



“High on Jesus”: US evangelicals and the counterculture

“Viajando em Jesus”: os evangélicos norte-americanos e a contracultura¹

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Abstract

The political mobilization of conservative Protestants in the United States since the 1970s is commonly viewed as having resulted from a “backlash” against the alleged iniquities of the 1960s, including the excesses of the counterculture. In contrast, this article maintains that conservative Protestant efforts to infiltrate and absorb the counterculture contributed to the organizational strength, cultural attractiveness, and political efficacy of the New Christian Right. The essay advances three arguments: First, that evangelicals did not simply reject the countercultural ideas of the 1960s, but absorbed and extended its key sentiments. Second, that conservative Protestantism’s appropriation of countercultural rhetoric and organizational styles played a significant role in the right-wing political mobilization of evangelicals. And third, that the merger of evangelical Christianity and countercultural styles, rather than their antagonism, ended up being one of the most enduring legacies of the sixties. In revisiting the relationship between the counterculture and evangelicalism, the essay also explores the larger implications for understanding the relationship between religion and politics. The New Christian Right domesticated genuinely insurgent impulses within the evangelical resurgence. By the same token, it nurtured the conservative components of the counterculture. Conservative Protestantism thus constituted a political movement that channeled insurgencies into a cultural form that relegitimized the fundamental trajectories of liberal capitalism and consumerist society.

Keywords: Backlash argument. Jesus Movement. Evangelical left. Countercultural capitalism.

Resumo

A mobilização política dos protestantes conservadores nos Estados Unidos desde os anos 70 é comumente vista como tendo sido o resultado de uma “reação adversa” contra as supostas iniquidades dos anos 60, incluindo os excessos da contracultura. Em contraste, este artigo sustenta que os esforços protestantes conservadores, para se infiltrarem e absorverem a contracultura, contribuíram para a força organizacional, atratividade cultural e eficácia política da Nova Direita Cristã. O ensaio desenvolve três argumentos: primeiro, que os evangélicos não simplesmente rejeitaram as ideias contraculturais dos anos 60, mas absorveram e ampliaram seus sentimentos-chave. Segundo, que a apropriação da retórica e dos estilos organizacionais contraculturais pelo protestantismo conservador desempenhou um papel significativo na mobilização política dos evangélicos de direita. E terceiro, que a fusão do cristianismo evangélico e estilos contraculturais, ao invés de seu antagonismo, acabou sendo um dos legados mais duradouros dos anos sessenta. Ao revisitar a relação entre a contracultura e o evangelismo, o ensaio também explora as implicações maiores para a compreensão da relação entre religião e política. A Nova Direita Cristã dominou os impulsos genuinamente insurgentes dentro do ressurgimento evangélico. Da mesma forma, ela alimentou os componentes conservadores da contracultura. O protestantismo conservador constituiu, assim, um movimento político que canalizou as insurgências para uma forma cultural que relegitimou as trajetórias fundamentais do capitalismo liberal e da sociedade consumista.

Palavras-chave: Argumento de reação. Movimento de Jesus. Esquerda evangélica. Capitalismo contracultural.

¹ Editor's Note: Although one of the meanings of “getting high” in Portuguese refers to drunkenness and even experiences resulting from the use of other drugs, we understand that the translation of the title as “Alto em Jesus” could be misunderstood and sound strange and ambiguous. We chose “Viajando em Jesus” because it establishes a clearer relationship with the notion of “trip” related to the effects of narcotics, especially LSD, a very popular drug in the context of the counterculture of the 1960s.

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Introduction

Since it first appeared with a vengeance on the political scene in the late 1970s, the New Christian Right has been the focus of a wide range of studies that have probed the clientele, motivations, techniques, and politics of resurgent conservative Protestantism. Despite this flood of books, articles, and essays on the evangelical political revival, however, in 2004 religious historian Jon Butler (2004) came to a rather damning conclusion: While the rise of the Christian Right was frequently discussed in scholarship, he declared, it was nonetheless rarely historically explained. Instead, scholars treated religion as a "jack-in-the-box" that popped up occasionally to provide a scary religious sideshow in the largely secular drama of US society.

One prominent example of this historiographical problem is the "backlash" thesis. Its adherents largely regard resurgent evangelicalism as a spontaneous reaction against the alleged excesses of the counterculture, militancy of the Civil Rights movement, iniquities of the liberal welfare state, immorality of secular culture, and betrayal of God and country by anti-Vietnam War protesters. In a nutshell, the conventional backlash argument runs as follows: Beginning in the 1960s, desegregation and the Civil Rights movement alienated white Southerners from the Democrats, the Vietnam war split the party as protests ran afoul of the patriotic instincts of middle America, and the economic downturn and new tax burdens imposed by the Lyndon Johnson administration's Great Society programs ate into the party's working-class base. Meanwhile, Johnson's War on Poverty appeared to condone immoral behavior and create welfare dependency; the growth of a "secular humanist" state relegated traditional religion to the sidelines; and sixties-style "permissiveness" clashed with lower middle-class culture organized around family, church, and neighborhood.²

As a result, the backlash thesis suggests, the traditional link between evangelicals and the Democrats was severely strained by the 1970s. While the

² For good examples of the backlash argument, see Wilcox (1996), Bruce (1999), Liebman; Wuthnow (1983), Ribuffo (1983).

Democratic party was torn apart, the Republicans gradually built a power base among disaffected white working and middle-class voters. The New Christian Right played a key role in this political realignment because by emphasizing “social issues,” such as abortion, homosexuality, and “traditional values,” it provided conservatism with both a populist agenda and a new electoral base which embraced strict morality, the heteronormative family, and patriotic nationalism. Naturally drawn to resurgent conservatism, which was fostered intellectually by neo-conservative intellectuals and institutionally by big business, the Christian Right became part of a new conservative alliance. In the end, Christian fundamentalists, conservative Republicans, disaffected Democrats, and right-wing fringe groups had combined in a movement which centered ideologically on an amalgam of moral rigidity, religious orthodoxy, and the cult of the free market, and institutionally on Republican grass-roots campaigning, church organizing, right-wing think tanks, and business funding.

The backlash thesis, however, has come under increased scrutiny in recent decades. A new generation of researchers has probed more deeply the origins of the evangelical resurgence and has provided us with a more nuanced reading of the movement. In particular, many of the critics of the backlash argument highlight the *longue durée* of evangelical religious and political organizing. They locate the religious resurgence less as a reaction against “the sixties” broadly conceived than in political mobilizations dating back to anti-New Deal campaigning, the “spiritual-industrial complex” of the Cold War, and the socioeconomic rise of the South and the sunbelt (HERZOG, 2011). Noting that the religious surge started “long before external provocations like the death-of-God theology or the Vietnam debacle had started to rattle evangelical nerves” (WACKER, 1995, p. 378), these observers move away from a simplistic “culture war” scenario that depicts the Christian Right as having spontaneously leapt onto the political stage with a drum roll and a musical score from behind the veil of subcultural isolation and obscure morality politics. Instead, they uncover a diverse movement whose ideologies and institutions were molded in the process of interacting with postwar economic changes, sociocultural transformations, political realignments, and Cold War state-building; whose

political identities remained contingent and contested in a complex process of internal purges, grassroots organizing, and political coalition-building; and whose cultural resonance combined insurgent impulses with the affirmation of the fundamental trajectories of liberal capitalism and consumerist society.³

Taking on board these findings, this essay looks at another challenge to the backlash thesis by revisiting evangelicalism's relationship with the counterculture. It argues that the counterculture of the 1960s was pivotal for conservative Protestantism not solely because it provided a convenient enemy image, but because evangelicals participated in, shaped, and transported the decade's transformative impulses they professed to oppose. In particular, the essay advances three main arguments: First, that evangelicals did not simply reject the countercultural ideas of the 1960s, but absorbed and extended its key sentiments. Second, that conservative Protestantism's appropriation of countercultural rhetoric and organizational styles played a significant role in the right-wing political mobilization of conservative Protestants. And third, that the merger of evangelical Christianity and countercultural styles, rather than their antagonism, ended up being one of the most enduring legacies of the sixties.⁴

1 Evangelicals and the counterculture

On the surface there is little that appears to connect the free-love hedonism and make-peace-not-war iconoclasm of the counterculture with the patriotic hypernationalism, moral conservatism, and middle-class conformity of evangelicals. Underneath this contrast, however, there was a whole subterranean world of connections and crossovers, revealing that evangelicalism has a lot in common with the sixties' insurgencies it loves to hate. In her study of the conservative Young Americans for Freedom (YAF) and the left-wing Students for a

³ For excellent studies of evangelical movement organizing prior to the 1970s, see, for example, Dochuk (2011), Williams (2010), Miller (2009), Turner (2008), Eskridge; Noll (2000). In my own research I have focused on the longer-term engagement of evangelicals with the nation-state in general and with public funding on nongovernmental agencies in particular. See Schäfer (2012).

⁴ On the link between evangelicalism and the insurgent movements of the 1960s, see the works cited below. In addition, see also Isserman; Michael (2000, p. 241-59), Oppenheimer (2003), Kent (2001), and Rossinow (1998). I have explored this further in Schäfer (2011) and in Schäfer (2013).

Democratic Society (SDS), sociologist Rebecca Klatch (1999, p. 134) regards the counterculture as the “meeting ground for the varying interests and overlapping impulses of this divided generation.”⁵ Historian Lisa McGirr (2001, p. 244) notes that hippie communities in Southern California attracted both countercultural teenagers and adult middle-class suburbanites. Preston Shires (2007) argues that a surprising number of teens and young adults who participated in the counterculture eventually made their way to the evangelical movement. And journalist Rod Dreher (2006) describes the coalescence of cultural conservatism and countercultural rebellion from the Slow Food movement to the revolt against modern architecture. Granted, the scope and impact of evangelical incursions into the counterculture remain subject to debate and await further scholarly analysis.⁶ Nonetheless, a small library of books suggests that, as historian David Swartz (2008, p. 69) put it, evangelical “engagement with ‘the world’ came not in a reactionary rejection of the dramatic cultural shifts of the sixties, but rather in resonance with elements of the counterculture (...).”⁷

Indeed, there is plenty of anecdotal evidence indicating that the rigid line of division drawn in public debates between the counterculture and Christian fundamentalism does not do justice to their complex interaction. A plethora of literature has explored the process by which the New Right appropriated and copied the language, insignia, symbols, expressive styles, and organizational techniques of the insurgent movements of the 1960s. This ballooning literature on the so-called “counterculture of the Right” bristles with references to “Birkenstocked Burkeans, gun-loving organic gardeners, evangelical free-range farmers, hip homeschooling mamas, [and] right-wing nature lovers.”⁸ Anyone looking for the spirit of American counterculture, John Leland maintained in the

⁵ Klatch (1999, p. 134); see also p. 148-149, 155-156.

⁶ In contrast to research that reveals significant linkages between evangelicalism and the counterculture, sociologist Robert Wuthnow concluded in an early study of Pentecostals, the Christian World Liberation Front, the Children of God, Jews for Jesus, and the Campus Crusade for Christ in the San Francisco Bay Area that hippie conversions were an altogether limited phenomenon. Although religious experiments were a trademark of the counterculture, he noted that the primary focus of hippies was on Eastern traditions and other non-Christian philosophies. In addition, the crucial development was not the emergence of new religions, but the large number of people who abandoned the established churches and became essentially nonreligious. See Wuthnow (1976, p. 30, 41, 37-39).

⁷ See also Swartz (2012).

⁸ Jesse Walker, “The Traditionalist Counterculture,” review of Dreher (2006), <https://jessewalker.blogspot.com/2020/05/the-traditionalist-counterculture-on.html> (accessed 21 November 2020).

New York Times in 2006, "need look no further than the nearest evangelical bookstore, youth ministry or clothing line (...)." (LELAND, 2006). Evangelical organizations of the 1960s and 1970s, such as the Christian World Liberation Front (CWLF), explicitly aped the rhetoric of the insurgent movements. There were sit-ins, pray-ins, sing-ins, and be-ins with the son of a preacher man and a camp of Christian acidheads (MARSH, 2001). Randall Terry of the anti-abortionist Operation Rescue wrote a "Letter from Fulton County Jail." Invoking the memory of Martin Luther King's iconic "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Terry told a reporter that he was at heart a 1960s radical (SWARTZ, 2008, p. 542).⁹ And Jack Sparks' CWLF featured guerrilla theater, picketing, leafleting, and personal confrontation (SWARTZ, 2012, p. 92).

Moreover, evangelical meetings often resembled sixties-style happenings. Particularly in the 1970s one could see people with long hair wearing granny dresses, jeans, or bib-overalls carrying fur-covered bibles and talking about getting high on Jesus (BALMER, 1989, p. 19-20). Flashy Southern Baptist Arthur Blessitt hosted a psychedelic nightclub called His Place on Hollywood's Sunset Strip, an establishment whose logo combined a cross and a peace sign. "Like, if you want to get high, you don't have to drop Acid. Just pray and you go all the way to Heaven," Blessitt advised. "You don't have to pop pills to get loaded. Just drop a little Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John."¹⁰

Above and beyond linguistic or tactical borrowings, infiltrations and crossovers between movement and countermovement resulted in shared subcultural identities. Especially the Jesus People Movement tapped into the spiritual crisis among hippies and the desire for moral certainty in the aftermath of the moral burn-out and structural fragility of the counterculture. The Jesus People emerged out of the hippie scene in the late 1960s, mixing countercultural styles and communalism with evangelical orthodoxy. From its beginnings in 1967 in a small storefront evangelical mission called the Living Room in San Francisco's

⁹ See also Terry (1989, p. 82-83).

¹⁰ Quoted in Lindsey (2007).

countercultural Haight-Ashbury district, the movement spread to college campuses and hippie communities all around the country. It developed not only its own language, regalia and symbols, such as the Jesus Cheer, the One-Way sign and Jesus Teach-ins, but also its own newspapers and radio shows.¹¹

Flamboyant radical evangelicals formed a crucial cadre of Jesus People Movement leaders. Jack Sparks, former professor at Penn State University, for example, sought to Christianize countercultural students and street people, adopting their dress, language and lifestyle. He also established an underground Jesus Movement paper called *Right On*.¹² Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel baptized hippies *en masse* in the waves of the Pacific Ocean.¹³ Pentecostalist Bobbi Morris set up the Living Word Fellowship in a suburb of San Francisco, a “born-again, spirit-filled revival church” that initially attracted Hippies because of its alleged “weirdness” (TIPTON, 1982, p. 36).—Some Jesus Movement offshoots set up sectarian colonies across the country, forcing newcomers to turn over their belonging. One of the most notorious was the Children of God. Led by David Berg, it made its followers engage in prostitution to win converts and gain funds.¹⁴

“Getting high on Jesus” was appealing to hippies for a variety of reasons. For one, evangelicalism addressed the spreading post-Vietnam and post-Watergate disillusionment with the liberal-scientific-secular establishment.¹⁵ More importantly, it offered relief from overwrought times after drifting, prostitution, and hard drug crime had ravaged flower power communities; the cut-throat economy of dope-peddling began to mirror the worst excesses of market capitalism; and situational ethics had collapsed into the instrumental pursuit of selfish want-satisfaction.¹⁶ Rephrasing drug experiences in terms of religious conversion thus became a key component in the movement's efforts to reestablish

¹¹ On the Jesus People movement, see Eskridge (2013), and Enroth; Erickson Jr.; Peters (1972). For further information, see also Sabatino (2004). A brief summary of the movement by Eskridge can be found at <https://wrlrels.org/2016/10/24/jesus-people-movement/> (accessed 14 December 2020).

¹² Richard Quebedeaux (1978, p. 146, 149); Lyra Jr. (1973, p. 53-54).

¹³ See Balmer (1989, p. 22-23); McGirr (2001, p. 243).

¹⁴ See Streiker (1971, p. 16); Lyra Jr (1973, p. 52); Enroth, Ericson and Peters (1972, p. 241-246).

¹⁵ See Marsden (1991, p. 104); Gallup Jr and Castelli (1989, p. 4,11),.

¹⁶ See Tipton (1982, p. 29, 41, 53); Enroth, Ericson and Peters (1972, p. 228, 236).

biblical authority via the appropriation of countercultural images and expressive styles. Hippie converts often compared the "religious be-in" to a permanent good drug trip. "You always come down when you're on drugs. But if you're keeping your life right in the Lord, and confessing your faults and forsaking them, then you don't ever come down," one convert stated.¹⁷ Religious imagery could thus be grafted onto the countercultural notion of drugs as a means of self-transcendence and self-revelation.

Moreover, evangelical narratives could make sense of the self-destructive aspects of drug use. Bad trips and near fatal overdoses had confronted many hippies with vicarious death experiences, their own inner dark side, and a view of the world as evil and doomed. In turn, the religious drama of conversion, in which facing and expunging one's inner demons was crucial for spiritual rebirth, combined the ritual cleansing from the unnatural and "plastic" drug habit with a sense of authentic enlightenment, self-awareness and inner peace associated with drug taking.¹⁸ Nonetheless, this symmetry of drug experience and religious was sometimes difficult to maintain. "I'm back on acid," one former Jesus Freak said, "I used to be tripped out on Jesus. I was really zapped by the spirit . . . But it was a bummer." (ENROTH; ERICSON; PETERS, 1972, p. 243).

Pentecostal and charismatic traditions within evangelicalism were particularly successful in attracting countercultural converts. Rather than stressing doctrinal purity and literalism, they emphasized the personal, therapeutic, and emotional dimensions of the faith. Practices gleaned from Christian primitivism, such as faith healing, laying on of hands, speaking in tongues, and getting filled with the Holy Spirit, appealed to a generation reared in "situation ethics" and "make love not war" rhetoric. Pentecostal ritual resolved the contradiction between fundamentalist absolutes and countercultural permissiveness in the merger of spiritual fervor and moral rigidity. It offered strict normative guidance and moral

¹⁷ Quoted in Tipton (1982, p. 55, 58, 61).

¹⁸ Quoted in Tipton (1982, p. 49, 58-60). Arthur Blessitt, for example, was known for his "toilet ceremonies," in which new converts would gather around a toilet bowl and flush down their drugs, pills, powders and paraphernalia. See Lyra Jr. (1973, p. 51).

absolutes based on biblical authority while validating hippie ecstasy, intuited knowledge, and communal relationships.¹⁹

2 From the Jesus Movement to the New Christian Right

Conservative religion, however, did not necessarily mean right-wing politics. Indeed, the 1960s and 1970s were the heyday of left-wing evangelicalism, which formed a small but outspoken minority within resurgent conservative Protestantism. Many left evangelicals had organized in groups such as Evangelicals for McGovern, Evangelicals for Social Action, Sojourners, the People’s Christian Coalition, and the CWLF. They championed women’s rights, pacifism, social justice, and civil rights.²⁰ Likewise, the revival of global evangelical missionary and humanitarian engagement since World War II had changed in fundamental ways the relationship of evangelicals with international relations, human rights issues, and economic justice crusades. Having engaged with anticolonial uprisings and independence movements, many Protestant missionaries returned to the US as critics of global exploitation, economic oppression, and discriminatory race and gender politics. Colorful individuals such as Pablo Escobar, Michael Cassidy, Tom Skinner, Ron Sider, Jim Wallis, Caesar Molebatsi and Steven Biko demanded that evangelicals realize their own complicity in colonialism, capitalist exploitation, and war. They challenged their fellow believers’ established attitudes to racism, multiculturalism, immigration, and sexuality in ways that mirrored the sixties New Left agenda.²¹

Observers in the mid-1970s could thus hardly be faulted for thinking that a type of liberal evangelicalism, rather than the militant Christian Right, had emerged triumphant from the sixties’ “Jesus trip.” Separated from fundamentalist militancy on the one hand, and cleansed of the abominations of “sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll” on the other, evangelicals projected an upbeat, positive, and benign

¹⁹ On Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement, see Balmer (1989, p. 21, 24-25); Enroth, Ericson, and Peters (1972, p. 223, 227); Tipton (1982, p. 57, 64-77); Marsden (1991, p. 78); Stone (1997, p. 27, 33-34); Lienesch (1993, p. 15-16).

²⁰ On left evangelicalism, see especially Swartz (2012) and Quebedeaux (1978).

²¹ Among recent books on the international activism and global history of US evangelicalism since World War II are Wuthnow (2009); McAlister (2019), and Swartz (2020). See also Kendrick; Balbier; Krabbendam; Schäfer (2017, p. 1019-1042).

image. In 1976, Jimmy Carter, a liberal born-again Southern Baptist, was elected to the US presidency. Meanwhile, a sequence of colorful conversions, ranging from black panther Eldridge Cleaver and *Hustler* magazine's Larry Flynt to Watergate villain Charles Colson and musician Eric Clapton, made front-page news and established what pundit George Will called "evangelical chic." (HUNTER, 1983, p. 46)²² As evangelical theologian Carl Henry noted, conservative Protestantism had a "new aura of acceptability among parents who prefer that their teen-agers take up with the Jesus Movement or with the charismatics rather than join the Moonies." (HENRY, 1980, p. 17).

Underneath this seeming rise of liberal evangelicalism, however, an altogether different story unfolded. As the hippie phenomenon faded, many countercultural evangelicals made their way into the larger conservative revival and into the religious Right. Indeed, significant parts of the Jesus Movement, as George Marsden (1991, p. 95-96) put it, were largely re-politicized in the framework of the New Christian Right and its coalition-building "around a militant, broadly Christian, antiseccularist, anticommunist heritage."²³ According to a survey of former Jesus Movement participants, prior to their involvement with the Jesus People 42 percent defined themselves as politically liberal and only 22 percent as conservative. In contrast, in their later politics only 10 percent identified themselves as liberal and 57 percent as conservative (ESKRIDGE, 2013, p. 292).-In many ways the Jesus Movement thus provided a good indication of the disenchantment with alternative lifestyles and political radicalism, and marked the beginning of the conservative tendencies of the 1970s.

In addition, a number of key players in the religious Right had their origins in sixties-style mobilization and protest. Dan Berrigan, for example, was a Catholic civil rights activist who moved to protesting abortion in the 1970s. Juli Loesch was an antiwar activist at Antioch College and a labor activist for Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers before becoming a media coordinator for the anti-abortionist

²² See also Leonard I. Sweet (1984, p. 29-45).

²³ On the conservative mobilization of the Jesus People see also Flowers (1984, p. 42-43, 48-50).

Operation Rescue in the 1980s (SWARTZ, 2008, p. 541-542). The clearest case of the link between evangelical Left and the religious Right, however, is Francis Schaeffer, countercultural founder of the L’Abri community in Switzerland. Schaeffer’s critiques of affluence, segregation, the nuclear arms race, and environmental degradation resonated with the left evangelical constituency in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet in the late 1970s Schaeffer took a hard right turn, applying his cultural critiques to abortion, euthanasia, and secular humanism. “By the 1980s he had more clearly aligned himself with Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and the broader religious right, all of whom cited Schaeffer as their inspiration. Many of his surprised disciples (...) followed Schaeffer, who through Jack Kemp helped link evangelical activists to the Republican Party” (SWARTZ, 2008, p. 533-534).²⁴

There are a variety of reasons why militant neo-fundamentalists were more successful in recruiting hippies than the young, left-leaning evangelicals who had formed a crucial cadre of leaders in the Jesus Movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s. For one, resurgent neo-fundamentalism with its moral absolutism, apocalyptic expectations, and view of the US as having fallen from original pristine state offered a more countercultural image to converted hippies than the evangelical Left.²⁵ As Todd Gitlin (1996, p. 56) suggested, “the style of extremity, millennialism, intolerance of ambiguity is an operating principle . . . of both the 60s and the backlash.” Indeed, “today’s Christian Coalition deplores the decline of civilization as fervently as the most apocalyptic environmentalist or hippie antimaterialist of the late sixties.” Likewise, both conservative Christians and pot-smoking, commune-dwelling draft resisters could agree on the evils of big government, established authority, and secular institutions (HALL, 2003, p. 381). In many cases, the transition from being a hippie to being an evangelical was thus characterized not by merging traditional religious precepts with the open, tolerant, relativistic, and existentialist live-and-let-live attitude of the counterculture, but by converts exaggerating their depravity, spiritual misery, and heart-wrenching break with the past as a way of establishing their credentials as born-again. As one

²⁴ On Schaeffer see also Barry Hankins (2008).

²⁵ See Quebedeaux (1978, p. 55-56).

convert stated, “If I had never become a hippie, I would never have realized I was a sinner.”²⁶

Another key reason is that right-wing evangelicals, unlike left-leaning groups in the movement, could draw upon a well-established subcultural infrastructure of bible institutes, day schools, colleges, mission societies, publishing houses, journals, radio stations and TV programs. This fundamentalist fabric, ranging from study groups via prayer meetings to self-help groups and therapy sessions, enmeshed converted hippies and ultimately engaged them in conservative re-politicization.²⁷ As Richard A. Viguerie, a key architect of the New Right, put it, “[o]ur success is built on four elements – single issue groups, multi-issue conservative groups, coalition politics and direct mail (...) all the New Right has done is copy the success of the old left” (VIGUERIE, 1992, p. 647-648).

In addition, the Right successfully sidelined the ideologically fractured and organizationally weak evangelical Left as part of an “internal backlash.” Indeed, intramovement dynamics played a much larger role in explaining evangelicalism's partisan political affiliations than is commonly acknowledged. In the 1970s, evangelicalism entered one of its most raucous period. Conflicts raged between the evangelical Left and a newly assertive Christian Right not only over biblical inerrancy, but also over civil religion, militarism, capitalism, public funding of religion, and social involvement. As evangelical theologian Carl Henry had presciently warned in 1974, the failure on the part of postwar neo-evangelicals to provide effective leadership for the movement's new social action impulse opened up opportunities for rightwingers to occupy the arena (HENRY, 1974, p. 99-100). Though leftist and liberal evangelicals continued to vie with conservatives for political influence, by the late 1970s, the evangelical establishment was largely immobilized and left-wing groups withdrew into a small-group culture (MARSDEN, 1991, p. 77).²⁸ Meanwhile, the Right was overcoming its own internal

²⁶ Quoted in Tipton (1982, p. 58-59). Among New Christian Rightists exaggerating their previous background of countercultural were Lon Mabon, founder of the Oregon Citizens Alliance, and Randall A. Terry, founder of the anti-abortion group Operation Rescue.

²⁷ See Hunter (1998, p. 39-44); Carpenter (1989, p. 109, 111-114, 116; 1997); Wuthnow (1988, p. 137-143); Marsden (1991, p. 65-70).

²⁸ On this issues see also Wuthnow (1989, p. 35); Davis and Robinson (1997, p. 56-57); Schäfer (2011, ch. 4).

divisions and experienced an institutional revival that enabled it to fill the leadership vacuum and provide a new sense of direction for the movement. In particular, the Right's emphasis on single-issue moral campaigning continued the social action impulses of 1960s left evangelicalism while dropping its progressive content.²⁹

A good illustration for this process is provided by sociologist R. Stephen Warner in a study of the transformation of a Presbyterian church. Part of this story involves a hippie commune called "The Land," located near Mendocino, California. Led by "hippie queen" Therese and her charismatic lover Pete, nudity, sexual freedom and psychedelic drugs were the standard features of life in the commune. The group had adopted a halo of religiosity, which encompassed an eclectic mix of a Native American peyote cult, Tibetan Buddhism, and Vedic Hinduism. In fact, "by 1971, some were even experimenting with Christianity" (WARNER, 1988, p. 141). After a series of dramatic events, including the loss of the commune's meeting center and a range of personal crises, the group came into the purview of a variety of religious newcomers. Filling the void in commune leadership, fundamentalist Marge Schulenberg and her husband provided a new religious focus and effected the first conversions. At the same time, Mark Kimmerly, the pastor of the local Presbyterian church, was also trying to minister to the commune. In turn, Christianity emerged as a legitimate religious expression. However, while it was "Kimmerly's intention to promote humane values at the Land," Warner concluded, "most of those who were members later became converts to a fundamentalism far more doctrinally conservative than his own intellectualized faith." Communards began to participate in conservative evangelical meetings, converted members were sent to "religious boot camp," and a veritable battle ensued when Pete's conversion, supported by the force of his personality, put pressure on Therese and others to follow his example (WARNER, 1988, p. 145-148).

²⁹ On the ways in which right-wing campaigning picked up on the styles and politics of left evangelicalism, see Swartz (1991); Fowler (1987); Marsden (1991, p. 22-35).

By early 1972 the Land had a substantial majority of new fundamentalist converts, who demanded behavioral changes among the rest of the members, burned books, and booted off recalcitrants. In its wake, work patterns in "The Land" were regularized and a clear division of sex-roles was imposed, with males acting as decision-makers. Drugs, drinking, smoking, and nudity were no longer allowed, and strict evangelical teachings and observance replaced the earlier spiritual eclecticism. At the same time, however, the focus on spirituality, expectation of salvation, and the excitement over miracles bridged the old countercultural and new evangelical identities. The new Land thus became an agency of resocialization that worked as "as pathway for reintegration for the aging counterculture and revitalization for the crusty establishment" in the Mendocino Presbyterian church. The commune's role in the radical evangelical movement that spread through Mendocino in early 1970s also meant that many former communards retained this combination of a countercultural and evangelical identity beyond their involvement in The Land or in a specific church (WARNER, 1988, p. 148-154).

Finally, the key to the resurgence of the Right, and its appeal to recovering hippies, was that fundamentalism had itself been transformed by the encounter with both the evangelical Left and the counterculture. Theologically, the New Christian Right, in spite of its militant rhetoric and fundamentalist moral objectivism, continued the patterns of transdenominationalism and cultural accommodation pioneered by the 1960s. This manifested itself in the shift from the liturgical and legal-rational tradition to the subjective, experiential, and therapeutic aspects of Christianity – which found expression in the growth of Pentecostal and Charismatic groups within the evangelical family at the expense of Calvinist and Reformed denominations. Leading Charismatics, such as Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jim Bakker, emphasized the intuitive, ecstatic, unmediated experience of the divine as the primary way of constructing meaning out of reality. They regarded the conversion experience as less associated with self-denial and tough moral codes than with spiritual health, business success, personal fulfillment, and self-esteem. Phrased in the language of psychology, "conversion

came to mean psychological healing, when a divided, unhappy personality could be integrated.” (BRERETON, 1991, p. 48).³⁰ The church increasingly became a place where people went to feel good about themselves. In the words of theologian Leonard Sweet, therapeutic Christianity, promising success and health through faith, uses Jesus as a “kind of theological chaser, making it all go down easier” (SWEET, 1984, p. 34).³¹

Indeed, many sociologists of religion locate evangelicalism’s renewed cultural legitimacy and influence in the movement’s accommodation to modernity, rather than in the assertion of traditionalism. In their view, adopting modern advertising techniques, using state-of-the art technology, and relying on modern organizational and managerial principles ultimately blunted the jagged theological edges of the movement. In identifying with the more materialistic, market-driven, and individualistic trajectories of US society, evangelicals abandoned the humility and “tortured millennialism” of their Puritan forebears (HECLO, 2007, p. 43, 202).³² Instead, they embraced a therapeutic and consumerist “God-is-on-our-side” rhetoric that sanctified the established social order and emphasized that God wants us to be healthy, to succeed, and to be rich.

This trend toward “soft conversionism,” while running counter to fundamentalist orthodoxy and strictness, also enabled conservatives in the evangelical fold to overcome inherited antipathies and prejudices toward other religious groups and to build alliances across denominational boundaries. Anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism and segregationist racism, which had been widespread among fundamentalists, were on the decline. Downplaying doctrinal differences put conservative evangelicals in the vanguard of a post-sixties religious realignment in which the split between liberals and conservatives within each faith tradition increasingly replaced traditional denominational divides. As a result, evangelical Protestants, who believe in the inerrancy of the bible, salvation through faith, the born-again experience, and a premillennialist eschatology, began to have more in

³⁰ For good discussions of the changing nature of conversion, see also Hatch and Hamilton (1995, p. 402-403); Watt (1991, p. 24).

³¹ On the therapeutic impulse and the spiritualization of popular psychology, see also Roof (1999).

³² See also Berger (1973); Shibley (1996); Smith (1998); Hunter (1983).

common with conservative Catholics and Jews than with liberal members of their own faith, who have a modernist understanding of the bible and emphasize the historicity of sacred texts.³³

In the same vein, “lifestyle evangelicalism” facilitated the construction of lasting coalitions between religious and secular conservatism. This connection became crucial for the broader resurgence of conservative populism. On the one hand, evangelicals provided the Republican party with inroads into a lower-middle and working class constituency that had previously eluded them. In positioning itself as the standard-bearer of the radical promises of nineteenth-century producer-class ideology and working-class moral conservatism, the Christian Right gave voice to a class-based sense of propriety, cultural fears, and material aspirations that enabled conservatives to build a broad-based political campaign.

The key to the political effectiveness of the right-wing resurgence, however, is not just the electoral power of the Christian Right, but also business financing. Beginning in the 1970s, big business abandoned the postwar consensus in which it had accepted more rigid labor laws and social legislation in exchange for social peace and government subsidies. Resentful of new regulatory agencies and social entitlements which cut into profitability, business mobilized across traditional divisions in pursuit of an anti-statist agenda. Business interests set up conservative think tanks, such as the American Enterprise Institute, the Hoover Institution, and the Heritage Foundation. They funded advertising campaigns and Political Action Committees, and established pro-business research clusters at leading universities.³⁴

By the 1980s, after many twists and turn, the various strands of conservatism came together to form a successful political movement which combined moral traditionalism and market libertarianism, and rejected the postwar liberal consensus. The link between an insurgent anti-institutional message and institutional ties to the establishment was a crucial factor in this

³³ See Wuthnow (1988, p. 133-172); Liebman and Wuthnow (1983); Hunter (1992).

³⁴ On forging the conservative coalition, see Kruse (2015); Sutton (2014); McGirr (1985, p. 356-357).

process. As political scientist Jerome Himmelstein (1990, p. 78) maintains, the “paradoxical combination” of “insider resources – support from business and the upper middle class as well as solid roots within the Republican party – and a capacity to use antiestablishment rhetoric to talk to the growing range of discontents that grew out of the 1960s constituted the strengths of the conservative movement”.³⁵

3 Countercultural capitalism

The confluence of evangelicalism and the counterculture, however, had significance beyond aiding recovering hippies or mobilizing them politically. In a larger sociocultural sense, evangelical inroads into the insurgent movement of the 1960s were part and parcel of the adjustment of countercultural and evangelical Americans to the normative requirements of consumer capitalism. In this process, both “the sixties” and evangelicalism were domesticated via a cohesive right-wing ideology that kept alive countercultural ways of thinking and feeling while at the same time revalidating religious orthodoxy, moral traditionalism, and liberal capitalism. In the words of the libertarian Cato Institute's Brink Lindsey, conservatism's curious accomplishment was that “marching under the banner of old-time religion, it made the world safe for the secular, hedonistic values of Aquarius.” (LINDSEY, 2007).

In order to understand this process we need to examine some of the contradictions of the counterculture, the tensions within religious revivalism, and the way the New Christian Right positioned itself within these conflicts. Among the tensions that characterized the counterculture was the conflict between institutional insurgency and normative accommodation. On the one hand, hippies turned against materialism, utilitarian culture, and established institutions. On the other hand, they affirmed the very hedonistic values of immediate gratification and self-indulgence which are at the core of consumer culture. Indeed, sixties'

³⁵ The broader relationship between religion and politics, and the way religious revivals translated into new political alignments, see Fogel (2000); Noll (1989).

countercultural impulses were often more suited to the normative requirements of consumer capitalism than to the solidaristic impulses of social democracy, or the participatory visions of liberals and progressives. As social critic Christopher Lasch (1991, p. 515) remarked, “a defense of values loosely identified with the counterculture was quite compatible with a defense of business and the free market.”

By the same token, evangelicalism was historically characterized by a conflict between conversionist spirituality and bourgeois market individualism. This manifested itself, for example, in the clash between evangelicals’ commitment to “traditional values” and community cohesion on the one hand, and its embrace of the commodifying trajectories of laissez-faire economics on the other. Indeed, US Protestantism was as much about spiritual transformation, emotional experience, and affective satisfaction as it was about an entrepreneurial ethic of moral self-discipline, sobriety, individual responsibility, and business success. Nineteenth-century Methodist revivalism and Baptist anti-establishmentarianism in the US contained strong strains of small-scale entrepreneurialism. As historian Sacvan Bercovitch (1978) has pointed out, in the nineteenth century the Jeremiad was already transformed into a ritual celebration of middle-class culture and free enterprise capitalism. Likewise, the twentieth-century rise of Pentecostalism saw a rapid ascent of the prosperity gospel—a vision that combined the practices of spiritual gifts, faith in miracles, and new forms of affective worship with the prospect of material rewards.³⁶

By merging countercultural sentiments and evangelical revivalism, the religious Right effectively spelled out a particular way of addressing these contradictions within both movements. It did so on the basis of what could be viewed as a type of “countercultural capitalism.” On the one hand, the New Christian Right used evangelical tropes to successfully repackage the sixties’ agenda of personal liberation, authenticity, and self-actualization in ways which reaffirmed market individualism. It funneled countercultural anti-institutionalism and

³⁶ See, for example, Porterfield, Grem, and Corrigan (2017).

hedonism into a concept of the entrepreneurial self as inherently moral and spiritual due to being grounded in an anti-establishmentarian and self-actualizing mind-set that shunned the oppressive institutions of the state in favor of the moralizing effects of the market.³⁷

On the other hand, the religious Right, in appropriating countercultural imagery and sentiment, socialized evangelicals into the norms and values of consumer culture. It aligned evangelicalism's own religious heritage much more clearly with laissez-faire economics and consumer society. It portrayed the nineteenth-century moral matrix of the converted self in terms derived from sixties' themes of individual freedom, spiritual self-realization, and immediate gratification. “Countercultural capitalism” reconstructs the bourgeois self and its moral codes around a consumerist self, economic libertarianism, and the ethic of material indulgence. In the process, hesitancy about materialism common in evangelical discourse in the immediate postwar era yielded to the New Christian Right's spiritualizing of free-market capitalism and the prosperity gospel.³⁸

On this basis, the New Christian Right domesticated genuinely insurgent impulses within the counterculture. It nurtured sixties' anti-governmentalism and the personal liberation agenda, yet channeled them into a social form that shored up the established social order and property-based distribution of wealth. It thus established evangelicalism as a distinct cultural form in postindustrial society that provided a space for countercultural expressiveness, yet discarded its potential for meaningful socio-economic change. At the same time, conservative Protestantism coopted the genuinely insurgent potential of religious conversionism. In fetishizing capitalism as both a countercultural force and a guardian of moral order, it deflected from the inherent contradiction within evangelicalism between the “traditional value” of moral self-discipline and a consumer society which could never quite get enough of hedonism and permissiveness in order to function properly.

³⁷ See Tipton (1982, p. 72-73, 79-80, 85) Enroth *et al.* (1972, p. 228, 236).

³⁸ On linking conversion to this-worldly success, see Watt (1991, p. 24); Wacker (1995, p. 381).

This combination is part and parcel of the underlying normative codes of post-industrial consumer capitalism. In terms of personality structure, consumer capitalism cultivates notions of self-realizing, authentic, hyperindividualistic, non-conformist individuals seeking adolescent self-expression. Simultaneously, it relies upon the conformity, deferred gratification, self-discipline, wealth accumulation, and materialism of bourgeois consumers. Likewise, in terms of the system of production it is characterized by the marketing potential of countercultural imagery, sentiments, and affections that generate promises of material and spiritual fulfilment within a society ruled by the cold, hard, calculating rules of the competitive market.

In the end, this suggests that the “old-time religion,” building upon the long-term experience of evangelicalism, can funnel insurgent social impulses into a cultural expression that relegitimizes the established social order. Resurgent evangelicalism reconciled biblical religion and countercultural modes in ways which domesticated insurgent passions and resocialized former hippies as bourgeois individuals without forcing them to relinquish fully their subcultural identity. Religious commitment once again became primarily an instrument of norm maintenance and social integration, rather than of substantive transformation. It laid the foundation for containing "within tolerable bounds the ideological dissatisfactions of both the countercultural left and the religious right." (LINDSEY, 2007).

Conversely, the New Christian Right is thus part of the larger story of capitalism coopting cultural insurgencies in US society – ranging from revivalism to the counterculture. For this it built on the fact that there could be no counterculture without mass affluence and that the traditionalist notion of moral order was coupled with a libertarian emphasis on individual self-expression. As Lindsey put it, the counterculture “denounced capitalism but gobbled its fruits,” while the Christian Right “cursed the fruits while defending the system that bore them.”³⁹ In turn, “neoliberal” Thatcherite and Reaganite notions of consumer

³⁹ Quoted in Lindsey (2007).

power in a competitive deregulated economy became more powerful "insurgent" visions for a populace thoroughly socialized into the consumerist mindset than the Left's ideas of social justice and redistribution of income.

Conclusion

The resurgence of white evangelical Protestantism as a significant political and cultural force in American society arguably constitutes one of the most important developments in US religion since the 1930s and in politics since the 1960s. Most studies of the rise of the New Christian Right in the US since the late 1970s locate the organizational and political resurgence of evangelicalism in the so-called “backlash” against the Civil Rights movement, Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, and the counterculture. More recently, however, the critical literature has revealed patterns of substantial interaction and borrowing between sixties’ movements and evangelicalism. Building on this research, this essay suggests that the boundaries between evangelicalism and the counterculture are rather more fluid than is commonly assumed.

Revisiting the relationship between movement and countermovement reveals patterns of interaction and convergence that ranged from tactical and linguistic borrowings, infiltrations and crossovers to shared subcultural identities. Moreover, it shows that evangelicalism's involvement *with*, rather than its reaction *against* the counterculture was a crucial factor in the religio-political resurgence. Finally, it suggests that the New Christian Right’s ideology of “countercultural capitalism” combined evangelical Christianity and insurgent sentiments in ways that provided a new legitimation of consumer society in a post-sixties age.

Although evangelicals and fundamentalists opposed the excesses and moral relativism of the counterculture, they at the same time displayed numerous similarities with the spirit of the sixties, particularly in regard to epistemological assumptions, expressive styles, and organizational modes. Evangelical revivalism with its reliance on the immediacy of the divine, faith in intuitive spiritual

knowledge, pursuit of self-purification and holy living, and desire for a profound personal conversion experience closely resembled the aspirations of the sixties' movements. The deliberate air of spontaneity, penchant for public confession, ascription of spiritual insight to ecstasy, and emotional expressiveness is characteristic of both the counterculture and revivalist religion. And for all their differences, conservative Protestantism and the counterculture share a disdain for liberalism, rational-legal authority, large-scale bureaucracies, and technological rationality.

These cognitive and organizational connections formed the basis for the development of ideological and institutional ties between evangelicalism and the counterculture which fed into the resurgence of conservative Protestantism. In the post-sixties era, evangelical groups were surprisingly successful in offering sustainable community structures built on biblical teachings for converted hippies. Spiritually, the revival of the 1970s was, in many ways, a “Jesus trip” that grew out of the experiential culture of the 1960s. While regarding countercultural communal endeavors as a “caricature of Christian society”, evangelicals nonetheless recognized “real affinities between this American type of existentialism and the Christian faith.”⁴⁰

Considering that since 1945 the sprawling and loosely organized evangelical movement has become the largest single religious faction in the US, and that conservative Protestants now form the most strongly Republican group in the religious spectrum, this analysis raises the question what role the relationship between evangelicals and the counterculture played in the rise of the New Christian Right. Here the findings suggest that a combination of moral rigor, subcultural infrastructure, intramovement tussles, and external coalition-building paved the way for conservatism's inroads into the fracturing counterculture.

⁴⁰ The Rev. Robert Spike quoted Dirk Jellema, "Strange New Faiths." *Christianity Today*, 6 June 1960, 16.

Rigidly structured fundamentalist churches that provided clear moral guidance and emphasized discipline – while embracing an anti-establishment message – appealed to drifting hippies. The vibrant institutional subculture and grassroots organizing of the religious Right, built up since the 1930s and newly geared toward “social issues” such as abortion, homosexuality, and “family values,” proved an effective means of politically mobilizing former hippies. In particular, the Right's emphasis on single-issue campaigning, “identity politics,” and polarizing rhetoric continued the social action impulses of 1960s left evangelicalism while dropping its progressive content. What is more, the New Christian Right thrived because it exploited internal divisions and marginalized competing left evangelical groups, weakening their ability to cater to recovering hippies. Finally, evangelical engagement with the counterculture continued the trend toward the growing domestication and even secularization of the conversion experience. This process was characterized by a shift from an emphasis on theological dogma towards the experiential, ecstatic, and therapeutic aspects of Christianity that resonated with the counterculture. This also fed into the ability of the religious Right to forge political coalitions, both across traditional theological divides and across the religious and secular conservative spectrum.

In a larger sociocultural and political sense, these evangelical inroads into the counterculture adjusted both traditional religion and sixties' insurgencies to the requirements of consumer society. In particular, the religious Right's “countercultural capitalism” maintained both the anti-establishmentarian trajectories of the counterculture and the radical dimensions of evangelicalism, while simultaneously containing them via the process of revalidating liberal capitalism and sanctifying consumer culture.

On the one hand, the religious Right used evangelicalism to negotiate tensions within the counterculture. Recognizing the counterculture's inherent ambiguity – deligitimizing utilitarian culture and major social institutions while at the same time affirming the hedonistic values which are at the core of consumer culture – the Right's evangelicalism provided a space for countercultural

expressiveness while reconstructing hippies as bourgeois market subjects. It utilized evangelical conversionism to absorb the spiritual impulses of the counterculture and to funnel them into a vision of the self-realizing entrepreneurial individual within a “countercultural” market capitalism. It thus integrated the subversive 1960s language of cultural transvaluation while effectively marginalizing its socioeconomic radicalism.

On the other hand, the New Christian Right used the counterculture to negotiate tensions within evangelicalism. Acknowledging the conflict within evangelical religion between a hyperindividualistic emphasis on spiritual freedom and a traditionalist emphasis on moral order, religious conservatives revitalized the link between religious conversion and the operations of the market. They appropriated the anti-institutionalist, hedonistic, and libertarian spirit of the counterculture in order to link the conversion experience to affirming the market as a spiritualizing and moralizing force. In this way they confirmed the subcultural and transformative dimensions of the evangelical faith while marginalizing its cultural radicalism.

In summation, the findings indicate that in order to understand the cultural resonance and political mobilization of post-war evangelicalism, we need to move beyond the focus on the “backlash” as a reaction against the political and cultural upheaval of the 1960s. Instead, we need to recognize that the organizational strength, cultural attractiveness, and political efficacy of the New Christian Right was not primarily predicated upon resentment against the cultural changes of the 1960s or a return to traditional values. Instead, the ideology of the New Christian Right affirmed both the anti-establishmentarian self-image of hippies and a traditionalist notion of bourgeois entrepreneurial individuals. At the same time, it revalidated market capitalism via fetishizing it as both countercultural and as a moralizing agency. On this basis the Right was able to use religious conversionism to contain countercultural ways of thinking and feeling, to blunt the subversive edges of religious conversionism, and to integrate both into the orbit of post-industrial consumer capitalism.

Crucially, the New Christian Right did this primarily via a politicization of religion based on a “politics of affect” – which included the celebration of unreason, denial of scientific reality, lapses into conspiracy theories, credulous vulnerability to charlatans, and a weakness for apocalyptic prophecy. Students of US politics have of course long lamented this anti-intellectualism that has historically characterized revivalist politics. Richard Hofstadter criticized that a breadth of feeling and a shallowness of social analysis was typical of revivalist movements. Similarly, William Lee Miller has argued that the contribution of American religion to politics has not been “perspective, wisdom, depth of insight” but “a tremendous oversimplification and sentimentalization of politics.” And Ferenc Morton Szasz reminds us that religious conservatism brought with it a critical debate about the role of experts in a democratic society.⁴¹

A closer examination of the intersection of evangelical revivalism and the counterculture contributes to understanding this affective dimension in US politics and its recent return to political salience. It suggests that affective politics is part and parcel of the way in which religion and politics construct each other and that, as historian Darren Dochuk (2011, xxii) notes, we need to take religion seriously “as an incessantly active agent in modern political development.” In the case at hand, affective politics constitute a political form that both transports and contains forces that arise from the inherent contradictions of the socioeconomic and political order in the United States.

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⁴¹ Hofstadter (1955), Miller (1961, p. 103, 108), Szasz (1982, p. 129-134). See also Creech (2006).

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