GOV. JIMMY CARTER'S CANDIDACY -
THE FOURTH GREAT AWAKENING?
by Marc H. Tanenbaum

The nomination of Governor Jimmy Carter as Democratic candidate for the Presidency of the United States has introduced a new element into the American national political scene but an old element in American society. For the first time in modern politics, a presidential candidate has publicly identified himself as an evangelical "born again" Christian and has spoken freely of his personal religious convictions and their relationship to his political behavior.

"The most important thing in my life is Jesus Christ," Carter has testified, "I turn to Him in prayer daily and before every decision I have to make which affects the life of others...I don't want anything that's not God's will for my life." (From an interview with the Associated Press, May 24, 1976).

The Democratic National Convention in July nominated Carter and his vice-presidential running mate, Senator Walter "Fritz" Mondale, in a carnival-like demonstration of jubilant unity which momentarily gave the impression that the doubts and misgivings about Carter-as-President were somehow resolved, and that the main task that lies ahead is mainly the conventional political one of producing a Democratic victory in November. And yet it is significant that during the weeks following the post-convention period, the same doubts and misgivings were given wide public utterance, and to a very large extent, much of that questioning revolved about "the mystery" of what it will mean for America to have a "born again" Christian in the White House. Speculate that the issue of an "unfrocked" Evangelical President will continue to loom in the air for months to come and the mounting anxiety and emotions that have been raised will offer fragments to less political behavior. Are we moving from a "Soberly" President to a "Secular" President?
Governor Carter is himself obviously conscious of the ambivalences raised in the public mind, especially in the non-evangelical world of northerners and liberals, by his profession of Baptist faith. In an interview with the editor of the World Mission Journal, a publication of the Southern Baptist Convention Brotherhood Commission, of which the Democratic standard-bearer is a trustee, Gov. Carter was asked what he thought was the reaction of non-evangelical reporters to his statements about his personal religious conversion. His reply:

"It is very difficult for anyone who has not had that experience to understand... Many of the newsmen who ask about this never had this experience. Some of them are downright cynical about it. I think it worries some of them." He added that "a lot of news reporters are mystified" by his spiritual autobiography. "I don't think they doubt my sincerity, but they just don't understand. I don't make a big issue of it, but neither do I hesitate to say publicly that the most important thing in my life is Jesus Christ." (May 13, 1976, RNS).

Generally in the past, as the Rev. James Wall, editor of the influential ecumenical weekly, Christian Century, has noted, it has been assumed that religious references by public officials were not to be taken seriously. But now our leading candidates are clearly not joking. They mean it."

While most of the attention has been focused on Carter's beliefs, the heightened publicity has also lifted up to public attention the evangelical commitments of both President Ford and Gov. Ronald Reagan. President Ford, an Episcopalian, is also of an evangelical bent. He says that his religious faith is "a personal thing" and tells reporters that "I rely on for guidance from my God." His son, Michael, is a seminarian at the evangelical Gordon-Conway Seminary in Mass. The
The President's closest spiritual advisor, Michigan evangelist Billy Zoli, sends the President a weekly memo of spiritual guidance. The President has written to him, "Because I've trusted Christ to be my Savior, my life is His."

Republican candidate Ronald Regan, a member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), once a Sunday School teacher, now attends Bel-Aire Presbyterian church in Los Angeles, an evangelically-oriented congregation. Regan's wife, Nancy, says he prays before every major decision.