

A VIEW OF THE WORLD

Abraham Martin Murray

THE WORLD CONFERENCE ON RELIGION AND PEACE "laments the growing use of the name of religion in political issues...." The lament comes in the course of a news release asking Americans to restrain the anti-Muslim sentiments stirred up by events in Iran and elsewhere. The Conference "urges that individuals and groups take concrete steps to maintain calm among members of different faiths and to effectuate reconciliation where it has been destroyed." While lauding the irenic intent of the statement, one's enthusiasm for the lament about the role of religion in politics is severely limited.

In truth, religion is breaking out all over in the public realm. Much to the distress of secularists who subscribe to the Enlightenment dogma that modernity means religion's withering away or strict confinement to the private world of the spirit; much to the delight of some religionists who call us to a moral revolution, whether of the Right or of the Left; and much to the embarrassment of reporters and columnists who were taught that religion belongs next to the obituaries and fashion page and who are, perhaps for that reason, religiously illiterate.

THERE HAS BEEN A TURNAROUND BY SOCIAL THEORISTS in the last decade or more. They had long supposed that modernity and secularization were a package deal. The more a society advanced into the postindustrial era, and the more premodern societies became embroiled in a network of interdependence with modern trade, technology, and culture, the more would religion recede from public relevance. But today--notably but not only in Islamic countries--religion has become the politically volatile instrument both for resistance and for self-determined accommodation to modernity. And in advanced societies, such as that of the United States, there is an evident resurgence of religion impinging upon the public realm in new and sometimes troubling ways.

In the first volume of his memoirs Henry Kissinger repeatedly uses the terms theological and liturgical. "Theological" means any argument or viewpoint that is impossibly esoteric and irrelevant to the business at hand. "Liturgical" describes the rote repetition of a well-known party line. In Kissinger's vocabulary the terms are always pejorative, describing things beneath the attention of a serious man of the world. Only fools and hopeless sentimentalists give the time of day to ayatollahs and prelates, who, as Stalin observed, have no divisions and therefore can be of no interest to the engineers of real power in the real world. It may well be that the world is filled with fools and hopeless sentimentalists, or it may be that the real world is a great deal more complex than the engineering mindset of vaunted "realism" can grasp.

WASHINGTON POLITICIANS, who are usually very realistic about reelection, are taking very seriously indeed the Protestant and Catholic clamor for "pro-life" measures aimed at protecting the unborn and other marginal forms of humanity. Until recently, fundamentalist (the nice word is Evangelical) Protestants joined with militant secularists in insisting that "Religion and politics don't mix." But now the broadcast barons of the electronic church have come to town with groups like Moral Majority and Christian Voice. Presumably backed by millions of faithful adherents, they have every intention of turning spiritual charisma into political clout aimed at "turning America around." From the Hill to the White House there are no illusions that "theological" means irrelevant or that references to morality can be saved for ceremonial speeches on Our Great American Heritage. Senator Kennedy in particular has discovered how a confoundedly moralistic public can be distracted from "the issues" by purely private questions of alcohol, adultery, and death. Jefferson's

"wall of separation," which many took to mean the separation of religion from the public business, is in a state of sorry disrepair, or perhaps it has always been more fiction than fact.

THE FACT WOULD SEEM TO BE that human beings are, for better and for worse, incorrigibly religious. The further fact is that religion has, as the social scientists say, a strong moral component. At least in America, popular notions of right and wrong are inseparably tied to talk about God, Bible, church and synagogue. To wish that were not the case is to wish that people would give up religion or kick the habit of thinking that ideas about right and wrong have anything to do with politics. That religion will be abandoned is as likely as the disappearance of sex, while the incompatibility of morality and politics--supported by distressingly abundant experience--is not a position that most of us would want to embrace in principle. So it seems we are stuck with the messy mix of politics and religion.

IF SECULARISTS NEED TO BECOME MORE SOPHISTICATED about the importance and complexity of religion in the modern world, believers need to attend to the dangers of religion in the public arena. There is of course the danger to religion, that its integrity can be compromised by captivity to party lines of the Left or the Right. But for those who are uneasy about any mix of religion and politics, the greater danger appears as the disruption or even destruction of the political process by sometimes fanatical religious passions. The fear is not without foundation. After all, the most militant secularism of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment arose in reaction to the wars of religion in Europe, which came close to destroying the basis of civil discourse.

Fear of fanaticism is fired today by instances such as the Jonestown suicides and Khomeini's riotous legions. True, Jim Jones had much earlier repudiated the religious content of his socio-political movement. And true, almost the whole of Islam agrees that the hostage-taking in Teheran violates Islamic law.

And true, the profoundly antireligious movements of Stalin and Hitler represent a political fanaticism that claimed more victims in relatively few years than did the whole history of religious conflict. One can make the case that the disease of fanaticism, whether ostensibly religious or political, can only be cured by religious integrity; that is, only by establishing a transcendent point of reference that is beyond party conflict can conflicts between parties be checked and brought under judgment. All that said, however, the religious factor is a troubling force in the world of politics. It should be a troubling force, as the prophets were exceedingly troublesome to the kings and rulers of Israel. But it should not be a disabling force, precluding the possibility of exchange and compromise across the divides of deepest conviction.

FINALLY, ONE CANNOT JOIN in the lament over the growing role of religion in politics. There is religion and then there is religion. Religion that demonstrates an ecumenical and universal commitment that restrains conflict within and between religions, religion that is able to translate its moral judgments into a public reason accessible to outsiders, religion that cherishes diversity for the sake of keeping history open to the promised Messianic Age--such religion provides the vision, moral conviction, and compassion without which politics is sterile and finally lethal. In a time of religious resurgence, both believers and nonbelievers urgently need to rethink the nature of politics, of religion, and of the modern world. The one thing on which everyone should be able to agree is that, for better and for worse, from Tuscaloosa to Teheran, religion and politics do mix.

Abraham Martin Murray is the collective name of those who contribute to "A View of the World." The opinions expressed sometimes coincide with those of the editors.

Please notify the WORLDVIEW subscription department 6 weeks in advance of your move to insure uninterrupted delivery of the journal.