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Box 3, Folder 35, "Camp David and American Religion", 24 July 1979.



PREPARED AS POSSIBLE OP-ED
FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES
July 24, 1979

CAMP DAVID AND AMERICAN RELIGION
by Marc H. Tanenbaum

Religion in America seems to be getting a bum rap in the media.

The treatment - or lack of treatment - of the meeting between President Carter, Mrs. Rosalyn Carter, and the senior White House staff with a group of ten prominent Christian and Jewish religious leaders and scholars on Tuesday evening, July 10th, at Camp David, is a dramatic case in point. That quite remarkable "dialogue" was reported either with selective inattention, snickering caricatures, or condescension.

While the seminars that the President held with other representative groups of American leaders gripped the attention of the front pages of much of the American press and TV news - and in most cases deservedly so - the President's session with the religious spokesmen was virtually ignored. The few reporters and columnists who took notice of that meeting tended to dismiss our group sardonically as "the God squad." Talk about cynicism in America...

My pique over that media inattention has nothing to do with any interest in self-serving publicity. Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish groups have their own newspapers and wire-services and manage quite effectively to reach most of their constituencies with their respective messages. My annoyance has ~~first~~ ^{with} to do/first, the distortion of the historic record of the unprecedented Camp David ^{even} talks, and second, the inevitable minimizing of the major, indeed, central role that religious groups could play in helping the majority of the American people to cope constructively with the moral and practical challenges which the present energy crisis poses.

As to the historic record of Camp David, ironies abound. Future historians who will rely on the front page story of the New York Times of July 22nd, or the News in Review of the same date - both excellent and presumably comprehensive accounts of the Camp David conversations - would nevertheless be justified in concluding that virtually every segment

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of the American polity and the academic disciplines were deemed important enough and had something thoughtful to contribute in dealing with the urgent energy and economic crisis for the President to invite their counsel - except for the institutions of religion. And yet, on the morning following our July 10th meeting with President Carter, one of his top White House aides telephoned several of us to say, "The President and the White House staff felt that the meeting with the religious leaders was among the best and the most useful of all the Camp David meetings."

It was uniquely at the meeting with Christian and Jewish leaders that the President explored as a central theme and at great length the philosophical, ideological, and moral issues - "the malaise of America," and the moral vision which needs to be reconstituted as a precondition for mobilizing the moral will of the American people without which no energy programs, however boldly conceived, would take hold.

It was during this session that we discussed the fact that the Founding Fathers of our nation, however much they argued over points of constitutional structure, agreed unanimously that it would take "more than a perfect plan of government to keep up the spirit of good government." Something else was needed, they asserted, some moral principle diffused among the people to strengthen the urge to public virtues which are the essence of freedom. The cultivation of these great public virtues - moral action without compulsion, love of liberty, public spirit and patriotism (defined by Thomas Jefferson in 1776 as "a disinterested attachment to the public good, exclusive and independent of all private and selfish interest"), moral incorruptibility, industry and frugality, hard work and plain living - was considered the first duty of a free people.

One can only imagine our gratification that the President devoted twenty-two minutes of his July 15th address to precisely these "moral and spiritual issues" that we had the privilege of examining with him, and that, according to the Times/CBS poll, some 77 percent of the nearly 100 million Americans who listened to the President's talk agreed with his views about our nation's "moral and spiritual crisis." Indeed, Hedrick Smith and his colleagues

were led to characterize that talk as "the most successful speech of the Carter Presidency." (N.Y. Times, July 22nd.)

Let the ^{historic} record show, therefore, that the President of his own choosing had the benefit of clergy, for reasons of substance, we believe, far more than for public relations ritual.

No less important than the question of historic accuracy is that of media responsibility for portraying fairly the effective role of religion in public affairs. In that same July 22nd issue of the Sunday Times, there appeared a lead OP-ED article by a Catholic priest from Minneapolis, the Rev. Robert G. Howes, in which he denounced "America's churches (for being) thunderingly silent (on) immense national crises, inflation and energy, in particular."

His criticism is surprising but not unexpected. A director of pastoral planning should know better, but perhaps not if he relies solely on the dominant media for adequate information about the role of religion in our national life.

Memo to the media (and to Father Howes, with all due respect)

There are roughly 146 million Americans affiliated with the Churches and Synagogues of the United States. With all their diversity, the Christian and Jewish communities in aggregate represent the largest single network of organization and communication in our nation, larger by far than the constituents reached respectively by organized business, labor, or the universities. Only national television reaches as large an audience at one time, as was the special case with Roots and Holocaust. As one Protestant leader portrayed the religious scene to me, "Why, there are more Methodist churches in this country than there are post offices!" (He joshed about which institution is more effective in delivering its message.)

Three years ago, when famine raged in the Sahelian zone of West Africa, and in the Indian subcontinent, Congressional committees informed a group of religious leaders - a number of whom were at Camp David - that Congress would not vote to allocate four and a half million tons of food because "there was no constituency calling for such action." Led by Father Theodore Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, a group of us, Christians and Jews, brought that message to our constituents. Within weeks, Congress was bombarded with letters, telegrams and visits indicating that

Americans did not want our country to stand idly by while tens of thousands of human beings were dying before our eyes - especially when our silos were groaning with bumper crops of grain.

P.S. - Congress, learning once again dramatically that religious types had troops, lots of troops, reversed itself, and today there are hundreds of thousands of human beings alive because a group of Christian and Jewish leaders cared and acted out their Biblical and democratic heritages of compassion in the real world. Not incidentally, we found that there were no other leaders from any other segment of American life on the hill advocating to save the hungry and impoverished people of Africa and Asia. Only the "God squad"...

In July 1978, the eight billion dollar foreign aid bill was threatened by a fifteen percent cut that would have wrought havoc with our economic development program for 800 million poor and starving people. Steep cuts in foreign aid would also have undermined our support of the World Bank, Middle East peace, and our foreign policy generally. On 72 hours notice, we brought 26 Christian and Jewish leaders to the White House to meet with the President and his top foreign aid experts. The 26 religious leaders spontaneously prepared, on their own initiative, a joint statement articulating our moral responsibility for the poor of the world, and then gave copies to every member of Congress, with many of whom we discussed the moral issues at stake. The next morning the foreign aid bill passed intact.

At the following Thursday morning Cabinet meeting, the President reportedly declared that the foreign aid bill would not have passed in such good shape had it not been for the actions taken by the religious leadership of America.

And most recently, the Vietnamese boat people, the ethnic Chinese, and the Indochinese refugees. While a number of voluntary agencies, particularly the intersectorian International Rescue Committee under Leo Cherne's dedicated leadership, have been involved in helping to save the lives of these tragic human beings, the Catholic, Protestant, and Jewish refugee and immigration agencies have sponsored, resettled, and rehabilitated (through jobs, housing, education, medical, and social welfare ~~services~~ services) more than

75 percent of the 210,000 Indochinese refugees already brought to this country since 1975. And two weeks ago, at a press conference in New York, the same religious leaders pledged that they would take care of whatever other refugees that are rescued from drowning in the South China sea and brought to these shores for safe haven.

A similar track record exists for the role these religious leaders and their millions of followers have played over decades in advocating vigorously the causes of human rights, universal nuclear disarmament, arms control, as well as supporting effective measures to combat inflation, unemployment, social welfare reform, national health care, among other pressing domestic ~~xxxxxxx~~ concerns.

My point in laying out this impressive track record - which is virtually unknown to many Americans (including, bewilderingly, some clergy) and quite obviously to many people in the media - is not to beat a publicity drum for the religious establishment. Despite some flagrant and well-known abuses by a number of clergymen, modesty, self-effacement, and altruistic service are still regarded as fundamental religious virtues. Rather it is to make the point that in the present critical moment facing our nation, the religious groups have a major, if not central role to play in helping Americans - especially the 146 million people affiliated with the Churches and Synagogues - cope creatively and constructively with the energy crisis and inflation, particularly with the issue of conservation of resources.

For at its heart, conservation is a matter of cultural lifestyle, and lifestyle ultimately rests on moral values - what is really important in your life, what is essential and what can be discarded as sheer ~~xxxxxxx~~ self-indulgence, how do you achieve personal happiness that does not depend on the endless accumulation of material goods, how do you meet personal and familial needs and at the same time remain responsive to the common welfare, especially that of the poor, the ill, and the ~~the~~ indigent elderly?

The President of the United States seems to have understood the distinctive role of religion as the historic custodian in our nation of moral and spiritual values, as well as its track record in translating those values into daily human realities. Hopefully, the

media will someday soon also reflect that important understanding.

(Rabbi Tanenbaum, national interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee, was the Jewish spokesman among the ten religious leaders who met with President Carter at his invitation on July 10th at Camp David.)

