The Preacher And Senator Equivocate

By H. PAUL SANTMIRE

The affability of the event made the headlines. The liberal Catholic politician from Massachusetts, Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, and the fundamentalist Baptist preacher from Virginia, the Rev. Jerry Falwell, virtually embraced each other in public. Their nationally televised appearance before the annual convention of the National Religious Broadcasters on Tuesday was their second publicized encounter, this time on the theme of religion in public life.

But the affability obscured the real story. Each one failed to come to terms with the comprehensive implications of a fundamental moral principle that both took for granted — the right to life. They applied that principle selectively. Both argued for coercive legal policies based on the right to life in some areas, but not in others.

Kennedy eloquently described the plight of the black majority in South Africa, and urged legally coercive action in response to that situation, such as boycotts and disinvestment. But he approached the issue of abortion in quite different terms. Here he referred to the familiar liberal norms: the woman's right to make a private decision and the need for legislative caution, even legislative inaction, when the nation's citizenry is sharply divided over an issue.

But that kind of liberal argument would have precluded the civil rights legislation of the 1960s, which Kennedy of course favored. Some opponents argued that those laws impinged on the private right of association and that they should not be passed since society was so sharply divided about racial justice. Presumably, such arguments could be mounted by representatives of the ruling white minority in South Africa today.

To have been consistent with his right-to-life assumptions as they pertain to justice in South Africa, Kennedy should have dealt with the public policy implications of "the cry of the unborn," frequently mentioned by Falwell. If it is true that "15 million unborn human beings were destroyed in the last 12 years," as Falwell maintained, then Kennedy is to be faulted for what can only be thought of as a shocking inconsistency when he rejects a legislative approach to this issue.

Falwell, while pressing for wider acknowledgement of the right to life for the unborn, indeed sanctioning coercive acts on their behalf in the form of new laws or a constitutional amendment, at the same time fell back on familiar conservative arguments defending the Reagan administration's policy of "constructive engagement" with the racist authorities of South Africa.

While condemning apartheid in principle, Falwell made every effort to justify in practice a go-very-slow policy of structural change. He argued that South Africa is a young country (25 years old, he said) with potentially warring factions ready to erupt. He raised the specter of Soviet expansionism in Africa. He even suggested that we should not expect more of "our friends" than we do of our enemies.

He concluded that we should be patient and not impose coercive sanctions of any kind. Then he asked why those picketing the South African embassies were not also picketing the embassies of the Soviet Union, above all because of the Afghanistan invasion and the brutal repression of the Afghan people.

This is a little like saying that it is wrong in principle if my son were to steal a car, but nevertheless understandable, since he is young and since other boys are doing it, too. Do not expect too much of him.

On the contrary, I have a special responsibility to try to influence my son, over whom I can exercise some moral and other kinds of persuasion, to uphold the law, however young he may be, whatever his peers may be doing, however much he might then turn against me under the influence of alien values.

What about the cry of the born? What about the millions of South African black children who suffer from malnutrition, from virtually non-existent medical care, and from the disintegration of their families due to the homelands policy, not to speak of the millions of the born who die an early death?

Do we not owe them coercive policies aimed to alleviate their plight a constitutional amendment, so to speak, in our foreign policy? Does not the principle of right to life have urgent implications for our South African policy? Is it not shockingly inconsistent for Falwell to fall back on a kind of Kissinger Realpolitik in this case?

Perhaps those who are picketing the abortion clinics and those who are picketing the South African embassies need to talk with each other. Perhaps, likewise, Kennedy and Falwell could have been less enamored with the affability of the moment and more rigorously concerned with the logic of their arguments, so that the radical implications of the right-to-life principle could have been addressed.

Only with that kind of serious-minded, if contentious, engagement can such events prove themselves morally helpful.

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