Public religion, through thick and thin: Religion and the "shared life"

by Richard J. Mouw in the June 7, 2000 issue

Politics, Religion, and the Common Good : Advancing a Distinctly American Conversation About Religion in Our Shared Life, by Martin E. Marty with Jonathan Moore

Sometimes I hear voices inside my head. I worry about that a bit. Not so much that I am afraid I'm going crazy—I'm not ready to change my name to "Legion." The voices in my head argue with each other, but they do so rather calmly. And they argue mainly about questions of public policy. The thing that worries me is that sometimes two conflicting voices both make good sense to me. That means I don't get along very well with many of the people whose theology is quite similar to mine, people who seem not to have any arguments going on inside their heads. Their pronouncements about public life are delivered with a tone of absolute certainty.

Martin Marty hears voices inside his head too. His voices are a lot like mine. Here is one of Marty's examples: The daughter of Christian Science parents is very ill; she will die if not given medical treatment. The parents refuse to allow the procedure because of their religious convictions. One of Marty's voices tells him that the courts should not interfere—it is dangerous to infringe on the free exercise of religion. But another voice tells him the child's life must be saved. Both voices make sense. A good judge will probably hear both of them. But the judge must act fast.

Another of Marty's examples has to do with a fundamentalist university that faces losing federal aid to its students because the school discriminates against a specific racial group. The case for discrimination is made, with apparent sincerity, by quoting Bible verses. One voice tells Marty that the fundamentalists have a terrible theology. Another tells him that governments should respect sincerely held beliefs. Again, somebody has to make a difficult decision.

Marty encourages us to listen to these kinds of voices, both inside and outside of our heads. This book is a sustained plea for a wide-ranging public conversation in which

many voices speak. It also frequently reminds us that in public life difficult decisions must be made.

I take seriously what Marty has to say about such matters. Because I have learned a great deal from his other books, reading what he has to say in this one is very reassuring—and helpful—to me. This is a good opportunity for me to say publicly how much I, as an evangelical social ethicist, have been influenced by Marty's writings. I can't think of any other nonevangelical commentator on American religion who knows as much about evangelicalism as Marty does. He knows not only our history but our jokes and in-group gossip. Consequently, I have always considered him a trustworthy guide to what is going on in the rest of American religious life.

Marty has also influenced the ways in which I think about social ethics. For example, I was struck by a provocative comment he made in a 1981 autobiographical book, *By Way of Response*. A problem in contemporary life, he said, is that the folks who are good at being civil often don't have very strong convictions, and the people who have strong convictions usually aren't very civil. We need to find a way of combining a civil spirit with a "passionate intensity" about what we believe. That observation—the call for convicted civility—kept teasing me, and I ended up writing a book on the subject.

Marty's new book is a resource for people of conviction who want to be good citizens in a pluralistic society: "You want to do the right thing by your God, your tradition, your country, the public order, the law and the courts, and your fellow citizens. You have found that shouting, polarization and demeaning arguments are of no help. We hope the model of conversation presented in this book will be helpful," he states. The "we" signals that Marty is speaking for more than himself throughout most of this book. He is summarizing some of the lessons learned through the three-year Public Religion Project, which he directed (with the assistance of Jonathan Moore) under the sponsorship of the Pew Charitable Trusts. In the last chapter, however, he does offer a more personal take on the issues.

Though the first two words in the book's title are "politics" and "religion," this is not a typical discussion of the relationship between the two. Once there was a real need for generic treatments of religion and politics. In the evangelical world, for example, it seemed important several decades ago to insist that there is indeed a positive relationship between biblical faith and active involvement in political life. But while these generic discussions serve their purpose, they also mask some important

complexities. It is easy for Christians, for example, to get stuck on abstract issues, such as whether the believing community ought to be—in terms borrowed from H. Richard Niebuhr's Christ-and-culture typology—"above" the political order, "in tension" with it, "transforming" it, "of" it or "against" it. Helpful though this kind of analysis can be, it also can keep us from attending to the complex everyday realities of political life.

Back in the '70s, when evangelicals were debating Reformed-versus-Anabaptist perspectives on faith and politics, I participated in a forum in which a self-proclaimed "radical Christian" urged all of us to "stand over against everything this American political system stands for." As a parent of a grade-school student, I had a difficult time getting into that mind-set. I was too grateful for the traffic lights the "system" had installed on the corners of the busy streets my son had to navigate on his way to school, and for the school crossing guards the city government had hired to make his daily journey less dangerous, and for the fire inspectors who regularly visited his school to check for hazards, and so on. The more concrete one's political focus, the less applicable did those "big" theological formulations seem.

This is a book that appreciates the messiness that characterizes the actual, many-layered, multifaceted dimensions of the relationship of religion to politics. Does someone want to talk about "the wall of separation between church and state"? Well, Marty tells us, that phrase—which is not found in the Constitution or the Bill of Rights but comes from a letter that Thomas Jefferson sent to a group of Connecticut Baptists—will not be of much help to a congregation that needs to challenge a local zoning ordinance, or to ask the city police force for help in keeping the neighborhood noise level down during Sunday morning worship hours. When we attend to these kinds of realities, says Marty, "James Madison offers a more accurate characterization: there is a 'line of distinction' between civil and religious authorities—a line that is often permeable, sometimes blurred, always contested."

Much of Marty's discussion is devoted to sorting out the various entities that figure into the complex workings of religion in public life. Here, too, our preferences for abstraction are directly challenged. It is not enough to think about the public role of "the church" or "the synagogue" or "the mosque." The realities are too messy to be covered adequately by those formulations. Denominations speak out on many political issues. But so do ecumenical agencies and local congregations.

We must also make room in our schemes for the likes of the American Jewish Committee, World Vision, Bread for the World, the Christian Coalition, local right-to-life groups and denominationally linked gay-lesbian advocacy groups. Marty's lengthy discussion of the role of denominations is fascinating—especially his observations (which I find convincing) about the continuing relevance of denominational entities in our reportedly "postdenominational" religious culture.

The messiness that we must acknowledge in dealing with the complex variety of religious entities in the public arena has important implications for Christian thinking about political realities. Marty's insistence that "the political arena is not a place where everything will be absolute, neat and pleasing" challenges some basic assumptions in the political theologies of both the left and the right.

This messiness is not something that we ought to eliminate or minimize. It is a good thing for us to find our way in the midst of messiness. Here some other key words from the book's title and subtitle must be underscored: the relationship between politics and religion must be thought about with reference to the common good; our conversations must be about how religion figures into our shared life. This insistence that our strategies for public involvement must take seriously the health of the larger society obviously calls for intense theological investigation.

Marty acknowledges this need. He notes that "most religions have what we might call 'theologies of public order,' thoughts about the common good that provide interpretations of the working of the body politic and the forces in it." He recommends that these various theological perspectives be given expression in the public arena, since "a variety of voices can help assure freedom."

Here I must confess to a tinge of disappointment about this book. Marty says nothing about what this challenge might mean for theological schools, whose attention to these topics will play an important role in educating the people—pastors, denominational employees, lay leaders and the like—whom he frequently singles out as important interpreters and "brokers" of the public involvement of religious groups.

Right now the Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada is conducting a major study of the public character of theological education, with a special focus on how seminaries can educate leaders who take their public role seriously. The task is being carried out by four working groups, representing the

Protestant mainline denominations, evangelicals, Roman Catholics and the university-related divinity schools. Here, too, there is some messiness: Dallas Seminary will approach the subject differently than will the Sacred Heart School of Theology, and the two of them will differ in turn from the approaches of McCormick Seminary or Harvard Divinity School.

It would have been helpful if Marty, himself a veteran theological educator, would have given some guidance for this important kind of messy conversation. But even without such words of encouragement, his theological colleagues can learn much from his environmental scan of the territory that they must explore.

Marty's emphasis on religion's role in the broadly "public"—rather than the narrowly "political"—arena is especially valuable. Religious groups have a public presence even when they officially eschew political involvement. They can hide this fact from themselves only by not taking the scope of the public arena into account. When a rabbi writes to a newspaper about Israeli policy, or when evangelical parents make their views about science and religion known to a school board, or when a Methodist congregation gives a send-off to a daughter of the church who is entering the navy chaplaincy, they are expressing a public faith.

Which brings us back to the phrases "common good" and "shared life." Some of my Christian ethicist colleagues get nervous when someone even hints that religion might be good for the larger pluralistic culture. Debates can get pretty heated these days about the dangers of sacrificing the "thick" texture of Christian discourse for the alleged benefits of a "thin" ethical contribution to the larger public arena. Marty, long a defender of "public religion," does not address this controversy explicitly, but his observations about the practical realities of religion in public life have clear relevance to the topic.

Certainly no careful reader can come away with the impression that Marty cares about religion only insofar as it can provide utilitarian benefits to the larger society. He knows that people of faith will serve the culture best by nurturing convictions that sometimes go against the cultural grain. It is not healthy for public life, Marty says, for the conversation about important issues to lapse into the "serenely civil." Of necessity "different interests, creeds, and personalities will be involved, and they will bring passion. Rather, the goal of the conversation is to help people envision and practice ways for those of good intentions to be true to themselves, their faith, their causes—and do little damage to others along the way."

Having made that point, Marty quickly adds that this is “a rather limited way” to characterize a conversation “that has considerable promise for the republic.” The kinds of “mediating structures” that are possible only because of passionate faith can also do much “to enliven” our shared life.

I think Marty speaks wisely here. The “thick” versus “thin” debate is often a confused one. The truth is—and I am convinced that it is a profoundly theological truth—that one of the obligations entailed by our “thick” Christian convictions is that we be willing to speak as carefully as we can in the public arena the “thin” language of “common good” and “shared life.” Marty’s book is an important guide to all of us who want our lives as citizens to be immersed in that kind of thickness.