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SOME IMPRESSIONS OF MARTIN E. MARTY'S PAPER:
"LOCATING CONSENT AND DISSENT IN AMERICAN RELIGION"

by
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There cannot be much ground for reasonable doubt that the area marked off for consideration by Martin Marty is one of fundamental importance. To practical men and to certain scholars as well (e.g., sociologists and historians) the forces that tend to increase or decrease concord or dissent in American life are of great concern. Indeed, whether we ourselves are consciously concerned or not over such forces, the fact remains that such forces are of fundamental importance, for no one's life is unaffected by them.

There are, however, a number of questions which Dr. Marty's paper raises and I shall address myself to a few of these. The question I shall attempt to answer is: Has Dr. Marty properly located and identified the major forces of consent and dissent? To answer this question adequately might require carefully done, lengthy historical and sociological analyses. These analyses I will not attempt (not so much because of limitations of space as because of limitations imposed by my own background: I am neither a sociologist nor an historian, but rather simply a philosopher). However, the philosopher is not without his own methods of investigation and it may be that conceptual clarification and criticism are at least as important as careful historical and sociological analyses in answering the question. Whether this is so or not I leave to your judgment. But whatever your judgment, it hardly seems likely that you will doubt that, if it can be attained, conceptual clarity is preferable to conceptual vagueness and confusion or that truth claims and value judgments which can withstand rigorous criticisms are preferable to any which appear to be dubious. So, this response will have some value in any case, if it is well done.

Let us begin then, by noting some of Dr. Marty's claims in an attempt to be clear about their meaning and their status as truth claims and valuations. He begins by quoting part of the Supreme Court decision in the *Zorach v. Clauson* case of 1951—the assertion that “We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being”. Of this assertion he says: “While the last clause of that dictum . . . may not be a demonstrable proposition, the first half of the sentence is.”

Now it will be my contention that even the first half of that sentence is demonstrable, if at all, only if there is agreement on what is to be meant by being a “religious” people. Indeed, there is no acceptable way, as far as I can see, in which the truth or falsehood of such a putative assertion could even conceivably (i.e., in principle or in terms of theoretical possibility) be shown to be plausible, let alone demonstrated as probable or certain unless clear and acceptable meanings can be established for “religious” and its cognate terms. And it will be my contention that Dr. Marty has not given us a clear and acceptable meaning for this term or its cognates.

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Let it be noted, as a beginning, that Dr. Marty does not attempt to define these terms in his paper. In the absence of precise definitions for such terms, how does Dr. Marty give his readers an impression of the meaning he intends to attach to them? I call the reader's attention to the paragraph on page one of his paper where he refers to the "impressive observations concerning the enduring religious character of the American people". These are, apparently, meant to illustrate typical, or perhaps even outstanding, facts about the religious character of the American people. Without repeating him at length here, I simply ask you to consider whether or not all of the things he mentions (e.g., church attendance, money spent on church buildings, reference to "God" on our coins, etc.) might be found in a secularized society which, due to cultural inertia, retains many symbols and rituals largely as empty forms, i.e., forms no longer associated with any deep, abiding ("enduring" in Marty's usage) sentiments. Even if "all" is too strong, my point is, I think, still well taken. What constitutes being "religious"? Need it be conceived in terms of such practices as those he mentions? If so, what of the prophetic rebel who is either indifferent to or even actively opposed to such ritualistic forms? And note that some of the most influential individuals throughout religious history have been just such prophetic rebels.

Nor does Dr. Marty clear up the difficulty by claiming, as he does on page two of his paper: "The great religions have tended to be coextensive with the borders of states or cultures, and provided rationales for the political and personal life of their members. Even in modern pluralistic society . . . religion can serve on a voluntary basis to help them (citizens) situate themselves in patterns of meaning and acceptance." This does not assist us in clarifying what is to be understood by the term "religious"; because even if this claim is acceptable—which I think I can show it is not—the coextensiveness of religions and cultures which Marty suggests, whatever the terms "religion" and "culture" may be taken to mean, might simply be a result of the fact that religion is conceived, in many cases at least, as an aspect or component of culture. In other words, to the extent that this coextensiveness were taken to be fact, the truth asserting it might well be analytic in nature.

In any case, even if religions are coextensive with cultures, what precisely is this "religion" which is coextensive with culture? Even if 'A' and 'B' are correlated, this does not, of itself, tell us the nature of 'A' or 'B'.

Are we perhaps given some further clue to the meaning of this term in Marty's claim that religions have "provided rationales for the political and personal life" of the people involved in states and cultures, that religions help people "situate themselves in patterns of meaning and acceptance"? Not really, for as we all know, many sorts of things, quite different and even antithetical to each other, can, in some sense or other, serve such functions. Many sorts of economic theories, political ideologies, superstitious belief systems (such as Astrology and Palmistry), etc. can, in one way or another, attain these goals for individuals and social groups. Are we to consider all of these diverse phenomena religious? If so, where are the limits of the concepts? What does it exclude?

These questions bring me to what I consider to be the greatest conceptual difficulty posed by Dr. Marty's paper. As difficult as it may be to pin down the notion of "denominational religion" involved in Dr. Marty's paper, we are all at least vaguely aware of its applicability. For instance, if someone were to ask us whether the Sunday services taking place at the corner Methodist Church are religious, in the denominational sense intended by Marty, we could, probably without any reasonable hesitation, give an affirmative answer. So that, even though the boundaries of the concept are unclear, there are certain obvious cases which are easily recognizable. And it might be possible, by means of some precisising stipulations, to quite clearly demarcate denominational religion from secular concerns. But any such endeavor is apparently doomed to failure, because Dr. Marty finds it necessary to thoroughly conflate the secular and the religious. For, in order to localize concord *and* give this locus a religious dimension, he proceeds to speak of secular practices as a peculiar kind of religion. For this purpose he employs such designations as "Conventional Consensus Religion", "Lay Religion", "Folk Religion", "Generalized Religion", "Societal Religion", "National Religion" and "Civil Religion". Under such rubrics he is able to include any social realities which can "attract the ultimate concerns of its adherents" and which possess "other characteristic features of religion." I call your attention to the characteristic features of "Civil Religions" to which Dr. Marty refers, e.g., myths, symbols, creeds, ceremonies, etc. Is it not clear that if all the widely shared beliefs, attitudes, symbols and practices occurring in American society are referred to as "religious" that term will be indistinguishable from "the secular"? And if this be allowed, then surely great conceptual confusion results. For in this case any society, all the way from a theocracy to an atheistic society, becomes, in this sense (the sense involved in "National Religion") religious. In other words, in some cases at least, the religious (in the sense of "Civil Religion") will mean the anti-religious (in the sense of "Denominational Religion"), so that in these cases, a creed, practice, etc. will be both religious and not religious (but of course not in the same sense).

There is, of course, no reason why Marty's stipulations could not be accepted, if our only interest is purely logical. As long as we kept our distinctions in mind and uniformly used the proper adjectives—"denominational" or "Civil"—we probably would not find ourselves mired in confusion on this score. Where the confusion arises is not so much between the two senses of religion, even though both are in need of further clarification; the confusion is primarily created by Marty's use of the word "religion" to refer to what has usually been referred to as "the culture" or "the ethos" of a social group. These latter terms are, as generally used, wider than and (in many cases) essentially different from what is usually understood by the terms "religion" and "religious." In terms of general usage, both among social scientists and other scholars, the terms "culture" and "ethos", which seem to cover the characteristics Dr. Marty discusses in describing Civil or National religion, have no necessary reference to the concepts of "religion" or "the religious". Thus, as it appears to me, he has simply offered us a new name, in which is incorporated the word "religion" (along with some of its emotional if not intellectual associations) for phenomena which are more

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adequately (because more neutrally and more precisely defined) designated by the terms "culture" or "ethos".

If it is not quite clear what is to be understood by "religion" in either sense or how at least one of those senses is to be distinguished from "the secular" or "non-religious", what are we to make of Dr. Marty's attempt to locate consent and dissent in American religion?