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Jimmy Carter, 'Freestyle' Evangelicals, and the Future

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The American Prospect bills itself as "an authoritative magazine of liberal ideas." According to its Web site, the Prospect "strives to beat back the right wing and to build a majority of true patriots who understand what really makes America great."

In "Reaching to the Choir," Prospect writer Ayelish McGarvey argues that progressive evangelicals—here called "freestyle evangelicals"—will reshape the political picture in this year's election, turning conservative Christians away from "the conservative morality issues of abortion and gay marriage to progressive matters of social justice, America's role in the world, and care for the environment." In making this claim, McGarvey pointed to several figures calling for such a turn, including Jim Wallis, Tony Campolo, and former President Jimmy Carter.

Let me ask this as nicely as I can: Does The American Prospect really think that these three men—all far to the left of most evangelicals—are in a position to predict the future of conservative Christianity in America?

Jim Wallis is editor of Sojourners magazine, founded in 1971 as the voice of liberal evangelicals on issues of social justice. Its current mission statement calls for "nurturing community by bringing together people from various traditions and streams in the church." Those streams all flow to the left, and the magazine doesn't even come close to representing the convictions of most evangelicals.

In an op-ed column in The New York Times published last December, Wallis called for Democrats to take up their agenda as a religious cause. "True faith results in a compassionate concern for those on the margins. . . . Allowing the right to decide what is a religious issue would be both a moral and political tragedy," he argued.

Tony Campolo, a well-known and controversial figure in evangelical circles for several decades, is held up by McGarvey as a sign that evangelical resistance to homosexuality may not be as invincible as first appears. "Many freestyle evangelicals privately disapprove of homosexuality," she explains, "but they wince at the shrill, anti-gay posturing of the hard right." Campolo, whose wife is a prominent proponent of gay rights and same-sex marriage, argues that the Bible clearly identifies homosexuality as sin. Yet, homosexuality "was not on Jesus' top 10 list of sins," he explains. "What was No. 1 on the list? Religious people who go around creating hardships for everybody [with] their legalism."

In an attempt to personalize her story, McGarvey introduced Jonathan Eastvold, a 26-year-old graduate of Wheaton College. Eastvold voted for George W. Bush in the 2000 election, but plans to vote for the Democratic candidate this year. Eastvold supported retired Gen. Wesley Clark in the early primaries, even writing for the Web site, "Christians for Clark." When the Clark campaign collapsed, Eastvold turned to the campaign of Sen. John Kerry and offered to set up a

“Christians for Kerry” forum on Kerry’s Web site. The Kerry campaign told Eastvold he could set up a forum on Yahoo.com, but they did not want a “Christians for Kerry” forum on their official Web site.

Jeffrey Johnson, a 28-year-old graduate student at Princeton University, is another of McGarvey’s examples of left-leaning evangelicals. A graduate of Baylor University, Johnson also voted for Bush in 2000, but now faults the President for his tax cuts and for failing to support the Kyoto Protocol on global warming.

Do Eastvold and Johnson represent a trend? McGarvey offers no persuasive argument that they do. Evangelicals may differ with each other on issues of economic theory and tax policy, but most evangelicals remain stalwartly pro-life and opposed to the normalization of homosexuality—including the legalization of same-sex marriage.

No one should know this better than former President Jimmy Carter. Carter was denied a second term in office, at least in part because of the defection of American evangelicals to the candidacy of Ronald Reagan. Key issues in the 1980 race included abortion and “family values”—a network of concerns that defined evangelical interest long before any serious proposal for homosexual marriage had emerged.

Nevertheless, Carter figures prominently in McGarvey’s analysis, slamming the Republican Party, President Bush, and the evangelicals who support them. “Christ was committed to compassion for the most destitute, poor, needy, and forgotten people in our society,” he told McGarvey. “Today, most of the people strongly committed to the Republican philosophy have adopted the proposition that help for the rich is the best way to help even poor people by letting some of the financial benefits drip down to those most deeply in need.” Characterizing conservatives as the “ultra right wing,” Carter accused conservatives of abandoning “that principle of Jesus Christ’s ministry.”

Few can top Carter in terms of judgmental language. He faults conservative evangelicals for supporting Israel and military action. “Those are the two principal things in the practical sense that starkly separate the ultra-right Christian community from the rest of the Christian world,” he offered. “Do we endorse and support peace, and support the alleviation of suffering among the poor and the outcast?”

The Prospect’s Web site also features an extended version of McGarvey’s interview with Carter in which the former president accuses “fundamentalists” of developing a sense of superiority that flows from their conviction that they have a “proper” knowledge of God. Standing on this “proper” knowledge of God, conservatives then judge others. Carter seems to miss the essential question raised by this argument. On what basis does he judge conservatives? Evangelicals are wrong for judging homosexuals, but Carter shows no hesitation in judging evangelicals in terms of both character and conviction.

This is the Great Liberal Double Standard at work. Conservatives are called judgmental for insisting that abortion and homosexuality are moral issues settled by Scripture. Meanwhile, liberals are free to make whatever judgments they want, all the while calling those who oppose them judgmental.

Carter says he is against gay marriage, but favors civil unions that grant homosexual couples the same rights as married persons. On this issue, the former president reveals the same pattern of fuzzy thinking he has long shown on the abortion question. “I personally, in my Sunday School lessons, don’t favor the endorsement of gay marriage,” he explained. “But I do favor equal treatment under the law for people who differ from me in sexual orientation.”

This language says much and says little at the same time. Mr. Carter seems to think that the pressing issue is the legal standing of those with a sexual orientation “different” from his own. That is not of material interest at all. The real question is the public policy this nation should assume with respect to those who demand that homosexuality be normalized and same-sex marriage legalized. In claiming to oppose same-sex marriage while endorsing civil unions, he wants to have it both ways at once.

On abortion, the former president went back to his position in the 1976 campaign. “I have always been against abortion,” he said. “It’s not possible in my own concept of Christ to believe that Jesus would favor abortion. But at the same time, I have supported the Supreme Court ruling of our country as the law of the land. And the present arrangement, whereby a woman is authorized to have an abortion in the first trimester of the pregnancy, or when the pregnancy is caused by rape or incest—these are things that moderates who have beliefs like mine can accept as the present circumstances in our country. The liberality of abortion is anointed by the laws of our country, including the ultimate

ruling of the Supreme Court.”

That statement is both inaccurate and inconsistent. In the first place, the “present arrangement” on abortion does not limit a woman’s right to abortion to the first trimester, or to cases of rape or incest. As a former Chief Executive of the nation, Mr. Carter must surely know that. Beyond all this, what sense can we make of a former president who claims to oppose abortion, but acts as if the “ultimate ruling” of the Supreme Court is an eternal and infallible authority? If other presidents had followed that logic, slavery would still be legal and racial desegregation would never have happened.

In reality, Wallis, Campolo, and Carter are all far to the left of the majority of American evangelicals. The issue of abortion will not just go away, and the issue of same-sex marriage is likely to determine evangelical voting patterns far more than tax cuts and fiscal policy. The “freestyle evangelicals” may look promising to The American Prospect, but they are far more freestyle than evangelical.

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