

RELIGION

Prayers, Action

Evangelicalism And Watergate

By Louis Cassels
New York Times

ETERNITY magazine, published in Philadelphia, is one of the most respected voices of evangelical Christianity in America.

It is in the large, politically and doctrinally conservative evangelical wing of Protestantism that President Nixon always has found his most ardent supporters.

These considerations give significance to an editorial "Eternity" is publishing in its December issue about the way Christians should respond to "the national crisis" resulting from scandals in Washington.

"Eternity" discerns four reactions among evangelical Protestants to Watergate and related disclosures.

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SOME, it says, view the whole mess as a "judgment of God" upon human depravity, and proof that the Bible is right in saying all men are sinners. A corollary of this view is a feeling that "no politician, regardless of his personal background and popular image, is immune to corruption." So why get excited about a few peccadillos in the present administration?

A second view prevalent among evangelicals, "Eternity" says, is that "Watergate has been blown up out of proportion, that nothing is really wrong, and that it has all been the fault of the nit-picking press."

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FLATLY repudiating this attitude, "Eternity" says:

"It is true that the press is not perfect . . . but in view of the many abuses of the law associated with Watergate, the enormous cast of characters, and the immense complexity of events, we believe we should thank God for the impressive accuracy and success the media have achieved in getting the dismal drama of Watergate before the electorate.

"Those who persist in discounting not only the press but the history-making concern of Capitol Hill and the moral indignation that has swept the country are to be pitied more than the proverbial ostrich."

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THE OTHER two reactions are much healthier, in "Eternity's" view. One is a belief that the current crisis offers a great opportunity for a nationwide

religious revival. "America is shell-shocked and needs as never before the knowledge of a God who cares, who is in control, who offers mercy to a people that humbles itself."

The fourth response, which is growing rapidly among evangelicals hitherto inclined to shrug off Watergate, is "let's get involved" in the fight for morality in government and legislative reforms to forestall future corruption.

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THESE concerned Christians have not stopped with praying for their government and its leaders. They have "followed their prayers with concrete action."

"Through letters, telegrams and telephone calls, they have joined hundreds of thousands in a spontaneous appeal to Washington to (1) insure a complete uncoverup of Watergate and like episodes; (2) Deal firmly with the erosion of the President's capacity to lead; and (3) if necessary, act decisively to give the country fresh leadership in the White House."

All that has been said before by spokesmen for liberal Protestantism. But this is a voice from the center of what has been until now, President Nixon's least critical and most faithful constituency.