

These 2 vignettes touch on a morbid fascination with evangelicals that goes back to my adolescence...

Of the prosperity gospel:

In reading a website article about the political muscle of conservative evangelicals in the USA, I thought of the Pentecostal girls of my boyhood village:

They eschewed short skirts, lipstick and Saturday night dances. They wore their hair long and straight. They were rarely seen outside of school, except with fellow Pentecostals or in summer when boarding their gospel tent bus. From across the classroom, it was hard not to steal glances at them. There was nothing in their sober faces that revealed any hint of the lusty whoops that emanated from their local tabernacle during the rollicking Sunday services...

I also recalled having once, in a vague spirit of anthropological field work, spent part of a Friday night at a gala revival meeting at a hockey arena in my college town. The event featured the TV evangelist, Rex Humbard, and his country gospel band. I slipped away soon after slick-haired sidemen moved among the crowd with long-handled baskets.

“I know some folk think all we’re after is yer money,” Humbard joked. “Well, I ain’t gonna disappoint ya’ll!”

I felt sorry for the hicks of the surrounding villages digging deep for their \$2 bills. Many of the younger women were nursing babies. The mothers in their early-20s hardly looked different from the old women in attendance, except that their long hair had yet to go witchy grey. It was hard to imagine any ever escaping their drabness...



In a visit back to my natal village some 20 years later, the most significant change I noted was along a street on the outskirts remembered for its tarpaper shacks. The area was completely transformed by sprawling new houses. On the roadside nameplates were familiar names. They belonged to the boys who left school early to drive pulp trucks and marry the girls they knew from childhood bible study.

Outside the fine houses were late model cars, speed boats and ATVs. At the front of the long yards were gleaming logging trucks. Stenciled on the door of one was: ‘*Praise Jesus for victory*’. One of those dour Pentecostal girls had likely dragged its driver by the collar away from the vices that destroyed so many unsaved local lads... I suppose the driver could just as well have displayed on his truck: ‘*praise my pussy-whipping wife!*’

In any case, it was clear that he and many of his kind right across the continent, had lifted themselves into a prosperity well beyond that of many of the college boys who once pitied them...



In flipping through the TV remote just a few nights ago I heard Rev. James Dobson, founder of ‘focus on the family’, supplicating his viewers to pray for Ariel Sharon. On another channel, Pastor Ted Haggard was demanding “citizenship for fetuses to stop their mass murder...”

Another piece, also recently read on *‘The New York Times’* website, described a Christian college in North Carolina which is grooming students for high profile law careers. The disciples of this evangelical *madrasa* are reputedly rising at 3:00 AM to plug SATs along with Bible study... The college’s debating team, all home-schooled by Christian moms, apparently bested the effete Brits of Balliol College on a debate about the US constitution.

According to the report, grads from Christian academies already fill more internships in the Republican Congress than those of the Ivy League schools. Other alumni become ‘researchers’ at Christian think tanks such the ‘Discovery Institute’ that promotes “intelligent design”. Their expectation is that public school boards across America will one day privilege the teaching of creationism over the “godless theory” of evolution...

The same article described a tour of home-schooled white Christian teens to the empty chambers of the Supreme Court in Washington. “This is our goal,” the accompanying pastor reportedly told them. “When we appoint Christian to our highest court— then we can usher in a new moral awakening in our nation...”

So it appears that legions of the born-again are rising in the legal profession, rising in business—even in academia. In Canada, the evangelical right may not yet have quite the political clout as in the USA, but they are still a powerful conservative constituency to be courted or feared...

I thought again of those plain Pentecostal girls of 40 years ago. Their grandchildren are certainly not taking their summer bible study in sawdust floored gospel tents...

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A fourth awakening?



In advising daughter TE on her term paper on the 'abolition movement' in her American history course, I read the text of a 1835 sermon of one Charles Finney. It is historically significant for its appeal for ending the "great national sin" of slavery... One can imagine a big-bearded preacher with piercing eyes, shaking his bible with equal fury in the faces of the drunkard and the slaver. The sin of holding fellow men in bondage, he moralizes, is no less shameful than the sin of intemperance...

Finney's epiphany of the moral imperative of abolition occurred with the period which historians refer to as the 'Second Great Awakening' in America. The 'Awakenings' were periods when religious fervour raged like influenza through rural America giving rise to such crazed visions as that of Joseph Smith, founder of Mormonism. Yet the Awakenings also gave rise a deeper spirit of charity in some Christian hearts. Still, Christians like Finney who opposed slavery were northerners at a time when sympathies for abolition generally split along the lines of the slaveholding and the northern states. Indeed, in the 1840s, the Southern Baptist Convention in its assurance that slavery was supported by scripture, split away from its northern counterpart...

Despite the reactionary reflexes of whites in the old confederacy, a gospel for social justice still stirred in many American Christians. A third Great Awakening in the 1920s was primarily a reaction to America's tightening embrace of the golden calf of materialism, yet it also is associated with a growing awareness of social inequities wrought by free enterprise. Such an awareness has been linked to popular support among rural whites for Roosevelt's New Deal in the 1930s...

Yet it seems that the cyclical 'awakenings' have had both progressive and regressive impacts on the political landscape. Cyclical bouts of spiritual hunger in America have moved hearts towards greater social justice—but have also triggered fear of change...

As difficult as it is to be charitable to the vicious Christian right in America today—it is understandable that many white Christians long for a simpler past. Yet they seem willfully blind to any conflict of the mighty sword and the mightier dollar with old Protestant virtues. Nothing less reflects thrift and frugality than splendorous megachurches headed by business-suited preachers who wear Rolexes. Meanwhile, the politics of evangelicals is animated not by the Prince of Peace but rather by a fire-breathing Jehovah...

Still, a question arises: might there still be a tiny voice of social conscience somewhere deep within Protestantism—the vestige of conscience that gave rise to three earlier Great Awakenings?

If so— what form might it take? One might imagine some latter-day Charles Finney, awakened to the spirituality of deep ecological interconnectedness. Perhaps he would thunder against the polluters and the false idols of the marketplace... Perhaps a Christian embrace of environmentalism could be as spirited as the abolitionist crusade... How naïve is it to so hope?

One thing is clear— such an awakening will never emerge from the bowels of a megachurch...

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