

Dr. Falwell's Wacky World

by Mark R. Powell

Not long after terrorists crashed their hijacked planes into the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and a rural Pennsylvania field, the Reverend Jerry Falwell and the Reverend Pat Robertson speculated that this tragic circumstance had occurred as a judgment from a God our nation had insulted.

To quote Dr. Falwell directly: "I really believe the pagans, the abortionists, and the feminists, and the gays and the lesbians who are actively trying to make that an alternative lifestyle, the ACLU, People For the American Way, all of them who have tried to secularize America, I point the finger in their face and say 'you helped this happen.'" Thankfully, and no doubt because he was under intense pressure to do so, the good Reverend retracted his words, first saying he was quoted out of context (a very real possibility), and then later he put the matter to rest by apologizing for his indefensible and insensitivity. (Jerry's words)

No doubt the original statement will be remembered and not the apology, which will serve to continue Jerry's credibility slide with the culture (if that's possible), and will significantly raise the level of his buffoonery quotient. It goes to show you that some people just shouldn't be allowed on television.

More importantly, evangelical Christians in general and evangelical Baptist Christians in particular will again be viewed with deserved, wary skepticism by the culture because of our supposed spokesmen's wacky view of the world and of God.

We can be glad for one thing: Billy Graham is still speaking as well. If you were privileged to hear Dr. Graham share his thoughts during the Day of Mourning at the National Cathedral, you will realize that the ridiculous comments made by a few were markedly offset by the moving words of this simple Baptist preacher. He is a prophetic phenomenon that continues to announce truth to a culture desperately needing to hear what he has to say.

It was gloomy, however, to watch Dr. Graham needing help up the steps to the pulpit. I was reminded by his physical struggles just how fragile his life has become, and how immense the loss will be for us when he passes. Who will speak for us when this last Protestant icon leaves the scene, as he inevitably must? Be sure of this, when he dies we will lose the final remnant of credibility toward the culture. It will signal to us the full and complete collapse of evangelical authority and trustworthiness. Then we will be faced with the grim prospect of continued, steady national ridicule when extreme fundamentalists like Falwell (who is a Southern Baptist by the way) decide to shoot their mouths off.

The loss of Dr. Graham, besides silencing the last evangelical prophet, will also coincide with the ongoing demise of the Christian consensus, commonly called Christendom.

That is, there was a time when religious values in general and Christendom's values in particular were the dominant values in this country. (i.e. Western Christianity's reality was the monopoly reality.) But since the 1940's (and most visibly since the 1960 s), we have observed the continuing erosion of these values, until the country no longer feels like the same place. (De-monopolization) In short, what Christendom valued (e.g. religious rules, ultimate truth, strict conservative behavior), is now seen as an anti-value in our social context, creating for the church a pariah status.

To the watching world, we are Amishly antiquated and strangely out of touch. Our pronouncements are heard as unlearned and socially bigoted. Our doctrines are understood as narrow and obsolete. A reality Jerry Falwell apparently has yet to learn, or doesn't care to.

And we feel this exile all too well. We feel the loss of importance and cultural position, and we acutely sense the passing away of our society's affection. Simply put, the new monopoly no longer cares for Christendom or for its version of reality. Sociologically speaking, Christianity in the West has lost its plausibility structure. A plausibility structure is what makes our beliefs seem true-- the more social props within the culture a belief has, the more social plausibility for the belief by the culture's inhabitants. (Please note: I'm decidedly not making a theological statement here, so I'm not suggesting that our beliefs are true or false based upon this idea. Rather, I'm talking about how our beliefs now seem to the culture and how they will eventually seem to us.)

Think of it in this way: In a world of people, it is very difficult to believe anything by oneself. (Peter Berger) We are social beings and we need others to stand with us to confirm and retell, or nod our worldview-beliefs back to us. For example, where does communism feel most true, in the USA or in China? In China, of course, but why? Because in China communism has a sympathetic community and a State sanction that continues to affirm the communist lifestyle and beliefs. These supports function to make their beliefs more plausible to the culture. For them, the communist world is the real world. (This idea helps bring clarity to Tiananmen Square the students were offering a competing, plausible explanation of the world.)

With the secularization (not secularism) of the West, Christendom's explanation of reality, its voice and its behavioral practice, no longer holds plausibility for the culture. This means our influence and authority has moved from monopoly, to majority, to minority status, so that we now face the bizarre prospect of speaking to ourselves. Protestant prayer in school, for instance, only made sense to a culture firmly imbedded within the friendly confines of Christendom. (That is, when it was a monopoly.) To have lost our voice means we have lost the language of our society. It means we speak a faint and distant dialect, one no longer clearly understood. It means we use the same vocabulary as the culture, but not the same dictionary. (Os Guinness). And so we wander, lost and searching, culturally captive.

The rise of extreme religious fundamentalism must be understood in this context. Fundamentalism is the response of fear, fear brought on by the loss of place (or marginalization). The current religious crusaders, the extreme fundamentalists like Falwell, Robertson and the like, are attempting to force-birth Christendom's ethics, a moral to spiritual revival of sorts, but these ideals are now sunset values. That is, discarded values are always brightest just before they set. In short, Christendom's day is past.

This means the fundamentalists are in a deep struggle with a cultural monopoly who genuinely and clearly intend to disregard in total what they have to say, except to catch them in examples of bigotry and obscurantism. That is, for the power elite fundamentalists continue to make good copy as long as they are accompanied by a laugh track.

I would assert that this struggle can only be won by the fundamentalists with the use of force. Thus, when extreme fundamentalism chose to wage this conflict politically (get out the vote as a means of saving America), it was an admission of defeat for the Gospel, a stark betrayal of the faith, and a clear sabotage of our message. This desire to regain control of the culture by coercion was in fact a surrender of the gospel's means and ends. And in order to fund this campaign and to be heard above the cultural roar, these crusaders' words must become ever more shrill and ever more outlandish. Hence Jerry's remarkable theological assertion that it was God who killed over 6,000 people on that dark September day, and not extreme Islamic fundamentalists.

Woe unto us.

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