
A Response by William P. Mahedy
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Walter Capps is clearly ambivalent about Falwell. As a humanist and scholar committed to "those intellectual challenges that remain unmet" he can scarcely endorse the tone or the content of so simplistic a program. As a religious thinker he abhors Falwell's ideology and the Armageddon impulse of his apocalyptic religion. There is, nonetheless, a good deal of sympathy for some of Falwell's analyses of the moral vacuum of contemporary American life. I also read in Walter Capps the acknowledgement that the liberal voice has really not been raised in the true context of our present dilemmas. Falwell's taunt: "if humanists really have something to say, why don't you say it," disturbs him deeply. I must confess that our inability as humanists and religious thinkers to respond to the issues appropriated by the moral majority bothers me far more than does the transient phenomenon of Jerry Falwell.

About a month before the election of 1980, I spoke by telephone with a friend who was at the time on the board of directors of one of the scholarly societies which comprise the Council on the Study of Religion. I asked my friend how his society intended to respond to the issues then being raised by the moral majority. He replied that no response was envisioned because these people need not be taken too

seriously. They were, after all, quite simplistic in their analyses, their scholarship was not even skin deep, etc. My first impression was that, in his view, a condescending laugh was all the moral majority merited in terms of a response. Before my blood pressure returned to normal I wrote to my friend cataloguing the reasons why a scholarly society devoted to the study of religion should deal with the questions raised by Falwell and company. Several weeks later I received a reply from the president of this society to whom my letter had been forwarded. He was intrigued by my perceptions of the new fundamentalism as a movement to be taken seriously, but he wrote "all of that is largely lost or neglected by the East Coast academic world whose existence is predicated on the conviction that the world and religion must become more and more secular."

If we are to evaluate Falwell and the Falwellians we must do so within the context of the desacralization of every corner of reality, virtually completed in our own time. We must consider seriously the implications of the moral and spiritual abyss created at the center of modern life by the "amoral majority." We must acknowledge the unravelling of the alliance between the Enlightenment and religion. Falwell does not deserve the press coverage he receives except as a symbol of a set of very serious concerns shared by many Americans. Religious humanism has no choice but to respond to these concerns. One issue in particular deserves our immediate attention: the question of nuclear war. Falwell's Armageddon mentality is exceedingly dangerous especially as

it coalesces with the resurgence of ahistorical biblical fundamentalism and the renaissance of a virulent strain of American civil religion. This is a lethal mix, given the present instability in world affairs.

The moral-spiritual-religious abyss which has emptied contemporary life of any transcendent referents becomes the matrix that spawns Falwell. To assume, as the liberal intellectual establishment has, that "the world and religion must become more and more secular" is to create both the moral majority and the resurgence of religious fundamentalism. We must acknowledge that most of the presuppositions of modern intellectual life, hence of contemporary civilization, run counter to the assumptions of biblical religion, and, in fact, of all the great religious and philosophical traditions in our history. Robert Bellah bears repeating:

"...for social science...embodying the very ethos of modernity, there is no cosmos...no whole relative to which human action makes sense. There is, of course, no God, or any other 'ultimate' reality, but there is no nature either in the traditional sense of a creation or expression of transcendent reality. Similarly no social relationship can have any sacramental quality. No social form can reflect or be infused with a divine or cosmological significance. Rather, every social relationship can be explained in terms of its social or psychological utility. Finally, though the social scientist says a lot about the 'self' he has nothing to say about the soul.... To put the contrast in another way, the traditional religious view found the world intrinsically meaningful.... The modern view finds the world intrinsically meaningless, endowed by meaning only by individual actors and the societies they construct for their own ends."
(Bellah, Robert N. "Biblical Religion and Social Science," NICM JOURNAL, Summer 1981, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 10 and 11.)

Bellah touches a central issue: the distance between the "project of modernity" and the worldview which necessarily undergirds all religious faith. Falwell perceives quite accurately, in a way we liberals do not, the antipathy between faith and the philosophical presuppositions of contemporary civilization.

I believe that Christian humanists must call into question the positivism, reductionism and relativism which undergird our academic life and the structure of our civilization. Methodologies appropriate to the physical sciences need not have become a closed metaphysical system extruding a worldview open to transcendence. The discovery that values and beliefs are formed in their specifics by time and culture need not have severed the thread of connectedness between times and cultures. The voyage into the inner world of our psyche had at its outset destinations other than narcissism, radical individualism and the reduction of all values and beliefs to psychological reality.

Without in any way diminishing our commitment to "those intellectual challenges that remain unmet," we must explore alternatives to the basic assumptions of modernity. This is not to suggest that we should attempt a journey backward in cultural time such as that prescribed by Falwell. Quite the contrary, the quality of life made possible by modern medicine and the physical sciences is an immeasurable improvement over the harsh and brutal existence endured by earlier people. The insights provided by psychology, the social sciences, anthropology and historical studies which have necessarily

accompanied these advances vastly enrich our lives. In no way, however, do any of the methodologies, premises or conclusions intrinsic to the modern project foreclose access to the transcendent. Contemporary civilization is as open to a sacramental interpretation of reality as to the positivism that now pervades it. Falwell sees the problem but he lacks the tools and the insight to formulate an adequate response. I suspect and hope that Falwell's role with respect to authentic Christian humanism is that of the man who gets the mule's attention by hitting it on the head with a stick. On one point, however, as I have said, Falwell merits immediate response and direct challenge even as we await a more adequate treatment of the larger issues on the part of Christian humanists. As nuclear war becomes increasingly probable, those who abet the humanicidal forces must be exposed. A number of Christian fundamentalists, Falwell among them, have appropriated to the American political and economic system the symbols and characteristics of the biblical people of God. This, of course, is not new. From the beginning of colonial times we have believed that we are God's chosen people resettled in a new land. Central to our myth is war, the terrible sacrificial act through which we lay hold of our greatness. Also deeply embedded within our psyche is the conviction that we have a divine mandate to evangelize the world to our American way of life. Of course, we do not wage mere wars. We fight crusades against the infidels. We divide society into saints and sinners and with the divine blessing we beat into submission the unrighteous. Falwell

and company have resurrected the more heinous characteristics of our civil religion, confused them with the Christian gospel and proclaimed the final crusade against the demonic forces which are now embodied in Soviet Russia.

Professor Capps believes that Falwell is a creature of the American trauma concerning the Vietnam war. My reading of this connection is that Falwell thinks we, the American people, have been seduced by secular humanists to abandon our special covenant with God. Proof of our fall from grace was our defeat in Vietnam. We have lost a battle to the forces of evil. We must now recommit ourselves to God through military strength, including, of course, nuclear superiority over the Soviets. Vietnam must never happen again. The next time we must defeat the godless. This may be a simplistic interpretation but I believe it does justice to Falwell.

The problem is that the scenario becomes self-fulfilling. We have in the making the final showdown, the shootout at the OK Corral, apocalypse now with a real Armageddon. Because this issue is both imminent and ultimate I believe we must speak out clearly. Falwell and the Falwellians not only have no scholarly or historical sense of Scripture, but they have, in the biblical sense, fallen into the worship of idols. American culture, prosperity, political and economic systems may be good things and worthy of preservation but they are not ultimate reality. God alone is worthy of worship, American made idols are not. These people are unable to make that distinction. For them the American flag has become a graven image and the religion of the republic an idolatry.

Falwell and those who hold that the Soviet Union is a supernaturally evil entity which must be defeated by the United States in an apocalyptic drama are not merely naive and unsophisticated; they have become dangerous. That the Soviet government is evil and aggressive is beyond question but that it is the final embodiment of evil in the biblical sense is as fatuous a conclusion as is the identification of the kingdom of God with the American way of life. The arrogance of this type of thinking is not only non-biblical but it is, given the capacity for nuclear overkill on both sides, the most deadly concept ever formulated in the name of religion.

Walter Capps believes that the moral of the story is quite simply that the gospel being espoused must be a message of peace. I agree, for the cult of war ill becomes the disciples of one who commanded us to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us. The radical non violence of Jesus continues across the centuries to rebuke his followers for their warlike aberrations. Never more so than at the present time, for the consequences of violence now are irreversible.

San Diego, California
March 31, 1982

A CULTURAL AND POLITICAL FOOTNOTE
TO "Falwell on Location"

by Hubert G. Locke

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Walter Capps, in the sensitive style which his readers have come to thoroughly appreciate, has provided an admirably balanced account of the Jerry Falwell phenomenon and a concise, penetrating assessment of its religious significance. Two questions arise from Capps' analysis. First, is Falwell and the New Religious Right a passing phase in the continuous saga of the realignment of cultural, social, and moral values on American society - the "last hurrah" of an antiquated world view which cannot stand up under the onslaught which the realities of a post-industrial society present, both for the present and the future? Second, what are its short - and, if it should prove not be a passing fancy, long-term political consequences.

For the very reasons Capps cites, and a few I should like to add, it would be a serious mistake to view the religious-political fundamentalism of Falwell and his followers as a temporary phenomenon. If anything certain can be said about ideologically-driven world views, it is that they need not square with the realities of any given period in which they are expressed. In fact, it is quite likely that the very complexities of the present era, together with all that we can reasonably anticipate for the future, will continue to reinforce the anger, the indignation, and the sense of loss of control that fuels the fundamentalist perspective on the world and its alleged ills. Viet Nam, Watergate, and the deterioration of the public schools did not create the fundamentalist phenomenon; these episodes and experiences have only served to revivify its expression in the closing decades of the twentieth century, as the growth of cities and their attendant "evils" did in the waning years of the nineteenth.

Of greater importance, for those of us who do not subscribe to this world-view, is the possible course of its political expression and action. Here, we may be faced with an equally enduring phenomenon and one of far greater significance. Commager (The American Mind) suggests

that the "strength and persistence of fundamentalism well into the twentieth century" may be accounted for "because religion meant, on the whole, so little; because divorced as it was from the ultimate realities of daily life and excused from active participation in the affairs of business, politics, or society, it could be regarded as a thing apart, not subject to the normal tests prescribed for secular faiths and doctrines." (pp. 178-179).

If Commager is right about fundamentalism up until the present period, then we have reason to take with especial seriousness the dramatic turn of events which has produced the fundamentalist phenomenon as both a religious and a political crusade. The signs of its political disaffection with the current national administration are already visible; the ideological purity which fundamentalism demands in the political sphere may impel it to reach for someone even more "right-minded" than Reagan. Should this happen, de Tocqueville's sage observation that nations "...allow civilization to be torn from their grasp (while)... others who themselves trample it under foot" may become a grim reality.

NOTES ON WALTER CAPPS' NOTES ON JERRY FALWELL

By Harry S. Ashmore, author of
HEARTS AND MINDS: THE ANATOMY OF RACISM FROM ROOSEVELT TO REAGAN
Published by McGraw-Hill, May 17, 1982

Walter Capps, appraising the Moral Majority in the light of his conviction that the Vietnam War represented a watershed in American consciousness, finds Jerry Falwell representative of a new and threatening counterrevolutionary phenomenon, one that has been underestimated by the intellectual community.

It seems to me, on the contrary, that the importance of Falwell, and of the Moral Majority, has been generally overestimated by the intellectuals. He and his movement strike me as standard products of one of the seminal strains in the American tradition.

What is new is the use of television to project the image of a charismatic preacher beyond the confines of the church auditorium. When I watch Falwell on the tube I am impressed by his mastery of TV technique, and the high production values his organization now commands. But I do not hear any significant additions to traditional Bible-based fundamentalism with its simplistic evocation of the values of God, family and country.

There are, however, significant subtractions from what I suppose can be called fundamentalist theology. In the past the poor and lower middle-class Americans who predominated among the true believers were divided by conflicting prejudices. Racism precluded communion between whites and blacks. Protestants rejected Catholics in response to an inherited commitment to separation of church and state, and the know-nothing bigotries associated with it. Catholics and Protestants shared a strain of anti-Semitism brought over by their European forebears. Old stock Americans tended to denigrate--- and to an extent fear---immigrants marked by a different culture, and the immigrants tended to respond with a mixture of resentment and envy.

The Moral Majority is now able to reach across the old divisions and unite the lower middle-class in, if not a common religious faith, a common set of politically potent prejudices. It can do so because of changes in institutional arrangements, and in public attitudes, liberals have hailed as marks of progress.

Lowering the barriers of institutional segregation has permitted the black middle-class to enter the mainstream, and has robbed the doctrine of white supremacy of respectability. Hence at least one black face looms like a trademark in the segment of choir that appears on the screen behind Jerry Falwell in his TV services. He confesses that he once believed the Bible sanctioned segregation, but it since has been revealed to him that the reverse is true. His political activism, he says, was inspired by another noted Baptist evangelist, the Reverend Martin Luther King.

Abortion was not an issue in the days when Protestant fundamentalists

saw the nation threatened by Papist conspiracy; it was illegal everywhere, and there was no perceptible pressure to change the law. Now, of course, the Moral Majority stands shoulder to shoulder with the Catholic hierarchy in single-issue political support of Right to Life. With this breakthrough, Falwell's troops can march comfortably with the Legion of Decency in opposition to pornography, homosexuality, and assorted sins of the flesh.

In the days when Catholic parochial schools made up the only significant church-related system, Protestant fundamentalists powerfully opposed tax credits for private school tuition. Now that white flight has brought forth a proliferation of "Christian academies" in the old Bible Belt the issue of church and state has disappeared on the right; advocates with Roman collars are relegated to the back row as Jesse Helms and Strom Thurmond, with the backing of Ronald Reagan, lead the crusade for private school tax relief.

Hyperglandular patriotism has always been common to fundamentalists of all denominations; in calling for holy war against Godless Communism the likes of Father Coughlin could arouse the common folk by sharing texts with the Ku Klux Klan, while eminent WASP cold warriors drew inspiration from princes of the Church like Cardinal Spellman. At the international level anti-Communism was often difficult to distinguish from pro-Fascism, and the tragic experience of Jews tended to isolate them from the superpatriots in the early years of Pax Americana. But the surge of neo-Zionism brought on by emotional response to the perils of Israel has changed all that. Now even Jews who can be counted on the left on all other issues equate American armed might and saber-rattling diplomacy with Israel's survival. And there is no more ardent an advocate for unequivocal American support of Menachem Begin and the Israeli hard-liners than Jerry Falwell. The Bible tells him so.

It does not follow, however, that this bridging of traditional prejudices has produced a durable political alliance, or that Jerry Falwell is in any sense its architect. He was simply standing by, armed with a body of traditional fundamentalist doctrine and equipped with a great new electronic megaphone, when anti-establishment populism faded on the left and revived on the right---breaking up the centrist political coalition that had prevailed for half a century. It remains to be seen how effective this emotion-fired negative grouping will be in holding its followers against the pull of pragmatic self-interest---now beginning to be felt in terms of job and income as the inevitable failure of Reaganomics becomes evident. The President's voodoo economics and the "new federalism," after all, are only political manifestations of Moral Majority theology. And in the past it has produced the opposite result when the pressing need was not for moral certainty, but for economic salvation.

REFLECTIONS IN RE WALTER CAPPS'
"Falwell on Location"

by R.C. Gordon-McCutchan
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Walter Capps' essay Falwell on Location underscores what is for me the gravest danger posed by the moral majority--their willingness to circumscribe the civil liberties of those who differ morally or intellectually from them. We learn from Walter's essay that Falwell (p. 9)"doesn't believe in the liberal goal of creating free minds," that Falwell's religious objective is the elimination of competing faiths and the conversion of everyone to Christianity (p. 10), that Falwell backs (p. 13)"censoring library acquisitions and removing books from shelves," and that Falwell and his co-workers are (p.5)"giving strong support to restoring voluntary prayer in the public schools." Such thinking is at odds with the kind of intellectual freedom which must be allowed to flourish if our society is to remain truly pluralistic. And yet the religious right threatens that pluralism by their insistence that all should be made to conform to the principles of truth and morality as defined by the moral majority.

Alexis de Tocqueville long ago pointed out that the political majority in America

exercises a prodigious actual authority, and a moral influence which is scarcely less preponderant; no obstacles exist which can impede or so much as retard its progress, or which can induce it to heed the complaints of those whom it crushes upon its path. This state of things is fatal in itself and dangerous for the future.

These words are particularly appropriate in re the current moral majority. Proponents of this point of view are only too willing to crush in their path all of those whose moral codes differ from the Judeo-Christian. Of especial concern is Falwell's assumption that everyone has the ten commandments written by God in their heart. Condoning gays, drugs, abortion, pornography, and feminism (p. 8)"makes it all the easier for indi-

viduals to live beneath the standards of their own moral beliefs," according to Falwell. He tacitly assumes that we are all innately Christian moralists and that it is the task of the preacher to assist people (p. 7) "to live where their inside hearts tell them they should." Thus circumscribing the liberties of those who differ morally from the majority is justified on the grounds that such persons are violating their own inner conscience, or worse, are actively in league with the devil. And moral majoritarians are only too ready to trample on the civil liberties of persons perceived to be participants in evil.

Thinking of morality in these terms was appropriate in the Puritan theocracy of the seventeenth-century. Biblical moral standards then provided the criteria according to which legal statutes were drawn. So long as most Americans were nominally Protestant, Biblical moral standards could be imposed with relative ease. But today it is all too obvious that America is made up of many diverse cultural backgrounds each of which has its own definition of morality. Pluralism has rendered problematic the precise relationship which ought to obtain between law and morality. Falwellians agree with their Puritan progenitors that any conduct considered immoral by Biblically derived majoritarian standards should merit legal circumscription. Crime they define simply in terms of sin--i.e., those things considered by the Bible to be sinful are to be considered illegal by the state.

Cross cultural pressure and moral/religious pluralism have now made apparent the unfairness of equating Judeo-Christian definitions of sin with crime. In a pluralistic society we must distinguish between crime (acts which violate the person or rights of others) and sin (acts which are thought to have morally destructive effects on the performer) and insist that the authority of the state shall in future be limited to punishing instances of the former only. As John Stuart Mill said, "The only purpose for which power can rightfully be exercised over any member of a civilized community against his will is to prevent harm to others." Any connection between

law and sin should be improper. Crime alone falls within the legitimate judicial power of the state. We must deny to the moral majority the power to punish as crime personal behaviors defined by the majority's culturally relative standards as "sinful." Such culture-specific sumptuary legislation must now give way to the claims of individual conscience and the desire for maximum freedom, religious and moral. Only behavior which can empirically be shown to disturb the public order should be subject to punitive legislation.

A pluralistic approach to ethics would, of course, be anathema to moral majoritarians. As Capps points out:

The "national sins" Falwell feels obligated to denounce, in virtually every instance, concern matters of personal and interpersonal behavior--matters of personal morality--most of which most people consider to be items of choice or rights of privacy. (p. 15)

In a truly free and pluralistic society, matters of personal morality must remain items of choice protected by the rights of privacy and the canons of civil liberty.

In recent American history, courageous civil libertarians have achieved a significant widening of our perspective on moral and intellectual issues. The gains in personal freedom achieved during the 1960's must not be surrendered to zealots who would force us all into their narrow mold of righteousness. That is the form in which "tyranny of the majority" threatens us today. Blinded by the belief that they alone are possessed of the truth, the religious right is only too willing to tyrannize over the personal lives of others. That is a tyranny which faith in freedom compels us to resist. As Hamilton makes clear in Federalist 51:

It is of great importance in a republic not only to guard the society against the oppression of its rulers, but to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part. . . . In a society, under the forms of which the stronger faction can readily unite and oppress the weaker, anarchy may as truly be said to reign as in a state of nature.

COMMENT

Hodding Carter III
INSIDE STORY
New York, N.Y.:

"The Capps piece is excellent---thoughtful, thorough, good journalism and worthwhile insights. I think it goes to the core of two problems, one being the possible effects of what Falwell represents, the other being the reality of the societal conditions to which he speaks".

Clifton Fadiman
Santa Barbara, CA.:

"I found Walter Capps' manuscript interesting, of course. It helped me understand the successful Reagan-Falwell axis. I hope the manuscript will see formal publication".

Daniel F. Martensen, Director
THE WASHINGTON THEOLOGICAL CONSORTIUM
Washington, D.C.:

"As a recent returnee to North America, I find the analysis reinforces my evaluation of the new American religious right shaped during the years of living in and doing international church work out of Geneva, Switzerland. Professor Capps has described the tragedy of a man who lives with a parochial conscience in a universal world. He points to the unhappy reality of a large segment of the USA populace which takes some comfort in defining political ethics in terms of personal morality rather than public philosophy or policy.

The Analysis suggests that Mr. Falwell has learned one lesson but is incapable of learning a second which is equally essential. Most ecumenically sensitive Christian communions (i.e., those concerned about Christian unity and the whole inhabited world---the oikoumene) have learned that to separate religion and politics is to split our human personalities, an act which threatens mental health and obstructs social justice. To some degree Mr. Falwell has learned that lesson. What he seems not to have learned is that to bring together politics and religion in a thoughtless and uncritical fashion is to threaten both the freedom of the political system and the integrity of the Christian faith. If Professor Capps is correct Mr. Falwell's most fundamental of fears is that forces are conspiring to upset the supremacy of patriarchal order, then the chances are not good that the second lesson will be learned.

The essay makes a valuable contribution to the difficult task of discerning both the actual and the correct relationships between politics and religion.