

The Truth about Conservative Christians



*What They Think and
What They Believe*

Andrew Greeley
& Michael Hout

Contents

| | | |
|-------|---|-----|
| | Acknowledgments | ix |
| ONE | Introduction | 1 |
| TWO | The Religion of Conservative Christians: A Return to the Reformation? | 11 |
| THREE | Conservative Christians in American Politics | 39 |
| FOUR | The Politics of Conservative Christianity in Black and White | 69 |
| FIVE | Freedom, Inequality, and Conservative Christianity | 76 |
| SIX | A Social Portrait of Conservative Christians | 91 |
| SEVEN | Conservative Christian Growth: Membership Begins at Home | 103 |
| EIGHT | Conservative Christians in the “Sexual Revolution” | 113 |
| NINE | The Conservative Christian Family and the “Feminist Revolution” | 136 |

| | | |
|----------------|---|-----|
| TEN | Happiness and Lifestyle among Conservative Christians | 150 |
| ELEVEN | The Pentecostals: Ultimate Conservative Christians | 162 |
| TWELVE | Conservative Christians and Catholics: Too Estranged for Alliance | 172 |
| THIRTEEN | Conclusions | 178 |
| APPENDIX | Regression Results for Models of Vote and Party | 184 |
| NOTES | | 189 |
| REFERENCE LIST | | 199 |
| INDEX | | 203 |

ONE



Introduction

Conservative Christianity, as a religious movement, could hardly be more straightforward. Members seek a religious practice consistent with a relatively small number of basic principles that are rooted in scripture. Such a straightforward approach apparently offers little protection against misapprehension, though. Insiders and outsiders alike misperceive, misrepresent, and stereotype this large and diverse segment of American culture.

To insiders, Conservative Christianity is—in Christian Smith’s memorable phrase—“embattled and thriving.” That is, Conservative Christians defend the core values of both America and Christianity against the onslaughts of a secular and vulgar culture that will, if unchecked, undo both nation and religion. Conservative Christians alone can be trusted to accomplish this, and in pursuing it, they become stronger.

Conservative Christians are a dangerous juggernaut bent on undoing liberty, equality, and the fraternity of nations. Power-mad hypocrites, they mask hate with love, a judgmental streak with pieties, exclusion with appeals to inclusion, and monoculture in the name of diversity.

Neither the insider nor outsider portrait does justice to the variety, complexity, and subtlety of Conservative Christianity. How could it be otherwise? No collection this large—by our count just under one American in three identifies with a Protestant denomination affiliated with one of the Conservative Christian traditions—could possibly be as monolithic in their opinions as this group is made out to be. Both insiders and outsiders have an interest in exaggerating. Movement

leaders gain political clout by pumping up their numbers. Movement critics bring in more political contributions and sell more magazines by broad-brush caricature.

We have no stake in either the insider or outsider rendition of Conservative Christianity.¹ As social scientists we not only resist stereotyping on principle, but we also have the tools to counter stereotypes with facts. And that is our goal here in this book. We hope to deliver facts about Conservative Christians.

The first thing to remember is that the last two Democratic liberals to be president of the United States were Southern Baptists—and by their lights devout ones! The skeptical reader should start there and ask where Presidents Carter and Clinton fit into the stereotypes about Conservative Christians.

OUR APPROACH

We began our project with an op-ed article for the *New York Times* that appeared on the Saturday of Labor Day weekend before the 2004 election. In that piece we argued for fairness for the fundamentalists. They are, we contended, far too varied in their political views to be President Bush's political base, as everyone seemed to think. White Protestants from conservative denominations contributed only a minor increment to the Republican coalition over that already provided by other Protestants. In our own research on American religion (spanning the past several decades) we have been impressed by the variety and pluralism among those who call themselves "Christians." Our reading of the extensive academic literature reinforces that view. Yet the journalists and public intellectuals who form and reform and re-form again the conventional wisdom of the United States, it seems to us, are monumentally ignorant of the faith and behavior of the citizens who fit under the rubric of "Conservative Christians"—a label we will here apply because there seems to be little agreement on what "fundamentalist" and "evangelical" mean. They live someplace else—in the red states.² They are invisible in the global cities of the country—Boston, New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco. We don't know them. We rarely meet them. We judge them by enthusiastic preachers, militant spokespeople, speakers at national meetings, and the occasional person who asked us whether we've been saved.

Fortunately we have at our disposal a wealth of data gathered over a span of over thirty years—enough time to add some historical perspective to our up-to-date information. We do not deny partial truth in some of the stereotypes.³ In many cases we replace absolutes with qualified statements about tendencies. For example, we replace the absolute statement that Conservative Christians are the Republican base with the observation that 7 percent more of them vote Republican than Mainline Protestants. Conservative religion, we argued in our *New York Times* piece, cannot be equated with conservative politics. In the leisure activities their propensity to enjoy NASCAR racing reflects the stereotypes, and the tendency for one-fifth of them watch PBS every day flies in the face of it. They are more likely to oppose abortion than other Americans, but only 14 percent of them oppose abortion in all circumstances while 22 percent counter that with a consistently pro-choice stance.

Thus we present a sociodemographic study of Conservative Christians, which will attempt to understand them from within their own perspectives and to reveal them in all the variety and complexity that they—like all other large groups of people—display.

As we go about our task of describing and documenting the beliefs and practices of Conservative Christians, we take people at their word. When we tender an explanation, we do so with respect for the ideas they express. We take seriously William Shea's (2004) warning that explaining ought not become "explaining away." It is not acceptable to dismiss Conservative Christians with psychological explanations. To say that they are frightened and hence emotionally troubled or to say that they are insecure and hence resisting change insults their faith. And it begs the important social and political questions. Granted, Conservative Christians defend the "fundamentals" of the Reformation against modernity and the compromises with modernity that they think other Christians—Protestant and Catholic—have made. However, a dislike of modernity is a social attitude, not a psychological symptom. Conservative Christians insist that Darwin's findings go against the Christian faith and must be rejected. They criticize other Protestant denominations for compromising with Darwinism because compromise is only possible if one accepts a drastic reinterpretation of sacred scripture. Conservative Christians also firmly believe that their faith is the faith of the reformers that must be defended against

modernity and those Protestants who make compromises with modernity. It is said that they need certainty in their worldview and hence hide from the obvious findings of modern science. However, it is our observation that the adherents of every worldview seek certainty, whether it be Mainline Protestantism or Catholicism or secular rationalism. There are some adherents of every worldview who find it difficult to be tolerant of other worldviews—whether they be agnostics or believers. We are ill-advised to see the mote in the eye of the Conservative Christians and ignore the beam in our own.

Conservative Christians' convictions may be living truth or misguided; it is not our ken to assess those kinds of claims. But as social scientists studying a religious subculture, we must respect the sincerity and integrity of its convictions, regardless of our own opinion. Otherwise fairness is impossible and so too is understanding.

We also note to those who are heavily invested in demonizing Conservative Christians for their alleged political stands that they might well consider the similarities we will report between Conservative Protestants and Afro-American Protestants.⁴ If whites are emotionally troubled searchers for certitude in their Republican vote, how then do the critics account for the fact that African Americans, who are in nearly every respect as religiously conservative as whites, vote overwhelmingly for Democrats?⁵ Belief, for example, in the key conviction of the Conservative denominations—the word-for-word inerrancy of the Bible—does not inhibit political liberalism among African Americans. The political dissimilarity of religiously conservative black and white Americans calls into question the equation of biblical Christianity and conservative politics. Both of us have long been concerned with the demonization of Conservative Christians in the higher media and the scholarly academy. It is unjust to dismiss anyone with pop-psychological putdowns. When a group is one-fourth of American society, bigotry against them is a dangerous threat to the fabric of that society.⁶ Even if, as Smith argues, this adversity strengthens the Conservative Christian movement, it brings no credit to the critics or academics who sit by and let the errors prevail.

Neither of us is a Conservative Christian.⁷ We do not believe in the literal word-for-word inspiration of the Bible. We have not been “saved.” We have not pressured anyone to join our own denomination—though we are ready at the drop of a statistic to argue its merits.

Science is the quest for truth with no holds barred, in the inimitable phrase of Columbia sociologist Harrison White. Sociology, because it deals with the most complex phenomenon that we know—humans in society—has its own methods and its own limitations. Our style of sociology, the analysis of survey data, has many limitations and also many advantages. We must be transparent about our presuppositions, the probability samples we use for our estimates, the statistical rules for drawing conclusions (tests of statistical significance), the wording of our questions,⁸ and the necessary restraints on our conjectures about the meaning of our findings.

One of the alleged weaknesses of our methods is in fact a strength. When we are told that our findings are mired in qualifications or that the world we describe is gray, we rejoice because we believe that therefore we have reflected the reality of a gray and qualification-worthy world, the world that exists outside our office windows and is not always visible in the neat ideological divides of the faculty dinner parties or the “balanced” television news interviews.

Our picture of the gray world is built up, alas for the reader who would like this book to read like an article in *Time* or the *New York Times Sunday Magazine*, by numbers, a succession of numbers more typical of the business and sports pages. There is no other way to put our gray portrait together. We try to keep tables at a minimum and use charts only when the story they tell is dramatic. Yet without our obsession with numbers we would never have discovered how many Conservative Christians watch PBS every day, that while they tend to be more pro-life than pro-choice more take an absolute pro-choice stand than an absolute pro-life stand, how many of them approve of maternal leave, how few of them support anti-pornography laws for adults, and how many of them vote Democratic.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

Our work draws extensively on the General Social Survey (GSS), a broad-ranging inventory of behaviors and attitudes conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago since 1972. Initially an annual survey, the data have been since 1994 collected in even-numbered years. A representative sample of U.S. households is drawn using full probability methods. An English-speaking adult is randomly selected from within the household. About 77 per-

cent of persons thus selected choose to participate in a 75-minute face-to-face interview and 20-minute self-completion questionnaire. When surveys were done annually, the target number of interviews was 1,500; the new biennial design calls for samples of 3,000. The total number of interviews through 2004 was 46,510, including 707 African Americans in oversamples collected in 1982 and 1987. Nobody is asked to answer all the questions, even all the questions slated for a given year.⁹ Only a few very basic questions are asked of all respondents. Fortunately one of them is, *What is your religious preference? Is it Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, something other religion, or no religion?* People who respond “Protestant” are then asked, *What specific denomination is that, if any?*

The question about Protestant denominations has yielded the names of over 230 specific religious organizations over the years. A few researchers may have the expertise required to make use of the full complexity of these denominational distinctions, but most use one of two approaches to classify the denominations by type. The first was developed by Tom W. Smith, one of the GSS principal investigators, in a 1990 article. He referred to the three *sola* we discuss in chapter 2 and classified denominations as “fundamentalist” if they (or their fellows) showed a close affinity to three prescriptions: literal interpretation of the Bible, acceptance of Jesus Christ as personal Lord and savior, and spreading the good news. He classified as “liberal” the (mostly liturgical) denominations that did none of these and “moderate” the ones that were neither “fundamentalist” nor “liberal.” A decade later Steensland et al. (2000) proposed some reclassification and a couple of additional categories.

In our research we have combined the two approaches. For the most part, we follow Smith (1990). But the Afro-American tradition is so distinct that we found it useful to follow Steensland et al. (2000) in giving it its own category. Also we only classify the Protestant denominations as “Conservative” and “Mainline.” Our “Conservative” denominations are Smith’s “fundamentalists” with the Afro-American churches pulled out; our “Mainline” denominations are Smith’s “moderates” minus the Afro-American moderates and the Catholics plus his “liberals” minus the Jews. Finally we reclassified the “Christians” and “Nondenominational or inter-denominational” parts of the “other religions” as “Conservative.” These two groups within the “other religions” have much in common with the Conservative

Protestants who call themselves Protestants: half are Bible literalists compared to 55 percent of Conservative Protestants, 88 percent believe in God without doubt compared with 82 percent of Conservative Protestants, their distributions on church attendance and prayer frequency are indistinguishable, and they are more likely to think of themselves as “strong” Christians than Conservative Protestants are to think of themselves as, for example, strong Baptists or Pentecostals or members of the Church of Christ. The GSS has only reported these two categories since 1998.

We tabulate the current religion, classified according to our scheme, by decade in table 1.1. Conservative Protestants increased from 22 to 26 percent of adults between the 1970s and the 1980s, then leveled off (the one-point increase in the 1990s and one-point decrease in the 2000s are not statistically significant). Afro-American Protestants are between 6 percent and 10 percent of adults (the changes over time are not statistically significant). Mainline Protestants decreased from 34 percent to 23 percent of adults in thirty years. Catholics held steady at 25 percent; Jews held steady at 2 percent. People of other religions increased from 1 to 4 percent of adults, and no religion doubled from 7 to 14 percent of adults. The doubling of nonaffiliation is rooted in the demography of the 1990s and the politics of that decade. The cohort that was probably the most religious cohort in American history, the one born 1900–1914, passed away and was replaced by a much less religious one, born in the 1970s. Meanwhile the growing identification between organized religion and a conservative social

Table 1.1 Religion by decade

| <i>Religion</i> | <i>Decade</i> | | | |
|--------------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| | 1972–1978 (%) | 1982–1989 (%) | 1990–1998 (%) | 2000–2004 (%) |
| Conservative Protestant | 22 | 26 | 27 | 26 |
| Afro-American Protestant | 9 | 10 | 6 | 6 |
| Mainline Protestant | 34 | 29 | 27 | 23 |
| Catholic | 25 | 25 | 24 | 25 |
| Jewish | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Other religion | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| No religion | 7 | 7 | 10 | 14 |
| Total | 100 | 100 | 100 | 100 |
| <i>N</i> | 10,627 | 14,190 | 13,156 | 8,359 |

source: General Social Surveys, 1972–2004.

agenda turned off casually religious liberals, some of whom dropped their religion identification (Hout and Fischer 2002).

Table 1.2 shows the breakdown of Protestants. Southern Baptists are the largest Conservative Protestant denomination—one-third of Conservative Protestants are in that denomination. The next largest segment among Conservative Protestants are the other conservative

Table 1.2 Specific denominations by religion category

| <i>Religion</i> | Percent |
|---|---------|
| <i>Conservative Protestant</i> | |
| Southern Baptist | 32 |
| Other Baptist | 21 |
| Missouri or Wisconsin Synod Lutheran | 6 |
| Churches of God / Assemblies of God | 3 |
| Pentecostal | 9 |
| Christian Scientist | 1 |
| Church of Christ | 3 |
| Jehovah's Witnesses | 3 |
| Latter Day Saints—Mormon | 3 |
| “Christian” | 5 |
| “Inter-denominational” | 2 |
| Other Conservative | 10 |
| Total | 100 |
| <i>Afro-American Protestant</i> | |
| American Baptist | 14 |
| National Baptist | 10 |
| Other Baptist | 54 |
| African Methodist Episcopal / AME Zion | 10 |
| Other Methodist | 3 |
| Holiness | 3 |
| Sanctified | 3 |
| Church of God in Christ | 2 |
| Other Afro-American | 2 |
| Total | 100 |
| <i>Mainline Protestant</i> | |
| United Methodist | 25 |
| Other Methodist | 4 |
| Lutheran, other than Missouri and Wisconsin Synod | 15 |
| Presbyterian | 11 |
| Episcopal | 9 |
| United Church of Christ | 5 |
| Other Mainline | 9 |
| Protestant—no denomination | 23 |
| Total | 100 |

SOURCE: General Social Surveys, 2000–2004.

Baptists (including people who identified as Baptists but could not say which kind they were). Pentecostals are 9 percent of Conservative Protestants; “Christians” are 5 percent.

The largest group among the Afro-American Protestants are various kinds of Baptists (including those who cannot name a denomination). The African Methodist Episcopal tradition is also important.

Mainline Protestants are the familiar Methodist, Lutheran (except Missouri and Wisconsin Synods), Presbyterian, and Episcopal denominations. They also include the elements of the United Church of Christ—the Congregational and Reformed churches—and the Quaker, Unitarian/Universalist, and Brethren traditions.

STATISTICS

We have tried to keep our statistical manipulations simple and transparent. But some questions require multivariate calculations to get an accurate answer. Most of the techniques we use are based on the standard social science tool of multiple regression: a statistical routine for assigning the relative weights to each of a set of independent variables thought to be important for some outcome. We use a special feature of this approach. In situations where three variables link up in what might be thought of as a causal chain, that is, X causes Y which in turn causes Z , then a regression that treats Z as the dependent variable and X as the independent variable, ignoring Y , will yield a large, significant regression coefficient for X . Then when a second regression brings Y into the analysis, X disappears, and Y carries all the explanatory weight. Otis Dudley Duncan spelled out how all this works in an important series of papers between 1963 and the late 1970s (e.g., Duncan 1966, 1969, 1970; Duncan and Hodge 1963; also see Alwin and Hauser 1975).

In most analyses in this book, religious denomination takes the role of X , the EVANGELICAL scale takes the role of Y , and we apply the method to a wide variety of Z s. We get a coefficient from the first regression of, say, the frequency of praying, on denomination, ignoring the EVANGELICAL scale. That represents the direct effect of denomination on praying and its indirect effect that operates through the components of the EVANGELICAL scale. When we do the second analysis, this time adding EVANGELICAL to the regression equation, EVANGELI-

CAL does its own work and the coefficient for denomination is just its direct effect (if any). If the coefficient for denomination was, say, .90 in the first regression and .10 in the second then we would say that the EVANGELICAL scale accounted for $1 - .10/.90 = .89$ or 89 percent of the original (total) effect.

Ordinary multiple regression methods depend on some key assumptions that are likely to be violated unless the dependent variable has lots of possible scores. Some of the variables we are interested in approximate these conditions tolerably well; for them we use ordinary regression. But many of the variables we analyze have just two, three, or four categories. For them we make use of generalizations known as logistic regression and ordered logistic regression. Technical information is available in Long (1997; also see the appendix to Greeley and Hout 1999 for a short primer). We also use a statistic developed by Leo A. Goodman (1991) as an analogue to the regression coefficient. Hout, Brooks, and Manza (1995) modified Goodman's coefficient for these kinds of problems. We called it "kappa" and denote it with the Greek letter (κ). It works just like a regression coefficient in the sense that when we perform a logistic or ordered logistic regression with denomination as the independent variable we get a κ that represents the total effect of religion on the outcome; when we add EVANGELICAL scale to the equation, we get a smaller κ and the proportional reduction is, as in the ordinary regression approach, the proportion explained by the EVANGELICAL scale. Consult Hout et al. (1995) for the formulas and details about how to calculate κ .

CONCLUSION

There is a built-in conflict, we very much fear, between survey analysis and conventional wisdom. After all, we fashion the conventional wisdom in conversation with people we know. But "people we know" is a lousy sample. There is more variation in American society than we can sample in the circles of our acquaintance. Of course when the conventional wisdom stresses the otherness of some group, it usually turns out that what the intelligence gatherers overlooked were the similarities. Therefore we proceed to our study of Conservative Christians open to the possibility that they may very well emerge as men and women much like the rest of us—especially like the appropriate comparison group, Mainline Protestants.

TWO



The Religion of Conservative Christians

A Return to the Reformation?

INTRODUCTION

Conservative Christianity today inherits the religious doctrines and worldview of the social movement that swept through American Protestantism little more than a century ago. Our question is whether that initial formation survives as a religious system among contemporary Conservative Christians (our name for those who are otherwise called “evangelicals” or “fundamentalists”—a pair of misleading labels). Can one describe its key elements, its worldview, its beliefs, its spirituality, and its sense of moral obligations by interviewing American adults who identify with it? We will conclude that Conservative Christianity—in both its major contemporary forms—is a biblical religion in the tradition of the Reformation not only at the leadership level but also within the ranks of the faithful. We also find enough heterogeneity to challenge any facile generalization or stereotype. Importantly, though, our test is not uniformity of belief (in fact, we find that only a minority of Conservatives embrace all of Conservative Christianity’s essential elements). Our test is whether those historically defined elements partially distinguish Conservative from Mainline Protestants today. They do.

Once we have established the evidence that Conservative Christians’ approach to the Bible sets them apart from other Christians, we will turn to the political and social correlates of that distinction. But first things first. What do Conservative Christians believe and how do those beliefs set them apart?

THE REFORMATION LIVES!

Shea (2004) contends that Conservative Christians are in most respects the legitimate heirs of the Protestant Reformation. The three “*sola*” (alone) of the Reformation—*sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*—exist in their pure and undefiled form among the Conservatives, with perhaps a single exception. They propose the inerrant Bible as the only legitimate authority against those denominations that place greater or lesser authority in churches and traditions of one sort or another. They propose faith in God’s mercy against the temptation to think that mercy can be obtained by human works. They propose God’s supervening grace against any human attempts to merit (earn) that grace.

Conservative Christians—or at least most of their writers and teachers—also have inherited, Shea says, the virulent anti-Catholicism of the Reformation, an anti-Catholicism that is only weakly reflected (if at all) in the attitudes of Mainline denominations. The Conservatives for the most part reject all attempts at ecumenism both among Protestants themselves and between Protestants and Catholics as a betrayal of the Protestant heritage. Conversations should be directed towards winning them as converts and thus saving their souls.

Shea observes, however, that Conservative Christians read the Reformation incorrectly if they think that the leading Reformers took inerrancy to be “word-for-word” inerrancy—that God personally inspired every word that the authors of the Bible wrote. In this respect the different understanding of inerrancy among Mainline Protestants may be closer to what the Reformers practiced—which is why the Conservatives are so constrained to denounce them for their questioning of the authority of the inspired word of God in the Bible. If they give that up, they believe that will be no different from other “compromisers” with Darwin and modernity. One either accepts Genesis as written word for word, or the game is lost. This passage from *The Fundamentals* (vol. 1, chap. 5) is illustrative:

I think it is an essential element in a tenable doctrine of Scripture, in fact the core of the matter, that it contains a record of a true supernatural revelation; and that is what the Bible claims to be—not a development of man’s thoughts about God, and not what this man and that one came to think about God, how they came to have the ideas of a Jehovah

or Yahveh, who was originally the storm-god of Sinai, and how they manufactured out of this the great universal God of the prophets—but a supernatural revelation of what God revealed Himself in word and deed to men in history. And if that claim to a supernatural revelation from God falls, the Bible falls, because it is bound up with it from beginning to end.

While it is fair to say that contemporary Conservative Christians are repeating the theories of the Reformation, one must also remember that the context of this repetition is difference and that the difference in context means that Reformation doctrines take a different shape, however verbally similar they may be. Thus the original reformers—Luther, Calvin, and Knox, for example—were fighting against a Church that they perceived was overwhelming the scriptures with its political power and its claim that tradition gave it final authority in the interpretation of the scriptures. The contemporary “reformers” are much less threatened by Catholicism (though they don’t like it very much, as we shall note in a later chapter) than they are by Darwinism and the Modernism compromise with it among the Mainline Protestant denominations. Hence the insistence on word-for-word inerrancy is necessarily much stronger today than it needed to be in the original *sola scriptura*. Would Luther, disciple of Augustine that he was, have as much trouble with Darwin as his successors do today? To engage in that sort of historical and theological discussion goes beyond our skills and our mandate.

Shea suggests that the Conservative Christians practice Biblical Christianity—a religion centered on the Bible as the sole (*sola*) source of authority without any need for a Church or for liturgy. Catholics on the other hand practice Liturgical Christianity—the Bible as understood within a worshipping Church. Mainline Protestants, with their own denominational structures and their own sacred liturgy, are somewhere in between.

We must note that the methods of the brand of social science we practice—analysis of survey data—have their strengths and weaknesses. They are powerful tools in drawing big pictures and refuting conventional wisdom—the major goals of this project. They often lack the precision necessary for intricate investigations of complex issues like religious decisions. We believe that our tools could become much

more useful in these matters—as in the questionnaire items about basic worldviews we will turn to later in this chapter. However the resources necessary to support such efforts do not seem to be available in the present climate of research funding. We hope to add important clarifications to the understanding of Conservative Christian religion in this work, but we are aware that much mystery will remain.

At the very center of Reformation thinking—and of Conservative Christian conviction—is the belief that the Bible is the sole rule of faith. There is no need for an organized church so long as the individual Christian has the sacred book available for study. God speaks directly to the reader in the book and God's grace enables the reader to understand what He is saying. For the Conservative Christian the Bible is the bedrock of faith. The modernists view the Bible as a collection of stories, fables, law texts, religious instructions, history and poetry written by different authors with different intentions for different audiences in different times and places, and with different literary styles, a collection which was gathered together years, even centuries after the pieces of the collection were written. It can be understood properly only when the various components are read with an understanding of the context and the style in which it was written. The creation stories of Genesis are therefore to be understood as teaching profound religious truth about creation and human nature and destiny, but not as literal, scientific accounts. Mainline Protestantism has no problem now with such a literary view. For the Conservative Christian this construct destroys the possibility of faith. Thus one cleric, cited by Shea (2004, 32), argued in 1920:

Every honest man knows that accepting evolution means giving up the inspiration of Genesis; and if the inspiration of Genesis is given up, the testimony of Jesus to the inspiration of the scriptures, goes with it; and if his testimony to the scriptures is given up, his deity goes with it and with that goes his being a real redeemer and we are left without a savior and in the darkness of our sin.

The movement which came to be called fundamentalism was born of the instinct that there could be no compromise with Darwinian evolution without the loss of Christian faith.¹ Between 1915 and 1920 a group of conservative scholars published twelve short volumes called *The Fundamentals*, which laid down the nonnegotiable requirements

of Christianity. In 1919 the conservatives founded the World's Christian Fundamentals Association (in opposition to the Federal Council of Churches). During the 1920s the supporters of the Fundamentals tried and failed to take over the Northern Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian General Assembly. They charged that their adversaries were no longer Christians but founders of an entirely new religion. They claimed for themselves the title of "Evangelical" to which they denied that their opponents had a right. In 1942 a new generation of evangelical leaders founded the National Association of Evangelicals, which many claim has been responsible for the increase in members in the Conservative Christian churches (a claim we question in the "upsurge" chapter).

While the argument (in the finest tradition of apocalyptic Protestant controversy) between the Conservative Christians and their adversaries covers many topics, the Bible is still the critical issue. The touchstone question is whether one embraces the literal, word-for-word, inerrancy of the Bible.²

Since 1984 the National Opinion Research Center has asked the following question in its annual (more recently biennial) General Social Survey (GSS):

Which of these statements comes closest to describing your feelings about the Bible:

- a) *The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word.*
- b) *The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word.*
- c) *The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history and moral precepts recorded by man.*

Fifty-four percent of the Conservative Protestants and 59 percent of the Afro-American Protestants endorse the first response; 26 percent of the Mainline Protestants and 21 percent of Catholics choose this response. Four percent of Conservative Protestants and 7 percent of Afro-American Protestants say that the Bible is a book of fables, as do 13 percent of Mainline Protestants and 12 percent of Catholics. Conservative Christianity is thus firmly biblical but not unanimously so.³ Moreover there is a notable (and statistically significant) decline in belief in word-for-word inerrancy across year of survey ($\kappa = .30$);

62 percent of Conservative Protestants in the earliest data, gathered in 1984, took a literal interpretation of the Bible; it was a minority view (47 percent) by 2002. Additionally there is a decline across birth cohorts from a high of 67 percent for those born before 1920 to 50 percent in the 1950s cohort followed by a modest rebound to 54 percent of those born since 1970s ($\kappa = .33$).

A statistical model that considers age, year of survey, and year of birth simultaneously reveals no age effect and independent influences for both year of survey and year of birth. Nonetheless half of Conservative Protestants born after 1980 believe in word-for-word inerrancy. Given the changes in society and in religion during the second half of the twentieth century, the conviction that God is responsible for every word in the Bible among Conservative Protestants remains remarkably robust. Without the data from twenty years ago we would be marveling at 50 percent orthodoxy. Conservative Protestants are twenty percentage points more likely to believe in word-for-word literalism than Catholics are to believe in the infallibility of the pope.

BORN AGAIN?

To be “saved” or (to “find the Lord” or to “find Jesus” or to be “born again”) is an experience essential to the Conservative Christian creed. It is also often essential in relationships between Conservative Christians and others. To ask another whether she or he has been “saved” is to establish where one is in religious geography. The ranks of the saved will be rescued early in the end times. Others are, sadly perhaps, in the ranks of those who are destined for damnation. According to some Conservative Christian views, those not saved will be vaporized on the day of the Rapture. For Catholics at any rate the question of “finding the Lord” or “being saved” is a jarring experience. The words do not fit the Catholic’s religious vocabulary. Unless one has had frequent contact with Conservative Christians it’s not quite clear what they are talking about.⁴ However, if the Conservative Christian believes that you have not been saved, then it is their duty to offer you the good news of salvation so that you can thus be reserved from hell fire and vaporization. Those Catholic prelates in Latin America who complain about the zeal of the “sects,” as they are often called, to convert Catholics to “Christianity” do not understand that the goal

of the missionaries is to guarantee the ultimate happiness of their converts, to save them from damnation. From the point of view of the Conservative Christians, the missionaries are risking their lives in the same cause for which the early Christian martyrs died. One might fairly compare the Conservative Christian missionaries to the Catholic missionary orders of priests and nuns who dedicated their lives to the conversion of “pagans” in Asia and Africa and indeed in South America. The theological and ecclesiological presuppositions and the techniques of the two kinds of missionaries might be very different, but the perspective—and the bravery—are similar.⁵

Thus the question arises as to whether the “born again” experience and the obligation to lead others to salvation are part of the religious perspective of all Conservative Christians. The GSS included the following question in its three special religious modules (1988, 1991, and 1998): *Would you say that you have had a “born again” experience—that is, a turning point experience in your life when you committed yourself to Christ?* Sixty-five percent of the Conservative Protestants report such experiences, as do 64 percent of the Afro-American Protestants; about half as many—36 percent—of Mainline Protestants have had experiences they describe this way. There is no trend over time or cohorts in this experience. Thus today’s Conservative Protestants are even more likely to be “born again” than they are likely to believe in word-for-word inspiration of the Bible by God. In a similar question asked in an International Social Survey Program (ISSP) religion module (1998), *Did you ever have a religious or spiritual experience that chanted your life?*, 69 percent of the Conservative Protestants reported such experiences as did 66 percent of Afro-American Protestants; 45 percent of the Mainline Protestants affirm this variant of the question. With both the more expansive question and the more specific question, therefore, the Conservative Protestants are much more likely than the Mainline Protestants to report life-changing religious experiences. However, a substantial minority of Conservative Protestants apparently have never been “saved.”

In the three religion modules (1988, 1991, 1998) a question was asked about spreading their faith to others:

- *Have you ever tried to encourage someone to believe in Jesus Christ or to accept Jesus Christ as his or her savior?*

Seventy-one percent of both the Conservative Protestants and the Afro-American Protestants replied that they had tried to spread the faith compared to 43 percent of the Mainline Protestants. Curiously, more Conservative Protestants report such efforts than report “re-born” experiences. Thirty-nine percent of those who had not “found Jesus” themselves nonetheless tried to lead others down the path to acceptance of Jesus as Savior. Nearly all of these apparently un-reborn proselytizers were raised in the same faith they now profess and report being active churchgoers as they were growing up. We infer that their negative response to the question about changing reflects this continuity in their religious background and current practice.

Taken together these three items—word-by-word inspiration, born again experience, and leading others to Jesus (belief, experience, and action)—are crude measures of the presence of the Reformation faith in the Conservative Protestants—*sola scripture, sola fides, sola gratia*. To what extent, one may ask, do the Conservative Protestants endorse all three? Two-fifths of Conservative Protestants endorse all three—40 percent (35 percent of Afro-American Protestants); 15 percent of Conservative Protestants reject all three (11 percent of Afro-American Protestants). However, only 15 percent of Mainline Protestants affirm all three “fundamental” items, as do a small 4 percent of Catholics. Forty-one percent of Mainline Protestants and 54 percent of Catholics reject all three.

How can it be that only one-third to two-fifths of those who one can legitimately call Conservative Protestant because of their denominational background live up to the full requirement of the Reformation pure and undefiled? Orthodoxy is tricky, and propositional orthodoxy even trickier. No one can reasonably expect everyone who embraces a religious heritage to conform to all of its doctrines. Arguably we could end this exposition of Conservative Protestant religion at this point and consider only those who are its perfect exemplars. While the Conservative Protestants are almost a quarter of the American population (one-third when we add Afro-American Protestants to the tally), those who measure in on all three of the “fundamental” items are a more modest 18 percent of the population—hardly the mass of Reformation zealots that both the enemies and the friends of Conservative Christianity pretend to see.

However, it would seem more useful to ask how the differences among the Conservative and Mainline Protestants can be explained by the EVANGELICAL scale as we will hereinafter call it. Are the Conservative and the Mainline Protestants different one from another precisely because they embrace the EVANGELICAL scale to differing degrees?

Half of both the Conservative Protestants and Afro-American Protestants read the Bible at least every week (21 percent every day) as opposed to a third of Mainline Protestants (14 percent every day). Fourteen percent of Catholics read the Bible once a week (just 3.5 percent every day). This corresponds to Shea's (and others') characterization of Conservative and Afro-American Protestants as Bible Christians, Catholics as Liturgical Christians, and Mainline Protestants as a mixture of the two style. The EVANGELICAL scale completely accounts for the differences in Bible-reading frequency among Protestant denominations, but Catholics read the Bible significantly less than Protestants, even at the same EVANGELICAL value.⁶

In conclusion to this section, Conservative and Afro-American Protestants can reasonably claim to be the legitimate heirs of the Reformation. Americans who identify with these two Christian traditions are more likely than other American Christians to adhere to the three solas—scripture, faith, and grace. However, even among the Conservative and Afro-American Protestants, full embrace eludes the majority. Mainline Protestantism and Catholicism are significantly different Christian traditions. Catholics emphasize liturgy and community over the lone believer encountering the word of God alone in Bible study (see Greeley 2000). The Mainline Protestant denominations (in the United States at least) blend Biblical and Liturgical Christianity.

WORLDVIEW

Religion, in the definition of Clifford Geertz, is a symbol system that seeks to explain reality and especially the suffering in human life—death, sickness, injustice. In the archives of the General Social Survey there are a number of items that seek to probe the worldview of the respondents. In general they suggest that in keeping with the ethos of the Reformation, Conservative Protestants tend to have a harsh

picture of God and a negative view of both the world and human nature.

Two items are based on David Tracy's (1981) view of a Catholic "analogical imagination" and a Protestant "dialectical imagination." Both items ask respondents to place themselves on a seven-point continuum between these poles:

- *On a seven-point scale, where would you place your image of the world and human nature between these two contrasting images: "The world is basically filled with evil and sin" and "There is much goodness in the world which hints at God's goodness"?*
- *Where would you place your image of the world and human nature between these two contrasting images: "Human nature is basically good" and "Human nature is fundamentally perverse and corrupt"?*

Twenty-four percent of both Conservative Protestants and Afro-American Protestants lean to a view of the world as evil compared to 13 percent of Mainline Protestants. Twenty-three percent of Conservatives and 27 percent of Afro-Americans also see human nature as fundamentally evil and corrupt in comparison again with 13 percent of the Mainline Protestants. Conservative Protestants and their partners, Afro-American Protestants, are much closer to the Reformation's grim view of the world and human nature than are the Protestant Mainline. Adding the two items together to form a simple scale, we find that the Conservative and Afro-American Protestants get a score significantly closer to the "evil" pole than Mainline Protestants do. Protestants of any denomination who are high on the EVANGELICAL scale incline more to the "evil" side of the scale; differences on EVANGELICAL account for 54 percent of the difference between Conservative and Mainline Protestants.

Another series of questions asks people to think about God as more like *mother* or *father*, *master* or *spouse*, *judge* or *lover*, and *friend* or *king*.

The Conservative and Afro-American Protestants generally have a much harsher image of God than do Mainline Protestants. Either Conservative or Afro-American Protestants are more likely to view God in the harsher term; Mainline Protestants are least likely to take the harsher alternative in each case (table 2.1).

Table 2.1 Image of God by Protestant denomination

| Image | Protestant Denomination | | |
|--------|-------------------------|-------------------|--------------|
| | Conservative (%) | Afro-American (%) | Mainline (%) |
| Father | 66 | 47 | 47 |
| Master | 62 | 56 | 48 |
| Judge | 46 | 46 | 35 |
| King | 28 | 33 | 18 |

SOURCE: General Social Surveys, 1996–2002.

When these four items are combined into a single scale, Conservative Protestants score almost one-third of a standard deviation higher than the Mainline (the difference is .30, to be precise). The EVANGELICAL scale accounts for 51 percent of that gap; the residual difference is .15 standard deviations.

Thus Conservative Protestants hold starker images of the world, human nature, and God than Mainline Protestants do. The three *solas*, as captured by our EVANGELICAL scale, explain just over half of that propensity.

Finally, there are seven items in the ISSP religion modules of 1991 and 1998 that also might be considered indicators of worldview⁷:

- *There is a God who concerns himself with every human being personally.*
- *To me life is meaningful only because God exists.*
- *The course of our life is determined by God.*
- *In my opinion life does not serve any purpose.*
- *People can't change the course of their lives.*
- *Life is only meaningful if you provide meaning for yourself.*
- *We each make our own fate.*

Three factors⁸ emerge from analysis of these items. The first factor includes the first three variables and seems to measure dependence on God; the next two are somewhat pessimistic; and the third emphasizes personal control. Only on the first scale are there any differences between Conservative Protestants and Mainline Protestants.⁹

Conservative and Afro-American Protestants view God as a more active agent in their lives than other Christians do. Thus 65 percent of Conservative Protestants and 62 percent of the Afro-American Protestants “strongly agree” about God’s personal concern, and another

24 and 26 percent, respectively, merely agree. Fewer Mainline Protestants see God in such active terms; 40 percent agree strongly and 32 percent just agree that God has personal concerns.¹⁰ While most Christians would, we speculate, ascribe some of the meaning they find in life to their faith that God exists, the ISSP question imposes a much stiffer condition in the form of the word “only.” Nonetheless, 36 percent of Conservative Protestants and 38 percent of Afro-American Protestants strongly agree that “life is meaningful only because God exists”; another 32 percent of Conservative Protestants and 29 percent of Afro-American Protestants just agree. Mainline Protestants find meaning in other spheres of life; 20 percent strongly agree and 25 percent just agree.

The doctrine of predestination divided Protestants in the sixteenth century and, though the ISSP “predetermination” item is an imprecise expression of that doctrine, it appears that it continues to do so in the United States today. Afro-American Protestants are most likely to agree that “the course of our lives is determined by God”; 67 percent agree (36 percent do so strongly). Conservative Protestants are significantly less likely than Afro-Americans to agree—48 percent (26 percent strongly)—but significantly more likely than Mainline Protestants, of whom only 36 percent agree (16 percent strongly).

Combining the three items into a scale, we find that Conservative Protestants and Afro-American Protestants are indistinguishable while Mainline Protestants are less theistic by one-half of a standard deviation on this scale.¹¹ The EVANGELICAL scale accounts for 61 percent of the difference between Mainline and other Protestants; after statistically adjusting for differences on the EVANGELICAL scale Mainline Protestants are only .18 standard deviations less theistic than Conservative and Afro-American Protestants.

In summary, Conservative and Afro-American Protestants tend, in comparison with Mainliners, to emphasize dependence on God, the depravity of the world and of human nature, and the harshness of God. This emphasis is strongly reflective of the degree to which Protestants in different denominations and traditions accept and practice the three-point core of conservative belief, experience, and action. This, one assumes, is what the original Reformers meant by *sola gratia*, by grace alone.

BELIEFS

Conservative Protestants, as might be expected, are strongly orthodox in their beliefs. Regarding some beliefs, for example, in God's existence or life after death, there is little difference among the three Protestant groups we are studying. More than nine out of ten believe in God and more than four out of five believe in life after death. Even so, there are some discernible shades of belief. Conservative and Afro-American Protestants are more likely to express their belief in God without doubt (83 percent and 81 percent, respectively) than Mainline Protestants (60 percent), while Afro-American Protestants are less sure about the afterlife (81 percent believe) than Conservatives (87 percent believe) and Mainline Protestants (86 percent believe). The *EVANGELICAL* scale accounts for half of the greater doubt found among the Mainline Protestants but none of the difference between Conservative and Afro-American Protestants regarding the afterlife.

On other matters there is considerable difference of belief. The 1991 and 1998 ISSP religion modules included questions about heaven, hell, and religious miracles; the 1991 religion module also had a question about believing in the devil. Overall, more Protestants believe in heaven than in hell, more believe in hell than in religious miracles, and more believe in religious miracles than in the devil. As we see in table 2.2, Conservative Protestants have not only the highest belief in all four ideas but also the least drop-off from one belief to the next. Afro-American Protestants are indistinguishable from Conservative Protestants except regarding views of the devil. Mainline Protestants are less likely to believe in each of the four; they also are the group most likely to believe in heaven but not in hell.

We combined the three items that appear in both ISSPs into a scale.¹² Conservative Protestants and Afro-American Protestants were indistinguishable in 1998 (the year in which the *EVANGELICAL* scale items are also available); their means are 4.38 and 4.48. Mainline Protestants score significantly lower at 2.99. The *EVANGELICAL* scale accounts for 60 percent of the difference between Mainline and Conservative Protestants in beliefs about heaven, hell, and miracles; the difference with *EVANGELICAL* held constant is .55 (compared with the initial difference of 1.39).

Table 2.2 Beliefs about supernatural subjects by Protestant denomination

| <i>Subject</i> | <i>Protestant Denomination</i> | | |
|--------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| | Conservative (%) | Afro-American (%) | Mainline (%) |
| Heaven | 91 | 89 | 80 |
| Hell | 82 | 79 | 62 |
| Miracles | 77 | 77 | 67 |
| Devil ^a | 78 | 61 | 58 |

^a This item was only asked in 1991.

SOURCE: International Social Survey Program modules, 1991 and 1998.

One cannot be sure of the direction of causality in these matters. It may be that Conservative Protestants are more likely to believe in the devil, hell, and miracles because they also believe in literal interpretation, have experienced salvation, and have tried to win someone for Jesus. Or it may be that the relative orthodoxy of the Conservatives attracts others who hold similar interpretations of Christian dogma. However, as we show in chapter 7, we have no evidence of massive conversions of Mainline Protestants (or Catholics) to the Conservatives, despite contrary claims by the Conservatives. This suggests that few people adjust their affiliation to accommodate their beliefs. The interpretation more consistent with the bulk of the evidence is that most people are socialized to a broad spectrum of beliefs in the context of their religious heritage—in short, denomination constrains belief.

SPIRITUALITY

Conservative Protestants are very devout. Thirty-seven percent attend services every week—almost half of the weekly attenders go more than once a week. Afro-American Protestants are only slightly less devout; 28 percent attend weekly and one-third of them go more than once a week. Mainline Protestants practice their religion significantly less; 23 percent attend weekly and only one-fourth of the weekly attenders go more than once a week. The Conservatives also pray often—71 percent at least daily (37 percent several times a day)—as do Afro-American Protestants—69 percent daily (33 percent several times a day). Mainline Protestants pray less; 54 percent daily (25 percent several times a day). The EVANGELICAL scale completely explains these

differences; significant as we have described them, the differences among the three denominational groups are not statistically significant after controlling for EVANGELICAL.

Three other questions were asked in the religion modules that might indicate the strength of one's relationship with religion or God—strength of religious preference, feeling religious, and engaging in religious activities:

- *Are you a strong ____ or not a very strong ____? {fill blanks with name of denomination}*
- *Would you describe yourself as extremely religious, very religious, somewhat religious, neither religious nor non-religious, somewhat non-religious, extremely non-religious?*
- *How often do you take part in the activities and organizations of a church or place of worship other than attending religious services?*

Conservative and Afro-American Protestants have stronger, more religious identities, and they participate more than Mainline Protestants. Over half of Conservative and Afro-American Protestants identify as “strong” members of their churches compared with just over one-third of the Mainline Protestants. Thirty-eight percent of the Conservative and 43 percent of the Afro-American Protestants compared to 25 percent of the Mainliners consider themselves either “extremely religious” or “very religious.” Over one in five Conservative and Afro-American Protestants participate in church-related activities other than services on a weekly basis, but only one in seven Mainline Protestants do. Multivariate analyses of each of these measures of identity and activity show that our EVANGELICAL scale explains the differences. Thus the evangelical orientation (Bible, rebirth, convert) is a notable part of the proclivity of the Conservatives and Afro-

Table 2.3 Religiosity by Protestant denomination

| | Protestant Denomination | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|----------------------|-----------------|
| | Conservative (%) | Afro-American (%) | Mainline (%) |
| Indication of religiosity | | | |
| Strong identification | 52 | 53 | 37 |
| “Very religious” | 38 | 43 | 25 |
| Participates in activities | 23 | 21 | 14 |

source: International Social Survey Program modules, 1991 and 1998.

Americans to feel more religious and participate in church-related activities other than services.

The world often seems to be evil and human nature bad. God is stern and demanding. In response Conservative Protestants are devout, feel religious, and engage in more religious organizational activity than anyone else (save for Afro-American Protestants). How then do they experience their relationship with God in the midst of the problems of life? What sort of spirituality emerges in times of stress? Several responses in the 1998 health and religion module provide some clues:

Think about how you try to understand and deal with major problems in your life. To what extent are the following involved in the way you cope:

- *I look to God for strength, support, guidance.*
- *I work together with God as partners.*
- *I try to make sense of the situation and decide what to do without relying on God.*
- *I feel that God is punishing me for my sins or lack of spirituality.*
- *I think about how my life is part of a larger spiritual force.*
- *I wonder whether God has abandoned me.*³

Two items that immediately follow these are also relevant:

- *I believe in a God who watches over me.*
- *I try hard to carry my religious beliefs over into all my other dealings in life.*

The first three “coping” items plus the two that follow are hallmarks of Afro-American spirituality; the Afro-Americans rank highest on all five. Conservative responses are different from those of the Mainline on the first four “coping” items and the two that follow. Fifty-nine percent of Conservative, 68 percent of Afro-American, and 42 percent of Mainline Protestants look to God for strength, support, and guidance “a great deal.” Denominational differences are almost as large on working together with God as partners; 28 percent, 42 percent, and 21 percent of Conservative, Afro-American, and Mainline Protestants, respectively, do that a great deal. They also differ on trying to make sense of the situation without relying on God (47 percent, 54 percent, and 35 percent of Conservative, Afro-American, and Mainline Protestants, respectively, do that “not at all”).

The other large differences come in believing in a God who watches over people; 77 percent, 81 percent, and 57 percent of Conservative, Afro-American, and Mainline Protestants, respectively, share that belief strongly. Conservative Protestants then seem more likely to have a vivid sense that God is with them in their troubles, though African-Americans are even more likely to have that sense. Clearly this sense of the support of God is nearly as essential to the Conservative spirituality as it is to Afro-American spirituality. We formed a scale from the first three “coping” items and the two follow-up items. Afro-American Protestants score almost one point or one-fifth of a standard deviation higher on the eighteen-point scale than Conservative Protestants do; Mainline Protestants score a point and a half (one-third of a standard deviation) lower than Conservative Protestants. African Americans of all denominations score higher on this spirituality scale, so we include race as well as scores on the EVANGELICAL scale in our statistical adjustments. We find that race and the EVANGELICAL scale together account for all significant denominational variation, and the EVANGELICAL scale accounts for one-third of the racial difference within denominations too. Thus this form of God-in-action spirituality is a reflection of the Reformation core of Conservative Protestantism. It is tied in a special way to African Americans’ spiritual lives whether they are in the Afro-American denominations or elsewhere.¹⁴

Another set of questions probes more deeply into the question of the Conservative Protestant spirituality—what is the nature of the presence of God that Christians experience.

*The following questions deal with possible daily spiritual experience. To what extent can you say that you experience the following:*¹⁵

- *I feel God’s presence.*
- *I have strength and comfort in my religion.*
- *I desire to be closer to or in union with God.*
- *I feel God’s love for me, directly or through others.*
- *I am spiritually touched by the beauty of creation.*
- *I feel deep inner peace and harmony.*

These items certainly measure a dimension of the spiritual tradition to which all Christian traditions would subscribe. Fifty-five percent of the Conservative Protestants report that they feel God’s presence every day, as do 66 percent of the Afro-American and 43 percent

of the Mainline Protestants. The numbers for “strength and comfort” are 55 percent, 65 percent, and 42 percent for Conservative, Afro-American, and Mainline, respectively; for the desire to be closer to God: 62 percent, 63 percent, and 46 percent; for feeling God’s love: 60 percent, 59 percent, and 44 percent; for “beauty”: 65 percent, 67 percent, and 59 percent; and finally for “harmony”: 41 percent, 39 percent, and 32 percent. Summing the number of daily experiences we get a scale that ranges from zero to six. Among Protestants, the scale has a mean of 3.1; for Conservatives it is 3.4, for Afro-Americans it is 3.6, and for the Mainline it is 2.7. These differences are completely explained by the EVANGELICAL scale; at an average value of the EVANGELICAL scale (a score of 1.67), the adjusted means on the scale of daily religious experiences are trivially different—3.13, 3.19, and 3.09 for Conservative, Afro-American, and Mainline Protestants, respectively.

Conservative Protestants confront the problem of evil in life with intense religious conviction. When asked (in 1988) where on a scale from one to seven they would place the freedom of their faith from doubts, 63 percent of the Conservative Protestants choose 1 or 2 on the end of the continuum that asserts that their *faith is completely free of doubt*; only 43 percent of Afro-Americans and 38 percent of the Mainline Protestants are as free of doubt. Some might wonder whether complete freedom from doubt is a sign of strong faith or whether the other end of the continuum (*My faith is mixed with doubt*) is the more realistic and human stand. However, there can be no question that the Conservative Protestant faith is firm—perhaps in great part because they can call on a direct experience of salvation in Christ. The EVANGELICAL scale accounts for 81 percent of the difference between Conservative and Mainline Protestants, and the remainder is not statistically significant. Both an extra sense of closeness to God and an extra confidence in one’s faith, therefore, are closely linked to commitment to the “fundamentals” of Reformation religion.

It would appear therefore that there is an authentic Conservative Protestant spirituality that the Christian tradition can hardly reject. It combines religious devotion, a strong faith, trust in God’s active intervention to assuage life’s difficulties (especially but not exclusively among African Americans inside and outside the Afro-American denominations), and an awareness of God’s presence in the world and in

the love of others. Moreover, these characteristics of spirituality are integrated around the three core items of the Conservative Christian faith—literal interpretation, spiritual rebirth, and a need to share the good news with others; our EVANGELICAL scale, composed of measures of these concepts, accounts for between 70 and 99 percent of denominational differences in spiritual issues. It hardly seems possible to deny that this is a Reformation spirituality and that it is admirable, though one may not like the words and the deeds with which it is propounded. Conservative and Afro-American Protestants share its most profound elements in a way highly distinct from the spiritual expressions favored by Mainline Protestants.

DUTIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

A system of faith and spirituality arising from that faith creates duties and responsibilities for the faithful. If the faith and spirituality are in the tradition of the Lord's Prayer, then one duty is certainly forgiveness. Three items in the health and religion module of 1998 attempt to measure a person's willingness to forgive.

- *I have forgiven myself for the things that I have done wrong.*
- *I have forgiven those who hurt me.*
- *I know that God forgives me.*

On all three items the Conservative and Afro-American Protestants are more likely to choose forgiveness than are the Mainline Protestants, though the margins are smaller than in other aspects of religion we have investigated in this chapter. Afro-American Protestants are more likely to say they almost always forgive themselves (61 percent), and Conservative and Mainline Protestants are harder on themselves (only 46 percent have always or almost always forgiven themselves). Fifty-five percent of both the Conservatives and the Afro-American Protestants say that they almost always forgive those who hurt them as do 50 percent of the Mainline Protestants. Both the Conservative and Afro-American Protestants are somewhat more likely than are Mainline Protestants to say they know that God has forgiven them (88 percent and 90 percent compared with 79 percent). Only on this last item is the difference between Conservative and Mainline Protestants significant.

One measure of how serious this forgiveness may be is whether it correlates with willing to forego the death penalty. Forgiving self and others does not matter for how Protestants feel about capital punishment, nor does knowing that God has always forgiven them change Afro-American and Mainline Protestants' feelings about the death penalty. However, Conservative Protestants who feel they know God has forgiven them are significantly more likely than other Conservative Protestants to oppose the death penalty for murderers; 25 percent versus 8 percent.¹⁶

There is also a responsibility to be concerned about the influence of your religious faith on your daily life. With data on the relative influence of religion and other factors over important decisions, one can begin to address the issue of at a general level religion's place in people's life decisions. Four questions from 1988 ask respondents to place each of these influences on a five-point scale from very important to not very important when weighing decisions:

- the Bible;*
- your family and friends;*
- the teachings of your church or synagogue;*
- your own personal judgment.*

As one might expect, Conservative and Afro-American Protestants are more likely than Mainline Protestants to say that the Bible has a very important influence on decisions—59 percent and 65 percent versus 28 percent. They also, perhaps surprisingly, are more likely to list the teachings of the Church as very important—45 percent and 41 percent versus 22 percent. This second finding may be surprising because in Reformation theory one ought not to *need* a church, much less use its teaching in decision making. In an even more surprising outcome, Conservative Protestants are twenty percentage points more likely than are Catholics to say that the teachings of the Church are very important.

Protestant denominations do not differ significantly in the importance that they ascribe to family, friends, or themselves.

Combining the Bible and church items into a single scale of religious importance, scored zero if neither is very important, one if either is very important, and two if both are very important, we find that Conservative and Afro-American Protestants score the same (mean = 1.03 on the importance scale) and Mainline Protestants significantly

lower (mean = .51). Adjusting for denominational differences on the EVANGELICAL scale accounts for 69 percent of this difference (residual difference is just .16). It is hardly surprising that in Bible Christianity the Bible is critical to decision making. However, the puzzle remains about the influence of the Church. Most of the Conservative Protestants belong to churches that are “congregational” with a small “c,” that is, the local congregation makes its own decisions, which are not subject to review by a hierarchy. As Paul Harrison argues in his classic *Authority in the Free Church Tradition* (1971), the central church organizations—like the Southern Baptist Convention—speak to the local churches but not for them. Nor do they give formal orders to the local congregations. However, it would appear that the Church still has considerable influence and that our Conservative Protestant respondents do not find any contradiction that the Church should be important within a religion tradition that in principle does not need churches. Indeed, one might be persuaded that the efficacy of local control increases the Church’s influence relative to the distant echo of hierarchical pronouncements.

Another series of question asks how important to the respondent are a number of religious attitudes and behaviors. The one of interest in the present context is, *How important to you is it to follow the teaching of your church or synagogue?*

Forty-eight percent of the Conservative Protestants say that it is very important as opposed to 26 percent of the Mainline Protestants. In this respect at any rate, the Mainline seems more consistent with the Reformation heritage. (Again the Conservative Protestants are almost twice as likely as Catholics to insist on the importance of the Church.) Indeed the Conservative Protestants are more likely to consider following the teachings of the Church more important than following their own consciences—48 percent to 38 percent (as opposed to 26 percent and 28 percent for Mainline Protestants).¹⁷

Sociologists ought not be surprised by this phenomenon. The iron law of oligarchy suggests that means easily become ends in themselves. There is, we know, a historical tendency for sects to evolve into denominations and churches. The Reformation itself, in revolt against the Roman church, produced, in time, its own churches. The Reformation’s aspiration to replace Church with Bible was only partially fulfilled. The apparent importance of churches to the rank and file of contemporary Bible Christians suggests that the influence of

individual members and congregations over Church cycles back in the form of a strong influence of Church over individuals.

MORALITY, SCIENCE, AND LAW

The original Reformation set out to reform not only the Roman Church but also individual lives. It was important for the leaders of the Reform that their followers lead godly lives. The early settlers in New England were Puritans in more than name. Are the Conservative Protestants of today equally stern in their moral orientations?

Responses to four items in the religion modules provide possible answers for these questions:

- *Those who violate God's law must be punished.*
- *Right and wrong are not usually a simple matter of black and white, there are many shades of gray.*
- *Immoral actions by one person can corrupt society in general.*
- *Morality is a personal matter and society should not force everyone to follow one standard.*

Thirty-eight percent of the Conservative Protestants and 37 percent of Afro-American Protestants versus 18 percent of the Mainline Protestants agree strongly on the punishment of sinners.¹⁸ In the matter of an immoral person corrupting society the proportions agreeing are 68 percent for the Conservative Protestants versus 47 percent and 48 percent for Afro-American and Mainline Protestants, respectively. The Conservatives have a far greater tendency to see moral issues as black and white—29 percent agree that they are *not* that way compared with 39 percent of Afro-Americans and 44 percent of Mainline Protestants. There are no differences across religions on the subject of morality being a personal matter. Mainline Protestants score about one-third of a point below Conservative Protestants on the moral ambiguity item; the EVANGELICAL scale accounts for 40 percent of that. Some of the Conservative Protestants' taste for moral absolutes grows out of their Reformation theology, but a significant residual remains.¹⁹

This code might explain why many Conservative Protestants were so eager to demolish former president Bill Clinton. He was a sinner who would corrupt society unless society proved its worthiness by

punishing him. Taking the longer view, we also note that several of the great socioreligious movements of American history were driven by fervent religious enthusiasm—abolition, prohibition, civil rights.²⁰ Perhaps the contemporary antiabortion, antihomosexuality, antipornography crusades represent continuity in moral righteousness among the Conservative Protestants.

There are also four multiple choice responses in the 1991 ISSP questionnaire that touch on issue of morality and law.

- *Right and wrong should be based on God's law.*
- *Right and wrong should be decided by society.*
- *Right and wrong should be a matter of personal conscience.*
- *Books and films that attack religion should be prohibited by law.*

As one might expect Conservative Protestants endorse God's law as superior to society and personal conscience and also believe that the law should ban books that attack religion. Thus 44 percent strongly agree that right and wrong are determined by God (52 percent of Afro-American Protestants), twenty percentage points more than the Mainline Protestants, and 46 percent (53 percent of Afro-Americans) also strongly agree that the law should protect religion from attack again twenty percentage points more than the Mainliners. There are no differences across denominations in opinions about the importance of conscience, but only 32 percent of the Conservative Protestants and 36 percent of the Afro-Americans support society's right to decide right and wrong while 45 percent of Mainline Protestants support society's right to involve itself in determining what is right and wrong. Thus do the Conservative Protestants equip themselves with a theory of resistance or opposition to society's laws (legalized abortion, for example) in the name of God's law. The difference between Conservative and Mainline Protestants is statistically significant (it amounts to .63 standard deviations). As in so many of these issues, there is no difference between Conservative and Afro-American Protestants. A modified version of the EVANGELICAL scale accounts for 55 percent of that difference (leaving .28 unexplained).²¹ Biblical Christians have thus substantial support from their core beliefs in appealing to God's law.

Conservative Christians are prepared to array themselves against the rest of society when it is an issue of God's law. This stand is ob-

vious especially on the issue that caused the Conservatives to break with other Protestants—modernity as represented by Darwinian evolution. Society may praise science, but the word of science must be exposed to the judgment of God’s law. Responses to four items from the 1988 religion module measure the Conservative Protestant attitude to science.

- *Science will solve our social problems like crime and mental illness.*
- *One trouble with science is that it makes our way of life change too fast.*
- *Scientists always seem to be prying into things that they really ought to stay out of.*
- *One of the bad effects of science is that it breaks down people’s ideas of right and wrong.*

It is hardly unexpected that the Conservatives are skeptical about science. The surprise is the lack of disagreement across denominational lines regarding science’s inability to solve social problems; only one-fifth of Protestants share that faith in science (Catholics and people with no religion have more faith in science; 27 percent of Catholics and 31 percent of people with no religion think science can solve social problems). However, 45 percent agree that science changes our way of life too fast and 43 percent that scientists pry into things they ought not. Afro-American Protestants are even more critical; 52 percent say science makes life change too fast and 54 percent agree scientist pry too much. Mainline Protestant give much more support to science—only 38 percent and 27 percent, respectively, agree with these negative statements. Most tellingly, substantial minorities of Conservative and Afro-American Protestants believe that science tends to break down ideas of right and wrong—41 percent and 48 percent—versus 28 percent for Mainliners. On a three-point scale of attitudes toward science, Conservative Protestants score one-quarter points lower than Afro-Americans and one-third of a point higher than Mainline Protestants. Adjusting for EVANGELICAL accounts for 62 percent of the difference between Conservative and Mainline Protestants. Thus Conservative Protestants have different attitudes on science from those of the Mainline Protestants mainly because of the core beliefs of their brand of Reformation religion—Bible, rebirth, and saving the unsaved.

The 1992, 1994, and 2000 ISSP environmental modules had a similar item: *We trust too much in science, and not enough in faith*. Only 20 percent of American adults disagree with this blunt critique of science, a finding that will offer very little consolation to scientists. Support of science however, is even weaker among Conservative Protestants. Only 13 percent of them reject the critique (and 15 percent of Afro-American Protestants) in comparison with 19 percent of Mainline Protestants. The significant differences among Protestant denominations come at the other end of the scale; 22 percent, 21 percent, and 11 percent of Conservative, Afro-American, and Mainline Protestants, respectively, strongly agree with the statement. In a multivariate analysis of this item, the observed difference between Conservative and Mainline Protestants is .68; it falls to .39 when we adjust for the literal interpretation of the Bible (the only element of the EVANGELICAL scale available in 1992, 1994, and 2000). In any competition between science and the Bible among Conservative Protestants the Bible easily wins. Therefore the Grand Canyon was created by Noah's flood.

There might be a temptation for some readers to say that the reason for this dislike of science is that the Conservative Protestants are uneducated. However, educational attainment does not affect these denominational differences.²² Conservative Protestants take their stands not because they are uneducated but because they hold strong religious beliefs that take precedence over scientific facts. From a scientist's perspective this is an untenable view. But for many nonscientists, "the science is not in." Too many newspapers have reported contradictory findings about evolution and health for the nonprofessional to keep up. A study finds that the fat in milk increases the risk of a heart attack. A few years later another study finds that the calcium in milk can help ward off osteoporosis. Read the original studies, and it is easy to keep track. But watch the evening news and hear "University study shows milk causes heart attacks" and then "Women should drink more milk for their bones" and let the doubts creep in.

Another question in the 1993, 1994, and 2000 ISSP environmental modules enables us to ask about attitudes toward the core issue for Conservative Protestants—evolution: *Do you believe that human beings developed from earlier species of animals?*

Note that the ones who framed the question did not use the word “evolve”—not that such an evasion was likely to fool convinced Conservative Protestants. Half as many Conservatives as Mainline Protestants—25 percent versus 50 percent—agree that it was probably or definitely true. Afro-American Protestants are in between at 37 percent answering at least probably true. Three out of five of the Conservatives said it was definitely not true as opposed to one out of three of the Mainline Protestants.

Taking education into consideration changes the picture somewhat but does not wipe out Conservative Protestants’ preference for the Bible over science. The proportion of them responding that it is definitely not true that humans developed from earlier species of animals is actually *higher* for high school graduates (64 percent) and people with some college (63 percent) than for dropouts (57 percent). It is the same for college graduates as for high school dropouts. Only among people with advanced degrees is “definitely not true” a minority response—and then just barely at 46 percent.

Figure 2.1 shows how biblical literalism deflects the influence of education on Conservative Protestants’ views on evolution. For those who reject the literal interpretation of the Bible, some education mod-

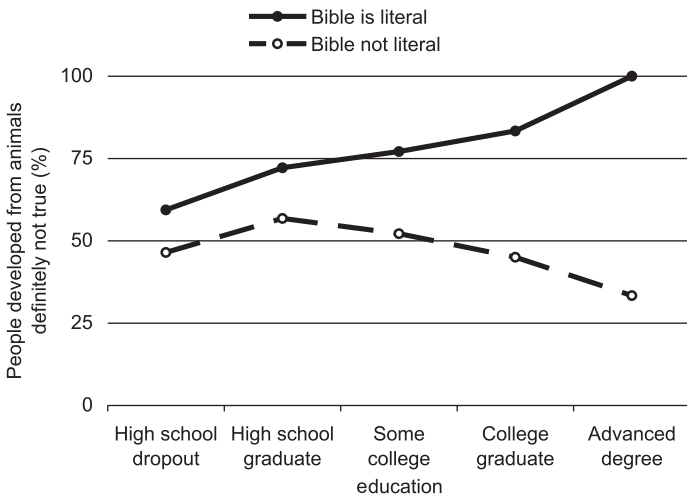


Figure 2.1 Evolution by education and attitude toward the Bible: Conservative Protestants. SOURCE: General Social Survey, 1993, 1994, and 2000.

estly raises the proportion saying that people definitely did not develop from other animals, but college and graduate education lowers it substantially. For those who read the Bible literally, though, more education means more dissent from science; each increase in education is accompanied by an increase in the percentage saying people did not develop from animals.

Higher education does not eradicate faith in biblical inerrancy.

CONCLUSION

We have tried in this chapter to navigate a torturous path through survey data to organize a sketch of Conservative Christianity as a religious system. We conclude that the Conservatives and Afro-American Protestants both embrace a systematic religious heritage, one that they can legitimately claim is an authentic updating of the Reformation. The central issue is the Bible as sole rule of faith. Once Mainline Protestantism began to equivocate about Genesis it compromised with modernity and lost its authenticity. Most elements of faith and practice that we have considered here point to differences between Bible religion, as espoused and practiced by the Conservative and Afro-American denominations, and the Bible-liturgical hybrid that is Mainline Protestantism. Over and over we found that a scale composed of the three solas accounted for between 60 and 99 percent of the differences between Conservative and Mainline Protestants.

Make no mistake about it, Conservative Christians and their Afro-American partners in faith are the real dissenters in America—some, no doubt, more than others. Dissent permeates their core beliefs, their worldviews, their morality, their relationships with God, and their devotions. It is not a fashionable dissent but rather a stern, consistent, and determined dissent.

As important, we think, as the distinction between Conservative and Mainline Protestantism, though, is the overwhelming similarity between the Conservative and Afro-American Protestants. When they differ it is almost always the Afro-Americans who take the more doctrinally conservative position. These Christian traditions share the Reformation's emphasis on Bible, rebirth, and reaching out to others. They share high levels of activity, and members of both report that their religion is very important to them. Afro-American

Protestants see God as a significantly more active presence in their spiritual life.

This strong similarity has intrinsic merit and interest. But our fascination with it comes from the question, What is conservative about Conservative Christians? Here we have two active groups that place God at the center of their thoughts and actions. But as we turn to politics we will see that their faith and spirit move them in opposite directions.