

RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE AND A NEW FOREIGN POLICY

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It is invigorating to speak of "man come of age" and to proclaim that modern man has marched, with noble maturity, from his sacral and myth-bound past into the secular present. An abundant and exuberant literature has celebrated this grand event. Sacral man, however, is alive and thriving and finds himself in something of the position of Mark Twain who, when he read of his own death in the paper, immediately wrote to the editor: "The reports of my death are greatly exaggerated."

Let me suggest at the outset that the reports of secularization are greatly exaggerated. Sacred, sacral, and religious are still operative categories and anyone who would prescind from the religious phenomenon will understand neither the ethos nor the policies of this nation.

If anyone would doubt that *homo Americanus* is still *homo religiosus*, I would recommend to his memory the recent inauguration of Richard Milhous Nixon. I can recall that as I watched on that prayerful day I wondered, at times, whether it would be a president or a pope that would finally emerge from the solemnities. Every nation, of course, turns to the sacred in the formation of its own image. Its foundational literature becomes a bible, its heroes are saints, its enemies, demons, its flag, a consecrated symbol; its holidays are marked with ritual. A survey of the nations can only make us agree with Thales of Miletus when he cried: "Everything is full of gods!" American nationalism, though, has always had its own peculiar cultic quality. A brief look at our history will illustrate this American linkage of religion and politics. I will then go on to suggest that religion is linked to politics, not by history alone but by natural necessity and that it influences domestic and foreign policies in ways that demand critical attention. I am particularly concerned with the positive influence religion can have in the development of a sensitive and creative foreign policy.

First, to our history. Though it is true to say that we are shaped by our dreams, it is also true that we are our history. It is for this reason that I am in accord with Henry F. May when he writes: "For the study and understanding of American culture, the recovery of American religious history may well be the most important achievement of the last thirty years." Our

religious history, of course, like any history, is shot through with clashing paradox. We run the gamut from isolating individualism to cosmopolitan messianism. And yet, there are certain ideas and movements which struck deep impressions into the dynamics of national consciousness. Certainly, the Puritan theocratic experience is one of these. The Puritans were imbued with notions of the promised people in the promised land. Early America was not just founding a nation but fulfilling a destiny. From the beginning, the messianic consciousness was there. This land was to be a sign to the aching monarchies of Europe of the freedom and democracy that were God's will for all men. Religion and patriotism were wed. There was scorn for the impious revolution in France. The new age, the new Zion was here in this nation under God. Energetic preachers and revivalists drove home the message that it was in the new world that God would foster the new era. They built up what Perry Miller calls "a religious nationalism which even the [Civil] war could not destroy." No one faulted Nathaniel W. Taylor when he declared with confidence that this nation was the one "on which the Sun of Righteousness sheds his clearest, brightest day . . ."

The ugliness unearthed by the Civil War did not dispel this predestination complex. The war was interpreted as an expiatory event which further demonstrated our divine calling. Evidence of divine blessing in Union victories was traced out by George S. Philips of Ohio in his remarkable book, *The American Republic and Human Liberty Foreshadowed in Scripture*. Philips argued that God's Old Testament promise to found a nation fully obedient to him was fulfilled when he established the United States. For Philips, Isaiah and Daniel clearly foretold the day and the hour of the Declaration of Independence; Isaiah predicted the Boston Tea Party and even the coming of Chinese immigrants to California. Philips roared on to this conclusion: "These facts of history . . . clearly show that the Government of the United States was set up by the God of heaven." "The United States," wrote Philips, "is to fill the earth . . . so to occupy the place of government in the world, as to leave room for no other government."

Philips' thesis is all the more startling when we

realize that it was published just a century ago and that his thinking was not atypical. In his book, *From Sacred to Profane America*, William A. Clebsch says of this work: "The patent unoriginality of Philips' book signifies its representing a major body of religious and nationalistic sentiment in the north."

One could easily be tempted to say that this religious patriotism in its naive fundamentalist dress deserves no more today than a commemorative smile. Such a conclusion, I fear, would be shallow. I, for one, would not try to prove that the mind of Philips is not at all represented in the pulpits and parlors of modern America. And even when sophistication has banished his medium, his message maintains a discernible presence.

It was very obvious in the Spanish-American War when, with no injustice in our own land, we went to set things right in Cuba and were spurred by our "manifest destiny" to seize and hold the Philippines. The rationale for World War I moved from explicit religiosity to the transcendence-language of abstract virtue. "To make the world safe for democracy." Again it has been our love of democracy and freedom that has motivated our resistance to demonic communism. To see at a glance how idealized our self-image is, refer back to the witch-hunting House Un-American Activities Committee. The title of that committee has voluminous implications. Can you easily imagine a search and destroy agency in Italy seeking out un-Italian activities? Or can you envision a hunt for un-Austrian activities in Austria . . . un-Dutch activities in Holland!

It is not at all hard to find the myth of New World mission and virtue in our modern Asian policies. Harvard's Ross Terrill has collected some edifying expressions of America's pious concern for Asia. When President Johnson left for Asia in October, 1966 he warmed Asian hearts by announcing: "I have a great many objectives . . . for the people of that area of the world." After Britain announced its withdrawal from Asia, the *New York Times* acknowledged: "The arc from Arabia to the China Sea becomes virtually our responsibility." *Look* magazine too in May of 1967 was forced to admit: "The Far East has now become our Far West." Less than thirty years ago, Senator Wherry promised: "With God's help, we will lift Shanghai up, and up, ever up, until it is just like Kansas City."

Implicit in this is something that cannot be fully explained without religious categories. There is more here than the responsibility that attaches to power. There is a faith in the old American dream that is not shared or appreciated by many nations in the world and is certainly not empirically demonstrable.

It is, in fact, like the religious faith defined for us in the Epistle to the Hebrews (11:1): "What is faith? It is that which gives substance to our hopes, which convinces us of things we cannot see." What is operative is not conviction based on closely analyzed data but a truly transcendent faith in our mission, the kind of faith that we roundly derided when we spied it in Charles de Gaulle. (That, of course, is not surprising. Messiah-types have never been known to agree.)

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With all of this, then, why is it that the religious factor is so egregiously neglected in the so-called hard analyses of political man? There are a variety of important reasons for this. I will list a few:

1) First, there is the "let's keep-religion-out-of-politics" syndrome which has always been visible in American preaching if not in American practice. Some years ago George F. Kennan, in his much read little book *American Diplomacy*, made a strong case against abstract moralism in international affairs. Unfortunately, he misnamed the culprit, calling it "morality" and said that it should be confined "to the unobtrusive, almost feminine, function of the gentle civilizer of national self-interest." In most people's minds, I believe religion, if at all regarded, is relegated to this unobtrusive, feminine role. The impression is that religion might have a warming and gentle influence on you at home but you do not take her along when you go to work where hard and practical decisions are made. Such a position, I am afraid, shows as little understanding of religion as it does of women.

2) There is a promiscuous and confusing usage of the terms sacred and sacral, which allows religion and the sacred to be easily caricatured. In general, the *sacred* is that which is in some way above me and which is worthy of my absolute obeisance. Not every perception of the sacred would cheer the hearts of orthodox preachers. For some persons it is indeed a personal God to whom they can relate in love and loyalty. For others it may be a tree or the sun, an artifact, a person, an idea, or a church. Or it may be the human society, conceived as it was by Auguste Comte, as the Grand Being. For Emile Durkheim it was the apotheosis or transfiguration of society, the emergence of the irresistible need men feel for reaffirming the values underlying association. Wherever it is found, it has an absolute claim on its finder. When found, however, it can easily be lost in the effort to make it concrete and local.

The *sacral* is the attempted localization of the sacred. In sacralization the sacred is no longer other or beyond; it is idolized and limited. The result is a loss of the experience of the sacred and of the dy-

namism which can arise from that experience. Idolization is the superstitious attempt to capture the sacred in simple and concrete forms that do not tax our cognitive possibilities.

3) The third reason for the slighting of religious motivation is that the study of religious experience is too often fixated on *religions* with their churches and sects. Great ideas and basic experience do seek institutional expression. The pursuit of the sacred leads naturally to the creation of churches. Unfortunately, however, these churches might offer more of the sacral than of the sacred. Religious experience is immeasurably broader than church affiliation and you can easily have one without the other. It would be better to study religion with the human consciousness of Everyman as your prime *locus*.

4) Religion is often identified with particular ideas or dogma. Hence, the collapse of certain dogmatic structures such as we witness in our day signals to some the end of religion. It is well to remember that the charge of "atheism" has regularly attended profound religious reformation. Anaxagoras was accused of atheism for teaching that the sun was ignited matter. Socrates and the early Christians were martyred on the precise charge of atheism. Fustel de Coulanges in his work *The Ancient City* records how new gods were the sign of growth. The household gods gave way to the god of the phratry which was in turn displaced by the god of the tribe only to be succeeded by the god of the city. Idols are smashed to make room for more worthy objects of religious need but the temples are never empty.

5) Finally, it may be noted that in this country, our avowed separation of church and state deludes us into thinking we have actually severed the category of the sacred from political theory and practice. The language of the first amendment can suggest the undesirability of religious influence on the state. Discussions on this subject rarely distinguish man's openness to the sacred from institutional religious forms.

So much for the distracting prejudices. Now what of this force called religion which I am urging is a constant and radical influence for good or for ill in human affairs? Robert A. Nisbet writes: "In the main line of sociological thought, religion is far from illusion . . . [it] is ineradicably built into the very nature of mental and social life. It has the same degree of constitutive and causal efficacy that political and economic forces have." It is with such thinking that I concur. Obviously, it is not by religion alone that social man lives. But it is also not enough to explain him unilaterally in terms of economics, instinct,

authority, power, passion, or reason. He lives by all of these.

To press the thesis that religion, understood as the experience of the sacred, is much more than a gentle, amorphous motivator or a remote depot of impractical ideals, let us consider first its minimal contribution to society and its politics.

The profit motive might run a business but it will never make a nation. A. D. Lindsay in his *The Essentials of Democracy* writes: "No government can be based merely on consideration of advantage of what pays. Men will not die for their own profit and there can be no stable government unless men are prepared to die for it. If government itself is not recognized as absolute — and that is no longer possible — it must stand for, be the instrument of, something absolute." Lindsay's statement is at one with Cardinal Newman's epigram: "Men will die for a dogma who will not even stir for a conclusion."

A community of men, whether national or international, has many empirically describable aspects, but at root it is an idealized entity. It requires a variety of legal appurtenances and pragmatic braces, but it will not *be* without a mystique. Pragma alone will not yield a stable union any more than money alone will make a genuine marriage, or mere utility a home.

Man is a self-transcending being. He cannot rest with the actual; he must reach for the possible. His horizons are as real to him, or more real, than the terrain on which he stands. Man senses that he is a creature of infinite possibilities and that these possibilities have an absolute value that beckons absolutely. He asks of his fellows and his institutions that they do not choke off these possibilities. It is for this reason, I believe, that man will not respond to a society that is merely a corporation of convenience and utility. Man is so constituted that a nation must also be a cause. It must somehow reflect his infinite possibilities and the inexorable summons to realize them. Anything else is offensive to our common personhood. In a word, the state to be viable and to win the loyalty of its constituents must reflect that in man which is sacred.

Perhaps this would be more easily understood if we had not been seduced by the idea that the sacred is "wholly other" and that there is a deep and bridgeless abyss between the sacred and the profane. The happy discovery of our day is that Cox's "secular city" and Chardin's "divine milieu" are one and the same territory. The terms sacred and profane are still necessary, for the sacred cannot be identified with the profane. Nevertheless, the profane is sacramental. It reveals and reflects the sacred. Rather than as the datum of another world, the sacred must be seen as

discoverable at the deepest dimensions and farthest horizons of this world.

This reflection of the sacred in the profane world of persons is not just something to scintillate the metaphysicians; it is also functionally basic to human society. It means that there is among men, not just that which is useful or expedient but also that which can command outside of narrow utility and would command if, *per impossibile*, there were no utility. This reality shows up in all matters affecting the dignity of personhood. It is needed to understand the inviolability of human rights or to comprehend the compelling dignity of oaths, promises, marriages, secrets, courts, and nations. It is also utterly essential to explain why the so-called "supreme sacrifice" is not insane. Human society is possible because no man is a pure utilitarian; there is no man for whom nothing is sacred.

It can be said further, in the same vein, that it is not only the just man but Everyman who lives by faith. The philosopher of history, Eric Voeglin, writes: "Every society is burdened with the task, under its concrete conditions, of creating an order that will endow the fact of its existence with meaning in terms of ends divine and human." To continue to live we must believe that being is somehow trustworthy, that meaning can be found. The trustworthiness of being, of reality, cannot be proved. Absurdity could be the ultimate, but I do not believe man could live with that conclusion. Man abhors a vacuum of meaning and so he *believes*. Without a radical, trusting faith in the possibilities of reality he would be immobilized. I do not believe that even Sisyphus could have kept rolling that stone were he not activated by a secret hopefulness that someday he might make it over the top, or, at least, find some meaning in his failures.

This fundamental act of faith is an identity-giving act. It is also an act that gives shape to man's interpretation of the sacred. It is loaded with what Peter Berger calls "the signals of transcendence." It is acted out in man's religious life, for religion seeks to liturgize and vindicate man's faith in fundamental order. It should not be difficult to see here again how religion crosses lines with politics, for politics too is an ordering adventure. Thus, it should not be surprising that upheavals in church and state, in religion and social ideas are often concomitant. Whether you side with Marx who allowed that types of religion were but reflections of types of societies, or with Weber who held the opposite, it seems that the two are indeed intertwined.

Add to all of this that religion is not just a functional

factor in the societalization of man, but that it has an inner power at times to dominate man. It is of such a potential that Huston Smith writes when he says that "whenever religion comes to life it displays a startling quality; it takes over. All else, while not silenced, becomes subdued and thrown without contest into a supporting role." Of such an historic force we should be aware, especially since a religious realization can be destructive or creative in its impact.

That it can be a force for evil is all too clear from history. Religious wars alone provide a gory witness to the fact that "the worst of madmen is a saint gone mad." Religious motives can give an absolute quality to our enterprises. Witness John Calvin saying that no consideration should be given to humanity when the honor of God is at stake. Machiavelli, by divinizing the needs of state, reached a similarly insensitive conclusion. Religion can be used to bless our *hubris* and dignify our rationalizations. The harm wrought by American messianism has begun to get the notice that is its due. But actually we need not belabor this more, since in these demythologizing days, it is the sins of religion that are more likely to be studied.

Could we, perhaps, buck the tide and inquire whether religion, even in its institutional mode, might well serve our society in positive and creative ways? I make particular reference to the Christian churches though these represent only part of our available resources. In many ways the churches have made important contributions in history. American ideals and American messianism have not always been deviant or fruitless. But the record is still not worthy of the genetic Christian vision.

It is appalling how some speak of a "post-Christian" era as though there ever had been a really Christian era. I am more sympathetic to Chesterton when he says that Christianity has not failed; it simply has never been tried. Suppose it were tried, even at an institutional level. Let me suggest a number of possibilities.

First, it has been urged of late that the church must rejoin human society by undergoing both a Copernican and an Einsteinian revolution. It must recognize that it is not the sun and center of God's creative enterprise. In a universe where not even the solar system can claim centrality, the church must see itself as called to serve and not to reign. It is one of many agencies and it is worth no more or no less than the values it can attempt to realize among men. Leaving Newton for Einstein, it should face the relativity of its present forms and formulations and refit itself for a new age. If these revolutions took place, the church

would be readied for service. It would then be in a position to suggest similar revolutions to the United States of America. Nothing less will do as an antidote to our false messianism.

Secondly, the church has a rich legacy in the Judaeo-Christian notion of prophecy, a legacy which we have lip-serviced to death. The prophet, whether person or institution, exists at the cutting edge of evolving moral consciousness. In our tradition, the prophet is seen as a man, equipped for criticism by his religious experience of the transcendent as real. His view can be transnational and transcultural because of the transcendence of his ultimate referent. His characteristic passion is for the *anawim*, the exploited, the benighted, the powerless of this earth. It is his authenticity, not his appointment, that gives him authority. His target is the ossified social conscience (an all too normal condition) and the false gods that preside over such conscience.

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What would a prophetic church be like? It would live in the conviction that humanization consists in the constant expansion of our horizons of moral concern. It would be oblivious to national borders in the measuring of concern. It would prove that the genius of Christianity is incarnation, enfleshment . . . the capacity to take on the flesh of another and feel through it. In Christ Jesus there is neither Chinese, nor Communist, nor black man.

Could prophecy give birth to citizens who would ask how America looks from eyes that peer out of yellow flesh? Could we break the myths that block us from the Chinese and thus from China? With a little bit of incarnational thinking, a nation which was so terrified of the Cuban missiles in 1962 might come to realize that the Chinese are afraid of us. They do not picture us in terms of Thanksgiving Day dinners and Mother's Day cards. They judge us as we would judge them were they in Canada and Mexico with the force that we have strung from Korea to Thailand. They fear our lethal hardware as we would fear theirs, especially if they had already shown an ability to perpetrate atomic slaughter. Our biochemical kill potential impresses them more than our prose. If you would take a new view of American foreign policy, make Chinese flesh your starting point.

A prophetic American church would confront the "quiet American" who wants only to pay his taxes, mow his lawn, and be left alone and who believes that voting completes his political responsibilities. A prophetic church would face this man and tell him that he is a barbarian. A barbarous society is not a place where everyone is cruel. In the most barbarous of

times only a few were practitioners of cruelty. Barbarism is constituted by the apathy of the quiet many which undergirds and makes feasible the cruelty of the few.

Also, a prophetic church would find no shortage of deities ripe for smashing. There are the false gods who hide under the ambiguous title of "national interest." There is the self-fulfilling pessimism that has too long passed for "political realism." There are the principalities and the powers of profit who dwell in the temples of Defense and those who block our commitment to world development. There is the big lie that America is distinguished in its concern for the economically poorer nations. Development is a problem for which the "quiet American" reserves his most special apathy. And it is a problem that screams for prophecy. Much aid has exploitative strings attached. The real *anawim* are the nations who have only raw materials which are depreciated or replaced by the swelling array of synthetics. The first clumsy attempts to process native materials can be snuffed out by the instinctive tariffs of the strong. Enlightened self-interest will never meet these needs. The apparent dream of kenotic, self-emptying love is a necessary force for development and for the building of international community. But it will take an eloquent prophet to sell that to the American giant.

A prophet will confront law and resist it when it embodies apathy and blocks creation. He will attack the popular heresy that says that there could exist a political or military situation that has no moral dimension and is not open to moral scrutiny. He will expose the pernicious use of secrecy in government and show the quality of those who prefer darkness to light. Prophets are not ashamed of ideals, for they know that ideals are as practical as seeds. A prophetic church, further, will not lose its soul in sterile activism. It will seek to provide a locus for ecstasy and for awe. It will spurn a mechanization that leaves no room for contemplation, for this too, like bread, is necessary.

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I conclude by confessing that my conclusions are a dream. I am suggesting that the church do in the nation and in the world what it could not do in Elmsville. Yet I am buoyed up knowing that whatever the prospects for success, the attempt would be electrifying in its excitement. And excitement is the pre-condition of any success. It is precisely what the churches do not have going for them now. Maybe there would be enough excitement to arouse our sleeping ecclesiastical giant and make quiet Americans noisy. At any rate, I can only request with Yeats that you tread lightly if you would tread upon this dream.