

*What Does
the Lord Require?*

HOW AMERICAN CHRISTIANS
THINK ABOUT ECONOMIC JUSTICE

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PREFACE TO THE 1996 EDITION

Religion and Politics at Century's End

This book argues (among other things) that Christian traditions, as understood and used by ordinary Americans, work in favor of aspirations for equality and community in the economic realm, at least as much as against them. In spite of the increased visibility of religious right politics since the book was originally written, I am convinced that this remains true, and in this new preface I will present empirical evidence and arguments to that effect. For those who are discouraged by recent political trends, it may be heartening to discover that the cultural resources provided by Christianity, now as in the past, can potentially support alternatives to the mean-spirited agenda currently dominant in Washington. (Other evidence suggests that the same is true of some other cultural traditions, religious and secular. However, the particular focus of this book is on Christianity.)

I have written this new preface to bring the story in the book up to date, and in the process to relate it to contemporary debates about religion and politics. The book is based on in-depth interviews conducted in 1976 and on public opinion poll data ending in 1989. I also rely to some extent on *Habits of the Heart*¹ (by Robert Bellah and four colleagues) for information on secular frameworks Americans use to address public issues; the interviews reported in that book were done from 1979 to 1984. Clearly a lot has changed in the United States since then, and specifically in the connections between religion and politics. First, the political agenda in Washington and many state capitols has veered sharply to the right. Second, the loose movement usually called the New Christian Right (NCR), which was relatively new in 1976, is now an important feature of American political life. Evangelicals and fundamentalists, while always present as a major part of the electorate, are much more visible public actors, since most NCR leaders belong to this religious tendency. And third, as a result first of feminism and the gay rights movement, and more recently the religious right, “personal”

questions—family life, sexuality, and the like—are more a domain of explicit political struggle than they were before the 1960s. “Cultural” politics are more evident.²

How, in light of such changes, are we to understand the ways in which religious traditions inform debate about economic issues? Here we are asking not about the politics of cultural issues, but about the cultural dimension of *economic* politics. Are the arguments made in this book still valid? I believe that they are, and to support this proposition I will examine recent research on religion and politics and present results from my own new research—an analysis of current public opinion data.

I will begin by examining the “field of debate” on economic issues, arguing that the fundamental issues at stake have not changed significantly in the past generation. Then I will show that there is no shift rightward in public opinion on economic issues (even though there has been such a shift in practical politics) and that views on economic and cultural issues remain disconnected from each other. The religious right, I will argue, does not live up empirically to the frightening images one often encounters. The link between religious traditionalism and economic as well as cultural conservatism that the religious right makes is not particularly natural for Americans and in fact not very common. When I originally wrote the book, using public opinion data from the mid-to late 1980s, I found that religious traditionalism, contrary to stereotypes, is *not* connected to economic conservatism; the statements the respondents made in the depth interviews help us make sense of this finding. The most recent data available (1994) show that this conclusion is just as true today. Finally, I describe some of the ways in which Americans are using quite varied religious traditions (including traditionalist ones) in the context of peace and justice movements.

The evidence to be reviewed in this preface suggests that the cultural resources for a different kind of politics than we have seen recently—for a higher valuation of our responsibilities to one another and of public life—are as strong as ever. That these potentials have been realized only sporadically represents both a challenge and an opportunity for the pursuit of social justice.

The Field of Public Debate on Economic Issues

To understand economic debate, we need to examine the terrain on which it takes place as a *cultural structure*—the set of rules, concepts, issues, and so forth that structure our discourse, providing capacities and constraints with regard to how we talk and think about economic justice in the United States. In some ways this is parallel to the grammatical rules that govern our use of language.

One example of such a political “grammar” is found in a recent article by Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith. They show how in a variety of American political crises leaders on both sides of the debates have had to describe themselves as the proponents of democratic values and their opponents as anti-demo-

cratic.³ While quite varied positions have been legitimated in this way, each has been argued to be the “democratic” alternative. Alexander and Smith argue that this structure (which they call “the democratic code”) has dominated American public discourse for at least a century and a half and give examples over this entire period. At least in the formal contexts of congressional speeches and editorials in major national newspapers, it appears that this code directs debate into pre-defined channels or at least excludes from the playing field anyone who denies the values that this code embodies.

What Alexander and Smith describe is a *cultural* phenomenon. The democratic code defines a “field” for debate but not the outcomes, just as a baseball diamond defines a terrain but does not determine the score of particular games. (The field is not neutral, of course, in either case; think of how baseball teams manipulate the height of pitching mounds at their home parks.) This code provides discursive rules for political debate on economic issues. These rules are collective, not individual, just like the rules of grammar and usage that we violate only at peril of not communicating or even finding ourselves in the position of cultural outcasts. We determine the existence and nature of such rules by observing what groups and individuals can say, and how they can say it, without finding themselves in foul territory—that is, without becoming non-participants in public debate.

Douglas Rae’s analysis of equality, while framed as political theory rather than as a social-scientific analysis of culture, gives us a picture of another political-culture code, this one operating specifically in the economic arena.⁴ Rae shows that the idea of equality is extremely complex, with multiple interpretations—all quite logical since they highlight different concerns, each arguably legitimate in itself—that provide a basis for supporting varied political proposals. Thus, for instance, both Alan Bakke and the University of California, in the Supreme Court case about affirmative action programs for medical school admissions,⁵ could argue their positions on an egalitarian basis. Yet equality still operates, he says, as a kind of rhetorical screen. That is, it provides a basis for making certain kinds of justification of political proposals, thereby favoring the kind of proposals that they can most easily support and ruling out some proposals, or at least justifications for proposals—ones, for instance, that deny fundamental kinds of human equality; thus no contemporary American would argue that a transaction to sell oneself into slavery, even if advantageous to both buyer and seller, should be legally permissible. Furthermore, the discourse of equality, just like the democratic code, defines a set of terms and oppositions that influence how people conceptualize political issues.

What is the field of debate with regard to economic issues, and has it changed? The rightward shift in the tendency of national public policy, and of the positions that seem to have serious chances of success in Washington debates, indicates change in who is currently winning the game played on this field but not in the nature of the field itself. Has there been change in the fundamental issues under debate, or in the criteria and grounds used in the debate—the political-culture

code structures governing it? Scholars occasionally assert that we are at the end of ideology, history, or at least the relevance of left-right debates, but the evidence they provide is scanty, and the conflicts that supposedly were now either resolved or irrelevant—passionate struggles over equality, justice, and rights—keep coming back. The traditional values of the Left keep getting asserted in struggles and debates of various kinds: unionization efforts by health care workers, inner-city resistance to disinvestment, national debates about health insurance and fairness in taxation, and so on. The participants in such struggles are often perplexed as to how humane goals can be achieved under current circumstances, and confidence in specific utopian blueprints is at a low ebb; but that hardly implies that basic values or even hope have been abandoned.⁶ All indications suggest, on the contrary, that in the economic arena debate still takes place—and has taken place for a very long time, probably since a mature capitalist system was confronted with its characteristic modern critiques, reformist and radical—on two basic fields, each representing a cultural structure.

The first field is about equality. This principle can be opposed to rewards for individuals based on such sources of inequality as hard work, intelligence, or education. (There are other sources, in fact, such as inherited wealth, cultural capital, racism, or gender discrimination, but these do not have the same kind of positive ideological meaning; rather, they provide a negative pole in the discourse of equality.) The concept of equality, as Rae argues, is complex, and it may be that the disputes, once closely analyzed, turn out to be better interpreted as debates among different egalitarian claims (for instance, about outcomes versus opportunities) than as a struggle between equality and other values, but in any case ideas of equality are central to the discourse. This field is manifest in debates about progressivity in taxation, transfer programs, health care, and the like.

The second field is about the value of common, social, or public decision-making versus claims for individual autonomy or private freedom in economic life. Here liberals and radicals sometimes argue that decisions have effects on others that the market will not take into account properly—that is, utilities and disutilities for individuals and the social order that will not be measured by markets and therefore not have the appropriate influence on decisions—and require some form of social or public regulation. Or a claim for democracy in the economic as well as the political sphere is made—as in the Port Huron Statement, which provided a paradigm for the New Left of the 1960s—with the implication that people should have a voice in economic decisions by virtue of being citizens, even if they are not wealthy enough to own stock or a business. Or, as with radical Quakers and many of those influenced by anarchism, a more communal way of life is advocated as a better way to express basic human values and potentials. These claims are counter-balanced by utilitarian or individualistic arguments, such as concerns for productivity and belief in the efficiency of unfettered markets or assertions that the freedom of consumers, workers, and business

owners is a fundamental human right. This field of debate is seen in issues about the size and tasks of government and more specifically environmental policy, health and safety regulation, public planning (not talked about much nationally but constantly debated in local politics), and government activity in areas like housing and education (where the debate obviously also raises questions about equality).

These fields are expressed in a set of key legitimating terms used in debates over economic policy. Among these are equality, justice, fairness, compassion, need, protection (of consumers/workers/the environment), common good, rights, efficiency/productivity/growth/competitiveness, merit, work, reward, freedom, and regulation/control (understood either negatively or positively). These terms are used recurrently, as they were a generation ago (although the frequency of their use has probably shifted, manifesting the changing tides of political fortune). Their connotations, the oppositions and dualisms they imply (e.g., to injustice or selfishness), and the unspoken assumptions built into them, provide a structure for debates on economic issues that changes only slowly and incrementally.

Political Culture and Public Opinion

How are these kinds of cultural codes related to “public opinion” in the sense of what is revealed by opinion polls? A generation ago, researchers like Gabriel Almond talked about political culture in terms of the distribution of responses to surveys—that is, as a kind of public opinion—but in fact these are two separate phenomena, one collective and the other subjective or individual.⁷ (And of course neither by itself determines what actually happens politically.) In fact, what is called “public” opinion is in a sense very private, happening in a solitary discussion with an interviewer rather than in interaction among citizens. However, opinion polling is by now a well-known and ritualized social practice in America, one that mimics elections through norms of confidentiality, citizen equality, and potentially universal inclusion (the latter two represented in polling by equal-probability sampling techniques). Since people know that poll results are reported in the mass media and can have important political consequences, they participate in polls with some regard for the impact their responses will have on others. To subject oneself to a sociological interview, like those in polls or the depth interviews I did for this book, is therefore an act of participation in public discourse. It is not, however, the only kind of participation, and we have to be cautious in generalizing from it. Pre-existing cultural codes—like the specifically political ones described by Alexander and Smith or by Rae, and also more general ones defined by religious and ethical traditions—provide the context for our participation in public discourse (in interviews and more consequentially in other contexts), giving us resources that we can appropriate and combine in ways we determine, but also constraining and directing the uses we make of

these resources through the structures and presuppositions built into them. They define the criteria that individuals use and the issues they are responding to when they express public opinion, advantaging some kinds of arguments over others.

Public Opinion on Economic Issues

It is hard to doubt that the political agenda on economic issues has become significantly more conservative over the past two decades. Federal taxation has largely lost the progressivity it once had and proposals currently likely to pass Congress could well make it regressive. Many programs that benefit the poor and those of modest incomes have already been cut sharply, with more cuts likely. The regulatory and legal climate for labor is hostile. Income inequality has significantly increased over the past twenty years, in part because of these changes in federal policy. The power and resources of the federal government are under attack; already, workplace health and safety controls have loosened, and environmental and consumer protection look likely to come next. This is not just a matter of the 104th Congress (elected in 1994), but represents a trend starting during the Carter administration, speeding forward through the Reagan and Bush years, and slowed rather than reversed by the Clinton administration.

Republicans claim that these changes represent a broad popular mandate, but there is little evidence to support this claim. (In fact, Frank Luntz, the Republican pollster who claimed in 1994 that there was strong public backing for the “Contract With America,” now acknowledges that his questions were flawed and that he never actually measured support for the contract.⁸) On the contrary, the picture painted by public opinion research is one of stolid continuity. The two major scholarly studies of recent opinion poll trends, by Tom Smith and James Davis, both come to this conclusion.⁹ Smith reviews 455 survey trends from a variety of polling institutions, covering the period from 1945 to 1987 (any particular item, however, usually covers only part of that period). He shows that since the 1970s views on equal rights and “individualism” have become more liberal, views on crime have become more conservative, and views on economic issues show no clear trend in either direction. While over the entire post-war period there have been significantly more liberal than conservative trends, since the mid-1970s conservative and liberal trends have been about equally frequent. That is, “the general shift was from liberal advance to a liberal holding-pattern” (p. 499). He concludes that “hosannas from the right and wailing from the left over a conservative tide . . . are both overreactions” (pp. 502-503). Davis, undertaking a detailed analysis of cohort replacement and intra-cohort aging/period effects, also finds “no support . . . for a major conservative shift in Americans’ attitudes and opinions” (p. 294). Like Smith, he does see the liberal trend in opinions since World War II as now vastly slower. Again like Smith, he finds conservative changes regarding crime, liberal ones regarding race, free speech, and gender equality, and mixed ones in other areas.

The conclusions drawn by these two eminent survey researchers are the same

as those from my own analyses of trend data from the major national academic survey programs that ask the same questions repeatedly from year to year: the American National Election Study (ANES) of the University of Michigan and the General Social Survey (GSS) of the University of Chicago.¹⁰ Some economic items show conservative trends and others liberal ones. Even views on cultural issues do not show any consistent rightward trend; abortion views as measured by the ANES, for instance, liberalized somewhat over the period from 1972 to 1992.

The lack of any consistent change in public opinion on economic issues, combined with the significant change in actual policy directions, cautions us not to expect policy to be a reflection of popular sentiment. As is immediately obvious once one thinks about it, policy is determined by many factors other than public opinion and would be even if all the defects in American democracy could be corrected.

American values appear in most respects stable. This is true not only in public opinion polls but in our associational life. Americans are still involved in a rich array of voluntary associations oriented toward creating community, improving civic life, providing help to the needy, and so forth. Some social critics currently blame our political woes on deficiencies in “civil society,” arguing that associational participation is down.¹¹ At a factual level, this debate is unresolved, but some diminution of practical involvement would be quite consistent with holding the same values, given the large increase in American work hours and dual wage-earner families over the past two decades. To explain what is wrong with contemporary American politics, we may need to examine not our values or civil society but our political process and the ways in which our values and cultural traditions do and do not find expression in that process.

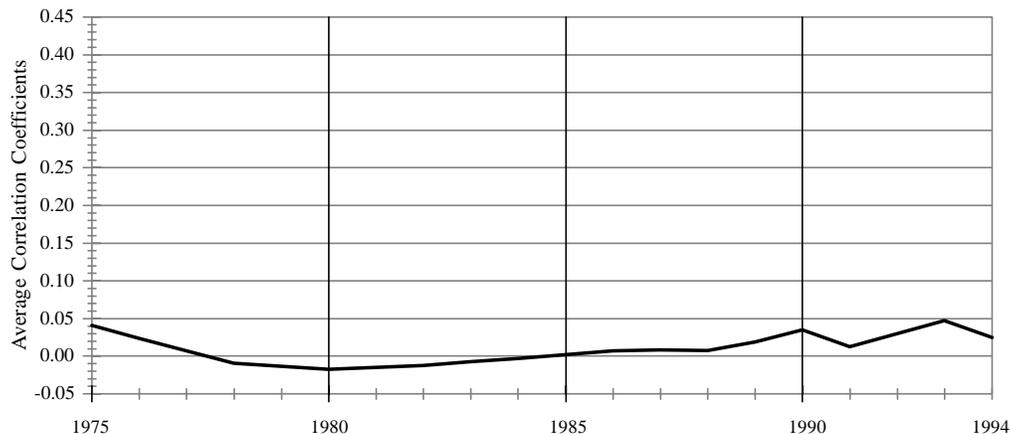
Links between Economic and Cultural Politics

To understand the connections between religion and politics, it is important to assess the relationship between the cultural and economic domains of politics. The contemporary journalistic idea of a liberal is a person who favors equality and public action in the economic realm and individual liberty in other realms (civil liberties, sexuality, etc.). Such a person, for example, might oppose legal restrictions on pornography and favor environmental regulations. Conservatives, of course, would have the opposite views. But often people do not hold their views in the packages that would constitute “consistent” liberalism or conservatism.¹² They may, for instance, be economic liberals but cultural conservatives. The respondent Joseph Krieger, profiled in the opening chapter of the book, is a good example, backing many liberal economic positions while taking a conservative stance on anything having to do with sexuality. When I originally wrote the book, using opinion poll evidence from the 1980s, I found little “consistency” in the combinations of economic and cultural views held by ordinary Americans; that is, knowing how conservative a person is on cultural issues does not help us

predict how conservative that person will be on economic issues. This is not just because people think illogically, although that may be part of the story, but because the “logics” that they acquire from the cultural environment have diverse structures. Krieger, for instance, draws on corporatist and communitarian strands from traditional Catholic social teachings and shows little attachment in any domain to unrestricted individual freedom. His package of views is in its own way just as logical as consistent liberalism or conservatism. This is only one example; the book shows through the depth interviews how people weave quite varied combinations of views into intelligibly patterned fabrics.¹³

Has this situation changed, in response to the efforts by such NCR groups as the Christian Coalition to put forward a combined cultural and economic agenda, or as part of the realignment and polarization processes some claim to be happening in America? To assess this systematically, we can look at trends in the *associations* between views on economic and cultural issues. Let us consider the relationships between the four longest-running economic items in the GSS (about equalizing wealth, whether government is doing too little or too much overall, whether it should help the poor, and whether it should intervene to help people meet health care expenses) on one side, and four similarly long-running cultural items (about pornography, sexual preference, school prayer, and abortion) on the other. Figure I shows the average correlation coefficient for each year. The scale goes up to .45, a coefficient that is about as high as one usually finds between two attitude questions. (A coefficient of 1.00 would mean perfect correspondence between liberal answers on the two questions, while 0.00 means no corre-

Figure 1. Correlations between Economic and Cultural Variables, 1975–1994 (GSS Data)



Notes: (1) All variables are set so that “liberal” views are at the same end; thus, positive coefficients mean that liberal economic and cultural views are associated. (2) Not all questions were asked each year, and therefore the number of coefficients averaged for a given year varies (from 2 to 16).

spondence at all; negative coefficients mean that liberal answers on economic issues go along with *conservative* answers on cultural ones.) The pattern the figure shows is one of ups and downs with no significant trends and tiny, meaningless correlations even at the peaks. The current average correlation, .025, indicates an essentially random relationship, and is actually lower than the corresponding figure for 1975. In short, the associations we are examining are minuscule and for all practical purposes constant; cultural attitudes have been unrelated to economic justice attitudes for the entire period under study and remain so today. Liberalism and conservatism, in terms of grass-roots public opinion, do not form coherent wholes. Economic and cultural politics run on separate tracks, and the relationship of each to religion needs to be understood separately.

Religion and the Right

In recent years most scholarly and journalistic discussions of the connections between religion and politics have focused on the New Christian Right (NCR). This is a movement spearheaded by a number of leaders, most prominently Jerry Falwell in the 1980s and Pat Robertson in recent years, and by organizations such as the Moral Majority in the past and the Christian Coalition (led by Ralph Reed) at the moment. While NCR organizations and leaders vary, for the most part they pursue a conservative agenda on a broad range of issues, including cultural, economic, and foreign policy questions. In other words, these leaders are “consistent” conservatives, although they emphasize cultural issues. The vast majority of religious right leaders and supporters are theologically traditionalist Protestants—evangelicals, fundamentalists, Pentecostals, and the like—although a few come from what are usually called “mainline” denominations (Protestant groups with a moderate or modernist theological stance, such as most Presbyterian, Methodist, and Lutheran churches) or from the Catholic Church.

Despite all the attention this movement has gotten, it is not nearly as powerful as it maintains or its enemies fear. In fact, its practical accomplishments are quite debatable. Steve Bruce, one of the more skeptical observers, argues that the NCR has fulfilled practically none of its policy goals—and that this was and remains essentially inevitable.¹⁴ Traditionalist Protestants, he points out, are divided into different groups (e.g., charismatics versus fundamentalists, whites versus African Americans) with deep mutual antagonisms. Efforts to move beyond this core constituency and build alliances with Catholics (not to mention Jews) are even more difficult. A recent New York State conference of the Christian Coalition, for instance, tried to reach out beyond white evangelical but almost no non-whites, few lay Catholics, and not a single Catholic priest attended. A Jew who came to observe went away dismayed.¹⁵ Attempts at imposing a Christian agenda generate counter-mobilizations and have little appeal among the elites holding positions of power in the media, the courts, and large bureaucracies (including corporations). Corporate managers, for instance, would just as soon not have to deal with religious differences (or moral disagreements)

as a factor in marketing or workplace human relations. In Bruce's view, modern states and economies inherently need to remain "areligious" in the sense of not allowing people to use state or corporate power against their religious opponents. In short, it is hard to institutionalize a specific and explicit religious agenda in state practices in the contemporary world.

What about the grass roots? One trend looks hopeful for the NCR: traditionalist Protestants have recently been becoming Republican, in voting and party preference, to a greater degree than Americans as a whole. Exactly what this means is hard to assess, however, since people's party choices do not directly represent policy preferences. Also, the most dramatic Republicanization has been in the South, the stronghold of religious traditionalism, and may involve less a change in political philosophy than a switch from voting for conservative Democrats to voting for politically similar Republicans.¹⁶ It is therefore imperative to look at public opinion data about *issues*. Doing so, it becomes evident that the religious right has a significant constituency for its cultural agenda but *not* for its overall perspective. People who represent the model of thinking of the Christian Coalition—traditionalist Protestants who are quite conservative on cultural issues *and also* on economic ones—make up (depending on how one interprets "quite conservative") only about 6 percent of Americans.¹⁷ The reason that this figure is so low is that, as survey data consistently show, traditionalist Protestants are not particularly conservative economically. The upshot is that only a minority of traditionalist Protestants are politically in tune with NCR organizations.

And finally, there is room for skepticism about claims that traditionalist Protestantism is becoming an ever greater cultural force in the United States. GSS data indicate that over the period from 1972 to 1994 the proportion of Americans who identify with traditionalist Protestant denominations has risen from 24.7 percent to 26.4 percent—too small a difference even to be reliable, let alone mean anything substantively.¹⁸ The proportion of Christians who adopt a literalist view of the Bible has actually fallen, from 40.8 percent in 1984 (when this question, the only one asked over a long period on the GSS that gives us even an approximation of traditionalism as an *individual* orientation, was first asked) to 35.4 percent in 1994. Here is yet another reason to doubt that the religious right is destined to play an ever-increasing role in American politics.¹⁹

Certainly the NCR has grabbed the spotlight and influenced the tone of debate on cultural issues, and while it has not achieved its own goals it may have contributed to blocking some of the goals of cultural modernists. Given the very limited popular support its overall perspective actually commands, to what are we to attribute its notoriety and the degree of success it has had? (As we saw with the lack of correspondence between American economic opinion trends and those of practical politics, one cannot expect any one-to-one correspondence between power and popular support base.)

First, the NCR has built a strong infrastructure and therefore gets attention and wields influence. This is possible in part because it has a strong core of devoted

left-of-center organizations. Second, while NCR leaders and organizations have a broad, “consistently conservative” agenda, they put the bulk of their energy into a narrower cultural agenda.²⁰ The broad agenda pleases their economically conservative allies (such as Republican politicians), while the narrower one can attract support from a broad spectrum of religious traditionalists. (There are some dangers, of course, lurking in such a two-sided strategy. It can seem dishonest or lead to disaffection in the ranks.) Ted Jelen shows that support for NCR leaders and organizations is correlated with holding conservative views on cultural issues but not with economic positions.²¹ Religious traditionalists who are culturally but not economically conservative may well be unaware of the NCR’s economic program (or not care much about it) and give some support to NCR organizations even though they do not agree with these organizations’ views on economic issues.²²

Furthermore, religious rightists have generally done better cultural work than liberals and radicals (secular or religious). Left-of-center causes, both economic and cultural, have too often been presented in technocratic or elitist terms, ceding much of the terrain for ethical debate to the right. In the 1930s it was labor unions and in the 1950s and 1960s the civil rights, anti-war, and feminist movements, that spoke with passion and clarity about justice and equality. But in the 1980s and 1990s such voices, while certainly not silent, have been less evident than those of conservative movements. This is, in fact, acknowledged by many left-of-center analysts. For example, Alan Charney, the director of Democratic Socialists of America, says that the Right waged a “war of ideas, . . . and we [the Left] did not wage comparable warfare, stake out and defend our turf. We basically fell asleep at the wheel.” Todd Gitlin thinks that the Left has lost its “vocabulary for the common good.” And Barbara Ehrenreich argues that “the New Right has been able to seize the moral initiative . . . because it has dared to advance a strong *qualitative* critique of capitalist society”—that is, basic criticisms of a capitalist way of life, not just a demand that those left behind get more of the things capitalism produces. According to Ehrenreich, “an effective response to the right must rest on a genuine critique of capitalist culture and on a genuinely radical alternative vision.”²³

Religion and Positions on Economic Issues

Chapter 7 of this book (see especially pp. 155-61) uses survey data to show that—contrary to the stereotypes many scholars, journalists, and activists hold—there is no connection between being theologically traditionalist (as measured, albeit imperfectly, by biblical literalism) and being conservative on economic issues. In fact, the only consistent difference in economic attitudes related to religious variables that can be found in poll data is that Catholics and people who claim no religious affiliation are on the liberal side, and that members of black Protestant denominations are exceptionally liberal. The analysis uses thirty-nine economic questions asked on the GSS from 1984 to 1989, examining the connec-

Table 1. Differences between the Responses of Biblical Literalists and Non-Literalists to 6 Questions on Economic Issues (1994 only, GSS Data).

<i>Of the questions,</i>	
None	show literalists as more <i>conservative</i> than non-literalists
2 questions	show literalists and non-literalists holding essentially <i>the same views</i>
3 questions	show literalists as slightly more <i>liberal</i>
1 question	shows literalists as somewhat more <i>liberal</i>

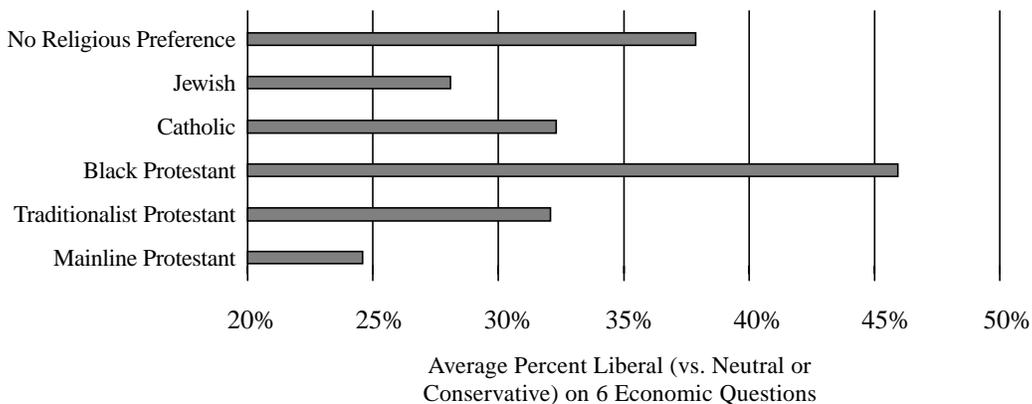
Note: “Somewhat more” is defined as a correlation coefficient of .100 to .199 and “slightly more” as a coefficient of .050 to .099. Smaller coefficients indicate essentially no difference.

tion between each economic item and religious variables, and then summarizing the patterns found in the whole set of thirty-nine economic variables.

Is this still the case? Of the thirty-nine items, six were still being asked in 1994. Table I shows the pattern of responses, in the same format as Table 7-1. In all six cases, literalists are more *liberal* than non-literalists, on the average by seven percentage points. In two of the six cases the differences are not statistically or substantively significant, and in the others they are modest. But not a single one of these cases supports the stereotype of religious and political conservatism going together. As in the analysis reported in the body of the book, controls for income (a key predictor of economic attitudes) do not reverse the relationship. Once this control is introduced, on two of the six questions literalists are more liberal, and on the other four there is no statistically significant relationship. Thus we can say with confidence that theological traditionalists are not particularly conservative on economic issues.²⁴

With regard to denominational groups, the results are also the same as from the 1984-1989 data. Figure 2 shows 1994 results in a format similar to Figure 71. Because the analysis is of a single year, there are too few Jews or members of black Protestant denominations for the figures on these groups to be reliable (however, the few respondents in the latter category are a remarkably liberal

Figure 2. Denominational Differences on Economic Issues, 1994 (GSS Data)



bunch). The amorphous “other” group has been omitted from the chart, and the mainline Protestant category is the equivalent of Figure 7-1’s moderate and modernist ones combined. As before, we see strong black liberalism, moderate Catholic liberalism compared with Protestants, and traditionalists more liberal than mainliners.

The conclusions in the body of the book are therefore still true. They have also recently been confirmed in a painstaking analysis by Laurence Iannaccone, who discovered that in public opinion he could not find the links between religious and economic conservatism he had been led to expect, and that even in statements by religiously traditionalist leaders (which he subjected to systematic analysis) such links were fairly weak.²⁵

Once we have established that religious traditionalism does *not* lead to economic conservatism, and also that in surveys no religious variables except denominational group predict economic views, there are at least two possible interpretations. The first is that American Christians may have a lively faith but it is one that is “privatized”—unrelated to public questions beyond the kind of moral concerns captured by cultural politics. This is certainly true for some believers, but the body of this book gives evidence for an alternative interpretation. This evidence shows how faith is publicly relevant—providing resources for thinking and talking about economic issues—for a large proportion of the depth interview respondents. The factors in faith that matter, however, are not whether one is theologically traditionalist, or what denomination one belongs to, but how one interprets basic religious principles—such as Christian love, the equal status of every human as a child of God, or the need for each individual to make voluntary ethical choices—and how one deals with the classic dilemma of living “in but not of” the world. Furthermore, a wide range of political interpretations of faith—from very conservative to very radical—have developed over the course of Christian social thinking, and grass-roots Christians have access to this varied historical deposit, as well as to secular frameworks for thinking about economic issues. The terrains of debate described earlier are specifically political and have a distinctive terminology, but they are permeable. Americans can use other cultural traditions, such as religions, to help locate themselves on these fields. When the respondents for this book do so, putting on their “Christian hats,” the fields tilt a few degrees, advantaging certain kinds of arguments about economic life, some of them conservative but more of them liberal. Thus the contributions of Christianity to the construction of grass-roots public discourse in the economic realm are ambiguous and complex; explicating these is the main task of the body of the book.

Conclusion

What, then, can we say about the relationship of religion in America to issues of social and economic justice? In addressing this question, the enormous attention given to the New Christian Right in recent years is a distraction from arguably

more important topics.²⁶ Of course, there is much that a person could find fault with in the agendas of NCR groups, and some religious right proposals do threaten civil liberties. Certainly NCR discourse sometimes lacks civility and tolerance (although this can also come from liberals, as in a recent student newspaper column that linked pro-life activists to Hitler and said, “Just once, I’d like to see someone blow up one of their churches”²⁷). But the influence of the NCR, especially in the economic realm, is quite limited.²⁸

This book is about connections between religion and economic politics that are “missing from the picture” when all the attention goes to the NCR. What shifts of emphasis does this entail?

First, the focus on conservatism in NCR research distracts us from examining the cultural bases—secular and religious—of liberal and radical politics. Left-of-center political views do not come into people’s heads spontaneously or from the use of the reasoning powers people have simply by virtue of being human (that is, in a way independent of historical and cultural location) but emerge instead from long-standing, often passionate and transcendent cultural traditions, some religious and others secular. The Christian elements of this picture become visible, even striking, from what the depth interview respondents tell us.

Second, if we concentrate on traditionalist Protestants, we end up thinking of the perspectives of Catholics, mainline Protestants, and people of other or no faith mostly in terms of what they lack, of their difference from this presumed norm. That is, everything outside Protestant traditionalism is treated as a “residual category,” or as various degrees of being secular (since traditionalism is taken as the norm of religiosity). This distorts our understanding. We need to focus on what religious traditions have rather than what they lack. That is, we need to examine the varied and sometimes politically significant perspectives that Americans hold. Quakers and Catholics, for example, do not “fail” to be traditionalists or try to be non-traditionalists, in the sense that evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants define traditionalism. Rather, they are trying to do something altogether different—to be religiously faithful in the sense defined by their own traditions—and they typically do not measure their success by how traditionalist or non-traditionalist they are. Furthermore, the statements of the depth interview respondents show clearly that even for the traditionalists, their “traditionalism” is not the key element in how they approach economic questions. It is not because people are literalists nor because they are not, not because they are Presbyterians nor because they are Nazarenes, that they connect either liberal or conservative economic views to their faith. The themes and issues in Christian tradition that matter for economic politics, such as the ones described earlier, crosscut such distinctions.

The portrait that emerges in the book suggests some hopeful possibilities for the future of American politics. These become realities to varying degrees, of course, but some are already finding expression. Practical political work connecting Christian (and other religious) traditions to struggles for justice and peace—that is, to political agendas that are at least liberal, and sometimes more liberal

than the Democratic Party is likely to pursue—is far from absent in America today, if not as visible as the work of the religious right. Let us consider a few examples, in the context of traditionalism, Catholicism, and then interfaith organizations.

There is a small religiously traditionalist or evangelical left, represented by such magazines as *Sojourners* and *The Other Side*, and by leaders such as Jim Wallis. Wallis is the founder of the Sojourners Community and more recently of Call to Renewal, an evangelical organization with a social-justice agenda; fifty-five of its members were recently arrested in a demonstration against welfare cuts. The organization Evangelicals for Social Action pursues a moderately left agenda. Even such a mainstream traditionalist figure as Robert Schuller has recently spoken out against the message of the NCR, and Billy Graham has for decades foresworn his former conservatism.²⁹

The Catholic Church, most obviously through the statements of its bishops, has played an important role in public debate about economic questions. Recently the bishops have spoken out against current conservative policy proposals, preparing a pamphlet for distribution in parishes. Many are hostile to attempts by the Christian Coalition to set up a Catholic auxiliary (called the Catholic Alliance), and one bishop has actually asked the Alliance to stay out of his diocese.³⁰

Most movements linking religion to left-of-center concerns, however, have a varied religious constituency. Support from people in religious communities has been central to the peace movement in the past two decades, for example in the anti-intervention movement with regard to Central America, opposition to the Persian Gulf war, and disarmament work.³¹ This has been especially important given the reduced role student movements, Marxists, labor unions, and socialists have been playing in recent years.

In the economic realm, religious organizations are not only providing services—soup kitchens, homeless shelters, and the like—but also working in many states to fend off welfare “reform” proposals that will have a drastic impact on the most vulnerable citizens. It is not just church bureaucrats or good-hearted pastors, but rank-and-file members of congregations, who are involved in such work. In southeastern Wisconsin, a Congregational Action Network has enlisted over one hundred congregations in a regular program of lobbying state legislators, primarily on behalf of the needs of minority groups and low income persons. Several hundred people gather yearly for a training and education conference, and letters and phone calls are generated regularly as legislative decisions near. Every April meetings are held in churches, with all legislators in this part of the state invited to hear the concerns of members of congregations in their districts. The legislators turn out without fail, which is an indication of the organization’s effectiveness. The network certainly does not control what happens in Madison, but it exerts a significant influence.³²

A somewhat different and very hopeful way of linking faith to the struggle for economic justice is *congregation-based community organizing*, which may well be the largest single social justice movement in the United States today that

involves people locally as face-to-face participants (rather than operating as a “mail-order” organization from New York or Washington). This movement uses a model of work for economic empowerment and justice that links religious social-action traditions with the Alinsky style of community organizing. Local projects following this model are underway in over ninety cities around the country. Collectively, these projects have enrolled approximately 1,800 congregations, with 1.6 million members altogether, as formal, dues-paying, volunteer-sending participants. At least \$11 million per year—a small sum in one sense, but large in comparison with the resources usually available to grass-roots movements on the Left—is being expended around the country on this kind of work, over a quarter of it from the Campaign for Human Development (the anti-poverty program of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops).³³

Unlike some earlier ways of involving churches in community betterment enterprises, or movements that simply use churches as a recruiting ground, this is a highly “religious” movement. It has constructed a distinctive and coherent religio-political language formed of ideas drawn from various traditions, such as Catholic social teachings, liberation theology, and the Social Gospel. This language is systematically communicated, through extensive educational programs, to lay participants and pastors. Furthermore, the congregations are integral to the community organizations, sending representatives to the organization’s work groups and governing bodies and forming their own internal committees to deal with the issues the organization is working on.

The movement is diverse culturally and religiously. Nationwide, just under half the congregations involved are European American, while about one-third are African American and another fifth are Latino. In Milwaukee, where I observed one of these projects, a third of the congregations are Catholic (some black, some white, some Latin), another third are from mainline Protestant denominations (again with a racial mixture), and the other third are from predominantly black denominations. The congregations in this last group are strongly evangelical in style and biblical in theological orientation, and thus there is religious as well as ethnic diversity within the organization. (In other cities, although not in Milwaukee, there are non-Christian congregations involved.) That people of all these religious orientations and cultural backgrounds can work together on a common agenda of social justice—explicitly based on a biblical vision—is exactly what one would expect from the arguments I make in this book. Here we see in action many of the themes about relating faith to politics, grounding values of community and equality in religious traditions, and taking personal responsibility for public life, that I believe to be an important inheritance from our religious traditions—an inheritance that Americans can still draw on today to seek a better world.

Buffalo

November 1995

Notes

1. Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, Ann Swidler, William Sullivan, and Steven Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985).

2. This observation takes a strong form in the idea of “culture wars”—popularized by scholars such as James Hunter and now used widely—which encodes the proposition that economic and other mundane concerns have been pushed to the side of the political arena by the grand battle between traditionalists (mostly religious) and modernists (mostly secular or secularized). See James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (New York: Basic Books, 1991).

3. Jeffrey Alexander and Philip Smith, “The Discourse of American Civil Society: A New Proposal for Cultural Studies.” *Theory and Society*, 22 (1993): 151-207. One may question whether this code is as universal, uniform, and dominant in public discourse or has as much causal power as Alexander and Smith think. Even in the examples provided to illustrate the authors’ argument, there are strong signs of competing ethical structures (such as utilitarian ones encoded in terms like the national interest, and romantic ones encoded in patriotic thinking), and the authors present no data about grass-roots appropriations of the democratic code. But in the particular culture-making context of congressional debate (and perhaps newspaper editorializing) the evidence provided very plausibly supports the contention that actors cannot *contradict* the democratic code (although they can bring in other considerations) without being marginalized.

4. Douglas Rae, *Equalities* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981). Rae’s analysis is not explicitly empirical in the social science sense, but rather is presented as political theory, a disentangling of the conceptual elements of the idea of equality. (Rae does try to deal with the complexities involved in applying ideas of equality to real-world situations.) However, I would interpret his analysis as in practice a careful and empirical reading or hermeneutic of a cultural code structure currently operating in the United States and (probably with some differences) similar nations. Furthermore, he does use empirical materials, such as court decisions, although not systematically.

5. *University of California v. Bakke*, 98 S CT 2733 (1978).

6. For one recent argument that left-right debates are becoming irrelevant, see Randall Collins’s “Liberals and Conservatives, Religious and Political: A Conjunction of Modern History,” *Sociology of Religion* 54 (Summer 1993): 127-146. A rather different (and more interesting) argument, advocating major revisions in the radical agenda—in particular, scaling back hopes for “progress” or mastering history—but continuing to work for equality, democracy, and community, is found in Anthony Giddens’s *Beyond Left and Right: The Future of Radical Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

7. Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1963).

8. “Pollster says he never measured popularity of GOP ‘contract,’” *Buffalo News*, November 10, 1995. This story provides a case study in the political implications of polling: Democrats and Republicans alike accepted the “fact” of widespread support for the “contract,” with Democrats accusing the Republicans of pandering to public opinion and Republican leaders convincing moderates in their party to support it on the basis of its popularity. Luntz now admits—to take one provision in the “contract” as an example—that he counted people as supporting Republican proposals to limit consumer, investor,

and other tort lawsuits if they agreed to a statement that “we should stop excessive legal claims, frivolous lawsuits and overzealous lawyers.” But Democrats never seem to have doubted that public opinion was against them, whereas in fact reaction to the “contract” was very mixed, with some parts of it popular and others unpopular.

9. Tom Smith, “Liberal and Conservative Trends in the United States since World War 11,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 54 (Winter 1990): 479-507. James Davis, “Changeable Weather in a Cooling Climate Atop the Liberal Plateau: Conversion and Replacement in Forty-Two General Social Survey Items, 1972-89,” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 56 (Fall 1992): 261-306. Similar arguments are made by Thomas Ferguson and Joel Rogers, in *Right Turn* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1986) and in Ferguson’s *Golden Rule* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

10. *General Social Surveys, 1972-1994*, machine-readable data file (Chicago: National Opinion Research Center, 1994). *American National Election Studies Cumulative Data File, 1952-1992* (ICPSR Study 8475), machine-readable data file (Ann Arbor: Institute for Social Research, 1992). The GSS has been conducted most years during this period, and the ANES every other year.

11. An article that has made an enormous impact recently is Robert Putnam’s “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* 6 (January 1995): 65-78. Using a theoretical framework drawn from de Tocqueville’s view of America in the 1830s, Putnam—a comparative political scientist—argues that our network of voluntary associations is decaying, depriving us of the intermediary institutions that could help link individual Americans to public life.

12. This observation is related to longstanding debates about the existence and nature of “ideology” in mass publics. See notes 21 and 22 on pp. 237-38 for a discussion of these debates.

13. An important example of an alternate logic in contemporary public debate is the “consistent ethic of life” approach that Cardinal Joseph Bernardin and other Catholic leaders have been advocating for the past decade. This grounds opposition to both abortion and the death penalty in a single principle. Whatever the appeals of this logic, however, researchers have found little evidence that Catholics adopt it any more than “consistent liberalism” or “consistent conservatism.” See Bradley Hertel, “Attitudes toward Abortion and Capital Punishment: Pro-life, Prochoice, Seamless Garment, and Inconsistency,” in *Abortion Politics in the United States and Canada: Studies in Public Opinion*, ed. Ted Jelen and Marthe Chandler (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994).

14. Steve Bruce, “The Inevitable Failure of the New Christian Right,” *Sociology of Religion* 55 (Fall 1994): 229-42.

15. “Coalition Fishing for ‘Pro-family’ Catholics,” *National Catholic Reporter*, October 27, 1995.

16. For an argument that this shift does represent an ideological realignment, see Lyman Kellstedt et al., “Religious Voting Blocs in the 1992 Elections: The Year of the Evangelical?” *Sociology of Religion* 55 (Fall 1994): 307-26. These researchers make claims, not supported by others or even by their own data, to the effect that traditionalist Protestants are conservative on economic as well as cultural issues. Most of their tables contain no data on economic issues, and the two exceptions do not support this claim. In Table 3, evangelicals are four percentage points more conservative on government health insurance and five points more conservative on government aid for blacks than mainline Protestants. It is likely that the differences are not statistically significant and they are certainly substantively unimportant. In Table 7, the differences are an even more mean-

ingless one and four percentage points. Such results tend to support the null hypothesis that mainline and evangelical Protestants do not differ. For a discussion of the widespread tendency to assert a connection between conservative economic views and religious traditionalism in the face of disconfirming evidence, see pp. 161-164 of this volume (pp. 164-172 continue with an analysis of reasons for this false assumption).

17. These findings are based on GSS data for 1994. To measure support for the NCR, I looked at three of the four economic items mentioned earlier (government activity in general, helping on health costs, and helping the poor) and three of the four cultural issues (pornography, sexual preference, and abortion). (It was not possible to use all eight items simultaneously because they were not asked on the same version of the questionnaire.) A little over a quarter of the respondents (26.4 percent) are traditionalist Protestants. But the traditionalist respondents who take a conservative position on at least two of the three cultural issues *and* on at least two of the three economic issues, comprise only 5.9 percent of the overall sample. (These people make up 22.5 percent of the traditionalist Protestants. The main reason this is so low is that traditionalist Protestants are more likely to be liberal than conservative on economic issues. Furthermore, 11 percent are liberal on all three of the cultural issues, and another 26 percent on two of the three, so these Protestants are not a united bloc even in the cultural arena.) Given how far right the positions of NCR organizations such as the Christian Coalition are, on both cultural and economic issues, this way of measuring NCR support seems fair, perhaps even generous. For a debate on the size of the religious right, see John Simpson, "Moral Issues and Status Politics," in *The New Christian Right*, ed. Robert Liebman and Robert Wuthnow (New York: Aldine, 1983), pp. 187-205; an extended critique of Simpson's argument by Lee Sigelman and Stanley Presser, "Measuring Support for the New Christian Right," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 52 (1988): 325-37; and Simpson's reply, pp. 338-42 in the same journal issue.

18. There are much-discussed problems with the denominational categorizations in the GSS and ANES, but these probably do not affect trends, and how to categorize Protestant groups as traditionalist versus moderate or modernist is fairly well agreed.

19. The combination of a shift away from traditionalism at the level of individual belief (taking literalism as an indicator) and stasis or mild growth in traditionalist denominational allegiance might stem from traditionalist denominations operating more effectively as organizations (which there is some evidence they do), or from their being strong in the parts of the country that are experiencing population growth.

20. This is documented in Laurence Iannaccone, "Heirs to the Protestant Ethic? The Economics of American Fundamentalists," in *Fundamentalisms and the State*, ed. Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

21. Ted Jelen, *The Political Mobilization of Religious Beliefs* (New York: Praeger, 1991). See also Jelen's "Religion and Public Opinion in the 1990s: An Empirical Overview," forthcoming in *Public Opinion in the 1990s*, ed. Barbara Norrander and Clyde Wilcox (Washington: CQ Press).

22. An example of a more focused and successful approach is that of the National Rifle Association (NRA), which has managed to thwart the desires of the majority of Americans who favor more gun control. The NRA has accomplished this largely with money. There are two important differences between the NRA and the NCR that may help explain the NRA's greater success: first, the NRA has a very narrow agenda; and second, it appears that its members know about and wholeheartedly support that agenda.

23. "National Director Visits PhilaDSA," *Delaware Valley Democratic Left*, Novem-

ber 1995. Tamar Jacoby, "The Politics of Identity," review of *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, by Todd Gitlin, *New York Times Book Review*, November 19, 1995. Barbara Ehrenreich, "The New Right Attack on Social Welfare," in *The Mean Season: The Attack on the Welfare State*, by Fred Block, Richard Cloward, Barbara Ehrenreich, and Frances Fox Piven (New York: Pantheon, 1987), pp. 190, 192.

24. Note that in the analysis of literalism, non-Christians are excluded since the idea of biblical literalism makes no sense, or has a different meaning, in other traditions.

25. Iannaccone, "Heirs to the Protestant Ethic?". This confirmation is especially valuable coming from a careful and thoughtful scholar who shares almost none of my central political and social-theoretical perspectives.

26. An important case of a scholar who takes on broader and more interesting questions about religion and politics is José Casanova. His *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) deals in detail with American Catholicism as well as traditionalist Protestantism and several non-U.S. case studies. He argues, for instance, that the U.S. Catholic bishops have contributed to making ethical considerations—including those based on religious principles—a more legitimate part of discussions of economic issues.

27. "Spectrum Staff Speaks," *Spectrum* (State University of New York at Buffalo), October 16, 1995.

28. The degree of concern about it that one frequently encounters represents a more general worry that cultural politics can endanger civil liberties and civility in discourse, or compete for energy and attention with the search for social justice. This worry partakes of a longstanding concern among many American intellectuals (a paradigm would be Richard Hofstadter) about what they see as the dangerous potentials of mass movements and mass culture.

29. "Christians Against Welfare Cuts Are Arrested in Capitol," *New York Times*, December 8, 1995. (Other documents show the title of the new organization as "The Cry for Renewal.") "'Hour of Power' Host Takes Issue with Religious Right," *Buffalo News*, October 14, 1995.

30. "Bishops Unveil Major Tract on the Issues," *New York Times*, November 5, 1995. "Bishops, Old Allies Split on Aid to Poor," *National Catholic Reporter*, December 1, 1995.

31. Christian Smith's *Resisting Reagan: the U.S. Central America Peace Movement* (forthcoming from University of Chicago Press) documents in depth the relation of faith to this movement.

32. Information based on fieldwork and interviews conducted by the author in 1991 and 1992.

33. These data are from a nationwide survey of such organizations conducted by the author in 1994 and from fieldwork in the Milwaukee organization in 1991-1993.