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The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years by Steven Miller

David A. Mattingly

American Military University

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Miller, Steven P. *The Age of Evangelicalism: America's Born-Again Years*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. viii + 221 pages. Hardcover, \$24.95.

Explaining the American political arena is often analogous to a blood sport, especially as it revolves around the presidential election cycle. A 2002 study by sociologists Michael Hout and Claude S. Fisher identified a trend in which a “rapidly increasing portion” of survey respondents identified “no religion” when asked about religious preference.¹ More recent studies indicate the trend has continued. If a growing number of Americans identify themselves as “no religion,” then how was the evangelical right able to appear as a force on American’s political stage? In *The Age of Evangelicalism*, historian Steven Miller bookends the role of born-again evangelical Christianity with the election of President Jimmy Carter in 1976 and the administration of President George W. Bush in the 2000s in order to show how the movement grew from a liberal religious philosophy to a conservative right-wing political organization divided from America’s mainline religions and aligned with independent televangelists and megachurches. He also explores the impact of the 1980s scandals of a number of prominent evangelists on the movement.

Although this book focuses on a more recent slice of American history (1976-2008), it also touches on the longer Cold War between the former Soviet Union and the West led by the United States. The author defines the idea of a “civic-church” as one that cuts across the lines of Christianity, Judaism, Protestantism, and Catholicism and demonstrated in Billy Graham’s 1952 rally at the Lincoln Memorial. The author argues that the leaders of the nation’s mainstream religions joining Graham on the dais set the stage for “born-again Christianity” as a vital force in American society.

The book opens by describing the general distrust by Americans of Washington politics in the 1970s after the end of the Vietnam War, the Watergate burglary and resignation of President Richard Nixon, and the exposure of the misuse of American intelligence. The author argues that these events provided a platform for an unknown state governor, a self-described born-again Christian named Jimmy Carter, to upset the sitting president and precipitate the rise of the “arch-nemesis” Christian Right. The 1976 presidential election campaign set up the first engagement between the left and right wings of the Christian born-again movement, which Miller describes as “an age, not a subculture” (p. 8). *Time Magazine* called 1976 the “Year of the Evangelicals,” as Jimmy Carter introduced his faith in the campaign and “evangelical chic” came to describe many of those that joined the movement from the “hippie” Jesus movement to those that responded from the turmoil of 1970s America. The 1980s saw the rebound of the conservative political movement in the form of Republican Party presidential candidate Ronald Reagan and the conservative evangelical movement of the likes of Jerry Falwell and televangelism. The author argues the strength of President Reagan’s use of symbolism—he consistently used “God Bless America” to close speeches—throughout his two terms and the evangelical right was not only “part of Reagan’s coalition: it was one of its pillars” (p. 67). Many prominent Americans saw the rise of conservative evangelicalism as a threat to the basis of American culture. Television producer Norman Lear argued, “Call me a liberal, or a moderate, or a progressive—I think I am a bleeding heart conservative—but it’s my flag too.” Others saw, “a small group of preachers and political strategists had begun to use religion and all that Americans hold sacred to seize power across a broad spectrum of our [American] lives” (p. 73). The prominence of evangelicalism in the Reagan administration raised the question of the role of religion in the American political process. Miller points out that the earlier presidents, including

John F. Kennedy, had distanced themselves from their religion because of concerns that the church would influence policies and decisions.

The sex and financial scandals of several televangelists, including Jim and Tammy Faye Baker, Jimmy Swaggart, and Oral Roberts, blackened what appeared as a new powerbase in the future of American politics. The conservative evangelical movement failed to coalesce the Protestant and Catholic factions, was not racially inclusive, and took on very emotionally packed issues—gay rights, women’s rights, and abortion—which are still debated today. During the administration of President William Clinton, the evangelicals took a side seat as the nation’s conscience and worked to further the movement under the umbrella of the Christian Coalition (called the mistress of the Republican Party by the *Washington Post*), which grew to 1.6 million members by 1996. The religious right’s political movement culminated with the election of George W. Bush in 1999, who openly professed his “born-again” experience as life changing after an admitted early life of alcohol abuse.

Miller marks 2012 as the point of decline for the Age of Evangelicalism; though it remained a voice in the Republican Party, it became less of a voice for the American population. As many of the religious figures highlighted in the book retire or die and new political bases emerge, as demonstrated by the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, the question remains whether religion will regain its previous role as a pillar or a political party or fall back to a sector that gets a nod but lacks the power to influence the outcome of an election or policy? The 2016 presidential election may be the test.

There is a plethora of literature written in the area of religion, and it is important for the reader to understand the point of view or perspective of the writer as well as the scholarship used in researching and presenting the subject. The book is well written and thoroughly researched and documented; however, the author is a Christian writer, and though he does touch upon Jewish thought from time to time, he appears to exhibit a friendlier attitude toward those of the Christian right than those in opposition, either politically or religiously.

Can two decades of controversy over religion and politics be adequately covered in just over 200 pages? From this standpoint, it sometimes hits merely the wave tops of a very difficult subject.

NOTE

¹ Fischer, Claude S., and Michael Hout. “Why More Americans Have No Religious Preferences: Politics and Generations.” *American Sociological Review* 67, no. 2 (April 2002): 165-90.

David A. Mattingly, Ph.D.
National Security Consultant
American Military University
Leesburg, Virginia