

1984

# Politics And Religion

A High Holiday Sermon, 1984-5745

Temple Beth Am

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By

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When I first came to Miami in 1956, my primary job was that of Regional Director for the Union of American Hebrew Congregations, the parent body of Reform Judaism. It so happened that my office was downtown in the Congress Building which also housed the Metropolitan Council of Churches. To my surprise I learned that there was no existing group of interfaith clergy, so with the help of the Director of the Church Council, I arranged for a meeting of Ministers and Rabbis. We would have been happy to invite Catholic Priests, but at that time the Catholic Church did not permit this kind of interfaith activity for its Priests. I remember that first meeting well, because it was a great disaster. Shortly after the meeting got underway, a Protestant Minister arose to say "You Rabbis frequently get too pushy. After all, this is a Christian country". At this point, one of Miami's esteemed Rabbis jumped to his feet. The good Rabbi exclaimed, "We not only disagree with you, but we'll fight you in the courts to prove that you are wrong." Within a few minutes everyone had left the meeting somewhat less inclined towards interfaith activity than when he came. Two clergymen remained behind to continue talking. One was the Rev. Lloyd White, a Baptist Minister; the other was myself. To this day, the Rev. White and I have remained close friends, and together with considerable help from the Anti-Defamation League, we have tried to bind the Jewish and Baptist communities together.

It was another half dozen years at least before Bishop Carroll came to town and activated locally the good will that Pope John had instigated in Rome. In a meeting sponsored by the American Jewish Committee which took place at the Eden Roc, Priests, Ministers, and Rabbis met together on a formal basis for the first time in the history of Miami, A picture of that meeting hangs in my office.

The current good will that exists between a rather wide range of clergy in the Miami area is the result of years of hard work. When I first came to Miami, it was the custom for Christian Ministers to end their benediction or invocation at a public gathering with a particularistic Christian salutation. I still remember the shock which some Christian Ministers expressed when one of our Rabbis told them that a reference to Jesus in the salutation to a public prayer would automatically exclude Jews. The Rev. Fulton, then President of the Ministerial Association, later said to me, "While I was in Virginia I never heard a Jew say that he would prefer that we give a prayer in the name of God and not in the name of Jesus". Angry at first at our request, but then more understanding, Fulton later said, "Maybe I didn't understand that the Jews were just afraid to speak out".

I remember a meeting of clergy held in those early years at the Presbyterian Church near the foot of the bridge on Brickell. We were trying to fashion some understanding about prayer in public places or in the public schools. The Minister of that Church, a Rev. Dahlberg, said to us, "Can't we solve the problem of prayer in the schools by having each child in class, in rotation, give the prayer of his particular denomination?" "That won't work", I replied, "because if there are twenty Christians in the class and two Jews, as is the case in many schools, the Jews will be praying in a Christian environment ninety percent of the time." This answer was not well received by the Rev. Dahlberg. He blurted out at me, "I can see that you don't believe in democracy!"

There was then, and there still is in this country, a large number of Christians who believe that this is a Christian country and the people of other faiths are merely tolerated. Fortunately, there are also a large number of Christians who believe with the Jews that this country has no official religion and where religion is concerned, the question of majority and minority is not to be considered.

The search for religious freedom was one of the main driving forces in the founding of America. The intolerance of the national churches in Europe drove many people from minority groups, like the Pilgrims and Puritans, to these American shores. Once they arrived in America, however, many of those who established their own church here became as intolerant to others as their own oppressors had been abroad. Catholics and Jews were the clear victims of prejudice sometimes reinforced by official decrees from a particular American colony. Small wonder, then, that men like Thomas Jefferson tried to make religious freedom one of the cornerstones of the new democracy. Jefferson authored the famous Virginia Statute For Religious Freedom and dictated before his death that his tombstone omit the fact that he had been President of the United States and include instead that he had been the author of the Virginia Statute For Religious Freedom.

George Washington, for his part, signed a treaty with Tripoli in 1796 which states, "The government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion". The sixth article of the United States Constitution provides that, "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States". The first amendment to our Constitution reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof". What these few words mean has been fleshed out for two hundred years by decisions in the courts of the United States. Let it be said that the decisions of the courts have not always been popular in certain sections of the country where fundamentalists were in the majority. In many parts of the country, decisions of the courts were violated on a regular basis. In my public school experience in Southeastern Virginia, it was a common practice for all children in public schools to be asked to sing Christian hymns at Christmas time.

### *Miami Problems*

In Miami, we have frequently had problems with religious symbols displayed on public property, especially at Christmas time. The Supreme Court has held, until recently, that the religious symbol of a particular religion should not be displayed on publicly owned property. One of the memorable battles in Miami was over the lighted cross on the County Court House Building downtown. For years this cross was turned on at Christmas time, and it was not removed until several Christians brought suit against Dade County. To this day, the inner doors of the courthouse are carved with Christian crosses.

Recently, the attempt by a Jew to remove religious symbols from public property in West Miami was roundly defeated with many Jews joining in the attack against the complainer. The Rabbinical Association of Greater Miami has long been on

record as being opposed to the use of Chanukah displays alongside Christmas displays on public property. If it is wrong for Christian symbols to be displayed, it is wrong for Jewish symbols to be displayed, and doubly wrong for both to be displayed, since Jews and Christians are not the only religious groups in America.

The current Supreme Court recently held that it was all right to display symbols in a publicly owned place at Christmas time, thus reversing the attitude of the Court for many decades. The Court's decision reflects the appointment of conservative judges to the Court in the last several Republican administrations. It also reflects the growing power of religious fundamentalists in America.

When John Kennedy became the Democratic candidate of the Presidency, he met with a large assembly of Protestant clergy in Houston to make clear to them that although he was a Catholic, he felt perfectly free to act independently of the Pope. Kennedy expressed to this group of clergy his belief, "In an America where the separation of Church and State is **absolute**-where no Catholic Prelate would tell the President (should he be a Catholic) how to act and no Protestant Minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote".

The United States of today is not the America of John Kennedy. It is important for all Jews to recognize this fact and to deal with it. There are two substantial movements which have already proven that what Kennedy said was true then is not true today. All of us know that the Rev. Jesse Jackson could not have run half so well had it not been for the use of the Black Church as the very hub of his campaign. Jesse, the candidate, spoke regularly in the Sanctuary of the Black Churches, and these Churches were used as the central sites for fund-raising. It is interesting that little objection was raised to this practice which seems to contradict the separation of Church and State. Most of us who sympathize and work with the Black people in its search for equal rights understand that the Black Church has long been outspoken in its search for Black rights, and Jackson's campaign cannot be considered an ordinary kind of thing. As the first serious Black candidate for the Presidency, Jesse had all the hopes and yearnings of Black people riding with him. Anyone who knows how much Blacks have suffered in this country can understand the involvement of the Black churches, but the partnership of a Presidential candidate with a whole tier of churches is an entirely new experience for America.

### *Moral Majority*

The second movement involving the Church directly in politics is that movement which includes the conservative wing of Protestantism and the Conservative wing of Catholicism. The most obvious involvement of the fundamentalist Protestant Church is the so called Moral Majority with Jerry Falwell as its chief spokesman. Falwell and his group attract millions of Christians to their evangelical brand of Christianity and then use these same mailing lists as grist for their political mill. These same people who seek Christian salvation through Jerry Falwell respond to appeals to support a political fund which is used to support Moral Majority politicians all around the country. Falwell may not use the name of his religious group in these political appeals, but the name-cover is thinly disguised.

The activities of the conservative Catholics are characterized by Archbishop Bernard F. Law of Boston who, claiming the support of 18 New England Bishops, recently issued a statement that, "Abortion is the critical issue in this campaign". Archbishop Law urged voters to make abortion their central concern when they cast their ballots. "I don't want to be a political boss", said the Archbishop, "but I hope our statement will influence everyone who hears it". Whatever may be Archbishop Law's position, it is clear that he has no separate organization outside of the Church which equals the power of Falwell's Moral Majority. Nonetheless, "The Right To Life" groups, which are composed primarily of conservative Catholics, include many Catholic clergy.

I am not one of those who believe that the clergy should never speak out on issues or even candidates. On the contrary, I believe that clergy have the duty to point out the moral aspects of government policy or non-policy. For me, the problem comes in at that point where the clergy teach that if someone does not do as they wish, then that person is a sinner or is going to hell. For example, I see nothing wrong with a Catholic Priest teaching that abortion involves the taking of a life and should be avoided at all costs. I happen to believe that abortion in some cases is justified, but I can understand that a Catholic Priest would teach as he does on this most difficult of issues. On the other hand, when a Bishop says publicly that a Catholic politician cannot be a good Catholic and agree that each individual has the right to make a choice in the case of abortion, then I believe that the Priest is crossing the line of separation of Church and State. The Catholic Priests and Bishops who teach this today, and there are many of them, are going counter to the basic position John Kennedy stated short decades ago. Geraldine Ferraro, as a Catholic, speaks in the tradition of John Kennedy, but she is being severely pressed for her stand on abortion by many Catholic clergy. Senator Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts recently stated, "We cannot be a tolerant country if churches bless some candidates as God's candidates and brand others as ungodly or immoral" (Herald, 9/16/84).

I see the Civil Rights Movement, as led by the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. in the 60's, as a legitimate expression by a clergyman on what happened to be also a political issue. The Rev. King tried to organize people to support him in opposing laws and customs which clearly discriminated against one group of people. This Rabbi participated in a number of civil rights marches, and many of us Rabbis were active in the Civil Rights Movement long before Martin Luther King. The first civil rights organization in America was organized by Jews (the American Jewish Committee).

Many Christian and Jewish clergy worked together in the anti-Vietnam crusade, as we tried to impress upon our government and the American people that this was an unjust war. There is a legitimate use of the power of the Church and Synagogue when moral issues are involved. Yet none of us who were active in these movements ever inferred that those who disagreed with us were sinners and were going to hell. The clergy involved in the Civil Rights and anti-Vietnam movements, unlike Archbishop Law, did not infer that good Christians and Jews were unable to be on the opposite side of the issue. On the contrary, the very clergy involved in these noble endeavors were accused by some fundamentalists of being unpatriotic and treasonous.

### *Court Prophets*

In ancient Israel, religion was not completely separate from politics. In all other countries of ancient times, the Church was controlled by the political power, and the Church did its bidding. In ancient Israel, the function of the prophets was to control those in political power, to see that the King did not set himself above the law. The prophet was the protector of the Torah or the Constitution. When the King violated the ancient Israelite laws of private property or freedom of the individual, the prophet would call down the wrath of God upon the King. The Israelite prophet, in other words, was a kind of Supreme Court all rolled up into one person. As you might imagine, many prophets were imprisoned or killed by an unappreciative King.

There were also in ancient Israel, "court" prophets. The court prophet was one who sat at the King's table and was paid by him. The court prophet said whatever the King wanted him to say. The true prophets, men like Isaiah and Jeremiah and Micah and Hosea and Amos, called themselves prophets of God. They would not accept the King's pay, because they reserved the right to be critical of him.

In America today, we seem once again to have an alliance of a religious group and the person in power. The Moral Majority has as some of its main goals the elimination of the right to abortion under most circumstances and the establishment of prayer in the public schools. The movement is a strong supporter of the vast military build-up under the present national administration.

For his part, President Regan has gone out of his way to endorse the Moral Majority objectives. In 1980, he is reported to have said to a conference of religious conservatives, "If you can't endorse me, I endorse you". The Moral Majority has on the other hand lined up all of its political power behind the President. At the recent Republican National Convention, the Rev. Falwell lauded the President and Vice-President as "God's authority instruments for rebuilding America". This alliance between the President and the religious right was further cemented by a speech the President gave after the convention in Dallas. Speaking to a mass meeting of fundamentalists, the President especially supported prayer in the public schools and went on to say that those opposed to it were intolerant. We Jews are concerned about prayer in the schools because we think that there is no way to prevent that prayer from becoming denominational. We fear that the progression is first-prayer in the schools, then secondly, Christian prayer. The Rev. Falwell has left no doubt about his intentions. Writing in his book, "**America Can Be Saved**," published in 1979, Falwell said, "I hope to see the day when, as in the early days of our country, we won't have any public schools. The churches will have taken them over again and Christians will be running them. What a happy day that will be" (p. 52-53-). In this same book, on page 21, Falwell writes, "America was founded by Godly men who had in mind establishing a republic not only Christian in nature, but a republic designed to propogate the Gospel worldwide". On a recent television show, Falwell attempted to deny that he ever wrote these things, but they are there in his book for all to see.

The President of the United States is also working with such people as the Rev. W.A. Criswell who gave the benediction at the Republican Convention. The Rev. Criswell said in a interview aired on CBS on September 6th, 1984, taped the day after he gave his benediction, "There is no such thing as separation of church and state. It is merely a figment of the imagination of infidels." It is this kind of attitude which we fear taking hold once the defenses we have carefully built between church and state are breached.

We have a right to be disturbed that our President regularly welcomes to the White House the leadership of The American Coalition For Traditional Values. "That coalition consists of fundamentalists and evangelical leaders working to register 'Bible-believing Christians' and to develop a talent bank to fill political appointment and civil-servant jobs" (see Jim Castelli, Miami Herald, Sept. 25th, 1984). The chairman of this coalition, the Rev. Tim LaHaye of San Diego, is a frequent White House visitor. In LaHaye's new book, "**The Coming Peace In The Middle East**", he attacks Jews like Karl Marx (who actually was a Christian and Sigmund Freud for bringing harm to mankind, and he points out that Jewish suffering is the natural result of our rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. LaHaye is also bitterly anti-Catholic.

### *A Broader Agenda*

It is important for Jews in America to understand that a major development is underway in American politics. Not only is there a sharp movement to conservatism, but the conservative political movement is being increasingly controlled by the religious right. With its huge political chest, the Moral Majority is supporting and electing not only conservatively oriented politicians but those who will be responsive to their special program. It is certainly no crime to be a conservative where we speak of conserving traditional values. **In that sense, I am very much a**

**conservative**, but I would be greatly concerned if the religion that is on its way into our public schools bears the imprint of the Moral Majority, and I would be alarmed if a large bloc of our political representatives set about legislating only those specific programs which are blessed by Jerry Falwell.

Jerry Falwell is correct about some important things. Religiously oriented people **ought to vote!** Everyone of you should make certain that he or she is registered and vote. And Falwell is correct in saying that religiously oriented people ought to be concerned about what goes on in our schools. So everyone of you with a child in school should join the PTA. More Americans than ever before, because of the push of the churches, black and white, are going to be voting in this election and are going to be active within the school system. In a way, this is very good. I would hope that you will become increasingly active on the community scene and that you will work for those causes which enable more Americans to share in the democratic process and in the economic success of our country.

Let us take seriously the teachings of our prophets who dared to be critics of the political powers of their time. Let us work to see that the agenda of our political leaders is expanded beyond the issues of abortion and prayer in the schools to include the injunctions "to feed the hungry, clothe the naked", to care for the weak, for the stranger, the elderly, and the sick. Let us with the prophet Isaiah work to see that nations "beat their swords into ploughshares so that they will learn war no more".

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