

VIEWING WITH ALARM: BACKGROUND THOUGHTS ON THE "MORAL MAJORITY"

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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The great figures in Israel's Golden Age of Prophecy had a way of stating the case in a few words:

"Set the trumpet to your lips,
for a vulture is over the house of the Lord,
because they have broken my covenant,
and transgressed my law."

(Hosea 8.1)

which is to say, much less picturesquely, sound the alarm, for everything is about to come down about your ears.

For the past few weeks I have been harkening to the alarm of the Reverend Jerry Falwell's book Listen America. This is, I believe the definitive expression of the views of the group who call themselves "The Moral Majority." In tune with Mr. Falwell's trumpet are a chorus of little pipes that come across my desk unsolicited with each day's mail. I find these brassy sounds so unsettling that every so often I run outside to see if, indeed, there is a turkey buzzard perched above the Roberts window.

In the meantime, a mounting cacophony of other alarms cry out against the peril of Mr. Falwell and his collaborators. Members of the congregation drop off magazine articles. Norman Lear, the television producer, writes asking support for a counter force that will be called "Citizens for the American Way." Among the citizens already enrolled are Father Hesburgh, president of Notre Dame and Martin Marty, the Lutheran historian.

All of which goes to prove that last Easter's sermon about Tirades and Tombs was more on target than some of you may have thought.

Today there will be no tirade. Perhaps at the later time I shall try to answer more directly this latest outburst of political fundamentalism. That is my duty, I think, if for no other reason that on every issue on which Mr. Falwell and his friends choose to speak they take a position directly opposite to that taken by the councils and leadership of the United Church of Christ. On ERA, Nuclear Disarmament, Abortion, Organized Prayer in Tax Supported Schools, and other items on their select list of causes, they stand diametrically opposed to the witness of our church for more than a generation. In general the same may be said of their positions vis-a-vis the United Methodist Church, the United Presbyterian Church USA, the Episcopal Church, the American Baptist Church, the Disciples of Christ, the Lutheran Church in America, the ALC, the Religious Society of Friends and other long established Christian communions whom the moral majority people classify among the "secular humanists." Indeed, except on the abortion issue, they also stand directly against positions taken by the Council of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church.

In short the crusade of the moral majority is a direct and deliberate attack upon the social vision of most Christian groups who do not share their fundamentalist orientation.

Clearly this challenge cannot be allowed to go unanswered. I suggest that it would be timely for us to form a study group to look into the whole matter. I would be glad to meet with such a group at a mutually convenient time. For the present,

however, I should like to say a few words about the background giving rise to the strident alarms we are hearing today. For before we develop strategies for dealing with them, I think we need to try to understand why these alarms are sounding and how we may share responsibility for them.

First we need to see that there is an historical background. A virulent and combative variety of Protestant fundamentalism has been with us since World War I. For at least half a century there has been a link between some leaders of this movement and extreme, right wing social philosophies. For a readable account of earlier phases of this movement I refer you to the book Apostles of Discord (UMD Library) by Ralph Lord Roy, 1953. Mr. Roy attended Swarthmore College with my wife and graduate school with myself. As a very young man he turned a Master's thesis into a best seller documenting the activities of religious hate groups as well as others more moderate that linked their religious beliefs to extreme political views both on the Right and on the Left. Among the leaders of such movements were Gerald Winrod, Gerald K. Smith and Carl McIntyre.

Not all the people described in Mr. Roy's book were religious fundamentalists. Included in his study are the Quaker, Howard Kershner, a man whom I also knew slightly in my youth; and the minister of the First Congregational Church of Los Angeles, James Fifield. Some of you will recall Kershner's Christian Freedom Foundation and Fifield's "Spiritual Mobilization".

Such a figure as Fifield should warn us against assuming in too simple a way that certain things always go together. It was the socially progressive Congregationalist magazine Social Action that accused Mr. Fifield of being a "Theological Humanist."

One of the worst tendencies of the Moral Majority people is their habit of lumping things together indiscriminately. For Mr. Falwell, the Equal Rights Amendment, incest, drug addiction, liberal theology, and Russian Communism are all in the same bag. We must not fall into their immoral and irrational techniques of guilt by association. We need to recognize that many people who call themselves "Evangelicals" and even some who call themselves "Fundamental Christians" reject indignantly this ongoing historical movement of which the Moral Majority leaders are but the latest representatives.

Nevertheless, for the last fifty years there has been an unbroken chain of fundamentalist leaders attacking churches such as ours and espousing a certain social and political outlook. What is new is that such preachers have become more adept at using the powerful vehicle of television and that they have taken a much more direct role in the political process.

This observation leads us to the economic and political background of The Moral Majority movement. It is alleged that Mr. Falwell receives much of his financial backing from Bunker Hunt, the Texas tycoon who almost lost his shirt a few months ago trying to corner the silver market. This would not be surprising, since the Hunt family have supported essentially the same cause for many years.

My own suspicion is that the whole Moral Majority movement is but a facade. It is a front for certain economic interests. A primary task of any church study group looking into this matter ought to be to try and uncover the reality behind the facade.

Yet that is not to say that the rank and file of those concerned people aroused by the Moral Majority campaign see themselves in such a light. For them the moral and religious issues are important in themselves. These people are anxious and angry at the drift of society away from what they were brought up to believe. Here we come to the emotional background underlying this new surge of crusading fundamentalism. Before we condemn all these people as a pack of bigots and fools, we need to try to attain some empathy with their feelings.

Such empathy should come easily. For despite what we may tell our enlightened friends, we share in that emotional background. We too are bewildered, frightened and angered by the changes all around us.

Many of these changes have to do with family life. The larger share of us grew up believing we knew what was expected of us as family people. We had our roles and responsibilities. Our self-respect was bound up with how we carried out these roles and responsibilities. Father went to work, Mother darned the socks, and Junior went to summer camp like he was told. Now we're glad to be free of all that, but we don't know who we are any more. So Father falls back secretly into feeling guilty because Mother works, and Mother feels inadequate because Father wears disposable socks, and Junior feels he has failed as a son because he never learned how to portage a canoe. We're half ready to believe Jerry Falwell when he tells us how much better family life was in the days of Abraham.

Perhaps these are just the growing pains of living through change that is constructive. But not all the changes in family life look very constructive these days. People write reassuring articles in our church magazines and local newspapers telling us that despite everything the American family is alive and well. But we may wonder in these cases whether the noun "family" denotes anything resembling our own understanding of that word. And we may feel that Jerry Falwell is more credible when he writes, "The American family may well be on the verge of extinction in the next twenty years."

Another part of the emotional background has to do with lifestyle. It seems that all the ancient taboos have toppled within the twinkling of an historical eye. Oh, perhaps there are one or two left, but it is obvious that they are about to fall too. For the arguments that served to knock over the first will carry the same force of logic with respect to the last. "If people love, why not?"

But logic is not the rule in our confusing culture. On the one hand, we declare that people of certain sorts must be employed as role models. On the other hand we insist that matters of lifestyle ought not to enter into consideration in the employment of anyone. You would be surprised at the lifestyles of some of the people your tax dollars go to support as youth counselors. No, on second thought, you would not be surprised.

Well, maybe it's progress and maybe it's decadence, but one thing for sure, it's bewildering.

Still another part of the emotional background has to do with national pride. It was only a few brief years that we Americans were on top of the world. We thought that providence guaranteed that position for ever. Then came a series of unhappy events from Korea to Cuba to Iran, to Watergate, to the Toyota to the decline of the dollar.

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No longer do we seem on top militarily, apolitically or economically. Some people may be more concerned about what has happened to our moral reputation. Oppressed peoples around the world, and people who were just starting to rebuild their own nations, used to look to us as a model. Less and less that is true. More and more we look both to ourselves and to others as a nation that has lost its way, as a paradigm of a failed ideal.

Now we could point to other areas of emotionally disturbing change on the contemporary scene. But if there are three things that people get worked up about very quickly they are family, sex and patriotism. Add religion and you have a formula for setting off every alarm system from Eastport to San Diego. It is precisely with respect to these aspects of our changing lives that Jerry Falwell and others blow their trumpets.

And well they might. For they are not all wrong. As I read Jerry Falwell's Listen America I find that many of the things that upset him, upset me too--all the way from skyrocketing abortion statistics to the declining scores on the college board tests. I cannot think of any of his proposed solutions that I like, but I share many of his feelings about the problems.

Jerry Falwell is not all wrong. That point is made by William F. Fore, Assistant General Secretary for Communication of the National Council of Churches--an organization that has been number one on the fundamentalist hit list for more than a generation. Writes Mr. Fore:

Jerry Falwell is partly right, and this makes him more dangerous than if he were totally wrong. It is true that the nation needs spiritual reform, that the family is endangered, that ordinary people need to assert themselves politically. It is true that our society has fallen into moral cynicism and feeds corruption and makes possible ever-increasing centralization of power.

Falwell has sized up the feelings of millions of Americans far more accurately than have America's mainline church leaders, the politicians in Washington, or even the eastern media establishment. In fact, according to Falwell, they are part of the problem. And again he is right. The mainline churches have become acculturated, too "country club", too uninterested.

Now, of course, Mr. Fore goes on to argue that Mr. Falwell's cure is worse than the disease. I agree. But we need to recognize that the feelings of those millions of Americans to which he appeals are feelings that ought to be taken seriously. People feel bad about a lot of things and they ought to feel bad. And we enlightened Christians cannot afford to sit around anymore saying to one another, "Well, change is always unsettling." We too have got to muster our forces to make sure that the changes lead us somewhere other than the road to hell.

There's the shadow of a vulture over the house of the Lord. Some say it's the shadow of Chairman Breznev or Ms. Friedan. Others say the shadow is shaped to the portly outline of Jerry Falwell himself. But it could just be that the shadow is thrown by the ghost of a whole society fit for carrion. We have more to do than to blow the horn on "The Moral Majority." We have to lift up our own trumpets for righteousness with no uncertain sound.

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"Set the trumpet to your lips,
for a vulture is over the house of the Lord,
because they have broken my covenant,
and transgressed my law."

☐ CORRECTED (if checked)

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