

Earl Raab

October 30, 1978

THE "P" STEREOTYPE

There is probably no group at which more fun is poked these days than the "P" in WASP: "Protestant."

Talk about stereotypes: Protestants are seen as limp and lifeless, without the flavor that we robust ethnics have. After all, what traditional food do they boast? Boiled beef (flanken?), and, perhaps, at best, Boston baked beans. And they don't even have a colorful mother-tongue. Most of their great-grandparents probably spoke English; they are unable to sprinkle their speech with quaint, proprietary foreign phrases.

Without strange food, picaresque language, exotic roots or passionate traditions, the Protestant just sits quietly on his lawned estate, listening to his blood thin. That's the image.

The reality, however, is that Protestantism, as an historic force, has one of the most important and blood-stirring traditions in modern times. It was the Protestant impulse which re-established the practical importance of the individual, and opened the way for much that is best in our modern life, including political freedom. It was Protestant heroism that established the modern principle of religious liberty.

There is much to complain about in the conduct of Protestants, as there is much to complain about in the conduct of Jews. In both cases, the complaints have to do with the radical departure of Protestants and Jews from their respective religious principles. For Protestants, the inevitable example is the fact that so many German Protestants became part of the Nazi tide. Some Protestant leaders in Germany saw this exactly as a perversion of Protestantism, and fought it as such. Pastor Martin Niemoller, for example, publicly condemned the anti-Jewish policies of the Nazis and in 1933 gathered

2,000 Protestant clergymen who publicly proclaimed their opposition to Nazi repression. Many Protestant clergymen later joined this circle, a number of them, like Niemoller, ending up in prison and concentration camps. But they failed. Indeed, as the German Evangelic Church acknowledged in 1945, the German churches had failed. But the point is that they had failed the historic and religious principles of Protestantism.

The principles of Protestantism were born in the struggle against medieval collectivism, and are antithetical to modern totalitarian collectivism. That is why the Nazis had to crush the classical Protestant churches, and that is why the Soviet Union is trying to do the same. The Baptists in the Soviet Union suffer from the same kind of oppression as the Jews. Many of them are in jails and concentration camps.

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In America, the Protestant and the Jewish communities have stood side by side in the early fight against Nazism, in the current fight against neo-Nazism and in many intervening causes for human freedom and dignity.

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We have stood side by side on so many occasions partly, of course, because we have the same religious roots. But, as historical forces, Protestantism and Judaism have also had a similar stake in spiritual and political freedom. Paul Tillich refers to the Protestant principle of "Theonomy," wherein the ultimate religious meaning of existence shines through all earthly forms of thought and action -- as distinct from "Heteronomy," wherein a specific religion attempts to dominate earthly existence from outside. In that sense, and from our point of view, Protestantism somewhat re-Judaized Christianity.

It is impossible to stereotype Protestants in any way. There are many diverse Protestant churches. There are many diverse Protestant groups, not all of them WASP by any means. But there is a classical Protestant historical tradition. One would hope for

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a resurgence of Protestant pride in that tradition. We all owe a debt to it. One would hope for a revival of classical Protestant principle and vigor in America. We would all benefit from it.