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The Moral Majority And Its 'Dirty Tricks'

By H. Carl McCall

The current evangelical political revival is a thinly disguised effort to give religious blessing to conservative causes and issues. As such, it is a manipulation of religion and religious belief for purely political purposes, as blasphemous as it is dangerous.

Under the banner of returning morality to public office, the evangelical political revival is really an effort to carry biblical inerrancy and the literal interpretation of scripture into the political arena for the advancement of pet single-issue causes. The evangelical political mobilization seeks coercion rather than conversion. It seeks agreement rather than repentance. It is protective rather than prophetic.

Rather than prophetically siding with the poor, the weak, the afflicted, rejected and abandoned, the evangelical political revival seeks to legislatively institutionalize peculiarly American and middle-class moral values at the expense of the poor and the oppressed. Rather than seeking to set at liberty those who are oppressed, the evangelical political revival seeks to preserve and codify the blessings of liberty as defined by one branch of the evangelical tradition.

Rather than truly returning to God, the current religious revival seeks a return to an image and concept of America as a nation under God, a nation favored in the eyes of God, a nation chosen and designated by God to accomplish His purposes in the world, by force if necessary, but always by unquestioned divine right and blessing.

Today, we witness a kind of theological "dirty tricks"—using religion and religious belief to advocate and accomplish political ends which are quite inconsistent with a radical faith which is re-

sponsible to God and accountable for God's world.

As a New York State legislator, I have had some experience with this kind of manipulation of religious belief. The classic example occurred during one of the annual debates over the reinstatement of the death penalty. One of my upstate colleagues, Senator James Donovan (Oneida County), received a letter from the Mohawk Valley Council of Churches, which protested his support of the death penalty, insisting that the death penalty violated both the spirit and the tenets of the Christian faith.

In his letter of reply, Donovan challenged the very grounds of the Council of Churches' interpretation of the faith. He said that "there would be no Christianity if it were not for the death penalty." "Where would Christianity be," he went on, "if Jesus got 8 to 15 years with time off for good behavior?"

Now that's a clever line, but it is also clearly a manipulation of the crucifixion and the Christian faith for political purposes. Certainly, it ignores the relevant and lasting words of Jesus concerning capital punishment as society's just retribution: "You have heard that it was said 'an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth,' but now I tell you, do not take revenge on someone who does you wrong." Clearly the death penalty is society's act of revenge and retribution which rules out any possibility of redemption and rehabilitation and denies the sacred value of human life. Proponents of the death penalty and murder share a common *devaluation* of human life.

Political entities such as the Committee for the Survival of a Free Congress and the Conservative Caucus and evangelical groups like Christian Voice, the Religious Roundtable and the Rev. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, have now assumed the unaccustomed role of open, unashamed and aggressive political involvement.

Their stated purpose is to "put God back into Government" by electing those candidates who adopt their political agenda.

The so-called Moral Majority traces America's problems at home and abroad to backsliding from the oldtime religion, to a straying from God, which has resulted in an atmosphere of moral permissiveness. According to this evangelical view, the consequences of backsliding are leading this nation straight to hell and are seen in the decline of America's image, prestige and influence abroad, and the destruction of family life and the diminishing of wealth, growth and productivity.

So the new evangelical political agenda opposes the Equal Rights Amendment, gay rights and abortion—seeing them as destructive of the supposedly God-given traditional nuclear family. Increased military spending for greater strength, and opposition to the SALT II Treaty are also on the moral political agenda as a way of asserting America's divinely favored role as a God-fearing nation in the face of increasing challenges posed by so-called "Godless" Communism.

Last November 4th, the political clout of the Moral Majority was clearly and manifestly in evidence. Candidate after candidate targeted for political extinction was indeed eliminated—John Culver of Iowa, Frank Church of Idaho, Birch Bayh of Indiana, George McGovern of South Dakota. Gone too are Warren Magnuson of Washington, John Durkin of New Hampshire and Gaylord Nelson of Wisconsin, resulting in a conservative-dominated and Republican-controlled Senate for the first time in a quarter of a century.

In the House of Representatives, Democrats retain the numbers but hardly the control—245 to 190. Perhaps most symbolic of the shift in power and control in the Senate, and the plight of vanquished liberal influence, is the change in the

12 chairmanship of the Senate Judiciary Committee. That job moves from Senator Edward Kennedy to Senator Strom Thurmond of South Carolina, who once ran for President of the United States as the States' Rights Party candidate in opposition to the civil rights planks hammered into the Democratic Party platform by the late Hubert Humphrey.

The application of counter-pressure and the creation of a new perceived public consensus are the appropriate responses to the new evangelical political mobilization effort.

To date, it seems, criticism of the evangelical political revival has focused elsewhere. It has been criticized for violating the principle of separation of church and state. It has been criticized as violating Article VI of the United States Constitution, which states that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." Such criticisms are misplaced and miss the point.

The Rev. Jerry Falwell is correct in citing the hypocrisy of liberal Christians who resort to such criticisms and who have been quite willing to invoke biblical faith and witness in support of such liberal causes as civil rights and opposition to the war in Vietnam.

Rather, the appropriate response to the evangelical political revival is the mobilization of a counter Christian and biblical view more in line with radical faith and obedience and representative of gospel imperatives, thereby providing legislators and policymakers with an alternative perceived Christian public consensus. Those who lift up single conservative issues on a biblical banner should be reminded of their hypocritical inconsistencies when measured by the larger moral imperatives of the Christian faith.

Those who oppose abortion, for example, under the banner of right to life, tend to

be more concerned with the rights of a fetus to be born than they are with the birth rights of children of the poor. They seem to feel that the moment of conception confers certain rights which the act of birth does not sustain.

A Christian political agenda which stands in opposition to individual human rights must be countered and opposed by those who stand with Jesus in showing a special concern for the despised and rejected social and religious outcasts, represented in Jesus' time by prostitutes, drunkards and tax collectors.

Those who call themselves Christian and stand in opposition to the SALT II Treaty and insist upon an increase in military spending must be countered by other Christians who stand with Him who said that those who live by the sword shall die by the sword, the Prince of Peace who did not take up arms in defense of His cause or His person and who alienated and frustrated His followers by refusing to lead an armed revolt against Roman oppression to validate and fulfill His role as Saviour and Messiah.

Those who are obsessed with material wealth, power, image and prestige must be challenged and called to repentance by Christians who follow the Lord Jesus who began His ministry by refusing the devil's tempting offer of worldly power, glory and control with the firm admonition, "Begone, Satan. For it is written, 'You shall worship the Lord your God and Him only shall you serve.'"

Those who insist upon tax cuts at the expense of social spending or income redistribution to ease the plight of the poor must be challenged and reminded by other Christians of the words of Him who said to the rich young man, outwardly religious but hung-up on wealth, "Go and sell all that you have and give to the poor."

Perhaps a clue to an appropriate response to the evangelical political re-

vival comes from St. Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians, "There must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized."

The appropriate response to the evangelical political revival is the mobilization of a genuine, vocal Christian perceived public consensus.

The above was excerpted from an address by H. Carl McCall, alternate representative of the United States for special political affairs at the United Nations, on the occasion of the dedication of Howard University's Divinity School last November.