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THE MORAL MAJORITY - THREAT OR CHALLENGE?

by Marc H. Tanenbaum

The first and most important issue to understand about the Moral Majority phenomenon, I believe, is that it is a symbol, a metaphor, for a much larger, more complex social-political development that most Americans, and most American Jews, have not yet begun to confront.

The Rev. Jerry Falwell first organized the Moral Majority in June 1979. In less than two years, it has - thanks to the pervasive cultural power of the mass media - caught the national fancy and fears of much of America.

That media blitz, however, has tended to obscure a far more significant if less dramatic reality; namely, the gradual but growing emergence of 40 to 50 million Evangelical Christians into the mainstream of American life - economic, social, cultural, religious, as well as political.

If the Moral Majority were to collapse tomorrow, and if Jerry Falwell were to disappear magically from the TV tube and the front covers of Newsweek and Penthouse magazines, we, thoughtful American citizens, would still need to deepen our understanding of the facts and the meaning of the rise of the New South and the entry of Evangelical Christians into the public stream of American religious-cultural pluralism. That historic development is of a magnitude comparable to that of the emergence into first-class citizenship of the Roman Catholic community in 1960 when the election of John F. Kennedy as the first "Catholic" president ratified the rite of passage of 50 million Catholics into American public life. Not incidentally, the Catholic religious-ethnic succession was attended by some of the same ambivalences - would "a Catholic president" undermine the separation of church and state, etc?

Except then, Evangelical Christians were in the forefront of expressing public anxieties, most notably when John F. Kennedy was compelled to assure Southern Baptist pastors at that famous encounter in Houston that his first loyalty would be to America and not to the Pope and the Vatican.

Much of our national literary culture and popular folklore still perceives Evangelical Christians through the stereotypes of crackers, rednecks, Bible-thumpers, illiterates, and poor white trash. Anyone who has traveled through the South since the end of World War II knows that those are caricatures that have no relation to present-day realities. The South has become during the past 35 years the fastest growing economic region in America (Houston today has the largest gross national product per capita of any city in the United States.) That economic growth has resulted in the massive movement of population to the South from the rest of America, so that today the 80 million people in the 11 Sun-belt states constitute the largest concentration of population in our country.

Those developments in turn have affected every other aspect of life in the South. Today the New South is urbanized, industrialized, and its citizenry is overwhelmingly middle class, white collar workers, with income and educational levels comparable to the rest of the nation's population.

The combination of economic wealth and widespread literacy has supported the growth of Evangelical Christians as the fastest growing religious group in America.

That consciousness of newly acquired power - dollars and knowledge power - have transformed the formerly sleepy, Magnolia-scented South into a rising political force on every level of government and society. Americans, and American Jews, will need to relate constructively to that new social-political-

religious reality, long after Jerry Falwell and the Moral Majority disappear from the scene.

The second most important reality that needs to be understood is the extraordinary diversity and pluralism within the Evangelical community. All Fundamentalists are Evangelicals but not all Evangelicals are Fundamentalists.

More than one-half of the 40-50 million Evangelicals are affiliated with the "mainstream" Southern Baptists, Southern Methodists, and Southern Presbyterians. The enlightened leadership of these 20-30 million Evangelical Christians are proudly conscious of the fact that their forbears - the Southern Baptist farmer-preachers, the Methodist circuit-riders, and the "dissident" Presbyterians in Virginia - fought and bled to disestablish the Anglican Church. We owe to those Evangelical Christians both the doctrine and the institutionalization of religious liberty, freedom of conscience and religious pluralism. With the assistance of James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, these Evangelical Christians are responsible for the Virginia Statute for Religious Liberty which became the basis for the First Amendment separating church from state.

It is no accident that when Fundamentalist preachers in unholy alliance with ultra-conservative political organizers began advocating the establishment of a "Christian America" (a mythical idea with no substantial precedent in American history) and were urging their followers to "vote for born-again Christians only," that the first Americans to oppose that Constantinian view were Southern Baptist leaders, foremost among them the Rev. Dr. Jimmy Allen, the Rev. James Dunn, among many others.

Similarly, when the Fundamentalist preachers and politicians began advocating single issue politics and were urging their followers to vote for candidates solely on the basis of how they stood on pro-family and pro-life issues

mainstream Evangelical leaders were in the forefront of condemning that reductionism of American domestic and foreign policy concerns. Indeed, the leading Evangelical journal, Christianity Today, wrote a sharp editorial warning the Fundamentalists that their single politics approach "could lead to the election of a moron who holds the right view on abortion." (Sept. 19, 1980).

And, most significantly for Jews, when the Rev. Bailey Smith uttered his obscenities about "God not hearing the prayer of a Jew" and that "Jews have funny hooked noses," of far more enduring importance than this display of cultural anti-Semitism is the fact that Rev. Smith received literally thousands of letters, telegrams, telephone calls, and resolutions sent him by Baptist and other Evangelical pastors and leaders condemning him for his anti-Semitism. Many quoted an official resolution adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention in 1972 which read in part:

"Whereas, Baptists share with Jews a heritage of persecution and suffering for conscience's sake...Southern Baptists covenant to work positively to replace all anti-Semitic bias with the Christian attitude and practice of love for Jews, who along with all other persons, are equally beloved of God."

Since my first meeting with the Rev. Billy Graham in 1965, I have become increasingly persuaded that the mainstream Evangelical Christians were potentially among the most stalwart friends of the Jewish people and of Israel. The record has borne that out.

While many liberal Protestant church bureaucrats have become the willing instrument for PLO politics and propaganda, the vast majority of Evangelical Christians have remained steadfast in their support of Israel as a Jewish state and of a united Jerusalem under Israeli sovereignty. American Jewry would be foolish to take that for granted, and just plain dumb and self-

destructive to alienate that support by engaging in theological casuistry over why Evangelicals and Fundamentalists really support Israel. It is wise Rabbinic teaching that "even though the intention may not be pure (for the sake of heaven), the effects can be pure."

Much more could also be written about the wide support we have enjoyed among Evangelical Christians in behalf of Soviet Jewry, and their collaborative programs with us to uproot the sources of anti-Semitism in Southern Baptist and other textbooks. And on the touchiest issue of proselytization, we have also begun to make progress, including the writing of Evangelical essays that appreciate Judaism as a complete religion for Jews who do not require salvation by becoming Christians. We are in fact at a stage with Evangelicals theologically not unlike the early stage we were at with Roman Catholics just prior to Vatican Council II. Those positive seeds need to be nurtured if they are ever to grow into sturdy plants, and they should not be poisoned by reckless polemics and noisy headline charges that suggest that all Evangelicals are anti-Semites. That route seems predestined to snatch defeat from possible victory.

Withal that, I do not want to suggest for a moment that there are not serious problems, especially with some Fundamentalists. When they advocate views that we perceive to be a threat to democracy, to pluralism, to social justice, and to a reasoned foreign policy, we have an obligation to stand against those views. And we have, and were in fact among the first in the Jewish community to do so.

But Jewish statesmanship requires that we seek to create an environment where it is possible to oppose in a civil manner those things with which we disagree and yet affirm those values with which we agree. And that method of

how to disagree and yet affirm those values with which we agree. and that method of how to disagree agreeably holds for our relationships not only with Evangelicals, but with Catholics, liberal Protestants, as well as other Jews.

Ultimately, to cite Talleyrand, we do not have permanent friends, but we do have permanent interests.

