University of Pennsylvania
ScholarlyCommons

Boardman Lectureship in Christian Ethics | Department of Religious Studies

10-29-1984

Religion and Politics in America: The Prospects for Civility

Harvey Cox
Harvard Divinity School

Boardman Lecture XXIV. Edited and Foreword by Leonard Norman Primiano.

This paper is posted at ScholarlyCommons. http://repository.upenn.edu/boardman/4
For more information, please contact repository@pobox.upenn.edu.

Religion and Politics in America: The Prospects for Civility

Abstract
Harvey Cox examines ways in which the categories of religious and moral reflection be brought to bear in political life in a pluralistic democracy in such a way that an American polity can be restored to democratic vigor.

Disciplines
Religion

Comments
Boardman Lecture XXIV. Edited and Foreword by Leonard Norman Primiano.

This presentation is available at ScholarlyCommons: http://repository.upenn.edu/boardman/4

The George Dana Boardman Lectureship In Christian Ethics

(Founded 1899)

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN AMERICA:

THE PROSPECTS FOR CIVILITY

Delivered Before
The University of Pennsylvania
29 October 1984

By
Harvey Cox
Victor S. Thomas Professor of Divinity
Harvard Divinity School

Edited By Leonard Norman Primiano

Foreword

During the 1979-80 academic year, University of Pennsylvania Provost Vartan Gregorian transferred to the Department of Religious Studies the responsibility for coordinating and administering the George Dana Boardman Lectureship in Christian Ethics. The last lecture had been delivered in 1961. Over the course of twenty-three lectures since 1900 noteworthy figures in the spectrum of American religous history, Biblical scholarship, education, and social commentary have addressed the University community as the Boardman Lecturer. Most notable among these are Lyman Abbott, Francis Greenwood Peabody, James Moffatt, Henry Bradford Washburn, and David Starr Jordan.

The Religious Studies Department reinaugurated the series on 29 October 1984 with the address, "Religion and Politics in America: The Prospects for Civility," delivered by Harvey Cox, Victor S. Thomas Professor of Divinity at the Divinity School of Harvard University. Professor Cox is a noted theologian, author, pedagogue, minister, as well as a 1951 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's College of Arts and Sciences.

The reprinted outline of the general purpose of the lecture highlights the moral interests of Dr. Boardman and his wife nearly a century ago. Some individuals may find its reflections dated. What is noteworthy about this statement is that it made no qualifications or restrictions on the selection of the Boardman Lecturer based on Christian denominational affiliation.

The editor would like to thank Camille Bacon-Smith, John Gregory Garrity, Martha Kokes, Mary LaRue, Jacqueline Z. Pastis, and especially Becky Vorpagel and Benjamin Wright for the assistance that they provided during the preparation of this publication.

Leonard Norman Primiano
University of Pennsylvania
Philadelphia
1 September 1985

RELIGION AND POLITICS IN AMERICA: THE PROSPECTS FOR CIVILITY

It is a singular privilege for me as a graduate of this university to be asked to reinstate this venerable lecture series. I would like to offer it in part as a tribute to two great teachers and scholars, both now gone, who influenced me deeply while I was an undergraduate at Pennsylvania some thirty-five years ago. The first is Professor Edwin E. Aubrey, the University's first professor of Religious Thought, as the Department was then called, whose brilliance as a scholar convinced me that religion was indeed worth thinking about. The second is Professor John L. LaMonte, then Henry C. Lea Professor of Medieval History, who won me forever to the historical way of looking at things.

For me, this is not only a return to my alma mater, it is also a return to my ancestral turf. The Coxes first came to Pennsylvania back in the early part of the 1700's, 1708 as far as we can see, and I think that they would have understood the debate which is going on today about the place of religion in political public discourse. They were Quakers and, as Quakers, they would not settle for an exclusively individual notion of what religion entailed for them. They were excited, as William Penn was, by what one needed to do to establish a godly commonwealth of peace, tranquility and justice. However, as religious refugees, as refugees from religious persecution, they were also very aware of what happens when a particular religious group armed with state power begins to inflict its views on others. Therefore, I think that they would have understood some of the terms of the debate now going on in the United States and about which I hope to make some contribution in this lecture.

Perhaps, at this time, I should also thank all those people who rather consciously or inadvertently have contributed to the current popularity of the topic of this address. I think that I would have to list Archbishop John O'Connor of New York City, Vice-Presidential

candidate Geraldine Ferraro, New York Governor Mario Cuomo, Reverend Jerry Falwell, President Ronald Reagan, North Carolina Senator Jesse Helms, Reverend Jesse Jackson, and others that one could add to the list. It was not at all clear when I was first invited to give this lecture that the topic would in fact become one of such moment in the current presidential campaign, which in fact it has become. I am also here to say that I do not think that this issue will go away at the end of the campaign. Let me start with a story.

There was a young candidate for Congress who had something of a reputation for being a free thinker. During the campaign, his staff informed him that many ominous rumors were circulating about him. Reports had it that he was contemptuous of organized religion, that he hardly ever went to church, that he was really not a proper Christian at all. After a staff meeting, the candidate issued a pamphlet staunchly denying that he had ever spoken with disrespect of religion. Despite the controversy, he was elected to Congress and, upon his arrival, immediately began to oppose an unpopular war which the President at that time was carrying on, a war which was opposed by many leading religious figures. He was promptly defeated at the next election. The successful election occurred in 1846, the defeat was in 1848, and the young Congressman was Abraham Lincoln, later elected sixteenth President of the United States. The war he opposed was the Mexican-American War and the chief executive at that time was James K. Polk.

I suppose what I am saying with the above illustration is that I do not think that the current topic of the influence of religion in American politics is all that new. Religion has influenced politics in America from the very beginning, religion continues to influence politics, and religion will continue in one way or another to influence politics for as long as we can anticipate. I am not particularly interested in discussing this point as a problem. I would rather restate the problem. I think that stating whether religion should have an influence on politics is academic in the wrong sense of the word. It is a moot point. Rather, I think the issue should be stated in the following way: how can an increasingly thin and technocratic form of political discourse be once again linked to the larger universe of moral discourse, and moral discourse linked with ultimate world views and their symbols in such a way that the thinned out political discourse can be energized and strengthened?

How can the categories of religious and moral reflection be

brought to bear in political life in a pluralistic democracy in such a way that an American polity which is in serious danger of ceasing to be democratic— that is of and by and for the people except in the very formal sense—can be restored to democratic vigor? Now that is a somewhat different way to put it, but that is the way I would like to put it at the outset. What are the chances then for civility in a democracy in which religious discourse and religiously based arguments about public policy decisions are admitted into the marketplace of political ideas?

The word "civility" is rooted in the Latin word, *civis,* which means pertaining to citizenship. It meant this for many years throughout the medieval period and historians of the language tell us that only rather late did it evolve into the meaning that it has more or less today, that is polite, deferential, gracious or even courtly. My argument is that before we can have the derivative and later form of civility we need to restore the original sense of *civitas,* the original form of civility, which is based on the participation of citizens in a society in which citizens engage in reasoned debate and exchange about public issues based on the values they hold important. Is that possible? And what contribution, if any, can religious argument and religious metaphors and beliefs make to this discussion? Here I would like to suggest that religious values, far from being viewed as some kind of nuisance to those who form public policy, should rather be regarded as one source among others, though an important and valuable source, of the renewal and the empowerment of the *civitas* in the United States. *Civitas* is that form of community without which civility becomes mere propriety, a necessary but hardly sufficient element in public life, and I wish to argue that in America the re-linking of morality and religious discourse to public policy discussion is an essential prerequisite to the reclaiming of the *civitas.*

My argument then will have three points. The first is that this missing link between the moral, the religious, and the political has to be restored first because our faltering political system needs it. The second reason is that our traditional religious beliefs in the United States require it, and the third is that most of our people want it. Let me talk about each of these in order.

The first point is that our politics needs it. Throughout most of the history of Western political theory, moral reasoning, ethical discourse, and political theory have been closely related, from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas, from Luther to Reinhold Niebuhr,

up to and including Jacques Maritain and John Courtney Murray. Only recently have we witnessed any kind of defense of a theoretical splitting of these universes of discourse. When that happens, however, two negative consequences ensue. Politics becomes less than politics and ethics becomes less than ethics. Politics is reduced to the art of brokering between power interests—what someone has called war by other means-and ethics becomes a kind of trivial argument about whether someone is stealing the pencils or padding their expense accounts. These two realms are severed. I think we are now seeing something of the consequence of this severing and I would contend that some of the present high visibility of religious and moral discourse within the public arena has to do not so much with the increased assertiveness of these groups as it has to do with the enfeeblement of political discourse in America as such, its progressive impoverishment.

The result has been something that we all have to face as those committed to a democratic polity in America, namely that we are facing a catastrophic decline in the participation in our democratic decision-making. Although it may be a little higher this year, each presidential election has seen a falling-off of those who even think it is worth voting in a presidential election, to say nothing of local congressional elections and lesser contests. Indeed when one compares this pattern with other democracies, it is something of a national disgrace. If you follow campaigns carefully, especially if you have followed the 1984 Democratic campaign for the nomination for the presidency, you get the impression that campaigns tend now to be about the campaign, about whether you can correctly predict how a candidate is going to do in a particular state, whether someone will win or not depending on what was expected and what actually happened, and what an individual's vote-getting ability is. More and more the political realm seems to be one for pollsters, for technicians, for experts for what is called the policy-making community, and ordinary citizens feel excluded except in very limited roles.

Wilson Carey McWilliams wrote in his remarkable 1973 book, *The Idea of Fraternity in America,* the following sentences:

> The great concern of American political philosophy has been the development of democratic theory. That concern has focused on formal institutions and organizations, even when it rejected formalism. In so doing, it has neglected the fact that democratic theory must always be a theory about a *demos* [what I am calling a *civitas*], about the character and relations of citizens.

I think that is a very important paragraph about the faltering and declining democratic process in our country. "Citizens" here is the key word. I believe, however, that this is not only a problem in theory, although a political scientist would naturally think of it that way. I think it results in some other larger cultural and institutional developments that have conspired to produce a subversion of the very idea of what was once called an active and informed citizenry by the founding fathers. I will just briefly mention two of these manifestations.

One is the enormous development of a bureaucratic state which seems to reduce citizens to clients. The other is the enormous power of corporate capitalist institutions intruding now into the political process, the way it is planned and carried out, and reducing citizens to customers. The process is from citizen to client and from citizen to customer and it is a rather ugly prospect, a rather ugly picture. Here is where some of our religious traditions in the United States act as a kind of counter-force to both of these tendencies. At least within our religious traditions, both the Jewish and Christian traditions in the United States, there is a certain theme of restraint in the limiting of human possessions, wants, and needs which is not in keeping with the endless proliferation of commodities and the endless stimulation and creation of artificial needs. That part of these religious traditions answers to the customerization of politics. There is also in our traditions the ideas that the people have an important participatory role in making decisions both within the congregation and within the civil polity, that is, voting to select the minister has a way of rubbing off on voting to select the magistrate. This relationship can be traced out to some of our Puritan and free church forebears and there are analogues to this in the Roman Catholic tradition as well. This is a view in which citizens are not viewed as customers to be tested, measured, and sold to, rather citizens are viewed as sources of value and intelligence who are enlisted in discussions about public policy, instead of being treated as audiences to be persuaded. I think that we have within our religious traditions in the United States two counterbalancing ideas to this subversion of democracy. Both of these "anti-citizen" phenomena produce a politics which erodes and

subverts the *civitas* in which genuine civility in the truly classical sense is not possible and, therefore, civility is in its more derived sense also impossible.

I must agree with Alexis de Tocqueville when he writes: "A nation cannot long remain strong when every man belonging to it is individually weak, and no form or combination of social polity has yet been devised to make an energetic people out of pusillanimous and enfeebled citizens." There is nothing terribly restrained and there is no circumlocution in this phrase. I rather believe that because of some tendencies including those I have mentioned and perhaps others that could be added, we do face an enfeebled citizenship. I like the word enfeebled because it is a process which is causing this enfeeblement and part of the way we all hear and experience that enfeeblement is that we do not really feel genuinely invited to be participants in the political process. If we do get involved in it, if we try to become an active and informed citizenry, we are frequently told by people from the so-called policy community that we do not know enough, that it is not our business and that there are people who know better.

Let me indulge in just one anecdote to illustrate this point. A few years ago, I was rather actively involved in interpreting and supporting the nuclear freeze movement which began in western Massachusetts not from political leadership, but as a movement of an active and engaged citizenry and which then spread to Vermont town meetings and on to New Hampshire. I remember attending a meeting in Vermont where they were voting on the nuclear freeze and someone visiting from the State Department or the Defense Department was there arguing with these folks during their town meeting that they did not really know anything about this subject. This person's point was that these people were not sufficiently informed, that these were decisions that they really ought to leave to those who knew more than they did about these issues. Well, I think before that speech was made in the town meeting there was some doubt about how the motion would go. After that speech was made, those folks in Vermont passed the freeze resoundingly. Whatever else it was, it was not good political strategy to tell folks in Vermont that they were not competent to decide such things, though we have become used to hearing such statements. This example demonstrates a lack in our political process.

The second point is that our faith requires it. The faiths which have been part of our American experience from its founding, Christianity

in its various forms and Judaism in its different expressions, are not accidentally or peripherally concerned about politics because they are concerned about justice and justice is impossible without the consideration of politics. Just think of the great images of our faith: Moses and Pharoah, the prophets and the kings of the Old Testament, Jesus and Pilate, the popes and the emperors, Martin Luther King at the Lincoln Memorial. The common thread underlying all of these religious traditions is that God not only created the world, but that God created along with it the foundations, if not the specifics, of public and private morality and, furthermore, that God is involved in human history. God is not utterly and completely transcendent to the world and is in fact involved in a particular way as the one who vindicates the poor, the orphans, the homeless, the voiceless.

The purpose of public policy from the point of view of these religious traditions is not simply the maintaining of rules of fair play, although that is important and in fact essential. Rather, there is a larger moral purpose to public policy which goes far beyond brokerage and has to do with seeking a justice which is measured by how this society deals with those who are most vulnerable, its weakest members, and how they are dealt with. This is why it is not only the right but the responsibility of religious leaders, and of lay people in religious communities for whom this tradition is the basis of their lives, to remind those in power of this vision and to do so in such a way that the pretentiousness which is often present in kings and emperors and in public policy makers is punctured. There is a certain kind of demystifying of the absolute claims of experts and governors which is built into the Jewish and Christian traditions. It strips the mystique away when it is functioning at its best. I think that the nurturing of an informed and active citizenry, what used to be called in the good old-fashioned language a virtuous citizenry, is an essential component to a healthy democracy. These traditions also underline a belief that public virtue cannot ultimately arise out of compromising and balancing private vices and this is an idea which now has very wide support that somehow enough private vices are going to produce public virtue. I think that this is not something which our religious traditions affirm. This is why, or at least one of the reasons why, we have so many new voices in the area of public political discourse about which some people are so concerned.

We hear a great deal about the evangelicals and the fundamentalists becoming active in politics, making speeches, supporting

and opposing candidates, among other activities. They, however, are not the only actors. We also have the remarkable, yet not widely discussed, phenomenon of the maturation of the participation of the Black churches in the American political process in the last year, specifically the Jesse Jackson campaign, in a way which dumbfounded those who thought this was going to be an insignificant and marginal effort. I think that this movement is completely incomprehensible unless one understands the roots of Jackson's rhetoric and his vision, and his social base in the Black churches. He had been a lieutenant for Martin Luther King and his tradition is that of the Black churches. He is a minister, a Baptist minister, just as Jerry Falwell is. There is not much else similar between the two, but they are both Baptist ministers.

There is also the remarkable change and maturation taking place among the American Roman Catholic bishops. In fact, I would argue that their way of introducing their moral and religious perspectives into a very important public policy debate, namely the debate over nuclear weapons, is almost a model of how this can be most felicitously and constructively done. They not only issued a pastoral letter about nuclear weapons, they even let us watch over their shoulders as they were drafting it and sent it out in its raw form for discussion and response. They addressed it not only to Catholics, but to all people of good will, all people who could follow a rational argument. They did not say "thus saith the Lord." They said, "here is our contribution to a very important issue drawn from our tradition." "We invite others into this discussion." What they were insisting is that the discussion about nuclear weapons is not merely a technical discussion, which is what we have been told for many years by the military policy-making community. We, as ordinary citizens, have had no access to this policy debate. We have had no access not only because it was a technical debate, but because they did not want us to talk about it in moral terms. They did not want to introduce that confusing category into this debate. They probably further recognized that for many people in the United States this might give them an opportunity for participating in others kinds of discussions about defense policy.

We have many concerned actors and I am not among those who believe that this is some kind of passing bleep on the screen of American politics. We are learning slowly to have this kind of discussion without jumping down each other's throats and without seeking to exclude anyone from this discussion. I would even want to

argue that although they do often sound very strict and sometimes a little ominous, given the opportunity to participate in political discourse and argumentation, fundamentalists will probably move along the way other groups in American society have, discovering that you have to find allies, build coalitions, settle for half of the desired objective. Eventually, they may even be able to discuss and debate issues in a way they now find difficult.

We had a conference in June 1984 at Harvard University, co-sponsored by the Divinity School and by the Institute for Politics of the Kennedy School of Government, on religion and the campaign for public office. I can report with a certain amount of gratitude that we invited people from across the political spectrum: men, women, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, conservatives, people from the Jesse Jackson campaign, people from the Moral Majority. We spent two days together. Nobody killed anyone else. People did listen to each other. They even formulated a commonly accepted statement and were all very grateful that somebody had thought it was important for them to have an opportunity to listen to each other. I do not want to be sanguine about how easy it is going to be, but I think of this as a promising possibility rather than some terrible obstacle or some ultimate threat to our democratic pluralism.

The third point is that our people want it. If our political process needs it and if our traditional faith in America requires it, the simple fact is that most people want this linking of morality and religious discourse to public policy discussion. Most people in America want this and as a democracy that should be at least something of an important datum. A public political ethic in the United States which is not a trivial one will have to make room for religious values among others because that is the way many people in America think about values and moral issues. The recent Gallup polls show that over sixty percent of the American population believe that religion is very important to them. Now this does not mean that this gives people with that perspective any license to dominate or impose their views on others. I think that it does mean that they should be welcomed as anybody else is into the argument. Ironically, people who want to exclude all religious language or values from public policy discourse would have to impose that view arbitrarily since it would have to be an elitist view. It is only a minority of people who think that you can actually carry on an argument which does not have that reference. This would be undemocratic. It would be a disenfranchisement of large numbers of people to ban references to religious metaphors or

beliefs in the area of political argumentation.

People seem to want it and for large numbers of people, Catholics, Protestants, Jews, and others in the United States, what they think is right or wrong, and how they think about important decisions in public life, is based on a morality which is in turn grounded in some kind of world view. This is often a religious world view which can express itself in liturgy, songs, metaphors, and stories.

I want to repeat that this is not the only tradition that we have. I draw a very sharp distinction here between myself and some of the people who are advocating a return to a Christian America. I think that this is a dangerous and misleading idea. There never was a Christian America. America was pluralistic from the very beginning. There was John Winthrop in Massachusetts. There were also such individuals as Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and, of course, Philadelphia's Benjamin Franklin, hardly an orthodox Christian. They were all in the developing country, the United States. The people who claim that there is some mythical Christian America to which we should be returning, from which we have departed or fallen, are talking nonsense. It is historical mythology and not history. However, those who claim that America has always been a secular nation are equally wrong. This country has a delicate balance of religious and Enlightenment themes. We have classical republican theory as well as republican virtues. We have the philosophy of the Enlightenment, especially the American Enlightenment, and we have these various Biblical religious traditions. They are all represented. They are contending with each other and with the various other views. I am very happy myself that all of this is out in the open at present because we have had periods in American political history when this was not a reality. One has only to go back to the 1928 Hoover-Smith presidential campaign or to Kennedy-Nixon in 1960 to recall such notions.

Now let me ask my question again. What are the prospects for civility in the midst of all of this? I think that civility in the later sense of restraint and deference must be based on civility in the classical sense, pertaining to citizenship, and the life of a *demos*, a *civitas*. It could also be argued that this depends on the life of the *communitas*, at least in some measure a *communitas*, that is a shared fund of arguable principles and ideas, shared affective symbols, shared stories. Without that, once again, politics becomes mere brokerage, technical brokerage. Our choice is not whether religion shall

influence politics. We do not have that choice. We must, however, carefully distinguish between religious ideas and political ideas influencing each other, the people holding these ideas, and the separation of governmental institutions from churchly institutions. It is quite a different subject and we have to be on our guard about it. No, our decision is whether we will devise ways of relating this larger universe of moral discourse and religious discourse, in such a manner that it nurtures the particular kind of *civitas* that we have in America, which is a pluralistic religious enterprise.

This is quite an achievement when you compare it to other countries. At last count, six hundred forty-eight different churches, sects, and religious denominations existed in the United States, all more or less thriving, sometimes at each others' expense. How can we not just detect but nurture this diversity while at the same time welcoming this kind of debate in the public arena? We have to because if we do not we will continue to drift toward a merely formal democracy in which various political, educational, cultural, and religious elites make the decisions for the rest on the basis of their putative expertise and we find ourselves once again as clients and as customers. The overall prospects are relatively good, but it is still an open question.

I would like to end by referring to one of my favorite theologians, Reinhold Niebuhr, who used to say that the core insight of all religion is that there is meaning beyond my meaning. There is a purpose in the universe which is not necessarily my purpose or the purpose of my group. I think that is an enormously valuable insight. Against the technocratic reduction of politics, it says there is a larger moral purpose which the political process must serve. Otherwise politics ceases to be politics. It becomes plumbing. Against the religious fanatic and the bigot, it says that this purpose is above and beyond and quite possibly different from my purpose.

Abraham Lincoln, to whom I referred earlier, is still trustworthy on these matters as in many others. He was often attacked and harassed by religious groups, but I think that he was one of the most profoundly religious men and one of the best theologians ever to serve in the presidency. In 1862 during the very worst hours of the national agony, when there was every political reason to demonize the South and to sanctify the cause of the Union, he would not do so. He wrote the following words when it still appeared that the Union might lose: "In the present Civil War it is quite possible that God's

purpose is something different from the purpose of either party." Is it too much to hope that the candidates for the presidency or Presidents might be able to say something like that, even today? Lincoln saw the larger moral and religious purpose within which politics must proceed, but he refused to claim God for his side, even in the midst of a bloody war. I think that he was right then and is still right today.