

Is Religious Right dead or part of new center?

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WASHINGTON (ABP)—Reports the Religious Right's demise have been greatly exaggerated, according to Tony Perkins and Harry Jackson.

But Jim Wallis, Samuel Rodriguez, David Gushee and other leaders and authors argue that the Religious Right, while not dead, is certainly suffering from a failure to thrive.

Both sides may be right.

Perkins and Jackson, both prominent Religious Right leaders, hosted a Washington discussion on their new book, *Personal Faith, Public Policy*. In the text, they argue the movement known as the Religious Right is not dead or dying but actually is expanding—despite recent media stories noting a new generation of evangelicals is increasingly weary of the culture-war rhetoric that is the movement's hallmark.

"I feel amazingly well; I don't feel like I'm cracking up or I'm dying," said Perkins, president of the Family Research Council. "These headlines, like

the paper that they're written on, are recycled."

Perkins and Jackson—a Washington-area pastor and key African-American supporter of President Bush in his successful 2000 and 2004 election campaigns—note in the book that the "liberal media" has at least twice in the past pronounced the Religious Right dead. The first was in 1989 after the death of the Moral Majority. The second was in the late 1990s after Congress failed in its impeachment efforts and the Christian Coalition's influence began to wane.

Jackson said the fact that many younger evangelical leaders seem as concerned with global poverty and the environment as with abortion rights or sexuality simply shows the Religious Right is evolving. "Our movement is not dead; it's maturing," he claimed.

But Wallis and other Christian leaders say that, inasmuch as a broad evangelical political movement exists and is maturing, it is maturing beyond the causes and structures of the Religious Right.

"I am not one of those who say the Religious Right is dead or gone," Wallis, head of the Sojourners/Call to Renewal anti-poverty movement, said during the discussion. "What I have said is what has felt like a monologue is over, and a dialogue has begun."

The mainstream media finally is beginning to realize that not all self-described evangelicals are socially or economically conservative, white or obsessed with legalized abortion, gay rights and government endorsements of Christianity, Wallis said.

"I am pro-life as well. The question is: How does a consistent life-ethic apply? How deep and wide does it go?" he said. "To me, it includes the 33,000 children who will die today as a consequence of poverty and disease."

Jackson and Perkins, in their book and in the discussion, acknowledged that the Religious Right has, in some cases, been too closely identified with the Republican Party—and that both may have suffered a loss of confidence from evangelicals, as evidenced by the number who voted for Democrats in the 2006 mid-term congressional elections.

“I think we saw in 2006 there was some hesitancy to challenge the Republicans in their long train of scandals that derailed their majority,” Perkins said. “I know that I was criticized for speaking out against some of the Republicans, for instance, (disgraced Florida congressman) Mark Foley, because there was concern that if we spoke out against them we would lose our majority.”

Some questioners noted that the Republican Party, in turn, was poised to nominate a presidential candidate—Sen. John McCain of Arizona—who has had a contentious relationship with the Religious Right.

But Perkins said conservative Christians are still exerting influence in the party.

“I think the fact that we have a McCain candidacy shows that evangelicals are strong, and it’s not a Rudy Giuliani candidacy,” he claimed, noting the collapse of the moderate former New York mayor’s GOP campaign. “Clearly, the Big Apple values were seen as being totally inappropriate to the core of the Republican Party.”

The fact that Jackson and Perkins have written their book is itself vindication of the idea that evangelical politics is changing, said David Gushee, a Mercer University professor who has written a new book hailing the emergence of what he calls the “evangelical center.”

At a separate March 11 panel discussion on Gushee’s book, *The Future of Faith in American Politics*, Gushee said Jackson and Perkins are offering a “reformist vision” of the conservative evangelical political movement that

seems to have a lot in common with what leaders like Wallis and others are saying.

“It looks like the evangelical center is indeed arriving and that many are converging toward that center,” Gushee said.

Rich Cizik, chief public-policy officer for the National Association of Evangelicals, said the emergence of new evangelical politics will change the “us-versus-them” tone with which many conservative Christians have addressed those who disagree.

“It’s moving, you see, from a zero-sum-game politics where someone else has to lose for us to win, to a common-good vision of politics,” he said.

Cizik should know. He has drawn repeated fire from the Religious Right’s old-guard leaders for his outspokenness and willingness not to toe the traditional conservative line on issues such as global warming and torture.

“In transactional politics, you exchange goods, services, votes or whatever in return. And the evangelicals were in effect saying to the leaders of the Religious Right, ‘We’ll give you our support’” in voting for a party that seemed to embrace the values they found important, Cizik said. But more moderate and liberal Christians, as well as non-Christians, fought back.

But, he continued, “Transformational politics is very, very different.”

The Religious Right might not be changing its tone altogether, though. For example, Perkins’ book assails those who support gay rights or strong church state-separation as “anti-Christian” and contends media and political elites continue to harbor anti-Christian biases.

Nonetheless, Perkins’ willingness to invite Wallis to appear on the same panel with him may itself be the sign of new cooperation with groups his movement has often vilified.

“We do have some common ground with Jim Wallis and others that approach some of the same issues, but we approach them different,” Perkins admitted.

“This is an example of a new dialogue,” Wallis said.

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