Concordia Theological Monthly

Volume 36 Article 57

11-1-1965

The Status of Societal Religion in the United States

Martin E. Marty
University of Chicago, Chicago

The Status of Societal Religion in the United States

MARTIN E. MARTY

I

In recent years citizens of the United States have been experiencing a new version of an old debate. This debate concerns itself with the question: Does or should a nation, a culture, or a society have a single integrating and supporting societal religion?[1] What is the relation of a particular theology to such a common faith or religious consensus in our society and in our nation? The parties which are participating in this widespread and profound debate are many; we can identify some of them.

The proponents of a societal religion who are themselves not involved with institutional religion are divided both into

[1] The title of this paper refers to "societal" religion. By "societal" I refer to a basis in society; society involves all the people who share a common culture. It is my intention in this sentence, however, to link society and culture and to view them not in general but specifically in relation to the nation. I am aware that society and culture may both refer to units larger or smaller than "nation," but the question here discussed is narrowed because of a specific modern problem. The rise of the modern "pluralist" state, a state which has disestablished a formal legal religion, has occasioned the question. Historically the society or the culture of the nation characteristically was based on a single religion or a clearly defined religious basis. Today this is not so.

By "religion" I mean only that dimension of spiritual and religious life which refers to man's attempt to interpret and integrate personal and social life in reference to a transcendent order or by regarding something in the empirical world with "ultimate concern."

The attempt to localize the problem in the United States is not predicated on the idea that America has a wholly unique experience. But in many ways the "newness" of the New World lay in the fact that in the United States a nation was formed without a specific, official, legal commitment to one metaphysical interpretation of the universe as a basis for society and the state. One such interpretation based on sources in Judaism, Christianity, the Enlightenment, and Western forms of theism and deism tended to prevail in the thinking of most "founding fathers," but they carefully kept from imposing this view on citizens by refraining from coercing religion of any sort in the Constitution. Insofar as other nations are now described as "pluralistic societies" (e.g., the Netherlands) or "secular states" (e.g., India), much of what is said here has bearing. But historical circumstances vary widely, and it has been necessary to restrict the problem to American pluralism and the problem of religion.

Where the term "consensus" is used, it refers to a commonly held body of unofficial opinion, in this case "opinion" having a religious reference or dimension. All of the terms to which I have referred have wider meanings than are here associated with them; the narrowing was necessary for historical reasons and for attempting to deal with the topic in brief space.

The essay was occasioned by the new situation in American political life: the nation became particularly conscious of its profoundly pluralist character after World War II, during two decades when a religious revival was reported to be in progress. Christian theology enters the picture as informer and critic of this peculiarly syncretistic pluralist-religious culture at a moment when articulate theologians were speaking of "the religious" in ways different from those used in the American past.

Martin E. Marty is associate professor of church history at the University of Chicago Divinity School and an associate editor of the Christian Century.

a right and left wing[2] and into camps which argue on the one hand that such a religion should be carefuly developed and controlled by a society or, on the other, that it will develop inevitably but must be regarded largely positively. We are most familiar with the religious and political doctrinaire right wing representatives who argue consistently that some sort of precise official consensus religion must unite the national majority against "enemies without and heretics and traitors within."[3] Less recognized but more plausible is a cluster of historians and literary figures who have observed that American Constitutionalism has evoked a practical tradition of religious response which is today being forgotten but to which the nation must return.[4]

On the left in this camp are those who are uneasy with the nationalistic implications of societal religion. Yet they celebrate certain values of a democratic civilization and seek metaphysical sanction and ceremonial reinforcement for these values. In effect, they argue for what seems paradoxical — a kind of creedal secular religion for the whole culture.[5] At their side are

[2] It has been necessary to borrow conventional political terminology to describe two attitudes toward societal religion. In general the right wing is more conservative, and specifically it tends to focus its loyalties more narrowly on one nation. The left wing tends to be more liberal and seeks to broaden its focus beyond the nation toward the international and ecumenical scene. Thus "The Religion of the American Way of Life" would characteristically be described as "right wing," and "The Religion of Democracy" (or "of Humanity" or "of Secular Humanism") would more readily be regarded as "left wing." The terms are necessarily imprecise but necessary to suggest general patterns of thought.

[3] This language of religious nationalism has been strongest when Americans were asserting their "manifest destiny" and in times of international insecurity. After World War II it sometimes revealed itself in "the McCarthy era" among non-Christian right-wing intellectuals, but then and in the early 1960s the right-wing in politics ordinarily found occasion to be identified with Christian forces and tradition. The coercion of opinion against "heretics or traitors within" in the 19th century usually bore a "Protestant" as opposed to a nonreligious mark, but the American Protective Association and similiar anti-Roman Catholic groups attracted people who opposed Catholicism as being subversive of the state without reference to Protestantism. In more moderate forms this non-Christian approach to consensus is present in the attempts to formulate "An American Creed"; again, the non-Christian approach is limited because explicit theistic or deistic references mark too much of the extra-Constitutional literature of American national tradition.

[4] Much of the "neoconservatism" in American literary circles in the 1950s was marked by this attitude. Eliseo Vivas, Russell Kirk, James Burnham, the editors of *The Modern Age*, and others regularly referred to a national tradition which provided or relied upon a metaphysical basis. To some of these conservatives Christianity was an integral, and to others, an arbitrary, ingredient; to many, while they may have been Christians, it was not absolutely essential. Some of the editors of *The National Review* are not Roman Catholic Christians, and some of them are militant about their disassociation from Christianity.

[5] A typical statement of this position is J. Paul Williams, *The New Education and Religion* (New York: Association, 1945). See also his last chapter in *What Americans Believe and How They Worship*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 472 ff. Williams divides religion into private, denominational, and *societal* forms and, while paying respects to the first two, insists that the societal must predominate in a chaotic pluralism. "Ignoring the lack of spiritual integration invites disaster. Relying on the haphazard methods of the past will not meet the need. . . . Governmental agencies must teach the democratic ideal *as religion.*" He seeks "metaphysical sanctions" and "ceremonial reinforcements" of this religion. Williams recognizes that such a religion can easily become "right-wing" and lapse into nationalism, but he calls for "a higher type of societal religion than the faith which is now called nationalism." More recently Duncan Howlett has made a book-length proposal for

historians who would be critical of the ideological tendencies of such an official religion. But they celebrate the same values which have been secreted in a democratic civilization. This "liberal tradition," to them, must be regarded with a virtually religious devotion if it is to unite a civilization and make its way in the world.[6]

Just as there are proponents of a societal religion among the religiously unaffiliated, so there are advocates to the right and to the left in what might be termed the general (as opposed to particularist or confessional) religious community. The most potent forces in this community are on the doctrinal right, where many contend for an official religion which amounts to a syncretism of historic Christian elements and later distinctively American accretions.[7] They are joined by those who are devoted in practice to a similar syncretistic faith but who would be reluctant to see it promoted with the sanctions of the law and the coercive power of public institutions.[8]

On the left in the generally religious community are those of doctrinaire tendency who represent various brands of humanitarian theism but who are uneasy about seeing them identified with our specific nation and society.[9] At their side are

---

recognizing such a societal religion. See *The Fourth American Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964).

[6] Some elements of this religious regard for national tradition and values are seen in the writings of Clinton Rossiter, Walter Lippmann, Daniel Bell, and Louis Hartz. All of them are "anti-ideological," but they celebrate ideas and experiences in America's "conservative tradition" or "public philosophy" or "liberal tradition" or "genius," ideas and experiences of a more or less religious character. Not all of these writers would be at home with a reference to "the liberal tradition," and many are regarded as somehow conservative. But the right-wing religious nationalism rejects them all for their liberalism. Ideological liberals like William J. Newman in *The Futilitarian Society* (New York: Braziller, 1961), p. 48, see their understanding of the societal role of religion to be confining and inhibiting: "Behind all . . . talk of essences, higher truth, religion, individualism, hierarchy, concurrent majorities, and the constitutional state, is a search for a fixed society, not a search for freedom."

[7] "The general religious community" is made up of great numbers of non-affiliated Americans, newspaper columnists, and politicians. They are ministered to chiefly by "celebrity clerics" or "public priests." In America these men and women will naturally be based in one or another of the denominational traditions, but they are particularly gifted at the art of reaching the general religious community. This tradition goes back at least to the years of Henry Ward Beecher and later the "princes of the pulpit" T. DeWitt Talmadge, Russell Conwell, and others. Norman Vincent Peale, Billy Graham, and Fulton Sheen were the most prominent representatives of this vocational cluster in the 1950s; all of them characteristically favor amendments which would permit and perhaps promote prayer in public institutions. The radical religious right unanimously holds to this position.

[8] The testimony of numbers of "celebrity clerics" before the House Judiciary Committee in 1964, when H. J. Res. 693 and similar "Prayer Amendment Proposals" were being debated, reveals that not all who disagreed with the Supreme Court decisions prohibiting such prayer (in 1962 and 1963) were prepared to encounter the decisions with legal establishments of prayers.

The general theological bent of the Luce magazines has been in this direction; it regrets certain tendencies in judicial decisions, but seeks to explain to the public that alternatives are more regrettable.

[9] Horace M. Kallen's *Secularism Is the Will of God* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1954) is representative. Kallen writes as a disaffiliated Jew who sees no conflict between Judaism and America and who argues for a broad base of religious liberty while celebrating pluralism. See also Arnold J. Toynbee, *America and the World Revolution* (New York: Oxford, 1962), pp. 144 ff. Norman Cousins and the American

a number of practically oriented interfaith agencies who, in their advocacy of religious tolerance, tend to unite on commonly held quasi-religious tenets which they are reluctant to reduce to specificity.[10]

A third family of proponents of a societal religion can be found in the Christian community, among representatives of the United States' historically predominant religion. Once again, this family has the right and left wing elements which seem so diverse that each wing may have more in common with some who are religiously unaffiliated than with each other. Yet they do unite practically on certain political and legal questions or in interpretation of some factors in culture. On the doctrinaire right would be those fundamentalist factions which contend for an official Christian interpretation of culture, legally undergirded by Christian amendments to the Constitution.[11] Conservative nationalist Christians who are reluctant to impose their interpretation frequently base their appeals to the larger public on the generally Christian background and history of American institutions.[12]

To the left of both these broad clusters of contenders are more liberal and ecumenical Christians who celebrate Christian motifs in a transnational culture. One "doctrinal" party, while it may not seek legal reinforcement of its view, will argue for the idea of a Christian society which can be codified and made incarnate in a specific set of institutions.[13] They are

---

interpreters of Schweitzer hold to this viewpoint. Winthrop Hudson in *The Great Tradition of the American Churches* (New York: Harper, 1953), pp. 80 ff., makes a plausible case for Abraham Lincoln as an incarnation of this supranational theological tendency. Sidney E. Mead has frequently used Lincoln to exemplify the creative syncretism between Enlightenment religion and Protestant Christianity in American societal religion. Mead's historical analysis, insofar as it relates to the period 1776 to 1865, seems to me to be most accurate. Whether that particular combination of Enlightenment and Christian values is a potentiality today in the "pluralist ethos" represents a separate question, however.

[10] The earlier National Conference of Christians and Jews was oriented to an ideology of toleration based on a kind of Jewish-Christian-Enlightenment interplay. More recently the N. C. C. J. has been conscious of more implications of pluralism, more ready to stimulate creative conflict or to promote interfaith harmony without a specific religious argument to inform all who share its program.

[11] The National Reform Association was founded in 1863 to seek to amend the United States Constitution. Its goal was to insert God into the institutional charter for American life. A similar Christian Amendment Movement still thrives. An attempt to introduce the amendment was made by Senator Ralph Flanders in June 1953. It reads: "This Nation devoutly recognizes the authority and law of Jesus Christ, Saviour and Ruler of Nations, through whom are bestowed the blessings of Almighty God." The formal proponents of the amendment in a June 1959 attempt were Representatives Denver Hargis of Kansas and Eugene Siler of Kentucky. See Religious News Service for June 11, 1959.

[12] The neo-evangelical magazine *Christianity Today* ordinarily supports this view. In general those who recall and celebrate the Calvinist theocratic tradition share the argument. A recent instance is Rousas J. Rushdoony, *This Independent Republic* (Nutley, New Jersey: The Craig Press, 1964). The temptations to make legal proposals to impose a Christian consensus is strong among those who hold this general view.

[13] Christopher Dawson's *The Historic Reality of Christian Culture* (New York: Harpers, 1960); T. S. Eliot's *The Idea of a Christian Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1940), and the work of Evelyn Waugh illustrate an Anglo-Catholic or British Roman Catholic view of culture along these lines. Jacques Maritain might also be associated with

joined by a more liberal and more Protestant element which seeks a theology of culture but is less doctrinaire in its pursuit of such a theology.[14]

Over against all these proponents of a societal religion are both religiously unaffiliated Christian cultural interpreters who argue either that no such common faith has been widespread or recognizable or that such a social faith would be undesirable if it appeared and should be resisted whenever it begins to appear. On the "right" among those not connected with organized religions there have been few advocates of this viewpoint in the United States, probably because the religiously disaffiliated in America have not ordinarily found it wise or possible to be militant in their opposition to widespread religious consensuses. A number of philosophers and political scientists on the left have systematically opposed all attempts to define national history in quasi-religious terms and have been even more emphatic in their opposition to contemporary definitions or impositions of a "religious America" motif.

Of course, the middle category, the "generally religious" or syncretistic group, will not be found on this side of the debate. Its adherents almost unanimously contend for a common religion for society as a first order of business. A conceivable exception might be syncretistic withdrawal cults which would take no interest in the political society even though they would doctrinally unite or absorb numbers of nonpolitical religious motifs.[15]

In the Christian community, however, there are what might be termed "right" and "left" factions which are united only in their opposition to societal religion. On the right would be those withdrawing communities or those theological contenders who turn their backs on the larger society. Practically and theoretically they have as little contact as possible with any societal consensus.[16] Perhaps the most articulate of the voices from the theological left belong to those who despair of or are not interested in building bridges to those who represent societal religious consensus. They may do this because they feel

this view. Significantly, these authors have been popular in the United States, but few natives have been able to sustain argument on their level so far as the matter of "a Christian culture" here is concerned. America's establishment may be too far in the past and its pluralism so long recognized that Americans who contend in this way must borrow their argument from England or the Continent. The position has been assaulted during the past decade with the rise of the "post-Christendom" view of institutions or a "secular-meaning-of-the-Gospel" school of theology, both of which attract attention most in the campus circles where Dawson, Eliot, and Maritain once held sway.

[14] There is some of this in Paul Tillich's positive attitude toward religion in culture. Bernard Meland in *The Realities of Faith* (New York: Oxford, 1962), pp. 70 f., expresses concern over culture, society, nation, and "the West." "Has the process of secularization, implicit in a technological civilization, progressed so far in the West that sensibilities inherent in the Christian ethos can be expected to become ineffectual, or cease to make any claims upon us as a people? There is really no ready answer to this question."

[15] In this group would belong the small groups intent on forming a para-society inside the larger national society but which would have universalistic claims for their views. See William J. Whalen, *Faiths for the Few* (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1963); Richard R. Mathison, *Faiths, Cults and Sects of America* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1960); Vittorio Lanternari, *The Religions of the Oppressed* (New York: Knopf, 1963).

[16] Hutterites, Doukhobors, and Jehovah's Witnesses would be familiar examples.

that in a world not dominated by Christian theology communication has broken down or because they feel that in a religious climate distinctive Christianity would be dissipated or misunderstood even when it attempted to communicate. Many other motives and interests could be cited. Of course, great numbers of Americans would not recognize themselves in these descriptions. Few are completely consistent in viewpoint; in a fluid and free society most elements will be forming coalitions, influencing and being influenced; many would fall between these family descriptions; great numbers are inarticulate or apathetic. Our interest has only been to depict in broad outline the kinds of emphases which are represented in public life and literature today.

The debate has a legal basis, and many of its effects are felt chiefly in the political sphere. While during the 1950s contention for societal religion took on new urgency and became popular, the accompanying legal issues and the political realities became the focus in the 1960s. To illustrate: in 1960 the election of a Roman Catholic President and the debate preceding the election were indicative of a society-wide concern for the character of the "consensus." The chief executive of political life has tended to play a sort of sacerdotal role whenever political life issues in religious ceremony and function. For the first time that *executive* was not committed to or informed by the chief particular contributor to an American consensus religion.[17]

In 1961 it began to become evident, however, that the *judicial* branch of government would provide the controversial center for debate. The First Amendment to the Constitution had gone largely untested in the highest court for one and three-fourths centuries. In the 1960s numbers of cases dealing with the religious clause reached the Supreme Court, and scores were argued in lower courts. In *Torcaso v. Watkins, 367 U.S. 488*[18] the Court outlawed compulsory faith for public officials and, to the complication of many advocates of a societal theism, in effect agreed that nonreligion satisfied the legal requirements traditionally associated with religion in American society.

---

[17] See Patricia Barrett, *Religious Liberty and the American Presidency* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), a full-length study of religion in the campaign of 1960. Illustrative of the "modernist"-"fundamentalist" coalition was the makeup of "the Peale Group," "an *ad hoc* anti-Catholic group of 150 Protestants" led by Norman Vincent Peale, Daniel L. Poling, L. M. Bell, Glenn Archer, Harold J. Ockenga, Charles Clayton Morrison, and others. Many in this group (as in the instance of the foundation of Protestants and Other Americans United) had nothing else as a basis for fellowship than anti-Catholicism, as they represented opposite ends of the theological spectrum. (See Barrett, p. 14.)

[18] A Maryland resident was denied his commission as notary public because he would not swear that he believed in the existence of God. The Supreme Court overturned a ruling of the Maryland Supreme Court and upheld the right of the notary to take office without the oath. It is interesting that in this decision Justice Black, speaking for the unanimous court, referred to God-less religion as "religion" and thus introduced another dimension to the legal discussion of societal religion in America. "Neither [a state nor the Federal Government] can constitutionally pass laws nor impose requirements which aid all religions as against non-believers, and neither can aid those religions founded on different beliefs." Black's footnote added: "Among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God are Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism, and others."

In 1962, in *Engel v. Vitale, 370 U.S. 421* [19] a more far-reaching legal shock was felt; by now more and more people were able to enter the debate. It had become an immediate and practical issue for them. "General religion" was not to be officially propagated in devotion in public schools. The year 1963 saw a more profound enlargement in *Abington Township v. Schempp 374 U.S. 203.*[20] Now traditional and particular religious elements such as historic forms of prayer and Bible reading were prohibited in schools and similar institutions.

In 1964 the controversy on the *legislative* level became most intense in the House Judiciary Committee where *H. J. Res. 693* and a gross of similar amendment proposals were made: they had as a common intention the reversal of the Supreme Court decisions. The level of official and public interest is evident from the published proceedings which run to 2,774 pages in three volumes. In 1964 a political party placed advocacy of such amendments into its platform.

During the decade ahead the legal feature of the debate will no doubt remain prominent as the courts wrestle with a number of complex cases dealing with the role of religion in a free society. But one can notice the legal feature at the expense of the debates which deal with persuasive aspects of national life, with ethos and mores and traditional practice or custom. The whole cluster of debates has become and may remain for some time the most public religious issue in America except for the issue of religious involvement in civil rights struggles.

These debates are not new, but their context is. The question of a societal religion or a theological consensus at the base of society certainly took a different form in colonial America than it does today. Most of the colonists came proposing or assenting to a specific metaphysical base for and to a distinctive religious institution in each colony. Only near the end of the colonial period, when the colonies began to be more interactive (for trade, common defense, in religious awakening, in revolution, etc.) did it begin to become necessary for citizens to find means of uniting people who did not share identical religious views of society's basis even though almost all of them were "Protestants" of some sort.[21]

The first dramatic and significant change in the debate occurred in the latter decades of the 18th century. Words relating to that period, words such as "Revolution," "Enlightenment," "Constitutionalism," "Separation of Church and State," "Voluntaryism," "Federalism," introduce us to new problems and new possibilities. The legal resolution came between 1776 and 1833—34 as religious disestablishment

[19] The court wanted to make clear that its decision did not "indicate a hostility toward religion or toward prayer. Nothing, of course, could be more wrong. The history of man is inseparable from the history of religion." Then follows a brief and positive view of wholly unofficial and licit "societal religion" located in the "sentiments" and "hopes" of Americans in the past and present. *Engel v. Vitale* is printed in full in *The Bible and the Public Schools,* edited by Arthur Frommer (New York: Liberal Press, 1964).

[20] Frommer, pp. 181 ff. The category developed in this latter decision is one of "wholesome neutrality" on the part of the government toward religion of all kinds in national life.

[21] See Sidney E. Mead, "From Coercion to Persuasion," Chapter II in *The Lively Experiment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

reached all the states. The question of theology and ethos in national life remained. In that period the distinctive "Protestant" interpretations shared place or vied with a generalizing or natural interpretation which we associate with the American version of the Enlightenment.[22] That sharing and vying remains a part of all later debates.

The second significant change occurred as the 19th century progressed. The later immigrations brought numbers of people who were not of the dominant American religious tradition: Roman Catholic, Jewish, and representatives of a broad spectrum of people who had in common a religious nonaffiliation. The first of these served to threaten the traditional American religious hegemony; the second constituted first a subtle and later an overt questioning of Christian monopoly; the third represented a small but articulate voice of opposition to explicitly religious or theistic bases for interpreting national life. Throughout the 19th century the traditional American religious culture and its infusion of societal religion developed despite opposition.

After World War II the long decay of the imperium of this religious culture had become apparent; the alternatives were now exposed to the whole society and demanded attention. The term "pluralism" began to impose itself with the logic of history where "Protestant" had previously served to characterize the religious dimensions of culture. While the colonial fathers had experienced difficulty in communicating with each other or in uniting disparate "Protestant" elements, their descendants found nothing even so homogenous as Protestantism available for a consensus basis. The arguments for a societal religion took on new variety.[23]

"Pluralism" is a methodological and not a substantive category. It refers to a ground rule and not to the game of national life, and is unsatisfying so far as attempts to provide a content for societal religion are concerned.[24] Perhaps pluralism will re-

---

22 See Paul Boller, *George Washington and Religion* (Dallas, Tex.: Southern Methodist University, 1963) for an example of a founding father's "Enlightened" religion. It is curious that those who wish an official societal religion based on the Christian tradition must attempt to reinterpret Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, and others in order to render them orthodox. For a bizarre attempt to "convert to the Christian tradition by definition" see Charles Wesley Lowry, *To Pray or Not to Pray!* (Washington, D. C.: The University Press, 1963), chapters VI and VIII and Appendix C. This appendix reproduces Benjamin Franklin's "plea for prayer" during the Constitutional Convention. The Convention in general avoided prayer and reference to deity, and did so for a complex of motivations. Lowry cites only that "Dr. Hugh Williamson of North Carolina said that the reason for lack of prayers was that the Convention had no funds to hire a minister."

23 The Fund for the Republic through its project on "Religion in a Free Society" in the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions played a historic role in this developing national self-understanding through a number of seminars and publications; this occurred during the later 1950s. The Fund became active at the height of the religious revival when meaningful pluralism was being challenged on the one hand by those who held to the idea of a general religious consensus and on the other by the "mere pluralists" who tended to worship the process or the ground rule of national life without quest for religious substance.

24 Thus John Courtney Murray, at a Fund for the Republic seminar: "Religious pluralism is against the will of God. But it is the human condition; it is written into the script of history. It will not somehow marvelously cease to trouble the City." In John Cogley (ed.), *Religion in America* (New York: Meridian, 1958), p. 40.

main a theological "nothing" word to most citizens of a complex society. It is often argued that pluralism as such leaves a vacuum which will somehow be filled. Among many social scientists it is commonly observed that a complex society will somehow and inevitably tend to develop one working faith, one inclusive ideology.[25] This faith may permit exceptions, but according to this observation even these distinctive forces find themselves absorbed by the less defined societal religion. Historians in general are less sure about the inevitability of the single-religion-producing feature of a complex society and are more interested in the exceptions or in the interplay between those who seek monopoly and those who would withhold consent from history or doctrinal design.[26] In their view America "muddled through" or "played it by ear" without an ideology or a clarified single religion. Some Christian theologians suggest that Christianity and the world would be best served if Christians frankly recognized this historical development and then related to it.[27]

To Christopher Dawson a "pluralistic" culture is by definition a "secular" and by mood a "secularistic" one.

[25] The overdramatic attack on all forms of religion by the American adherents of the Barthian school and the regular prophetic protests against the American form of societal religion in the later 1950s occasioned a number of replies from sociologists of religion. Most of them are eager to point out that some sort of societal religion is inevitable. Historians and social scientists base their view on past and present experience. Theologians who observe the general trend to a "world coming of age" and moving "beyond religion" would often disagree with the social thinkers. Typical among the latter is Robin Williams, Jr: "Every functioning society has to an important degree a common religion." "A society's common-value system — its 'moral solidarity' — is always correlated with and to a degree dependent upon a shared religious orientation" (*American Society* [New York: Knopf, 1951], pp. 345). James M. Gustafson, J. Milton Yinger, Charles Frankel, and others have argued that it is unrealistic to picture, and unsalutary to conceive of, a society which does not somehow respond to or generate a common societal religion. The difficulties in this view come when one makes the move from "societal" to "national." America has numbers of internal subsocieties which have articulate unifying faiths and it belongs to a larger or "Western" society which has a broader common faith (it is, for example, by its definition "the free world"). But these societies are not coexistent with the more artificial society, the nation, which concerns us here.

[26] Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), p. 148: "In American culture, then, an especially valuable role may be reserved for those religions like Judaism, Catholicism, and the intransigent Protestant sects which remain in a sense 'un-American' because they have not yet completely taken on the color of their environment. Such sects, while accepting the moral premises of the community, can still try to judge the community by some standard outside its own history. But even these religions often take on a peculiar American complexion and tend toward validating themselves by their accord with things as they are."

[27] We have already referred to Paul van Buren's work. Samuel Laeuchli, Richard Luecke, William Hamilton, and other American theologians have made social proposals along this line. See Etienne Borne, *Atheism* (New York: Hawthorn, 1961) for a Roman Catholic argument that political desacralization is advantageous for the church. "Faith in a transcendent and immanent God has desecrated nature, secularized society, and set man in his true place again" (p. 123). While Borne scores "propheticism," he shares some theologians' prophetic spirit over against societal religion. "Sociological theories of religion are good explanations and successfully destructive of any nationalist polytheism, any religion of a closed community. There are some gods of whom Lachelier said, to show them false, that they are born in the streets, the product of collective excitement. Class, nation, race, empire — every group of man setting itself up in opposition to some other group, challenging its right to exist, makes a carnal religion of its fanatical patri-

How the Christian theologians, for example, make up their minds in this debate will depend not only on their theological commitments and methods but also on their perceptions of the organization of society and their views of the history of that society. Much of the theological argument has dealt with an abstract view of society, culture, and nation.[28] Often we hear of the relation of "Church" to "World" as if each represented a single construct; the problem then would be merely one of communication and persuasion between them. How is "little Church" relevant to "big World"? If one proceeds on this basis, he is likely to remain in the abstract and may seriously misinterpret the environment and be forced to a limited view of the kinds of relations between Christian theology and society in both its religious and nonreligious dimensions.

The world has its single *daimon* but it also has many "principalities and powers." A single, intact, organic model for an integral world does not do justice to the way a complex society is organized or how its values and goals are perceived by most people. A better model would see the disparate elements of the environment broken down into a wild variety of interests, factions, factors, emphases, and parties. We can apply labels at random: "Entertainment," "Politics," "Academy," "Commerce," "Religion." Each of these is broken down again into specialties or subspecies. That little effectual communication goes on between each and that as each becomes more technical the problem of integration grows is regularly recognized. The modern university, united as it is only by its heating system or parking problem — as administrators have recently complained — serves for a picture. Some argue that theology, once purportedly the queen of sciences, has been dethroned. Indeed, she has. But who is queen? The scientific world view? Specifically, what is that? Who will spell it out to the satisfaction of the scientists, to say nothing of representatives of other cultures?

These self-contained worlds, these apparent privacies and autonomies, may be found to be coalescing at many times. Some of them unite more easily than others. Some are nearer to being fundamental than others. But it is difficult to integrate them or to see them integrated. Theologians, philosophers, literary artists make integrating proposals. But who integrates the integrators?[29] The theologian who wishes

otism, and slips into believing that in reducing its enemy to despair, slavery, or death it is executing the judgment of its gods, or of one God, who is then a pagan God" (p. 140). Borne seeks a secularization of politics and desacralization of nature (the death of Caesar and of Pan) for the sake of faith in the living God.

[28] One of the most helpful and yet necessarily distorting views was represented in H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

[29] Warren Wagar in his study of integrators such as Mannheim, Mumford, Teilhard, Tillich, Toynbee, Northrop, Wells, Sorokin, and others asks this question (*The City of Man* [Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1963]). Attempts to answer the question lead the reader to frustration. The question might be asked: "How high a valuation should be placed on the reality of world integration? Can it be achieved without coercion or the spirit of 1984?" I prefer to say that the theologian is of most help when he "interprets and *begins* to integrate" the competitive realms which people perceive. Insofar as religion enters into the world of the universalistic world-integrator, it usually turns out to be much more arcane and private than are most of the inherited "particular" religions of world history.

to communicate to representatives of these other partly private domains or elites does not have to choose merely between the completely integrated, unitary model on one hand and an anarchic pluralist model on the other. He must be discreet in his interpretation of both models; he will probably work best if he keeps in mind a certain fluidity and an interest in the concrete, in the changing empirical situation, in the actual relationships of powers and communicating centers.

To be specific: it is apparent that some very vague elements of a religious consensus have appeared and proved durable in American life. "We hold these truths to be self-evident." Attempts to defend these self-evident truths have found theologians and other contenders breaking into disagreement. Yes, the majority of people in a complex and mobile society may at least nominally assent to certain quasi-religious propositions about equality, human worth, rights, and the general welfare. But these common notions and widely believed propositions are interrupted by particular and narrower beliefs which again and again serve as checks on them or as immobilizers. The interest of the theologian should then be most creative when he relates to both the common notions and the drastic interruptions of these and when he perceives the subtle and sudden shifts of public attention or emphasis between them.

I would illustrate this contrast between the concrete and the abstract in the history of the American people by reference to an apothegm from the *Zorach v. Clauson, 343 U.S. 306* (1952), decision which was cited in the Supreme Court "prayer" cases of 1961 and 1962. In *Abington v. Schempp* we read: "We gave specific recognition to the proposition that [we] are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being." The first half of this proposition is historically demonstrable; the second is neither historically demonstrable nor logically tenable. That we are "a religious people" by most of the conventional norms applied to a people and certainly by those implied by the court seems clear. Indicators of this religiousness would include widespread assent to "belief in God" as a polltaker's category: church membership; church attendance; desire on the part of people to be thought of as religious. This is not the place to evaluate the kinds of religion involved; the assertion can stand: "We are a religious people."

Do our institutions presuppose a Supreme Being? Legally they cannot, for the legal basis of these institutions, the Constitution, is notable for its avoidance of a specific metaphysical reference even to that Supreme Being who appeared so frequently in the unofficial language of the Constitution's drafters.[30] "We are a religious people." In this *historical* reality lies the promise for relationship between Christian theologian and advocates of so-

[30] Of course, the Declaration of Independence and scores of state papers go into the formation of our national ethos; but the legal basis of our institutions, the only basis to which all are committed, resides in the Constitution. While it is impossible today to know "what was on the mind of the founding fathers" in many respects, at least in this one it is clear: they made a studied attempt to avoid committing the whole society to one specific theology or metaphysic even as they made a clear attempt to avoid committing the Federal Government to any particular or positive involvements with religious institutions.

cietal religion.[31] That societal religion has always contained and may long contain in America many elements of denominational or general "Protestantism," Christianity, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, or the historically-conditioned theism of the West. This general orthodoxy has always contained and may long contain many elements of orthopraxis: in public ceremonies (where the heretic or traitor would be most noticed); in general public regard for religious institutions; in public expectation from these institutions.

What we have been calling societal religion presents many problems to Christian theologians; since they represent America's predominant particular faith they are accorded special attention in this paper. I have argued that it is difficult for any discipline to integrate all the elements of a complex society. Formal theology is particularly handicapped. For a variety of historical reasons, theology is not looked to by most people for specific and determinative interpretation. Theology is "boxed in" among the disciplines; it represents a single specialty and not a recognized overarching or undergirding discipline.

The particularist theologian lacks the coercive power of the political figures who can change the construct of societal religion as, for example, in the Supreme Court decisions or by constitutional amendment. He makes his way almost wholly by persuasion. Political life is a broader and more plausible basis for organizing the modern world than is theological witness.[32]

The theological community, relying on persuasion, is handicapped. It is divided and, in the consensus-seeking public eye, competitive and disruptive. It seems to be in no position to inform, motivate, judge, or inspire a society when it has not "made up its own mind" about the specific task of integrating a culture.

The theologian of a particular tradition is handicapped as informer or critic of societal religion in that he is less directly functionally related to this role than are some other people. That is, he must be about his business doing many other things; theology has other and possibly more important tasks than serving to form (or to keep from the formation of) a national consensus. But other people are directly and functionally related to the one task. The author of best-selling books on religion, the celebrity-preacher, anyone who caters to or makes a direct intuitive appeal to the millions who somehow assent to the vague but potent societal religion has an inside track. These people can be more frontal. If in this competition the theological community would reorganize itself just to meet this one task it would certainly then be distracted from other tasks. When it overreaches in its claims it will seem to become obsessive and pathetic in

---

31 "That our institutions presuppose the existence of a Supreme Being is demonstrably false. Not a single one of our political institutions, or all of them taken together, presuppose the existence of a Supreme Being. The existence of God is logically compatible with any political system whatsoever and with any feature within it. Whatsoever the political organization of heaven may be, it certainly does not suggest a democratic republic!" Sidney Hook, in *Proceedings of the Annual Judicial Conference of the Tenth Judicial Circuit of the United States* (1963), p. 77.

32 An offhand remark of Isaac Rosenfeld points to a feature which deserves systematic analysis: "It is my own conviction that politics furnishes the best of all bases for secular culture." *An Age of Enormity* (New York: World, 1962), p. 332.

its desire to be relevant; it may dissipate its energies and lose its existing energies in such reorganization.

The theologian may be tempted to complicate the task of informing and criticizing societal religion if he makes extravagant claims for his community or his position. Those unrelated to churches or synagogs may better contribute to and control the consensus than may the churches; the latter may represent the problem and not the solution. Would Christian theology, for instance, be demonstrably better off in relation to a consensus formed by WASP-ism, by culture-religion of the white Anglo-Saxon "Protestant" syndrome, than it would be by any number of entities which bear no mark of traditional religion.

The theologian of a particular community inside the larger society can come to recognize the difficulty of communication. He comes to learn that "the world" is not a-tiptoe waiting for a theology of culture; its elements do not sit still either for a theological portrait or for criticism. If he is naive about his relationship to them, he may rob the whole theological enterprise of its seriousness and might better have remained inside the ecclesiastical circle. These are accidental problems of communication; substantial problems relating to the interior tasks of theology are more profound.

If theologians and churchmen take no direct interest in relating to, interpreting, and even in part in integrating society, it may be easier for any of the "autonomies" we describe to be idolized, to take themselves with ultimate seriousness. If a residual social faith, fed and judged in part by Christianity, disintegrates, what will fill the vacuum? Will new gods come to replace the old? Christian theology by definition is to war against idolatry, against absolutizing the relative. If by definition it professes disinterest in the notions of a semi-religious culture, it abandons the culture. Some theologians have expressed concern lest the culture deprived of a formal religion based on legal and suasive pressures force Christian theologians to be so remote from the power centers of the larger culture that they be not heard at all, that communication wholly break down.[33] If theologians do not meet the problem of societal religion frontally and intelligently they may find themselves absorbed and taken captive by it. Theologians in the past have often enough served as agents for nationalist religion![34]

Insofar as they have opportunity, how do theologians relate to societal religion as a feature in culture-building and the development of consensus in a free society? Before making final comment I shall try to summarize with a concrete illustration or picture some of the options present today. Religions can be portrayed through their shrines. Has America a shrine?

"No," answers one school. There is no societal religion, no spiritual consensus, no social faith. None has developed; none should or can develop.

"Maybe," says another. Whether it does

---

[33] John C. Bennett, James Pike, and other "liberals" have regularly expressed concern on this point, both in the face of recent Supreme Court decisions and of the newer "secular-oriented" theology in the churches.

[34] The Bismarckian "court preachers" have had their modern counterparts; the Rev. Edward L. R. Elson last filled this role in America during the Eisenhower administration. The radical religious right seeks to fill the role with a more dogmatic intension.

or does not makes no difference in the practical life of people in the nation.

"Yes," answers another, but it is empty. The reality of the holy and the regard for the spiritual are all that matter. They are enough for the society.

"Yes," says still another, "and it is full. It has an an old icon and a traditional shelf of systematic theology to support it." This "old" might be "Protestantism" or the Judaeo-Christian tradition or generalized religion colored by Biblical theism and natural religion. What matters to its advocates is that it is there and that it has served well.

"Yes," once again, "and it is full. It has a new icon and a new systematic defense." Here we find the advocates of new and articulate religions of democracy or common faiths.

"Yes," says the last. "Sometimes it has been full, sometimes empty. Sometimes it has been used and sometimes it has not been used or it has been misused. It bears evidence of the presence of a number of images and in its halls have been heard numbers of arguments. Some of the images have been central, more compelling, more durable. Some arguments have made better, more plausible, more permanent contributions, than others. It is important that there be a shrine, but all people are free to make their contribution or derive benefit from it. And there shall always be those who try to shatter all the images and freely to question all the arguments."

The last picture, inadequate as it may be, does most justice to the realities of the American situation of the past. Theologians have taken numbers of approaches to this "shrine" or, more abstractly and accurately, this societal religion. Some relate through natural and others through revealed theological claims.[35] Some have capitalized and some have not been interested at all.

Theologians and churchmen often contend that they must be free to be themselves and free "for" others; if so, their relations to societal religion may take at least two forms. They must be sufficiently a part of the community which devises and is informed by a social faith to gain a hearing, just as they must be sufficiently removed and disengaged to bring a word based on a norm that is not wholly captive of or controlled by the community. They are then free, insofar as they can communicate at all, to contribute to a healthy integration of societal life without being suffocated or absorbed by it. They are free to bring a redeeming, salutary, and informing word because they have been identified, have shown their inclusive concern. Such a dialectical relation to general societal religion on the part of theologians seems preferable to the alternatives of total disinterest and withdrawal or of capitulation. That relation would be built on a careful analysis of the environment and would gain credence through a thoroughly modest definition of the task and the possibilities.

---

[35] The "recovery of the natural" in Reformed thought would be a fruitful avenue for proceeding further on these topics. The most radical rejection of "the natural" was apparent in the legal tradition which found Karl Barth's thought congenial: see Jacques Ellul, *The Theological Foundation of Law* (Garden City, N. Y., 1960) which was an extreme statement. Discussion of "the natural" is newly complicated, of course, by Protestant theologians who seek to "do" theology without reference to God or to a coherent universe.

II

To this point I have prepared what might be called a "position" paper; that is, I have called attention to the broad spectrum of possibilities in the American past and present. I have tried to stay within the limits of the historians' (and the reporters') discipline, offering a minimum of judgment or proposal. This seems to me to be the approach most fruitful as a basis for discussion of a topic which remains open and ill-defined on the national scene. What follows will be a "position" paper, in which I shall as briefly as possible detail my personal attitudes to the problem of the relationship between Christian theology and societal religion in America.

Societal religion is threatened or at least changed by the trend toward the kind of state which lacks a formal religious ground. This process of "de-religionizing" is many centuries old, but it has accelerated rapidly in recent centuries and recent decades. It seems to me that this trend is built into the human condition and develops with a kind of logic in human history. As man seeks dominion over the created order through philosophical explanation and even more through technological control, he tends to narrow the range of domains which he seeks to explain by transcendent reference. Specialization seems to work against "the old religions." Medicine, history, the arts, science, and especially law are taken from the priests and handed to the specialists. In the matter of modern society the legal removal of a religious base for society has been most patent: it was a dramatic moment in the history of the state when the United States "constituted" itself a nation without explicit metaphysical reference or commitment; when it began to "separate church and state." It was equally a dramatic moment when the churches assented to this constituting principle and when most of them claimed it as their own!

Philosophical, technological, and legal removal of religious bases are but three dimensions of a single complex problem. What do we understand in the resultant kind of culture which lacks a societal religion? A minimal definition would include the following elements: (a) It refuses to commit itself to a particular view of the nature of the universe and man's place in it. (b) It tends to be heterogeneous. (c) As far as beliefs are concerned, it tends to be a tolerant society. It does not set out legally to enforce beliefs or to limit their expression. (d) The society must have some common aims, but these do not need a specific metaphysical or religious reference or base. (e) Most problems are to be solved by examination of the facts in the political order.[36] If this is all that "de-religionizing" or the "secular" means, the contention that such a state is displacing societal religion would no doubt be non-controversial. The present reality of America conforms in many ways to this picture.

Societal religion complicates the picture when one moves from the legal domain to that of the ethos. In the ethos we observe the secreting of ideologies, of common quasi-religious references or practices which overarch and undercut existing religions of particular faiths and may even displace them. It is precisely at this point that the provocative theologians who "do" theology "after the proclamation of the

[36] These five points are taken directly from D. L. Munby, *The Idea of a Secular Society* (London: Oxford, 1963), pp. 14ff.

death of God" come into conflict with social thinkers who contend that societies and nations inevitably and by definition tend to produce societal religions and common faiths.

The conflict results in part from a clash between those theologians' and the social thinkers' or historians' ways of going about their work. The historian is limited in his ability to speak of "the death of God" or "the problem of God" for society.

> For the historian this problem only becomes a problem when it is concretely stated in terms of the godless man, who is existent and present in history, as God Himself is concretely existent and present in history. The reality of the problem appears in the fact that, within the religious tradition derivative from the Bible, the phrase, 'the godless man,' asserts a contradiction *in adiecto*. St. John Chrysostom was simply stating the central truth of this tradition in his famous dictum: 'To be a man is to fear God.' . . . Therefore the man who does not fear God somehow does not exist, and his nature is somehow not human. On the other hand, there he is. That is the problem.[37]

Render this in the plural: within the religious tradition derivative from the Bible the state is grounded in God's creative and governing activity and Word. The human city lives in relation to its prince or its principalities and powers. These characteristically have a transcendent relation to society, and societal religion grows from them. The phrase "the godless state" or "the godless society" or even — in some senses — "the secular society" asserts a contradiction *in adjecto*. "Therefore the state that does not fear God somehow does not exist, and its nature is somehow not human and social. On the other hand, there it is. That is the problem." The Biblical strictures against nations which do not want to know or believe in or follow God refer to nations which know better: they refuse to accept God's activity, His signs, His Word. In what John Courtney Murray calls the "post-modern" situation God is not perceived as being active, giving signs, or speaking in the realm of the state — or anywhere else, for that matter. He simply is not reckoned with at all."[38]

This process has been largely liberating, and Christian interpreters, when they are reflective, are usually quite prepared to acknowledge the gift which is theirs from the hand of those who disestablished formal religion in the state. What of the future? To those theologians who speak of a "world come of age," the resultant kind of state is pictured as arriving or on the point of arriving at a place where the religious dimension of social existence disappears immediately. The historian can only say that this has not happened yet. He is reluctant to project a future in which that trend which progressively removes religion is retarded or the purely autonomous order develops. I am tempted to suggest a clumsy but apt historical picture analogous to Zeno's paradox of motion. Before a body in motion can reach a given point it must traverse half the distance and then a quar-

[37] John Courtney Murray, "On the Structure of the Problem of God," *Theological Studies*, XXIII (1962), 16f.

[38] "God must not have a place in the political life of a nation. In one case [Marxism] it is a matter of philosophic principles and in the other it is the pragmatic necessity of political action in a religiously pluralistic society." Gustave Weigel, *The Modern God* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 71.

ter of it, *ad infinitum.* So the rabbit in motion halves and quarters the distance to the tortoise an infinite number of times but never "logically" reaches the tortoise. In the historical picture the ever-advancing "hare" of secularization keeps gaining, keeps halving the distance to the "tortoise" of the religious society, but never overtakes it. The historian of today will not very likely be on the scene to perceive an outcome: if societal religion continues to exist he tries to account for it. If, one day, it would disappear, he would reckon with that.

The pursued "tortoise" has his day, too! From another angle, societal religion never had it so good. In the post-modern situation after 1848 or 1933 when the old gods were killed off, new ones arose in historical ideologies and mythologies, in pantheisms of history and power: integral Communism, National Socialism, and Nationalism. Each of these is profoundly religious in character. Where a transcendent reference is lost, attachment to the immanent object (The *Führer,* the process of dialectical materialism, the State) becomes one of ultimate concern. Again, the historian has no difficulty observing this process which seems to contradict the whole thesis of "the world coming of age" into a post-religious, post-ideological stage. Theological commitments vary: some see man and society one day to be freed from the "powers." Others — and this is my position — see written into the human condition that man and society are among and under the "powers." They extricate themselves from one set and flee into the jaws of another.[39] Man, society, and nation are becoming less religious, but this development is not serene and even; it is not on schedule; it has not been completed; it meets amazingly strong countertrends. The post-modern world seems to be as cluttered with renewed religions, pseudo-religions, ersatz-religions of society as was the Greco-Roman world in which Christianity first spread.

That tradition of theological thought which is critical of "the natural" and is wholly reliant on its own witness to "the revelational" can see human religions and societal religion as always and only a frustration of the purposes of God and the church. The liberal tradition which tends to see continuities between orders of nature and grace will tend to be somewhat more tolerant of environmental religious development. It will seek to build bridges, to "conspire" with it, and sometimes to stimulate its better and more productive forms. This tradition assents to the observation common to many sociologists and students of comparative religion that a "working common faith" develops in all complex societies.

As I see it, complex *national* societies can get along with a minimum of religious and ideological baggage. Their members can assent to a number of "self-evident truths." Some may argue for these truths on metaphysical and others on purely pragmatic bases. Somehow the society makes its way. I am reluctant to apply too readily the label "religious" to all forms of societies' or national consensuses. Many

[39] See Gustaf Wingren, *The Living Word* (Philadephia: Muhlenberg, 1960), p. 93. Wingren associates with Karl Barth the definition of "secular" man as natural man, so that "unbelief is regarded as the only really natural thing." Wingren sees unbelief as "diabolical powers that strive for mastery in human life."

nations have existed and have been productive in spite of the fact that no common formal religion has developed and informal common faiths have been undercut because of conflict between formal historic religions. Admittedly, civil concord is not always easy to reach in such situations, but it has been manifest.

The greatest danger in the City of Man in the development of societal religion is the modern historical situation in which most pressures are placed on the national society. Nationalism in effect becomes the real religion of the modern world; it hardly seems necessary or prudent for partisans of historic religions to augment this competitive and often destructive faith. The Christian tradition ought to provide extra- or inter-national resources for judging and informing a world civilization. The greatest danger from the theological viewpoint in the development of societal religion is the tendency to idolize the society, the state, its leaders, its processes, and its achievements. The need for prophetic attack on such religion is so obvious that I need not detail it here.

What might be a theological attitude toward that societal religion which grows here and there in the state and society which have removed legal encouragements toward religion? In the earlier part of the paper I gave assent to the position which recognizes the presence of societal religion and sees reason to contribute to the consensus with positive elements of the Christian tradition (or other particular traditions) just as it constantly seeks to judge the larger community by norms and standards from outside it. I would build on that position now, proposing a distinction between "integral" (intact, totalist, organic, dogmatic) societal religion, which becomes a massive problem for a particular faith, and nonintegral (open-ended, tentative, historical) societal religion. Christians, as an instance, historically and practically have interests in communicating with, "'conspiring" with, and perhaps converting people in their environment.

They will find it notoriously difficult to be understood by those who have absolute commitments to integral societal religions; these are "closed off" to their witness. They can only absorb an outside position on their own terms. (For example, Marxism or the *Deutsche Christen* of the 1930s; the Christian Anti-Communism Crusades of today). Christians will find it difficult to "conspire," to breathe with and work with, such totalist and dogmatic national or cultural faiths. These integral faiths have "thought things through" and their definitions and appetites are all-encompassing. Their adherents are not interested in anything except subduing and displacing competitors. Certainly adherents of such a religion are not open to the possibility of conversion.

Assent to societal values may take on a quasi-religious character, however, without becoming an ultimate threat to a particular faith, in this case to the Christian presence. Such assent seems to be built into the nature of responsible men in complex societies. But Christian participants in such value systems claim to bring their commitments into the orbit of divine judgment. Their relative attachments to "nonintegral" systems of societal religion leave them in communication with the larger society just as their international openness to an interrupting word from the

Biblical and Christian tradition stands as a sign that societal religion is conditioned, is limited, is to be judged. Adherents of societal religion in any form are not standing around waiting for information or judgment. "Innocent" Christian theologians who wish to be heard would need some of the serpent's guile. They could not reasonably expect a hearing if they abstracted themselves wholly from societal concerns and then bewailed its "secularization." And they would have nothing to say when granted a hearing if they did not themselves stand close enough to their Biblical and historical witness and norms so that they would themselves be informed and judged, so that they would have resources from outside that society or community which produces the religious values and, in holding to them, turns out to be worshiping only itself.

Chicago, Ill.