

'New Christian Right' Stirs Political Waters

By Jay Merwin
Religious News Service Staff Writer

"Nobody's ever accused the National Council of Churches of mixing religion and politics," says Moral Majority Inc. leader Rev. Jerry Falwell. "But when ol' Jerry gets into it, that's violating separation of Church and state."

The recent entry of outspoken fundamentalist and evangelical Christians into political activism has provoked a liberal backlash against the Moral Majority, the "pro-life" movement and radical conservative groups who, in this presidential election year, have formed an unusual alliance informally dubbed the New Christian Right.



As the New Christian Right has waded deeper into electoral politics, it has been accused variously of forming a "conspiracy," and "unholy alliance" and of posing a "threat to democracy" by attempting to "impose its beliefs on everyone." The so-called "mainline" and liberal churches have taken time from their synods, meetings and conferences to denounce this new political force for attempting to lump issues and candidates into simplistic "Christian" and "un-Christian" categories.

At an Interfaith press conference in Washington, former Southern Baptist Convention President Jimmy Allen said the Christian Right had no right to "label their political solutions as the Christian answer and reject as un-Christian those who address the problems' solution in another way."

He was joined by the Rev. Charles V. Bergstrom of the Lutheran Council in the U.S.A.; Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum of the American Jewish Committee and Msgr. George Higgins, former public affairs specialist for the U.S. Catholic Conference.

The sort of Christians who tend to watch Falwell's Old Time Gospel Hour and other evangelistic television programs, traditionally have been reticent about political issues and elections. At one time politics was considered a "worldly" pursuit inappropriate for those concerned with the soul. Such people tended to stay home on Election Day.

Their mainline brethren used to criticize them for standing aloof from the rough and tumble of civil rights, the war on poverty and protests against the Vietnam War.

But at a National Affairs Briefing sponsored by the conservative Religious Roundtable in Dallas last summer, evangelist James Robison declared political apathy "a crime against the country and a sin against almighty God."

He told some 14,000 evangelicals, "It's time for God's people to come out of the closet and the churches — and change America."

Indeed, they have been "coming out" against abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, homosexual rights, sex education in public schools, pornography, SALT II, and the formation of a separate Department of Education. They are for laissez faire capitalism, a balanced budget, increased military spending, voluntary prayer in public schools and a strong American commitment to Israel.

Grassroots Moral Majority church coalitions typically identify the stands of opposing candidates on these key issues, then urge constituents to make an obvious choice on the basis of fundamentalist biblical morality. In this manner, evangelical and fundamentalist churches already have influenced an outright endorsement for a particular candidate.

Recently, the National Council of Churches executive committee responded in a resolution that "there can be discerned no exclusively 'Christian vote,' nor can 'single issue' political pressure serve the interests of our total society."

And in an indirect reference to the New Christian Right's hit list of vulnerable liberal incumbents, the NCC resolution declared, "Christians may not agree on all political decisions, but they are enjoined not to hold one another in contempt, for all stand before God's tribunal."

At a day-long conference in September, the New York chapter of Planned Parenthood attempted to rally churches and communities against the "dangerous new alliance" which opposes abortion. In doing so, Planned Parenthood promised to "take off the white gloves" for a bare-knuckled contest.

The Catholic Church has felt the liberal backlash for its anti-abortion activism. The Abortion Rights Mobilization has sued in U.S. District Court in New York to remove the tax-exempt status from Catholic publications and agencies that allegedly support and condemn candidates on the basis of the abortion issue.

Seminary Librarian Retires

Mrs. M. Jay Byam, public services librarian at St. Bernard's Seminary for the past twelve years, will retire at the end of the month, according to a seminary release.

Father Jasper Pennington, librarian director, said "Jay Byam has been dear to the hearts of many students and

faculty during these years and much valued for her dedication to excellence in library service and for her cheerful and generally supportive manner. She will be very much missed by the seminary community, and our best wishes and regards go with her as she begins a new life."

As one piece of possible evidence, the plaintiff's cited Boston's Cardinal Humberto Medeiros who, on the eve of the Massachusetts primaries, issued a pastoral letter condemning pro-abortion politics.

In the rising din of religious voices in politics, the evangelical magazine Christianity Today castigated Moral Majority Inc. and the Christian Voice lobbying group for emphasizing traditionally "conservative" issues to the exclusion of other equally valid Christian concerns such as racial prejudice and world hunger.

"Too narrow a front in battling for a moral crusade, or for a truly biblical involvement in politics, could be disastrous," said a recent lead editorial. "It could lead to the election of a moron who holds the right view on abortion."

Whatever the size of their voting bloc, leaders of the New Christian Right have attempted to turn the accusations back on the accusers by reminding them of their own political legacy. When syndicated columnist Ellen Goodman deplored

the Christian Voice lobby for the "moral" rating of candidates, its legislative director, Gary L. Jarmin, replied: "It is the likes of Ellen Goodman who established the 'moral quotient' in political issues long before our arrival."

"Our leftist friends decried America's involvement in the Vietnam War as 'immoral,'" he wrote, "conversely, are we to assume that support for Hanoi's aggression and genocide was the moral position?"

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CWC Sets Fall Events

The Catholic Women's Club has opened its fall and winter season with a membership drive to acquire 100 new members.

The drive is under the chairmanship of Mrs. Norman Fertig and Mrs. John McLaughlin. The club presently boasts 800 members.

The Business Women's Group of the club gathered recently for a fall luncheon in Sibley's Downtown Terrace Room. The program, under the chairmanship of Mrs. Bernie Bromka, featured a travelogue by Father Bernard Power, CSSR, pastor of Our Lady of Victory Church. His program included a discussion of the Oberammergau Passion Play.

Holy Hour

Father George Wood, pastor of Our Mother of Sorrows Church, will lead the Peoples Eucharistic League in holy hour devotions, tomorrow, Oct. 23 at Holy Trinity Church in Webster. The rites begin at 7:30 p.m.

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