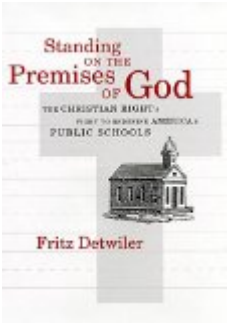
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Fritz Detwiler. *Standing on the Premises of God: The Christian Right's Fight to Redefine America's Public Schools.* New York and London: New York University Press, 1999. xi + 331 pp. $30.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8147-1914-5.



Reviewed by Joseph P. Farry

Published on H-AmRel (June, 2000)

This is an insightful, sometimes overly conceptualized, but provocative analysis of the Christian Right's campaign to reform public education. Professor Detweiler constructs his study on three assumptions: (a) The Christian Right is a "religiously grounded social movement"(p. 2), linked by a shared religious view, committed to achieve the cultural transformation of America; (b) The sociological and anthropological conceptual models developed for the academic study of religion provide useful insight into the movement's internal dynamics, purposes and strategies; (c) The ideological structure of its shared religious worldview presents the best perspective for analyzing the Christian Right's campaign to change public education.

In his first chapter Detweiler outlines a structural/functional understanding of religion as a social movement. For many readers, the application of such categorical distinctions as "shared mythos, symbolic web and ritual practices" will confuse, not clarify, their understanding of the Christian Right's opposition to particular school policies and programs.

In applying Berger and Luchmann's model of a social movement, however, Detweiler provides a useful three-tiered framework for analyzing the Christian Right's diffuse organization.[1] First, a cultural elite, composed of theologians, academics and intellectuals, "develop[s] the ideological rhetoric or master protest frames that give the movement ideational coherence. . ." (p. 134). Second, "knowledge workers" manage the "special projects groups"--such as the Christian Coalition and local advocacy groups--that project the religious worldview into the "area of public opinion and politics" (p. 140). Finally at the grassroots, the "movement's foot soldiers carry out the designs and targeted actions of the knowledge workers" (p. 135).

Detweiler's core analytical assumption is that the Christian Right is animated by a coherent religious worldview which "has permitted the leadership of Christian Right organizations to articulate a common purpose, agenda, and strategy for the movement. . . ."(p. 24). In Detweiler's account of the Christian Right's ideological foundation, the worldview of biblical Christianity is the seedbed.

From this tradition the Christian Right draws its commitment to the inerrancy of the Bible, the efficacy of biblical principles in personal and public life, the primacy of God's dominion in human affairs, and a conviction that America is a divinely instituted Christian nation.

The Christian Right's distinctive cultural analysis and political theology, according to Detweiler, was derived from the writings of Francis Schaeffer, Rousas John Rushdoony, and the tradition of Dutch Reformed neo-Calvinism. America is envisioned as engulfed in an apocalyptic conflict between biblical Christianity and secular humanism. Francis Schaeffer, in the aftermath of ***Roe v Wade***, advocated a strategy of "presuppositional struggle" against secularism. He posits that all ideas and social practices, including secular humanism, are ultimately grounded on faith assumptions or presuppositions. Through direct action and education, Christians can successfully expose secularism's hollow presuppositions. Once Americans lose confidence in this secular worldview, they will embrace Christian presuppositions. In the Christian Right's worldview, Schaeffer's cultural critique is joined with Rousas John Rushdoony's "restorationist" vision of a future America in which the state, the schools and the family would be reconstituted as institutions for God's dominion.

In the second half of his book, Detweiler offers his account of the Christian Right's religious presuppositions as a framework for making sense out of the "many controversies and initiatives advanced by the movement on all levels" (p. 184) of American public education. In addition, he explores how this theological worldview brings together Christian Fundamentalists, Pentecostals/ Charismatics, Holiness Christians, Reformed Christians, and varieties of "born-again" Evangelicals to achieve shared political goals. At the same time the author cautions that his construction of the Christian Right's worldview "does not equate with the way in which movement activists view the world" (p. 18).

To analyze the activities of a social movement primarily through the prism of its ideological presuppositions has obvious advantages and disadvantages. Detweiler's study situates the Christian Right's campaign to restore biblical principles in public education as a way station on the road to the total cultural reconstruction of a Christian America. His perspective prompts several provocative insights.

First, the strategy of "presuppositional struggle" is not aimed at winning every school policy confrontation. The ritual of mobilization is intended to "bring people into the movement"...and "erode the public's confidence in public education"(p. 159). The Christian Right has proved to be very resilient and persistent despite the setbacks experienced by particular advocacy groups.

Second, Detweiler's ideological account provides a framework for understanding the Christian Right's opposition to such apparently unrelated school policies and programs as whole language curriculums, cooperative learning, and "school-to-work" programs.

Third, the Christian Right's basic assumption that "public schools are an extension of the divinely ordained institution of the family"(p. 9) creates an irreconcilable conflict with educators who envision public schools as agencies for socializing future citizens of a pluralistic society.

Fourth, the Christian Right's religious presuppositions are derived from traditional American Protestant beliefs. In some specific policy confrontations, the movement will receive support from individuals who reject its overall "restorationist" strategy.

However, viewing the Christian Right primarily from Detweiler's ideological perspective can be misleading. His description of the evolving Christian Right's educational policy over the past twenty years might equally be held to demonstrate

that the movement is most influenced by short-term political calculation. Having failed to advance its agenda during the Reagan administration, it turned its energies to winning local school board elections--only to have its successes overturned by a more politically effective counter-movement.

Currently, Detweiler's framework suggests that the Christian Right's campaign to display the Ten Commandments in schools is an application of its "presuppositional struggle." However, Detweiler doesn't demonstrate how the growing popularity of "home schooling" is consistent with the movement's cultural transformational ideology.

Nationally, the Christian Right is focused on to seeking tax dollars for religious schools. This policy, however, could cause serious ideological dissonance within the movement. If Christian activists urge parents to dessert the public schools, they will lose leverage over an institution that their ideology identifies as critical to achieving national cultural transformation. However it is not likely that the Christian Right leaders will let their "restorationist" ideology derail their short-term political strategy.

Note

[1].Berger, Peter, and Thomas Luckmann. ***The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge***. (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1967).

Citation: Joseph P. Farry. Review of Detwiler, Fritz. ***Standing on the Premises of God: The Christian Right's Fight to Redefine America's Public Schools.*** H-AmRel, H-Net Reviews. June, 2000.

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