

The religious right in flux: A pivotal year

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History books are full of seminal events: 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to a church door and launched the Protestant Reformation; or 1973, when the Supreme Court legalized abortion. Those boldface dates were preceded by less prominent but decisive ones: 1516, when a Dominican named Johann Tetzel led the sale of indulgences that deeply angered Luther; and 1970, when a young Texas woman named Norma McCorvey (Jane Roe) filed suit to obtain an abortion.

The year 2007 may be recorded as the latter kind of pivotal year for U.S. religion and politics—relatively quiet, unremarkable at first glance, but nonetheless significant as a harbinger.

“There are a lot of discrete things, but if you put them all together, you get the sense that change is in the air,” said John Green, a senior fellow at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life.

The realignment of the religious right is perhaps the biggest religion story of 2007 and the one most likely to affect 2008. The religious right is hardly dormant, but at the close of 2007 it is significantly altered:

- The deaths of Jerry Falwell and D. James Kennedy and the diminution of the Christian Coalition signaled a passing of the guard to a new generation of less doctrinaire conservatives with a broader social agenda.
- The new president of the National Association of Evangelicals said he’d rather conduct a wedding or funeral than meet with White House hopefuls.
- Pat Robertson pronounced Rudy Giuliani an “acceptable” choice despite his support of abortion rights and gay civil unions and the fact that he has divorced two wives. “To me, the overriding issue . . . is the defense of our population from the bloodlust of Islamic terrorists,” Robertson said.

In other indications that something is shifting, a Mormon won the endorsement of the head of ultraconservative Bob Jones University; an antiabortion former Southern Baptist pastor-turned-governor from the Bible Belt had to struggle to gain traction; and megachurch pastor Rick Warren brought in Hillary Clinton to speak at an AIDS conference, where she received a standing ovation.

Some of the biggest names in religious broadcasting ended the year under a cloud of scrutiny after Senator Chuck Grassley (R., Iowa) requested financial records in a probe of lavish spending by six ministries.

“The religious right is not dead,” said Laura Olson, a political scientist at Clemson University in South Carolina, “but it certainly has begun to look different lately.”

All of this could change—dramatically—once nominees are chosen in the first months of 2008. A Clinton win could rally evangelical “values voters” against her, just as a Giuliani win could mobilize at least some evangelicals against him.

“Most would still vote for Giuliani or Mitt Romney against Hillary Clinton, but there’d be a lot less enthusiasm,” said Marvin Olasky, editor of the conservative *World* magazine. “Would they stay home? Most would not, but a significant slice might. Would they vote for a third party? Most would not, but again, a significant slice might, to make a big difference.”

Either way, the religious right seems uncharacteristically splintered, demoralized and disengaged heading into the 2008 election year. Alan Wolfe, director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Life at Boston College, says religion is losing its grip on the voting booth.

“We’ve got big foreign policy problems, a suffering economy—those are the rock-bottom issues that people are going back to, and religion doesn’t really help with those issues,” he said.

One issue still unsettled is how Giuliani, a Catholic, will navigate relations with the church hierarchy over his support of abortion rights. In November, Catholic bishops said abortion remains a preeminent issue.

It’s unclear whether the abortion issue will become the same albatross for Giuliani that it was for Senator John Kerry in 2004, although a handful of bishops have already been critical. “That’s one of the biggest questions to watch,” Wolfe said. – *Kevin Eckstrom, Religion News Service*