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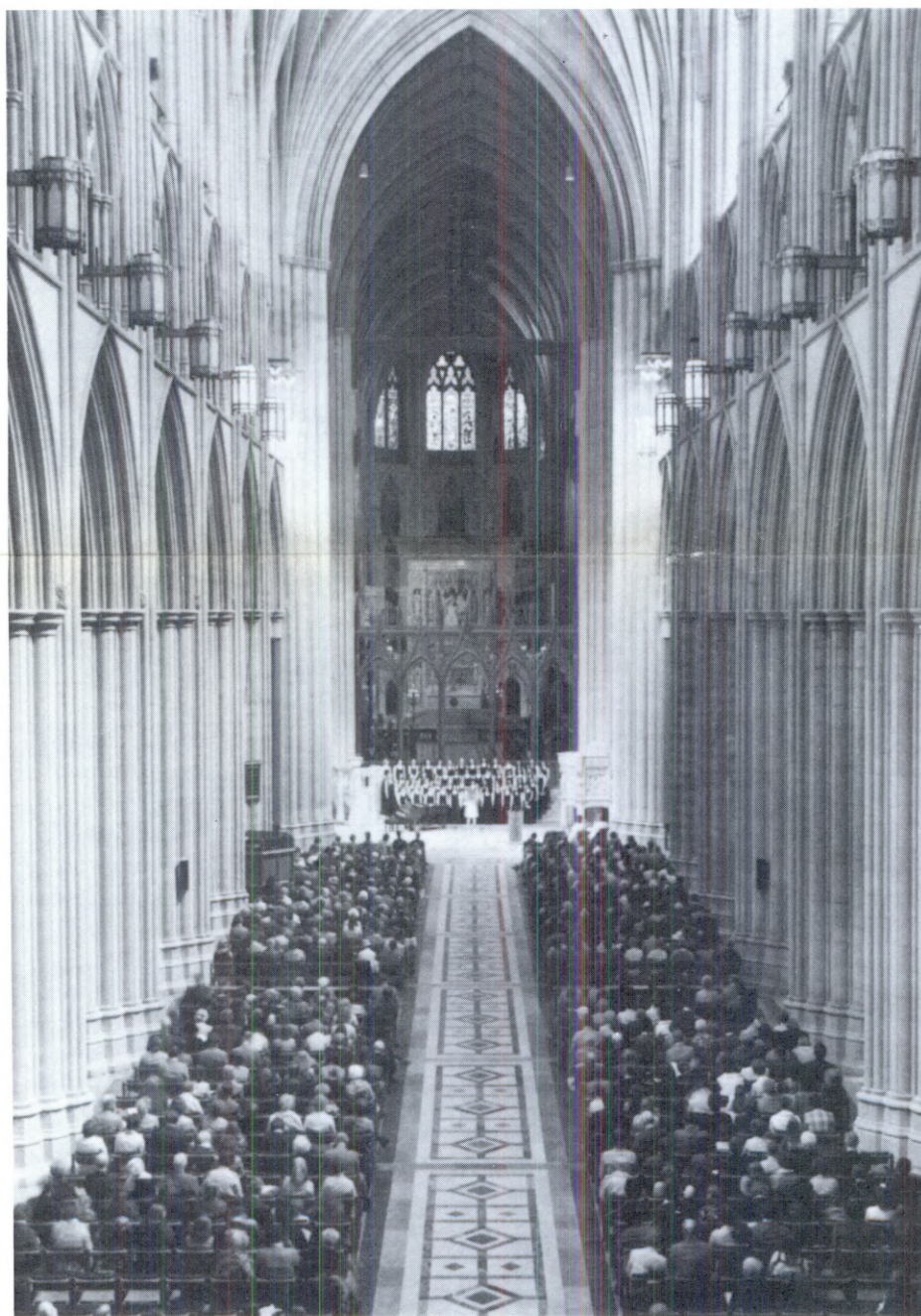
Humanities

Religion, the Great Teacher

BY WALTER H. CAPPS

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 interracial dating and marriage at Bob Jones University are acceptable exercises of religious freedom or violations of the internal Revenue Code. And, as public attention is concentrated more and more on economic realities, greater urgency is accorded questions about the propriety of linkages between capitalist incentives and the common good. In divinity schools and think-tanks, some believe capitalism to be divinely inspired, the best friend the Judaeo-Christian tradition ever had. Others contend that only by severing its ties with capitalist rewards will the truer and more fundamental ethic find room to re-emerge. Some of these go further, wishing to adorn Marxist aspirations



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 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. Monastic life has become attractive again, and the mystical strains of the world's religious traditions are being enunciated, at times, in unexpected combinations and symbioses. Observing this phenomenon, some commentators have proposed that 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 learning 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 intelligible 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 enthusiasms and self-identity. How a people understands the meaning of human life and communicates this understanding to itself and others



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pertains directly to religion. Religion functions both as catalyst for change and a means of stability.

"One nation, under God, indivisible" we attest in our Pledge of Allegiance. But is it one nation indivisible or two, or are there more? This kind of multiplicity is encouraged by the various roles religion plays within a democratic society, not all of which can be neatly systematized.

Sometimes we draw upon the resources of religion to reassure ourselves that our national destiny possesses a divine mandate. But we invoke religion, too, to distinguish some of us from others of us. Religion can serve as advocate of the total collective harmony or can work more singularly to sustain specific identities. And there are perils on both sides. When all are understood to be included, the cohesive powers of religion are placed under strain, and the affirmations of faith can appear to be platitudinous. But when only some are deemed "elect," religion becomes narrow and restrictive, quickly transformed into a mechanism of intolerance. Because it plays so many roles, religion is regarded as a primary source of human inspiration while also serving, some say, as a basic obstacle to the advancement of the

human spirit.

Astute commentators have observed that contemporary society is undergoing extensive reassessment following the cumulative shockwaves of the 60s and 70s. Religion is experiencing reassessment too, and is allowing a "back-to-basics" instinct to serve as a primary motivational force. Conservative institutions are flourishing. Fundamentalist elements form the most powerful social and political forces 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 super-

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 inculcation of these values can assist the common good instead of merely serving partisan interests. And, as a significant by-product, we may begin more satisfactorily to define the crucial terms in court cases and legal disputations.

These are 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, boasts of having nearly a thousand curricular programs of study in American colleges and universities, 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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