
Pro Rege

Volume 14 | Number 2

Article 4

December 1985

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Recommended Citation

Van Til, Nick (1985) "On Being Religious," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 14: No. 2, 22 - 28.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol14/iss2/4

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On Being Religious

Nick R. Van Til

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A charter member of Dordt's faculty, Professor Van Til has taught history and philosophy for more than a quarter century. Now retired, Van Til has kept active reading and writing about things philosophic and timely.

Perhaps, like no other recent presidential campaign, the 1984 campaign called upon us to clarify the meaning of the word "religion." Various issues touched on the idea one way or another. Unfortunately, much of the discussion was carried on without the benefit of any effort to clarify meanings and to sharpen distinctions.

Concern about religion came to the fore for a variety of reasons. First, President Reagan as the Republican candidate came out in favor of tax credits for those who send their children to private and parochial

schools and went on record as favoring a prayer amendment allowing the use of prayers in public schools. He also continued his unequivocal opposition to abortion.

Second, in view of the positions which President Reagan had taken, the Moral Majority joined the political fray with renewed vigor, particularly in support of a prayer amendment and the pro-life position as to abortion. Historic recollections of establishment seemed to make some fundamentalists hesitant about supporting the tax credit proposals.

Third, with the unprecedented selection of Geraldine Ferraro, a woman and Roman Catholic, as the Democrats' vice-presidential candidate, a religious dilemma presented itself. The dilemma did not arise because of her sex but because of her church and her party affiliation. Her church was uncompromisingly opposed to abortion on religious grounds while her party, trying to be all things to all segments of the electorate, among other reasons, took a pro-choice position on abortion. Ferraro, firmly grasping a horn of the dilemma with each hand, held that she could join her church in maintaining a private religious decision in the matter, and at the same time could uphold her party's position by offering a pro-choice alternative as a civil liberty option.

Fourth, those who insisted that secularism is the only proper context for political life and decisions inserted into the contest their particular narrow view of religion. They seemed convinced that by limiting the concept of religion they could also limit its area of influence. Presuming pragmatically that politics is the art of the possible, they wanted to eliminate moral and religious considerations from the political arena. For them God-talk would not ventilate the smoke-filled rooms where political bargaining takes place. It would only make them stuffier.

The secular bias in politics tends to cut in two directions. With one stroke it erroneously seems to substantiate the notion that if one leaves out religious convictions from one's political discussions and decision making, then one can lay claim to occupying the high ground of objectivity. With the other stroke of the blade, it cuts at the heart of evangelical Christianity. All those who would support their political choices with religious convictions must be pared into a mold and labeled fanatics or idealogues.

Clarification Needed

Underneath the conflicts which the discussion of religious issues in the 1984 campaign generated, there lay basic confusions as to

the meaning of the term "religion" itself. In fact, a long-standing lack of clarity as to the meaning of "religion" has caused the long-standing confusion in American politics generally and in American judicial decisions in particular.

When the United States Supreme Court banned the use of prayer from public schools, only the now-retired Justice Potter Stewart voiced dissent. He argued that there is no such thing as a religious vacuum and that the idealogical place previously occupied by Christianity in public school thought would be quickly occupied by secular humanism. In fact, many Christians were convinced that secular humanism had already gained the day and that the elimination of formal prayer was the elimination of a vestigial tokenism.

Paul Tillich's Definition

If Justice Potter Stewart was right in his contention that secular humanism is also a religion, then we have to enlarge our definition to a broader dimension than most of the definitions in current use. In his little book *Christianity and the Encounter of World Religions* Paul Tillich suggested the following definition:

Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of meaning of life. Therefore, this concern is unconditionally serious and shows a willingness to sacrifice any finite concern which is in conflict with it.¹

One weakness of Tillich's definition, as I see it, is found in the fact that it seems to make no room for those who limit themselves to finite concerns. I call to mind the young man in our apartment complex at graduate school. Most every Sunday morning when the weather was favorable he

would be out in the parking lot polishing his red convertible. I never saw him go through any formulary of obeisance as he began the ritual which would maintain his car as the pride of his life. But there did seem to be a faithfulness which bordered on religious devotion. In fact, it has been suggested that with some American macho men the order of priority is car, Monday evening football, and then their spouse.

If it is true that all people are incurably religious, then it should not surprise us if they find for themselves a pseudo or substitute religion once they have turned their backs on the God of the Scriptures, the Lord of all of life. During World War II it was popularly held that "there are no atheists in the foxholes." Yet when people are allowed to follow their interests unhampered by death-dealing crises, they seem to worship the finite concerns of money, power, and sex, more regularly than any infinite power.

The Greeks in the apostle Paul's day wanted to be sure that they stayed in the good graces of all that could be included in the realm of the deities, so they raised a memorial to "the unknown god." That was added to the service which should be rendered to an already crowded galaxy of deities in their day.

John Calvin insisted that all of humankind has a "sensus deitatis," a sense of the deity, by reason of having been created by God. Cornelius Van Til in his forty-five years of teaching apologetics at Westminster Theological Seminary, always insisted that rational arguments for the existence of God were not valid because, as Pascal had said earlier, they do not lead one to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. One can appeal to the unbeliever because the unbeliever, in spite of his protestations of apostasy, knows that he is a creature from the hand of God and must give account of himself.

One can also argue that when the hippies of the late sixties and early seventies experimented with LSD, it was at least in part an attempt to transcend the materialism of

the establishment which they presumed to detest. Many, with their parents as their examples, were out of touch with the transcendent God of the Scriptures, so they sought release by experimenting with pseudo-transcendents.

The Skeptic

Most lay people have not worked out a secularism with self-conscious intent. As the student of philosophy would say, "They are not epistemologically self-conscious." In other words, they have not worked out a theory of knowledge by which they self-consciously support their religious convictions; or for that matter, their lack of any apparent religious convictions.

However, some secularists have worked out their principles in such a way as to embrace a basic skepticism. Often they then take on an air of superiority over those who profess to live by faith and have not carefully ordered or perhaps fully explored their presuppositions. Concerning the skeptic Tillich has the following to say:

If even the skeptic claims the right to affirm his skepticism (if he makes a statement at all) and to contradict those who doubt it, why should the member of a religious group be deprived of his "civil right," so to speak, of affirming the fundamental assertions of his group and contradict those who deny this assertion. It is natural and unavoidable that Christians affirm the fundamental of Christianity that Jesus is the Christ and reject what denies that assertion. What is permitted to the skeptic cannot be forbidden to Christians, or for that matter, to the adherent of any other religion.²

Secularists organized to combat the influence of Christian organizations in politics do not agree with Tillich. For example, Norman Lear refers to the Moral Majority as

"fascism masquerading as Christianity." I imagine that Lear himself presumes to be occupying some rational middle ground in the political arena. George McGovern called Jerry Falwell "a menace to the American political system." But then, as William Buckley suggested, McGovern would undoubtedly consider Republicans generally a menace to the American political system.³

Civil Religion

From ancient times to the present, virtually all nations have had some form of civil religion. In ancient Israel the dos and don'ts of ritual, judicial, and executive duties were combined in the person of Samuel, the last of the judges of Israel. But as soon as the office of the executive was separated out in the anointing of Saul as king, the latter was severely reprimanded and punished for presuming to serve as priest.

Caesar Augustus, who established the imperial office for Rome, also inaugurated and demanded a ritual for emperor worship. He did this by way of trying to maintain some cohesion for a far flung empire of disparate races as well as native religions and cultures. Later, in the Middle Ages, the pope and some of the political leaders tried to revive the idea of universal empire under a universal religion. Emperor worship was abandoned in favor of Christianity and the coterminous bounds of empire and religion was designated "Christendom." In that new coordination, only Jews were considered beyond the pale.

Coming to Massachusetts in large numbers after 1630, the Puritans harbored totally anachronistic ideas about statecraft. Taking the Hebrews of the Old Testament as their model, they attempted to revive the ideas of theocracy, a state under the direct rule of God, though they did not presume to receive new and direct revelations from the Almighty. They had access to God's will by reference to the Bible as interpreted by their religious leaders. Church membership was a prerequisite to participation in the political

processes. There was no need for any civil religion ritual. Invocation at the Town Meeting was addressed to the God who was commonly recognized.

It is generally assumed that the success of the American Revolution constituted a vindication of the principles of freedom which were set down in the Declaration of Independence. But the quest for freedom encouraged a feeling of autonomy among the individual colonies which the Articles of Confederation could not counter-balance. The "more perfect union" which the Constitutional Convention sought to achieve made it necessary to deal with the problem of the variety of religious professions found throughout the colonies. Obviously, there could not be an establishment of the particular religion of one of the colonies.

For purposes of the laws, the Constitution went the route of disestablishment. This meant that the civil religion had to be based on the recognition of a kind of generic God whose attributes did not fulfill the confessional specifications of one group in preference to another. The Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution laid the foundation for this by making vague references to "Providence" and "Creator" while avoiding any expressions which would suggest Christian theism and the Trinity as confessed by the Christian churches.

Today many forthright secularists oppose any reference to God and the use of religious ritual in civic functions. But there is also a residual feeling for a father-figure God who will look with favor on our country if he is regularly and properly recognized. So we include his name in our Pledge of Allegiance, invocations are spoken at civic functions, and civic good deeds are encouraged in order to deserve divine favor.

President Reagan is one of those who seems to be thoroughly confused in his thinking about religion. He enjoys receiving standing ovations from convocations of fundamentalists as he speaks out against abortion and favors school prayer. But ap-

parently he does not espouse the evangelical Christianity to which the fundamentalists lay claim.

After the terrorist bombing of the marine barracks in Beirut, President Reagan tried to console the nation in its loss by saying, "I will not ask you to pray for the dead, because they're safe in God's loving arms and beyond the need of our prayers." While it has long been an article of faith in the catechism of American civil religion that giving one's life for country is a sure way to heaven, it is not part of biblical soteriology, i.e., the biblical way of salvation. It should be noted that all civil religions are basically moralisms. Good deeds whether for country

American civil religion, President Reagan regularly pronounces benedictions upon the nation at the close of his national addresses. No doubt this jars the religious sensibilities of those who know how to make theological distinctions. It must also incense those secularists who believe that a president has no right to impose his religious preferences when he is acting in an official capacity.

Religion and the Constitution

A thoughtful reading of the two clauses of the First Amendment to our Constitution should yield the conclusion that religion is used in a different sense in the first clause

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or neighbor cannot fail to be rewarded by some manifestation of divine favor.

Clinton Rossiter in his little book on the American presidency outlined ten roles which a modern president has to play. Several of these roles were not played by George Washington but developed with the development of our country. For example, after the Great Depression of the thirties, presidents had to be "the chief economist." Reverting back to Caesar Augustus, President Reagan has revived the role of Pontifex Maximus as an added role. Several Protestant professions as well as the Roman Catholics do not allow clergymen to pronounce benedictions until they have been fully ordained. As the high priest of

than it is in the second. When the first clause forbids any law for the establishment of religion, it means that no institutional religion, i.e. church, shall be given any kind of legal preference. That clause was written to remedy the conditions of establishment which had existed before the American Revolution. For example, dissenters were not legally welcome in Massachusetts. In Virginia a Baptist couple had to pay a fee to the Anglican clergyman before they could be married by their own pastor.

The second clause of the First Amendment forbids any legal impediments to the free exercise of one's religion. In recent political campaigns secular interests have tried to prevent Christians from bringing their religious

convictions to bear on political issues by suggesting that such action violates the intent of the first clause of the First Amendment. Whether this is an unintentional or calculated confusion, it is used in an effort to hobble Christian influence in the political races.

The history of the Supreme Court's dealings with questions of religion is not without evidences of confusion and turnabouts. For example, in the 1940 case of *Minersville School District v. Gobitis*, under the dominant influence of Justice Frankfurter, the Court saw no difficulty in forcing a Jehovah Witness's child to join in the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag in spite of parental convictions to the contrary. The Witnesses felt that it was forcing a kind of establishment of American civil religion in violation to their second-clause rights of free exercise. Eight years later, with a change in the personnel and leadership, of the court under Justice Hugo Black, in the case of *McCullum v. The Board of Education*, almost completely reversed itself by ruling that no released time religious education could take place on public school premises because one boy, Terry McCullum, declined to participate.

In that decision Justice Black wrote new meanings into the separation clause of the First Amendment. He wrote:

The "establishment of religion" clause of the First Amendment means at least this: Neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church. Neither can it pass laws which aid one religion, *aid all religions*, or prefer one religion over another (emphasis mine, N.V.T.).⁴

The various permutations of law which arose out of Court confusion are summed up succinctly in a commentary by a Jesuit scholar as quoted by George Goldberg. The Jesuit scholar wrote:

There has been a full and truly vicious circle from religious persecu-

tion, intolerance and church establishment to benign tolerance; to disestablishment; to equality of all faiths before the law; to equality of belief and non-belief before the law; and now to the secularists' and religious dissenters' intolerance of religious belief in public law. The wry irony is that this is being done in the name and for the sake of religious liberty.⁵

In sum, we can say that the court has misconstrued and overemphasized the first clause of the First Amendment, thus jeopardizing rights guaranteed in the second clause of the First Amendment. With the exception of Potter Stewart, as mentioned earlier, virtually all the justices define religion too narrowly. They assume that a totally secular society is a religiously neutral society. If it continues that misunderstanding, the Court will continue to make misjudgments in the future.

Divergent Protestantism

By the time the United States Constitution was being framed, American Protestantism was already being segmented into divergent emphases. Orthodox evangelicals with some variations followed what they felt was essential Reformation theology. They preached salvation by grace alone. They held to an inerrant Bible as their only authority for faith and practice.

By contrast, there were those who invoked reason as a modifying influence away from an authoritarian Bible. They honored the Sermon on the Mount as a moral model from which they could formulate what their detractors label a "social gospel." They held that improvement in the human condition begins with improvements in the physical conditions of life. These "modernists" had contempt for the fundamentalist "soul-savers" who preached a "pie-in-the-sky" salvation.

To counteract social gospel liberalism,

early in our century a group of evangelicals set down some "fundamentals" as the basics of Christianity, hence the name fundamentalism. In those days Billy Sunday was their crusader. He entered the political arena in support of a Prohibition Amendment. He did valiant and vociferous battle with the prime enemy, John Barleycorn, as the personification of alcoholic evil was called. In those days salvation was vouchsafed to one who could point to a datable born-again experience; would fore swear alcohol, tobacco, and assorted worldly amusement; and could point to an identifiable anti-Christ in the person of some world leader.

Born Againism

Born Againism, a little book by Eric W. Gritsch, is critical of "born-againism." The idea received national attention when Jimmy Carter came into political prominence and subsequently into the presidency. For the secular press a born-again president was a new and strange phenomenon. They had seen formalism and moralism in the White House, to say nothing of hypocrisy, but never "born-againism."

Yet, Carter's born-again status did not earn him fundamentalist support. Reagan, in part, rightfully earned that support by taking a strong pro-life stand in the matter of abortion. He also played on the residual strains of civil religion moralism⁷ which finds place among fundamentalists. Reagan joined them in support of prayer in our public schools. The presence of civil religion moralism was clearly evident in a March 5, 1984, press photo of the march in Washington supporting public school prayer. A placard there read, "Will God bless America if we don't let our kids pray?" I do not say that Christians should not be encouraged to pray for their nation. But I do hold that in a largely secularized and pluralistic society a formal prayer or moment of silence can only be a kind of civil religion ritual and a vestigial remnant of a bygone day.

Though entertaining some theological aberrations of his own, Eric W. Britsch offers some trenchant criticisms of that part of fundamentalism which he calls "born againism." Evangelical Christians with a different emphasis, for example, those of the Reformed faith, may have some criticisms arising out of their particular point of view. but withal, Christians generally should applaud the effort of the fundamentalists to bring their religious convictions to bear on the political issues of the day. None should be intimidated by the secularists' efforts to brand that effort as parochial or subversive of Americanism. True Americanism will allow Jerry Falwell just as much of a right to give leadership to the Moral Majority as it does Norman Lear to promote his secularistic ends.

With their fall in paradise, the life of Adam and Eve took an idolatrous turn. Since then, God-substitutes have been as numerous and diverse as the limits of human imagination. Perhaps we can best understand the meaning of "religion" for any particular group of people if we can ascertain what kind of God or gods they serve. And reverting to Tillich and his definition, we can probably decide as to the kind of religion on the basis of where the devotees place their ultimate concern.

Endnotes

¹Paul Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter with World Religions*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961) p. 4.

²Tillich, *Christianity and the Encounter with World Religions*, p. 29.

³William Buckley, *Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*, Feb. 21, 1985.

⁴George Goldberg, *Reconsecrating America* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984), p. 41.

⁵Goldberg, *Reconsecrating America*, p. 122.

⁶Eric W. Gritsch, *Born Againism: Perspectives on a Movement*. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982) See particularly the "Conclusion."

⁷The religion of "moralism" holds that there is a direct one-to-one relationship between human moral goodness and divine favor. Good deeds should merit the "good life" here and heaven in the hereafter.