

Who are the people who make up the religious right?

The religious right is really a group of people who share values, and who have decided to put aside their historical and denominational differences, in order to, as Jerry Falwell said once when he was on stage introducing me, "We have to work together now so we can attain the right to fight later," which is a pretty good way of putting it.

In other words, the great difference between Protestants and Catholics, between Jews and Catholics, between Mormons and the rest of Christians, and so on, have been put aside in a political context, in order to work for the retention of certain values and government institutions which we feel would enable us to practice our faith without any kind of government interference; and, enable us to raise our children in the kind of society where they are not threatened and refuse to conform to the state.

One of the best known components of the religious right is the Moral Majority.

How did the name Moral Majority originate, and who is it intended to represent?

Well, actually the name came about quite by accident. I was down in Lynchburg, Virginia, the headquarters of Jerry Falwell, for a meeting with him. One of my colleagues, Howard Phillips, was also going to attend this meeting, and he was late. Ed McAteer, who had arranged for the meeting, said to me, "Why don't you give Jerry Falwell a sort of political overview about how you see things out there." And so, I talked about how people had been divided by historical denominational differences, and that these differences had kept them apart politically, so that they weren't able to unite and elect people to public office. Yet, I said, despite that, out there are probably 60 to 65 percent of the public that share certain basic values — what you might call a moral majority.

Then, I went on and Falwell put his hand down on the table and said, "Stop — hold it right there. Repeat what you said." Well, I had gone on by that time, and I started to repeat what I had just said, and he said, "No, no, no, back before. You said something about out there, there was some kind of majority." And I said, "Well, you know, this sixty-five percent of the public that shares certain values, you might call a moral majority." And he turned at that point to his marketing person, who was with him in the room, and he said, "That's it. If we form an organization, that's what we'll call it." So, that's how the name came about, and if Howard Phillips hadn't been late we probably wouldn't have the name.

What were the political and religious factors in the United States that enabled the religious right and Moral Majority to take hold in the 1970s?

Well, I think, as is the case with all movements, you have root causes and you have immediate causes. The root causes really go back many years to the sort of defensive position which was adopted by a lot of fundamentalists and evangelicals, probably following the Scopes trials. That defensiveness became ever more pronounced as government moved into what you might call "values related questions," which occurred in the middle 1960s.

So, as that movement began occurring and as the Supreme Court decision on abortion occurred, and the push for the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, and other kinds of issues began to boil up on the political front, you have a simultaneous development on the religious front called the Ecumenical Movement.

The Ecumenical Movement really sought to unite people of different faiths on a common agenda. In some cases, it sought to merge different denominations. But, on the political front ... it sought to put most of the mainline religious denominations into a central framework of issues, which then would be put before the public on a sort of moral basis.

That caused a very significant reaction on the part of those members of those mainline churches who didn't agree with that battle inside of those denominations. But, most of them ended up giving up and getting out of those denominations and into the various fundamental churches that were forming across the country. At the same time that was occurring, the Vatican Council came about in the Roman Catholic Church, and created an enormous amount of upheaval, to the point where the traditionalists inside the Catholic Church began to be on the defensive, and were backed into the corner by the Ecumenical group which had seized control — particularly in the United States — of the Catholic Church. So, it put the traditional Catholics really in the same position as the fundamentalists and evangelicals.

So, all of them were sort of backed up against the wall, reacting to a very strong Ecumenical Movement which was seizing the moral high ground and presenting its issues in a framework which most of these conservative religionists found unacceptable. That condition, I would say, enabled the historical bridges to be crossed, in that people who were unwilling to consider themselves allies in the previous eras, were suddenly willing to look at each other as co-oppressed, in the sense that they felt they were in sort of the same defensive position.

So, it was really the Ecumenical Movement, as well as the government moving into issues which it previously had not moved into. Or, let's put it this way, the consensus about these issues which no longer existed and the divisions which resulted from the lack of consensus caused, I would say, conditions to be right to bridge the otherwise unbridgeable gap between Orthodox Jews on the one hand, fundamentalists, and evangelical Protestants on the other hand, and traditionalists and Catholics on the third hand.

Had the people who joined the religious right been previously active in politics?

You find them, if anything, very reluctant to engage in the political process. You find people who for 50 years were told it was sort of a sin to be involved in politics, and who are now being told it's a sin not to be involved in politics, and who are very, very leery of throwing their weight around politically — and, who are very reluctant to get involved in issues, other than bottom line sort of morally oriented issues. So, the number of people, for example, who would go out crusading on an issue like the balanced budget, involved in the religious right is very, very small.

What tends to link all these people of differing faiths together?

It's a world view. It's a world view as to where man stands with respect to his creator, and what man's purpose is on earth. On that one, I'm very close to the Orthodox Jews and I'm very close to the fundamentalists, and yet, I'm a Catholic. ... What seems to me to unite these people, more than just the political issues at hand, is a world view: a sort of idea of who are we and where do we belong, and what is our proper role here on earth, and what is the ultimate outcome.

Would you call that a common theology?

Yes, it's the beginnings of a theology, sort of a primitive theology, which is probably the same kind of theology which has united the liberals who have gotten together from the various churches, who have really been united in a more humanist view of the world, and a sort of man-centerdness in their operationally pre-occupation with what can you do with the world now ... Whereas, the common theme that runs through the minds of the kind of people we deal with is what happens in the hereafter and how do we relate to that ... I'm not saying that the liberals, the humanists, don't believe in the hereafter, some of them do, but the emphasis is different.

Are you talking about the hereafter in hope of deterrence?

Yes, we're talking about the hereafter in hope of deterrence, and we are talking about a kind of society which stresses delayed gratification, as opposed to the kind of society which centers around a more immediate gratification. That, I find to be a sort of central issue in the different approaches to things.

What does the religious right believe the cause of sin or evil in society to be? Are the problems environmentally created, as a result of social injustices, for example, or is evilness inherent in human nature?

Well, we do not believe in any kind of collective guilt or innocence. We believe in individual guilt or innocence, and that is a common thread amongst all the groups that we work with. So, yes, you can have injustices in a society but, mainly because a group of individuals are individually guilty and happen to have united together to form the kind of society which collectively perpetuates injustice. But, not because there is a collective wrong there, or a social sin. It is a series of individual wrongs put together, which I think is a fundamental difference. Indeed, you have sick societies, but we stress the individual accountability of all people, and that no one can be excused for their behavior on the basis of having come from a society which doesn't live up to a particular standard ... In Nazi Germany, you had all kinds of people who overtly perpetuated evil, but the real guilt came from individuals who did not fight that, and that taken collectively produced a society that was very unjust.

What about those who have suffered from what you would call individual sin, such as the poor and groups of minorities. How do you believe these people should be helped?

We have much the same view as liberals have about these various minorities, only our method of aiding these people, or how we see human nature, is fundamentally different ... The fundamental difference is that we look first of all, at individuals. We do not believe in any kind of a collective grouping, because, I think, you will find that all collective groupings are not accurate.

But, in any case, we are not of the same mentality as the secular conservatives who, in many cases, have a fundamental disregard for the welfare of people who are less fortunate than themselves, and who view every question in economic terms, and who look upon most of the questions as being solved if we only provide enough opportunity for somebody to pick themselves off the ground and move forward.

I wish you would come with me to the various churches, to the homes of the individuals who are involved in this movement, and see what they have done in a very real way, with very real personal sacrifices in taking people off the street, in feeding the hungry, in clothing the poor, in providing jobs for those who need it, in educating people who are less fortunate than themselves. They haven't done this with any government programs, and they haven't done it with any prodding from big brother, they have done it with individual acts of charity.

Do you think the churches could handle aiding more people without government assistance?

Yes, I think they could handle a good deal more than they're handling now, and if they can't — then I believe in the principle of subsidiarity, which is that the government closest to the people can handle it best because they know the individual local conditions. Washington is the last place that one ought to turn to for some kind of assistance to these people. But, there is a role for government when it is clear that private charity cannot suffice.

How do you respond to accusations that the intention of the religious right is to create a one religion Christian society in America, which would leave out others with different religious beliefs?

Well, I reject that off-hand, if we're talking about authentic Christianity, as opposed to some perverse version of it which we've had from time to time throughout history. But, if we are talking about authentic Christianity, then all of the other religious groups should welcome any movement in that direction, because authentic Christianity treats others as children of God and as brothers. Now, you can cite any number of examples throughout history and say, well, they didn't in this case and this group of people didn't and they got in control, and you always have that danger. I think you have that danger no matter who gets in power in any democratic institution. But, most of the people who I know — 99.9 percent of the people involved in the religious right — are fundamentally committed to the democratic process.

If the school prayer initiative passed, for example, would the religious right tolerate a situation in which Buddhist, Hindu, Moslem, or non-Christian prayers are said in the classroom?

Oh, surely.

That wouldn't cause any problems?

Well, I can't speak on every individual case, because I'm sure some people would be less tolerant than others, but I think that if these people are part of the community, what the religious right really wants to see is local control of that kind of thing, and I think that if you have a large number of people in a community, or even a small number, I think that the students ought to learn what their religious beliefs are and find out what their prayers are like.

How many people are now active in the religious right?

Well, it's involving an ever increasing number. It's hard to get a handle on the precise numbers, because there's a lot of overlap of television evangelists^{views}. But, Bob Tieter, who is a Republican pollster, was persuaded by Congressman Newt Gingrich of Georgia to put certain questions related to the religious right in a nationwide very extensive in-home poll, which he took for the Republican Congressional Campaign Committee recently, which cost a quarter of a million dollars.

He was astounded to learn that now 45 percent of Americans acknowledged watching one of those television evangelists once a week ... That is a phenomenal number, and it corresponds with what I know to be the case, and that is the exponential growth of most of these operations, which are far larger today than they were, say, two years ago.

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How do you explain the rise in popularity of television evangelists?

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What this says to me is that the mainline institutional churches have absolutely failed in preaching the gospel ... I think the major reason is that the modern churches in many cases do not offer what the public is hungry for, and you know, that may be trouble, but it is a fact of life. So, the point I'm trying to make to you is that this movement, far from disappearing, is only beginning to gather strength.

So, you don't feel the movement peaked in 1980 to 1982, as many have suggested? You believe the religious right is still politically powerful?

Absolutely. Well, political questions are quite different, because in the 80 to 82 time period, the movement was very much linked to the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Failure of the Reagan Administration to act on a number of issues connected with the religious right caused a lot of those people to back off. But, in terms of the actual numbers, let me give you a couple of ideas. Pat Robertson, who runs the Christian Broadcast Network, saw his ministry double within the past year — *double* — and it was a large operation to begin with. His Christian Broadcast Network now reaches 26 million people at least once a week.

Reverend Charles Stanley of Atlanta, who was up until a couple of years ago a regional television minister in the south, is now in all fifty states and is getting 3,000 contributions a day, without ever asking for contributions on his program. Jerry Falwell's Old Time Gospel Hour has an incoming Watts line, for example, where people who want help call in. Last year at this time, they were spending \$63,000 a month paying for the incoming calls. This year, they are spending \$300,000 a month taking the incoming calls.

There is a definite movement in the country, and I could cite the growth of Jimmy Swaggart, for example, who a few years ago wasn't heard of, and now is the fastest growing ministry, taking in last year something like \$65 million in his television ministry. That is the fastest growing political religious movement in the United States.

Yet, President Reagan is not assured of re-election votes from these people?

Ronald Reagan articulated the views of a lot of the people connected with the movement, but they are not particularly pleased with the back burner nature of the Reagan agenda, as far as the social issues are concerned. And, many of them who were highly enthusiastic about Reagan are not as enthusiastic today. How that will translate politically down the road remains to be seen.

I think these people are looking at a different agenda. I think they're looking at electing people more at the local level. I think they're looking at members of Congress, I think that some of their activities will tend to translate that way. I think it is a three to five year period between the time that many of them are now coming on-line, so to speak, with these television evangelists, and a time when they will begin to be active politically, because the message which they get from the evangelists is translated that way into some kind of a need for action, on the part of these people in society.

Would the religious right ever consider forming a third political party?

It's conceivable. I am an advocate of a sort of limited third party, that is not a third party to run presidential candidates, which I think is a dead-end street; but, a third party to run people for the House of Representatives and the United States Senate and below, and state legislators and things of that sort.

I think there's a place for a third party, which generally end up influencing the major parties. I would look to the model of the Progressive Party, for example, from Wisconsin, (which) really influenced both political parties in the middle west. And, I would hope that if there is a new party, that it perhaps could influence the major political parties as well, if not maybe take the place of one.

What would you like the future for the United States and American society to be?

Well, I think that if you have a lot of individuals who understand their proper relationship with their creator and understand their proper role in society, that you will have a lot better society. We do not believe in the perfectability of man, except through God. So we don't look for any kind of perfect society to evolve here in the United States; but, we can achieve, and I think we have achieved, a better model than we have in the current time.

So, we think that if there is a religious revival, where people go back to basics, that we will probably come out of some of the severe problems that we have been facing, that I think will sink us as a nation if they are not turned around. I'm speaking, of course, of drug problems; I'm speaking of massive crime problems which effect everybody; I'm speaking of problems of killing the unborn, and things of that sort.

We think that as people internalize a world view, that they will translate into society as a whole. In other words, we don't look to reform the environment which is then supposed to reform man. We look to reform man, who is then supposed to reform the environment, and that is a very basic difference.

I don't know whether America will come out of the problems that it's been facing or not, but I will tell you that there is more of a trend toward the kind of religious beliefs that I've been talking about now than there was even two years ago, or five years ago. So, there is a back to basics religious revival in the country, and if it takes hold, we will see a translation to society in a way that will effect the eventual politics and the operation of them.