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Divided They Fall? Hairline Cracks in the Christian Right

BY ROB BOSTON

On March 24, 1997, Christian Coalition Executive Director Ralph Reed stood before a bank of microphones in a crowded room in the US Capitol and announced his organization's support for a new school prayer amendment. Known euphemistically as the "Religious Freedom Amendment," the measure was introduced by US Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Okla.) and was enthusiastically endorsed by Speaker Newt Gingrich. Flanking Reed and Istook were leaders from the nation's top Christian Right groups. In his prepared remarks, Reed promised to spend \$1 to \$2 million in Coalition funds on a grassroots campaign, which would work in tandem with a massive lobbying effort designed to win passage for the amendment.

Observers could be forgiven for a sense of *deja vu*. Nearly two years earlier, Reed had appeared in another room in the Capitol and said much the same thing. At that event, on May 17, 1995, Reed unveiled the Christian Coalition's legislative agenda for the 104th Congress. Within that legislative package, Reed referred to the "Religious Equality Amendment," worded almost identically to the Istook proposal, as the "crown jewel."

Why was Reed being forced to re-

peat himself? Primarily because his 1995 amendment had gone absolutely nowhere in the 104th Congress, after a deadlock—sparked by a disagreement over how the amendment should be worded—among assorted Christian Right factions. Two additional versions were tossed into the congressional hopper, further fracturing the process and ensuring that none would pass. While there was plenty of fulminating from Christian Right leaders and an occasional press conference, no amendment saw so much as a committee vote in 1995 or 1996. Progressive groups supporting separation of church and state had geared up for a battle that never came.

In 1997 the Christian Right claims to have resolved its differences and insists that only one "Religious Freedom Amendment" will be introduced. However, that 1997 amendment has already been rewritten three times to placate various Christian Right factions, and the discontent some groups felt in 1995 still simmers.

This squabbling over a school prayer amendment brings to light a useful truth about the Christian Right: the movement is not a monolith. Although many Americans tend to lump ultra-conservative religious/political movements together and assume they all agree on policy and tactics, in fact there are important differences between

groups and factions. Leaders of the various organizations clash sharply on strategy, message and, most important, the movement's relationship to the Republican Party.

At the risk of oversimplifying, it's safe to say that the Christian Right as a political movement has fractured into two camps. One is a hardline faction that will not compromise on the "culture war" issues it champions. This faction demands submission, maintaining that any deviance from its agenda on the part of the Republican Party amounts to heresy. For example, earlier this year an executive of Focus on the Family, a massive right-wing Christian organization based in Colorado Springs, Colorado, led a band of followers in taking over Colorado's El Paso County Republican Party. Their first act was to announce that they had signed pledges to support only candidates who oppose legal abortion and gay rights and to back a "parental rights" constitutional amendment.

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From the Deputy Director

Progressives have had little to cheer about since the Right converted two decades of movement-building into the fruits of national power in the November, 1994 elections. We've watched conservatives demolish social programs that took years of tenacious organizing and advocacy to win. We see cruelty pose as virtue in the virulent campaigns of scapegoating against welfare recipients, gays and lesbians, people of color, and other vulnerable groups; campaigns that artfully camouflage a massive transfer of wealth to the already wealthy.

And we've witnessed, with a mixture of incredulity, anger and grudging respect, the awesome effectiveness of the Right's propaganda machine. It's one thing to propose, without apology, a welfare "reform" program that will condemn 1.1 million more children to poverty; but selling it successfully to the public is a measure, not only of how much the Right has come to dictate the terms of public debate, but how it has depersonalized the consequences of its programs and disengaged so many people from their basic humanitarian instincts. (For an analysis of how the Right crafted a public consensus against welfare, see *The Public Eye*, Fall, 1996).

The political landscape appears unremittingly bleak. As progressives, we do our best with rearguard actions, we console ourselves with small victories, and we struggle to piece together an understanding of what went wrong—and what we need to do differently when new political space and opportunity open up.

The onus is on us to make it all happen. Still, it's comforting to know that we're not the only ones with a little local difficulty. In this issue of *The Public Eye*, Rob Boston describes the increasing signs of internal strain within the Christian Coalition, which has provided much of the Right's electoral muscle in recent years. Boston reviews some of the long-simmering conflicts and contradictions that characterize the Coalition, especially in its relationship to the Republican party, and how the movement has essentially split into two competing factions—one hardline, the other more pragmatic.

It's tempting to make too much of this, and Rob Boston rightly cautions us against wishful thinking. The fact is that the complex amalgam of social and political movements that make up the Right as a whole, including the Christian Right, is firmly entrenched. Cracks there may be, but the walls are thick, and the foundation is deep and solid—as befits an edifice that was constructed, stone by stone, over two decades. It will take a lot more than a few family feuds to inflict any serious damage.

Moreover, the squabbles and schisms on the Right won't do our work for us. What will ultimately turn the tide—and reclaim public support for fairness and justice as instinctive cultural norms—is good old-fashioned organizing. There is no substitute, as the Right has clearly demonstrated. From our research perch at PRA, we do all we can to support those on the frontlines, helping ensure that organizing strategies and tactics are grounded in a thorough understanding of the opposition. Shortly, we will begin making available our newest resource: the Activist Resource Kit. This packet of materials combines background information on the Right with practical organizing tips and resource guides. The design will allow us to customize each kit with modules on any one of 11 different topics—from welfare rights to the environment to affirmative action to labor—depending on the interest of the person requesting it. The basic kit and the first topical module, on public education, are all but complete. And we'll be producing the other modules on a staggered basis through next Spring.

In concluding his article, Rob Boston identifies apathy as progressives' biggest enemy. Apathy, he says, allows right-wingers to win elections, stay in power, and pursue their oppressive social vision. Whether or not that's true, it requires more than motivation to challenge the Right effectively. It requires appropriate strategies and accessible resources. PRA is helping to provide both. And we hope that the Activist Resource Kit will play a role in empowering activists with the information and ideas they need.

— Peter Snoad

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The second faction is somewhat more moderate and politically pragmatic, willing to make short-term concessions on the social issues in the interest of advancing a longer term agenda and maintaining peace within the GOP. This faction might consider, for example, backing a candidate who favored limited abortion rights if that candidate agreed with the Christian Right on other issues.

No individual more neatly encapsulates this division within the Christian Right than Ralph Reed, the youthful, charismatic executive director of the Christian Coalition, who has announced his resignation, effective September 1, 1997. Reed is often characterized by mainstream media reporters as representative of a new and politically sophisticated Christian Right. Well spoken and blessed with a disarming ability to sound moderate, Reed has spent eight years urging the Christian Right to become a more mature political movement that acknowledges the limitations and realities of the political system in the 1990s. In his new position as a freelance political consultant and perhaps an at-large pundit, he likely will maintain the same line—but he'll be free of the constraint of his boss, the Christian Coalition's founder and president, Pat Robertson.

Reed's job was not an easy one, and he became a controversial figure within the Christian Right for his efforts. He was often forced to walk a rhetorical tightrope. As a public figure who dispensed statements for general consumption through the mass media, Reed had to sound reasonable and non-threatening. However, when addressing the "true believers" that compose much of the Coalition's membership, he freely expressed the "take-no-prisoners" attitudes that movement purists demand. Further, Reed was encumbered by the decades-long rantings of Robertson, whose zealotry on numerous issues is well documented and highly visible in his role as TV preacher. While Reed may have succeeded in pasting a more moderate mask onto the Christian Right—and many analysts believe he has—it often seemed to be crooked and in danger of

slipping off.

For his efforts, Reed was often attacked by other Christian Right leaders who viewed his willingness to compromise, whether genuine or just politically expedient, as a weakness they could exploit in building their own competing empires. Gary Bauer, a former Reagan-era Education Department official and a protege of radio counselor Dr. James Dobson, runs the DC-based Family Research Council, the public policy/lobbying arm of Dobson's Focus on the Family. (FRC, once an integral part of FOF's operation, was spun off as a separate agency in October of 1992 to avoid jeopardizing FOF's tax-exempt status, but Dobson still sits on the FRC board and he has stated that the two organizations are "legally separate but spiritually one.") Bauer now seems eager to stake out a position to the right of Reed, perhaps hoping to pick up Coalition members unhappy with CC's somewhat moderate direction under Reed's leadership. Already in Washington there has been speculation that the Christian Coalition's power has peaked. Perhaps this is wishful thinking, but even if not, that does not mean the Christian Right as a political force will fade away. Far more likely, a leader like Bauer will pick up the reins.

To what extent this intra-Christian

Right tension hastened Reed's departure from the Christian Coalition remains a mystery. There has been some speculation in Washington among inside-the-beltway pundits who follow politics, that Reed was forced out by Robertson, who may want his Christian Coalition to promote a harder political edge. Others believe Reed simply grew weary of working for a loose cannon like Robertson and wants to make substantially more money as a political consultant.

The real story of Reed's departure may never be known. But his unexpected resignation has only served to fuel speculation about which path the Christian Right will take as we approach the millennium, a moment of enormous significance for the Christian Right. A clear dichotomy between the movement's two sectors emerged during the 1996 presidential campaign. That dichotomy has yet to fully play out, and Reed's absence from the Coalition adds an additional wild card to an already volatile situation.

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT AND THE REPUBLICAN PARTY

In 1996 Bauer, Dobson and other Christian Right figures, including anti-feminist crusader Phyllis Schlafly of the Eagle Forum, were clearly unhappy with Republican presi-



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dential candidate Robert Dole's strategy of keeping the Christian Right at arm's length. Dole's reluctance to speak forcefully against abortion or to promote anti-homosexual initiatives and school prayer amendments on the campaign trail infuriated the Christian Right's more doctrinaire sector. But what made them even angrier was that Reed repeatedly gave Dole cover. They saw Reed as an interloper, willing to give Dole a pass on the social/cultural issues in the interests of the pragmatic goal of electing a Republican president. In other words, Reed was seen by this sector as a "sell-out."

Reed's backing for Dole reflected his assessment that the candidate backed by Christian Coalition members—firebrand commentator Pat Buchanan—was unelectable. Exit polls in early primary states confirmed that many Christian Coalition members were backing Buchanan's upstart candidacy. In South Carolina's Republican primary, Coalition members flirted with open rebellion against CC's support for Dole, and only personal intervention by Reed brought enough votes back into the Dole column to assure his defeat of Buchanan. Some analysts believe that if Buchanan had triumphed in South Carolina, Dole's candidacy would have been too wounded to continue.

In addition to flacking for Dole, Reed tried, without much success, to diffuse the GOP's long-simmering abortion wars. In his 1996 book, *Active Faith*, Reed went so far as to recommend that the Republican Party consider altering its strict anti-abortion platform plank, asserting that a constitutional amendment banning abortion was unlikely to pass, and warning conservative Christian activists of the dangers of "spiritual arrogance." The passage was excerpted in *Newsweek*, giving it wide circulation.

Reed's proposal drew the immediate ire of the right-wing hardliners. Bay Buchanan, sister of Pat Buchanan, fired off a stinging rebuke. Reed, she said, was "sending up the white flag of surrender." Ms. Buchanan added, "There is no question that he no longer represents those of us who feel very strongly

about family values and life and the importance of the Republican platform. I would say he is not the leader he was two weeks ago."² Judie Brown of the stridently anti-abortion American Life League was equally harsh, saying Reed had "taken the child in the womb and that baby has become a political football to him, and that is sad."³

Under such intense fire, Reed quickly fell back on his time-tested strategy for fending off criticism: furious back-pedaling and dissembling. Claiming he had only intended to spark a dialogue over the issue, Reed issued a statement insisting that the Christian Coalition opposes abortion in every case except when the mother's life is in

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danger, would oppose exceptions even in the case of rape or incest, and would work to keep that plank in the GOP platform. But Christian Right hardliners remembered the incident. In October, 1996, with Dole's defeat increasingly apparent, Schlafly was livid. She told the ultra-conservative *Washington Times* newspaper, "Dole owes his nomination to the Christian Coalition. We can't let them off the hook."⁴

Although Reed talked tough to the faithful at Coalition rallies, in reality he is astute enough to realize the need for compromise in politics. He would rather win elections and advance the Christian Right's agenda piece by piece, one congressional district at a time, than undermine that long-term goal with short-term political purity. In interviews with the secular press, Reed frequently asserted that the Christian Right must learn to accept the fact that it will not always have veto power within the GOP. He drew an analogy with

labor unions and "radical feminists," two groups he said damaged the Democratic Party in the 1970s by making unreasonable demands. The Christian Coalition, he insisted, must not repeat that mistake. To that end, he was more than willing to support candidates like George Bush and Robert Dole who, though they often voted the Christian Right's way, were not "true believers" on an issue like abortion.

Dobson, Bauer, Schlafly, the Buchanans, and many of the lesser lights in the Christian Right take the opposite view. They will gladly stand on principle and go down to defeat if that's what it takes to "defend the unborn" or stand up to "the homosexual agenda." By contrast, to Reed the Dobson-Bauer-Buchanan-Schlafly formula is a recipe for political marginalization. While Reed labored to project an image of the Christian Coalition that is far removed from the shrill tones of earlier Christian Right groups, such as the Rev. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, Dobson, Bauer, Schlafly and certainly the Buchanans are less concerned about whom they offend, as long as they speak what they believe to be "God's word."

In his book *Active Faith*, for example, Reed condemns attacks on gay people. There are reasons to doubt the sincerity of this politically pragmatic declaration; the Christian Coalition continues to advertise and sell a book called *Legislating Immorality*, which suggests that homosexual behavior should merit the death penalty. But the fact that Reed chose to say it at all is interesting because there was a time, not long ago, when no Christian Right leader would have dared to make such a statement. Attacks on gays and lesbians have been a standard Christian Right tactic for decades as well as a lucrative fundraising theme. Many Christian Right groups have felt, and still feel, no need to apologize for their anti-homosexual agenda. Reed has promoted at least the appearance of a group that is kinder and gentler. The Christian Coalition's recent announcement that it will emphasize programs for the poor and needy—its so-called "Samaritan Project"—similarly under-

scored Reed's desire for a less harsh public image for the Coalition. Again, legitimate concerns have been raised about the sincerity of the project, and it has been criticized as a vacuous political stunt. But there is no doubt that the Coalition intends to pour substantial funds into it, even though as a fund-raising tool, the project appears to be a non-starter. It seems unlikely that large numbers of Christian Coalition members will be moved to send checks for a project that seeks to induct African Americans or poor inner-city residents into right-wing politics.

The Christian Coalition may or may not be sincere in these efforts, but by publicly stressing them, Reed has run a real risk. If the group's own members and supporters start believing that a much-discussed new direction is real, they may well lose interest because they long for the good old days of uncompromising right-wing rhetoric, and begin casting around for a new organization.

There is no shortage of potential new homes for disaffected CC members. Dozens of Christian Right groups proliferate in Washington and around the country. Many are small and may exist more as letterhead groups than actual organizations. But others are up and coming and may soon present a real challenge to the Christian Coalition's dominance and its brand of politics.

One prominent candidate is the Family Research Council, which has seen tremendous growth in recent years. Now headquartered inside a new six-story building in the heart of Washington—a structure paid for with money from the Prince Foundation and the Richard and Helen DeVos Foundation—the FRC continues to snap at the Christian Coalition's heels.

During the 1996 election season, the FRC staked out a position to the right of the Christian Coalition. When then-GOP chairman Haley Barbour made noises about the party being a "big tent" that welcomes pro-choice people, Bauer threatened to bolt the Republican Party for a third party, stating that "None of us is calling for a third party, but we are stating a fact: No

group of voters continues to give their loyalty to a party that refuses to fight for it." Reacting to a claim from a party activist that the Republicans would soon be "operationally pro-choice," Bauer said, "then it's inevitable, it doesn't matter what I say or any other pro-family leader says, that there will be a third party. We couldn't stop pro-family voters from finding a genuine leader."⁵ Bauer's mentor, James Dobson, who has made the same threat, was actively courted by Howard Phillips' reactionary US Taxpayers Party.

After the election, Bauer was more explicit. Speaking to an audience at the Heritage Foundation on November 20, he warned, "Catch on now, GOP, or suffer the consequences." He added that if the Republican Party moved toward a pro-choice position "it will be inevitable" that religious conservatives would form a third party. He added, however, "That will be a disaster for all of us."⁶

Such talk may be mere saber rattling, but it is the type of rhetoric that Reed, a party loyalist, would never dream of uttering. Reed's infrequent criticisms of the GOP have been tepid. He did criticize the Republican "leadership" last March during an appearance before the Conservative Political Action Committee in Washington, but when reporters wrote the next day that Reed had lashed out at Gingrich, Reed was quick to write to the Speaker to assure him that he hadn't really meant it.

Reed's dissembling has alienated the certain sector of the Christian Right that increasingly embraces a "take-no-prisoners" attitude. The announcement in June that Randy Tate, a hard right, one-term GOP congressman from Washington state, would replace Reed indicates that Robertson is interested in winning these people back. Tate, who scored a 100 percent approval rating from the Coalition during his term in Congress, is, like Reed, a young political operative who knows how to play hardball. During his first race for a seat in the Washington legislature in 1988, Tate, then only 22, was accused of distributing a scurrilous flier accusing his Democratic opponent of being a child

molester.

Tate's selection was hailed by a host of Christian Right leaders, including Schlafly, who called him "an excellent choice, a staunch conservative on everything." (At the same time Tate was hired, Robertson announced that Donald Hodel, who served as secretary of energy and interior under President Ronald Reagan, will become the new president of the Christian Coalition. Robertson, formerly president, will become chairman of the board of directors. Hodel will apparently oversee the Coalition's day-to-day operations while Tate focuses on grassroots organizing.)

Christian Right activists so disenchanted with the Christian Coalition that they cannot be swayed even by new leadership will have little difficulty finding a new home. At the margins of the Christian Right are individuals who hold views so far to the right, they consider even the Family Research Council and Focus on the Family too liberal.

Reed avoided language implying that the United States should be an officially "Christian nation." In his public speeches and during media interviews, Reed used the phrases "people of faith" and "Judeo-Christian." He pointed with pride to the handful of Jews who work with and support the Christian Coalition. But the longing for an officially "Christian America" remains a key Christian Right goal at the grassroots level. The idea that the law should afford some sort of special status to Christianity—Christianity as the ultra-conservative sector of the Christian Right defines it, of course—is becoming more commonplace. Increasingly these activists are turning away from groups like the Christian Coalition and rallying under the banner of dominionism and Christian Reconstructionism.

THE RECONSTRUCTIONIST CONNECTION

At first glance, Christian Reconstructionism seems bizarre, almost cartoonish. It posits a society based on the harsh legal code of the Old Testament. In a "reconstructed" society, the church would not so much

run the government as it would use it as an instrument to ensure a "godly" society. Blasphemy, worshipping "false gods," apostasy, "witchcraft," abortion, homosexuality and failure to respect one's parents would be capital crimes. (Some Reconstructionists go so far as to advocate death by stoning.) The American legal system would reflect "biblical law." There would be no separation of church and state. Reconstructionists consider tolerance of other religions and pluralism as a betrayal of the Savior, rather than as appropriate goals for a mature democratic society.⁷

As recently as 10 years ago, Christian Reconstructionism was considered a marginal philosophy, relegated to the Christian Right's farthest fringe. Even today it has not been fully embraced by many Christian Right leaders, but its influence on current Christian Right thinking is undeniable.

Gary DeMar, a prominent Reconstructionist who runs American Vision in Atlanta, has hosted TV preacher D. James Kennedy. Kennedy, who has aspirations to become as powerful and well known as Pat Robertson, is currently working to organize followers at the grassroots to affect state and local governmental policies. Kennedy calls the separation of church and state a "myth," believes that Humanists and Pagans are now running things, and has stated that America was founded to be a "Christian nation."⁸

Pat Robertson himself has flirted with Reconstructionist ideas, though he ardently denies being a Reconstructionist. Still, several Reconstructionists found their way onto the staff of Robertson's law school at Regent University. One of them was Herb Titus, dean of Regent's law school until Robertson fired him in 1993.

During his tenure as Christian Coalition executive director, Reed stated publicly that the organization opposes the idea of an officially "Christian" America; Reed would never implement the brutal ideas of the Reconstructionists. He even insisted that the Coalition supports the separation of church and state. During one Washington address in 1995, Reed went so far as to say that separation should be "complete and inviolable."

But it is undeniable that the Coalition harbors individuals who seem to be influenced by Reconstructionist thought.

Apparently, one of them is Jay Rogers, a member of the board of directors of the Brevard County, Florida CC affiliate. Rogers has posted a series of articles clearly influenced by Reconstructionism on a Brevard County CC website. In one of them, titled "Is It Possible to Build a Christian Nation?" Rogers argues that establishment of a "Christian Republic" be the goal of the Christian Right. Establishing such a society, Rogers says, "only requires some standard of orthodoxy to be held by the majority of its citizens: a common creed

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or confession based on the bare minimum standard for what it means to be Christian." Rogers asserts that "Reformed Protestants, Baptists, Pentecostals, Charismatics, Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholics" can agree on this orthodoxy "and the standard of Biblical Law for ruling a society." This, of course, begs the question of the fate of everyone else.⁹

Rogers is quite enamored with Zambia, a nation that he says "is run by Christians and has a Constitution which recognizes Biblical Law as the basis for government and Jesus Christ as Lord." For a taste of life in this "Christian" paradise, consider that in Zambia books deemed "obscene" have been destroyed in public book burnings, and doctors who perform abortions in defiance of the law have been beaten in the streets. The country's public school system is saturated with fundamentalist Christian dogma. Interestingly, Pat Robertson is also fond of Zambia and has interviewed the country's President,

Frederick Chiluba, on his TV program, "The 700 Club." After one appearance, Robertson beamed, "Wouldn't you love to have a man like that as president of the United States!" The leading Reconstructionist journal, *The Chalcedon Report*, has run articles lauding the "reconstructed Zambia."

In e-mail correspondence with a member of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Rogers admitted that under the Old Testament legal code, homosexual acts would merit the death penalty. But, he added, it "would have to be proven." According to the code, "proof" is reminiscent of that required during the Salem witch trials: accusations by three "witnesses." Incidentally, Rogers says Puritan Massachusetts gets a bad rap and that the Salem witch trials have been unfairly portrayed. But Rogers is not the only example of a Christian Coalition grassroots zealot. Newsletters of local CC units are often full of ugly gay bashing and unsubstantiated charges against Bill and Hillary Clinton, reproduced straight from mills of conspiracist theories circulating within the Religious and secular Right.

Two years ago the Christian Coalition affiliate in Rensselaer County, NY printed an article in its newsletter, *Capital Christian News*, asserting that a United Nations takeover of the US government was imminent. Supposedly, international troops, composed primarily of Russians, were due to occupy the country and subdue the population. All Americans would be forced to carry a national identity card, and dissenters would be shipped off to converted military bases for detention. This type of "hate the federal government" rhetoric is by no means limited to the Christian Coalition. In November, 1996 *First Things*, which poses as a sort of Christian Right magazine for the thinking person, published the proceeds of a symposium during which several participants strongly indicated that the federal government may no longer be legitimate because "activist judges" have supposedly usurped the Constitution. Symposium participants repeatedly referred to the US government as "the regime."¹⁰ That this type of "militia lite" posturing appeared in what is alleged to be a jour-

nal of ideas underscores how far to the right the political spectrum has shifted. What once was marginal now is often mainstream. Though Reed has disavowed these tactics and the florid rhetoric of the far right's conspiracist demagogues, ugly articles and examples of intolerance keep popping up in local Coalition chapters. It is easy to conclude that, as leader of the troops of the Christian Coalition, Reed was often out of step with his army, and that fact alone may have hastened his departure.

WHAT DIVISIONS MEAN

It is clear that, as we approach the 21st century, the Christian Right is not a monolith. Divisions within it are not limited to clashes between organizations and cannot be written off as mere institutional rivalries. Sharp distinctions appear *within* many groups, including the largest group, the Christian Coalition. The movement is riddled with competing factions and leaders jockeying for power. Nowhere is this more clear than when political pragmatists compete with hardliners. Political pragmatists are GOP loyalists who speak of "big tents." Hardliners plot takeovers.

What sort of opportunities do these divisions present to the progressive community? For starters, the fact that more zealous and authoritarian theorists within the Christian Right appear to be gaining dominance is, ironically, cause for some optimism. Many people in the US may be conservative, but they are not, for the most part, reactionary. When Christian Right leaders talk about impeaching judges whose only crime is handing down decisions that television preachers don't like, or assert—as Robertson once did—that feminism encourages women to "kill their children, practice witchcraft and become lesbians,"¹¹ they marginalize themselves.

Progressives can and should seize on each instance of Christian Right excess. On some issues, notably abortion and gay rights, Christian Right groups have been able to win some measure of public support by concealing their ultimate agenda and pushing emotional hot buttons. It's time for progressives to turn the tables.

Witness the recent controversy over banning the type of late-term abortions that right wing opponents call "partial birth abortions." Because the procedure, as described by the Christian Right, is so grisly, many people who favor keeping abortion legal have agreed with the Christian Right that this particular procedure should be banned. But this is an example of a classic bait-and-switch maneuver. Every major Christian Right group, including the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family and Concerned Women for America, advocates nearly a *complete* ban on abortion. According to their agenda, abortion would not be legal in cases of rape, incest or fetal deformity (although Reed claimed the Coalition supports a "threat to the mother's life" exception). Banning late-term abortion and its specific procedure was seen by the Christian Right as a step in this direction.

Yet, for the most part, no one challenged Christian Right groups on their opposition to all abortions during the protracted debate. Instead, supporters of abortion rights tried to defend late-term abortions. As a result, Christian Right groups controlled the debate and determined its direction.

Progressives failed to flip the equation and direct public attention to the Christian Right's opposition to any form of abortion. Christian Right activists desperately want to avoid exposing the punitive views of many of their members—the belief, for instance, that doctors who perform abortions should be imprisoned or perhaps executed. (Pushing the envelope as always, Christian Reconstructionists would go ahead and have the woman executed as well.) Public opinion polls show that only about 10 or 11 percent of the people in the US agree with the hardline Christian Right view that nearly all abortions should be banned. The vast majority of people are very uncomfortable with the notion of jailing doctors or women who seek abortions.

Progressives must persistently challenge Christian Right activists over the issue of abortion rights. Otherwise, these activists will continue to divert public attention away from their real agenda—outlawing all abortions—

with stories of late-term abortions. Similarly, in its campaign against gay rights, the Christian Right gets away with far too much. By constantly talking about their opposition to "special rights" for homosexuals, Christian Right activists have clouded the movement's real agenda: denial of basic civil rights to gays and lesbians. What the Christian Right terms "special rights" are rights many of us would take for granted, such as the right to hold a job, to rent or buy a home in the neighborhood of your choice, and to raise your own children.

Once again, progressives have not been aggressive enough and have thus failed to make it clear to the average person that what the Christian Right wants to do is to disenfranchise an entire segment of the population and place it in a separate class, with fewer rights than everyone else. Most people do indeed oppose an extension of "special rights" to gay men and lesbians, because such language conjures up some type of quota system. However, public opinion polls show most do not favor cutting away gay people's basic civil rights.

If the hardline wing of the Christian Right continues to gain prominence within the movement, Christian Right leaders may stop relying on the rhetoric of obfuscation and become more frank about their real beliefs on issues like abortion and homosexuality. Pat Buchanan, for example, leaves little room for doubt about where he stands on gay rights. In fact, his rhetoric is becoming more excessive by the day. Buchanan was one of the first rightists to climb aboard the far right anti-government bandwagon, and accuses the federal government of being nearly satanic. He now talks openly about "rebellion" in his newspaper columns.¹² Buchanan remains exceptionally popular among the Christian Right, despite the efforts of Reed and others to steer activists away from his brand of xenophobic, hate-driven conservatism.

THE CHRISTIAN RIGHT AND THE GOP

We have seen that the Christian Right has an uneasy relationship with the Republican Party, a tension which creates openings

for progressives. Polls show that most Republicans disagree with the Party's strict anti-abortion platform plank, but so far pro-choice forces in the GOP have simply been out-organized by the Christian Right. But the results of the last election, with its so-called "gender gap" and poor performance by ultra-conservative candidates outside of the Deep South and Mountain West, have sparked a round of soul searching within the GOP. Last February John A. Moran, former Republican Party finance chairman, took the extraordinary step of writing letters to major GOP donors urging them to support a new organization of moderate Republicans not beholden to the Christian Coalition. Moran was dismayed because Reed had taken credit for the election of the new Republican National Committee Chairman, Jim Nicholson.

The Republican Party has staved off a civil war over the role of the Christian Right in its ranks for at least a decade. By encouraging moderate Republicans, and working with them wherever possible, progressives can help put the GOP back on a more centrist course, perhaps even reviving "liberal Republicanism," a once viable political philosophy that is today virtually extinct.

Divisions in any political movement create weaknesses. Infighting ultimately causes some people to become disaffected, to drop out and try other options, or, in the case of politics, perhaps to step back altogether. It would be foolish optimism to assume that the Christian Right will implode; it will not. The movement's obituary has been written many times over the past 15 years—always prematurely. Yet there is no doubt that the current strife will have consequences. Progressives must work to exploit and deepen the cracks in the Christian Right facade. To do so requires that progressives increase their political activism, which should be *political*, not necessarily partisan.

THE MOVEMENT MACHINE

The Christian Right succeeds not because people in the US agree with its agenda, but because religious/political zealots have built an effective political machine that potential

officeholders—especially those running on the Republican ticket—can ill afford to criticize, let alone ignore. At Christian Coalition conferences, operatives are trained in the art of voter identification and how to boost election day turnout by the "right" type of voters. In other words, they identify the people in a given geographical area who agree with the Christian Right on political matters, make certain they are registered to vote, and get them to the polls for primary and general election days.

This process is labor intensive. It might mean, for example, that a Coalition activist must visit each home door-to-door in his or her "neighborhood" (the boundaries of which just happen to overlap with a political precinct) and ascertain the political leanings of the residents. Information about those who seem receptive to the Christian Right's message is placed into a computer or noted on a card file. Follow-up calls have to be made on election day, rides to the polls must be organized. It takes a lot of legwork, but the members and followers of Christian Right organizations are willing and disciplined. No progressive model exists to counter this amount of individual political work.

Christian Right activists are also willing to sit through long, often dull intra-party GOP meetings. They serve as Republican precinct chairs and head county units of the Party. They run for delegate slots and actively campaign for them. At the Christian Coalition's annual "Road to Victory" meetings, the session titled "How to Work Within the Republican Party" is always packed. (The similar session on working within the Democratic Party usually attracts 10 or 12 people.)

In a country where voter turnout for a presidential election can easily fall below 50 percent, it's not hard to see how well-disciplined blocs of religious/political zealots can have a disproportionate influence. Turnout for primary elections is notoriously low, and in the general elections that follow, turnout for local and state offices is often much lower than that for national offices. A power vacuum is created by low voter turnout, and the Christian Right is only too happy to fill it.

The good news is that it doesn't have to be this way. The Christian Right *can* be defeated at the polls. Over the past few years, community activists in Vista, California, Merrimack, New Hampshire, Lake County, Florida, Round Rock, Texas, and elsewhere have banded together to remove Christian Right majorities from their school boards. In Vista, activists successfully organized a recall election. In each community, it took a lot of work through broad-based coalitions that included traditional progressive activists, moderate Republicans and even fiscal conservatives who put aside their differences on other issues to work toward a common goal. Duplicating this model at the state and national levels will not come without a lot of similar hard work, but one thing is certain: it has no chance to succeed if it isn't tried.

Ironically, for all of the talk and even anger directed at the Christian Right, the movement itself is not progressives' biggest enemy. Apathy is. Apathy enables religious/political hardliners to win elections, stay in power, and threaten this country's traditions of civil liberties and liberal democracy. Challenging the Christian Right's oppressive vision is crucial, but working to overcome apathy is equally important, and, in the final analysis, is probably the more daunting task.

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Call or write PRA for footnotes to this article.

FUNDING CONSERVATIVE CAMPUS NEWSPAPERS

The Leadership Institute recently sponsored a Student Publications School (SPS) on July 12-13 in Washington, DC where some of the country's most conservative journalists and fundraisers taught students how to access donor and foundation support, devise a successful advertising strategy and develop editorial policies. The Leadership Institute offers conservative campus newspapers aid in recruiting staff and articles as well as raising funding through the Institute's Balance in Media Grant. This grant is designed to help SPS graduates get their conservative papers up and running. In order to receive the grant, students must attend the SPS.



and our nation." In a recent direct mail appeal, Quayle outlines the goals of the Susan B. Anthony List: "Bring more women into politics; train these women to be effective; support these trained women in their bids for elective office

through the Susan B. Anthony List Political Action Committee." He adds, "Their vision is to see the final end to the myths about women in politics and the lie that all women support

abortion, and the creation of a strong and growing Pro-Life caucus of women legislators in Congress." In short, the Susan B. Anthony List has one goal: to elect anti-abortion, anti-feminist women to Congress.

INDEPENDENT NEW MAN

New Man magazine, formerly the "official magazine of Promise Keepers" has become an independent publication. After a three year publishing agreement between Strang Communications and the Promise Keepers Ministry expired in April of this year, both organizations agreed to make *New Man* independent of Promise Keepers. In the May, 1997 issue, editor Brian Peterson writes, "*New Man* will continue to cover official news and events of the Promise Keepers, but the ministry will no longer be involved in the approval of articles and advertising." The mission statement for *New Man* remains the same: "To inform and equip men with Christ-centered perspectives in every aspect of their lives to be godly influences in their world." *New Man* continues to be published by Strang Communications which publishes many Christian publications including *Charisma* magazine and *Ministries Today* magazine.

ADVANCING ANTI-FEMINIST WOMEN

Dan Quayle is singing the praises of the Susan B. Anthony List, a political action organization which "finds, trains, and elects women to public office who believe...that life is sacred; that all political talk aside, abortion is wrong and destructive to the moral fiber of families

CHRISTIANS ON-LINE

Christian Community Network (CCN) is a new Internet community centered around faith in Christ. Participating organizations include Promise Keepers, Prison Fellowship Ministries, World Vision, Christianity Today, Reuters and Marantha Music. CCN offers Christians discussion groups and deeper involvement in the movement through the participating organizations. CCN is located at www.christcom.net.

FOCUSING ON WOMEN

In September, Focus on the Family will sponsor its first conference for women. Called "Renewing the Heart," the conference will take place in Nashville, Tennessee and feature Shirley Dobson, Patsy Clairmont, Kay Coles James, Anne Graham Lotz and Eva Self. According to *Focus on the Family* magazine, the conference will "encourage, rejuvenate and teach women to evaluate God's priorities for their lives." The event is scheduled for September 20 at the 16,000-seat Nashville Arena.

RECRUIT, RECRUIT, RECRUIT

In keeping with its goal of "teaching students the principles of American freedom: individual liberty, limited government, the religious base of our liberties, and a strong national defense," the

Young America's Foundation (YAF) recently held two conferences. In an effort to reach out to high school students, the YAF held the first National High School Leadership Conference in June at the National 4-H Campus outside Washington, DC. Featured speakers included Oliver North, Ron Robinson, Michelle Easton, Burt Folsom, Michael Medved, Stan Evans and Senator Malcolm Wallop. YAF also held the 19th Annual National Conservative Student Conference from July 20-26 at George Washington University in Washington, DC. Featured speakers included Pat Buchanan, Ralph Reed, Walter Williams, Pat Boone, Oliver North, Trent Lott, Bay Buchanan and Edwin Meese.



"Hatred of certain things is a family value, and a very important one. In fact, if we are going to rescue our culture, we need a lot more hate. We need hate of the very things cultural Marxism most strongly promotes, including loose sexual morals, Feminism, and bad behavior by certain racial and ethnic groups."

— William Lind, Director of Cultural Conservatism for National Empowerment Television (NET), quoted from *Next Revolution*, a NET TV Program (2/24/97)

LIMERICK

No condoms or pre-marriage intercourse;
Banners on Robertson's Trojan Horse.
Yet inside the belly,
brimstone and hell; he
prays we go down with no remorse.

True Believers



Frederick Clarkson
**Eternal Hostility: The Struggle Between
 Theocracy and Democracy**
 (Common Courage Press: Monroe, ME) 1997, \$15.95 PB, 278 pp, ISBN:
 1-56751-088-4.



Sara Diamond
**Roads to Dominion: Right-Wing Movements
 and Political Power in the United States**
 (The Guilford Press: New York) 1995, \$19.95 PB, 445 pp, ISBN: 0-
 89862-864-4.

Reviewed by Eleanor J. Bader

She is shrill, the old woman. Day-after-day, as season follows season, she stands outside Brooklyn's Atlantic Avenue subway station and screams her lungs out. "Fornication. Abortion. Homosexuality. All are sins against Jesus. Jesus died for you! How are you gonna repay him?"

Clutching a dog-eared Bible and a well-worn set of rosary beads, the old woman punctuates her words by closing her eyes, and for the briefest of moments, rocks back and forth, forth and back. Then, abruptly, her eyes open and the litany of exhortations begins anew.

For the most part, the bustling rush-hour commuters ignore her. Although some smirk, rolling their eyes in bemused annoyance, most look away, scurrying past lest eye contact force a confrontation. While a few take the pamphlets she offers, by and large she

is treated as a pariah, a batty old lady who cannot possibly be taken seriously.

Yet perhaps we straphangers should listen more carefully, for while the woman's street corner preaching plays to our stereotypes and allows us to dismiss her, her message—for those concerned with religious pluralism and the separation of church and state—cannot be dismissed. Indeed, churches that preach a homophobic, misogynist brand of Christianity are once more gaining ground, and according to two new books, represent a frightening and potent trend for the 21st century.

Although US politics have long been riddled with unsuccessful efforts to Christianize the body politic, investigative reporter and researcher Frederick Clarkson has written a searing account of growing contemporary Christian Nationalist movements that is intended to put us on notice: American pluralism, as we have known it for more than 200 years, is seriously threatened. His probing report is thorough—

and amazingly readable—and includes the words and voices of both leadership and rank-and-file members of groups including the Christian Coalition, the Unification Church of Rev. Sun Myung Moon, the all-male Promise Keepers, and the Reconstructionists who believe that Biblical law represents a viable and desirable form of governance.

Fast-moving and lively, *Eternal Hostility* puts a chilling spin on a theological movement that has already made inroads into our political lives. While Clarkson highlights the religious and doctrinal schisms that divide the various strands of the Christian Right—for example, most members of the Christian Coalition support the Republican Party while most militia members eschew party politics in favor of "common law courts" run by "community members;" in addition, racism and anti-Semitism play a more central role in Reconstructionist and Christian Identity movements than they do in the Promise Keepers—he also analyzes the generally agreed-upon methods and strategies that govern most of the movement.

Take electoral work. Clarkson quotes Christian Coalition activist and theorist George Grant whose insights about running for elected office provide the foundation for that organization's day-to-day efforts. "Since only about 60% of the people are registered to vote and only about 35% of those bother to go to the polls, a candidate only needs to get the support of a small, elite group of citizens to win," Grant wrote in 1987. "It only takes 11% of the electorate to gain a

seat in the House or Senate. It only takes about 9% to gain a governorship. And it takes a mere 7% to gain an average mayoral or city council post."

Scary? You betcha. And nothing was more sobering than the 1990 election, dubbed the San Diego Surprise, that proved Grant right. In that election, 60 of the 90 people who won seats on the school board, fire district board and town council were "Christians." Although many of the candidates were people Clarkson calls "political unknowns," intense phone banking to members of sympathetic churches to "turn out the Christian vote" alongside the California Pro Life Council's distribution of 200,000 flyers to churchgoers on the Sunday before the Tuesday election, mobilized the masses— successfully.

Similarly, when a "theocratically-informed faction" won control of the Cobb County, Georgia Commission in the early 1990s, they took quick action. Within months, homosexuality was denounced, arts funding cut, and abortion services for county employees were curtailed.

Clearly the victories in San Diego and Cobb County have many religious right-wingers convinced that they have God on their side. Disciplined and devoted, their political doctrine has been bolstered by a belief in the necessity— and possibility— of building "the kingdom of God here and now, before the return of Jesus... Jesus will return when the world has become perfectly Christian, the return crowning 1000 years of Christian rule."

A small band of evangelical Christian purists, called Reconstructionists, think that imposing an Old Testament penal code on Americans will lead to the spiritual cleansing of the nation and the hastening of Christ's reappearance. And that penal code? "Doctrinal leaders," Clarkson writes, "call for the death penalty for a wide range of crimes in addition to such capital crimes as rape, kidnapping and murder. Death is also the punishment for apostasy [abandonment of the faith], heresy, blasphemy, witchcraft, astrology, adultery, sodomy or homosexuality, incest, striking a parent, incorrigible juvenile delinquency,

and in the case of women, unchastity before marriage." Hard to take seriously? Consider this: the US Taxpayers Party, a party dominated by Reconstructionists, appeared on the ballot in more than 40 states in 1996.

Still, as tempting as it is to focus exclusively on the Religious Right— and their fiery rhetoric and fire and brimstone prophecies— US conservatives have tentacles that extend far beyond the pews. Sara Diamond, a longtime student of the US right wing, has written a virtual encyclopedia chronicling reactionary/conservative movements since World War II. Dense, and

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chock full of names, dates and places, *Roads to Dominion* is a phenomenal, if not always easily readable, account of the many players making up the secular and religious right. With both eyes turned to the racism, sexism, anti-Semitism and anti-communism that undergird the movement, she offers a cogent exegesis of "how social movements accrue and deploy power within formally democratic political systems."

A sociologist by training, Diamond is particularly interested in when and why particular organizations mobilize to support government efforts and when and why they oppose them. The role of anti-communism is particularly instructive, Diamond concludes, since it has served to make the right wing a federal ally and at the same time has glued the disparate strands of the right together. From Joseph McCarthy in the 1950s to Oliver North in the 1980s, anti-

communism has provided a pivot for conservatives to organize around. On the other hand, many on the right have long opposed government efforts on issues including abortion, civil rights and religious pluralism, and Diamond explores their contentious stand, vis-a-vis the state, on these and other topics.

Yet it is Diamond's grasp of history that gives the book its resonance. Everything from the Ku Klux Klan, to the virulently racist Citizen's Councils popular in the US south in the 1950s and 60s, to the Goldwater and Wallace presidential campaigns of the 1960s, to the militias and Reconstructionists of the 1980s and 90s, get their due. Neoconservatives, as well as single-issue conservatives, are investigated.

Although neither Diamond nor Clarkson offer much in the way of strategy to help us counter right wing efforts, taken together the books provide a unique, and seemingly comprehensive, overview of what we are up against. It can be the stuff of nightmares or it can activate us to fight back.

On a personal level, I've started to listen a lot more carefully to the subway preacher I see every morning. She may be a kook, but I no longer see her as a solitary agent. Indeed, I now know that her message is identical to that of the theocratic warriors who are chomping at the bit to transform America into a Christian nation. As a Jew, as a feminist, and as a progressive, I shudder. Now I am taking her words seriously, reading her pamphlets, and talking to others about the ideology she advocates. I refuse to let my terror immobilize me. Instead, I am hoping that once more of us grasp what Christian nationalism is all about, we will find creative ways to fight the right, and win.

God help us if we don't.

Eleanor J. Bader is a freelance writer and teacher from Brooklyn, NY.

Resources

Institute for First Amendment Studies
P.O. Box 589
Great Barrington, MA 01230
413.528.3800

Tracks religious right and covers separation of church and state issues. Reliable expertise on religious right and reconstructionism. Publishes *Freedom Writer* and *Challenging the Christian Right: The Activist's Handbook*.

People For the American Way
2000 M Street, NW, Suite 400
Washington, DC 20036
202.467.4999 Fax: 202.293.2672

Has several reports and press releases on homophobic campaigns and rise of the religious right. Newsletter: *Right-Wing Watch*. Videotape: *The Religious Right, Then and Now*. Write for current list of background reports.

Center for Democracy Studies
177 East 87th Street, Suite 404
New York, NY 10128
212.423.9237 Fax: 212.423.9352

Researches right wing and anti-democratic movements in areas including: reproductive rights, gender equality, separation of church and state, law and democracy, and the militias. Currently doing intensive research on Promise

Keepers. Publishes *PK Watch* newsletter.

Interfaith Alliance
1511 K Street, NW, Suite 738
Washington, DC 20005
202.639.6370

An alliance of religious leaders concerned about the narrow vision of the religious right.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State
1816 Jefferson Place, NW
Washington, DC 20036
202.466.3234

Monitors the religious right and promotes church-state separation. Several pamphlets available on church-state topics, and packets of articles on the religious right in politics and school vouchers.

Narrowcasting: Technology and the Rise of the Christian Right

A 29-minute video produced by Paper Tiger Television. Documents the rise of the Christian Right as "the most powerful grassroots movement in America today." Highlights the Christian Coalition and also focuses on the right's aggressive use of a

constellation of communication technologies including satellite networks, cable TV, video productions, and the Internet. Long-time researchers Sara Diamond, Fred Clarkson, Loretta Ross, Barry Lynn and Chip Berlet add pointed commentaries. Available from the PTT Collective, 339 Lafayette St., New York, NY 10012, 212.420.9045.

With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America

A six-hour documentary series chronicling one of the most important political and cultural stories in contemporary America: the rising power of the Religious Right. The first in-depth and non-partisan look at this controversial movement, the series traces its roots from the anxious Christian anti-Communism of the 1950s to the sophisticated politics of the Christian Coalition today. The six-hour series includes interviews with Ralph Reed, Jerry Falwell, Billy James Hargis, James Robison, Bill McCartney, Pat Robertson, and many other religious leaders. The series was produced by Lumiere Productions (Calvin Skaggs, Executive Producer, David Van Taylor, Series Producer). To order the video or the companion book, call PBS Video at 800.828.4PBS

The Public Eye

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