

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.

Resistance to the shifting culture came most notably through political action led by a movement called the Religious Right. A striking example of its influence on American political life came in 1984 during the first televised presidential debate between Republican party candidate Ronald Reagan and Democratic party candidate Walter Mondale. Mondale referred to televangelist Jerry Falwell no less than three times. Falwell was running for no office. He held no position in the administration. And yet the Democratic candidate for the country's highest office felt compelled to introduce this Baptist pastor into the debate no less than three times. Why?

Jerry Falwell was pastor of the Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Virginia, but after creating a political action group called the Moral Majority in 1979, Falwell rose out of nowhere to become the first prominent spokesman for the so-called Religious Right.

The label stood for a loose coalition of fundamentalist, Pentecostal, evangelical, and Catholic Christians who, driven by concern for the decline in American morality, had become extremely active in the political arena. The core of the movement was a loose alliance of groups led by the Moral Majority. Clustered around an agenda defending traditional moral values and conservative political goals were The Christian Voice, led by Robert Grant; Concerned Women for America, under the leadership of Beverly LaHaye; and the Freedom Council, formed by Pat Robertson, a televangelist who became an unsuccessful candidate for the Republican presidential nomination in 1988.

The passion of the Religious Right lay in their perception that the United States was falling under the influence of secular humanism and that traditional family values were under attack in the media and the public schools. They instinctively resisted the values of the "New Class," as sociologist Peter Berger labeled this new, knowledge class.

Designers of television's programming and decision-makers within America's public schools emerged as the new "information elite." To counter the agenda of the cultural left, the Religious Right preached, promoted, and marched against abortion, the Equal Rights Amendment, homosexuality, pornography, and the increased government involvement in education and welfare.

The roots of the new Religious Right lay in the 1970s. Several explosive national issues seemed to ignite this new conservative reaction. First, in 1973 the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the *Roe v. Wade* case agreed with Jane Roe, a young, single Texas woman, that her right to privacy included her right to terminate her pregnancy by abortion. Many Catholics and Protestants, who held that human life begins at conception, were shocked and dismayed by the decision.

Second, in 1978 a ballot proposition in California tried to expand the legal protection of homosexuals. When a group of conservative pastors organized to defeat the measure, the Internal Revenue Service warned them that the tax-exempt status of their churches was endangered by their political activity. The pastors thought this was reason enough to form the Christian Voice. They were unwilling to give up their fight.

Finally, came the battle over the Equal Rights Amendment, the movement to grant women the legal protection of an amendment to the Constitution. Like many conservative Christians, Jerry Falwell was opposed to the wording of the amendment adopted by Congress. He felt that it would allow homosexual marriages and adoptions, and would allow women to be drafted into the armed services. So in Virginia he fought successfully against the ratification of the amendment.

These three issues, abortion, homosexual rights, and feminism, served to mobilize conservative Christians for battles in the political arena, soon to expand to include other moral and political issues. These Christians tended to find a political home in the Republican party, which historically had advocated a limited role for the federal government.

To achieve their goals the Religious Right relied heavily on the ministries of televangelists. Falwell's *Old Time Gospel Hour* and Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) and *700 Club* led a host of Christian-sponsored radio and television outlets in promoting the conservative moral and political agenda. On radio, a child psychologist-turned-broadcaster, Dr. James Dobson, enlarged his radio ministry called Focus on the Family into a powerful voice for traditional family values. Perhaps most significant politically, these groups succeeded in educating and mobilizing fundamentalists and Pentecostals, a segment of the American population that had once been politically inactive.

Not all Christians, however, joined the resistance to the cultural shift in America. Many of them preferred to think that self-expression could be enlisted for gospel duty. Many Protestant and Catholic churches joined in the appeal to baby boomers by presenting themselves to the public as healing or happy communities. The Word itself became part of the therapeutic and multimedia industry. As one observer described it, churches experimented with "the tokens of mass-produced affection, the illusions of community: bumper-sticker smiles, personalized form letters, televised compassion, published advice."

In the age of self-expression, expressive individuals within the churches threatened to overthrow corporate Christianity. User-friendly churches,

like America's prevailing culture, made religion almost totally a matter of personal choice. Confession, covenant, vows, ministerial authority, tradition, community—these became little more than memories of the past.

A 1978 Gallup poll found that 80 percent of Americans held that "an individual should arrive at his or her own religious beliefs independent of any churches or synagogues." As a result, Americans in the 1980s and 90s chose churches not so much to meet God and surrender to his revealed ways as to satisfy some personal need. Unlike the rich young ruler in the Gospels, church attenders seldom asked, "What must I do?" They were far more likely to ask, "What do I get out of this?" American churches in the 1980s and '90s became even less doctrinal and more emotional and sentimental. Like families in the Age of Self, they were expected to be havens of love and acceptance in an otherwise harsh and competitive society.

RISE OF THE MEGACHURCH

With the decline of denominations in American public life and the increasing privatization of religion, large churches gained an increasing share of churchgoing America, or as some crassly called it "the religious market." These large churches grew, at least in part, because they shed the negative image of denominational Christianity and appealed to popular religious tastes. Like the 76 million members of the post-World War II generation, "megachurches" liked to think of themselves as independent and highly individualized.

With attenders in the thousands, Sunday morning services in these churches were usually "full-service" assemblies. But their buildings were filled the rest of the week, too, with Bible classes, support groups, field trips for Seniors, weight-loss classes, and children's activities. The appeal to popular taste was revealed in several common characteristics:

First, these congregations seldom carried a denominational label. They much preferred "chapel", "center," or "community" on the sign out front. The name was a symbol of their openness to people with diverse backgrounds and problems: divorce, addictions, and depression.

Second, the worship in these large congregations was marked by fast-paced and enthusiastic, popular, religious music. From black gospel to rock 'n' roll to jazz, music was a major element in the warm-up for worship and, on occasion, for sheer entertainment.

Third, they were built around the attractive ministry of a magnetic

preacher who possessed a winsome personality. The sermons stressed the Bible's application to day-to-day life. Loyalty, what there was to be found in the gathering, was usually to the pastor rather than to a denomination or congregation.

Fourth, these large churches seemed to have the best that money could buy. Buildings were often new; the staff of ministers was well-trained and effective; services were available for every imaginable need.

Historians tended to view this development as another example of Americans' privatization of faith. Even in the excitement of a large crowd, attenders of a megachurch were looking for faith that served the private life: help on child rearing, family unity, and personal emotions.

Certainly, in the wider society Americans sought a private house, a private means of transportation, a private garden, a private laundry, and self-service stores. Even within families, Americans had come to expect that each member of the family should have a separate room, and even a separate television, phone, and car, at least when economically possible.

But in this world of private choices Americans were slow to discover how many people were desperately lonely. Sociologist Philip Slater in his important little book *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (1970) probably expressed it best when he wrote: "We seek more and more privacy, and feel more and more alienated and lonely when we get it." We compete rather than cooperate; we avoid rather than engage; we play it cool, and thereby make "the world a little colder."

During the 1990s, with the approach of the new century, new voices sounded within evangelical Christianity and created widespread interest in how Western culture had changed. The ferment was most apparent in the younger generation, the children of the so-called baby boom generation. By attending youth conventions, interacting on the Internet, and publishing books expressing their views, these advocates of a new and better way inspired what some called "the emergent church movement."

At the heart of the movement lay the conviction that changes in Western culture signaled that a new, postmodern church was "emerging." With globalization came a widespread awareness of other cultures and traditions. The emerging church leaders dared to ask, "If this new generation represents a new culture, how does a Christian missionary or pastor relate the gospel to this new culture?" The new—and mostly younger—voices dared to answer their own question.

"American megachurches of the previous generation," they announced, "have little appeal to the emerging generation." And at the turn of the cen-

ture a stream of books soon poured from the presses and tens of thousands of “blog” messages swept through the vast Internet blogosphere pointing to the cultural accretions that hid the Christian gospel behind forms of thought and modes of expression that no longer communicated effectively with the new, emerging generation.

Hundreds of new churches also appeared throughout the United Kingdom and the United States, all attempting to reach out to the “postmodern” generation. “Those who fail to change their ministry ways” said the new voices, “risk hiding the gospel behind forms of thought and modes of expression that no longer communicate with the new emerging generation.” The discontent of these “new-age” leaders soon became clear. Emerging churches were intent upon emphasizing feelings and affections rather than rationality and linear thought, on personal experience over propositional truths, on inclusion rather than exclusion, and on participation in corporate worship in contrast to lost-in-the-crowd, megachurch individualism.

Suggestions for Further Reading

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