

THE ELECTRONIC CHURCH

One could have wandered into that crowd a couple of weeks ago and thought: "This is the biggest pro-Israel demonstration that has ever been held in the nation's Capitol."

There were 200 thousand people present, more than had come to hear the Pope. The glowing references that were occasionally made to Israel were greeted with loud enthusiasm. But there were few Jews in the crowd, and they were more disturbed than pleased.

It was, of course, the "Washington for Jesus" demonstration by evangelical Christians. More specifically, it was created by those evangelical clergymen whose pulpits are mainly in the television stations of the country.

These ministers, and others like them, are generally referred to as "the electronic church." Among them, they own about 1600 radio and TV stations in the country, and have programs on many other stations. No one in the country is further than a flick of the dial away from one or more of their voices.

A meeting of the National Jewish Community Relations Advisory Council (NJCRAC) was held in New York shortly after the Washington demonstration. It brought together, as usual, representatives from the national Jewish organizations, and from many local Jewish communities, including San Francisco. The delegates were uniformly uneasy about the Electronic Church and its evident power.

They agreed that the Electronic Church tended to be markedly pro-Israel -- more so than some mainstream Protestant churches which flirt continually with the P.L.O. One Jewish community reported that an evangelical electronic church had contributed about 300 thousand dollars to the Jewish Welfare Federation. And studies had not generally found overt anti-semitism on electronic church programs. But still the NJCRAC delegates were uneasy. Why?

Some were concerned with the missionary activity of the Electronic Church, as it may affect the Jews. But there is no indication that many Jews have been led astray by these particular Churches. A distinction must be made between these evangelical groups and the smaller cults which are primarily aimed at the Jews. Evangelical Christianity has *always* tried to convert people in order to save their souls -- a proper enough activity if they pursue it by means of above-board religious argument. Jews, by and large, have always been able to resist that argument -- and that's *our* responsibility in any case.

Some were worried about the potential for overt anti-semitism in such a force, even though it does not exist now -- remembering that the largest anti-semitic movement in America was propelled by the early Electronic Church of Father Coughlin in the 1930s.

However, the gravest concern is with the growing linkage between this fundamentalist force, and political life in America: a Moral Majority Inc., which has elected most of the Alaska delegation to the Republican national convention; a Christian Coalition for Legislative Action in Maryland, which has a counterpart in California; a Christian Voice Moral Government Fund, which is trying to defeat a number of "immoral" Congressional delegates.

These fundamentalist forces are the only religious groups which are growing in this country -- and however they may support Israel, or contribute to Jewish Welfare Federations, they are dangerous to our way of life as long as their avowed mission is to make America "more Christian" by political means.

Earl Raab
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The NJCRAC members, along with a number of Protestant and Catholic groups, issued a joint press release attacking the nature of the evangelical movement's intrusion into political life. But people are drawn to this fundamentalist movement because they feel a need for more leadership, faith, hope, national pride -- and, yes, moral and political sanity. Unless the mainstream Christian and Jewish groups can more positively help to provide these qualities, all their press releases will not stem the tide.

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