

RELIGION AND...

Addressing the Naked Public Square

The question is asked whether Moral Majority is a threat or a challenge. The answer, I believe, is that it is both. The less intelligently we respond to the challenge, the greater is the threat.

The concern is about a cluster of organizations and movements representing an alliance between religion and the New Right in American politics. Moral Majority and its leader, Jerry Falwell, are simply the most visible part of the phenomenon. I am persuaded that the religious New Right represents a deep and long-term change in American religion, culture, and politics. Moral Majority and other organizations may not be around five years from now, but the change they represent will be with us for a long time.

To date, the response to Moral Majority has been disappointing and probably self-defeating. There has been a great deal of mutual name-calling. One side screams "secular humanist" and the other screams back "bigoted reactionary." One calls its opponents "Communists" and the other returns the compliment with "fascist." If the Moral Majority are reactionaries, liberals who disagree are simply reacting to their reaction, which makes liberals reactionaries squared.

The leaders of the religious New Right have been called Yahoos, Rednecks, Ku Kluxers, and neo-Nazis. From months of researching this phenomenon, from conversations with Jerry Falwell and others, I am persuaded that we have been blinded by the caricatures used to try and discredit these people. I am convinced that the leadership of the religious New Right is, for the most part, sincere, shrewd, and utterly convinced of the need and possibility to correct what they view as the moral rot of American society.

They are capitalizing on a deep resentment. They and their followers believe that in the past they have been excluded from and despised by the leadership elites in American life. They feel this way because in fact they *have* been excluded and despised. Fundamentalist religion was excluded from respectable circles and made an object of ridicule in the 1920s. Today developments within the evangelical-fundamentalist world, combined with the growth of the "electronic church," have met with a new conservative coalition in politics to produce what it believes is a time of opportunity.

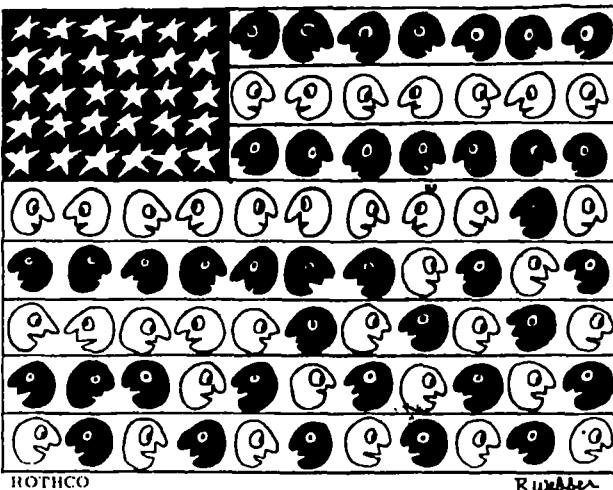
Taking Stands

Moral Majority defines its platform as pro-life, pro-family, promorality, and pro-America. Who would want to be against any of these? But each general category is loaded with specifics — dealing with everything from gun control and prayer in the schools to abortion and the defense budget.

Jerry Falwell believes that on a majority of their

issues a majority of the American people agrees with them. He is probably right. In the past two decades liberals have made the enormous mistake of letting the so-called social issues and the juices of patriotism gravitate to the reactionary Right. The conflict is not between a moral majority and an immoral minority. We are witnessing, rather, a conflict of moralities. In view of the minority of people who think through these questions in a coherent way, we are witnessing a conflict of "moral minorities."

The Moral Majority and its allies are threatening in several ways. (1) It is superficial in its analysis of what is wrong with society. The symptoms of moral degeneracy are condemned, but its causes in a materialist and individualist society are not traced. (2) It fails to understand how problems must be solved in a pluralistic society. It is impatient with compromise and indifferent to the need for public argument that does not depend upon everybody subscribing to a particular reading of the Christian ethic. (3) It lacks prophetic backbone. Its issues are safe middle-class issues that do not threaten the pocketbook or life-styles of the people to whom it appeals. (4) It violates a fundamental part of the Judeo-Christian ethic by showing little believable concern for the



poor and socially marginal. (5) It promotes a narrow nationalism that comes very close to identifying America with the purposes of God in the world.

The movement is also challenging and encouraging in several ways. (1) It represents a recovery of social responsibility among fundamentalist Christians. For years liberals have blasted them for lacking that responsibility. Liberals should now welcome this change, instead of engaging in fatuous talk about the violation of the separation of Church and State. (2) It represents a Christian confidence that God is indeed at work in the world and that the church must combat social sins as well as personal sins. (3) It recognizes that Western culture is indeed in a state of moral decline. (4) It emphasizes that the Jewish people and the State of Israel have a particu-

lar and powerful claim upon the Christian conscience. (5) It alerts us to the fact that this nation and all nations are accountable to God.

Puzzle and Promise

A big proposition: We are witnessing the collapse of the two hundred-year hegemony of the secular enlightenment in Western culture. Jerry Falwell has — inadvertently and somewhat clumsily — kicked the trip wire and set off an alarm alerting us to this massive change.

The secular enlightenment assumed — indeed, it was a dogma — that as people become more “enlightened” religion either would wither away or could be safely confined to the private sphere of life. Now, for better and for worse, religion is breaking out all over. In the physical and social sciences, in law, in art, and in politics.

For decades public policy aimed at producing the naked public square. That is, public space — physical and political — was to be stripped of every symbol of religion. Now Christian and Jewish thinkers, and many who identify with no religion, are recognizing that this was a mistake. Without any symbols of the transcendent, a society has no absolute sanction against evil and no imperative to pursue the good. It is adrift.

As odd as it may seem, Jerry Falwell and Martin Luther King, Jr., are alike in one important respect: Both dared to enter the public square and call society to account by use of religiously based moral beliefs. What is happening does not fit into the thought-slots of liberal/conservative, Left/Right. It is something quite new, both puzzling and promis-

ing, and it is fast transforming the cultural and political alignments of the past.

What, then, is to be done? (1) We should recognize the long-term significance of what is under way. (2) We should try to understand the views and motivations of those who seem to threaten our values. (3) We should disagree with them candidly when necessary, but within the context of a dialogue that avoids polarization and preserves the pluralism we cherish. (4) Those of us who claim the tradition of liberal democracy need to examine ourselves, asking why the symbols of morality and patriotism (prolife, profamily, promorality, pro-America) have been permitted to gravitate toward the Right.

Martin Luther King was fond of saying, “Whom you would change you must first love.” Millions of Americans believe that liberals are basically contemptuous of them and their values. They are close to the truth. We will have another chance to lead in changing America when we convince the American people that we love them and share their noblest aspirations. Rather than surrendering to the radical Right, we, like Dr. King, must dream a more persuasive dream for America. When that happens, the present squatters in the public square will be forced to let us back into the game of defining America’s future.

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