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*The Prophetic Politics  
of Religious Lobbyists*

DANIEL J. B. HOFRENNING

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# 1

## CHAPTER

### Religious Lobbyists as Prophets

Organized religion has played a vital role in virtually every major political issue in the history of the United States. During the Revolution, ministers were in the throes of the struggle for independence. Most supported the Revolution and often boldly proclaimed their support of liberty from the pulpit. But, as in most struggles, organized religion was found on both sides. Some clergy, perhaps 25 percent, maintained an allegiance to the crown. After the Revolution, as they forged a new nation, virtually all the American founders thought religion was essential to the republic. Although they feared that religion could threaten liberty, the early leaders contended that religion provided an indispensable source of morality for the new nation's citizens. Democracy might not survive without it.

Religion has continued to play a significant part in many other issues of public significance. The movement to end slavery began in a Quaker meeting house. The Progressive and Populist movements drew much energy and support from organized religion. The prohibition of alcohol was in large part a religious movement. The protest against the Vietnam War included many prominent religious leaders at its forefront. In recent years, battles over abortion and Nicaraguan Contra aid would have changed considerably with-



out the involvement of religious groups. In virtually every significant issue of American public life, religion has been inextricably involved.

Despite this involvement, many analyses of American politics ignore the role of religion. The major media seem blind to the significance of religion. When Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated, a television announcer reported, "And so today there was a memorial service for the slain civil rights leader, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. It was a religious service, and it is fitting that it should be, for, after all, Dr. King was the son of a minister."<sup>1</sup> Reporting of this type depreciates the religious identity of the civil rights movement. Martin Luther King, Jr., was indeed the son of a minister, but he himself was also a minister. Every speech he made was shaped by his own personal faith, his academic study of theology, and the oral tradition of black preaching. In the civil rights movement that he led, virtually all the organizational meetings, all the rallies, all the celebrations, all the funerals were held in churches. Religion gave the civil rights movement the impulse to take on injustice and the sustenance to endure through the long struggle. To ignore this dimension is nothing less than a failure to understand the heart of one of the most important political movements of the twentieth century.<sup>2</sup>

In academia scholars have often minimized religion by placing it in the framework of secularization theory. In this theory, religion shrinks in value as societies advance toward modernity.<sup>3</sup> Advancing human reason increasingly makes religion unnecessary. "This theory or myth is that of the Enlightenment, which views science as the bringer of light relative to which religion and other dark things will vanish away."<sup>4</sup> From this perspective, religion is a primitive practice. Some evidence supports the secularization theory. In most countries of Western Europe, surely among the most "modern," organized religion seems to have faded. Fewer and fewer Europeans attend worship services or en-

gage in other religious practices. In the United States, some public opinion polls show higher rates of religious observance among people who live in rural areas and have lower levels of education. One might argue that these people have less exposure to modernizing forces in society.<sup>5</sup>

However, much evidence belies the secularization theory. In the United States and elsewhere, religion persists and flourishes amid modernization. Viewing the world through the lens of secularization theory, scholars ignore or explain away evidence of the powerful allure of religion for all people.<sup>6</sup> As a result, they fail to comprehend why 90 percent of Americans continue to tell pollsters that they believe in God.<sup>7</sup> They may misunderstand international affairs by ignoring the central role of religion in two-thirds of the seventy armed conflicts in the world today.<sup>8</sup> They do not understand Hillary Clinton's talk of America's "sleeping sickness of the soul"<sup>9</sup> or the millions who flocked to the candidacies of Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson.

The media and scholars have also failed to assess the rich variety of religious groups that has recently become involved in the political process. Though religion has always been a part of U.S. politics, evidence suggests that there has been a recent upsurge in religious involvement. In the 1960s, the activity of religious liberals in the Civil Rights Movement and the protest against the Vietnam War was the big story. In the 1980s and 1990s, conservative religious organizations thundered onto the political stage with concerns about school prayer, abortion, education, and gay rights. Some of these groups have literally served as precinct caucuses for the Republican party.<sup>10</sup> The religious "left" remained active on many issues including South African apartheid and conflict in Central America; however, the religious right was more vigorous. Interestingly, religious groups have become active when many citizens expressed much cynicism and apathy about American politics. Other forms of political participation such as voting and involve-

ment with political parties declined. The two trends may be connected. While other forms of participation have deteriorated, organized religion has moved to fill the void.

Responses to the contemporary politicization of religion have been mixed. At the Republican convention of 1992, many people decried the dominant role of religious conservatives. Some of the critics were fellow Republicans who resented the entry of these zealous new religious activists. Some Republicans formed the Republican Majority Coalition, an organization aimed at revitalizing the more moderate and less explicitly religious wing of the party. Toward the other end of the political spectrum, Molly Yard, former president of the National Organization for Women, recently said, "Political leaders would do well to understand the ominous threat of the church."<sup>11</sup>

Other contemporary commentators take a more balanced approach. Responding to the rage over the spirited role of groups like the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition, David Broder argues that the hysteria is overstated. No single religious group dominates the political process and imposes its will on all citizens. Pointing to groups as diverse as Affirmation, a voice for gay and lesbian Mormons, and the Friends Coordinating Committee on Peace, Broder concludes, "The endless variety is reassuring, for it reflects the diversity in our society, which many incorrectly feel is threatened whenever some man or movement of strong religious faith appears on the political scene."<sup>12</sup>

In the midst of this increasing activism, not all scholars have ignored religion. Many have moved to broader understanding of religion and politics. In the last few years, political scientists and sociologists have done more research on the role of religion in politics. Sociologists Robert Wuthnow and James Davidson Hunter have published pathbreaking books on religion, politics, and society that have received wide acclaim.<sup>13</sup> In political science, a sizable number of books and articles have been published in the last five

years.<sup>14</sup> Scholars are increasingly realizing the integral role of religion in American politics.

This book examines a particularly neglected aspect of religion in U.S. politics, religious lobbying. While there have been many studies of lobbying in general, few scholars or other observers have focused on religious lobbying. Using other studies of lobbying, I will compare religious lobbyists with their secular counterparts and assess their role in the American political process. I will argue that religious lobbyists significantly transform politics in the United States, but that they wield power in ways distinct from other political actors. In terms of conventional wins and losses on specific pieces of legislation, religious lobbyists often—but not always—come up short. Occasionally they achieve momentous legislative victories, but their influence transcends any simple tally of wins and losses. They are also powerful because of their clarion calls for moral reform. With these calls, religious lobbyists register a challenge to the state and offer mediating organizations for citizens to voice their discontent.

In a country in which church and state are separate, the existence of this religious challenge is not surprising. The purposeful design of religious institutions distinct from the state will inevitably produce challenges to the state. This arrangement enhances democracy; indeed, the preservation of democracy depends upon the existence of autonomous organizations.<sup>15</sup> Garry Wills states, "That is one of the American paradoxes that we can be most proud of—that our churches have influence because they are independent of any government."<sup>16</sup> Without the organization of groups in opposition to the state, a government can become tyrannical, and religious lobbies are among the organizations that arise to challenge the state. While similar in some respects to other, nonreligious organizations, their religious roots make them unique. Because religion has long been a primary source of moral and ethical teaching, religious lob-

byists play an important and distinctive role in the maintenance of liberty and justice in the American experiment.

## **THE PROPHETIC POLITICS OF RELIGIOUS LOBBYISTS**

Lobbying is an important political activity of organized religion. In the last half century, a growing number of churches, synagogues, and religious organizations have established lobbying offices in Washington. Ironically, the very idea of religious lobbying seems incongruous to some. The serene and contemplative rituals of religion seem a far cry from the rough and tumble of politics. The popular media and populist politicians groan about the pernicious impact of lobbying, pointing to fantastic expense accounts and slick salespersons for the rich and powerful. To many observers, lobbyists are people who lavish campaign contributions, expense-paid trips, and so-called lecture fees on legislators in exchange for parochial legislation that undermines the broader public interest.

The recent scandals of prominent television evangelists and other religious leaders might lead us to assume that religious lobbyists are no more principled than nonreligious lobbyists. Nor would we be the first to reach this conclusion. Looking further back in history, religion's seamier side is evident. Slavery and apartheid endured in part because of religious justifications. Many of the purges and inquisitions of centuries past had religious inspiration. While not denying that religion has sometimes been a force for ill, this book argues that contemporary religious lobbyists offer a principled and moralistic vision. Unlike most other lobbyists, they seek nothing less than a transformation of American politics to a higher moral plane.

While sharing a common goal of transforming society, religious lobbyists differ—sometimes radically—in their

political and theological beliefs. In the struggle to form U.S. policy toward Nicaragua, liberal groups vigorously fought the efforts of President Ronald Reagan's administration to increase aid to the Nicaraguan Contras. At the same time, some conservative groups were reported to have sent chaplains to minister to those very contras who fought the ruling Sandinistas. A similar paradox existed regarding policy toward South Africa. While some groups stated that one could not have true faith in God without opposing apartheid, conservative leader Jerry Falwell traveled to South Africa and attempted to discredit Archbishop Desmond Tutu and antiapartheid forces. Despite these intense differences, religious lobbyists share a common type of political strategy. They have the same approach because of their shared religious heritage and their similar relationship to the state. All religious lobbyists claim a Jewish and Christian tradition<sup>17</sup> that calls followers to work for morality, justice, and peace. This tradition includes ancient biblical exhortations to create "a new heaven and a *new earth*." No other lobbyists claim such an ancient and extensive moral foundation.

In addition to their heritage, all religious lobbyists share a similar relationship to the state. They are often viewed with suspicion simply because they are religious. Other lobbyists who work on similar issues do not face the same obstacles. Legislators and citizens object to the very presence of religious lobbyists because they violate the tidy picture of a separate church and state. If church and state are deeply divergent, then some argue that religion should not be political. As a result of this sentiment, many religious lobbyists are deemed illegitimate players in Washington politics. Their common experience of rejection contributes to a type of activism that is different from nonreligious lobbying.

The word *prophetic* best describes the strategy of religious lobbyists. Many may object to the use of the word *prophet* to describe this group of activists. There are powerful differ-

ences between Old Testament prophets and religious lobbyists, but there are similarities as well. Prophets claim to communicate directly with God. Max Weber made famous the notion of the prophet's charismatic authority. Weber contrasted prophetic authority that rests in the unique charisma of individuals with bureaucratic authority that is rooted in one's position in the hierarchical institutions in society.<sup>18</sup> The clear implication of Weber's distinction is that the prophet worked outside the major institutions of society.<sup>19</sup>

Other scholars point to the location of prophets within the temple and other central institutions of society. Sigmund Mowinckel wrote of the existence of cults of prophets who had an official status in ancient Israel,<sup>20</sup> where the king often appointed prophets to sit in his court. They were called on to speak the truth, no matter how disturbing or uncomfortable. Many uttered penetrating criticisms of governments that ignored the poor and practiced other forms of injustice.<sup>21</sup> Because religious lobbyists are appointed by organizations and institutions to do their work, they can be understood as contemporary "cultic prophets." Like ancient prophets, religious lobbyists offer scathing criticisms of the state based upon their interpretation of their religious tradition.

To be sure, religious lobbyists may be false prophets. That is, they may claim to root their arguments in their religious tradition, but in reality their work is secular. Some scholars have argued that creating specialized lobbying offices and other agencies may be evidence of the increasing secularization of churches themselves. Lobbyists may work in ancillary organizations that are superfluous to the exercise of real religious authority that takes place in congregations and synagogues. Religious lobbying is then distinguished from activity that is truly religious or prophetic.<sup>22</sup>

In Israel, the difficulties of discerning false prophets may have led the temple to end the cult of prophets. Identifying

prophets of the twentieth century is difficult, but religious lobbyists act in prophetic ways. At least they understand themselves in prophetic terms. They offer searing condemnation based upon their interpretation of biblical justice. Whether false or true prophets, their criticisms are prophetic. To those who fear religious political activism, one might draw comfort in the fact that even true prophets are rarely followed. Indeed, the Scriptures note that prophets are often unacceptable in their own country, not necessarily because they are wrong, but because their truth is too distressing.

In Washington, prophetic lobbyists engage in radical as opposed to mainstream politics. Like biblical prophets, they begin with a deep dissatisfaction with the status quo. In response to their discontent, religious lobbyists seek fundamental change on a wide range of public policies. This effort contrasts with the work of most nonreligious lobbyists, who seek small changes in a narrow range of policies. Unlike their secular counterparts, religious lobbyists aspire to reorder the very priorities of government and alter the terms of the political debate. Like the long tradition of prophets before them, religious lobbyists see something profoundly wrong with society. In response, they expound an alternative vision for U.S. public policy.

Because it is prophetic, all religious lobbying—both conservative and liberal—works against a ruling elite that holds values alien to their faiths. While virtually all religious lobbyists share an antielitist perspective, different lobbyists perceive different elites as the source of America's ills. Religious conservatives blame a secular humanist elite. At a recent meeting of the Christian Coalition in Washington, D.C., Gary Bauer, president of the Family Research Council, another conservative lobbying organization, was honored as the "Protestant Layman of the Year." In his speech, he exhorted the delegates by saying, "How superior your values are to the decadent elite of this city. . . . Before



this decade is over your values will prevail.”<sup>23</sup> In the eyes of conservative Christians, the secular humanist elite have corroded the underlying values that have made America great. Family values seem particularly vulnerable. In addition, the secular humanists fail to protect the unborn or recognize the necessity of prayer in the schools.

Liberals rage against another elite. Their elite is aligned with a wealthy corporate power structure that threatens to divert resources away from the poor and needy to the rich and powerful. In the debate on the North American Free Trade Agreement, many liberal groups spoke of the corporate supporters of NAFTA who lobbied Congress heavily. One liberal activist stated,

I think there's a special concern of churches in this country, not only about ourselves and working brothers and sisters in our communities, but also of brothers and sisters in Mexico and Canada. Why in the world doesn't President Clinton just say this is the Bush/Quayle agreement? Why doesn't he say, "Let's make this agreement right?"<sup>24</sup>

To religious liberals, the alliance with the corporate elite is blasphemous politics and is diametrically opposed to the prophetic demands of faith.

Because their prophetic stance often is not supported by their members, religious lobbyists are criticized for their autocratic or oligarchical tendencies. The members of such denominations as the Episcopalians and Presbyterians may not necessarily share the prophetic or antielitist political sentiments of the religious lobbyists who represent them in Washington. For example, Episcopalian lobbyists work for a fairly liberal political agenda; however, public opinion polls show that most lay Episcopalians are Republicans who disagree with the policy positions of that agenda. To a degree, prophets are only concerned with truth; the acquiescence of members is unimportant. However, a purely autocratic approach may lead members to oppose or even dismantle the budgets of offending lobbyists. Religious