Drop-out Christianity: The religious right's sectarian future?

by Alain Epp Weaver in the March 17, 1999 issue

Is the religious right becoming sectarian? That was the question I found myself asking after Paul Weyrich, one of the founding fathers of the Moral Majority, recently called on Christians to "drop out" of American culture. "I believe that we have probably lost the culture war," Weyrich lamented.

During the Reagan years one could speak confidently of a "moral majority" which embodied basic Christian virtues, Weyrich suggests. Today, in light of the enduring popularity of President Clinton despite his apparent proclivities toward lying and adultery, conservatives must recognize that no such beast exists. "Americans have adopted, in large measure, the MTV culture that we so valiantly opposed just a few years ago, and it has permeated the thinking of all but those who have separated themselves from the contemporary culture," Weyrich declared. The pervasiveness of individualistic, hedonistic culture has prevented conservatives from translating electoral victories into policy changes. Weyrich cited American indifference to presidential mendacity and the failure of pro-life legislators to ban late-term abortions as evidence of America's slide into "an ever-wider sewer."

How to respond to defeat in the culture war? Here's the seemingly sectarian kicker: "We need to drop out of this culture, and find places, even if it is where we physically are right now, where we can live godly, righteous and sober lives."

Liberal pundits such as Clarence Page greeted Weyrich's announcement with bemusement, wondering when the Religious Right had "dropped in" to American culture. "Don't expect to be missed," Page counseled Weyrich.

As an Anabaptist Christian, accustomed to my faith tradition's being dismissed as sectarian, I'm not sure whether to rejoice or feel troubled that Weyrich wants to "drop out." I'm tempted to say that Weyrich has gotten it only half right--"it" being the church's relationship to the wider culture.

I should begin by confessing that I've never been a fan of Weyrich or his Moral Majority cohorts. Growing up in the Reagan years in a faith community that made discipleship to a nonviolent Messiah central, I was disturbed by what I saw as the uncritical patriotism of Weyrich, Jerry Falwell, Oral Roberts and others. For such luminaries of the Religious Right, being a good Christian seemed to be too easily equated with being a good American.

Moral Majority: the very name projected a confidence in the overlap, if not the identity, of the faith community and the broader political community. I, on the other hand, as a pacifist Christian, had no illusion about being in the majority. Now that the Reagan era has faded away and the Religious Right finds itself politically stymied, some of its leaders (Charles Colson and William Bennett have issued declarations similar to those of Weyrich) have begun to recognize, if only haltingly, that the church is called to be different from the world.

While Weyrich's call to "drop out" reads as a (probably unwitting) parody of Timothy Leary's psychedelic admonition to "tune in, turn on, drop out," it has deeper Christian resonances as well. Have Weyrich et al. been reading postliberal theology? Compare, for example, Weyrich's "drop out" stance with the rhetoric of some influential theologians and ethicists. Alasdair MacIntyre bemoans the incoherence of liberal moral discourse and calls for a new St. Benedict to construct local communities which can serve as beacons of hope in the midst of a new Dark Ages. Stanley Hauerwas and William Willimon urge Christians to view themselves as "resident aliens" in American society. George Lindbeck speaks of the "sectarian future of the church."

Perhaps these thinkers are helping the Religious Right to see that its nostalgia for a Christian America (if such an entity ever existed) has been misguided, and that the task for the church is not to rule society, or to try to impose its values on others, but rather, through its worship, practice and communal faithfulness to God, to embody a witness to the wider world.

Perhaps. But I fear that Weyrich and the new Moral Minority still pine for a Christianized America and view dropping out as simply a temporary tactic in an ongoing culture war. For example, in an interview with CNN, Weyrich quickly qualified his call to "drop out," denying that the Religious Right was surrendering and suggesting that it was instead opening up a "new front" in the cultural battle.

Whether the move to drop out is a temporary tactic or an expression of theological convictions, Weyrich's declaration should provoke serious reflection from all Christians, of the right and the left, about how the church is to live and witness in a culture hostile or indifferent to its message. I would advance three brief observations on the church and the necessity of dropping out of American culture.

1) T*he primary political witness of the church is its life as a gathered community.* It's easy for Christians living in a democratic society to equate Christian political witness with electoral strategy and legislative lobbying. In the process, the church's calling to live as a city on a hill, a light to the nations (Matthew 5), a royal priesthood (I Peter 2) is obscured. The church is not simply an agglomeration of individuals; rather, it is a polis, a community with a particular way of ordering its life. The church's primary political witness, then, will consist not in position papers issued by denominational bureaucracies or in the sway that its members exercise at the ballot box, but in how it orders its internal life.

The late John Howard Yoder argued persuasively that the church's practices of baptism, communion, mutual correction and the diversity of gifts can serve as models for the wider society. "The difference between church and state," Yoder explained, "is not that one is political and the other not, but that they are political in different ways."

2) *Selective participation in traditional political arenas is valid*. I have grown accustomed to hearing and reading the heirs of Reinhold Niebuhr decry the Anabaptist refusal to participate in violent forms of political power as a "sectarian" position, a shirking of Christian "responsibility" for the political order. The initial rejoinder to the Niebuhrian charge of irresponsibility is to say that by embodying the "firstfruits" of the kingdom in its corporate life, the church is being eschatologically responsible.

The second response is that there is no reason why Christians cannot selectively participate in traditional political processes even while denying their centrality. The church can both live as a peaceable community and also urge government to reduce military spending and question the utilitarian benefit of bombing campaigns and sanction regimes. Christians can both strive for racial equality within the church and critique institutionalized forms of racism in the wider society.

3) *The church does not drop out for the sake of moral purity*. Weyrich calls on Christians to find places where they "can live godly, righteous and sober lives." I have no objection to the desire to live a godly and righteous life; on the contrary, I affirm it. However, if such language encodes a desire to escape "an ever-wider sewer," to maintain a sense of moral purity amidst a decadent society, then the motivation for dropping out must be criticized. The church distances itself from the world not for its own sake but for the world's. The pacifist Christian, for instance, is not concerned with avoiding "dirty hands" in the violence of the world, but rather with embodying a vision of shalom for the world in the midst of its violence.

Christians must also be wary of a search for purity that mirrors chauvinism and xenophobia. One of the central practices of Christian communities of character, Stanley Hauerwas never tires of reminding us, should be the welcoming of the stranger. Will the communities formed by conservative Christians dropping out of American culture be communities which not only welcome but seek out the stranger? Or will they be the religious equivalents of homogenized suburban enclaves or gated communities which keep strangers at arm's length?

Those of us who have been skeptical of the politics and the theology of the Religious Right should resist the temptation to gloat or be dismissive of the discovery by Weyrich, Colson, Bennett and others that the "moral majority" is an illusion. In a post-Christian society, their problems are to some degree our problems as well. How the church can live as a polis that counters the politics of the world will, I believe, increasingly be a challenge for all American Christians. May God give us the wisdom to know when, how and--most important--why to drop out.