During two decades spent studying Conservative Protestantism, I’ve grown used to colleagues asking me: “Are the people you’re describing ‘really’ Christian?” Or, to paraphrase a recent encounter: “Why do you study a religious culture that has diverged so much from what used to be considered mainstream Christianity? The questioner saw Conservative Protestantism, the kind of evangelical Christianity associated with the religious right in America, as inauthentic, as a kind of “McFaith,” a system of belief and practice that doesn’t belong in the same university classroom as religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism. The question I received from the editor of this journal, Roy Grinker, that prompted the writing of this piece was, I’m pleased to say, considerably more nuanced. Would I be interested in submitting an article to AQ that explored an apparent puzzle to anthropologists: How to explain the popularity of the Christian Right in American culture and politics? Grinker also supplied a quotation to reflect upon, which included a description of something a Bush aide said to a journalist:¹

The [Bush] aide said that guys like me were “in what we call the reality-based community,” which he defined as people who “believe that solu-
tions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality…. That’s not the way the world really works anymore…. We’re an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality. And while you’re studying that reality, we’ll act again, creating other new realities, which you can study too, and that’s how things will sort out. We’re history’s actors… and you, all of you, will be left to just study what we do.”

As Grinker suggested, these remarks are grist for the anthropological mill, and they prompted some initial questions in my mind. Are we seeing “models for” and “models of” reality being translated into evangelical realpolitik? What is the significance of the seemingly modest adjective “discernible” when applied here to “reality”? I hope to address these questions later in this piece. However, in the context of Grinker’s query, the image that really stayed in my mind was a more specific, historical one, albeit one overlaid with a fair amount of myth. It was of John Winthrop, future first Governor of Massachusetts, writing his diary in 1630 on board the ship that was taking him from “Old Europe” to what would become a “New England.” Winthrop’s meditations famously laid out the vision of a city on a hill, a Puritan light to the world that would be a model for other “plantations.” His imagination extended as far as Church and State “configured in a godly commonwealth” (Balmer and Winner 2002:13), and drew on the Puritan assumption that God’s covenant to His People, described in the Old Testament, now applied to all faithful societies and generations.

Ironically, Winthrop became the first governor of a state that would eventually come to embody just the kind of East Coast values that the Bush aide would presumably dismiss as being “reality-based,” but the juxtaposition of the two perspectives is suggestive, even if they are separated by almost three centuries. Both assume that the eyes of the world are upon them, and that they have been given the opportunity to be exemplars to others in ways that include but also transcend the political realm. Both can be seen as “actors” on a cultural and social stage that is visible—as is a city on a hill—to many others; but they are also actors in the sense of being agents legitimately engaged in conflict against a world often perceived to be secular, weak and corrupt. The two examples therefore map America on to a metaphorical landscape where the nation’s calling often seems akin to that of a New Israel.

Why, however, have I replaced the image of a city with that of an empire? If the idea of an elevated city provided a beacon of hope for a believer still in transit, still aboard the boat leading him to the shores of a Promising Land,
an empire can be seen as a place for people who have arrived, who are already occupying a center. Winthrop was contemplating a possible future; but in the case of the Bush aide, it seems that the future is being created out of the present, providing what in theological terms is akin to a “realized eschatology,” a sense that redemption has already been achieved for “justified” and empowered believers. But how can one imagine an empire being contained on a hill? I am using a deliberately paradoxical metaphor to suggest a form of exemplification alongside isolation, a self-magnification allied with a separation of the self from others, that has also sometimes played an important part in the development of forms of American Protestantism.

As my invocation of Winthrop implies, I think one way of responding to Roy’s question is to explore recurrences and transformations in the American polity and in its forms of evangelical Christianity over time. That, I will argue, is key to framing an understanding of the Christian (Protestant) Right in relation to its recent apparent resonances within American culture—resonances that have involved articulating responses to pluralism, modernity and challenges to the authority of the nation state. More generally, I want to explore the past and present of what has become the Christian Right by seeing it as wrestling with three interrelated and creatively paradoxical stances to the world beyond itself—to the world visible from the metaphorical hill that it inhabits. The first involves positions of retreat countered by those of advance and appropriation; the second entails the simultaneous invocation of naturalistic and supernaturalistic approaches to “reality”; and the third invokes the ineluctable connections and tensions between self-mastery and mastery of others. Each of these positions points crucially to the way Conservative Protestantism in America, of whatever denominational hue, almost invariably implicates others in its conception of itself. Understanding these stances is not necessarily going to provide a full answer to the question of why right-wing Christian politics appears currently to be so visible and “popular,” but it should indicate some of the ways in which elements of evangelical ideology have co-existed with—indeed helped to constitute—significant elements of the American polity.

**Structures and Schisms**

Winthrop’s voyage was a real and dangerous one. It therefore contrasted with an exclusively literary maritime journey made by the anthropologist James Frazer more than two and a half centuries later. Frazer’s *Golden Bough* invit-
ed the reader to undertake an excursion through the cultures of the world that ended with his decorously termed “bark” drooping its weary sails into port. Frazer hoped that once we had stepped ashore with him at the end of the journey we would have acknowledged the parallels between Christianity and other faiths, and also have come to see its anachronistic position in a world where science should be replacing both religion and magic as the dominant mode of thought. In Frazer’s final paragraphs, we turn away from the seductive image of another distant city (and one definitively representing “Old” Europe)—Rome—basking in the sunset, and turn back to Nemi, even as the sound of the city bells ringing the Angelus lingers in our ears.

Frazer was working in an age many believed was becoming increasingly secular. But in America at the very same time Protestant Christianity remained central to many people’s conception of who they were and what their nation represented. Harder times were to follow as conservative believers adopted a lower profile after the Scopes trial and its attendant intellectual humiliations (Wills 1990), but retreat did not mean defeat. In the 1980s, social scientific observers of religion in the conferences I began to attend were still prompted to ask: “Why is the US the great religious exception?” By this, they meant: “Why is the most ‘advanced’ technological nation in the world also seemingly one of the most religious?”

Various evolutionist and intellectualist assumptions can be detected in such a question, involving the conflation of technology with secular reason, the association of religion primarily with issues of cognition, and the implied opposition between religious faith and progressive human development. However, it is at least backed up by statistics that imply high levels of both belief and practice in the US by international standards.²

Martin Riesebrodt has summarized the historical and contemporary peculiarities of American Protestantism thus:³ “Separation of church and state, religious pluralism, absence of hierocratic domination, dependence of the clergy on their clientele” (1993:34). Riesebrodt is one of many analysts who point to these features, but the important point is that we see how they might create a particular kind of context for the exercise of religion in a federal system. The relatively diffuse nature of public life encourages the maintenance of distinctive subcultures (Bruce 1996:153) while also potentially encouraging political and religious activism. Pluralism at a national level might sometimes be counterbalanced by relative hegemony—or more likely the alluring prospect of it—at the local level, so that as Bruce suggests (ibid.134): “Utah is as Mormon as Spain is Catholic.” However, where no single church is formally allowed to
dominate the state, religion per se is less likely to become the target of politically-motivated secularists than has been the case in many European countries. Thus the “dissenting denomination” has become a widespread religious form (Martin 1978), along with a stress on spontaneity and popularism that suits denominational ideals of voluntarism and commitment. As such, it is a cultural form that promotes and maintains symbolic differentiation in a way Varenne (1986a:28) sees as characteristically American, and broadly parallel with processes involving the nurturing of ethnic groups in the US.

The articulation of dissent, or at least of mutual difference, does not need to imply a peripheral relationship to wider culture. Balmer and Winner (2002:ix) describe Protestantism as till recently serving as the “organizing principle” for religious life in America. Wuthnow (1983:167) notes that evangelicals have historically often been deeply involved in politics, playing significant roles in Prohibition, the antislavery movement, and the original drive for independence. These actions have revealed assumed connections between private morality and the collective good that have been a frequent feature of evangelical worldviews (ibid.:177) and have often been incorporated into the themes of American civil religion. For the nation to be “great”—to deserve to succeed in establishing an empire—it has also ideally been supposed to be “good”—embodying the ideals of the city on a hill.

Commenting on the current revival of the Christian Right, Capps notes (1990:182) “a salvation religion is being recommended to guide the affairs of the nation…the fundamental axiom is that salvation religion can effectively function as an operational civil religion.” This is an important point not only because it refers to the way the millennial assumptions of such evangelicals can be remapped on to the broader ideals and aspirations of American political piety, but also because it indicates the easy shift between personal and public realms in much evangelical rhetoric. Thus Smith (1988:188-9) refers to the individualistic lens of “relationalism” that can be traced in conservative evangelical ideologies, ranging from Free Church traditions to more recent forms of anti-Social Gospel fundamentalism, which advocate internal moral reform rather than structural transformations as means of influencing society. Or, to put the point negatively, figures such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson could interpret 9/11 as prompted by the godlessness of Americans just as much as by the external enemies of the nation, thus proposing a form of “American Jeremiad” (see Bercovitch 1978).

But—in part because of its historical centrality—evangelicalism has constituted a very broad church, encompassing cross-cutting heterogeneities and
tensions uneasily within an overarching personalized and conversionist rhetoric. Over the centuries, Calvinist-Puritan conceptions of election and order have had to co-exist and sometimes compete with Baptist-Pietist hopes for individual redemption and salvation (Riesebrodt 1993:34ff). On the one hand, Pietism has historically encouraged a world-rejecting, personalistic, anti-institutional strand of religious practice. On the other, the religious “awakenings” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries often encouraged a bullish optimism that could sometimes convert civil religious principles all too easily into religious nationalism—the contemporary counterparts of which are evident in the current political climate.

Some of these fissures in evangelical culture have clustered historically around competition between premillennial and postmillennial conceptions of temporality and redemption. So-called “pre-mills” have tended to take the pessimistic view that salvation associated with the Last Days is only attainable after tribulation, after a period of severe earthly suffering; “post-mills” see believers working actively towards a Golden Age. These attitudes therefore provide significantly different visions of agency in relation to religio-political order and the material world. Are political structures and earthly resources inherently to be mistrusted, or might they be seen as resources, empowering believers as present and future stewards of the world? This question not only lies at the heart of much of the secular critique of the New Christian Right (as supposedly containing all politics and no religion), it is also central to internal debates among conservative Protestants. Carpenter (1997:xii) sees the most significant paradoxical tension of the fundamentalists he has studied as “being their indecision as to whether they were alienated outsiders or quintessential Americans.” Milbank (2003:67), more colorfully if critically, refers in an article on evangelical religion to “isolation” and “hysterical expansion” as being “two halves of the American Republican dialectic.” Or, as Heinz (1983:136) characterizes Jerry Falwell’s own decision to reverse the professed quietism of a lifetime into political activism in the form of the Moral Majority: “The rapture was out; the sovereignty of God was in.” (At least for the time being.)

Despite, or in some cases because of, such ambivalences, Conservative Protestants have been good at creating biblically-prompted forms of segmentary opposition bolstered, to use Heinz’s (1983:133) term, by nested “countermythologies” that feed on the presence of potentially threatening others. Non-Christians are opposed to Christians; conservatives to liberals; premills to postmills; and so on. Of prime importance in the articulation of such boundaries, which are variously invoked according to context, has been the degree
to which central political and economic institutions are to be shunned or appropriated. Here we discern some significant U-turns in orientation over the past century. While the Scopes Trail in 1925 seemed to act as a catalyst for tactical withdrawal from the public sphere (at least for more fundamentalist believers), during the rest of the inter-war years conservatives’ adversarial attitudes to liberalism were expressed through a lower-key consolidation of networks that provided parallel educational and communications institutions to those of mainstream society. Protestant conservatives were therefore in a strong position to react when both the opportunity and the desire to reenter political and other public realms became ever more apparent from the 1960s on. Feminist, gay and youth movements all provided cosmopolitan challenges to a spiritualized morality that perceived connections between the health of the polity and the morality of its citizens—and such developments also helped to politicize other conservative religious groups such as Roman Catholics and Orthodox Jews, as the Moral Majority found to its advantage. Issues including prayer in public schools and the teaching of evolution (Coleman and Carlin 2004) provided powerful evidence to conservatives of what was at stake in contesting issues relating to public life. The Watergate scandal provided its own form of dramaturgy, embodying a national trauma that required either further rejection, or a repurification, of politics. Mobilization was also prompted by the perceived encroachment of the secular public sphere (in the form of government interference) on to evangelical sub-culture. Investigations of the financial practices of faith-based organizations and IRS attempts to remove the tax exemptions of racially imbalanced Christian schools and colleges combined most notably with pro-abortion legal judgments such as the famous 1973 Supreme Court Roe versus Wade ruling.

At the same time, political activists such as Richard Viguerie (a pioneer of direct mailing techniques) were coming to see conservative Protestants as a potentially significant—and, it must be said, increasingly wealthy, even middle-class—but untapped block of voters who could be mobilized around social and moral issues (Bruce 1996:154). In support of this strategy, televangelists such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson were important because they had developed powerful means of communication (mailing lists, fund-raising networks, television) with large numbers of followers and leaders of other congregations. An important question was also whether disparate and heterogeneous denominations and churches could be united by such lobbying groups as the Moral Majority, Religious Roundtable and Christian Voice. To some degree, the mobilizing work done in the 1980s onwards can still be seen
as believers defining themselves as “outsiders” monitoring those in power—judges, politicians, teachers—in order to ensure that a demonized “secular humanism” did not win out. However, in the late 1980s Pat Robertson did of course demonstrate that a preacher, albeit an Ivy-League educated one who at times chose to emphasize his secular rather than spiritual credentials, could gain some initial success in running for the presidency.

These comments on the reemergence of Christian politics need to be tempered by at least two qualifications. First, the fact that some religious conservatives were highly critical of such engagement with politics, seeing it as a compromise with “the world.” Falwell’s own wavering commitment to the Moral Majority can be seen as a sign of his own unease with his position. Second, the observation that for much of the 1980s and 1990s the actual influence of conservative Protestants in national politics can be questioned (Bruce 1996:155). Few New Christian Right (NCR) supporters gained national office and President Reagan, for instance, failed to use his influence to mobilize congressional votes for bills on school prayer and abortion that would have supported the NCR position. The inconsistencies of the politicized conservative Protestant stance were embodied by the need to preach an exclusive doctrine of salvation on Sundays, and at other times engage civilly with peoples of other faiths in political or legal fora, and even in meetings of the Moral Majority. In the 1988 poll for GOP presidential candidate, Southern conservative Protestants divided 44% for Bush, 30% for Dole, and 14% for Robertson (Bruce 1996:159), indicating potential unease with the very idea of Robertson’s political engagement, quite apart from any concerns about the candidate himself.

Some twelve years later, George Bush was elected to his first term with some 70% of the evangelical vote—the lowest of any Republican since Reagan, prompting political strategist Karl Rove to identify evangelicals once again as a key target group, but one that appeared to be on the wane. Four years later, Bush was to capture around 78% of the evangelical constituency, according to exit polls, after a term in which he had been encouraged both to speak openly about his faith and to express his pro-life views on abortion. How, then, to explain the difference? One key distinction between Bush and Robertson, quite apart from the perceived religious convictions of their respective opponents, may have been the fact that Bush could be presented as a politician who was also a believer, rather than a preacher temporarily turned politician. Robertson appeared to water down his role as a spiritual leader in order to gain political power; after four years in power, Bush seemed to be a President who combined his public calling as a politician with person-
al convictions that resonated with many believers, and moreover—as we shall see below—he took on the role of national leader engaged in a military drama that touched on key areas of overlap between civil religion and millennial evangelical conviction.

Over the medium to long durée of American history, then, conservative Protestantism has been engaged in struggles between stances of separation from and cooperation with mainstream politics. Such oscillations have themselves mirrored the theologically and organizationally schismatic and accommodationist cycles of many churches and denominations. More recently, they have also expressed alternative ways in which to respond to the challenges of modernity, either avoiding or attacking liberal assumptions of human progress combined with ideological pluralism and cultural cosmopolitanism (see Ammerman 1987). However, this rather Troeltschian view of the Christian Right, which presents ideological stances of appropriation and withdrawal as occurring in temporal sequences that bounce off each other in dialectical fashion, does not tell the whole story. In the next section, I want to argue that a rather more subtle way of understanding evangelical views on “discernible reality” and political engagement can be detected, and it is one where material and spiritual imperatives can be seen to exist in parallel rather than in sequence. In this sense, it provides yet another adaptation to the threats—and the opportunities—of the modern world.

The Hidden Kingdom

A number of years ago I was carrying out fieldwork in Uppsala, Sweden, examining local reactions to a controversial evangelical ministry that had been set up in the city, supported by certain American ministries (Coleman 2000). As part of this work I attended a local meeting that provided an opportunity for local students to question the head pastor of the ministry, Ulf Ekman. I listened to Pastor Ekman respond to the students in what I thought were rather calm and witty, occasionally even wryly self-knowing, terms. Then, filing out of the meeting, I bumped into a Christian friend and asked how he thought the meeting had gone. To my surprise, he uttered a single word in reply: “War!”

In retrospect, I realize that what I took to have been a civilized exchange of views could also be interpreted, in conservative evangelical terms, as a battle. In addressing the meeting, knowing that he had both supporters and opponents in the audience, Ekman was probably engaging in what I later came to term “double talk,” skillfully using language that could be understood at two
levels—indeed, appealing to two different levels of reality simultaneously. On the one hand, there was the “discernible,” exoteric reality detectable by secular observers; on the other, a less evident but more spiritually “real” perspective on the world was being made available to believers. The distinction between the two was sometimes glossed as the gulf between “the natural” and “the supernatural” by my informants. I saw even more explicit examples of how “double talk” worked when observing how Ekman might reply to his many political, theological and journalistic critics in the media by deploying what appeared to be a broadly civil discourse, and then provide far more spiritually radical comments on such discursive engagements in sermons given to his congregation. He was thus reflexively reappropriating the significance of his public language for internal purposes, engaging in a spiritualized deconstruction of his own apparently secular discourse.

Such a linguistic strategy, which I argue is more generally shared by evangelicals, is intriguing within a movement so often branded as one-dimensionally literalist in its approach to the relationship between reality and language. “Double talk” provides a means of evangelical engagement with the world that does not compromise with it at a deeper level of reality—providing a way to classify “the natural” as a cultural superstructure overlying a more profound sacred realm. Secular modernity can therefore be seen as a form of reality with which one negotiates a complex form of linguistic distance that is also a means of control.

The theological underpinnings of such a position are exemplified by Capps’s (1990:183) discussion of the way Pat Robertson affirms the primacy of a secret, invisible and transcendent kingdom in relation to which both salvation religion and the affairs of the civil order are to be judged. This grounding provides the occasion for allowing the Christian believer to be “in the world, but not of the world.” We also see how such a double perspective encourages believers to “read” the world as a manifestation of biblical reality. At time the connections are made very clearly, such as when prophecy is applied overtly to America as a kind of new Israel. However, more esoteric connections can also be made. Capps (1990:189-90) points out that the issues on which Christian Right advocates have often campaigned have been ones for which two levels of struggle can be discerned. Thus voluntary school prayer is about the rights of citizens to enjoy the protections of the First Amendment, but also about the primacy of divine authority over the giving of life; similarly abortion is about the conditions under which it is appropriate or not to bring a pregnancy to term, but also about the primacy of divine authority over the giving of life.
Understanding this form of conservative Protestant disposition, this double orientation to reality, can provide a further key to appreciating the ways in which believers negotiate relationships between the sacred and secular in complex ways. For instance, Harding (2000:105; see also Coleman 2004) describes how Jerry Falwell encourages followers to send financial support to his ministry—an action that seems from the outside to be a cynical exploitation of the gullible for blatant material gain. However, as Harding puts it (2000:109): “The whole point of giving to a God-led ministry is to vacate the commercial economy and to enter another realm, a Christ-centered gospel, or sacrificial, economy in which material expectations are transformed.” The personalized figure of “Jerry” becomes the figure who mediates between the two realms, the key through which secular resources are given divine significance.

Or, to take the point even closer to contemporary political debate, consider a striking example provided by the anthropologist Omri Elisha. Elisha provides an intriguing analysis of a pre-election email letter from Laura Bush that was sent out on October 26, 2004 to the newsletter subscribers of “Crosswalk,” a conservative, “Christ-centered, for-profit corporation” that provides news digests and other Internet resources. Elisha notes how Laura Bush begins: “Dear Friend, We’ve watched as President Bush has led this country through the most historic struggle of our generation….” A few lines later, the First Lady relates an anecdote that she also uses on the campaign trail: “In Ohio, I visited with a woman who summed up our success this way. She said, ‘President Bush was born for such a time as this. He never wavers when it comes to doing the right thing. It makes me feel so secure to know that our leader has such a love for our country.’”

Elisha picks up on the apparently insignificant words “for such a time as this” (words that, we note, Laura Bush is herself citing from another person). The phrase can be seen simultaneously as a reference to the forthcoming election and as a quotation from the Book of Esther, chapter 4, verse 14. Esther is a Jewish woman who takes on a political role in the Bible, that of Queen of Persia, before risking her own life to save the Jewish people from destruction by a wicked enemy. As Elisha points out, the Esther story is read by evangelicals as a sign of the individual’s role in faithfully enacting God’s sovereign designs for human history. The biblical narrative can also be applied, as Laura Bush and many fellow believers are likely to assume, to the person of a president who is wrestling with enemies who constitute or support “an axis of evil.” In political terms the beauty of such a positioning of Bush is that it also resonates at a less esoteric, more civil religious level, with the idea of an
American leader who is unafraid physically to defend his nation’s calling in a world that seems so often to be on the edge of apocalyptic destruction.

**Revival and Rebound**

I ended the last section with an image of violence as both tool of the righteous and transnational threat to the nation. In the following, I again explore evangelical engagement with threatening realms of “otherness” through examining themes that bring together violence and politics. This time, however, I focus on the very boundary between evangelical and non-evangelical identity, the distinction between being “born again” and not, before showing how this distinction plays into an intriguing dialogue between the personal and the political in American evangelical culture.

Let me begin with a decidedly schematic description of evangelical personhood. The spiritual experience attendant upon becoming born again is generally seen as a means of regenerating as well as conquering the mind and flesh. While theological differences may exist among believers as to how regeneration is embodied—through tongues, moral action, prosperity, and so on—the point remains that the person becomes a vessel for the transcendent in a way that has been latent or absent beforehand. Furthermore, the gaining of a born-again identity is often not only a way of justifying the self, it also involves the injunction to spread the “Good News” to others. Avoiding the injunction to missionize may imply that one is allowing the timid, all too human part of the person—located in the flesh or the mind—to dictate to the spiritual self.

Scholars often focus on the effects that evangelization has on the people being missionized. However, we need also to consider its effects on the evangelical self. As I have argued elsewhere (Coleman 2003), we can view such conversionist orientations as providing opportunities to relive the narrative of one’s own experience of conversion in relaying it to others. Similarly, Stromberg (1993) refers to the ways in which the transformational efficacy of the conversion experience is not confined to the original event. For him, telling and retelling conversion stories is a central ritual of faith, framing personal experience in canonical language and recreating that experience in the telling. Carpenter puts the point well in the very title of his book, *Revive us Again* (1997). So the issue here relates to the way in which individual or collective evangelical identity can be constituted in the very act of extending out into “the world” in order to missionize.
What might be the contemporary political significance of such an orientation, quite apart from its potential to cause strife in contexts that might not welcome intrusions from Christian proselytizers? I want to open up an exploration of this question by juxtaposing my sketch of evangelical personhood with what initially seems to be rather different ethnography. Maurice Bloch’s book *Prey into Hunter* (1992) is an attempt to provide a general understanding of “The Politics of Religious Experience.”

In effect, he argues for the existence of a basic grammar underlying a number of different types of ritual across cultures, ranging from initiation to sacrifice, possession, fertility rituals and funerals. In brief (pp.5-6) the idea is that an “irreducible core” of the ritual process involves a symbolically or physically violent conquest of the present world by the transcendental. The first part of the ritual involves the participants moving away from the here and now towards a valorized, transcendent realm. In the return, the transcendent continues to be associated with those who made the initial move in its direction, so that the move back to the ordinary world becomes a kind of conquest of that world. “Rebounding” violence occurs because (p.48) a willing co-operation by the subject with a transcendental attack on her vitality is followed by a violent recovery of vitality from an external source. For instance, the Orokaiva initiation that Bloch summarizes (p.8ff) acts out the transformation of initiates from prey into hunters, into a state where their spirit element dominates their mortal element. We see therefore (p.19) the significance of the Orokaiva ritual representation of the division of the person into two elements, the one consuming the other.

A further aspect of Bloch’s argument is one that takes him beyond ritual into politics. He is attempting to explain the oft-noted fact that religion furnishes an idiom of expansionist violence to people in a whole range of societies, an idiom that under certain circumstances becomes a legitimation for actual, outwardly-directed violence. Thus (p.17) Orokaiva initiation ends with an open-ended menace to outsiders which can become the beginning of serious hostility. Bloch similarly argues (p.58 ff) that in Japanese history Buddhism has provided the path of the exit of vitality while Shintoism has contained the path of its triumphal and forward-looking return (p.63): “Renunciation on the part of the subjects and of the Buddhist monks could then lead to the rebounding vitality of the Emperor in much the way the renunciation of the Hindu Brahman could lead to the conquering sacrificial strength of the king.” Rebounding violence requires the presence of particu-
lar circumstances for it to legitimate military expansionism, including both the presence of outsiders and the resources to act in such a manner.

Bloch does occasionally refer to Christianity. He talks, for instance (p.32) of how the lives of Christian saints illustrate the process of the person turning against the mortal, bodily aspects of themselves in favor of supernatural invasion. Or more generally he argues (1992: 96) that “the aggressive ideology of rebounding conquest has...been very evident in Christianity.... This element was particularly evident during the crusades or when religious fervour could be backed by military might, as in the periods of European colonial expansion.”

No mention is made of conservative Protestantism of the type analyzed in this paper, but from what I have said so far the parallels should be evident. I am interested, for instance, in the way Bloch moves from a consideration of personhood (and its construction in ritual) to political action, and the way his argument resonates with an evangelical ideology that in effect devalues mortal flesh in favor of the spirit and associated supernaturally-derived agency. Original self-abnegation is often accompanied by metaphors of surrender and penetration, but is followed by the adoption of an identity that is “justified.” The idiom of evangelical revival permits, as I have noted, a constant replaying of the experience of self-regeneration in the process of missionizing others, ideally converting them to the model of the self. My discussion of “double agency” also refers to the ways in which the believer can play on two levels of reality and existence, the “natural” and “the supernatural,” with the latter ideally conquering the former, even if only at a spiritual level discernible to fellow initiates/believers. Naturally, we have to take into account the tendency of evangelicals to withdraw from this-worldly ambitions as well as to adopt them, but interestingly even the more separatist conservative Protestant organizations still tend to retain missionizing practices.

The extent to which the idiom of evangelical conquest of the self and others leads to physical force is certainly likely to vary, as the course of American history itself indicates. However, Jewett and Lawrence’s (2003) recent analysis of the role of violence associated with zealous nationalism in American history refers precisely to the sense of mission, and the question, phrased in now familiar imagery (ibid.:xiii): “Should America be the ‘city set upon a hill’ that promises the rule of law even when faced with difficult adversaries? Or should it crusade on the military plane of battle, allowing no law or institution to impede its efforts to destroy evil?” Jewett and Lawrence trace the ways in which George Bush has framed his fight against terrorism in world-redemptive terms, but also note a longer American tendency to draw on civil religion
in this way (ibid.:5): “The ideas of holy war have been combined with a distinctly American sense of mission in language that fuses secular and religious images. In major developments of American life—the Civil War, the settling of the western frontier, the World Wars, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, and the so-called war on terrorism—these ideas have continued to surface.” Even where physical force has not been deployed, the symbolic violence of transformation has been deployed—either “killing” or “converting” the other as Jewett and Lawrence put it—and here we see an imagery being deployed that stretches back to a Puritan appropriation of the redemptive violence of the Old Testament. Such thinking also lends itself easily to reading and describing the world “doubly” as I have described it, so that one way the Moral Majority originally attracted the political involvement of thousands of previously uninvolved pastors and churches was by presenting the conviction that the final crisis of world history was indeed at hand (ibid.:140), thus promoting candidates and policies supporting a stronger nuclear force and an enlarged military budget, along with support of Israel.

**Concluding Remarks**

In responding to an initial inquiry about the current popularity of the Christian Right I have found myself, somewhat to my surprise, attempting to discern the deep structures of relations between religion and politics in America rather than exclusively appealing to the circumstances of the present. On reflection, I think the reason for my approach has not constituted an attempt to ignore the particularities of the current situation, or to deny the possibility that fundamental changes may be underway in the position of conservative Protestantism in the US, but rather to place that “popularity” in an analytical context where it might become a little less surprising.

This is not to say that the evangelical relationship with the American polity has been an easy one, particularly over the past century. The three main sections of this paper were organized around images of paradoxicality rather than complementarity, though perhaps “dialectic” might have been equally accurate as a term. I argued for the existence of tensions between the everyday and the transcendent within evangelical ideology that might be expressed through sequential, oscillatory movements between world-denial and world-appropriation; or that might be evident in more obviously “parallel” if hierarchical relations between “the natural” and “the supernatural”; or that might both be contained in rituals of symbolic or physical conquest through the “rebonding”
violence of ritualized aggression against the self, and then others. Implicit throughout the paper, therefore, has also been an argument about evangelicalism and modernity, and the suggestion that it is far too simple, as some opponents have asserted, to see conservative Protestantism as an ideological anachronism. I think it makes much more sense to think of this faith—at least in its conservative forms—as requiring social, cultural and religious boundaries against which to react, including those of forms of modernity that it finds uncongenial. The continued existence, indeed thriving nature, of the movement can therefore be seen as one example of how, in Pels’s terms (2003:29), it makes little sense of talk of a singular modernity. Rigid distinctions between “magic” and modernity rely on forms of “modernist purification” that ignore the constant translations and mediations between the two (ibid.:32).

In an essay on “Doing the Anthropology of America,” Hervé Varenne asserts (1986b:37) that “An anthropology of America must be an anthropology of the center.” I have been trying to show how a focus on evangelicalism is indeed a way of carrying out an ethnography of central themes in American culture, even if we are dealing with a movement that itself oscillates between self-perceptions of centrality and alienation, and is often encouraged towards the latter by its many opponents. My attempt also invokes the spirit of Crapanzano’s (2000) analysis of literalism in America, where he brings together Christian fundamentalists with “legal literalists” to show the similarities as well as the differences between these two groups, one ostensibly religious and the other secular, since (ibid.:xx): “I soon realized that the literalism I was seeing among the fundamentalists was in fact a widespread characteristic of American thought.”

So perhaps the reemergence of the NCR is not so surprising. And while we often talk of how ethnographers know they are on to something when they encounter an event or explanation that does not seem to “make sense” (Caughey 1986:245), we might also reflect on what is revealed about our own assumptions when we decide what does and does not make sense in our own culture. Of course, the evangelical paradoxes I have highlighted are present in other religious faiths as well, albeit with very different forms and emphases, but that is part of my point. We still have a tendency to see the Christian Right as a particularly objectionable form of religion, and possibly not a real religion at all. My intention has been to show some of the reasons for the continued presence of conservative forms of this faith in the US, but also to show how such a continued existence continues to challenge what we presume to know about the nature of religion, modernity, and the connections between the two.
ENDNOTES
1The remarks have been much quoted, not least on the net. They come from Ron Suskind’s article “Without a Doubt” in the New York Times, Section 6, Page 44, Column 1, October 17, 2004.
2For instance, Bruce notes (1996:129) that, according to Gallup survey data, the proportions of Americans saying “yes” to the question of whether they attended church or synagogue in the last seven days has remained remarkably stable. During 1939-81 it rose to a peak of 49% in the mid-1950s, then fell gently back so that since 1967 it has been 40-43%.
3The terminology to describe the varieties of conservative Protestantism is complex and tendentious (see Coleman 2000). For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to deploy “evangelicalism” as a catch-all term to describe the fundamentalist, Pentecostal, charismatic and more conventionally evangelical Christians that broadly support the Christian Right. In using the term in this way, I also accept that by no means all evangelicals can, in practice, be regarded as conservative either theologically or politically.
4When describing their own religious past, American scholars tend to invoke Alexis de Toqueville, a French nobleman who visited America in 1831 toward the end of the Second Great Awakening, and an observer who was struck by the variety and voluntarism of American religion. In contrast to de Toqueville’s country, where the one Church sided with the old pre-Revolution order, religion in the form of voluntary associations could counteract despotism, therefore in itself taking on political functions without the taint of government (see Hammond 1983:209-11). Apart from de Toqueville’s prescience, one of the things that is interesting about him is the way he has in himself become an icon of American self-understanding—a rather different traveler from Europe to America, 200 years after Winthrop.
5The historical trajectory of American civil religion has been traced by Angrosino, who argues (2002:248) that it contains theocratic elements that European observers find perplexing. Angrosino also (p.261) notes the constant and creative tensions between conservative and liberal brands of American civil religion.
6Angrosino (2002:264) notes that Richard Mouw, an evangelical liberal, dismisses this conservative Protestant interpretation of the event as resulting from moral lapses.
7The Moral Majority was itself dissolved in 1989, only to re-emerge as “The Moral Majority Coalition” after the re-election of George Bush encouraged its supporters to hope to influence a new generation of conservative lawmakers.
8Around one in five voters in this election could be classed as evangelicals, a record. Among Catholic voters, Bush held a slight edge, reversing the previous trend of Catholics to support Democrats.
9For a recent overview of the connections between religion and violence (though not one that discusses Bloch), see Faubion 2003.

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