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CLEVELAND
Jewish News.com

Wednesday September 14, 2005

10 Elul 5765

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Patriot Pastors

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Evangelical clergy seek to save America through the ballot box

America is a Christian nation, at least if you're counting noses. An overwhelming majority of Americans - 77% or 159 million people - identify themselves as Christians, a recent study shows.



Televangelist the Rev. Rod Parsley of Columbus preaches against abortion, gay marriage and "judicial tyranny." His Center for Moral Clarity instructs pastors on how to arrange voter registration drives and contact legislators.

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Jews, who only comprise 1.3% of the population, rely on the First Amendment's ban on the state's endorsing any religion to protect their minority status.

Thus, the Ohio Restoration Project (ORP) has stunned many Jews with its plan to identify and train 2,000 so-called "Patriot Pastors" to get out the evangelical vote for the Ohio primary in May 2006.

The Rev. Russell Johnson, ORP head and senior pastor of Fairfield Christian Church, an evangelical congregation in suburban Columbus, casts the 2006 election as an apocalyptic clash between a virtuous Christianity and the evildoers who oppose Christianity's values.

"This is a battle between the forces of righteousness and the hordes of hell," says Johnson on his church's website. He exhorts evangelical clergy to get off the sidelines and lead America away from secularism and godlessness through the ballot box.

Before the 2004 presidential election, Johnson denounced tax-supported schools that have banned the teaching of creationism, Bible reading and prayer. He blasted the "pagan left" for its warfare against the very

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definition of marriage. He decried "homosexual rights" that will come with "a flood of demonic oppression."

Most important, he envisions a Christian America. "Reclaiming the teaching of our Christian heritage among America's youth is paramount to a sense of national destiny that God has invested into this nation," he writes on his church website.

In the 2004 presidential election, conservative evangelical Christian voters found a national candidate who shared their values. Thus, they turned out in record numbers to vote for President George Bush.

Wielding Christian power at the polls

ORP hopes to capitalize on that newfound evangelical political fervor. There will be Patriot Pastor policy briefings in eight targeted cities, including Cleveland and Canton/Akron. The pastors are expected to host voter-registration drives in their churches. They will distribute voter guides provided by the Christian Coalition and the Center for Moral Clarity, to "clarify the positions of various candidates, who at times, would like to remain vague and noncommittal," the ORP website states.

Their goal is to register 500,000 new conservative voters, spreading the church's view from the pulpit on "values" issues. Ohio for Jesus advertising in 30-second radio spots would feature Secretary of State Kenneth Blackwell, Republican candidate for governor.

White House adviser Karl Rove has acknowledged that one of his main strategies for the 2004 election was to turn out the white, evangelical Protestant vote. On Election Day 2004, four million more evangelicals voted than in 2000, when Bush lost the popular vote to Democrat Al Gore. (Bush won that race in the Electoral College.)

Ballot issues banning gay marriage, including one in Ohio that amended the state constitution to limit marriage to a union between one man and one woman, drew large numbers of rural and suburban conservatives to the polls.

Buoyed by such success, ORP has new plans to wield conservative Christian influence at the polls.

The Patriot Pastors would help build a database of 300,000 postal addresses and 100,000 e-mail addresses to recruit a network of like-minded Christian voters to be 21st-century Minutemen. These volunteers would help transport the elderly to the polls, provide childcare so parents can vote, and assist with voter registration drives and rallies.

As a nonprofit organization, ORP hopes to raise \$1 million for a campaign war chest. The immediate goal is to elect conservative Blackwell as Ohio's next governor in 2006. A charismatic speaker, Blackwell will be invited to address a statewide Ohio for Jesus rally in late February to mid-March 2006.

Also invited to address the rally are conservative Christians such as the Rev. Franklin Graham, Dr. James Dobson and the Rev. Rod Parsley. Republican politicians expected to attend include former U.S. Rep. Bob McEwen of Hillsboro, Ohio, and former Amb. Alan Keyes. Former Democratic Sen. Zell Miller of Georgia, keynote speaker at the 2004 Republican National Convention, is also on the schedule.

Rallies like the above notwithstanding, ORP insists it is nonpartisan and complies with IRS rules that bar nonprofits from endorsing political candidates.

Clergy's vision for America

Creating a corps of Patriot Pastors is not a new idea. Several years ago, the Rev. Rick Scarborough, a Baptist preacher from Texas, created a network of Patriot Pastors to lead evangelicals to the polls. He added 2,000 clergy to the rolls in May 2005 alone.

On his Vision America website, Scarborough encourages pastors to "speak out on the great moral issues of our day ... to restore and reclaim America for Christ." Scarborough has lobbied aggressively in Washington to push Senate Republicans to change the rules so that Democrats cannot use the filibuster to block President Bush's conservative judicial nominees.

This outpouring of conservative Christian political activity crosses far over the line into partisanship, some Jews insist, breaching the Constitution's guarantee of church-state separation and jeopardizing churches' tax-free status.

But not all Jews are so perturbed. Evangelicals are not new on the American political scene, says David Elcott, national interfaith director of the American Jewish Committee.

During the civil rights movement, evangelical churches were very involved in advocating for equal rights for all Americans, Elcott says. The same passion and energy are now resurfacing.

Evangelicals "don't see themselves as bound by the law anymore than the abolitionists did or those of us who fought for civil rights," he says.

Blacks and whites sitting side-by-side at segregated lunch counters broke local laws, but activists saw their behavior as supporting a greater justice. Liberal Democrats used the filibuster and other legal tactics in the Senate to advocate for civil rights. During the Vietnam era, rabbis spoke from the pulpit against the war.

Now that Christians are adopting such tactics, "we Jews who think citizens should support the political process are furious," says Elcott. "It was okay when we had church and God on our side. Now we are getting nervous and resorting to legal technicalities" to find fault.

Where a movement like ORP might lead concerns Rabbi Naphtali Burnstein of Young Israel of Greater Cleveland. "We live in a country where there has been church and state separation," Burnstein says. "That's given us religious freedom to practice what we want. With this fundamentalism, Christianity becomes the religion of the country. This (adversely) impacts our religious freedom and our relationship with our neighbors."

Evangelicals on campus, in the military

A network of Patriot Pastors is not the only bold effort of the religious right to transform American politics and culture. Patrick Henry College, a conservative Christian institution in Purcellville, Va., 50 miles from Washington, D.C., is training undergraduates for careers in politics. Almost all of their 300 students have internships in Washington. Students serve as aides to influential Republicans, like Rove, who oversees the White House's Office of Strategic Initiatives.

Some of these students will one day graduate from White House and congressional interns to become members of Congress, the college predicts.

The growing influence of evangelical Christians is evident even on secular college campuses. Evangelical students in recent years have established prayer groups and clubs at Ivy League institutions, most notably Brown and Princeton Universities.

The Christian Union, based in Princeton, N.J., was founded three years ago by several Ivy League alumni including Matt Bennett, who previously spent 12 years with Campus Crusade for Christ at Princeton. The organization's core mission, its website says, is to "change the world by bringing about sweeping spiritual transformation at the Ivy League Universities, thereby raising up godly leadership for all sectors of society."

The Christian Union, which notes that all gifts to it are tax-deductible, encourages donations as a "means of touching many of tomorrow's leaders. These universities have a disproportional influence in society, and we want as many graduates, staff, and faculty as possible to be strong and devoted Christians."

Evangelicals have also strengthened their presence in the military. The number of evangelical chaplains has doubled in some branches of the service, The New York Times noted; the ranks of chaplains from more liberal Protestant churches, many of whom oppose the war in Iraq, have thinned.

In June, the Air Force organized and paid \$300,000 for a four-day Spiritual Fitness Conference at the Air Force Academy for its military chaplains. An evangelical Christian tone permeated the conference, The Times reported. When chaplains enter the military, they pledge to serve the spiritual needs of every soldier, including non-Christians.

While 10 Jewish chaplains stayed at the same hotel as the Christian chaplains, they participated in a separate program. Only one interfaith worship service was held.

The Air Force chief of staff recently advised commanders that there must not be proselytizing or promotion of personal religious beliefs. But the chaplain who organized last month's conference told The Times,

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"We are not generic chaplains. We say 'cooperation without compromise.' I cannot compromise my faith."

Gathering the faithful

While Johnson of the Fairfield Christian Church conceived ORP, the Rev. Rod Parsley, a wealthy TV evangelist and senior pastor of the World Harvest Church located outside Columbus, is the name and face behind the campaign. For the last year, Parsley has been speaking to the faithful across the country about gay marriage and abortion on his "Silent No More" tour.

Last July, Parsley formed the Center for Moral Clarity, "a Christ-centered voice and force in the United States to help raise the standard of moral excellence and protect the Judeo-Christian values upon which our nation was founded," according to the organization's website. Among the political and cultural issues the center hopes to tackle are abortion, bioethics, judicial tyranny and religious liberties. The center also instructs pastors and individuals in how to arrange church voter registration drives, legislative contacts, and petition initiatives. It provides legal guidelines and boundaries for ministers under section 501C-3 (the IRS category for tax-exempt, nonprofit organizations).

Several months ago, Parsley's church hosted the third annual gathering of Christian pastors. Its goal: galvanize the Christian leadership to get involved in politics through the ORP. About 1,100 ministers from 80 of Ohio's 88 counties listened to Parsley and guest speaker Roy Moore, former Alabama Supreme Court chief justice ousted over his refusal to remove a monument of the Ten Commandments from the courthouse rotunda.

Todd Appelbaum, a 44-year-old native Clevelander who has lived in Columbus for the past 25 years, attended the event along with a number of Republican government officials, including Blackwell. Former chairman of Columbus's chapter of American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), Appelbaum is now active in a Jewish-Christian coalition that works to support Israel and other issues.

Evangelicals are loving patriots

Appelbaum, who brought three Orthodox rabbis to the pastors' gathering, attended in order to meet Parsley

and to develop deeper relationships between the Jewish community and conservative evangelicals.

"Our freedoms are threatened, our Judeo-Christian beliefs are threatened by radical Islam," Appelbaum says. "If western civilization is going to be saved from these evil forces, who don't share our values, it has to be done through Christianity. There are only 14 million Jews throughout the world. There are two billion Christians. They are the only ones who can stand up to radical Islam."

A member of two Orthodox and two Conservative synagogues, Appelbaum identifies himself as a moderate independent who leans slightly to the right. Until the 2004 election, he had always voted for a Democrat for president, he says.

He does not share all of the evangelicals' views on social issues like stem-cell research, abortion or gay rights. But he felt at home, he says, at the Christian evangelical event.

"These are people who love their country. They are proud Americans. They are concerned about where America is heading and its survival."

Wrapping the American flag around Christianity - or wrapping Christianity around the flag - does not particularly trouble him. "As Jews we get involved in politics and support candidates who support our issues," he says. "Why can't Christians do that, too?"

He insists evangelicals will create a separate organization as their political arm in order to respect the constitutional division between church and state, just as Jews have done with AIPAC.

The country has moved too far to the left, Appelbaum maintains. Democrats, he says, have allowed far-left fringe groups to influence their party. "That terrifies me."

The demonization of political opponents also disturbs him. Adherents of the Christian right are "loving, caring, sensitive, with love of family and country. We can agree to disagree on those other social issues."

Not everyone is so easily reassured. Some in the Jewish community see ORP as a threat. Others say Jews should stop complaining and get better organized

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themselves.

Traditionally, the Jewish community has been a model of such grassroots political activity. Last year, the Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland organized voter registration drives at the Tops supermarket in Beachwood, says Shari Kochman, then the Federation's government relations director. Several hundred new voters were registered.

The group also targeted absentee voters and college students, distributing forms requesting absentee ballots to synagogues and Jewish agencies. Cards were mailed to Federation's list of Jewish college students, encouraging them to fill out enclosed absentee ballot request forms.

"People fear the new-found political power of those whose social justice agenda is so far removed from theirs," says Joyce Garver Keller, Columbus-based lobbyist of Ohio Jewish Communities. In comparison, Jewish influence is limited by their demographics.

"There are 150,000 Jews of voting age in the state," she notes. "If we get everyone to register, teach them about tikkun olam (repairing the world) and social justice, and get them to the polls, we're not even close to competing."

Unsavoury mingling of religion and state

As champions of free speech and free exercise of religion, the American Civil Liberties Union has no philosophical quarrel with pastors preaching from the pulpit on political issues. Or endorsing a specific candidate. It's organized religion's tax-exempt status that disturbs the civil rights group.

Doing away with a religious entity's tax exemption would eliminate the furor over the free-speech issue, says Chris Link, executive director of the ACLU of Ohio. "It's questionable or unsavoury when (a member of the clergy) equates a certain political position with an absolute knowledge that that's what God wants. How is it they know that?"

She notes that the IRS is investigating the tax-exempt status of the nonprofit NAACP as a result of statements its leader, Julian Bond, made in support of Democrat John Kerry in the last election. Link hopes the IRS

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would be nonpartisan and even-handed when it examines ORP's status.

With its Patriot Pastors and Ohio for Jesus rally, ORP "is pretty blatant" endorsement of a candidate, says Link, and a good illustration of the need for religious liberty and separation of church and state. "We're beginning to see the unpleasant results of intermingling religion and government," she notes.

Such mixing has also crossed the aisle to the Democratic side in the Ohio Senate. Near the end of the Senate's session in late May, while the body was preparing to vote on its version of the state's biennial budget, the minority leader, state Sen. C. J. Prentiss (D-Cleveland), circulated a list of quotations from the New Testament.

The goal, according to the Democrats' communications chief Amanda Conn Starnier, was to "remind (all the senators) that Jesus and Scripture taught that you need to take care of the most vulnerable among us."

The idea also seemed to be to show that Republicans weren't the only ones with spiritual values and faith. However, the biblical quotes did not move any Republicans to earmark more funds for the poor; they voted overwhelmingly for the budget that was less than generous on social-welfare causes.

Clergy preach on political issues

Rabbis in Northeast Ohio do preach from the pulpit on political issues they deem important. However, those contacted by the CJN all say they are careful to be nonpartisan and to maintain the Constitution's boundaries between church and state.

Young Israel's Rabbi Burnstein occasionally preaches about a political issue, particularly if it involves Israel. The Orthodox rabbi notes that he did talk about the Terry Schiavo case and gave two or three Friday afternoon lectures on the subject.

Presenting the Torah's perspective on such controversies as Schiavo's right to life was Burnstein's goal. But the rabbi does not tell his congregants whom to vote for, which he notes, would imperil the synagogue's tax-exempt status.

Before the last presidential election, he did encourage people to register and vote. His responsibility, he says, was to make sure people understood what was at stake for Israel. "They could argue whether Bush or Kerry would be better."

Last Yom Kippur, Rabbi Richard Block of The Temple-Tifereth Israel spoke from the pulpit against Issue 1, which banned gay marriage. However, the Reform rabbi doesn't suggest that God identifies with a political philosophy or party.

"When a religious leader begins to assert that God supports a particular candidate or a particular point of view, I think that verges on demagoguery," Block says. "Religious fundamentalism of any character is a threat to civil society."

Conservative Christians are part of a growing effort to promote a particular religious perspective to change the country in ways that are harmful to everybody, the rabbi says. "That's exactly what the separation of church and state is designed to protect" against.

Religion must be intrinsically involved in the political and social issues of the day, insists Rabbi Eric Bram of Suburban Temple-Kol Ami, who talks about societal concerns from the pulpit. "Otherwise, religion is simply an expression of some idealistic philosophy that has no bearing on real life."

But the line between church and state is a clear one, he adds. If ORP's idea is to make America into a fundamental Christian theocracy, "that should have a wider hearing than from the pulpits. They should run candidates and try to elect them, rather than take a stealthy approach like this. If this is illegal, they should be scrutinized closely and shut down."

The religious right's tactic of electing stealth candidates to local offices and school boards has been successful, Bram says. Ohio's state education board is a case in point.

The board, which most Ohioans pay no attention to at election time, has approved wording on state science lessons and standards that open the door for the teaching of intelligent design. Calling evolution merely "a theory" about the origin of life, proponents of intelligent design say the universe is too complex to be

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explained by random natural selection. Therefore, some sort of "intelligent designer" must be at work.

Opponents say intelligent design is creationism in new clothes.

Our faith shapes our politics

Jews are not the only ones who have difficulty with the Ohio Restoration Project. The Rev. John Lentz of Forest Hills Church, Presbyterian, in Cleveland has spoken out publicly against the ORP. He acknowledges that "our faith shapes our politics." Conservative Christians have every right to discuss these issues in the public arena, he says.

The trouble is, "theologically, they have defined and claimed what is holy and what is not, what is patriotism and what is not."

Thus, anyone is who not Christian and does not agree with the evangelical doctrine is less righteous and less patriotic.

"To me that is insulting and antithetical to my Christian faith and to people who are not Christians," says Lentz. "The theological move they are making is exactly what the Taliban is doing with the Koran. What is holy, who is in, who is out, and combines this holiness with nationalism."

The Heights Interfaith Council and the National Association of Community and Justice have contemplated how to respond to ORP, Lentz says. A letter to the editor and an op-ed piece in The Plain Dealer are planned. To counter ORP's pastor-training sessions and the Ohio for Jesus rally, Lentz expects the Interfaith Council will hold a public event, an alternative celebration of how people of faith can organize.

"We must have everybody at the table, including those with whom we disagree," says Lentz. "I don't have the truth. That's different from an exclusive holiness that judges people, at the extraordinarily crucial level of who is going to heaven and who isn't."

"As long as evangelical pastors don't say 'vote for Ken Blackwell' or 'we need to be Republicans,' what they are doing is kosher," says Rabbi John Spitzer of Temple Israel in Canton. "But it's not okay to say God will send you to hell if you support this person. Or that Jesus is

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on your side, or Moses is on the side of another person."

The Reform rabbi has contacted his friends in the Christian clergy in hopes that mainstream pastors will discuss the issue and contact Ohio legislators. "We need to let (lawmakers) know a person can be a patriot without being evangelical or even Christian."

The problem, as Spitzer sees it, is that radicals on both ends of the political spectrum are vocal. "The rest of us are quiet. We watch. We can't afford to do that today."

Lessons from the past

History tells us that people who think they're being patriotic can easily be "co-opted by the political powers that be," says the Rev. John Mann, pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Canton. "Pastors end up preaching political ideology rather than the word of God."

For example, the Lutheran Church's uncritical zeal for the Fatherland, the Nazi Party and Hitler during the Holocaust was "downright blasphemous," he says.

Mann frequently preaches about political issues of the day but makes it clear he's offering his "take on the issues, not God's take."

The Jewish Community Federation of Cleveland has convened a task force of its Community Relations and Government Relations Committees to discuss a response to the Patriot Pastor problem.

"But we don't want this to be the Jewish community versus the evangelical Christian community," says Rob Zimmerman, CRC vice-chair and GRC chair.

He's concerned, however, that the ORP is exclusive and intolerant of other religious points of view on public policy.

What should the Jewish community do?

Attorney Elliot Azoff, a member of the Cleveland Federation task force, says so far the Christian conservatives have done nothing that requires a response from the Jewish community. There are other more pressing concerns, such as the liberal Protestant denominations that are urging divestment from Israel.

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The evangelicals are "exercising First Amendment rights to participate on the political stage," Azoff says. "I haven't seen anything that has crossed the line any more than when African-American churches have elected officials (typically Democrats) speak from their pulpits."

The ORP's amassing a campaign war chest strikes Azoff as no different from the fundraising by organizations such as the NAACP and the National Council of Jewish Women.

Opposition to ORP "is a knee-jerk reaction in the Jewish community by a group of liberals," says Azoff, who is a Republican. "We don't like their social agenda. Why do we get upset with this kind of activism and not others?"

ORP is more of a legitimate issue for mainline Protestant churches, he says, who are unhappy with the dogma of evangelicals. "The Jewish community should stay out of it. The evangelicals literally are our only friends (supporting Israel) in the Christian community."

At the same time, Azoff thinks the Jewish community should watch the ORP to make sure they don't cross the church-state line, which, he concedes, is a fuzzy one.

If the ORP with its Patriot Pastors becomes an advocacy arm for a conservative political stance, it will violate the constitutional separation of church and state, Zimmerman insists. "If any elected official participates in that Ohio for Jesus rally, it gives the perception that the government is working in concert with religious groups to promote a particular point of view."

How the institutionalized Jewish community responds depends on its reaching a thus-far elusive consensus.

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