

In the name of Politics

For the last three years, Lee Marsden, lecturer in Politics at the University of East Anglia, United Kingdom, have been researching the Christian Right. The name is an umbrella for a number of churches and denominations – from Evangelical Pentecostals to conservative Catholics – that share common interests and have influence in the USA political agenda.

The results are in his last book, For God's Sake, published last June. In this interview, he talks about the research, explain Christian Right's strategies to achieve power and argues that, whoever wins the forthcoming North-American presidential elections, the Christian Right stills as a major political player in the USA.



They believe in creationism and, based on a literal Bible reading, say that there is no global warming. For others, the more USA protect Israel, the more blessed USA will be. Finally, some of them believe that only as a theocracy the USA will fulfill their divine mission of preaching the Gospel, the American Gospel, through the world.

How powerful is the Christian Right? Could you mention some occasions when they really changed some decisions in the North-American government?

I think they are powerful. In terms of actions they have taken that have been influenced, we have to look at what's going on in the Middle-East in particular. In terms of Israel and the Palestinian conflict, support for Israel has been unequivocal from the Christian Right. And what we have to administrate is whenever there's been pressure put on Israel. They have phoned it to the Congress, e-mailed it to the Congress, lobbied

Congress and the White House as well, to try and get a change of policy. This was something which was discussed before handling with the Christian Right. Every Monday, there's a conference call from the White House, in which the Christian Right leaders.

Then I can tell my reader that this week George Bush met some Christian Right leader...

Yes, yes. For example, some of the people are talking about a meeting which was called with Christian Right leaders to discuss the Iraq war and strategy. The strategy discussion is surrounded about presentation, about how this unpopular war can be made back representative. Rather than military strategy, presentational strategy, and how to keep the Christian Right on board securely.

And about the religious issue? How much influence does the Bible have in these decisions? When they're talking about politics, do they refer to the Bible, or do they mention religion?

Yes, they do it very much, concerning references to religion and the Bible. Many issues are considered, for example: if you give political support to Israel, than God will bless you, so God's blessing on America is wholly dependent on this line of thinking or its support for Israel.

So, any possibility of compromising and maybe agreeing policy is completely related to the Christian Rights. John Paul II has declared that it was not a just war. Now, Catholic membership owns most of the churches in the United States, it's a big demographic thing. And this is a great concern to George Bush, how to ensure that they're happy with the Catholic within United States.

Fortunately for him, Baptists actually got together a group of leading Christian Right ministers, who wrote a letter to George Bush, saying that this *was* a just war, and explaining theologically why this could be a just war. And this went through the membership of these churches and insured legitimacy for what Bush was doing in Iraq, and managed to discount what John Paul II had said.

Who are the Christian Right sponsors?

Members of the Christian Rights are wealthy, so they have significant financial support. But lot of it will come from faith organizations, or some of these fast-growing churches, then they're tiding their money and providing resources. This significant source of revenue, the TV ministries, they all cooperate. I don't know if Brazil is also having it, but offering and taking can ask for a prove of faith to give resources. So resources are not a problem.

What was the people's reaction during the research? Were they open to your questions?

When I was interviewing people, the reaction was very favorable; they didn't realize I was writing something expositive of the US foreign policy. They were very open. I found that generally with any American just tend to be quite open.

The big thing with the Christian Right, in particular, is that it's not a secret agenda, they are very open and explicit. You can find it through the literature, through their websites, the speeches which are made. What tends to happen in the American policy is that not sufficient attention is paid to the influence of the Christian Right. Maybe it is in terms of domestic policy, but at large they ignore what's going on in the foreign policy agenda.

This I think is probably an American problem generally, and there are many Americans, so it's dangerous to generalize, but I'd say that many Americans have little idea of what's going on in the outside world, and little concern about what is going on in the outside world.

During your research time, did somebody try to stop you by saying "Oh, you are doing something wrong"?

No, because they see it as an opportunity to get their world out there, so they didn't feel threatened by that at all. They're used to having bad publicity, so they faced all this as an opportunity to explain how for them things are a very natural response to what's going on in the world. It's obvious that Islam is a problem, and it's obvious as

well that Islam needs to be supported, from their perspective. So they actually try to get that message out to a wider audience, and they're not quite happy to engage with academic stuff. What I'm trying to do in the book is help the readers make their decision and judgment about how dangerous – or not – they are as organizations.

There is a whole chapter in your book about how the Christian Rights use media to spread their concepts. Holding a conservative agenda and using the modern mass media is not a contradiction?

They have no problems at all in terms of seeing any contradiction. They would see media as being another instrument to spread God's word, which integrates their political agenda. The domestic agenda will now use their websites, radio, satellite TV and cable TV as well, which will put across the Christian message to their followers, because it has to be put into the show. But they also try to work in an influence in secular media. So they are reading the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*.

These newspapers are regularly bombarded by Christian Rights activists protesting about liberal things which might be said in *New York Times*, anything which deviates from their restricted agenda, so there will be a lot of pressure put on journalists to conform, because there will be complaints made at editors and newspapers. And on the other hand, starts support to the war in Iraq, perhaps these dynamic statements that might be made. Then, the same people who write here praise and support the editors and support the journalists. It is a way of trying to manipulate the agenda and intimidating something that deviates from their agenda.

And what happens next? We're about to have elections in the United States. What changes for the Christian Right if McCain or Barack Obama wins?

I think that's an important point, this attempted phenomena, caused by Bush's pressure, but that's not possible to avoid. The Christian Right main start line is a republican party, and they're about 40% of the strength of their republican party, which McCain needs to secure in order to win the presidency. Now they're supporting McCain

on the basis not of his faith – which is hardly suspect (he is a Baptist who hasn't been baptized, there's a whole question about whether he is a Christian).

For the Christian Right churches which minds to be with him, the most important consideration is that if they can get their social agenda approved by a presidential candidate, than that will be great.

The bigger issue is America's position in the world and the spread of radicalism. So what is needed is a very strong commandant chief. They will probably back McCain because he is seen as being a strong commandant-in-chief and most likely to take conflict to radicalism rather than wait to attack them, and so they will start with Iraq and Iran as well, which is another big issue, and think that he was less willing to compromise over any potential Israel, Palestinian or whatever related to the Israeli terms. So he has a suspect record on a lot of the social issues, but also a concern to them.

Sometimes in your book you mention “the global south”. What are the plans the Christian Right has for it? What are the Christian Rights plans for Latin America?

First of all I think that it would be proper to say that the Christian Right is not a homogenous unit. So, when we talk about what a Christian Right will do, we're talking about lots of different organizations with different movements, like church organizations, churches, ministries, evangelists coming together. In terms of what they would plan to do, they say their agenda is worldwide evangelist.

They see very little difference between the Christian Gospel and an American Gospel, so American values, which they would say have been corrupted by the political process, in their pure form either if it's individualism and prosperity, working hard. I think they would see that it's being something which is universal and can be transported anywhere in the world. And that would be their agenda: to actually promote the Gospel – as they say – reality is American Gospel.