

The end of Newsweek?

by L_Brent_Bozell

Newsweek greeted the coming of Easter with a black cover, and the headline "The Decline and Fall of Christian America," spelled out in red in the shape of a cross. Inside, it was more declarative: "The End of Christian America." Why? Because they found that the percentage of self-identified Christians had fallen 10 points since 1990. OK, then let's compare. How much has Newsweek's circulation fallen since 1990? Just since 2007, their announced circulation has dropped by 52 percent. It would be more plausible to state "The End of Newsweek."

At the end of 2007, Newsweek reduced its "base rate" (or circulation guaranteed to advertisers) from 3.1 million to 2.6 million, a 16 percent drop. At the end of 2008, the Wall Street Journal reported that Newsweek, faced with an estimated 21 percent decline in ad pages, could soon drop that circulation number by another 500,000 to 1 million readers. In February, the magazine confirmed the million-issue drop, saying it would drop to a base of 1.9 million in July and 1.5 million readers by January 2010.

"Mass for us is a business that doesn't work," Tom Ascheim, Newsweek's chief executive, told the New York Times. "Wish it did, but it doesn't. We did it for a long time, successfully, but we can't anymore." Now that U.S. News and World Report waved a white flag and said it would only publish monthly, the evidence is much stronger for wondering about the decline and fall of the American "news magazine" — as if Time and Newsweek haven't already shed that label in everything but name.

Newsweek's strategy in the midst of all its financial decline is to double and triple the amount of editorializing, cast aside all semblance of "news" in favor of long, liberal essays by self-impressed Newsweek editor Jon Meacham and his international editor Fareed Zakaria. Is that really a business solution, or is it the captains performing violin solos on the deck of the Titanic?

One has to wonder whether Newsweek's financial gurus really think it's a smart business strategy to greet the Easter season with funerals for "Christian America," and greet the Christmas season by making the "religious case for gay marriage"? (That's not to mention all the reverent Obama worship in between.)

Christianity, in contrast to Newsweek, is in decent demographic shape. The American Religious Identification Survey that Newsweek touted — from Trinity College in Connecticut — estimated there are now 173.4 million self-identified Christians in America, up from 151.2 million in 1990. The percentage declined, but the actual number increased.

The real bold-faced result in the survey that spawned Newsweek's cover is the rise of what the pollsters called the "nones," up from 14 million to 34 million. In a typically ponderous essay, Newsweek editor Jon Meacham welcomed the alleged decline and fall of "the modern religious right's notion of a Christian America" because it creates a "calmer" political environment and a more "theologically serious religious life."

Translation: The "culture wars" should be declared over, and the left should be declared the winner. The Christian right should slink back to its church buildings and keep its antiquated notions of sin and salvation out of the public square. "Calmer" Christians will seek a creed that chummily goes along and gets along with the modern, secular culture. Only surrender on social issues is "theologically serious."

Newsweek watchers might find it odd that Christians should surrender, but Muslims should be granted greater respect. A month ago, Newsweek's cover announced, "Radical Islam is a fact of life. How to live with it." Fareed Zakaria argued the smart strategy was "nuanced, noncombative rhetoric" that avoids sweeping declarations like "war on terror." Zakaria's piece ended right in the secular liberal's sweet spot. He was confident radical Islamism would eventually lose adherents, because "they lack answers to the problems of the modern world. They do not have a worldview that can satisfy the aspirations of modern men and women. We do. That's the most powerful weapon of all."

Modernity will win, and archaic religion will lose. All this leads back to the sneaking suspicion that the top minds at Newsweek think they are the wisest of men, the definers of trends and the shepherds of public opinion. So why is everyone abandoning their advice? Why are the captains of a magazine that's lost half its circulation telling the rest of us where the mainstream lies?

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