

Groveling is always bad politics

It was P.T. Barnum, I believe, who used to advertise one of his more peculiar performers, a gentleman called "Joe-Joe, the dog-faced boy," who, among other accomplishments, could "crawl on his belly like a reptile." I'm sure it was impressive to see Joe-Joe do his stuff, but Joe-Joe never had to compete against Ralph Reed of the Christian Coalition.



Samuel Francis

Last week, Mr. Reed performed before the assembled throngs of the Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith (ADL), explaining to the liberal Jewish group how it is a "blatant wrong" for the "Christian right" to call the United States a "Christian nation," assuring them that he was obliged to instruct the members of his organization in the history of Christian persecution of the Jews and admitting that some conservative Christians "have been insensitive" to Jewish suffering. He also apologized for the "thoughtless lapses" of many Christians who claim that because they are "pro-Israel," that "somehow answers for all other insensitivity to Jewish concerns."

Under the circumstances, Mr. Reed's remarks can be interpreted in no way other than an act of groveling. Twice within the past year, the ADL has explicitly accused the Christian Coalition and its founder, Pat Robertson, of anti-Semitism, and though Mr. Robertson's initial response was one of righteous indignation and denial, Mr. Reed's performance last week suggests an unseemly eagerness to jump through the hoops the ADL's ringmasters have built for him.

Moreover, whatever "insensitivities" to "Jewish concerns" Christian conservatives may have expressed or failed to abase themselves for, no one, including Mr. Reed, seemed able to recount any particular act of anti-Semitism perpetrated by the contemporary Christian right. The best (or worst) they can come up with is the frosty

chestnut of the preacher who, more than 15 years ago, said that God doesn't hear the prayer of a Jew.

Most Christians, when they say America is a "Christian nation" mean no disrespect to Jews or their "sensitivities," and Mr. Reed, whatever he tried to pretend at the ADL banquet, knows it. In fact, it's probably fair to say that most American Christians don't think much about Jews at all. Of course in some quarters that's considered proof of anti-Semitism on its face.

One person who lodges in such quarters is New York Times columnist Frank Rich, himself Jewish, who saluted Mr. Reed's exercise of self-abasement as being "a credit to any bar-mitzvah" but asserted, predictably, that the confession just didn't go far enough. Of course it never does.

Mr. Reed didn't go far enough because, while he might have acquitted himself of any suspicions of Jew-baiting, his speech did nothing to allay doubts about his chief rabbi, Mr. Robertson. Mr. Rich then picked over some of Mr. Robertson's writings in which the evangelist (or his ghostwriters) gives voice to a lot of limp conspiracy theories about "European bankers" and the "Illuminati."

Theories like these have bobbed and floated on the European and American right for some 200 years, first rising to the surface in the wake of the French Revolution. Sometimes they've been embedded in anti-Jewish theories as well, but not necessarily, not always and in Mr. Robertson's case not at all. But Mr. Rich makes much of the language of these theories as "code-words" that hide Mr. Robertson's real anti-Semitism — a mode of interpretation that's the intellectual equivalent of claiming Jewish capitalists are really the same thing as Jewish communists.

Instead of taking Mr. Reed's remarks as evidence that the ADL has misjudged the Christian right, Mr. Rich seizes on them as proof the ADL was right all along. That ought to be a warning to others on the Christian right who seek to appease implacable enemies like Mr. Rich and his cohorts.

The whole purpose of the ADL attacks on the Christian right was to provoke performers like Mr. Reed to do exactly what Mr. Reed did: apologize for and retreat from the religious and moral agenda his organization has designed. Once he apologizes and retreats, of course, it doesn't go far enough. Now Mr. Robertson himself must also apologize and retreat.

The goal is, to gut the religious right completely, and you don't need a conspiracy theory to see how the goal is being achieved. By crawling on his belly before the very organization that has insulted and vilified his boss, Mr. Reed obligingly crawled right into the trap.

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