

POLITICS AS NOBLE CALLING

IN THE summer of 1981, when President Ronald Reagan was trying to get the U.S. Senate to adopt his vision of a better America, a baby-faced Senate intern from the University of Georgia moved about the corridors of power in wide-eyed wonder. Young Ralph Reed had learned early in life three things about himself: he could fit in quickly, he loved history, and he had a gift for politics. This experience in the Senate was his first step up the leadership ladder.

At the University of Georgia, Reed was already active among the College Republicans and wrote a weekly column for the student newspaper, *The Red and Black*. But when he returned to school in 1982, he felt imbued with “a mission, a purpose. I knew what I was about. There was no ambiguity.” His mission was to mobilize the campus conservatives much as liberals had been in the sixties.

These were frenetic months in his life. He was finishing his senior thesis and planning another step toward power in high places, a new job with the National College Republicans. In his more reflective moments, however, Reed knew that his undergraduate lifestyle was a problem. Heavy drinking was particularly troublesome. So much so that during the summer after graduation, he vowed to himself to give up alcohol once and for all. A few weeks later, while sipping soda in a Washington bar with friends who were enjoying the jolt of harder stuff, a thirst for a “deeper spiritual meaning” in life swept over him. He searched the Yellow Pages and randomly picked out a church to attend the next morning. In a matter of days he became a born-again, charismatic Christian, turning his back on “the genteel Methodism” of his youth.

Evangelical confession and restoration soon followed. He wrote to one victim of his dirty politics, "I was the cause of all the unsavory behavior. Politics for me had degenerated into a cheap play for power. I now realize that politics is a noble calling to serve God and my fellow man."

Reed, who would become the young executive director of the Christian Coalition, the political action group founded by televangelist Pat Robertson, is illustrative of the rise of the Religious Right to political power in the United States. By 1993, after only three years of his leadership, Reed's political and organizational skills had made the coalition the most effective political force in the family-values movement. *Time* magazine reported that year: "With a resume that includes a doctorate in American history as well as many innings of political hardball, Reed, at 32, has made himself the model for the latest incarnation of the religious right."

By 1990 it was clear to Ralph Reed and the Christian Coalition that America, in three short decades, had experienced nothing less than a psychological revolution. Public education and popular culture had turned from the traditional religious vision of morality and had embraced the new morality of self-expression rather than the inherited ethic of self-denial, rooted in the teachings of the Bible. But what does a genuine Christian do about the moral decline of his society?

Personal choice and individual rights had come to dominate American popular culture. In the vast majority of American households, children were raised to be "expressive individuals" and to demand their rights. Americans by the millions had come to feel that success was a life rich in experience and strong feelings, and freedom was the freedom to be oneself against society's constraints and traditions.

Such individualism itself was nothing new. Americans have always admired the virtues of their mythic heroes like the courageous cowboys of the old West who single-handedly overthrew the evil cattle barons. This traditional image of noble Americans is one of self-reliant, take-charge individuals who resist authorities in order to do what is right and good.

In the 1970s and 1980s, however, this traditional ideal was transformed into the liberated, expressive individual. Americans discovered "You must be yourself. Let it all hang out." Happiness was promoted as a life rich in experiences, strong, sensual feelings, and self-expression. Since the "real self" was, in effect, a morally indefinable entity, most people considered its discovery an unending search.

SHIFTING ALIGNMENT OF CHURCHES

This view of reality centered on the self had a rather obvious impact upon the Protestant and Catholic churches in America. Among the privileged Protestant mainline churches—the Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, United Church of Christ, the major Lutheran bodies, and the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)—the impact was largely negative. They were perceived as symbols of the old, established but irrelevant past.

Officials within these denominations tended to endorse the optimistic view of the human self but they also appealed to the federal government as the guarantor of the “inalienable rights” of the expressive self. They became strikingly unemphatic about the “God of our fathers,” who “cast our lot in this free land.” As a result, the mainline bodies saw their membership figures and their finances during the 1980s and 1990s decline, suggesting that these churches were moving “from the mainline to the sideline.”

In sharp contrast, conservative Protestants, including evangelical, fundamentalist, charismatic and Pentecostal church groups, were, in general, flourishing. While these churches also reflected the imprint of the Age of Self, they retained their faith in “the life above” and preached it. Signs of this were found in surveys of the nation’s 500 fastest-growing Protestant churches, in the growth of many of the smaller evangelical denominations, and in the phenomenal growth of independent nondenominational “megachurches.” To take one striking example during this age, the Pentecostal Assemblies of God quadrupled from a half million to more than four million.

By 1990, figures on Roman Catholicism in the United States had also jumped—in their case to 55 million. Large numbers of these new Catholics could be traced to the explosive growth of the U.S. Latino population.

Fully a third of the Roman Catholic Church in America was now Hispanic. By the 1990s, however, Catholic leadership assumed a new “center” position on the American religious landscape, presenting a social vision to its members as well as to the larger society.

But perhaps the most striking feature of religious life during the Age of Self was the growing number of Americans who accepted the designation “no religious preference.” In 1980, 61 million Americans said they had no church affiliation. By the 1990s over 78 million gave that answer. Millions more said that they were “believers,” but not “belongers.” Preferring not to be formally affiliated with any organized religious group, these people nevertheless considered themselves “spiritually inclined” and interested in spiritual things.

This spreading “secular mind” created problems for the evangelism and growth of the American churches. In the early nineties millions concocted their own recipes for moral commitment in a “cultural supermarket.” Without denominational brand-name loyalty, they were inclined to pick up most anything from the God shelf that seemed to offer a “quick fix.”

Changes in the makeup of the American family seemed to feed this trend. Families in America tended toward the nontraditional, with a variety of values, career and gender roles, and liberal views towards living together outside of marriage. Single-parent families (which reached one in five), working women (at least 40 percent of the work force), and a highly individualistic and privatized religious culture tested the ingenuity, patience, and staffing abilities of most churches in the 1990s.

The confusion of the clergy in the face of this significant cultural shift was also evident. Some called the ordained ministry America’s “most frustrated profession.” Only one-third of pastors in one survey said they felt their efforts in ministry produced spiritual results in the lives of their parishioners. Clergy stress, illness, and burnout were rampant.

Taken together, these signs indicated that “old-time religion” was moving swiftly toward a minority status within the culture.

THE RISE OF THE AGE OF SELF

How did the Age of Self arise? A host of ideas and events contributed to the new way of looking at reality, but two developments stand out: the popular acceptance of psychology and the pervasive use of television.

The new way that Americans looked at their inner world began to appear after World War II. During this war millions of young soldiers and sailors had direct contact with psychology for the first time. Large numbers of them received psychiatric treatment and discovered the magic of the therapist. In 1947, for example, in a well-informed article in *Life* magazine announced that the once obscure and much maligned profession of psychoanalysis had exploded: “From the horde of outright psychotics who occupy more than half of all the hospital beds in the country to the simple-minded folk who seek guidance and solace from the phony tea-leaf ‘psychiatrists’ in Los Angeles and elsewhere, the story is the same—a mass demand for psychiatric help which has swamped facilities and practitioners alike.”

Paperback novels added to the popular interest in mental illness and Hollywood contributed to the popularization of the therapeutic mind by

promoting a host of productions with psychiatric overtones. For examples, the Oscar winner for 1945, *The Lost Weekend*, depicted alcoholism, and a short time later *The Snake Pit* dealt with mental illness. After television appeared in the 1950s, it soon became apparent that it was a “cool” medium, almost the perfect instrument for communicating human emotions and appealing to the inner world of the self.

As early as 1959, social critic Philip Rieff surveyed the cultural landscape and discovered that its symbolic center was no longer the church building or the legislative hall but the hospital. Psychological studies were creating standards by which middle- and upper-class Americans evaluated themselves. By the late sixties therapeutic thinking had shaped popular vocabulary. It was fashionable and healthy to “hang loose,” be free, and experience “inner space.” It was unhealthy to have “hang-ups” or to be “uptight.” Immoral acts were easily explained by psychological conditions.

The unusually large generation that grew up during these post-war years (1946–1964) came to be called “baby boomers.” These children of the fifties, sixties, and early seventies grew up as the first standardized generation. They were drawn together by the history shaping their lives. They shared the great economic expectations of the 1950s and the fears that came with Sputnik and the dawn of the nuclear era. They shared the hopes of John F. Kennedy’s New Frontier and Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society, and the disillusionment that followed the assassinations of national figures, the Vietnam War, the Watergate scandal, and the resignation of President Richard Nixon. Memories of these events united the baby boom generation and shaped its values and dreams of happiness.

During boomer years the ethic of self-denial, including concepts of duty, postponed gratification, and self-restraint, which earlier Americans considered virtues, were no longer advertised or considered valuable. Only rights and opportunities. By stressing the liberation of the self, expressive Americans came to treat every commitment—from marriage and work to politics and religion—not as moral obligations but as mere instruments of personal happiness. And millions “caught the spirit.”

In this sacred status of the self, sexuality seemed to fill a particularly critical function in the individual’s quest for self-expression and self-realization. It seemed to be the primary source of “ultimate” significance for the soul. Thus liberation of sexuality from social control became a pervasive social cause. Boundaries, and the security they provide, were gone.

By 1980 the gospel of personal freedom and sexual expression had spread by stage, screen, and film into the general population of America. In his

New Rules: Searching for Self-Fulfillment in a World Turned Upside Down Daniel Yankelovich presented the evidence for the dramatic changes in American attitudes, including the tolerance of those who sought fulfillment of their sexual drives outside of marriage, including homosexuality.

The new therapeutic ethic sang the praises of honest self-expression and communal intimacy. Clinics, agencies, and therapy centers by the thousands created a new growth industry. Traditional self-restraint governed by the standards of religious institutions was no longer healthy; it reflected hypocrisy or enslaving conformity. People needed to be freed from their past.

TELEVISION'S IMPACT

The other major contributor to the Age of Self was television, the new popular medium designed to appeal primarily to feelings. In his scholarly study *No Sense of Place: The Impact of the Media on Social Behavior*, Joshua Meyrowitz revealed the fundamental ways that television had impacted American social behavior, including life in the churches.

“By revealing previously backstage areas to audiences,” Meyrowitz wrote, “television has . . . led to a decline in the image and prestige of political leaders, it has demystified adults for children, and demystified men and women for each other. This has led to the widespread rejection of traditional child and adult, male and female, and leader and follower roles.”

Television also fostered the rise of hundreds of “minorities” or people, who in perceiving a wider world, began to see themselves as unfairly isolated in some pocket of it. So television played an important part in the social explosions beginning in the 1960s: the many “liberation” movements (blacks, women, elderly, children, disabled, and homosexuals), the rise of malpractice suits, the development of “halfway” houses for prisoners and the mentally ill, the decline of the nuclear family, the trends toward living alone and “living together.”

Electronic media bypassed traditional channels and gatekeepers and undermined the pyramids of status that were once supported by a print culture. Parents, teachers, doctors, corporation presidents, political leaders, and experts of all kinds began losing the controlling elements that supported their traditional status.

Television fed the demand that all information—whatever its source or form—be accessible to the average person. Leaders in business, politics, and religion were forced to espouse a public commitment to “openness” in order

to appear trustworthy. Ironically, however, the more people found out about what their leaders did and knew, the less they accepted them as all-powerful authorities. Once authorities in the society “gave away” their information, the more their status dissolved. The consumer became king.

DIVIDED NATION

This rise of the expressive individual and the “therapeutic mind” set American against American. Two parties, let’s call them “liberationists” and “traditionalists,” struggled for the nation’s soul in a not-so-civil war. The war was the most obvious sign that Americans no longer shared the same vision of the Good Society, the same idea of patriotism, the same code of morality, or the same religious faith.

Both parties looked at the same country but saw different things. The last quarter of the twentieth century brought the easing of divorce laws, the legalization of abortion, the ending of “censorship,” and the new tolerance for “alternative lifestyles.” America’s academic, artistic, and media elite—often called the New Class—considered these events great advances for human freedom and dignity. But the other half of the nation looked out and saw moral decadence, social degeneration, and national decline.

Traditionalists argued it is “the truth” that sets men and women free, the truth handed down in Judeo-Christian traditions, beliefs, and books. These values provide the foundation of true morality, which, in turn, should serve as the bedrock of legitimate laws and a good society. That, after all, is what America was supposed to be.

America’s laws, however, were more and more rooted in a new, secular morality that held, as one commentator observed, that men and women “may create their own moral code, that all voluntary sexual activity is morally neutral and legally permissible, that abortion is a woman’s right, that pornography, like beauty, is only in the eye of the beholder, that suicide and euthanasia are, in some circumstances, logical, legitimate and ‘humane,’ and that if a man wishes to distort his mind with drugs, that is his business alone.”

THE RISE OF THE NEW RELIGIOUS RIGHT

As so many times in America’s past, Christians responded to the cultural shift in one of two ways: some chose to resist the changes; others decided to adapt to the changes.