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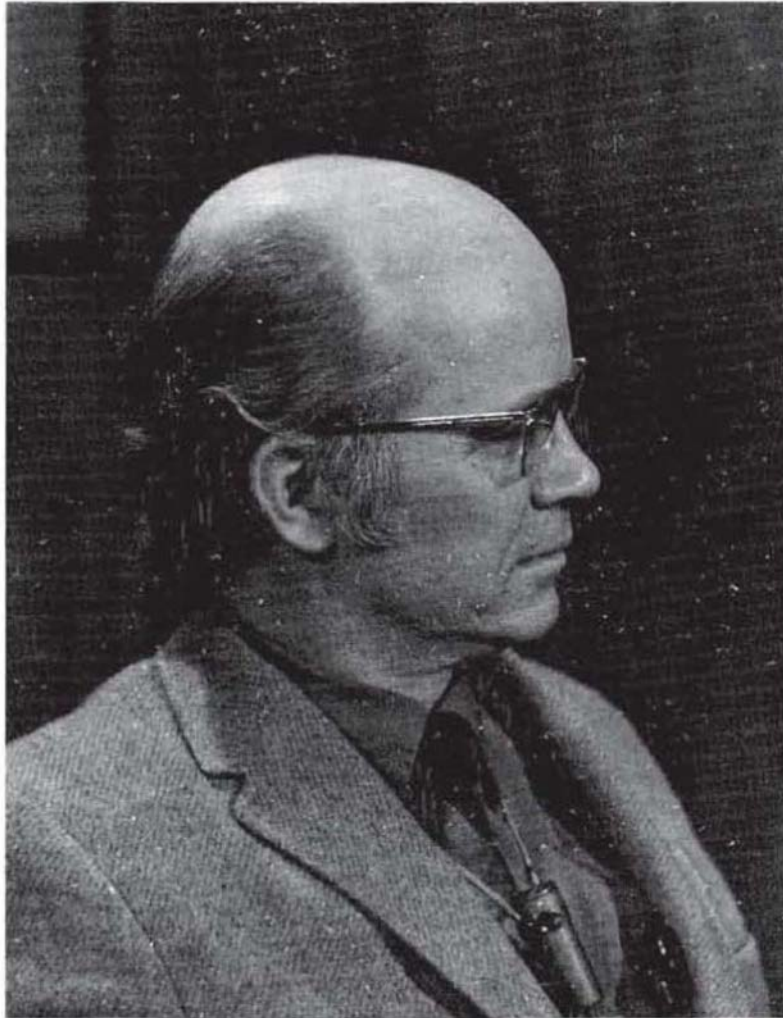
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## LOCATING CONSENT AND DISSENT IN AMERICAN RELIGION \*

by

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“We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being.” While the last clause of that dictum from the Supreme Court decision in *Zorach v. Clauson* (1951) may not be a demonstrable proposition, the first half of the sentence is. Such an assertion may seem to run counter to many generalizations about the secular character of American life. The United States was born late enough in Western history to fit well into many peoples’ time table as a case of late-stage secularization. The secular dimensions of American existence, then, must at least be referred to.

The root of the secular aspect of American life is legal. The separation of civil and religious realms, an event or process which occurred during the first half century of national life, suggests that the state can get along without explicit commitment to one or another metaphysical or religious positions. The United States Constitution is silent about such matters, and silence in this case implies consent.

On that legal base there have risen many other occasions for the judgment that America is secular. Foreign visitors for almost two hundred years have commented on the feverish this-worldliness, the materialism, the practical godlessness of the people; in later years academic skepticism or agnosticism is as advanced and as characteristic of intellectual circles as is the case with ‘secular’ Europe. Religious apathy, recent declines in the power of religious institutions, and the cancelling-out effects of religiously pluralistic voices all give rise to generalizations about American secularity.

These generalizations are paradoxically matched by at least as impressive observations concerning the enduring religious character of the American people. The majority of them belong to religious institutions; two out of five of them claim to attend their services weekly; reportedly, churches and synagogues represent an \$80 billion investment; churches are sought out for rites of passage by the majority; we pledge allegiance to the flag in recent years ‘under God’; “In God We Trust” marks our money; we subsidize chaplains and tender tax-exempt status to religious organizations; deference has normally been paid clerics. The signs are endless.

It is to the religious dimensions of this paradox that we turn to discuss the location of conflict and concord in American spiritual life. However marginal religious organizations may be in the personal and political life of many citizens, people remain uneasy about the role of religion in basic societal issues. A structural-functional observation can serve first to see the two sets of needs religion ordinarily fulfils in personal and societal life, and then it can be applied to the local scene. Other terms are appropriate and variations could be endless, but let us refer to the ‘integrative’ and ‘disruptive’ roles of religion.

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*Religion as integrator.* By integration we imply the potential religion has to help the individual come to terms with the questions of values, meaning, and community. This help may refer to his acceptance in a small group of people who share his vision and become important to him; it may refer to the ability religion offers to help random or threatening features of existence fit in to some sort of intelligible scheme or pattern. Primitive man normally used religion in this way; the location of villages and huts, roads and holy hills all suggested that the cosmos could be reduced to microcosm and he could find his place. The great religions have tended to be coextensive with the borders of states or cultures, and provided rationales for the political and personal life of their members. Even in modern pluralistic society, while no single religion serves for all citizens of a state or culture, religion can serve on a voluntary basis to help them situate themselves in patterns of meaning and acceptance.

*Religion as disruptive force.* If religion as an integrator can be expected to support civil concord, so will the other religious element complicate the question of consensus or unity in a society. Religion can be a disruptive force within a culture whenever the prophetic dimension is introduced, as is the case in Jewish and Christian tradition. There is a disparity between the prophets' vision of what is coming on one hand, and the present reality on the other. Or the moral demands of a particular vision may run counter to the prevailing mores of a society and an abrasion results when the two confront each other. A third disruptive factor may be the mystical, ecstatic, or other extraordinary ways of perceiving reality, which can enoble the lives of the experiencing agents even as they can cause dys-ease among those who do not share them.

Religion therefore may often imply exile or pilgrim status; it has often thrown its adherents into postures of dissent and outcaste status. Most of today's internal conflicts in multi-religious societies have religious dimensions and most of today's wars are, in some senses holy wars: Arab vs. Israeli, Hindu vs. Muslim, Protestant vs. Catholic in Ireland, are only a few prominent examples.

Clearly, religion can be an agency of discord in civil society. The founders of the United States, given the record of the Europe they had left and the potential of the competitive colonial life they had known, had good reason to expect that the discordant and dissenting elements would predominate in America. Historians have little difficulty finding evidences of both integrative and disruptive features in American religious history. That is no novel assertion. This paper examines, however, whether we conventionally locate accurately the locales in which integration and disruption are fostered or expressed.

*Conventional Consensus Religion.* In the eyes of most observers, on a national scale religion has served chiefly to promote civil concord. In a complex society whose motto is '*e pluribus unum*' the accent almost always has to fall on the '*unum*' when religion is referred to. There are psychological, social, political, and religious necessities behind such a stress. The alternative, it is regularly observed, would be simple atomization of society into the aimless or competitive visions of two hundred million members. Or, since many of these people will find each other in some sort of set of common expressions, there can be com-

petition between religious groups. These will cancel each other out, and anomie may result.

In past societies the consensus-generating features of religion were not hard to isolate and nurture. Where one religion prevails or, at best, where this one religion merely has to tolerate quiet dissent as an uneasy host tolerates an unruly guest, religion can easily serve as the integrator or interpreter of society. The king rules by divine right. People know their place in a theological scheme of things.

In the United States this has never been easily possible, since over two hundred recognized organized religious groups have come to vie for attention, and these are also split into smaller jurisdictions and a bewildering array of ideological sub-camps. Yet Americans, again reacting to the past record in Europe and the practice of men almost everywhere, knew the unprofitability of holy war in their society and took conscious and unconscious steps to assure that religion would ordinarily play a concordant role.

This role has been perceived most easily in those periods of national history when the highest premium was placed on a single national consensus. During the four years when there were 'two nations' here, this process can best be seen. Abraham Lincoln regarded the Union with an almost mystical concern; the Confederacy was held together and its morale was sustained in no small part in Protestant religious terms. Whenever anomie threatens, apathy impinges, anarchy is feared, people have turned to religion to promote consensus.

Most recently in post-World War II America, there were reasons for people to stimulate and to observe the consensus-engendering elements of religion. Thus in the Eisenhower years, as the Cold War heated up, it was important for Americans home from the wars to find roots, to have their anxieties ministered to and their complacencies supported. Over against 'atheistic communism', the enemy, it was important to point to the theistic commitment of this society.

A school of historians, now dubbed chiefly by its enemies as 'consensus history' regularly pointed to the unifying dimensions of religion. These historians spoke of the 'givens' of national life, the ways in which the peculiar blend of resources and people predisposed Americans to come to terms with each other in a particular way. That particular way demanded religious homogenization; at the very least there was observance of the blurring of the lines between religious and civil orders, the mingling of religious and political thought. True, each group had its separate theological commitments, but what mattered was what was shared.

Assurance was given that now as always, whatever the various sects or parties held in their particularities, these were irrelevant to or at least not disruptive of the demands and necessities of the inclusive civil order. The denominations were harmless; they cancelled each other out. People could have separate views of ultimate reality because their proximate views of civil society could be amassed into an alternative religious vision that transcended cultic views of the ultimate. The public good made the demands; while they no longer had coercive or legalistic support, churches were even stronger now because they relied on persuasive and voluntary spheres.

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The result, by common observation, has been the development of a religious *Gestalt* that has been dubbed, variously, 'lay', 'folk', 'generalized', 'societal', 'national', or 'civil' religion. By most definitions of the religious phenomenon, this generalized religion 'belongs'. It does succeed, however casual the allegiances seem superficially to be, to attract the ultimate concerns of its adherents. One dies for the national religion as he does not for sectarian faith; he is allowed less latitude of expression and finds it easier to be a heretic in civil religion—despite its loose definitions—than in sectarian religion, however rigid its dogmas.

To this ultimate concern are added other characteristic features of religion. There is a mytho-symbolic expression in flags, informal creeds, mottos and slogans, historical dramas and written history; this expression serves to reduce and interpret reality for the many. And these myths and symbols are celebrated or enacted through ritual or ceremonial reinforcement: a cycle of national holidays provides a sort of liturgical year. There are sanctuaries, memorial sites, sacred shrines. Quasi-metaphysical claims are made for the self-evident truths which belonged to that original 'compact' compact on whose terms the society came together; the compact is elaborated upon infinitely. And consequent action or behavior is expected: this religion like any other implies significant gestures and postures and expects moral fulfilment. Hans Kohn, Carlton J. H. Hayes, Robert Bellah, Sidney E. Mead, J. Paul Williams, Robin Williams, Lloyd Warner, Will Herberg and others have isolated and defined this religious reality quite appropriately around mid-century or after, in the 'consensus-seeking' years.

Such a religion does provide integration for a complex society; it nurtures individuals' identity and gives them power. But questions are raised almost instantly about the value, truth, and worth of such a religious form and expression. Three attitudes stand out.

Affirmation occurs on the part of those who stress the dangers of anarchy and anomie or atomization; a foreign foe may inspire the acceptance of a common societal religion, but internal threats of breaking up or contention can serve as well. Affirmation may come from the 'right', where a creedal orthodoxy of national values is imposed over against external and internal heretical conspiratorial forces. From the 'left' there will often be a different version of the same kind of support, especially among those who see in the democratic process itself the final repository of truth-value continuums. Defenders of such a common faith claim that critics see only its worst dimensions and compare these to the putative 'bests' of particular faiths.

Negation of common religion tends to come from those who assert the values of various particularities. In America these values have characteristically been associated with denominational, confessional, and theological peculiarities or particularities, though—as we shall see—these need not be the only base of particularism. If the affirmers often give evidence of monistic hungers or commitments, those who negate societal religion often seem to be able to be at home with what William James called a kind of metaphysically 'pluralistic universe'.

Those who are critical tend to point out to the whole society the dangers of religious monopoly, no matter how informal and subtle. Inevitably implied

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coercion seems to go along with the civil religious rites, while free men can simply exempt themselves or absent themselves when sectarian religion is practiced. Prophets fear idolatry; definers, blurring. From some normative standpoint or other they find their sub-groups' commitments to be true and the larger societies' homogenizing faiths to be false. Hooked on to the realities of *Realpolitik* a culture-wide religious expression strikes critics as being particularly dangerous.

A third attitude, and one which is probably sought by the majority of the most thoughtful and careful affirmers and negators, is dialectical. Dialecticians see the values in common religion but fear some of its effects; they may wish to celebrate theological particularities of sub-communities, but do not want to see these become ends in themselves. From Jonathan Edwards through Reinhold Niebuhr one strand of American religious thought has been able to combine a belief that the American environment is somehow revelatory and redemptive, with faith in a transcendent order which calls the American religious pretension into judgment. As a result, one can be both engaged and detached.

In the civil realm the tradition runs at least from Jefferson through Lincoln and has been expressed with some care after mid-century by a figure such as Adlai Stevenson. Jefferson could both say that Americans were a chosen people (the root of a civil religious sense) and that all people were chosen who properly stewarded the earth. Abraham Lincoln was even more sophisticated as he spoke in the affirmation of America's chosenness but kept some prophetic distance by speaking of the nation as "God's almost chosen people." In Paul Tillich's terms, this tradition allows 'catholic substance' (positive culture-building value) for national religion and asserts 'protestant principle' of prophetic protest over against it.

### The Religion of Dissent and Particularism

If we are to continue our examination of the conventional location of religion in our complex society, it is possible to see dissent placed chiefly in the successful and assertive denominational tradition. Just as obvious to every foreign observer as is America's societal religion is the fact of religious competition and denominational proliferation. Instead of a host/guest situation, the American legal tradition and practice allows for a "multiplicity of sects," as James Madison spoke of them, all enjoying legally equal status.

Denominationalism, which Sidney E. Mead called "the shape of Protestantism in America" comes to most observers to be the shape of religion in America. The denominations allow their members to safeguard particular views of the ultimate while ordinarily they can support the national consensus religion. Exceptions have been rare: at various moments in American history the larger citizenry has teared Mormon theocracy and polygamy; Jehovah's Witnesses' rejection of civil religion or that group's and Christian Sciences's particular views of healing or rejection of conventional medicine; or Amish and Hutterite isolation and moral distinctiveness. But most denominations play the public game well enough to be permitted private particularity.

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Denominational religion sounds as if it is the main repository of dissent. Certainly the rhetoric has been there; creedalists, dogmatists, and revivalists have often sounded as if they were mortal foes out to do each other in. Competition for placement of denominational churches in post-war suburbs was as intense as any commercial competition has ever been.

However, theological particularity and contention is regarded as a national luxury. Debates over transubstantiation, apostolic succession, immersion in baptism have exercised and agitated adherents of two or more sects at any given moment, but society at large did not tremble over outcomes.

Since denominational dissension is assumed to be present and its dangers feared, many attempts have been made to reduce it. From within, positive steps have been taken to stimulate consensus through ecumenical or interfaith moves. If denominational concord is arrived at, all will be well. From without, the society devises various ways to minimize denominational conflict. The apparently dangerous but always mild minister-priest-rabbi jokes, the careful regard politicians show religious voters' blocs, and the high societal premium placed on religious concord despite meaningful differences are examples of attempts to minimize conflict.

Several attitudes may be taken toward particular religion, just as they were shown generalized faith. Affirmers affirm because they believe in their own creed and enjoy its expression and benefits, or because they celebrate the tradition of religious freedom whether or not they are regular adherents of a religious organization. Denominationalism is the guarantee of faith and freedom. Sometimes the results of competition—the general health of America's voluntary churches—are advertised as being a theological certification of the value of the American way.

On the critical side, ecumenists, world-integrators, those who share positive religious views of both ultimate and proximate unity deplore denominationalism. The non-religious in society often see no point to the whole denominational venture. Some fear the encroachments of larger (particularly Roman Catholic or ecumenical Protestant) combinations of religious forces.

Here as in the civil case, there has been room for a dialectical position. Many celebrators of civil religion have used denominational particularity to help them qualify or compromise their commitment to a religion they feel can become too embracing and demanding. Many negators of civil religion find in denominationalism the base for prophetic stances. Those who stand chiefly in the particularist traditions tend, as noted above, either to be able to live with a pluralistic universe or, as Father John Courtney Murray once implied, can bracket their ultimate metaphysically monistic commitments for the sake of dealing with givens of pluralism in the city of man.

In summary to this point, we have suggested that the religious dimensions of American existence and experience have generally been divided on these lines: consensus or integration is reposed in societal religion; dissent or disruption are the potentials of denominational religion. While there is no reason to seek to demolish this conventional wisdom, it is my thesis that the situation is seen in a much different light if one looks for conflict and consensus in various patterns



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of organization of life *between* civil and denominational religion.

To introduce this point it is profitable to ask some questions. First, if denominationalism is so productive of authentic conflict, where are the dead bodies? Holy wars leave dead bodies; Puritan Revolutions and the Thirty Years War just before the formation of America and countless jihads and crusades ever since suggest the potential for physical violence in religious differentiation. But America has few such 'dead bodies'; a few Mormons, a few Roman Catholics, perhaps a Mason or two are pointed to and religious factors may have been present in each.

Given the violence of American history which reaches climaxes in events such as the Civil War, however, these bloody conflicts are statistically negligible; they play little part in Americans' recall; they do not often threaten today. Religious conflict on denominational lines, then, is not intense enough to threaten the civil order.

Put another way, the question could read, "What does society have to fear or hope for from denominational concord?" Individuals may feel ostracized if they are rejected by a denomination—but there are always plenty of acceptant ones available; individuals may find personal salvation through them. But does American society as a whole look for great benefits from, say, a successful outcome of the Consultation on Church Union, when even most members are but dimly aware of its efforts? Doctrinal disputes within or between denominations have normally had little public consequence, threat, or promise.

Yet there has been conflict in American religion; one simply must look elsewhere and relocate it. Here one moves beyond the universal/particular models provided by civil versus denominational religion. Conflict can be found chiefly on the matters of tribe, race, ethnic group, movement, or cause—each of which are not necessarily perceived as being fundamentally religious but each of which is colored by religious concerns and interpretations.

Indian/white, black/white, north/south, expansionist/white-man's-burden, sometimes liberal/conservative—these have usually been the lines of conflict. They may be seen to be simply secular, but he who overlooks the religious dimension will miss the drama of American history and may overlook threats and promises in the future.

#### Old and New Tribalisms as Loci of Consensus and Conflict

To take a few public examples: First, the Afro-American movement has made its way under various religious banners. Pan-Africanism, Martin Luther King's non-violent integrationism, the Black Muslim movement, Albert Cleage's black regionalism—all of these are examples of black movements whose power lay in no small measure in the leaders' abilities to invoke religious responses.

Amerindians who tell whites that "Custer died for your sins" resort to theological terminology and religious understandings of power to pose themselves over against white oppression. "Sisterhood is powerful!" The movements for consciousness-raising and women's liberation are normally perceived secularly, but as they unfold they find it necessary to undertake religious analyses

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and make quasi-religious claims. Jews find their identity and assert their power by reflection on particular events such as the Holocaust and on implied concepts of chosenness in many aspects associated with the formation of Israel.

Whenever there is a movement, there seems to be a religious ethos. The counter culture of the 1960s looked to Eastern and African primal religion for many of its impulses, and its communes, drug-culture, and ritual was often explicitly religious. The regrouping of white ethnics and WASPS in politically potent Middle American-Silent Majoritarian nexuses often takes the Catholicism and Protestantism of these complexes for granted, but this masks the religious racialist appeals which sanctioned their separate histories in the past and overlooks many elements of contemporary appeal.

The old ethnicity and the new ethnicity, the old tribalism and the new, the natural and the artificial groupings of Americans almost always seek to provide identity and power to people who cannot appropriate America's civil religion directly or who want to make formal war on it. At the very least, membership in old ethnic group or new counter cultural tribe (or whatever) serves to refract the experience of civil religion into particularist communities' schools of interpretation. At the most, membership in such groups is designed to guarantee peculiarity even at the expense of civil discord.

Our questions can be answered in a different way, then, when we move from denominational to tribal organization. There have been and are dead bodies as a result of conflict enhanced by religious symbolization in these groups. Society does have something to fear from conflict between them and has something to hope for when that conflict is rendered creative or when it is transcended.

Historians today are retracing their steps to see the religious dimensions of ethnicity-raciality throughout American history, a history which often has obscured religious ethnicism in the old WASP majority. Meanwhile analysts of the contemporary are coming to new understandings of identity and power in tribalism with its religious dimensions.

More than a sense of symmetry occasions a glance at attitudinal alternatives to this religious clustering. Here again there has been room for affirmation: unless one finds himself or herself in a sub-group, say the celebrators of tribalism or counter cultures, he will be lost and powerless. The whole society cannot provide a sufficiently clarified identity, and repressive tolerance by the homogenized whole will exploit the situation of those who lack identity and visibility. On the negative side, it is possible to see that unchecked tribalism can lead to disintegration of society and reestablishment of jungle conditions: people will be at each others' throats in defense of 'chosenness' and in the name of the gods.

The dialectical view is poised over against these. It recognizes psychological and political values in pen-ultimate attachment to particular groups (be they racial, ethnic, political, religious, or committed to various life-styles) even while it does not lose sight of ultimate values associated with religious visions of a single Family of Man, City of Man—and even a theological vision of the City of God.