

# Religion in America

ERNEST VANDENHAAG

## I

### *Some Causes of American Pelagianism*

THE PROTESTANT Reformation aimed at a turn to the Augustinian emphasis on "faith" and "grace" and away from "works" as a means of redemption from the corruption originating with the fall. It constituted a repudiation of the Pelagian elements the reformers saw in the Church to be reformed. This original emphasis has been weakened and in some cases reversed in the brief history of Protestantism particularly in America. Let us consider the largely sociological factors which produced this result.

The Roman Catholic Church hierarchy depends on a supernational center and is fairly independent of local and national influences, although quite adapted to them and often deeply involved with them. It consists of a number of power hierarchies, locally coordinated by bishops, but each dependent on the Roman see. This church structure makes the parish priest quite independent of his local congregation, although, to be sure, his success with the congregation can be helpful in various ways. The parishioner in turn looks up to the priesthood and to the hierarchy. They are the custodians of God's word, of the dogma, and the powerful mediators between man and God, able to bestow His blessings. Celibacy, ritual and even the ceremonial language used, elevated the priesthood and separated it from the laity.

For doctrinal and historical reasons, Protestant ministers never, or at least not for long, occupied so high a position (there are gradations of course: Episcopalian priesthood is in many ways similar to the Roman Catholic one, as is the Orthodox priesthood). The dependence of Protestant church personnel on their congregations is least in Europe, where, when they prevailed, Protestant churches often became established. In these cases the clergy became dependent on national church authority (often subject to central political direction) and relatively independent of local congregations. But in postcolonial America, all churches competed with each other in a free market and none was established. The Protestant minister depended far more directly, and to a far greater degree, on his congregation than did his European or Roman Catholic colleagues. For he depended on nothing else. Central authority was weak and became weaker as time passed, and political authority was separated.

Church and ministers did—to use an economic simile—no longer enjoy a protected market. They compete for customers and are tempted to offer the most saleable product and to adapt it to the taste of the market. The structure of the Roman Catholic Church—the relative independence of the hierarchy—tended to make reasonably sure that the product—the faith—remained relatively immune to local influences and demands. But Protestantism was bound to become a consumer religion, and to supply the faith people were willing to accept, to

modify the product in accordance with market demands.

Recent developments indicate that the Roman Catholic Church is changing too and in the same Pelagian direction. But the change itself will be centrally directed in response to universal rather than local demands and it is unlikely to be as pervasive and far reaching as it became in the Protestant denominations. There are indications as well of mounting pressure toward decentralization. There may be some yielding, but it is hard to believe that the basic power distribution will undergo major change.

In general, the product—the faith—of a church is most immune to local and temporary market conditions when:

- 1) the church has a monopoly;
- 2) the church has branches in many heterogeneous markets;
- 3) its personnel is rendered independent of each local market;
- 4) its personnel is recruited from numerous heterogeneous regions;
- 5) its personnel depends on an autonomous central authority.

If the above be true, clearly the Roman Catholic Church is most and the American Protestant churches are least immune to local and temporary market influences—to local and contemporary pressures and inducements to make the product more acceptable. We are not surprised, therefore, to find that in the Protestant churches doctrine tends to be interpreted most along lines derived from the contemporary secular world and in accordance with its ideological and intellectual moods.

Now, it is among the tasks of all Christian churches to make the biblical message as relevant and convincing and effective in the existing world as possible. Historical religion attempted to make the world conform to the Christian message. Contemporary religion, however, often tends to make the message conform to the

world, to make its acceptability to the world the norm for the contents to be given to the message. Whereas historical religion saw the world *sub specie aeternitatis*, eternity now is seen more often as a postscript to a temporal life which has itself become the center of religious concern. There has been a shift from other-worldly, theocentric to this-worldly anthropocentric, concerns, from faith to morality and works, from God to human relations, from salvation and redemption *from* this life to peace of mind *in* this life. This shift has occurred by changed emphasis, and certainly not uniformly at all. But it has occurred, and has occurred first and most in the Protestant churches.

The shift is portentuous. God and eternity cease to be ends; they become means, instruments of comfort and success, defined in psychological terms, and not in religious ones. Morality becomes the essence of religion; it too, is defined in humanitarian and egalitarian certainly not in religious terms. "Works" become the task and test of religion, and take the place of suffering and contemplation. Even faith becomes faith in ourselves. *Amor Dei* is no longer just accompanied by, but is translated into *amor hominis*. *Timor Dei* is suppressed and with it the *sapientia* of which it is the *principium*. Religion loses its intellectual autonomy and becomes a branch of secular psychology, morality and social work.

All this is done in the name of God's relevance to contemporary man. Yet a truly religious man could never worry about God's relevance to man—he could only wonder about whether men are willing to lead lives relevant to God, lives that may lead to salvation. Religion, if it is to be that, cannot possibly adapt God to man, it must adapt man to God. Yet some ministers of religion are worried enough about God's relevance to our life to do anything to adapt His image to make Him interesting. If God has to

be dead, they seem to say, to make religion acceptable to modern man, so be it. Better a dead God to make the scene than a living God who seems old-fashioned and intellectually embarrassing and will never get you on TV.

What causes the contemporary demand for a religion bereft of its essential characteristics and reduced to secular morality at best? Education, technology, science, urbanization, industrialization, all contributed to a steady erosion of tradition, of faith in revelation, to an increasing belief in the infinite perfectability of man and in the sufficiency of his reason. Perfection is to be attained by economic, social and psychological manipulation, by efficiency, or by factitious orgiastic spontaneity, irrationality and narcissistic love. This secular attitude which goes back to Pelagius was revived by the *philosophes* of the Enlightenment, systematized by Marx, and amended by neo-Utopians such as Erich Fromm, or more extreme, Norman O. Brown. It reflects now the general liberal discounting of the SuperEgo in favor of a rose-colored Id and Ego that owe more to J. J. Rousseau and to Pelagius than to Freud. In its less extreme forms, this secular "religion" has greatly influenced American life and threatens to become the American "religion"—to take the place of Christian religion, inside and outside of church.

As science accustomed people to the demonstrability of much truth and to its practical benefits, the transcendent part of religion became steadily less appealing, its secular aspects more emphasized. People came to identify truth and demonstrability. Yet, although the demonstrable must be true, the true need not be demonstrable—unless we maintain the arrogant anti-religious and pseudo-scientific faith, unsupported by actual science or by revelation, that science necessarily exhausts and can demonstrate to our senses the total contents

of the cosmos. But though public demonstrability must be a rule of science, it need not be a rule of knowledge, unless the latter is defined arbitrarily as coextensive with the former. Such a definition would subject religion to the rule of science and therefore leave it an empty shell. Once "the evidence of things unseen" is no longer admitted, religion, too, is excluded.

Curiously enough this development has made stronger inroads among Protestants who doctrinally depend much less upon reason, than among Catholics, who depend on it more. The cause of this odd disparity is to be found in the sociological differences sketched above.

## II

### *Wishes and Wants*

IF RELIGION is to be no more than a vague traditional sanction for an essentially secular morality, which aims at the maximization of collective and individual welfare, then religion has become socially well adjusted—but it has ceased to be the Christian religion. It does not transcend our temporal life, or preach redemption from it, and salvation by divine grace. No longer do we hold that "God is justly secret, and secretly just" as St. Augustine did. Justice can remain securely in our hands for *peccatum Adae*, we believe, *ipsum solum laesit nec per resurrectionem Christi omne genus hominum resurget*. We can save ourselves, we do not need divine grace. Technology, planning, psychotherapy and a liberal outlook will do.

Whether or not they declare God dead, churches can act as though He were, by emphasizing not the evangelical message, but, instead, "adjustment" and whatever social causes be appealing at the moment. In respect not to politics, but to religion, I find no basic difference between the Reverend Martin Luther King and the Reverend

Norman Vincent Peale. To both, this life—success and relief in this life—seems to be the end, and religion, at best, the means to achieve it. Religion thus becomes popular because it has lost its transcendent sting, because it no longer treasures, prompts, demands, cultivates and elaborates *religious* truth in thought, feeling and action.

Certainly such euthanasia of religion is what many people wish and do practice, though without acknowledging it. Churches and ministers in their frenzied attempts to be “relevant” and acceptable to these people, all too often have gratified their wishes. However, the question is whether what these people *wish* is what they *want*.

Are our real religious needs satisfied by sermons encouraging us to be nice to each other, and good, or at least careful? For we do actually have religious needs, even though not always aware of them. By concealing the absence of actual religiosity *Ersatz* “religion” leaves society bereft of transcendent justification, and the individual confronted by insufferable futility and loneliness. Religion has been, from time immemorial, what makes the universe morally intelligible and the human career on earth meaningful. It is religion which has made life worth living—which has given us values; from religion spring the justification for the *vinculum charitatis* and for sacrifice. Without religion, humanity can give no meaning to life, no norms to culture, no transcendence to art. Without faith, no order. Pseudoreligion, such as political ideologies, and Pelagian humanitarianism—which often degenerates into such ideologies—can keep us afloat only as long as we still are nourished by the fruits of the receding faith on which our culture was built.

Contemporary religion plays but a marginal role in our pluralistic society. Its failure lies in its intellectual inassertiveness in its willingness to allow itself merely to

become a bearer of essentially nonreligious and impermanent values: Christianity is no longer in danger from any other religions, but from indifference to all. It tends to counter this danger with undifferentiated and indifferent religion, thereby gaining popularity—and abandoning its mission. If our religious need is injuriously assuaged, without being gratified, by spurious “religious” activity, its fulfillment is removed farther.

In the past, political and general secular involvement usually served religious or at least ecclesiastical purposes. In contemporary religion one feels that the political concern is politically, or, sometimes humanistically, but not religiously motivated. The minister concerned with civil rights often uses his religious office to reinforce a cause he believes just because just, not because Christian. Now, justice is properly a religious concern. But divine and eternal justice, extra-historical revelation, rather than secular justice, is properly the primary religious concern. Secular justice is everybody’s concern; the main concern of the church, however, is transcendent, not mundane, justice. No, I do not wish to advocate an inhuman remoteness of the church which might make it ineffective and, indeed, an unintentional accomplice to injustice. Yet, avoiding Scylla, we seem to have come near wrecking the ship on Charybdis: the church is so involved with this world, so intent on helping “succeed” in it, or on righting its injustices, that it is in danger of losing its religious essence—the message of salvation beyond history.

Even if one were indifferent to the religious message, if one were to wholly discount the truth of transcendent salvation, one must notice that if the church itself discounts this salvation, by operating wholly or mainly to improve man’s fate in this world, then the church also, and quite unavoidably, will diminish and finally elimi-

nate the effectiveness of its secular labor, and its own functional social utility. For the effectiveness of these derives from belief in the transcendent mission of the church—in the truth of its dogma. If the church became just one more secular agency, the church would but offer some less than competent social workers, or lay analysts, and some more than average hypocritical politicians. It would retain no claim to be followed beyond and above that of any political party or humanitarian pressure group. Thus the very wish for secular involvement, if indulged too much, not only endangers the religious, but also the secular effectiveness of the church—the very end being pursued.

### III

#### *Theological Developments and Secular Effects of Religion*

HERE WE MAY GLANCE at some developments in theology. Roman Catholics always have believed that we have some knowledge about God independent of revelation, the main source of such knowledge. This independent “natural” knowledge makes us more receptive to revelation than we might otherwise be; in turn, revelation causes us to assess historical and rational evidence receptively. Protestantism on the other hand maintains that the fall so corrupted us that our natural reason can tell us nothing about God. Our knowledge of Him depends entirely on His own disclosures in sacred history.

Karl Barth pushed this Protestant doctrine further by asseverating that God’s intervention in history not only is the basis of faith but that our belief in this intervention must itself rest on faith in scripture independent of historical evidence. Thus our belief is to be based but on faith in the human experience of God within history. The basis of Protestant belief, narrow to be-

gin with, is narrowed further—it becomes faith in sacred history bereft of empirical, or rational evidence. Doubts about sacred history automatically become doubts about God—yet other aspects of Protestantism unavoidably encourage such doubts. (Criticism may come in through the back door by concerning itself with human error in recording and interpreting the divine presence. But it is impossible to draw an authoritative line.) The reliance on faith alone also weakens defenses against enthusiasm. This doctrinal development appears to endorse Ludwig Feuerbach’s description of Protestantism as a station on the way from theism to atheism.

Perhaps in reaction to this danger some theologians have attempted to broaden the base of Protestant belief. Some have gone so far as to identify God with existence itself—but rather than a defense this seems but a thinly disguised surrender to atheism. So does the identification of God with secular attributes such as love or goodness. Obviously, worship is not theistic, if it is not worship of God, as distinguished from his attributes, and his creation. Christian worship is not Christian unless it is worship of the God revealed in Christian scripture. He may be the ground of being, or the source of qualities such as love. But he cannot be reduced to either, without ceasing to be divine, and Christian.

There have been parallel developments in Catholicism though they have not gone quite as far. To the modern philosophical mind natural theology is even less acceptable than revelatory theology. But it seems a necessary support. Without it, Protestantism, paradoxically, seems both more Tertullian (v. de carne Christi: “*prorsus credibile est quia ineptum est . . . certum est quia impossibile*”) in its exclusive reliance on faith, and yet in practice also more Pelagian than Catholicism, in its enthusiastic deinstitutionalization.

To be sure the secular effects of religion are ambiguous. The transcendent outlook may have a sedative effect—religion may be “the opium of the people”; or a stimulant effect, leading to missionary, inquisitorial, intellectual, charitable, oppressive, or revolutionary pursuits. Similarly, the psychological effects on individuals may lead to endoplastic or alloplastic endeavors of many kinds.

Religion may also impose burdens on society by inhibiting recreation or various liberties, or opposing population control—just as it may lighten burdens by propagating compassion. However in all these matters religion is only one of many variables and there is no reason—theologically or historically—to believe that religion must always oppose, or favor, slavery, civil rights, contraception, abortion, democracy, or what not—howevermuch it may support these causes at one time or another. The religious conscience may be stricter than the law. But whether religion favors legal enforcement of the dictates of that conscience depends on circumstances—and this is as it should be.

The Catholic belief in a prescriptive natural law binding on all humans because recognizable to all in the light of reason, leads Catholics to insist that sins, such as abortion, be crimes; Protestants, although they often justify their views with pseudo-sociological propositions, insist—for originally theological reasons—that sins such as gambling, or prostitution, or even drinking, be crimes. Yet criminal sanction is unlikely to decrease the occurrence of the prohibited acts of this kind; but it unavoidably leads to enormous corruption, sordidness and social injury. While not significantly decreasing the frequency of the prohibited acts, these prohibitions have generated “organized crime” which thrives by supplying the outlawed demands and corrupting law enforcement. Such legal

prohibitions are contrary to the pluralistic nature of our society and likely to remain unenforced. (Anyway, the ancient notion of a prescriptive natural law, obligating government and the governed is not indispensable to religion.)

The real social benefit of religion does not lie in anything specific done or undone. It lies in something believed. Social justice and hedonism—for that matter even the most austere of moral philosophies—are not enough to make life meaningful. In very stable societies custom sometimes can supply the psychological ingredient that man needs. And it can then become a form of (non-Christian) religion. But in a society as rapidly changing as ours, custom and tradition cannot be relied on. Yet man does not live by bread alone—least when the bread (if not the butter and the jam) is plentiful even for the poor. Nor does man live by efficient plumbing or sex. We can live this life with some degree of satisfaction and serenity only by giving it a meaning which transcends it—and religion is the only source of such meaning. Therein lies its usefulness. Nothing else can take its place. Art, for instance, far from replacing religion itself, can but celebrate the meaning religion gives to life—it cannot create it or replace it. For religion to give up this mission is truly to give up the blessing that still may be bestowed on us for a mess of pottage that, despite advertising to the contrary, is not even nourishing.

But where is true religion—faith—to come from? There is but one source: God’s grace. What we can do, is to prepare to receive it, by living *de Deo querendo*—without pretending that God is found in civil rights demonstrations. The faithful must pray that, however *absconditus* He be to some theologians, He will reveal himself once more. For without Him we have no values—life becomes valueless.