



Protestant Piety and Politics in Contemporary America

HARRY R. DAVIS

Beloit College, Beloit, Wisconsin

The leaders of modern, secular cultures have characteristically expected and intended the progressive privatizing of piety and the exclusion of religious impulses from the political realm, first in their own societies and ultimately in the world at large. Recent political experiences raise considerable doubt about the feasibility of that project.

On the world scene, we witness Communist (and erstwhile fascist) regimes which are religious in claim and temper; the theocratic thrusts of a resurgent Islam; the continuing political impact of the Roman Catholic Church in Poland and Latin America. Within even the relatively tame and tolerant politics of the United States, we experience, for example, the substantial involvement of the churches in the civil rights and Vietnam protest movements; the prominence of public policy issues such as abortion law and school prayer; and of course the recent rise of the "New Religious Right" with its born-again political leaders.

The persistence of religion as a motivating force in modern politics tends to support a formulation widely shared among modern sociologists of religion: the religious beliefs of the people of a society decisively shape their cultural assumptions and values which in the long run legitimate their public institutions and guide their political choices. To the extent that this proposition may be valid, religion becomes a decisive category for social and historical analysis, and churches bear a tremendous burden of moral and political responsibility. In such a context, how should we understand what is happening to the relationship of the Protestant churches to the public order in the United States and appraise the performance of the churches in fulfilling this social responsibility? Essaying answers to such questions is a highly hazardous enterprise, but an urgent one which some thoughtful contemporary analysts are undertaking.

I. FROM LEGAL TO CULTURAL DISESTABLISHMENT

Historians are generally agreed that the religion which predominantly shaped the political culture of America during its first three centuries was Protestant

Christianity, particularly in its evangelical Puritan expression. The English colonies were founded by people of undoubted piety, and their public life was directed by officially established churches. The commitments of the revolutionaries and the founding fathers were rooted in the precepts of the Reformed faith, albeit somewhat modified by Enlightenment ideas. After legal disestablishment, the holy hopes of Christianity continued through the nineteenth century to inspire the nation's varied efforts to fulfill its "manifest destiny" by creating under God a "new Israel," a "righteous empire," a "Christian civilization." Lutheran and Roman Catholic

immigrants complicated and enriched the scene. But it was the now-dilute Puritanism of the “mainline” denominations which was the principal bearer of the “social gospel” into the twentieth century. As late as 1931, and despite the First Amendment, the Supreme Court could state without controversy that “we are a Christian people,...acknowledging with reverence the duty of obedience to the will of God.” America has been a “nation with the soul of a church” (G. K. Chesterton, *via* Sidney Mead), an “almost-chosen people” (A. Lincoln).

During the first half of the twentieth century Christians experienced much which confirmed continuity with past efforts to actualize the Kingdom of God in America. President Wilson exemplified progress toward justice within the nation and an internationalist approach to peace in the wider world. The New Deal and the growth of the welfare state seemed to move toward fulfillment of the social gospel. The churches themselves gestured in the direction of ecumenical unity nationally and even internationally, and in the 1950s shared in the outward revival of a generalized form of religion.

But of course such evidences of progress were interlaced with experiences which raised questions and anxieties. Domestically there was the Great Depression and the persistence of racism and poverty. Internationally there were the two world wars, and between them a strong isolationist impulse. Mainline church leaders were temporarily sobered by the theological interpretations of life represented by neo-orthodox pessimism and Niebuhrian “Christian realism.”

The quietism of the 1950s ill prepared Christian citizens for the explosively turbulent events of the 1960s and early 1970s. The civil rights movement which black churches and Martin Luther King did so much to initiate was joined by large numbers of white activist clergy and laity, marching and pressuring for racial justice in law and attitude. Christian voices were prominent in the outcry of protest against our Vietnam war, which spread from the campus to the great middle class and raised questions of conscientious objection, militarist imperialism, and political trust. Meanwhile, sexual attitudes and conventions were being radically challenged; ecological fears and energy shortages prompted action for environmental concerns; and so on.

Respected Christian historians are already boldly interpreting the changes of recent decades as constituting a genuine cultural revolution, especially in the relationship of religion to civil values. Robert Handy argues in his *A Christian America* (New York: Oxford University, 1971) that a “second disestablishment” of Protestantism from American society climaxed in the 1930s—the breakdown of the cultural hegemony of the Puritan worldview which had persisted for a hundred years after the legal disestablishment. Sydney Ahlstrom claims that it

was the traumatic decade of the 1960s which witnessed conclusive evidences of the disintegration of the Puritan cultural consensus and a profound shaking of cosmological foundations and social attitudes.

Other insightful analysts perceive even broader and deeper transformations in our erstwhile Christian culture: the almost limitless expansion, through technology, of the areas of human life open to individual choices; the evolution of the consensual religious pluralism identified by Will Herberg (*Protestant-Catholic-Jew* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1955]) in 1955 toward a value-pluralism so radical as to approach cultural anarchy; the dissolution of primary community bonds and the thoroughgoing secularization and privatization of purposes, throwing

autonomous individuals back upon a shallow economic or psychological utilitarianism and subverting the possibility of public, common goods. Many thoughtful Europeans believe that their societies have ceased to be more than nominally Christian and that the Constantinian establishment of Christianity has ended, after fifteen centuries. Probably it is too soon to make the judgment; but it may well be that American Christians are also living in an essentially post-Christian era and society.

II. WHO SPEAKS FOR THE CHURCHES?

Any attempt at appraisal of the churches' performance in responding to the political challenges of the modern era must first take note of two interrelated and unanswerable questions. How authentically have our theologians, clergy, and other leaders kept and interpreted the faith in this age of rapid, radical change? And how deep and genuine is the "piety" of our lay members—their understanding of and commitment to the faith? Obviously, God only knows! But there are reasons for skepticism. Reinhold Niebuhr, among others, made a strong case that the liberal theologies of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries very considerably diluted classical Christian understandings with an admixture of Enlightenment idealism, and thus led Christians to put their faith in human progress rather than the biblical God. Aside from the neo-orthodox interlude, the rapid succession of theological fashions in recent decades tends toward variations on similar underlying themes. These generalizations apply with less force to Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologizing; but those communions also increasingly participate in ecumenical, mainstream thinking about the meanings of faith.

The character and commitments of the person in the pew are of course being shaped by multifarious forces loose in modern American culture, few of which could be accused of much Christian inspiration. Gallup polls turn up huge majorities of self-confessed orthodox believers and church-attenders; but the realities of parish life seem to tell quite a different story. Among those who do participate actively, as well as among the clergy, there are doubtless some saints. But the operational values of most of us seem more conformed to the American World ("way of life") than transformed by the Word.

Nevertheless, the church is whatever it is in any particular historical context, and we must assume that God does not leave it without some measure of authenticity and power. So, begging the question of the "state of the church" in

America, what have the visible churches been doing in recent decades in relation to the political order?

Churches of the mainline, ecumenically oriented denominations have presumably, along with their other usual functions, been forming the character of the young by teaching and preaching, and thus nurturing the political ethos of our country; with what effect it is most difficult to judge. But their more direct and overt political activities have consisted mainly of pronouncing, lobbying, and occasionally directing action on a wide variety of public policy issues. The pronouncing and lobbying have been done primarily at the national level through the official denominational assemblies or offices for church and society issues and the National Council of Churches. Every year annual denominational meetings issue scores of resolutions stating what government policy ought to be, and every month church councils supplement and

update the statements and dispatch witnesses to testify before Congressional committees.

Critics of the pronounce-and-lobby approach raise serious theological and political questions. Paul Ramsey (though his immediate target in *Who Speaks for the Churches?* [Nashville: Abingdon, 1967] was the *World Council of Churches*) asks: Do not church positions on political questions require stronger, distinctive theological grounds and warrants, and not merely cues from the liberal political culture? Do we not need more responsible and careful study and deliberative procedures on which to base pronouncements? Do not governments have their own vocations and competencies which the churches are obliged to respect? Are there not normally a *range* of possible Christian positions on a political issue, rather than the one dogmatic Answer? Ramsey concludes that the churches ought generally to eschew numerous pronouncements on particular policies in favor of the more general guidance of William Temple's "middle axiom" approach—providing directions rather than directives to Christian citizens and governments.

There is also of course the question of the political effectiveness of resolutions voted by small groups of social activists. The politicians will take pronouncements seriously when large numbers of church members do.

Perhaps the clearest moral issue of our recent political past was that of racial justice, and the churches performed creatively, sometimes heroically, in the civil rights phase of that struggle; many Christians moved beyond pronouncement to direct participation. The role of church people in the Vietnam war protests is somewhat muddier, both as to theological justification and political effect; but in any case it was prominent. Other persistent concerns of the mainline churches include poverty and economic justice; human rights at home and abroad; outreach to the less developed societies of the Third World; and a non-militarist foreign policy.

The official statements and actions of mainline churches have leaned quite consistently to the "liberal" side on policy issues, advocating change and reform. Sometimes they have edged toward agreement with the more "radical" left—for example, condemning not simply racial and economic injustices but the American social system as systematically and comprehensively unjust; or moving from a critique of Vietnam involvement to condemnation of our role in the world as essentially imperialist and militarist. Such stances have of course

tended to alienate the patriotic Americans who occupy the pews, pay the bills, and read the newspapers. Observers such as Richard John Neuhaus believe this attitudinal rift has gone so far as to amount to the abdication by these churches of the moral leadership and culture-forming responsibility which they historically fulfilled.

One of the most persistent, and doubtless the most portentous, issue to which the churches have spoken is that of war and peace in the nuclear age. Mainline churches have taken the lead, not only in the Vietnam protests, but also in consistently questioning military expenditures and the compulsory draft. Their pronouncements, and the actions of many activist church people, have given reason for the public impression that they lean strongly to the pacifist position. Building on the Niebuhrian stance about World War II, a few Protestant thinkers have revived for the church's edification the traditional Christian "justifiable war" approach to considering this issue; but to little effect. Recently many European Christians and a number of Roman Catholic bishops in America have called for a unilateral freeze on nuclear weapons. How

best to fulfill Jesus' injunction to be "peacemakers" in an explosive but complex political world is a question which will not go away, but which the churches are a long way from answering.

III. THE RISE OF THE NEW RELIGIOUS RIGHT

Several perceptive observers (including Neuhaus, Roger Shinn, Daniel Maguire, and Max Stackhouse) believe that the dominance and failings of the mainline church establishments is one important factor which invited the rise of the "New Religious Right"—surely the most prominent and interesting religio-political phenomenon to enter the scene in recent years. The mainline churches have tended to monopolize national cultural influence and respectability, and have neglected social concerns which are important to their own constituencies as well as to those of the New Religious Right: threats to conventional sex patterns and family life, evidences of the breakdown of personal and corporate morality in many spheres of national life, and pacifistic undermining of legitimate national defense. The resentments and frustrations growing out of this monopoly and neglect largely account for the following of the Moral Majority and similar movements. As Neuhaus puts it, "In the past two decades liberals have made the enormous mistake of letting the so-called social issues and the juices of patriotism gravitate to the reactionary Right."

The New Religious Right has received such flamboyant coverage in the mass media that its general nature is well understood. The New Religious Right is a general term which covers Moral Majority, Christian Voice, certain television evangelists, many fundamentalist congregations, and a few non-Protestants. As a conservative political movement it surfaced in the elections of 1980 and claimed considerable credit for the victory of Ronald Reagan and the defeat of several liberal U.S. Senators. It urges the purging of "secular humanism" from our culture and the recovery of a "Christian America" through such means as the anti-abortion amendment, school prayers, and military rearmament.

page 145

The immediate reaction of liberal churches to the New Religious Right was to join the secular press in cries of alarm about mixing religion and politics and the threat to civil liberties and democratic pluralism. But on sober second thought, nearly everyone has agreed that religious conservatives have every legal and moral right to raise their political voices, and that in fact they have only been doing what the religious left had been doing for decades: pressing upon the public and the government policies which purport to be Christian (though in a style more consistently paranoid than that of the liberals).

Robert Webber, in his *The Moral Majority: Right or Wrong?* (Westchester: Cornerstone, 1981) presses this irony by showing similarities in the political approaches of the New Religious Right and the World Council of Churches, and by condemning both for identifying the gospel with particular political-economic systems and programs. It has been noted that the advantage on this point may even go to the New Religious Right, whose action groups are at any rate somewhat detached from official church bodies (though speaking directly for God is surely more blasphemous than merely speaking for his church).

More mature and irenic assessments of the New Religious Right are now coming from liberal and moderate analysts (besides those already named: John Bennett, Peggy Shriver, Peter Berger, and Gabriel Fackre). They tend to take the New Religious Right seriously, but are not

panicked by its political potency and do not exaggerate it as a threat to either church or polity. They emphasize the distinction between the great “evangelical” branches of the church and the newcomer “fundamentalist” offshoot. They point out very considerable diversity of political viewpoint among evangelicals, ranging from the New Religious Right groups to moderates such as Carl Henry, Billy Graham, and *Christianity Today* to somewhat radical leftist groups such as the Sojourners. Even within the New Religious Right there are some conflicting interests and personalities.

These partly sympathetic critics agree that the New Religious Right has spotlighted some important but neglected social-cultural concerns; but they think that the New Religious Right’s analysis of the ills of society is superficial and one-sided, omitting from its agenda such profound social issues as nuclear warfare, economic and ecological justice, racism, sexism, and human rights. They see it as a great gain that fundamentalists now accept political activism as a Christian responsibility. But they put little trust in the New Religious Right’s favorite remedies: electing born-again candidates and passing coercive legislation such as school prayer and the anti-abortion amendment. Fackre and Webber make a strong case that the political program of the New Religious Right derives mainly from a kind of “secular humanism” of its own—from a culture-bound, conservative, nostalgic vision of the American way of life—rather than from full and balanced classical Christian doctrine. Liberals’ admission that the fanatical style of political certitude is not appropriate for sinful Christians is surely a net gain for all concerned.

IV. CIVIL RELIGION

A much less visible, but perhaps intellectually and in the long run important, discussion has been going on for the past sixteen years—a discussion primarily

among academic sociologists of religion: the rather confusing and thus far inconclusive debate about “civil religion.” The exploration of this phenomenon began in a general way with Will Herberg’s *Protestant-Catholic-Jew*, published in 1955. But the focused debate dates from the 1967 article on “Civil Religion in America” by Robert Bellah (an article widely reprinted, e.g., in *American Civil Religion*, ed. by Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones [New York: Harper & Row, 1979]). Bellah’s proposition was that “there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America.” This touched off a torrent of articles and books which is still flowing.

Perhaps the main points which have been debated can be stated as three questions: What is “civil religion”? Does it actually exist in America? Is it or would it be a good thing? The question of definition has been widely discussed and is still unsettled. It is usually agreed that every political society must in some sense be integrated and legitimated by some overarching consensus on values and worldview. Definitions differ mainly as to how such a consensus relates to the one or many particular ecclesiastical traditions which may exist in the society, and how the element of transcendence does or does not fit into this phenomenon. John Wilson, in his *Public Religion in American Culture* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1979), prefers the term “public religion,” so as clearly to include those dimensions of particular ecclesiastical traditions which impinge on the public order. The word “dimensions” seems vague enough to be widely useful in discussion of the problem of definition!

Does a civil religion really exist in America? By the looser definitions it clearly does. But Wilson, for one, searches rigorously for *institutional* expressions and can find none. So the empirical search continues.

Is civil religion a good thing? The obvious hazard is that of idolatry: something short of transcendent Jehovah may turn out to be the object of worship—most likely the nation or state, but possibly a “way of life,” “democracy,” or some particular religion. In his stimulating book called *No Offense* (New York: Seabury, 1978) John Murray Cuddihy expresses fears that the American pluralistic “religion of civility” may already have squeezed the vital juices of commitment out of the various particular traditions of Christianity and Judaism.

In the course of discussion, the Bellah thesis has come to be called a “proposal”—suggesting a perceived need in contemporary America for the re-establishment or strengthening of the consensus on civil values which sustains our political institutions and our modes of conflict management. Few academic “religionists” or theologians have thus far engaged these debates: their voices are needed.

V. PROSPECTS FOR PIETY AND POLITICS IN AMERICA

What can be said about the immediate future of the relation of “piety and politics” in our complex, rapidly-changing society? Various prospects are envisioned by insightful scholars and analysts. Peter Berger (*The Heretical Imperative* [Garden City: Anchor, 1979]) sees the radical pluralism and openness of our society as opportunity for the Christian alternative. Richard Neuhaus believes

page 147

that, in the context of the collapse of the Enlightenment cultural paradigm, mainline Protestants have forfeited their historic role of moral leadership; but he sees no very likely candidates to fill the vacuum. Martin Marty (*The Public Church* [New York: Crossroad, 1981]) both observes and urges a new ecumenism among mainline, Catholic, and evangelical communions for the sustenance of a civilized polity.

In any case, the context for the evolution of “piety” is surely the un-orderly but massive ecumenical *rapprochement* by the separated Christian churches. Protestant denominations are rejoining within and among themselves. Lutherans have generally become part of what we have called the “main line.” Evangelicals of both politically moderate and “new right” persuasions are now more socially activist and have joined the discussions. Roman Catholicism is increasingly integrated into both the political and religious communities.

Deliberations and debates about the appropriate roles of Christians and churches in the political order will thus become more complicated. But there is a realistic prospect that, out of the sharing of the rich theological resources of these diverse traditions, and the ferment of mutual criticism and repentance, Christians can reconstruct a valid public theology for our troubled time and situation.