


Some Reflections on the American Catholic Bishops' Peace Pastoral

John F. Kane

 For more than three years now, the American Catholic Bishops' pastoral letter on war and peace has been the subject of extensive comment. Most of this comment has, with good reason, focused on the bishops' specific discussion of the ethics of nuclear threat. Comment has focused, in other words, primarily on the letter's specific judgments about the possession and use of nuclear weapons and on the general call for movement toward nuclear disarmament. Yet there has also been another, broader type of comment concerning the significance of the letter for the future of the Catholic Church in America and, even more broadly, concerning its possible significance for our country as a whole.

The bishops themselves call attention in a variety of ways to this larger context of discussion. Indeed the global crisis to which we have been brought by the nuclear arms race — what the bishops, quoting the Second Vatican Council, refer to in the opening sentence of their letter as “a moment of supreme crisis facing the whole human race” (#1) — is itself but one of the most terrible manifestations of a deeper and more complex and equally global crisis in our received political and religious traditions. Thus, however important the specific ethical discussions of nuclear policy, it would seem that we will not actually begin to move from under the shadow of the nuclear threat without a broader and deeper renewal of the ethical (and thus the political and religious) life of our people. What, then, might be the significance of the pastoral letter for such renewal in the life of the American Catholic community and for the possible renewal of that broader vision of American life which Robert

JOHN F. KANE is associate professor of Religious Studies at Regis College in Denver. This paper was presented at the Rocky Mountain-Great Plains Regional meeting of the American Academy of Religion and the Society of Biblical Literature, 27 April 1984. References in the text to the bishops' letter are to numbered paragraphs in the original, The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response (Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, 1983).

Bellah has, aptly I believe, called our civil religion?¹ What might be its potential for refocusing American identity and purpose at this fateful time in American and world history?

Of course, such a focus on the pastoral's possible broader significance may well be exaggerated. It may, indeed, be an empty fantasy, given the mad momentum of the arms race and the continual degeneration of American public life into the irrational pursuit of corporate power and profit, on the one hand, and the despairing pursuit of private pleasure, on the other. Yet such a reading is at least consistent with the explicit purposes given by the bishops themselves. For their intention clearly is not simply to make specific judgments about nuclear weapons, but to speak words of both hope and challenge (#2) to their church and to the nation as a whole, and to call for that "moral about-face" (#333) without which the specific judgments about nuclear weapons would be quite ineffectual. They see their letter as "a contribution to a wider effort meant to call Catholics and all members of our political community to dialogue and specific decisions" (#6) and they urge that we as a people "have the courage to believe in the bright future [of] a world freed from the bondage of war [and thus] able to make genuine human progress" — "not a perfect world but a better one" — and to believe in a God who wills such a world for us (#336–37).

That such broader intentions are involved in the bishops' "challenge of peace" has been underlined recently by the appointment of Cardinal Joseph Bernadin of Chicago to chair the bishops' national pro-life committee. He also chaired the committee which drafted the pastoral letter. In his new capacity he has quite deliberately, in a number of major public addresses, called for both church and nation to develop a "consistent ethic of life" which would not only bring together peace and pro-life movements, but would include such related "life" issues as opposition to capital punishment, struggle against poverty and world hunger, and commitment to racial and economic justice.²

Thus the "new moment" the bishops speak of (#126) which provides a context for their letter is not simply a critical moment in the arms race brought about above all by growing world-wide awareness that the real and present danger is global nuclear suicide, but more broadly a moment of crisis in the life of the American Catholic Church and in the life of the nation, and a moment of opportunity (however remote) for that refocusing and renewal without which the possibility for a reversal of the arms race may well be irretrievably lost.

Of course, the idea of a crisis in American culture can be (and has been) discussed in a variety of ways — in terms, for instance, of the after-effects of Vietnam, or in terms of the development of post-industrial technology, or as an

¹ Robert Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 168–93.

² Joseph Bernadin, "Cardinal Bernadin's Call for a Consistent Ethic of Life," *Origins* 13 (29 Dec. 1983): 491–94. See also his "Enlarging the Dialogue on a Consistent Ethic of Life," *Origins* 13 (5 April 1984): 705, 707–9.

aspect of the multi-national thrust of contemporary capitalism. Yet perhaps the deepest cause of the contemporary crisis, as already indicated, is the gradual erosion of a shared sense of the good previously mediated through national institutions and history — a collective national myth which gave meaning and purpose to action by providing a transcendent standard for direction and judgment. This “civil religion,” nurtured by the various particular religious traditions yet shared across confessional lines, is foundational for maintaining political ideals which restrain the raw exercise of power and focus collective effort in the pursuit of liberty, justice, and peace for all. Yet recently Robert Bellah, with disturbing insight, has described the breaking of the covenant of civil religion, its reduction to mere ideological legitimation for the exercise of power and the pursuit of narrowly partisan or chauvinistic interests, or its increasing irrelevance for a narcissistic and forgetful generation whose leaders have generally been unable or unwilling to attempt the needed reappropriation of received traditions in a new, global, and increasingly fragile world situation.³

At root, of course, for all of its historic particularity, the American civil religion depended upon and mediated the deeper classical traditions of Western reason and revelation. Thus the crisis of American civil religion is fundamentally but one instance of the undermining of received traditions of good in that broad upheaval of life and consciousness typically referred to simply as modernity. It is a story that has been told often, initially as a tale of victory, but increasingly with a sense of loss and even dread.

Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, has recently characterized the dominant pattern of modern life as “bureaucratic individualism” — the end product of a process whereby critical or relativizing rationality has gradually pervaded all aspects of human life, public and private.⁴ All language of good, of ends, has as a result been transformed into the language of values (which are sharply distinguished from facts), into matters of free and fundamentally private individual choice. Reason finally tells us nothing of ends. Its domain is technique or expertise about means. Thus, the only end that can be publicly agreed upon is freedom itself, or, more accurately, the pursuit of means (or power) for the exercise of freedom. For MacIntyre, then, the basic role models for modern American culture are the manager and the therapist — those experts in the manipulation of means in the public and private spheres respectively who quite explicitly disavow any claim to the knowledge of ends. Thus, too, the essence of modern political life has become administration — not public debate about the common good, but the organization of expertise which in theory serves the ends of contractually related, free individuals, but which in practice typically serves the ends of the most powerful. More concretely, the end of corporate power has become, quite literally, the endless pursuit of power

³ Robert Bellah, “American Civil Religion in the 70’s,” in Russell E. Richey and Donald G. Jones, eds., *American Civil Religion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974); and his *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury, 1975).

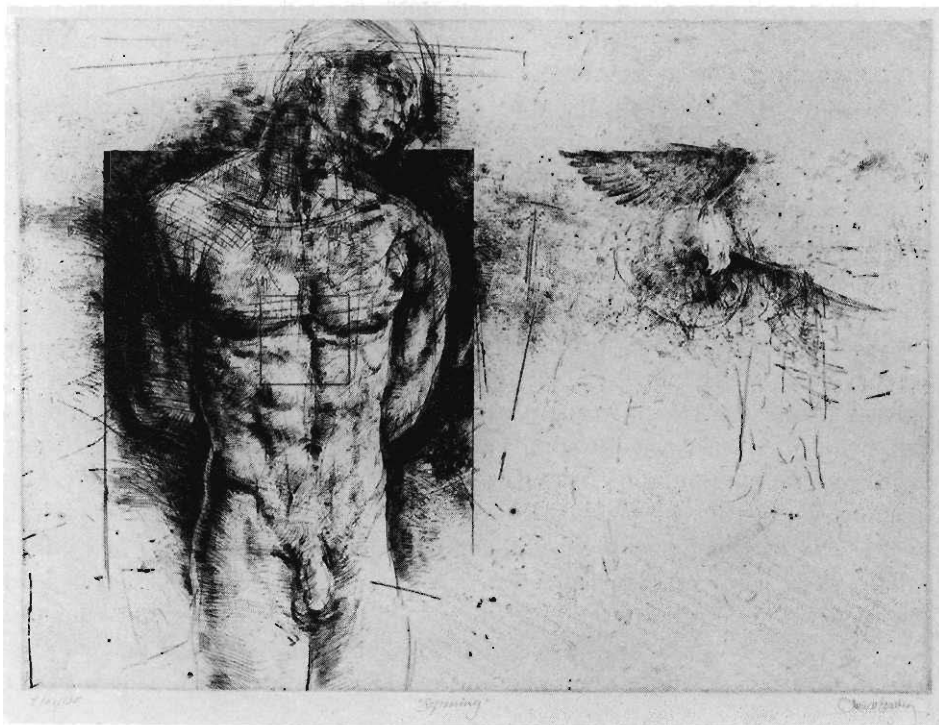
⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), pp. 22–34.

or means, profit itself being at once the most abstract and the most endless form of means.⁵

Religion does not disappear in such a culture of "bureaucratic individualism." In fact it may flourish, but in strikingly diminished form. Far from serving to nurture even a faint memory of public good, religion becomes essentially privatized as one of the many forms of therapy available in the marketplace of values. This privatization of religion occurs in both the more liberal churches (where the content of belief has often been quite explicitly transformed into the language of self-fulfillment) and in the supposedly more conservative sects where doctrinal fundamentalism provides a type of separate peace typically quite compatible with the public patterns of corporate power.

The pursuit of knowledge is likewise transformed by the dominant separation of rationality from consideration of good. This becomes disturbingly con-

⁵ George Grant, "Some Comments on Ideology," photocopy of typescript in possession of the author.



crete for those of us engaged in academic pursuits when we experience the mental paralysis which has characterized recent efforts to recover a core curriculum. Despite all the hue and cry of "back to basics," the academic community's inability to grapple intelligently with fundamental questions about what knowledge is good (and what knowledge is good for) leads almost inevitably to some sort of (usually tacit) agreement that core or fundamental knowledge is really determined by the interests of established departments and tenured faculty (and even more fundamentally by the interests of the corporations which they serve). Such an arrangement works, moreover, because there is even more widely shared agreement between faculty and students that all knowledge is essentially something that is simply "there" for the free use or rejection of the private individual — unless, of course, as usually happens, that individual's freedom is constrained by the more powerful but equally irrational "choices" of the corporations.

The ironies here are, I suspect, especially poignant for those of us engaged in the study of religions which have typically made claims to some knowledge of human good. We have, endlessly it would once again seem, amassed more and more knowledge about such claims and about their mediation throughout religious history. Yet despite periodic and by now almost ritualized discussions about the need to move our study from the merely descriptive to the normative, we fundamentally find ourselves unable to tell our students and ourselves what such knowledge is good for except in the reductionistic language of value and private choice.

This rather cryptic description of the predicament of modern rationality and freedom as the endless pursuit of means would almost seem a comic absurdity were it not for a growing awareness of the tragic consequences of our seeming inability to recover any publicly shared and politically effective ideal of common good. The massive corporate penetration of Third World countries in the name of a form of "development" which is essentially unrelated to (which is to say, only accidentally related to) the basic human needs of one-quarter to one-half of the world's population is, of course, one such tragic consequence. But the endless pursuit of nuclear over-kill is, for most of us in the First World, the clearer and more frightening example of the pursuit of means which have lost all relation to any sane human ends. It is monstrous in the most literal sense of that word. It is a warning, perhaps of that "Second Coming" envisioned by Yeats some fifty years ago when "the center cannot hold" and "mere anarchy is loosed upon the world," when "the best lack all conviction while the worst are full of passionate intensity."

And yet, however broadly true this picture of crisis, the full reality of our situation seems at once both more complex and more hopeful. Perhaps, as Bellah's fellow sociologist John Coleman suggests, "American civil religion is not dead." Perhaps the recent and "awful puncturing of the American dream" and the "painful confrontation with . . . national breakdown and failure" has "planted some seeds of hope."⁶ Perhaps, to give but one example, the vitality

⁶ John A. Coleman, *An American Strategic Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1982), pp. 119, 118.

of one million people marching joyfully into New York's Central Park to protest the nuclear madness is indicative both of an enduring memory of common good and of the emergence of that memory in new forms responsive to the crises of our times. Perhaps the breaking of older forms of civil religion opens the possibility of the type of transformed reappropriation of our traditions called for by both Bellah and Coleman. And, once again, perhaps recent changes in American Catholicism, symbolized above all by the quite startling appearance of the peace pastoral, are indicative of one major source for that transformation and reappropriation.

To be sure, American Catholicism has not escaped the general crisis of American culture.⁷ Indeed the dominant agenda or strategy of the American Catholic community since the great immigrations of the last century tended to support the increasing privatization of American religion. The history is not unambiguous. The immigrant church's maintenance of strong doctrinal and ethical traditions (above all through the development of the Catholic school system) did indeed contribute indirectly but substantially to the American civil religion. At times, too, when specific issues directly involved large Catholic interests, as in the labor struggles during the earlier decades of this century, Catholic presence and influence contributed to the national ideal of a fundamentally just economic order. Yet the rigid, almost ghetto-like character of the immigrant church and its predominant concern with gaining access and acceptance in American life led overall to an essentially sectarian style of Christian life characterized by carefully compartmentalized religious experiences and ethical norms generally compatible with the increasing secularization of public life.

Ironically, the ultimate success of the immigrant church's agenda, symbolized above all by the Kennedy presidency, only served to emphasize the broad compatibility of American Catholicism with the dominant forms of American culture and with the continuing erosion of the public, civil religion. In fact, during the mid-'60s and through the '70s, the successful entrance of American Catholics into the mainstream of American life merged with such initially liberalizing effects of the reforms of the second Vatican Council as the loosening of church structures and greater emphasis on freedom in matters of belief and ethics. The process of privatization within American Catholicism seemed all but assured. Today younger Catholics know little of their traditions and tend to view their religious life (insofar as they still profess such a life) as a matter of picking and choosing belief and practice simply according to personal need.

Yet once again, this is not the whole picture. For if the years since the Second Vatican Council have seen breakdown and drift in the once seemingly impregnable fortress of ghetto Catholicism, they have also seen the gradual emergence of a new agenda, an agenda which, I believe, represents the fuller significance of the renewal set in motion by the council and which has only

⁷ Ibid., pp. 155-83; David J. O'Brien, *The Renewal of American Catholicism* (New York: Paulist Press, 1972).

now, with the peace pastoral, come to center stage in the life of the American Catholic Church. The "event" of this pastoral letter (the three-year process of open debate which saw the transformation and, in broad terms, the politicization of so many members of the hierarchy) is not simply, as one journalist called it, "the most significant event in the American Catholic Church . . . since the Second Vatican Council."⁸ It may well be "the most significant event in the American Catholic Church . . . since Lord Baltimore's contingent of Catholics disembarked on Maryland's shores in 1634."⁹ Above all, however, it is (or could be) the full arrival of the impact of the council into the mainstream of American Catholicism in much the same way the 1968 conference of South American bishops in Medellin, Colombia, represented the radically transforming impact of the council on Central and South American Catholicism.

Some brief remarks about this "full significance of the Second Vatican Council" will help to clarify the new agenda of American Catholicism and its significance for the possible renewal of American civil religion. Perhaps the simplest way to suggest the character and dimensions of the turning point which the council represents for Roman Catholicism is by recourse to the idea of a paradigm shift which Thomas Kuhn used to describe the nature of major scientific revolutions. Vatican II represents such a paradigm shift — a comprehensive refocusing of the meaning of *church* which sheds new light on various aspects of the life of the church and has made possible a creative reappropriation of those aspects of church life alongside new developments. The general character of this paradigm shift has been described in various ways: as a move from church as a refuge from the world to church as a community with a distinctly world vocation, or, similarly, as a move from a basically vertical (or heaven-centered) orientation to a fundamentally horizontal (or kingdom-centered) orientation. Perhaps most illuminating is the suggestion of a "Copernican revolution" which has replaced the previously church-centered understanding of Christianity with a world-centered understanding, one which sees the church in the world to serve, in dialogue and cooperation with others, the realization of the kingdom.¹⁰

The new paradigm was given articulation above all in the Vatican Council's *Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, arguably the most important document of the council and the document which the bishops quite clearly and explicitly credit as the primary modern source for their pastoral letter (#7). As Brian Hehir, principal staff author of the bishops' letter, notes, the constitution "took the whole social idea in ministry and brought it very close to the center of what the church is all about."¹¹ What is new here and in the whole series of social encyclicals and statements from John XXIII's *Peace on Earth* to John Paul II's recent *On Human Labor* (and in the various ministries and movements corresponding to such teachings) is not the fact of

⁸ Jim Castelli, *The Bishops and the Bomb* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1983), p. 180.

⁹ Vincent Yzermans, "Op Ed Page," *New York Times*, 14 Nov. 1981.

¹⁰ Richard McBrien, *Do We Need the Church?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

¹¹ Castelli, *Bishops and the Bomb*, p. 20.

social teaching or of concern for peace and justice, but their location. What is new is the understanding that such concern is not simply one consequence of the gospel, but very much at the heart of the gospel — not one among many ministries of the church, but the central task and mission of the church. As the bishops stress in the conclusion of their letter, the task of peacemaking is not simply the avoidance of overt conflict but the continual building of world order in anticipation and partial realization of the kingdom. It “is not an optional commitment. It is a requirement of our faith” (#333).

It perhaps does not need to be stressed that this assertion of a worldly vocation is not a return to the feudal ideal of Christendom or to more recent efforts in Europe and South America to capitalize on Catholic majorities through the establishment of ruling Christian Democratic parties. Vatican II explicitly embraced the American ideal of a separation of church and state; and it is clear that John Paul II, in his recent efforts to move church personnel out of direct political involvement, is concerned to maintain that separation. Rather the assertion of a worldly vocation is made in a context where Catholicism recognizes that it (and Christianity as a whole) will remain a minority, but a minority called to struggle with others, in terms set by the particularities of a given nation or region, for the justice and peace of the kingdom.

This is clearly how the American bishops understand their role and the purpose of their pastoral letter. They see themselves as moral teachers who speak with two different kinds of authority and with two differing yet compatible languages (those of faith and moral reason) to two different yet overlapping audiences (the American Catholic community and the wider political community of the nation). They call the Catholic community, not to become another special interest group, but to become above all a community of conscience which will engage the conscience of the nation in the struggle for peace and justice. They issue this call in the name of both specifically religious and more broadly moral principles. These principles, in part or in whole, are (or at least could be) recognized and affirmed in the wider political community. In other words, they are (or at least could be) part of a renewal of the nation’s civil religion.

Of course the suggestion that the American Catholic community could contribute, from its own renewed sense of vision and practice, to the possible recovery of American civil religion is in no way a claim that Catholicism has some special or privileged contribution to make to that recovery. There are, to be sure, particular strengths in the Catholic tradition which might prove important in the present context — its international contacts and sympathies, for instance, and its traditional refusal to separate faith and reason along with its almost naive faith in the idea of objective principles and truths, or, as Robert Bellah has recently urged, its hierarchical or “church” (as distinct from sect) structures which, however much in need of reform, nonetheless at times (as in the present instance of the pastoral letter) provide a powerful resource for resistance to pervasive privatization.¹² Interestingly enough, it seems that Prot-

¹² Robert Bellah, “Religion and Power in America Today,” *Commonweal* 109 (3 Dec. 1982): 650–55.

estant scholars, because of their own struggle with the undertow of this pervasive environment, have taken the lead in urging Catholics to be mindful of the importance of such aspects of their heritage. Yet the civil religion will not be renewed from any one source. Its roots in this country are deeply Protestant, but its renewal today depends upon contributions from many sources. At best, a renewed American Catholicism might make a significant contribution to that broader renewal and thus to the urgent task of moving the nation in the direction of disarmament and peace.

Yet even the hope for such a contribution may be illusory. The claim that the pastoral letter represents a new agenda for American Catholicism, however accurate, provides no assurance that that agenda will be taken seriously, even by many of the bishops themselves and by the large numbers of increasingly "liberated" Catholics for whom religion has become at best a comforting therapy. The shift of paradigm and agenda has been suggested in theology and theory. It is yet a long way from realization in practice.

The bishops' call for the development of a "community of conscience" focused on "a consistent ethic of life" needs to find its response in the development within Catholicism and elsewhere of specific strategies and structures to embody such renewal. What is needed is a specifically North American counterpart, for instance, to the Basic Christian Community movement which has, at least in part, revolutionized Latin American Catholicism.¹³ The character of such strategies and structures seems anything but clear, even while it seems quite clear that strong elements both in and out of American Catholicism will mightily resist such developments. The dream of a renewed Catholicism contributing to a renewed American civil religion in the quest for global peace and justice may prove a fantasy. With their letter, however, the bishops have at least opened the door to its realization. The spirit, like the wind, it is said, blows where it will (John 3:8). How people and nations respond is yet another matter.

¹³ This is the thesis of Coleman's *An American Strategic Theology*.