



## St. Paul's Church, Chestnut Hill 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Speakers Series

Religion and the Rise of the New Right  
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Ours is a religious nation. Indeed, our own state, where religious tolerance bloomed from the first in the late seventeenth century, was said to be a “Holy Experiment.” It is also true today that the United States has a higher percentage of its population who are believers in a supreme being, and a higher percentage of church-goers, than any other country in the developed world.

The first clause of the First Amendment to our Constitution is about religion: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . .” Our task tonight is to explore some of the interesting issues presented by the tension between the prohibition against establishment and the guarantee of free exercise. There is to be no official religion, yet there are to be minimum constraints on religion.

Unsurprisingly, a public opinion poll commissioned by the Pew Charitable Trusts reports that Americans by a close margin of 51% to 44% think that churches, or religious leaders, should comment on current public issues. Yet an ABC News poll finds that two thirds of the public opposes religious leaders influencing political leaders. We read new stories about the Internal Revenue Service investigating the tax exemption of several churches, All Souls, Episcopal, in Pasadena among them, because the minister from the pulpit is alleged to have crossed some ambiguous line of political advocacy. Most informed observers would undoubtedly say that

preachers and priests should feel free to comment upon public issues from a religious perspective, but they should avoid giving advice about how to vote.

Even a cursory glance at our history will reveal religiously derived values hard at work in the public arena from the beginning to now. The abolitionist movement and other reform movements of the first half of the nineteenth century were closely tied to religion and to churches. The social gospel movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries consciously applied religious values to current social realities and asked, “What would Christ do?” The Catholic Worker’s Movement was and is on the Left. Father Caughlin during the Great Depression harangued a mass radio audience from the Right. The Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s in the South was based in black churches and led in part by a preacher, Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Council.

This history explains the conventional observation that in the United States church and state are firmly separated but religion and politics are intensely intertwined.

At present, of course, it is the Christian Right that is a major political power. There are observers who insist that the Christian “Dominionists” have seized control of the Republican Party, using it as a tool to insure that Americans live according to Biblical precepts – or at least according to the fundamentalist’s interpretation of those Biblical precepts. The observers point out that in 2004, for instance, 48 out of 51 Republican Senators voted with the Christian Coalition 100% of the time. Only one Democrat, Zell Miller of Georgia, had a similar record.

The rise of the Christian Right has caused talk, of course. This week, six of the top sixteen books on the New York Times’ non-fiction best-seller list are about religion. We are led to wonder how all of this happened.

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Even a casual follower of the political conflict of our present era will detect in the issues and the rhetoric the scent of the 1960s. More specifically, the non-economic issues have their roots in a reaction against the social upheavals of the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement, the Anti-War Movement, the Woman's Movement, the Gay and Lesbian Rights Movement, the Hispanic Rights Movement, and of course the Counterculture. It was a time of rapid social change and of cultural conflict. Such times generally spawn revivifying movements, or conservative reactions, that are aimed at knitting together a fragmented society. Such a reaction to the liberal thrust of the 1960s occurred along two fronts, one political and the other religious. We are heirs to that reaction.

There is, however, a curious bifurcation involved in this story. Let me explain. Not long ago, on Super Bowl Sunday [February 5, 2006], my favorite conservative columnist, David Brooks, wrote an op-ed piece for the New York Times entitled, "Remaking the Epic of America." In it, he points out that several popular movies of late have the same plot: "Hoosiers," "Glory Road," "Coach Carter," "Remember the Titans," "Miracle," and "The Replacements." In all of them, a tough coach takes over a weak and dispirited team, forces the team members to work hard and sacrifice for the common good, and then leads them to victory and glory over favored rivals. One can recognize here a version of the American Dream, perhaps even the classic "western" movie, or perhaps the rags-to-riches myth. One can also see that the counterculture of the 1960s has had little effect on this mythic ideal of America.

"In short, writes Brooks, "these movies embrace the civil rights part of the 1960s and 1970s. Women and minorities should be given full access to the competitive world of the meritocracy. But they take the therapeutic, progressive, New Age part of the 1960s and 1970s and they crush it dead. They create a culture of all-inclusive traditionalism. . . . Which is about

where American society as a whole has settled after all the tumult. The 1960s happened. Vince Lombardi won.”

How could that be? Well, the Brooks thesis is overly simplistic. We know from careful studies that the racial discrimination and gender discrimination and ethnic discrimination persist; the social justice movements were incomplete. We also know that our society actually absorbed a lot of the values of the counterculture. Sexual behavior changed dramatically during the Sixties, and our therapeutic, meditating, pill-popping culture also shifted a bit toward self-indulgence.

Nevertheless, there is some substance to the Brooks thesis. It was, for instance, difficult to take on the social justice issues without appearing to be a bigot. That is in large part because the movements couched their goals in terms of the American Dream. Blacks simply wanted to be included as equal citizens. Women just wanted to be free to pursue the career of their choice. None of this called for a transvaluation of the culture. We simply had to include previously excluded human beings within the embrace of the culture.

The Immigration Act of 1965, abolishing the national origins quota system that had been in existence since the 1920s, can perhaps be taken as the symbolic legitimization of racial, ethnic, and cultural pluralism. It was completely non-controversial at the time because the huge in-flow of Latino and Asian immigrants was not foreseen. So, thenceforth, naked racism and raw sexism were banned from polite discourse.

Our civic religion, if not our reality, now embraces racial, ethnic and gender equality. Those who still oppose these changes must do so covertly. Their political rhetoric must use code words and euphemisms. Richard Nixon in 1968 spoke of the need for “law and order,” with winks and nods toward the anti-war and pro-civil-rights demonstrators. He was in favor of

school desegregation, he insisted, but opposed to “forced busing.” When Ronald Reagan kicked off his presidential campaign in 1980 against Georgia’s favorite son, Jimmy Carter, he did so incongruously in Philadelphia, Mississippi, the site of the abduction and murder of three civil rights workers in the summer of 1964. The message was lost on no one.

So, with the traditional Anglo-Dominance of the social order off-base as a nostalgic goal, the revitalizing movements had to look elsewhere for their enemy. The permissiveness and self-indulgence of the counterculture was an ideal opponent. Remember how Newt Gingrich called Bill Clinton a “countercultural McGovernik?”

Now, interestingly, this bifurcation in the results of the 1960s has its parallel in the Sixties themselves. Within the New Left, there were discussions, even arguments, about the different approaches to change represented by the “fists” and “heads,” the fists being the hard-core political activists and the “heads” being those who thought that America would be changed faster by “flower power,” “letting your culture be your politics,” “if it feels good, do it,” and otherwise striving to shatter the stultifying middle-class virtues of hard work and postponed gratification.

The counterculture is the first social movement that I know about that saw the culture itself as the oppressor. It wasn’t exclusionary laws, or an unjust economic system, but repressive cultural values that prevented one from realizing one’s full human potential. Those constricting values had to be changed in favor of spontaneity and authenticity. Even the woman’s movement got into the game of consciously manipulating cultural values. Miss and Mrs. were banished from polite usage in favor of Ms. If the marital status of Mr. was irrelevant, the marital status of Ms. was also irrelevant.

Left unresolved by this countercultural search for one's true self is the question of the identity of the self that was to do the choosing of the self that one wanted to become. Can one really escape one's culture in order to make an unfettered choice?

One of the ironies of the situation is that in 1967 and 1968, just as the public was coming to see that the war in Vietnam was not a good thing, it was also coming to the conclusion that the Anti-War Movement was not a good thing. Similarly, the public was frightened by the urban race riots that occurred every summer from 1964 through 1968, yet simultaneously thought that the government should do more to insure racial justice.

As the social justice movements began to fragment and to drift off into the psychologically satisfying but politically disastrous excesses of revolutionary hallucinations and black power rhetoric, mainstream politics began to reflect the anxious mood of the public. President Johnson took himself out of the presidential race of 1968 because it had become clear to him and to Robert McNamara that the war in Vietnam was not winnable. Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, adding to the fears of the public. Even so, Richard Nixon barely edged out Hubert Humphrey in the general election, aided by the candidacy of George Wallace, who took the electoral votes of five deep-South states. Of the eleven ex-Confederate states that had been solidly Democratic throughout most of the twentieth century, Humphrey carried only Texas, the fiefdom of his sponsor, LBJ.

Southern whites were leaving the Democratic Party primarily because they saw it as the champion of black equality. Nixon's subtle southern strategy allowed him to carry the "rim South" and edge out Humphrey in the Electoral College. In 1972, with Wallace battling for his life after being gunned down in Maryland while on the campaign trail, running for the Democratic nomination, the South became solid again, but it was now the Solid Republican

South. The sardonic observation made by LBJ to his staff after signing the Voting Rights Act of 1965 proved prescient: “We have given the South to the Republican Party for at least a generation.”

Movement conservatives do not see Richard Nixon as their man. He was too liberal, too wedded to big government, too pragmatic, and not focused enough on using his position to solidify the power of the Conservative Movement. The roots of that Movement should be traced to the founding of The National Review by William F. Buckley in 1955. The formula at that early stage was to fuse libertarians, traditional economic conservatives, and the emotional appeal of the sort of anti-communism represented by the John Birch Society into an anti-liberal crusade.

The long-term view of Buckley and his allies is revealed in his calling together a group of college students in 1960 to found Young Americans for Freedom, at about the same time that the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee was being organized in the wake of the first phase of the sit-in movement. The timing is an important clue. The National Review and YAF were reacting to the dominant ethos of New Deal liberalism. They would come to explain the excesses of the Sixties as the natural product of the Leviathan state, and use those excesses to recruit their popular political following.

The Goldwater campaign in 1964 was a disaster in most respects, but it provided a tremendous organizing impetus for the New Right. The direct-mail genius, Richard Viguerie, got his start here. Alumni of the Goldwater campaign came together in 1966 to organize the American Conservative Union, meant as an activist counterweight to the liberal Americans for Democratic Action. Right-wing donors like Coors, Scaife, Koch, and Bradley soon began funding conservative causes. In 1973, the Heritage Foundation was founded as a “think tank” that would provide policy studies and also give advice about political strategy and tactics. It

joined the American Enterprise Institute that was already in existence but that was considerably reenergized during the 1970s. The Manhattan Institute and the libertarian Cato Foundation joined the fray. In 1973 also, Paul Weyrich founded the American Legislative Exchange Council to coordinate conservative legislative initiatives at the state level. In other words, the intellectual and organizational infrastructure of the Conservative Movement was being put into place.

The last constituent of the coalition that is the New Right was the traditionally non-political evangelical Christian church, lured into the political arena as a reaction to the *Roe v. Wade* decision of 1973 and the earlier Supreme Court decision declaring mandatory prayer in public schools to be unconstitutional. In 1974, Dr. Robert Grant organized the American Christian Cause in southern California, and then went national with Christian Voice in 1976, after the election that brought Jimmy Carter to the presidency. Only modest success had been achieved in 1976, though pollster George Gallup called it “the year of the evangelical,” and Time and Newsweek did cover stories on evangelicalism in politics. Friction within Christian Voice led to the ousting of Howard Phillips, Terry Dolan and Richard Viguerie in 1979, and those three, with Paul Weyrich, founded the Moral Majority and recruited Jerry Falwell to be its executive director and spokesperson. The Moral Majority was joined on the right in 1983 by another major player, James Dobson and The Family Research Council.

Pat Robertson, the televangelist, ran for President of the United States in 1988. The following year, the Moral Majority was disbanded. Falwell and Robertson brought forth The Christian Coalition and installed Ralph Reed as its Executive Director. Ralph Reed is now out on his own, for better or worse, but the Christian Coalition still operates. Such, in outline form, is the history of the Christian Right.

When the religious opposition got going, it was focused naturally on the cultural issues. It was difficult to take on the social justice issues without appearing to be a bigot, but it is significant that Goldwater in 1964 carried only five states in addition to his home state of Arizona, and all of those other states were in the deep South. This is an indication that the South's newfound attraction to the Republican Party is not only because of Christian fundamentalism, which was not influencing votes in 1964, but because of race. Nixon also did well in the South before the Christian Right got really organized and rolling.

When the Christian Right got underway, however, the cultural issues came to the fore. There were plenty of issues: abortion rights, prayer in school, gay rights and eventually gay marriage, the permissive atmosphere in which loose living and drug abuse were tolerated, if not glorified, the death penalty, assisted suicide, and even the environment.

Even more important, I think, is the fact that the social friction of the 1960s was psychologically unsettling. The fracturing of society into so many warring camps was unnerving. In addition to the 1960s themselves, the globalizing economy, rapid technological change, the shrinking world – all of this stimulated the desire to belong, to be a part of an organization or a movement that promised love and acceptance. The answer to the question of why blue-collar workers, whose jobs have disappeared into the off-shore abyss, vote for the party whose economic policies will not help is that the trauma of finding oneself adrift in a heartless world makes one want to be part of a community of love and purpose, and perhaps even a community of neighborly help. So, the numbers of people “available” for proselytizing by the Christian Right were increasing.

Furthermore, evangelicals leaped into the political fray. The thrust of the first effort in 1976 was dampened by the fact that Jimmy Carter was a “born again” Christian. He easily

defeated Gerald Ford, the caretaker president, by carrying all of the South, except Virginia, as well as the usual Democratic Party strongholds on the east coast and the near Mid-West. Nevertheless, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Phyllis Schlafly and others were increasingly successful in linking traditional Christian values with images of a simpler time in small-town America.

Some observers think that the commitment to new, mass, political organizations by the Christian Right came when President Carter announced that he thought, as a matter of public policy, that abortions should be legal, even though he disapproved of them as a matter of private moral values. It is just this division between public and private realms that the new Christian Right is intent on abolishing. So, we need the Christian Coalition, the Family Research Council, Focus on the Family, and a bevy of other advocacy organizations and think tanks.

Remember the curious 1980s when Ronald Reagan was in the White House even though his positions on most of the policy questions of the day were the minority positions among the public? Now, the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank established to mimic those on the Right, finds in its polls that 64% of the public thinks that economic justice is the biggest moral question facing the public, far more than the 27% who feel that abortion is the most important moral question, or the 11% who identify gay marriage as the most important. Another poll in spring 2004 revealed that a majority of Americans would support a tax increase to pay for anti-poverty programs, and a comfortable majority would support stronger environmental regulation.

Yet, the Left cannot get those policy questions before the public. It is not the policies that are the problem. It is the context or the frame within which the public is evaluating the political leadership of the two parties.

The public is actually very closely divided. Evangelicals are mostly Republican. The very small percentage of the population who are non-believers are mostly Democrat. The vast majority of the public, however, is closely divided.

Progressive Christians need to heed the call of faith to work for social justice, and they need to do so using the language of Christian faith. If one wonders why there has been no constructive policy movement on the great long-term problems that face us as Americans and as human beings – oil dependency, global warming, the degradation of the environment, the growing disparity of wealth, the increasing social fragmentation of society, the mounting evidence that the American Dream is not a realistic promise for poor Americans – the reason is that politicians don't lead, and we can't expect them to lead. They are focused on getting reelected, and thus they are focused like corporations on the short term. The public, therefore, must organize and create an environment in which politicians will choose morally healthy long-term policies.

If we want an America in which the American Dream is real enough to command belief, then we must put our Christian faith to work in the public arena. Once the American Dream dies, America dies.