

THE PASSING OF AN UGLY GIANT OF THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT

“Merciful Father, hear our prayer: Please let the death of your wayward servant the Rev. Jerry Falwell be a sign that an era has ended, and a new one has begun.”

--Mary C. Schulken, Charlotte Observer (5/17/07)

The closest I ever came to Jerry Falwell was a 1983 debate I had with Cal Thomas, then the Vice-President of Moral Majority (1980-85) and now a nationally syndicated columnist.

For the first time in my debating career I actually experienced stage fright, but after 15 minutes I recovered my confidence and made some good points. At the end of the evening, Thomas came over to me, put his arm around me, and said: "Nick, I would love to take a class from you sometime."

Falwell himself, however, was rarely so gracious. Mel White, a speech writer who left Falwell's employ after coming out as gay, said that Falwell was always nice in person, but when he appeared in public he grew horns and a tail.

In 1980 Falwell agreed with Bailey Smith, President of the Southern Baptist Convention, that God does not answer the prayers of Jews. Falwell always condemned secular humanists, but for someone to restrict the actions of an omnipotent and free deity is the height of humanistic hubris.

In a 1958 sermon Falwell proclaimed that the segregation of the races was divinely ordained: "When God has drawn a line of distinction, we should not attempt to cross that line." Here is yet another example of the arrogance, usually attributed to humanists, of fundamentalist ministers claiming to have the truth about texts written and transmitted by fallible human beings who were not witness to the events about which they were writing.

After the Holocaust, there is nothing uglier and more reprehensible than anti-Semitism, but the Jewish prayer example was only one of many. Falwell was always in legal and financial hot water, and he objected to one ruling against him on the grounds that the

judge was Jewish. In January, 1999, Falwell proclaimed that the Anti-Christ was now alive among us and that he was a Jewish male.

His most famous offense was the linking of the 9/11 attack to the ACLU, People for the American Way, pagans, abortionists, gays, and lesbians. Addressing them directly, he said: "You made this happen." Earlier Falwell had said that the sins of these same groups had led God to use the AIDS epidemic as a divine judgment for a world that had ignored the laws of God.

Speaking about his brash statements to NPR on June 30, 2006, he said that "none of them [happened] by chance." This makes all of his apologies for the statements above rather suspect. They all appear to have been shrewd PR calculations.

For example, he apologized for his 9/11 statements, but then essentially repeated them, not once but twice, on NPR (6/30/06) and on CNN (5/8/07). He once said: "Thank God for these gay demonstrators. If I didn't have them, I'd have to invent them. They give me all the publicity I need."

When Larry King was asked why he had Falwell on his show so many times, his response was: "He gets people mad." Journalists such as King are partially responsible for the fissures that Falwell and other preachers like him have created in American culture.

Sadly, there are many evangelists waiting in the wings to take Falwell's place. Douglas Wilson, pastor of Moscow's second largest church is one of them. One of Wilson's books is entitled *The Serrated Edge*, in which he defends the use of cutting humor to advance the Gospel. Wilson and Falwell are masters at applying their wicked blades to the body politic.

Wilson, however, is different from Falwell in at least one respect: he has yet to apologize for any of his serial serrations. He warns his flock never to be embarrassed by what the Bible literally says, even if it means ancient laws that allows slavery or mandates capital punishment for homosexuality, adultery, child disobedience, and apostasy.

In 1987, when Falwell dissolved the Moral Majority, he said: "I shudder to think where the country would be right now if the Religious Right had not evolved." Yes, Jerry, we are all shuddering, but for the opposite reason.

David Kuo, an evangelical who once headed Bush's faith-based initiative, said that "Jerry Falwell almost single handedly blurred the line between Jesus and conservative politics to the detriment of both." Falwell's former Vice-President Cal Thomas sums it up best: "Little was accomplished in the political arena and much was lost in the spiritual realm."

Mary Schulken finishes her prayer: "We commend to you, Lord, the soul of your wayward servant. He had a profound influence on politics and culture in the past two decades. But he led us by dividing us, and invoked your name to do it."