



## **Faith, Freedom and the Future: Religion in American Culture**

Charles W. Dunn (ed.)

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Religious faith in industrial societies was supposed to become obsolete, with modernization, education and urbanization rendering it superfluous. Marx's 'opium of the people' would disappear, no longer necessary in a free and just world. But, says Charles Dunn in his introduction to this book, issues of faith and freedom still have a dramatic influence and are at the front of the political agenda in the World and also in America — the focus of this collection of essays. However, he goes on, it is only in the last 25 years or so that scholars have addressed the impact of faith and freedom in American society. This is all the more important in the context of the change in the religion traditions in the USA; in the decline of the old reformed protestant ascendancy and the growth of more evangelical protestant churches; in the growth of the Catholic Church, Islam, New Age movements, and all in the context of a multi-cultural secularism where religion has been reduced to one interest group among many. These essays seek to redress this and look at the relationship of religion, and more specifically Christianity, to issues of public policy.

The essays originate in a series of lectures organized by Grove City College called 'Faith Freedom and the Future' and comprise of the lectures given in the series. It may fairly be said that the issues are addressed not from the 'liberal Christian' point of view but rather from a conservative Christian evangelist one, and some are no more than rallying calls for that point of view. Stemming as they do from a public lecture series, many are also more suited to a non-academic and non-theoretical audience and they certainly succeed in giving a clear and at times provocative view that places the debate in context. This is all very well, but it is not altogether appropriate when it seeks to address a lack of scholarship in this area, especially from their own perspective and also in the light of Peter Berger's view (quoted approvingly) that the USA is a country where the population is as religious as that of India but ruled by an elite who are as secular as Swedes (there is much comment about academics being determinedly secular).

In particular there is not much, it seems to me, theological engagement in the book. In this respect, it might have been useful if Dunn had followed



up Marx's comment about religion being the opiate of the people. Marx said:

Religious distress is at the same time the expression of real distress and the protest against real distress. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people.

(Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*)

What he meant here was not that religion was used as a narcotic to prevent the revolution, but rather it was where people went to find the soul in a soul-less world because they had nowhere else. The world did not provide something that religion offered and that was necessary for a good and fulfilling life. Famously, he thought that what religion provided was an illusion. But the point is that religion was supplying something that was necessary. What is it? This is what the book does not really address theologically which then, I think, would have been interesting for political theory. It does not, in other words, attempt to understand the meaning of that phrase from St John: 'The Truth will set you Free'. Rather it looks at what influence religion might have and what political programmes it can influence and deliver.

But the issues are sometimes addressed obliquely in two of the essays. In one, Jean Elshtain, from a somewhat 'liberal Christian' perspective, looks sensitively and insightfully into what it means for the Christians to engage in Politics and why they should engage in its 'dirty business'. In the other, George Weigel looks at what he thinks of as the key role and impact of Pope John Paul II on the collapse of communism. There is much to disagree with in that article but Weigel does start airing a key question for a book of this sort. What was the nature of Pope's action and vision that made him so successful? It certainly was not orthodox political activity in which the radical Christian right in America now excel; it was not just a simplistic evangelizing, nor a straightforward anti-communism. US presidents have found that, to their chagrin, the Pope is not much enamored of capitalism either. Nor was it quite a sort of Gandhi peace programme. It included all of these but was something more — something at odds with the normal political economy of moral and political discourse. I do not think that Weigel gets the answer (he cannot be expected to in such a short piece), but he recognizes the questions — vital if the book is to deliver its promise of showing what it means to live and act in the Truth.

In the book, the best answer comes from poetry and Billington in his essay, uses it to great effect — showing what religion can bring to a soul-less world.

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