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Religious conservatives were part of the Reagan coalition but are far more central to the party now.



Activist Dan Beazley brought his cross to the Kirk memorial in Arizona. JOHN LOCHER/ ASSOCIATED PRESS



DECLARATIONS

Charlie Kirk and the New Christian GOP

While watching the Charlie Kirk memorial Sunday, I was swept by a memory that yielded a realization,

The memorial, in State Farm Stadium in Glendale, Ariz., has been well described. There was a height to it, and a gentleness, with a few rhetorical exceptions. More than 90,000 people attended. TV and online viewership is estimated to have reached tens of millions.

Halfway through it struck me the memorial might have been the biggest Christian evangelical event since the first visit to America of Pope John Paul II, in October 1979. He was a year into his papacy. "Be not afraid!" he said, and took America by storm.

At the memorial there was an altar call—at a public memorial for a political figure. It was singular, and moving. So was the dignity and peacefulness of the crowd. They didn't indulge their anger or cry out against the foe. It was as if they understood that would be bad for the country. I couldn't remember a time a big Trump-aligned group did that, as a corporate act, in the past 10 years. It struck me as a coming of age. They were taking *responsibility*.

There is something you could have said at any time the past decade that is true now in some new way. It is that the GOP is becoming a more explicitly Christian party than it ever has been. A big story the past decade was that so many Trump supporters, especially but not only working-class ones, were misunderstood as "those crazy Christians" but in fact were often unaffiliated with any faith tradition and not driven to politics by such commitments.

But it looks to me as if a lot of those folks have been in some larger transit since 2015, as Kirk himself was. He entered the public stage to speak politics but said by the end that his great work was speaking of Christ. If he had a legacy, he told an interviewer, "I want to be remembered for courage for my faith."

The secretary of state of the United States gave personal testimony on what Christ is in history and in his life. The vice president did the same. John Foster Dulles and Hubert Humphrey didn't talk like this!

The whole thing was self-consciously and explicitly Christian. Kirk's widow, Erika, talked of new converts and asked the crowd to help them. She said of her husband's assassin, "That young man—I forgive him." And she received a standing ovation.

As I watched I realized: This is the true sound and tone of the Republican Party right now. This is the takeover of the previously patronized.

Forty years ago in the Reagan White House, Christian activist leaders and people who spoke of "traditional values" were pretty marginalized. As a group they were treated as part of the GOP coalition: They had a seat at the table, respect was due them, especially at election time, but they were looked down on by many who ran the White House. (The speechwriters were by and large on their side, which was part of why we were often in trouble.) - Note

Opposing them were the famous so-called pragmatists, who were generally moderate in their politics and had to keep an eye on the polls. Both sides felt misunderstood by the other and both were right; things sometimes got sparky.

In my first book, "What I Saw at the Revolution," I wrote that I'd always detected a bit of "ye old class antagonism" in the split. The pragmatists in a general way came from some high-up backgrounds, the traditional values folk generally didn't, so both groups started out seeing America from different levels of observation.

In that book I wrote of a young man named Gary Bauer, who saw an America in which "the habit of religion" was being "removed from public life." He was a domestic policy adviser, aligned with the Christian conservatives, and one day at a big issues lunch he departed from the topics to be discussed to tell the president of a kid in a public school down South who was valedictorian of her class and wanted to give her speech on the importance of God in her life. School authorities thought it might violate the separation of church and state, and said no.

As Gary spoke he looked around the table. His colleagues were embarrassed for him. We've got big things on our plate, and you're going on about some kid in East Jesus. And they laughed. But President Reagan drew him out, asked what he could do, and sent a letter bucking her up.

As I watched the Kirk memorial I thought: The people in that audience are the sons and daughters of the patronized Christians of that old White House. They had a seat at the table then but are at the head of the table now.

Gary Bauer went on to run the Family Research Council and is now head of a group called American Values. I called and asked for his thoughts: "Over the decades what was taking root then has, I believe, produced the great movement we've been seeing, where men and women of faith are the biggest voting component of any Republican victory. What's different now is that in terms of policy we don't have to beg for a bone." He watched the memorial on television with his wife, Carol, at their home in Fairfax, Va. "I watched for four or five hours—every minute of it! I shed a tear more than once." He said that what was said at the Kirk memorial wasn't that different from what had been said at GOP conventions in the past. "What changed is the progressive movement in America has massively swung to the cultural left, and that has simply made the movement of faith-based voters a stronger movement." And when Mrs. Kirk spoke, "I don't know why this especially grabbed me—she said, 'Charlie wanted to save the lost boys of the West'—and that was just incredible. Young men robbed of their inheritance, taught their countries are worthless, told they're toxic, they're the cause of all the problems. We see all the impacts of that. If we can't save our sons, it's over." He thinks America may be at the start of a religious revival.

In the Charlie Kirk memorial I saw a shift in some new way into a more self-consciously Christian GOP, one composed of Christians and those who like or don't mind them, or feel what they stand for on policy is constructive. The other party will be everyone else.

Reservations? Of course. If it's true, it feels European—the "Christian Democrats"—and not American. As a Christian I see things through a Christian lens, but big democracies demand many lenses to maintain peace in the political sphere. Modern democracies get through in part by not letting the lines get too vivid, the demarcations too sharp. A big blur can

be helpful. But that would be another column. What I think I see evolving is big. That wasn't just a memorial; it was a stepping forward in a new way of Christians and the Republican Party.

By Peggy Noonan

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