

Chapter One

Religion, Theology, and the Public Realm

Over the past couple of decades a growing number of theologians have begun to insist that religion and theology can and should play a greater role in shaping our public lives. These voices, coming from various quarters, have received considerable attention within the theological community and, in many instances, from the media at large. Consider, for example, the emergence in the 1960s of European political theology in the writings of a Metz or a Moltmann.¹ Commanding even more attention has been the development of Latin American liberation theology with its similar mission to develop a politically effective theology. Within the United States we have witnessed the growth of black and feminist theologies with their respective political and social agendas. On the other side of the political and religious spectrum, we have confronted the meteoric rise of the new Christian right seeking to fashion a "Christian America." These developments clearly cannot be homologized into one movement; they not only reflect incommensurate substantive goals, but they owe their existence to differing local antecedents and contexts. Nevertheless, we can identify a "common enemy" that unites them. Each of these movements is seeking to overcome the privatization of religion. Each is seeking a larger and more effective role for religion and theological discourse in shaping events in the public arena.

This plea for a greater role for religion and theology in shaping our public life has been echoed by others who have been particularly interested in the American scene. Richard John Neuhaus, for example, has argued in his influential book *The Naked Public Square: Religion and Democracy in America* that the American experiment in democracy is

seriously threatened by the recent secularization, or, as he would have it, sanitization of our public sphere. Under the ruse that we are a secular, pluralistic society, various forces have succeeded in excluding an appeal to religion or religiously based values in determining our laws and policies. As a consequence, the integrating moral vision he considers necessary both to legitimate and to act as a check upon the law and the power of the state has decayed. The erosion of a shared moral discourse has increasingly left us with the play of power politics and the jockeying of interest groups for shaping our national life. Moral assessment and persuasion have more and more given way to a crude majoritarianism, now considered by many the only way to resolve conflicts in a pluralistic context. Neuhaus contends, however, that the "naked public square" is at most a transitional phenomenon because "transcendence abhors a vacuum."² Unless we begin to allow for a larger, more responsible role for the Judeo-Christian traditions in American public life we run the risk, Neuhaus warns, of "an elite construction of a normative morality from sources and principles not democratically recognized by the society."³ At the moment, he suggests, we are in danger of a totalitarian state or a Christian fundamentalism filling this vacuum.

Robert Bellah has been another vocal critic of the privatization of religion in American life. Although not persuaded that we now confront a naked public square, he shares Neuhaus's sense that biblical religion in America has lost much of its former power to shape our beliefs, values, and sensibilities.⁴ This is particularly regrettable, he argues, insofar as the biblical traditions have been largely responsible for cultivating the communal focus that has helped to sustain our liberal democracy. The corrosive effects of modern capitalism combined with the philosophy of secular liberalism have together spawned a rampant individualism that has slowly undermined the moral consensus and communal identity of the American people. Like Neuhaus, Bellah contends that we need to nurture the biblical traditions if we are to dilute the acids of individualism that are corroding the communal mores that undergird our democratic way of life.

While Bellah and Neuhaus focus primarily upon the substantive contributions that biblical religion can make to our public life, others have turned a critical eye upon theology itself. In what respects has theology, following a parallel trajectory, located itself in the private sphere? How has theology conspired, whether knowingly or not, to reinforce its own marginalization? David Tracy argues that some of the blame must indeed be placed upon theologians who have acclimated themselves to the privatization of religion, abandoning all presumptions to speak to or for those outside their narrow communities. Theological arguments have degenerated into dogmatic assertions or confessional accounts of personal beliefs that lack the power or intent to persuade others. As Tracy so aptly puts it, we have fled to local "reservations of the spirit" where we need not confront the wider indifference to and impotence of our work.⁵ Seconding this charge, Max Stackhouse insists that what is most urgently needed is a public theology that makes an effort to persuade. He rightly notes that we have plenty of religion in America but very little critical reflection upon it or defense of it. "The land abounds with religious groups, sects, movements, priests, and preachers of all stripes. The problem is that modern religious movements have not made, and seem neither capable of nor interested in making, a case for the truth of what they are talking about in a way that might convince those not already convinced."⁶

The above voices are representative of the recent movement that has begun to speak in terms of a public religion or a public theology. Despite the growing numbers endorsing a more public role and status for religion or theology, there is clearly no consensus on this issue. Indeed many find the conjunction between public and religion or public and theology immediately objectionable. For some it corrupts the character of genuine religion while for others it is not only wrongheaded but a dangerous threat to our pluralistic society.

Public religion to some ears fails to do justice to the intensely personal, private nature of religion. From this angle religion is more a personal religious experience, or as a William James expressed it, "the feelings, acts, and experi-

ences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”” To turn this intensely personal experience into a public phenomenon, then, is to direct attention to secondary external forms not the core experience. However, emphasizing the public character of religion and theology does not require the denial of their connection to the inner, personal dimension. Focusing upon the political or social implications and effects of religious beliefs and practices is more aptly regarded as a corrective to the individualizing trajectory which has tended to assimilate religion to the inner, private world of the autonomous individual.

Those who dismiss the notion of public religion or public theology as wrongheaded, even dangerous, are more numerous. Their fears tend not to stem from a conviction about the essential nature of religion but from a commitment to freedom and pluralism as essential components of the American way of life. There is often a sense, seldom fully articulate, that a public religion or theology in America would transgress the boundary between the separation of church and state. Sometimes operating with a common understanding of public as belonging to the sphere of the government, critics fear that a public religion constitutes an official establishment of religion, a move prohibited by the first amendment to the Constitution. To them a public religion sounds dangerously close to espousing a theocracy in lieu of a democracy. A similar objection is made by those who construe the public not as the state but as the corporate body of “we the people.” Insofar as this corporate body displays an array of religious beliefs and affiliations, public religion appears to threaten the religiously plural landscape of American life. Who from the public gets counted in the identification of a public religion? Are Jews or Muslims statistically insignificant when it comes to the articulation of public religion in America? The initial exclusion of religion from the public domain was a hard fought battle to avoid sectarian strife and to ensure freedom of religion for all. Doesn’t the effort to reassert the public character of religion threaten to undermine these very real gains?

These are, of course, very serious objections that cannot be lightly dismissed. They make it clear that the terms public religion or public theology cannot be used without substantial clarification. What precisely is meant by public religion? Is it a retrieval of the Durkheimian notion that an integrated society needs a single religious vision? Is there one generic form of public religion or are there many forms of public religion reflecting the multiplicity of religions? How is public religion related to the phenomenon of civil religion, that much discussed and debated concept that Bellah popularized twenty years ago? What are the similarities and differences between public religion and public theology?

The vociferous objections to public religion and public theology can do more than underscore the need for careful distinctions and definitions. They can tip us off as to the nature of the dispute. The relative ease with which calls for a public religion or theology are construed as abridging the constitutional separation of church and state is quite revealing; it suggests that we are dealing here with different ways of interpreting the meaning of public. Advocates of public religion and theology are, whether implicitly or explicitly, objecting to the way in which we have come to configure our public and private spaces. Their proposals amount to a paradigm shift in the public and private geography that we have inherited. It is small wonder that, particularly if this shift goes unrecognized, the notions of public religion or theology strike many as contradictory and dangerous. Therefore, before distinguishing and defining more clearly the nature of public religion and public theology, we need first to attend to the meaning of public. Only by appreciating the variations in this term can we begin to understand the rationale and, perhaps, the legitimation for a public religion and theology.

The Geography of Public and Private

It is easy to assume that the contours of our public and private worlds are permanent features of the social landscape.

The private world encompasses the individual and family, and perhaps intimate friends. The public realm, by definition, would include that world lying beyond our private enclave. What these simple definitions do not capture, however, is the varying ways in which these spheres can be fashioned.⁸ In different historical eras human beings have “filled in” these spaces in quite distinctive ways. They have made decisions about such things as the codes of civility, the type of dress, the architectural style, and the forms of discourse that are appropriate in each domain.⁹ Just as importantly, the meaning and value of these spheres has varied significantly over the course of history.

The Greek Model

Consider, for instance, the way in which the ancient Greeks construed their public and private worlds.¹⁰ With the rise of the city-states a division between the private life of the family and household and the public sphere of the polis emerged.¹¹ The family and household were regarded as a natural association belonging to the domain of necessity; this realm catered to the needs of humans to sustain and to reproduce life. The household was a hierarchical domain, with the head of the household wielding primary power. This power was only limited if it conflicted with the interest of the polis. Hence the patriarch, for instance, had complete liberty to sell children or to expose infants to death, for they had no independent rights, protected by the state, proscribing such activities.¹² The polis, on the other hand, was not hierarchically structured. It consisted of a community of equals, each of whom had the right and responsibility to participate in shaping the public life.¹³ This egalitarianism had important consequences for determining how the affairs of public life were conducted. Most importantly, it ruled out the use of force or violence on the grounds that such tactics were inappropriate within a community of peers. Debate and persuasion, tactics recognizing and appealing to the heart and mind of the community, were mandated. For the Greeks, participating in this public conversation constituted the life of freedom par excellence. Notice, however, that it was not a freedom *from*

all constraints that the Greeks prized most highly. It was the freedom to participate as a citizen in the ongoing conversation of the polis about the appropriate ends of a common life.

The ancient Greeks esteemed the public sphere much more highly than the private. As the domain of freedom, it was the end for which humans were created. "A man who lived only a private life, who like the slave was not permitted to enter the public realm, or like the barbarian had chosen not to establish such a realm, was not fully human."¹⁴ We can see, therefore, that the private sphere was perceived as a privation, as indeed the word indicates; "it meant literally a state of being deprived of something, and even of the highest and most human of man's capacities."¹⁵ The Greeks' attitude toward wealth reflected their relative estimation of the public and private domains. The wealth that an individual accrued in private life was not regarded as an intrinsic good but as that which provided access to the public world, to the realm of freedom. Without wealth an individual was enslaved to procuring the necessities of life and hence was effectively barred from participating in the distinctively human realm of a public conversation amongst equals. Thus while wealth was essential to transcending the sphere of necessity, it was never considered a legitimate end in its own right. "If the property-owner chose to enlarge his property instead of using it up in leading a political life, it was as though he willingly sacrificed his freedom and became voluntarily what the slave was against his own will, a servant of necessity."¹⁶

The contrast between the Greek vision of the public and private spheres and our own is striking. Whereas the Greeks associated the public world with the exercise of freedom, we are far more likely to consider freedom facilitated in the private sphere. Freed *from* the constraints of the public world, we can give full reign to our feelings and expressions in the refuge of the home. The privative sense of the private sphere has eroded, leaving many with the expectation that the meaning and significance of their lives can be fulfilled within this domain. Nor do we retain the Greek attitude toward the accumulation of wealth. Despite some lingering restraints from a religious ethos, the private accumulation of wealth

is no longer considered merely a vehicle enabling one to participate in public life. It has become for many an end in itself. This attitude is, of course, reflected in and reinforced by modern political theory which holds that one of the primary rationales for government is the protection of an individual's right to hold and increase personal wealth.¹⁷ The commonwealth now largely exists for the common *wealth*.¹⁸ The common life of the polis where equals freely participate in debating the meaning of excellence for the body politic has given way to a procedural, watchdog state whose mandate is to secure the private interests of its members.

Lest we romanticize the Greek vision we must point out the underside of their private and public landscape. The public realm was a decidedly restricted sphere. Far from connoting the modern sense of "open to all," the public excluded the vast majority of the populace. Slaves, women, and children were banished to the private domain of necessity; the life of reasoned conversation amongst equals, wherein human identity and excellence were achieved, was only available to a minority. Furthermore, the respective autonomy of the private and public spheres meant that each household had great latitude in conducting its own affairs. Practices that modern society would find reprehensible, and legitimately outlawed, were to the Greeks private affairs. The radical disjunction between the egalitarian public realm and the hierarchical private sphere meant that the power and whims of the paterfamilias, although subject to social disapproval, went otherwise unchecked.

Comparing the Greek and modern ways of configuring and valuing public and private life underscores their historically contingent nature. However, it still leaves us with accounting for the differences. What are the factors that have helped to shape the modern geography of the public and private realm? This, of course, is an enormously complex story that cannot be fully unraveled here. To understand our own interpretation of these realms, however, we must consider, if only briefly, the effect that the Enlightenment has had upon shaping the modern outlook. For this chapter in our history continues to exert its effects long after its official closure.

The Enlightenment Legacy

The Enlightenment influence in the formation of the public and private spheres can be appreciated most fully when set within its own historical context. For the Enlightenment contribution was an intellectual and practical solution to a very real and prolonged crisis in society. It was not some timeless option dreamed up by theorists but the forging of a political and philosophical resolution to pacify a conflict-ridden society. The social crisis that the Enlightenment thinkers faced had its roots in the Protestant Reformation and the lengthy religious wars that ensued in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As scholars have often noted, the Reformation both reflected and greatly exacerbated a crisis of authority within the sixteenth century.¹⁹ Luther's turn to *sola Scriptura* to quell his own uncertainties, and to escape from the cacophony of multiple, conflicting authorities, failed to resolve the problem of authority as the ensuing sixteenth century plainly manifested. The splintering of the reformers into diverse groups, each with its own varied reading of the sacred text, belied the reformers' claims that Scripture was self-interpreting. On the contrary, the multiple readings were ample testimony to the intensification of the crisis of authority not to its resolution. Nor was the Roman Catholic church's response, as reflected in the Council of Trent (1545–63), anything more than a dogmatic reassertion of its own authority. The Protestant Reformation and Catholic Counter-Reformation of the sixteenth century, therefore, constituted a serious impasse over the question of legitimate authority in matters of religious belief and practice. This impasse eventually led to the bloody and disruptive religious wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Against this backdrop of civil and religious discord Enlightenment thinkers sought to demarcate a space that would transcend the sectarian strife. The need was to establish a sphere and an appropriate form of discourse that would avoid the seemingly unresolvable religious controversies that were tearing apart the very fabric of society. The immediate impetus, then, was to develop a secular vocabulary

that would be free from divisive religious commitments. To reestablish social peace, religion was increasingly relegated to the sphere of the private, and a secular discourse was developed to articulate the nature of political and social life.

Two of the more important contributors to the creation of this secular discourse were the English Enlightenment theorists Hobbes and Locke; their writings, part of the canon of philosophic liberalism, have had an enormous impact upon the attitudes, behavior, and institutional forms of modern western life. Indeed the assumptions underlying these theories have become so embedded in the personal and political fabric of Western life that they have largely assumed a self-evident quality. It is essential to recognize that these secular theories were not ahistorical or interest-free portraits of human life. They reflected very explicit, historically contingent assumptions about human nature, social life, and the nature of reason.

Basic to philosophic liberalism is the assumption that human beings are radically autonomous creatures who are driven by their desires to pursue their own self-interest. Recognizing the dangers of unrestrained egoism, individuals rationally choose to enter into a social contract that will facilitate their personal security and private gain. Society, according to this view, is not based upon any substantive agreement about the "public good." Indeed, insofar as individuals are naturally disposed to seek their personal interests, there *is* no consensus about the good. Nor need there be, according to liberalism. The most desirable society is one that, as far as possible, maximizes the freedom of individuals to secure their private ends.

The vision of the individual and society at the basis of philosophic liberalism reflected and furthered the social arrangements of the emerging capitalistic economy.²⁰ Capitalism was breaking the social bonds that had structured the older feudal order; classical liberalism was offering a conception of the autonomous self, unfettered by social relationships, that was eminently suited to the needs of modern capitalism. Not surprisingly, the liberal rationale for pursuing private interest was parallel in the social and economic spheres.

Liberal theory optimistically assumed that the pursuit of private interest would produce the optimal society—one with sufficient order and maximum freedom. Similarly, the underlying assumption of capitalism, reflected in Adam Smith's metaphor of the invisible hand, was that the pursuit of private gain would, through the market economy, produce the optimum public gain. Through this calculus the private interests of individuals and the public welfare were conveniently harmonized.

It is important to recognize the emancipatory thrust of the liberal vision of human life and society. The interwoven strands of its political, social, and economic theory placed primary emphasis upon the autonomy and freedom of the individual. This was a very deliberate intellectual strategy to liberate the social order from the power of entrenched political and ecclesiastical authorities. As William Sullivan notes, "from the seventeenth century to the present the defense of freedom for the individual has been its major theme. The Old Regime in Europe tied political, ecclesiastical, social, and economic institutions together, justifying privilege by appeals to tradition. Thus emancipatory liberalism easily associated escape from injustice with freedom conceived as an end in itself."²¹ This emphasis upon the freedom of the individual also spawned a new paradigm of reason that buttressed the political and social implications of the liberal outlook.

To help secure the liberation of the individual and society from the religious and political establishment, Enlightenment thinkers developed a notion of reason that sought to free human thought and practice from the control of heteronomous authorities. Although the Enlightenment paradigm included both rationalist and empiricist variations, its fundamental concern was to free human thought from the chains of tradition. As Kant expressed it in his seminal essay "What Is Enlightenment," reason consists in the capacity to think for oneself, in the refusal to allow outside authorities to determine sound judgment. To the Enlightenment thinkers reason was a distinctively human capacity that we all share. The universal character of reason ensured that inquiry and

argument would proceed according to shared criteria, and would, at least potentially, produce a consensus. According to the Enlightenment model, reason is not limited by particularities of time and place. It is an ahistorical capacity that transcends parochial limitations, thereby ensuring that human inquiry need not be dependent upon local authorities or traditions for its assumptions and warrants.

The Enlightenment interpretation of reason took as paradigmatic the style of inquiry that was emerging in the natural sciences of the seventeenth century. It was a style that stressed the requirements of objectivity, neutrality, and a quantitative approach to knowledge. As Sullivan explains, "the new ideal of knowledge was the ability to describe successfully the observable appearances of events in the language of 'simples' and to display their mathematical-logical coherence. . . . Knowledge, then, was knowing things as facts."²² Insofar as knowledge came to be construed as knowing the facts, it increasingly relegated ideals and goals to a noncognitive status.²³ To know some object was not to know it in light of its telos, but to know it as it appeared. Description and analysis could dispense with the nonempirical concern with ends. A reason modeled upon the empirical sciences might explore what is now the case. It was woefully inadequate, however, to explore what should be the case. However, insofar as ends were considered a matter of private desire, it was to be expected that they fall outside the appropriate province of reasoned, public inquiry. Ends were a function of the passions, not of reason that might debate their relative merits and reach a consensus. Hence we can see that the trajectory of the Enlightenment interpretation of reason was increasingly to limit reason to the province of means, denying it a role in the discernment and adjudication of the ends for which we act.²⁴

The effects of the liberal interpretations of human nature, society, and reason in shaping our public and private topography in recent centuries have been considerable. To achieve its emancipatory and irenic aims, liberalism, simultaneously, construed "public" in very expansive and very reductive terms. On the one hand, public is highly inclusive insofar as

it encompasses all persons. On the other hand, it does not include those aspects of individuals that make them distinct. It “reduces” the individual to a least common denominator of personhood, separating the self from the characteristics and roles that determine personal identity.²⁵ These specificities that belong to the personal histories of individuals are irrelevant within the public realm. This duality in the meaning of public is also reflected in the Enlightenment model of reason. Reason, in its expansive sense, is a universal capacity shared by all human beings. However, it necessarily excludes the historical determinants or “prejudices” in human reflection that destroy this common character, thereby “reducing” reason to its technical, instrumental function.²⁶ Hence public has come to have a very inclusive, but very abstract or formal application. Although the most encompassing sphere, it is also the least substantively defined.

The Eclipse of the Public in Contemporary Life

This bivalent meaning of public that the Enlightenment bequeathed is entangled in two dialectically related tendencies that have come to define contemporary life. On the one hand, it has contributed to the expansion of the private sphere in terms of its meaning and significance for human life. “The most revolutionary trait of modern society,” Thomas Luckmann has suggested, may be that “personal identity becomes, essentially, a private phenomenon.”²⁷ There clearly can be little interest for the individual in a realm that excludes the specific roles and local affiliations from which we derive our identity. The turn to our private histories and parochial communities as the locus of meaning, therefore, is most apt given the contraction in the meaning of public. The contemporary fascination with psychology, especially analysis, is the logical extension of this trajectory toward locating meaning and purpose within the private realm. As Richard Sennett observes, “Each person’s self has become his principal burden; to know oneself has become an end, instead of a means through which one knows the world.”²⁸ To many this trajectory has increasingly felt like a dead end. “Masses of

people are concerned with their single life-histories and particular emotions as never before; this concern has proved to be a trap rather than a liberation."²⁹

The modern construal of public, however, has also inflamed another movement, dialectically related to this individualizing thrust. Interpreting public in terms of the common, of what we share, has exacerbated the leveling processes at work in modern postindustrial society. The economic, political, social, and technological forces contributing to mass conformism have been well documented. As Josiah Royce, an acute analyst of this phenomenon, has explained:

because of the spread of popular education, and because of the consolidation and of the centralization of industries and of social authorities, we tend all over the nation, and, in some degree, even throughout the civilized world, to read the same daily news, to share the same general ideas, to submit to the same overmastering social forces, to live in the same external fashions, to discourage individuality, and to approach a dead level of harassed mediocrity.³⁰

The leveling processes in modern life are not checked, but sanctioned, when public is defined in terms of commonality. The only escape from such public conformity is the private realm that, perhaps for a time, can protect individuality. This escape, however, is precarious at best. For the trend toward radical individualism and the trend toward an incipient collectivism are not as radically opposed as they might initially appear. They are not conflicting extremes; they are, rather, as John Dewey and Royce, among others, have argued, dialectically related, each intensifying the other in an upward spiral.³¹ The retreat to a private realm, therefore, carries with it the ever present danger of a collectivist reversal. The only lasting escape is to break out of the dialectical spiral, to avoid the twin perils of radical individualism and collectivism. Escaping the spiral entails breaking with the entire paradigm of public and private with which it is intertwined.

The ease with which the public, interpreted as the common, slides into mere collectivism, has led some social

analysts to speak of the eclipse of the public sphere in the contemporary world. Dewey, for instance, contended that the modernizing forces which destroyed the older local forms of communal life simultaneously eroded a public realm. These modernizing forces have helped produce a "great society," a vast and complex form of life with "lasting, extensive and serious consequences of associated activity."³² However, there is no organized, conversant public body to explore and debate the far-reaching effects of this vast associational life. For Dewey the public realm is not a collection of individuals who have left their particular histories and commitments at home, but a community of persons who have the desire and resources to debate the relative merits of the various consequences of associational life. The populace, Dewey insisted, lacks both the disposition and the tools to establish this public life. "The essential need," he suggested

... is the improvement of the methods and conditions of debate, discussion and persuasion. That is the problem of the public. We have asserted that this improvement depends essentially upon freeing and perfecting the processes of inquiry and of dissemination of their conclusions.³³

Hannah Arendt shared Dewey's diagnosis about the eclipse of the public realm, contending that it has been absorbed by society with its mass conformism. She, too, suggested that we have lost sight of a sense of public whose commonality does not eradicate all individual differences. In her words:

... the reality of the public realm relies on the simultaneous presence of innumerable perspectives and aspects in which the common world presents itself and for which no common measurement or denominator can ever be devised. For though the common world is the common meeting ground of all, those who are present have different locations in it, and the location of one can no more coincide with the location of another than the location of two objects. Being seen and being heard by others derive their significance from the fact that everybody sees and hears from a different position.³⁴

It sounds somewhat odd to speak of the eclipse of the public sphere when we hear and use the term daily. Indeed it would be less confusing if it were more clearly acknowledged that we are dealing here with different models of public life. Both Dewey and Arendt were attempting to retrieve a notion of public life that has roots within classical Greece³⁵ While not embracing the elitism of that model, they were seeking to revive its dialogical and communal dimensions. It is important to recognize that their agenda presupposes a significant transformation in the Enlightenment construal of public. In particular it requires the rejection of the reductive character of the Enlightenment interpretation of public. The public is not a collection of contextless or narrative-free selves—a lowest common denominator of personhood. Nor is the public exercise of reason one that transcends the historical location of these selves. The public is the all-encompassing community of persons who come together to debate and evaluate the effects of their associational life. From this perspective, then, the public is, in an important sense, not fully realized. We currently have too many barriers to the full and equal participation of persons in shaping a communal life. The public, according to this model, must be created through the overcoming of narrow and distorted communication.³⁶

This brief excursion into alternate ways of construing the meaning of public illuminates the controversy over calls for a public religion and theology in America. Defenders and critics of public religion and theology, other differences notwithstanding, are talking past one another. Each camp is operating with a different interpretation of public without making sufficiently clear that this is the case. We still stand, in many respects, within the Enlightenment topography of public and private; criticisms of this landscape, as in calls for a public religion and theology, constitute challenges to the long dominant cultural paradigm.³⁷ The case for a public religion and theology in American life, therefore, coincides with an attack upon our prevailing model for the public realm. Recognizing this connection will prove useful in the next chapter when we consider what it means to engage in a public form of argumentation. The merits of this case, however,

cannot be decided in the abstract. We must explore the potential strengths, as well as dangers, of public religion and theology in terms of the specific context to which they are addressed. We have to consider, in other words, the purported ailments affecting contemporary American life that are thought to justify, indeed demand, forms of public religion and theology.

The American Context

Public Virtue and Religion

Calls for a more public face for religion and theology in America coincide with a wider cultural discontent with the state of our national life. There is a growing sense that the liberal capitalistic society of late twentieth century America is seriously flawed. Descriptions of the "cultural crisis" that we face abound, reflected in such works as Daniel Bell's *The Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism* or Christopher Lasch's *The Culture of Narcissism*. Much of the critique is directed against the ethos that has emerged from the confluence of capitalism and philosophic liberalism. It is an ethos that has spawned a radical individualism within American life whose dark underside has grown more and more apparent in recent decades. Liberalism's sanction of the pursuit of personal gain in the social and economic spheres has appeared increasingly shallow, even dangerous, in the light of economic stagnation, growing inequalities in wealth, and depletion of resources. According to many observers, personal success and consumption have become primary ends of American life. Ours has turned into, Roland Delattre argues, a "culture of procurement": the majority of Americans have become "dependent mass consumers with insatiable wants and cravings" whose satisfaction becomes an overriding goal.³⁸ The liberal expectation that the pursuit of private gain, economically and socially, will produce the optimal society has to many ears taken on a naive, utopian ring whose destructiveness has become progressively more evident in the social pathologies it has spawned.

We have increasingly lost what America's founding figures referred to as "public virtue," the disposition to work towards the improvement of the commonwealth even at significant cost to the self. To a great extent it is the erosion of public virtue within American life that has fueled recent interest in a more public religion. To understand this preoccupation with public religion we must consider, first, why public virtue is considered an indispensable basis for a republic. Secondly, we must explore the historic relationship between public virtue and religion in American life.

Contrary to the *theory* of political and economic liberalism that makes public good a function of private interest, American life has never been solely informed by the liberal outlook. Although moving closer and closer to embodying the liberal ethos, America has also been shaped by the biblical and republican traditions that have historically reflected a much stronger communal emphasis.³⁹ These more communal traditions have helped to elicit and reinforce a commitment to a common life, thereby tempering the radical individualism of classical liberalism. As Sullivan expresses it, "The ambiguity of America's greatness has always been the coexistence of an economic life of private self-interest with a public commitment to justice and the common welfare."⁴⁰ Although our political institutions and economic arrangements reflect the liberal framework, our attitudes and behaviors, at least historically, have been informed by other, less individualistic, motifs. This patchwork combination has, to many minds, been not only a fortuitous but an essential factor in the success and endurance of the American republic. Indeed America's founders recognized that the future of the republic depended upon more than the institutional structures they were erecting; these very structures could only minimize not eradicate the devastating effects of an amoral people. As James Madison noted, "To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people is a chimerical idea."⁴¹ Describing the attitudes of the architects of the American republic, William Lee Miller writes:

. . . There was wide agreement about the importance of the intellectual and moral condition of the citizenry. These forefathers did want to avoid that cause of the downfall of the republics of the past, a condition they called by terms with an eighteenth-century meaning, “luxury” and “corruption”—the neglect of the public good for private gain, display, advantage, and pleasure: They did want, in their differing ways, to nurture an attachment to the shared human good.⁴²

The founders’ estimate of the importance of public virtue in sustaining the life of the American republic was echoed fifty years later by Alexis de Tocqueville. If anything de Tocqueville was more adamant about the need for the “habits of the heart” that would temper the privatism and acquisitiveness that he saw growing in nineteenth century America. If left unchecked, he argued, these tendencies posed a serious threat to the fledgling republic. In de Tocqueville’s judgment it was largely Christianity, the dominant religion of the American people, that had been responsible for instilling the public virtues needed to sustain a healthy common life. For this reason he insisted that religion in America is “the first of their political institutions.”⁴³ Religion nourishes the communal mores that constitute the essential background for the liberal political and economic framework of American life.

For de Tocqueville, as for contemporary advocates of public religion, Christianity’s contribution to the American republic has been crucial insofar as it has been a primary vehicle for the cultivation of the public virtue that is required to sustain a democratic republic. America’s founders had already recognized this connection between public virtue and religion in the formation of the cultural mores. In his famous “Farewell Address,” George Washington observed that “of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.”⁴⁴ Although many espoused the Enlightenment notion that morality was in principle separable from religion, they recognized that this was generally the case only for an educated elite. For the vast

majority of the populace, morality was very much a product of a religious outlook. As Washington, an exponent of this view, warned:

And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. What ever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.⁴⁵

More recent observers of the American scene have concurred with Washington's prediction, contending that the privatization of religion in American life has coincided with a gradual erosion of moral reflection in public discussions. In our zealously to preserve religious freedom, to sustain a separation between the church and the state, we have increasingly lost an appropriate vocabulary to examine and evaluate our public policies and commitments. Writing more than twenty-five years ago, John Courtney Murray noted a growing refusal to explore questions of domestic and foreign policy in light of our moral ideals. Too often we decide such policy in terms of economic and technical criteria without raising larger questions about the values and ends guiding our actions. As Ted Koppel, the popular anchor of "Nightline", opined, foreign policy is by definition amoral.⁴⁶ We have become habituated to a "cynical divorce between politics and morality" in discussing the affairs of our common life.⁴⁷

However, despite this ideological exclusion of religion and morality from public life, in reality the separation is far less neat. Religious beliefs and moral values do impinge upon public policy, but their presence is all too often obscured because of their purported impropriety within public life. We live out of mythic frameworks with clear religious and moral dimensions without sufficiently recognizing their power in shaping our attitudes and behaviors. The sense that America is a promised land, Americans a chosen people with a mission to fulfill a divine destiny, for instance, reflects a religious myth that competes with the "myth of liberalism" in shaping our