Years of the evangelicals

by Steven P. Miller
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Long before Sarah Palin met CPAC and the *Duck Dynasty* clan discovered A&E, George Gallup Jr. famously declared 1976 the "Year of the Evangelical." Subsequent commentators often pluralized "evangelical." They might have done the same for "year," too. In many years hence—1980, say, or 2004—it was 1976 all over again, to judge from the headlines. Those election years highlighted the Christian Right, a force that was not on Gallup's radar screen back when Jimmy Carter was the prototypical evangelical in public life.

The years of the evangelicals were not only about campaign politics, however. For a generation of observers across the cultural spectrum, evangelicalism was a sign of the postmodern times. The megachurch was the new civil society, while Habitat for Humanity was the tie that bound.

Unquestionably, though, politics powered the evangelical meme. Even in 2008, by which time the Christian Right seemed to have peaked, the narrative of religious politics read as the narrative of evangelical politics. Could John McCain keep white evangelicals in the GOP fold—or would Obama woo enough of them to seal victory?

If 2008 was the year of the "Obamagelicals," then 2012 was the year of another Obama-leaning bloc: the religiously unaffiliated nones. Their share of the population, if not the electorate, resembled that of conventionally defined white evangelicals (around one-fifth). Even without an anointed figurehead like Jerry Falwell, the nones may soon receive the status of honorary silent majority, never mind their lack of an actual majority.

Now, the story is one of evangelical decline as a whole. Perhaps Dean Kelley's famous argument in *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing* (1972) has run its course.

There is good reason to be skeptical about any thesis of closure. For many, Billy Graham's postwar revivals were the last gasp of the old-time gospel. Upon further reflection, they were the opening act of a broader evangelical renaissance. After

1988, in the ashes of Pat Robertson's failed presidential campaign, the Christian Right was labeled a one-hit wonder (the hit being Ronald Reagan). Yet in popular culture, evangelicalism retains the spectacle quality of Chick-fil-A "buycotts" and Rick Warren CNN interviews (not to mention TED talks).

Such anecdotes are easy to dismiss, but the connecting thread is not. During the past 40 years, evangelicalism was everywhere, and influentially so. Born-again Christianity was a critical standard against which notions of liberal and conservative, religious and non-religious, were shaped. When George W. Bush wanted to differentiate himself from his father, he spoke like the evangelical he had become. When Barack Obama wanted to prove that he was a person of faith, he struck a similar note. Evangelicalism became the working political definition of religion.

It also became the working definition of religion in public life. Evangelicalism did not create the culture wars, but its ubiquity helped to popularize the term. James Davison Hunter's landmark book resonated because the American Civil Liberties Union and the Moral Majority were already thesis and antithesis.

There are many other ways of understanding recent American history, of course. We would do well to reflect on the power and limits of paradigms as we consider the future of the nones, wonder whatever happened to the "Mormon moment," and ponder which *Duck Dynasty* cast member will endorse which GOP presidential aspirant.

A related task is to pursue alternatives to the evangelical frame. An opportunity to do so was at hand in 2012. Neither Mitt Romney nor Obama fit the evangelical mold. Yet each had understandable incentives to run away from his very American faith story. Romney thought that he needed to win over conservative evangelicals. Obama was not about to let Jeremiah Wright resurface as a political issue.

Many politicians, left and right, go out of their way to assert that the public square needs a religious cloak. The question is whether their default understanding of religion will continue to be evangelical Christianity. The State Department's recently announced faith-based office has attracted attention and, with it, criticism. It is a test case for what religion actually means from a policy standpoint. What is an acceptable level of inclusivity? Is it possible for public officials to engage religion without redefining it?

Before we turn away from the evangelical narrative, though, we do well to have taken stock of the influence of born-again Christianity in the decades since Gallup’s pronouncement.

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