

Religious and Mortality Themes in the Primaries

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RELIGIOUS AND MORALITY THEMES IN THE PRIMARIES

by James W. Pratt

Theodore H. White, writing about John Kennedy's 1960 Presidential campaign, observed that "religion and ethnics have always been important in American politics¹ . . . the intertwining of religion and politics (are) laced all through the history and traditions of America . . ."2 And Dean Francis Sayre of the Washington Cathedral, commenting on the 1976 Presidential campaign, argues that "every aspect of our democracy comes from (the) vestigial remnants of (the) faith" of the nation's founders, who sought to establish an ethical and moral government led by men who could be trusted to preserve that moral heritage.³ Religion and ethics are always at least latent issues in our nation's Presidential campaigns. But religion was an overt issue in the elections of 1928 and 1960, when Roman Catholics Al Smith and John Kennedy sought the Presidency despite their religion; and it is an issue in 1976, when Jimmy Carter seeks the Presidency, in part, because of his religion.

1976 is the right year for the use of religious and morality themes. Some have suggested that it is an appropriate outgrowth of the Bicentennial celebration; but there seems to be widespread agreement that such themes are well adapted to a receptive national audience of voters. Listen to some of the comments. George Reedy, Lyndon Johnson's former press secretary, says that the real issues of this campaign are spiritual rather than economic or social.⁴ Marquette University sociologist Wayne Youngquist says that "the meta-issue--an issue above (all the other issues). . . involves tone, honesty, decency, truthfulness, morality, and religion."⁵ Lutheran historian Martin Marty observes that the voters are seeking a "decent, religious man" for the

Presidency.⁶ Time magazine comments that Americans are ready to welcome Carter's moral promise, as a refreshing relief after the Viet Nam war, the Watergate scandals, and the widespread corruption of the Nixon administration.⁷ Dean Sayre amplifies this view when he says that "Harry Truman . . . was a towering figure of moral probity. The American people expect it in our system, but the more recent Presidents have hardly been mindful of it."⁸ Indeed, the recent wave of popularity of President Truman testifies to this mood. A popular song wistfully celebrating the character of this man who fired God-like General MacArthur and recommended that striking railroad workers be hanged would hardly have risen on the charts in the early fifties. And the contrast is striking between the character of the man who kept a roll of three-cent stamps in his White House desk because the taxpayers shouldn't have to pay for his personal mail and the man who let those taxpayers build him a shuffleboard court at Casa Pacifica. Carter tells voters, "My favorite modern President is Harry Truman,"⁹ and he invites them to "Trust me." "I'll never tell a lie," he assures voters. "I'll never knowingly make a misstatement of fact. I'll never betray your trust. If I do any of those things, I don't want you to support me."¹⁰ That position is one that appeals to the current mood of American voters, in the opinion of many observers.

Carter himself sees religious and morality themes as central to the campaign. In an interview published in U. S. News and World Report, Carter identifies "integrity" as one of the three central issues in the campaign.¹¹ Time quotes Carter as saying the central issue this year is "the feeling many Americans have that the country has lost its moral and spiritual underpinnings, its sense of purpose and direction."¹² Carter's "sincerity" is the one

quality most often cited by voters to explain their support for him.¹³ His character, his personality,¹⁴ and his religious background¹⁵ are among the characteristics of the candidate highest on the voter's list of positive attributes. In such a political context, religious and moral themes can be used to great advantage by the skillful candidate.

And Carter has done so. John Kennedy's campaign staff in 1960 advised him "to raise no religious issue in public" because the subject was too explosive.¹⁶ Carter's campaign staff, in their long-range master plan for victory in 1976, gave no such advice...in fact, they identified religion as one of their candidate's strong issues.¹⁷ Carter was the first of the candidates in the primaries to introduce a religious theme, by telling his audiences of "a profound religious experience that changed my life dramatically," his complete personal commitment to Christ; and he continues to tell his audiences that "religion is the most important thing in my life."¹⁸ What could the other candidates do? Arranging a personal religious experience in the midst of the Presidential primary campaign would probably be viewed as an opportunistic gesture by skeptical voters, already impressed by Carter's "sincerity." But the other candidates did begin to sprinkle religious and moral themes into their campaign rhetoric. Ford began referring frequently to a "spiritual reawakening" of the nation, and mentioned a "commitment" to Christ made by him and his son Michael, a divinity-school student.¹⁹ Ronald Reagan spoke of a "real hunger in this country for a return to spiritual and moral values," and affirmed that "it's inconceivable to me that anyone would think he could do this job, the Presidency, if he couldn't call on God for

help and have the faith that he'd be granted that help."²⁰ Jerry Brown, his speeches liberally interspersed with Biblical and theological references, seemed to many to personify in his role as California's governor the ascetic Catholic lifestyle of the Jesuit seminary which he attended; and he projected that theme to his proposed Presidential administration.²¹ Brown observed that the White House could use "a little Jesuit logic," and he referred to his Jesuit background often.²² And Henry Jackson refused to deal in religious themes at all, announcing to his public that Carter's discussion of his religious views was in "bad taste."²³ Then, with the primaries long over, candidate Ford emerged from the White House in mid-September to launch a strong attack on Carter's "trustworthiness," and he identified "trust" as one of the major campaign issues in his closing statement in Thursday's debate, acknowledging by these actions the importance of the issue of integrity and personal character in the campaign.²⁴

Although the other candidates picked up Carter's cue and dealt with religious and morality themes, it was still Carter himself who epitomized this form of campaign rhetoric. Time calls his campaign "unorthodox," because, as they say, his basic campaign speech deals almost exclusively with the 'spiritual' issue.²⁵ His standard campaign speech is a general and informal celebration of that issue, followed by a question-and-answer session.²⁶ He identifies with his typical audience: he smiles, often appears without a coat or in informal attire, maintains prolonged eye contact. He sets off his references to love, brotherhood, and harmony, with a hushed and deliberate style, clearly distinguished from the rapid and clipped manner in which he discusses policy issues.²⁷ Late in the primary campaign, Carter brought in a new speechwriter in an effort to overcome some of the criticism that he was

"fuzzy" on issues; but even then the style remained inspirational, causing Newsweek reporter David Alpern to compare it to Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech,²⁸ and leading others to identify it with William Jennings Bryan's religious fervor and Woodrow Wilson's moral idealism.²⁹ Carter repeatedly invites voters to "Trust me"; and apparently a large number of them do. He creates the image of a deeply religious person who is yet not a mere pawn of his church. Carter talks freely of his personal religious practices: even while campaigning, he reads the Bible nightly, (although he gains political ground by commenting that he is now reading it in Spanish, to brush up on that language.)³⁰ Interviewed by NBC's John Hart, Carter reveals that he prays about twenty-five times a day.³¹ As governor of Georgia, Carter had a small room near his office where he could pray privately on his knees.³² Yet also as governor, he criticized Georgia's ban on Sunday liquor sales as hypocritical because it led people to patronize bootleggers; he ended former governor Lester Maddox's daily religious services, calling them "pointless"; and he reads the Bible critically.³³ John Kennedy had to convince the American people that they were wrong to assume that he would be controlled by his church; and he did so most forcefully and effectively in a speech before the Greater Houston Ministerial Association. Carter does not have the same obligation-- after all, the mass of American voters do not harbor the same fears of Southern Baptists that they historically have of Roman Catholics, and Carter has the advantage of fitting within the Protestant mainstream. Indeed, George Gallup reported this week that one-third of adult Americans call themselves "born-again" Christians.³⁴ Still, the issue exists that Carter's religion may interfere with his performance as President, a fear which is advanced by his frequent use of the word "sin" when commenting on political issues,

or his statement supporting the Supreme Court's ruling allowing states to outlaw homosexual activity because such relationships are "contrary to the Bible's teachings."³⁵ Carter vows to maintain strict separation between church and state, denying that there is any conflict between the two; but he justifies his position with Biblical quotation. He argues that his religious convictions will make him a better President; and such a statement is probably consistent with the expectations of large numbers of voters.³⁶

So who doesn't trust Carter? Well, Robert Schrum, for one, the unhappy speechwriter who quit Carter's campaign after nine days. In an article called "No Private Smiles" in New Times magazine, Schrum characterizes Carter's use of religious and morality themes as cold opportunism. "Forget about the Jewish vote," he quotes Carter as saying; "We get the Christians."³⁷ So Schrum left the Carter campaign, disenchanted with what he saw as Carter's hypocrisy. Skepticism about Carter may also be found among Jews, liberal Protestants, and Roman Catholics. The Southern Baptist Church, of which Carter is a loyal member, has a long history of anti-Catholicism, anti-Semitism, and anti-communism; and his strong identification with that church is a cause for concern among the members of some other religious groups. Rabbi Marc Tanenbaum, national director of Inter-religious affairs for the American Jewish Committee, circulated to Jewish leaders throughout the country a statement on "Carter, Evangelism, and Jews," in which he discussed the basis for Jewish anxiety.³⁸ Throughout the first hundred years of the country's history, evangelical Christianity was the norm; and persons who deviated from that norm were separated from any participation in the political

process. Now, in an era displaying many symptoms of being a Puritanical reaction to the moral corruption of the Viet Nam War and Watergate, there is concern that Carter might resurrect a mentality of second-class political status for non-evangelicals. But Rabbi Tanenbaum ends his statement as he began it: on a note of caution and concern, rather than opposition to Carter. He urges readers to study the positions of the candidates and not vote on the basis of prejudice, mythologies, and stereotypes, remembering that evangelical Christians have, at times, championed religious liberty.

Carter has worked to overcome this religious suspicion; and he seems generally to have succeeded. He apparently has not forgotten about the Jewish vote: New York's mayor Abe Beame endorsed him, as have several other prominent Jews, including leaders of Atlanta's Jewish community. Carter has actively solicited the Catholic vote, and has been warmly received in Roman Catholic neighborhoods in northern cities. In recent weeks, abortion has emerged as an active religious and moral issue in the campaign, despite persistent and growing demands from a variety of sources that it is not properly a Presidential issue. The Minneapolis Tribune says that abortion has become known as "the Catholic question";³⁹ and, (despite protests that opposition to the Supreme Court's abortion decision is not limited to Roman Catholics), the public statements of the Roman Catholic hierarchy, the regular presence of priests in protest groups, and the overt action of the Roman Catholic Conference of Bishops all tend to combine to reinforce the impression that opposition is being led by the Roman Catholic church. Carter's position on abortion has remained clear and consistent since the early stages of the

primary campaign: Time described that position in early March in this way:

"He opposes abortion and would use the bully pulpit of the Presidency to discourage it. . . . But, because he believes that a woman has a legal right to decide for herself, he does not favor a constitutional amendment to ban abortions."⁴⁰ Carter's campaign aides, acknowledging that the issue is

"troublesome," nonetheless repond that their candidate will simply have to "ride it out." And the issue may prove to be more harmful to the power

structure of the Roman Catholic church in America than to Carter himself:

interviews with Catholic laymen throughout the country have revealed that they generally consider abortion to be a relatively minor issue; and the Conference

of Bishops was forced to deny that their implicit endorsement of Ford was really an endorsement, after they received a flood of protest mail from their constituents. Interestingly, John Kennedy also encountered opposition from

the Conference of Bishops in 1960, most notably when they issued a formal statement on population pressures, saying that the term "the population explosion (a term frequently used by Kennedy in his speeches on the developing nations) "was a recently-coined terror technique phrase."⁴¹ Privately

irritated, Kennedy's only public response was to joke about their opposition:

"They're working on a package deal--if the Electoral College can be changed into an interdenominational school, they'll open up the College of Cardinals."

and, although it was widely assumed in the press and in political circles that the Bishops' opposition would doom the chances for Kennedy's candidacy, Kennedy continued to joke about the Roman Catholic hierarchy, and the issue dissipated.

Perhaps the Bishops' opposition to Carter in 1976 will have the same impact.

Even more recently, Carter broke Presidential tradition by agreeing to be interviewed by Playboy magazine; and in substantial excerpts from that not-yet-published interview, he expresses a view which clergymen have affirmed as theologically sound, but he projects a very human and tolerant image which appears to be intended to counter a number of the religious reservations about him. And finally, to the skeptical charge that Carter's language sounds like a pious facade, Time magazine pronounced that "that, decidedly, is not the case."⁴² | How could anyone still doubt?

So, for Jimmy Carter, the effective use of religious and morality themes was an important part of his primary campaign. Certainly, they alone were not responsible for his decisive victory in New York City; but they were thoroughly and naturally intertwined within the substance of a carefully planned and skillfully executed campaign. And they continue to function well for him, as the issue of personal trust and integrity remains in the post-convention spotlight. Concerned Democratic leaders may view Carter's Playboy magazine statements with apprehension; but sinful non-evangelicals may be better able to identify with the Baptist Sunday School teacher who admits that he, too, is guilty of "adultery in his heart," while Gerald Ford differs with his wife on whether their daughter's hypothetical affair would come as a surprise to them. The Conference of Bishops may issue statements disapproving of Carter's refusal to endorse a constitutional amendment to ban all abortions; but the majority of voters will probably regard it as the minor, tangential Presidential issue which it is. Perhaps the televised debates will solidify this significant voting issue of personal character and morality; certainly they are capable of doing that, although Thursday night's debut seemed to change few opinions. If American voters respond to the "Great

Debates" of 1976 as they did to the Kennedy-Nixon debates in 1960, however, the specific issues that the candidates talk about will be of distinctly secondary importance in influencing voting behavior. What will matter will be the personal image which each candidate projects. There is strong agreement among authorities in argumentation that Richard Nixon did a better job of debating the issues on television in 1960; but John Kennedy was the real winner. He projected confidence, assurance, command of information; while Richard Nixon, running a fever, simply perspired. The voters are not likely to respond to the televised confrontation as do debate judges; and if personal integrity is really the issue in 1976, then they will be looking for behavior which will permit them to resolve that issue before they go to the polls.

Religious and morality themes were the right ones for 1976, appropriate to the mood of the country; and they were the right ones for Jimmy Carter, who simply had to focus on a natural and important part of his life. Dean Sayre, for one, thinks that those issues will determine the outcome of the Presidential election; for, as he says, if Americans find a man of the proper moral dimensions, it will hardly matter whether he is liberal or conservative, Republican or Democrat. What will matter, he concludes, "is the passionate care that he brings to the White House."⁴³

FOOTNOTES

*James W. Pratt (Ph.D. University of Minnesota) is assistant professor of Speech Communication and director of forensics at Saint Olaf College.

- ¹Theodore H. White, The Making of the President 1960 (New York: Pocket Books, Inc., 1961), p. 110.
- ²White, p. 310.
- ³Dean Francis Sayre, quoted in Hugh Sidey, "Yearning for Morality," Time, May 17, 1976, p. 31.
- ⁴"The Search for Someone to Believe In," Time, April 26, 1976, p. 13.
- ⁵"The Search . . . ," p. 13.
- ⁶"Politicians are Discovering it's O.K. to Talk Religion," U. S. News and World Report, May 3, 1976, p. 19.
- ⁷"Jimmy Carter's Big Breakthrough," Time, May 10, 1976, p. 19.
- ⁸Sidey, p. 31.
- ⁹"Jimmy Carter's . . . ," p. 11.
- ¹⁰"Jimmy Carter: Not Just Peanuts," Time, March 8, 1976, p. 15.
- ¹¹"What Carter Believes," U. S. News and World Report, May 24, 1976, p. 23.
- ¹²"Carter Faces the 'Fuzziness' Issue," Time, May 31, 1976, p. 15.
- ¹³"The Carter Phenomenon--It Was No Accident," U. S. News and World Report, May 17, 1976, p. 17.
- ¹⁴"Jimmy Carter: Not . . . ," p. 20.
- ¹⁵"Prophetic Game Plan," Newsweek, May 10, 1976, p. 29.
- ¹⁶White, p. 127.
- ¹⁷"Prophetic . . . ," p. 29.
- ¹⁸"Politicians are Discovering . . . ," p. 18.
- ¹⁹"Politicians are Discovering . . . ," p. 18.
- ²⁰"I've Had a Bum Rap," Time, May 17, 1976, p. 19.

- 21 "Brown: Test By Rorschach," Time, May 31, 1976, p. 9.
- 22 Kenneth G. Briggs, Minneapolis Tribune, June 8, 1976.
- 23 "Politicians are Discovering . . . ," p. 18.
- 24 Minneapolis Star, September 16, 1976.
- 25 "Carter Faces . . . ," p. 15.
- 26 "Jimmy Carter: Not . . . ," p. 20.
- 27 "The Carter Phenomenon . . . ," p. 17.
- 28 "Down the Home Stretch," Newsweek, June 7, 1976, p. 19.
- 29 "Jimmy Carter's . . . ," p. 19.
- 30 "Carter: The Deacon," Time, April 12, 1976, p. 14.
- 31 "Carter: The . . . ," p. 14.
- 32 "Jimmy Carter's . . . ," p. 20.
- 33 "Jimmy Carter's . . . ," p. 20.
- 34 Minneapolis Star, September 21, 1976.
- 35 "Politicians are Discovering . . . ," p. 18.
- 36 "Jimmy Carter's . . . ," p. 20.
- 37 Robert Schrum, "No Private Smiles," New Times, June 25, 1976, p. 39.
- 38 James Reston, "Carter's Evangelism," Minneapolis Tribune, June 8, 1976.
- 39 Al McConagha, Minneapolis Tribune, September 12, 1976.
- 40 "Jimmy Carter: Not . . . ," p. 20.
- 41 Theodore C. Sorensen, Kennedy (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), p. 126.
- 42 "Jimmy Carter's . . . ," p. 19.
- 43 Sidey, p. 31.