

The New Custodians of American Morality

Some said there were 200,000, others 300,000. No matter. It was an impressive, even intimidating, turnout on April 29 when "evangelical" Christians rallied in Washington. The day of prayer and lobbying to "return America to God" was sponsored by a coalition of groups with names like "Christian Voice" and "The Moral Majority." The secular media were miffed and mystified, and the coverage was slight. The *New York Times* gave as many lines to the event's critics as to the event itself. The criticism came from mainline and mostly liberal Protestants who were unsettled by a phenomenon they did not understand. They condemned the politics and tactics of these "fundamentalist right-wingers," but their protest reflected the suspicion that something fundamental is changing in religion's role in our public life. The suspicion is probably correct.

The "Washington for Jesus" crowd was pilloried for identifying its position with *the* Christian view, its politics with the will of God. The establishment churches called for diversity and respectful disagreement about the nature of righteousness in a pluralistic society. A necessary and commendable caution indeed. In this case, however, the caution was self-serving, based upon a nervous calculation of the opposition's forces. The conflict between the fundamentalists and the mainliners is more one of politics than of principle. It is a question of whose oxen are being gored.

A joint statement on the rally was issued by the government liaison offices of twenty religious groups—including Lutheran, Presbyterian, Episcopalian, United Church of Christ, American Baptist, and Reform Judaism. Noting that we live in "an increasingly complex society," the statement deplored the polarization provoked by the Washington rally. In the civil dimensions of life, it declared, "justice is enhanced by all persons of good will working together for the common good." Surely we can all agree to that, assuming we have a shared understanding of justice and the common good!

The signers of the statement say their approach "can be applied to specific issues" and offer examples: "the White House Conference on Families, prayer in the public schools, capital punishment, freedom of choice regarding abortion, SALT II, Panama Canal Treaties, Equal Rights Amendment, welfare, D.C. voting rights, gun control and foreign aid." On each of these issues the position of the United Church of Christ and the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, for example, is precisely the opposite of Moral Majority and Christian Voice. As presently stated, the conflict is little more than partisan competition. And this is a great shame, for more momentous questions are raised by the developments reflected in "Washington for Jesus."

The Italian social theorist Wilfredo Pareto (d.1923) promoted a charming notion that he dubbed "the circulation of élites." The idea is that there are a certain number of power and leadership functions to be exer-

cised in a society and, when one élite gets flabby and fails to lead, those functions "circulate" to another and usually quite different élite. It may be that the function of religious leadership in American society is now circulating from the "church-and-society" bureaucracies of the mainline denominations to the well-scrubbed hordes of "Washington for Jesus." The circulation theory is not without irony. One mainline official accused the Moral Majority crowd of "flagrantly mixing politics and religion." Until recently that was the charge fundamentalists leveled against mainliners and their sundry causes. What distressed the official in question was that these people are mixing *their* politics with religion.

A FORCE FOR GOOD

Well into this century, the WASP religious élite was the custodian of America's moral heritage, protecting it against immigrant barbarity, cosmopolitan decadence, and papal conspiracy. No doubt some members still believe in that role, but their leaders are embarrassed by it. Understandably so. Older ideas of "Christian America" were often smug, bigoted, and thoroughly lacking in self-criticism. But the need for institutions that conserve and celebrate a society's moral identity will not disappear. At its best, conserving and celebrating can be combined with fruitful criticism and change.

In the last ten years or more, much religious social activism underwent dramatic change. In the conventional "radicalized" view, America's moral tradition is not to be strengthened, advanced, or even reformed; it is to be repudiated, revolutionized, reversed. Most of the world's woes, from exploitation by multinationals to ecological despoliation, are attributable to American—specifically, capitalist—power. Of course an argument can be made for this viewpoint (an argument I find unpersuasive), but those who embrace it disqualify themselves from effective moral leadership in the society. Specific injustices are to be protested, but effective protest must be linked to patriotism. Those for whom "prophetic witness" means a more or less unqualified assault upon America and all its works and ways cannot but view patriotism as odious.

The question is, Is American power—on balance and considering the alternatives—a force for good in the world? The answer from the mainline churches is ambivalent at best. The answer from the Moral Majority is a resounding Yes, and never mind the qualifiers above. By their confident and populist affirmation of the American tradition the fundamentalists are now in position to benefit from "the circulation of élites."

It is easy to ridicule the "Washington for Jesus" people; the daunting ecumenical job is to engage them in reflection and debate about the concerns we inescapably share. It would be the final and unhappy irony if the current liberal lament about mixing politics and religion further discredits religion's public responsibility, resulting in the privatization of faith that liberals have traditionally deplored.