Every day brings new evidence that religion is a significant component of contemporary social, cultural and intellectual life on both a national and international scale. Within only the past five years, for example, a political and cultural revolution occurred in Iran inspired and nurtured by the strong reascendency of fundamentalist forces within Islamic religion. Not far from there, the strife that persists in the Middle East is fanned by long-standing antagonisms between cultures and religions that have grown up side by side, both in continuity and in contrast to each other. The political and economic upheavals in Latin America and in developing nations throughout the world, bring religious forces into sharp and violent opposition, frequently making enemies of adherents of one and the same religion.

These conflicts are reflected in issues that are prominent in the American consciousness. An overloaded legislative agenda in the United States Senate was placed in temporary suspension so that members might debate the establishment of voluntary prayer in the public schools. Would-be spectators waited for hours, in long lines, outside the Supreme Court building hoping to witness some of the deliberations over whether prohibitions against intrerracial dating and marriage at Bob Jones University are acceptable. 

As the debates continue, the Polish head of the largest collective entity within Christendom, Pope John Paul II of the Roman Catholic Church, makes his rounds about the world, preaching peace and justice, reminding his flock that prayer is more important than revolutionary activity, a deep personal spirituality more vital than political acumen. Some of that advice has been heeded, even by those who are under no obligation to accept the instruction of the Pope. Mystical life has become attractive again, the cultivation of interior reality (following St. Augustine’s counsel, “Do not go abroad, but turn within, for in the inner man dwells truth”) implies more reliance upon personal survival strategies. To them this signifies an abandonment of confidence in collective efforts and a disappointment with institutions and the workings of government.

But, as some within the religious community are turning more about the vita contemplativa, there are others who, for the first time, have experienced the excitement of being directly involved in political campaigns. Neighborhood churches, still being used primarily for evangelistic services and Bible studies, have also functioned as precinct headquarters, from which door-to-door drives for voter registration have been conducted. In other quarters, some of the mystical fervor is being used as a resource for the prevention and resolution of international conflict. Bishops gather in solemn colloquy, lending their authority to efforts that attempt to reduce the arsenals of nuclear weaponry. As they meet, disciples of another orientation assemble to hear esteemed national leaders alert them to the possibility that the intrusion of an alien value system threatens the very basis of our civilization. And while each group listens intently, talk persists about an impending battle of Armageddon, which some resist as the ultimate horror and others await with calm indifference.

Religion is a factor throughout the world. So large is its place and so formative its influence that there is no way to understand the dynamics of a people, a period or a culture without coming to terms with religious factors. Religion is present wherever aspirations are being expressed in text, symbol, behavior, and habits. Religion is implicit in the processes through which basic purposes are given definition. Religion provides linkages between collective aspirations and self-identity. How a people understands the meaning of human life and communicates this understanding is reflected in the way they live.

BY WALTER H. CAPPS

photograph by Mort Broffman, courtesy of The Washington Cathedral

with religious sanctions. Others shun religious/political coalitions altogether, preferring that the causes of human dignity originate under banners of their own. As the debates continue, the political and cultural revolution in Iran inspired and nurtured by the strong reascendency of fundamentalist forces within Islamic religion. Not far from there, the strife that persists in the Middle East is fanned by long-standing antagonisms between cultures and religions that have grown up side by side, both in continuity and in contrast to each other. The political and economic upheavals in Latin America and in developing nations throughout the world, bring religious forces into sharp and violent opposition, frequently making enemies of adherents of one and the same religion.

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powers be transposed into apocalyptic mythology reflecting the cataclysmic contest between Michael and his angels and the devil and his dragons? And how shall the desire for world peace be disentangled from the various utopian expectations of the world's religious traditions? How shall fidelity to a cause escape the zealotry of the crusader spirit? And, on the other hand, how shall persons who embody religious ideals—Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa and others—be free to inspire? How shall religious ideals be recognized, protected and nourished?

When we clarify some of these questions we will know what and how religious values should be taught in the public schools. When we have such clarification we will know how the insculcation of these values can assist the common good instead of merely serving partisan interests. And, as a significant byproduct, we may begin more satisfactorily to define the crucial terms in court cases and legal disputations.

Perhaps the questions belonging to the field of religious studies, one of whose chief catalysts was the pioneering social-scientific inquiries of Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, who were among the first to probe religion’s social origins and functions. Formed by a coalition of intellectual interests, religious studies engages some 15,000 scholars and teachers in North America, and is attended by approximately one million new undergraduate students each academic year. Placed prominently here, such questions will require that religious studies function to make religion intelligible, the better to understand the constitutive features of human life. Instead of following easier academic pathways, religious studies must remain as dynamic as its principal subject. For it is through a multi-dimensional sensitivity to the power of religion in contemporary social and cultural life that the very best theories have come.

The primary religious questions also belong to the agenda of the humanities. They concern the processes by which cultural values are transmitted within a society and social values are implanted within a culture; and, how both processes pertain to the composition of a civilization. From this perspective, the power of religion can be approached in terms of the dynamics of living intellectual orientations. Tradition and innovation stand side by side, always being formed by the dictates of social and cultural change. The product is religion in contemporary society, a rich and variegated reservoir of human experience, an eloquent expression of the yearnings and discoveries of the human spirit.}

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*Pope John Paul II ... makes his rounds about the world, preaching peace and justice, reminding his flock that prayer is more important than revolutionary activity, a deep personal spirituality more vital than political acumen.*

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*FAITH, LIFE & WORK*

Rhetorical functions both as catalyst for change and a means of stability. When only some are deemed "elect," religion becomes narrow and restrictive, quickly transformed between the world’s leading superpowers.

Religion can serve as advocate of the total collective harmony or can work within each of the major religious traditions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—of the western world. Even the most provocative of the new religions look very much the same as some older religions when they, too, were brand new.

The most significant questions, therefore, concern the interpenetration of tradition and innovation, of religious resources and present need. How does religion function in the pursuit of the common good? And how can this be distinguished from the need for salvation which religion also enjoins? Why, for example, should the society continue to interpret its major events and crises by employing the biblical narrative as a primary frame of reference? Why should the ongoing competition between the world’s leading superhuman spirit.