

Introduction

In 2002 I was reading the *Christian Century*, the flagship magazine of the mainline Protestant world, when an article caught my eye. A biblical scholar named Robert A. J. Gagnon was responding to a previous issue, where his book *The Bible and Homosexual Practice: Texts and Hermeneutics* was negatively reviewed by the liberal biblical scholar Walter Wink. Gagnon offered the expected assertions about the Bible and church tradition condemning homosexuality, but he also appealed to social science data in his attempt to prove that “the negative effects attending homosexual behavior are disproportionately high, often grossly so.”¹ His primary evidence was the alleged lack of long-term monogamous relationships among gay men and lesbians; biology rather than social stigma was presumably the cause. “These problems persist,” Gagnon wrote, “even in homosexual-supportive areas such as San Francisco. The main culprit is probably sexual noncomplementarity, not societal ‘homophobia.’”²

Since I’m a sociologist, my first reaction was to chuckle at his clumsy attempt at social science reasoning. This Gagnon fellow, clearly, was in over his head. But then I felt puzzled. Why on earth would a biblical scholar use social science data to support his interpretation of the Bible? As a faculty member at a school of theology, I knew that this wasn’t how biblical scholarship worked, at least among academically reputable scholars. I was intrigued enough to pick up a copy of Gagnon’s controversial book.

It turned out that Gagnon was a leader of a movement claiming that homosexuality was a curable illness and that the psychiatric establishment was covering up this fact because it had been taken over by gay activists motivated by “politics” rather than “science.” His book recycled arguments that went back nearly two decades. I’ve done significant research on American evangelicalism, and I was certainly aware that evangelical leaders condemned homosexual behavior and offered “heal-

ing” to those who wished to become straight. What I hadn’t known was that these practices were supported by a movement, called the ex-gay movement, with an extensive organizational infrastructure, and that for members of this movement, science was contested territory, a terrain on which to wage battle. This reminded me of another emerging movement of evangelicals battling over scientific truth—intelligent design. A foray into the intelligent design literature revealed some striking parallels with the ex-gay movement. Further research uncovered two other evangelical movements challenging the work of scientists, one promoting conservative stances on bioethical issues and a second denying the existence of anthropogenic (human-induced) climate change.

No one had yet written a comparison of these four movements, and I knew I had the subject matter for a book. After finishing up some other research projects, I dove into the materials (books, websites, and DVDs) that each movement had produced. I found lots of fascinating and disturbing details about each. However, I still struggled to articulate the underlying theme that linked the four movements. Then, while reading through the scholarly literature on evangelicalism, I came across a reference to the work of the historian Richard Hofstadter. Hofstadter’s classic essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” had attracted renewed attention in the media when critics of the Bush/Cheney administration charged that its policies were rooted in paranoid thought rather than reality. Something told me I needed to read that essay for myself.

Did I ever. I was stunned by how much Hofstadter’s description of paranoid political movements matched the behavior of the four evangelical movements I had been studying. I soon realized that they weren’t simply advancing pseudoscience, they were advancing *paranoid science*.

Paranoid-Style Politics

To understand the four paranoid science movements that I focus on in this book, we need to look at Hofstadter’s classic essay. Hofstadter first presented “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” as the Herbert Spencer Lecture at Oxford University in November 1963. He included an expanded and revised version in his 1965 book *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, which is the version I’ll discuss here. The essay described a recurring style in American political life that

Hofstadter referred to as paranoid “because no other word adequately evokes the heated exaggerations, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy that I have in mind.”³ Hofstadter made clear that he wasn’t referring to people who were clinically paranoid; movements led by such people would have a limited impact. Rather, “it is the use of paranoid modes of expression by more or less normal people that makes the phenomenon significant.”⁴ His examples of paranoid-style political movements in American history included the panic over the Bavarian Illuminati at the end of the eighteenth century, the anti-Mason movement of the 1820s and 1830s, the anti-Catholic movement, the anti-Mormon movement, McCarthyism, and the Goldwater movement.

Hofstadter identified several features common to paranoid-style movements. At the center is the image of “a vast and sinister conspiracy, a gigantic and yet subtle machinery of influence set in motion to undermine and destroy a way of life.”⁵ He recognized that there have been conspiratorial acts in history, and there’s nothing paranoid about noting them. However, the paranoid style goes beyond seeing conspiracies here and there in history. Instead, history itself is supposedly the product of a “vast” or “gigantic” conspiracy with enormous stakes: “The paranoid spokesman sees the fate of this conspiracy in apocalyptic terms—he traffics in the birth and death of whole worlds, whole political orders, whole systems of human value.”⁶ This is a Manichean (dualistic) mentality—that is, it sees the world in terms of black and white, absolute good versus absolute evil. This kind of mentality doesn’t tolerate compromise with political opponents. Only complete victory will do. Furthermore, those operating in the paranoid style believe that their enemy is not only evil but immensely powerful. Different paranoid movements imagine this power in different ways: “[The enemy] controls the press; he directs the public mind through ‘managed news’; he has unlimited funds; he has a secret for influencing the mind (brainwashing); he has a special technique for seduction (the Catholic confessional); he is gaining a stranglehold on the educational system.”⁷

In the foreword to the 2008 edition of *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays*, the Princeton University historian Sean Wilentz described the continued relevance of Hofstadter’s signature essay, noting the many organizations and spokespeople over the previous three decades that had followed the paranoid-style tradition. Christian

Right leaders such as Phyllis Schlafly and Pat Robertson continued to argue that conspiracies involving communists and liberals threatened the United States. With the growth of right-wing talk radio, “the radio airwaves became conduits for every variety of right-wing conspiracy theory, along with character assassination of all liberals and of Democrats in particular.”⁸ Wilentz’s essay is dated December 18, 2007. Had he written it a year later, he could have commented on the flood of racist paranoia during the 2008 presidential race as Barack Obama became the first person of African descent to be nominated by a major political party. The paranoid conspiracy theories of “birthers” and others were unrelenting during Obama’s two terms as president. It doesn’t look as if the paranoid style is leaving American culture anytime soon.

Updating Hofstadter’s Theory

Hofstadter noted that even though the paranoid style retained basic elements, it evolved over time. The paranoid spokespeople of the nineteenth century considered themselves to be part of the establishment that controlled the country, even as they fended off threats to that establishment. In contrast, Hofstadter observed, the paranoid right wing of the mid-twentieth century “feels dispossessed: America has been largely taken away from them and their kind, though they are determined to try to repossess it and to prevent the final destructive act of subversion.”⁹ He also noted how the birth of the mass media had affected paranoid rhetoric:

The villains of the modern right are much more vivid than those of their paranoid predecessors, much better known to the public; the contemporary literature of the paranoid style is by the same token richer and more circumstantial in personal description and personal invective. For the vaguely delineated villains of the anti-Masons, for the obscure and disguised Jesuit agents, the little-known papal delegates of the anti-Catholics, for the shadowy international bankers of the monetary conspiracies, we may now substitute eminent public figures like Presidents Roosevelt, Truman, and Eisenhower, Secretaries of State like Marshall, Acheson, and Dulles, justices of the Supreme Court like Frankfurter and Warren, and the whole battery of lesser but still famous and vivid conspirators headed by Alger Hiss.¹⁰