THE RELIGION AND POLITICS DEBATE:

WHY IT WON'T DIE

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Now that the religion and politics debate has sunk to the level of priggish concern about Ronald Reagan's church attendance record and self-serving celebrations of Walter Mondale's church choir exploits, some might expect that the whole debate is about to roll over and die, like so many media events before it. Or, others might readily conclude, if it is not to die because of triviality, it may well die because of tedium. Clergy such as the Rev. Jerry Falwell, Bishop John J. O'Connor, and the Rev. Jesse Jackson appear to have become entangled in enough media rope in this election year to hang themselves by overexposure.

The prospect of the 1984 religion and politics debate coming to such an ignominious ending will be welcomedby more than a few serious-minded citizens, on both sides of the political spectrum. On one side, the usually unflappable, conservative Wall Street Journal has lately complained editorially about "our hyperpolitical clergy," with reference first to the Catholic bishops' statement on nuclear war, and secondly to a group of priests, rabbis, and Protestant clergy who had issued a statement warning about the dangers of genetic engineering. On the other side, the plaintive liberal voice of "People for the American Way," headed by TV producer Norman Lear, has recently proclaimed in a full-page ad in the New York Times that "relgion is a matter of private conscience" and has raised the specter of a "Moral McCarthyism" descending upon the nation, if the influence of politicizing evangelists such as the Rev. Jerry Falwell continues to grow.

But brace yourself, America. If you are waiting for a return to "normalcy" in religion, with the editors of the Journal and the protagonists of People for the American Way, if you are expecting a speedy return to the day when religious folks knew their place and stayed there, inside the stained-glass confines of their private piety, you may be rudely disappointed, very soon. The other shoe of the religion and politics debate is about to be dropped, with such a thud that it may well set off tremors deep inside the nation's soul.

When the U.S. Roman Catholic bishops gather in Washington, D.C. on November 12th, they will issue the first draft of their pastoral statement on economic justice

and capitalism. The prospect of yet another "bombshell from the bishops," following close on the heels of their pastoral on nuclear war and peace, has already drawn the notice and the ire of those who may rightfully feel that they will be the center-stage targets (unmentioned to be sure) of the statement. The evangelists of corporate capitalism who produce Business Week and Fortune have already taken potshots at the bishops with regard to the November statement, whose text no one, as yet, has offically seen, except the bishops themselves and their coworkers. In the same spirit, last May a twenty-seven member "Lay Commission on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy" was founded, headed by establishment noteworthies such as Alexander Hague, Claire Boothe Luce, former Treasury Secretary William Simon, and neo-conservative theologian Michael Novak. The battle lines are already being drawn.

The statement is the product of an impressively wide-ranging process of consultation, with business leaders as well as with labor spokespersons and politically radical Catholic activists. It will in all likelihood focus on four related economic issues: (1) employment as a good in itself (as opposed to employment viewed only as a mechanism of production), (2) the provision of adequate income for the poor, (3) the justice of U.S. trade with third world countries (profit cannot be the only or perhaps not even the chief goal), and (4) the development of socio-economic policies in the long range which will internalize social justice and environmental values (as distinct from laissez-faire economics).

Perhaps the singlemost important assumption of the statement -- and, it appears, the singlemost threatening idea to the editors of Business Week and Fortune and to the members of the Lay Commission on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy -- will be a notion given currency in recent years by Latin American "liberation theology," what is called "the preferential option for the poor." This is the principle that social, economic, political, and religious goals and policies must be developed first from the vantage point of what they can do in terms of basic structural change in the social order to benefit the poor and the oppressed around the world, and then only with regard to other criteria, for example, the primacy of the profit motive in a free economy or the primacy of allegiance to the nation.

It is noteworthy that the Vatican itself in its recent statement raising questions about Latin American liberation theology took pains to stress that that warning "should in no way be interpreted as a disavowal of all those who want

to respond generously and with an authentic evangelical spirit to 'the preferential option for the poor'." No wonder the likes of Alexander Hague and Claire Boothe Luce are disturbed. The American bishops, and behind them the Vatican itself, are evidently not passionate true believers in the free enterprise system and the America-first nationalist assumptions that are bound up with that set of convictions. The bishops are marching to a different drummer.

More than that, the bishops are not alone. While some critics have suggested that the bishops are moving too far out in front of their flock, that they are speaking more and more just for themselves and less and less for the fifty million Catholics in this country, such a critique seems to be born more of wishful thinking on the part of the critics than of a close reading of the complex dynamics of Catholic communal experience in this country. To begin with, as the Jesuit writer James Hug has observed, the bishops' primary intention is this regard is to develop Catholic social thought in our democratic and pluralistic American context: hence their self-conscious insistence on the sometimes laborious process of wide-ranging consultation which they have already undertaken and their forthcoming publication of a "first draft" of the statement this year. They mean to involve major segments of the vast American Catholic community in the formative chapters of the discussion, rather than, in a more traditional mode, hand some pronouncements down with every jot and tittle in place. And it appears that given the conveniently accessible system of hierarchical authority which still functions impressively, if not flawlessly, in American Catholocism, they will in all likelihood achieve that goal, to a significant degree. In Hartford, for example, the Archdiocese recently began a three-year, grass-roots program, "RENEW," which in its later stages will be a natural vehicle for the dissemination of the bishops' social teaching about economic justice and for involving the church's most committed lay people in the discussion.

Further, notwithstanding the unconditional embrace of the free enterprise system and America-first nationalism by the fundamentalist Protestant right in this country, a wide spectrum of Protestant communions -- including the United Church of Christ, Presbyterians, Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, and many black denominations — already stand more or less in solidarity with the Catholic bishops, as far as the principle of the preferential option for the poor is concerned. And, notwithstanding the formation of some countervaling ad hoc groups within some of these denominations (akin to the Lay Commission on Catholic Social Teaching and the U.S. Economy), most of these mainline denominations have also been working through their own extensive processes of consulation with grass-root constituencies

(some denominations more effectively than others).

This kind of consultation generally brings the churches' social teachings to bear on specific social issues, while attempting to bracket partisan political approaches to the same issues. In this way conservatives and liberals have been enabled to come together to work out common understandings of their churches' social teachings and common formulations of their churches' social pronoucements. In a word, these consultations are by no means rubber stamp operations. They draw, in fact, on the views of various constituencies. This gives the final products of the process, the statements themselves, a generally firm base within the denomination itself.

The 3.5 million member Lutheran Church in America, for example, with its large constituencies in central Pennsylvania and the Midwest heartlands, is about as middle-American as one could possibly imagine. But this very middle-of-the-road, mainly middle class church has taken some noticeably other-than-middle-of-the-road positions in recent years, on the basis of its own social teachings. It went through a long and encompassing process of constituency consulation in developing its June, 1984 statement on peace and politics, which then permitted and encouraged its national convention to endorse the Nuclear Freeze, by the vote of a large majority of the delegates. A similar kind of process has enabled that denomination to become a vocal supporter, at every constituency level, of the cause of blacks in Namibia and South Africa who are living under the abhorent appartheid system. This advocacy role has included the commitment, by vote of the church's national convention, to divest itself of financial holdings in firms that do business with South Africa, as a last resort, if other means of moving toward justice for the majority black population seem to be failing (in a painful moment, the denomination's Treasurer, a lay leader who also happened to occupy a high position in Exxon, resigned on the spot). The Lutheran Church in America also joined with other members of the sixty-five million member Lutheran World Federation in ousting two South African member groups, which had refused to admit blacks to membership.

All of these churches, both Catholic and Protestant, it should be noted, are thoroughly Americanized. They all accept the well-established American principles of institutional separation of church and state, on the one hand, and practical interaction between the two, on the other. Of course they sometimes disagree on particulars, where to draw the lines on any given issue, especially regarding complicated problems such as school prayer or abortion legislation (members within any given church also disagree among

themselves, in like manner, on occasion). But this kind of disagreement is to be expected in a pluralistic society which allows its religious bodies freedom to interact with the state and with each other.

Few thoughtful representatives of these mainline churches, therefore, would question the right of any church member to address the state and to try to influence social, political, and economic goals and policies. On the contrary, all of these churches themselves regularly support advocacy programs (church lobbying) of various kinds and take public stands, usually in the form of statements, on public issues which they feel have moral urgency. They are fully committed to the principle of practical interaction between church and state, yet within the context of institutional separation of the two.

For this reason, the complaints issued against these churches and their clergy for becoming "too political" frequently turn out, upon close examination, to have little weight as far as the issues of church-state relations are concerned. Those complaints seem to arise mainly from the ranks of groups which have concluded that the churches are opposing them, their reading of the issues and their commitments to certain policy objectives.

Matters are not helped, surely, by the fact that much of the churches' steady and usually well-considered involvement with the great moral issues of the day characteristically has taken place behind the scenes, as a quiet but forceful witness (conferring one-to-one with legislators, for example). As a result, only the splashy events, the public protests and the sometimes angry encounters, tend to get reported. Given these factors, the general public tends to see a rather one-sided picture of the mainline churches' involvement with social issues.

Nevertheless, thoughtful observers ought to be able to draw the appropriate conclusions themselves. Yes, a number of individual church leaders have made it into the headlines this election year. But No, that is not the big news about the religion and politics debate in this country. The big news is that major segments of the American Christian community, in concert with millions of fellow believers around the world, have been mobilizing themselves institutionally, from the grass-roots to the highest levels of governance, in behalf of the poor and the oppressed in this country and abroad. The sleeping giant of American religious life, the mainline Catholic and Protestant churches, is stirring. This news is the other shoe in the religion and politics debate which the Catholic bishops will drop loudly for all to hear, if not to understand, on November 12th.

The religion and politics debate in this country is not going to roll over and die. Even if we should come to the point where no one else cares, the mainline Catholic and Protestant churches are resolved to keep that debate alive.