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The Political Dimension of Evangelical Fundamentalism in the USA

The R factor – or *religious gap*, the term currently popular in American political diction – has played a decisive role in the United States during the era of George W. Bush. At no time has the influence of the *religious gap* been more evident than during elections. In the 2004 presidential campaign, for example, a key to the success of Bush was the ability of the Republican Party to involve and mobilize the “evangelical” sector, potential voters who traditionally abstained from electoral politics.¹

The political importance of religious affiliation is hardly a novelty in the United States. Consider, for example, the central importance of theological disputes during the Colonial Period or the vital role that religious communities played in the establishment of the first states along the Atlantic seaboard. Equally familiar are the influence of the Bible on American culture and the relevance of social movements – from the abolitionists to the opponents of racial segregation – that originated within and were supported by religious communities.² Novel to and noteworthy in the current political environment of the United States are particular components of the *R factor* that have emerged during the past decade. The *religious gap* is characterized by political elements that are largely unprecedented yet sufficiently powerful to condition the strategic choices of the Administration and alter the basic equilibrium between Church and State enshrined in the First Amendment of the Constitution.³

A recent best seller that makes this point is *American Theocracy* by Kevin Phillips. The book’s subtitle is significant: “the peril and

politics of radical religion.” Cogently argued, Phillips’ thesis denounces “a potent change in this country’s domestic and foreign policy making: religion’s new political prowess and its role in the projection of military power in the Middle Eastern Bible lands” (viii). As a result of this change, American democracy runs the risk of devolving into a theocracy whose norms no longer are dictated by a rational search for the common good but by the principle of adhering to an absolute, non-negotiable religious truth.

This thesis is sobering but also surprising. The author is not part of the liberal establishment of New York or San Francisco. He has been a consultant to the Republican Party, for which he helped develop economic and foreign policy, and considers himself a conservative. Nonetheless, he mounts a scathing attack on the policies of Bush and the Republican Party that has supported him. Phillips accuses both of having betrayed fundamental principles of American democracy: the separation of Church and State – the theme which interests us here – and the free market, the result being the subjugation of national policies to the interests of the major oil corporations. As Phillips himself noted in the *Washington Post*, the United States and the world are witnessing the transition from the *Grand Old Party* to *God’s Own Party*⁴. Is the USA really at risk of becoming a theocracy? Are the Bush Administration and Republican Party really implementing a level of institutional political change capable of altering the fundamental features of American democracy?

The debate on these questions quickly can assume an ideological bent that divides us into equally prejudiced and dogmatic camps of pro- or anti-Americanism. Succumbing to this temptation, we run the risk of failing to comprehend the problems that are emerging in the U.S. political system. This risk, so frequent in the debates of these days, underscores the need for prudence and measured judgment.

Undoubtedly, claims of theocracy have come to us on the wave of the theological current that conventionally we define as

fundamentalism. Accordingly, I propose a three-tiered articulation of Christian fundamentalism of Evangelical Origins.

The First Wave: Innocent Origins

As is widely known, the “fundamentalist” current within the North American Protestant world starts in 1895, following the research of the theologians of “Niagara Falls.” This is how this group of scholars defined themselves when, at the conclusion of a series of meetings, they desired to recall five fundamental principles of the Christian faith: divine inspiration and the inerrancy of Scripture; the divinity of Jesus Christ; the virginal birth of Christ; the expiatory and vicarious work of Christ on the cross; the physical resurrection and the personal and corporeal return of Christ to the earth. Such principles were then defined and disseminated thanks to a fortunate editorial series, *The Fundamentals*, which in a short time were circulating in millions of copies. The theologians of Niagara Falls belonged to various Protestant denominations of the United States and formed, therefore, a “transversal thread” that crossed even the “historic” denominations of American Protestantism of those years.

Under many aspects, the gathering of such a lineup of theologians can be considered a reaction to the liberalism that had solidly affirmed itself in all the denominations. According to Sidney Ahlstrom, “the liberals led the Protestant churches into the world of modern science, scholarship, philosophy and global knowledge. They domesticated modern religious ideas. They forced a confrontation between traditional orthodoxies and the new grounds for religious skepticism exposed during the nineteenth century, and thus carried forward what the Enlightenment had begun. As a result, they precipitated the most fundamental controversy to wrack the churches since the age of Reformation” (782).

As a call to remember the values of the Christian faith, fundamentalism insisted upon the need to be dogmatically grounded. None of the themes belonging to the first

fundamentalists lead to thinking of the possibility of an organic link between its theological claims and a political platform. In its initial phase, this theological current seemed in fact to be politically neutral. Because its primary aim was recovery of the nucleus of a Christian dogmatics, it showed little or no interest in “the things of this world,” which the fundamentalists, on the contrary, regarded with some suspicion.

The first political expression of fundamentalism can be registered only after 1925, following the anti-evolutionist polemic that exploded with the so-called “monkey trial.” In reality, this pivotal event was the trial of a naïve teacher from Tennessee, John Scopes, who had ventured to teach a class on Darwin and his theories. Evolutionism hit at the heart of a pillar of biblical fundamentalism; that is, that the human species had originated exactly as described in the Book of Genesis. School authorities took Scopes to court, and the ensuing trial became a passionate focus of public attention and opinion.

The great prosecutor was William J. Bryan, renowned lawyer and important exponent of the Populist current of the Democratic Party, once candidate to the presidential elections of 1896. Nominated later as Secretary of State by Woodrow Wilson, Bryant resigned as a result of his disagreement with Wilson on the question of the sinking of the “Lusitania” and the involvement of the United States in World War I. Bryant’s basic thesis, expressed with great rhetorical strength, was simple and straightforward: if evolutionism wins, Christianity dies.

Finally on July 21 Scopes was found guilty and ordered to pay a US\$ 100 fine: that verdict importantly provided the fundamentalist current with an operative strategy. To affirm themselves and defend their beliefs, fundamentalists had to leave their churches and act in the political arena. After Tennessee, provisions against the teaching of Darwinism also were approved in Oklahoma, Florida, Mississippi and Arkansas. For the early fundamentalists, this was the first contact with politics and, for many of them, it was a fateful meeting. The Scopes Trial showed

that possessing the lever of government –a lever obtained through politics– allowed the transformation of mere theological principles into “norms” and “laws” of the state.

In this event, in other words, fundamentalists saw and welcomed the opportunity to enlarge the sphere of their influence. Their convictions did not have to be oriented only to the individual conscience of each believer but could apply also to the laws of the civil community.

This passage to “politics” modified substantially the original nature of fundamentalism and established the premise for an evolution of its basic characteristics. In a short time, in fact, neutrality ceded to a logic of alliance with political conservatives that was destined to become increasingly clear and explicit. This alliance developed to the point at which making a distinction between “fundamentalism” and “the religious right” became ever more difficult. If, however, beginning in the middle of the 1920’s, a certain type of fundamentalism had explicit political connotations, it is also true that other fundamentalist currents kept well away from political involvement. Such is the case, for example, of many Pentecostal churches that continue to view with diffidence and suspicion everything that has to do with “the present age.” An analogous position –although outside the evangelical word– is that of the Jehovah’s Witnesses who, not acknowledging the legitimacy of state institutions, radicalize their non-political position to the point of refusing to vote.

The Second Wave: Counselors to the Prince and Mass Movements

The peak of the process of politicization of evangelical fundamentalism dates back to the 1980s and is concurrent with the explosion of the phenomena of television preachers. These are the years of Ronald Reagan in the White House, a *born again* Christian who wanted to surround himself with numerous spiritual counselors, all of a fundamentalist matrix. Not by chance, these were the golden years of the *Moral Majority*, the first big

lobby that was explicitly Christian and that intended to combat the processes of secularization that developed both in society and in the political system of the United States.⁵ The basic themes of mobilization for the *Moral Majority* were opposition to national abortion laws (especially the 1973 Supreme Court decision, *Roe vs. Wade*) and insistence that politicians needed to defend traditional family values. Especially animated were the positions that the *Majority* took against homosexuals, their associations and their political agenda.

According to a hypothesis now largely accepted, the *Moral Majority* identified itself too closely with the Reagan presidency. The *Majority* was an important but elitist phenomenon unable to reach the heart and the roots of American society. At the end of the 1980s, the movement suffered a crisis from which it never fully recovered. The ideals of the *Majority* were adopted by an association with a similar platform but a different way of working – the *Christian Coalition* of Pat Robertson. Particular to Robertson was his willingness and ability to work at the grassroots level in order to build a vast network that followed a precise strategy: work at the base to acquire consensus; elect members to local school boards; encourage voters to pressure their congressional representatives to adopt the platform of the *Coalition*; conduct local and national campaigns for the Christianization of U.S. society and the American political system. A characteristic example of political mobilization of the grass roots was the *Coalition's* campaign to allow prayer in the public schools. This initiative challenged existing interpretations of the First Amendment of the Constitution prohibiting prayer in public schools and judging the practice harmful to the principle of separation of Church and State.

The most significant political result obtained by the *Coalition* was the 1994 election of Newt Gingrich as Speaker of the House of Representatives. Gingrich was author of the famous “Contract with America,” a document that anticipated other contracts more familiar to us Italians. Gingrich defined as follows his vision of

the relationship between faith and politics: “All of our rights come from our Creator. In nearly all countries, power belongs to the State, and is occasionally loaned to individuals. In America power comes from God to the individual and is loaned to the State. It does not belong to the State or a king” (34).

In the 90’s, the organizational model of the *Coalition* was further refined and strengthened thanks to the work of a young leader, Ralph Reed, who was called upon to accompany and eventually replace an aging Pat Robertson. Reed was the real *strategist* in the sense that he noticed a fact of extreme importance: the necessity to give visibility to the political weight of conservative Christians. “In the last three generations,” he wrote, “Christians have not exercised a civil responsibility proportional to their numbers.” Under this profile, Reed’s *Coalition* has been a unique case in the galaxy of Christian fundamentalism. No other organization has had the strength and the capability to structure itself in such a capillary and politically relevant way. In 1997, however, Reed left the *Coalition*. His departure triggered a steady decline in the importance of the organization. The current day *Coalition* is a mere shadow of the organization it once was.

Once the “great” *Coalition* failed, there remained on the field many determined organizations. These groups, however, drew more on the model of *think tanks* than mass Christian lobbies. Examples include the *Family Research Council*, *Eagle Forum*, *Promise Keepers*, and *American Values*. All these associations have as a common denominator the commitment to support the family in its traditional and institutionalized form. Accordingly, these groups strongly oppose abortion and any legal provisions that recognize and safeguard rights for non-traditional couples. A notable example of the work of these groups is an initiative first proposed by movements of the religious right but subsequently adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention, the most numerous evangelical denomination in the USA, with more than sixteen million members. The initiative consisted of a boycott of Walt

Disney Industries when the company approved a retirement policy that extended benefits to homosexual couples.

In short, we can conclude that the “second tier” of fundamentalism extended from an original agenda of family themes and social and school policies to deliberate efforts to influence the agenda of the *domestic policy* of the Administration.

The Third Tier: Global Mission

In a sense we can say that with 9/11, the second tier of fundamentalism ended. The movements and associations that animated it are still present on the public scene but have faded into the background. A new political religious force has gained strength and vigor. I have elsewhere defined this new force as “apocalyptic fundamentalism.”⁶ The main inspiration for this school of thought comes from the writings of an English preacher brought up in the Anglican Church, John Nelson Darby, who in the 1800s elaborated and defined his theology based on the existence of a plan of God for humanity articulated in seven eras or *dispensations*: from Adam to the end of time. This theology has influenced a number of *evangelical* currents, first among them that of the Plymouth Brethren, of whom John Darby, having left his church of origin, became an influential exponent. Groups adhering to *dispensationalist* thought today, however, can be found in any number of evangelical American churches and, above all, in the galaxy of Baptist churches.

Already in the 1970’s, in the heart of the cold war, we see an interesting theological-political recovery of the dispensationalist theses with the publication of the work of the Baptist preacher, Hal Lindsay. *The Late Great Planet Earth* is written in a narrative style that easily and convincingly reconstructs the biblical prophecies according to Darby’s scheme. The volume ends with the dark prophesy of an imminent war: “The conflict will not be limited to the Middle East. John [the author of the biblical Revelation] says that all the cities of the nations will be destroyed (Revelation 16:19). Imagine cities like...New York, Los Angeles,

Chicago cancelled!...At the start of Armageddon with the invasion of Israel by the Arabs and the Russian Confederation and with the subsequent rapid destruction, there will start the greatest period of conversion of the Jews to their true Messiah...”⁷

In more recent times, this “theology of history” has been taken up and spread with extraordinary success by Tim LeHaye and Jerry Jenkins, authors of a theo-geopolitical saga entitled *Left Behind*, translated in Italian as *Gli esclusi*, The Excluded.

The series has sold over fifty million copies to date, mostly on the American market.⁸ This series of novels, available also in movie versions, recounts how the events of the last days begin and force themselves into the lives of people. Everything starts with a disappearance: thousands of people literally vanish into nothing. All are wonderful people, noted for their evangelical dedication and their love for Christ. Where are they? A group of persons – we could say a handful of believers, deeply affected by one of these disappearances – starts to investigate this dramatic event. They are pastors of an average evangelical community, a TV newscaster, an airplane pilot and his young daughter. Together they constitute the “Tribulation Force,” the true believers who have understood that the disappearance of so many people is nothing less than a step toward the fulfillment of “God’s plan” for the entire human race. Those who disappeared have been “raptured” or “taken up to heaven.” They are the vanguard of the saints called to God’s presence. For those who have been “left behind,” very hard times of tribulation, suffering, and struggle lie ahead.

In fact, there is no reason to be cheerful. A skillful but unscrupulous man becomes the leader of the United Nations. He does not hesitate to kill his opponents and is able to create a fragile peace between Israelis and Palestinians. His objective is to create one world religion, establish the worship of his person, and transfer the center of the world to the new Babylonia. His project is a violent and terrible one. It triggers Armageddon, the final

battle at the end of which the millenary kingdom of Christ can begin.

In a time during which every newscast opens with news from Jerusalem and Baghdad, it is understandable that apocalyptic suggestions find wide acceptance. The present is always complex, however, and needs appropriate keys for interpretation. Without these keys, it is easy to feel a sense of disorientation that produces, in turn, a loss of connection with the most obvious and logical reality. There springs forth, in fact, an apocalyptic anxiousness aimed at deciphering theologically the events that are taking place and giving them an apocalyptic interpretation of the unveiling of the End Times belonging not to humanity but to God. The Last Days are a time that we cannot control but only decipher, a time full of unprecedented and obscure scenes that are destined – this is the reassuring element of the process – to establish a kingdom of peace and justice. Given the reality of a conscience marked with fundamentalist and dispensationalist thoughts, it does not take much to imagine what emotions were stirred by events like the formation of the State of Israel in 1948, the Six Day War of 1967, the fall of the Soviet Union, the escalation of conflict in the Middle East, 9/11, and, most recently, the attacks of Hezbollah against the Jewish State.⁹ The time of Armageddon is at hand. According to a survey by CNN (2002), 71% of evangelicals are convinced that the end of the world will arrive soon and that this event will be precipitated by the battle between Jesus Christ and the Anti-Christ.

The geo-theological schema of this new dispensationalist cult induces in European observers a mixture of incredulity about and scorn for the cultural fragility of Americans. However, this phenomenon is very serious both politically and theologically. According to sociologist of religion, Harvey Cox, we are dealing with a “toxin that puts in jeopardy the health and even the life of the Christian churches and the American society” (as quoted in Phillips 101).¹⁰ Accordingly, it is a serious mistake for “institutional” theology to dismiss the theses of the

dispensationalists. “The elements that the dispensationalists insert in the cosmic plan of God,” notes Lutheran theologian Barbara Rossing, “are for the main part world wars, bloody battles, earthquakes, sicknesses and other violent cataclysms” (4). There emerges a God closer to a Terminator than a merciful and loving father.

A particular variant of the new, apocalyptic dispensationalism is the movement of “Christian Zionism.” The term is evasive and ambiguous in that it does not have anything to do with a cultural, political movement in support of Israel. Christian Zionism is rather a political/ theological framework that inserts the historical and political events of the Middle East in a “plan of God” chronologically determined by the Darbyists. These events culminate in the battle between the armies of Good and Evil.¹¹

From this perspective, Israel is no longer a state or a political subject, the Palestinians are no longer a people, and the Middle East is not a specific geopolitical scene. The Middle East battle transcends every political dimension to acquire precise theological and eschatological valences. The complexity of the Middle East is reduced and absorbed into Armageddon, the decisive precondition for the *eschaton* that is realized when the millenarian kingdom of Jesus the Messiah finally is acknowledged by everyone, even the Jews. The proclaimed love for Israel and its military forces ends, therefore, with the classic reaffirmation of Christianity as the sole way to salvation. The seriousness of the present political situation, however, tends to divert attention from this necessary theological epilogue, at least for the radical Israeli right that enjoys the support of “Zionist Christians.”

The political corollaries to this idea are evident. First and foremost are unconditional support for the policy of occupation of the Territories and opposition to every concession to the Palestinians. For example, the main associations of Christian Zionism – first among them the *International Christian Embassy* Jerusalem – opposed Sharon’s plan to withdraw unilaterally from the Gaza Strip. Within this context, the absolute lack of attention

that “Christian Zionists” express on behalf of the small, Christian minority in the Middle East becomes easier to comprehend.

Completely marginal to the official academic circles of the historic churches, these theologies are evidently very popular. Echoes of them are evident even in the language of the Bush Administration, echoes that Massimo Rubboli has analyzed and systemized very well.

Conclusions

Are these waves of fundamentalism sufficient to justify concern over the risk of theocracy gaining the upper hand in America? The debate in the USA and the rest of the world is unfolding in a lively manner, and the thesis of Phillips serves more as a political and intellectual stimulus than as a forecast of political science. Phillips’s thesis, however, is a necessary provocation.

American democracy has an intrinsic strength precisely in a culture of pluralism that a certain fundamentalism intends to negate in order to affirm the exclusive value of the *Christian nation*. The First Amendment of the Constitution has always been, to resort to a European terminology, an anchor of the lay principle of the secular state. There exists, furthermore, a Christianity that is not fundamentalist. This Christianity has its strength and, because of its moderation, does not make news. Even within the evangelical world, there is no lack of criticisms of preachers and communities pursuing a conservative political platform that detracts from the Christian vocation of service to the poor and the marginalized.¹²

Finally, the theocratic hypothesis is not politically sustainable. It proposes permanent war and dissolution of the social pact among different people – *e pluribus unum* – that has marked many periods of the history of the United States. Nonetheless, some processes are troubling in and of themselves. The menace is not only theocracy, but a bad democracy, a democracy under a confessional religious guardianship that drains strength and power from democracy.

In Europe we live in the presence of a massive secularization that you do not find overseas. Accordingly, it seems that the prerequisites for the emergence of fundamentalist movements is lacking. But we should not overlook occasional and specific alliances among the Roman Catholic Church and evangelical fundamentalist currents on themes such as the sanctity of life, abortion, scientific research, and Christian consecration of the Old World.

We should ask ourselves if – at least in the USA – in the clash between secularization, on the one hand, and aggressive fundamentalism, on the other hand, there may be any room for the intense and yet moderate spirituality of Ned Flanders, the *evangelical* neighbor of Homer Simpson, the cartoon born from the genial pen of Matt Groening. The music of his doorbell is “A Mighty Fortress is Our God,” perhaps the most typical hymn of the Protestant tradition. The favorite game of his children is “The good Samaritan.” His preferred play ground is called “Praying Hands.” He is a determined *evangelical*, even a little fanatic, but he is not theocratic. As his badly dressed and secularized neighbor Homer Simpson says, “if everyone would be like Ned Flanders, there wouldn’t be any need for paradise.”¹³

NOTES

¹ The white *evangelicals* have voted for Bush in the measure of 78% and have left Kerry with the crumbs of a modest 21%. The increase of the *evangelical* vote for Bush with respect to the election of 2000 tells a lot: a net +10%, determined for the most part by the recovery for the Republican vote of people who usually kept their distance from the polls. See Naso, “Il destino.”

² Besides the great and unfortunately out of print work by Giorgio Spini see Nese; and Moore. On the more recent aspects of the political dimension of religion in the USA, see Gentile; and Naso, *God Bless America*.

³ “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

⁴ April 2, 2006

⁵ For an analysis of this particular phase of evangelical fundamentalism see my contribution to S. Allievi, D. Bidussa and P. Naso.

⁶ For an analysis of this phenomenon see Naso, “I crociati.”

⁷ The original English edition was written in 1970. An Italian translation appeared in 1973.

⁸ See Halsell.

⁹ After the Six Days War, when all of Jerusalem passed under Israeli control, Nelson Bell, father in law of the famous Baptist preacher Billy Graham, wrote: “The fact that for the first time in over 200 years, Jerusalem is entirely in the hands of the Jews, gives to biblical scholars a new excitement and renewed faith in the precision and in the validity of the Bible.” *Christian Today*, July 1967

¹⁰ See Kevin Phillips, p.101

¹¹ Among the volumes that spread these theological currents, see Hagee; and Frazier.

¹² Among the more indicative voices of these tendencies, the sociologist and evangelical preacher Tony Campolo and Jim Wallis, director of the magazine *Sojourners* and author, among others, of *God's Politics*.

¹³ See Pinski.

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