

RELIGION AND POLITICS:REAL AND PHANTOM CONCERNS

It might be instructive to quote from the beginning of an article that was written by David Danzig in *Commentary* just about 20 years ago, in April of 1962:

"Early in February of this year (1962), a group of leading Protestant ministers and laymen in Dallas, Texas, were invited to form the core of a local chapter of 'Christian Citizen,' a new national organization whose announced aim is to train Christians in the techniques of practical politics."

The purpose of the "Christian Citizen" organization was "to foster Christian principles in the nation's government and to combat an increasing sense of futility and apathy in America." Qualifications for membership required that the recruits must give testimony of their personal experience with Christ -- and accept the Bible as the infallible word of God. These people would be organized as a bloc and thus "participate effectively in the nation's political life."

Ideologically, beyond generally bringing religion back into American life, there were described two kinds of goals, for this fundamentalist political movement some twenty years ago: On the international scene, to combat America's decline and revive an "Americanist" spirit. Secondly, to "abolish the welfare state .. which was reshaping America in a different image." Does all this sound familiar two decades later?

David Danzig commented: "It remains clear that large numbers of fundamentalists *are* being mobilized, and that their religious and regional conservatism is converting readily into the ideology of the radical right and swelling the chorus of reactionary and apocalyptic voices in the land."

Well, that "swelling chorus" of voices came to nothing. Indeed these forces were swept aside completely by the swell of American history. There ensued perhaps the lowest ebb of "Americanist" spirit in the country's history. And, it was in the years following the formation of this particular fundamentalist political movement, that the American welfare state really came to fruition. Holding both population and inflation constant -- in other words, in terms of per capita expenditures and constant dollars, social welfare expenditures quadrupled in those ensuing 20 years.

So the fundamentalist right-wing movement did not live up to its billing and fell on its face two decades ago. There may be a couple of points to be taken from that, none of which have to do with the growth of fundamentalism, which has been steady but moderate.

What factors might have changed? Well, the fundamentalist, evangelical population may have become more politically right-wing than it was then, or the rise of television may have had some effect. Or, the changes in the circumstances of the American society may have made a radical difference.

Before examining those factors of possible change -- I would like to briefly examine another factor -- a Jewish factor which might be relevant. I just hope I can make myself clear. I think Jews constantly live in the way of harm. Jews are especially vulnerable to the failures in modern society. We are saying exactly that, when we say that the fate of Jews is the litmus paper for a civilized society. Jews would be insane, out of touch with reality, if they did not have some night-mares as a point of reference. But it is also a form of insanity to take the night-mare for the reality.

And American Jews -- for reasons it is not necessary to elaborate here -- tend to suffer from some distortion of social reality along those lines. In a recent survey, we asked Jews whether they thought the neo-Nazi movement in the U.S. was a major and

present danger to the security of the Jews. The majority answered "yes" -- but when queried further, they could only point to the possibility that someday, if things turned bad in this country, a neo-Nazi movement could be dangerous. That latter kind of foreboding, that kind of potential nightmare, that kind of assessment of the dire possibilities of neo-Nazism in the future of America, is realistic and healthy enough in Jews. But to confuse that possibility with the present reality is not healthy.

We might pose a spectrum, on one end of which sits Chicken Little, crying "The sky is falling, the sky is falling" -- while on the other end is Goody Two-Shoes crooning, "The sky can never fall, the sky can never fall." Well, Jews (and, now, scientists) know that they sky can fall -- and that they had better keep it in mind -- but that doesn't mean that it is yet Chicken-Little time.

I belabor the point because I think the Chicken Little tendency serves to blunt the analytical quality of the Jewish public affairs mind -- and therefore seriously hinders the ability of the Jews to defend themselves effectively against real sky-falling possibilities.

That Chicken-Little tendency serves to homogenize the dangers. And it serves to divide the world into simple, apocalyptic dichotomies: Israelophobes and Israelophiles -- or even anti-semites and Judeophiles; anti-semites and Israelophiles. Less and less is the world that simple, or reflective of such simple dichotomies. We cannot afford to over-simplify the dangers if we are going to array our defenses effectively against them -- and that caution, I would suggest, applies to our assessment of the evangelical fundamentalist right.

Among the several questions posed earlier were: Has the fundamentalist tendency in this country turned significantly towards the right? Have the circumstances

of the country changed with respect to the potential of that fundamentalist right? These questions are intertwined with each other, and with the larger question: What is the proper role of religion in our political life?

Let us first get rid of the premise that the religious fundamentalist evangelical population of this country is more right-wing on general political issues than the non-fundamentalist population. When we refer to the fundamentalist/evangelical population, we're talking about the considerable number in this country who belong to a fundamentalist denomination, believe in the literal word of the Bible, are born-again Christians, and are interested in evangelizing the rest of the population. Most recently, Gallup asked that population how it felt about a tax rate cut. There was no significant difference between them and the rest of the population (evangelicals: 63%; non-evangelicals 62%). There was no difference between them and the rest of the population, when asked whether we should spend more on defense (evangelicals: 65%; non-evangelicals: 61%). There was no difference between them when asked whether government should spend more or less on welfare (more: evangelicals, 17%; non-evangelicals, 13%. Less: evangelicals, 56%; non-evangelicals, 62%). And there was no difference between them on questions of gun registration, building more nuclear power plants, capital punishment, or the need for government social programs.

You will note that the Moral Majority and the Religious Round Table had enunciated some strong positions on several of those issues. Yet their supposed constituency did not follow them. But, if the politically right wing fundamentalist preachers do not control the fundamentalist/evangelical population of the country -- how about their more specific constituents, those that watch them on TV? A large cadre of such dedicated people could make a difference. A recent study and book by Hadden suggests that the figures for evangelical TV-watching are highly inflated. But in

any case, a Los Angeles Times national survey last September found that, on the same kind of general political issues, there was no significant difference between TV-watching evangelicals, and non-TV-watching evangelicals -- and therefore between them and the non-evangelicals of the country. About the same number of all three groups, for example, by about a 3 to 1 margin, believed that the Vietnam war was a bad piece of business, and that the U.S. should not upgrade its relations with Taiwan -- contrary to the holdings of their politicized TV preachers.

Of course, there is a difference between evangelicals and non-evangelicals on another sector of issues -- which are of serious concern to Jews -- issues relating to personal morality -- issues which tend to edge over into questions about the direct relationship between government and religion. Thus, in the latest Gallup poll, and in others, the evangelicals of the country are evenly split on the question of banning all abortions, while non-evangelicals are opposed to such a ban by better than a two to one margin. Furthermore, the TV-watching evangelicals are in favor of such a ban by a three to two margin. So the evangelical stance has some leverage on this kind of personal morality question, and the evangelical preachers have presumably some intensifying effect on their TV constituents. Also, there is a significant difference between evangelicals and non-evangelicals in their feeling as to whether homosexuals should be allowed to teach in public schools.

The biggest difference between evangelicals and non-evangelicals is in their other major personal-morality issue -- or, at least they see it as a personal morality issue -- that of prayer in the public schools. While the non-evangelicals of the country are rather evenly split on whether prayers should be required in the public schools, evangelicals are in favor of such a requirement by better than a 4 to 1 margin.

So, the strong indication is that the evangelical/fundamentalist political movement and preachers have little effect on swaying people on the larger political and economic issues, but have some effect on the personal morality issues. How does this translate into the matter of their influencing the election of candidates? Well, the facts, so far, are rather clear on this question as far as national candidates are concerned -- that is Presidential politics or even Senatorial politics. The evangelicals did not vote any differently on presidential or senatorial choices than did the non-evangelicals. These were presumably the political races in which the larger political and economic issues, and the pocketbook issues dominated. This lack of influence applied dramatically to the targeted Senatorial races; even those who lost had declines in votes from the previous election which were exactly the same as the decline in votes for non-targeted Senatorial candidates.

The picture is not so clear for more local races, run on more local issues, including candidates for the House of Representatives. Although there is some evidence that targeted Congressmen did as well as their colleagues elsewhere, it is likely that in a few given local races, the concentrated activity of an activated fundamentalist constituency could have made a difference. Such localized contests are more vulnerable to that kind of activity, the larger issues don't loom so large, and the personal-morality issues can be made to loom larger.

On the whole, however, nationally, the movements such as the Moral Majority and the Religious Round-Table simply did not have much of an impact on candidates. Perhaps there is a clue in the fact that when they were asked last Fall, only 3 per cent of the electorate said they would be more likely to vote for a candidate because that candidate was recommended by a clergyman -- 8 per cent said they were less likely -- most said it wouldn't make any difference.

The sum is that candidate races have been affected by the evangelical/fundamentalist movements and preachers only through the medium of issues which affect the political race. Thus, those races dominated by the larger political and economic issues have not been significantly affected by the evangelical/fundamentalist movements and preachers; in races which are seriously affected by the personal-morality issues, those movements and preachers can have a marginal effect. And, in the arena of issues, with respect to the White House or Congress, these movements have little effect on political and economic issues -- but can have an effect on the limited issues of so-called personal morality. What are the implications of all this, especially for the Jewish community?

To put it bluntly, the first implication is that we should not treat the evangelical religious movement in this country as an incipient fascist movement. Their attitudes just do not warrant such a characterization.

The corollary to that is that we should not treat the evangelical population as though it were captive to the politicized preachers and their movements, such as the Moral Majority and the Christian Round-Table, on general political and economic issues.

A corollary to that corollary is that we should not impute more power to those politicized preachers and movements than they have, on the general issues. That would be mis-targeting, and bad strategy. We could become an active part of a self-fulfilling prophecy.

I say "mis-targeting," in the sense that, if you are unhappy with the political direction this country is taking, it would be a bad mistake to blame it on the evangelical/fundamentalist movements. The political direction of the country reflects the mood change of the American population, which was not subverted by any special

insidious force. The evangelical/fundamentalist political movements did not create that mood, but rather had a free ride on its crest. The conditions of this country created that mood -- problems of inflation, a stagnant economy, and dwindling American prestige.

If anyone wants to redirect the political winds of this country, he would be well advised to address himself to those objective conditions, neither dismissing them nor ascribing our political direction to some group which has illicitly subverted the American consciousness.

It is, of course, true that extremist movements in America's past -- such as the American Protective Association and the KKK -- have been associated with a culturally conservative backlash. And it is true that the evangelical/religious ranks in this country, as much for sociological as for religious reasons, are marked by culturally conservative tendencies, even while they may be supporting economically progressive tendencies. There is always the possibility that this population would form some disproportionate part of a backlash extremist political movement which could develop in radically adverse circumstances in this country sometime in the future.

But it is also true that this evangelical/fundamentalist population never created such an extremist movement, but rather was recruited into it, somewhat disproportionately. And those serious political backlash movements were not created because of evangelical/fundamentalist religious impulses. We always have to be concerned -- more, perhaps than Jews are today -- about the conditions in this country which might be fertile for the growth of such movements -- rather than mistakenly scapegoat this particular population.

And we have to watch for the growth of traditional extremist political movements, with their over-simplified comprehensive solutions, their conspiracy-phobias, their

ethnic targeting -- although if we are really progressive, we will watch out not just for the traditional extremist movements -- but also for the counterpart of the major extremist movements which are gaining sway in the world today, and which come from the left. But the evangelical/religious political movements of today, however offensive they may be to some of us, are simply not on that track.

Not only should we not treat the evangelical/fundamentalist population as though it were an incipient fascist force -- we should not treat the evangelical/fundamentalist political movements and preachers as though they were an incipient fascist force. Indeed, their stands on the larger political and economic issues seem very conservative to many of us. But we are in a period when conventional liberal/conservative positions are in a state of radical evaluation.

That is not a subject we need to explore now, but merely to note, in connection with another observation: extremist movements of the kind we Jews fear were always marked in America with conservative economic and political viewpoints. But that was not the ultimate characterization of extremist movements. The "extremism" of extremist movements always finally referred not to extreme positions on economics -- but on extreme positions with respect to the democratic process. Thus, extremist movements were those which espoused the breaching of democratic rights and procedures. That is what made them extremist.

When David Danzig wrote his piece twenty years ago, the association between extremism and conservative stances was still conventionally valid. And part of that "extremism" -- that breach of democratic procedure -- was typically related to ethnic bigotry. Extremist movements were characterized by that kind of breach of democracy, as well as others. And, indeed, the fundamentalist political movement that he was writing about flirted with such bigotry and anti-semitism, as other such movements had and as some such groups still do. The person organizing that movement in Dallas 20 years ago went out of his way to say that the Christian

anti-Communist Crusade was "doing a fabulous job." Earlier, groups like Gerald Winrod's fundamentalist organization were specifically anti-semitic.

However, it should be noted that the Moral Majority is not featured by that kind of anti-semitism or bigotry. Let's just make a comparison on a common-sense level: Can you conceive of Winrod inviting Jews to join his organization? Can you conceive of Winrod being willing to accept an award from a Jewish organization? Can you conceive of Winrod contributing heavily to a Jewish welfare federation, or politically supporting the State of Israel? Can you conceive of Winrod saying publicly, as Falwell has, "I want to stand with the Jews."

No, if the impact of the evangelical/fundamentalist political movements is anti-Jewish today in some way -- and I think it can be -- it is not the kind of anti-semitism we associate with fascism. And, while the major evangelical/fundamentalist movements have adopted conservative stances, they have just not called for the breaches of democratic procedure which recall political extremism.

Perhaps they seem to come closest to calling for a politically extremist breach of democratic procedure in their campaign against what they consider pornographic and anti-moral material in the media, and even in the libraries. They are sending delegations to the media, and calling for boycotts of advertisers and stations, where they see such material appear.

On that score, I would invoke the image, twenty years ago, of black, hispanic and Jewish organizations, buttressed by clergymen, sending delegations to television and radio stations, and to newspapers, demanding that certain programs and commercials be excised or altered because they broadcast stereotypes and images which were defamatory to certain racial, ethnic and religious groups. For many years, the Jews had a special organizational apparatus in Hollywood, supported by

all the Jewish organizations, whose sole purpose was to monitor movies and TV series in the making, to see whether they were kosher with respect to the images of Jews they broadcast -- and to bring as much pressure as possible if they weren't. The Jews have never been big in announcing boycotts, but they have engaged in some -- and come close in others -- and so have many civil rights groups which included Jews.

Need I recall the public concern of some Jewish groups about Nazi material in the libraries; about playing The Merchant of Venice in schools; about Vanessa Redgrave playing a Jewish victim in a TV movie?

Now, some of us may think that some of those Jewish efforts were mistaken at one time or another. But that's not the point. These Jewish efforts were not, on their face, fascist in nature. People have a right -- sometimes a duty -- to exert citizens' pressure on the media when the latter seem to be going astray. That is, exactly, the democratic procedure. It would, indeed, be a breach of democratic procedure if we were to say that our cause is just, with respect to our pressures on media -- but their cause is not just. The essence of democracy is that any group has a right to decide what they think is just or unjust -- and to exert whatever pressures are constitutionally guaranteed by the right of free expression and the right of free assembly.

That pressure on the media is not, properly speaking, "censorship." Censorship is a word best reserved for those situations in which government attempts to decide what should or should not be printed or shown. And that is where political extremism, the breach of democratic procedure would enter the picture. If there is a group calling for one kind of moral standard in the media, the only proper antidote is for another group to call for a more relaxed (or more stringent) standard for the media. There can be outrage on the issue, but not outrage that a group is exerting pressure out of conscience, or that such pressure is undemocratic. Such pressure is all part of the free marketplace of ideas.

This is a good entree to the general matter of religion in politics -- and a good place -- perhaps none too early -- to start moving away from the Goody-Two-Shoes end of the spectrum. The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights states two propositions: one, there must be freedom of religion and religious expression; two, the state should not establish a religion, or impose one religious expression on everyone. There is a tension between those two provisions. There is another kind of conflict:

According to our laws, everyone has almost an absolute right to publicly express any belief they hold, religious or otherwise. The idea is that conflicting beliefs should be pitted against each other in open debate, and may the better belief win -- the problem in this case being that, by definition, religious belief is undebateable.

A key to the riddle may be found in civil rights experience. Before the Civil War, Southern religious ministers were using the scriptures to support the oppression of blacks; and Northern religious ministers were using the same scriptures to oppose the oppression of blacks. There is, of course, no way to reconcile such a clash of religious belief in the "open marketplace of ideas."

However, in modern America, especially after World War II, the matter was put on another plane. Racial oppression was ruled out of order because it was contrary to constitutional law, and to the purposes and practicalities of our civil society. Now, those matters are debatable. And, after the debate, the laws passed to prohibit racial discrimination did not say a word about what people should believe. The purport of the laws was that you could not violate a person's rights because of group affiliation, even if you hated that group, which you had an absolute right to do.

To look at it from another vantage point: a large number of Israelis have been saying that the First Amendment concept should be applied more often to Israel, which is, within certain bounds, also religiously mixed -- and in which certain fundamentalist religious parties have sometimes been directly making civil law for everybody.

There is, for example, the current controversy in Israel over whether the law of return should be amended by the government to exclude converts to Judaism under the auspices of Reform or Conservative rabbis. But, as the noted Orthodox rabbi, David Hartman, writes: "It is not through (politics) that we must convince Jews that (conversion) should be according to Halacha, but rather through the patient process of education ..."

Thus does Rabbi Hartman strike the simple First Amendment note, wherever it may be applied: religious groups must be free to publicly express their beliefs, without interference, in the pursuit of converts; the civil state machinery must not be used by them to directly impose those religious beliefs on others.

Now, a good case can be made that the better part of the rules of our civil society stem from religious impulse -- even, if you will, from institutionalized religious doctrine. But, procedurally, religion must be a secondary, indirect factor in the making of laws. If the democratic civil political process results in the creation of a kind of moral standard for society, so be it. If a religious force has won its argument in that political process, so be it. The only prohibition is that no religious doctrine shall be automatically or directly made the moral standard for civil society. And there is a practical caveat: for that kind of reason, government should stay as far away as possible from delineating specifics of moral behavior. But even that, finally, must be the fruit of political process.

But then the areas of strong concern the Jews should have about groups like the Moral Majority -- and the issues on which we should concentrate our combat -- stand out sharply:

Jews should have a concern with groups like the Moral Majority trying to establish too precise guidelines of moral behavior in government law. The political fight must be against that.

Jews should have a fundamental concern with groups like the Moral Majority attempting to Christianize America through government law or quasi-official societal practice. The requirement of prayers in the public schools is a prime example of the former. The campaign to support candidates because they are Christian, or because they espouse explicit Christian values is an example of the latter.

These are our specific fights with groups like the Moral Majority. They are important, weighty fights for the Jewish community. They should be fought openly and strongly, with allies, in the political arena, and in the educational arena.

But, in order to be effective, we must make that fight without being diverted by false and phantom issues -- such as the right of religion to speak on political issues ... phantom issues, such as the right of groups to put pressure on the media without being called illicit censors ... phantom issues, such as political subversion of the American public by mighty evangelical/fundamentalist groups -- or of such groups being harbingers of incipient fascism because they espouse conservative causes.

Nor should we treat the evangelical/fundamentalist religious movement as a pariah. We have many allies there, including many on issues where there is joint disagreement with some of the tenets of the Moral Majority.

Nor indeed should we treat the Moral Majority itself as pariah. There is no reason why we should not have dialogue with them -- as long as that dialogue includes a frank statement of our differences with them, as well as of the matters on which we may agree.

If we want to fight conservative tendencies, or right-wing extremist tendencies, we won't find the wellspring in these groups. We would do better, at this time, to address ourselves constructively and preventively to those issues which could form the basis of a significant movement of political extremism.

In other words -- unlike Chicken Little, let us use our energies to fight the real dangers, of which there are plenty, and not phantoms, however titillating they may be.

Working Note

A little experience in holding discussions with evangelical groups on the *local* level, leads to these suggestions:

1. *Expect a culture shock*: Evangelicals typically do *not* accept the legitimacy of Judaism, as do most of the non-evangelical Christians with whom we come into contact. They do *not* and cannot accept the concept that there are many houses in God's kingdom. They do and must believe that Jews cannot be saved from eternal damnation unless they convert. Therefore, they do and must strive to convert and "save" Jews at every opportunity. The most they can promise is not to harass in pursuit of conversion.

Evangelicals typically *do* accept, and cherish, the legitimacy of *Jews* as a people. The ideal, for many of them, would be for the Jews to convert to Christianity, but to maintain their identity, culture, Holy Days (altered, to be sure) and community as God's People.

There is no point in meeting with evangelicals unless you are willing to accept the fact that they are not going to change that basic approach to Jews and Judaism.

2. *Avoid theological debate*: It follows that, except among sophisticated theologians, there is no point to discussing theological matters, beyond information-gathering. What, then?

3. *Emphasize internal, mutual responsibilities:* At best, the evangelicals have the responsibility to conduct educational campaigns *within* the evangelical population with respect to anti-semitism, Israel, etc. The Jewish community has a reciprocal responsibility to educate the Jewish population with respect to the activities and true aspects of the evangelical population.
4. *De-emphasize public joint activity:* At this stage, public joint activity between Jews and evangelicals (public meetings, services, ads, etc.) might just muddy the waters, depending on the locality. Many Jews, at this stage, and many others, might misunderstand, thinking that the evangelicals are doing it in order to convert the Jews -- and that Jews are submitting to it because of their own agenda. (Of course, if evangelicals join larger coalitions with Jews on general social issues, that would be a different matter.)
5. *Cooperation and communication should continue:*
 - a. In order for each community to help the other in achieving their internal educational responsibilities (3 above), there should be occasional meetings between the organized communities -- and a line of communication, for materials, etc.
 - b. Such meetings should have a second, indirect objective: Given the fact that the evangelicals will not and cannot change their premises, perhaps they can, with more intimacy, learn a more *sensitive style* which will avoid the appearance of disrespect towards Jews and Judaism.