

'Piosity' From the '50s'

Reviewed by
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In his jibe at modernist clergymen who care more for the survival of the Florida alligator than the salvation of souls, Vice President Agnew scored off an easy target—the political parson. That Agnew has not commented as pungently on the preacherly politician is certainly tactful. Now we know why. According to the assistant dean of the chapel at Princeton University, he works for one—Richard M. Nixon.

In the turbulent Cambodian spring of 1970, when the President appeared jointly with Dr. Billy Graham at Knoxville, Tenn., and "spoke grandly of the nation's 'spiritual sources,'" Charles Henderson Jr. "began looking for further evidence of his piety." He found much. He discovered that "Richard Nixon . . . takes his moral and theological convictions seriously," and views his particular brand of theology as "the irreplaceable core of American culture."

In his quest for the Nixon theology, Henderson combed Nixon's early life, in which his mother's Quakerism vied for influence with his father's evangelical Methodism. But the focus here is upon the major episodes of Nixon's public career: the Hiss case, the anticommunist crusade, the Nixon fund, the White House church services, the recent statement on abortion, the pronouncements on epic public events (e.g., that the Apollo flight to the moon was "the greatest event since the creation"); and in various ways the lines of Nixon's civil religion emerge.

Despite its occasionally strident tone, however, this is not one of those tiresomely predictable anti-Nixon tracts that disguises political judgment in the

jargon of psychiatry, sociology or religion. Rather, it is a serious scrutiny of Nixon as the exemplar of a civil piety that persists in American politics.

Like many young Protestant clergymen, Henderson seems to be greatly influenced by so-called neo-orthodoxy, one of whose favorite targets has long been the bland, theologically otiose religiosity that confuses the acts of men casually with the purposes of God. Thus Henderson judges the "Nixon theology" harshly. Lacking depth, lacking "a consistent recognition of the tragic and demonic," it is in his view "the political manifestation of the death of a national god."

Henderson, leading up to this conclusion, makes a persuasive case that Nixon is a "representative figure" of that perfect tidal wave of piety that swept the nation in the 1950s:

In 1953 the prayer breakfast movement was initiated; in 1954 the phrase "under God" was added to the pledge of allegiance; in 1955 "In God We Trust" was made mandatory on all U.S. currency; in 1956 the same phrase was adopted as the national motto by a vote of the House and Senate.

The basic trouble with this American civil religion, Henderson believes, is that it "sees a perfect harmony between faith in God and in the nation and . . . identifies the will of God with the welfare of the state." In the public utterances of Richard Nixon and Dr. Billy Graham it becomes "a primitive mythology" suggesting that "all mankind would be saved by a simple imitation of American mores and institutions."

These conclusions may be unpalatable, even shocking, to a society whose ceremo-

nies of politics are often beclouded in a slack and undisciplined piety. But if they are scarcely original, they need constant saying, and I am glad that a young man of Henderson's maturity and detachment has restated them. For whatever else an agnostic age may suppose, we may guess that a God whose character is as traditional Judeo-Christian theology depicts it must be bored by this kind of nonsense and presumption.

But we must be wary of being too categorical. American Presidents, as Henderson must know, have mouthed this civil theology from Washington's time, some more tastefully than others. As Edmund Wilson notes in "The Union as Religious Mysticism," Lincoln grasped the dark and tragic side of the divine mystery to a depth satisfactory even for a Princeton Presbyterian. There is, then, an unavoidable snobbery in our assessments of presidential theology. When it is done well, as invariably it was by Lincoln and as sometimes it was by Adlai Stevenson or John F. Kennedy, it can be quite suitable. We must admit to ourselves—as I am not sure Mr. Henderson admits—that it is taste and not theology alone that is offended by the shallower Nixon brand.

Moreover, the author may exaggerate the simplism of Dr. Graham's own theology, although that is not easy to do. On a recent talk show Dr. Graham told Dick Cavett that he recognizes that the demonic can invade the civil realm, as it did in Hitler's Germany, so that it becomes the believer's duty to resist unto martyrdom. It is an elementary point, and it would be reassuring to believe that Dr. Graham's favorite President grasps it. On the evidence of this book, I am not sure that he does.

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THE NIXON THEOLOGY. By Charles P. Henderson Jr.

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