church of Christ pastors strongly favor abortion for any reason whatever. The liberals are uneasy about endorsing "choice" in all cases and the conservatives are uneasy about protecting the life of the fetus when the mother's life is at stake.

Table 3
Issues Preached on by More than Half of All Pastors During the Preceding Year

<u>Issues</u>	<u>Percent who preached on it</u>
World hunger	76
Drug abuse	61
Needs of the elderly	57
Alcoholism	57
Child abuse	56
Divorce	53
The homeless	53
Racial concerns	51

A SELECTIVE RESISTANCE

The interest theological liberals have in a wide array of social questions originated in the social gospel movement, which was already under way a hundred years ago. This movement was influential in the years just before World War I, floundered during the 1920s, grew once again during the Depression, and reemerged about 1960 with great vigor in the peace and justice mission of the "new breed" of clergy about whom Harvey Cox (1965) wrote so enthusiastically.⁴ This new mission has closely resembled the program of the left wing of the Democratic party. Liberal Protestant leaders have found it hard to mobilize a large lay following to support this mission, and the shrinking of their constituency over the past thirty years has made their job even harder. Today, it is the religious right, not the left, that is mobilized for social action.

The modern conservative movement in American Protestantism emerged as an opposition to the liberal turn. The liberals initiated something new, and the traditionalists organized to oppose it. Fundamentalism and neo-evangelicalism were not exact copies of classic nineteenth-century evangelicalism, but they have defined themselves as protectors of a heritage under attack, and their posture has been one of defending, opposing, and restoring.⁵

It is well known that the conservatives' most concerted opposition has been to liberal theological innovations concerning the historical accuracy of the Bible and the exclusive truth of Christianity. The fundamentalists lost their wars to turn back the liberal tide in two big denominations seventy years ago, but since that time religious conservatives have succeeded in holding the theological line very well in many denominations in which they predominate. They have been able to nip liberal, or crypto-liberal tendencies in the bud in the Missouri Lutheran Synod and the Southern Baptist Convention. And the 1987 Oregon clergy data show that since 1962 Southern Baptists and Conservative Baptists have hardly budged an inch in their theological views.

The current political mobilization of religious conservatives does not, however involve specifically theological issues; nor can it, given the nature of the U.S. Constitution. The mobilization focuses on issues of public policy perceived by conservatives as violating what I referred to in my 1967 article as "traditional commitments of their religious subculture" (Johnson, 1967:441). For the new Christian right, the chief enemies today are secular education and such "family values" issues as abortion, gender equality, and libertarian policies concerning sexuality.

It is notable, however, that the Christian right's list of current enemies does not include several other developments that have also violated its traditional commitments. One such violation concerns the manufacture and sale of beverage alcohol, a practice intimately linked with "family values" in the not so distant past. The longest and most concerted political campaign that American Protestants ever waged was for the enactment of legal prohibition at all levels of government. To this day, fundamentalist and evangelical churches use grape juice, not wine, in their communion service, and many liberal churches do so as well. The final defeat of national prohibition in 1933 was a humiliating blow to this religious culture. But despite Protestant conservatives' lingering opposition to the sale of alcoholic beverages, the national leaders of the Christian right have little or nothing to say about the subject. They do not propose to restore the grand tradition of prohibition.

Clearly, the Christian right is selective in what it chooses to resist. For one thing, it focuses on "new" threats and humiliations and not on old ones. Nineteen sixty-three, when the Supreme Court outlawed mandatory school prayer, is more recent than 1933, and *Roe v. Wade*, gay rights, R-rated movies, and the new wave of feminism are even more recent. But recency is only part of the story. Some other selective factor is also at work in determining which threats and to the traditional culture of old-line evangelicalism the new has chosen to take a stand on and which they have chosen not to.

For they have chosen not to take a stand on at least three major threats of the thirty years. The first threat is divorce. The 1987 clergy data show that centering around divorce figure prominently in preaching, but the new has not mounted a campaign to replace the new no-fault divorce with what old-line evangelicals referred to as "scriptural" divorce laws. Silence on divorce laws is especially puzzling in view of the new Christian strong defense of family values.

The second threat is legalized gambling. In 1962, legal public gambling was mainly to the state of Nevada. Today, only two states prohibit all gambling, most have state lotteries, and quite a few allow casinos. Yet opposition to gambling has long been part of the culture of American Protestantism. The pastors in the 1987 study are overwhelmingly opposed to lotteries. What is more, on this issue there are no differences whatsoever between theological liberals and conservatives. But despite some attempts to a liberal-conservative coalition to stop the spread of legal gambling, it is not an issue that has achieved much national attention and it does not figure prominently on the agenda of the new Christian fight.

The third issue is Sunday closing laws. Thanks to some peculiar features of Oregon's history, the issue had been settled there long before our 1962 clergy study, and so we did not ask pastors about it. But the issue was not settled elsewhere. Strict observance of the Sabbath and support for Sunday closing laws were major agenda items for many old-line evangelicals. The Supreme Court outlawed school prayer in the early 1960s, and evangelical leaders were able to mount a movement to restore it. But evangelical leaders have not mounted a movement to stem the steady tide that has led to the loosening or repeal of Sunday closing laws around the nation over the past thirty years.

Why do the leaders of the new Christian fight choose to fight some threats to their traditional culture and to ignore others? A major part of the answer lies, I think, in what these leaders believe their constituency will wholeheartedly support. That constituency is mainly white, well integrated into the major structures of workaday society, and moderately well off. It is not well insulated from the influences that have made Sabbath observance inconvenient or divorce a plausible option. It does, however, still maintain a certain distance from "the world," including the world of religious liberalism. In fact, as a religious community it has thrived for generations by maintaining a medium degree of tension with its surrounding culture.

When that culture changes rapidly, as it did beginning in the 1960s, holding the line against all threats would increase, rather than simply maintain, the level of tension, and hence increase the costs of group membership. It would be demoralizing to oppose none of these threats; it would be too costly to oppose all of them. Maintaining a medium degree of tension means that some threats have to be overlooked. In all probability, the changes that are overlooked are those that have already begun to affect the religious culture itself.

My study of Presbyterian General Assembly pronouncements convinced me that the decline in vigilance about Sabbath observance was a genuinely popular shift that was led by ordinary lay people. It was not something that a liberal leadership imposed on a reluctant constituency. The Oregon clergy study contains intriguing hints of similar shifts among the Baptists. In 1987, none of the Baptist pastors had been divorced since entering the ministry. But one-third of Conservative Baptists and almost three-fourths of Southern Baptists reported that divorces had occurred in their immediate families. What is more, this Southern Baptist figure was the largest by far of any of the six denominations. Most of these Baptist pastors come from Baptist backgrounds, so we may assume that in the main these are Baptist divorces.

We have clear evidence of the relaxation of other old standards. In 1962, over 80 percent of all the Oregon Baptist pastors had preached against drinking during the preceding year. The figure for Southern Baptists was 100 percent. In 1987, those figures had fallen precipitously. The figure for Conservative Baptists was 24 percent, and for American Baptists 8 percent. In 1962, even Methodist liberals had not abandoned their denomination's historic opposition to alcohol. In that year, 75 percent of Oregon's Methodist pastors had preached against drinking and 73 percent had preached against the sale of alcoholic beverages. By 1987, however, their successors had given up the fight. Only 9 percent preached against the sale of these beverages and only 4 percent preached against their use. The fact that the issue of selling alcohol appears on the 1987 index of polarization does not mean that it is hotly contested. Both liberals and conservatives consider the matter less important than their predecessors did. The issue is "polarizing" only because many liberals are now willing to approve the sale of alcohol whereas conservatives cannot yet bring themselves to do so. Given the long-term trend, in another twenty-five years their successors will probably have no objection to taverns and liquor stores, just as Oregon's Southern Baptist pastors no longer object to dancing. In 1962, 92 percent of them had preached against it, but by 1987 the figure had fallen to 13 percent. The data show a similar decline of preaching against card playing.

Despite their militancy on gay rights and abortion and their traditionalism on matters of doctrine, many evangelicals have been quietly accommodating themselves to the cultural changes around them. James Hunter (1983, 1987) documented such a process several years ago. Moreover, all over the evangelical world pastors are facing increasing public resistance to traditional denominational names, including such terms as Wesleyan, Church of God, and even Baptist. To an increasing number of people, these old terms seem hidebound and exclusive. A highly placed official of the Conservative Baptist Association of Oregon told me in 1987 that some of the younger pastors sense that the very term Conservative is a turn-off, and they want to replace it. Mark Shibley's new book, *Resurgent Evangelicalism* (1996) demonstrates the difficulty that strict, southern-style boundary-drawing churches in southern California are having attracting younger people, who prefer the much more relaxed and culturally affirming atmosphere of a new brand of evangelicalism represented by such groups as Calvary Chapel and the Vineyard Fellowship. As the culture changes, the conditions for church stability and church growth change. Old standards crumble and old issues fade away.

CONCLUSION

Over the past two decades there has been a decided swing to the right in the United States on issues of taxation, welfare, and "big government." On issues for which the religious right has agitated, however, the swing is not so clear-cut. To be sure, capital punishment has returned in many states, including Oregon, and our 1987 clergy data show that both liberals

and conservatives were more inclined to favor it than their predecessors had been in 1962. The gay rights issue is far from settled and will remain controversial for years to come. Although evangelicals and their Roman Catholic allies played a key role in defeating the Equal Rights Amendment, no serious attempt has been mounted to repeal those sections of the Civil Rights acts of the 1960s that in effect mandate much of what that amendment would have achieved. The constitutional amendment on abortion is stalled and will probably remain stalled indefinitely, and the same is true of school prayer. Politicized evangelicals have helped strengthen the Republican party, especially in the South, but so far the pay-off for this support been bountiful.

If I am still alive in 2012 I will be 84 years old and perhaps still vigorous enough to do a fifty-year follow-up study of the Oregon clergy. What would I expect to find? Although long-term predictions can be notoriously imprecise, a few well grounded guesses can be made. Since basic value orientations change only slowly, it seems safe to predict that by 2012 the great bulk of evangelical pastors will continue to be theologically and politically conservative and that United Methodist and United Church of Christ pastors will still be to the left of them politically. On the other hand, given the long-term process of accommodation to cultural change, it also seems safe to predict that at least some of the controversial issues that evangelicals care so much about today will have faded in importance by 2012. Will Baptists still oppose abortion but no longer preach on it? Will divorce have invaded the ranks of the Baptist clergy? And what new threats, hardly imagined today, will have come along to displace the old, dead issues of 1987?

NOTES

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1. In view of the fact that the population of Oregon is overwhelmingly white, it is not surprising that virtually all the pastors in the survey are also white. Because the contention between theological liberals and conservatives in the United States has historically been confined almost entirely to preponderantly white denominations, the lack of racial diversity among our respondents has no adverse implications for the generalizability of our findings.

2. The new Christian right has been thoroughly investigated by scholars and journalists. Among the many scholarly books on the subject are Jorstad (1988), Liebman and Wuthnow (1983), Liensch (1993), and Martin (1996).

3. The index of polarization was constructed by adding the maximum percentage difference between liberals' and conservatives' responses on both extreme categories of each controversial issue, using a control for denomination. As we shall see below, for virtually every item the maximum difference was between theologically liberal pastors of the United Church of Christ and theologically conservative Southern Baptist or Conservative Baptist pastors. I arbitrarily set a 40 percent difference on each extreme response as the minimum to qualify for inclusion on the index. Consequently, the lowest possible index score was 80 (40%+40%) and the highest was 200 (100%+100%). Because the number of response categories per item varied between three and five, in calculating the index scores it was necessary in many cases to reduce the number to three by merging response

categories. Happily, it was possible to produce a meaningful reduction in the case of four category items by merging the "yes" category with the category labeled yes, with reservations."

4. The social gospel movement and the modifications of its character introduced by Reinhold Niebuhr and his associates have been extensively studied, e.g., by Hopkins (1939), May (1949), Meyer (1960), and Miller (1958). A good history has yet to be written of the social agenda of liberal Protestants in the period since 1960, though many works advocating this agenda have appeared, among them Cox's *The Secular City* (1965). An excellent recent study of the efforts of liberal Christians to overturn President Reagan's Central American policy is Christian Smith's *Resisting Reagan* (1996).

5. There is a large and growing scholarly literature on the fundamentalist and neo-evangelical movements. See, for example, Ammerman (1991), Barr (1978), Carpenter (1997), Marsden (1980), Sandeen (1968), and Stone (1997).

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