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# The Religious Context of Neo-Conservatism

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## Introduction

North American society is apparently religious. One might even assume that the importance of religion has increased over the past two or three decades. There are more religious programs on TV in this decade than ever; more religious movements among us; more overt influence of religious perspectives in politics and social programs than seemingly has ever been the case. But curiously the role of the church and of religion in general does not seem clear. Many feel the church is not relevant or at least not effective. People in fact seem increasingly uneasy about the role of religion in society, the relationship between religion and politics, and the nature of religious freedom.

Furthermore, according to the most recent analyses we are actually experiencing a decline in interest in religion in North America. A survey done by the Princeton Religious Research Center in 1986 indicates that less than half of Canadians felt religion was important to them. This assessment was recently confirmed by a poll conducted by *Macleans* magazine and reported on 5 January 1987<sup>1</sup>. According to this survey the percentage of Canadians who consider religion important in their lives is about 40 percent. These figures represent a decrease from polls conducted as recently as 1978 which indicated more than 50 percent of Canadians regarded religion as an important factor in their lives. This uncertain view of the importance of religion must itself be placed in a larger context.

## I. The Present Religious Context

### *1. A Context of Skepticism and Failed Idealism*

Much of the religious mood of North American society is tempered by a growing sense of skepticism and failed idealism. The 1950s was a decade of heady optimism following the conclusion of World War II. That optimism was fostered both by rapid growth in our churches and a burgeoning growth of technology and material prosperity. The advent of Sputnik seemed to signal an unlimited future for human advancement. The 1960s, however, with its wave of new wars, political assassinations, civil rights confrontations and decline in church growth, shocked us back into a more realistic sense of fallibility. The 1970s has seen the rapid erosion of almost all idealism as the heroes of the 1960s have had their clay feet exposed, and many have been toppled from their position of power. Persons, movements and technology have in many ways failed us and left in their wake large vacuums into which are now sweeping powerful forces of despair, fascism and reaction.

Richard Nixon and Ferdinand Marcos are in certain ways symbols of the political era of the 1970s and 1980s. They represent reasons why there is now such profound distrust of politicians and the political process. These days the best and most honest of politicians are regarded with a skepticism bordering on cynicism. The inability of any government, Western or Eastern, to stem the tide of armaments or to redress the frightful imbalance of rich and poor, produces a mood approaching despair and suggests a reaching towards totalitarian measures which can force solutions on people. There is much to be uneasy about in the political climate in the world today. In this uneasy and skeptical climate religion is expected to restore a framework of order, simplicity and traditional values.<sup>2</sup>

We are also very much aware of the failure of the technological dream. Actually our technology has not failed us for it is surely a marvel, but our use of and dependency on technology are at the point of destroying us. We have mass transportation, marvels in communication, miracles in computerization, but we are also committing global suicide. Industrial pollution may have reached irreversible proportions. The Chernobyl accident symbolizes our alarming tendency to destroy ourselves

in the process of saving ourselves. Our mastery of technology has produced weapons now sufficient to annihilate the human race many times over. It is almost as if we have created monsters for our service which now have taken control of us. As persons we function in this atmosphere of apprehension, and religion has not provided a consistent sense of hope.

The liberal humanist dream which underlies most of the social sciences has also failed us and contributes to the prevailing mood of skepticism. The disciplines of the social sciences are seen by many as having failed to produce solutions to human problems. Many social scientists freely admit their studies have revealed little about the nature of humanity and even less about how to treat our complex psychological ills. Medical doctors for example are no longer the white-hatted heroes we once thought they were. Our children, nurtured as they are on the deliberate deceits of the advertising world, and exposed to the patronizing deceits of governments, are surely among the most sophisticated and cynical people the world has known. Our emerging generations are conditioned to expect deceit and as a consequence show an appalling cynicism about our social structures and an apathetic attitude towards the church. This context of failed promises, deliberate deceit and shattered idealism is very much the context of our time.

## *2. An Age of Religious Pluralism and Fundamentalist Religions*

Another significant aspect of the present religious milieu is that it is one in which many religious groups are seemingly preoccupied with the future and promise some kind of salvation in a doomed world. We are in what one might call an age of religious pluralism, apocalypticism and resurgent fundamentalism.

The last decades have seen an astonishing increase in the emergence of "new" religions having little direct connection with the historic development of the church. Initially in Europe, but also in North America, such non-Christian sects as the Unification Church, the Church of Scientology, Hare Krishna and Transcendental Meditation have made large and aggressive inroads among disenchanting but idealistic youth. While traditional youth work in the churches has been hesitant at best, the sects and cults have grown vigorously. There

is no doubt that the Jonestown incident did something to discredit such sects and the principle of charismatic leadership.<sup>3</sup> However, the fact remains that the uncertainties and fears of many people make them vulnerable to the legalistic appeal of disciplined, committed and persuasive religious groups. The new sects touch a raw nerve—the profound need for direction, personal care and a place to commit one's loyalty. They appeal to the selfishness in us, but they also draw on the idealism of youth who are looking for meaningful ways to live out their lives. Such groups present a distinct challenge to the institutional churches.

In the overall context of apocalyptic anxiety and the desire for a return to safer, more ordered, predictable and controllable values another religious phenomenon is evident. This is the rise of what Martin Marty has called the "electronic church". What is referred to here are the so-called evangelism and religious interview programs which compete for time and the viewers' dollars.

Millions watch the evangelists in carefully staged programs, performing like actors as they come striding out on cue after a warm-up by professional entertainers, handsome men, beautiful women and professional athletes. Using a slick combination of biblical references and emotional appeals, the speakers promise, "You too can be healed, you too can be prosperous, you too can be happy. Send in your dollars to keep us on the air so we can pray for you."

Most of these evangelists seem to have little concept of the church as a community of persons. The churches are ignored. Sunday worship is ignored, the gathering for fellowship is almost entirely set aside.<sup>4</sup>

A further interesting and perplexing aspect of the religious context of our society is the resurgence of a militant fundamentalism. This is a world-wide phenomenon. In the Middle East it is typified by the Islamic fundamentalism which has taken over Iran and appears also in Lebanon and Libya. One could offer a similar analysis of the situation in the Punjab and in parts of Indonesia. In North America resurgent Christian fundamentalism has wedded itself to a very conservative political philosophy and become a significant political force which has important implications for the fabric of society both through

those elected to legislative office and new appointments made in our judiciaries.

There are, interestingly, some elements common to the apparently diverse religious movements we have noted as phenomena in our society. There are three in particular which seem evident.

#### a) A Simplistic World View and Life Philosophy

Both the cults and fundamentalism offer a simplistic view of life situations, problems and the solution of those problems. While life is in fact extraordinarily complex, the cults and fundamentalist groups suggest it can be reduced to an elemental and harmonious simplicity. This has extraordinary appeal to those whose life has become desperate or who have not found an outlet for altruistic idealism. We would all like to think life can be simple; that there are precise answers to all questions; that there is a lifestyle which can give fundamental satisfaction and meaning to life. Our experience and our own Scriptures, however, teach us that meaning and purpose and growth are found in the midst of ambiguity and struggle, not apart from those realities. Any religious system or movement which offers deliverance from ambiguity is fundamentally fraudulent for life itself is ambiguous: but this simplistic approach has a powerful appeal—not only to Christian fundamentalists but to many others who see life as having become chaotic and without direction.

#### b) The Subversion of Freedom to Legalistic Principles

A second common problem is the subversion of personal freedom implicit in many current religious groups. One is invited to surrender one's personal autonomy and right to decision either to a person or to a set of principles legalistically applied. The threat of eternal damnation or some other form of punishment is the tool which enforces the surrender of freedom. One functions within such a society not as one whose ideas have worth and may contribute to the betterment of all, but as one who surrenders one's ideas and even identity in service of the person or organization. Margaret Atwood's latest novel, *The Handmaid's Tale*, provides a fascinating if fictional account of a society dominated by a religiously fundamentalist perspective.<sup>5</sup>

### c) The Exaltation of the Leadership Principle

A third commonality is the leader-follower principle. Cults, sects and fundamentalist groups are always dominated by strong, charismatic leaders whose words are regarded as law and truth. Our society seems particularly vulnerable at this point because we have an almost pathological desire for and admiration of strong leadership. Our political campaigns and our ecclesiastical politics are saturated with this mentality. What we seem always to forget is that "strong" leaders are almost inevitably "bad" leaders. In an address given in March of 1933 Dietrich Bonhoeffer drew an important distinction between a "leadership principle" which exalts a person and leadership which is implicit in a position. He observed:

Whereas earlier leadership was expressed in the position of the teacher, the statesman, the father, in other words in given orders and offices, now the Leader has become an independent figure....The problem of leadership, which is as old as any problem of society, specifically became the problem of the Leader....in the case of the Leader, the essential thing is the supremacy of the person.<sup>6</sup>

The leader-follower principle which is a prominent feature of cults, charismatic groups and fundamentalist religious associations is one of the most dangerous aspects of current religious movements.

## II. Responding to Change

Christian churches are responding in a variety of ways to the social, political and religious changes which are taking place so rapidly in our world. Since we live in such a complex world, however, there is no single or simple way of describing what is going on. At the very least it must be said that we cannot ignore in one part of the world what is taking place in every other part. Some years ago Marshall McLuhan coined the phrase "global village" to describe the fact of our global interdependence. It has become a kind of truism to speak of this as a reality. In a sense it is true. In another sense it is a myth in that while we are interdependent we are by no means equally concerned about everyone. The reality of nationalism, the growth of regionalism, and the resurgence of protectionism in most of the industrial countries all militate against the ideal

of an interdependent family-like world. Racism remains a major problem. The clash between the ideologies of Marxism and capitalism continues to dominate much of international relationships. Aggressive expansion policies on the part of religious groups are also a source of friction. Iran, for example, seems almost a closed country because its current militant Islamic fundamentalism is intolerant of other religions. In our own country the previously noted rapid increase of non-Christian religions, following large scale immigration from the Middle East and the Far East, has produced a pluralistic environment which makes many people very uneasy. To some this suggests the need for correspondingly more aggressive assertion of Christian fundamentals in the face of a perceived threat from other religions. That, however, should be seen in the context of demographic shifts in the world's Christian population and reevaluations of its role as a religion.

### *1. Expansion, Retraction and Shift*

The figures annually made available by *Lutheran World Information*<sup>7</sup> demonstrate that there is not a uniform world-wide religious response to social and political change. In 1982 Lutheranism increased slightly in the world, by .5 percent or 354,000 persons. North American numbers declined slightly while there were slight increases in Europe, Latin America and Australia. In 1983, 1984, 1985 and 1986 there were further declines in North America and substantial declines in Europe. Continuing a pattern, however, there were significant increases in Africa and Asia. What importance is to be attached to such figures? Some observations can be offered. For one thing it is apparent that a major shift is taking place in the Christian population of the North and the South. Throughout its history since the Reformation Lutheranism has been primarily a northern and western religion. The face it has turned to the world has been that of the culture, traditions and values of Europe and North America. The prevailing attitude towards Christians of other cultures, colours and language groups has been paternalistic. Now that has begun to change. The president of the LWF is an East European and the associate general secretary is African. The past director of the Department of Studies was Japanese. One of the vice-presidents is African



and a woman. There are Indians, Indonesians, Africans and South Americans on the Executive Committee and in the Commissions. Debate in this worldwide committee is no longer dominated by European theology or North American pragmatism. The fact that Christianity is expanding elsewhere gives us cause to consider whether a role reversal may be taking place in which we become the students and our southern and eastern sisters and brothers become our teachers.

When we turn our attention specifically to North America we are confronted with a situation which differs markedly from the southern world. The mainline churches are at virtually a no-growth plateau. Real growth is taking place among those groups which are most strict and demanding of their members. Such groups as the World Wide Church of God, Adventists, Mormons, Southern Baptists and Pentecostals have experienced some growth although even that has dramatically tapered off in the last few years. An obvious appeal of some of these groups is that they provide a firm structure and set of beliefs in the ambiguous times in which we live. There is a great appeal in believing that someone knows what needs to be done in our world and in feeling that someone can tell us how to live. In turbulent times, in unpredictable environments people want structure not ambiguity. They want something to hang on to, not debate. The demand for structure is increasing and is being supplied by the most conservative religious movements and the charismatic personalities who seem unflinchingly certain of what needs to be. This trend is not likely to change. The great religious awakening in the eighteenth century took place in the context of transition from an agricultural to an industrial society. If Toffler<sup>8</sup> and Naisbitt<sup>9</sup> are right and we are now in transition from an industrial to an information society we can look for an expansion of pluralism and a continuing assertion of religious fundamentalism in this time of transition and unsettlement.

## *2. The Reevaluation of the Role of Christianity*

When one considers what is happening to Christianity in the world at large and in our own communities, there are a number of questions to raise as one asks what now is the role of the church? In response to the situation described, several alternatives have been put forward.

### a) Post-Conventional Religion

Charles Davis, professor of religion at Concordia College, Montreal, has made a quite radical proposal. He suggests we need to abandon our old religious identity and form a new one which will take account of the requirement for a different kind of relationship with other world religions. Davis points to the erosion of Christian identity in our secular culture and its blurring by the widening phenomenon of religions intersecting one another. We must, he argues, find ways of accommodating the elements common to Christianity and other world religions. The problems facing humanity are, he says, too large to be solved by any one religion. We need, therefore, a new religious identity. This he sees as a positive response to the guidance of the Spirit. He writes:

The present religious situation requires more than the adaptation of what already exists. It calls for the creation of new forms and new institutions. None of the major problems confronting the human race, such as the formation of a world order to make nuclear disarmament possible, the ecological crisis, economic injustice and world poverty, race prejudice, and the position of women can be solved within the boundaries and resources of any one tradition. Traditions must converge to produce altogether new solutions. Only by going behind a conventional identity in both its personal and collective realization to a post-conventional, universalistic identity, personal and collective, as grounded in the structure of human communication will that be possible.<sup>10</sup>

Davis' proposal is certainly radical in its implications. Few would be ready to take up an idea which means an abandonment of present religious pluralism and the formation of some sort of structure which calls for a converging of religions. In a more recent work Davis gives a clue to the implications he envisions for Christianity when he refers to "the identification of Christianity not with a comprehensive world view or with a body of doctrine, but with a practical way of life in this world".<sup>11</sup>

### b) The Ecumenical Imperative

A second, less radical, option, but one having been pursued with much vigor in this century, arises from the conviction that Christianity can no longer afford the luxury of its exaggerated inner pluralism and must respond seriously to Jesus' prayer

that the church may be one. The formation of the Lutheran World Federation in 1947 and the World Council of Churches in 1948 is an expression of the powerful imperative towards a more united Christian witness in the world. These agencies acting on behalf of the churches have been important instrumentalities in focussing ecumenical initiatives so as to produce some practical results.

At least two recent developments demonstrate significant theological agreement among sister denominations where none had existed previously. In 1973 in Europe Lutheran and Reformed churches signed the Leuenberg Accord.<sup>12</sup> This historic document which forms the basis for full fellowship between the signatory churches represents a theological consensus on issues which have separated Lutherans and Reformed since the Reformation. The conviction was reached that it was now possible to find agreement, even on the eucharist, by in effect transcending the arguments of the sixteenth century and setting them aside. Such theological consensus has profound implications beyond its rather meager practical effects thus far for it represents a coming together on points of doctrine which have long separated parts of the church.

A development almost as startling in its pace is the theological rapprochement between Lutherans and Roman Catholics at the level of both international and national dialogues. Out of extensive and prolonged conversations at the world level has come a set of documents of which three in particular seem especially important. In 1980 the Roman Catholic/Lutheran Joint Commission produced a document on the *Eucharist*<sup>13</sup> and in 1983 a document on *Ministry*<sup>14</sup> which are fascinating in their scope and style and content. These were followed in 1985 by the document *Facing Unity*<sup>15</sup> which brings us face to face with new practical possibilities in the congregations of our churches. Since Vatican II waves of theological renewal have swept the Roman Catholic Church. Also since the formation of the LWF and because of other worldwide experiences, Lutherans have been forced from their cultural and theological ghettos. The result has been a serious and more or less successful attempt to listen seriously to one another. The ecumenical movement is altering the face of Christianity and forms an important part of the religious context in which the neo-conservative movements are rising.

### c) The Relationship of Christianity to Other Religions and World Systems

One of the questions pressing upon us with increasing urgency is the relation of Christianity to other world religions. This is a question not only for Asia and Africa but for all of us in our increasingly pluralistic society. The rise of the power of the Arab countries; the waves of immigration from Asia and our general increase in world travel make this question unavoidable. How for example shall one relate to Islam? This relatively new religion now embraces one-fifth of humanity. It is a political and economic force of global significance numbering approximately one billion people. The Islamic revival is not only of the fanatic Iranian style, it is much more diverse than that. While some of us know virtually nothing about it, we cannot any longer live in isolation from it, with our knowledge of it limited to a mythical evocation of "Arabian Nights". Recently an independent publication was begun, called *Arabia: The Islamic World Review*, the intention of which is to provide a forum for dialogue between Muslims and others on the whole range of issues (social, religious and political) affecting the contemporary world. Johnny Carson makes jokes about Yassar Arafat and his "tablecloth" hat—but the issues which are raised by the PLO are deeply religious as well as political. In any large Canadian city there are Muslims, Hindus and many other non-Christian religions represented by persons who are members of our faculties, our service clubs, salespeople, doctors, lawyers. The question of relationship is no longer academic, nor is it one confined to the drama of Lebanon and the phenomena associated with terrorism.

Christianity as a worldwide religion is both growing and retreating. It is experiencing and creating change. In its traditional centers it is being driven inward and often put on the defensive. In the South and East it is on the move, expanding and challenging. There is no doubt the Spirit is active in the church for the Spirit moves as he wills and sometimes in strange ways. Who is to deny the Spirit's presence in Ethiopia, Siberia and China as well as Europe and North America? Our situations are vastly different but we are brothers and sisters in Christ and it behooves us to be sensitive, open and committed as we reflect on our place in this tapestry of faith.

In this issue we are addressing in particular the phenomena of religious conservatism and fundamentalism in our churches and asking ourselves what do these phenomena mean? We can only hope adequately to understand them when they are placed in the larger context of religious change worldwide and in particular in the context of religious change in North America.

Probably the average person has little interest in the kind of broad religious contextualization offered in this article. Most peoples' concerns are immediate and pragmatic rather than analytical. And yet it is important for us to try and gain some understanding of why a particular emphasis or thrust has a special appeal in a given historical period. In the previously mentioned poll done by the Princeton Religious Research Center there are some interesting reasons offered why persons leave the church or are not reached. Most said they believe in God and almost half said they prayed every day. Two-thirds said they believe in Jesus Christ as Son of God and the same number believe in his resurrection. Among reasons offered for not going to church or for leaving the church, the opinions that most churches have lost their spiritual appeal and are no longer effective in helping people find meaning in life are frequently stated.<sup>16</sup> An obvious reason for the growth of new sects, transdenominational movements and the renewal of fundamentalism is that they seem to address persons precisely at those expressed points of need. In our church we ought to be re-examining the way in which we bring the long heritage of the Lutheran tradition to bear on the complex and intimidating problems of late twentieth century humanity. The immediacy of our problems however and the urgency of the challenges we face must always be seen in the larger context of the call to bring the Gospel to the whole world.

Particularly in its time and place of origin, the Christian faith stands or falls in its import for the entirety of humankind. The love of the God who created the universe, communicated in the word of liberation to Israel and incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, is love for the world. And the message of this Good News was meant, from the beginning, to be preached in "Jerusalem, all over Judea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8).<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> *Macleans*, 5 January 1987, 58–60.
- <sup>2</sup> For a further discussion of these expectations see Martin E. Marty, “Religion in America since Mid-Century” as cited by Mary Douglas and Steven Tipton, eds., *Religion and America: Spirituality in a Secular Age* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1983) 283–85.
- <sup>3</sup> For a fascinating insight into the character of Jim Jones and the operating style of the Peoples Temple Church see Jeannie Mills, *Six Years with God, Life Inside Rev. Jim Jones’s Peoples Temple* (New York: A. and W. Publishers Inc., 1979).
- <sup>4</sup> There is a perceptive treatment of the subject in Richard N. Ostling, “Evangelical Publishing and Broadcasting” in George Marsden, ed., *Evangelicalism and Modern America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984) 46–55.
- <sup>5</sup> Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid’s Tale* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1986).
- <sup>6</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *No Rusty Swords* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965) 195.
- <sup>7</sup> *Lutheran World Information*, weekly edition, English editor Roger Kahle, Lutheran World Federation, Geneva 20, Switzerland.
- <sup>8</sup> Alvin Toffler, *The Third Wave* (New York: William Mournier, 1980).
- <sup>9</sup> John Naisbitt, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives* (New York: Warner Books, 1982).
- <sup>10</sup> Charles Davis “Our New Religious Identity”, *Studies in Religion*, 9/1, 1980, 37. Waterloo, Ontario.
- <sup>11</sup> Charles Davis, *What Is Living, What Is Dead in Christianity Today?* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986) 78.
- <sup>12</sup> *Leuvenberg Agreement, Agreement of Reformation Churches in Europe*, 1973. The text may be found in Hans-Georg Link, ed., *Apostolic Faith Today: A Handbook for Study* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1985) 169–74.
- <sup>13</sup> Lutheran/Roman Catholic Joint Commission, *The Eucharist* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1980).
- <sup>14</sup> Lutheran/Roman Catholic Joint Commission, *The Ministry in the Church* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1982).
- <sup>15</sup> Lutheran/Roman Catholic Joint Commission, *Facing Unity* (Geneva: Lutheran World Federation, 1985).
- <sup>16</sup> For further discussion of this see Erling Jorstad, *Being Religious in America: The Deepening Crises over Public Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986).
- <sup>17</sup> Donald W. Shriver, “The Globalization of Theological Education: Setting the Task”, *Theological Education*, 22/2, Spring 1986, 7.