

Religion and the American Way of Life

From Sacred to Profane America: The Role of Religion in American History, by William A. Clebsch. Harper & Row. 242 pp. \$5.95.

by David Little

It is not easy to write a book about "the role of religion in American history." The subject is so vast, the prevailing categories of analysis so imprecise, the possibilities of verifying conclusions so elusive. Nevertheless, despite some methodological inelegancies, William Clebsch seems to have surmounted some of the obstacles rather successfully.

To make his task manageable, he selects six "campaigns" in which American religious groups initiated plans of action or ways of looking at things that, in turn, appear to have had some significant results in American culture. In well-organized, impressively comprehensive chapters, Clebsch analyzes the impact of religious thought and action on education, pluralism, welfare and morality, social participation and conceptions of novelty and nationality. In each of the six cases, the movement Clebsch finds is from religiously motivated programs of action and outlook to their eventual profanization as they bear fruit in the society at large. Hence the title.

His argument to support his thesis seems careful and restrained, although many of the conclusions need further investigation and documentation. Clebsch is admirably even-handed in evaluating the contribution of religion. He neither defends its role uncritically, nor does he dismiss its benefits to American society. In the matter of encouraging participation, for example, he contends that

the strong emphasis upon "congregational laicism" and revivalism, and their cultivation of equal consent and individual responsibility, worked against status-consciousness and sex discrimination. At the same time, Clebsch does not mince words when he discusses certain religious attitudes and programs which had, for Negroes and Indians, painful results.

I found the chapter on education especially illuminating. Quite properly, Clebsch assigns an ambiguous role to religion in developing liberal higher education in this country. While it is true, he says, that religious institutions have been an inspiration in the founding of colleges, the sort of education they have inspired is dogmatic and restricted. Ironically, it was only as the religious colleges and universities began breaking their direct ties with the churches that the promise of a truly liberal education was fulfilled. (Though Clebsch does not mention it, the "feedback" effect on the liberalization of church colleges is consistent with the thesis.)

The difficulties of the book are, as I hinted, methodological, although these difficulties are related to some deficiencies of interpretation. Clebsch is not precise in discriminating the *different types* of relationship between "sacred" and "profane" aspects of the campaigns he investigates. I discover at least four types of relationships in Clebsch's discussion.

1. A campaign (plan of action or way of looking at things) which is in the first instance, religiously justified ("sacred"), becomes non-religiously justified ("profane").

3. There may exist together within one religious outlook several incompatible plans of action. One of them may be extended in such a way as (a) to be disentangled from the other plans, and (b) to be justified non-religiously.

4. A religious campaign leads,

by extension, to a plan of action or way of looking at things which (a) is justified non-religiously, and (b) by a "feedback" effect alters the original religious campaign.

The second type applies to the chapters on education, pluralism and parts of the chapter on welfare and morality. For example, in the case of education, the drive of the churches to educate produces a profane pattern which not only ignores its source but in some cases reacts against it. With respect to pluralistic culture, the (logical) extension of the principle of denominational pluralism implies an "open market" in which non-religious and even irreligious plans of action are a possibility.

As Clebsch's discussion of morality and welfare stands, it would be divided between types (1) and (2). Generally, I have no quarrel with that, except that I would place the "Puritan campaign" under (3) rather than under (1), as Clebsch does. For him the Puritans proclaimed a prudent, adjustable, success-oriented ethic which readily became translated into profane terms — "from the Puritan doctrine of vocation . . . to the Gilded Age's gospel of wealth." There is much more ambiguity in the Puritan ethic than that. On the one hand, individuals were prodded by Puritan divines to work hard and acquire economic benefits. On the other, they were urged to resist becoming slaves to gain, not only because of what it did to them individually but because of what happened to the all-important common good. The right thing — working hard and prospering — became, by extension, the wrong thing. Only so can we understand the celebrated "bad conscience" of the Puritan, which Clebsch completely neglects.

Clebsch's discussion of the impact of religious thought and action on the status of women is

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another example of (3). "Here as in many of its other social functions, religion's practices outran ministers' preachments. While doctrine exhorted the daughters of Adam's rib to cherish their dependence, deed made them equals . . ." It was only a short step from the religious practice of equality to the establishment of the secular

movement for women's rights.

Clebsch's description of the American way of looking at novelty falls under (4). While religion promoted change and a forward-looking attitude (*Novus Ordo Seclulorum*), "yet the novelty which religion had generated grew of itself even as it relegated religion to the minor role of . . . tradition-

alizing." That is, the profanization of a spirit of novelty forced the religious outlook into a backward-looking position.

While Clebsch's book is generally edifying and suggestive, those interested in refining the concept of the "role and function of religion" in social change will not be completely satisfied.

The old pre-Civil War peace movement took new form in the hopes of supranationalistic Christians for a world without wars. The effort of these reformers was to engage religion with grandly universal hopes and hurts of mankind by disengaging its interests from specifically American nationality. Thinking that nations as such willfully helped Satan by resorting to war, energetic elements within the churches cultivated programmatic pacifism not as an individual's conscientious protest against collective evil but as a panacea for human happiness in uncoercive and uncoerced societies. This spirit made World War I a holy war to end war by safeguarding democracy, and for two decades thereafter American religion basked in a pacific calm before the awful storm. Apparent inconsistencies between Christian pacifism and American assistance to the European Allies melted in a fervor for universal peace which justified military means. . . .

The popular hero who thought to apply principles of the Prince of Peace to disputes between nations was indeed Bryan, to whom Christianity was "not only a solution but the Best solution of international problems." Resigning after a brief term as Wilson's Secretary of State in protest against the second note to Germany concerning the sinking of Lusitania, Bryan thought surely the southern and western United States would stand with him against the President. Characteristically, he proceeded from pious belief to political certainty in an easy stride, and he never saw a possibly irreconcilable conflict between religious ideals and international realities. But for that reason he remained until his death the model Christian statesman in the minds of throngs of pious Americans.

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From Sacred to Profane America

current reading

Nonviolent Direct Action

American Cases: Social-Psychological Analyses

A. Paul Hare & Herbert H. Blumberg, eds. Corpus. 575 pp. \$10.00

What is the motivation for such forms of social protest as sit-ins, peaceful marches, pray-ins? What is achieved by the face-to-face encounter between non-violent actor and others in the community? This book provides an introduction to theories of non-violence, eleven recent examples of civil rights and peace protests as related by participants or observers, together with "the major social-psychological analyses published to date which focus on nonviolent direct action."

The United Nations: A View from Within

Ralph Townley. Scribner's. 355 pp. \$6.95

Economist Ralph Townley is a senior official of the U.N. development program and his is "the first book dealing broadly with international organizations to be written by a serving member of the United Nations Secretariat." The aim was a comprehensive study of the United Nations and its specialized agencies, including the International Court.

No More Vietnams?

Richard M. Pfeffer, ed. Harper & Row. 299 pp. \$5.95

At a two-and-a-half day meeting last June some twenty-six current and former government officials, scholars and journalists met at the invitation of the Adlai Stevenson Institute of International Affairs to examine the lessons of Vietnam for future American foreign policy, basing their discussion on papers and criticisms distributed in advance of the meeting. The editor has blended the oral and written presentations so that the text appears in dialogue form.

The Israel-Arab Reader

Walter Laqueur, ed. Bantam Books. 371 pp. \$1.25

Selections for this "Documentary History of the Middle East Conflict" (from the time of the first stirrings of Jewish and Arab national movements, to July '68) were chosen "with an eye to the interests of the general reader, not the expert in international law", aiming, rather, "to present pertinent documents, viewpoints and opinions." The volume's editor directs the Institute of Contemporary History and Wiener Library (London), is professor of history at the University of Reading and professor in the history of ideas at Brandeis.