The Fourth Great Awakening and the Political Realignment of the 1990s

This April 1995 commencement speech examines the political outcomes of previous religious cycles in America to chart the directions of current ethical and social trends.

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The legislation that has already emerged from the 104th Congress and the tenor of their debates make it clear that we are witnessing a major shift in American social and economic policy. What do these developments mean for those of you who are graduating today?

A clue to the answer is contained in the pattern of voting over the past dozen years. Exit polls taken during the midterm congressional elections of 1982 revealed that about one-third of the voters identified themselves as believers in what historians call enthusiastic religion, which is characterized by spiritual intensity linked to conversions. Such individuals split their vote fairly evenly between Democratic and Republican candidates in 1982 but not in 1994. Not only has their share of the ballots risen between the two elections, but the bulk of believers in enthusiastic religion have shifted from the Democrats to the Republicans. In 1994 only 26 percent continued to vote Democratic while 74 percent voted Republican.

If those who embrace enthusiastic religion turn out in the same proportion in 1996 and if they continue to favor the Republicans over the Democrats by the same margin, there will have been an interparty shift of about 7.5 million voters. That shift by itself is enough to create a fourteen-point spread in the upcoming presidential election in favor of the Republicans.

The election statistics thus reveal that we are in a process of a political realignment that is to a large extent spawned by trends in American religiosity. One cannot understand current political and ethical trends without understanding the cycles in religiosity in American history and the previous social and political reform movements that they have spawned.

Religious enthusiasm in America has tended to run in cycles that last about one hundred years and that consist of three phases, each about a generation long (see table). A cycle begins with a phase of religious revival, which intensifies religious beliefs and ushers in new or reinvigorated ethics and theological principles. The phase of religious revival is followed by a phase in which the new ethics precipitate powerful political programs and movements. The cycle ends with a phase in which the ascendancy of the ethics and politics of the religious awakening come under increasing challenge and the political coalition promoted by that awakening goes into decline.

Those who directly identify with the principles of a revival are usually only a minority of the population, even if a large one, but what they lack in numbers they make up in enthusiasm and in an energy derived from a sense that their cause is righteous. By building coalitions on single issues, they have been able to extend their influence in politics far beyond their numbers.

Historians of religion refer to the periods of religious revival as "Great Awakenings." The United States in currently in its fourth great awakening, which began about 1960. The upsurge in religiosity takes the form not so much of an increase in the number of churchgoers as of an intensification of religious beliefs and a mobilization of believers to shape political and social institutions.

The past several decades have witnessed a sharp shift of membership away from the mainline Protestant churches, which are identified with a rationalistic approach to religion, to the more mystical churches, which appeal to emotions as much as to the mind—to a religion of passion and sensation. These more enthusiastic churches stress personal conversion and salvation through faith in the atoning death of Christ. They call on their adherents to strive for a mystical experience that will cleanse them of their earlier sins and lead to their spiritual rebirth. The churches in this movement

American Cycles in Religiosity and Their Political Impact

Great Awakening	Period of religious revival	Period of rising political impact of the revival	Period of increasing challenge to dominance of the revival's political program
First	**1730–1760** weakening of predestination doctrine by recognizing possibility that even sinners may be predestined for salvation; rise of the ethic of benevolence	**1760–1790** attack of British corruption; American Revolution	**1790–1820** breakup of revolutionary coalition
Second	**1800–1840** anyone can achieve saving grace through inner and outer struggle against sin; widespread adoption of the ethic of benevolence; upsurge of millennialism	**1840–1870** abolitionist, temperance, and nativist movements; attack on corruption of South; Civil War	**1870–1900** replacement of prewar evangelical leaders; Darwinian crisis; urban crisis
Third	**1890–1930** shift from emphasis on personal to social sin; more secular interpretation of Bible and creed	**1930–1970** attack on the corruption of big business and the rich; labor reforms; civil rights and women's rights movements	**1970–199?** attack on liberal reforms; defeat of ERA; rise of tax revolt; Christian Coalition and other political expressions of enthusiastic religion
Fourth	**1960–199?** return to enthusiastic religion and reassertion of mystical content of Bible; reassertion of personal sin	**1990–?** attack on materialist corruption; pro-life, MADD, and animal rights movements; expansion of tax revolt; attack on entitlements	**?**

were estimated in the late 1980s to have about sixty million adherents. Although often identified with the rapidly growing Fundamentalist, Pentecostal, and Protestant charismatic denominations, the movement is far wider. It includes about twenty million persons in the churches of the mainline Protestant denominations, six million Catholics who have reported a "born again" experience, and nearly five million Mormons. During the past three decades, enthusiastic churches have grown at a rate far greater than the population, while the mainline Protestant churches have lost from 20 to 25 percent of their members. To stem the tide, some mainline churches are attempting to respond to the demand for a more passionate religion, including the Roman Catholic Church, which has launched its own charismatic movement.

The new religious revival is fueled by a revulsion with the corruptions of contemporary society. It is a rebellion against preoccupation with material acquisition and sexual debauchery; against indulgences in alcohol, tobacco, gambling, and drugs; against gluttony; and against all other forms of self-indulgence that titillate the senses and destroy the soul. The leaders of the revival are attempting to win their hearers to piety and to an ethic which extols individual responsibility, hard work, a simple life, and dedication to the family.

To fully understand the meaning of the Fourth Great Awakening, we must briefly review the three previous religious-political cycles in American life. America was from its beginning a deeply religious society. Down to 1790, about 80 percent of Americans (90 percent of the free population) were of British descent and were attached primarily to the dissenting British churches: Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Quakers, and Methodists. Another 5 percent were pietistic Germans or Scandinavians whose religious creeds and ethics were similar to those of the dissenting British churches. The New England strains of these denominations were particularly strong in America because favorable demographic conditions produced unusually high rates of natural increase. By the 1820s, Yankees and their descendants, who accounted for hardly 5 percent of all the immigrants into the U.S. before that decade, represented about 80 percent of the northern population and about 20 percent of the southern population.

Although the Puritan founders of New England were deeply dedicated to their religious principles, their children and grandchildren were more equivocal. Religious enthusiasm waned until the early 1730s, when a new surge of religiosity became evident. The most inspirational figure was George Whitefield, a Methodist itinerant minister, who from 1738 to 1740 evangelized both northern and southern colonies with an explosive emotional power that deeply moved his hearers. Whitefield inspired other ministers and lay itinerants to take up the task of extending the revival to every corner of the British colonies.

The main theological features of the First Great Awakening were the justification of mass, emotional revival meetings; the emphasis on "new birth" as the central objective of the revivals; the emergence of the ethic of benevolence as an aspect of "new birth"; and the weakening of the Calvinist doctrine of predestination.

The political phase ran from 1760 through 1790. It was marked by attacks on British moral and political corruption and by charges that this corruption was being foisted on the American colonies, where it threatened the struggle for purification. The political product of this ideology was the American Revolution. Between 1790 and 1820, the revolutionary coalition broke apart along ideological and partisan lines. And the influence of churches was at its lowest point in American history, due in large measure to the impact of the secular ideology popularized by the many deist leaders of the Revolution.

The Second Great Awakening began about 1800, and the revival phase lasted until 1840. During this era, the camp meeting was invented. In the North, the doctrine of predestination was further weakened, and a new theology, reflecting Methodist influence, arose. This theology held that anyone was capable of achieving saving grace through a determined inner and outer struggle against sin and through the practice of benevolence. Hearers were assured that if they achieved grace they would be healthy and prosperous because God rewarded virtue while the condemned would be visited by economic and other catastrophes because poverty was the wages of sin.

Hearers were also told that the American mission was to build God's kingdom on earth. An array of reform movements

were launched to make America a fit place for the second coming of Christ. These included the temperance movement, the abolitionist movement, and a nativist movement that aimed either to cut back the large number of Catholics allowed to enter the country or to convert them to Protestantism.

During the political phase of the Second Great Awakening, which began in 1840 and continued until 1870, the temperance movement was successful in getting many state and local governments to license the sale of alcoholic beverages. The high point of this campaign was reached between 1846 and 1855 when thirteen states, led by Maine, prohibited sales of all alcoholic drinks.

The militant abolitionists initially focused their campaign on the denominations but later shifted the struggle to the political arena. That switch diluted the benevolent content of the antislavery appeal but greatly broadened the antislavery coalition and eventually led to the formation of the Republican Party. Republicans urged the northern electorate to vote for them, not to free the slaves because it was their Christian duty, but to prevent slave owners from seizing land in territories that rightly belonged to free whites. The slavery issue was settled by the Civil War. Despite the passage of the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments, however, the deep hostility of southern whites and the ambivalent support of northern whites compromised the struggle for the civil equality of ex-slaves and led to its virtual abandonment in 1877.

The Third Great Awakening began about 1890, and the revival phase extended to 1930. It was marked by a major theological split among the principal evangelical churches, with the winning faction rejecting the proposition that poverty was the wages of sin. To a large extent, this split was precipitated by the urban crisis. Evangelicals were divided on how to reform the cities, which were growing at alarming rates and were viewed as centers of corruption, crime, drunkenness, prostitution, and graft that threatened to infect the entire society.

Debates over these and other issues spawned two camps. The conservatives wanted to stand fast on the basic evangelical principles of the Second Great Awakening. That movement, whose most conspicuous element is now called Fundamentalism, upheld the Puritan belief that God spoke to humankind through the Bible.

The Fundamentalists were strongest in the rural areas, particularly in the South.

The winning camp of the Third Great Awakening has come to be called "modernist" or "liberal." Modernists applied scientific principles to the study of the Bible, on the assumption that it was a historical document written by men who were trying to understand God's will within the context of their own times and civilizations. Modernists also believed that Darwin's evolutionary theory was consistent with biblical thought since the world was evolving not only toward human beings as the highest form of life, but also toward ever more perfected human beings. In this view, the laws of nature were God's laws, and scientists were the ones who would discover and explain them. As theologians were needed to interpret the Bible, scientists were needed to interpret nature.

A radical wing of the modernist camp came to be called the Social Gospel movement. Its leading figures argued that if America were to revitalize itself, it would not only have to change its creed—its theory of man's relationship to God—but also change its ethics. It would have to make poverty not a personal failure, but a social failure, and evil would have to be seen not as a personal sin, but as a sin of society. According to these radicals, it was the obligation of the state to improve the economic condition of the poor by favoring labor and redistributing income, since such intervention was necessary to put an end to urban corruption.

The millennialist dream of the Second Great Awakening thus became transformed by the modernists. The new theory switched the emphasis from the second coming of Christ to a new optimism about perfecting American society. In the place of divine revelation stood the revelations of science. Since most of the problems were not physical or biological but social, a new breed of social scientists was required who understood the problems of the cities and who knew how to reconstruct them in a way that would alleviate the social crises of the age.

During most of the revival phase, the theological conservatives, not the modernists, were in control of the church hierarchies and related organizations. Indeed, down into the 1920s, these conservatives were the ones on the offensive, seeking to limit the influence of the modernists and Social Gospelers within denominational circles if not to defeat them entirely.

Support for the modernist cause came from an unexpected source. During the nineteenth and into the early twentieth century, colleges and universities were church institutions and focal points for revivals. Their presidents were usually ordained ministers who taught required courses in moral philosophy or natural theology. However, during the Third Great Awakening, modernist and Social Gospel theories were widely embraced by university teachers, who then taught them to their students. Moreover, for reasons that had more to do with technology than ideology, the student bodies of the colleges and universities began to expand at a remarkable rate. By World War I, the universities were producing far more secular than sacred writers. Journalists, essayists, historians, social scientists, novelists, and dramatists who embraced modernist ideology were turned out by the tens of thousands. They became entrenched in the new mass media—low-cost daily newspapers, glossy magazines, inexpensive books, popular theater, vaudeville, and movies—which they used to attack conservative religionists. The victory of the modernists and Social Gospelers laid the basis for the welfare state, providing both the ideological foundation and the political drive for the labor reforms of the 1930s, '40s, and '50s; for the civil rights reforms of the 1950s and '60s; and for the new feminist programs of the late 1960s and early 1970s.

I now return to the question posed at the beginning of this address regarding the Fourth Great Awakening and the political realignment of the 1990s. The phase of religious intensification began in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when church membership began to grow across all denominations. However, from the mid-1960s on, only the enthusiastic religions showed rapid growth, not only cutting deeply into the membership of the mainline churches, but also drawing many unchurched persons into their fold. Over the past three decades, membership in the principal Protestant mainline churches of America has declined by as much as 25 percent, while the membership of enthusiastic churches has nearly doubled. In some cases, as with the Mormons, the membership has quadrupled.

Single-issue movements began to emerge about halfway through the religious phase: the right-to-life movement emerged during the mid-1970s, tax revolts exploded in the late 1970s, and

the movement against drunk driving (MADD) followed early in the 1980s. These developments were comparable to the temperance, nativist, and abolitionist movements of the 1830s and early 1840s, which despite considerable successes were viewed as zealous minority efforts far from the mainstream of political life.

In 1979 the Moral Majority came into being with a bid to become the vehicle through which believers in enthusiastic religion could unite on a national program of political restructuring. The program included anti-abortion, prayer in the schools, and the elimination of pornography. Although it had significant success in shifting intensely religious voters from the Democratic to the Republican column during the 1984 elections, it collapsed in 1989, tarred by the televangelist scandals of the mid-1980s. Too rigid theologically, too focused on the abortion issue, and undecided whether the denominational churches or the broader political electorate was its main concern, its place was taken by a broader movement called the Christian Coalition, which was formed a year earlier in 1988.

The Christian Coalition has more clearly focused on politics, is more willing to make compromises on key issues in the interest of extending their coalition, and is theologically more flexible, with better connections among enthusiastic religionists in the mainline churches than was true of the Moral Majority. Thus promoting the traditional family has superseded abortion as a coalition issue. The Christian Coalition has also reached out to economic conservatives by integrating tax reductions and smaller government into their social program, linking them to their principles regarding individual responsibility. This move recalls the compromises made by such politically skillful abolitionists as Salmon P. Chase, senator and later governor from Ohio, when he joined with former adversaries in creating first the Free Soil Party and then the Republican Party on a minimalist antislavery program.

It is too soon to know whether the coalition that swept the Republicans into power in 1994 has been consolidated. President Clinton, Vice-president Gore, and other Democratic strategists may possibly devise an appeal that will win back those intensely religious voters who have only recently deserted them. By now it is probably clear to at least the Democratic moderates that their

party committed a major political blunder when they pilloried believers in enthusiastic religion. As Baptists from Arkansas and Tennessee, Clinton and Gore understand and speak the language of evangelicals and know how to fashion an effective appeal. The real issue is whether the more secular parts of the Democratic Party have enough flexibility to accept such a strategy.

If the Republicans retain or increase their control of Congress in 1996 and also capture the presidency, it will probably mean that the religious voters who deserted the Democrats are permanently disaffected. In that case, the Republicans will probably be the dominant party for a generation, for it may take that long to rear a generation of believers in enthusiastic religion who are again comfortable with the Democratic Party.

In closing, I want to discuss briefly how governmental policy is likely to be affected by the new coalition. First, even though the rhetoric is different, many issues stemming from the ethics of the Fourth Great Awakening were also embraced in the ethics of the Third Great Awakening. For example, "sexual harassment" may have originated as a slogan of the feminist movement, but its content is quite Victorian, and it is an aid to those who wish to see a return to traditional family values. Other reforms that unite both ethical camps include protection of the environment, reversal of the growth of pornography and violence in the media, reversal of state-sponsored gambling, and control or suppression of illegal drug trafficking and use.

Second, although the new Republican coalition may pursue different tactics and have a different set of priorities, it is unlikely that it will turn back the clock on race relations, universal education, equal opportunity for women, religious freedom, and the other great social reforms of the twentieth century. I base this assessment partly on the fact that professional women, Hispanics, African-Americans, and Asian Americans are already an important part of the movement for enthusiastic religion and will become an increasingly large presence in the electorate over the next generation.

Among existing programs most likely to be trimmed are those that aim at bringing about equality of income rather than equality of economic opportunity. The theory that cultural crises can be resolved by raising incomes has been given a long trial and has

turned out to be incorrect. Over the past century, the real income of the bottom fifth of the population has increased thirteen-fold, which is about twice the gain of the balance of the population, the upper four-fifths. The poor of the 1990s are relatively rich by 1890 standards, since only households in the top 10 percent of the 1890 income distribution had real incomes that exceed the current poverty line.

Yet despite these economic accomplishments, we have still not solved the national cultural crisis that precipitated the Social Gospel movement. Such problems as drug addiction, births to single teenage women, rape, battering of women and children, broken families, and violent teenage deaths are far more severe today than they were a century ago. As a consequence, not only members of enthusiastic churches, but many in the mainline churches have become convinced that cultural reform must be pursued primarily at this individual level, with an empathy and warmth better achieved by churches and organizations such as Alcoholics Anonymous than by government bureaucracies. This reemergence of confidence in the power of personal compassion is a major factor in the new populism with its demand to return power to the people.

The new coalition will likely enact substantial new legislation designed to increase the share of the population that completes high school and goes on to college. Not only are there strong ethical and social grounds for such legislation, but economic and technological factors are also at work. The competitive pressures of globalization and the substitution of computers for labor in many lower-level service occupations mean that full employment and high rates of economic growth in the United States will require an expansion of the share of the labor force in technical and professional occupations. As I have argued elsewhere, nothing has done more to redistribute income in favor of the poor and middle classes over the past century than the subsidization of higher education. A well-established tradition in education—accepted by believers in enthusiastic religion as passionately as by secular liberals—is that scholarships should be awarded not equally but on the basis of need. That principle allows a concentration on the most disadvantaged sections of the population.

You are leaving Brigham Young University and entering the world of work during a period of considerable hope. The economy is in good shape, and you will have varied opportunities to establish yourselves in that world. You are also entering the next stage of your lives when momentum is with the forces of virtue. What you have learned at BYU will help you find fulfillment in the material world and to contribute to the improvement of the spiritual one.

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