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MSW's Falwell bio: a key to understanding today's politics

by Tom Roberts

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A strain of religious political activism, at times virulent and destructive, found a nurturing environment near the heart of the U.S. body politic in the late 1970s. It surfaced in perhaps its purest and most effective form as the Moral Majority of the 1980s. Since then it has resurfaced in numerous mutations, some more religious or political, depending on circumstances. Its latest incarnation, the Tea Party, is a highly toxic concoction of nativism and a rabid anti-government outlook heavily flavored with a bouquet garni of fundamentalist religion and patriotic sentiment.

The progenitor of this strain in modern U.S. politics was the Rev. Jerry Falwell, the subject of a compelling biography, *God's Right Hand: How Jerry Falwell Made God a Republican and Baptized the American Right* (HarperOne, 2012) by my colleague, NCR columnist Michael Sean Winters.

Full disclosure requires that I note that Winters is as well a good friend, someone I've come to know as a discerning observer of the complexities of both religion and politics. He has a deep knowledge of history in both spheres and an uncanny ability to slip the noose of any ideological absolutes. Agree or disagree, and there are ample examples of both in our conversations, when I speak to him I am sometimes reminded of standing in front of a large canvas on which was a human figure painted by a friend of some renown in the art world. The academic element to the painting was holding the figure in place no matter how viewed, and when my artist friend quickly flipped it on end, I almost tripped over myself trying to stay with it. A different view, different angle, same figure, and it worked.

Considering all the angles and allowing what's there to speak for itself is a primary strength of *God's Right Hand*, a detailed account of the forces that shaped Falwell's faith and politics. If one hopes to understand today's politics, it is impossible to skip over Falwell. He did more than any single pastor to

give religion a peculiarly American caste, a language that reduced religious content to easily digestible sound bites, wrapped in red, white and blue and delivered in the either/or style of political combatants.

One cannot easily discern from the telling that Winters ? as evidenced in his blogs and essays and earlier work, *Left at the Altar: How the Democrats Lost the Catholics and How the Catholics Can Save the Democrats* (Basic Books, 2008) ? would have deep disagreement with some of Falwell?s theology, much of his politics and certainly the way he often combined the two.

In fact, the only major critique I had of the book early on is that Winters at times is too generous in allowing Falwell?s tale to stand on its own. All of the inconsistencies and self indulgence that accompanied the evangelist?s rise to political prominence are there, but at times so considerably depicted that one gets pulled along, the way a Falwell aide might have been, looking past something he understood was amiss for the sake of the larger cause.

But that sense of being an intimate, of being dragged along by the force of Falwell?s ambition and vision, is also a great strength of the book. In the end, I concede, it was the best way to tell the tale.

Falwell, whose world could seem grounded in absolutes and views cemented in religious certitude, of course, changed over time. But whether his views changed to match the fluctuations of cultural tides or because of religious insight is unclear. Take racism, for instance, about which Winters writes that Falwell?s views ?would undergo an extraordinary transformation? from the attitudes he absorbed as a youngster growing up in Lynchburg, Va., where ?Jim Crow still reigned supreme.? Falwell, writes Winters, ?would come to regret segregation and would speak plainly and powerfully about the ways in which segregation had been wildly unfair to black Americans. But he would never examine the ways in which segregation had corrupted his own sense of human relations? nor the insight that racist attitudes are ?as morally corrupting of those who perpetrate the idea as it is morally degrading to those who are unjustly discriminated against.?

One gets the sense that building a political and religious empire didn?t afford the time for such introspection. It would have been inefficient.

Falwell didn?t care much about consistency. More important were circumstances to be navigated. One of his more famous sermons, ?Ministers and Marches,? which was printed as a pamphlet, argued that preachers should stay out of politics. The job of the preacher was not politics, but to ?win souls for Christ,? he said in a blistering critique of civil rights leaders. He decried any political activity that diverted the preacher?s attention from winning souls. ?We need to get off the streets and back into the pulpits and into the prayer rooms,? he said, in the sermon that Winters notes ?he would be explaining ? for the rest of his life.?

From his early conversion through the intrigues of a life that moved in and out of the national spotlight, often in step with the major political figures of the day or incongruously in step with figures on his enemies list ? both the late Sen. Edward Kennedy, a political polar opposite, and porn publisher Larry Flynt, whom Falwell unsuccessfully sued, were among foes turned friends ? Falwell was unmistakably a man on a religious mission.

It was, however, a pragmatic mission. He needed his audience, he needed to maintain a certain credibility as a pundit and newsmaker if he wanted wide exposure, and he needed to keep his donors happy.

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He made the occasional outrageous remark. After 9/11 he said God was allowing the enemies of the United States "to give us probably what we deserve," in a conversation with TV preacher and one-time political aspirant Pat Robertson, who nodded in agreement.

Falwell further claimed that "the pagans, and 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.?"

In this case, Winters writes, Falwell realized he was paying too high a price in popularity and was forced to dial it way back with apologies in subsequent interviews.

If there were inconsistencies along the journey of one of the 20th century's major cultural warriors, they were minor by comparison to those of other rising "televangelists" at the time. Falwell was a faithful family man and never got involved in the kind of sex and money scandals that made laughing stocks of the likes of Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker or Jimmy Swaggart.

Falwell's greatest political achievements, however, were occasion for the deepest questions about how much he had compromised the religious dimension of his mission. President Reagan courted him as did candidate George H. W. Bush. He was used for their purposes as certainly he knew how to use them for his.

There were, in his anti-abortion campaigning, babies to be saved. Ironically, none of that happened in the political sphere. To his credit (and the shame of larger denominations making a lot of noise about the issue) Falwell backed up his opposition to abortion with an alternative, a successful ministry to unwed mothers that provided a place to stay, an opportunity to continue education during pregnancy and legal and medical help from volunteer lawyers and physicians. The program was so successful it went national.

There were homosexuals to be ostracized and demeaned, though as the cultural tide turned, so did Falwell's rhetoric. Correspondence with a former employee who was gay and high profile incidents of violence against gays led Falwell to host a conference at his Liberty University among gays and straights, during which Falwell apologized, more or less, for using incendiary language toward homosexuals.

There were secularist, atheist forces to be challenged and fought, though his theology and social framework could accommodate the bloody realities of Central American dictators if they were on the right side of conservative Republican politics.

No public figure is perfect, not even a Bible-believing preacher.

Beyond doubt, Falwell brought conservative religion out from behind the cultural curtain, planted it firmly in the public square and announced that it was here to stay. And it has.

Is there another country on earth, save some unsavory theocracies, where political discourse is so heavily laced with religious content?

Winters makes few arguments in the book, but one of the most profound suggests that the mixture of religion and politics squeezes out the essence of faith. Lost in "the reduction of religion to ethics," in manufacturing a morality "on the left or right" of a particular approach to public issues, was the kerygmatic pronouncement, the jarring news that God became human, died and rose again.

In the end, too, Winters draws a connection between a decade of "frantic, unrelenting activity by the Moral Majority, and an increase over the next decade of those who claimed no religious affiliation. "In the 2008 Pew survey of religious affiliation, more than 16 percent of Americans claimed the mantle of the "nones."?"

Perhaps the trend is a reaction against what some see as a narrow view of religion, or it may reflect the fact that Falwell's brand of in-your-face Christianity, now so pervasive in public matters, brooked no ambivalence.

Whatever the case, our politics and public discourse has since, and perhaps forever, been changed by Falwell, a man for whom conversion had unusually large consequences personally and whose mission continues to play out in the public square.

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