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Is There a Religious Revival in America?, 1988.

IS THERE A RELIGIOUS REVIVAL IN AMERICA?

About 9 in 10 Americans believe that there is. They say that you have only to look at ~~television~~ television, at the Jerry Falwells and the Tammy Bakers and Jimmy Swaggarts, not so much at their collective sins, as at the public their programs entice. Some of these televangelists, and there are dozens, ~~televangelists~~ have television setups which bring in tens of millions of dollars a year.

When I pressed ^{people} further and asked, what evidence is there of a religious revival in your own life, then there's a good bit of hemming and hawing and the admission, "not much." Religious revival, if it exists, is not here but somewhere out there.

* ~~But~~ Now can anyone doubt that there is a religious revival when a former televangelical preacher like Pat Robertson can run a presidential campaign, the most monied campaign of them all?

Most of us are under the impression that there is a rise of religious interest. Collegians report they are visited in their college dorms by neatly dressed members of the campus crusade for Christ who offer them community, hope, warmth and Christ. Every day on television you see someone being interviewed, speaking of having had a bout with drugs or liquor or a bad marriage and having come through because he or she ~~found~~ found the Christ and consecrated his life to him.

Almost every day in our papers there is a report of some church group, usually in a small town, making it difficult for the local school board to operate or arguing with the local library board as to what books they may buy. A recent investigation of ~~the~~ book purchasing policies by the State Board of Education in California showed that every major publisher of high school science texts had fudged the chapter on evolution. Generally, equal time was given to what fundamentalists call creationism -- the claim that Genesis 1 is scientifically true, a claim which might lead the student to assume that Charles Darwin and his scientific heirs were simply engaged in guess work, ~~that~~^{SINCE} creationism can claim equal or higher authority -- the authority of God.

There are even cities in the United States where someone has published a Christian yellow book, a telephone directory of Christian merchants, bankers and the like so that their folk can deal only with their folk.

There has never before been a presidential campaign where two of the major candidates were ministers. This is Jesse Jackson's second time around. The issue of being a minister in politics rests rather comfortably on his back. The black church has always been a conservative community except in matters of politics where it is the political arm and vehicle for black activism. I have not seen any criticism or concern with Jackson because of his religious commitments, though he, too, is a member of an evangelical order.

This is due to the fact that Jackson, over the last 8 or 10 years, has made himself so visibly a part of the American political constellation that most people no longer tend to think of him as a minister.

Pat Robertson, of course, resigned his 700 Club association to run for the presidency, but its ideals are still his. They are: the United States must be a Christian democracy, the enemy are the humanists and the atheists, who ~~they~~ are eager to corrupt the young minds of the nation ^{AND} ~~they~~ are rather successful in doing so because they control most of the school boards in the nation and, therefore, hold sway over what our children are taught. One of Robertson's major aims is to recapture the schools from the 6 percent of Americans who presumably govern school policy today. Every school day ought to be introduced by prayer.

He has also promised to shut down our government if any aid is provided for planned parenthood or any group that encourages abortion.

There's more: The evil empire is actually evil. We must do what we can to reconstitute the exile government in Nicaragua. All members of the eastern establishment, particularly those who belong to the Council of Foreign Affairs and the Trilateral Commission, must be removed from any government position which they now occupy.

To the evangelicals the foreign enemy is communism and the domestic enemy is something called secular humanism. What do they mean by secular humanism? They mean the secular university. They mean the whole secular and critical apparatus of modern thought.

They doubt that the human mind can work through and reason out an adequate and noble philosophy of life or moral code. Only God's way is the right way and God's way is set out black and white in the Bible.

Robertson's campaign is interesting on several levels. First, it gives an indication of the political agenda of the evangelicals: a strong America dependent upon no one, Russia treated as a satanic empire, nuclear missiles in Cuba pointed directly at the heart of the United States which must be removed. One is tempted to laugh at some of his ~~more~~ wild^{er} imaginations. Yet, Robertson and his clique are able to summon a surprising large number of people. In every state of the union his people are crossing party lines to vote for him and are doing so out

of the conviction that he stands for their values and their hopes.

There is something for us to worry about in this message. When he isn't careful, Robertson speaks of Christian values rather than American values, and if he doesn't speak of them his campaign literature certainly holds Christian values to be first and foremost.

We have now had two successive presidencies in which religion played a major role. Jimmy Carter with his highly visible prayer breakfasts always found time to teach Sunday school. He spoke for those who felt a need for a national religious and spiritual renewal.

Ronald Reagan from the beginning made overtures to this group and won them over. I did not believe that I would ever hear a president who had just come into office and had sworn to uphold the Constitution, encourage the passing of a Constitutional amendment requiring morning prayer in the public schools. There is, after all, the separation doctrine. Nor did I ever believe that I would hear a president discussing foreign policy in terms right out of the Book of Revelations, in terms of Armageddon, the struggle of the godly against the evil empire.

Given this mix of evangelism and politics and its ability to satisfy the media's appetite for pictures and intriguing stories, it is not surprising that when we look at the situation

we feel this a time of religious revival. But when we look for evidence of a broad scale religious revival, it becomes harder to find. Indeed, there is evidence of diminished interest in religion. Between 1970 and 1980 affiliation and membership fell in the mainline Protestant churches. The Presbyterian church lost 19 percent of its membership, the Congregational church 17 percent, Episcopalians 15 percent, the United Church of Christ 11 percent, the United Methodist 9 percent. In 1970 3 out of 4 Americans affirmed some kind of allegiance to a religious group. By 1980 that number had diminished to 67 percent.

There has been some membership growth in the Roman Catholic community, but those who study such matters find that this growth is due almost entirely to two factors: the increased rate of immigration from Latin and South American countries and Southeast Asia and the large families of the first generation. // Parochial school enrollment declined by 54 percent between 1965 and 1985 while the Catholic population of the United States grew from 25 to 29 percent.

Sociologists who study patterns of Catholic religious practice and discipline point to a steady downturn in the numbers of those who attend weekly mass. Between 1965 and 1985 regular attendance dropped from about 80 percent to about 50 percent. demography is set by Southern Baptists, Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists.

In the same period of time the number of those leaving religious orders grew significantly. Sociologists also report a large scale indifference to church teachings about birth control, abortion and divorce, particularly among the young. In a recent study of Catholics 30 years of age and younger it was found that only 9 percent accepted the doctrine of papal infallibility.

The resurgence of religious activity and interest among conservative congregations, Protestant and Catholic and also Jewish, rests on two factors - a high birth rate and the strength of their convictions. If you look at the population of the orthodox day schools in Cleveland or elsewhere you will find that families of 4, 6, or even 7 or 8 children are normal. The same demography is set by Southern Baptists, Mormons and Seventh Day Adventists.

If you look at our Reform school rosters you will find on average at most 2 children in a family. The mainline Protestant churches, like non-orthodox Jewry, are simply not reproducing themselves. The average Presbyterian family has less than 2 children ~~AND~~ Not all young Presbyterians have families. The average evangelical family has 4-5 children. Similar statistics exist between us and the right wing of the Orthodox Jewish community. ¶ The Evangelicals and charismatics do not represent a broad scale religious awakening so much as an increased energy and confidence of the more conservative religious groups, ~~in family and in activity~~

Another reason for the popularity of conservative churches derives from their ability to provide a strong and warm sense of community. The satisfying sense of being part of a disciplined community in an undisciplined, morally lax world is enticing. Many of these communities feel morally superior to those outside and insist that we join their truth because their truth is the only truth and their way the only way. If you are raised in a home in which doing your own thing is held to be the absolute value you may rebel against that feeling of being cast out on your own and want the warmth of community.

In earlier years the theology of these groups was not to involve themselves in politics. Now all that has changed and they have an unexpectedly strong impact on the political process---the anti-abortion campaign, the anti-pornography campaign, the campaign →

to reestablish prayer in the public schools, and the like. Because they are true believers they are crusaders and so rather than engage in the regular give and take of politics they go directly to the jugular and tend to be uncompromising.

In contrast to the dismal membership records of the mainline churches between the 1970's and the first part of the 80's the Evangelical and fundamentalist groups like the Nazarenes, the Church of God, the Seventh Day Adventists and the Southern Baptists increased their numbers by 50, 60 or 80 percent. The Mormons have been increasing for several decades by 6 percent a year.

How did this happen? These churches offer what the liberal churches seem not to and to a certain degree cannot -- certainty. They know what is true// They teach what is true.// The Bible is literally the word of God.// They are confident of their promise.// They accept the proposition that he who believes in the Christ and only he who believes in him will have peace of mind and health and happiness and a place in heaven.// Their congregations provide a fraternity of like-minded people, a warm and happy fraternity, mostly lower middle class and middle class, largely white, midwestern and southern. They replicate the small town and compact village which was once so secure and such a comfortable place to live.

Political activity is not new for religious groups. What is new is that the most active and effective religious groups have taken positions with which we, the once politically active and effective, are uncomfortable. In the early post World War ² years the mainline churches and an increasing number of liberal Catholics and Jews labored long and hard for social welfare legislation, voters' rights, civil rights acts, and later the E.R.A. **LATER** These same groups ~~now~~ sponsor ^{ED} the Sanctuary Movement and the peace marches. In those days we didn't worry that much about the separation doctrine. We simply put these activities down as civic duty.

~~Position~~ **Position**

The liberal ~~position~~ was: welfare programs would hasten the coming of the Kingdom of God. The nuclear freeze movement would hasten peace. Peace would hasten the day when every man might live under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make him afraid. We were working for the good of the nation and could not be faulted for being politically active.

We no longer have the political field to ourselves, and I can assure you that the Jerry Falwells of the world, the leaders of the religious right, have exactly the same attitude toward their activities as we have toward ours. They, too, are serving God and not parochial interests.

We no longer turn out an army of the committed. They can and do. They are fierce crusaders. Their agenda is a different one than ours. They see their responsibilities to God in a far more personal light. A different set of issues has arisen, issues which involve personal status and private feelings. The pressures of daily life and the confusions of our day have made many concentrate on their private lives, the safety of their homes and their children, the sanctity of their marriages, and just getting through the day. The social action commitment is no longer a sufficient definition of religious life.

Over the last 4 decades the liberal churches and synagogues have been busy trying to save the world. The world has proven more difficult to save than we originally imagined. Power is obstinate. Daily living has become more complicated. ~~The issue now is first things first.~~

The issues today start with the individual and go from the individual to the community rather than, as previously, from the community to the individual.

Many have found that the liberal churches and synagogues do not speak effectively to their needs. For the past decade^s in ~~my city~~ MY CITY, ~~the liberal community became~~ the liberal community became deeply involved in the desegregation of public education and busing, the war on poverty, racial justice, and the peace movement. The liberal churches were able to mobilize large numbers

of people for these noble activities, but they found that their pews on Sunday morning were emptying out. The specific needs of their congregants were not being satisfied. We were so busy creating new worlds we forgot the close world where people live every day, the world to which the evangelical speaks directly and immediately.

There were signs of this need as early as 30 to 40 years ago. No one expected that an evangelist like Billy Graham would be able to fill football stadiums with people eager for his message, but he did. In those days Billy did not preach a social gospel. He did not encourage busing or nuclear freeze. He spoke of loneliness, alienation, the grace of God's love.

fashioned moralities, the so-called traditional American way.

He spoke of moral confusion, family disintegration, and the saving power of faith. He spoke of the family, of loyalty to one's marriage vows, of the values of traditional Christian morality. He offered people salvation, to be reborn in Christ. He told them that if they find grace and the strength of faith now, they will be able to manage their problems, whatever they may be.

He spoke with confidence of a church which held fast to traditional myths, a church which affirmed the Bible as the inerrant word of God, and emphasized the magic and mystical power of faith to save. He never spoke without a Bible in his hand. He spoke for and to those who had been conditioned to believe in the small-town, old-fashioned moralities, the so-called traditional American way.

He insisted that the modern had lost his way because he had abandoned these old-fashioned values.

Many Americans are no longer confident they can manage on their own. They are confused by the materialism and the permissiveness that the media photographs and catalogs. These have been bruising and confusing years, years of traumatic social change, with the gender revolution and the so-called sexual revolution leading the way, alcohol and drugs are everywhere, and every excess is being defended by someone.

Within a generation or so we went from the extended family to the nuclear family and now we seem to have gone from the nuclear family to the two-wage-earner family and to the single-parent family. Marriages were breaking up at an unconscionable rate.

To many the old ways began to seem better than the new, a quieter world, a world of home, family, family values. They found their salvation in religion. Religion offers a sense of balance, a sense that one can cope, that there are institutions of healing, and there is help available in the warmth of the community.

In the evangelical frame of reference man is a sinner. A sinner can always throw his cares upon the Lord and invite repentance by praying for forgiveness. It did not matter particularly what the preacher did. It's what he said and the drama of what he said.

It's a heady feeling when you feel yourself part of a group of decent-minded folk who will soon take over the country and cleanse it of sin. The depths of a man's religious needs can be shown by the indifference of millions to clear evidence of misuse of church funds as well as ^{or} personal degradation by some of the better known pastors.

~~Jimmy Swaggart is a case in point. His Board, the Board of the Louisiana Assembly of God, had originally met the news of his various peccadilloes by slapping him on the wrist and imposing a 3-month preaching suspension. If I or any other leader of a mainline church or synagogue were to do what Jimmy Swaggart did we would be out on our ear, but these folks have a strong sense that God forgives a sinner, particularly if he will confess his sins and is a noted preacher.~~

These folks are white. They come from ~~a~~ small town^s or closely-knit neighborhoods. Many of these folk are educated ^{but} ~~but~~ unsophisticated. They feel they must reject the worldliness, the vanity and sophistication all about them in order to save themselves and their children.

To accomplish this they have to revive the good old certainties they had known in their childhood, to turn the clock back, to build a protective wall around themselves from all that is urbane and challenging. For many that wall ^{is} ~~was~~ built out of the bricks of ~~the~~ conservative evangelical church doctrine; ~~and~~ ^{and} Television spectacles packaged with panache, became their religious rituals.

The mainline churches have not been abandoned by their members. For the most part those who have belonged remain loyal. The children, however, found few reasons to join. When asked what the church represents, most said good works and noble visions. Well, then, why not join? How would giving time to the church make a difference in our lives? Marxists and agnostics now join us in our causes, ^{they say.} We don't have to believe to be committed, so why bother with the churches?

* * *

Let me offer a theological perspective on these events. The agenda of the liberal synagogue and church was largely shaped by a turn-of-the-century theology which theologians call post-millennarian. Basic to this perspective is the confidence that humankind has reached the point where we have the

tools and the knowledge necessary to build a kingdom of God on earth. Man, not God, is really in control of human destiny. // In post-millenarian theology the need for God is more philosophic than immediate. We are not waiting for the Second Coming nor the coming of the messiah. The emphasis is on social action and ecumenism and interfaith work.

* * *

A conservative clergyman told me sometime ago: Where there are questions there is no faith. Where there is faith there are no questions. I happen not to believe this. I have questions. Faith leaves me with many serious questions and it is the existence of these questions which forces me to lead a life that seeks to be compassionate and understanding, which allows me to see the good in another's faith as well as in my own.

The liberal churches played a major role in the political and social reform movements of the past century, but, unfortunately, they have not been able to fully understand the personal needs of today. They were so busy building the brave new world they neglected man's spiritual needs. So we see ~~such a large number of~~ youngsters who cross the globe in search of the ultimate guru and peace of mind; ^{OR} ~~and the~~ ~~the~~ ~~youngsters who stay at~~ ~~home~~ go to Israel and join a Baal Teshubah yeshivah, a yeshivah which is designed to take the child raised in a liberal home and train him in an orthodox way.

A cold world needs a warm faith.//
 A confused world longs for certainty//
 A troubled world thirsts for hope.//
 The conservative church satisfies these
 spiritual appetites. The liberal
 church does not. Clergy trained in ~~the~~
 disciplines of modern scholarship
 cannot offer the simple answers and
 unconditional guarantees people thought
 they needed. The liberal cannot set
 reason aside.

Take a simple question. What does
 Judaism believe about immortality?
 Through the ages there have been any
 number of beliefs: From Sheol, the
 unmediated underworld of the Bible, to
 personal resurrection and the immortality
 of the soul. Resurrection of the dead
 was a primary principle of medieval
 Judaism. Today there is great doubt
 among many whether there is any other



immortality than that which we establish through our acts. // We cannot answer such a question today simply by quoting the past. Many people, however, do not want to hear the doubts. They want answers. They want a religion which gives them answers and they want the comfort of a caring community.

One of the surprising facts about the renewal of activity among the conservative churches is that they are far ahead of the liberal churches in accommodating modern technology. They learned early how to use the massive power of television. Years ago the Federal Communications Commission mandated stations to allocate a certain number of hours to public service. The liberal churches and synagogues were satisfied with what was offered: 6 o'clock on Sunday morning, 11 o'clock on Saturday night. Beggars could not be choosers.

No one, in any case, had the money to purchase prime time and it seemed wrong to set ourselves up as hucksters, using air time to shill for money to buy more air time.

Then the evangelists came along and they had no such scruples. They came out of the revival tents. They had a long history of collecting money for miracles. They bought prime time. They used much of it to shake down their air audience for money to pay its costs. This air time has made them extremely visible. It also showed that religion was more than the hush of solemnity. The evangelical religious programs are entertainments, dazzle and glamor, ~~at that~~ a passive experience, viewing ~~and watching~~ rather than participating, but for many a wholly satisfying one.

In some ways the conservative churches were smarter than we ^{were.} We forgot that when religion ceases to be a spectacle, it ceases to have broad appeal. The medieval mass was a spectacle. In fact, drama originated in the church. The audience likes to watch a preacher who looks like a movie star and is backed by a glittering Cathedral of Tomorrow with a 200-voice choir. If it is satisfying to them, they will forgive him his failings as they would those of a movie star. The Swaggarts and the Bakers have discovered that man has an infinite capacity to be foolish. Why not? They saw the preacher lay his hands upon the infirm and watched them cast away their crutches. How can they doubt the power of faith? It works. Seeing is believing.

brought down the gold tablets that

In the past decades Americans have moved away from optimism to sobering realism. They realize that planet earth was and will continue to be a dangerous, conflicted place. They realize that many international problems have no quick solutions, and possibly no solutions.

Unfortunately, the liberal church and synagogue cannot draw on traditions which they know are the truth. The liberal synagogue no longer believes in the myths rabbinic Judaism has been based on, that Moses received the commandments on Mount Sinai. Liberal Christianity no longer ~~really~~ believes that the son of God literally died on the cross that they might be forgiven for Adam's sin. But the Mormons really believe in an angel named Moroni who brought down the gold tablets that →

JOSEPH

~~Smith~~ Smith found and translated. The Falwells and the Robertsons really believe the Bible is literally and inerrantly the word of God.

Evangelism and the conservative church offer certainty and encourage people to accept specific disciplines. They envelop the believer in a way of life which he can accept as consecrated. Life is difficult, but at least he knows where he is going, and if he sins God will forgive.

We should not be surprised that the churches with the strongest disciplines are generally the most successful. The Mormons require that young people not smoke or take drugs or alcohol or drink any caffeine. They must devote 2 years of their lives to missionary activity. Adults must tithe.

Members are encouraged to marry young and to have large families. The elders are to be obeyed.

Jews had a similar revivalist movement 200 years ago, Hasidism. Hasidism had its televangelists. They were called zaddikim. These charismatics preached the truth. They healed and they prayed. They gave advice and spoke with authority. They reaffirmed the traditional values of family. They created a new community based on the table of the zaddik. He knew how to live so that their prayers might be answered and followed their prayers by celebration and dance, song, the warmth of a highly emotional experience. Worship was considered the foretaste of Paradise and proved magnetic to many. But there was a problem.

not provide them the encouragement and the warmth that they need.

The Hasid was confident that ^{the} ~~the~~ ^{of his ZADIK} ~~that~~ he asked had been properly answered, but the answer was often a lie. He may have been told, God will heal, when he needed to be told, go and see a doctor. If he asked, should I go to America, the answer was most often, no. Why shouldn't he go? In America he would be away from his spiritual resource, the zaddik. The zaddik would have lost a contributor. Yet, had he come to America he and his family might have escaped the Holocaust.

Today the Hasidic world, like most of the right wing churches, raises a wall around itself, a wall within which there is warmth, reassurance and community. This world appeals to some youngsters who feel that they live in a world which does not provide them the encouragement and the warmth that they need.

The need itself is so great that some of these young folk give up the opportunity for a normal life to live with members of their sect in a closed, close-knit community.

~~It would be wrong to dismiss what has happened as another evidence of mankind's infinite capacity for foolishness.~~ A great deal is good in the conservative faith. We must learn to measure the power of religion and its verifiability by its ability to move people. We must turn the synagogue and church into institutions which touch many more areas of our lives, where the ~~values~~ ^{NEEDS} and hopes of our day are spoken to directly and effectively. If we don't do this we will find our young people stealing away, one by one, either into indifference or into black-hat orthodoxy.

The difference between the conservative church ^{& SYNAGOGUE} and the liberal *ONES* ~~church, between the halachic synagogue~~ and ~~the liberal synagogue~~, is that liberals place the burden of defining duty on the individual rather than on the priest or the rabbi or the tradition. But make no mistake about it. Any creed that calls itself Jewish must have disciplines. There is a right and there is a wrong. There is our duty to family, to kiddushim, the sanctity of the marriage vows. There is the responsibility of parents to their children even at the expense of business or professional time. And there is the discipline of social justice.

not necessarily presage an end to American religious pluralism. The numbers and powers of the conservative church must not be exaggerated.

To Jews it is obvious that the conservative theology presents certain dangers: The stridency of those who demand that Christians deal only with Christian merchants or elect only born-again Christians or the stridency of the minister who several years ago said that God does not hear Jewish prayer.

Still, we ought not to delude ourselves, in spite of a shared social agenda, that our interests are supported by those of the liberal Christian camp. The ~~positions of the National~~^{WORLD} Council of Churches positions on Israel are hardly encouraging. ^{AND} The surge of the conservative churches ~~has been~~ does not necessarily presage an end to American religious pluralism. The numbers and powers of the conservative church must not be exaggerated.

They are no more than 8 percent of the population.

If we want Judaism to be meaningful to our children, and to derive benefit from it for ourselves, we must pay far more attention to that side of the tradition to which we have paid the least attention in recent years, the needs of the spirit, the realms of personal value and personal morality, the nature of religious duty. We need to offer the individual a sense of steady purpose and hope and to do so colorfully and compellingly, yet remain open to the world and committed to social justice.

The sages taught: Sanctify yourself and then sanctify others. Seek spiritual renewal in your congregation, but do not abandon the proud record we have of social justice and social action.