In the 1970s and '80s, the Christian right emerged as a potent political force in the United States as evangelicals mobilized to combat moral decay and “secular humanism” by restoring prayer in schools, the teaching of creationism and voting for anti-abortion statutes.

A Gallup poll revealed that more than a third of Americans declared they had been born again, and another third agreed that “the Bible is the actual word of God to be taken literally, word for word.” Although some observers thought the “Moral Majority” had come out of nowhere, Frances FitzGerald reminds us that evangelicals have had a significant impact on American culture and politics for hundreds of years.


Convinced that black evangelicals deserve a separate book, Ms. FitzGerald restricts herself to white evangelicals. She devotes three quarters of her book to developments since the end of World War II. And she makes clear that evangelicals — individuals who believe they have been born again in Christ and have an obligation to spread the good news of the Gospels — are not always fundamentalists.

Ms. FitzGerald’s book is filled with vivid portraits of evangelical leaders, including not only the “usual suspects” (Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Jim Bakker, James Dobson and “new evangelical” Rick Warren) but also the two principal theoreticians of the Christian right (R.J. Rushdoony and Francis Schaeffer). Her analysis is insightful, but it should be noted that she comes at her subject as an outsider.
to evangelicalism. She does not approve of people who are certain they know what God wants, and she views education as the process of learning the single right answer to every question.

In preaching a “prosperity gospel” that included advice to parishioners to ask God for a camper and specify the color, Jim Bakker, Ms. FitzGerald writes, played a dangerous game with the boundaries of the sacred and the profane. She deems Francis Schaeffer’s claims about America’s origin as a Christian nation “inaccurate”; she is “disquieted” by his approval of 16th-century religious wars. A member of Falwell’s Thomas Road Baptist Church she tells us, apologized for being uninformed about the Equal Rights Amendment, only to add: “I know I’m against it. I’m just not sure exactly why.”

Ms. FitzGerald believes that the influence of the Christian right is waning. The United States, she points out, is less white and less Christian. Almost one-third of Americans under 30 have no religious affiliation; this cohort is decidedly in favor of same-sex marriage and abortion. Since the 1990s, moreover, the white evangelical population has plateaued. Younger evangelicals have become less attracted to an inerrant Bible, less ideological and doctrinaire, more inclined to speak out against racial intolerance.

That said, Ms. FitzGerald acknowledges that the Christian right retains power in the South and many other states dominated by the Republican Party. In these states, anti-abortion statutes remain in place and the culture wars still rage. And with the election of Donald Trump, a Republican Congress, and the prospect of conservative appointees to the Supreme Court, issues important to the Christian right may be “nationalized” again.

“Presidential election votes may seem to deny it,” Ms. FitzGerald concludes, “but evangelicals are splintering.” She may be right, but these days it is probably wise to think — and think again — before making predictions about the future of religion and politics in America.

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