

Macalester Civic Forum

Volume 3, Issue 1

2009

Article 4

RELIGION IN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC SQUARE

Editor's Note

EDITOR'S NOTE

The topic of religion, and particularly its role in society, is at once as ancient as human civilizations and timely in our epoch. Perspectives with regard to the phenomenon come in diverse guises. Among the more notable are those of Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Emile Durkheim. The first, though his fullness as a complex thinker on the issue requires more expansive rendition, saw religion as a seductive distraction when it comes to revolutionary and worldly consciousness. Nietzsche took religion to be a shibboleth for those who are unable to compete for the power they aspire to and, consequently, are eager to sanctify their feeble condition. For Durkheim, religion is a special effort by human beings to reduce the abyss between the legible and the inexplicable. Thus, the exploration of religion is not all negative or construed as a burdensome superficiality. In his last and major work on the topic, the distinguished anthropology, Roy Rappaport, writes:

No society known [to us] is devoid of what reasonable observers would agree is religion, even those such as the former Soviet Union which have made deliberate attempts to extirpate it. Given the central place that religious considerations have occupied in the thoughts and actions of men and women in all times and places, and given the amount of energy, blood, time and wealth that have been spent building temples, supporting priests, sacrificing to gods and killing infidels, it is hard to imagine that religion, as bizarre as some of its manifestations may seem, is not in some way indispensable to the species.¹

To believe, then, is a constant element of human culture. It is, in Vico's assertion, the first act in moving out of what he called the time of the "*grossi beastioni*" and, therefore, the making of civic human institutions. Our epoch of high anxiety, characterized, among others, by omnipresent opacity and powerful centrifugal forces, seems to be making it difficult for people in all societies to make a clear separation of the imminent (that is, this world) and the spectral informed by different religious traditions. Perhaps this state of affairs is more acute in those communities of faith, particularly in this case the United States, that are in the immediate grip of bewildering changes that challenge the meaning and direction of their immediate lives.

This edition of the Macalester College annual spring Civic Forum offers a set of reflections, led by a keynote address, on “Religion in the American Public Square.”

The 2010 topic for the spring Civic Forum is “Civic Leadership in the Age of Obama.”

Notes

1. Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 1–2.