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MS-603: Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum Collection, 1945-1992.

Series A: Writings and Addresses. 1947-1991

Box 4, Folder 3, "New Right Evangelicals", 1980.



STATEMENT BY RABBI MARC H. TANENBAUM,  
NATIONAL INTERRELIGIOUS AFFAIRS DIRECTOR  
OF THE AMERICAN JEWISH COMMITTEE  
ON "NEW RIGHT EVANGELICALS"

The current emergence of "the New Right Evangelicals" or "the New Christian Right" has elicited widespread interest and concern among millions of American citizens, among them, a great many Jews.

No responsible and fair-minded American questions the right of fellow Americans of Evangelical Christian or any other religious or moral persuasion to participate fully as citizens in the political process nor to advocate the adoption of public policy positions which reflect their ideological bent. Indeed, maximum participation by our fellow Americans in the democratic process can only be encouraged and welcomed.

During the past fifteen months, however, there have been a number of actions and statements by major spokesmen of this newly-forged alliance of several Evangelical Christian leaders and ultra-conservative political organizers which have become deeply troubling to many of us, and which require, we believe, careful analytical scrutiny by both Presidential candidates, both political parties, and by the American people. These concerns center around the following major issues:

- 1) A number of major spokesmen of "the New Christian Right" assert that their primary purpose in this election, and through related political activity on the local levels, is "to Christianize America," and to establish "a Christian republic."

That is a myth and it is an ideologically dangerous myth for American democracy which must not go uncontested. The only period in American history during which anything resembling a so-called "Christian Republic" existed was the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony after 1629. That colony was a Puritan theocracy which yoked together ecclesiastical and civil government. As every major church historian acknowledges, the Puritan oligarchy sought religious toleration for themselves but did not believe in religious toleration for others, and that "Christian republic" collapsed after about 50 years when dissenters such as Roger Williams fled persecution in order to find freedom of conscience in Providence, Rhode Island.

What is historically true is that Baptist farmer-preachers, Methodist circuit-riders, and dissenting Presbyterians became the foremost champions of freedom of conscience, religious liberty, and the principle of the separation of church and state. They suffered persecution, imprisonment, and ruthless harassment at the hands of the Anglican Establishment in Virginia and elsewhere to uphold those fundamental democratic principles not only for themselves but for all Americans.

It is both ironic and sad that some of the spiritual heirs of those Evangelical Christians in Virginia today and elsewhere have chosen either to forget or to ignore that historic achievement of American democratic pluralism.

2) A number of "New Christian Right" spokesmen regularly speak of the "Golden Era" of "Evangelical Christian America" when our forbears were supposedly deeply religious and highly moral people, and by contrast, we today are convicted of religious and moral inadequacy.



That is also a myth, and its repetition tends to immobilize us in unnecessary guilt and self-doubt, rather than energize us to face the truth about our past and our moral responsibilities in the complex, real world today.

As every major church historian documents, "the great majority of Americans in the eighteenth century were outside any church, and there was an overwhelming indifference to religion." Dr. William Warren Sweet wrote (Revivalism in America) that "taking the colonies as a whole, the ratio of church membership was one to 12." Dr. Robert R. Handy states, "No more than ten percent of Americans in 1800 were members of churches" (A History of the Churches in the United States and Canada).

As a result of the vast labor and the rough, uncouth hardships encountered by the pioneers, frontier communities became coarse and partially wild societies, with little or no social restraints, and filled with low vices and brutal pleasures. The West was described as "the land of sinful liberty" with large sections of the frontier society debauched and whiskey-sodden. The violence and anarchy resulted in a breakdown of respect for emerging civic authority.

The Three Great Awakenings in America -- the first in the 13 colonies from 1725-1770; the second, West of the Alleghenies, 1770-1830; the third, 1865-1899, with the rise of city evangelism -- were all responses to the widespread decline of religion and the degenerated moral conditions of the times. We may well be in the midst of The Fourth Great Awakening today.

The point is that there are more people affiliated with our churches and synagogues today than any time in the past. And while we face real and serious moral issues in contemporary America and in the troubled world, it serves no useful purpose to imply that we are a generation of moral pygmies when contrasted with our forbears who were supposedly moral giants. Precisely because there are more Americans who are religiously committed today than in the past we are in a far better position to mobilize conscience and moral will to cope constructively and realistically with our many problems. That means that religious and civic leadership needs to speak to our better selves rather than evoke paralyzing images of our worst selves.

A vital lesson that should be derived from our past is that when confronted with the massive moral challenges of the frontier societies, evangelical leaders -- to their everlasting credit -- launched a wide range of moral reform movements as voluntary expressions of the churches. Organized benevolence ("The Benevolence Empire" these efforts were called) were created for the poor and downtrodden, anti-slavery groups, temperance societies, aid to youth, and the military. With the exception of the Prohibition legislation calling for total abstinence from alcoholic beverages adopted as the 18th amendment in 1920, the anti-evolution law, and the Puritan Sabbath -- all of which subsequently collapsed and resulted in general disillusionment and loss of morale -- all of the great moral reform movements were effected through internal, voluntary church resources, rather than through legislative means of dominating the government or the nation's political machinery.

3) Several "New Christian Right" spokesmen have asserted or implied that "the Founding Fathers" of our nation perceived America as "a Christian Republic." If you check their writings, you will find that such assertions contradict everything Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and others stood and fought for.

Thus, Thomas Jefferson wrote in his Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom -- which became the basis for the First Amendment -- "Almighty God hath created the mind free, and that all attempts to influence it by tempt or punishments or burns or by civil incapacitations tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion."

The exercise of religion, Jefferson added, is "a natural right" which has been infringed by "the impious presumption of legislators and rulers" to set 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."

In his Notes on Virginia, Jefferson stated, "The rights of conscience we never submitted, we could not submit. We are answerable for them to our God ... Subject opinion to coercion; whom will you make your inquisitors? Fallible men; men governed by bad passions, by private as well as public reasons. And why subject it to coercion? To produce uniformity. But is uniformity of opinion desirable? No more than of face and stature."



I would commend such writings of our Founding Fathers to the Rev. Bailey Smith and others who share his views about uniformity of conscience and religion. Rev. Smith's utterance about "God not hearing the prayer of a Jew" is not only religiously presumptuous and morally offensive; it is dangerous to the future of our democratic pluralistic society. He is saying not only that the Jewish people have been living a religious lie for 4,000 years across 30 civilizations; he is also saying that because they are religiously invalid there is no place for them at Presidential inaugurations or political conventions, and ultimately, no legitimate place for them in American democratic society. Some evangelical pastors spoke such theological obscenities about the Jews in Nazi Germany.

It is encouraging to us that literally hundreds of Baptist pastors, Christian seminary faculties and lay people have issued statements repudiating his narrow views as un-Christian and un-American.

4) The campaign by some members of the "New Christian Right" to elect "born-again Christians" only to public office is anathema to everything American democracy stands for. It violates Article 6 of the United States Constitution which forbids the exercise of "a religious test" for any citizen running for public office. The American people must repudiate that anti-democratic practice. Candidates must continue to be judged on the basis of their competence, their integrity, and their commitment to the common welfare. That is the American way.

5) The most effective critique of "single politics" campaigns and candidates is provided by the leading Evangelical journal, Christianity Today (Sept. 19, 1980):

"Moral Majority and Christian Voice appear to emphasize the first three principles of Evangelicals for Social Action more than the others (that is, the family; every human life is sacred (abortion); religious and political freedom are God-given inalienable rights). The Bible deals with all of them. In fact, probably more space in the Bible is devoted to calls for justice and the care for the poor than to the fact that human life is sacred, though none can deny that both are Biblical mandates. The concerns of the religious lobbies will appeal to a broader range of Christians to the extent that they emphasize these other equally biblical principles of justice, peace, stewardship of our resources, and care for the poor, as well as profamily and prolife issues. It is a case of "these ye ought to do but not to leave the others undone." Too narrow a front in battling for a moral crusade, or for a truly biblical involvement in politics, could be disastrous. It could lead to the election of a moron who holds the right view on abortion."

6) Many of us are concerned about the militant apocalyptic style of some "New Christian Right" spokesmen. This mentality dates back to antiquity when in every century where there was vast social disarray and disorientation, there emerged a widespread yearning among the masses, especially the poor and disinherited, for a Messianic savior joined by an Emperor of the Last Days who would relieve society of its oppression and moral decay and usher in the Millenium "in which the world would be inhabited by a humanity at once perfectly good and perfectly happy" (Norman Cohn, The Pursuit of the Millenium).



This revolutionary apocalypse was dominated by eschatological phantasies of a new Paradise on earth, a world purged of suffering and sin, a Kingdom of Saints. A prodigious final struggle would take place between the hosts of Christ and the hosts of the Antichrist through which history would attain its fulfillment and justification.

Before the Millenium could dawn, however, misbelief had to be eliminated as a prelude to realizing the ideal of a wholly Christian world. In the eyes of the crusading Messianic hordes (which began to form in the Middle Ages), the smiting of the Moslems and the Jews was to be the first act in that final drama which was to culminate in the smiting of the Prince of Evil (Satan, the Devil).

Much of the present "New Right" public discussion of issues seems to be characterized by that traditional scenario of political conflict between "the children of light" and the "children of darkness." There is too much demonology in the current discussion which appears to consign political candidates to being demolished as "satanic" -- the moral hit lists with "zero ratings," "secular humanists standing at the side of satan." Reasoned, civil debate in an open democracy requires another, higher order of discourse.

One has a sense that some "New Right" advocates perceive America as if it were a vast camp revival meeting whose characteristic method was to plunge into anguish the sinner over the state of his soul, then bring about a confession of faith by oversimplifying the decision as a choice between a clear good and an obvious evil. The Civil War was rendered all the more intransigent and destructive

Marc H. Tanenbaum  
"New Evangelical Right"

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by each side claiming that God was on their side, and by portraying the other side as "infidel" and "atheist." A mature America deserves a far more balanced and thoughtful method to analyze its problems and to formulate its responses; anything less than that is an insult to the intelligence of the American people.



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## Evangelicals Of 'New Right' Denounced

An ecumenical group of religious leaders yesterday denounced the political activity of the "New Right evangelicals," saying it is a threat to both church and state.

Jimmy R. Allen, past president of the Southern Baptist Convention and now president of its radio and television commission, said there is a "clear and present danger to the health and well-being of both the church and the state involved in religious and political extremism."

Allen was joined at a news conference by Rabbi Marc H. Tanenbaum, national interreligious affairs director of the American Jewish Committee; Monsignor George G. Higgins of the Catholic University of America, and Charles V. Bergstrom, executive director of the office for governmental affairs of the Lutheran Council in the USA.

"One doesn't have to be doctrinaire in his interpretation of the principle of religious freedom and the separation of church and state to be put off, indeed to be frightened, by this kind of political extremism," Higgins said.

# Protestants, Catholics, Jews *are interfaithly* Attack Christian Far Right 10.7.80

By Marjorie Hver  
Washington Post Staff Writer 15

A group of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish religious leaders yesterday criticized efforts of the Christian far right to mobilize a Christian vote in the political campaign.

"Religious and political extremism produce a no-win situation" for everyone, said the Rev. Dr. Jimmy R. Allen, past president of the Southern Baptist Convention and currently head of that denomination's massive radio and television operation.

"Churches lose because the anticlerical anger roused by such activities increases harassment by various political leaders at every level of political life," he said. "The religious message loses because its voice is lost in the din of political disagreement."

If the extremists win at the polls, Allen said, "government loses because the deals made with religious leaders put people in power representing a narrow sectarian point of view on matters vital to all the public."

Southern Baptist sources have said that a group of evangelicals met with Republican presidential nominee Ronald Reagan during his visit to a Dallas religious-political convention in August and received a promise from him to appoint right-wing evangelicals to office, in return for their political support. A Reagan spokesman confirmed that the evangelical leaders had met with the candidate and that the question was discussed, but the spokesman said no commitments were made.

While upholding the right of right-wing evangelicals such as the Rev. Dr. Jerry Falwell to express their viewpoint, the churchmen yesterday cited the dangers of efforts to "Christianize" government and politics. The Rev. Dr. Charles V. Bergstrom, director of the Lutheran

Council's Office for Governmental Affairs, said, "It is arrogant to assert that one's position on a political issue is 'Christian' and that all others are 'un-Christian,' 'immoral' or 'sinful.' There is no 'Christian' position; there are Christians who hold positions."

Bergstrom said it is "unnecessary and unbiblical for any church group or individual to seek to 'Christianize' the government or to label political views of members of Congress as 'Christian' or 'religious.'"

Msgr. George Higgins, a consultant to the United States Catholic Conference, called the campaign of the Christian right to create a "Christian republic" in this country "ominous and, particularly for Jews, cause for profound anxiety."

Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, interreligious affairs director for the American Jewish Committee, said the emergence of the new Christian right is of concern to "a great many American Jews" as well as Americans generally. Tanenbaum said "there is too much demonology" in political discussions and assailed what he called the far right's oversimplification of complex political issues.

Several participants in yesterday's press conference, which was organized by Allen, said mainline religious leaders have been reluctant to go public with criticism of the evangelical right for ecumenical reasons.

Higgins, who like the others emphasized that he was speaking only for himself, added: "It's a delicate ecumenical affair. . . I don't want to get into a theological dispute."

On the other hand, Tanenbaum said that Falwell, the Lynchburg, Va., TV evangelist, "has begun to change as issues are raised. There seems to be a learning process going on."

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