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Series A: Writings and Addresses. 1947-1991

Box 6, Folder 6, "Patriotism and Piety - New Right Evangelicals",  
Undated.



Marc H. Tanenbaum

### PATRIOTISM AND PIETY - NEW RIGHT EVANGELICALS

The current emergence of the "New Right Evangelicals" or the "New Christian Right" did not begin with the organization of the Moral Majority in June 1979. The nation's press, TV and other mass media discovered the evangelical right during the past year and has treated it as a spectacular novelty, resulting frequently in caricatures that tend to obscure rather than to reveal the depths of its historic importance as well as its challenges to American politics and democratic pluralism.

The present phase of the surfacing of the "New Right Evangelicals" dates back some thirty five years. Following World War II, the South underwent an extraordinary transformation in economics, politics, education and religion.

The South is today the fastest growing region in the nation. "The sixteen states that make up the region we call the South," Ben J. Wattenberg and Richard M. Scammon have observed in This USA, "comprise the most populous single area in the nation." Nearly eighty million people live there and more Americans can claim to be Southerners than can claim to be anything else."

Despite some recent slowdown, the population of the South and Southwest is mushrooming at double the national average, with more than 85% of the nation's population growth now taking place in these areas. As a matter of straight census fact, the South is today more urban than not - almost 60% - and there is solid evidence of mounting wealth, modern industry, and vibrant growth in many Southern

areas.

As the 1976 Presidential elections demonstrated, no political party can win a presidential election without some of the eleven states of the Old Confederacy, and their cousin former states who control 163 electoral votes - 60% of the magical 270 needed for victory.

A growing number of Southerners are deeply conscious of this seismic change in American life and speak unabashedly of it, sometimes in heady, triumphalistic terms. "A reshuffling of power is taking place in America today that has nothing at all to do with political parties or former elections," Governor Reuben Askew of Florida said recently, "The wheel of power in this nation is turning, unmistakably and undeniably from the North to the South."

Accompanying - or perhaps more accurately - integrally involved with this "secular" transformation of the South has been an equally vigorous religious transformation. According to the Southern Baptist Handbook, the populations of the Sunbelt states, excluding California and Hawaii, grew 38% from 1950-1970, while the population percentage of Southern Baptists grew 64%. The Southern Baptists are among the fastest growing denominations in this country, numbering 12.7 million members. But there are also some 30 associations and groups of independents who now bring the number of Baptists in the nation to 30 million.

When you include other Evangelicals - Southern Methodists, Southern Presbyterians, Assemblies of God, among others - evangelicals today number about 50 million Americans.

The Baptists have spread far beyond the South and border states in recent years, and there are now Baptists in all 50 states who are

aligned with the Southern Baptist Convention. Today, the Southern Baptists are the largest Protestant denomination in the United States. Some church historians predict that "they will eventually become the largest church in the world." (Dr. James T. Baker.)

Today, "born again" evangelical Christians represent 20 percent of the adult population, and number over 30 million potential voters.

As shall be indicated below, there have been three major religious revivals that swept across America in the 18th and 19th centuries, known as "the Great Awakenings." The present upsurge of the "New Right Evangelicals" appears to be a full-blown "Fourth Great Awakening." There are two distinctive features in the present revival that have not existed before in American religious and political history:

First, the growing domination of "the electronic church" by charismatic evangelical preachers who claim to reach 86% of the nation's homes (50 million viewers weekly), and who raised in 1979 a combined total of at least \$150 million;

Second, the forging of an alliance between "electronic preachers" and ultra-conservative political groups headed by skilled professional political organizers. While there has been a precedent of evangelical preachers joining forces with "Christian" businessmen to "Christianize America" - especially beginning with the "Third Great Awakening" in 1859 - this appears to be the first time in America's history that evangelical leaders have consciously set out to form with professional politicians "an evangelical political lobby" for the purpose of mobilizing "the Christian vote" and to elect "born-again Christians" into public office.

How does one explain this extraordinary assertion of the "New Right Evangelicals" in American politics today?

In many ways, the present development conforms to earlier evangelical patterns in our nation's history:

Each of the earlier /three"great awakenings" was an ~~awakening~~ evangelical response to massive social and religious dislocations that resulted from huge migrations of populations.

The first religious revival was that of "The Great Colonial Awakening" that took place from roughly 1725-1770. It was essentially a response of evangelical leaders to the disintegrating consequences ~~of~~ for morals and manners, the decline of religion, that resulted~~ed~~ from European peoples the transplanting of ~~settlers~~ that migrated across the Atlantic to the New World, with its coarse and rough conditions of life.

The Second Awakening took place between 1770s-1830s. This was the period of immense population movements from the East to the valleys west of the Alleghanies (11 new states were then admitted to the union.) As a consequence of this vast migration which filled the continent from the Alleghanies to the Pacific, the religious and moral condition of the country as a whole was regarded by church historians as having "reached the lowest ebb quite possibly in the entire history of the American people."

In both migrations the conditions of vast labor, rough and coarse ~~labor~~ hardships accompanying the pioneering life resulted in violent a partially/and wild society, with no social restraints, a breakdown in respect for authority, low vices, brutal pleasures including the killing of Negro slaves and the massacre of Indians. The West was described as "the land of sinful liberty" with large sections of the frontier society

The "Third Great Awakening" coincided with the rise of the city, the decline of the frontier, and the emergence of modern urban America. This was the period of mass immigration of foreign-born, and city evangelism which reached its heyday from 1865 to 1899 was intended to reach thousands who lost contact with the churches in the anonymity of the burgeoning urban centers.



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debauched and whiskey-sodden. Drunkenness fueled by pervasive home-made whiskey became the greatest church discipline problem.

"Whatever man or family removed to any new country," Horace Bushnell wrote in 1847, "made a large remove to barbarism."

The "Third Great Awakening"

Our contemporary "New Right Evangelicals" continuously preach about "the Golden Age" of America, that our nation was "a Christian nation" in its earliest days. That is a myth, and the historic data ~~hides~~ <sup>hides</sup> that myth. New England was the best churched section of the colonies, and here church membership was about 1 to 8 in 1760. In the Middle Colonies, consisting mainly of German and Scotch-Irish immigrants, it was 1 to 15. In the Southern colonies, even with its established Anglican churches, it was 1 to 20. Taking the colonies as a whole, the ratio of churched to unchurched was about 1 to 12. In his "History of Revivalism," William Warren Sweet writes, "The great majority of Americans in the 18th century were outside any church," and there was "an overwhelming indifference to religion."

The first two "great awakenings" were started by evangelical leaders as a conscious effort to counter the moral disintegration and the pervasive lack of affiliation with churches that characterized much of the life of the colonies and the western frontier. In the third awakening, big time evangelism was spearheaded by such "professional evangelists" as Dwight L. Moody and later Billy Sunday. They sought to fight the grosser sins common to city life, to lift moral standards by concentrating on bringing about reformed lives.

The present day "Fourth Great Awakening" therefore conforms to earlier patterns of evangelical revivals by addressing itself to the current "malaise of America" and by seeking to bring about a moral and spiritual transformation of its adherents and of the society at large.

But there are other continuities - and discontinuities - that the present revival has with the earlier awakenings that are instructive.

1) One of the most significant features - indeed achievements - of the first great awakening took place in its "Southern phase" which began around 1775 in Hanover County, Virginia. Anglicanism was the established church of Virginia and persecuted remorselessly the dissenting Baptists, ~~and~~ Methodists, and Presbyterians. Since the days of Roger Williams who fled the Massachusetts Bay Colony's oppressive Puritan orthodoxy to achieve freedom of conscience (the first Baptist church in America was established primarily to enforce that principle in Providence, Rhode Island), the Baptists were the foremost champions of the principle of the separation of church and state and complete religious liberty. Together with dissenting Methodists, and Presbyterians, they were responsible for flooding the General Court with petitions demanding ~~equal~~ the full right to every free exercise of religion "without molestation or danger of incurring any penalty whatsoever."

In Virginia, it took a ten-year contest, which Jefferson called the severest of his life, to separate church from state. Finally, the Virginia Status of Religious Liberty drafted by Jefferson - and based on James Madison's Virginia Declaration of Rights - was passed by the Assembly on January 16, 1786. The exercise of religion, it declares, is a "natural right" which has been infringed by "the impious presumption

or legislators and rulers" to set up up their "own modes of thinking as the only true and infallible," and "to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves," which is "sinful and tyrannical."

The statute roundly declared, "No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever." It even warns later assemblies that any attempt on their part to tamper with this law "will be an infringement of natural rights." That action formally launched the present epoch of American church-state relations.

Ironically, both the Rev. Jerry Falwell who heads the Moral Majority and the Rev. Pat Robertson of the 700 Club have their national headquarters in Virginia. Their campaign to try to "reestablish" a "Christian America" and to vote only "born-again Christians" into public office clearly runs counter to everything Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, the Virginia Assembly stood for, and for which the early Baptists sacrificed their lives.

2) Like their latter-day descendants, "the electronic preachers," the founding fathers of the evangelical revival movements were deeply concerned about "the moral malaise" of Americans. But their methods were significantly spiritual and moral rather than political. They addressed themselves to the conversion of individual conscience and to the development of vast programs of voluntary social reform rather than to campaigns for taking over the political machinery of their societies.

Thus the Baptist and Methodist revivalists, who addressed their gospel of repentance to the common man, sought to become the moral courts of the frontier. Their frontier churches and preachers were

intensely individualistic with their members, and they exercised rigid disciplinary oversight over them.

Baptist churches watched over the conduct of their members and held regular church meetings to hear charges of immoral conduct, requiring repentance of sinners. Methodist camp meetings gave class tickets to those in good moral standing. Presbyterians set up the institution of "fencing the tables" disbarring from church services those members who violated the Ten Commandments, and giving "tokens" allowing attendance at services to those who maintained high standards of life and conduct.

Under the influence of John Wesley's teaching on the importance of "social holiness," there developed "The Doctrine of Disinterested Benevolence" and vast programs of social reform were pioneered as voluntary expressions of the churches. Organized benevolence were created for the poor and downtrodden, anti-slavery groups, temperance societies, aid to youth, and the military. (These revivalistic efforts laid the foundation for the social gospel movement that liberal churches were to adopt in the 20th century.)

It is clear that the early Baptists and Methodists relied on their own internal church resources for bringing about a deepened spiritual life and for meeting the moral and human needs of their communicants. It is difficult to believe that they would have countenanced the efforts of their spiritual descendants, "the electronic preachers" and their political allies, in resorting to means of dominating the government and the political machinery for effecting spiritual and moral change.