

THE MORAL CRISIS IN AMERICA: A REPORT FROM THE
NEW RELIGIOUS RIGHT

by

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I had opportunity a few months ago to have conversation with former president Jimmy Carter about the high points of his four years in the White House. He said, as I had expected after reading his biography, that his greatest satisfaction may have come at Camp David, when he was able to encourage Anwar Sadat of Egypt and Menachem Begin of Israel to sign the Camp David Peace Accords. Knowing that I work and teach in the field of religious studies, he commented, "You know, the Camp David meetings were a kind of religious retreat." And then he explained that he had experienced great difficulty in trying to serve as moderator between Begin and Sadat -- that is, between the interests of Israel and those of Egypt -- because both of those statesmen were devoutly religious persons; and their religions were preventing them from coming to an agreement. He further explained that he himself is a person of religious sensitivity. Hence, he believed that if all three personages -- Begin, a Jew; Sadat, a Moslem, and Carter, a Christian -- could meet at some point other than at the negotiating table, say, in a setting in which their religious sensitivities would be acknowledged by the environment, perhaps

they could make some progress. He called it a "religious retreat," and he was manifestly pleased that it had resulted in a signing of the peace accords. I am confident Mr. Carter believes that it was the setting, the conscious recognition of the religious component, that contributed positively to the outcome.

But it was what came next, in our conversation, that captivated me the most. Striking a reflective posture, Mr. Carter recalled that when he was nurtured in religion, as a boy, by his mother, he was told that religion stands for the good things in the world -- peace, global harmony, compassion, brotherhood. And he still believes this. But, in his four years as president, he discovered that wherever the very opposite of these virtues was occurring, religion also seemed responsible, either as source or as catalyst. That is, wherever there was militancy against the cause of peace, wherever there were forces that threatened to undo any possibility of global harmony, wherever there was violence and intolerance, indeed, wherever brotherhood and sisterhood seemed severely challenged by prejudice, one could usually find the influence of religion present in a powerful, formative way. He explained that he could make no headway at all with the Ayatollah Khomeini because he couldn't penetrate the workings of the Moslem mind; and he indicated that he tried his best to study this subject when dealing with Iran for the return of the fifty two American hostages. And then Mr. Carter asked a series of penetrating questions that I shall continue to think about, for I recognize them to be absolutely crucial. He queried, Why, if religion believes in peace, does it contribute so much to the cause

of violence, bloodshed, and discord? Why, if religion claims allegiance to global harmony, does it seem to support intolerance, as well as wide ranges of global disharmonies? Why does religion seem to promote causes that work absolutely counter to the ideals it wishes to espouse and teach?" Under the force of such basic questions, even while standing on a vista overlooking the Pacific Ocean on a beautiful sunny morning, I found myself unable to respond, because I recognized that this is what a recent president is thinking about after having spent four years occupying the position that many regard as the most powerful and influential in the world.

I have chosen to open this distinguished lectureship in this way to call attention to the contrary roles that religion seems within a democratic society. Writing nearly 150 years ago, in a classic text with the title DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA, Alexis de Tocqueville pointed out that one of the reasons society needs religion is to counteract the force of religion. This sounds confusing and paradoxical in the extreme unless one recognizes that there is always a sharp polarization of energies and devotions among advocates of the same religious tradition. Christendom, today, is virtually split down the middle between those who regard capitalism, as it were, as the best friend the gospel ever had, and those who regard capitalism as providing the primary sanction for the exploitation of the poor and the continuing oppression of colonized peoples, in Central America and elsewhere. Within one and the same religious tradition, among persons who claim to be worshipping the same God, there are those who regard

the elimination of all nuclear weaponry as religious duty, and those who believe that we are obligated to maintain a strong national defense so that the causes of justice and righteousness will remain secure. And in many areas, they are on a collision course. One can cite virtually countless examples of such religiously-sanctioned juxtapositions to illustrate Alexis de Tocqueville's observation about the contrary function of religion in a democratic society.

Against a background framed by the observations of both Carter and de Tocqueville, I would like to offer some interpretive suggestions about the appearance of a "new religious right" in our society within recent years, and how its occurrence can be employed as commentary on the formulae that both Jimmy Carter and Alexis de Tocqueville uncovered and underscored.

We don't have time to go into this in proper detail; at the University of California, Santa Barbara, I offer a full-quarter course on "Religion and Politics in America Today." Suffice it to say that the recent incidence of a strong religious right in our country was stimulated as much by educational as by religious sensitivities (although, at all times, education and religion are very closely aligned). But it was a concern about what was happening in the public schools, together with alarm over the ways in which Christian schools were being harrassed by federal IRS regulations, that brought the new religious right into being. To be sure, the Reverend Jerry Falwell, leader of the Moral Majority

and pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, was visibly present from the beginning. But Falwell functioned more as a congealing element -- the one who could articulate what the movement stands for -- than as the initial or primary sparkplug. There were several sparkplugs: Paul Weyrich, who now heads the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress; Richard Viguerie, the acknowledged master of direct-mail solicitation; Robert Billings, the founder of the National Christian Action Coalition, Ronald Reagan's "religious liaison staff persons" during the 1980 presidential campaign, and currently under-secretary of education in Washington; and Howard Phillips, and others whom we will mention when providing a more comprehensive account. The important point is that these various personages, and the groups which they represented, agreed to bury some of their differences so that they might act in a politically effective way to achieve the objectives they shared. They recognized that "conservative America" had heretofore been politically ineffective both through apathy and indifference and because of significant differences among conservatives. And religious fundamentalism, heretofore, had the reputation of being deliberately anti-intellectual and apolitical. But this time around, the molders of a powerful religious right pleaded that the vision conservative America shares should not languish simply because conservative Americans differ among themselves over major issues. Instead, a coalition of conservative forces should be forged among conservative Catholics, conservative Jews, conservative Protestants, conservative people of no particular religious identification, and any others who espoused the same ideals. Jerry Falwell has done his best, for

example, to avoid intramural squabbles among religious fundamentalists; he has been careful not to respond to the very severe criticisms that have been directed his way by the fundamentalists who tend to congregate around Bob Jones University in Greenville, South Carolina. Billy Graham was criticized when he appeared to be taking too benign an attitude toward the officials of the Soviet Union who, his critics say, have jeopardized religious freedom; but the leadership of the new religious right didn't participate in that criticism. [Indeed, just a few days ago, Senator Ted Kennedy appeared at Liberty Baptist College, accepting Falwell's invitation, and Falwell seemed pleased with the symbolism.] Thus, a coalition of conservative political strength was formed about convictions conservatives shared. And when this was linked to direct-mail political efficiency, effective local precinct work (which utilized fundamentalist churches as precinct offices and fundamentalist persons as precinct workers), and, most importantly, to the opportunity to elect a president who fully espoused these same ideals, the successes came. We all remember what happened in 1980, not simply in the contest between Mr. Carter and Mr. Reagan, but also in the senatorial races in South Dakota, Indiana, Idaho, Iowa, and elsewhere.

I've spent a good deal of time on this topic in the past several years. In fact, I've been to Lynchburg, Virginia; I've observed Jerry Falwell in action in Thomas Road Baptist Church and at Liberty Baptist College. I've been to a number of national conferences sponsored by various entities within the new religious right. I've spent time in Greenville, South Carolina, at

Bob Jones University, and I've been studying the recent court case over whether rules against interracial dating, and interracial marriage, violate the Civil Rights Code, and, thus, disqualify Bob Jones University, as well as the Greensboro Christian Schools, as tax-exempt institutions. And I've been following the debate concerning voluntary school prayer, which, according to at least one national poll, would have the support of 83% of the American citizenry. And I find all of it intensely important, not only because it is one of the chief contributors to the constitution of the national character today, not only because of clear linkages between the rise of religiously-supported militancy and the national frustration over the outcome of the Vietnam War, and not only because the subject provides illustration of the power of religion and this happens to be my professional field of study. No, I find all of it intensely important because it seems to illustrate some of the contrary ways in which religion functions in a democratic society, as astute observers like Alexis de Tocqueville, 150 years ago, and Jimmy Carter, just a few short weeks ago, have emphasized. And I have tried my best to view our world through the eyes of conservative religious sensitivity.

There is a kind of consensus, from that vantage point. We don't have time to sketch in all of the details today, but we can identify some of the major elements. And we don't need to go all the way back to the time of the Puritans to get the sense of the story, or even to the post World War I period which was marked by the famous Scopes Trial. It suffices to return to the mid-1960s

when there was a coalition of intellectual, social, and religious forces -- let's call it a potent spiritual force -- which brought some of the aspirations of the Counter Culture into ambience with some of the stated objectives of the Great Society. Advocates of the new religious right believe both Counter Culture and Great Society to be colossal mistakes and massive failures. In their eyes, this was when the tendency toward socialism gathered force in our society, and, as everyone knows, they say, socialism is merely a mediating temporary resting point on the road to communism. It is called socialism, at times, but the name used most often is "humanism," or "secular humanism," which terms have the ability to do double duty. They can describe the set of convictions that empowered both the Counter Culture and the Great Society, and they can also invoke opposition between "humanism" and "theism," as in "atheistic humanism" (which is implicit in "godless communism") which stands opposed to the theistic (or godly) orientation of the new religious right. But, at this point, the appeal is to something far more powerful than the collective religious convictions of those who espouse new right philosophy. In addition, there is a claim that the Counter-Culture and Great-Society orientations represent a marked deviation from the vision of the founding fathers of our country. Thus, a nation that is deviating more and more from the ideals for which it was founded, and the convictions on which it was established, is in grave danger -- literally -- of losing its soul. The only immediate remedy is to return to an espousal of those vantage points that pertained before either Counter Culture or Great Society got the na-

tion off course. And to lend force to this critique of the nation's untoward departure from the convictions that, at one time, gave it a rich character and a clarity of vision, new right advocates point to the dismal outcome of the Vietnam War, the increase of crime on our streets and in our communities, the dramatic incremental rise in the use of drugs and consciousness-altering substances, the high divorce rate, the breakdown of traditional family life, the high degree of absenteeism among high-school students throughout the land [in California today, a typical high-school student misses 45 days of school each year, or nine weeks of a scheduled thirty-three or thirty-four], and the general apathy, indifference, and listlessness of the people. In the attitude of the new religious right, something very serious has been happening to both individual and collective motivation. American men and women do not embody the clarity of resolve and the stature of character that seemed typical of those generations that were willing to sacrifice everything to safeguard the ideals of the nation. Thus, it is only by returning to a fresh discovery of those formative ideals, to a zealous recovery of those same aspirations, and, indeed, to a heartfelt espousal of the religious convictions on which the nation was founded will we re-discover the path that leads to greatness. It was on this path that we were traveling -- so the account reads -- before the incursions of both Counter Culture and Great Society got us badly off course. And to make their charge the more compelling, advocates of the new religious right contend that what they have been saying about the failures of our national education has all been corroborated by such recent reports as THE NATIONAL AT RISK, a

thorough analysis of our educational strengths and weaknesses conducted by the Committee for Excellence in Education. Advocates of the new religious right contend that nearly a decade ago they were saying what the report issued in 1983 confirms. And they chuckle to themselves that people are listening today because the report carries the authority of a blue-ribbon panel.

Now, if you've been listening to my remarks carefully, you know that I've gotten myself into a bind. I've been describing the "worldview" of the new religious right in terms, I submit, that might make it sound pretty attractive, even to a distinguished university audience, and even within a public-university setting. And you hadn't suspected that I would do this, particularly if you know anything about my own background -- a teacher in a state university in California, an author of a book about the impact of the Vietnam War, a former administrator of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions (a think-tank that was among the first to criticize Senator Joseph McCarthy, a perennial bastion of human rights, civil liberties, and individual freedoms), and a person who, on two occasions, co-taught a university course with George McGovern, who is not exactly the darling of the new religious right. You had every expectation that I would come out lambasting Falwell's cause, as President A. Bartlett Giamatti of Yale University did a couple of years ago, when he contended that the spirit it embodies runs directly counter to the spirit of free inquiry that must be protected, at all costs, within the university. And I have not done this, at least not yet. True, I could have said something negative about the alleged obscurantism

that is being practiced in some quarters -- the censorship and book burnings that even embarrasses some of the new right's leadership. I could have sketched in a very worrisome apocalyptic dimension -- the shared delight that the world will soon end, perhaps even in a cataclysmic nuclear holocaust. That element is always there, of course, but the new right leadership has been taking steps lately to diminish its place and soft-peddle its potential force. And I could have demonstrated how portions of the new right employ biblical imagery to give cosmic dimension to the conflict between the two superpowers, America and Russia. But I didn't, though I could have. And my hesitations are based on convictions far more compelling than the awareness that though I wrote these words in California, they were meant for delivery in Kansas. After all, I was born and raised in nearby Nebraska, and, except on subjects like football, the two places cannot be radically different.

No, I believe we've come to the time in our individual and collective life wherein the realization of our best ideals is being frustrated by the way we are pursuing them. This sounds paradoxical; it sounds paradoxical because it is paradoxical. We are living in an age in which our most compelling convictions can hardly be expressed except in opposition to convictions that also find support within the national character. We are surrounded on all sides by a situation carrying the formula: A can be defined only in opposition to B, and only one of them can be sustained. And until we can determine which one can be sustained, we will be caught in the crossfires between them. Or, put in other terms,

the aspirations of Superpower #1 can only be defined in opposition to the ambitions of Superpower #2, and until that conflict can be resolved, we are caught in the perpetual crossfires between them. Or, as James Watt is reported to have said, "I never use the words Democrats and Republicans. It's liberals and Americans." Watt explained, "I speak in black-and-white terms, without much gray in my life. I see problems without the complexity that is confusing to a lot of people." The polarization of forces that such statements imply is indicative of what I wish to call "the spiritual crisis in America today." And I wish to provide some examples of how we might proceed more effectively.

Writing just a few short weeks ago for THE NEW YORK, former U.S. Ambassador to the Soviet Union, George Kennan, attempted to interpret the meaning of the tragic shooting down of Korean airliner 007 after it had strayed off course over the territory housing extensive Soviet military weaponry. Kennan pointed out that Averill Harriman is the only person still alive who has had more ambassadorial experience with the Soviet Union, lending force to his observation that the two peoples -- the Russians and the Americans -- have avoided direct military conflict for more than six decades, during very explosive and tumultuous times. Kennan pointed out that while the world's great superpowers seem to have come to an impasse over acutely critical questions concerning arms reduction, they also share the vested interests that belong to nations living in the northern hemisphere -- interests ranging from widespread ecological and environmental problems to communication problems to hunger to poverty to transportation, et

al. And Mr. Kennan proposed that the two nations try their best to approach some of these pressing human issues in cooperative terms, since each has a large stake in the outcome, which outcome requires a mutually-beneficial solution. In making this proposal Kennan attests that he is not unmindful of the absolutely crucial nature of the nuclear issue. But he believes that full-scale concentration on that issue, year after year without resolution, may be too singleminded. Perhaps the nuclear issue could even be approached more resourcefully if the two superpowers could find a shared facility for dealing with additional pressing human issues in a cooperative manner. My comment: it doesn't solve it, but it may be pointing to a mode of relief that might indeed be on its way.

Not long ago, Cal Thomas, Vice President for Communications of the Moral Majority, mistakenly sent a membership card to Senator Ted Kennedy, inviting him to join the fight against "ultra-liberals such as Ted Kennedy." When news of this hit the press, Thomas wrote Kennedy that he didn't have to surrender the card; in fact, he could even come to Liberty Baptist College to make a speech sometime. Kennedy accepted. Thomas informed Jerry Falwell. Falwell turned "white as a sheet," it was reported, but then dispatched his own plane to Washington so that Kennedy could come to Lynchburg. Kennedy used the occasion to plead with his audience that "liberal clergymen are not Soviet sympathizers," and "Dr. Falwell is not a warmonger," and "critics of official prayer in public schools are not pharisees," and "people are not sexist because they stand against abortion." Further, Kennedy

said, "we sorely test our ability to live together if we too readily question each other's integrity." Kennedy lamented the fact that when Dr. Falwell spoke at Harvard University, he was booed and jeered by students, some of whom screamed "Nazi" as he tried to speak. Kennedy added that some within the Moral Majority are no less tolerant of opposing political and religious views. My comment: the event may contribute to the reduction of the intensity of the prevailing polarization in our country, in both political and religious terms.

I've taken two examples wherein leadership roles were exercised by persons who belong, we might say, to the more liberal side of things. But I think we could compelling examples in which so-called conservatives have taken the lead. Indeed, there are times in which the moves of the conservative leadership have the greatest influence, precisely because they were not expected. But the point is not to commend one or another of the two polarized groups for the initiatives they seem to be taking, but to suggest that a whole lot more of this kind of activity needs to occur if the polarization is to be overcome.

But I wish my argument to rest on something more compelling and something more substantial than the examples I have cited. I would like to suggest that neither of today's two polarized positions are so comprehensively impressive that, if adhered to, they will enable humankind, or even American humankind, to meet the challenges of the present and the future. Both positions are seriously and severely flawed. Each is inadequate. Neither ef-

fectively encourages its devotees to measure up to the stature that might have been expected of members of the human family. And it isn't simply that each needs the other. Polarized positions do not require each other; in fact, polarization itself is eloquent testimony that resolution lies beyond, in formulae or orientations toward which some more fundamental human impulse might find itself groping. I know those of you who are familiar with the philosophy of Hegel will see in my recommendation an expression of the viewpoint that thesis and antithesis must eventually lead to synthesis, or, indeed, to a new thesis. And if Hegel is helpful in this respect, I would say, "why not?"

But I'm not talking about Hegel, and I'm not speculating on how the polarization might be overcome, in abstract or theoretical terms. I'm really thinking about Jimmy Carter and Alexis de Tocqueville, and the evident religious and political polarization that seems to dominate both national and international life today. Wouldn't it seem to make sense that religious resources be tapped to overcome the power of other religious resources, at least, for the sake of the greater future of humankind? Wouldn't it appear to be our obligation to find ways to take a longer look at what is involved in our present difficulties -- "the spiritual crisis in America today" -- so that we regard neither of the two presently-polarized positions as providing any ultimate resolution? I don't know if this is possible. We may find out that the fundamental contrariness is built into the human situation, and that we are forever doomed to side with "Option A" or "Option B". And maybe it is even more serious than former President Car-

ter suspected, that our best ideals are forever in opposition to each other.

But I would like to close in a different way.

Last June, at the graduation ceremonies in the institution where I teach, a twenty-two year old student, Jeff Mann, was asked to deliver the senior's address. Instead of doing any of the perfunctory things one might do on such an occasion, Jeff Mann seized the opportunity to ask his classmates a series of penetrating questions. Being a history major, he started out this way: "Do you know who we are?" he asked. "Do you know where we are? Do you know what place we've ^{been} assigned in the long history of humankind?" Then, when everyone was silent, he said: "We have the opportunity to be the first generation of human beings to learn how to live effectively in the nuclear age." He repeated his contention, adding, "perhaps we will be the ones who, finally, will get the hang of it." Then he explained that his father's generation hadn't yet mastered this, even after a number of well-intended tries, and he looked at his father as he said so. And his grandfather's generation hadn't even thought of it. But this generation has to think about it, and perhaps it will learn how to triumph.

In this light, we already know what the future demands. The religious traditions of the world are not going to contribute significantly to the achievement of those objectives if they continue to define themselves and their aspirations in opposition to each other, eventhough there is no reason why they cannot

maintain their intrinsic identities. And the attitudes that prevail in the nation are not going to help us live effectively and responsibly in a nuclear age if it ever happens that we become TWO NATIONS INDIVISIBLE -- which is one way of describing the consequence of our present course -- instead of ONE NATION INDIVISIBLE, as the founding fathers intended.

So we return to Mr. Carter's questions. But I must attest that it was the look on his face when he asked them that was most compelling to me. It was the visage, the demeanor, that I shall remember longest, for even if the questions hadn't been enunciated I would have heard his plea: can't we find a better way to do it?

When I was referring to Alexis de Tocqueville a few minutes ago, I was citing passages from DEMOCRACY IN AMERICA referring to the way he believed religion to be constituted. But when de Tocqueville was talking about the national character -- about the formative and sustaining spirit of the nation -- he was bold to suggest something else. The uniqueness of the American experiment, he said, lies in its ability to make the cause of religion and the cause of freedom compatible and mutually supportive. de Tocqueville understood his words to be a description of what he had observed in his journeys from place to place. Today, one hundred fifty years have passed since Alexis de Tocqueville wrote his impressions. And if such words are no longer description, they remain for all of us an ever-present challenge.

Thank you very much.

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