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The Media's Discovery  
Of Southern Baptists

By Hal Wingo

NEW YORK (BP)--Whatever else history may finally decide about Jimmy Carter, it should surely credit him with shaking the regional dust off the words "Southern Baptist."

Let the record reflect that what George Washington Carver did for peanuts, Jimmy Carter's "religion on his shirt sleeve" did for his brethren in the faith, whatever they may have thought of him.

No one, not even Billy Graham, ever came close to creating the public awareness and curiosity about Southern Baptists that Carter managed from the moment he burst on the national scene in 1976.

And his lustings in Playboy notwithstanding, Carter remains the personification of a Southern Baptist to most Americans. The spotlight that fell on him, in fact, brought the 12.9 million member Southern Baptist Convention into a prominence it had never before enjoyed --or endured.

Why? Because most Americans had never seen a Southern Baptist up that close before. Even though the denomination is part and parcel of the social and political life of every Southern town and claims representation in all the other states, the pickings north of the Mason-Dixon line are slim indeed.

Consider: There are 22 million people living in the greater New York Metropolitan area, and the Baptist Convention of New York (covering New York state, New Jersey and Connecticut) numbers only 18,000 followers. Among the 45 million people--one out of every five Americans--who live along the eastern seaboard from Boston to Washington, there aren't enough Southern Baptists to fill Baylor Stadium.

And since most of the national press is located in this eastern corridor, a presidential candidate who happened to be Southern Baptist was a challenge to the reportorial and interpretive skills of the nation's press. Some of them met the challenge honorably while others never got past a misunderstanding of "born again."

The press was nonetheless obliged to deal with Carter's religion. He was the one, after all, who said that it shaped everything else in his life--his politics, his social attitudes, his priorities. There was nothing for journalists to do but get on the bandwagon and discover the joys of being southern and religious.

Not long after it became clear even to Jerry Brown and Mo Udall that Carter was going to sweep through the New York convention like Sherman through Georgia, the press began looking for new ways to extoll the South. The New York Times actually devoted half a page to the greater glories of grits, complete with mouth-watering recipes.

And in some of the more cynical circles of Manhattan it was suddenly chic to be southern and nothing less than politically prescient to be Southern Baptist. On more than one occasion this year I had people say to me, "You mean you really are one?" and then proceed to stare as if I were going to sprout wings or babble in tongues.

At an only slightly more sophisticated level, this was the early reaction of much of the national press. The problem was that they had confronted a presidential candidate whose "manner of believing" was a complete enigma to most of them. Not only was Carter southern, and a peanut farmer, but he admitted without a trace of embarrassment that he was first and foremost a "born again" Christian.

This upfront confession of a frequently misunderstood faith explains much of the difference in the way that religion was a factor in the election of 1976 as opposed to John Kennedy's race in 1960.

Everybody has some idea of what a Catholic is, and Kennedy's only real hurdle was to convince a segment of the voters that he wouldn't be taking orders from the Pope. He did that effectively in his famous encounter with the Baptist Ministers Conference in Houston, and the religious issue was pretty much behind him from then on.

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But with Carter the problem was simpler for two reasons: the electorate didn't really understand what a Southern Baptist is, and Carter's religion was apparently much more central to his life than Kennedy's was to him. It is not known that anyone ever stayed up nights worrying about Kennedy's being fanatically religious. When James Reston made this point in the New York Times, however, he heard from one interested dissenter: Rose Kennedy responded that Kennedy was indeed a deeply religious man, that he had prayed every day.

As Carter's prominence grew, so did the stories dealing with his church. The Southern Baptist Convention's annual meeting in Norfolk, Va., last year got much bigger play in the New York papers than ever before and Time magazine did a two page feature attempting to explain who these Baptists were anyway. The stories were often objective, fair and sometimes admiring of the denomination. Some of them even understood what Carter meant by being "born again."

Others are still trying to figure that one out. Not long after Carter won the nomination, New York Magazine produced a cover story entitled "Jimmy Carter" Thrice Born--a psycho-history of his mystical rebirth."

In the article, two respected scholars reported on their personal interviews with Carter and how they came to the conclusion that Carter was "born again" for the first time when his father died in 1953 and a second time on a mission trip to New England for the Home Mission Board in 1967. By this reckoning, Carter could have been expected to experience a third rebirth the night of his nomination and a fourth on election day. (And all this time Baptists thought that Catholics were the mystics.)

But journalists love catch phrases, and "born again" quickly became the most popular description of the season. More often than he was called a peanut farmer, Carter was labeled a born again Southern Baptist, and from the accurate beginning sprang other uses of the words that left theology waiting to be reclaimed.

Theater advertisements on New York radio soon began beseeching audiences to "be born again--see 'Godspell.'" A journalist friend of mine proposed that a terrific idea for a new magazine would be one called Born Again, with limitless editorial possibilities: "Born again with a new career," "Born again with a new wardrobe," "Born again with a new mate," etc.

Somewhere along the way Carter's purer protestations of the rebirth experience almost got lost in the shuffle. Because he did make such an obvious point of his own religion (and his mother complained that his religion was being overdone in the press), Carter's Sunday morning church attendance and public prayers were initially met with a healthy dollop of skepticism. One midwestern bureau chief for a national magazine spent two weeks following Carter on the road and reported to his editors in New York that he felt Carter really believed he was Jesus Christ. Other reporters feared that Carter was using his religion to get the "evangelical vote," which in itself became a major new block of the electorate to contend with.

Everytime Carter went to church, his morning prayers and Sunday School observations were dutifully reported by the wire services, news magazines and television networks. On occasion he actually taught the lesson for his Bible class and reporters soon noted that he brought some of the same mannerisms and methods of the Bible class into his campaign speeches.

Often at political rallies Carter would ask questions for which there were simple, obvious answers, waiting for the response from the audience. Other times he would ask for a show of hands in response to a question. Observers who had sat with him through the Sunday School session dubbed his campaign style "Southern Baptist dialectic."

But the newsmen had to admit they never found a real inconsistency between the public and private Carter on questions of his deepest personal beliefs. Not even after Playboy.

Ironically, at just about the time the press began to perceive Carter's religious sincerity (there may have been no conversions from all those hours spent in the Plains Baptist Church, but the skeptics about his religious convictions fell away for the most part), Carter's stock among fellow Baptists and other evangelicals appeared to fade.

While some took exception to his candor and his words, the language in the Playboy interview was reassuring to many who had wondered all along if anybody could be as consistently righteous as Carter appeared.

Years ago, Reinhold Niebuhr wrote that "religion is more frequently a source of confusion than of light in the political realm." Probably so, but at the end of the Carter campaign the man and his religion seemed compatible to those who had followed him down the long months of the political trail. Religion was one thing on which he had never changed his point of view.

And in the process much had been written about the kind of church he represented, the kind of faith he claimed. Southern Baptists living far away from the encircling presence of the denomination could now confront that part of their identity without hearing "Southern what?" in response. For that, if there had been nothing else, I say "Thank you, Jimmy."

Hal Wingo, News editor of People Magazine, is a Southern Baptist and a graduate of Baylor University, Waco, Tex., which published this article in the Baylor Line.

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News Service of the Southern Baptist Convention

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**Baptist Tent Meetings Set  
In Area of Prior Persecution**

TAMBO, Ecuador (BP)--A major evangelistic thrust to the Quechua-speaking Indians will take place here despite previous persecution of believers in the area, Southern Baptist missionaries report.

The week-long meetings will be held in a large tent in Tambo and nearby Canar.

"In view of what has happened in this area in the past, missionaries organizing the revival have no idea what to expect," says Archie V. Jones, Southern Baptist missionary to Ecuador on furlough in the States. "The possibilities for results are astounding, but the possibilities for adverse reaction are also astounding."

The major incident of persecution here occurred in October, 1975, when about 80 Indians disrupted a church service led by Jones in a local Indian believer's home. When believers tried to calm the mob, a fight began, resulting in machete wounds and other injuries. Jones escaped, summoned the police and the mob leaders were arrested.

All the wounded, except two men, have fully recovered. One almost lost an arm and has only limited use of it now. The other man's eye was cut and badly sutured. As a result, the tear duct does not function and causes him some difficulty.

According to Jones, the 31 Indians who have been baptized here are publicly ridiculed in the streets by other religious leaders. Many times, the Baptist Indians are not able to sell their wares in the marketplace and suffer losses by theft. In a few cases, homes have been burned.

Attempting to criticize Baptists, an article in one of the Spanish-speaking newspapers accused Baptists of "preaching peace, love and forgiveness and denying the Indians the right to their rebellious spirits," Jones related.

"You know, it's interesting that not one of the Indians who has been baptized has fallen away from his faith," he continued. "We've not lost one. When an Indian makes a decision, he sticks to it. And in the case of the Quechua-speaking Indians, that means in spite of persecution."

"Southern Baptist missionaries Gerald W. Doyle and James C. Muse Jr., who are organizing the revival, are requesting that Southern Baptists pray about these specific meetings," said Jones.

Doyle and Muse hope the services here will help get churches started in Tambo and Canar, about 15 miles away.

In Canar a church building is already under construction, according to Jones. A Quechua speaking pastor from Quito is leading the Tambo congregation, and the group hopes to build a chapel on the outskirts of the town.

"The Baptists in Canar and Tambo are excited about the evangelistic meetings," Jones said. "They want their people to hear the gospel. They, along with Southern Baptist missionaries in Ecuador, solicit earnest prayers."

Redford Recovering  
From Heart Attack

BOLIVAR, Mo. (BP)--Former Southern Baptist Home Mission Board executive secretary-treasurer Courts Redford has been taken to his daughter's home after suffering a heart attack.

Redford, who retired in 1964 after 11 years with the board, is president emeritus of Southwest Baptist College in Bolivar.

His daughter, Mrs. Elizabeth Teters of Bolivar, says Redford may receive cards and letters at her home; Route 3, Bolivar, 65613.

Redford preceded Arthur B. Rutledge, executive director-treasurer emeritus, at the board. He was formerly assistant executive secretary-treasurer to J. B. Lawrence and was president of Southwest Baptist College from 1930-1943.

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Okla. Baptists Take 2nd  
Step Against Pornography

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OKLAHOMA CITY (BP)--Oklahoma Baptists took the second step in their statewide fight against pornography, with a "Anti-Pornography Conference" here.

More than 700 persons attended the event which included such speakers as Oklahoma Gov. David Boren; Oklahoma Attorney General Larry Derryberry; Foy Valentine, executive secretary-treasurer of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission (CLC); Harry N. Hollis Jr., director of family and special moral concerns for the CLC; Jimmy Allen, president of Americans United for Separation of Church and State and pastor of First Baptist Church, San Antonio, Tex.; and Joe L. Ingram, executive director-treasurer of the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma.

The event, sponsored by the Oklahoma convention's Christian Life Committee, drew persons from at least 15 other denominations and civic groups, around the state, among them a Roman Catholic priest, to Trinity Baptist Church here.

The first step in the campaign was taken when the Oklahoma convention voted last November to launch the fight. The next step will be the formation of county anti-pornography councils and the staging of mass rallies against pornography. A group of county coordinators and associational directors was organized during the meeting, to serve as community leaders in the coming statewide fight against pornography.

Participants in the conference went home armed with numerous suggestions and strategies for combatting pornography in Oklahoma.

Most speakers mentioned the recent conviction of "Hustler" magazine publisher Larry Flynt, convicted in Ohio for engaging in organized crime and pandering obscenity in publishing the magazine. Flynt has appealed the decision.

"The conviction of . . . Flynt is a warning that there are many Americans who are not going to roll over and play dead for the pornographers," Hollis told conference participants.

"Weep not for Larry Flynt," Hollis said, but for the models "exploited" by the magazine, the "jaded human beings" who search its pages attempting to bring meaning into their lives, for America "which gives people like Flynt an opportunity only to be repaid with filth spewed in her face.

"On second thought, perhaps we should weep for this man who has so scrambled up his values that the title of his magazine . . . is a tragically accurate description of his life . . .," Hollis said. "Thank God a jury had the courage and the wisdom to find him guilty."

Other speakers urged church members to become involved, not as fanatics but to be selective and balanced in their approach to the problems of pornography.

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"If church members could be awakened and brought to say they won't buy from merchants selling pornography, and if we would set the right example, there would be no market for pornography," Boren said.

"And once we have a spiritual awakening among the people and the people get right, there will be no market for such a commercial venture as pornography," Boren said. He then urged citizens to lead the kind of lives that "will bring us back to the firm value and commitments of our faith."

Derryberry told participants that the church is people, as are government and politics. He decried the attitude of many that says, "I don't want to get involved," and noted that "politicians can't be looked to in solving this problem (of pornography) alone, because the politicians we are complaining about today didn't get where they are by their strength. They got there because the Christians and other people didn't want to get involved."

Derryberry suggested three basic things to do about pornography--"Be informed, be reasonable, and be positive . . . The only certain thing about pornography laws is that they are uncertain . . . Even the courts are trying to decide on and define obscenity," he said.

One problem, the attorney general added, is that "some state laws contradict each other."

Allen argued that people against pornography are the "defenders of freedom with responsibility" and that pornography fighters are "really a hedge against censorship because when and if the pendulum swings to the other extreme, we may end up with state censorship."

He urged people fighting pornography to "deal with love, gentleness and firmness. Do your work selectively, and take one thing at a time. And don't spread yourself too thin."

Conference participants were urged to enlist persons and groups of other denominations and interests to join in the anti-pornography fight.

Ingram noted that in the last five years, "We've had three votes on moral issues in Oklahoma, two on liquor and one on gambling, and we won each . . . with increasing strength."

The Oklahoma Baptist Convention has appropriated \$10,000 for legal counsel, materials and assistance in areas where the campaigns against pornography will take place, a convention spokesman said.

The key to cleaning up the "moral sewerage of pornography," said Valentine, is "effective Christian citizenship. Our moral outrage at pornography, to be effective, must be channeled into votes, laws, public policy, and law enforcement through a continuing position of responsible Christian citizenship."

Valentine and Hollis called for support of a Christian understanding of sexuality, rather than the "distorted" and "debasing" view of sex they said pornography presents.

"Others may argue that pornography may actually be helpful in liberating people's views about sex . . . The truth is, Christians believe, however, that pornography does not tell the truth about sex," Hollis said.

"The trouble with pornography," he continued, "is not that it tells too much but that it tells too little. It focuses on physical aspects of sex and neglects emotions, feelings, commitments and love."

Hollis said that pornography contributes to a breakdown in the moral values of a community, demeans the family, debases males and females, and warps character and conduct. It contributes, he said, to antisocial behavior, often blocks healthier relationships between "real human beings," and "enriches the treasure chests" of people linked with organized crime.

Hollis concurred with Allen that pornography is not an expression of freedom with responsibility. Rather, Hollis said, "pornography does not tell it like it is; it censors and selects its facts."

He urged Christians to "practice aggressive evangelism" and to announce that the abundant life makes the "crutch of pornography" unnecessary.

Through Jesus Christ, he said, "we can replace the superficial pleasures of pornography with the genuine joy that comes when we use the good gift of sex as God intended. This is the ultimate solution to the pornography problem," Hollis concluded.

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Pan American Union of  
Baptist Men Sets Sessions

Baptist Press  
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NITEROI, Brazil (BP)--David Y. K. Wong of Hong Kong, the only layman ever to serve as president of the Baptist World Alliance, heads the program list for the 3rd Congress of the Pan American Union of Baptist Men (PAUBM), here August 15-20.

Owen Cooper of Yazoo City, Miss., president of the PAUBM, said that lay people from most countries in the Western Hemisphere are expected to participate in the meeting.

Niteroi is just across the bay from Rio de Janeiro, where the PAUBM held its first congress in July 1968. The second congress met in 1972 at Cali, Colombia.

Besides Wong and Cooper, program personnel will include Glendon McCullough, executive director of the Southern Baptist Brotherhood Commission; Jack Stanton, professor of missions at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; and Eugene Grubbs, a member of the staff of the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board.

Others are Jose Reis Pereira and David Gomes of Brazil; Natalio Aldo Broda and Samuel Liberl of Argentina, and Samuel Prado Gomes of Venezuela.

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