

Is the evangelical right actually conservative?

By [John D. Wilsey](#)

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What does it mean to be a religious conservative? Our minds may go to an ironclad commitment to the Republican Party or the Christian America thesis or the Second Amendment. Certainly many religious conservatives oppose abortion and advocate for marriage as being solely between a man and a woman. Six-day creationism, Fox News, and an American exceptionalist foreign policy also animate religious conservatism for a lot of folks. The list could continue.

When we think of religious conservatism, we likely think in terms of slogging through the trenches of the great American culture war. But does the culture war serve as a useful paradigm for understanding religious conservatism? Unfortunately, it would appear so, whether one identifies as a religious conservative or not.

I consider myself to be one. I am pro-life, I own guns, and I have a moral and biblical problem with gay marriage. Still, I am not comfortable with every so-called conservative position in the culture war. I identify myself as a conservative not because I am fighting a war, but because I am committed to a worldview. And I've grown in my understanding of that worldview after years of careful intellectual and spiritual consideration.

*Conservatism* has become a subjective term in the past few decades. That is a shame. Any idea can pass as conservative these days—as long as the idea fits within a rightist agenda. For many evangelical conservatives, religious authority has come to be defined by subjectivity. Feelings, personal experience, and pragmatism have largely replaced textual authority. Scripture is supposed to be the supreme religious authority for evangelical conservatives, but increasingly it is a rallying cry, a talisman that is brought out to support a particular theme. Scripture has become like the emperor of Japan in the 1930s—a useful symbol to lend credibility to what is too often an arbitrary agenda.

Many on the evangelical right have also jettisoned the intellectual, credal, and liturgical traditions of Christianity. There's not much new in that. The anti-credal

trend goes back to early-19th-century America. But it continues, and this “crisis of authority” has profound ramifications, as [Molly Worthen](#), [Thomas Bergler](#), [D. H. Williams](#), and other scholars have noted.

This is a major problem. If we take Russell Kirk’s emphasis on *order* in conservatism, then it is difficult to classify rightist evangelicalism as conservative. At the beginning of his [Roots of American Order](#), Kirk defines *order* as “a systematic and harmonious arrangement” that “signifies the performance of certain duties and the enjoyment of certain rights in a community.” Disorder is “a confused and miserable existence” wherein “the commonwealth cannot endure.” Kirk’s understanding of order as central to conservatism is one rule by which we ought to measure the legitimacy of conservatism in American evangelical Protestantism.

As a result of turning away from objective authority, evangelicals have a sentimentalized religion. Sentimentalism yields a self-referential faith. Kirk calls this “egoism,” which is antithetical to “humility, charity, and community.” Sentimentalism turns inward and rejects the outside world. Self-help and self-defense messages abound, along with constant appeals to stay relevant for the young people. Bergler terms this process “the juvenilization of American Christianity.”

The prophetic voice, the primary mode of Christian engagement with the world, has historically been the church’s distinguishing feature. As Kirk writes, “Without the Law and the Prophets, order in existence could not endure.” And on this score, a Christian like Cornel West is more conservative than many rightist evangelicals who no longer recognize the prophetic voice except in the context of the culture war.

The crisis of authority among rightist evangelicals is more than a nuisance. As Kirk rightly observes, the lack of objective authority results in disorder, leading to meaninglessness and the community’s disintegration. In abandoning the objective authority of scripture—informed by the historical tradition of the church—rightist evangelical congregations risk devolving from churches into cultural centers. If that occurs, rightist evangelicalism will become salt that has lost its taste (Matt. 5:13).

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