Shapeshifting the Christian Right

The Moral Majority as a Faith-Based Organization and the Immanent Turn of Evangelicalism in the Late 20th Century

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Abstract *Without organizations, religious movements would unlikely survive or achieve social and political influence. This article therefore looks at nonprofit organizations as a specific religious social form. It uses the Moral Majority as an example of how the Christian Right evolved from a loose network of church organizations into a politically successful movement by adopting new forms of organization. These nondenominational faith-based organizations arose in part in response to tax regulations imposed by the government. The Christian Right thus underwent an immanent turn, increasingly adapting its social forms and semantics to secular forms of organization and legal discourse.*

Keywords *Christian Right, faith-based organization, Moral Majority, nonprofit organization*

1. Introduction

On June 24, 2022, the US Supreme Court overturned the 1973 Roe v. Wade legal ruling that granted women the federal right to make a personal choice on abortion. Since then, it has been up to individual states to decide whether and how to grant this right. Twenty-two states have already banned abortion or placed more significant restrictions on it than before. What makes this ruling so unique is that for nearly half a century, conservative Christians in the US not only ceaselessly fought the 1973 decision but also managed to turn this private matter into a public issue to morally charge and politicize it. Many Christian

campaigns, rallies, and even physical assaults in front of abortion clinics have taken place since then. Yet, all these local protest actions would not have had such an impact on public discourse and politics had it not been for the emergence of larger organizations of conservative Christians that have since engaged in targeted political lobbying (Hertzke 1988). As a 2012 study by the Pew Research Center for Religion and Public Life showed, not only have religious organizations begun to open offices in Washington and engage in political lobbying since the 1950s, but their numbers and diversity have also grown tremendously in the 20 years preceding the study, and have nearly quadrupled since the 1970s.[1] One reason for this increase, according to the study, is the "growing reach of the federal government in economic, environmental, and social policy", which acts like a magnet and "draw[s] religious groups to the nation's capital" (ibid.: 26). However, the rise of the Christian Right and its political lobbying cannot be explained quite so simply. Historian Randall Balmer (2021), for instance, has even argued that the beginning of the Christian Right lies not in Roe v. Wade but in segregated schools, an argument I will discuss later. Scholarly research on the beginnings of the Christian Right shows one thing above all: astonishment at its sudden success. How could isolated churches and preachers with few connections swiftly mobilize the broad masses and conquer the political stage? Different answers have been given to this question.

My purpose in this paper is not to add yet another answer to the question about motives that gave rise to the Christian Right. Instead, I want to shift the focus away from motives and toward changing organizational forms. I thus endorse the theses of Markus Hero (2010), who points towards the importance of the "productivity of mediation structures" for religious change and assumes an "inherent logic of institutional arrangements" (35). The turn toward Evangelical political activism in the late 1970s was spawned by several organizations that had a lasting impact on public opinion and party politics. Among the best-known of these were Focus on the Family (founded 1977), Christian Voice (founded 1978), The Religious Roundtable (founded 1979), and Moral Majority (founded 1979). By this time, Evangelical leaders such as Jerry Falwell, Robert G. Grant, Paul Weyrich, and James Dobson had established solid networks. They forged a plan for Evangelical Christians to exert more influence on Washington politics. These organizations, most notably the Moral Majority, were their first genuinely successful instruments for doing so.

1 Cf. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2011/11/21/lobbying-for-the-faithful-exec/.

Two aspects of these organizations are of particular interest: First, they are not ecclesiastical or denominational organizations, as was typical in the US for a long time, but rather supra-denominational organizations whose religious character is only sometimes immediately apparent. Second, they often consist of several component organizations with different tax statuses. They were usually founded as tax-exempt religious nonprofit organizations but, at the same time, established sub-organizations that are not tax-exempt but enable political lobbying. As I will argue in this contribution, the differentiation and diversification of organizational forms in the US has provided new opportunities for the Christian Right, and these two organizational strategies helped the Moral Majority, in particular, to achieve its success and influence.

For a long time, research into religious social forms was based on the classic distinction between church and sect; it was not until the 1970s that other terms, such as movement, cult, or network, were added (see the introduction to this volume for a detailed discussion). More recently, religious organizations have been considered as well, but rarely in their function as a social form. In the last 30–40 years, there has been an enormous increase in religious organizations, leading to a transformation of religious social forms. Religious organizations – be they so-called religious nongovernmental organizations (RNGOs), religious nonprofit organizations (RNPOs), or faith-based organizations (FBOs)[2] – are exerting significant influence on social and political processes and, at the same time, becoming more and more like secular organizations because they have to translate their religious motives into secular language. I therefore speak of an 'immanent turn' in US Evangelicalism based on this change in religious social forms. However, I do not claim that religions or Evangelicalism have transformed into mere organizations. Instead, I argue that several social forms of religion exist side by side and that religious organizations have changed the face of religion in the US significantly in more recent decades. Therefore, I will take a closer look at religious organizations as particular social forms of religion to address the transformation of US Evangelicalism.

2 These terms for religious organizations are sometimes used synonymously. While RNGOs are often more internationally active, RNPOs tend to operate at a local or national level. The term FBO is more recent and often used in the context of social welfare or development discourses. There is no adequate typology (Jeavons 2004). I do not see it as my task to solve this problem here, but rather to address the role of religious organizations as religious social forms, regardless of the definitional problem. For this purpose, I will use the more general term FBO and, in the context of US tax law, RNPO.

First, I will review some of the central arguments for the success of the Christian Right to argue that so far, mainly substantive motives have been discussed and less attention has been paid to the social forms of the religious organizations that make up the Christian Right. Secondly, after reviewing recent literature on religious nonprofit organizations and explaining the differences between the various 501(c) types of organizations based on the United States Internal Revenue Service, I argue that they, as particular social forms of religion, play a crucial role in explaining religious change. Building on this, I will further argue that the rise of the Christian Right is closely intertwined with tensions between Evangelical organizations and the US's Internal Revenue Service (IRS) about tax exemption. Finally, and against the background of this tension, I will show that the social forms of Evangelicalism have shifted from church-based to faith-based organizations, giving the Religious Right its success and paved the way for the 'immanent turn' of US Evangelicalism. By this, I mean replacing its rhetoric of redemption with nationalist and legal rhetoric and establishing advocacy groups. I understand my contribution as a cautious sketch of some implications of this development while providing references to relevant literature to acknowledge previous work and further stimulate the debate.

2. Out of the blue? Explaining the success of the Moral Majority

The Moral Majority (1979–1989) is considered one of the most influential Christian conservative organizations and lobby groups of the Christian Right in the United States. It was founded in 1979 by Rev. Jerry Falwell (1933–2007), the well-known best-selling author, televangelist, founder of a megachurch, and founder of the Evangelical Liberty University. Falwell actually has a Baptist background, in which religion and politics are traditionally strictly separated (Allitt 2005: 152). By the 1970s at the latest, and in the wake of the counterculture movement as well as rising unemployment, the attitude of many conservative Christians changed, and they now increasingly blamed the government for social and moral decay. In a series of rallies entitled "I love America", Falwell traveled the country intending to awaken patriotism, morality, and cohesion among Christians and make them aware of their opportunity to exert political influence and to get them out of their self-imposed bubble, which until then had resulted primarily in missionary work to save souls. In his view, there was a moral majority in the country that was not (yet) visible and needed to be

mobilized to exert real political influence. The term "moral majority" in this context goes back to Paul Weyrich, who co-founded the Heritage Foundation and Moral Majority, Inc. with Jerry Falwell. By 1980, the Moral Majority already had state chapters in 18 states, and at its peak, it had more than 4 million members.

The rapid success was astonishing to many contemporary observers. For several decades, it seemed that the activities of Evangelical Christians were limited exclusively to saving souls and planting new churches. After the Scopes Trial in the 1920s, Christian fundamentalists were particularly critizied, and it was not until the 1950s that Bible-believing Christians were given a new social stage on which to publicly express their devout faith, most notably through the famous preacher Billy Graham. In the following years, Evangelical training and education centers, radio stations, and televangelists also increasingly emerged. Still, most activities served missions. Politics in Washington was far too distant for many Evangelicals to be closely involved, and local campaigns had little reach because there was no organization to focus activities (Liebman 1983b: 227).

It came as all the more of a surprise – in the perception of the media public and among scholars – that an organization like the Moral Majority should achieve a meteoric rise seemingly out of nowhere and begin exerting enormous political influence. Through the media prominence of Jerry Falwell (he reached some 15 million viewers every week through his television program "Old Time Gospel Hour"), mass letters, and an ideological program, it succeeded in mobilizing Evangelicals and bundling their votes. This way, the Moral Majority managed to cast itself as the conservative and moral conscience of the nation. However, even in the years before the Moral Majority's founding and in the wake of Jimmy Carter's presidential candidacy, the power of Evangelicals as a constituency became clear. Carter, a representative of the Democratic Party, officially declared himself a "born-again Christian" and received the full support of Jerry Falwell for his candidacy. On October 25, 1976, *Newsweek* magazine ran the headline "Born Again! The Evangelicals", and *Christianity Today*, the largest Christian magazine in the US, programmatically proclaimed 1976 as "The Year of the Evangelical" (Kucharsky 1976), followed by the *Time Magazine* titling "The Evangelicals: New Empire of Faith" on December 26, 1977. It was only when Carter did not come out firmly in support of conservative causes such as school prayer or a ban on abortion that the mood tilted. Falwell turned his back on Carter and in the next presidential campaign supported Republican Ronald Reagan with the help of his newly formed Moral Majority. The Moral

Majority was not the first Evangelical lobby group. Still, it was certainly one of the most influential, and its unexpected success drew a lot of attention to this movement, which led scholars to take up the phenomenon of the Christian Right. Over the years, much has been written about its sky-rocketing appearance and much research done to seek explanations for this surprising development. Initially, Moral Majority attracted the interest of political scientists, sociologists, and also communication scientists. Some contributions attempted to explain the religious and political support for Moral Majority using demographic evaluations and analyses of voter behavior. For example, Clyde Wilcox (1989) points to such diverse factors as geography, religious values, social status, party identification, alienation, and symbols, and argues that support for the Christian Right was primarily a reaction to political symbols rather than a reaction to social problems. Sociologists Johnson and Tamney (1984; 1988), on the other hand, examined the voting behavior of Christians in several quantitative studies and found that older, less educated people predominantly voted for the Moral Majority, but also that Christian media possessed a great deal of influence (televangelism, radio stations, etc.) (Lienesch 1982; Roberts 1983; Shupe/Stacey 1983).

Since many also attributed the success of the Moral Majority to the prominence of its leader Falwell, several publications initially focused on Falwell's rhetoric. Between 1983 and 1985 alone, at least five dissertations were written on this topic (Buckelew 1983; Brenner 1984; Jefferson 1984; Phipps 1985; Ray 1985). These works focus primarily on Jerry Falwell's sermons and public speeches, analyzing in particular the argumentative strategies of the Moral Majority in light of their political opposition. In addition, Snowball (1991) attempted an analysis of Falwell's use of war metaphors, which he considered significant for Moral Majority rhetoric. But this explains more about how Evangelicals perceived social tensions than it does about the success of the Moral Majority as a politically influential organization.

For many observers, especially sociologists, the success of the Moral Majority was at odds with modern America. They believed in the secularization of society and that Evangelical and fundamentalist Christians were a dying breed, to be found at most in the very rural areas of the United States. However, the opposite was true. While liberal churches lost members, conservative congregations experienced growth (Liebman 1983b: 234). The rural-urban divide played a role here, as did the establishment of Evangelical educational institutions in the 1970s. Susan Harding (2009), for example, argues that only liberal intellectuals (like herself) believed for too long that religion in general and

Christian fundamentalism in particular were on the wane as secularization progressed. In her view fundamental Christians never disappeared, which she attempts to demonstrate through her historical review going back to the 19th century. In doing so, she emphasizes that the "period between World War II and the birth of the Moral Majority hosted an unbroken series of politically active or politically inflected conservative Protestant mobilizations" (ibid.: 1281). Harding points out a historical thread of the Christian Right that has never been broken and argues that Evangelicals were already trying to bring moral issues into the public sphere before the 1970s to "legislate morality" (ibid.: 1282).

There is no question that the Moral Majority did not simply emerge out of thin air but built its success on various activities and diverse organizations. However, I argue that the success of the Moral Majority cannot be explained solely by the expression of its moral consciousness and social concerns. Before the 1970s, the issues were much more centered on anticommunism, a minor issue for the Moral Majority and only one of many it served. Moreover, the organizations Harding listed were not as successful as the Moral Majority, both in their expansion and reach or membership. Many Evangelical organizations at that time were almost exclusively registered as religious, tax-exempt organizations and, therefore, did not function much differently than church congregations. Their opportunity for political influence was limited if they did not want to risk their status. Accordingly, I argue that a closer look at the organizational form of the Moral Majority promises to shed a different light on the question of its political success.

Robert C. Liebman and Robert Wuthnow made an initial foray in this direction as early as 1983 in their anthology *The New Christian Right: Mobilization and Legitimation*. They also express their astonishment at the rapid success of the movement by opening the volume with the following words: "Scarcely anyone expected it. For more than 50 years Evangelicals kept studiously aloof from American politics" (Liebman/Wuthnow 1983b: 1). They also emphasize that while there had been Evangelical activities before, against communism, for example, these had been exceptions and for many conservative Christians politics was "an evil of the flesh, an exercise in futility" (ibid.: 1). To better understand the Evangelicals' sudden turnaround, they propose a movement-sociological perspective, first noting that social and political movements are often short-lived and that it was therefore uncertain how long the Christian Right movement would last. Today, 30 years later, it can be said that they were right, as the Moral Majority lasted only about 10 years. On the other hand, the

authors also emphasize that social and political movements can have a lasting effect on society, which is also true for the Moral Majority.

The main concern in their volume is to show that common interpretations of the sudden success of Evangelicals have too often been attributed solely to the social discontent of Evangelicals and the popularity of pastors like Jerry Falwell, with less consideration of the actual activities and strategies of the movement.[3] Moral protest and burgeoning ideological visions alone might explain a movement's beginnings and motivation, but not necessarily its societal triumph. Every movement consists of various protagonists, lobbyists, and, most importantly, organizations that provide an infrastructure to make the protest permanent and gain political influence. In the new Christian Right, several organizations can be found with financial resources, technical capabilities (such as computerized direct mail solicitation), media publicity, targeted lobbying, and particular organizational forms (Liebman/Wuthnow 1983b: 4). Robert Liebman compared four of the most successful of these new Christian Right movement-organizations and found that Moral Majority's advantage over the others was its experience in fundamentalist political activity as well as its access to a widespread fundamentalist network (1983a: 49). Although the anthology on the Christian Right focused on social and political movements and their organizations, the aspect of particular social and organizational forms, especially regarding the Moral Majority, was not pursued more deeply. The fact that the Moral Majority consisted of various organizational forms sheds a different light on its success, a point to which I return in the next section.

In more recent years, however, historian Randall Balmer (2021) has brought a very different reading of the success of the Christian Right into the debate. Balmer argues that its success was not (solely) due to the abortion issue, but that the real motive was to be found in a dispute over segregated schools (see also Marti 2020). Balmer even claims that the narrative of the Christian Right's success triggered by Roe v. Wade is a fiction served by scholars as much as by Evangelicals themselves. The historical facts would prove that Falwell did not prominently feature the abortion issue in his speeches until the late 1970s. Moreover, he emphasizes that the real key figure was not Jerry Falwell, but

3 The editors emphasize that the contributions in the anthology argue quite differently. While some emphasize the role of ideology in the rise of the new Christian Right, others do not see it as a central factor. The volume deliberately unites different positions (Liebman/Wuthnow 1983b: 6).

Paul Weyrich, who tried out various themes to mobilize the Christian Right. Balmer's reading goes like this: In 1970, public schools in seven federal states were still racially segregated, which had been illegal since the US Supreme Court's 1954 Brown v. Board of Education decision. In response to that decision, white students left public schools to enroll in private, racially segregated schools, so-called segregation academies. These schools not only were funded by churches, but also enjoyed tax-exempt status. In a legal trial in 1971 (Coit v. Green), the Supreme Court ruled that nonprofit segregation academies could not be eligible for tax exemption based on the IRC 501(c)(3) definition of public charities. In reaction, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) withdrew the tax-exempt status of segregation academies, sparking an outcry among white conservative Christians. According to Balmer, Paul Weyrich found this a common ground for Evangelical leaders and approached Jerry Falwell with this issue, which both now turned into a conversation about government interference. It took until 1976 for the United States Supreme Court to rule, in Runyon v. McCrary, that private schools implementing racial segregation violated federal law. Another famous case from the late 1970s was Bob Jones University v. United States (1983), in which Bob Jones University lost its tax exemption on the grounds of racial discrimination.

Balmer's discovery is very intriguing, even though I don't share his rather one-sided account of the Christian Right mobilizing solely on the grounds of segregated schools. Nevertheless, his studies highlight a central point in the emergence of the Christian Right, which I believe was also important for the strategic orientation of its organizational forms. Following Balmer's findings, I argue that it was not only abortion (nor was it only segregation) that gave rise to the Christian Right, and that the influence of Paul Weyrich on Jerry Falwell has probably been underestimated in most historical explanations. Given Weyrich's process of trial and error, it is convincing that abortion, even though it was already an important topic for some Evangelicals, was made a central issue not immediately after Roe v. Wade in 1973, but was publicly politicized only when the Moral Majority was in place. The success of the Moral Majority – in my opinion – therefore cannot be reduced to a single reason or contentious issue. The advantage of the Moral Majority over many other Evangelical organizations was that it served several issues simultaneously. In addition, I argue that past experiences of Evangelicals with the IRS prepared them to develop new ideas on how to build an organization per se. Evangelicals felt that they had long enough been castigated by the political arm from Washington with the IRS as its sharpest tool. The tax-exempt status of religious organizations

such as churches or Christian schools has always been an important pillar for organized religion in the United States. It guarantees tax-free income via donations and donors' tax claims on their donations. In addition, tax exemption also means freedom from the state. However, the tax law for religious charities and their relationship with the US government has a checkered history. I will argue, therefore, that the trigger for Evangelicals' mobilization lay primarily in the perceived threat to their religious liberty from the government and the IRS. The mobilization of the Christian Right cannot be explained by motives alone but must consider the infrastructure and strategies involved in establishing new forms of organization. In the following, I will discuss these particular forms of religious organization in more detail.

3. Religious social forms: From nonprofit organizations to faith-based organizations

The Christian Right in general, as well as the Moral Majority in specific, are often casually classified as religious movements. The term movement seems a popular label for many religious social forms. However, religion has rarely been researched in its social form as a movement (Snow/Beyerlein 2019). Research on New Religious Movements (NRMs) from the 1960s onward has scarcely engaged with social science movement research. In contrast, older distinctions of religious social forms such as church, sect, and mysticism have been taken up repeatedly and supplemented by further terms such as cult, consciousness, or charisma (Ashcraft 2018). This has not helped to sharpen the concept of movement in the field of religion. On the contrary, it seems to be applied to any 'religious movement' that is not a church, denomination, or cultic community. While most NRMs are groups with a concrete and manageable following that turns to a charismatic leader, the term movement is more appropriate for collective mobilizations such as religious reform and protest. The Christian Right also rises from a position of protest against the state and the perceived moral decay of society and seeks divine reform of society and politics. Therefore, the movement concept often forms the overarching classification of such a social form, which consists of diverse groups, informal networks, and organizations (Diani 1992: 13).

To better understand the dynamics and structure of such movements as the Christian Right, it is necessary to distinguish between the substantive motives of collective dynamics and mobilizations on the one hand, and the

formal strategies and organizational structures on the other that together form a movement. As such, movements like the Christian Right also consist of (movement-)organizations. While much has been written about the motives of the Christian Right, less is found about its organizational structures. However, without organizations the dynamics of the newly emerging collective consciousness would fizzle out shortly. Moreover, organizations must translate the (religious) ideological demands of the mobilized masses into secular policies and political action.

To become politically active, the Moral Majority had to adopt a different organizational form than most religious organizations in the US. All formally organized religions in the US are run as private nonprofit organizations (Hammack 1998). A religious nonprofit organization operates within legal parameters defined by the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) that allow it to receive tax-exempt status and engage in activities related to its mission.[4] For many decades, religions in the US were organized primarily as churches and congregations, legally registered as charitable nonprofit organizations and thus tax-exempt. However, this was to change from the 1970s at the latest. I argue that it was the Christian Right that initiated this change and became the forerunner of a new type of religious nonprofit organization, which on the one hand consists of a more complex organizational form to be able to become politically active, and on the other hand identifies itself less as a religious organization. From this perspective, the Moral Majority is one of the first so-called faith-based organizations (FBO). This transition from a denominational church-based loose network to a politically right-wing movement is grounded on creating faith-based organizations. It has allowed the Christian Right to take advantage of the benefits of this legal structure, such as fundraising, legal recognition, and targeted advocacy efforts, while continuing to address its core religious and moral concerns. To better understand this change in social form, the present section will provide an overview of different variants of nonprofit organizations and past research on religious nonprofit organizations to determine the specific character and appearance of FBOs.

For centuries, religions have seen charity and care for the poor as one of their most important tasks. In the US, it is primarily local churches and congregations that provide such social services. Legally, all organizations whose activities serve the general and public good are classified as charitable nonprofit or-

4 Cf. IRS Tax Guide for Churches & Religious Organizations: https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p1828.pdf (last accessed January 18, 2024).

ganizations.[5] In fact, the definition of a "charity" is determined by the requirements of state laws and the federal tax laws represented by the IRS. The IRS also distinguishes between several variants of charitable organizations, all of which are coded according to the internal IRS coding system. In total, there are 29 different 501(c) types, such as for Social and Recreational Clubs (501(c)(7)) or Veterans Organizations (501(c)(23)). Religious organizations such as churches are usually listed as 501(c)(3) organizations. All 501(c) corporations are exempt from corporate income tax, but donations to (c)(3)s are the only ones that are tax deductible. This makes it especially valuable for religious groups to be run as 501(c)(3) organizations. The label "nonprofit" also means that these organizations may take in more than they spend, but the income may not enrich individuals.

Most religious organizations fall under section 501(c)(3). Since at least the 1970s, there has been a shift of some religious organizations to establish one or more sub-organizations that have 501(c)(4) status. According to the IRS definition, a 501(c)(4) is a "social welfare" organization that is primarily engaged in promoting the common good and general welfare. This rather vague definition makes it difficult for the IRS to understand the exact intentions of an organization and classify it accordingly, thus allowing religious organizations to expand their activities. Social welfare organizations are also granted tax-exempt status, but one important difference is that donations to 501(c)(4) organizations are not tax-deductible for donors, unlike donations to 501(c)(3) charitable organizations. This is a consideration for both the organization and potential donors. What makes the status of a 501(c)(4) organization interesting for religions is that they have more flexibility in engaging in political activities and advocacy. This means they can actively influence legislation and public policy debates by supporting partisan campaigns and candidates. It's important to note that while 501(c)(4) organizations are allowed to engage in political activities, there are limitations on the extent of their political involvement. They are still required to primarily focus on social welfare rather than solely engage in partisan political activities. Unlike (c)(3) organizations, (c)(4) organizations do not have to disclose their donors, and a change from (c)(3) to (c)(4) is not always easy because various aspects are taken into account here. It is therefore

5 Nonprofit organizations and not-for-profit organizations are different legal forms. A NFPO must be distinguished from a nonprofit organization (NPO) because it need not be established expressly for the public good. In addition, NFPOs are considered recreational organizations, which do not generate revenue.

also noticeable that religious organizations do not usually switch to (c)(4), but establish further sub-organizations with (c)(4) status. This also means that the activities and finances of each sub-organization must be kept separate. In general, the vague boundaries and requirements of nonprofits have led to litigation, and there are now special nonprofit associations that provide legal advice to individual nonprofits on tax issues.[6]

The relevance of the 501(c)(3) status for religious organizations in the United States has evolved over the past 100 years, particularly as the legal and regulatory landscape surrounding nonprofit organizations and their activities has developed. The significance of the 501(c)(4) status for religious organizations became particularly pronounced during the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st century. For instance, in the early 20th century, tax-exempt status was primarily associated with charitable organizations and there was less differentiation for social welfare activities. However, over time, amendments to the tax code allowed for recognizing other tax-exempt organizations, including 501(c)(4) social welfare organizations. The distinction between the two types of organizations began to take shape during this period. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s prompted increased advocacy and activism from various groups, including religious organizations. While religious groups had previously engaged in social and political issues, the civil rights movement highlighted the potential impact of organized advocacy. This period marked a growing interest among religious organizations in participating in political and social advocacy efforts. During the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st century, issues such as abortion, LGBTQI+ rights, family values, and other moral and social concerns gained prominence in public discourse. Many religious organizations sought to influence the outcomes of debates surrounding these issues. The 501(c)(4) status provided a legal framework for organizations to engage more directly in advocacy, lobbying, and political activities related to these issues. The rise of the Christian Right marked a significant period of political activism among conservative religious groups. Some of its organizations operated as 501(c)(4) entities to maximize their ability to engage in political activities.

6 As an example, see the California Association of Nonprofits, which lists the advantages of being a nonprofit organization and creating another 501(c)(4) sub-organization to exert political influence. Cf. https://calnonprofits.org/publications/article-archive/616-what-should-nonprofits-know-about-501-c-4-organizations-especially-in-an-election-year.

These developments have further underscored the relevance of the 501(c)(4) status for religious organizations. Accordingly, the IRS has published a *Tax Guide for Churches & Religious Organizations*, which at least attempts to distinguish between churches and other welfare organizations. Nevertheless, the overall situation remains rather confused. It poses practical challenges to religious organizations and the government in dealing with the tax conditions for religious and other welfare organizations (Scheitle 2010: 137).

Research on religious nonprofit organizations has been very limited, although the religious nonprofit sector has grown significantly in the US and globally in recent decades. One of the earliest explorations of the topic was written by Jeff E. Biddle (1992), who describes who benefits from the religious and social activities of religious NPOs. It is noteworthy, however, that Biddle focuses mostly on local congregations rather than larger parachurch organizations or faith-based organizations such as the Moral Majority. This shows that until the 1990s, religious NPOs were perceived primarily in their social form as churches.

In the first edition of the handbook *The Nonprofit Sector*, initiated by sociologist Walter W. Powell, which has already been published in three greatly revised and expanded editions, there is no entry on religion (Powell 1987). Only in the second edition is there an entry entitled "Religion and the Nonprofit Sector", in which the authors make clear: "Whereas religious organizations generally fit the profile of voluntary associations that involve membership and support from members, they do not so easily fit definitions of nonprofit organizations based on registration with tax authorities" (Cadge/Wuthnow 2006: 485). Therefore, to obtain tax-exempt status, religious organizations must demonstrate that a substantial portion of their activities are for charitable and benevolent purposes. In addition, they highlight that "the law and policies governing religious organizations in the United States are subject to differing interpretations and frequently contested" (ibid.: 489).

The complexity of religious nonprofit organizations has also increased since the 1980s. Brad R. Fulton's article "Religious Organizations: Crosscutting the Nonprofit Sector" notes that religious organizations have rarely been considered from an organizational sociology perspective and emphasizes: "Religious organizations are also the most prevalent type of organization in the nonprofit sector, encompassing not only congregations but also a wide variety of other faith-based organizations that provide a vast array of products and services" (2020: 579). In addition, some religious organizations have recently become active in non-religious areas of the nonprofit sector and tend

to downplay their religious roots and intentions (ibid: 580). Ultimately, this makes the transition between religious and secular nonprofits increasingly fluid and difficult to define for administrative authorities. Fulton also notes the changing nature of religious organizations: While many scholars understand religious organizations to mean primarily churches and congregations, and even other religious traditions such as Buddhists and Hindus in the US organize themselves into congregations, it is also clear that not every religious organization is a congregation. He therefore makes an analytical distinction between congregations and faith-based organizations, which I adapt here.

The term faith-based organization (FBO) is not a legal term and is understood more broadly than the category of a religious organization. Thus, FBOs do not necessarily have to be of or affiliated with a particular religion or denomination. Most FBOs are social service organizations that run soup kitchens and care for the poor. The term emerged in the late 1990s, after President Bill Clinton initiated the welfare reform of 1996 that took control over welfare away from the federal government and gave it to the states. As a result, they were now to decide whether to allow religious organizations funding for their charitable work (this state degree is therefore also known as charitable choice program, cf. Nagel 2006). This was pushed even further when President George W. Bush launched the so-called Faith Based Initiative in 2001 that provided more infrastructure for the welfare reform and allowed FBOs to partake in federally directed social service programs to the same extent as any other group as long as they used the money only for their welfare activities and not for religious activities (Scheitle 2010: 155). This development has resulted in much more research literature on FBOs than on religious NPOs since the 1990s (cf. Bielefeld/Cleveland 2013). Usually, it addresses only the state's financial support of religious organizations and not attempts on part of religious organizations to influence the state through lobbying.

Although the term FBO refers principally to developments in the nonprofit sector since the 1990s, I think it is also fruitful for describing the transformation of religious social forms particularly within the Christian Right since the 1980s. Similarly, sociologist Christopher Scheitle has shown that parachurch organizations have been growing since the 1980s (2010). The term parachurch organization is used here synonymously with faith-based organizations that work across or outside of denominations. In an additional study of Evangelical mobilization in the nonprofit sector, Scheitle and McCarthy (2018) have shown that counties with more Evangelicals in the population are more likely to establish parachurch organizations than counties with more Catholics or Mainline

Protestants. Unfortunately, their analysis only covers the period from 1998 onwards. Nevertheless, this study highlights an important point in my argument: I suggest that since the late 1970s, Evangelicals in particular have begun to form FBOs that have changed the organizational landscape of Evangelicalism. These are characterized above all by the fact that, unlike other religious NPOs, they cannot be assigned to any particular church or denomination and are often – at least in terms of their name and appearance – hardly recognizable as religious NPOs. The Moral Majority fits that description. It was also open to other denominations, but was composed of and addressed primarily to Evangelical Christians, without the name Evangelical in its title.

Summing this up, traditional religious social forms such as church, sect, or cult have often been the subject of academic inquiry. In contrast, religious movement organizations such as religious parachurch organizations, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations received less attantion as distinct social forms of religion. Nevertheless, they can help to explain the transformation of religious social forms in late modernity. The emergence of faith-based organizations from the 1980s onwards can therefore be understood both as a reaction to the demands and possibilities of the rule of law (like the IRS) and as a way of manipulating the rule of law (as in federal politics). In the case of the Christian Right, faith-based organizations like the Moral Majority not only gave opportunity for political activism, but also gave the Christian Right a whole new image and an integrative, mobilizing force beyond church organizations and denominations, as I will exemplify further in the next section.

4. From mobilization to lobbying and advocacy: The immanent turn of Evangelicalism

Since the founding of the United States, the religious nonprofit sector has been characterized by "an ethos of voluntarism or self-help and the development of a strong civic sphere that was only loosely associated with government" (Cadge/Wuthnow 2006: 488). During the 20th century, however, tensions between the state and religious service providers increased: "As the role of federal government has expanded, church-state rulings have also governed the extent to which tax, employment, and nondiscrimination policies that apply to other nonprofit organizations would apply to religious ones" (ibid: 488). These tensions culminated in the 1970s and repeatedly led to legal disputes.

The first mobilizations took place at the local and regional level, and interest in political activism arose around abortion laws, pornography, and gay rights legislation, most of which were fought in local courts or led to protest campaigns. Accordingly, from the 1970s onward, Evangelicals became increasingly politically aware. Local and regional networks and organizations became an important infrastructure for the later success of the Moral Majority. It quickly utilized its infrastructure to engage in advocacy, education, and mobilization efforts while remaining aligned with its religious foundations. In addition to all the motives that contributed to the mobilization, a general awareness developed among Evangelicals that religious liberty was threatened by state impositions and an overly liberal government (Marti 2020). The IRS became a symbol of governmental evil and suppression of religious liberty.

At the National Affairs Briefing Conference in Dallas on August 21, 1980, just a few weeks before presidential election day, Ronald Reagan held a well-known speech in front of thousands of Evangelicals. Some say this is when Evangelicals finally embraced the Republican Party. In his speech, Reagan makes direct reference to religious freedom under threat by the state (which he himself soon intended to represent): "If we have come to a time in the United States when the attempt to see traditional moral values reflected in public policy leaves one open to irresponsible charges, then the structure of our free society is under attack and the foundation of our freedom is threatened" (American Rhetoric Online Speech Bank). Of particular interest here is that for Evangelicals, political activism is part of their religious freedom, but political decisions should not limit their religious freedom: "When I hear the First Amendment used as a reason to keep traditional moral values away from policy making, I'm shocked. The First Amendment was written not to protect the people and their laws from religious values, but to protect those values from government tyranny" (ibid.). This tyranny he also sees in the IRS when he speaks against plans to "force all tax-exempt schools – including church schools – to abide by affirmative action orders drawn up by – who else? – IRS bureaucrats".[7] Evangelicals saw America in jeopardy of losing its identity as a Christian nation, and the Christian Right continuously spread the narrative that America was founded as a Christian nation, a myth that prevails until today.

The name Moral Majority was therefore also programmatic and had an inclusive rather than a denominational character. To target advertising and reach

7 Cf. https://millercenter.org/rivalry-and-reform/building-movement-party.

additional groups of people, the Moral Majority distributed a leaflet with the inscription *Your Invitation to Join The Moral Majority*.[8] The leaflet was intended to address pastors in particular, who were seen as multipliers for the organization's concerns: "Bible-believing churches of America constitute the largest single minority bloc of America. However, this bloc is, for the most part, uninformed and disorganized, to the point that politicians ignore them. The only persons who can lead this mammoth bloc are the pastors".[9] This top-down process also shows that the Moral Majority was less of a grassroots movement than it is sometimes portrayed. The movement was much more thought through structurally by a small circle of actors, and its organizational form is modeled on modern FBOs. On the back of this tri-fold leaflet one finds a quite revealing organizational chart of the Moral Majority. According to this chart, the Moral Majority is divided into four organizational units: the Moral Majority Foundation, the Moral Majority, Inc., the Moral Majority Political Action Committee, and the Moral Majority Legal Defense Foundation. All four suborganizations had their legal status.

According to the leaflet, the Moral Majority Foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization whose central mission is to educate "pro-moral citizens". Conferences, rallies, and seminars are to be offered for this purpose. The leaflet specifically points out that donations can be deducted from one's taxes. The reader also learns that Moral Majority, Inc. is a 501(c)(4) organization whose primary mission is to influence national, state, and local legislation. The organizational structure here is the most extensive and includes the production of print media, targeted seminars, and assistance for political candidates and their staff to win elections. It also mentions a network of 435 congressional coordinators who can recruit and train "pro-moral" candidates for all public offices. The Moral Majority Political Action Committee is listed as a separate sub-organization, but without specifying its legal status (regarding the IRS). This committee aims to coordinate moral activism between the Moral Majority and other "pro-moral" organizations and promote voter registration among church agencies. It also specifically states that donations to the committee are tax deductible. Finally, the Moral Majority Legal Defense Foundation is listed as a 501(c)(3) organization and described as a "pro-moral" counterpart to the "humanist" American Civil Liberties Union. The ACLU, founded in 1920, is an NGO advocating for civil rights such as freedom of speech and liberal positions such as the

8 Cf. https://cdm17184.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p17184coll1/id/22/rec/2.

9 Cf. ibid.

right to abortion and the separation of church and state. The so-called "pro-moral" counterpart of the Moral Majority therefore wants to help individuals and families with adequate legal defense "who are attacked by the godless, amoral forces of humanism". It also states as one of its goals to "legally establish Humanism as a religion and have it expelled from the public schools". Here, once again, the Moral Majority's perception as a group of citizens oppressed by the liberal state and the attempt to legally translate its concerns into secular language (humanism as a religion) becomes clear. This way, the Moral Majority also established another trend: the use of legal action in addition to political lobbying. For example, Evangelical law firms proliferated after the end of the Moral Majority, with the American Center for Law and Justice, founded by Pat Robertson in 1990, as one of the leading firms.[10]

The Moral Majority can generally be seen as an FBO with clear hierarchical structures to organize a centralized decision-making process, allowing for swift and coordinated responses to emerging issues. This hierarchical structure aligned with the organization's objectives of influencing public policy, particularly on issues like abortion, homosexuality, and school prayer. The Moral Majority effectively utilized media platforms and personal networks to communicate its message, showcasing the significance of organizational communication in promoting its cause and garnering support. Unlike classical churches and denominations, FBOs often operate within a complex network of stakeholders, including members, donors, and other advocacy groups. These interconnections influence the organization's activities, strategies, and effectiveness in achieving its goals. The Moral Majority's collaboration with other conservative groups such as Robert Grant's "Christian Voice" or the "Roundtable" demonstrated the broader social forms that emerged from shared values and objectives. The Moral Majority is thus not a typical (denominational) religious organization but can be considered one of the first faith-based organizations to use the creation of sub-organizations to obtain various legal and tax benefits and to operate at various levels. In this way, Evangelicalism has taken an immanent turn on its organizational side. By immanent turn, I do not mean the Moral Majority's attempt to be politically active, but to position itself as a secular organization that is no longer set up like a church-based nonprofit and is even barely recognizable as a religious organization. Moreover, this organizational shift also implies a semantic shift:

10 Cf. https://www.duo.uio.no/handle/10852/41063.

religious concerns are translated into secular, partly legal, language. The salvation of souls through faith and repentance, as preached by Billy Graham, is being transformed into the salvation of the nation through morally educated citizens whose rights must be secured by the courts. In this process, there have been many areas where Evangelicals have identified moral lapses. These may have been triggers for mobilization. But as I have shown, it was also the organizational choice that made the actual success of the Moral Majority and the Christian Right possible.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the paper argues that understanding the success of the Christian Right requires examining not just ideological motives but also the changing organizational forms that allowed these groups to exert significant political influence. The interplay between religious organizations, their legal status, and political strategies is seen as crucial in shaping the trajectory of the Christian Right and its transformational impact on US Evangelicalism. Therefore, I focused on the organizational forms of the Christian Right, emphasizing the importance of movement organizations like Focus on the Family, Christian Voice, The Religious Roundtable, and Moral Majority. These organizations, founded in the late 1970s, significantly mobilized Evangelical Christians for political activism. Notably, they were supra-denominational and utilized tax-exempt religious nonprofit status while establishing sub-organizations that allowed for political lobbying. This legal transformation began as a response to tax regulations imposed by the IRS and led to the adoption of new organizational forms. The rise of Evangelical political activism is thus attributed to the differentiation and diversification of organizational structures. I further argued that this shift from church-based to faith-based organizations and the strategic use of legal statuses like 501(c)(3) and 501(c)(4) organizations with varied tax classes provided new opportunities for the Christian Right and contributed to its success. To explain this process, I have introduced the concept of an 'immanent turn' in US Evangelicalism, through which religious concerns are translated into secular language and used to address legal and political challenges. The Moral Majority began the legalization of the Christian Right, which continues to fight its battles primarily in the courtroom. While the Moral Majority's direct influence may have waned, its organizational tactics and impact continue to resonate in contemporary Evangelical political activism. The text underscores

the importance of understanding both the substantive motives and formal organizational structures to grasp the dynamics of movements like the Christian Right.

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