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RELIGION AND THE 1984 ELECTION CAMPAIGN

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The 1984 race for the White House saw a remarkable injection of religion into a national election campaign. This essay will examine the extent to which that occurred, look at the issues and motives involved, and show how it came close to being unparalleled in American history. The role of religion per se as a factor in American politics is not at issue here, because more or less it has always been present. Moreover, the constitutional guarantee to the free exercise of religion contained in the First Amendment reinforces the claim of those citizens who bring religious concerns to bear upon public life that they have the right to do so. The questions under consideration, rather, are whether the religious backers of President Reagan in their enthusiasm exceeded the bounds of propriety and whether this effort was necessary to secure his reelection.

Historical Precedents of Religious Involvement

Religion has frequently been an issue in presidential campaigns. Among the most noteworthy was the 1884 race between James G. Blaine (Republican) and Grover C. Cleveland (Democrat). A New York City preacher had said the Democrats were the party of "rum, Romanism, and rebellion," and this allegedly so angered voters in Irish and German Catholic neighborhoods that they flocked to the polls and made the difference in Cleveland's narrow margin of victory. More recent scholarship has shown, however, that the Republicans in their speeches and legislative actions had for over a decade been exploiting anti-Catholic feelings and thus the party's stance was already well-known to the electorate. One sermon could not have changed things (Lipset and Rabb 1970:75-76; Farrelly 1955).

The 1928 campaign between Herbert Hoover and Alfred E. Smith again saw the religious issue take on an unpleasant character. Many Protestants opposed Smith because he was a Roman Catholic, and the *Christian Century* (1928:1252) called him "the representative of an alien culture, a medieval Latin mentality, of an undemocratic hierarchy, and of a foreign potentate." Smith declared forthrightly that he believed in the absolute separation of church and state, but to no avail. The "solid south" was split for the first time and Hoover triumphed primarily because of religious bigotry, although the current prosperity, Smith's identification with New York City (the symbol of urban corruption and decadence to rural and small-town America), and his opposition to Prohibition were also factors (Lichtman 1979:231).

In 1960 the problem emerged for what many hoped would be the last time. The Protestant opposition to John F. Kennedy was sizable, and Richard Nixon had Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale on his side (Pierard 1980:119-120; 1985 in press). When a group of conservative clergy denounced Kennedy and accused the Roman Catholic Church of meddling in politics, the candidate decided to face the issue head on. Appearing before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association on

September 12, he declared his belief in “an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant nor Jewish . . . , where there is no Catholic vote, no anti-Catholic vote, no bloc voting of any kind,” and affirmed his support for the separation of church and state (*NYT* Sept. 12, 1960; Dulce and Richter 1962:ch. 9-13).

In spite of his victory the involvement of Protestant clerics in politics continued and with it the expression of religious beliefs by public figures. A nascent Christian Right lent its support to the conservative Barry Goldwater, while President Lyndon B. Johnson utilized Billy Graham as his personal spiritual counselor and occasionally as a spokesperson for his policy. Nixon did likewise and at the same time sponsored church services in the White House (Pierard 1980:122-125; Henderson 1972; Hibbs 1972). In 1976 Jimmy Carter openly professed to be a “born-again” Southern Baptist (Carter 1975), and Gerald Ford’s backers belatedly dusted off his religious faith as well. The latter was introduced to a cheering crowd at a joint convention of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) and National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) in Washington (*Sojourners* March 1976:8-10), and the pastor of the largest Baptist church in America, W. A. Criswell of Dallas, endorsed him publicly. In 1980 all three presidential hopefuls, Carter, Reagan, and John B. Anderson were regarded as born-again, and in fact Carter and Anderson possessed long and impressive records as churchmen (Pippert 1978; Anderson 1975; Wead 1980). But by now an unforeseen element had entered into the picture, a political “New Right” which took advantage of the shambles of Watergate to infiltrate and position itself to take control of the Republican party.

The New Christian Right Emerges

A major achievement of the political wirepullers of the New Right was the enlistment of fundamentalist ministers and television evangelists in their cause. The preachers eagerly grabbed at the bait, as most of them were already deeply conservative in their political and social views and this would give them a chance to exercise some real clout for the first time. Through the efforts of Ed McAteer, a sales executive for the Colgate soap firm and Southern Baptist lay preacher who had been involved in the 1976 Republican campaign and then became field director for the Conservative Caucus, New Rightist Howard Phillips (his boss) was placed in contact with Jerry Falwell, a Baptist television preacher from Lynchburg, Virginia. At a meeting in 1979 Phillips persuaded Falwell to form a religio-political movement called the Moral Majority. Joining with him were such right-wing personalities as Robert Billings, Tim LaHaye, and Greg Dixon. In the same year Robert Grant, Richard Zone, and Gary Jarmin brought into being Christian Voice, with backing from singer Pat Boone, Christian Broadcasting Network mogul Pat Robertson, and multi-millionaire author of doomsday books on the Second Coming of Christ, Hal Lindsey. Then, encouraged by the top New Rightists Richard Viguerie and Paul Weyrich, McAteer organized the (Religious) Roundtable, a kind of “trade association” for the New Christian Right that would coordinate and stimulate efforts by evangelicals and fundamentalists who were fighting for “pro-God, pro-family, and pro-American causes” (Liebman and Wuthnow 1983; Bromley and Shupe 1984; Blumenthal 1984).

The Christian Right groups and their sympathizers (but by no means all fundamentalists—the traditional separatists like Bob Jones, Jr. distanced themselves

from Moral Majority style political activism) threw themselves body and soul into the campaign on behalf of Reagan, a man they believed was a godly, evangelical Christian who would bring America back to God. In fact, how a veteran movie actor who was an indifferent churchman at best was transformed into such a great man of faith that Pat Robertson could exclaim with delight, “he is probably the most evangelical president we have had since the Founding Fathers,” is one of the remarkable image building stories of our time (*WSJ* Sept. 18, 1984:1; Pierard 1984:47-56). Many distributed tracts and books extolling his spiritual qualities, Christian Voice and Moral Majority used direct mailings, a media blitz, and voter registration drives to rally conservative believers behind the Reagan standard and minimize the Christianity of the more consistently devout but politically liberal Jimmy Carter.

By now Falwell had edged into the circle of Reagan’s advisers, apparently had some influence in the writing of the anti-abortion and ERA planks in the party platform, and warned against the selection of George Bush as his running mate. Bush did agree to support the platform and thereupon was portrayed as a good Christian. In his acceptance speech Reagan referred to “Divine Providence” making America a refuge for freedom and asked people to join with him in a moment of silent prayer as “we begin our crusade.” McAteer with help from television evangelist James Robison put together a “National Affairs Briefing” in Dallas on August 22. At this loosely structured New Right festival Reagan delivered an address that pleased his audience of 10,000 and concluded with the dramatic phrase: “I know you can’t endorse me, but I want you to know that I endorse you and what you are doing” (Pierard 1983b:1184).

Obviously the candidate welcomed the outpouring of support, and the Christian conservatives were led to believe he would implement their “social program” of banning abortions, permitting prayers in the public schools, and maintenance of traditional “family” values. However, after the election he did little about them, and his people adopted a strategy of “repressive tolerance.” They feared that embracing these could destroy the new Republican coalition they were building. As Sidney Blumenthal described it, drawing upon information confided to him by a senior presidential advisor:

The evangelical New Right and its allies rallied followers around constitutional amendments on school prayer and abortion. The White House staff, fearing Republican fragmentation and the galvanizing of new opposition, offered insincere gestures of support while desiring continual frustration. With tacit White House agreement, Senate Majority Leader Howard Baker granted time for the various social issues to be ventilated. The bills lost and were sent back into limbo. Any White House aide who seriously tried to keep the “social issue” bills on the front burner also was sent into limbo. For example, Faith Whittlesey, director of the Office of Public Liaison, campaigned fanatically for evangelical New Right goals—even haranguing bewildered corporate executives on tuition tax credits—and quickly became a non-entity. In the meantime, a Presidential assistant, Morton Blackwell, was assigned to look after the constituency, which was to be maintained in a state of perpetual mobilization. The flaw in the strategy was that the White House served as an incubator for the movement it was trying to contain. Reagan, for his part, never wholeheartedly cooperated with the containment strategy; he insisted on encouraging the movement evangelicals whenever he was given the chance (1984:1184).

In short, Reagan’s staff followed the dictum that groups which were largely concerned about symbolic matters like school prayer could be bought off by symbolic gestures.

But the hitch was the president’s own reservations about the policy of putting the

social issues on the back burner, and this unease was heightened by the assassination attempt on March 30, 1981. He believed he had been providentially saved from death and said to Terence Cardinal Cooke a few days later: "Whatever time He's left for me is His" (Slosser 1984:82). Because his sympathies lay with the evangelicals, he decided to strengthen those ties. The fact of his declining popularity in the opinion polls and doubts as to whether he could increase his congressional bloc in the 1982 elections almost certainly must also have entered into his thinking.

The November setback made clear that his evangelical admirers were a valuable asset, and he began courting them actively. In the new year he delivered rousing addresses to the NRB and NAE conventions (the latter was the notorious "evil empire" speech), proclaimed 1983 "The Year of the Bible," bestowed the Presidential Medal of Freedom upon Billy Graham, and declared repeatedly that he was against abortion and for school prayer. As expected, fundamentalist Christians rallied to his side and soon the mailboxes of evangelicals were filled to overflowing with fund-raising appeals from various Rightist organizations and big name personalities. They used apocalyptic language about the national plunge into the abyss of liberalism and secular humanism in order to motivate believers to redouble their efforts on behalf of the president.

Hand-in-hand with the Evangelicals

In 1984 he pushed forward in the effort to rally religious conservatives of all stripes to his cause. He proclaimed January 22 as "National Sanctity of Human Life Day," and expressed the ideals of spiritual revival, renewal, and "keeping faith with the mighty spirit of a free people under God" in his State of the Union Address. In speech after speech he pressed for tuition tax credits, endorsed "voluntary" school prayer, and reaffirmed support of efforts "to restore the protection of the law to unborn children." He appealed directly to evangelicals with stirring oratory at their major conclaves—the NRB on January 30, the NAE on March 6, and Jerry Falwell's Baptist Fundamentalism 1984 convention on April 13. Moreover, he spoke before some Catholic and Jewish groups but not the meetings of mainline denominations.

In April Reagan appointed an evangelical, Douglas Holladay, as a special liaison person to work with and communicate his religious and political views to moderate evangelicals and mainline churchmen. (Also appointed as religious liaisons to their respective communions were Jewish Marshall Berger, Roman Catholic Robert Reilly, and fundamentalist Protestant Carolyn Sundseth.) Not only did the clergy of the New Christian Right have ready access to the White House, but also a delegation of Catholic bishops met with the president in March to discuss common concerns on abortion and aid to private schools and differences over nuclear arms and Central America. Despite Holladay's bridge building efforts, representatives of the major denominations for the most part felt ignored. However, he did make some headway in September when fifteen leaders of the National Council of Churches were invited to the White House for a meeting with top level officials (*Christianity Today* May 18, 1984:80-81; *RNS* Sept. 21, 1984).

The evangelical conservatives responded to these initiatives and sprang into action. Three major religious publishing houses produced books on or by Reagan with the White House's cooperation and blessing. Thomas Nelson inflated a slight essay published under the president's name in the spring 1983 issue of the *Human*

Life Review into a mini-book entitled *Abortion and the Conscience of the Nation*. Campaign worker David Shepherd prepared a compilation of the president's public statements on religious and moral issues for publication by Tyndale House as *Ronald Reagan: In God I Trust*. Word Books released *Reagan Inside Out*, by Bob Slosser, a charismatic journalist and associate of Pat Robertson. Slosser's (1984:14-15) work explained away the criticisms of the president's lackluster Christian demeanor, portrayed him as a man of profound faith, and related an extraordinary anecdote about how Christian TV broadcaster George Otis in October 1970 personally conveyed a word of prophecy from God to Reagan while he was governor of California in which he was addressed as "My son" and told: "If you walk uprightly before Me, you will reside at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue." Nothing of this sort was generated by evangelical publishers for Walter Mondale.

Robertson created an agency called the Freedom Council to monitor alleged infringements of "religious freedom" and promote the social programs of the Christian Right and the election of conservatives to public office. The Moral Majority actively registered voters and mustered support for the president. David W. Bolsinger (known for his efforts to find Noah's Ark) was employed by Christian Voice to produce the so-called *Presidential Biblical Scoreboard*. The country was blanketed by nearly a million copies of this forty page compilation of the candidates' records on fifteen "biblical-family-moral issues." Also included were vice-presidential, congressional, and gubernatorial candidates. The "non-partisan, non-sectarian" magazine maintained that it would "aid and educate Christian voters" in choosing candidates "who support Judeo-Christian values" and enable them to do their duty "in helping to reclaim America for God." It boasted that if the 30 million born-again Christians who have not been voting could be gotten to the polls: "We could elect a President no matter how objectionable he was to the liberal, humanist media; we could insure that the majority of congressmen took a strong moral stand; and we could pass Godly legislation." A band of anti-abortion forces and fundamentalists calling themselves the New Christian Conservatives took over the Republican party organization in some parts of Minnesota, and a similar power grab orchestrated by Christian Voice occurred at the GOP Convention in Texas (*RNS* May 2, 1984; *CQWR* Sept. 22, 1984:2317, 2319; Bole 1985).

The most important action was the creation of the American Coalition for Traditional Values (ACTV, pronounced "active"), launched on June 11 at a meeting with President Reagan. It was headed by the Rev. Tim LaHaye, a sturdy fixture in the Christian Right leadership cadre and the one whom the Reagan-Bush '84 committee had assigned to keep the evangelicals in the chief executive's corner. He was best known during the election year for an assertion that if liberals regained control of the Senate and White House in 1984, "it will be all over for free elections by 1988." They would curtail the electric church and restrict bulk mail, and thereby would "effectively cut us off from the minds of the American people." If that happens, "it will be all over for freedom before 1988" (LaHaye 1984:15).

The field director was Christian Voice's Gary Jarmin, and its thirty-three executive board members comprised a who's who of conservative evangelical preachers, including Falwell, black minister E. V. Hill, the current Southern Baptist Convention president, Charles Stanley, and two previous ones, Adrian Rogers and James Draper. Among the TV evangelists were James Robison, Jimmy Swaggart, Kenneth Copeland, Rex Humbard, Jim Bakker, and Jack Van Impe. Other notables included Campus Crusade for Christ leader Bill Bright, NRB chief Ben Arm-

strong, NAE public affairs director Robert Dugan, and family expert James Dobson. In some ways it seemed to have replaced the now dormant Roundtable, and McAteer interestingly was not on the board.

On July 9 ACTV brought some 300 conservative ministers ("pastor-chairmen" who would head up the work in their respective cities) to Washington for a White House meeting. They heard an address from Reagan and met with Vice President Bush and top presidential aides Edwin Meese and William P. Clark. Not present at the gathering were Billy Graham, who stayed clear of the religious Right during the campaign (but not of President Reagan), and Pat Robertson who had preferred to work on his own politically and did not formally ally himself with ACTV. Its platform of "traditional values" included a Human Life Amendment to protect the unborn, religious freedom, voluntary school prayer, rejection of "gay rights," elimination of pornography, no Equal Rights Amendment, parental responsibility (without government interference) for raising children, public aid for private schools, government assistance for the "deserving poor" so long as it encouraged self-reliance, and a strong national defense as the way to secure liberty at home and peace and freedom in the world. It claimed to represent 4.5 million Christians and announced it would register 2.5 million voters, raise 1.5 million dollars, and mount a telephone blitz on election day to get out voters who would choose "pro-moral candidates" and "flood the bureaucracy with Christians" (*NYT* Sept. 10, 1984:138; *GRR* Sept. 1984:52; *CQWR* Sept. 22, 1984:2316, 2318; *Newsweek* July 9, 1984:52; *Christian Science Monitor* Nov. 6, 1984:40).

According to a confidential memorandum (copy obtained from People for the American Way, Washington, DC) ACTV intended to continue its work after the election and take advantage of the "four more years of freedom" which God would give to turn America back to its traditional moral values. At its board meeting on November 15, 1984, plans were made to move the headquarters to Washington, bring more key conservative Christian figures into the leadership, recruit and train "qualified Christian leaders" to run for public office at all levels, and sponsor a spiritual/political conference for federal employees to "help orient them ideologically to offset the influence of the left they get through government" (Bole 1985).

The Reagan organization established the closest working relationship with the Christian Right. Campaign chairman Senator Paul Laxalt on July 9 sent a letter to 45,000 carefully selected ministers in sixteen states which addressed them as "Dear Christian Leader" and asked the recipients to "play a significant role in what may very well be the most pivotal election of this century." The chief executive "has made an unwavering commitment to the traditional values which I know you share. . . . As leaders under God's authority, we cannot afford to resign ourselves to idle neutrality." It then urged them to organize voter registration drives in their churches to "help assure that those in your ministry will have a voice in the upcoming elections . . . a voice that surely will help assure the re-election of President Reagan and Vice President Bush."

The letter was mailed out under the auspices of the "Christian Voter Program" division of the Reagan-Bush '84 campaign committee and tailored for each of the states to which it was sent. It listed the number of evangelical Christians registered to vote in 1980 and targeted a specific number as the goal for "Christian voter registration" in the particular state. When the letter got out, it was the brunt of press criticism, including the normally conservative William Safire who in his *New York Times* column called it "surely so unethical as to be un-American" (*CQWR*

Sept. 22, 1984:2318; *NYT* Aug. 27, 1984:A19; copies of the flyers for the various states in the library of Americans United, Silver Spring, MD).

The Republican Convention

The Republican National Convention in Dallas represented the zenith of Reagan religiosity. Kentucky Moral Majority leader, the Rev. LaVerne Butler, told his congregation that the 1984 Democratic and Republican conclaves were as different “as a sex orgy and a Sunday School picnic,” and he let his parishioners decide which was which. Falwell boasted that the platform with its affirmation of voluntary school prayer, silence about the Equal Rights Amendment and rejection of equal pay for women for jobs of comparable worth, call for a constitutional amendment banning abortion and the appointment of federal judges who oppose abortion, and omission of anything about homosexual rights “is just like I wanted it.”

Conservative ministers provided most of the invocations and benedictions, including Robison, Falwell (he labeled Reagan and Bush as “God’s instruments in rebuilding America”), E. V. Hill (he called the G.O.P. the “Prayer Party”), and W. A. Criswell. In 1960 Criswell had written a pamphlet “Can a Man be a Loyal Roman Catholic and a Good President of the United States?” with the answer of course being an emphatic *no*. The Sunday before the convention he said from his First Baptist, Dallas pulpit that Reagan “is the best president we ever had” and asserted in a *CBS Evening News* interview that week: “I believe this notion of the separation of church and state was the figment of some infidel’s imagination” (Buie 1984:6; Blumenthal 1984:18; *NYT* Sept. 8, 1984:A21; *WP* Aug. 24, 1984:A8; Reavis 1984:162-66). Falwell’s prayer comment evoked considerable objections, and he hastily retreated in an interview on ABC’s *This Week with David Brinkley* by saying Romans 13 teaches that the powers that be are “God’s instruments for the purpose of peace and building our society.” Asked if this included the Democrats, he replied: “Of course. Absolutely” (*WP* Sept. 10, 1984, p. A6).

In a religious sense the climax was not Reagan’s acceptance speech but an address he gave before the approximately 15,000 people who attended an “Ecumenical Prayer Breakfast” in the Reunion Arena on August 23. This was sponsored by the Dallas convention host committee and tickets to it had been distributed at local churches, synagogues, and work places. As a result of his remarks the long smoldering issue of religion and politics erupted into a firestorm of controversy.

The president affirmed that faith and religion had always played a critical and positive role in the life of the nation, but things changed in the 1960s when steps were taken to secularize the nation and remove religion from its honored place. The Supreme Court decisions on prayer and Bible reading made religion vulnerable, but some now are fighting to return prayer to the classrooms. However:

The frustrating thing is that those who are attacking religion claim they are doing it in the names of tolerance, freedom, and open-mindedness. Question: Isn’t the real truth that they are intolerant of religion? They refuse to tolerate its importance in our lives.

In particular regard to school prayer, “those who claim to be fighting for tolerance on this issue may not be tolerant at all.”

The president went on to say: “Religion needs defenders against those who care only for the interests of the state,” adding that “politics and morality are insepara-

ble—and as morality's foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related." We "need religion as a guide" because we are imperfect and "our government needs the church, because only those humble enough to admit they're sinners can bring to democracy the tolerance it requires in order to survive." Moreover: "A state is nothing more than a reflection of its citizens; the more decent the citizens, the more decent the state." We are not establishing any religion in this country, but "we poison our society when we remove its theological underpinnings." The "tolerant society" encourages all religions and strengthens us. History teaches that all great civilizations which fell all had one thing in common. A "significant forerunner of their fall was their turning away from their God or gods." Thus, without God, democracy cannot long endure. He concluded by remarking: "If we ever forget that we're one nation under God, then we will be a nation gone under" (Text from the Office of the White House Press Secretary).

This disturbed not only Safire who called the president "Reverend Reagan," but also *Time* magazine essayist Charles Krauthammer who asserted he had crossed "the line that in a pluralist society divides civil discourse from demagoguery," the *Baltimore Sun's* Ray Jenkins who called his words "ominous" and felt "a keen sense of wrong at being so casually accused of intolerance," and NCC general secretary Claire Randall who contended his view "falls far short of the standard of tolerance for the beliefs of others which must undergird religious freedom in a diverse society." New York senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan viewed the whole speech in more cynical terms in an NBC-TV interview on September 9. He quipped: "I absolutely believe President Reagan when he says he does not want to establish a state religion—that would require him to attend services" (*NYT* Aug. 27, 1984:A19; Krauthammer 1984:80; *Baltimore Sun* Sept. 11, 1984; *WP* Sept. 5, 1984:A4; Sept. 10, 1984:A6).

The president's reluctance to go to church services was well-known (unlike Carter who even taught Sunday School on occasion), and his excuse was that he did not want to inconvenience the other worshipers or put their lives in danger. Wags pointed out that this did not seem to deter him from going to be with groups of businessmen or show business celebrities. Earlier in the year Billy Graham had defended Reagan by asserting he had told him after the assassination attempt that he could not see how the president could any longer attend church services because of the required security. The evangelist claimed he was trying to deflect some of "the flak President Reagan is taking for not going to church" (*WP* Apr. 16, 1984:A2).

One plausible interpretation of Reagan's actions at Dallas and earlier is that they were tactical. In effect he utilized the religious question as a means of reaching out to fundamentalists who tended to be at relatively low income levels and were traditionally Democratic voters. Since they would not respond readily to an economic appeal, he hoped that stressing the themes of religion and nationalism would achieve the desired result.

At this point, Democratic standardbearer Walter Mondale decided that things had gone too far. To be sure, his running mate, Geraldine Ferraro, had taken a jab at Reagan in July when she remarked: "The President walks around calling himself a good Christian, but I don't for one minute believe it because [his] policies are so terribly unfair. They are discriminatory and they hurt a lot of people." Mondale had discreetly remained silent, but he angrily exclaimed to his advisers after seeing the news clips of the prayer breakfast: "That's insulting. He's calling me un-Christian." His camp believed a backlash was beginning to develop because of

Reagan's and the New Christian Right's effort to portray the Democrats as anti-religious and their willingness to have government interfere in the personal lives of people. Mondale went on the attack in a radio speech on September 2 where he warned that mixing religion and politics, as the president was doing, would "corrupt our faith and divide our nation," and he followed this up with a forthright presentation of his religious views to B'nai B'rith on September 6. When reporters questioned Reagan the next day as to whom the "anti-religionists" trying to break down the wall of separation between church and state were, press spokesman Larry Speakes advised him: "Best don't answer that" (*WP* Sept. 3, 1984:A1; Sept. 8, 1984:A4).

Blacks and the Religious Issue

Three other developments on the religious front need to be tied into the story. First, Jesse Jackson had mobilized a great number of blacks in his unsuccessful presidential bid by using churches as an organizational base. Although nearly all white conservatives and some liberals criticized this as mixing politics and religion, Professor Gayraud Wilmore, himself a black, pointed out in *Newsweek* that their churches had always felt a responsibility to engage in political action to obtain a just society:

Black religionists have been more willing to risk open confrontation with [reactionary white religious power] than to cry foul when the Pat Robertsons and Jerry Falwells have taken off their kid gloves politically. Walter Mondale would do well not to argue against involvement in electoral politics from black pulpits (Sept. 17, 1984:31).

Jackson pledged to support the Democratic ticket in his speech at the San Francisco convention, and on August 28 he and several dozen black leaders met with Mondale and promised their backing. Their churches continued to register voters and worked to get them to the polls on November 6, while Dr. T. J. Jemison, president of the country's largest black denomination, the National Baptist Convention, told his constituents: "I don't believe the present administration feels the heartbeat, the desires, the concerns of black people" and would not lead blacks "into the mainstream of American life." The president did not speak to the group's annual meeting in Washington, although he was invited, but Mondale came and delivered the same speech he had given to B'nai B'rith. Reagan's "damage control" specialists quickly realized the faux pas and arranged for Jemison and six other black Baptists to meet privately with the president on September 10. This had the desired result, since Jemison told reporters after emerging from the Oval Office he thought "that perhaps his views on blacks have been distorted some" and that Reagan "does have sympathy for blacks" (*WP* Sept. 7, 1984:A4; *NYT* Sept. 11, 1984:A26).

The Jewish Involvement

The Jackson campaign put Mondale in a ticklish situation with a second religious grouping, American Jews. In trying to avoid antagonizing either faction, he walked a thin line. The anti-Semitic remarks of Jackson's friend, Black Muslim sect leader Louis Farrakhan, and his own remarks about "Hymies" and "Hymietown" deeply offended Jews. At the Democratic convention Mondale forces blocked a resolution condemning anti-Semitism in order to avoid the danger of a possible floor fight

with Jackson forces. Also, Jews had had a low estimate of the Carter administration and only gave forty-five percent of their vote to him in 1980.

President Reagan recognized that his support base here was substantial, and as mentioned earlier, he assigned the politically conservative Orthodox Jew Marshall Berger to serve as the White House liaison to the Jewish community. Reagan's call for tuition tax credits struck a favorable chord among those Orthodox who operated their own private schools. In a speech to the National Jewish Coalition Vice President Bush tried to defuse the religious issue by attacking the "obscene anti-Semitism that has . . . infected UN debate" and saying the president is not afraid to "stand up to bigots and haters" both in the international community and at home (*WP* Sept. 15, 1984:A7). Meanwhile, a conscious effort was made to "clean up the act" of the Moral Majority by means of a book published in February entitled *Jerry Falwell and the Jews* (Jonathan David Publishers). Falwell gave very carefully crafted answers to questions put to him by the book's editor, Merrill Simon, in which he adroitly expressed his fundamentalist theology in a non-offensive way and came across as a friend of the Jewish people and an unabashed backer of Israel.

In the July issue of *Commentary* neoconservative Irving Kristol took advantage of Jewish fears about Jackson's black nationalism and ties with Third World haters of Israel, the threat posed by affirmative action, the failure of Great Society welfare programs, and liberal internationalism and its support of the UN in order to call into question the long-standing Jewish ties with the Democratic party and to suggest they might be more comfortable in the camp of conservative politics. He also hailed the Moral Majority for being "unequivocally pro-Israel" and proposed its advocacy could be decisive to the existence of the Jewish state. He downplayed the significance of its socio-religious program, saying that it had not and would not meet with success, and urged a favorable attitude toward the group so its concern for Israel would not wither on the vine. Needless to say, the article evoked considerable controversy in Jewish circles (Kristol 1984:23-29; *Commentary* Oct. 1984:4-17; Stern 1984:1, 8-12). In a more tentative manner Holocaust scholar Lucy S. Dawidowicz also questioned whether Jewish voters should continue to give unqualified support to the Democratic party because of black anti-Semitism and liberal softness toward Israel (*Commentary* Feb. 1985:25-30).

Still, Jews were extremely uncomfortable about the church-state aspects of Reagan's program, and occurrences like the letter which was sent out by three Republican politicians in Michigan (including ultra-conservative Congressman Mark D. Siljander) urging local pastors to help oust liberal Democratic representative Howard Wolpe, a Jew, and thus "send another Christian to Congress" did not exactly allay their fears. This reflected just how much of a problem Reagan had with his own far-right followers. James Robison was quoted as defining an anti-Semite as "someone who hates Jews more than he's supposed." Falwell and others continually referred to the United States as a "Christian nation." New Right senators Steve Symms and Jesse Helms consistently voted against bills the Jewish lobby regarded as favorable to Israel. And, the Reaganites' apparent lack of concern about social justice for all Americans, an item traditionally high on the Jewish political agenda, was almost as disturbing as the religious issue (*WP* Oct. 31, 1984:A6; Nov. 24, 1984:C10; *NYT* Oct. 8, 1984:A19; Oct. 20, 1984; Stern 1984:10-11). These facts explain as much as anything why the efforts to entice Jewish voters away from their traditional Democratic allegiance failed and they went 70 percent for Mondale.

At the September 6 B'nai B'rith convention in Washington both candidates appeared. President Reagan backed away from his earlier comments somewhat by affirming the rebirth of faith in America, denouncing intolerance, bigotry, and anti-Semitism, praising pluralism, and asserting "the unique thing about America is a wall in our Constitution separating church and state" which "guarantees there will never be a state religion" and "every American is free to choose and practice his or her religious beliefs or to choose no religion at all. This right shall not be questioned or violated by the state." Most of the speech, however, was dedicated to underscoring how much the United States supported Israel and how this alliance would be more secure if he were re-elected (Text from Office of the White House Press Secretary).

Mondale lashed out at the "moral McCarthyism" of those on the Religious Right who "are reaching for government power to impose their own beliefs on other people, and accused the Reagan administration of having "opened their arms to them." Referring to the Laxalt letter he sarcastically remarked: "Most Americans would be surprised to learn God is a Republican." He then confessed he was going to do something that he thought he would never have to, namely, "defend my faith in a political campaign." With sharp words Mondale condemned the idea of the state enforcing the religious life of the people, Falwell's alleged boast that when Reagan is re-elected "we will get at least two more appointments to the Supreme Court," the president's implication that he would occupy the role of defender of religion against the state, the contention that those who oppose the Prayer Amendment are "intolerant of religion," and the comment in a speech at Salt Lake City, Utah, three days earlier that some [i.e. his Democratic opponents] would "wish the concept of freedom of religion to mean 'freedom against religion.' " Mondale criticized Reagan's own lack of moral leadership and denied forcefully that there was just one party that believed in God, was for family and life, would morally strengthen America, believed in America's greatness and was patriotic (*Church and State* Oct. 1984:12-15).

The tone set by Reagan's Dallas prayer breakfast speech and their B'nai B'rith addresses was continued in the first presidential debate on October 7. Most of the arguments that had been advanced about each other's religious views were brought up there, and this writer, who happened to be in Europe at the time, noticed that foreign observers were baffled by the spectacle of the candidates giving a confession of faith on national television. The social issues of abortion and school prayer were once again aired and the usual points scored.

On October 26 Reagan made a new pitch for Jewish support by claiming in a speech at a synagogue in Woodmere, Long Island, that the Democratic leadership had lacked the "moral courage" to condemn anti-Semitism at its national convention. Mondale replied that the platform from the outset should have included a strong statement denouncing anti-Semitism, but party rules precluded the adoption of any resolution that had not already been approved by a standing committee. In the confusion following the convention the matter had not been attended to, but at his insistence the executive committee of the Democratic National Committee on August 9 did agree to a statement. The resolution declared that the party reaffirmed "its adherence to pluralist principles" and repudiated and completely dissociated itself "from people who promote all forms of bigotry, racism, and anti-Semitism" (*NYT* Oct. 30, 1984:A4).

The Roman Catholic Stance

There was also a Roman Catholic dimension to the religious issue. The selection of Geraldine Ferraro as Mondale's vice-presidential candidate, a New York City congresswoman and a Catholic, brought the abortion issue to the fore. She declared she was personally against abortion but stood behind a woman's right to choose for herself on the subject, and she would not force the church's stand upon others. She was strongly supported by Governor Mario Cuomo of New York and Senator Edward Kennedy, while Senator Patrick Moynihan said he would not want a law banning abortion because the fiercely divisive measure would not be obeyed by at least half of the populace. However, her views were sharply criticized by New York archbishop John J. O'Connor and bishops Bernard F. Law of Boston and James C. Timlin of Scranton. Cardinal John Krol also had harsh words for candidates who favored abortion and from his Philadelphia pulpit urged Catholics to vote against them. Krol and O'Connor were widely regarded as pro-Reagan prelates (*NYT* Sept. 19, 1984:B9; Oct. 17, 1984:A24; Klein 1984).

The issue came up in the vice-presidential debate as well. George Bush tried to downplay his 1980 stance (he then supported federal funding for abortions in case of rape, incest, and danger to the life of the mother and opposed an anti-abortion amendment to the Constitution) by embracing the Reagan position wholeheartedly, while Ferraro affirmed separation of church and state, condemned government intrusion in people's private lives, and insisted she would resign if she could not practice her religion and perform her duties properly. As she elaborated later on NBC's *Meet the Press*: "If my church was to say to me, 'Because you are not supporting our position on, say abortion, we will remove you, we will excommunicate you,' I'd quit my job" (*WSJ* Oct. 15, 1984:64).

During the campaign the Reagan forces wooed Catholic voters, who for some time had been drifting away from their traditional Democratic party home, by using the religio-social issues and the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Vatican. White House Catholic liaison Robert Reilly carried a personal letter from the president to the National Wanderer Forum (an archconservative Catholic group) praising it for its support of Judeo-Christian values, and the Reagan-Bush '84 Committee placed ads in Catholic newspapers with a picture of the president receiving Pope John Paul II and affirming his support of "basic family values," tuition tax credits, the "rights of the unborn," tough new anti-pornography laws, and voluntary prayer in public schools. (Still, as many as a dozen Catholic papers had reservations about what they felt was exploiting the pope in a political advertisement and thereby refused to run it.) Editorials and articles in papers like *CGA World*, *National Catholic Register*, *The Wanderer*, and *Our Sunday Visitor* criticized Ferraro's abortion views, while Catholics for a Moral America and the Catholic Center for Private Enterprise, Strong Defense, and Traditional Values adopted political stances analogous to ACTV and the Moral Majority (Press clippings, Americans United, Silver Spring, MD).

Other Reactions

An interesting difference between 1980 and 1984 was the scarcity of church and denominational denunciations of the New Christian Right, in contrast to the large number that had been released four years earlier (Shriver 1981). There were some,

however. The American Jewish Committee drafted a statement on August 8 expressing concern about the erosion of church-state separation and the weakening of pluralism. B'nai B'rith adopted a resolution on September 5 condemning ideas expressed in the Prayer Breakfast speech and declaring the First Amendment was "under attack by fundamentalist religious groups." On the same day a joint statement was issued in New York by five prominent Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish spokespersons which called on the leaders of both parties "to reject categorically the pernicious notion that only one brand of politics or religion meets with God's approval and that others are necessarily evil" (*WP* Sept. 5, 1984:A4; *NYT* Sept. 7, 1984:A14; Sept. 6, 1984:B13). Also, watchdog groups whose primary focus was church-state relations (for example, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, and People for the American Way) from their perspective alerted the public to the implications and dangers of the Reagan religious thrust.

An intriguing event occurred on October 23 when the Christic Institute, a think tank in Washington, released a declaration signed by over 100 Roman Catholic, mainline and evangelical Protestant, and Jewish leaders calling on both presidential candidates to repudiate the idea that a nuclear war with the Soviet Union was foretold in the Bible. The signatories feared that the nuclear "Armageddon theory" would lead people to see arms reduction negotiations as pointless because war was inevitable. In the second presidential debate on October 21, Reagan brushed aside the matter which already was being noised abroad, conceding merely that "a number of theologians" had talked about the possibility of Armageddon but he did not think a nuclear war could be fought and won. What he failed to mention was that these "theologians" were popular preachers who had little training in theology as such, and they were the very ones whom he welcomed to the White House and who were working for his re-election. New Right figures tried to disrupt the Christic Institute's press conference, and when Falwell flatly denied he had ever said a nuclear Armageddon was a probability, copies were distributed of an interview published in the *Los Angeles Times* on March 4, 1981, and a tract written in 1983 where he had unambiguously expressed the idea (*NYT* Oct. 21, 1984:A32; Oct. 24, 1984:A1, 25).

Neither this nor the revelations by journalist Jim Castelli that the ACTV stalwart Jimmy Swaggart who had made anti-Catholic statements on his TV show was invited to a White House strategy session on the school prayer amendment on January 18 and that ACTV's Tim LaHaye openly labeled Catholicism a "false religion" made any difference whatsoever. The same was true with the reception given Mondale by pupils from the all-white Lakeview Baptist School when he came to Tupelo, Mississippi, on September 13. The hecklers not only passed out pictures of dead fetuses but also got into a shoving match with some Mondale supporters. The press reports mentioned "racial epithets"; those who witnessed the incident on national television heard the Christian school pupils refer to the Mondale partisans as "nigger-lovers" (*Our Sunday Visitor* Oct. 14, 1984:7; *WP* Sept. 14, 1984:A4).

President Reagan or his campaign people never publicly condemned or repudiated these excesses on the part of his religious backers. To be sure, he did back away some from the fundamentalists in the last days of the campaign by downplaying his born-again status and dissociating himself from the views of individuals who attacked Catholicism as a "false religion." He declared in an interview with a

Catholic paper that “there is no room in our party for religious intolerance or bigotry of any kind, and I repudiate anyone claiming to be a supporter of mine who engages in that,” but confessed he had not seen “such direct quotes” from individuals in his camp (Interview in *Our Sunday Visitor*, quoted in *Church and State* Dec. 1984:9).

Even though this could be regarded as a veiled criticism of the evangelical Right, no one in the group perceived it as such. They were now so committed to obtaining his re-election that they simply winked at excesses in their own ranks, whether they be racial slurs, lies, and overt bigotry, condemning Democratic incumbents as “secular humanists,” registering new voters in church vestibules and instructing them how to cast their ballots, prayer and fasting vigils on election eve, or just innocuous letters plugging a candidate as “a Christian man” who was “willing to take a stand for righteousness” (fund-raiser letter of July 24, 1984, for Pat Trueman, Republican congressional hopeful in Minnesota in the possession of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Washington, DC) and full-page ads placed by the Arthur S. DeMoss Foundation (an evangelical-oriented fund) in leading newspapers defending mixing religion with politics (*NYT* Nov. 4, 1984:A38, E9; *WP* Nov. 5, 1984:A24). With such tactics it is no surprise that white evangelical Protestant voters went 80 percent or more for Reagan, as the study of election statistics made by Albert Menendez of Americans United clearly revealed (*Christian College News* Dec. 1984:1-2).

How Significant Was the Religious Issue?

It will require some time for scholars to complete their analysis of the election data and provide a definitive interpretation of what transpired on November 6, 1984. However, two conclusions were immediately apparent. First, although the moral dimensions of public policy had been made into a major campaign issue, poll results from the latter stages of the contest already were showing that religion was not as decisive an element in the electorate’s decision-making as many had thought. A *New York Times/CBS News* poll of regular church-goers made between September 12 and 16 found that four out of ten voters felt the candidates had improperly injected religion into the campaign, and three-quarters wished that the clergy would not use religious arguments to endorse candidates. The majority of respondents leaned toward Mondale’s views on religious questions but still they were supporting Reagan because of the economy and such personal traits as leadership, and they felt one could be patriotic without believing in God. A Gallup Poll revealed that a majority opposed both the direct involvement of clergy and church organizations in the political process and candidates bringing in their own religious beliefs when discussing issues facing the nation (*NYT* Sept. 19, 1984:A32; *PRRC Emerging Trends* Oct. 1984:1-2).

A survey of registered voters taken between September 30 and October 4 found that only *four* percent of the sample would change their vote just because they did not agree with the person’s stance on abortion. Similar polls in 1978 and 1982 had shown *seven* percent were willing to do so. As for a constitutional amendment outlawing *all* abortions, 64 percent opposed that. If it were qualified to allow one when the life of the mother was at stake, 49 percent remained in opposition (*NYT* Oct. 8, 1984:B4). Pollster Louis Harris reported that his September figures showed 69 to 27 percent against an abortion and 60 to 34 against a prayer amendment (*USA*

Today Oct. 11, 1984:11A). Jerry Falwell's efforts to secure Reagan's re-election received a negative reaction of 59 to 24 percent nationwide. It was still negative even among those who followed evangelical preachers. When Catholics were asked about those bishops who urged them to vote against candidates who were against banning abortions, the negative response was 69 to 22 percent. A poll by the Republican firm V. Lance Tarrance and Associates conducted in July 1983 ascertained that a majority of evangelicals supported the Equal Rights Amendment and legalized abortion in some instances, and many knew little about or thought little of groups like the Moral Majority or NCPAC, the National Conservative Political Action Committee (*CQWR*, Sept. 22, 1984:2316). Thus, survey data demonstrated a considerable "softness" among the electorate on the issues with which the Religious Right was so concerned.

The second observation came from the election returns themselves. It was a great personal victory for President Reagan but not for the New Christian Right or for that matter his own party. Although he won with 59 percent of the popular vote and the largest electoral vote in history, the Republicans lost two seats in the Senate and only picked up fifteen in the House of Representatives, not enough to give him a working majority there. Several candidates rode through on the president's coattails, most notably Jesse Helms. Reagan defeated Mondale by over 500,000 votes in North Carolina (62 percent-38 percent), while Helms won over James B. Hunt, Jr. by a mere 82,000 votes, a ratio of 52 percent to 48 percent. A couple of other Senate coattail winners were Republican Mitch McConnell in Kentucky, who ousted the Democratic incumbent Walter Huddleston by 4,000 votes out of 1.2 million cast, while Reagan carried the state 60 percent to 40 percent, and Gordon J. Humphrey in New Hampshire, who led his Republican challenger 59 percent to 41 percent, while Reagan carried the state 69 percent to 31 percent. Conservative senators William Armstrong in Colorado and Phil Gramm in Texas won by slightly lower margins than he did in their states. It does appear, however, that intense Moral Majority electioneering may have been decisive in a few House seats in North Carolina and Texas.

On the other hand, the Right suffered noteworthy losses in the defeat of Sen. Roger Jepsen in Iowa and Rep. Dan Crane in Illinois and George Hansen in Idaho, even though Reagan took these states by comfortable margins. New Christian Right figure Ed McAteer made a quixotic bid for the Senate seat from Tennessee as an independent after the Republicans snubbed him and he only received 5 percent of the total vote. Sen. Howell T. Heflin (D-Alabama) easily turned back a challenge from a New Right figure, Albert Lee Smith, who had been a representative but lost his seat in 1982. Smith was best known for sponsoring an omnibus collection of legislation on social issues like abortion and school prayer. Some liberal Democratic congressmen whom conservatives vigorously tried but failed to unseat included George E. Brown, Jr. in California, James Jones in Oklahoma, and Timothy J. Penny in Minnesota (Election results published in the *International Herald-Tribune* Nov. 8, 1984:4-6).

Conclusion

It is clear that although moral concerns occupied a central position in the campaign, they were not crucial to the voters' decisions. Those evangelicals who were predisposed toward Reagan would probably have voted for him anyway

despite the informational efforts of the Christian Right. The intriguing question is how many of them would have stayed home on election day if their political preachers had not registered them to vote and urged them to go to the polls. Still, those who wanted to keep Ronald Reagan in office really did not have to resort to the tactics delineated in the essay. The election was essentially a referendum on his performance as president, not an affirmation of his social policy. A substantial majority of the electorate was satisfied with the economic recovery that had taken place and the image of leadership and optimism which he conveyed. Like in the 1980 election, the mobilization of the New Christian Right, especially to the extent that took place, was to many observers a disturbing but hardly the decisive element in the Reagan victory. Heating up the religious question only served to divert the attention of conservative Protestants and Catholics from the other issues of the campaign and thereby, in this author's opinion, demeaned the quality of both religious belief and political discourse.

One may conclude from Reagan's performance in the first term that although he looks favorably on the social issues and deep down inside he would like to see their "solutions" enacted into law, it is unlikely he will go all out for their implementation. Thus, Douglas Holladay's comment to a *Wall Street Journal* reporter, "I don't think he's going to do anything different" in a second term, takes on real significance (Sept. 18, 1984:62).

Interestingly, Paul Weyrich told a Conservative Political Action Conference in March: "As Conservatives we kid ourselves if we think the president's re-election in 1984 is going to deliver major gains to our movement." After the ballots were counted, NCPAC's Terry Dolan predicted that disaster lay ahead for the GOP because Reagan allegedly had moved toward the center. Richard Viguerie declared that the campaign "will rank among the all-time greatest blunders in American politics" because it ignored lower-level candidates (*CQWR* Sept. 22, 1984:2315; *GRR* Nov. 1984:37). There are rumblings that Viguerie, Weyrich, and possibly some Moral Majority people may form a "populist" third party if the administration fails to deliver the agenda of the New Religious Right, but this is surely an idle threat. They will have to settle for a second Reagan term of lack-luster performance on the religio-political questions. Their victory in 1984 was a hollow one.

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- Abbreviations: *CQWR* *Congressional Quarterly Weekly Report*
GRR *Group Research Report*
NYT *New York Times*
RNS *Religious News Service*
WP *Washington Post*
WSJ *Wall Street Journal*

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