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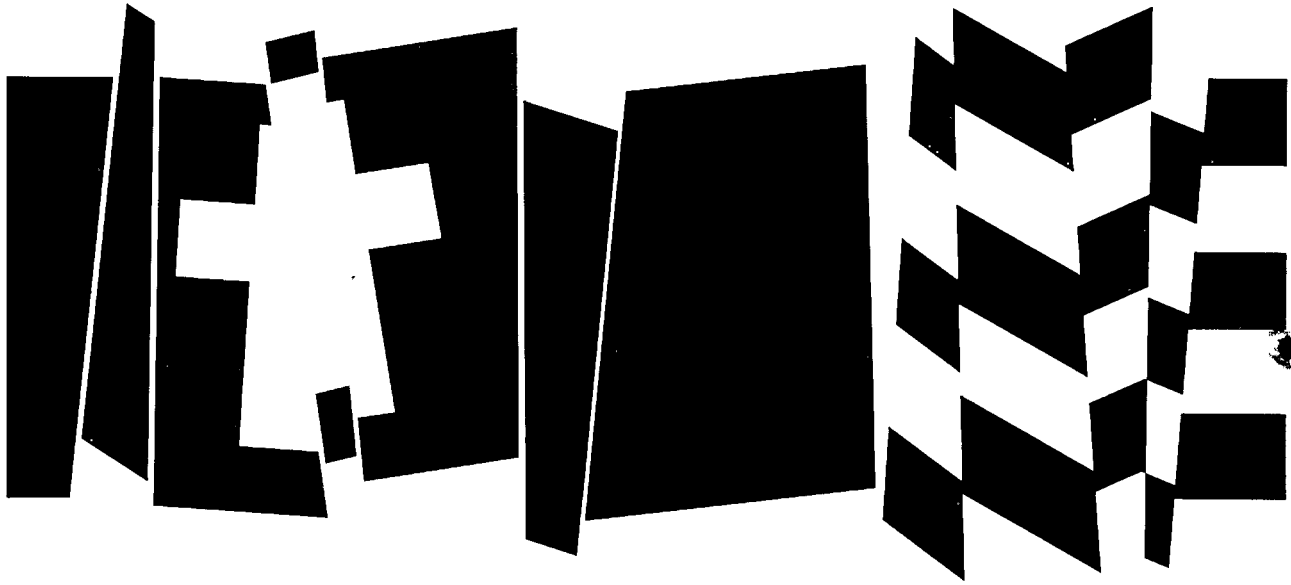
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## A NOTE ON THE RISE OF THE NEW RELIGIOUS RIGHT

By Walter H. Capps\*

Any serious discussion of religious liberty in our time will involve a realistic recognition of the emergent power and influence of the movement now commonly referred to as the New Religious Right. Since it came into prominence in 1979 (the year the Moral Majority was founded) and was nationally certified in 1980 (the year that Ronald Reagan was elected President), the movement has been instrumental in drawing national attention to questions pertaining to the relationship between church and state. Thus, within the past several years, the U. S. Supreme Court has found itself debating such issues as whether a prohibition against interracial dating at Bob Jones University, in Greenville, South Carolina, is a question about civil rights or religious liberty. More recently, the same Court has ruled on the matter of legal rights belonging to religious sensitivity regarding the Sabbath Day. Along the way, the Court has also taken a stand on whether the city fathers of Pawtucket, Rhode Island, ought to be allowed to include the creche, from the Christian nativity scene, amidst reindeer, Santa Claus, clowns and artificial snow, in a public civic display commemorating Christmas. The Court has given its judgment, too, on whether school children in Alabama should be allowed to take a moment, at the beginning of the school day, to pray, meditate, and/or observe silence. And while such debates have been occurring, the Congress has also been deliberating about the propriety of voluntary school prayer, not to mention the

nest of thorny issues implicit in prevailing but contested national laws concerning abortion rights (which question, 'esteemed pollsters have confirmed, became the primary political issue during the presidential campaigns of 1984). Many of these issues have been pushed to the forefront of the national collective consciousness by the persistent efforts and agitation of the New Religious Right. Put in other words, significant portions of the debate about religious freedom in our time have been framed within the agenda of the Falwellites. The outcomes may not always please those who have raised the questions most pointedly. But it is culturally significant that the nation and its religious communities are now responding to the issues that the New Religious Right regards as having greatest significance.

How did it happen? What set of socio-political conditions provided opportunity for the rise of a movement appropriately referred to as the New Religious Right? What things occurred within the mindset of Americans to lend support, or, at least offer an openness, to a development of this kind?

Musing on the same question, Mary Douglas, the distinguished anthropologist, offers that such developments have taken the entire religious studies profession "by surprise."<sup>1</sup> Previously, Douglas explains, scholars perceived religious change to happen in one of two ways. Either there would be a "falling off of worship in traditional Christian churches" or there would be "the ap-

pearance of new cults, not expected to endure." Douglas adds that "no one credited the traditional churches with enough vitality to inspire large-scale political revolt." The scholarly community was caught off-guard, in Douglas' words, because of "the rigid structure of its assumptions."

If the renewal of right-wing political values in the West surprised all political scientists, it is natural that those who least welcomed it would have been the most surprised.<sup>3</sup>

Martin Marty, always reliable as a chronicler of such developments, noted in May, 1980, that the growth of the conservative tendency in American religion and politics should be associated with the growing religious fundamentalism and fanaticism that seemed to be enjoying a renaissance throughout the world.<sup>4</sup> Marty pointed to the intense loyalty millions of Iranians felt toward the Ayatollah Khomeini, the nationalistic political activities of the Sokagakkai group in Japan, the rise of militancy within certain forms of Hindu religion in India, the increasing power of the Gush Emunim party in Israel, the growing tendency toward militancy among the religious dissidents within the Soviet Union, and even the right-wing leanings of Pope John Paul II. Marty's international, global survey provides illustrative background for his description of a growing militant fundamentalism within the United States. His contention is that all of this should be interpreted together. Yet he finds it paradoxical that this should be happening in an age in which considered opinion assesses religion to have severely diminished its influence and capacity. "There is no denying that in the 1980s religion is back with a vengeance," Marty writes, "and not just in Iran. Most of the burgeoning movements around the world are militantly anti-modern, fanatical, and hold in contempt the separation of church and state."

How did it happen? How was it possible for the change to come with such suddenness, with such convincing power, with such resilience? How should or can the development be understood?

Analysts who keep an eye on shifts in political enthusiasms have been quick to offer that the rise of a "new religious right" is to be associated with the rise of a new political right which, in turn, is to be interpreted as a consequence of the diminishment in power and influence of the old religious and political left. Such an assessment is accurate. Descriptively speaking, political liberals do not wield the power and influence they once enjoyed. Similarly, so-called liberal elements within the nation's religious communities have not enjoyed the successes that, in some quarters, could almost be taken for granted when Great Society incentives were virtually synonymous with the nation's for-

native impulses. But what does such an assessment mean? How should such an explanation be interpreted? Why does one orientation, either political or religious, encounter diminished power and influence while a contrary disposition seems to gain ascendancy? When the analyst of such transpositions tries to penetrate beneath and beyond mere description, what counts as compelling evidence? To what do such analyses point?

Sociologists are prone to say that such developments are reflective of reverberations within a society when the changes that have occurred have been too numerous too quickly. The reversion to conservative stances, the run for cover to the wisdom, say, of "the founding fathers" (whether belonging to the dominions of church or state), and the forceful criticism of "modernity" all belong, such analysis attests, to the society's attempt to cope with changes that are forcing confusions in identity, function and purpose. The theme that was heard repeatedly in 1984, namely, that "America is back again," is representative of a desire to cope with change by attempting to reestablish the conditions that pertained before such change was set in motion. The New Religious Right tends to believe that the stability of the society requires that it recapture an orientation to that period prior to the time that the Great Society incentives were launched. It also wishes to reestablish the mode of domestic tranquility that pertained when the family was the most significant social unit, before ERA initiatives were advanced, when fathers still held title to the office of head of the family. But the desire to return to a situation which once was, and is now being threatened—so the sociological analysis offers—can be understood in terms of the dynamics that tend to accompany widespread social and cultural change.

Others employ imagery to provide illumination if not explanation. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for example, has argued that, from the beginning, our national life has been marked by repeated clashes between conservative and liberal political and philosophical orientations.<sup>5</sup> But Schlesinger is quick to urge that such clashes are not to be likened to contests between truth and falsity, or even between correct and incorrect points of view. Rather, both orientations, together with the ongoing interaction between them, have a part to play in "preserving the health of the body politic." Both have their indispensable roles in what Schlesinger calls "the rhythm of public policy." After all, Ralph Waldo Emerson once said that "a good deal of our politics is physiological." He likened the relationship of conservatism to liberalism to a back-and-forth movement, as in the sequence of season, and proposed that shifts in orientation are necessary to

digest the changes that have been effected in the previous period. Schlesinger explains:

So, conservatives, who had savagely resisted the New Deal in the age of Roosevelt, accepted it in the age of Eisenhower. Moreover, the national energies begin to be replenished, the national batteries start to recharge themselves. Most important of all, the problems neglected in the years of cynicism and apathy become acute and threaten to become unmanageable.

This, in Schlesinger's view, is the way it has been, and this is what we can expect from the future. "The cycle will continue, until the nation grows tired again of commitment and uplift," like the "cyclical rhythm" that is best exemplified in "the physiological process, like the systole and diastole of the heart." Schlesinger invokes Emerson's authority again when suggesting that "both conservatism and liberalism easily rush to excess." He counsels, with Emerson, that "both must be restrained from pressing their points too far."

My own deliberations on the matter have been significantly influenced by the late Thomas F. O'Dea, a pre-sociologist of religion, perhaps best remembered for his study of Mormonism and for his analyses of the changes affecting Roman Catholicism in that period immediately following Vatican Council II. O'Dea, who was particularly sensitive to the dynamics of crisis situations involving the interaction of political, social and religious forces, believed that the most effective way to come to terms with a conservative movement is to identify its *formative instinct*. This identifies its primary motivational factor, or that by which the movement is most distinctively empowered. He believed that the primary motif would register instinctually first before it could be translated into conception or creed or treated within the framework of a set of ideas. Further, he cautioned that interpreters who have learned to conduct investigations within academic environments sometimes misread the significance of a conservative movement because their own political sentiments get in the way—a caution shared, as we have indicated, by Mary Douglas. As a consequence, interpretive judgments get based on facile impressions, supported by assumptions and convictions the analyst feels obligated to protect. O'Dea hoped that the corrective he advocated would enable conservative movements to be understood in their own terms, that is, through the very same eyes by which they were also being advocated.

It is against all of these backgrounds that I have come to conceive of the rise of the New Religious Right as an intellectual and spiritual effort on behalf of deep-seated convictions about the indispensability of transcendence. And the context is the debate about what shall serve as the nation's

own collective formative instinct, which factor, more than any other, identifies that by which commitments and allegiances are secured. Such a judgment, on my part, can be interpreted in light of the analysis which says that societies that rush into full-scale change too quickly, and unknowingly, are likely to leave important sustaining elements behind. In specific terms, what has been left behind is the recognition of the place of transcendence. Such a judgment is also supported by an understanding that an emphasis, to excess, on the possibilities of *problem-solving*—such as has come to characterize the liberal agenda, whether within the contexts of church or state—will eventually need to beg for assistance from orientations that, ontologically speaking, run somewhat deeper and richer. The same judgment is supported, theologically speaking, by the awareness that immanence and transcendence are polar terms that need each other, each of which is resonant only in reciprocal interaction with the other. In this light, as ironical as this may appear, liberalism has failed because its commitment to immanentist proclivities has weakened its capacity to be nurtured by the resources of transcendence.

This explains, in part, why many of those who are promoting the new conservatism have taken strong stands on the matter of prayer (whether spoken or silent) in the public schools. Symbolically speaking, to "bring God back into the classroom," as Jerry Falwell, Ronald Reagan, and the others like to proclaim, is to effect remedial steps on behalf of the cause of transcendence. Similarly, to counter the power of *problem-solving* within American education—as Secretary William Bennett's new emphasis on "Character, Content and Choice" is calculated to do—is to bring something of more resilient substance back, and to stimulate the capacity to receive it.

This helps explain, too, why the issue of abortion has become the dominant, if not the most significant, religious and political issue of our time. The debate about abortion is in fact about abortion. But it is also representative of a clash between competing worldviews. New Religious Right advocates see "pro-choice" (especially when this stance is defended on the basis of civil rights) as an attitude that cannot claim to have the support of a powerful understanding of the reality of transcendence. Indeed "pro-choice" is how secularism comports itself, so its opponents attest, when backing away from acknowledging the reality of the true source and author of human life. And secularism, by definition (as seen through the eyes of the New Religious Right), is a worldview that has abandoned its commitment to a resilient transcendence.

Some features of the analysis being offered by

the New Religious Right, interpreted as we have done, are being confirmed by testimony from former transcendentalists who have found secular values to lack the vision and power necessary to bring about the changes that revised Great Society incentives continue to pursue. Such witnesses wonder if significant transcendence can be captured, or recaptured, on bases different from those conservatives wish to protect. Others, today, are relying upon "the poor," and upon situations of real human need, to provide the capacity for renewed senses of transcendence. These are committed to the viewpoint that widespread social and cultural change must be encouraged to reach its culmination, as befits the dynamics of an effective global society.

It is a significant debate. I have my preferences as to how I would wish it to turn out. But this is the

subject for a more extensive examination. Suffice it to say here that the rise of a New Religious Right in our time should not be interpreted as an aberration or an anomaly. It belongs—it pertains—to the larger process by which religious sensitivity in this last quarter of the twentieth century is searching for effective expression.

#### Notes

1. Mary Douglas, "The Effects of Modernization on Religious Change," in *Daedalus*, Winter, 1982, pp. 1-20.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 1.
3. *Ibid.*
4. Martin Marty, "Fundamentalism Reborn: Faith and Fanaticism," in *Saturday Review*, Vol. 7, May 1980, pp. 37-38.
5. Arthur Schlesinger Jr., "Is Liberalism Dead?" *The New York Times Magazine*, March 30, 1980, pp. 42 ff., reprinted in *Current*, June 1980, pp. 3-13.