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Himself

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Was Billy Graham Had?

PUNDITRY HAS been defined as a curious art in which who says what counts for more than what is said. A pundit was originally a Brahmin learned in Sanskrit and Hindu, philosophy, law and religion. That meaning has been debased to anyone who thinks he knows something about anything, and has a platform to disperse his views.

Most elected officers turn into pundits, soon or late. The legislative pundit is willing to discuss Kierkegaard, on the economics of Indonesia, at the drop of the hat, with the promptings of a reporter or two.

Joe Namath's views on love and sex and the ultimate meaning of life are the very fodder of a certain kind of mind. Even a nit like Jill St. John can be quoted on the balance of power, because of a couple of dates with Mr. Henry Kissinger, who is a bit of a pundit himself.

My favorite pundit, and perhaps the greatest of them all, is the evangelist Billy Graham. Quite apart from whether Mr. Graham does more harm than good by his pious babblings, it has to be admitted that he is very good at what the late H. L. Mencken called "the business of religion." Billy is a latter day Phineas T. Barnum. His product is the deity rather than Tom Thumb and Mrs. Tom Thumb.

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BUT MR. GRAHAM does not confine himself to God and godly matters. He is ready for a snappy quote on whatever may be in the headlines at the moment—dope, inflation, welfare, warfare or his favorite, the imminent arrival of a godless dictatorship if we all do not pray more, preferably with Billy and George Beverly Shea, his godly baritone.



Billy got caught in the wringer, however, when he took on Richard Nixon as a client. The more accurate way to say it: When Richard Nixon took on Billy Graham as a client to give the odor of sanctity to the stink of the White House.

Other clerics Mr. Nixon took on for the same purpose were that ineffable Jesuit, the Rev. John McLaughlin, whom Mr. Nixon appointed to his staff for the purpose of excavating his virtuous purposes in Watergate; the Rabbi Baruch Korff, who got good Republican money to organize the National Citizens Committee for Fairness to the Presidency, and the improbable Korean Rev. Sun Myung Moon, whose full-page newspaper ads told us that the office of President is sacred and only "God has the power and authority to dismiss him."

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IT WOULD be perfectly true to say that Mr. Nixon, who attended church when it seemed politically useful, enlisted the forces of God on his side; but not in the way that the sentiment might be expected to be understood.

The Rev. Billy, because he has the largest following, took the severest beating. He was used brutally by the former President. A series of White House worship services was held under Billy's direction, one as recently as last December. These services were treated as the pseudo-events they were, with cameras all over the place.

In a recent interview, the Rev. Billy wasn't still sure whether he had been used or not. "There is a fine line," he told a reporter, "between using and feeling that (one) must set an example to the country." The cleric did acknowledge, however, that the tapes "revealed a man that I never knew. I never saw that side of him."

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MR. NIXON used his posse of priests as consciencelessly as his aides used homosexuals to imply in television clips that followers of Mr. McGovern were gay, or other aides suggested shipping whores by the carload to the Democratic Convention in Miami.

Since Mr. Graham is in the religion business he is more or less compelled to view Godliness as largely a media matter. This is true of all evangelists, whose business is filling up stadia or large meeting halls, for the collection plater. To this end, Mr. Graham used Mr. Nixon quite as consciencelessly as Mr. Nixon used him. Where God was in all this, God only knows.