

# Political theology on the right and left

by [Rhys H Williams](#) in the [July 29, 1998](#) issue

By James L. Guth, John C. Green, Corwin E. Smidt, Lyman A. Kellstedt and Margaret M. Paloma, *The Bully Pulpit: The Politics of Protestant Clergy*. (University Press of Kansas, 221 pp.)

From the colonial era, through the debates over slavery, immigration and temperance, to current social movements such as those for civil rights or against legalized abortion, Protestant clergy have played pivotal organizational and ideological roles. If, as Alexis de Tocqueville said, America's churches are its "first political institutions," then Protestant clergy are a political "elite" worth studying.

Of course, the political involvement of clergy has waxed and waned. In the late 1960s and early '70s clergy led many civil rights and antiwar efforts. Dubbed the New Breed by theologian Harvey Cox, liberal pastors were on the front lines of national controversies and seemed poised either to take over their denominations, split their churches over political issues, or both. Two excellent books emerged from that period, Jeffrey Hadden's *The Gathering Storm in the Churches* (1969) and Harold Quinley's *The Prophetic Clergy* (1974). Both charted the actions of young clergy who were highly educated (usually in the humanities and social sciences) and committed to living out their faith in direct action, even if that required civil disobedience. That these pastors were well ahead of their parishioners on many issues was well documented; that gap was thought to have led to lay dissatisfaction with mainline churches, causing membership declines in the '70s and '80s--and concomitantly leading to the growth of evangelical denominations.

Subsequent social-scientific studies of membership trends have revealed that interpretation to be too hasty. Statistical analyses show that basic demographic facts such as birthrates and the retention of young people in the church better explain changes in membership. Nonetheless, the conviction that liberal activism alienated laity became conventional wisdom in many mainline denominations, and

the New Breed were either reined in or ushered out.

The parallel story of the late '70s and '80s was the rising political activism of evangelical clergy. Based in seminary connections and Bible-study networks and supported by televangelist operations, a new breed of evangelical pastors shed political quiescence in favor of participation in antiabortion, antipornography and anti-gay-rights movements, and several well-known media figures such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson became visible in the Republican Party. It became liberals' turn to worry about clergy "meddling" in politics and to trumpet the "separation of church and state." And--though this was little remarked upon--it was evangelical churchgoers who sometimes questioned the public activism of their clergy.

The so-called New Christian Right has generated a considerable amount of academic attention. Two recent examples are Clyde Wilcox's *God's Warriors* (1992) and Ted Jelen's *The Political World of the Clergy* (1993). Like their liberal counterparts of a decade or so earlier, evangelical activists tended to be more educated than nonactivist evangelical clergy (seminary vs. Bible-college training). They often represented newly middle-class constituents in growing suburban centers. Whereas the liberal New Breed represented "organizational elites," with jobs in denominational bureaucracies, in seminaries or on college campuses, many conservative activist clergy are part of the "technological elites," using their televangelist operations for both fund raising and spreading their message.

James L. Guth, John C. Green, Corwin E. Smidt and Lyman A. Kellstedt have an ongoing collective research project on the relationships between contemporary American religion and politics. Much of their recent work has focused on the political mobilization of conservative Protestants, but their more general point is that religion powerfully influences political attitudes and behaviors.

The newest offering from this productive group, here joined by Margaret M. Poloma, is a thorough examination of the religious foundations of the political views of Protestant clergy. Guth and his colleagues explicitly compare Protestant clergy (predominantly white) across the theological and ideological spectrum. The authors draw upon a series of surveys administered to clergy from eight different denominations. The data focus on religious beliefs and commitments, and relate them to ideology, voting, partisan identification and attitudes on specific issues.

A clear division of clergy into two different groups emerges, based on theological orientation, political attitudes and position on the issues. The researchers' findings support the claim that there is a "two party" system in American Protestantism, and that this division promotes a "culture war" in American politics generally.

The authors carefully develop a model for how religious beliefs and ideas affect clergy politics. In their scheme, a clergyperson's "theology" determines all other attitudes. While the authors recognize nuances and subtleties in theological positions, they divide Protestant clergy into two basic camps, the "orthodox" and the "modernists." The two camps approach scripture differently, the former emphasizing inerrancy and literal meaning, the latter preferring historical and contextual criticism that incorporates modern science and culture into its understandings. This divide recalls the fundamentalist-modernist debate of the early 20th century that split many Protestant denominations. The authors find elements of that dispute still firmly entrenched.

Theology is the building block for what the authors call "social theology." Again, they discern two basic worldviews, "individualist" and "communitarian." Social theology is about the role of the church in the world. It asks how the world should be encountered and what is the main "problem" to be solved. Individualist social theology views the church's primary mission as helping align individuals with the divine will; communitarian social theology concerns itself with building community in this life and reforming worldly institutions.

Social theology in turn forms the basis for clergy's "political agenda," which is divided between those who focus on "moral reform" and those who focus on "social justice." The former involves what is traditionally thought of as personal moral issues, primarily sexual and other personal "vices." The social-justice orientation is a contemporary version of the Social Gospel, meaning concern about economic, racial, gender and international inequalities. These are articulated as explicit issues for intervention on the part of both individual believers and the corporate church.

The authors next examine political "ideology" and "partnership," and again find a bipolar divide. Ideological liberals and Democrats tend to align against ideological conservatives and Republicans. Even in this day of weakened political parties, partisan identification remains a strong predictor of attitudes and self-understandings; we tend to root for "our side" even if we are a bit cynical about both sides in the first place.

In sum, those who hold “orthodox” theologies are likely to endorse “individualist” social theologies, support “moral reform” political agendas, be ideologically conservative and vote Republican. In contrast, those with “modernist” theologies more strongly support “communitarian” social theologies and “social justice” political agendas, are ideologically liberal, and vote and identify themselves as Democrats. The authors emphasize that this logical coherence is an aspect of elites--people whose stock-in-trade is ideas and values and to whom this type of consistency is an important part of identity. Such consistency is not often found in surveys of mass publics.

A number of other interesting findings deserve mention. First is the closing gap between modernist and orthodox clergy in their orientation to political involvement. The orthodox are almost as likely as modernists to consider “social justice” issues very important--but “moral reform” issues are so much more important to them than to modernists that their interests and activism are drawn to that agenda. Both groups generally approve of putting their beliefs into practice, although the modernists are much more likely than the orthodox to approve of “direct action,” which may involve civil disobedience.

Education, particularly at liberal arts colleges and seminaries, is important in shaping outlooks; indeed, even among orthodox clergy those with seminary educations are more like modernists than are orthodox clergy without it. Education thus has a potentially ironic effect on clergy; the education and experiences that provide the interests and motivations to get involved politically are also corrosive of orthodox theology.

The book is less concerned with actions than with attitudes, but here too the authors find distinctions between modernists and the orthodox. Both groups may have similar feelings about the appropriateness of activism, but they vary on what actions they tend to take. Each group has its own preferred style. The orthodox are more likely to preach or make pronouncements, while modernists are more likely to form in-church organizations or engage in direct action.

In sum, the authors argue that among Protestant clergy there are two basic constellations of values, beliefs and attitudes, running from religious theology to political participation. This conclusion supports what Martin Marty almost three decades ago called the “two party” system in American Protestantism. Marty distinguished between a “public” Protestantism dedicated to reforming society and

establishing the “kingdom of God” in this world (the stance of the mainline denominations through most of this century) and a “private” Protestantism that eschewed worldly involvement in favor of the care and salvation of individuals. This distinction still marks the politics of Protestant clergy. However, there is no distinct gap between evangelical and mainline clergy in terms of their willingness to engage the public sphere. The issues that galvanize the two groups are different, as are their proposed solutions to public problems, but significant numbers of both groups are equally involved with both public and private concerns.

The authors claim that rival social theologies are part of a wider-ranging division between theological and political worldviews. The “culture war” idea, popularized by sociologist James Davison Hunter, maintains that this division runs down the middle of all American politics. Differences such as economic class, geographic region, race and gender are thought to be receding as the enmity between the “orthodox” and the “progressive” becomes increasingly important.

*The Bully Pulpit* clearly uncovers a worldview gap. Of course, the population being studied here is in many ways homogenous. Since all are Protestant clergy, there is no sacred-secular tension. And the sample is overwhelmingly white and middle class. Consequently, the book is not representative of our nation or of the parts of our population growing most quickly: Latino/as, Asians, Catholics or Muslims. Thus, while the Protestant clergy are divided, theirs is a relatively limited culture war.

How much do the politics of Protestant clergy matter? Though white Protestants remain a substantial part of the nation, how much do their clergy guide the attitudes and actions of their flocks? Guth and colleagues note that even when clergy offer guidance or undertake action, they try to preserve congregational harmony. Clergy do a delicate balancing act among their own personal commitments, the perceived and vocalized wishes of their congregations, and their professional networks of fellow clergy. Under what conditions those contending pressures push clergy into activism is not an issue the authors can develop.

The authors do ask which issues are “addressed” by clergy and how often they address them; they also assess what leads clergy into overt action. However, we get little information about the context in which the “addressing” takes place. Clergy generally do not like to give explicitly political messages during sermons, and their congregations do not like to hear them. Thus it is difficult to know which messages get through to the laity and what the laity do when they receive them. A consistent

finding by those who study television evangelism is that many viewers watch these programs for the “religion,” but have their own internal “V-chip” that screens out political messages. So while clergy consistently see a part of their political role as “cue-giving,” we are still unsure what effects that has.

When considering activism, the authors carefully include both conventional, institutionalized behaviors such as letter-writing and nonconventional social movement-style actions such as pickets and boycotts. They chart who gets involved and in what kinds of actions; not surprisingly, conventional actions are more common and more approved.

This finding represents another irony: clergy have relatively few resources to offer conventional politics. They cannot readily deliver blocs of votes, money or media time--the coin of the current realm. On the other hand, clergy have many valuable resources to offer social movements, such as meeting space, organizational skills, social networks and public legitimacy. Thus clergy may well be most active in ways that have less immediate impact. And social movements, which usually arise from less-represented constituencies, need the resources that clergy can provide. But clergy are often constrained by both their predilections and their situations from being more active.

*The Bully Pulpit* provides an imaginative and persuasive account of white Protestant clergy and of how theological and political orientations are intertwined. Indeed, we probably don't need any more survey analysis of these issues for a while. Surveys can provide a lot of information, especially about voting habits and partisan identification. But less conventional kinds of politics are more difficult to capture, and the impact of political commitments is more elusive still. The politics of the next century may leave the Protestant orthodox-modernist conflict well behind. Those of us interested in these issues may need to broaden our radar scope and adjust our antennae to hear new voices expressing new issues in unconventional ways.