
THEME

NOTE

What has religion got to do with democracy? The long answer would be: everything. Ideas of the equal worth of individuals, of the demand for a just community, and of concern and affection for the well-being of others are a small part of the Western religions' contribution to democracy. The short answer would be: the idea that no person is owned by any human institution. Democracy's debts to religion are one thing, however, and radicalism's antagonism toward religion is another. Despite the valuable and often heroic part that many religious groups played in the civil rights movement and antiwar activities of the sixties, a formidable distance divides radicals from believers. They may cooperate on causes but not about causal theory. Most "serious" Marxists tend to be hostile to religion. Marx himself had a complex attitude, responsive to the theological drama of religion, but scornful of it as a political and social force. Lenin was both tone-deaf to the subject and militantly atheistic. Further to the left, anarchists have been consistently opposed to any religion that is organized or embodies an authority principle—which doesn't spare many religions. At the other pole of radicalism, classical liberals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were, typically, as critical of religion as were the more extreme radicals.

Although evangelical religion contributed to nineteenth-century reform movements in America, and particularly to abolitionism, most of the major religious organizations have been far more consistent in their support of the state. They have defended all of the nation's wars and, for the most part, the system of capitalism. In the last few years, however, some dramatic changes have occurred in a quarter where historical experience made them highly unlikely. Elements within the Catholic hierarchy have transformed the Church's attitude toward radical social change. This is most strikingly evident in Central and South America where bishops, priests, and laity have been in the forefront of the struggle against domestic tyranny, exploitation, and colonialism. The Church in Poland has thus far taken a critical position toward the military dictatorship and defended many of Solidarity's principles. Here in America bishops have begun to speak out forcefully on the arms race and the dangers of nuclear war. One bishop has questioned the moral propriety of working to produce nuclear weapons, another has wondered if a Christian should pay taxes that would subsidize the

manufacture of the terrible weapons of modern war, and still other Catholics have raised the issue of whether in a nuclear age there can be such a thing as a "just" war.

Historically, democracy's relationship to religion has been different from that of other forms of radicalism. Unlike anarchism, Marxism, and early liberalism, democracy did not come into the world with an animus against religion. Modern democratic ideas and impulses first emerged during the English revolution of the seventeenth century and as a result displayed numerous marks of the religious ferment of that extraordinary period. Ideas of equality, rights, participation, elections, freedom of expression, and consent as the basis of association were widely discussed and all of them were primarily religious in origin. Christopher Hill recaptures the revolutionary origins of democracy in the religious ideas and experience of that time. If religion has been the seed-bed of democratic ideas, there have also been periods where it has worked against democracy, as our lead article suggests. The place of religion in public education has been an issue for as long as the republic has existed: Julius Lester implicitly challenges the position of many religious leaders and followers that religion ought to furnish the content of "moral education" in the public schools. Peter Steinfels looks at the neoconservative uses of religion and discovers a familiar, if distressing, pattern.

—S.S.W.