

Death of a Titan: Where Were You the Day Jerry Falwell Died?

By Stan Moody*

I don't reckon that a common question will emerge, "Where were you the day Jerry Falwell Died?" Nevertheless, the day Jerry Falwell died, I was reading Jon Meacham's incredible treatise, *American Gospel* (Random House, NY, 2007). This is a must-read for every thinking Christian.

Back on message, however, what I was reading the day Jerry Falwell died was the account of his conversion from preaching to individuals the Gospel of Jesus Christ to that of saving the soul of America. "We were mobilizing a potential army numbering in the tens of millions. The fight was on!!" (p. 218).

God was not, apparently, sufficient for Falwell's purposes. Jetting around the world in his Lear donated by the State of Israel, Falwell achieved rock star status, while America lumbered on, defending its non-sectarian roots that provide the very freedoms that gave rise to Jerry Falwell.

Meacham systematically avoids his own litmus test of faith by leaving us in the dark as to his church affiliation, if any. That he perfectly understands the Christian message and its distortion by the charlatans of the Gospel is clear, however. He writes with a passion that un.masks more than a scholarly interest in the debate.

A striking message emerges from his brief thoughts on notorious atheist, Madelyn Murray O'Hair:

O'Hair and two of her relatives disappeared in 1995; they were killed, dismembered, and secretly buried on a Texas ranch as a result of an extortion-kidnapping scheme. It took nearly six years for authorities to locate the family's remains. When O'Hair's minister son learned that the bodies had been found, he said, "She was an evil person who led many to hell. That is hard to say about my own mother, but it is true" (p. 236).

Voices like Robertson's, Falwell's and O'Hair's come from the farthest fringes, but they reach many ears (p. 237).

Meacham's theme is that America is anything but a Christian nation, and he bases that on the carefully-constructed safeguards against the domination of public life by any religious belief system. He offers hope, however, in what he refers to as the "American Gospel," an underlying belief in the actions in human history of a sovereign power while protecting the rights to worship that power in any and all variations or not to worship at all.

Thus, the founders carefully and skillfully protected the minority from the over reaching of any majority, a concept foreign to the agenda of the Christian Right, which seeks to impose its theocratic aims through majority rule.

As a result of those founding principles, America is the most religious nation in the industrialized world but also, perhaps, the most *pluralistically* religious.

Had Falwell been an educated man, he might have latched onto the doctrines of the sovereignty of God and the presence of the Kingdom of God. It is in those two doctrines that he would have found the very sufficient Source of power necessary to overcome.

Instead, it will be a long time before the damage he inflicted on civility is repaired.

But then, in a world ruled by a sovereign God, who knows but that Jerry Falwell was ordained to awaken the sleeping giant of faith through the demonstration of its alternative?

* [Stan Moody](#) is the author of "[Crisis in Evangelical Scholarship](#)" and "[McChurched: 300 Million Served and Still Hungry](#)"