

THE REAL ORIGINS OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

Randall Balmer is a Dartmouth professor who maintains that the origins of the conservative evangelical-Catholic alliance, or what he prefers to call “the religious right,” are rooted in racism. A liberal evangelical himself, he has written about this story many times, and recounts it again in his new book, *Bad Faith: Race and the Rise of the Religious Right*. But is he right?

Balmer is certainly right to say that abortion was not the real reason why conservative evangelicals and Catholics initially came together. When *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion in 1973, Catholics stood alone in opposing it. Unfortunately, this was at a time when Protestants, and Jews as well, reflexively took the opposite side on many moral issues that Catholics took.

It wasn't until the late 1970s that evangelicals pivoted and joined the fight for the unborn. Ever since, the two sides have worked together, owing much to the work of Chuck Colson and Father Richard John Neuhaus; both deceased, they cemented the evangelical-Catholic alliance.

Balmer recalls a meeting in November 1990 in Washington marking the ten-year anniversary of Ronald Reagan's election. He said he was surprised to be invited to this closed-door meeting given that it was populated by many influential conservative leaders. Also in attendance was Paul Weyrich, who co-founded the Heritage Foundation.

Weyrich observed that it was not abortion that initially drew the two religious strands together: the political movement began with a controversy involving Bob Jones University's racist strictures, including a ban on interracial dating.

To make his case, Balmer says that a federal court decision in 1971 affirming the right of the IRS to deny a tax-exempt status to racially discriminatory private schools was seized upon by Weyrich to forge a union between evangelicals and Catholics. He therefore argues that the alliance was anchored in racism.

To be sure, it was the racist policies of Bob Jones (which was also well known for its anti-Catholicism) that galvanized the IRS. But it is a leap to conclude that it was racism that prompted Weyrich and his evangelical friends to join forces. A stronger case can be made that it was federal encroachment on religious schools that drove the movement, even if we allow that some evangelicals were racists. Indeed, it was federal overreach that *primarily* galvanized these two religious communities.

Balmer is correct to say that Weyrich had long been looking for an issue that would inspire a coalition, but he is unfair when he concludes that Weyrich and Jerry Falwell “sought to shift the grounds of the debate [away from racial segregation], framing their opposition in terms of religious freedom rather than in defense of racial segregation.”

Weyrich and Falwell worked together not because they were segregationists, but because they wanted to mobilize the “moral majority.” That term was coined by Weyrich, and it became a movement, ably led by Falwell. Their interest was cultural decay, not racial issues. Weyrich was always looking for a more macro subject, one that transcended the contentious moral issues of the day. Indeed, even Balmer acknowledges this verity.

Balmer quotes conservative activist Grover Norquist as saying, correctly, that the religious right did not start with prayer in the school or abortion. “It started in ’77 or ’78 with the Carter administration’s attack on Christian schools and radio stations. That’s where all the organization flowed out of. It

was complete self-defense.” He is correct again: it wasn’t racism that propelled the alliance; rather, it was the federal attack on the autonomy of Christian schools.

In a similar vein, Balmer quotes Weyrich’s very astute observation noting that when “the Internal Revenue Service tried to deny tax exemption to private schools, [that] more than any single act brought the fundamentalists and evangelicals into the political process.” Again, there is no mention of the race issue. It was never the predominant reason for mobilization.

Here’s more proof of Weyrich’s primary concern (again Balmer acknowledges in his book). “What caused the movement to surface was the federal government’s moves against Christian schools. This absolutely shattered the Christian community’s notions that Christians could isolate themselves inside their own institutions and teach what they pleased.”

Balmer also quotes what then presidential-candidate Ronald Reagan had to say about this matter. He told a big crowd of evangelicals in August 1980 that he stood with them in their fight against the “unconstitutional regulatory agenda” of the IRS “against independent schools.” Weyrich was at the event. “We gave him a ten-minute standing ovation. The whole movement was snowballing by then.” Their applause had nothing to do with celebrations of racism.

It should also be said that prominent conservatives opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act not because they were racists, but because of what they saw as an unconstitutional power grab by the federal government and a disrespect for states’ rights.

Why does any of this matter? It matters because it is unjust to maintain that the religious right was born of racism. No, it was born out of a genuine concern for the autonomy of Christian schools, and an animus against federal encroachment on them.