**Discussing the Evangelicals Paradoxical Vote**

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As of June 2016, public opinion polls suggest that white “Evangelical Christians” overwhelmingly support Donald Trump over Hillary Clinton for president by 78% to 17%. (Pew Research Center, July 2016). Their support for Trump exceeds their support for candidate Mitt Romney at a similar point in the 2012 campaign, where they preferred Romney by 73% over Obama’s 21%. Is this surprising? In several ways the answer ought to be “yes,” in that Trump certainly is not a knowledgeable Christian and has demonstrated virtually no interest in the Christian religion prior to seeking the presidency. He lives an ostentatious life-style, is a world-class braggart, flagrantly insults people, has made a fortune from gambling and casinos, is a notorious liar, praises money and wealth, boasts of his sexual conquests, disparages immigrants, has been twice divorced (having had public affairs while married), has a wife whose career began as a nude model, and who boasts of using force against demonstrators and advocates carpet-bombing swathes of the Middle East and “bombing the shit out of ISIS.” He bitterly attacked his rival candidate who had perhaps the most recognizable credentials as an “Evangelical Christian” (Republican Senator Ted Cruz.) Candidate Trump does not apologize for any of this and has not suggested even the slightest remorse for any of his behavior. White Evangelical Christians, and particularly the subset of so-called “Fundamentalists,” largely dropped out of participating in the American political system after the mid-1920s. Although the symbolic and dramatic turning point was the famous Scopes “monkey” trial of 1925 (State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes), the harsh public stereotyping led to a self-conscious withdrawal from American society that was perceived as being hostile to devout Christian beliefs. Evangelicals largely avoided participating in political life, electoral politics, and even the military – believing that its violence had a corrupting influence. It was rare for Evangelicals to serve as chaplains in the Army or Navy prior to the early 1950s.

Evangelicals in the 1920s were particularly critical of the modern American lifestyle that featured glamor, fashion, celebrity, movies (“Hollywood” was a particular target), divorce, gambling, alcohol, and the breakdown of the nuclear family. While Evangelicals as a whole never withdrew to the same extent as the Amish, though they may be seen as a relatively less strict and less rigorous version of separatist religion. The reemergence of Evangelicals into American political and social life came in several steps. Perhaps the first sign of a return came as a response to the Cold War after 1947. According to the historian of the Evangelicals and the US military, Anne C. Loveland: “Like other Americans in the immediate postwar period, [Evangelicals] regarded the military environment as a particularly corrupting influence. Even before World War II, profanity, drunkenness, and gambling were legendary in the armed services”. In 1947, President Truman sent a delegation of Christian leaders to Europe to investigate the “lifestyle” of soldiers. Evangelicals, apparently for the first time, participated in a governmental fact-finding commission. The report was scathing about the corrupting influence of the military on American youth, particularly with regard to sexual promiscuity, gambling, pornography, and cursing. That same year, the National Security Act of 1947 created a new “Department of the Air Force.” Shortly thereafter, the Air Force announced that it would establish its own academy on the model of West Point and Annapolis, to be based in Colorado Springs. The Evangelical community began to focus on proselytizing this new military service, and many Evangelical organizations non-coincidentally established their headquarters at Colorado Springs. Rather than resisting the corrupting role of the military, the Evangelicals decided to embrace it. Evangelical chaplains and believers flocked to the military. The growth of Evangelical organizations had begun (the National Association of Evangelicals began in 1942.)

Perhaps the next major factor leading to the integration of Evangelicals into the mainstream took place during in the 1970s, prompted by Paul Weyrich (1942-2008), a child of a mixed-religious parentage (Catholic and Protestant). Weyrich had long been a conservative political activist (he was a strong supporter of Goldwater) who identified issues to bring (largely unregistered) Evangelicals into politics. Two of the issues on which he seized were abortion (Roe v. Wade was decided in 1973), and the “religious freedom” for racially segregated religious schools to receive federal tax exemptions. Fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell (who had earlier denounced Martin Luther King for dragging politics into religion) and who previously had demonstrated no particular interest in the issue of abortion became a sudden convert to the budding “religious right.” He and Weyrich founded the “Moral Majority” in 1979 with the clear intent of defeating President Jimmy Carter and electing Ronald Reagan. Thus it was not until 1979, six years after Roe v. Wade, that Jerry Falwell finally realized that abortion was the great moral issue of his time. While not having previously seen the importance of abortion, he had seen “religious freedom” being violated by the federal government’s refusal to grant tax-exempt status to religious schools that discriminated on the basis of race. (Bob Jones University, the symbolic locus of the 1970s “religious freedom” fight, apologized in 2008 for what it acknowledged was its past wrongful discrimination.)

Whatever one might think about Jimmy Carter’s effectiveness as a President, his sincere Christian convictions cannot easily be disputed. Carter was himself an Evangelical Christian who declared himself to be “born again.” He was a Sunday school teacher, a faithful husband to his wife, and a devoted father. In short, Carter was the ideal candidate of what Evangelical Christians professed to want in a President.

But with the rise of the religious right (symbolized by the Moral Majority), Christian Evangelicals shifted their support to Republicans and strongly preferred a person who otherwise should have been anathema: a divorced Hollywood actor, a distant father to his children (as they acknowledged), and a man who was both unreligious and uninformed about religion. Evangelicals in 1980 opted for the political right rather than the right personal values in a leader. This appears to be a bellwether of politics having invaded and altered religion rather than (authentic) religion having changed society. From 1980 forward, a majority of Evangelical voters have supported Republican candidates who support Wall Street, big business, the robust use of military force, and who oppose expanding public services for the poor, needy, and disadvantaged. Christianity had been turned on its head.

One might have hoped that Trump would finally drive the Evangelical community back to its moral senses. Instead, he seems to represent the final triumph of secularism, wealth, gambling, braggadocio, pornography, carpet-bombing of populations, racism, and prevarication over the community that once professed its belief in the non-violent and transcendent message of Jesus Christ.