

UNDER COVER

The Cardinal, the Liberals & the Moral Majority

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When, on September 11, Cardinal Madeiros attacked legislators "who make abortions possible" under the law, it was inevitable that he would be criticized for "mixing religion and politics." Of course, the liberals who found fault with the cardinal were not similarly disturbed by the clergy who were active in the civil rights movement or in protests against the Vietnam war. In those cases, it was conservatives who denounced a "politicized" ministry and who urged the clergy to "get back to religion." And conservatives then were as wrong as the liberals are now.

The logic of Cardinal Madeiros's position is faultless. If abortion is a heinous crime, then those who give it support and legal sanction have encouraged the offense and they share in the responsibility. Liberals who do not believe that abortion is a crime are certainly entitled to argue with the cardinal, but their case is against his *premise*, not the conclusions he draws from that premise. Liberals do not really care that the cardinal has "brought religion into politics": *They object to his religion and its teaching.* Accustomed to thinking of themselves as tolerant folks, liberals are uncomfortable with this fact and prefer to conceal it (from themselves as well as from others). But in truth, it is the liberals who mix *politics* into religion, telling the churches to say nothing which seriously disturbs the life of the secular state—to stick to "religion," by which they mean uplifting solace for adults, support for noncontroversial moral verities, and training for children in rudimentary ethics and historic mythology.

Both liberal and conservative politics find religion useful when it supports or, at least, does not impede their secular teaching, and a menace or a nuisance when it does. They do not take it seriously on its own terms. Since they do not, neither the liberals nor the conservatives have been able to criticize the political involvements of the clergy in a sensible way.

Cardinal Madeiros, for example, is vulnerable not because he intervened in politics, but because he intervened too little and on too narrow a basis. Catholic teaching makes abortion a crime, but it makes a good many other things criminal or indecent. If the Church speaks only on matters involving procreation, it must seem to share, rather than oppose, the national obsession with sexuality. Moreover, the tradition of Catholic political thought has always recognized that political morality is not a matter of mechanically insisting on a series of separate "principles." Rather, it involves a judgment of the good of the political society as a whole, the best available approximation of justice. I think that Barney Frank—one of the candidates for Congress implicitly opposed by Cardinal Madeiros—is

wrong on the issue of abortion, but I know enough about him to think that he will make a splendid congressman. No citizen can vote rightly on the basis of a single issue, although one issue may be very important indeed. A "correct" position on abortion is not a sufficient ground for supporting a candidate, and an "incorrect" position is not a sufficient ground for opposing one. It is not simple to speak of the things that make judgments sufficient or just, but a less rigorous consideration is inadequate, less than God's truth deserves and requires.

The case of the Reverend Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority is different. Cardinal Madeiros can be charged with a political teaching which is incomplete, but Mr. Falwell's doctrine is debased. The Moral Majority includes in its platform too many secular doctrines with no relation to Christianity. Nothing in Christian doctrine suggests that the Kemp-Roth Bill is a particularly "Christian" approach to taxation. In fact, since that bill favors the wealthy more than the poor, there is a strong case against it. The only human motive which the Kemp-Roth Bill recognizes or supports is avarice—not high on the Christian list of virtues. Similarly, Christianity certainly does not command us to oppose SALT II. In both cases the Moral Majority is a mouthpiece for conservative, secular ideology, a right-wing Simon Magus eager to find high bidders.

This impression was strengthened by the Moral Majority's unqualified enthusiasm for Governor Reagan. I do not agree with the traditional evangelical severity regarding divorce and remarriage, but anyone concerned about the instability of the American family should have asked whether, at this time, America can afford its first divorced president. Would not so exalted a model give divorce the highest official stamp? It is possible to ask such questions and decide that, divorce or no, Governor Reagan—like Adlai Stevenson—deserves one's support. But no serious evangelical movement could possibly ignore such questions. The Moral Majority did ignore them. QED, it is not a serious movement.

Religion cannot stay "out of politics." Since religion speaks of a higher truth, it encompasses lesser truths. It claims to know when secular truth is illusion only, a matter of partial perception and passing fashion. Every society "needs foundations," and America today desperately needs to be taught the first principles of human and political life. Those who speak of the most important things have an obligation to teach ably. The techniques of teaching, however, are less important than the content of teaching. If we need those who speak well, we need even more those who speak truly. The cardinal may have been maladroit, but Mr. Falwell is false. An age that yearns for prophecy needs to be reminded that not all eloquence is true.

Wilbur Carey Williams

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