

Can Religion, Politics Mix?

"No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

The last clause of Article VI of the U.S. Constitution is among the bricks in the proverbial "wall of separation" between church and state in America.

But though no religious test can be formally required of presidential candidates, they and voters are free to mix religion and politics to the degree they see fit.

This election year, religion has emerged in the campaign, as it has not since 1960 or 1928 before that, when Catholic presidential candidates were still novelties.

In one sense religion is part of all presidential campaigns. Issues which have religious implications and about which groups of believers and non-believers have strong feelings are routinely raised.

In addition, the general style candidates project and their stands on issues generally have roots in their personal history, including their particular religious heritage.

And, since the days of America's founders, references to "religion in general," as church historian Martin Marty calls it, have been expected in presidential rhetoric.

A study of presidential inaugural addresses by the Rev. Charles LaFontaine, S.A., printed in the Journal of Church and State, notes that the first four presidents didn't mention "God," preferring instead terms like "Providence," or "benign Parent of the Human Race" or "Invisible Hand." Not until Andrew Johnson, Lincoln's successor, Father LaFontaine writes, was "Jesus Christ" equated with deity.

This election year, however, the religious affiliations of the candidates, the theological presuppositions on which they base their decisions, their personal understanding of their relationship to God, are growing topics of media and presumably voter interest.

One reason for this curiosity about candidates' religion is that a number of them are noted as practicing Christians or otherwise religious individuals, in ways which exceed the minimum allegiance to religious values and ethical norms generally expected of presidential contenders.

Democratic candidate Jimmy Carter is perhaps the most notable example. He talks freely about his conversion experience a decade ago, about his frequent resort to prayer about his conviction that his Christian faith is more important than his personal political success or failure. He still teaches a Bible class in the Southern Baptist church in the small Georgia town of Plains where he grew up.

President Ford is a lifelong and practicing Episcopalian. In recent years he has confessed a spiritual growth-related to involvement in prayer groups and Bible study. Michigan-based evangelist Billy Zeoli is a regular Ford counselor.

The Rev. Donn Moomaw, pastor of the Presbyterian church Republican challenger Ronald Reagan attends, reportedly calls him a "knowledgeable Christian" with "an alive faith" who "really knows doctrine." The candidate, with little on the public record about his religious beliefs, was raised a member of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

California Gov. Jerry Brown studied to be a Jesuit priest, and says much of his philosophy is partly traceable to Roman Catholic teachings. The doctrine of the Mystical Body is an idea that certainly has political implications on how people are treated, what their importance in life is, he has said.

The 38-year-old candidate, who has shunned the traditional gubernatorial fringe benefits like a large mansion and car, goes on retreats with Trappist monks and Zen Buddhists.

Comparatively, Carter's religious practices may seem conventional,



FORD

but he is a problem for some, says columnist George Will, because "he has the disconcerting habit of letting his religion affect his behavior." Carter's praying, church-going, and religious feeling antedate his presidential ambitions. That is why some people suspect that he is guilty of sincerity.

This year several candidates are perceived as having religious convictions more genuine, more specific and more firmly held, than is usual.

And so come questions from three sources according to James Reston of the New York Times: "from skeptics who cannot quite believe a presidential candidate can be a true believer, from religious fanatics who don't think a man should be a presidential candidate unless he is a true believer, and from reporters who are honestly curious about the effect of a candidate's religion on his politics."

Columnist Joseph Kraft asks, "Is America ready for a Christian president from the South?" A recent article in New York magazine by political commentator Richard Reeves is headlined, "Is Jimmy Carter Good for the Jews?"

In his piece, Reeves reports that a Harvard official told him, "I would never vote for anyone who believed in God." Says Reeves parenthetically, "The word usually used to describe attitudes like that is bigotry."

Whether all this discussion of the specifics of religion in a political campaign is a good idea depends on whom you ask.

Episcopal priest-writer Malcolm Boyd says he is concerned about politicians who write "their own spiritual report cards," adding his view that "the really decent religious man might be the one who didn't give himself an A." He worries about "exploitation and manipulation of deep emotional feelings in religion" if there is not "caution and restraint and respect for each other."

Talking with Father Boyd on a recent NBC Today program, Dr. Foy Valentine, executive secretary of the Christian Life Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, said that despite "a sinister and cynical manipulation of religious symbols" during the Nixon administration, "we need desperately a sense of justice and righteousness, goodness and integrity, and morality."

Father Boyd said expression of religious conviction could be "quite honest" without being manipulative, though he noted the danger that the same religious phrases may have different meaning to different hearers.

In that regard, Reeves quotes Dr. Marty: "For Jimmy Carter to say he is 'born again' is like you or I saying 'good morning.' There is no threat in those words."

That leads Reeves to conclude that "the threat, or the danger, it seems, is ignorance — on both sides." He cites a survey by the Anti-Defamation League showing that a majority of Southern Baptists do not know a single Jew "well," 38 per cent saying they are "not presently acquainted with a single Jew."

"I wonder," Reeves writes, "how many New York Jews are



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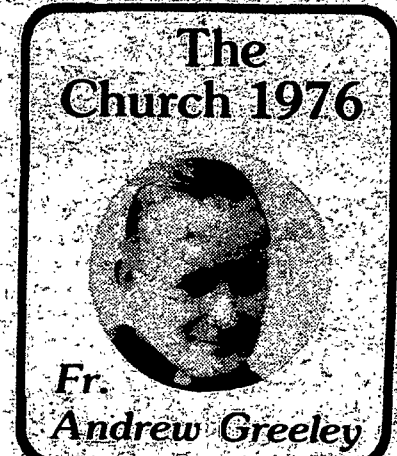
acquainted with a single Southern Baptist."

Reston worries that religion "relevant and even important up to



REAGAN

a point, is 'in danger of getting out of hand, and could, if we're not careful, divide the country on theological rather than political grounds."



I thought I was beyond being shocked by the intellectual dishonesty of the American Catholic Church, but the reaction of "official statements" to the new study, "Catholic Schools in a Declining Church" surprised even me. Obviously, Church leadership has no choice but to reaffirm its enthusiastic support of the birth-control encyclical and to note — as the report did, incidentally — that sociology cannot dictate theological decisions.

Such bland restatement of the official position is the sort of thing that the hired PR guns of the Church — like the USCC's ineffable Russell Shaw — can grind out in their sleep. No one is expected to take them seriously.

But there was a nervous edge to many of the statements. Long study, controversy, leading questions, dubious methods — all of these neat little phrases were tossed out to suggest that, well, maybe the authors were not all that competent and that the Church leadership would call in its host of superior social science experts to reveal to them the weaknesses of the methodology of the report.

The Chicago chancery was quite explicit about it all.

"Evaluation by professionals in the field will be helpful, since the authors suggest that their statistical study definitely proves a causal relationship (between the birth-control statement and declines in religious practices and the Roman Catholic school system). This (certainty) seems to exceed the scientific limitations of inference normally associated with the statistical methods employed."

Now if the chancery's hack or his expert on sociological jargon had bothered to read the report before shooting from the hip, he would have realized that the "d systems" model used in the sort of social change research attempted in "Catholic Schools in a Declining Church" do indeed admit of causal inference and under some circumstances can produce "definitive" proof — at least definitive insofar as history or social science are concerned.

The simple truth is that the American Church — to say nothing of the Chicago chancery — has no intention of providing any "professional evaluation" of the report and it misleads when it suggests that it does. There are no social scientists on the staff of the Church and no capacity to play the

role of intelligent consumer of social science data. Resident journalists like Mr. Shaw must double in brass as social scientists whenever the Church needs such expertise to suggest that the capacity for responsible professional evaluation exists is merely a technique for questioning the competency of researchers — one with minor effectiveness. It is also dishonest.

In truth, given the newness of the social change style of research and the complexity of the "d systems" models, I doubt that there is a single sociologist on the staff of a Catholic university who is capable of making a technical evaluation of the report (one previous evaluation done by such a "scholar" betrayed that he didn't even understand multiple regression techniques). There are certainly Catholics in the country who could make an intelligent evaluation and expose the weakness of the survey — and of course it has weaknesses, as do all human efforts (many of them quite explicitly acknowledged in the text). But the official Church doesn't know about them — and with good reason.

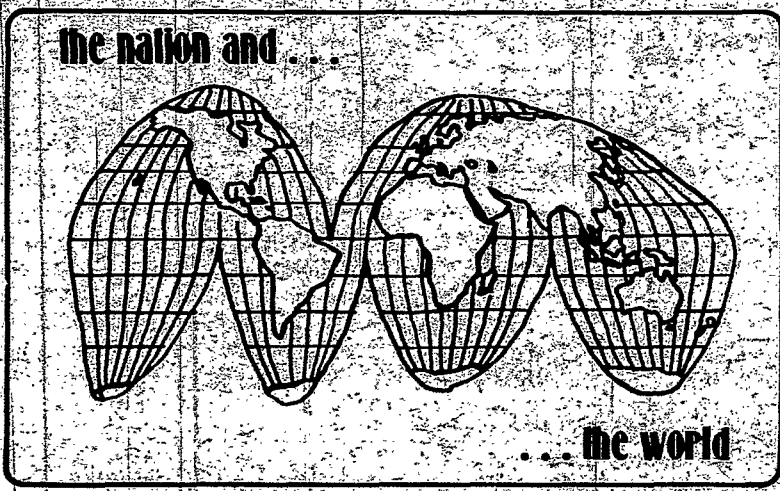
What the Church leadership is hoping for, of course, is that some inept and envious Catholic sociologist will ride into the fray to prove that "Humanae Vitae" was not a disaster for the Church. Doubtless, such people will turn up in the reviews of the book since Catholic journals as a matter of principle, it would seem, choose envious and inept reviewers for all their books.

But there is more dishonesty than the pretense of scholarly evaluation: the text of the report has been available to certain Church leaders for a long time. Indeed, many of them were briefed in great detail on its findings — as a matter of simple courtesy, I had no intention of revealing these briefings — and even now I will not name names — but the implied charge of incompetence doesn't give me much choice. If the leadership seriously planned an evaluation, it could have done one months ago. It didn't and it doesn't and lies when it attempts to imply that it does.

Maybe it is a necessary lie, a lie for the "good of the Church," as John Courtney Murray used to say.

But let me ask such men one more question: They know, of course, that the basic outlines of our findings about the rejection of "Humanae Vitae" and the document's impact on the Church are true. In private conversation they never deny it. Perhaps they have to reassert their loyalty to the encyclical to keep Rome happy. But what does it do to the Church when a document which has clearly been rejected is reasserted in the teeth of the evidence that it has been a disaster? What happens when the teaching Church says to the learning Church, in effect, "We don't care what you think?"

Does it not weaken even more the credibility of the hierarchy? Does it not make a bad situation even worse? Would it not have been better to just say nothing?



From Courier-Journal Services

Federico Alessandrini, the director of the Vatican Press Office since June 1970, retired June 3. A priest, Father Romeo Panciroli, secretary of the Vatican's Commission for Social Communications, has been named his temporary successor. Pope Paul VI concelebrated a special Mass on Ascension Thursday with the 20 new cardinals of the Church. Among the thousands attending were friends and relatives of the cardinals, as well as members of the diplomatic corps attached to the Vatican.

Bishop Edwin Broderick of Albany has been named executive director of Catholic Relief Services, to succeed Bishop Edward E. Swanson, 73, who has retired after 29 years as head of the agency. Americans of Lithuanian descent will present a variety of programs at the Eucharistic Congress in Philadelphia, Aug. 1-8, focusing on freedom and justice. Archbishop Helder Pessoa-Camara of Brazil strongly criticized multinational corporations which "serve only the needs of the rich and powerful." Archbishop Camara spoke in San Francisco at a program jointly sponsored by Catholics and Episcopalians.

A 36-year-old married man, the father of two children, will be the first married man to be ordained to the permanent diaconate in the Dutch Catholic Church. Dirk Lieter is setting the first for the Netherlands. A majority of the 900 permanent deacons in the United States are married. Cardinal Sergio Pignedoli, president of the Secretariat for Non-Christians, is leading a Vatican delegation in talks with Muslim religious leaders in Iran.