From the Pew to the Ballot Box: the mobilization of white Evangelicals in Alabama
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On a late summer Tuesday in 1980, when talk about the upcoming college football season dominated the sports pages and airwaves, Republicans in the sixth district of Alabama went to the polls for the U.S. congressional primary. Eight-time incumbent John Buchanan had defeated his opponent Albert Lee Smith two years earlier, and he expected to win again. But when the polls closed, Smith, an insurance salesman, had stolen the nomination.

The news hit the nation—and Alabama especially—like a shockwave. What force impelled the conservative voters of Alabama’s sixth district (which included Birmingham and surrounding counties) to dump their long-standing and well-respected incumbent? Attention centered on the fourteen month-old political action group Moral Majority, which counted Smith among its members.

This essay examines the appeal of Moral Majority to conservative Christians by looking at that 1980 campaign in Alabama. Dozens of political scientists and historians have examined the group’s leaders and the sociological makeup of its followers, but few scholars have sought to understand the New Christian Right of 1980 through its constituency. We can not simply assume that conservative Christians just parroted the party line. And scholars have obscured regional differences and local political battles by focusing on macro-level politics. By focusing my study at the grassroots level, I uncover the debates that took place “on the ground” among laypeople.

My examination of the political situation in Alabama uncovers some persistent themes. First, few white conservatives spent much time on any secular political issue. Virtually no letters in the Alabama Baptist or The Birmingham News addressed the current political battles in Washington with any degree of specificity. White churches and their periodicals were not the hotbeds of
political activity liberals suspected. For most Alabama evangelicals concerned about such issues, broad generalizations about “preachers in politics” sufficed to make their points.

But these men and women did get specific about political battles in the Southern Baptist Convention. The SBC claimed well over half of white Alabamians as members, and in 1980 the “fundamentalist takeover” over the convention had just begun. The new activist conservatives displayed considerable political acumen in mobilizing the fundamentalist vote.

Moral Majority did not overwhelm a bloc of apolitical yokels in 1980—it refocused a highly politicized group of white evangelicals on national concerns. While internecine battles would continue (and dominate the pages of Baptist periodicals for years to come), Moral Majority helped conservatives to see the importance of defeating liberals in Washington as well. Only with good, God-fearing politicians in charge could conservative Christians fix America. Moral Majority convinced conservatives to wage their battle on two fronts: at the convention and at the polls.

Conservative voters in Alabama charged their opponents with sullying the golden past of America. Moral Majority supporters spotlighted the founding fathers as exemplars of Godly government. They accused current politicians of kowtowing to liberal interests and forsaking their American heritage. Opponents of the group decried Moral Majority’s heavy-handed campaigns and its self-righteous statements. But their effort did not save Buchanan.

Moral Majority influenced the 1980 elections because the group’s leaders knew the concerns of its constituency—especially in the conservative south. The group convinced the bloc of white evangelicals who supported Smith that Democrats (and in this case, a moderate Republican) had failed them. But voters did not take this message lying down. Alabama evangelicals were anything but passive. They possessed an acute sensitivity to political issues. The New Christian Right brought new issues to the table and new voters to the polls, but it did so by tapping into a constituency that knew politics long before Smith swept Buchanan out of Congress.
For its remarkable size and diversity, American Catholicism has garnered only a small portion of critical historical study, at least in comparison with its Protestant counterparts. As a result, many aspects of Catholic life in America remain unconsidered. In an effort to address these gaps, this study examines a lay Catholic group working for peace in the Diocese of Richmond, Virginia. A focus on Pax Christi – Richmond (PCR) upsets the apple cart of scholarship in several respects. PCR fulfills some common notions about the Catholic laity, but disconfirms others. Further, it challenges traditional understandings of the Roman Catholic peace movement.

The Catholic laity created Pax Christi and continue to sustain it. Beginning with Vatican II’s revolutionary position that the church is the people, Catholic lay groups such as PCR now constitute a vital wing of the church. However, PCR’s growth has not come at the expense of an increased divide between clergy and laity. Their experience in Richmond, where their bishop fully champions them, shows that some lay groups find more support from the church hierarchy than other parishioners. As one PCR member noted, “The diocese supports us. We represent the position of the American bishops. But the rest of the folks in our parishes, they think were just a bunch of granola heads.”

PCR also reveals how lay groups in contemporary Catholicism function similarly to the parachurch organizations described by Robert Wuthnow in *The Restructuring of American Religion*. Nearly half of the members reported that they attend mass in their parish only a few times a year. Some suggested that Pax Christi represents their primary community of faith. In this way, we can see how the interest group tendency in contemporary American religion has reshaped American Catholicism as well. Unlike Wuthnow’s analysis, however, these two sides in American Catholicism shake down along different lines. Membership in Pax Christi does not determine political party affiliation or a position on issues such as abortion. While Wuthnow’s paradigm for religious alignment is helpful, it requires significant retooling in order to honor the particularities of the new American Catholic landscape.
PCR also transforms traditional ideas about Catholic pacifism in America. Before the Vietnam War, Catholic pacifist circles hosted the radical intelligentsia, including activists such as Dorothy Day. But Pax Christi, a group that focuses on peacemaking from both the pacifist and just-war perspectives, includes a much wider section of Catholic life. Its Richmond members, though more educated than the average Catholic or American, are not philosophers. The group includes teachers and physicians, along with several retired members of the military.

Further, the peacemakers in PCR integrate themselves into diocesan life more than their earlier, more radical peers did. Most members also work with peace and justice activities, particularly the diocesan partnership with churches in Haiti. Many report that they understand peacemaking as vital to their Christian faith. They understand the Catholic Church, particularly the hierarchy, to be moving slowly toward a peacemaking, if not pacifist, position.

The membership and activities of PCR demonstrate that boundaries once understood to be solid have become quite permeable. Old divides between clergy and laity, between ethnic antagonists, have subsided and a new gulf has emerged. Ultimately, a focus on the neglected pockets of Catholicism, including groups such as PCR, requires scholars to question assumptions about American Catholic history and the models for understanding contemporary American religion that are dominated by the Protestant experience.

Finally, a close look at PCR’s membership also challenges the category of Southern religion. The history of Catholicism in the South has always been seriously understudied; but the presence of so many transplanted Yankees in the diocese of Richmond, and particularly among the ranks of PCR, complicates any understanding we might have of Catholicism in the South or something called “Southern religion.” The great migrations between North and South in the past few decades have brought leftist strands to the church in Richmond, and to other cities throughout the region. In light of these movements, scholars must ask how religion in the South is truly Southern anymore.
“Living Religion” as a Key to the Nightly News:
The Failure of American Education to Provide Connections between 
Religion and Current Events

Megan M. Horton

In the preface to her book, Living Religions, Mary Pat Fisher identifies the text as a “sympathetic approach to what is living and significant in the world’s major religious traditions...[with an] emphasis on...believers and their own accounts of their religion and its relevance in contemporary life.” Teaching about religion in America’s public secondary schools is important. It is important not only in understanding what has happened in the past but as a tool to comprehend what is happening around us each and every day. Knowledge of religious beliefs and the way those beliefs shape lives and world views are critical to understanding the world in which we live.

This is true in an increasingly multi-cultural America and especially true at this time. As a result of the recent events, including September 11, 2001, the war in Afghanistan, and now, the war in Iraq, each night the news broadcasts information about conflict with Islamic culture. Hence, Islam has been chosen as a focal point for in depth study in this paper. That it was singled out should in no way be interpreted to indicate the importance of studying Islam over any other religious tradition. It was chosen simply as an example of one way the world’s religions have come to America’s doorstep. They are increasingly a part of the world we live in and therefore deserve our attention in the classroom.

There are three resources that determine what is taught in the public school system: curriculum, textbooks, and teachers. Within each of these categories, there are large gaps in the information and support provided for teaching world religion. Much of the national literature supports teaching about religion in secondary public schools. However, state government controls the development of curriculum and controls school policies. There is very little information at the state level to support teaching about religion. Textbook
publishers have improved their treatment of world religions in their World History textbooks, perhaps as a result of some of the national publicity supporting the necessity of teaching about religion as critical to understanding history. Yet, their treatment is still secular in orientation. Often the same is true of World Religions textbooks but with the reverse bias. In many ways, the textbooks reinforce the division of society into religious and secular arenas rather than tying them together.

With the failure of curriculum and textbooks to connect religious beliefs to current events, the burden of making these critical connections and creating a truly liberal education falls to the teacher. No state offers teacher certification in religion. There is no single comprehensive source for teachers to receive guidance and direction on how to teach about religion. Resources in the way of recommended texts and syllabi are available on the Internet and there is some information about the constitutionality of the subject. The end result, however, is that each individual teacher undertaking a course on World Religions in the public schools also undertakes the responsibility for educating himself first and piecing together a curriculum and bank of resources from the suggestion fragments available to him. The treatment of religions within history courses is another option and it often relies heavily upon the textbook as a guide, again placing the burden upon the teacher to tie together key themes.

As America grows increasingly multi-cultural, it is extremely important for teachers and students to make the connection between understanding the historical development of religion and understanding the implications of “living religion” on current events. This will require greater attention to the integration of religious and secular views of current events and can best be achieved by taking religion in the curriculum seriously enough to educate and prepare teachers to teach about religion.
“Looking Across the Doctrinal Divide”: Latter-day Saints,
Southern Baptists and the 1998 Southern Baptist Convention, Salt Lake City

“I was a graduate student at Duke University,” recalls Steven Robinson, a member of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), “when our LDS bishop, along with other local ministers, received an invitation to attend a meeting of a citizen’s committee combating the growth of adult bookstores and movie houses in our area.” But when LDS leaders showed up, several Evangelical ministers warned they would “walk out” if the LDS Church was involved. “So we withdrew,” wrote Robinson, “but the lesson was not lost on us—some Evangelicals oppose Mormons more vehemently than they oppose pornography.”

Likewise, leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), America’s largest Evangelical Protestant denomination, have long discouraged fellowshipping on moral issues with the LDS Church. But both Southern Baptists and Latter-day Saints “are conservative, virtually agreeing on family values (they are for them) as well as abortion, pornography, protected gay rights, drug use, and legislated gaming (they are against them),” describes religion historian Jan Shipps. “Voting Republican is the normal pattern for the great majority of Baptists and Latter-day Saints. Moreover, many members of both groups are clearly part of the Christian Right.” In fact, Evangelical Christians, including Southern Baptists, are more closely aligned to Latter-day Saints on moral and social issues than they are to their fellow Mainline Protestants. But Southern Baptists and Latter-day Saints rarely, if ever, work together. Not surprisingly, outside observers are often confused by the unwillingness of these two conservative groups to fellowship each other and unite on a shared moral/political agenda. Why the disconnect?

I will argue that doctrinal differences are responsible for the deep divide between Southern Baptists and Latter-day Saints. More specifically, it is the belief of Southern Baptists that the LDS Church is not Christian that divides the two religious camps. As Southern Baptists are committed to fellowshipping other “Christian” denominations on moral issues, they are unwilling to form moral
coalitions with groups like the Latter-day Saints whose theology renders them undesirable partners. In addition, LDS Church representatives seem reluctant to make overtures to those who criticize their Christianity. They instead seek to form ecumenical alliances with more inclusive religious organizations—Christian and non-Christian—that also share their moral agenda.

This tension between two of America’s largest religious organizations was highlighted during the 1998 SBC, Salt Lake City. The SBC’s “Crossover Salt Lake City” provided both denominations the opportunity to define who they were, and who they were not. Both the SBC and LDS Church showcased their doctrine and sense of morality, which like parallel lines mirrored each other but never met. “Conventional Christians ask, ‘Are Mormons Christian?’ and in asking think they already know the answer,” point out Richard and Joan Ostling. “And Mormons think they have a better, if unspoken answer. They are not only Christians, they are the only true Christians, and their church is the only true church of Jesus Christ.” SBC president Tom Elliff explained, “The Christ that the Mormons speak about is not, in our minds, identified with the Christ identified solely in the scriptures.” The Ostlings are both wrong and right on the LDS position. Latter-day Saints do not believe they are the only true Christians but do believe their church to be the only true church of Jesus Christ. As LDS scholar Terryl Givens explains, Mormonism has “never claimed to be anything less than the fullest repository of divine truth in the midst of a universal darkness. The evidence of that apostasy was guarantor of the need for a restoration; Mormonism was erected on the premise of radical difference.”

Due to these Christ-centered doctrinal issues, leaders from both denominations seemed content to stay on their side of the divide. “We don’t have to carry each other’s mail here,” said SBC president Tom Elliff. “We can happily agree that there are other people who sign on to the same issues we do. I’m grateful others do, but we don’t necessarily need to work together. If it works out in some arena where there’s no compromise of conviction or faith—neither group will compromise tenets of their faith.”
“Not Instruction, But Provocation”:
**Baptist Connections and Heritage at Wake Forest University**

A modern acoustical “sound cloud” hung down in front of the old cross-shaped iron grille over the organ pipes in Wait Chapel, obscuring the artistry and symbolism to reflect the words of Wake Forest Divinity School dean Bill J. Leonard out to a crowd of students, faculty, community members, and representatives from the nations’ universities gathered to celebrate the opening of Leonard’s Divinity School, which he described as “Christian by tradition, ecumenical in outlook, and Baptist in heritage.”¹ Just over a month later, in the coliseum complex down the street, the Baptists of North Carolina conducted their annual State Convention. The convention’s morning business did not include an acknowledgement of the new divinity school, but they did discuss Wake Forest, passing by “a substantial margin” a resolution criticizing the university for not barring use of the chapel for homosexual union services and serving alcoholic beverages on campus and then initiated a constitutional amendment severing remaining ties with the school.²

At first glance this would appear to be evidence of the secularization of a historically Baptist school, but Wake Forest (not only the divinity school, but the university as a whole over the past decade), presents an opportunity to challenge and reshape conceptions of secularization in the modern American university. The opening of a new seminary is one of several symptoms of a ground swell of religious activity at all levels of the school. Wake Forest University perceived a mission and even a mandate that is not necessarily connected with its institutional denominational heritage, but may still be very much Christian or, in Wake Forest’s case, even may be described as uniquely “Baptist” in the sense of overarching beliefs about how life and faith are to be approached, not in the sense of institutional denominations.

Foundational theory about the religious affiliations of modern American universities comes from George Marsden’s *The Soul of the American University* and Conrad Cherry’s *Hurrying Toward Zion* and *Religion on Campus*. In addition to these existing theories, it is important to treat modern conceptions of Baptist
affiliation and polity. Because this is a controversial issue all by itself, Baptists of all stripes, including present and former Wake Forest faculty, have written about the relationship between being Baptist and being part of a Baptist denominational structure.

Analysis of three major events at Wake Forest in the late 1990s provides the challenging data. First, there was a stepped breaking of all administrative, financial, and nominative ties between the North Carolina Baptist Convention and Wake Forest University throughout the decade. Second, as the introduction alludes, the Wake Forest University Divinity School opened in 1999 following ten years of exploration and preparation, with consistent updates to and tentative support from the state Convention. Finally, the university celebrated a “Year of Religion in American Life” during the 1997-1998 academic year, bringing scholars in residence for special programs and shaping the freshman curriculum and campus concerts and lectures to the theme.

Two sets of intertwined motivations fuel this growth in institutional religious activity despite a deepening divide between the university and North Carolina Baptists. Caught in the midst of a battle between conservatives and liberals for control of the Baptist name and identity, Wake Forest administration and faculty have decided to let traditional Baptist principles shape the school’s mission without letting institutional Baptist connections limit religious and educational mission. Also, the school is driven by a desire to educate professionals and remain culturally relevant: institutional Baptist connections were perceived as impeding the process of recruiting and placing the best students.

This test case provides evidence for an alternative to secularization. Wake Forest does not see itself as having moved away from Baptists, but rather having remained firmly planted in its Baptist heritage as denominational structures have shifted away from those foundations. The story has broad implications, informing our understanding of institutions struggling with increasingly flexible denominational identities.