

## IT'S RELIGION STUPID: *EMERGING HISTORIOGRAPHIES*

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When Bethany Moreton first set out to learn about how the anti-monopolist heartland of America (the Ozarks) managed to eventually cook up the largest economic Leviathan the world has ever seen (Walmart), she was not pursuing a book in the religious genre.<sup>1</sup> Her investigation, however, led her straight to the backbone of Walmart's labor force—conservative Christian women who also made up the largest portion of Protestant evangelicals in American Christianity. Building on Max Weber's work on the Protestant work ethic, Moreton shows how the faith of these conservative Christian women helped them shape the new service economy by providing the motivation and ideology that made their work meaningful to them. The faith of Christian women made the trope of Christian service stick for the corporation on the popular level—from the bottom up, not from the top down. This powerful grassroots ideology eventually transformed the dominating corporate metaphors of ownership and authority into that of the “servant leader,” successfully integrating evangelical and economic trends.<sup>2</sup>

Since the burden of shopping for the family also fell to these same women, consumer demand also drove an increasing number of Christian products in the store, along with a “series of widely reported product purges that spot-cleaned this shopping zone” for Christians that were a part of the “literalist branches” of Protestantism (i.e. members of Southern Baptist, Church of Christ, and Assemblies of God churches).<sup>3</sup> Christian consumers new ability at Walmart to think

of their consumption in terms of procuring wholesome goods for the family (rather than as splurging on unnecessary and sensual entertainment or fashion for oneself) suddenly fit neatly with the broader emphasis on “family values” in the religious right which came to mean (more or less) anti-abortion, anti-gay marriage, anti-pornography and anti-sensually driven or violent entertainment, etc.

Moreton does not think it a mere coincidence that entertainment-oriented megachurches downplaying rigid doctrine in favor of relationships and servant-driven models of ministry were sprouting up all around the Ozarks during the rise of Walmart where the Christian women glorified their “relationships” with customers and viewed it as Christian service. Walmart exploited the conservative family structure in the region by making the men managers on borrowed prestige and the women the servants of managers and customers. This made Walmart’s labor structure fit with the prejudices of the Ozark culture. The men, however, would eventually come to learn and glorify the servant ethos exemplified by the Christian women who became the “face” of Walmart. Exhortations from pulpits (and other forms of Christian media such as “Focus on the Family” with James Dobson) directed at husbands to lavish their wives with praise for their “role” in the home (the second shift) and to think of their own role as husbands in terms of service-leadership instead of mastery or authority are seen in Moreton as an outgrowth of the “feminized” service-economy.<sup>4</sup>

There is a shift in the latter chapters away from the store setting of Walmart itself to its role in the larger political movement of the conservative right for a pro-capitalist America and for spreading a message to the world that conflated freedom with free enterprise. Unique historical circumstances that cut funding for Christian Universities and regional schools helped them see the opportunity to create partnerships with Walmart in turn for financial support. This

marriage between education and Walmart meant that University programs would favor free enterprise and brainwash students using the mythical “entrepreneur” pedagogy with a holistic emphasis on “the entrepreneurial function” that emphasized character development and business ethics marketed in the name of practicality.<sup>5</sup> These “Students in Free Enterprise” would not only become the next workforce of the capitalist system, but would reproduce on other campuses internationally to become a catalyst for the spread of capitalism. Schools of business thus became schools of politics more than hubs for serious academic research, adding momentum to the broader national movement of creative conservatism.

Some parts of Moreton’s grand narrative are more convincing than others.<sup>6</sup> Were women treated unfairly in many Walmart stores in more gender conservative regions? In spite of the failed class-action lawsuit, this seems hard to doubt. But was drag tradition a conspiracy to reinforce gender bias? I am not yet convinced. Did Walmart successfully market an impressive amount of Christian products and keep secular products “safe” for their niche of Christian consumers? This is irresistibly plausible historiography. But does this make Walmart a *Christian Corporation*? Probably not. Did Walmart use Christian concerts in stores to draw shoppers? Surely somebody in the higher management saw the opportunity. But does this make Walmart a “megachurch” that meets on Saturday night? Perhaps that is overstated. The Walton’s were not evangelical, born again, Pentecostal or fundamentalists, “let alone Christian activists outside their mainstream denomination” and the company (for the most part) did not seek a Christian identity.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, the aggregation of so many associations does have the cumulative effect of making her historical narrative an enticing argument and her focus on injustices makes her argument emotionally appealing. Her own concerns for the exploitation and undervaluing of women as key abuses of capitalism may cause her ambitious narrative to stretch

the historical evidence as she paints a restrained but villainizing portrait of the corporation as drunk on the wine of opportunism, raping the livelihood of an entire generation and making them unwittingly cheer on their won decimation,<sup>8</sup> corrupting Christians institutions to brainwash their students to pervert the gospel into one of “Christian free enterprise,” etc.<sup>9</sup> Still, for all her overplayed associations, her book is fascinating, bold, nuanced, and well researched.

Although with much more subtlety and sympathy than Frank’s *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*, conservative Christianity is portrayed negatively in Moreton’s narrative as the key mechanism for reinforcing injustice. The gender bias that enabled Walton’s work environment to exploit women without offending cultural sensibilities is linked with evangelical complementarianism—one feature of a large constituency in American Protestantism. She also portrays evangelicals as naïve and myopic. The same people being oppressed by capitalism’s Leviathan are its most ardent supporters, spreading free enterprise fundamentalism through their institutional structures and “gleefully voting against their own material interests every time some hollered ‘abortion’ or ‘gay marriage’.”<sup>10</sup> The corporate homage for the “Christian service” of the lowest rung of undervalued Walmart workers was hypocrisy cloaked in evangelical idiom.

The reader is supposed to walk away from this book feeling outraged at the injustices done under the pretext of religion, as if we had just read a book about the Spanish conquest of the Americas with its brutal exploitations of slave labor. My own personal response is more ambivalent.<sup>11</sup> Her book offers a corrective to the axiom “It’s the economy, stupid” by showing the power of religion to shape economics, yet her depiction of religion’s power is disturbing.<sup>12</sup> Her argument seems to make American Christianity (or at least fundamentalist and evangelical Protestantism) out to be a worse than useless religion, except perhaps when making oppression bearable or even satisfying. Religion helps widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Her argument might be internalized as “a case study in the dangers of co-opting Christian principles for our own agendas—whatever they may be.”<sup>13</sup> There is a ready-made religious ideology waiting to be harnessed for justifying greed, sexism, Jihad, and probably just about anything.

The whole of Darren Dochuk’s book *From Bible Belt to Sun Belt*, like Bethany Moreton’s book, is also a sharp corrective to historiographies that downplay of the power of religion in American life.<sup>14</sup> Dochuk hopes his book will challenge the notion that religion is politically reactionary and haphazard or “pops up for a short time, makes some noise, surprises some people and scares others, but then suddenly disappears again to wait for its next release.”<sup>15</sup> While many historians seem to miss the larger picture by explaining the Religious Right as if it were invented by Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, we learn from Dochuk that it was just one species of a larger genus in the taxonomy of postwar religious politics. His narrative argument is also a critique of the tendency to see a liberal consensus in post-World War II America, for his story shows more of a “contested political climate in which conservatism occupies a central role.”<sup>16</sup> Dochuk’s careful research and easy prose help us understand how southern evangelicalism was one of the most sweeping and dynamic political forces in post-Depression America and helped fracture the Democratic Party’s Solid South. Dochuk successfully “thread[s] evangelicalism into mainstream narratives of U.S. political history, which still tend to paint evangelicalism as a sideshow.”<sup>17</sup>

By charting the Diaspora of southern evangelicalism to the West Coast—especially around the Los Angeles area—this treatment shows how transplanted southern religion stretched the notches on the Bible Belt to create America’s Sunbelt. Southern evangelicalism was effective through a combination of its plain-folk appeal, media mastery, and economic prosperity

(due in part to government funding of defense), but was especially empowered and emboldened by a combination of its “errand” interpretation of westward migration and its apocalyptic doomsday expectations. With respect to the latter, we might say that while Moreton offers the axiom “Its religion, stupid” through a more narrow focus on Walmart and its corporate culture and symbiotic relationship to evangelical institutions, Dochuk’s more comprehensive historiography not only provides a larger context to Moreton’s narrative, but also critiques the economy-centered understanding of the outworking of history with his own maxim: “It’s theology, stupid.”<sup>18</sup> After Southern California became the new hotbed for southern migrants, liberal Californians with a progressive vision for their state eventually found themselves surrounded by a southern menace. The ascent of southern evangelicalism on the West Coast coincided with the start of a conservative insurgency during the early cold war period before it broke through on the national level in the 1970’s. “The convergence was no coincidence” because California was the leading light in this revolution, innovating seeker churches, Hollywood quality media, political forums and platforms, and effective outreach strategies, all the while mixing religion and politics.<sup>19</sup>

Dochuk’s narrative offers snapshots of how certain postwar economic opportunities ultimately empowered evangelical westward sojourners—especially those who moved to southern California—who not only kept ties with their southern evangelical roots, but spread their southern religion in their new homeland to produce a silent revolution that only needed the opportunity to finally realize its political potential. Although their first few inexperienced tangos with California hardball politics (e.g. Ham & Eggers) did not bode well and ended in bitter defamation, it taught them valuable political lessons that would only serve to strengthen future efforts. Southern evangelicals were initially Democrats and greatly benefited from government

funding. This funding in large measure enabled them to thrive in California to become a powerhouse in politics. They started voting Independent and Republican, however, once they felt that Social democrats had overplayed their hand with a liberal agenda to make California a bastion of “racial tolerance, economic equality, religious ecumenism, cultural pluralism, and international cooperation.”<sup>20</sup> This not only threatened southern evangelicals religious prejudices, but also their racial and class prejudices that resulted from urban sprawl and safe white suburban neighborhoods where the “worst traits of Dixie flourished”—transplanted southern evangelicalism carried with it presumptions of white superiority.<sup>21</sup>

The old jerry-rigged neighborhoods from mass migration all around Los Angeles turned into wealthy suburban empires with megachurches like The Church of the Open Door and think-tank educational institutions like Pepperdine. Now, with the help of mainstream plain-folk pulpit masters like J. Vernon McGee, these (mostly) white suburbanite evangelicals became the Sunbelt’s political springboard as they preached entire sermons on anti-communism from their auditorium-sized worship spaces, proliferated political pamphlets and magazines, hosted Freedom Forums where political ideas spread, created alternative private schools, shaped a climate of suspicion and fear of communist takeover and apocalyptic doom, saturated the airwaves with radio conservative Christian broadcasting networks, and ultimately created alliances with old enemies (e.g. Blacks and Catholics) and similar political powers in the Bible Belt. Evangelical mass media seamlessly weaved together religion and politics, Jesus and Jefferson, religious freedom and free markets, theism and anti-communism, spreading a Goldwater gospel that was the prolegomena to the Regan administration. Having already learned to relinquish the rough edges of their fathers theological fundamentalism, when Goldwater’s campaign failed their eyes were soon aglow with a more centrist political agenda championed by

Ronald Regan.<sup>22</sup> After his lustrous career as governor of California he represents a pinnacle of evangelical power in a time when it seemed that anyone hoping for a shot at the presidency needed a religious testimony to win the support of the new evangelical-backed, pro-capitalist, anti-big government, conservative republican party.

Bethany Moreton and Darren Dochuk both represent emerging historiography that gives greater attention to the role of religion—specifically fundamentalist and evangelical Protestantism—in American history. Both use narrative arguments that pack explanatory punch rather than rigid logical deductions from the evidence. Dochuk’s narrative, however, is more convincing than Moreton’s. Whereas it seems that Moreton is sometimes straining the evidence to create associations between Walmart and Christianity, Dochuk’s ubiquitous citations of literature, countless sermons of populist preachers across multiple denominations, Freedom Forums, Peperdine’s own mission statement, and other ideal sources that show the link between Republican ideas and evangelical religion as widespread and explicit, makes his Sunbelt thesis more believable. Regan had an evangelical testimony—and *that was the whole point*; there is much less evidence to believe that Walmart corporation saw Christianity as the whole point of Walmart as if it were its own megachurch.

We get a mixed picture of evangelicalism in Dochuk. On the one hand, he depicts evangelicalism as a vital and adaptive movement with explosive religious ideology that thrust them into the limelight of power in yet another chapter in American history. On the other hand, Dochuk’s book is not exactly a eulogy. Transplanted evangelicalism in California was (at least initially) also transplanted racism. Historically it appears that perhaps their repentance from prejudice may have been motivated in large measure by political expediency—color-blind conservatism did not give their opponents the chance to pull the racial-card. It also helped them

win over people like E. V. Hill who could organize the black community for their political agenda.<sup>23</sup> The way evangelicals so comfortably (and effectively) used their pulpits to preach against communism and spread their political agenda certainly had the corrupting effect of confusing the Kingdom agenda of Christ with a contextualized and uncertain political agenda.

<sup>1</sup> Bethany Moreton, “The Real Paradox of Wal-Mart,” *The Writing on the Wal* (<http://thewritingonthewal.net/?p=8022>), accessed 11.15.11. Moreton summarizes for us the common theme highlighted in the business press at the time she began her research: “Wow, who would’ve believed a bunch of dumb hillbillies would have cooked up this economic Leviathan?”

<sup>2</sup> Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009), 107.

<sup>3</sup> For example, it was only *after* the larger conservative resurgence in American life and politics that it became impossible to get CDs by Snoop Doggy Dog or Tupac Shakur at your local Walmart (or if by chance you could find some explicit rap CDs that had slipped through the cracks, they were too inundated with the ubiquitous bleep censor for enjoyable listening). Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, 92.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 100-124.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>6</sup> Alexis McCrossen, for example, thinks Moreton has a tendency to “paint with too broad a brush stroke” and “marshals little direct evidence ... yet draws conclusions about them and their motivations in confident tones.” Alexis McCrossen, Review of *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* by Bethany Moreton,” *Business History Review* 85, no. 2, 2011: 421-423. Rob Horning thinks her evidence seems “suspiciously apt sometimes, considering the mass of corporate events, executive interviews, and incidents among the company’s many stores Moreton had available to work with. There’s no clear way to tell whether some of her anecdotes are typical or cherry-picked. And more generally, to focus strictly on ideological factors without acknowledging the hard numerical economies of scale that Wal-Mart could bring to bear against its competitors presents a picture of its rise that eventually starts to feel a bit myopic.” Rob Horning, “To Serve God and Wal-Mart by Bethany Moreton,” *PopMatters* (<http://www.popmatters.com/pm/review/107658-to-serve-god-and-wal-mart-by-bethany-moreton>, 2009), accessed 11.02.11.

<sup>7</sup> Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, 89-90.

<sup>8</sup> In her interview with Nancy MacLean for CSPAN2 she says emphatically that Walmart does not create jobs; it “cannibalizes” them. *After Words*, CSPAN2: BookTV (<http://www.booktv.org/Program/10548/After+Words+Bethany+Moreton+To+Serve+God+and+Walmart+The+Making+of+Christian+Free+Enterprise+interviewed+by+Nancy+MacLean.aspx>), accessed 11.24.11.

<sup>9</sup> As Moreton points out, in spreading this gospel, they do not say “this is how you become wealthy” or “this is how you take over the world through monopolizing” but rather “this is how you can change the world and make it a better place.” *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart*, 4. Darren Dochuk criticizes historiographies that depict evangelicals as being “duped” into voting against their economic interests. “First of all, the ‘duped’ motif has its limitations. Some of the Wall Street types I include in my story could be classified as evangelical populist themselves whose own politics covered a range of issues beyond their pocketbooks; economic interests wasn’t their

sole interest. ... to say they were snookered into doing something against their wellbeing shortchanges their own capacity as rational political actors. ... And ultimately, I'm hesitant to say someone is voting or acting against their best interests, as if I have some deep wisdom they don't; I can't even figure out what my own best interests are, let alone someone else's, so I'm not that eager to pass judgment." Darren Dochuk, "From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: An Interview with Darren Dochuk," interview by Paul Harvey, *Religion In American History: A Group Blog on American Religious History and Culture* (<http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2011/05/from-bible-belt-to-sunbelt-interview.html>), accessed 11.18.11.

<sup>11</sup> The author's response to the findings and interpretations of her research are also more ambivalent than the book reveals. In her interview for Nancy MacLean her incredible sympathy with all of the characters in the story is more pronounced. She takes a more positive tone about what was "accomplished" in Walmart's service economy by women. *After Words*, CSPAN2: BookTV.

<sup>12</sup> The potency of religion to shape culture, politics, and the economy could be taken as the "larger" point of the book, offering a powerful critique of the axiom "It's the economy, stupid." McGowin, after reading Moreton's book, concludes this "ground needs to be ceded to religion." Emily Hunter McGowin, "Book Review: *To Serve God and Wal-Mart* by Bethany Moreton," *Think. Laugh. Weep. Worship*. (<http://thinklaughweepworship.blogspot.com/2011/11/book-review-to-serve-god-and-wal-mart.html>) accessed 11.27.11.

<sup>13</sup> Chris Smith, "A Brief Review of *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise*," *Englewood Review of Books* (<http://erb.kingdomnow.org/brief-review-to-serve-god-and-wal-mart-by-bethany-moreton-vol-2-32/>), accessed 11.24.11.

<sup>14</sup> Darren Dochuk, "From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: An Interview with Darren Dochuk," interview by Paul Harvey, *Religion In American History*.

<sup>15</sup> Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: Plain-Folk Religion, Grassroots Politics, and the Rise of Evangelical Conservatism* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton and Company, Inc., 2011), xxii.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, xxii. Furthermore, although he appreciates Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, which uses the motif of "exodus" and "exile" rather than "errand" to emphasize the hardships of southern migrants in California, he believes the "errand" motif brings a certain balance to our understanding of the historical reality. Darren Dochuk, "From Bible Belt to Sunbelt, Redux: Part II of Darren Dochuk Interview," interview by Paul Harvey, *Religion In American History: A Group Blog on American Religious History and Culture* (<http://usreligion.blogspot.com/2011/05/from-bible-belt-to-sunbelt-redux-part.html>), accessed 11.18.11.

<sup>17</sup> Darren Dochuk, "From Bible Belt to Sunbelt: An Interview with Darren Dochuk," interview by Paul Harvey, *Religion In American History*.

<sup>18</sup> The "errand" motif was not unique to the westward migration of southern evangelicals, but has always been evangelicalism's "life source." Darren Dochuk, "From Bible Belt to Sunbelt, Redux: Part II of Darren Dochuk Interview," interview by Paul Harvey, *Religion In American History*.

<sup>19</sup> Darren Dochuk, *From Bible Belt to Sunbelt*, xix.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

<sup>22</sup> Dochuk argues that the purging of the John Birch Society members was "a key step in conservatism's move from the Goldwater margins to the Regan center." Darren Dochuk, "From Bible Belt to Sunbelt, Redux: Part II of Darren Dochuk Interview," interview by Paul Harvey, *Religion In American History*.

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<sup>23</sup> As Dochuk puts it, they were “part savvy, part sincere.” Darren Dochuk, “From Bible Belt to Sunbelt, Redux: Part II of Darren Dochuk Interview,” interview by Paul Harvey, *Religion In American History*.