

Prospects, part 1: Ebb Tide

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President George W. Bush is ending his Presidency.

It was 8 years of some objectives that were fulfilled, but also – in his own words – 8 years of many hopes that were disappointed.

It appears that those who are most disappointed are the group that is known as “the Religious Right.” This unfortunate term includes conservative Protestants, most evangelicals, charismatics, and fundamentalists. There are many in the Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic communities who would sympathize with much of the Religious Right agenda. Frequently, I count myself one of these (and I hasten to add that I genuinely like W, if not some of his more idealistic advisers).

President George W. Bush was the leader that was earnestly hoped for in this movement. He was their high-water mark. More than Ronald Reagan ever was, George W. Bush not only “talked the talk” of the Religious Right, but he also “walked the walk.” Leigh Schmidt, professor of religion at Princeton University (and reviser of [The Religious History of America](#), mainly written by Edwin Gaustad), called Bush the most powerful ally that the Religious Right has had since Reagan, and an ally that actually shares the “conversionist vernacular of popular evangelicalism” and speaks it fluently.

The candidacy and Presidency of George Bush may turn out to be the [high mark](#) of the particular form of American Protestantism that we call, simply, evangelicalism. Bush was a man produced by the American “camp meeting” tradition. He carried a real sinner’s testimony and conversion. He had been a lackluster, irresponsible and dissolute young man, whose academic, military and business experiences were hardly creditable. A crisis had brought him to a point where he acknowledged his shortcomings, and he called out to the Lord in a religious experience, and was converted. Since then he has given up drink (and other dependencies), and he has talked with Billy Graham, Tony Evans (of Promise Keepers) and many others in the evangelical community.

Reagan’s connection with the evangelicals (and with any Christian community, for that matter) was always tenuous. He identified himself strongly as “pro-life,” but one wondered whether that was due more to his conservative identification. In Reagan there might have been a strange reversal of the customary evangelical immersion into politics: where the evangelical became political because of his religious convictions (i.e., he attended the National Right to Life March in January because of his biblically-founded ethics), Reagan, on the other hand, made the reverse movement. Because of his political objectives (i.e., the construction of a conservative political coalition comprised of eastern financial, large corporation, and anti-modernist Christian communities), he espoused certain ethical/political positions which were salient in the evangelical agenda.

Moreover, Reagan's "walk" in Christianity was spotty. He attended church rarely. His wife consulted with astrologers and other esoteric practitioners. His family was torn by divorce and internecine conflict. His own wife and son have gone on record, after his death from Alzheimer's, as supporting fetal cell research.

I do not question Reagan's Christian self-identification. But with him, there is a sharp disconnect between the public rhetoric that was always careful to reinforce his affiliation with the Religious Right, and numerous behaviors that violated the historical evangelical ethic.

It seems that George W. Bush was much more to the evangelical liking. Here was a penitent sinner who did not mind at all the language of "being born again." He attended church. He opposed not only abortion, but also stem cell research. He pushed through legislation for faith-based community services.

At the same time, however, he perpetuated and exaggerated the old Religious Right political agenda. In the late 1970s, the Religious Right, under the aegis of people like Jerry Falwell, Bob Jones, Pat Robertson and James Dobson, sponsored on one hand the customary "natural law" agenda of opposition to gay rights, radical feminism, abortion, and other forms of libertinism. This was a reaction to the experiential and overly-privatized (and subjectivistic) "born again" Christianity made popular by Jimmy Carter, and to a simultaneous perception of the secularization of American culture. It was in this period that the Religious Right recognized the anti-abortion work which had been carried on by the Roman Catholics: and this recognition alone accounted for the enormously significant rapprochement between the conservative Protestant movement and the Roman Catholics (a relationship heretofore which had been frigid at best, if not downright antagonistic).

But for some reasons still shrouded in obscurity (though I have my own suspicions, which I will discuss later), joined to this "natural law" reaction were classic Republican emphases, which were not naturally connected to the evangelical mindset: promotion of nuclear weapon strategy and production; promotion of "neo-conservative" use of military to advance national interests; promotion of laissez-faire economics and high-finance/corporate interests; acceptance of domestic intelligence surveillance; and opposition to market regulation and environmental protection. This came to a critical development under Reagan, who fostered a "trickle-down" economic theory which clearly favored the interests of the aristocracy – a class for which that the evangelicals had historically reserved some of its most trenchant criticism. It is really a Reagan legacy that someone like Rupert Murdoch, who has constructed a journalistic empire on soft-porn and [yellow journalism](#), to be called a "conservative" ... even a "fellow-traveler" with the Religious Right. I have to believe that in another, more prurient and more consistently conservative age, that such a one as Ann Coulter would never have been counted in the conservative ranks: conservatism *then* meant [being civil](#) and [wearing clothes](#).

The evangelical dalliance with Republicanism reached full maturity in the neo-conservative policies of Vice-President Dick Cheney, who – while President Bush typified the evangelical leader of a Christian nation – designed and executed the perfect earthly and millennial vision of the Religious Right: the New Crusade (and call it for what it was) against the earthly menace opposing Christianity ... the invasion of Muslim Iraq, and the gain of carbon wealth from anti-Christian forces.

(Crusades do not work because they **cannot** work, since the Church has no **earthly** enemies, and what enemies she has cannot be fought against by earthly fire)

There is an odd and terrifying dynamic that history reveals: time – whatever it is – corrodes falsehood, and only permits that which is true to stand and remain. American history is a pageant of houses which have been raised up upon the sand, and the storms have come and lashed unfounded structures built on bad ideas. And many of these houses have carried Christian addresses.

It appears in this dynamic that at the very moment of triumph, the falsity is revealed in complete emptiness. It is as if the Religious Right was given everything that it wanted: indeed, it did, as for a space of one congressional term, the Republicans and Religious Right were in control of the Executive Branch, both houses of the Legislative Branch, and – to a degree – the Supreme Court.

But wars change everything, and this is especially true of the latest one. Some of the very stated rationales of the war (i.e., weapons of mass destruction; linkage to al-Qaeda) were not confirmed. Some of the expected results of the invasion (i.e., welcoming of the troops; cooperation with occupying power; profit-making oil-production) did not occur. Instead, a profound, wide-ranging insurgency and internecine Islamic civil war developed in the vacuum left by the removal of Saddam Hussein. The war turned from being a rhetoric-producing resource (that actually served to re-elect Bush in 2004) to a domestic political disaster that helped hand the Republicans the worst defeat it has suffered in decades (let alone the real costs of human life and material resources).

And this was by far not the only event which seemed to reckon judgment against the seeming triumph of the Religious Right. The very hallmark of the Republican agenda – the very issue which I believe forced the most profound complicity (and compromise) on the evangelical affiliation with the Republicans – was the pursuit of an international environment favorable to corporate interests.

The recent financial collapse of the usury "bubbles" should be interpreted for what it is. It was the pulling down of false gods. And this latest Wall Street crisis should have resonance within the heart and soul of American religionists, especially the evangelical community, since Wall Street had become the object of so profound a material faith: funds from churches, seminaries and "para-church" organizations were entrusted to the

almost-delphic stewardship of the investors ... clergy pension funds were surrendered to the esoteric charms of fund managers in the certain hopes of golden transmutation.

You (and evangelicals) say "free economics"
and shockingly impious declarations
like "the miracle of compounded interest":
I say alchemy and the occult.

President Calvin Coolidge once said that "the business of America is business." A Republican President who typified the over-confidence in laissez-faire "hands-off" economic policy, he also revealed the American middle-class naiveté about corporate interests – the same naiveté that produced the blindness of the Religious Right against its own historic critique of the aristocracy and mercantile interests. Coolidge was President from 1923 until 1929: he applied his admirable sense of fairness and liberty to the context of national economics – a common application (and simplistic distortion) which led to the disaster of the 1929 collapse of Wall Street.

That same Coolidge foolishness was reincarnated in the Reagan coalition, which also garnered middle-class, good-natured support from the overwhelmingly blue-collar, non-mercantile and definitely non-aristocratic evangelical population. They endorsed – with very little requirement for rational persuasion – the solidly pro-corporate "trickle-down" agenda: this was an agenda that was not abstract in the least. There was not even a modicum of concern for farmer, family or micro-business capitalism: there was only the bald claim that exorbitant profiteering, along with derivative usury programs (like hedge funds and other speculative enterprises), would somehow benefit the secondary classes in its wake.

In this period of Reaganomics, the Religious Right was happy in its economic prosperity and in some measured successes. Some pro-life Supreme Court Justices were appointed (although the loss of the [Robert Bork nomination](#) was a particularly hard defeat). Some regulation of the pornography industry was legislated. Some defenses were made of Christian activity in the public sphere, notably some church activity in the public schools, some leeway given to creationism/intelligent design in discussions of cosmogony.

More important (I wonder) than these political victories was perhaps the *material prosperity* that the Reaganomic programme offered not only to the American population, but to the evangelical community in particular. This is when you began to see the extraordinary material development of national televised ministries like [Focus on the Family](#), [the 700 Club](#) ([Pat Robertson](#)), the [PTL Club](#) (before its squalid demise), and the [Swaggart empire](#). This history of televangelism itself is worthy of close study, as it is a particularly American religious phenomenon, spreading worldwide insofar as American culture obtains. Oddly enough, the televised phase of this phenomenon began in the early 1950s with the pop-theology of the Roman Catholic [Msgr. Fulton Sheen](#), whose positive thinking emphasis (very close to the message of protestant Norman Vincent Peale) continues to find expression in most of the televangelists, but especially in the Lakewood

Florida enterprise of [Joel Osteen](#), who captains a hybrid teleministry and a megachurch, along with much work in media (DVD, audio and print sales).

Soon after Fulton Sheen were the crusades of Billy Graham, which started in Los Angeles, and then spread quickly to stadiums across the country. It would be difficult to underestimate the impact of these Crusades on the fundamentalists and evangelicals in particular, and the Protestant community in general. Indeed, Billy Graham has made his influence felt upon the Catholic and Orthodox communities, especially given the friendly reception he has received in Rome and Moscow in the 1970s-1990s. When he was invited to join Jerry Falwell's "Moral Majority" in 1979, [Graham's response](#) is interesting:

"I'm for morality, but morality goes beyond sex to human freedom and social justice. We as clergy know so very little to speak with authority on the [Panama Canal](#) or superiority of armaments. Evangelists cannot be closely identified with any particular party or person. We have to stand in the middle in order to preach to all people, right and left. I haven't been faithful to my own advice in the past. I will be in the future."

The Religious Right did not heed this advice. Instead, the Graham Crusades firmly established, for the Religious Right, a centralizing religious principle: the evangelical revivalist tradition of a crisis decision "to accept Jesus Christ as one's own personal Saviour."

As unifying as this new "lowest common denominator" as this formula turned out to be, it also produced a rejection of asceticism, a simplification of repentance, an overvaluation of individual experience, and a diminution of doctrinal and ritual into the category of "denominational distinctives."

Megachurches flowered in the years of Reagan, Clinton and the Bushes. Evangelicals had a lot more disposable income, as their religious endorsement of hyper-capitalism was amply rewarded (if only at first, say for 1260 days). The asceticism of simplicity, small-church humility and "invisible" local charity had been eclipsed by the visible success and health/wealth emphases of modern evangelicalism. Land and construction costs were manageable when leveraged. Various lay groups such as the Full Gospel Business Men Association, the Christian Business Men's Alliance, the Lions and Rotary served to provide financial, real estate and project management networking that is so critical to non-hierarchical institutional development.

Megachurches made a lot of sense to protestants. On one hand, they appeared to fulfill a simplistic understanding of the Great Commission: a great big group of people looked successful when compared to the words in the Book of Acts, "and the Lord added to their numbers daily." What was often overlooked is that most of the people who were added were already affiliated with some Christian community. The construction of a megachurch often had the same damaging effect on local smaller congregations that the erection of a super WalMart store had on mom-and-pop shops nearby.

Moreover, what was also overlooked was the fact that the particular ministries that required locality and intimacy – ministries such as indoctrination, disciplined fellowship and apostolic catachesis – were the *very ministries* that were eclipsed, if not disposed of altogether. The rubric of anonymity was actually embraced as a virtue, even a commodity, in the megachurch.

And thus megachurches accepted their role as “escape zones” for people who were malcontents and disaffected with their particular communities. They provided an immediate “opiate” to the *demands* of authentic fellowship and to the *commands* of Christian dogma – demands and commands that often aroused feelings of shame, which was the only way that many now understand the experience of “contrition,” which *should* naturally lead to repentance ... but in American religion, *usually does not*.

In the atriums and program brochures of the megachurches, one can find the natural extension of American evangelicalism from its revivalistic roots to its contemporary quest for application in the modern individual life. The Gospel has been re-defined as a “crisis experience” of belief, and then a psychosocial development along the lines of various “felt needs” (this term is significantly distinguished from “real needs,” as it was once explained that people are motivated more from “felt” needs as opposed to real ones ... this was the same source that said that there was a greater need in the American church for pastors who were administrators than pastors who were theologians or Bible scholars). One found in the megachurches an uncertain “anti-dogmatism” that persists to this day. Some ill-defined, ambiguous and simplistic beliefs (assumed to be derived from a self-evident reading of the New Testament, without any mediation by a historic church), were held to be necessary: everything else was negotiable, and indeed was defined as secondary, drawn from a primitive sectarian past that must be surmounted. There were strong affirmations of Biblical authority (in the sharply reduced Reformation understanding of the term), but there were also many explicit endorsements of not only political issues, but political candidates, parties and platforms.

The megachurch is really the icon of the height and extension of the American religion, which started in revival, and developed through phases of camp meetings, crusades, and then tele-media and large corporate structures. There is a simple reason why megachurches often look corporate in their architecture: they have simply become on the exterior what structure they have adopted on the interior. Megachurches are built on the prevailing “consumeristic” religion of America, whether it goes under a Christian name, New Age, Jewish or Muslim:

This style thrived in the world of high-rise apartments, long weekends, and airport newsstands; it was made up of clientele and not congregations, of consumers more than converts, of do-it-yourself experimenters more than people who felt called to be judged by a living God. The journey of the new American individualists is likely to be characterized by ever more paths, by ever more bewildering choices between options (Martin Marty, [Pilgrims in Their Own Land](#), p. 475).

We will look, later on, at the profound hypothesis of Harold Bloom – literature critic and professor at Yale, who suggests – with a great deal of reason – that the American religion has always been and is manifesting itself outright as a *gnostic ethos*.

We have seen this American Gnosticism induce a lot of privatized, subjectivist emphasis in the protestant movement, even in the conservative evangelical movement. We see it especially in the charismatic/Pentecostal yearning for ecstasy and for esoteric experiences and knowledge. More generally, we see it in the “radical individualization” of religion.

There are two developments which reveal this individualization. One is obviously the megachurch movement. The other is the “emergent” movement, which is a lot more honest and intellectual about its philosophical underpinnings (vs. the megachurch business model, which is rarely divulged and is often masked by religious-sounding “mission statements”).

The emergent movement, too, is a particularly American phenomenon. The [Emergent Church](#) emphasizes Christianity as a journey, and as an experience, more than a destination. It frequently confuses humility with uncertainty: very often, you will hear emergents tolerating or being open to doubt and skepticism about the Faith. They oppose dogmatism, and are generally uncomfortable talking about dogma, or “normative belief” or “faith-propositions” at all, since that seems to be too limiting, too patriarchal and too “western/colonial” and not multicultural enough. This is really a self-consciously “post-modern” movement that chooses an individualized “mysticism” over traditional dogma: this movement is very much built on a smorgasboard approach to Christian spirituality. In this “mood,” you will often hear emergents say, “Give me Jesus, not doctrine.” They will insist on the priority of “orthopraxis” over “orthodoxy,” especially in terms of doctrine (and we have to be cautious, because that same notion is gaining currency in our own community – the easiest response to this fallacy is that while one certainly sees deficiencies in orthopraxis, one *never* sees superfluity in orthodox doctrine; and it is certain that deficiencies in orthopraxis are produced by more profound deficiencies in doctrine).

While God is addressed as the “Wholly Other” in emergent speech, there is almost a complete lack of reference to God’s Holiness as wrath against sin and unrepentance. Moreover, there is almost a palpable avoidance of any reference to eschatology and the “Last Day.” Frequently, emergents and other postmodern evangelicals will diminish the Church’s traditional moral teachings (e.g., against homosexual behavior) with a rationalization like “Jesus never said anything about gays.” This rhetoric has now labeled itself as a movement: “[Red-Letter Christians](#).”

You might be impressed by the frequent references to eastern Orthodoxy: but this is only because postmodern evangelicals in general see Orthodoxy as an attractive “mystical” alternative to the over-familiar and worn-out categories of their fundamentalist upbringings. They recognize that “more” is needed in their doctrine, but they cannot bring themselves to the humility and full repentance of catechism and obedience (this probably explains the sad reality of certain numbers of evangelical converts to Orthodoxy

failing after a few years, and either returning to their upbringing or lapsing into irreligiosity).

The Emergent Church is attractive in that it is a more reasonable correction of the Religious Right political program. They reject some of the militarist and hyper-capitalist agenda of the Republicans, and they claim to reject the Democrats (I rather doubt that there is much of the Democrat agenda that they reject, as they too quickly “hedge” on issues like homosexuality, stem-cell research, and even abortion). It appears that the Emergents will turn out to be simply a subset within the Evangelicals who are steadily moving toward a mainline position, which has generally rejected the dogma of the traditional Church.

In any case, the political movement of the Religious Right has been hammered, and this last election may turn out to be its death knell. The evangelical community – which used to be completely represented by the Religious Right – is now a collection of associations, ill-defined congregations, movements and organizations, and a minimum of normative beliefs still centered around the crisis-centered revivalist identity.

The Religious Right, it could be argued, got everything they wanted politically in the years of George W. Bush. No President has ever before been so friendly to their aims *as evangelicals*. No one in the White House had ever talked the talk the way he did. Certainly, no one had ever walked the walk.

Now, they are left out in the record-setting cold, in political Siberia. Their only political hope lies now in arranging some coalition with Democrats (like Obama) who are trying to prevent a return to the old culture war delineations. What Republicans remain are busy denouncing social conservatives and blaming their woes on the Religious Right. They are working fast to construct an “inclusive” Republican party that is more amenable to pro-choice and pro-gay constituencies. Even Bush, in his final press conference on 12 January 2009, said that the Republicans needed to be more inclusive. After all, both his father and Colin Powell said that the Republican Party has a “big tent.” When this cliché is uttered, it is a code word for another rejection of Natural Law.

With the permeation of the megachurch into American culture, and the prevalence of “smorgasboard spiritual experimentation,” it could be argued that the evangelicals possessed, for a while, everything they wanted. In the years from Carter to George W. Bush, the evangelicals were at the very top of American society, both politically and culturally.

In 1978 (two years after the “born again” cover stories in Time and Newsweek, brought on by Jimmy Carter), Richard Quebedeaux enthusiastically wrote these words about evangelicals at the top of the world:

“Now, of course, evangelicalism, in its Protestant, Catholic, and charismatic forms, is really the mainline brand of American Christianity” (cited in Marty, p. 470).

This is probably still the case, if you want to use rather unfortunate terms like “brand.”

But it is a weak, *diluted* Protestantism. It is nothing like the strong flavors of the Reformation, where the propositions of Luther, Calvin and Zwingli (as heretical as they were) were clearly pronounced in honest (if combative) rhetoric. Now, the real goals have moved away from truth and faithfulness, and have become more “business-like”: the objectives are institutional development, recruitment, numeric gain. Programs are evaluated in terms of audience endorsement: real evaluation forms are sometimes handed out after “worship services.”

Evangelicals continue to succeed nowadays because it is much easier to call oneself “evangelical.” There are far few doctrines that must be espoused, and far few behaviors that must be practiced. Moreover, “affiliation standards” or “membership criteria” have been confused to the point where it is possible to change affiliation several times over the course of one year ... indeed, it is possible for one person to be a member of more than one institution, and not even know it ... and I wonder how many Orthodox individuals are counted as members of large evangelical churches because they attend those churches most of the year except for Christmas and Pascha.

So it is *easier* to be Evangelical, to be a member of the American religion, but it is probably less *meaningful*. It is certainly less important on the political stage.

Why spend time studying evangelicalism? Because evangelicalism has been the American religion, as we will carefully show throughout the duration of this course.

In American evangelicalism, you have the full development of democratized Protestantism, not only extant within the Protestant community, but also showing up significantly in the Roman community and also in some of the latest controversies of the Orthodox movement.

Evangelicalism *is* American religion. The study of the history of Evangelicalism, which we probably ought to call American Protestantism, is the best way to understand the *genius* of this country or a nation.

What is critical now, however, is that this American religion may be changing, along with American society. We are going to study carefully the newest sociological “pictures” of society and religion, especially the [Pew Forum U. S. Religious Landscape Survey](#).

We are going to take a close look at recent American religious history, so that we can understand what happened to the mainline Protestant movement after 1950. We will look further back at the Revivalist movement in America, and how it developed and changed with the rise of the Sunday School, the Graham Crusades, and tele-evangelism on the radio, TV and now the Internet.

Then, we will look at where American religion and society are heading. Like it or not, we live in a world that is very different from the culture that prevailed after WWII. More

people are in more debt, but more people live more comfortably. America may be losing her primary status to China and India. The economy may force a simpler lifestyle and a lowering of material expectations. The old Protestant mainline churches may be joined by postmodern evangelicals in their reaction to natural law. The fundamentalists are becoming less and less understandable, and more and more alienated in the modern world.

Religion is the teaching of the “genius” of a country to pray. That, I know, is the oddest formulation you have heard today, but we will take the rest of this course to try and figure it out. But suffice it to say that I think [Harold Bloom](#) is right: American religion has always been at least latently gnostic – it is only becoming more *explicit*. It is gnostic, because the American genius is gnostic. It cries out for ecstasy and esoteric power. It wants freedom from other selves, being allergic to koinonia, and it seeks (foolishly) a bareheaded solitude in the face of the demiurgic abyss.

Apostolic is the only dogma for gnostic neurosis anodyne

I think, after our careful study, that we will find that American Protestantism is receding. It is either fading into mainline renunciation of eschatology and dogma (e.g., “the journey is better than the destination”), or a fundamentalist minimalization of doctrine and a gross simplification of the end-times (which itself is a renunciation of history, and the Incarnation).

It has been disappointed by the Wall Street collapse of an economic structure it had worked so hard (ever since Calvin’s day) to justify and cooperate with. It has been disappointed by the failure of the Iraqi campaign to produce a missionary success for the Gospel of American democracy.

I suggest that these are more than disappointments. These are, like the wildfire growth of Islam, *Divine judgments*.

Judgment – however it occurs – is the fire that destroys falsehood, the storm that pulls down houses built on sand. Nothing can stand for long unless it is built on true, apostolic foundations.

At the end, there is complete apostasy, or there is Orthodoxy. American Protestantism is heading in *both* directions.

January 16, 2009 in [American prospects for Orthodoxy](#) | [Permalink](#)