How can we define the Christian Right?

One of the challenges of discussing a large and constantly evolving religious movement, made up of a number of different groups and individuals, is to be able to find an accurate definition for what you are discussing. It is all too easy to generalise based on the work of others, but each scholar tends to characterise the Christian Right in slightly different ways, for example, ‘born-again’, ‘charismatics’, ‘evangelicals’, ‘conservative Christians’. This is partly because there is no definitive answer.

In denominational terms, the Christian Right draws from a number of different churches including Southern Baptist, Mormon, Pentecostal, and evangelical-style. The majority of evangelical-style churches consider themselves non-denominational, but in academic terms they have become a category or denomination in their own right. The Christian Right also has some support from politically conservative members of Catholic and mainline Protestant denominations, which include Episcopalian, Methodist and Lutheran among others. Some politically conservative Jews are also supportive of the Christian Right’s aims, leading some commentators to describe the movement as the Religious Right.

Even within these broad categories, not all would consider themselves as part of the Christian Right, and one cannot assume that all members of these churches subscribe to the Christian Right’s political beliefs. Some may be politically conservative and also Christian, but would not identify as part of a political movement based on Christianity. Depending on whether they are measured by self-identification, theological beliefs or denominational affiliation, statistics can vary widely. For example, Corwin Smidt in his book American Evangelicals Today notes that ‘evangelical Protestants’ are roughly half of the population when defining themselves as ‘born-again’, about a quarter in terms of denominational affiliation, and about one-seventh when in terms of religious self-identification. Thus it is hard to provide accurate statistics for the demographics of the Christian Right.

It is still appropriate to use the term Christian Right in academic discussion if you can demonstrate the nuance in your definition, and clarify what you mean.

- Using the various descriptions of the Christian Right given above and what you have learnt about the Christian Right so far, have a go at creating your own short definition of the movement. Challenge yourself to write it in 50 words!
- In another 50 words try and explain why accurately defining the movement is so problematic.