

Jews, the Moral Majority, and American Tradition

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1

RECENT YEARS HAVE SEEN a great deal of interest in the question of organized religion's relationship with American politics, specifically in the case of the Moral Majority. Most of what has been written deals broadly with values and convictions: Is the Moral Majority good or bad? Is it virtuous or hypocritical? Is it a blessing for the Jews or a menace to the Jews? Few indeed have stopped to ask a more basic question: Is there anything new about the Moral Majority? The answer should concern more than just historians. Past experience provides a precedent for judging legitimacy, offers a valuable perspective on the present, and even furnishes some basis for predicting future trends.

To answer the question, "What's new about the Moral Majority?" we must look back two centuries to the founding days of our Republic. From there we can examine the subsequent history of religion's relationship with politics under three headings: law, ideology, and practice. A large library would be required to treat these subjects adequately.¹ Some preliminary observations can nevertheless be made.

First, with regard to law, nothing in the Constitution prohibits churchmen from participating in politics. George Mason, John Carroll, John Witherspoon, and John Leland were all involved with the formation of the Constitution and all remained deeply engaged in church affairs. What the Constitution did do was rule out religious tests for public office. A non-Christian (as Jews have enjoyed pointing out) could be elected president of the United States. It took a long time before this provision filtered down to the state level. As late as 1877, a Jew could theoretically be president of the United States but could not hold the lowliest office in New Hampshire. Finally, however, Jews achieved rights on the state level as well.

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The most important Constitutional provision on religion appears in the First Amendment. It has two crucial clauses: the no-establishment clause prohibiting Congress from establishing any religion; and the free exercise clause prohibiting Congress from making any law which hinders free exercise of religion. A natural tension exists here. A law which one person reads as a specific endorsement of a particular creed, another reads as merely permitting religion's free exercise. A Teaneck, New Jersey, case over regulations prohibiting school extracurricular activities on Friday nights, Saturdays, and Sunday mornings points up the problem. Does this law amount to government endorsement of strict Jewish practice, as opponents (including a few Friday-observing Moslems) contend, or does it do no more than permit Teaneck's Jews to exercise their religious rights unencumbered? The courts must decide.

There are, of course, many laws which seemingly establish religion but do not violate the Constitution. Sunday Blue Laws are one example; the establishment of Christmas as a national holiday is another; Prohibition is still a third. In all these cases, the claim is that legislators acted under their police powers. The fact that religious elements encouraged action under these powers has no bearing. The famous "Wall of Separation Between Church and State" that President Jefferson described in 1802 has, at different times, assumed different forms as social demands changed. The wall of separation between church and state is not made of concrete and never has been.

Moving from law to ideology we find three major positions on the relationship between religion and society in America, and to some extent all three continue to this day to battle for our hearts and minds. The first and most conservative view holds America to be fundamentally a Christian country. People holding this position invoke on their behalf longstanding ties between Christianity and the common law. They point out that the majority of Americans are and have since colonial days been Christian, and they have no trouble citing precedents dealing with America's supposedly Christian character. In 1811, a man named Ruggles was sentenced to three months in jail in New York for blaspheming the Christian religion. Chancellor James Kent, in pronouncing sentence, insisted that "we are a Christian people." Not to prosecute Ruggles, he believed, "would endanger the security of life, liberty and property, and the comfort and happiness of our families."² According to this view, religion can never be

separated from the polity, for without it society cannot be safe. Though it did not endorse Kent, the Supreme Court, as late as 1931, in *U.S. v. Macintosh*, declared that "we are a Christian people according to one another the equal right of religious freedom, and acknowledging with reverence the duty of obedience to the will of God."³

A diametrically opposite view of the place of religion in American life, equally longstanding, demands total and radical separation of realms. Many see Thomas Jefferson as the grandfather of this view, but in reality it goes back to the concept of moral autonomy—the idea that one does not have to be Christian, indeed one need not have any religion at all in order to be thoroughly moral. "The legitimate powers of government," Jefferson said, "extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty Gods or no God."⁴ Jefferson refused to proclaim so much as a Thanksgiving Day. To his mind, that smacked of religion and should, therefore, be a private concern. Jefferson's position could be traced *in extenso* from his day all the way down to our own, say to Madalyn Murray O'Hair who wanted "to be able to walk down any street in America and not see a cross or a sign of religion."⁵ In all cases, the "no establishment" clause and the "wall of separation" have provided those who are faithful to this view with their principal arguments.

Between these two extremes—"Christian America" and "secular government"—lies a broad middle ground, one where Americans are characterized as a religious people without defining the nature of their religion. Abraham Lincoln talked of an "almost chosen people," "one nation under God." President Eisenhower, not otherwise grouped with Lincoln, once said that the religion of America *is* religion (just, I suppose, as the business of America *is* business). Martin Marty talks of "a sort of Republican banquet of religion." Robert Bellah and others use the phrase "civil religion."⁶ I am consciously glossing over some important differences here to point to a more fundamental unity regarding American politics, American society, and the relationship of both to religion. Middle-of-the-roaders all hold that religion broadly infuses every aspect of American life, from the Pledge of Allegiance to the halls of Congress and to the invocation at presidential inaugurations. Only particular *forms* of religion must in their view remain rigidly separate, receiving no government aid whatsoever. In other words, religion yes, denominational

forms no; church and state separated, religion and national life allied.

When turning to the relationship of religion and politics in practice, we find that throughout American history all of these three ideologies have been jockeying among themselves for supporters, and that at different times each view has commanded a majority. Since none has ever totally won over the opposition, the centrist view has tended to predominate. Attitudes change as social and economic conditions change. The ideology that displays support, money, organization, and will can command a majority today; opponents can always hope that their day will come tomorrow. For this reason, America has heard at almost every election voices extending from the most theocratic right to the most anticlerical left. In 1803, the clergy were supposed to have been “the most violent partisans, the most busy electioneers, the source of violent animosities and discussions, and the very essence of political wrangling and disturbance.”⁷ Nevertheless, in 1804, the clergy lost and Thomas Jefferson won. In 1824, the situation was reversed and clergymen helped put John Quincy Adams in power. The years passed, the personalities changed, and the issues shifted, but whatever the central concern of the day—nativism, slavery, populism, a Catholic president, prohibition, civil rights, or war—churches spoke out, made their views (often divergent views) known, and tried to affect the political process.

Jews form no exception to this rule. They have frequently spoken out on social and political issues, and have been particularly active politically whenever Jewish interests were at stake. When, for example, Franklin Pierce ran for president in 1852, the *New York Asmonean* called for his defeat since his home state of New Hampshire still denied Jews full rights. Many rabbis spoke out against Ulysses S. Grant in 1868, when he ran for president, remembering his infamous order ousting Jews from his war zone in 1862. (This order, of course, was subsequently countermanded by President Lincoln.)⁸ Later, Jewish organizations became actively involved in politics whenever issues of immigration arose, when Jewish rights at home or abroad seemed threatened, or when Israel appeared to be in danger.

Always there are those who call this impermissible, a violation of church-state separation. But closer analysis reveals that this political involvement is fully sanctioned by American tradition. Religion has *always* been involved in politics, and this involvement has always met with opposition in some quarters.

Sometimes forces of religion are more successful, sometimes less. Frequently, success for one religious position spells failure for another. Since religion is not monolithic in America, churches and synagogues span the spectrum much as politicians do.

From my perspective, political involvement by religious groups is not necessarily a bad thing. The political arena is *the* place where policy is debated and shaped in America; better the political arena than the streets. To the extent that religion has something to say about policy, therefore, it must do so within this established framework. Shutting religion off from politics would render it profoundly irrelevant.

So I return to the original question: Is there anything new about the Moral Majority? In good Jewish fashion the answer is yes and no. Novelty lies in the ideological shift. Where for years the tide favored liberal religions and ever more radical separation of church and state, now we see a conservative swing and a return to the idea that America is basically a religious country. The reason for this change is quite clear. We live in a decade of doubt, when many of our old political, economic, social, and even scientific assumptions have proved wrong. People are searching for truths that will bear up better. Jerry Falwell's patent medicine may or may not succeed, but his efforts to shape American politics are, like it or not, legitimate. They fall well within accepted American practice. In that sense nothing is new at all. There is nothing un-American or untraditional either about conservative politics, or about fundamentalist religion—or even about the mixture of the two.

2

The fact that the Moral Majority is legitimate does not mean that it must win Jewish support. One may disagree with everything that the organization does while agreeing that it has the right to do it. The form of anti-Moral Majority animus evidenced in some quarters, however, strikes me as unfortunate. Instead of confronting the Moral Majority on its own terms, many prefer to dismiss it as anti-Semitic.

First of all, these charges are unfortunate because they impute to the many the sins of the few. Only a small scattering of Moral Majority members have actually spoken ill of the Jews; Bailey Smith's mischievous comments are the exception, not the rule. Philo-Semitism aimed at ultimate conversion more closely approximates the fundamentalist attitude. Conservative Chris-

tians oppose Jewish beliefs, not necessarily the Jewish people.

Secondly, charges of anti-Semitism, like charges of “racism” or “sexism,” obscure precisely that which deserves attention. The Moral Majority answers a deeply felt need of many Americans. One may believe that its prescription merely creates the illusion of health, but to wean people away from the Moral Majority will require another cure, a better one. Instead of just attacking Falwell supporters, we ought to listen to them and make their concerns our own.

Thirdly, attacks on the Moral Majority are easily misinterpreted as opposition to the majority’s morality. Judaism—quite distinct from the liberalism of many Jews—does not require support for abortion, gay rights, or E.R.A. The notion that secularism and licentiousness lie at the root of the nation’s ills may be right or wrong, but in no sense can it be termed anti-Jewish. Jewish teachings accord with conservative principles no less than with liberal ones.

Finally, imputing anti-Semitism to the Moral Majority may do more harm than good. Like the lonely shepherd who cried “wolf” too often, we too may find our howls ignored at the worst possible time. The term anti-Semitism loses its meaning when rashly applied to all with whom we disagree.

We cannot, of course, forget that, historically, revivalist preachers and fundamentalist pulpiteers have been “apostles of discord,” disseminating hatred under the guise of Christian love. The great evangelist, Dwight Moody, once charged that Jews took pride in the crucifixion and applauded it in public. Milton Flenner, Director of the now defunct Dayton Theological Seminary, allegedly preached that Jews “were murderers and liars from the beginning . . . we should build up our barriers in America . . . this is the time for the Jews to go.” Harold J. Ockenga argued just a few years ago that the “terrible responsibility that Israel has in the killing of Jesus” caused “the terrible anti-Semitic movements of today.”⁹

The Moral Majority differs precisely in its eschewal of such language, its avoidance of divisive theology, and its commitment to moral principles within a pluralistic framework. Nor is this mere rhetoric, for the Moral Majority is an unstable coalition of historically warring forces tenuously bound together by heady attractions of power and brilliant stratagems concocted in part by a Jew, Howard Phillips, leader of the Conservative Caucus. Were Moral Majority members to deviate far from their narrowly

drawn goals they would discover broad areas of irreconcilable disagreements over biblical interpretations, millennial doctrines, and dispensationalist calculations—not to mention the chasm between Protestants and Catholics in the movement. Internal strains seem far more likely to doom the Falwell coalition than any pressure from the outside.

What then should be the Jewish response to the Moral Majority? Instead of merely polemicizing, we must, I think, re-evaluate some of our basic policies in light of recent lessons. In demanding minority rights, for example, we must be more aware than we have been before that the majority too has rights. Virtuous support for the unpopular and underprivileged should not blind us to basic democratic principles. Instead, when rights conflict we must search for balance; absolutist claims on any side violate justice and engender hatred.

Similarly, we ought to re-examine our policies on church-state issues. We need not, indeed dare not, moderate our opposition to any form of national religious establishment. But the time has come for us to pay equal heed to demands for “free exercise of religion.” Jews have nothing to gain from national agnosticism. Again, compromise is called for: believers and non-believers both deserve fairhanded treatment.

Most important of all, we must carefully separate issues of broad Jewish concern from issues that narrowly concern Jewish liberals. A Christian amendment to the Constitution—something not publicly advocated by the Moral Majority but privately supported by some of its members—should arouse all Jews, whatever their political or religious commitment. On the other hand, an anti-abortion amendment, repulsive as it may be to many, need not arouse the Jewish community—as a community—at all. Pro-life and pro-choice are both arguable Jewish positions. Jews should not be made to feel that in voting their consciences they are showing any form of disloyalty to the Jewish people as a whole.

In responding to the Moral Majority we must also be governed by the fact that it is, for reasons already set forth, a legitimate political undertaking. It represents the latest in a long series of American movements for change, akin to Know-Nothingism, Abolitionism, Populism, Progressivism, Prohibitionism, and Socialism. Every one of these crusades embraced a broad coalition of disparate forces—some of them responsible, some not—that had genuine grievances, considerable religious fervor, little internal cohesion, and tremendous energy. When elected to

office, representatives of these movements usually proved remarkably tame; none seriously threatened American ideals. When not elected to office—the usual case—members of these movements allowed themselves to be co-opted by the major parties who trumpeted a few of their causes, adulterated most of their ideologies, and sought to harmonize new with old in a manner likely to appeal to a majority of voters.

Viewed in this context, the Moral Majority becomes considerably less frightening. Its extremists can be discounted; its moderates wooed; its grievances evaluated individually; its ties to major parties applauded. Of course, from a state of exaggerated alarm we should not move on to one of smug complacency. That is a condition no American minority group can long embrace. But a solid Jewish position on the Moral Majority should no more be expected or desired than a solid Jewish position on any other political question of the day. So long as we deal with the Moral Majority on a rational basis, viewing its claims as real and worthy of consideration, we may reasonably expect that our claims will be dealt with in precisely the same spirit.

In a sense, we possess a great advantage: historical experience. We know that movements like the Moral Majority have come and gone in America for over two centuries. American society and American Jews have always adapted themselves, and notwithstanding political changes American pluralism has always emerged intact. It seems safe to predict that this familiar pattern will recur. Jews will be around long after the Moral Majority has followed in the footsteps of its political predecessors and disappeared.

NOTES

¹See Anson Phelps Stokes, *Church and State in the United States* (New York, 1950); revised one-volume edition with Leo Pfeffer (N.Y., 1964).

²John Webb Pratt, *Religion, Politics and Diversity* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1967), pp. 138, 142.

³Stokes & Pfeffer, *op. cit.*, p. 563.

⁴*Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁵David Wallechinsky and Irving Wallace, *The People's Almanac* (New York, 1975), p. 1294.

⁶William J. Wolf, *Lincoln's Religion* (Philadelphia, 1970); Russell E. Ritchey and Donald G. Jones, *American Civil Religion* (New York, 1974); Martin Marty, "A Sort of Republican Banquet," *The Journal of Religion* 59 (October, 1979), pp. 383–405.

⁷Donald M. Scott, *From Office to Profession: The New England Ministry, 1750–1850* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1978), p. 24.