

The Religious Right – and Left: Moving Toward the Center

When you hear “religious right,” you think “Christian.” You soon may have to think again. Here comes the other half of the story.

Two new coalitions of Christians and Jews are forming behind social and political issues. One group is non-partisan and trying to work out differences and stretch for commonalities. The other is much more political in tone, emphasizing a common conservative political outlook on moral issues.

Orthodox Rabbi Yechiel Eckstein, founder and president of the International Fellowship of Christians and Jews, organized a nonpartisan meeting last month to smooth out the differences between Christians (especially Evangelical Christians) and Jews that emerge from what he calls “a history of pain in Christian-Jewish relations that goes back 2,000 years.”

This particular meeting was sparked by a criticism of Christian conservatives by the Anti-Defamation League, or ADL, which was disturbing to both Jews and Christians. Eckstein assembled a group including Abraham Foxman, national director of the ADL; Phil Baum, act-

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ing executive director of the American Jewish Congress; the Rev. Jerry Falwell of Liberty University; Ralph Reed, director of the Christian Coalition; and Pat Robertson, the television evangelist who founded the Christian Coalition.

Both sides sought to move beyond language that causes unintentional

offense. Christians, for example, resent being called “anti-Semites”; they see themselves as ardent defenders of Israel and the Jewish people. Foxman said he looked forward to the fulfillment of promises by both sides for greater “communication, tolerance, sensitivity.”

Falwell said he now understands how the word “Christianize,” which to Christians means “evangelize,” as commanded by Jesus, often is perceived by Jews as symbolic of 2,000 years of persecution: “It means reprisals, rejection; it means pain, it means hurt.”

Both groups expressed renewed respect for religious people who participate in democratic rituals based on the values that imbue their faith. They left with a fresh awareness of the importance of honest debate and civil disagreement with those of other faiths.

For years, liberal Jews and members of the so-called mainline Christian churches have engaged in political dialogues of common interests. But evangelicals and Jews often have viewed each other with a skepticism that comes from swallowing stereotypes whole.

A commonality based on conservative principles of morality and faith has become a goal of many Jews and Christians who welcome the sweeping changes of the midterm elections.

Toward Tradition, a national Jewish and Christian organization, took out an ad in the *New York Times* to applaud the conservative November sweep: “It affirmed our timeless Torah values as well as the Judeo-Christian principles upon which this republic was founded. These include

limited government, personal reliance and fairer treatment for those who work hard, pay taxes and obey the law. Jews have thrived under these conditions and so has America.”

Listed among shared conservative values are lower taxes, more effective crime control, fewer government regulations and school choice (based on the Talmudic assertion that parents are primarily responsible for directing the education of their children).

Daniel Lapin, an orthodox rabbi who is the religious rallying force for conservative Jews, says simply, “I don’t really see how it’s feasible as a conservative Jew to be anything but conservative politically.” He speaks of Judaism’s emphasis on personal responsibility and

traditional family values. He’s mystified that Jewish liberals, whose parents made their wealth through the free market, disdain the system from which they continue to enjoy their prosperity.

He thinks certain myths in America are wrongheaded and miss the point, such as the belief that men oppress women, whites oppress blacks, the rich oppress the poor, Christians oppress Jews. He thinks the fracture in America is more fundamental: “It’s between those who embrace a role for God in the village square and those who vigorously reject it. On both sides there are blacks and whites, rich and poor, Jews and Christians, men and women.”

Such sparring groups ought to see through the artificiality of their perceived conflicts: “We’re partners,” says Lapin, “who have actually been conned into fighting with each other.”

Their goals, he says, are the same: “Americans of all religions are concerned about a moral breakdown in society and are calling for a return to Judeo-Christian values in all aspects of public policy.”

Amen.

By Suzanne Fields

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