Religion as Political Motivation:
Analyzing the Rhetoric of the Religious Right Through Three Case Studies

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by

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Introduction and Acknowledgments
When I was a senior in high school, I got my first taste of church-state politics in my home state of Kansas. A parent from one of the high schools in my school district complained to the school board that the film version of Shakespeare's play *Romeo and Juliet* should be banned from English classes. The parent, who was also a local minister, voiced strong religious objections to the nudity and implied sexual relations in the film. Students, parents, and faculty immediately became engaged in the debate, and for the first time, I realized that the political controversy over the separation of church and state directly influenced me. I wrote a letter to the district school board arguing that one man’s religion, even if it was the belief system of the majority, should not be allowed to dictate the curriculum of public schools. The board eventually decided that teachers could continue to use the film in class.

Ever since then, I have closely followed the debate over the proper role of religion and government. Of particular interest to me is the Religious Right—a movement central to most church-state skirmishes. My involvement with political action committees that support church-state separation has given me multiple opportunities to watch the Religious Right in action. Although I strongly oppose its positions, I have developed a respect for the Religious Right as a well-organized political movement and a group of highly dedicated activists. The well-coordinated campaign efforts of the Religious Right made me want to formally study the movement’s political rhetoric, in hopes of gaining more insight on organizations I often work to oppose.

In the following chapters, I have tried to present a fair and accurate depiction of the Religious Right using its own words. However, I acknowledge my bias as an outsider of the movement. The first chapter of this work provides an overview of the Religious Right, addressing the movement’s history, religious beliefs, and political involvement.
In the next three chapters, I have used a modified case study format to analyze the rhetoric of the Religious Right. Similar to regular case studies, I have traced the chronologies of three different political issues, including the details of the policy making process, people and organizations involved, and the outcomes. Given the focus of my study, though, I have paid disproportionate attention to the arguments raised by the Religious Right. Also, rather than merely providing examples of Religious Right rhetoric, I have analyzed the purpose and motivation behind the communication employed by this movement.

Chapter Two traces the debate and policy decision making surrounding President Bush’s faith-based initiative. The Religious Right was a key player in this issue because Bush was counting on support from conservative Christians, but several organizations actually came out and criticized the president’s plan. Important to note in this chapter is the Religious Right’s strategic use of rhetoric to maintain political clout with Bush and, at the same time, ensure that its wishes were granted.

Chapter Three examines the Religious Right’s role in an issue on the state level, specifically, the Kansas State Board of Education’s decision to remove evolution from the state science standards. The Kansas case is significant because it illustrates the Religious Right’s shift in rhetoric in the evolution-creationism debate. Rather than raising arguments in support of the biblical account of creation, the Religious Right focused on scientific objections to evolution and proposed a new alternative theory called “intelligent design.”

Chapter Four is documents a case that occurred in a Florida county school district. As part of a national campaign initiated by a Religious Right organization, the school board was asked to post the national motto “In God We Trust” in every classroom. This case again
illustrates the Religious Right’s tendency to shift rhetorical tactics depending on the audience, and it also provides a complete picture of the several levels on which this movement operates.

Finally, in Chapter Five, I have attempted to synthesize the rhetorical tactics used by the Religious Right in these three cases and to develop a rhetorical method that forms the foundation of the movement’s political communication.

There are several individuals who must share in the credit for this work. First, I owe many thanks to Caroline McKnight of MAINstream Coalition in Kansas. With her enthusiastic guidance (and several barbecue lunches provided by husband Rob!), I learned much about campaigning and grassroots politics. I must extend my thanks to all the individuals I met and worked with at MAINstream; what an inspirational group of community activists!

Americans United for Separation of Church and State has also been influential in this study. I am grateful to this organization for steadfastly protecting the First Amendment for so many years. I would also like to thank Rena Levin for her help with my research and for always volunteering to serve as a resource.

Many thanks also to Dr. Susan Kay for serving as one of my thesis readers and providing insight from the political science perspective.

My interest in rhetorical criticism can be attributed entirely to two mentors, Dr. Ben Voth and Bond Benton. Dr. Voth shares my interest in church-state studies, though he approaches the topic from a decidedly different angle. Despite our political differences, working with Dr. Voth has made me a better student and rhetorical critic. I will always admire his commitment to forensics, teaching, and most of all, family. Bond Benton is, by all accounts, brilliant in this field. I truly value all of the coaching he has provided me and his constant encouragement and belief in my abilities.
As always, I owe great thanks to my family—more than words can ever give. My parents have always supported my decision to work in public service, even when my internships were unpaid. They have excitedly read every chapter of this thesis and offered patient encouragement whenever I needed it. Finally, I am so grateful to Chris, who has been a part of this project every day. I am blessed to know him as more than an exceptional rhetorical critic.
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Chapter One
God and Politics:
An Overview of the Religious Right

Over the past few decades, the growing visibility and political sophistication of the Religious Right have made this movement one that is hard to ignore. While the Religious Right may not yet claim substantial electoral victories on the national level, the influence of the movement has nonetheless been significant. In order to understand the motivation and efficacy of this political force, it is first necessary to examine what the Religious Right is, what its members believe, why they are politically involved, and how they came to be such a prominent group on the political scene.

Defining the Religious Right

The Religious Right can be difficult to identify and define, since it is not represented by a single political group or party. At its most basic level, the Religious Right is simply a religiously motivated social movement.\(^1\) Green explains that the purpose of the movement is to restore “traditional values in public policy by mobilizing evangelical Protestants and other conservative religious people to political action.”\(^2\) Detwiler further explains that the Religious Right is comprised of a “loose network of conservative Christian activists guided by certain presuppositions.”\(^3\) According to a 1996

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\(^1\) Since the Religious Right is mainly comprised of conservative Christians, the movement is also referred to as the Christian Right. Here, the term Religious Right will be employed because some non-Christians (such as Orthodox Jews) are a part of the constituency.


survey, 16 percent of Americans identify “very closely” with the Religious Right, and another 17.5 percent identify “somewhat closely” with the group. Thus, it is believed that the movement has a very fluid membership of, at most, 35 to 40 percent of the American population. Serving as the voice for these individuals are such noted preachers and personalities as Pat Robertson, James Dobson, D. James Kennedy, Phyllis Schlafly, Jerry Falwell, and Beverly LaHaye. Additionally, several national organizations work to implement the Religious Right agenda. These groups include the former Moral Majority, the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family, the Family Research Council, Concerned Women for America, and the Eagle Forum. Several other single-issue groups, such as anti-homosexuality and pro-life coalitions, align with the Religious Right to form a vast grassroots network.

As a political constituency, the Religious Right’s views on contemporary issues are based on their interpretation of the Bible. Followers believe that there is currently a profound cultural crisis in America— one that threatens to undermine biblical Christianity and its teachings. Thus, they seek “to extend the authority of the Scriptures to all spheres of society” in order to spread their vision of morality and family values. The Religious Right attacks what they consider to be violations of sexual norms, such as abortion, homosexuality, sex education in public schools, feminism, pre-marital sex, and the general breakdown of family life. They also attack the notion of secular humanism,

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5 Ibid, 103.
a term that implies a world without God and absolute values but is often applied to any beliefs that contradict the narrow vision of the Religious Right.

Although conservative Christians have been actively promoting their views and shaping policy throughout American history, the contemporary Religious Right is unique for two main reasons. First, the Religious Right is highly adept at using new technology to communicate its message and mobilize its followers. The movement relies on television, radio, direct mail, phone trees, email, and the internet to enhance its visibility and influence. Despite being critical of postmodern culture, the Religious Right has embraced some of postmodernism’s best resources, and as a result, the movement is far more organized and influential than any right-wing movement of the past. Second, there is a mainstreaming tendency in the Religious Right. Conservative Christians emphasize that their views at least deserve equal consideration—or as Ralph Reed (former Executive Director of the Christian Coalition) always said, “a place at the table.” While many people still consider their views extremist, the Religious Right has effectively moved from the fringes of society to the center of the debate, and it has gained political legitimacy in the process.

**The Religious Right as a Social Movement**

In its attempt to transform contemporary American culture, the Religious Right functions as a social movement. Structurally, the Religious Right is divided into the three

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7 Ibid, 4.
8 Ibid.
tiers that are characteristic of social movements. At the top of the pyramid are the cultural elite, who provide the intellectual and strategic leadership. The top tier is comprised of Religious Right leaders and their respective organizations; for example, Pat Robertson and the Christian Coalition are among the movement’s elite. Below the elite leaders are the knowledge workers. These individuals directly communicate with grassroots organizations and reduce the complexities of the cultural elite to a level that is commonly understood. The knowledge workers must communicate the symbolic web that frames the issues, generate a sense of conflict and urgency, and create the perception of effectiveness. Finally, the third tier is comprised of “foot soldiers.” The foot soldiers carry out the tasks specified by the knowledge workers. They often respond best to alarmist rhetoric, which is why creating a sense of conflict is so important in mobilizing grassroots action.

Religious Beliefs

Although the movement has followers from many different denominations, fundamentalist Christians form the largest subset. The views espoused by the Religious Right are also grounded in the framework of fundamentalist Christianity, thereby making it essential to understand the main beliefs of this religion. During the first half of the Twentieth Century, fundamentalist Christians and evangelical Christians were essentially one and the same. After World War II, a gradual distinction emerged between the two, mainly because of their different strategies for associating with “outsiders.” Evangelicals

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sought respect from outsiders as a way of broadening the base for their gospel. Fundamentalists, on the other hand, advocated an “active opposition to liberalism, secularism, and communism.”¹⁰ They became the most conservative of the evangelicals due to their “preference for confrontation over penetration of society.”¹¹

There are four central features of fundamentalism.¹² The first is evangelism, or an emphasis on “saving” others. When broadly defined, “evangelical” refers to the “authority of Scripture and belief in salvation by grace through faith.”¹³ Contemporary evangelicals emphasize the importance of an internal conversion experience (being saved) and adherence to rigorous moral and spiritual disciplines. The second belief is the inerrancy of the Bible. Fundamentalists believe that the only path to salvation is faith in Jesus Christ and faith in an inerrant Bible. They believe the Bible is the literal word of God, free from error in origin or transmission. The Bible is also considered to provide a completely accurate and authoritative account of science, history, morality, and religion.

The third feature is premillennialism, which is concerned with the prophesy of future events. Premillennialist fundamentalists believe that Christ will return before the millennium, or thousand-year reign of the earth. Another important part of premillennialism is the notion of Rapture, or the scripture-based belief that at any moment, the true believers will all be taken to heaven, while nonbelievers will be left behind on earth. Thus, the Bible is not only inerrant in its documentation of history, but

¹¹ Green, 12.
¹² Ammerman, 59-63.
¹³ Fackre, 5.
it also provides a glimpse of the destiny of the world. The final, and perhaps most
defining characteristic, of fundamentalism is the notion of separatism. Fundamentalists
insist on “separation from others whose beliefs and lives are suspect.”14 They will
intervene in situations if there is a possibility of saving someone from eternal damnation,
but if intervening or associating with the sinner would cause temptation, then the effort
will be avoided altogether.

It is important to note that not all people who have fundamentalist Christian
beliefs are part of the Religious Right. In fact, many fundamentalists believe that any
meddling in political affairs should be avoided. Research does indicate, however, that
they are becoming increasingly accepting of political activity.15 This acceptance is
largely due to the 1981 publication of Francis Schaeffer’s *A Christian Manifesto*. An
evangelical philosopher, Schaeffer endorsed dominion theology, which calls for
Christians to take dominion over secular society. Schaeffer argued that the Founding
Fathers intended for America to be a Christian nation, and that “Christians alone are
mandated to occupy all secular institutions until Christ returns.”16 As one of the
movement’s most frequently cited texts, *A Christian Manifesto* helped propagate the
fundamentalist worldview that Americans are divided into two camps: biblical Christians
and secular humanists. Secular humanists include all atheists and members of other

14 Ibid.
16 Diamond, Sara. *Facing the Wrath: Confronting the Right in Dangerous Times*. Monroe, Maine:
religions, even Christians with a different worldview.\textsuperscript{17} (In reality, the majority of Americans self-identify as Christians, and only a very small percentage consider themselves secular humanists.) Nonetheless, fundamentalists argue that secular humanism has essentially become a state-sanctioned religion that must be countered by Christians.\textsuperscript{18} Dominion theology seemed to provide the needed justification for fundamentalists’ mass entry into politics.

\textsuperscript{17} Detwiler, 46.
History of the Religious Right

The roots of the Religious Right can be traced back to the Puritans, but the contemporary movement is grounded more in the first quarter of the twentieth century. At that time, there was a surge of evangelism in America in response to rapid social and economic transformations. In particular, two factors were significant to the development of fundamentalism. First, the emergence of Darwinian evolutionary theory challenged basic Christian understandings about the origin of the earth and human life. With the Scopes Trial of 1925, the evolution-creationism debate gained national attention, and for many Americans, the trial was a sign that the country was turning away from God. A second important factor was the growing body of academic criticism of the Bible. German universities initiated intense historical study of the Bible in the mid-nineteenth century, and the criticism soon spread to American universities, seminaries, and churches. For many Christians, the idea that the Bible was not a historical document, nor the unique word of God, was threatening to their entire system of belief.

The extreme social changes of this inter-war period galvanized fundamentalist Christians to form an independent movement. They believed that World War I was a holy war against the forces of modernism, and they were firm in their conviction that

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19 Detwiler, 11.
21 Ammerman, 67.
modernism must be resisted in America.\textsuperscript{22} Therefore, William Bell Riley, a leading Baptist minister, founded the World’s Christian Fundamentals Association in 1919.\textsuperscript{23} The association served as a network for fundamentalists to voice their beliefs and attempt to resist modernist forces. Yet the movement was still very divided because its followers belonged to several different denominations. Recognizing that their efforts to direct doctrinal teachings in mainline churches were, for the most part, unsuccessful, fundamentalists withdrew from their religious institutions and established new churches and schools. The 1920s thus marked a significant theological separation, as fundamentalists became “isolated from the mainstream of American religious life.”\textsuperscript{24} For the next few decades, fundamentalists were not actively engaged in politics and became fairly invisible to the secular world.

That all changed in the 1960s. In the midst of social upheaval in America, fundamentalist churches offered answers, order, and stability. Thousands of Americans became “born-again” Christians, while mainline denominations decreased in number.\textsuperscript{25} Fundamentalists were able to expand their reach even further due to a 1960 ruling from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) encouraging networks to sell airtime to religious broadcasters. Through radio and television ministries, churches and parachurch organizations were able to create a sense of community among people who shared the

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{23} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
same moral, social, and religious viewpoints. Additionally, there was a rapid growth in independent ministries aimed at proselytizing youth. These developments helped create a strong fundamentalist network that was ripe for political mobilization.

There were several issues that seemed to compel conservative Christians into the political world. In 1962, the Supreme Court ruled in *Engel v. Vitale* that state-mandated prayer in public school was a violation of the First Amendment. Many Americans considered this decision a direct assault on their religion. Their concerns were exacerbated by the Court’s 1973 *Roe v. Wade* decision legalizing abortion. Congressional consideration of the Equal Rights Amendment was especially important for organizing fundamentalist opponents. Phyllis Schlafly joined with other concerned Christians to found the Eagle Forum, an organization dedicated to opposing the ERA and the feminist movement. Fundamentalists and evangelicals gained much media and public attention when Jimmy Carter became president in 1976. A self-described, “born-again Christian,” Carter’s devout religious beliefs were welcomed by a country still recovering from Watergate and Vietnam, and the publicity surrounding his religion led many to declare 1976 the “Year of the Evangelical.”

Despite the hopes of conservative Christians, Carter failed to focus on the moral and social agenda the Religious Right considered most important. For instance, when the president hosted the White House Conference on Families, he refused to exclude delegates representing non-traditional perspectives on family. Fundamentalists thought

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27 Diamond, *Roads to Dominion*, 163.
Carter’s decision was hostile to their religion and became determined to defeat him in the upcoming election. Republicans were also eager to court white evangelicals, and to that end, helped the Religious Right openly organize on a massive scale. In the late 1970s, four key political groups were created to help Ronald Reagan and other Republicans in the 1980 election. These groups included Robert Billing’s National Christian Action Coalition, Ed McAteer’s Religious Roundtable, Robert Grant’s Christian Voice, and Jerry Falwell’s Moral Majority.\(^\text{28}\) The Christian Voice researched legislators’ positions on various moral and social issues. They then distributed “moral report cards” that served as voting guides for conservative Christians—a strategy still used by the Religious Right today. Moral Majority became the most well-known of the Religious Right organizations. Using Jerry Falwell’s mega-church as its base, the group coordinated churches, television broadcasts, and sympathetic clergy to encourage fundamentalists to become politically active. By 1980, Moral Majority claimed to have registered over three million new voters.\(^\text{29}\)

With these efforts to mobilize conservative Christian voters, the Religious Right’s trend of political power took hold. Pollster Louis Harris estimated that white evangelicals accounted for two-thirds of Reagan’s ten-point margin over Jimmy Carter.\(^\text{30}\) President Reagan recognized the power of this new voting bloc, and his aides met regularly with leading Religious Right spokespeople. Yet once again, despite having a sympathetic administration in the White House, the Religious Right failed to obtain the

\(^{28}\) Detwiler, 13.

\(^{29}\) Diamond, \textit{Roads to Dominion}, 174.

moral reform they sought. Reagan focused mostly on his economic and military agenda, while efforts to pass a school prayer amendment and to reverse Roe v. Wade went nowhere. Nonetheless, the Religious Right remained firmly planted in the Republican Party. In fact, the Religious Right became one of two dominant constituencies that consistently vote Republican (the other being people with incomes over $200,000).\(^\text{31}\)

In September 1986, Pat Robertson, the televangelist host of the Christian Broadcasting Network’s popular “700 Club,” told his supporters he would run for president in 1988 if three million registered voters signed a petition and pledged to support his candidacy. One year later, after raising over $11 million and compiling a mailing list of millions, Robertson officially entered the race.\(^\text{32}\) On several occasions, Robertson publicly remarked that only Jews and Christians are qualified to govern in America, and he promised to appoint only ultraconservative officials if elected.\(^\text{33}\) The televangelist fared well in some caucuses and straw polls due to his highly determined, highly organized grassroots supporters, but the campaign was short-lived. George Bush won the Republican nomination, and eighty percent of evangelical voters supported him in the election. Shortly thereafter, in 1989, Jerry Falwell disbanded the Moral Majority. By that time, however, Pat Robertson had turned his campaign apparatus into the Christian Coalition—an organization that mirrors Moral Majority in both members and purpose. The Christian Coalition claims over one million members and over one thousand local chapters in all fifty states. The Coalition continues to mobilize sympathetic voters by

\(^{31}\) Diamond, Facing the Wrath, 39.


\(^{33}\) Ibid, 50-1.
distributing voter guides, maintaining direct mailing lists, and emphasizing the evils of a society governed by secular humanism.

Political Strengths and Weaknesses

Although some analysts suggest that the Religious Right has already passed its peak in political power, it is clear that the movement still remains a master of political strategy. One of the Religious Right’s primary strategies is to directly target churches for voters and activists. Fundamentalists are often suspicious of the larger culture and prefer to worship in decentralized religious organizations, such as small denominations, parachurch groups, and independent churches. While churches are not a formal part of Religious Right organization, they are one of the main reasons for the movement’s success. Churches are a forum for political organizing and an ideal source of activists who already share similar visions of the ideal America. As Ralph Reed once explained: “The advantage we have is that liberals and feminists don’t generally go to church. They don’t gather in one place three days before the election.” Independent churches also breed strong, effective entrepreneurial leaders, who often become key members of the Religious Right elite.

Additionally, there has been a recent trend in the growth of mega-churches, especially in the suburbs. These churches have between five to ten thousand members

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and are an ideal means of disseminating information to a large population. The size and cohesiveness of potential Religious Right followers is a true political asset. White evangelicals make up about one-fourth of the American population, so even if just half of them identified with the Religious Right, they would create a voting bloc larger than that of African Americans.

Perhaps the greatest strength of the Religious Right is its use of the “electronic church” and other forms of Christian media. Television broadcasts use an appealing, fast-paced, and entertaining format similar to the polished tactics of mainstream programming. Most effective about Christian media use is that each outlet refers followers to some other information medium. For instance, “The 700 Club” directs viewers to its website, where they can find featured “fact sheets,” prayer request forms, and, of course, donation information. Conservative Christian think tanks also serve as distributors of videos, newsletters, and books endorsing Religious Right ideas. These communication networks have provided the movement with the funding and supporters necessary to be considered a political force.

Yet the Religious Right still struggles to overcome several weaknesses. Internal disunity remains one of the primary obstacles to political organization. Rozell and Wilcox explain that there are three ways the movement fits into the political process: contention, consolidation, and confrontation. Contention refers to the need for conflict

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36 Kintz and Lesage, 35.
37 Rozell and Wilcox, 3.
38 Kintz and Lesage, 24.
39 Ibid, 22.
40 Rozell and Wilcox, 4.
in order for the movement to gain momentum and matter politically. Consolidation is a strategy by which members of the movement compromise with the broader coalition. For instance, some Religious Right leaders believe they should compromise with Republicans in the election process and then try to influence policy once the Republicans are in office. This is also called the pragmatic approach. Finally, confrontation is when members refuse to compromise and instead, fight would-be allies. This is considered the purist approach. The Religious Right is constantly divided between pragmatists and purists in determining how to achieve the movement’s goals. Often times, the coalition leadership cede to Republican allies, but rank-and-file members see no gray area for compromise.41 Such disunity causes political infighting and weakens the Religious Right’s mobilization efforts.

Another problem the movement confronts is theological conflict. Although firm religious beliefs are one of the movement’s strengths, they also are a huge limitation in the political world. Despite a growing acceptance of political involvement among evangelicals, many are still reluctant to engage in political matters; they believe religion should focus on saving souls rather than reforming society.42 Thus, the Religious Right is limited in the number of sympathizers it can persuade to be politically active. Moreover, the Religious Right’s fierce commitment to fundamentalist principles alienates many people who differ theologically but have similar political opinions. As a consequence, the movement must constantly debate its ideal identity— that of a group of unyielding

41 Diamond, Facing the Wrath, 21.
42 Green, 23-26.
moral crusaders, rank-and-file Republicans, or some combination of both these tendencies.\textsuperscript{43}

Finally, the Religious Right has recently experienced declines in funding and followers. In June 1999, the Christian Coalition lost its ten-year struggle with the IRS to gain tax-exempt status. The IRS concluded that the coalition’s voter guides and other politicking were partisan in nature, thus making the group ineligible for 501(c)(4) tax exempt status.\textsuperscript{44} The decision was a major blow to the Religious Right because many preachers and religious leaders became wary of collaborating with the Christian Coalition and potentially losing their institution’s own tax exempt status. Even before the IRS decision, the Christian Coalition faced substantial revenue losses; in 1996, the organization took in $26 million, but that figure dropped to $17 million in 1997.\textsuperscript{45} Without sufficient funding and support, the Religious Right’s ability to affect election outcomes and policymaking will be severely limited.

\textit{Into the Future}

Some analysts suggest that the Religious Right will only survive in a modest form, but despite receiving less publicity, the movement still has millions of followers who are highly devoted to enacting their political agenda. In the past decade, the Religious Right has shifted much of its focus from Congress to local politics.\textsuperscript{46}

\textsuperscript{43} Diamond, \textit{Facing the Wrath}, 87.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{46} Boston, 233.
Organizations like the Christian Coalition and Family Research Council still have a significant role in coordinating voters, but grassroots groups have grown in number and strength. As one critic cautions, “The Religious Right never died; it simply shifted tactics.”

Decades ago, political analyst Alexis de Tocqueville observed, “There is no country in the world where the Christian religion retains a greater influence over the souls of men than in America.” The Religious Right exemplifies the power of religion to motivate individual action in all spheres of life, including politics. Yet if this movement were to successfully make its vision a reality, a narrow definition of the Christian religion would hold influence over more than just the souls of believers; it would become the dominant influence over government, public policy, and all Americans, Christian or not. Clearly, the Religious Right, and the rhetoric it employs to persuade and mobilize followers, merit further study. By examining the political communication of this movement, a deeper understanding of the Religious Right’s motivation, worldview, and strategies can be reached, thus empowering opponents to respond more effectively.

48 Quoted in Jelen, 9.
Chapter Two
Faith-Based Rhetoric:
The Battle Over Bush’s Faith-Based Initiative

The 2000 presidential election made it clear that religion continues to play a significant role in American politics. George W. Bush’s controversial visit to the radically conservative Bob Jones University sparked criticism from Republicans and Democrats alike. Vice presidential candidate Joe Lieberman’s frequent references to God and religion were indicative of the public’s yearning for moral renewal in the White House. Yet remaining at the forefront of debate long after the election was a proposal to provide government funding to faith-based social service organizations. Both Bush and Gore agreed that faith-based groups are a necessary supplement to the government’s social safety net. Although the two candidates disagreed about the specifics of a plan to fund faith-based groups, the stage was set for what became an intense debate entangling both religion and politics.

Early Reactions to the Faith-Based Initiative

Shortly after Bush was elected to office, he began meeting with church leaders and faith-based organizations to get feedback about how the government could best help them in their efforts. Bush’s “faith-based initiative” soon took form. The president-elect explained that he hoped “to end regulations that prohibit religious groups from participating in federal programs; make it easier for churches, charities, and other nongovernmental groups to get taxpayer money to operate federal programs; and create
tax breaks to increase charitable giving.”

A born-again Christian, Bush credits faith-based programs for his own recovery from alcoholism. He often cites the success of programs like Teen Challenge (a Texas-based drug and alcohol rehabilitation program that emphasizes evangelical Christianity) and Chuck Colson’s Prison Fellowship, which also seeks to lead people to faith in Jesus Christ. The evangelical nature of these programs led many critics to believe Bush’s faith-based initiative was merely a ploy to appeal to his conservative Christian supporters.

To the surprise of the Bush Administration and critics of the faith-based plan, the Religious Right’s response was tepid from the beginning. In late December, the American Family Association became one of the first Religious Right groups to caution faith-based programs about accepting government money with strings attached. In an online column entitled, “Beware of Government in Faith-Based Programs,” the American Family Association raised several arguments and used rhetorical tactics that quickly became common among Religious Right groups. For instance, the article begins by voicing support for Bush as a leader and a person of faith: “Dubya means well. He appears sincere. He apparently is a man with a growing and genuine faith.” The article then criticizes Bush for involving the federal government in matters best addressed by religious leaders and community developers:

“In a comparison of speeches by George W. Bush and outgoing president Bill Clinton, Cato Institute’s president Edward Crane has noted that Bush is downright, well, Clintonesque on this point. Their speeches indicate that both

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men hold the ‘assumption that virtually any problem confronting the American people is an excuse for action by the Federal Government.’

This criticism relies not only on the Religious Right’s hatred of an over-expansive government, but also the negative associations related to former president Bill Clinton. “Federal government” and “Clintonesque” are essentially used as “devil terms” to simplify the debate and persuade readers that the faith-based plan is flawed.

The article uses several other references to caution allowing the “federal finger in churches and institutions of faith where government doesn’t belong.” To respond to church-state separationists, the column argues that the “original church-state argument was all about protecting the church from the state. This should be of paramount concern.” Here, despite the fact that both separationists and conservative Christians were concerned about church-state entanglement, the author attempts to distinguish the concerns of religious groups from those of the separationists. There is a clear message that religion, and religious people, should be the most important consideration—a argument that is often used in Religious Right rhetoric. The article further argues against government involvement by alluding to conservative icon, Ronald Reagan: “Reagan used to remind us of the scariest words in the English language: ‘Hi. We’re from the government. And we’re here to help.’” Thus, despite voicing support for Bush, the American Family Association’s reaction to the president’s pet issue was quite negative.

*Rifts in the Religious Right*
In January 2001, the Bush Administration strategized how to win enough support to pass the faith-based initiative. Concerned about liberal opposition to the plan, the administration decided to be reservedly open to compromise. On January 31, Bush signed two executive orders to establish the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives (OFBCI) and also, to organize similar outreach centers in five other executive branch agencies. Bush appointed John J. DiIulio, a former Gore advisor, to head the new White House office. The move was largely an effort to “show liberals that he was not in the religious right’s corner.” While DiIulio’s appointment may have appealed to liberal Republicans and Democrats, Bush’s decision landed him more criticism from the right. Michael Schwartz, vice president for governmental relations at Concerned Women for America, exclaimed, “Instead of entering into a dialogue with the base, they tried to make the initiative acceptable to radical secularists.”

The next few months were marked by mixed response from the Religious Right. The Center for Reclaiming America (the political arm of D. James Kennedy’s Coral Ridge Ministries empire) issued its own statement on the subject in mid-February. Entitled “The Truth About Faith-Based Initiatives,” the statement argues that church-state separation is a myth and that the federal government is discriminating against religious organizations. The statement begins by proclaiming that the faith-based initiative is opposed by “anti-family lobbyists,” such as the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. The “anti-family” label is one the Religious Right liberally applies to any group that does

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52 Ibid.
not support their definition of and opinions about family. By using the label, and promptly referencing the position of a gay rights organization, the statement clearly divides America into two camps: the pro- and anti-family forces, or the secular humanists and the Christians. This strong rhetoric leaves no room for shades of gray, and thus, followers are compelled to embrace the advocated position, or risk being associated with the enemy.

The Center for Reclaiming America continues its argument against “anti-family” groups by stating that church-state separation is not a part of “America’s true history.” According to the article, “the ‘evidence’ most often cited by those advocating ‘separation of church and state’ point to a letter written by President Thomas Jefferson in 1803 to the Danbury Baptists...” Here, the quotations around “evidence” and “separation of church and state” are an attempt to render the opponent’s argument illegitimate. The article claims that the Danbury letter was a private correspondence that received little attention at the time. The Religious Right frequently attacks Jefferson’s letter in an attempt to portray church-state separation as a myth.54 In addition to attacking church-state separation, the article claims that “‘separation’ doesn’t apply to everyone equally...anti-family groups have received federal funding for years, simply because they call themselves ‘secular.’” This argument illustrates the Religious Right perception that non-religious programs are, in fact, preaching their own religion of secular humanism—one that turns beneficiaries into “gender warriors and militant multiculturalists.” As the article concludes, “We’re not talking about religion versus secularism here. We’re

talking rival faiths.” The militant language in these statements clearly evokes images of a culture war and portrays opponents as the enemy “warriors.” This type of militant rhetoric seems to be used to inspire Religious Right “warriors” and to give legitimacy to their fight.

Arguing from a different point of view, the American Family Association issued another statement opposing the faith-based initiative on February 22, 2001. The organization raised a new objection to Bush’s proposal by questioning which religions would be considered legitimate by the government. The Religious Right’s belief in Christianity as superior religion is evident in the article’s statement: “What happens with the fringe of religion in America isn’t as important as what happens to the likes of Christendom, the majority belief system of the nation.” Another objection to the proposal is that faith-based programs receiving government money would have to separate any religious aspects from the service component. In response, the American Family Association contends: “That is not the way the faith of the Bible tended to operate.” Again, there is emphasis on religion being the most important consideration in policy-making. Finally, the article concludes by quipping: “For now the office is open. Let’s see what becomes of it. And pray.” Referencing the Bible, and encouraging people to pray about the faith-based initiative, are rhetorical tactics that remind readers of the religious nature of the organization. In this manner, the organization’s rhetoric subtly suggests that its views are superior since God is on their side.

The Family Research Council weighed in on the debate in its March 2001 *Washington Watch* newsletter. Taking a position similar to that of the Center for Reclaiming America, the Family Research Council argued in favor of the faith-based initiative. The newsletter details some of the successes of faith-based organizations and lauds Bush’s effort to remove barriers preventing federal funding of these groups. In yet another reference to the proposal’s opponents, the newsletter states: “Secularists who seek to remove all vestiges of religion from public life have begun an assault against this faith-based initiative.” This rhetoric simplifies the debate and once again portrays Christians as being persecuted by secular forces. In the Religious Right’s mind, Christianity is constantly under attack from a hostile government and a people increasingly embracing pluralism. Hence, the newsletter’s praise for Bush’s declaration: “The days of discriminating against religious institutions simply because they are religious must come to an end.”

At this point, it is important to observe that while Religious Right organizations did not all take the same position on the faith-based initiative, their arguments all followed a predictable pattern. Organizations that supported Bush’s proposal emphasized the importance of government recognizing the work of faith-based groups. According to the Family Research Council, “after eight years of cynicism about religion at the highest levels of the federal government, a new springtime has hit the White House.”

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57 Ibid.
opponents—labeling them secular humanists, gender warriors, and militant multiculturalists. This approach seems to suggest that some Religious Right organizations would support the initiative simply to avoid joining the opposing coalition comprised of their traditional enemies. Organizations opposing the faith-based initiative argued against government involvement with religion and raised concerns about “fringe” religions receiving benefits to the detriment of Christianity. Yet despite raising objections to the faith-based proposal, these groups still voiced support for Bush and praised the recognition he gave to religion as a force in changing people’s lives. Therefore, although Religious Right followers took different positions on the issue, their rhetoric was consistent in emphasizing certain commonalities: support for Bush, hostility toward secularists, and belief in religion (Christianity) as the most important consideration of all.

These arguments formed the foundation of Jerry Falwell’s controversial remarks in a Beliefnet interview on March 6, 2001.58 When asked about his position on the faith-based initiative, Falwell responded: “I have deep concerns about the faith-based initiatives, but I am in support...My problem is not with the intentions of the Bush presidency. My problem is where it might go under his successors.” The support for Bush is evident once again, and Falwell’s partisanship became even more blatant when he proclaimed: “I would not want to put any of the Jerry Falwell Ministries in a position where we might be subservient to a future Bill Clinton, God forbid.” Falwell also raised concerns that the “Church of Scientology, the Jehovah Witnesses, the various and many

denominations and religious groups” would be eligible for government funding. In response to questions about whether Islamic groups should receive federal dollars, Falwell stated: “I think the Moslem faith teaches hate...I think that when persons are clearly bigoted towards other persons in the human family, they should be disqualified from funds.” Falwell’s comments straightforwardly proclaim that Christianity is one of the few legitimate religions that should be recognized by the government. His rhetorical approach capitalizes on Americans’ fears about and unfamiliarity with minority religions in order to persuade them that the faith-based initiative should rightfully serve only Judeo-Christian values.

In his own editorial, Pat Robertson used similar rhetoric to express his concerns about the faith-based initiative. Robertson’s editorial first acknowledges the importance of faith-based organizations in “mediating between those in need and an enormously expansive and often coldly impersonal governmental social service bureaucracy.”59 This description of the government employs several terms with which people have strongly negative associations; Robertson’s use of “coldly impersonal” and “bureaucracy” immediately set the tone for the argument that religion needs sovereignty from government. He also contends that the effectiveness of faith-based groups is grounded in their religious message, and therefore, the government should not require aid recipients to “give up their unique religious activities” under “a tortured definition of separation of church and state.” While Robertson acknowledges church-state separation in this statement (he usually argues that it is a myth), he alludes to the oft-cited argument that

separation was only intended to protect the church. Finally, just like Jerry Falwell, Robertson protests, “The same government grants given to Catholics, Protestant and Jews must also be given to the Hare Krishnas, the Church of Scientology, or Sun Myung Moon’s Unification Church...In my mind, this creates an intolerable situation.” Indeed, the rhetoric of both of these Religious Right leaders stresses that placing minority religions on par with their own is “intolerable.”

Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s ethics agency, also expressed concerns about the initiative (though in a much more moderate tone) in a March 7 editorial. Land begins his editorial by praising Bush and his recognition of “religion’s vital role in society.” Land also repeats the Bush quote about ending “discrimination against religious institutions.” Voicing the same arguments as the American Family Association, Land then declares that government oversight is the most controversial aspect of the proposal. According to him:

“If the government gives funding to religious groups, then it must oversee how the money is used—and, we fear, how churches spread their message. That worry, coupled with the knowledge that Bush will not always be president...causes many religious Americans grave reservations.”

Land asserts the oft-cited concern that too much government intervention will inhibit religion, and thus, he concludes: “As for me and my house, I would not touch the money with the proverbial 10-foot pole.” In a move uncharacteristic of Religious Right

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60 It should be noted that Land is a part of the more progressive arm of the Southern Baptist Convention and may not identify himself with many of the positions held by conservative Christians associated with the Religious Right. Nonetheless, as an influential spokesperson of a dominant conservative religious organization, his rhetoric also merits analysis.

sympathizers, Land then voices disapproval for comments made by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson:

“People who are tempted to find some religious groups objectionable should always remember that the government permitted to discriminate against Hare Krishnas today may very well discriminate against Baptist and Catholics tomorrow.”

This argument reinforces the position that the faith-based initiative gives the government too much power to interfere with religion, and perhaps even destroy it. Land’s attempt to distinguish himself from Falwell and Robertson is a significant rhetorical tactic; individuals offended by radical rhetoric could find Land’s tone more reasonable and appealing. Despite the differences in approach, the message is consistent: be cautious when the government intervenes in religion.

White House Response

Just two months after Bush took office, the debate over his faith-based proposal had created a “rare rift between the new administration and once-loyal social conservatives.”

The situation grew even more contentious after OFBCI Director John J. Dilulio attended the National Association of Evangelicals meeting in Dallas. At the March 7 convention, Dilulio sharply responded to the comments from Religious Right leaders. He stated:

“Compared to predominantly ex-urban, white evangelical churches, urban African-American and Latino faith communities have benevolent traditions and histories that make them generally more dedicated to community-serving missions and generally more confident about engaging public and secular partners.

in achieving those missions without enervating their spiritual identities or religious characters. With all due respect and in good fellowship, predominantly white, exurban evangelical and national parachurch leaders should be careful not to presume to speak for any persons other than themselves and their own churches.”

Although White House officials apologized for DiIulio’s remarks to evangelicals, social conservatives pushed for him to be replaced. Louis Sheldon, chairman of the Traditional Values Coalition contended, “We didn’t know what he was made of, and we think he is the wrong person for the position,” adding that DiIulio is a Roman Catholic who voted for Gore. Richard Land also expressed his disappointment in DiIulio, accusing him of “caricaturing and stereotyping my denomination and the worst aspects of our past in a way that amounts to playing the race card.”

The faith-based proposal essentially stalled as conservative Christians complained that Bush was increasingly bending to demands from the left while ignoring evangelicals. The faith-based initiative, or H.R. 7 (the Community Solutions Act), even lost support from Marvin Olasky, a former Bush advisor and early architect of the proposal. Olasky’s main complaint was that under the new proposal, federal funds could not be used for proselytizing. As he argued, “I cannot give blanket support now because I am not willing to support discrimination in grant-making against evangelicals.”

Black clergy criticized evangelical leaders for not supporting the plan, and some even accused Religious Right leaders as opposing the initiative because it might disproportionately help African

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64 Ibid.
65 Ibid.
Americans. Land responded by saying such remarks proved that “bigots come in all stripes and all colors and all professions.” The political maneuvering and religious infighting were enhanced when Bush made several efforts to reach out to Catholics. Richard Cizik, vice president for government affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals, commented: “He [Bush] has certainly met with more Catholics than evangelicals. It’s probably hurt him with the Religious Right because they’ve felt ignored...this could come back to bite him.”

In response to growing concern that the bill was losing much-needed allies, John J. DiIulio agreed on April 26 to “drop his position that faith-based programs need to be devoid of preaching, teaching, or evangelism in order to be eligible for federal grants.” That concession was enough to quiet criticism from the right, but liberals were still dismayed at the prospect of the federal government paying for religious teaching and proselytizing. Fearing an embarrassing legislative defeat, the Bush administration and Republican leadership agreed to water down parts of H.R. 7. DiIulio withdrew from his previous agreement, and H.R. 7 was changed to require groups to segment their programs into religious and nonreligious parts in order to receive government aid. Then, in June 2001, a new clause was added that would require faith-based groups to provide a secular alternative if a service recipient objected to the religious nature of the program. Richard Land (Southern Baptist Convention)

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69 Olasky.
applauded the revisions and said they were “absolutely essential changes” to protect people from being forced to participate in a religious activity or being refused services for faith reasons.70

Some conservative Christian leaders fought the new revisions, but most were content with the bill’s stipulations. Louis Sheldon of the Traditional Values Coalition stated that faith-based groups could work around the regulations: “All it takes is a little bit of creativity.”71 One executive close to the White House explained that if a homeless shelter wanted to conduct a sermon after dinner, they could simply offer recipients a choice between writing a paper and attending the service. Since attending the sermon would be a voluntary choice, it would not be considered forced proselytization.72 Nonetheless, the White House continued its intense lobbying of conservative Christian groups, most of whom agreed to support H.R. 7 for no other reason than to support Bush’s principles.

*Debate in the House*

On July 11, the House Ways and Means Committee approved the less controversial, tax reform part of H.R. 7 and sent the bill to the floor for debate. The tax reform would allow nonitemizers to deduct charitable donations on their tax returns. Although Bush’s original proposal called for $84 billion over ten years, Ways and Means cut that figure to $6 billion. Thus, deductions were limited to only $25 for single


71 Olasky.

72 Ibid.
taxpayers, amounting to a meager $3.75 in annual savings.\textsuperscript{73} That same day, Bush personally spoke to wavering Republicans to urge them to vote for H.R. 7. Rep. Steve Largent (R-OK) commented, “He was incredible. He had no notes, he wasn’t being handled at all, he was speaking from his heart.”\textsuperscript{74} Both opponents and supporters of the bill predicted Bush had secured enough votes to pass his landmark legislation.\textsuperscript{75}

However, the faith-based initiative hit yet another roadblock when the \textit{Washington Post} acquired an internal document from the Salvation Army detailing White House collaboration to exempt religious organizations from anti-discrimination laws against gays.\textsuperscript{76} The Salvation Army memo indicated the organization was willing to lobby heavily for the faith-based initiative (spending over $100,000 a month) in return for a provision exempting faith-based groups from local anti-discrimination ordinances. Several charities shared the Salvation Army’s concern that they would have to hire gays despite religious objections to doing so.

In an attempt to save the bill and assuage concerns that federal dollars would promote employment discrimination, Rep. Mark Foley (R-FL) proposed an amendment that would require religious organizations receiving federal aid to be compliant with state and local civil rights ordinances. Immediately, the Religious Right fiercely spoke out against the amendment and threatened to withdraw support from H.R. 7 if the amendment passed. The Family Research Council sent out an email alert entitled “Call Congress

\textsuperscript{73} Carr, Rebecca. “House Panel OKs Modest Tax Breaks for Charity.” \textit{Atlanta Journal and Constitution}, 12 July 2001, 2B.
\textsuperscript{74} Olasky.
Now! Homosexuals to Hijack Faith-Based Bill.” Shannon Royce, director of government relation and legislative counsel of the Southern Baptist Convention warned, “If that amendment passes, we will oppose the bill. We’re not going to support a broadly expanded civil-rights measure to the benefit of homosexuals.”

Concerned Women for America—a Religious Right group previously undecided about the faith-based initiative—promptly issued a statement supporting the Salvation Army’s “attempt to protect itself from homosexual ‘rights’ laws.” The statement, entitled “Homosexuals Reveal Bigotry After Post Articles on Salvation Army,” cautions that “homosexual activists are stepping up their attempts to remove religious freedom protections” from H.R. 7. Concerned Women for America makes clear their “belief that homosexuality is sinful and that it is wrong to give benefits to unmarried and homosexual ‘domestic partners.’” In addition the obvious argument against homosexuality, Concerned Women for America frequently uses quotations to rhetorically indicate the group’s disapproval of gays and any legislation protecting them from discrimination. For instance, consider the press release’s reference to a “troubling” growth in the number of “pro-homosexual ‘nondiscrimination’ laws in cities across the United States. By depicting anti-discrimination legislation as “pro-homosexual,” the statement argues that such laws give special treatment to gays. The consistent use of “pro” and “anti” labels also mark clear divisions between Christian supporters and secular opponents.

77 Olasky.
According to the statement from Concerned Women for America, “the Salvation Army provides numerous services to homosexuals as part of its charitable outreach.” After all, the Army “has become well known for its AIDS work, and it recently built a $12 million center for families of people with AIDS in Los Angeles.” This argument is particularly worthy of attention because of the dichotomy in the organization’s position. While the group firmly opposes homosexuals and is outraged at the thought of a Christian organization employing them, it defends the Salvation Army for helping AIDS patients (who are presumed to be gay). The rhetoric implies that helping gays when they are in a need is worthy of praise, but any legislation giving them equal footing with heterosexuals is against “Biblical belief.”

The statement also reasserts the common Religious Right argument that Christians are really the ones being persecuted in America. According to the statement, the Washington Post story and subsequent media coverage “revealed the media’s penchant for classifying religious objections to homosexuality as ‘bigotry.’” Here, the Religious Right organization essentially shifts the label of “bigotry” from themselves to homosexuals and their supporters. The article then contends that this latest incident is just part of ongoing “hostility between homosexual activism and Christians and other people of faith.” Such stark language once again portrays the public as divided into two clear camps—a division that oversimplifies the debate but at the same time, is rhetorically alarming.
Finally, the article takes its anti-gay message a step further, radically accusing homosexuals of trying to destroy religion. The article quotes Rabbi David Eidensohn, director of the National Non-Sectarian Council of Pro-Family Activists:

“This flip-flop shows that religious people in America have to give their tax money so that gays can destroy religion. Millions and millions of dollars of tax money go to gays to hire lawyers, rent buildings, and achieve great cultural and political power, and those who pay the taxes must suffer in silence. The pro-family majority doesn’t even get a few crumbs for doing social work, unless we tear out that page in the Bible that calls homosexuality an abomination...Every step of gay power, every legislation empowering the gay lobby, is a knife pointed at the heart of those who heard God’s word at Sinai. We are fighting for our survival, not the right to discriminate.”

There are several aspects of this rhetoric that must be considered. First, there is a clear lack of evidence supporting the claim that tax dollars are being given to gays to “destroy religion” and “achieve great power.” Despite the lack of data, however, Eidensohn’s claim is alarming and could clearly mobilize individuals who already share those beliefs. Second, Eidensohn raises the oft-repeated argument that religious people are being persecuted. They “suffer in silence” and don’t “even get a few crumbs for doing social work.” Again, the rhetoric strongly paints a picture of an oppressed people and provides justification to attack the enemy—culturally powerful gays who threaten religion. Third, references to the Bible and to God are important in bolstering the advocated position; the more religious justification provided, the stronger the impulse to take action. Finally, it is important to note the militant language (destroy, knife, fighting, etc.). Eidensohn’s statement uses the same war metaphors often employed in Religious Right rhetoric. According to the research of Lakoff and Johnson, metaphors can be used to frame our
reality and our behavior. By portraying the debate in terms of war, the Religious Right convinces followers that a crisis exists, and that they must respond to the call to arms.

The Salvation Army story not only sparked renewed debate from the Religious Right, but it also divided House Republicans. When moderate Republicans threatened to withdraw support from the bill over the discrimination question, Republican leadership delayed the House vote for a day. The dispute was resolved when Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-IL) promised that the employment discrimination issue would be worked out with the Senate version of the bill. After all, with the Democrats controlling the Senate, it was unlikely the bill would pass without protections against employment discrimination. On July 19, after a day of debate that included no surprises, H.R. 7 passed on a vote of 234 to 195; fifteen Democrats voted in favor of the bill, and four Republicans voted against it.

On to the Senate

Following House passage of the Community Solutions Act, the faith-based debate shifted to the Senate, but forecasts for the bill were not optimistic. Senators Joe Lieberman (D-CT) and Rick Santorum (R-PA) took up the cause and agreed to co-sponsor the faith-based legislation, though both acknowledged the uphill battle ahead. Senate Democrats were unhappy with the House version of the bill, and Senate majority leader Thomas Daschle (D-SD) was not interested in bringing the legislation to the floor.

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Then, on August 17, John J. DiIulio resigned his post as director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. DiIulio said that from the beginning, he only planned to serve six months and cited health and family reasons for leaving the White House. However, some speculated that the legislative conflict in a deeply divided Congress contributed to Dilulio’s decision to leave.81 

Progress on the faith initiative essentially stalled, and debate became less stirring due to the lack of new developments. Even the tone of rhetoric from the Religious Right reflected the unlikelihood of seeing the faith-based initiative enacted. Organizations issued significantly fewer press releases, editorials, and articles after the H.R. 7 passed. What statements were released lamented the Senate’s steps to “gut the legislation of its intended goal” and blamed Democrats for stalling efforts to help charities.82 

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, attention from the White House, Congress, and the Religious Right shifted dramatically. Bush’s domestic agenda took a back seat to foreign policy concerns, and without heavy lobbying from the White House, the faith-based initiative dwindled in limbo.83 By the end of the year, proponents of the faith-based initiative were pushing to consider the legislation, but this time, there was new justification for passing the bill. Following September 11, many charities experienced a substantial decrease in donations as Americans contributed mainly to relief

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efforts and funds for rescue workers and their families. The least controversial aspect of
the faith-based bill was the tax deduction for charitable giving, so proponents emphasized
this section as they sought to revive the legislation.

By February 2002, Bush gave his approval for a compromise version of his faith-
based initiative, entitled “Armies of Compassion.” The negotiated proposal abandoned
the controversial charitable choice element, which would have provided government
funding to faith-based social service providers, but it increased the tax deductions for
charitable giving. The Senate bill would allow non-itemizing individuals to deduct up to
$400 (and couples up to $800) in charitable donations, which was hailed as large enough
to spur charitable giving, unlike the House bill’s $25 deduction. According to the Senate
sponsors, the last hurdle would be convincing Congress to approve the $10 billion
spending, despite other pressing needs.

Of course, the compromise legislation could not entirely please everyone.
However, many of the Religious Right’s concerns were resolved by abandoning the
charitable choice proposal altogether, and the inclusion of increased tax deductions gave
the acknowledgement to faith-based organizations that conservative Christians were
seeking. The Religious Right’s sentiments toward the revised legislation are aptly
summarized in a statement from Family Research Council President Ken Connor:

“We applaud the President for promoting tax incentives that would encourage
giving to private charities. Especially since the events of September 11, I think all
Americans realize the very important role charities play in our society. We do

85 Leonard, Mary. “Bush Backs Deal on Faith Initiative Pushed by Bipartisan Senate Group; Controversial
86 Ibid.
regret the President’s goal to expand charitable choice and the role of faith-based organizations was thwarted by the Democratically-controlled Senate. We encourage the President to continue to look for opportunities to revisit his original proposal.”

_Toward a Rhetorical Method_  
The debate surrounding President Bush’s faith-based initiative exemplifies the complicated nature of the Religious Right as a social movement. Organizations and spokespersons that identify with the Religious Right did not all take the same position on the faith-based initiative, which illustrates the tendency toward political and religious conflict within the movement itself. The lack of a consistent position also complicates efforts to measure the influence and effectiveness of the Religious Right in achieving its goals. However, even though various groups did not all agree to support or oppose the initiative, for the most part, they all asserted the same arguments. As a result, the Religious Right’s ultimate objectives to protect their religious ideals, avoid interference from the government, and advance their own political agenda were consistent. Toward that end, the movement employed similar rhetorical tactics, which can be summarized as follows:

1) Partisan Language – Religious Right groups made no effort to conceal their ties with the Republican Party. Every organization that weighed in on the debate was consistent in voicing support for President Bush, even those that disagreed with elements of the faith-based initiative. The Religious Right praised Bush for his “growing and genuine faith” and trusted his intentions of increasing support for

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faith-based service providers. At the same time, movement leaders expressed great concerns about “future Bill Clintons” overseeing the initiative. They often condemned liberals and Democrats for opposing the initiative and blamed them for stalling progress, despite the fact that moderate Republicans often shared similar concerns.

2) Skepticism Toward the Federal Government – Both proponents and opponents of the legislation were skeptical, at best, of the federal government, and hostile, at worst. Richard Land was concerned that government oversight would eventually lead to the restrictions on “how churches spread their message.” Pat Robertson called the federal government “coldly impersonal” and doubted its abilities to perform the same social services offered by faith-based organizations. Religious Right groups agreed with the American Family Association that it was wrong to give the federal government any more power to address domestic problems or to allow the “federal finger” to touch churches in any way.

3) One-Sided Definition of Church-State Separation – Several statements from Religious Right organizations responded to concerns about church-state separation by arguing that it was not part of “America’s true history,” or that it was only intended to protect the church from the state. Pat Robertson referred to the mainstream understanding of church-state separation as a “tortured definition” and emphasized the need for government to avoid entanglement with religion.

4) Belief that Religious People are Oppressed – The Religious Right frequently cited Bush’s statement that it was time to stop “discriminating against religious
institutions simply because they are religious.” Marvin Olasky even claimed that liberal pressures altered the faith-based initiative so much that it would now “discriminate against evangelicals in grant-making.” The Family Research Council argued that secularists began “an assault on the faith-based initiative,” and by implication, the conservative Christians who supported the bill. Concerned Women for America argued that the media portrayed religious people as “bigots” because they endorsed employment discrimination against homosexuals, due, of course, to their religious beliefs. Indeed, the Religious Right consistently emphasized their belief that they are the oppressed group in America, “suffering in silence” as the country becomes increasingly pluralistic.

5) Divisive Labels – In every statement issued by the Religious Right, there were divisive labels assigned to opponents and proponents of the bill. “Anti-family” and “pro-family” were applied with little regard to what groups or individuals actually believe about families. People who do not identify with the Religious Right were broadly labeled “humanists” or “secularists” and portrayed as the primary enemy of Christians. Concerned Women for America used the label “pro-homosexual” to describe any legislation or group that sought protection from employment discrimination. By using such labels, the Religious Right illustrated its affinity to see issues only in black and white; if people do not agree completely with the narrow agenda of the movement, they are immediately considered opponents.
6) War Metaphors – Much of the Religious Right’s language evoked images of war and supported their assertion that America is currently embroiled in a culture war that threatens traditional religious values. The Center for Reclaiming America claimed that secular service providers turn their beneficiaries into “gender warriors” and “militant multiculturalists,” and the Family Research Council warned members of homosexuals’ attempt to “hijack” the faith-based initiative. Concerned Women for America cited one leader’s warning that a “knife is pointed at the heart” of those who believe in God, and that they must “fight for survival.” The militant language enhances the significance and urgency of the Religious Right’s agenda.

7) Religious Justification – From statements encouraging people to pray for the faith-based initiative to Biblical references, the Religious Right sought to provide religious justification for its positions. When White House leadership agreed to require religious aspects to be separated from service provision, the American Family Association boldly asserted that the faith of the Bible was not intended to operate that way. In all statements, protecting religion, and more specifically, religions of the Judeo-Christian tradition, was always the most important consideration for the Religious Right.

8) Superiority of Christianity – For the Religious Right, one of the most controversial aspects of the faith-based initiative is that all religious groups would be eligible for funding under its provisions. This sparked leaders to criticize other religions as less deserving, such as Jerry Falwell’s claim that the Muslim religion
“teaches hate.” Pat Robertson agreed that it would be an “intolerable situation” if Hare Krishnas and other minority groups could receive federal funding. The American Family Association summarized the Religious Right’s paramount concern: “What happens to the fringe of religion in America isn’t as important as what happens to the likes of Christendom...”
In the summer of 1925, the sleepy town of Dayton, Tennessee, was put on the map. The small town became the center of national attention with the trial of John T. Scopes, a biology teacher who had taught evolution despite a Tennessee statute forbidding it. Featuring prominent attorney Clarence Darrow and former presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan, the infamous “Monkey Trial” transformed Dayton into a carnival atmosphere, with reporters, caged chimpanzees, lemonade stands, and curious onlookers filling the streets. The trial quickly turned into showdown between people who supported evolution and those who believed in creation as depicted in the Bible. On a broader level, the trial marked growing tensions between modernists and traditionalists in America. Although the jury eventually returned a guilty verdict, fundamentalists were not considered the victors. For weeks, negative publicity, largely perpetuated by journalist H. L. Mencken, portrayed fundamentalists as simple-minded and ignorant. The Tennessee Supreme Court later reversed the decision on a technicality, but the evolution debate was never fully resolved.88

In fact, almost seventy-five years after the trial, the state of Kansas captured similar media attention and renewed the debate between science and religion. In August 1999, the Kansas State Board of Education removed certain aspects of evolution from the state science standards and gave local school boards the option of introducing alternative
theories of origin. Kansas was not the first state to challenge the teaching of evolution, but it became the center of debate. Unlike the creationists of the Scopes era, evolution opponents in Kansas employed new arguments and strategies to persuade people that evolution should not be accepted as scientific fact. Yet evolution proponents believed the new rhetoric veiled the same old Religious Right agenda: to bring religion back into the classroom.

Conflict on the Board

The controversy in Kansas had its roots in 1997, when the State Board of Education ordered the development of science standards to spell out what information students would be required to learn in each grade level.89 Kansas Commissioner of Education Andy Tompkins appointed a committee of twenty-seven science instructors to create a draft of the requested standards. In October 1998, after more than a year of research, the committee presented a set of science standards modeled closely after the National Science Education Standards. Evolution was listed as one of five “unifying concepts” in science, and the standards stipulated that students needed an understanding of evolution in order to succeed in the life sciences.90

The school board, however, could not reach a consensus to support the proposed standards. Steve Abrams, a board member and former state Republican Party chairman, led the opposition group, arguing, “There is a lot of difference of opinion about what

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90 Ibid.
evolution is. I am trying to focus on good science.” 91 In an effort to break the 5-5 deadlock, the board voted to create a three-person subcommittee to design an alternative proposal.92 The committee was comprised of Abrams, who was selected as the chair, Scott Hill (an evolution opponent), and Harold Voth, who had previously voted in favor of the evolution standards. To help develop the new proposal, Abrams promptly sought assistance from the Creation Science Association for Mid-America (CSAMA), a fundamentalist Christian organization.

Tom Willis, the President of CSAMA, became an active spokesperson for those who oppose teaching evolution as scientific fact. Willis is a young earth creationist, meaning he believes both earth and man were created approximately six thousand years ago exactly as explained in the book of Genesis.93 Willis also believes that dinosaurs did not become extinct billions of years ago, but rather, roamed the earth until the twentieth century. According to him, “You find descriptions of dinosaurs in every culture. Government reports in the late 1800s were reporting flying reptiles. They just didn’t know it was politically incorrect to report them.”94 The primary objective of CSAMA is to convince people that evolution is a “false notion of history” and to introduce scientific evidence in support of biblical creation.95 CSAMA also seeks “to inspire faith in unbelievers and encourage the faith of believers, in the Bible as the Word of God, and

91 Ibid.
94 Ibid.

therefore the only trustworthy source of information regarding the meaning, purpose, destiny and conduct of human lives.”

Toward that end, CSAMA convinced Abrams and his committee to develop standards that excluded evolution and included a statement implying that the earth was created by “an intelligent designer.” Abrams was skeptical that such language would win enough support to pass, so he continued to work with CSAMA and groups of citizens to develop a more plausible draft. After five different attempts, the committee submitted a draft to the board for a vote. The proposed standards deleted a majority of the original two pages covering evolution, including the sections addressing macroevolution, or the theory of change from one species to another. The committee also excluded references to the big bang theory and the concept that evolution is “a broad, unifying theoretical framework in biology.”

In the meetings leading up to the August 11 vote, several organizations and individuals criticized the standards and urged the Board to adopt the draft developed by science instructors. Michael Crawford, a biology professor at the University of Kansas, told the board, “Evolution is not a theory; it is a fact. We cannot replace science with mythology. We cannot go back to the time that the church said that the earth was the center of the universe, that the earth is flat.” Similar criticism came from the presidents of all six state universities. In a letter addressed to board chairman Linda Holloway, the university officials argued that the proposed standards would “set Kansas back a

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96 Ibid.
97 Benen.
Some organizations even cautioned the board that they would bring legal challenges if the standards were adopted.

Nonetheless, the board voted 6-4 in favor of the standards that de-emphasized evolution. Harold Voth cast the tie-breaking vote, explaining that most of his constituents supported the standards and that he hoped the board would turn its attention to new issues. While the new science curriculum did not prevent the teaching of evolution, the theory would not be included on state assessment states. Moreover, local school boards were given the authority to choose whether to teach evolution, to introduce evidence against it, or even to offer alternative theories of origin. The decision immediately gained national attention, mainly in the form of criticism, but Religious Right supporters were quick to come to the board’s defense.

Religious Right on the Defensive

On August 26, 1999, Beverly LaHaye, the founder and president of Concerned Women for America, released a statement arguing her organization’s point of view on the evolution decision. LaHaye argued that even though “disgruntled liberals painted it as a Religious Right attack on evolution,” the board’s decision was really a return to “freedom, federalism, and fairness in Kansas’ public schools.” The editorial claims,

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“Critics fear this move will ‘force teachers to raise questions’ about the validity of evolution. In a free society, raising questions and exploring a theory’s validity should be an innate part of the educational process. Historically, it has been the totalitarian societies who suppress such activities in schools.”

LaHaye clearly praises the standards for granting students the freedom to question evolution and decide for themselves if they accept it as scientific fact. To emphasize the importance of such academic freedom, the editorial references “totalitarian societies;” using this language makes the enemy easy to identify, as it suggests that the State Board of Education would be “totalitarian” had it not passed the new standards.

The editorial further argues that the curriculum will improve students’ critical thinking skills as they compare different theories, rather than merely being “spoon fed an evolution-only science diet.” This strong language shifts the focus from the scientific validity (or lack thereof) of alternative theories to the supposed educational benefit of examining multiple explanations. Also, referring to the “evolution-only science diet” allows LaHaye to subtly argue the unfairness of only one theory being taught, while the Religious Right’s theory on human origin is neglected. LaHaye then quips, “One wonders how much confidence advocates of evolution have in the theory, if they are afraid of a little scrutiny from schoolchildren.” The statement implies that evolutionists cannot defend their theory or the scientific evidence that supports it, which is an argument the Religious Right would raise frequently.

Finally, the editorial contends that the board’s decision was a victory for local school boards and parents, since the “state bureaucracy” would no longer be able “to dictate that every schoolchild be taught one narrow theory of the earth’s origin.” Here
again, LaHaye not only employs a “devil” term (bureaucracy), but she also reinforces the belief that it is unfair and biased to only teach evolution in the classroom. She goes on to conclude,

“Many of the controversial issues tearing at our nation today come down to this tyranny of the elite: Government leaders, educational experts, Hollywood moguls with nothing but contempt for America’s parents. The problem is that the liberals just don’t trust parents and local school boards to make responsible decisions for their children’s education. And that’s as condescending as it is offensive.”

LaHaye’s concerns about a “tyranny of the elite” reflect the Religious Right’s skepticism of the government and fear of its power. In addition to placing blame on liberals, the editorial implies that parents’ rights have been infringed upon by government decisions, and thus, the new curriculum revives federalism in America.

The Center for Reclaiming America, an outreach of D. James Kennedy’s Coral Ridge Ministries, joined the debate with a statement issued in early September. The statement repeats the same argument that education should be “the search for truth” and praised the board’s decision as a “victory for truth in Kansas.”101 Criticizing opponents of the new standards, the article suggests, “these teachers’ blind faith and allegiance to evolution prevent them from seeing the scientific evidence to the contrary.” This statement uniquely employs the same language often used to describe evolution opponents, and in turn, uses it to deride evolution supporters. Teachers are accused of having “blind faith” in a flawed theory, which has prevented them from seeing truth. Not only is the argument couched in religious undertones, but it also suggests that evolution is treated as a religion in itself. This claim is important because it allows the Religious

Right to contend that one “religious” viewpoint (naturalism) is being taught to the exclusion of others. The article also states very simply that evolution is not true, since “the laws of science, probability, and the fossil record all negate the theory of evolution.” Despite Religious Right claims that analyzing different theories develops critical thinking skills, the Center for Reclaiming America makes it clear that evolution should be completely rejected. The statement criticizes evolutionists for being narrow-minded but paradoxically asserts a one-sided position on the issue.

While the Religious Right was praising defending the science curriculum in Kansas, negative publicity from mainstream media began to take its toll. In late September, three national science organizations denied the State Board of Education the right to use any copyrighted material in the revised science standards. Copyrighted language from the National Research Council, the American Association for the Advancement of Science, and the National Science Teachers Association had been included in the standards, but when macroevolution was excluded, the organizations denied the board permission to use their material. As Gary Wheeler, executive director of the National Science Teachers Association, argued, “We cannot allow groups like the Kansas State Board of Education to grossly misrepresent the vision of quality science education.” Consequently, the board then voted to rewrite the standards enough to appease the science organizations but still retain the general ideas. Linda Holloway

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103 Ibid.
commented that she hoped rewriting the standards would quiet the debate the board had sparked.104

Yet criticism continued to rage, and the Religious Right sought to “set the record straight.” The Eagle Forum, a conservative Christian organization opposed to public education, blamed the media for spreading false accounts of the board’s decision. In the October 1999 edition of Education Reporter (the “Newspaper of Education Rights”), Nancy Pearcey quipped, “Listening to the Chicken Littles in the press, you’d think the sky had fallen in Kansas.”105 But according to her, “contrary to hysterical reports...the board merely decided no to include evolution in state competency tests, by implication, not treating it as a fact beyond dispute.” In this manner, the article effectively downplays the gravity of the situation as described by the media. The article then praises the board’s vote as a “courageous stand for academic freedom” and lists objections the Religious Right often raises against evolution. For instance, Pearcey implores:

“Let’s teach students about the ‘gaps’ in the fossil record...contradicting the theory of continuous evolutionary change. Let’s teach what the discovery of DNA implies: that at the core of life is a language, a message, and that messages are not created by physicalchemical forces...Let’s tell students how textbooks often misrepresent evidence for evolution...”

The parallel language (or repetition of “let’s teach”) adds emphasis to the article’s message that students should question evolution in the classroom. Moreover, when presenting objections to evolution, Pearcey employs a tactic common in Religious Right rhetoric on evolution. She posits what seem to be valid scientific arguments in layman’s

terms. Instead of using religious justifications for teaching creationism, Pearcey attempts to discredit evolution on scientific grounds and provides readers with arguments to reinforce their own beliefs.

The argument against evolution is taken a step further, as Pearcey claims that scientists are distorting the facts in order to protect their own atheistic views. To prove her point that Darwinism is atheistic, Pearcey quotes three Darwinists who believe evolution “excludes God as the explanation accounting for the obvious design of organisms.” This reluctant testimony is presented as evidence that evolution “already injects a religious message into the classroom.” Pearcey claims that the atheistic implications of Darwinism should be countered by introducing alternative theories. Even though she states that evolution opponents “are not trying to inject religion into the classroom,” she also admits that “creation is the foundation of the Christian worldview; if it falls, so does everything else.” In the Religious Right’s opinion, evolution cannot be accepted as fact because if humans are merely “products of mindless, material forces, then there is no purpose, no basis for morality.” Regardless of the scientific argumentation, this belief—that evolution undermines the foundation of Christianity—seems to be the greatest objection, thus leaving one to conclude that the Religious Right’s opposition to the theory is, in fact, religiously motivated.

The Kansas State Board of Education received more praise and support from James Dobson’s organization, Focus on the Family. In an article appearing in an October publication, the Religious Right group contends that the board knew it was expected to approve standards “that put a heavy emphasis on Darwinian evolution...but the board
didn’t do what was expected.”106 The article further argues that the media distorted the board’s decision by declaring that evolution was banned in Kansas. Both of these statements suggest that the evolution opponents have become victims of unwarranted criticism. The article also presents statistics from a recent Gallup poll indicating that the “largest segment of the public (44 percent) say they believe that ‘God created man pretty much in his present form at one time within the last 10,000 years.’” Furthermore, according to a survey in the journal Nature, “60 percent of ranking American natural scientists don’t believe in God at all.” By presenting these statistics, Focus on the Family suggests that a minority of non-believers is perpetuating the “expected,” dominant theory of evolution against a majority of believers. Again, the implication is that conservative Christians and their viewpoints are being oppressed. It is also important to note that while creationism is not explicitly mentioned in the article, religious beliefs are still invoked in the rhetoric and reveal the organization’s ultimate agenda.

Similar rhetoric appears in a statement issued by Judy Smith, the State Director of Concerned Women for America of Kansas, on October 29, 1999. Smith’s statement first seeks to correct media reports by explaining that the board’s decision simply placed “the standards of curricula and assessments at the local level.”107 She relies on her position to grant credibility to her explanation of “the facts.” According to Smith, “there is no scientific, identifiable evidence—only conjectures—of macroevolution. Many evolutionary hypotheses have been altered or discarded throughout the years.” Because

she considers evolution a “fraud,” Smith argues that students “have a right to see all the facts and decide for themselves which hypotheses are more reasonable.” Thus, the decision to de-emphasize evolution is hailed as one that protects students’ rights and advances academic freedom. Smith concludes, “It’s a lesson on our current society that they [the board] are suffering abuse for upholding the fundamental principle of letting important decisions concerning our children be handled at the local level.” Praising local control is the primary thrust of the article. However, Smith ends her statement by invoking the oft-repeated argument that evolution opponents are “suffering abuse” for their beliefs.

Conflicting Approaches

Concerned Women for America, the Center For Reclaiming America, the Eagle Forum, and Focus on the Family all used rhetorical tactics very different from those traditionally used by conservative Christians. Defending the board’s decision, these Religious Right groups emphasized the need for local control and academic freedom. Recognizing that the courts will not allow creationism to be taught in public schools, these organizations shifted their rhetoric to attack the scientific merits of evolution. Their arguments downplayed the religious motivation of their organizations, even though religious viewpoints were still quite evident. In contrast to this approach, some Religious Right groups continued to rely heavily on religious argumentation to attack evolution and the theory’s supporters. Organizations like the Creation Science Association for Mid-America and Answers in Genesis made no effort to conceal their goal of returning
creationism to the classroom and often made more radical statements. Given the media’s penchant to report radical claims and personal attacks, these organizations tended to impede any credibility evolution opponents may have been gaining.

For example, consider the September/October issue of the Creation Science Association’s newsletter.108 Like other Religious Right statements, the newsletter begins by defending the board and questioning why so many people have been angered by the decision. To answer, the newsletter explains, “As Jesus made perfectly clear, it is evil to lie to children, especially to deprive them of a relationship with Him. They revile us because the KSBE spanked the fannies of the liars, and the liars think it politically wise to blame ‘creationists.’” This strong language clearly divides evolution supporters and opponents into the “liars” and the “faithful,” or the good and the evil. The argument voices the common complaint that religious people are being wrongfully blamed and “reviled.” In addition to a harsher tone of rhetoric, the religious intonations are much clearer. The newsletter goes on to state that the criticism toward evolution opponents is partly because “evolution is properly understood as apologetic religious mythology used to sustain the world’s largest religions—atheism, pantheism, deism and pseudo Christianity. Mythology cannot survive open, critical dialog.” Here again is the argument that evolution is atheistic and cannot sustain debate. The reference to “pseudo Christianity” is also important to note, for it implies the superiority of a conservative, fundamentalist Christianity that rejects evolution.

The newsletter later repeats the argument that Christians are oppressed by stating:

“According to our rancorous attackers, it is fine for atheists and ‘I believe in God too’ folks to control public policy, but evil for Christians to even participate in the dialog. Of course, these folks are all unbiased scientists, and we uneducated bigots. Did you ever wonder, since random processes have no purpose, how can an evolutionist know what is evil or bigotry?”

In the Religious Right’s opinion, public policy is already influenced by religion (atheism), and Christianity is unfairly excluded from the process. This statement clearly relies on sarcasm to deride evolution supporters and their arguments. Also raised is the oft-mentioned concern that evolution implies a purposeless, meaningless life for humans devoid of any absolute morality. The frequent references to “evil” are taken to an extreme in the newsletter’s concluding remarks:

“It is a simple fact of history that God’s enemies have never been able to win using honest public discourse, they have always lied and reviled, and ended up by killing God’s people...Had they the political power, it seems obvious this bunch would just kill us, as their spiritual brethren have always done and are now doing all over the world. Probably soon, even in the ‘land of the free,’ they will have the power to achieve their desired goal. Do not lose heart!”

First, the newsletter again claims that evolution supporters are “God’s enemies” and that they have to “lie” about evolution because it cannot stand the test of “honest public discourse.” More important, however, is the argument that Christians are oppressed and being killed all over the world. This rhetoric takes the Religious Right’s belief to a new level, suggesting that evolution supporters will soon have enough power to begin “killing God’s people.” By using such strong language, the newsletter clearly attempts to persuade readers of the severity of the situation and suggest that the “culture war” is more real than metaphorical.
Religious arguments form the foundation of rhetoric for another creationist organization, Answers in Genesis. Although Answers in Genesis raises the same “scientific” objections to evolution as other Religious Right groups, it also presents biblical references as evidence that evolution did not occur. In response to a *Time* magazine article on evolution, Answers in Genesis issued a statement condemning the publication for misrepresenting the Kansas board’s decision. Like other Religious Right groups, Answers in Genesis argued that new science standards were not cause for “the secular humanists to rant about expunging evolution from the school curriculum.”

The press release goes on to claim, “Indeed, evolution itself is an attack on Christian belief— that's why so many atheists figure prominently in pushing evolutionary teaching in schools, colleges and universities.” With this statement, Answers in Genesis equates evolutionists with atheists and accuses them of trying to indoctrinate students with their own religious beliefs to the detriment of Christianity. The constant association Religious Right organizations make between evolutionists and atheists serves an important function; it defines the issue completely in black and white— people either believe in evolution and are atheist, or they are Christian and embrace creationism. When the evolutionists are seen as the enemy of God, attacking evolution takes on a greater value and importance.

As the organization’s name suggests, Answers in Genesis also contests evolution from a biblical standpoint. In the same response to *Time*, the group states simply:

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“The Bible tells us that man is not ‘just an animal,’ and did not come from an ape by the natural processes of mutations and natural selection, or any other...Far from being 'just animals', people are made in God's image, and basically we all know that to be true. People compose sonatas, occupy professorial chairs in universities, and fly to the moon, while apes scratch themselves for our amusement in zoos.”

The rhetoric is clearly less sophisticated than that of several other Religious Right organizations. In this passage, the press release merely states what the Bible says and then argues that any conflicting argument is false. The group also employs simple observation, such as the fact that apes are in zoos, in an attempt to justify the ultimate conclusion that God created man. The reliance on biblical explanation is also evident in the following argument:

“The Bible also tells us that death, suffering and disease came into God's creation after Adam and Even sinned...The death, suffering and disease seen in the fossil record must therefore have come about after the first people were created, not before...So something is seriously wrong with the evolutionists' dating schemes and understanding of the fossils.”

Rather than attempting to invalidate the fossil record on scientific grounds, the press release simply argues that it is “seriously wrong” because it conflicts with the Bible. While this type of rhetoric may not be effective in persuading people to change their minds, it clearly seeks to provide biblical justification for individuals who already doubt the theory of evolution. As the rhetoric of Answers in Genesis and the Creation Science Association illustrate, some organizations blatantly endorsed creationism over evolution, seemingly negating the claim of other Religious Right groups that they simply wanted students to question the science behind evolution.

*Battle for the Board*
For months following the board’s controversial decision, the debate over evolution continued to rage in Kansas and in the national press. Evolution supporters criticized the new science standards as doing a disservice to students and bringing negative attention to the state. Meanwhile, conservative Christians took advantage of the attention to advance their own theory of intelligent design, which suggests “that some aspects of nature are so complex and improbable that they could come only from an intelligent source.”

While supporters of this theory do not explicitly state that God is the intelligent designer, the implication is quite clear. The group Answers in Genesis placed an advertisement in *USA Today* and some regional newspapers declaring, “The Truth About Education Exposed! Read the book Kansas State School Board members received and other leading evolutionists don’t want you to know about!”

Organizations on the state and local level, such as the Lawrence-based Parents for Objective Science and History, mobilized to ensure their beliefs were protected.

By the summer of 2000, however, debate shifted focus to the approaching August 1 primary, in which five board members, including three of the evolution opponents, were up for re-election. In heavily Republican Kansas, the primary was the most important race, since the Republican winners would be highly favored in November.

The school board campaigns became some of the most heated races in the state, sharply

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110 Marklein, Mary Beth. “Evolution’s Next Step in Kansas: Ballot Box Voters Join in the Fray Over the Teaching of Darwinism.” *USA Today*, 19 July 2000, 1D.


dividing the Republican Party between moderates and conservatives. Even Governor Bill Graves and U.S. Senator Sam Brownback—the top-ranking Republicans in the state—endorsed different candidates for the contested school board seats. A candidate’s position on evolution became a litmus test for voters. As University of Kansas political scientist Burdett Loomis, noted, “It is really the defining characteristic of Kansas politics now.” The primary was considered so significant that many Democrats changed their party affiliation just to vote for the moderate candidates.

One of the school board races even made history. Linda Holloway, the chair of the board and an avid opponent of evolution, became the first school board candidate to ever air television advertisements. Holloway raised $90,000 for a campaign in which candidates typically spend, at most, a few thousand dollars. Despite heavy criticism, Holloway defended her vote on the science standards, stating, “I’d fall on my sword over this issue. I wasn’t going to let evolution become the central focus of science in Kansas. My name was going to be on those standards, and I couldn’t sign on that.” Holloway’s opponent, Sue Gamble, raised $34,000 and argued that the standards “put students at a disadvantage on a national level. You need to know about dinosaurs, the age of the earth.” Many people believed the outcome of this race would be “a bellwether on the direction of education in Kansas.”

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113 Ibid.
114 Kaufman.
115 Ibid.
In the weeks leading up to the primary, organizations on both sides of the debate campaigned heavily and hosted several events throughout the state. A joint effort by MAINstream Coalition (a political action committee dedicated to church-state separation), Kansas Citizens for Science, the Heartland Humanists, the Interfaith Alliance of Wichita, and the American Civil Liberties Union of Kansas and Western Missouri brought several speakers to the area to commemorate the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Scopes Trial. “Scopes Week” sought to revive public discourse on evolution and remind voters of the upcoming election. On the other side of the debate, intelligent design supporters hosted their national symposium in Kansas City a few weeks before the primary. The convention featured some of the most prominent figures of the intelligent movement, including Michael Behe and Jonathon Wells, both of whom have published books “debunking” evolution.

In the end, the election outcome shifted control of the board to the moderates. Steve Abrams was the only conservative who was re-elected, defeating his opponent Roger Rankin 62 to 38 percent.\(^\text{117}\) Conservative Mary Douglass Brown, who supported the science standards, lost to moderate challenger Carol Rupe, 48 to 52 percent. Bruce Wyatt, a moderate appointed by Governor Bill Graves after conservative Scott Hill resigned and moved to Montana, defeated his challenger, 58 to 42 percent. In the most closely followed board race, Linda Holloway was soundly defeated by Sue Gamble, 40 to 60 percent. Bill Wagnon, a Democrat from Topeka, ran unopposed in the primary, as did his Republican opponent. Wagnon and all of the August primary winners went on to win

in the November 7 general election, thus giving moderates clear control of the school board. Holloway blamed the conservatives’ defeat on “this elite group in Washington that have an agenda, the National Academy of Sciences and other science groups. There is clearly still a misunderstanding of what we did,” she said. “There is still this stereotype that ‘this is religion, and this is science.’ It was much more complicated.”

Standards Revisited

On February 14, 2001, the newly elected science board voted 7-3 to adopt the science standards originally developed by a committee of twenty-seven science instructors. The new standards included macroevolution, which had been removed as a “unifying concept in biology” by the previous standards. While the governor and other evolution supporters praised the vote, conservative Christians immediately bemoaned the decision. Answers in Genesis repeated its claim that evolution was “not good science” and blamed a “media disinformation campaign” for the board’s decision. The Center for Reclaiming America declared, “The evolution scam continues,” and argued that the “evolutionists continue to intimidate non-evolutionists into silence.” Similar sentiments were echoed by Focus on the Family, which argued, “teachers can now silence students who question evolution.”

Rather than being in a position to defend the Kansas State Board of Education, Religious Right groups were now compelled to criticize the board’s most recent decision. Yet despite the change in sides, the rhetoric employed was essentially the same. For example, in the March 2001 Phyllis Schlafly Report, the Eagle Forum declared, “The 2001 standards contain provisions to prohibit scientific evaluation and debate about evolution. This means dumbing down science in order to promote evolution.”122 The report further contends that the new standards “encourage teachers to evade tough questions from students about the validity of evolution theories.” These arguments suggest that evolution is no longer allowed to be questioned, implying that other theories are being “evaded” or even censored. This violates the “academic freedom” hailed by Religious Right groups when the previous standards were adopted. The report later asserts, “The right to scientific dissent is closely related to the right to political dissent. When states abolish rights of students to criticize evolution, suppression of political dissent becomes easier.” By linking academic freedom and political rights, the Eagle Forum clearly cautions conservative Christians that they could easily face even more oppression in the future. Such a dismal prediction enhances the significance of challenging evolution.

In addition to accusing evolution of being “fraud,” “fakery” and not “true science,” the report also claims that evolution is a liberal plot to win elections. According to the Eagle Forum, “liberals have long realized that, if they can win the battle over what is taught in schools, they will win elections. While they claim to believe in

free speech, they usually have little tolerance for alternate points of view in the schools.”

Here, the organization turns liberals’ protection of free speech against them, claiming that by refusing to teach other theories of origin, liberals essentially contradict their own beliefs. The report also contends “liberals pursue the dogmatic teaching of evolution” because, “of the ten states that impose the strictest pro-evolution requirements, Al Gore won all but three.” Although other factors obviously influence this correlation, the organization presents this faulty logic as proof that teaching evolution is key for liberals to gain control of Washington.

The American Family Association echoed the Eagle Forum’s dismay over the new standards. In an article released March 2, 2001, the organization argued that academic freedom was being stifled in a manner “reminiscent of the Scopes trial of 1925 when John Scopes was put on trial for daring to teach what was not government approved at the time: evolution.” Here again, the organization uses an argument typically raised by its liberal opponents and turns it to counter the liberals’ position. The article also devotes considerable attention to explaining the merits of intelligent design. Responding to critics who “argue that [intelligent design] is merely a slick repackaging of the biblical account of Genesis,” the report states, “Design Theory does not seek to defend the Bible nor speculate on who or what caused the design.” Evident here is an attempt to stress scientific argumentation, instead of the religious argumentation that has proven unsuccessful in the past.

The Religious Right continues to argue against evolution as part of a larger, detailed strategy to “wedge” theistic explanations into the classroom. For now, however, the voters of Kansas have voiced their preference for students to learn about evolution as part of a comprehensive science curriculum. As Caroline McKnight, Executive Director of MAINstream Coalition quipped before the board elections, “Democracy got us into this, and democracy will get us out.”\textsuperscript{124} Democracy also fostered the ongoing discourse about evolution. In the book \textit{Darwin’s God: Evolution and the Problem of Evil}, Cornelius G. Hunter claims that “Darwin and his heirs...came to their views based on their assumptions about God.”\textsuperscript{125} He reaches a conclusion that sheds light on why the Religious Right held such a stake in the school board’s decisions, and why the evolution debate is unlikely to be resolved any time soon. As Hunter contends, “Evolution is not about the scientific details. Ultimately, evolution is about God.”\textsuperscript{126}

\textit{Toward a Rhetorical Method}

The evolution case in Kansas illustrates the Religious Right’s capabilities as a social movement to operate on several levels. Local, state, and regional organizations opposed to evolution voiced the same objections as the national leaders of the Religious Right, thus allowing the movement to not only address the situation in Kansas, but also to bring attention to the evolution issue nationwide. This case also demonstrates the shift in

\textsuperscript{124} Marklein.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
and growing sophistication of rhetorical tactics employed by the Religious Right. From the analysis it can be seen that the rhetoric was grounded in the following principles:

1) Emphasis on Scientific Argumentation – In a rhetorical approach significantly different from that of the past, the Religious Right focused primarily on scientific objections to evolution, rather than religious ones. For instance, the Center for Reclaiming America only criticized evolution from the standpoint that the theory was negated by “the laws of science, probability, and the fossil record.” The Eagle Forum pointed to gaps in the fossil record and the complexity of DNA to suggest that intelligent design theory has more merit than evolution. Even Answers in Genesis raised questions about the scientific basis of evolution before asserting that creationism was the only acceptable explanation for the origin of humankind. By avoiding the traditional “creationist” arguments, the Religious Right attempted to gain mainstream credibility and circumvent accusations that they were trying to insert God in science instruction. This strategy was clearly an intentional one, and in response to criticism, Religious Right organizations often pointed to the fact that their rhetoric included no mention of God or creationism.

2) Support for Local Control – When defending the board’s decision to de-emphasize evolution, the Religious Right voiced strong support for local control and criticized the “bureaucracy” for trying to take the place of parents. Concerned Women for America blamed a “tyranny of the elite” for trying to indoctrinate students with ideas that conflict with traditional values. The frequent references to powerful bureaucracies attest to the Religious Right’s skepticism
toward government and belief that parents and citizens should have more input in public policy.

3) Belief that Religious People are Oppressed – In every organization’s rhetoric was an argument that evolution opponents (conservative Christians) were being oppressed. The Religious Right believed the media wrongly characterized and relentlessly criticized them for the passage of the first set of standards. Focus on the Family and the Center for Reclaiming America protested that students were being silenced in the classroom when the second standards were adopted. The Creation Science Association for Mid-America even suggested that evolution supporters would soon gain more power and start killing “God’s people.” What is most important to note, though, is that even when the board voted in accordance with Religious Right views, conservative Christians still claimed to be the ones who were oppressed.

4) Claim of Media Distortion – Most articles and statements issued by Religious Right organizations blamed the media for distorting the facts and spreading misinformation. The Eagle Forum criticized the “Chicken Littles of the press” for writing “hysterical reports,” and Concerned Women for America argued that the media was flawed in its reports that evolution was banned in Kansas. After the school board elections, Linda Holloway even attributed her loss to media distortion of the science standards debate. Blaming the media not only supported the Religious Right’s claims of a liberal elite, but it also reinforced the belief that religious people are oppressed and their views excluded from public discourse.
5) Argument Turns – An interesting technique present in much of the Religious Right’s rhetoric was to turn the opponents’ arguments against them. For instance, organizations used the academic freedom argument to accuse evolution supporters of only encouraging critical thinking and analysis when it served their own purposes. The American Family Association accused evolution supporters of censoring ideas just like the creationists they so opposed did to John Scopes in the 1920s. By using arguments in this manner, the Religious Right attempted to point to inconsistencies in their opponents’ reasoning and decrease the credibility of evolution supporters.

6) Belief that Evolution is a Religion Itself – The Religious Right frequently associated evolution with atheism and naturalism, claiming that the theory is essentially a religious one. The Center for Reclaiming America accused teachers of having “blind faith” in evolution, and the Eagle Forum protested the atheistic implications of evolution. The Creation Science Association further argued that it was unfair for atheists to control public policy, while Christians were not allowed to present their alternative view. Focus on the Family presented statistics illustrating that the majority of scientists are atheist. The argument that evolution is a religion in itself served two important purposes for the Religious Right. First, it associated evolutionists with atheists, or “God’s Enemies.” This type of rhetoric characterized the debate as one between the faithful and the faithless, even though the Religious Right also claimed evolution is just a question of good vs. bad science. Second, by equating evolution with religion, conservative
Christians argued that only one religious viewpoint was being taught, and that they had a right to offer alternative explanations to negate the purportedly atheistic implications of evolution. The argument reasserted the belief that the views of only one group were being censored: the oppressed Religious Right.

7) Evolution Destroys the Christian Worldview – Despite attempts to only attack the scientific validity of evolution, the Religious Right alluded to the belief that evolution contradicted the fundamentals of Christianity. The Eagle Forum stated that creationism is the foundation of the Christian worldview; “if it falls, so does everything else.” The organization went to argue that if humans were created by mindless forces, then our lives would be meaningless. Similarly, Answers in Genesis contended that evolution was a direct attack on Christianity, which is why so many atheists were trying to perpetuate the theory. While the Religious Right’s shift in rhetorical tactics may be more effective in veiling their ultimate intentions, the religious motivation of conservative Christians is nonetheless quite evident. Fundamentalists base their worldview—their entire perspective and morality—an on a literal interpretation of the Bible. If one part of the Bible, such as the story of creation, were to be found untrue, then doubt would be cast on all of the Bible’s contents. Thus, evolution is seen as a theory that threatens not only fundamentalist Christianity, but also the very meaning and purpose fundamentalist Christians see in human life.
Religion has undoubtedly been a pivotal factor in America’s history and heritage. That a majority of Americans believe in God is reflected in the common use of religious references throughout secular society. Presidents still conclude their speeches with the familiar phrase, “may God bless America.” Ecumenical prayers are often used to solemnize public events. And the national motto “in God we trust” is printed on all forms of United States currency. These references to God have generally been accepted as a form of patriotism and ceremonial deism. In the summer of 2001, however, citizens of Collier County, Florida, were faced with the question of when such references are appropriate in public schools. On July 26, the Christian Coalition of Collier County offered the school board framed posters of the national motto and requested that they be hung in all of the public schools. The school board agreed to discuss the “In God We Trust” plaques at an upcoming meeting, and debate quickly ensued over whether the posters were merely a patriotic display, or an attempt to advance religion in the classroom.

A Nationwide Campaign

Months before controversy was stirred up in Collier County, the American Family Association (AFA) initiated a nationwide campaign to post the words “In God We Trust” in every public school in America. The Mississippi-based organization began lobbying
state legislatures to pass laws requiring that the national motto be posted in all
government buildings, including schools. In addition to its lobbying efforts, the AFA
began selling 11-by-14-inch posters emblazoned with the national motto and American
flag. Members were encouraged to purchase these posters and donate them to local
schools and government officials for display. Rev. Don Wildmon, the AFA president,
also promised legal defense to any group or individual whose efforts to post the motto
were challenged in court.

In the past, courts have upheld the constitutionality of the motto. For instance, in
the 1970 case Aronow v. United States, the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that
the motto and its placement on currency did not violate the First Amendment. According
to the court, the motto “is of a patriotic or ceremonial character and bears no resemblance
to a governmental sponsorship of a religious exercise.”127 In 1978, Madalyn Murray
O’Hair, the President of American Atheists, filed a similar suit against the national motto,
but the court disagreed with her claim and cited the Ninth Circuit’s previous ruling in
support of the controversial phrase. Most recently, in Gaylor v. United States (1996), the
Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals rejected the claim that the motto violated the
Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, declaring that the “the motto does not
create an intimate relationship of the type that suggests unconstitutional entanglement of
church and state.”128 Using these decisions to their advantage, Wildmon’s followers

127 Boston, Rob. “‘In Don We Trust?’ How Mississippi Preacher Don Wildmon is Using the National
128 “‘In God We Trust’ Day.” AFA Action Alert, 3 July 2001, available online at <www.afa.net>.
contend: “If it’s OK to put it on our money, it’s OK to put it on the walls of our nation’s classrooms.”

The first major victory for the AFA campaign came in March 2001, when the Mississippi legislature adopted a resolution requiring the motto to be posted in every classroom, school cafeteria, and school auditorium. Coincidentally, the law also mandated that the “In God We Trust” signs be placed in frames no smaller than 11-by-14 inches. Although no state funds were allocated to cover the costs of displaying the national motto, the AFA offered to donate 32,000 posters to Mississippi schools. On March 24, 2001, Mississippi Governor Ronnie Musgrove signed the bill into law and declared, “Our nation was founded as a godly nation and we put it on our money: ‘In God We Trust.’”

There were related efforts to display the national motto in Colorado, Georgia, Virginia, and Tennessee, but these campaigns were neither as successful nor as far-reaching as the Mississippi legislation.

Controversy in Collier County

Then, in the summer of 2001, the Collier County School Board found itself at the center of the campaign. Located in southwest Florida, Collier County is home to more than a quarter-million people and one of the fastest growing counties in the country. The School Board serves thirty-seven elementary, middle, and high schools, as well as


130 *Boston*.


fourteen alternative and adult education programs. At the school board’s July 26 meeting, Jerry Rutherford, Chairman of the Christian Coalition of Collier County, requested that the board allow schools to display framed posters of the national motto, “In God We Trust.” The model poster that Rutherford showed the board had the word “God” printed in a different color and larger font than the other words. He then cited Florida statute 233.0651, which allows the display of historical documents, and he provided a history of the motto’s adoption and legal arguments supporting the motto’s display. Ashley McElreath, a law student representing the American Liberties Institute in Orlando, joined Rutherford in arguing that the “posters are not religious but moral and historical guidance.” According to Rutherford, “Failure to post the motto for our students to see...is most unpatriotic.”

Concerned parents and citizens were also given the opportunity to voice their opinions on the issue, and among those who argued against the motto were Tari Harris of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Jeanne Brooker of the American Association of University Women (AAUW-Naples Chapter). Brooker stated: “In the current national climate of sectarian groups seeking to use the public schools to further their own religious and political objectives, AAUW has opposed such attempts and consistently supported the separation of church and state.”

133 District School Board of Collier County, <www.collier.k12.fl.us>.
136 Ibid.
137 “Call to Action.” Email Alert from Greater Naples Branch AAUW, 9 August 2001, obtained from correspondence with Americans United for Separation of Church and State on 11 July 2002.
member Pamela Cox offered her own opinion that “public education is for all children, not just Christian children.”\textsuperscript{138} In response, board member Nelson Faerber stated, “I don’t find ‘In God We Trust’ excluding anyone except atheists.”\textsuperscript{139} Vice Chair Donald J. York and member Linda Abbott both expressed a desire to hear more public input on the issue, and the board agreed to place the issue on the agenda for the August 23 meeting.\textsuperscript{140}

Public reaction at the first school board meeting was indicative of the heated debate yet to come. Ken Keller, president of the Christian Coalition of Collier County, remarked, “I think it’s good for the community that we have these discussions...let’s compete on the field of ideas. We as Christians ought to be forced to make our case.”\textsuperscript{141} Keller’s comments essentially repeat former Christian Coalition Executive Director Ralph Reed’s argument that conservative Christians deserve “a place at the table.” Keller’s comments further allude to the belief that Christians are often excluded from public discourse and that their ideas are ignored or oppressed.

Yet the Religious Right was prepared to argue for the motto based on legal and historical grounds, not just Christian ideology. Much of the Religious Right’s argumentation on the subject is reflected in an “information letter” issued by the American Center for Law and Justice (ACLJ). The ACLJ was formed in 1990 by Pat Robertson, who was president of the Christian Coalition at that time. In the ACLJ letter, Chief Counsel Jay Sekulow explains that the phrase “In God We Trust” originated with

\textsuperscript{138} Parker, “Board Will Ponder.”  
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{140} Information about board meeting taken from the Official Minutes of the District School Board of Collier County Regular School Board Meeting, 26 July 2001, available online at \texttt{<www.collier.k12.fl.us>}.  
\textsuperscript{141} Parker, “School Board Meeting Moved.”
Francis Scott Key’s poem the “Star Spangled Banner.” Written in 1814, the poem’s final stanza contains the line: “And this be our motto: In God is our trust.” Sekulow further explains that the phrase was placed on certain coins in 1865, but was ordered removed by President Roosevelt in 1907. Then in 1955, Congress “mandated the inscription of ‘In God We Trust’ on all coins and paper currency.” By tracing the history of the national motto, Sekulow provides justification for its display in contemporary settings as part of American heritage. Thus, any religious associations with the motto are de-emphasized in the letter, and the issue is presented as one of patriotism.

Sekulow soon shifts tactics, however, and the letter goes on to address the relationship of religion and government. Sekulow states, “It is commonly understood that our government, its Constitution, and its laws are founded on a belief in God...The nation’s history is replete with examples of acknowledgment of religious belief in the public sector.” To support his claim, Sekulow points to several examples of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches acknowledging “the central role of religion in our society.” By focusing on these government acknowledgments of religion, he argues that the national motto is just another way in which Americans pay tribute to our religious heritage. Instead of ignoring the religious angle altogether, the information letter argues that government and religion should not, and have never been, entirely separate.

Indeed, the American Family Association also recognized the importance that legal arguments would have in its ongoing campaign to post the national motto. At the

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campaign’s outset, Don Wildmon stated, “While I expect the ACLU will try to bully and intimidate public schools to keep them from displaying the national motto, AFA is ready to fight them fact-to-face.”143 This statement clearly demonstrates that the organization is prepared to engage in legal debate over the motto. More notable, however, is the militaristic tone of the rhetoric, which serves two purposes. First, by referring to the ACLU (an organization the Religious Right strongly opposes), Wildmon clearly identifies an enemy to rally against. The ACLU is portrayed as an organization that “bullies” and “intimidates” people and opposes the patriotic posting of our national motto. Thus, anyone who does not embrace the campaign to post the national motto is automatically associated with the enemy ACLU. Second, the militaristic rhetoric invokes images of a culture war between the righteous and the godless. Emphasizing the AFA’s commitment to this “fight,” Wildmon attempts to portray the issue as one of protecting traditional American values, and he uses war-like language to persuade people to join in the effort.

Despite attempting to focus attention on the legal and historical reasons for posting the national motto, statements from the AFA still contain religious arguments. For example, Wildmon states on behalf of his organization: “We believe the national motto incorporates the foundational belief of our culture, and its words ‘In God We Trust’ are a message our children need to see in school.”144 Here, close examination of the rhetoric reveals the organization’s desire to advance religion. The AFA claims that belief in God is “foundational” principle of our country and that children should be

143 See note 3.
144 Ibid.
exposed to God in school. More examples of rhetoric illustrating religious motivation appear in an AFA article from August 2001. Published at the time of the conflict in Collier County, the article hails the poster campaign as “idea whose time has come.”

Wildmon is quoted in the article as declaring, “There are 1.5 million public school classrooms in America, and every one of them should have the national motto poster. The very least we can do for our children is let them see with their own eyes the words that symbolize the foundational moral truth of our culture.” Wildmon’s statement inextricably links morality to God, implying that one is not possible without the other. Furthermore, Wildmon’s plea that posting the national motto is “the least we can do for our children” is reminiscent of the Religious Right’s common argument that God has been taken out of the classroom. In the Religious Right’s mind, all cultural problems and moral transgressions can be blamed on the lack of religion in schools.

The AFA article goes on to praise churches for helping distribute the posters to local officials. Clearly, key to the effectiveness of the national campaign is the reliance on local churches and volunteers to serve as the “foot soldiers” in the larger social movement. Wildmon explains: “We’ve had requests from people of many different walks of life—mechanics, doctors, dentists, mom and pop store owners—who want to put the poster up in their place of work. There is a spiritual hunger in this nation, and many people agree with the sentiments of our nation’s motto.” Again, the national motto is linked to “spiritual hunger” and religious sentiments in America. The religious motivation behind the campaign is further reflected in a statement from Chip Hannah, an

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AFA supporter who put up 650 posters in North Carolina schools. Hannah said, “While I did some leg work, I think prayer was the key. This whole thing has me charged up, and I’m ready to do more for God.” Important to note is the lack of legal or patriotic rhetoric and an emphasis instead on doing “God’s work.”

*Politics in Action*

When the AFA campaign became an issue in Collier County, organizations on the national, state, and local level became involved. People for the American Way (PFAW), a Washington, D.C.-based political action group, sent the school board a three-page letter detailing legal arguments against the national motto posters. According to PFAW’s Judith Schaeffer, “Our intent is not to sue people but help them understand what is being put in front of them.”146 The ACLU of Florida also warned that legal action could potentially be taken against the board should the posters be accepted. Opponents of the poster campaign were also mobilized by the Greater Naples Branch of the American Association of University Women (AAUW). In an email action alert sent to its members on August 9, the organization urged people to write letters to school board members and local newspapers and to attend the August 23 school board meeting. Recruiting help from the national level, local AAUW organizer Sandra Brown requested that Americans United for Separation of Church and State send the email to its activists as well.147

On August 18, the *Naples Daily News* published a guest editorial from Collier County School Board member Pam Cox. Cox, who was opposed to the national motto

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146 Parker, “School Board Meeting Moved.”
147 Personal email from Sandra Brown to Beth Corbin, 9 August 2001, obtained from correspondence with Americans United for Separation of Church and State on 11 July 2002.
posters from the beginning, explained, “the appropriate place for religion in American public schools has been a difficult issue for a long time.” Cox argued that it was necessary for schools to remain neutral on issues of religion in order to avoid severe conflict. According to Cox, “the goal of public schools is to educate children in an increasingly diverse society. They should not be used to provide a captive audience for the transmission of sectarian values. They must not promote or endorse any religion, or religion in general.”

Conservative Christian groups, however, not only disagreed with Cox’s statements but were busy organizing their own rally for the national motto posters. The Christian Coalition of Collier County planned a “God, Country and Apple Pie Rally” for Saturday, August 18—the weekend before the school board’s public meeting. The rally was scheduled for 7:30 pm at Sugden Regional Park, in between a water ski show and a gathering for Tree of Life Ministry. Contributing to the effort was the water ski organization Gulf Coast Skimmers, which gives weekly performances on Saturdays at 6:30 pm during the summer. The group seeks to provide “an alternative sport emphasizing respect, responsibility, credibility, accountability and traditional Christian family values,” and it became an avid supporter of the “In God We Trust” campaign. The Christian Coalition hoped for a large turnout and thus, planned its event to capitalize on the ski show audience.

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The rally, however, was interrupted by a rainstorm and had to be moved to Tree of Life Church in East Naples. Nonetheless, organizers still encouraged the small number of attendees to sign a petition urging the school board to allow the national motto to be posted in public schools. The Christian Coalition’s title for the event (“God, Country and Apple Pie Rally”) was in itself a rhetorical tactic employed to associate belief in God with patriotism and traditional American culture. Thus, organizers made available McDonald’s apple pies and tee shirts with slogans such as “Yes, Believe in God” and “The Student’s Freedom to Believe.” These slogans are representative of Religious Right rhetoric arguing that God has been removed from the classroom and that students’ freedom of religion is being oppressed. As one rally attendee stated, “They’re taking God out of school. That’s not right.” Another person argued that the motto threatened no one and that there was opposition to its display only because “people don’t want to hear that word, ‘God.’” Again, these statements illustrate the centrality of God to conservative Christians’ rhetoric and exemplify their belief that opponents of the motto are attacking religion.

Debate over the issue came to a head at the August 23 school board meeting. Over three hundred people attended the meeting, which was held in the East Naples Middle School auditorium at 5:30 pm. After addressing other business, the board turned the floor over to Jerry Rutherford of the Christian Coalition, who restated his request for the board to allow the national motto to be posted in all classrooms. Rutherford

151 Ibid.
152 Ibid.
presented a new poster that met legal requirements; unlike the poster originally proposed, the new one had all the words “In God We Trust” printed in the same font size and color and did not contain a reference to the Christian Coalition as the poster’s donor.

According to Rutherford, his organization was offering the posters “to promote patriotism and a love of country.” Attorney Frederick Nelson of the American Liberties Institute in Orlando echoed Rutherford’s sentiments by arguing that the motto was a historical document, and he offered his legal services if the board were to face litigation as a result of posting the motto. The rhetoric employed by Rutherford and Nelson focused again on the legal and historical aspects of the motto; in this setting, Rutherford and Nelson wisely recognized that arguments about the importance of God and morality would be perceived as an attempt to advance religion in the classroom.

More than seventy people spoke at the meeting, and after three hours of debate, the school board members offered their own comments on the issue. Member Linda Abbot said, “If we look at it as history, then the law says it can be posted in public schools...regardless of who offers the plaques...the plaque stands on its own on the basis of law.” Member Pam Cox expressed her belief that the motto was a divisive issue and that she still opposed its display in the classroom. Similarly, member Nelson Faerber stated, “I’ll vote ‘no’ on this issue because it divides us.” Before calling the issue to a

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154 Official Minutes of the District School Board of Collier County Regular School Board Meeting, 23 August 2001, available online at <www.collier.k12.fl.us>.
155 Parker, “Motto.”
157 Parker, “Motto.”
vote, Chairwoman Anne Goodnight said, “The schools and education need to remain neutral. I don’t have a problem with the plaque but I don’t believe the plaque should be placed in our schools.” The board then rejected the Christian Coalition’s proposal on a vote of 3 to 1. Abbott cast the dissenting vote, and member Don York was absent.

Aftermath

With that, the issue was put to rest in Collier County, but the AFA continued its campaign efforts elsewhere. In fact, less than a month after the Collier County School Board’s decision, the school board in nearby Pasco County unanimously voted to post the national motto in all fifty-six of the county’s public schools. In this instance, a local chapter of Concerned Women for America presented the issue to the board for consideration, arguing that too many students lack respect for their country. A similar line-up of organizations became involved in the Pasco County debate, but the board refused to change its decision.

Months later, after the ACLU failed to take legal action against Pasco County or any other districts that opted to post the national motto, Religious Right groups declared victory. In an article issued by Concerned Women for America in December 2001, the organization declared the ACLU a “toothless tiger.” The article quotes Sandy Rios, the group’s president, as stating:

158 Ibid.
160 Ibid.
“Many of us are scratching our heads in wonder at why the ACLU finds the motto ‘In God We Trust’ so threatening. Is it that there is no God, because if that is the case, a harmless fairytale can’t hurt any of us. Or do they believe that having ‘In God We Trust’ displayed on our money and in public schools has been forcing people to believe in God for the last century? That thousands of Americans have been forced to their knees in acknowledgement [sic] of the Almighty because of its presence?”

Rios’ use of sarcasm demeans the ACLU and portrays the organization as irrational and ignorant. Her comments suggest that the ACLU and its supporters either believe that there is no God or do not want Americans to acknowledge God. In this manner, Rios associates the ACLU with atheists, and therefore, enemies of Christianity. The article further attacks the ACLU with a quote from ACLJ Chief Counsel Jay Sekulow, who quipped, “It is ironic that these same civil libertarians who oppose the use of ‘In God We Trust’ certainly take the money with ‘In God We Trust’ written on it and spend it.”

In an Action Alert issued in December 2001, the American Family Association also claimed victory over the ACLU.162 According to Don Wildmon,

“For too long, the ACLU has used a mythical ‘separation of church and state’ argument to drive the knowledge of God out of our classrooms. As far as I’m concerned, their misdirected efforts— and the failure of God-fearing persons to challenge them— are a major reason our schools, and our society, are in the fix they are.”

Here, Wildmon raises the objection that separation of church and state is merely a myth, and that religion and government should not be entirely separate. The statement not only implies that the ACLU is an atheist enemy, but also, that the organization’s efforts are responsible for the moral decline perceived by the Religious Right. Finally, Wildmon calls his followers to action by arguing that if the ACLU is not opposed by “God-fearing

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162 “ACLU Admits They Can’t Block ‘In God We Trust’ Posters.” American Family Association, 17 December 2001, available online at <www.afa.net>.
persons,” Christianity will continue to be oppressed. Yet once again, despite Wildmon’s predominant use of religious rhetoric, he concludes his argument for the national motto by asserting the same claim that the Religious Right sought to convince Americans of: “It’s a patriotic issue, not a religious issue.”

Toward a Rhetorical Method

The national motto campaign in Collier County serves as yet another example of how the Religious Right relies on local activism to achieve change. In this case, a national organization (the AFA) initiated the campaign to hang ‘In God We Trust’ posters in public schools, and a local chapter of another national Religious Right group (the Christian Coalition) took up the cause in Collier County. With national support from the Religious Right elite, local groups and Religious Right supporters fulfilled the role of “foot soldiers,” or the activists who carried out the work necessary to accomplish the movement’s goal. Although the Christian Coalition of Collier County eventually failed to get the motto posted in schools, the organization was effective in gaining attention for the cause and initiating public discourse on the issue. In the debate that ensued, the Religious Right primarily employed the following rhetorical tactics:

1) Emphasis on Historical and Legal Aspects – When debating in public forums, Religious Right representatives were cautious to focus on the national motto’s historical significance and constitutionality. A representative from the American Liberties Institute contended the posters would provide not religious, but “historical and moral” guidance. Jerry Rutherford first urged the school board to
hang the motto in classrooms because it would be “unpatriotic” not to do so. Rutherford supported his arguments with legal documentation of the motto’s constitutionality, and the AFA often cited the long history of American acceptance of the words “In God We Trust.” In the same manner, the ACLJ issued an information letter detailing the history of the motto and the courts’ approval of its public display. By focusing on these less controversial aspects of the national motto, the Religious Right attempted to divert attention away from the religious motivation behind the campaign. This sophisticated type of rhetoric also allowed Religious Right groups to shift debate to the merits of the motto itself, as well as providing secular justification for the motto’s display.

2) Belief that Religious Ideas are Oppressed – The Religious Right also rhetorically emphasized the belief among conservative Christians that religious people and their ideas have been oppressed. One Christian Coalition member was eager to “compete on the field of ideas.” Don Wildmon of the AFA often criticized the ACLU for “bullying” schools into submission and preventing the motto from being posted because of its arguably religious nature. Perhaps the Religious Right’s viewpoint is best summarized by one citizen who argued, “They’re taking God out of school. That’s not right.” The Religious Right perceived the exclusion of the posters as an oppression of a historical, patriotic phrase simply because of its reference to God. By highlighting this unfair treatment in their rhetoric, Religious Right spokespersons gave followers even more reason to join the campaign.
3) Argument that Church-State Separation is a Myth – To counter arguments that posting the national motto would violate church-state separation, the Religious Right not only referred to court decisions upholding the motto, but also contended that church-state separation is misunderstood. In his information letter, Jay Sekulow listed several examples of government acknowledgment of religion and argued that historically, references to God and even encouragement of prayer have been accepted by the courts. Wildmon further argued that objections to the motto were wrongly based on a “mythical separation of church and state.” The Religious Right sought to convince the public that the national motto does not entangle religion and government. Furthermore, by arguing that church-state separation does not really exist, conservative Christians rhetorically undermined the basis of their opponents’ objections.

4) Association of Opponent with Atheism – In many of the publications from Religious Right groups, there was frequent reference to the ACLU as an organization trying to suppress belief in God. From the beginning, the AFA emphasized its preparedness to “fight (the ACLU) face-to-face.” Concerned Women for America accused the ACLU of trying to prevent Americans from acknowledging God. Don Wildmon voiced a similar belief that the ACLU was trying to drive God out of the classroom. The frequent reference to the ACLU served a couple of purposes. First, the Religious Right has long considered the ACLU one of its main enemies. They perceive the organization as godless and undermining traditional American values, so by pointing to them as the main
opponent, Religious Right leaders established a concrete enemy to overcome and portrayed the national motto debate in clear, divisive terms: either you believe in God or you are an enemy of God (the ACLU). Second, by emphasizing its willingness to oppose the ACLU in court, the Religious Right could proclaim victory when the ACLU did not file charges against public schools that posted the motto. In order to continue to receive support and monetary contributions from its followers, the Religious Right must persuade people that it is an effective political body. Overcoming the ACLU’s legal threats was rhetorically used to illustrate the Religious Right’s political efficacy.

5) Significance of God and Christian Belief – Even though much emphasis was placed on the legal and historical aspects of the national motto, the religious motivation behind the ‘In God We Trust’ campaign in Collier County was quite clear. For example, the first poster presented to the board highlighted the word God in a larger font and different color than the other words. Thus, even the poster rhetorically suggested that religion was really the issue at stake. Wildmon stated that trust in God was the “foundational moral truth of our culture,” exemplifying the Religious Right’s belief that God is fundamental to our morality and our country. In fact, Wildmon also implied that the problems in contemporary America are directly related to the absence of God and religion from public schools. This type of religious rhetoric was not used by Religious Right leaders during public debates in Collier County, but it formed the heart of publications distributed among Religious Right followers. This dual strategy of
focusing on secular arguments in public and using religious justification among conservative Christians did not convince the school board that there was a secular purpose behind the campaign. The rhetoric does, however, give insight to the Religious Right’s foundational belief that God, reference to God, and the spread of Christian ideology in the public realm is essential to restoring what they perceive as a lost morality in America.
Chapter 5
Conclusions

Examining the rhetoric of Religious Right organizations gives insight not only to the communication strategies employed by these groups, but also to the political mobilization that has made this movement such a significant factor in contemporary politics. In the three cases presented in this work, the Religious Right was not successful in implementing public policy that the movement ideally sought. However, the involvement of fundamentalist Christian activists profoundly influenced the discourse and policy making process surrounding all of these issues. Based on the analysis, some general conclusions have been reached regarding the Religious Right and its role as a social movement, political strategist, and rhetor.

The Religious Right as a Social Movement

These cases on the national, state, and local level illustrate how the Religious Right integrates the elite, the knowledge workers, and the “foot soldiers” to carry out its mission as a social movement. National organizations fulfill the leadership function by highlighting issues to focus on, lobbying government officials, and providing resources for state and local affiliates. When addressing national policy concerns, such as Bush’s faith-based initiative, national organizations and leaders were clearly the most influential voice for the Religious Right. In the evolution and Collier County cases, national organizations helped draw media attention and voter support in the areas of concern, but local activists were instrumental in executing the Religious Right’s mission. Because of
this well-organized approach to alter the institutional order, even when the Religious Right does not achieve its goals, the social movement still proves to be a considerable challenge to its opponents.

Rhetorical strategies are also very significant to the social movement. As these cases illustrate, Religious Right organizations constantly use “crisis” rhetoric. Political issues pertinent to the movement’s goals are often portrayed as battles in an ongoing culture war between good and evil. By characterizing every important debate or vote as a sort of crisis, the Religious Right not only draws greater attention to the issue, but it also provides an impetus for followers to take action. Social movement theory dictates that the crisis point often determines if a movement will succeed or fail; it is a time of mass decision when people must commit to or back down from the cause. Religious Right leaders have essentially attempted to create a perpetual state of crisis, and as a result, the movement participants are compelled to take action, or risk losing the opportunity to enact their ideals.

Despite the dominant use of crisis rhetoric, the Religious Right also communicates the successes of the movement. For instance, in the American Family Association’s “In God We Trust” campaign, several groups declared victory over the ACLU when it did not challenge the national motto in court. This type of rhetoric coincides with the consummation phase of a social movement, in which the goals of the movement are achieved. The simultaneous use of crisis and consummation rhetoric illustrates an important aspect of the Religious Right as a social movement. While its

ultimate goal is an enactment of the fundamentalist Christian worldview, progress toward that goal is marked by a series of small achievements, such as overcoming the threat of legal battles from the ACLU. The Religious Right must emphasize its political efficacy in order for movement participants to believe their efforts are worthwhile. Thus, while the Religious Right highlights its efficacy, the movement still emphasizes the need to mobilize followers because the ultimate goal has yet to be reached—hence, the constant use of crisis rhetoric.

The Religious Right as Political Strategist

The rhetoric analyzed in this work further illustrates that the Religious Right strategically uses communication in an attempt to achieve its political goals. Perhaps the best example of this is the Religious Right’s tendency to shift its rhetorical focus depending upon the audience. In the faith-based initiatives case, Pat Robertson openly condemned several non-Christian religions on his television show “The 700 Club,” which has an audience largely comprised of conservative Christians. Robertson’s rhetoric was significantly less extreme in the editorial he wrote for the conservative Wall Street Journal, a newspaper with a more mainstream readership. A similar shift in tactics occurred in the Kansas evolution debate. When giving statements to the public media, board members who opposed evolution emphasized the need for academic freedom and local control. In Religious Right publications, however, evolution opponents were more extreme in their argumentation. They not only pointed to “scientific” flaws in the theory of evolution, but they also blamed the teaching of evolution in public schools for causing
school violence and other immoral behavior. In Collier County, Christian Coalition representatives told the school board that posting “In God We Trust” was simply a patriotic gesture. In statements and action alerts distributed to their members, however, Religious Right groups accused the ACLU of driving God out of the classroom and causing moral decay.

This pronounced and sophisticated shift in rhetoric serves two important political purposes for the Religious Right. First, the Religious Right tempers its rhetoric to appear more moderate to mainstream Americans. A recent study of voting habits revealed that a small segment (roughly one-fifth) of the nonfundamentalist population intensely opposes fundamentalist Christians. These “antifundamentalist” voters orient their political behavior largely based on their feelings toward fundamentalists.164 This group is clearly not going to be persuaded by any argumentation posited by the Religious Right. However, many other voters, and particularly the less-informed ones, may be persuaded to agree with Religious Right positions, or at least, view them as non-threatening. Therefore, the Religious Right has much to gain by employing less extreme rhetoric in mainstream media and debate. Such rhetoric does not offend Religious Right followers, and it can appeal to voters who are undecided about issues or feel that sound arguments have been raised. Furthermore, this rhetorical tactic forces Religious Right opponents to spend much of their time and resources trying to show the “other side” of the movement to the public and to convince voters that a hidden agenda exists.

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The second purpose the Religious Right achieves with its shift in rhetoric is the mobilization of movement followers. Arguments that appeal to people’s belief in God and desire to spread Christianity are inherently more motivating to fundamentalist Christians than “secular” arguments. Linking political issues to religious ideology also makes the issues more salient to a population that has historically resisted political involvement. The Religious Right persuades its followers using rhetoric grounded in their religious framework and fundamentalist Christian worldview. At the same time, the movement raises secular arguments when the message recipients are mixed, thereby attempting to gain political legitimacy as a mainstream, rather than fringe, political organization. Shifting rhetoric between the “in-group” and “out-group” illustrates that the Religious Right is not simply communicating its beliefs and encouraging activism; it is making a strategic effort to be as politically influential as possible.

Consequently, the political efficacy of the Religious Right should be examined as well. As mentioned previously, none of the cases presented in this work was an overwhelming victory for the Religious Right. Yet, looking at the end outcomes of the cases is an incomplete method of evaluation. A more important observation is that the Religious Right seems to have a greater success rate when minimal public attention is given to the issue. For example, the Kansas State Board of Education initially passed the science standards that de-emphasized evolution when there was minimal media coverage and virtually no public debate. Only after months of media criticism and well-coordinated campaign efforts did the board’s membership change, and new science standards were adopted. In Collier County, the school board did not immediately reject
the “In God We Trust” posters, but rather, asked for public feedback at an upcoming meeting. Again, only after weeks of local organizing and media coverage did the board halt the Christian Coalition’s efforts. The faith-based initiatives case is a difficult one to analyze on this point because of the different Religious Right viewpoints and the intense media coverage of this national issue from the beginning. Nonetheless, the cases imply that the Religious Right is more effective politically when it can “quietly” enact its agenda.

This evaluation of the Religious Right’s political efficacy has several implications. First, it is clear that the movement is still very mobilized and effective at using local activists to achieve broader policy goals. For example, several conservative Christians had to be elected to the Kansas State Board of Education before the evolution standards were overturned. Their presence on the board suggests that Religious Right sympathizers were effective at recruiting and campaigning for candidates long before most voters even considered evolution a salient electoral issue. As long as school board elections received little attention, then, the conservative Christian agenda had a much higher chance of coming to fruition. The Religious Right’s mobilization of voters and candidates suggests that the movement can be far more politically influential, especially on the local level, than single-issue votes would reveal.

Second, while the Religious Right may be most successful when it can move “quietly,” the movement seems to fail consistently when its efforts gain significant public attention. The Religious Right blames this failure on a liberally biased media that wrongly interprets the issues and condemns fundamentalist Christians. Media biases
aside, however, there are some other factors to be considered. For instance, the Religious Right’s shifts in rhetoric between secular and religious arguments may be undermining any of the organization’s credibility with the mainstream public. Nonfundamentalists may agree with the Religious Right on certain issues but be offended by or apprehensive about the religious rhetoric the movement employs among followers.

Additionally, the failure of the Religious Right to persuade voters that it is not a fringe group highlights the movement’s greatest barrier: a very limited membership. In seeking to uphold and enact its narrow vision of Christianity in the public realm, the Religious Right still struggles to broaden its base of support. Even when using the most effective rhetorical and organizing strategies, there are still only a limited number of voters who can be persuaded to sympathize with the Religious Right agenda. Furthermore, with a growing number of “antifundamentalists” in the electorate, the Religious Right increasingly faces accusations of being too radical at a time when the American public seems to be seeking moderate representation. Therefore, when Religious Right issues gain significant media and public attention, it is likely that the movement will be overcome by its opponents—based on numbers alone.

The Religious Right as Rhetor

As the analysis indicates, the Religious Right has established itself as a sophisticated rhetor in contemporary politics. Pearce, Littlejohn, and Alexander note that the Religious Right is engaged in an ideological conflict with its opponents, meaning that “the significant differences stem from fundamental concepts of reality embraced by the
protagonists, including their understanding of what is real, what is good, and the means by which the real and the good can be known and acted upon.165 For the Religious Right, fundamental concepts of reality are grounded in the fundamentalist Christian worldview, which is inherently incommensurate with the worldview of its opponents.166 As a consequence, both sides “lack a common moral frame with which to understand the issues on which they agree and from which might be drawn some means of mutually acceptable adjudication of their differences.”167

Although the Religious Right and its opponents will never convince the other to think differently or to debate within a common set of premises, understanding the rhetoric of the movement is nonetheless important. After all, the rhetoric of the Religious Right is not really aimed at its opponents, but rather, its own followers and the small segment of the population that may sympathize with the movement on certain issues. Thus, for opponents of the movement, understanding the Religious Right’s worldview and its arguments is necessary in order to more effectively counter their messages to the undecided electorate.

As the case studies illustrate, the Religious Right has employed a wide range of arguments to advance its position on various issues. However, despite the breadth of argumentation, the Religious Right’s rhetorical method is grounded in the following four principles:

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166 Ibid.
167 Ibid.
1) Belief of Oppression – In any political issue in which it becomes involved, the Religious Right claims that religion and religious people (essentially, fundamentalist Christians) are being oppressed. When debating the faith-based initiative, Religious Right organizations argued that government was hostile to religion and praised Bush for actually recognizing the importance of faith in America. Moreover, fundamentalist Christians believed that the media treated them unfairly when they raised objections to anti-discrimination laws that would protect homosexuals. In Kansas, the Religious Right long argued that it was unfair to teach one religion’s creation story (secular humanists’ theory of evolution) and not allow Christians to raise objections or offer alternative theories. The media was also accused of mischaracterizing fundamentalists and their ideas in the evolution debate. The situation was similar in Collier County, where fundamentalist Christians argued that not posting “In God We Trust” was yet another attempt to suppress religion and prevent students from learning about God.

There is no doubt that the Religious Right honestly believes that fundamentalist Christians are part of an oppressed minority in America. Yet the movement’s frequent reference to this oppression indicates that the Religious Right finds some rhetorical value in the argument as well. Two explanations should be considered. First, rhetoric of victimage is usually associated with liberal politics. The major social movements of the past century predominantly identified with the left, and liberals are typically considered the representatives of
minorities and minority rights. By using the same argumentation strategies employed by successful movements before theirs, fundamentalist Christians seek to build legitimacy for their cause. Rather than merely arguing that their opinions are superior, Religious Right organizations claim that they have not been given a fair opportunity to contribute to public discourse, simply because of their religious association. The rhetoric of victimage may appeal to those who are frustrated by the growing multiculturalism and push for equal rights in America. Also, the use of “liberal” rhetoric helps the Religious Right portray issues as simple debates between right and left, with the left receiving special treatment and the right being silenced and oppressed.

A second explanation for the Religious Right’s rhetoric of victimage relates more directly to the movement’s fundamentalist Christian worldview. One of the major reasons fundamentalist Christians entered the political scene was because they did not believe their views were being represented in the policy making process. According to Pearce, Littlejohn, and Alexander,

“By the late 1970s, many conservative Christians perceived themselves as spurned by the institutions which shape national symbols. This rejection was neither surprising nor particularly distressing because conservative Christians ensconced themselves in rhetoric of personal victimage and social criticism. Together with an apocalyptic vision of sin and judgment, the rhetoric enabled them to thrive in the role of unheeded prophets.”\(^{168}\)

While the Religious Right argues for “a place at the table,” being the victim is also fundamental to the movement’s self-characterization. In their

\(^{168}\) Pearce, et al., 174.
minds, fundamentalist Christians expect to endure persecution just like Jesus prophesized they would. Religious Right leaders often refer to biblical accounts of the persecution of Jesus and his followers as justification to continue with their evangelical and political efforts. Thus, by claiming to be oppressed, fundamentalist Christians fulfill the role of the righteous, persecuted followers of God that is such an important aspect of their faith and understanding of the world.

2) Claim that Church-State Separation is a Myth – Some of the most common arguments of the Religious Right are that the separation of church and state never existed, that it is only intended to protect the church, or that it is wrongly interpreted. Church-state separation is an issue in which the Religious Right frequently gets entangled, obviously due to the nature of the movement’s political goals. During the faith-based initiative debate, Pat Robertson argued that church-state separation was only intended to protect the church, while other Religious Right leaders argued that there was no legal barrier to prevent a partnership between the government and religious organizations. Evolution opponents in Kansas argued that church-state separation did not exist, since one religion (secular humanism) was already being advanced by the government. In the Collier County case, the Religious Right contended that the government has long acknowledged religion and should be allowed to continue to do so.

There are several reasons that the Religious Right emphasizes its disbelief in any separation of church and state. First, fundamentalist Christians believe that America is a “Christian nation,” founded by and for Christians in order to spread
God’s word. They believe “that the United States [is] the nation created by God to provide the resources available for their mission. These resources [include] communications technology, transportation capabilities, a sufficiently stable and permissive society in which to work, and an adequately affluent economic base.”169 Acknowledging the concept of church-state separation, or any intentions of the founders to implement such an idea, undermines the Religious Right’s belief that America is a Christian nation. It further invites the growing religious pluralism in America that threatens Religious Right beliefs. Most of all, the concept of church-state separation conflicts with a fundamental tenet of the Religious Right’s worldview: “to preach the gospel to the entire world.”170

Second, the Religious Right contends that church-state separation is a conspiracy by secular humanists to undermine Christianity. When church-state separation is upheld, the Religious Right believes the government is supporting humanism over other religions, and this inherently conflicts with the belief that America is a “Christian nation.” According to Rob Boston, “the Religious Right knows that Americans fear fundamentalism more than humanism, so it spreads distortion in a desperate effort to change that equation.”171 Rhetorical strategies to discredit church-state separation are essentially another method by which the Religious Right seeks to promote fundamentalist Christianity.

169 Ibid.
170 Ibid.
Third, the Religious Right uses rhetoric against church-state separation to portray its opponents as enemies of religion. Since the movement associates separationists with humanists (enemies of God), then any time people raise church-state objections to the Religious Right, those individuals can be characterized as attacking religion. This strategy is another means by which the Religious Right simplifies issues and labels people as either believers or enemies of God. In the fundamentalist Christian worldview, only people who embrace the same, literal interpretation of the Bible are considered “Christian,” and all other people are seen as potential hurdles to achieving the goals embraced by the Religious Right.

3) Use of Militant Tone/War Metaphor – In all of the Religious Right’s statements and articles, the rhetoric portrays issues in black and white, with no room for compromise. The divisive nature of the rhetoric is seen in the Religious Right’s use of war metaphors, militant language, and negative labels. In the faith-based initiative debate, Religious Right groups accused “anti-family lobbyists” of derailing Bush’s efforts and spoke of “assaults” on the faith-based legislation. One organization claimed that a “knife was pointed at the heart of religion” and that Christians must fight for survival. Evolution opponents characterized evolution supporters as atheists and evoked images of a religious war being fought over school curriculum. So, too, did the America Family Association talk about “fighting face-to-face” to allow “In God We Trust” posters to be displayed in public schools.
All of this war-like language helps the Religious Right rhetorically re-enact the larger culture war fundamentalists believe is being fought in America. By “using the terminology of warfare or impending crisis, [Religious Right] groups vividly portray a cataclysmic sense of urgency in their efforts to motivate the troops.”

In addition to mobilizing activists, however, the uncompromising rhetoric reflects a more significant belief of fundamentalist Christians that their positions on issues are the only morally correct ones. The Religious Right would rather have no change in policy than be forced to compromise their moral and religious framework. As Pearce, Littlejohn, and Alexander state:

“Because so many issues and positions are collapsed together under a single moral frame, the specific issues are perceived as two-sided issues, in which the choice is simple dichotomy of right and wrong. Further, one cannot give up on one issue without giving up on all...any middle ground is summarily dismissed as an illegitimate betrayal of the larger moral position.”

Thus, the Religious Right justifies its refusal to compromise in the name of a higher moral authority, and the militant rhetoric illustrates the movement’s commitment to the principles of the fundamentalist worldview.

3) Accusation that Opponents are Godless – As mentioned previously, the Religious Right considers its opponents to be atheists, anti-family, secularists, or enemies of religion. This belief is evident in arguments like the Family Research Council’s claim that “secularists who seek to remove all vestiges of religion from public life have begun an assault against this faith-based initiative.” Another organization,

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173 Pearce, et al., 181.
Answers in Genesis, argued, “Indeed, evolution is an attack on Christian belief—that’s why so many atheists figure prominently in pushing evolutionary teaching...” In its national motto campaign, the American Family Association accused the ACLU of trying to suppress knowledge about God. All of these examples illustrate the Religious Right’s belief that those who oppose fundamentalist Christian goals are really seeking to undermine and attack religion.

The derisive labels the Religious Right uses to identify its opponents may strike people as contradictory to Christian teachings. However, accusing the opponent of being godless serves two important rhetorical purposes. First, such labels are another way in which the Religious Right mobilizes its followers. Classifying people as the faithful and the faithless simplifies the issue to one of good versus evil and makes it easy for a person to support the Religious Right’s cause. Moreover, if fundamentalist Christians largely accept the rhetoric that their opponents are enemies of God, more meaning and significance is given to their political activities. After all, opposing the work of atheists is not only important to winning votes on political issues, but it is also essential to protecting and spreading one’s religion and way of life.

Second, associating opponents with atheists reinforces a fundamentalist Christian view that their interpretation of the Bible— their faith— is the only true one. Confident that their beliefs are the only way to salvation, fundamentalist Christians feel justified in labeling anyone who disagrees with them as a “lost
soul” or an enemy of the faith. By portraying the debate in these terms, the Religious Right again enacts its worldview that fundamentalist Christians are merely doing God’s work, while persecuted and oppressed by people who seek to destroy the foundations of Christianity.

4) Christianity Serves as the Dominant Theme – Central to the rhetoric of the Religious Right is the emphasis on religion, which is valued above all else. Despite attempts to conceal the religious motivation behind their efforts, fundamentalist Christian activists clearly seek to make their faith the most important consideration in public policy. In the faith-based initiative debate, organizations argued that “fringe” religions should not be given the same opportunities as Christianity. Evolution opponents were largely driven by the fear that teaching evolution would undermine the foundation of their religion, and supporters of the national motto asserted that without knowledge of God in the classroom, moral decay would continue to spiral out of control.

The use of religious rhetoric serves to build a community among Religious Right followers. Whereas some individuals may be unfamiliar with certain issues or otherwise distant from the movement, conservative Christianity is a common trait among most Religious Right followers. Using biblical allusions or referring to Christian beliefs is a simple means of establishing commonality of purpose and unity in the movement. Since internal dissension has been one of the Religious Right’s weaknesses, as illustrated by the lack of a coherent position on the faith-based initiative, emphasizing unity is a significant function of movement rhetoric.
The rhetoric of the Religious Right also demonstrates that religion is truly the motivating force for fundamentalist Christians to engage in politics. Given the religion’s emphasis on evangelism, it makes sense that the Religious Right seeks not only to protect its beliefs, but also to enact them in the public realm. By basing public policy on their own worldview, fundamentalist Christians seek to spread their religious values more rapidly. According to Pearce, Littlejohn, and Alexander,

“Consequently, the New Christian Right’s approach to communication is one of confrontation and a rhetoric of salvation. The metaphor of ‘saving’ their order from its enemies provides a transcendent theme around which the New Christian Right may interpret their own activities as messianic and thus worth any sacrifice.”

Rhetoric that emphasizes God and fundamentalist Christian values is important to the movement because it inextricably links political activism to evangelism. It is this link that makes the Religious Right such a unique political force in contemporary America—one that is sophisticated in its mobilization and rhetorical strategies; one that seeks moral transformation grounded in a fundamentalist worldview; and one that is ultimately driven by a faith believed to be America’s only chance for salvation.

174 Pearce, et al., 183.