

# RELIGION

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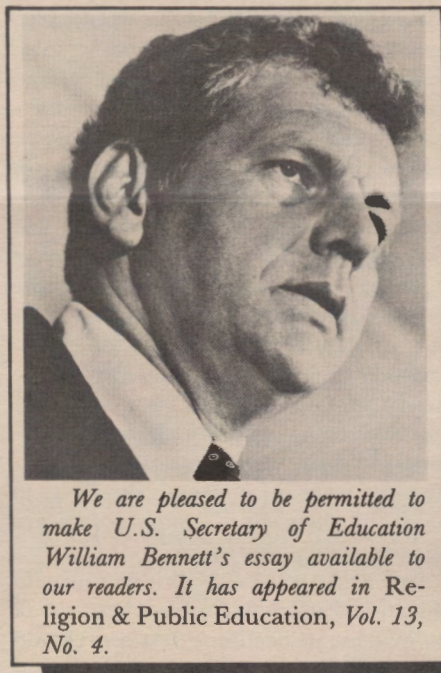
Feb. 1987

## In Defense of the Judeo-Christian Ethic

**A**t the deepest and most important level, America rests upon a durable and resilient common culture. Most American men and women, of all races, religions and backgrounds, subscribe to this common culture. The American common culture rests on at least three central elements.

First is the democratic ethic, with its roots in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. This democratic ethic recognizes the truth of human equity, and the fact that all men are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights. The democratic ethic emphasizes freedom, tolerance and respect for the rights of all. It also encourages everyone to develop their potential to the utmost. I think the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. grasped the essence of the democratic ethic when he declared, "Any law that uplifts the human personality is just. Any law that degrades the human personality is unjust."

Second is the work ethic—emphasizing the virtues of industry and diligence, the passion for excellence, respect for personal effort, individual enterprise and plain old hard work. If Thomas Jefferson is our chief spokesman for the democratic ethic, then surely Benjamin Franklin is the great champion of the work ethic. "Diligence is the mother of good luck," Franklin proclaimed, "and God gives all things to industry." That professional and economic success in this country tend to elicit respect rather than resentment and envy has surely



*We are pleased to be permitted to make U.S. Secretary of Education William Bennett's essay available to our readers. It has appeared in Religion & Public Education, Vol. 13, No. 4.*

contributed to a healthy spirit of enterprise and to a politics focused on individual opportunity rather than on group conflict.

The third element of our common culture in the Judeo-Christian ethic. This ethic provides the fundamental ideals that underlie our entire political and social system—ideals like respect for the individual, standards for individual behavior and a commitment to decency and to service to others. These ideals help to make us a genuine community—

and not merely a collection of self-centered individualists looking out for No. 1. Ever since the days of the Puritan pioneers—who consciously identified themselves with the Old Testament and its people—respect for the Jewish component of the Judeo-Christian heritage has been a constant feature of American moral and intellectual life.

One thing I would like to stress about this common culture of ours is that it isn't something manufactured by the upper stratum of society in the elegant salons of Washington, New York or Cambridge. Rather, it embodies truths that all Americans can recognize and examine for themselves. These truths are passed down from generation to generation, transmitted in the family, in the classroom and in our churches and synagogues. And while politicians, administration members and other official personages occasionally give formal expression to some elements of our common culture, more often than not this common culture expresses itself in the attitudes, states of mind and the rarely articulated premises that inform our conduct as a people. To put the same idea a bit differently, the common culture has become part of what one of our great literary critics, Lionel Trilling, called the *moral imagination* of our nation. This *moral imagination* penetrates all aspects of our life—our politics, our social affairs and our personal conduct.

Now the moral imagination of most Americans is, I think, sound. Indeed, it

has become increasingly tolerant, increasingly hostile to all manifestations of religious and racial bigotry. Yet, there are signs that the common culture has eroded in some places. We have failed to teach many of our children that it is not luck, but hard work, that brings success. We have failed to teach many of our children why we care deeply for the democratic ethic. And some of our schools have attempted to become value free—to avoid even the appearance of support of the Judeo-Christian ethic and all that can be derived from it.

**B**ecause some people are quick to see any defense of the Judeo-Christian ethic as advocacy of religious indoctrination, it is probably necessary for me at this point to stress that I do not urge schools to attempt to indoctrinate children in principles of religion, whether Jewish, Christian or any other. To do so would, of course, violate the Constitution and would wreck havoc with the second element of our common culture—the democratic ethic. I do not advocate religious education for public schools; rather, I advocate values, hard work, discipline and common sense. Of course, these things spring from our common culture and from its Judeo-Christian roots. But this does not mean that we must preach a religious message. As I have said before, our values and the Judeo-Christian tradition are flesh of the flesh. We do our children a terrible wrong to deny these values.

The task can be done within a context of secular public education. Take, for example, our attitude toward hard work—a value that in America emerged in the context of the Judeo-Christian ethic. (It is also fundamental to the Confucian ethic, as we can see by the large numbers of Asian immigrants now entering our finest universities.) For about the last 20 years or so, however, the traditional American belief that hard work is crucial to success, that what is needed is to clear away artificial barriers based on religion, class or racial origin, and then to encourage individuals to make what they can of themselves. This belief has come under sharp and sustained attack. In a study published during the late 1970s, for example, a number of leading sociologists concluded that they “could not isolate any singular personality characteristic that was critical to success.” Other sociologists argued that the whole notion of merit as a basis for distinctions,

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whether in college admissions or civil service exams, is phony, or that the rich have rigged the system to flimflam the rest of us. As Professor Joseph Adelson of the University of Michigan has argued, these writings help to create “a climate in which the idea of merit could not survive, at least not the belief that native gifts, cultivated by learning and effort, would produce achievement and reward, the fruits of which would ultimately add to the common good.” And a climate in which the idea of merit does not survive is not a healthy climate for a free society.

Now if merit has no meaning, if schools can no longer emphasize hard work and respect for achievement, just what are they there for? Well, according to some education reformers whose views became very influential in the '60s and '70s, the primary purpose of education was to undo the harm caused by society and unlock the creativity that conventional, educational and traditional child-rearing practices had stifled. Students were encouraged, in effect, to major in themselves. Standards were out; sensitivity was in.

The grim results of this venture in educational utopianism have become all too evident in declining test scores and the demoralization of both teachers and students. Fortunately, the situation now seems to have bottomed out and even to have turned around.

The education reform movement, with its emphasis on standards and discipline, on character and achievement and excellence, has taken hold. But we still have far to go to ensure that the graduates of our schools will receive the education they deserve, indeed the education they need to be able to play a productive and responsible role in our society.

We also have a responsibility to educate children about the roots of our

common culture. To do this adequately, we cannot avoid telling them about the role of religion and religious freedom in our country. One of my staff has a gifted son who skipped a grade and still wins honors in math and science contests. She has relied almost exclusively on the public school to teach her son about religion and religious freedom. She quizzed him recently about the reformation. He knew nothing. He started to identify Martin Luther as a civil rights leader, but corrected himself before the error was complete. Even then, however, he could not identify Martin Luther, after whom Martin Luther King was named, not did he appreciate the role of religion in the life and work of King. This young man knew little about the religious background surrounding the birth of our country and our Constitution. When our brightest students fail to know these things, whose fault is it? Is it theirs? No. It's ours. The fact of the matter is that in recent years our schools have not paid much attention to the role of religion and religious freedom in our history, in our society today and in the development of our democratic ethic and our common culture.

**R**ecently, we have heard solid evidence to this point. The studies by Bryan, Vitz and the Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, and the subsequent examination by People for the American Way all agree on the evidence. Religion and religious freedom do not receive attention in our textbooks. Dr. Haynes, author of the report sponsored by Americans United, observes that “‘good citizenship’ is taught with little or no reference to the role of religion or religious liberty in American life.” Dr. Haynes also notes that American history and civic textbooks can be accurate and comprehensive only if they include “our tradition of religious freedom: the many struggles concerning religion in schools, the problems of Catholics and other immigrants, the significant religious ‘awakenings,’ the emergence of new religious groups, church-state debates and many other related themes.” Unfortunately, Dr. Haynes concludes, “Many educators wish to avoid controversy, especially in the area of religion.”

That many educators wish to avoid controversy, especially in an area as sensitive as religion, is perfectly understandable. But if the desire to avoid controversy means that our students will grow up ignorant of the role of religion,

or religious freedom and religious faith in American life, then surely we have badly failed them. The achievement of religious freedom is one of the glories of American civilization. If students are ignorant of achievement, if they are ignorant of the Judeo-Christian tradition in general, they may ultimately become indifferent to religious freedom itself. For the vitality of religious freedom is itself tied to the vitality of the Judeo-Christian heritage. It was George Washington who argued in his Farewell Address that "reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." It is also George Washington who, in his famous letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, R.I., wrote that in America

all possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more than toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, required only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

And President Washington added, in beautiful words:

May the children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants; while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. May the father of all mercies scatter light and not darkness in our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in his own due time and way everlastingly happy.

As it happens, all surveys show that

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most Americans today believe in "the father of all mercies." But, whether individuals give personal assent to a father of all mercies or not, the extra gift of our common culture is this: the mercies—rights, freedoms, liberties—belong to us all. It is the heritage of our common culture, grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition, that helps support not just religious liberty, but our free society as a whole. Again, one does not have to assent to the religious beliefs that are at the heart of our common culture to enjoy its benefits. For example: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: That all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights. . . . And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor." Whatever one's personal views, the religious tradition at the heart of our culture does require, in our time, common acknowledgment, respect, attention, nurture and defense.

Now the situation I have described, in which some of the essential elements of the common culture are in danger of not being adequately transmitted in the schools, is by no means a new one. The

problem first emerged during the "cultural revolution" of the '60s, when traditional ideals were scorned, and leading pundits assured the rest of us that a new day was at hand in which the "reactionary" values of the common culture would be replaced by an infinitely more humane, infinitely more liberating and progressive set of values. Today we know better. As Leszek Kolakoski said in this past year's Jefferson Lecture, "However distasteful our civilization might be in some of its vulgar aspects, however enfeebled by its hedonistic indifference, greed and the decline of civic virtues, however torn by struggles and teeming with social ills, the most powerful reason for its unconditional defense (and I am ready to emphasize this adjective) is provided by its alternative." We know that in the real world the main alternative to the common culture of the United States is the common culture of totalitarianism. We know that our common culture is at once a precious historical legacy and a vulnerable one. And we know that our common culture deserves to be defended.

How then, are we to defend our common culture? This is a topic worthy of serious, extensive discussion. But first we have to agree on the importance of the task. And I think we can then agree on one necessary feature of our defense: Honesty. Honesty means telling the truth about this nation and its culture. Honesty also means telling the truth about our country's enemies and *their* culture. Let it never be said of us that we failed to tell the truth to our children. Let it rather be said that we told our children the whole story, our long record of glories and failures, aspirations and sins, of achievements and victories. Then let us leave it to them to determine their own views of it all: America is the totality of its acts. I am confident that our students will draw sound conclusions. They will learn the truth about our common culture, and about our nation—that it is worth defending, that it is worth cherishing. And this truth will keep them free.

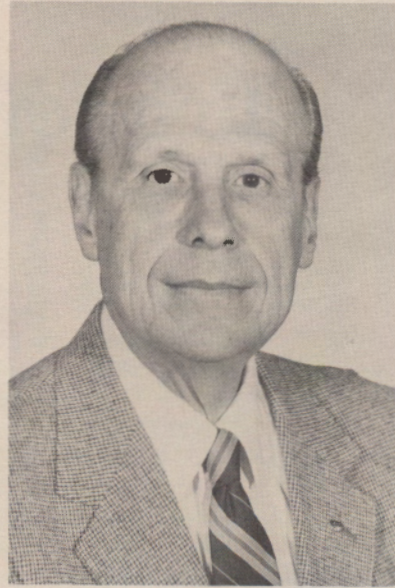
## James E. Wood to Deliver KSR Lectures April 7 & 8

Among the foremost scholars in the area of religion and the Constitution is James E. Wood, Jr. Dr. Wood will deliver the KSR Lectures on April 7 and 8. His principal address, entitled "The American Tradition in Church and State: Its Meaning and Significance in Historical Perspective," will be Tuesday, April 7 at 8:00 p.m.

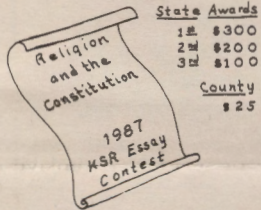
Wood holds the distinction of being Simon and Ethel Bunn Professor of Church-State Studies at Baylor University. For many years he was Executive of the Baptist Joint Committee in Washington; he knows many people in the government.

A seasoned scholar, he is Editor of *Church and State*, the definitive journal in this field. He is past president of the National Council on Religion and Public Education.

More information will follow.



### Contest Details Provided



State Awards	
1st	\$300
2nd	\$200
3rd	\$100

County	
	\$25

Essays of 1,000-1,500 words on the theme "Religion and the Constitution" submitted to local clergy groups by Feb. 15 will be judged for the county prize (furnished by

the Kansas School of Religion). The winning essay in each county automatically competes for the state prizes.

Essays will be judged on their originality, relevance to the theme, scholarship and clarity.

To preserve anonymity in judging, the author's name is not to appear on the essay. Submit with the essay a sealed envelope on the outside of which only the title of the essay plus the first four words of the text is written, but inside which is the author's name, address, telephone number and title (plus first four words) of essay. Local judging panels will not open the envelope of the winning essay but will forward it (sealed) with the essay to KSR by March 15, 1987. After final judging, KSR will announce the county first-place winners and the three state winners.

Sponsorship of the contest is by the Kansas School of Religion cooperatively with local ministerial groups across Kansas. Local ministerial groups are responsible for judging at the county level. If there is not a ministerial group in your county, please write us.

### Four Scholars Added

The last issue of *Religion* reported Sue Elkins as a KSR Scholar. Upon subsequent action by the re-

ligious studies faculty, the following people have been named also.

Pamela A. Detrixhe  
Sharyl McMillian  
Marianna Poulouse  
Nancy Trevarthen

To encourage the study of religion, the KSR provides funds for grants and scholarships. Recipients—named by the faculty—are designated KSR Scholars.

### 'Something From Our Hands'

A short program on video tape that presents the work of the KSR is now available for showing. Designed to be used on home video-cassette players, the presentation is being circulated by our Board of Governors. It was professionally produced. Overviews of our purpose and programs, showing representatives involved, are presented for information.

Anyone wishing to view the tape may call us at (913) 843-7257, or write KSR, 1300 Oread, Lawrence, KS, 66045. Members of the Board of Governors also can arrange to show the cassette.

In a separate matter, W. Dean Owens of the Salina law firm of Hampton, Royce, Engleman & Nelson has joined the Board of Governors.

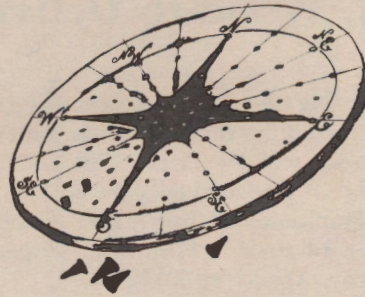
### Conference Focuses on Violence

The Department of Religious Studies is hosting a mini-conference on "Religion and Violence." The speakers are William W. Orbach from Louisville University and J. Gordon Melton from the University of California at Santa Barbara.

The conference, financed by the KSR, is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. on March 1 and from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on March 2.

The conference will take place in Irma I. Smith Hall, and the public is invited to attend.

# Traverse Log



This is it!

Now earnestly we are in the pilot run-throughs of the next quadrennial politicians' beauty contest and sidewalk sale—a presidential election. The 1988 bash will demonstrate some new things about religion and politics. The printout shows some wary observations.

**Item 1** The church-state debate has become a church-state affair. Religion is an influential item in America. Confidence in religious organizations over other institutions is very high. Sixty-one percent of us think it is most influential (Gallup). Twenty-five percent of the people oppose separation of church and state; eighty-seven percent favor the moment of silence in schools (Media General poll).

There is political muscle on the right wing.

Since Jimmy Carter used the term "born again," candidates have opened talk on religious backgrounds. Now the highly experienced George Bush is using evangelical language. Probably an avowed anti-religion candidate would already have pushed "self destruct." But of course any natural-born citizen 35 years old who has lived here long enough can be president.

**Item 2** At least one possible candidate for president comes straight from sectarian leadership in conservative Christian America, Marion G. Robertson. And Pat also comes from the world of glitzy religious TV production. It is his own turf. He is at home there; he is well equipped. But he runs his own enterprises. Robert Grant of Christian Voice said, "Pat has not been a joiner;" he has not been "overly involved with other people."

**Item 3** The religious right is splintered. Range of opinion is wide and conflicting. There is little enough that all Protestants agree on anyway. Beyond that statement, right-wing televangelists serve up various menus. Politically, Oral Roberts and Jimmy Swaggart wave Robertson's flag; Jim Bakker and Jerry Falwell are with George Bush. Perhaps such differences figured in Robertson's September unannouncement about the three million signatures needed to kick off his candidacy. And we have said nothing about the religious left side.

As the 1988 campaign heats up (it started long ago), we must face some basic propositions to which these observations lead.

**Basis 1** Political issues of governmental action must be sorted out from matters of personal faith. As it is, Robertson may expect attacks on his own faith. A bunch of ecclesiastical shirts may be lost if a gushy religious test becomes attached to national nominees. There is a difference between a political test and a "faith test."

**Basis 2** A heavy price may be asked of religion (the Church or "The 700 Club") and of the nominee if the church gets pressed into partisan politics. Peter Steinfels pointed out that political talk actually covers a deeper ideology. And so with religion. Robertson referred to John F. Kennedy as a candidate who faced religious barriers in his campaign. Let us recall that Kennedy upon hearing talk about how the President of the United States might be photographed kneeling to kiss the Pope's ring, distanced himself from church polity. He stated that as President he would not take orders from Rome.

The church in politics courts, in addition to religious risks, some new politically caused vulnerability.

**Basis 3** A "religion" candidate could split the new Christian right. Danny Collum worried in the November *Sojourners* magazine about meeting the conflicts in the Christian community and dealing with them straightaway before they worsen. It is no job for a loner, spirit-led or not.

The wide religious and cultural gap calls for a balancing act, a real 14-carat coalition. President Franklin D. Roosevelt succeeded in nailing together a coalition of wide power and long influence. The coalition needed here covers not only conflict in the religious right, but it should cover the issues between religion and politics.

It will be exciting.

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