

TEXANS AND GOD

by William C. Martin

"Harvey Cox wouldn't believe Texas." Dr. Kenneth Chafin, pastor of Houston's vigorous South Main Baptist Church, was referring to Cox's best seller of a decade ago, *The Secular City*, and to the absence of such cities in what Chafin regards as "the bellwether state in contemporary American religion." "Just as New York and the northeastern states lead in shaping the media, and California leads in influencing life-styles," says Dr. Chafin, "Texas is the most viable state religiously in this country." Since Baptist preachers seldom aim low, it is tempting to dismiss such a claim as just another Texas boast, but a little stock-taking lends support to the assessment.

Demographic precision is rarely possible when discussing American religious groups, but figures obtained from the National Council of Churches and well-informed denominational leaders suggest that adherents of the major religious groups in Texas break down as follows:

Southern Baptists	2,363,000
Roman Catholics	2,000,000
Methodists	856,000
Churches of Christ	c. 750,000
Pentecostal and Holiness	c. 500,000
Lutherans	248,000
Presbyterians	209,000

Episcopalians	176,000
Jews	60,000
Mormons	42,000

The Christian Science Church declares it keeps no records of its numbers in any state, but admits that Texas is a relatively high-density area for Christian Science, with 71 churches, 29 "societies," and 20 Christian Science youth organizations on college campuses.

The Roman Catholic Church, which has been in Texas since 1675, is strongest among Mexican-Americans in South Texas and in the counties just north of the Mexican border, westward to El Paso. The rest of the state is dominated by Southern Baptists, who constitute more than one third of the population in 113 counties and one sixth of all the Southern Baptists in the world. Most of the 1,400,000 blacks in Texas belong to fundamentalist Baptist, Methodist, and Pentecostal/Holiness churches. Those along the southern Louisiana border are mostly Catholic. The state's 60,000 Jews, whose largest concentrations are in Houston and Dallas, are more likely to be Reform than Conservative or Orthodox, and extreme sects, such as Hasidism, are practically unknown.

Texas has not escaped the secularization that has weakened churches in other sections of the country:

many young adults have abandoned the church, some out of deep resentment for what they regard as narrow and stultifying religious heritage, and others because the old symbols have lost their plausibility. Perhaps because its religious impulse is both so powerful and so varied, Texas has proven hospitable to a number of unconventional and non-Western religions. The first major commune of the Children of God was located on a farm east of Fort Worth; the "charismatic movement" has infiltrated virtually every large denomination; the Krishna Consciousness Society operates a training school for the children of devotees in Dallas; and when Guru Maharaj Ji ushered in the current millennium in October, 1973, he chose the Houston Astrodome as the spot from which universal love and peace were to flow outward in a never-ending stream. Even so, at least one of every two Texans—white, black, or brown—belongs to a church that espouses a literal interpretation of the Bible. Moreover, the most conservative of these—such as the Southern Baptists and Churches of Christ—are still growing, with the greatest increase occurring among various Pentecostal and Holiness groups whose strict moral standards, enthusiastic worship, and strong emphasis on such charismatic phenomena as "speaking in

tongues" and faith healing are attracting large numbers of working-class city dwellers. Reuel Lemmons, a longtime leader of the fundamentalist Churches of Christ and editor of the *Firm Foundation*, one of that church's most conservative publications, explains the situation this way: "There is something ingrained in human nature that demands an authoritative framework. People like to be told what to do. We do not want the chaos that comes without authority."

When at least 50 percent of their neighbors share similar assumptions about the nature of the cosmos and its inhabitants, believers feel little need to be defensive about their faith. One often sees bumper stickers that read IN CASE OF THE RAPTURE [an aspect of Christ's second coming] THIS CAR WILL BE UNOCCUPIED. Large signboards in front of churches contend for the motorist's eye with catchy slogans—"A Going Church for a Coming Lord" . . . "Anchored to the Rock but Geared to the Times"—and announce that the attendance goal for Homecoming Sunday is "1003 plus you and me."

Texas religion is not, however, simply a matter of slogans and salesmanship. Kenneth Chafin's South Main Baptist Church, for example, with a membership of 6500 and a budget of over \$1,000,000, sponsors an active program for 43 international groups, attracts 650 singles every Sunday to its activities for the "unmarried and formerly married," and is initiating a center for marriage and family counseling to be staffed by thirty psychiatrists and psychologists. But even South Main is dwarfed by First Baptist in Dallas, whose 18,000 members (including Billy Graham) and weekly contribution of \$80,000 make it the largest and richest Baptist church in the world. First Baptist is the second largest landowner in Dallas, surpassed only by the city itself. Its main facility, valued at \$17 million, sprawls over three and a half city blocks, and is flanked by four huge

parking lots and two indoor garages. Its staff of 256 supervises eight mission centers, an eleven-grade private school, the Criswell Bible Institute for laymen (named for Rev. W. A. Criswell, who has served the church as pastor since 1944), a library of more than 25,000 volumes, 23 choirs, recreation facilities used by more than 1800 people each week, a large summer camp, and a full complement of Sunday school and other educational programs.

Baptists have no corner on size or energy. Rabbi Robert Kahn, president of the Reformed Rabbinate of North America and leader of Houston's Temple Emanuel, reports that rates of temple affiliation and attendance by Texas Jews are significantly higher than those of Jews in the Northeast. In cities all over the state, churches from the major denominations are engaged, often on an ecumenical basis, not only in traditional charitable activities, but in ambitious and successful efforts to deal with alcoholism and drug abuse, to offer counseling to troubled families, to provide high-quality, low-cost medical care for the poor, to assist farm workers in obtaining better wages and working conditions, and to improve the lot of the aged.

Much that happens in Texas churches, of course, parallels developments in other parts of the country. Sizable groups of clergy and laity keep up with the latest trends in modern theology; women and minority representatives press successfully for leadership roles; Jews, united in their support of Israel, are manifesting greater pride in their Jewishness and increased interest in the basic traditions of Judaism; lay organizations support or oppose abortion; Roman Catholics leave the priesthood to marry; and Protestants leave the ministry to conduct encounter groups and workshops in transactional analysis. But religion in Texas is also characteristic of the state. The basic frontier optimism and individualism and the deep-rooted work ethic are regularly nurtured by the preaching in evangelistic churches. As a child, I heard sermons reminding me that a true Christian has an obligation to strive

to be the best at whatever he does—the best athlete, the best student, the best teacher, the best farmer or rancher, the most successful businessman. Coupled with this emphasis on the responsibility to develop and use one's gifts is a sense of obligation to make a constructive contribution to society.

Texas Christians, especially evangelical Protestants, regard it as unwise or improper for the church as a corporate body to get involved in such activities as social protest and legislative lobbying. In recent years, however, major religious bodies in Texas have built a coalition with impressive political clout. Last year, the Baptist Christian Life Commission, with assistance from Methodists and the Churches of Christ, mounted an information campaign that was instrumental in defeating a referendum that would have legalized betting on horse racing in Texas. Dr. Chafin is quick to note that this coalition is not simply negative: "These are not Blue Law people who feel the Kingdom of God is about to break in in Texas. But they do feel a commitment to work toward the betterment of their social environment." Dr. Jimmy Allen, a former director of the Christian Life Commission now serving as pastor of San Antonio's First Baptist Church, points out that essentially the same forces have successfully supported a recent bill to provide bilingual education and are currently working to reorganize the juvenile justice system.

Depending on one's temperament, social philosophy, and personal experience with fundamentalism, it is as possible to view the dominant manifestation of Texas religion with cynicism or outright antipathy as it is to regard it approvingly. But if one is going to try to understand Texas, it is not possible to ignore the faith in which so many of its people live and move. □

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"God made some men big and some men small, but Sam Colt made them all equal."
—Texas proverb

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