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Is The Religious Right Really Right?

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The Religious Right emerged on the national political scene in a big way in the 1980 presidential election, when Ronald Reagan was elected President with the overwhelming support of evangelical Christians. The evangelical support for Ronald Reagan—who, after all, defeated a "born again" Southern Baptist president—caught the national media by surprise and led to an avalanche of analysis. What would this new evangelical involvement in politics mean for the country? Were the evangelicals here to stay?

This election year promises to be no different, at least in terms of media scrutiny. With issues like same-sex marriage on the national agenda, the values-centered voting patterns of conservative Christians will play a big part in the presidential election. A fascinating look at the Religious Right and its critics is offered by Christian Networks Journal in its Winter 2004 issue, "Religious Right or Wrong?" The issue features an exchange of articles between Rev. Matt Fitzgerald, pastor of Epiphany Church in Chicago, Illinois, and Dr. Ronald H. Nash, professor of Christian Philosophy at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Fitzgerald, representing the religious left, and Nash, a prominent conservative philosopher, present a lively exchange focused on the influence of the Religious Right.

In, "Why the Religious Right is Wrong," Fitzgerald aims a broadside attack on the political involvement of conservative Christians. Fitzgerald, we might note, does not mince words. He identifies all evangelicals as fundamentalists, and charges that "belief in the inerrancy of Scripture saps God of majesty and mystery." Fitzgerald claims that his church takes the Bible "too seriously to read it literally," and argues that though "the Christian story speaks God's truth," this story is not to be limited to the Holy Scriptures. As he argues, "the doctrine of Biblical infallibility wants to trap the Divine inside texts that God's power ultimately transcends." This misrepresentation of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy is eccentric, to say the least. Doctrines do not have "wants" and are incapable of "trapping" the Divine.

Though Fitzgerald is predictably opposed to evangelicals on the basis of political judgment, he is remarkably candid in addressing his critique to the Gospel as preached and taught in evangelical churches. As he explains, "Conservative churchgoers are taught to believe that they deserve judgment, but that Jesus comes rushing in to save them." Evangelicals, Fitzgerald asserts, believe that humanity is "doomed" by its sinfulness and must be rescued from without, by the intervention of God in the person of Jesus Christ. According to Fitzgerald, conservative churches grow because conservative Christians "flock" to churches which tell the story of redemption and rescue. According to his analysis, "the threat of judgment plays a necessary role in the story that shapes their lives."

Amazingly enough, Fitzgerald is bold to announce that liberal churches no longer believe in the threat of divine judgment and thus no longer look to rescue by a divine Savior. Even as evangelical Christians experience the radical transformation that comes by faith in Jesus Christ, "few people in the mainline church experience this sort of

transformation.”

Fitzgerald explains that the liberal churches embraced a protest against “rigid and controlling religious orthodoxy and political tyranny.” Attempting to keep one foot in the modern world and the other in the Christian tradition, the mainline churches have accommodated themselves to a modernist perspective—a position Fitzgerald describes as “a very honest stance.”

What about the threat of divine judgment? “As people who believe that humanity has the answer to its own problems we no longer believe we’re doomed,” he explains. As Fitzgerald parodies the evangelical understanding of the Gospel, he accuses us of forcing a “rescue” on persons who are only standing in knee-deep water, and thus in need of no rescue at all. Liberal churches see the situation otherwise: “We think we’re splashing around in the shallow end of some motel pool, but Christian songs, scripture and stories treat us as if we are drowning in a storm-tossed sea. Because its liberal Protestant listeners no longer subscribe to the notion that humanity is in grave danger, the message of salvation is rendered nonsensical. Jesus has become the answer to a question we are no longer asking.”

Fitzgerald is not at all pleased that conservative Christians are now politically organized and involved in the political sphere. He declares that his church welcomes people “of all sexual orientations.” He identifies his vision of Christianity with the political left and charges the Religious Right with an “arrogant conflation of God’s will with American military might.”

Dr. Ronald Nash doesn’t beat around the bush in his response to Fitzgerald’s critique. One of America’s most prominent Christian apologists, Nash accuses Fitzgerald of demonstrating “either a defective grasp of American church history over the past fifty years and/or an emotional problem that makes one wonder if he knows what he’s talking about.” Take that, Mister “I take the Bible too seriously to read it literally.”

Turning the question on Fitzgerald himself, Nash accuses the Chicago pastor of harboring ill will towards evangelicals, who are simply following the example set by religious liberals in organizing themselves politically and seeking to influence public policy. At the same time, Nash understands that Fitzgerald’s agenda goes beyond politics.

“Suddenly the shoe is on the other foot,” Nash observes. “Religious conservatives have discovered the social dimension of the Gospel—although some never really lost sight of it. Now the liberals like Rev. Fitzgerald wish conservatives would go back into their churches and forget the political arena. Well, perhaps that sentence is too simplistic. Rev. Fitzgerald, it appears, would also prefer that they stop preaching their Gospel.”

Religious liberals conveniently force all evangelicals into their concept of fundamentalism, and then warn the nation of a horde of unwashed conservatives seeking to force an extreme vision on the nation. The scare tactics aren’t working.

Nash knows an evangelical when he sees one, and he defines an evangelical as “a Christian believer whose theology is traditional or orthodox, who takes the Bible as his ultimate authority in matters of faith and practice, who has had a religious conversion, and who is interested in helping others have a similar conversion experience.”

As Nash explains, evangelicals are deeply concerned about the nation’s moral crisis, the state of public schools, the mounting death toll of abortion, as well as a host of other issues including racial and social justice, poverty, and the environment. He points to evangelical ministries directed toward the alleviation of poverty and human suffering around the world. A published author and expert in the Christian analysis of economics, Nash also asserts that evangelicals generally oppose liberal social programs “because they are often counter-productive and they hurt the poor.” With wit sustained by wisdom, Nash observes: “With friends like the religious left, America’s poor and disadvantaged do not need any enemies.”

Finally, Nash accuses Fitzgerald and fellow leaders of the religious left of harboring a deep and dishonest hostility toward Christian conservatives, treating them as “bare-footed Neanderthals living in the fever swamps of Tennessee.” As Nash laments, “I think we have a right to expect a minister to be trained in the church history of the past fifty years and speak the truth.” According to Nash, “Fitzgerald owes an apology to the millions of faithful Christians he has maligned in his article.”

I wouldn’t wait long for that apology, for Fitzgerald and his fellow religious liberals see the Religious Right as a

formidable threat and one they cannot dare to take seriously in terms of an intellectual argument. Liberalism's arguments are now threadbare and worn, and conservatives have been offering the most compelling policy proposals put forward in the public square over the last several years. Political liberalism is on the retreat, even as lifestyle liberalism is now on the ascent in America and in other advanced nations.

Nevertheless, Fitzgerald's acid attack is useful in helping evangelicals to see how the "other side" sees us. Nash's article should remind evangelicals that this fight is not going to be won with pithy platitudes and public politeness. Here's hoping that Professor Nash is right when he argues that religious conservatives are not about to turn on their heels and retreat from the political arena. The next few months should show us where we stand.

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