

Sightings 11/13/06

Watch Your Language

-- Martin E. Marty

With regard to the recent election -- was it a seismic or glacial change? -- I want to make one observation or suggestion. It's in the "watch your language" category. Ever since my article "The New Christian Right" appeared in the *Encyclopedia Britannica Yearbook 1981*, I've quietly argued that in political contexts the term "the New Christian Right" should be used in place of "Evangelicals," which is what the public media have chosen to use -- and which they regularly misuse. The "Christian Right," then as now, I wrote, spoke only for "a minority of evangelical, fundamentalist, and Pentecostal Protestantism," and included some "Roman Catholics, who shared some of the New Christian Right's viewpoint," especially against abortion. That "minority," of course, has since grown.

If these together do not make up all of "evangelicalism," many evangelicals also are not fully at home on the political right. That was clear back when many took up the "it's the economy, stupid" theme in the Clinton years. Columnist Andrew Greeley and Michael Hout, in their important little book *The Truth About Conservative Christians*, provide ample sociological data to show that class, region, party, and self-interest also go into the mix of "evangelical" voting patterns, and only a minority of evangelicals is hard-Right. Reviewing the 2004 elections, they wrote that religion remained the story "because it suits both the interests that want to further the influence of their brand of religion ... and those who want to raise money to stop them." Each spooks out the other, most media, as well as many of us in the public.

The 2006 election was a partial de-spooker. Many in the Christian Right showed their frustration before, during, and after the election, feeling that their candidates and party did not deliver. On Greeley lines, we can read more declarations of independence from the Christian Right by many evangelicals, especially as they now put energies into other issues that they find religiously important (e.g., the environment, immigration policies, etc.). In 2004, had a couple tens of thousands of Ohioans voted differently, commentators would likely have said that the Right had met its limits and would fade. Instead, reporters had only asked voters in exit polls whether they had voted their values. Many said "yes." But who wouldn't, and who didn't, vote their values? That question was a blunt instrument. Now we shall look to John Green, Greeley and Hout, and Chris Smith, among others, to sharpen the tools of measurement and focus our lenses.

My take: The Christian Right took shape in the 1980s with the motives of the "politics of resentment," its members having long felt, and been, disdained. In the years of the Reagan charm, they found it easy to gain power, so they moved to the "politics of will-to-power," still voicing resentment. Many sounded as if they should and maybe could "win it all" and "run the show."

They have now begun to learn what mainline Protestants and mainline evangelicals, Catholics, Jews, and humanists know: No one is simply going to "run the show" in the American pluralist mix, as we watch shifting powers face off against other shifting powers, which is what happened again last Tuesday.

References:

Andrew Greeley writes about religion and the elections in his November 10 column in the *Chicago Sun-Times*, which may be found here:

<http://www.suntimes.com/news/greeley/131251,CST-EDT-greel10.article>. *The Truth About Conservative Christians: What They Think and What They Believe*, by Andrew Greeley and Michael Hout, is published by the University of Chicago Press.

Martin E. Marty's biography, current projects, upcoming events, publications, and contact information can be found at www.illuminos.com.