

THE TREASURES THAT PREVAIL

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Over the past few days, two of the most influential voices at the overlap of religion and politics in our nation have died: Pat Robertson and Welton Gaddy. Early on, they shared much in common. Both were leading figures in the Southern Baptist Convention. Then their paths diverged.

Pat Robertson, who died on Thursday at the age of 93, built an unremarkable television station in Virginia into the Christian Broadcasting Network. In the 1980's, CBN became a lucrative fundraising mechanism and a powerful political force. The Christian Coalition, an organization founded and principally funded by Robertson's media empire, enabled Robertson to influence Republican politics and engineer the takeover of both houses of Congress by the Republican coalition in 1994.

As Robertson was helping build the Christian right into a political force that could impact presidential elections, he said, "We have enough votes to run the country." Robertson went on to say that when people decide they have had enough of liberal governance, he and the conservatives would take over.

The takeover hasn't happened, at least not yet, but Robertson's merger of fundamentalist Christianity, mass media, and right-wing politics has profoundly shaped our nation for decades — and still does. The author Rick Perlstein, who has authored several books on the religious right, says that Robertson, along with Jerry Falwell, is the person most responsible for turning Christianity into Christian nationalism and Christian nationalism into insurrectionism.

Charles Pierce puts it pointedly in *Esquire* magazine. Speaking of Robertson, Pierce says, "He was the beginning of a blight that is still causing untold damage among our fellow citizens. He was one of the original vectors for the prion disease that is presently eating away at the higher functions of the Republican mind. And, not to put too fine a point on it, he was a bottomless abyss of completely crazy ideas."

For example, Robertson said that the 9/11 terrorist attacks were divine judgment on America's sinfulness, that the 2010 earthquake in Haiti was divine judgment for Haitians serving the devil, that feminism drove women to witchcraft, and that his prayers had averted hurricanes. For his part, Pierce concludes that American politics would have been infinitely better without Pat Robertson's influence.

I agree. Even though Robertson has died, his influence remains, and his co-conspirators are legion. Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church is an outspoken supporter of Russian president Putin and his invasion of Ukraine. Last week, Kirill awarded the Russian Orthodox Church's highest honor to Hungarian prime minister

Viktor Orbán. Under Orbán’s rule, Hungary has dismantled its liberal democratic government and replaced it with a so-called Christian democracy that rejects women’s rights and LGBTQ rights, along with many other liberal democratic values. Orbán’s retrograde rule has been championed by the political and religious right in the US, to the extent that the Conservative Political Action Conference has twice held its convention in Hungary, most recently last month.

In her Substack column “Letters from an American” this past week, the Boston College historian Heather Cox Richardson says that “the political career of Florida governor Ron DeSantis is the epitome of Orbán’s ‘Christian democracy’ come to the United States. DeSantis has imitated Orbán’s politics, striking at the principles of liberal democracy with attacks on LGBTQ Americans, abortion rights, academic freedom, and the ability of businesses to react to market forces rather than religious imperatives.”

Richardson points to a recent speech by DeSantis in which he invokes the cadence of a Churchill speech to declare war on progressive values. DeSantis said, “The woke mind virus represents a war on the truth so we will wage a war on the woke. We will fight the woke in education, we will fight the woke in the corporations, we will fight the woke in the halls of congress. We will never, ever surrender to the woke mob. We will make woke ideology leave it to the dustbin of history; it’s gone.”

Andrew Whitehead teaches sociology at Indiana University and has co-authored the book *Taking Back America for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. Whitehead defines Christian nationalism as a cultural framework — a collection of “myths, traditions, symbols, narratives, and value systems that idealize and advocate for a fusion between Christianity with American civic life.” About 20% of Americans champion this fusion (Whitehead calls them ambassadors) and another 32% are passively comfortable with it (Whitehead calls them accommodators). Together, these two groups make up slightly more than half of the population.

For Christian nationalists, Whitehead says, the ends justify the means. How you get to a truly Christian nation doesn’t matter all that much, nor does the character of the political leaders who get us there. The cultural framework of Christian nationalism, Whitehead says, “includes assumptions of nativism, white supremacy, patriarchy, authoritarianism, militarism, and it sanctifies and justifies violence in the service of what they deem the greater good or even God’s plan.”

This no-holds-barred approach is not new. Chris Hedges, a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and an ordained Presbyterian minister, tells of being a student at Harvard Divinity School in 1980. His ethics professor was Dr. James Luther Adams, the leading Unitarian theologian of the 20th Century. Adams, eighty years old at the time, told his students that by the time they were his age (in roughly the year 2025) they would be fighting what he called Christian fascists. Adams had listened to Pat Robertson and other prominent evangelists in the 1970’s speak of a new political religion. It would try to take control of all major American institutions and the U.S. government, to transform the United States into a global Christian Empire.

At the time, such rhetoric seemed too outlandish to take seriously. Adams, however, had been in Germany in the mid-1930's and had seen fascism up close. Fascism, Adams warned Hedges and his classmates, "would not return wearing brown shirts and swastikas. Its ideological inheritors would cloak themselves in the language of the Bible; they would come carrying crosses and chanting the Pledge of Allegiance."

In the late Adrienne Rich's poem titled "Diving Into the Wreck," she says, "I came to explore the wreck. The words are purposes. The words are maps. I came to see the damage that was done and the treasures that prevail."

When Pat Robertson and his minions arrived on Capitol Hill in the 1990's to wreck our democracy, they were met by the forceful presence of the Rev. Dr. Welton Gaddy, who died this past Tuesday at the age of 81. Amidst the wreckage, Welton was a treasure that prevailed. He grew up Southern Baptist and received his seminary training and PhD from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. He held pulpits and teaching positions across the southern United States before becoming a member of the Executive Committee of the Southern Baptist Convention at a time when the SBC was the most powerful religious force in the nation. Welton left the SBC in the early 1980's when it took a sharp turn to the political right.

Aligning himself with a progressive Baptist denomination that he helped found, Welton increasingly focused his ministry on the relationship between faith and public life. He joined the board of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and then served as its president. In 1997, Welton became president and chief spokesperson for a fledgling Washington-based national advocacy organization for faith and freedom known as the Interfaith Alliance.

The Interfaith Alliance was founded as a progressive response to the religious right's takeover of Congress in 1994. Made up of nearly 100,000 members across nearly 50 religious traditions across the nation, the Interfaith Alliance works to educate both religious leaders and political leaders about the appropriate use of religion when shaping public policy and the appropriate use of politics when shaping religious practice. The Interfaith Alliance also intervenes in situations where religious bigotry and hatred are used to incite discrimination and violence against religious people.

I served on the board of Interfaith Alliance for more than 15 years and as president of the board for four years. I learned to know Welton Gaddy extremely well. He was a trusted friend, a steadfast colleague, and an influential mentor. His presence and example have profoundly shaped my understanding of my public role as a theologian and religious leader. His voice on the national stage, which blended the sonorous cadences of a Baptist preacher with the prophetic challenge of a biblical prophet, insistently reminded our nation of its moral compass and its commitment to the well-being of all Americans. The silencing of his voice by death is a devastating loss both to me personally and to our nation.

Welton Gaddy is one reason the war waged by the likes of Pat Robertson and Ron DeSantis against democracy and progressive values hasn't yet been won — and hopefully

never will be. But we need to keep fighting back. We need to continue to champion faith instead of fanaticism, toleration instead of bigotry, compassion instead of condescension, and democracy instead of fascism.

Heather Cox Richardson reminds us that the diatribe by Ron DeSantis against people who have awakened to the realities of sexism, racism and bigotry is a perversion of a famous speech by Winston Churchill on June 4, 1940. As German troops advanced into France, more than 338,000 Allied soldiers were evacuated from Dunkirk by British, Canadian, and French destroyers, along with dozens of merchant ships and a flotilla of small boats.

In a speech to the British House of Commons, Churchill noted that Britain was not only fighting a nation, but also an ideology — fascism. He warned his people that the war would be neither easy nor quick. But, he promised, “we shall not flag or fail. We shall go on to the end, we shall fight in France, we shall fight on the seas and oceans, we shall fight with growing confidence and growing strength in the air, we shall defend our Island, whatever the cost may be, we shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills; we shall never surrender....”

I don't expect the proponents of religious fascism to surrender anytime soon, but neither will those of us surrender who champion democracy, equality, and freedom. It's true that this political battle is being played out in the public square of our nation, but it is also a religious battle — a battle for our nation's soul.

Those of us who continue to fight this battle do so inspired by the spirit of Welton Gaddy. His legacy of service and spirituality will remain with us always.

I close with these words from Welton:

Every time that religion has identified itself or entangled itself with a particular political movement or a particular government, religion has been harmed. I see religion as a powerful positive healing force for this nation and the world. But that force is blunted, weakened, compromised inestimably, if we turn religion into a tool for advancing political strategy; if we make it a matter of how to win political office; if we treat it as anything other than a sacred part of life from which we ought to draw sustenance and values and strength for living courageously as good citizens.

Rest in peace, Welton Gaddy, my beloved friend. Your legacy is a treasure that will prevail always.