

# Contemporary American Religion at the Crossroads

by Walter H. Capps

This is an anxious and uncertain time for American religion. There is tension in the air. There are dilemmas that remain unresolved. There is a mood of ambivalence. Previous confidences appear to be slipping, but the desire for spiritual certainty and collective self-confidence remains.

Why has this happened? Why is the mosaic of contemporary American religion made up of not altogether harmonious elements? There must be several reasons, all having directly to do with persistent struggles within the society, and with shifts, modifications, and adjustments within the culture.

For one, the New Religious Right that burst unexpectedly onto the scene in the late 1970s—and whose power, influence, and significance were mostly underestimated by academics and within the established intellectual communities—has made sufficient tactical errors to have largely fallen out of favor with sustaining opinion within the populace. But the occasion for such a movement remains. The Religious Right happened, like the previous Great Awakening within this country, when the moral and spiritual vitality of the people was at low ebb. The disappointments over the failure of governmental authority, the lack of confidence in previously established traditions, and the progressive erosion of the most stable institutions within the society (most especially, the family) had all taken a heavy toll. Americans, whose national spiritual and collective identity had been shaped by a revised Calvinistic covenant theology (which is an adaptation of biblical analogs), seemed subject

to the prophet's judgment that God could no longer bless the nation because the nation was no longer "listening to his voice and obeying his commands." The national situation, approached in these theological terms, was ripe for the proposal of the New Religious Right that the country could recapture its lost spiritual vitality only if the people were to turn from their wicked and/or errant ways. When the President of the United States, at least from time to time, seemed to be advancing the same position, and interpreting the national situation in the same biblical terms, the compulsions toward moral and spiritual regeneration were exercised with patriotic zeal.

However, the fact that key leaders of the movement were themselves the victims of "moral failure" supported a suspicion that the effort on behalf of collective religious renewal disguised a more fundamental interest in money, sex, and power (the very antitheses of the traditional virtues: poverty, chastity, and obedience). And the clear organizational linkages between the religious movement and the ideological zealotry of the patriots who had been responsible for the Iran/Contra episodes helped sustain the impression that there had been a serious overstepping.

Thus when television evangelist Pat Robertson made an effort to garner the Republican nomination for the Presidency—even after invoking the blessing of the Almighty—he was hardly a serious contender. The majority of the people of the nation had already witnessed too much scandal to be willing to vouchsafe presidential authority to such

precarious sponsorship. And the moral of the New Christian Right was not assisted when Mr. Reagan, despite bold promises that he was not selling out, made common cause, on four successive occasions, with the archenemy leader of the Soviet Union. A movement that possessed some of the necessary qualifications to be taken seriously, as it were, became frozen in time. The images it had unintentionally created became prominent obstacles that the cause found itself scrambling for a viable future.

It should have been taken seriously since it came into prominence in response to a widespread cultural recognition that the secularization of traditional religious values was incapable of giving the people sufficient moral and spiritual vitality. The irony of the story is that efforts of the Religious Right did more to advance rather than to resist the process of secularization. And yet the questions to which it related remain unanswered. What compelling religious values sustained America in this last quarter (and almost last decade) of the twentieth century? What wellsprings of moral and spiritual vitality can still be tapped by a society wishing to recover from successive forms of collective trauma? What is the status of the biblical tradition in a post-traditional America?

There is therefore good reason for the renewed current fascination with the events and challenges of the 1960s. On college campuses undergraduate courses on this subject are attracting high enrollments. Documentary filmmakers, textbook publishers, and curriculum planners have taken notice. It is as if there



is a growing compulsion to reconsider the era, as if there can be no clear directives regarding the future until a wiser understanding of the era is fashioned.

At the heart of this development is the interest in the continuing impact of the Vietnam War. Each year finds more books and articles on the subject than the year before. Each year also produces at least one seminal film on the subject: a film that carries the subject to the next stage of interpretation. In 1986-87 that film was Oliver Stone's highly acclaimed *Platoon*. In 1988, in my judgment, that film was *Dear America*, first shown on HBO television in April. And during the current year network television has also gotten into the act, with Zev Braun's *Tour of Duty*, and more recently the companion piece, *China Beach*, dealing with the role of women in the war, and thereafter. Add to this the fact that the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is the site that draws more tourists than any other in Washington, D.C. and that Americans are now free to travel to Vietnam, and one has a developing interest that has not yet peaked. The newest phase of the interest is the plan for a dialogue between American veterans of the Vietnam War and Soviet veterans of the Afghanistan War, perhaps in Moscow, in late November.

Why the ongoing interest in the Vietnam War, and what is its relationship to contemporary American religion? The answer seems to lie in the recognition that the nation lost more than a war through its prolonged military involvement in Southeast Asia: it also lost indispensable elements of its collective spiritual identity. Some have referred to it as the experience of "the dark night of the soul," bespeaking collective spiritual desolation, identifying one of the critical stages in the mystical life as being applicable to the national spirit. The consequence is a need for healing—between those who fought and those who protest-



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ed, between the "Vietnam generation" and both predecessor and successor generations, between Americans and Vietnamese people. But the questions for Americans are about history: How is the American story told after the Vietnam War? Can that traumatic event be accommodated within some continuous historical account, or does it constitute a break in the narrative sequence? To what (except to aberration and anomaly) do the 1960s belong? Following the war, is a continuous, self-consistent telling of the nation's history still possible?

As all of this is occurring, there is also a dramatic contest in the society between regional and global orientations. In education this tension has been illustrated recently in competition between core-curriculum attitudes at Stanford University. What for years was a general education program on the classic books of Western civilization is now a re-

vised general education program that also includes deliberate recognition of the treatment of race, gender, and ethnicity. In this tension is a clash between traditional and experiential points of departure. The one point of departure is directed toward a deeper appreciation of the American experience. The other strives for global citizenship. The first strives for in-depth understanding of what is assumed to lie close at hand, yet has no more than a precarious current status. The second directs attention to a world beyond the familiar one—the religions, world views, practices, beliefs, mores and ways of life of those who enjoy no established or assumed canonical status. In the mist of this clash comes Garrison Kiellor's success with regionally-oriented *Prairie Home Companion* as well as Michael Dukakis' appeal to being "the son of immigrants."

The contest between global and regional orientations is also present in contemporary American religion. At the very time that dedicated efforts are underway to "Christianize America" (which involves Americanizing Christianity), there is also increased sensitivity to the teachings of the great religious traditions of the world. The development of academic courses in religion in colleges and universities throughout the country has contributed to this new knowledge. Also significant is the fact that high schools now offer courses—in history, literature, and social studies—in which subjects like Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam receive some deliberate coverage. And the prominence of political tensions in the Middle East, South Africa, and Latin America have merely increased recognition that Americans belong to a global community. This awareness is strengthened by the conviction that the wave of the future for the entire international community has already begun to be felt. Of the Third-World nations.

The resolution of the conflict between the global and regional orientations can only be "both/and," not "either/or." In revamping the general educational requirements, for example, Stanford University opted in favor of both systems, trusting that the two are mutually supportive rather than mutually exclusive. In responding to the plethora of reports on the strengths and weaknesses of American education, most colleges have tried to have it both ways: courses in Pacific Rim Studies, for example, have multiplied, but so has the request that there be increased treatment of racial, gender, and ethnicity issues at home. And in the churches and synagogues across the land, concern about the nation's standing with respect to rival nations is being matched by concern about famine and hunger in Africa, the nation's moral commitment in Latin America, alarm about apartheid propensities throughout the world, and the plight of the homeless at home. The objective is to have it both ways, that is, to view the situation of those who continue to live at the margins of our national life as sharing the plight of those who, through one circumstance or another, have been marginalized throughout the world. But this too is American religion at the crossroads. The forces are poised to push in several different directions at once, with some willingness to maintain the tension until a successful resolution can be effected.

Over 150 years ago, in his classic *Democracy in America*, Alexis de Tocqueville observed that only in close allegiance with the dictates of democracy will religion declare "all persons equal in the sight of God" and "all citizens equal before the law." By any other formula, Tocqueville attested, religion will be brought to rebuff the equality which it

loves and to abuse freedom as its adversary, whereas by taking it by the hand it could sanctify its striving." Such statements suggest that the genius of the American dream lies in its inviolable affirmation of religious pluralism. Pluralism allows each of its constituent faiths to take itself with utmost seriousness so long as it not try to legislate its convictions into laws that are binding for everyone. In this sense a "Christian America" has no legitimacy, and attempts to create such a hybrid are doomed to failure. From the perspective of *Democracy in America*, when God blesses America it is religious pluralism that is being affirmed, and not one or another prescribed theological interpretation of the nation's nature and destiny.

When Robert Bellah and his co-authors of *Habits of the Heart* prepared their commentary on *Democracy in America*, they saw the clash between individualism and the quest for community as being the most compelling issue in the current era. They too worked toward a formula that affirmed the sanctity of pluralism as well as the equality of each person, as de Tocqueville's language has it, "in the sight of God." When the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher N.S.S. Grundtvig wrestled with similar challenges, he proposed that a "human first" principle be understood as representing "the divine order of things." All else (race, color, ideology, religion) are secondary characteristics, he attested, and the cosmos itself is violated when secondary characteristics are given primary status, or when the relationships between them are blurred or confused.



Contemporary American religion is at the crossroads because it is striving to address the perennial aspirations of the human spirit in accordance with the

dictates of democracy and in light of the specific challenges to the present generation. And what are the desires of the human spirit if not for compelling moral values, a sound historical orientation, and some reliable basis for discerning relationships between individuals and communities. Some of the proposals that have been advanced to treat this complex agenda have failed already, for their terms are drawn too restrictively. Others have faltered because they have identified with one or the other side in the competition between polarized forces, when the deeper challenge is to affirm both simultaneously.

But the attitude that will survive, if the spiritual vitality of the nation is to be rekindled, is one that honors the time-tested conviction that we (all of us) are human beings first, and citizens (all of us) before the law. Thus the larger story about contemporary American religion concerns the prospect that there is no way effectively to resist the secularizing tendency except through invocation of the principles of the Constitution. Alexis de Tocqueville envisioned the situation this way a century and a half ago, and the challenge continues. ☆

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**ABOVE:**  
Earthrise.  
Courtesy NASA.  
**OPPOSITE:**  
Vietnam Veterans Memorial, from the exhibition  
Vietnam Veterans Memorial: A National Experience.  
Photo by Jeff Ploskonka.  
Courtesy SITES and Museum of the Big Bend.