Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements

Jerry Falwell and Moral Majority

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Introduction

Jerry Falwell (1933–2007) was a co-founder and leader of the Moral Majority, a populist movement founded in 1979 that, at its inception, was adjacent to the Republican Party. Throughout its decade of existence, the Moral Majority served as the flagship organisation of the newly organised Religious Right and helped reshape the principles of the Republican Party along the lines of Protestant fundamentalism. This realignment—sometimes formally codified in the party platform, at other times an informal attempt to gain the conservative evangelical vote—included staunch Christian Zionism, revocation of welfare programmes, nuclear build-up, dismantling of business regulations, attempts to overturn abortion rights, opposition to green energy, efforts to repeal the gains of the Civil Rights Movement and Women's Liberation, anti-queer legislation, and Christian nationalism. Falwell adhered to dispensational theology, and his unique interpretation of it created a new milieu of political engagement for conservative evangelicals alongside a nationwide political realignment.

At the heart of the political ideology that underpinned the Religious Right was Falwell's millenarian understanding of the Cold War. He believed that this era was biblically foretold and indicated the imminency of the apocalypse—the Rapture of all 'true' (fundamentalist) Christians into heaven, the rise of a one-world government led by the Antichrist, and the judgement of God. In his understanding of dispensationalism, "Gog and Magog" of Ezekiel 38 referred to Russia/the Soviet Union, which he claimed would imminently invade Israel, in accordance with prophecy. America was not directly mentioned in the Bible according to Falwell's interpretation, but social unrest that occurred during the Cold War, especially the Civil Rights Movement, was also understood as representing the ticking of the prophetic clock towards the apocalypse. Falwell believed that legislation which responded to the Civil Rights Movement came from a Communist incursion, something that he also interpreted to be a sign of the End Times. In an effort to reverse this 'communist' trend and delay the wrath of God on America, his political theology called for an untrammelled approach to capitalism and nuclear build-up against the Soviet Union.

There is debate over whether 'fundamentalism' is a useful term in describing the conservative evangelical politics of the 1980s. Julie Ingersoll takes the position that fundamentalism referred to a very distinct movement within American Protestantism that began in the late nineteenth century and dissipated in the aftermath of the Fundamentalist-Modernist controversy during the 1920s (Gultasi 2025). While George

Marsden did not necessarily limit the movement to this exact period, he certainly emphasised the cultural milieu of the early twentieth century in ways that make his analysis difficult to transfer to the Moral Majority (Ladner 2021, 15–16). 'Fundamentalism' remains a useful term for describing Jerry Falwell and the political movement that he helped organise. Ernest Sandeen identified two strands of fundamentalism: the Princeton theology, which was avowedly *not* millenarian in nature and became absorbed into a broader movement of evangelicalism, and dispensational theology, which was organised around millenarian themes and survived as its own strand of folk belief among some conservative Protestants (Sandeen 1970, 308). Falwell came out of the dispensational tradition and self-identified as a fundamentalist. His political activism emerged out of how he adapted dispensational ideas to fit his understanding of America during the Cold War. As such, 'fundamentalist politics' is a helpful term for understanding the surge of evangelical populism during the 1980s that Falwell helped organise.

However, there is a connotation to 'fundamentalism' that suggests an enclave culture that is, to some extent, self-consciously separate from the rest of society. While this mode was somewhat (though not always) typical of fundamentalists before Falwell and especially of dispensationalism's founding teacher, John Nelson Darby (1800–1882), Falwell rewrote the terms of fundamentalist engagement. The liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s, alongside Civil Rights legislation that threatened the existence of fundamentalist schools that denied admission to African Americans, led him to believe that *activism*, rather than Darby's doctrine of *separatism*, should define the relationship of fundamentalist Christians to the rest of society. The university that he founded, Liberty University (originally founded in 1971 as Lynchburg Baptist College and then renamed Liberty Baptist College), has become one of the largest Christian universities in the world and has many students and academic staff who do not identify as fundamentalist or dispensationalist. However, Liberty University has long promoted an understanding of America's political systems and religious history that comes from Falwell's transmogrification of dispensationalist, fundamentalist belief.

The scholarly consensus of the 1980s and 1990s was that by the time Falwell disbanded the Moral Majority in 1989, it had accomplished no meaningful policy goals. However, this legacy can be questioned because examinations of state legislation and local ordinances that were passed at this time reveal that there were numerous grassroots successes. For example, Jerry Prevo (b. 1945) led the Moral Majority for the state of Alaska, and he also served as a long-time pastor of the megachurch, Anchorage Baptist Temple. During the 1980s, Moral Majority candidates took over much of the state's Republican ticket. Prevo helped organise support for a city ordinance that would allow discrimination against queer individuals in the city of Anchorage; this discrimination remained legal until 2015. Alaska's populist environment that was heavily shaped by Prevo, Falwell, and the Moral Majority helped lead to the political rise of Sarah Palin (b. 1964), whose appeal during the 2008 presidential election churned up the discontent that boiled over in the Tea Party movement. Following Jerry Falwell Jr's removal from Liberty University in 2020, Prevo served as the interim president from August 2020 until March 2023. Additionally, at a national level during the 1980s, President Ronald Reagan (president 1981–1989) was known to be expecting the battle of Armageddon, and his policy agenda included the dismantling of welfare programmes and nuclear build-up that Falwell also championed.

Biographical Sketch

Falwell was born in 1933 as Jerry Laymon Falwell Sr in Lynchburg, Virginia, United States of America, at the height of the Great Depression. At the time, Lynchburg was an economically depressed Southern town and incomes in the South were approximately one-half that of the national average. Further, the town was racially segregated and home to a thriving bootlegging scene, evidenced by his father's alcoholism and early death from cirrhosis. He attended the town's whites-only state schools and excelled in sports as well as academics. According to his autobiography, he earned the highest grade-point average in his graduating class. However, for disciplinary reasons he was not permitted to give the valedictory speech at his graduation (Falwell 1997, 113–14).

Falwell's father was agnostic and his grandfather was an atheist. His mother attended church but he was not interested in Christianity growing up. He described himself as converting when he was a teenager after listening to the televangelist Charles Fuller preaching on his *Old-Fashioned Revival Hour* radio broadcast (Falwell 1997). This show became the model for both the radio show and the television show that Falwell later operated out of Thomas Road Baptist Church, *The Old-Time Gospel Hour*.

Despite graduating as valedictorian and with an interest in engineering, Falwell decided to attend an unaccredited Bible school, Baptist Bible College, and become a pastor. Baptist Bible College was sponsored by the Baptist Bible Fellowship, a loose network of Independent Baptist churches. The church that Falwell attended in high school and preached at occasionally in college, Park Avenue Baptist Church, was part of the Baptist Bible Fellowship. In 1956, shortly after he finished college, the church experienced a split, with thirty-five of the members wanting Falwell to depart with them and become their pastor. In Falwell's telling, he had a conversation with the senior pastor and described how he could start another fundamentalist church in town, leading to more people converting to a particular form of Protestant Christianity. The senior pastor disagreed with the plan of allowing a 23-year-old college graduate to split his church and had Falwell expelled from the Baptist Bible Fellowship. The separation of Falwell from the more conventional approach of that group may account for some aspects of his less traditional and more extreme ideas in later years.

Falwell founded Thomas Road Baptist Church in 1956 with thirty-six members. However, he set out to knock on 100 doors every day, six days a week, to invite people to his new church. It grew rapidly, with membership swelling to 864 by the end of the first year. Additionally, Falwell began airing his sermons on a local radio station and then a television station. The television programme, *The Old-Time Gospel Hour*, would eventually reach millions of people around the world. Still, for over a decade, the church was only open to whites.

Fundamentalism and Capitalism

The fundamentalist movement in America began as a foil against what came to be known as the Social Gospel. Dispensational fundamentalism relied on the idea of inevitable social *regress*, while the Social Gospel had an optimistic approach to social *progress*. Both had antecedents in Great Britain, with reformers such as John Wesley (1703–1791) and Thomas Chalmers (1780–1847) laying a theological

groundwork for evangelicals to engage in social reform and John Nelson Darby providing an alternative theology for social withdrawal. Darby's theological programme began with a radical opposition to the Catholic Church, which he saw as a continuation of the Roman Empire headed by the Antichrist (the Pope). He also became disaffected with the Church of England, especially as the Oxford Movement of the 1830s sought to incorporate elements of Catholicism into Anglican liturgy. A significant tract that Darby wrote on the Oxford Movement is his 1854 "Remarks on Puseyism." He interpreted this paradigm to mean that society is in a state of irreversible decline, and there is no value in engaging in any kind of reform effort. Society, on this account, was damned.

With the Catholic Church being the domain of the Antichrist and the Anglican Church facing certain damnation for apostasy, Darby called on his followers to separate from all worldly institutions as much as possible. Instead of attending a parish church or even a dissenting church, they were to gather in small groups and wait for God to rapture them into heaven secretly. Then God's judgement on the world would begin, a period of tribulation, followed by the millennial kingdom of Christ. Darby divided history into seven distinct eras, or dispensations, beginning with the Garden of Eden and ending with the millennial kingdom. Significant works that he produced on this topic include *On the Formation of the Church* (1840) and *The Church of God in Connection with the Destiny of the Jews and the Nations, as Revealed in Prophecy* (1840). Though he did not put the onus of his thought on the concept of dispensations, his American acolytes called his system 'dispensationalism.' The millennial kingdom would be the seventh and final dispensation.

In addition to proposing an alternative answer for Protestant-Catholic tensions that were endemic to the nineteenth century, Darby's system provided a solution for the perennial question of the relationship between the church and the Jewish people. He claimed that both Jews and Christians are the people of God, but they are *separate* people of God with distinct prophetic destinies. Jesus had come as the Messiah for the Jewish people, but because they rejected him, an altogether unplanned dispensation, the Church Age, began. The Church Age would end with the Rapture, and the prophetic calendar would turn back towards the Jews. The tribulation would ultimately purge and prepare the earth for Jesus to return as the Messiah over Israel.

Darby visited the United States during the American Civil War (1861–1865) and his message took root not so much among people who resented denominational structures but rather among those affected by the war. People who had experienced live battle or who had family members fighting on both sides welcomed the idea that not only was society in a state of irreversible decline but such was biblically foretold. One of these people was Lyman Stewart (1840–1923), who converted to dispensationalism as a result of his experiences in the war. Afterwards, he earned a fortune from oil and endowed the opening of the Bible Institute of Los Angeles (later known as Biola University) as well as the publication of *The Fundamentals* (Dixon, Meyer, and Torry 1910–1915). These endeavours not only spread dispensationalism but also an approach to capitalism that served his interests against those of his archnemesis, John D. Rockefeller (1839–1937), America's titan of oil.

Rockefeller supported efforts aligned with the Social Gospel and a belief in perpetual progress rather than an inevitable social regress. To this end, he financed the opening of the University of Chicago and funded numerous social programmes aimed at alleviating disease and poverty. Stewart and his fellow American dispensationalists saw these efforts similarly to how Darby saw the Anglican Church: an apostasy that indicated that the world was on the cusp of the Rapture and the ensuing wrath of God. *The Fundamentals* castigated attempts at regulating businesses or departing from *laissez-faire* capitalism as indicative of an

encroaching socialism, vis-à-vis the Social Gospel. The solution to the progressive Christianity of the Social Gospel was an adherence to dispensationalism alongside *laissez-faire* capitalism.

Like the fundamentalist movement, the Social Gospel never truly went away but rather took new forms as progressive Christians who aligned with it took up new social ills to remedy. Martin Luther King Jr studied the theology of the Social Gospel at about the same time that Falwell was studying dispensationalism. By the time Falwell began his career, the Civil Rights Movement had developed as a new iteration of the Social Gospel, and he saw it in terms of an End-Times apostasy that heralded the wrath of God.

Segregation and Racial Tension

Around the time that Falwell formed Thomas Road Baptist Church with his thirty-five breakaway members, Lynchburg was moving from being an economically undeveloped backwater into a Cold War boomtown. Military contractors and manufacturers built plants there, providing jobs for locals as well as an influx of newcomers, including from northern states. Lynchburg quickly became home to a thriving middle class, which included northern transplants who quickly became dissatisfied with the city's segregation.

Adding to the tension of a growing and diversifying population, the *Brown v Board of Education* ruling from the Supreme Court in 1954 began the long and difficult process of desegregating schools in the American South. Falwell, an avowed segregationist, adamantly opposed the desegregation of Lynchburg's public schools. He was part of an effort to close Virginia's public schools to prevent integration and even served as chaplain for Defenders of State Sovereignty and Individual Liberty, a grassroots political organisation which aimed to uphold segregation. This response to *Brown v Board of Education*, rather than the later *Roe v Wade* decision that legalised abortion in all fifty states, represented the beginning of his political activism. In addition to engaging in local efforts to preserve segregation, he regularly used his church pulpit to preach about segregation. This endeavour did not cause much of a stir when Thomas Road Baptist Church consisted of just three dozen long-time Lynchburg residents but threatened the church's stability as it grew and attracted northern transplants who opposed segregation.

One of Falwell's most famous sermons from this period was called "Ministers and Marchers," and it clearly depicts how he saw the Civil Rights Movement in terms of dispensational theology and the fulfilment of biblical prophecy. The day that he preached it, 21 March 1965, was the day that Martin Luther King Jr led the third segment of the Civil Rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, and the sermon itself served as a rebuke of the Civil Rights Movement from a dispensationalist perspective. "Ministers and Marchers" insisted that the church has no mandate for engaging in social causes, and to make this claim Falwell drew upon not only his own racist views but also upon the organising principle of Darby's teachings: separatism. Darby taught that Christians are to separate themselves from society as much as possible, so much so that they should not even vote in democratic processes. Ideally, they should gather in separatist groups outside existing denominations and wait for the Rapture.

While Darby did not explicitly encourage evangelism and preferred to leave the world to its own destruction, Falwell used "Ministers and Marchers" to claim that Christians should be engaging in evangelism but not social activism. He saw a distinction between urging others to convert and working for social reform, even reform that aligned with a fundamentalist understanding of the world. The sermon

castigated the leaders of the Civil Rights Movement for engaging in social activism at the expense of evangelism; further, he saw this activism as stemming from a communist plot, which is antithetical to the fundamentalist ideal of *laissez-faire* capitalism. One reason was because a goal of the Civil Rights Movement was to expand government social programmes—such as job-training, workers' rights, and welfare benefits—so that African Americans could also receive them. Consequent with the embrace of *laissez-faire* capitalism that *The Fundamentals* promoted, fundamentalists such as Falwell roundly rejected these calls for more government intervention in the economy. Another reason is that Falwell was already engaging in social activism, and this social activism was not rooted in the Social Gospel but was rather being used in an effort to uphold segregation as the law of the land.

Transformation of Dispensationalism

Over time, Falwell's interpretation of dispensationalism moved from the *separatism* of Darby to the *activism* that, even in the 1950s, was already defining aspects of his career. He later claimed that his previous belief that religion and politics do not mix was invented by the devil to keep Christians from being in charge of America. Two events from his ministry prompted this change: an investigation by the Securities and Exchange Commission into a fraudulent bond scheme that Thomas Road Baptist Church conducted in order to raise money, and an effort of the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) to revoke the tax-exempt status of Christian schools that refused admission to African American students.

The Securities and Exchange Commission Scandal

During the early 1970s, Falwell was rapidly expanding Thomas Road Baptist Church and several ministries connected with it. One of these was Lynchburg Christian Academy (which would later become Liberty Christian Academy), a K-12 day school (which served children ages 5 through 18) that opened in 1967, and another was Lynchburg Baptist College, which opened in 1971 and would become Liberty University. Falwell was also expanding his *Old-Time Gospel Hour* into a nationwide television broadcast. To fund these enterprises, Thomas Road Baptist Church began selling $6.5 million worth of bonds (over $50 million in 2025, when adjusted for inflation) that promised to pay an interest rate of eight percent. People who bought the bonds lost substantial amounts of money when they were deemed worthless because the church could not pay them back.

In 1973, the Securities and Exchange Commission filed a suit against Thomas Road Baptist Church for fraud and deceit in selling the bonds. A judge ultimately cleared the church on the grounds that it had not intentionally engaged in fraud and deceit, but Falwell was forced to hand over the church's finances to local businessmen for restructuring. This experience deepened his mistrust of the federal government and provided an impetus for him to shift his political activism from local efforts at maintaining segregation to national efforts at deregulating government policies and programmes that he saw as threatening.

In response to the case, Falwell began touring the country with colourful, patriotic pageants that he called "I Love America" rallies. Students from the college's choir would dress up in patriotic regalia and sing on the steps of state capitols and courthouses before Falwell preached what became his "stump" sermon (a sermon delivered repeatedly across the country), "America Back to God." This sermon outlined a political

programme that was rooted in Lyman Stewart's forged connection between dispensational fundamentalism and capitalism and Falwell's apocalyptic understanding of the Cold War. In this account, America was understood to be under the wrath of God, and the only way to avert this wrath was to follow an agenda that included nuclear build-up, ending welfare programmes, Christian Zionism, and Christian nationalism.

Nuclear build-up. In the aftermath of America's detonation of the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, dispensationalists including Falwell began reading the atomic bomb and even nuclear war into what they saw as biblical prophecy. This paradigm was exacerbated by the rise of the Soviet Union, which Falwell believed the Bible prophesied under the descriptor Magog. Gog, a leader of Magog, would lead an invasion into Israel prior to the battle of Armageddon towards the end of the Tribulation period. To counter the rise of the Soviet Union and ostensibly protect America's freedoms from the communist threat, Falwell advocated nuclear build-up of nuclear defences. The funds for this nuclear build-up would ostensibly come from gutting welfare programmes, which he saw as enabling African Americans not to work.

Ending welfare programmes. Two significant factors shaped Falwell's views of welfare programmes, such as food stamps and housing assistance. One was his received tradition of associating dispensational fundamentalism with unregulated capitalism. Welfare programmes that came out of the New Deal had their origin in the Social Gospel, as President Franklin D. Roosevelt (president 1933–1945) himself had an appreciation for the Social Gospel. The other factor that fuelled his antipathy to welfare was the association that anti-integrationists of the 1960s and 1970s made between welfare assistance and African Americans. Deriding welfare programmes became a way of indirectly castigating African Americans. During the 1980 election season, Ronald Reagan made the trope of the "welfare queen"—an unmarried African American mother who keeps having children so that she can continue receiving welfare payments—a national call to action.

Christian Zionism. Darby, along with early dispensationalist leaders in the United States (such as James Hall Brooks and Lewis Sperry Chafer), did not believe that the Bible foretold that Israel would be reconstituted as a nation before the Rapture. The 1948 recognition of the state of Israel prompted a shift in dispensationalist thought, leading Falwell (among others) to believe that the nationhood of Israel meant that the prophetic countdown towards the Rapture had begun. Until then, America had a divine obligation to protect Israel from aggression, especially from the Soviet Union and Arab states. This confluence came into sharp focus in 1973, the same year that the Securities and Exchange Commission scandal occurred, when the Soviet Union armed the Arab states against Israel in the Yom Kippur War. The United States responded by arming Israel, leading to the OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) oil embargo and an economic crisis that helped popularise Falwell's message.

Christian nationalism. Christian nationalism refers broadly to the belief that America was founded by Christians, for Christians, and should be led by Christians. This idea has been present in American history since the colonial period but Falwell added an apocalyptic element that had not previously been asserted: Christians had to take back America by implementing the aforementioned policies, thereby delaying God's wrath. This wrath was presently being experienced through the OPEC embargo and consequent economic crisis. During the 1980s, Falwell would claim that the AIDS crisis was the wrath of God for America's toleration of queer lifestyles. Whereas Darby believed that social decline was inevitable, Falwell believed that Christians *could* and *should* engage in political activism to reclaim America for God. This would temporarily reverse America's social decline, but the ultimate decline of society was biblically prophesied

and therefore inevitable. As such, Falwell's approach to Christian nationalism was about preparing America to face the Rapture and Tribulation and ensuring that the country remained divinely strong enough to defend Israel until then.

Notably, abortion was nowhere to be found in the sermon. Though Falwell later claimed that he organised the Moral Majority in response to the *Roe v Wade* decision and the Religious Right has often been characterised as an anti-abortion movement, he did not preach his first sermon against abortion until 1978, five years after *Roe v Wade*.

Additional policy goals came to include the following: overturning the *Abington v Schempp* and *Engle v Vitale* Supreme Court decisions that removed Bible-reading and prayer from public schools; overturning the *Roe v Wade* Supreme Court decision that legalised abortion in all fifty states; reducing federal spending while increasing defence spending; removing women from the workforce so that they would stay at home to take care of their husbands and children; teaching creationism/creation science (instead of or alongside evolution) in public schools; ending sex education and teaching abstinence-only in public schools; preventing the development of green energy; implementing the death penalty for selling drugs; disbanding the Department of Education; and undoing all gains of the liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s (Gay Rights, Women's Liberation, and the Civil Rights Movement). Some of these policies were popular with wide swathes of the American population and led to the Moral Majority gaining support among the very racial minorities that Falwell opposed. The one that garnered the most support from broad sectors of the American public was the anti-abortion movement.

Segregation Academies

In 1967, Falwell opened Lynchburg Christian Academy as part of a broader trend of fundamentalist churches opening schools that only catered to white students. These schools became known as "segregation academies" because they provided a *de facto* means for schools to remain segregated. The proliferation of segregation academies was keeping African American students in poorly funded, under-resourced schools, and in 1970, the Supreme Court gave the Internal Revenue Service (the IRS) authorisation to revoke the tax-exempt status of schools that did not enrol a share of African American students that was roughly equivalent to the locality's demographics. Forcing these schools to pay taxes would threaten their financial solvency and potentially cause them to close.

The IRS did not attempt to revoke any segregation academy's tax-exempt status until the mid-1970s, when a series of legal challenges began between the IRS and Bob Jones University. The latter was a dispensational fundamentalist school founded in 1927 by the eponymous Bob Jones, who claimed that the Bible mandated segregation. In 1981, the Supreme Court agreed to hear the case of *Bob Jones University v United States*, and Falwell and his colleagues participated in support of the university.

Falwell had co-founded the Moral Majority with Paul Weyrich three years previously, and the historian Randall Balmer has pointed to the efforts of the IRS against segregation academies as the reason (Balmer 2021). That Falwell would participate in the case, however, is somewhat surprising given that the Moral Majority attempted to create a big-tent movement that included African Americans and other racial minorities. In an attempt to gain more support for a political ideology that was, at its core, saturated with

racism, he was making efforts to distance himself from his past racist rhetoric by this time; copies of all of his racially charged sermons had been recalled except “Ministers and Marchers,” which had been distributed so widely that it was impossible to do so. His choice to support Bob Jones University in the case shows that his ideology remained racially tinged, despite repeated insistences that he had left his racist past behind.
Bob Jones University lost the case in a precedent-setting decision that led to the demise of segregation academies. Lynchburg Christian Academy and what was now Liberty Baptist College had integrated by this point. Not only was Falwell no longer using overtly racist rhetoric to promote dispensational fundamentalist ideas but he was transforming Liberty into a mainstream evangelical school that would appeal to students and even faculty outside fundamentalist enclaves. Eventually, Liberty University would become one of the largest Christian universities in the world, boasting world-class facilities and sports teams. However, the conservative ideology that the university has promoted since its founding comes from the same apocalyptic, millenarian beliefs that Falwell brought to his sermon “America Back to God” and eventually to the Moral Majority.

These events—the Securities and Exchange Commission scandal and the IRS case against Bob Jones University—led to a shift in Falwell’s dispensationalism, from Darby’s organising principle of separatism to a novel political activism and Christian nationalism. Yet Falwell maintained an approach to prophecy belief that saw the Bible as foretelling an End-Times narrative of the Rapture, Tribulation (including the rise and eventual demise of the Antichrist), the battle of Armageddon, and the millennial kingdom of Christ. Because he no longer adhered to the core tenet of Darby’s belief system, Falwell’s thought by this time might better be considered ‘Rapture theology’ than something that can properly be called dispensationalism.

At the time that these events were occurring, America was steeped in the Cold War and an economic crisis and energy shortage precipitated by the OPEC embargo. People were losing their employment or having their pay checks reduced, drivers could wait for hours in line at a petrol station, and inflation was on the rise. Not only was this economic freefall creating populist discontent with current government policies, but a sense of impending doom resonated with the apocalyptic message that Falwell was preaching.

The Moral Majority Revolution

In 1989, Falwell declared that the Moral Majority had accomplished its policy goals and then disbanded it. Yet the movement had not made any meaningful gains in getting anti-abortion legislation passed (the anti-abortion movement became the face of the Moral Majority as Falwell attempted to distance himself from his racist past), nor in its attempts to Christianise America’s public schools through prayer, Bible-reading, and teaching creation science. The drug epidemic had reached new heights during the 1980s, especially with the introduction of crack-cocaine. Further, the government’s deficit spending had increased substantially under Reagan, despite Falwell’s adoration for the president and insistence that the government needed to balance the federal budget. The government’s debt was $3 trillion by the end of the Reagan era, up from $845 billion in 1979.

This lack of federal legislation has led scholars and analysts to conclude that Falwell’s declaration of the Moral Majority accomplishing all that it set out to do was misguided. Yet there were meaningful gains at

local and state levels that have not been as widely analysed. Outside of legislation, the Moral Majority succeeded in vastly reshaping the American electorate, the Republican party, and attitudes that conservative white evangelicals hold towards political engagement. Prior to the formation of the Moral Majority, white evangelicals were generally disengaged from civil politics. The arrival of the Moral Majority transformed their churches into voter-registration centres, and many conservative white evangelicals began to believe that churches should be open about political views. The Johnson Amendment of 1954 has prevented politicking in churches upon threat of losing tax-exempt status, so the extent to which American churches could be open about such things is contested.

This sudden surge of conservative voters transformed the Republican party from a moderate promotion of business interests (John D. Rockefeller's grandson, Nelson Rockefeller, was a liberal Republican) to a right-wing party that explicitly promoted Falwell's agenda. Liberty University became a necessary campaign stop for any Republican seeking nomination for the presidency. This transformation helped pave the way for the rise of the Tea Party in 2009, followed by Trumpism beginning in 2015.

Other vehicles for organising the Religious Right also developed during this period. Most notably, the Pentecostal televangelist Pat Robertson (1930–2023) created the Christian Coalition in 1987. When Ralph Reed took over, he directed the organisation's efforts towards local school-board elections. The effect was not felt right away but the 1990s saw drastic upheaval that foreshadowed the wars over school boards that began during the COVID era.

One particular area in which Falwell's political organising had a dramatic effect on public policy during the 1980s was with the AIDS epidemic. Falwell had been preaching for years that the wrath of God would soon come to America for its toleration of queer lifestyles and that the acceptance of queer individuals within some churches was making America inferior to the Soviet Union. When the Centers for Disease Control first identified the disease that came to be known as AIDS in 1980, it was found in a cluster of gay men. The disease was first designated GRID, or Gay-Related Immune Deficiency. Falwell preached that the wrath of God had come and then worked to prevent any federal funding towards understanding and treating AIDS. This antipathy towards AIDS continued throughout the Reagan years, and tens of thousands of people died from the disease without any large-scale effort for treating it.

When the liberal Democrat Bill Clinton (b. 1946) was elected president in 1992, Falwell said again that this marked the wrath of God on America. One of Clinton's first accomplishments in office was the appointment of an AIDS czar to coordinate efforts at understanding and treating AIDS. These efforts helped contribute to the development of anti-retrovirals, which prevent the HIV virus from turning into AIDS and have saved untold numbers of lives.

The Globalisation of Protestant Fundamentalism

Falwell's political activism had effects far beyond the borders of the United States. He believed that the Bible prophesied world events, and because America is not in the Bible, these prophecies concern other countries, most notably the Soviet Union and Israel. Like other dispensationalists of the Cold War era, he believed that the Bible foretold the rise of the Soviet Union in the prophecies about Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38. This interpretation of prophecy made the Soviet Union the eschatological enemy of God,

evidenced by the atheism of its communist regime. Soviet Magog would launch an invasion into Israel during the End Times, and the evidence that this prophetic calendar was about to be fulfilled was the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Israel emerged victorious because of the weaponry that the United States sent, a small foretaste of what Falwell believed the country should do as part of a Christian Zionist agenda.

Because Falwell read world events through the lens of prophecy, he saw any effort at negotiating with the Soviet Union as antithetical to God's purpose for America. The SALT (Strategic Arms Limitation Talks) and SALT II treaties in particular earned his ire. Limiting the nuclear arsenal of the United States and expecting the Soviet Union to do the same was a fool's errand and would cause the Soviet Union to conquer the United States. The country would then be unable to protect Israel from Soviet aggression. Should America ratify SALT II, God would not be willing to protect the country because it would have turned its back completely on God. The great irony here is that had the Bible foretold how the rise of the Soviet Union and reconstitution of Israel would unfold during the End Times, the actions of the United States regarding nuclear proliferation and Christian Zionism would have no bearing on Soviet aggression against Israel.

Falwell also interpreted the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and gave guidance on how the United States should respond to the new government through the lens of prophecy. He saw Ayatollah Khomeini (1902–1989) as a puppet of the Soviet government and claimed that Iran would be part of the Magog invasion into Israel. Prior to the Islamic Revolution, Iran did not figure in Falwell's interpretation of prophecy; rather, he adapted his understanding of prophecy to account for it.

One of the most significant ways that his political activism from the 1950s through the 1980s shaped global politics concerned apartheid in South Africa. Falwell supported the apartheid regime and urged the American people to do the same. His justification during the 1980s was not racism but rather the insistence that, should Black Africans gain power in South Africa, the country would fall to the Soviet Union. When countries around the world were engaging in boycotts and divestments from South Africa, President Reagan promoted what he called constructive engagement, which would increase trade with South Africa and investment in the Krugerrand currency. These efforts may have helped apartheid continue for another decade, before falling in 1994.

Conclusion

The survival and increased influence of the Religious Right beyond Falwell's death in 2007 indicate that the political moment of the Moral Majority was not limited to the 1980s. Rather, the rise of the Religious Right was part of a broader 'Southernisation' in which the political goals of the American South have not dissipated but rather become mainstream in US national politics. Falwell's upbringing in Lynchburg during the Jim Crow and Cold War eras led him to craft a political agenda based on dispensational prophecy and segregationist ideals. The surge of populism that he organised continued to reshape American politics, especially with the rise of Donald Trump. For a recent and full account of this history, see Ladner 2024.

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