CHAPTER FIVE

The Use, Abuse, and Relevance of Religion

Some Reflections on Professor Abraham van de Beek's Proposal

It is fashionable to speak about the relevance of Christian faith nowadays. It should be relevant for society, of interest for politics, helping people in their personal development, and so on. This article discusses the question whether religion should be relevant at all, and what the consequences will be of a denial of it.

Thus the preamble to a paper by Professor Van de Beek entitled, "Religion Without Ulterior Motive."[1] This paper is compatible with that on "Christian Identity is Identity in Christ,"[2] which he delivered at the sixth conference of the International Reformed Theological Institute in Seoul, Korea, in July 2005. I shall refer to both papers in what follows.

The possibility that religion is irrelevant may confirm atheists, agnostics, and secularists in their opinion; it may comfort the "armchair

1. Since I am working from a typescript, and therefore have no final pagination, I shall refer to this paper as RWUM.

2. I shall refer to this paper as CI.

Christian"; and it may appear to activist Christians as a huge step towards heresy. It might therefore seem that the first task is to analyze the term "relevance," recognizing that to determine that something is relevant is to make a judgment for which there are good grounds (not simply good reasons). But I shall work my way towards such a discussion by commenting on Van de Beek's papers as they stand. I shall suggest that it makes sense to speak of both the "use"/abuse of religion as well as of the usefulness of it, and that the gospel of Jesus Christ is relevant in all times and all places. I wonder whether Van de Beek's disjunctive mode of expression (for I do not think it is a question of his beliefs) tends to obscure this fact. But let us proceed step by step.

Disjunction or Conjunction?

Van de Beek sets out from a remark by Samuel Hirsch, a Jewish author who, writing in 1854, declared that "The subordination of religion to any other factor means the denial of religion."[3] The context of Hirsch's remark was the mid-nineteenth-century concern with progress, which turned some minds in an instrumentalist direction: those things are useful which contribute to human progress; those things which do not, are to be left on one side. Over against this, Hirsch protests that religion exclusively concerns our standing under God's law; it is not a means to any other end. Religion is not to be judged according to its ability to blend with the prevailing climate of thought; it is not relevant only in so far as it does this. Van de Beek concurs: "You cannot use faith as an instrument in order to gain something. If you do so religion is soon delivered up to the whim of the day of any person who can use it for his or her own interest" (RWUM). He recognizes, of course, that the godly life is a blessed life, but godliness is not to be sought in order to obtain the blessings.

Similarly, Van de Beek observes that faith has ethical consequences, but the desirable consequences may not be deployed as arguments to justify faith, for "The aim of faith is only God Himself—and nothing besides Him. He won't give his glory to something else . . . not even to ethics" (RWUM). Hence his disquiet at what he perceives as the instrumentalism of both liberation theology and the programme of the World Council of Churches entitled, *Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation*, and his adverse criticism of the view that "the main task of Christians" is "to strive

3. He quotes Frank et al., *The Jewish Philosophy Reader,* 393.

for the items that [the latter] program indicates" (CI). Over against this Van de Beek sets the injunction of Irenaeus that "It is the main task for Christians to think about their death"[4] (CI). He construes this to mean that we are not to strive for righteousness, for we cannot change things for the better. God alone can effect the desired changes, and the cross is the supreme testimony to this fact (CI).

Thus far Van de Beek appears to be committed to a disjunctive approach: we are to love God for his own sake; we are not to strive for righteousness. But later he writes, "We can call for justice to a corrupted regime, for we are not afraid even if they threaten us with death. . . . [Christians] do not try to change the world, because the world will not change for the better. They themselves have a different style of life" (CI). Is there not an ambivalence here? Why should we challenge a corrupt regime regarding justice if we have no hope that through our witness *God* may bring about change? We may agree that only by God's enabling grace will change be effected. But to rest in the conviction that we should not try to change the world because it will not change for the better would be to descend into a pessimism regarding God's ability which would cripple witness and foster the false comfort of quietism; or else it would land us in the unrealistic position of those evangelists who declare that when we (yes, they frequently speak as if they do it) have got everybody saved, all socio-political matters will be set to rights. If the former stance appears to deny the Christian obligation to be salt and light in the world, the latter seems to overlook the fact that the Bible has more to say about the faithful remnant, than about "packing all the sinners in."

The ambivalence emerges again in relation to liberation theology. Van de Beek writes, "Liberation theology is a clear example of religion with a goal. That goal is not God and his service, but political and economic liberation" (RWUM). Here again, *prima facie*, is the disjunction: we are to serve God; we are not to seek political and economic liberation. It is undoubtedly true that some of the earlier liberation theologians, under the dire circumstances of their socio-political contexts, did not always maintain their balance; but I should argue, and have indeed argued,[5] that the most insightful among them understood very well that since God uses means, our service and witness may be used by him in liberating ways. The ambivalence enters when Van de Beek, concurring

4. Irenaeus, fragment XI, *MPG* VII: 1233.

5. See Sell, *Enlightenment, Ecumenism, Evangel*, 306–25.

with Hirsch, qualifies the disjunction by saying that "True religion . . . is interested in material and social issues, but never in such a way that it makes a core issue of it [*sic*]. It must be clear that they are relative, second or even third level questions" (RWUM). But at least, now, they are legitimate questions: there would have been no Good Samaritan if the Samaritan, on seeing the wounded man, had said, "So sorry I cannot help you, I'm thinking about my death."

A further query concerns Van de Beek's declaration that "We cannot use arguments for our religion. . . . For at the very moment when we use an argument—for instance that it creates the most just society . . . then a just society is put above faith. . . . We are Christians only because we are Christians, and not because there is a good argument to be Christians" (RWUM). A number of points need to be untangled here. First, if we cannot use arguments for our religion we shall not be able to respond to those who confront us with their doubts and difficulties about the Christian faith; and this will be more than an intellectual failure, it will be a failure in witnessing, and it will frequently be a pastoral failure too. Secondly, I do not see that to point to the beneficial effects of Christianity is to put the effects above faith. It is rather to show that desirable consequences flow from faith, which is what Van de Beek himself believes. Of course, not every product of religion is beneficial, for believers may be fanatical, and empirical Christianity displays a sufficiently large multitude of blemishes to keep it in repentant mood to the end of time. Nevertheless, the fruit of faith can be highly beneficial to individuals and societies. Thirdly, we do not stand where we do as Christians because we have argued our way to faith (though through argument we may have removed some of the obstacles to faith which previously lay in our path or the path of others). Least of all is it the case that we "review God's claims and then admit Him as we are satisfied."[6] We are Christians because we have been called by God's free and sovereign grace. It does not follow, however, that reasoned, orderly, testimony is redundant.[7]

Instrumentalism

The above qualifications notwithstanding, Professor Van de Beek does well to insist that to "use" religion for extraneous ends is to abuse it. God

6. Forsyth, *The Principle of Authority*, 146.
7. See further Sell, *Confessing and Commending the Faith*; and ch. 7 below.

is the end of religion, and the primary task and privilege of the church is the worship of the God of all grace who, in Jesus Christ has visited and redeemed his people, and who, by the Holy Spirit, is ever present with them to guide, guard, challenge, reprove and forgive. Of the church P. T. Forsyth said,

> Her note is the supernatural note which distinguishes incarnation from immanence, redemption from evolution, the Kingdom of God from mere spiritual progress, and the Holy Spirit from mere spiritual process. She must never be opportunist at the cost of being evangelical, liberal at the cost of being positive, too broad for the Cross's narrow way. And she must produce that impression on the whole, that impression of detachment from the world and of descent upon it.[8]

These words have lost none of their pertinence during the hundred years since they were first uttered: and note carefully that Forsyth speaks of *both* detachment *and* descent.

Opportunist, instrumentalist—call it what you will, such attitudes have tempted the church through the ages, as a random selection of examples will amply demonstrate. Consider first, individuals. Since Shakespeare presents us with no evidence of their habitual piety, we may not unjustifiably conclude that when, in *The Tempest*, the storm-tossed sailors cry, "All lost! To prayers! To prayers! All lost!"[9] they are "using" (that is, abusing) religion in an instrumentalist way: when all else fails, religion may bail us out. When television evangelists preaching a "gospel of success" tell their listeners that if they "come to Christ" their bank balances, their career prospects, their health (and, for all I know, their racing pigeons) will prosper, they are "using"/abusing religion in a very crude way and, moreover, storing up disappointment for those who, having succumbed to their enticements, subsequently discover something of the way of the cross. If a Christian mission in an impoverished part of the world seeks to tempt individuals into the Christian faith by material benefits: "Come to our splendidly equipped hospital (much better than the Baptist one), lose your tonsils and find a Saviour!" it is likewise "using"/abusing religion. With regard to societies at large, if an Anglican church dignitary argues, as some in England have recently been doing, that because of the parlous moral condition of society we must build

8. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 82–83.
9. Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, I.i.

more Church schools, he or she is "using"/abusing religion, for religion becomes a tool of social engineering and, if a pupil's registration turns upon parental church attendance, an inducement to hypocrisy is offered which, as is well known, some will accept.

As far as groups are concerned: whenever nations or parties have justified war in the name of religion they have "used"/abused religion and have sought to cover extraneous motives with a cloak of respectability. When an allegedly Christian state, as in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century England, sought to enforce religious conformity in order to bring about national cohesion in face of foreign enemies (something against which the English Separatists and Dissenters protested at the cost of threats, imprisonment, banishment and even their lives), it was "using"/abusing religion. When a secular state contributes towards the cost of particular pieces of the church's social work which it would otherwise have to fund itself, this seems acceptable as payment for services rendered; but if the secular state contributes towards the cost of ministerial training, or the stipends of those who preach a gospel it repudiates, in the expectation of a more morally upright, benign and easily-governable society, it is hypocritically "using"/abusing religion. All of this seems undeniable, and Professor Van de Beek has done well to draw our attention to it.

But the case can be overstated. Van de Beek writes, "A church member uttered: 'If I would not have my faith, I would not know how to overcome my sorrows and troubles.' The underlying idea is that faith serves to overcome your problems—forgetting that Christian faith often is the cause of many troubles and that it is easier to speak like those people who do not worry about God, as Psalm 73 says" (RWUM). There can be no question that in certain circumstances the Christian faith can heap troubles upon the saints—remember, for example, the Separatists and Dissenters. But may it not be that the Professor also has momentarily forgotten something which he elsewhere grants, namely, that God can work through the testimony of believers? Hence, if a sincere Christian, not an evangelistic charlatan, makes a humble and grateful testimony to the peace which he or she has found in Christ, is it wrong if an untutored hearer whose life is in turmoil thinks, "I should like to have that peace"? May not God the Holy Spirit be prompting the thought, and may not that thought be the starting-point of a religious quest? Surely it would be callous in the extreme to say to such a person, "You only want religion because of what you can get out of it: you are 'using'/abusing religion." There

is a great gulf between testimony to the power and solace of faith and the mistaken view that faith provides an escape hatch from the troubles of life. Extending this line of thought to society at large, and to the church's role as yeast, may we not say that the church's task of nurturing those who uphold such values as honesty, integrity, industriousness, generosity, is of great significance to society, and that this nurturing work should not be stopped simply because some may be tempted to regard societal goods as acquisitions to be obtained instrumentally *via* religion? Societal goods can also be understood as fruits flowing from that honouring of God which is at the heart of true religion.[10]

At this point, I think it is pertinent to refer to church assemblies, for they provide opportunities for activists to "use"/abuse religion in the furtherance of their several agenda, and to the detriment of the Church's primary obligations of worshipping God and proclaiming his gospel. There seem to be so many "causes" at the present time, yet in a sense this is nothing new. In 1876 Joseph Parker, minister of the City Temple, London, addressed the Assembly of the Congregational Union of England and Wales thus:

> What an amazing amount of so-called "business" we have to do! We have to disestablish the Church [of England], modernize the Universities, rectify the policy of School Boards, clear the way to burial-grounds, subsidize magazines, sell hymn-books, play the hose upon [the Anglican] Convocation, and generally give everybody to understand that if we have not yet assailed them or defended them, it is not for want of will, but merely for want of time.[11]

What is different nowadays is the way in which highly politicized caucuses, well versed in managerial tactics, and sometimes well funded, can make the notion of a church assembly in which the saints, united by grace to Christ and therefore to one another, corporately seek his mind an unrealizable ideal. Instead of the earnest quest of unanimity in Christ we have pressure groups whose members have no expectation that their minds will be changed by anything that is said; who on occasion adopt a sectarian stance which is more than willing to "unchurch" those who disagree with them; who sometimes hijack the Bible so that it becomes a weapon in their hands with which they bludgeon their opponents; and

10. See further, Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society*, 123.

11. Quoted by Peel, *These Hundred Years*, 264.

whose sole objective is to drive their favoured motion through. When they succeed, we may well have the situation in which what is ostensibly "the mind of the church" as agreed at the assembly is in fact poles apart from that of the majority of the church's constituency. This is a recipe for friction, even in some cases for secession; and all because the organs of the church have been "used"/abused in order to score partisan points and achieve sectional goals.[12]

Motives, Divine and Human

In the concluding paragraphs of RWUM, Professor Van de Beek very properly reminds us that "users"/abusers of religion may well be disappointed. We may work and pray in the hope of a good harvest, but there may be a famine (cf. Hab 3:17). The way of suffering may be inescapable, as it was for Jesus. This thought leads him to God's saving act at the cross. Here we see the supreme example of the way in which "God loves us for nothing." That is, he acts towards us without ulterior motive. This is certainly the case; this is the abounding generosity of grace. But although, as Van de Beek rightly says, God does not call us because of our status or prowess (he cites Deut 7:7), we have good reason to think that God acts as he does because he desires a people for his praise and service. With such a people he enters into a covenant relationship. May we not say that these are consequences or ends desired by God? But God does not "use"/abuse grace in order to secure the desirable consequences; his motives are never mixed. The problem is that ours are. It seems to be part of the human condition that sinners are susceptible to ulterior motives in a way that God is not. Hence the analogy between God's actions towards us, and our human actions breaks down; for God is perfect, we are not. The doctrine of total depravity, while it does not mean that everything we do is absolutely reprehensible, does mean that nothing we do is wholly pure, for we are not God. This by no means releases us from the obligation to strive after perfection, it simply cautions us against supposing that we have already reached that happy state.

12. At an assembly held some years ago the theme for study concerned the Bible in relation to Christian witness. The theme was intended as a theological exploration that would result in more effective outreach on the ground. I was intrigued to note that some activists present did not feel that the occasion was successful because no denunciatory resolutions had issued from it. The idea of an assembly devoid of such "prophetic" utterances seemed anathema to them.

To put it somewhat crudely: it is easier for God to act without ulterior motives than it is for us, for his motives are not mixed. Thus, when Van de Beek writes, "We serve the Lord for nothing, as the book of Job says," this can be only a counsel of perfection held before the imperfect. It is an unrealizable ideal and, from all that experience teaches us, a psychological impossibility. We might even say that a significant aspect of the Creator-creature distinction is that God can act absolutely without ulterior motives whereas we, being sinners, cannot. But all may not be lost. Suppose that, given who we are, we are sometimes tempted to "use"/abuse religion because of certain goods which we think may accrue from it: may not our relatively lower motive be a means whereby God brings us face to face with our need of reorientation towards himself? For, when we remember ourselves, we know that apart from him we can do nothing, and we learn afresh that to desire the reward of faith (construed as the consequence of faith, not as a recompense for faith) without the root of faith (trust in God for his own sake) is futile. It is hardly necessary to add that the fact that sinners cannot act absolutely without ulterior motives does not legitimate the "use"/abuse of religion against which Van de Beek quite rightly protests, but it does go some way towards explaining it.

It will by now be clear that I am in total agreement with Professor Van de Beek that those who adopt a purely instrumentalist view of religion are grievously mistaken. Religion is not to be valued simply because of what can be got out of it. To fall into this error is to "use"/abuse religion. But are we necessarily bound to go to the extreme of maintaining that religion is irrelevant? Is it utterly use*less*? I shall attempt an answer to these questions by means of an analysis of the term "relevance."

Relevance

We may set out from the dictionary definition of "relevance" as being that which bears upon, or is pertinent to, the matter in hand. Clearly, the determination that something is, or is not, relevant entails a judgment, and such judgments can be mistaken. Suppose that during a severe winter the water pipes in my house freeze and the supply of water stops. I call in my neighbour, whom I suspect is something of a handyman because I have often seen him lying underneath his car. He looks at the situation and asks, "Have you any tools?" "Oh yes," I reply, and I go to the garden shed and return with a brace and bit, a plasterer's trowel and a garden

rake. My neighbour now wishes that he had asked for relevant tools. In this case the irrelevance of the tools to the matter in hand is obvious. But such judgments are not always so straightforward. In some cases we may not be sure whether something is relevant (will work) until we have experimented with it. Hence sophisticated scientific investigations; hence homely attempts to see whether porridge will really seal a leaking car radiator. Again, many judgments of relevance are time-bound. A person may sincerely have believed that a particular remedy was relevant to a particular medical condition, whereas—perhaps many years later—this is shown not to have been the case. (This is why even Reformed Christians would normally prefer to swallow John Wesley's theology than his medicinal potions.)

All of the judgments so far exemplified concern what may be labelled "relevance objectively conceived." That is to say, the judgments made refer to matters that are deemed to be the case, regardless of the feelings, dispositions or opinions of the judges. But sometimes people will say, "This is not relevant *to me*." Here a subjective emphasis is given to the judgment, and with it the implication that what is not relevant to me may be relevant to somebody else. There are cases in which this is perfectly understandable, though often qualifications may need to be entered. Thus (on the assumption that he or she is not a family lawyer, or a civil servant in a pensions office) a young person may say "The provisions of retirement law are not relevant to me." We should then need to supply the qualification "immediately relevant"; for if the young person lives long enough, the provisions will in due course be relevant to his or her situation. Again, I may say that the particular skills of an obstetrician are not relevant to male me; but if a member of my family required the attention of such a specialist, I should then need to qualify the claim by saying that such skills are not "directly relevant" to me: they would certainly be indirectly relevant to me in such a case. Consider the assertion, "Traditional church worship is not relevant to me." If a young person says this, what may be meant is that the church music is old fashioned, the sermon boring, too many people wear suits. . . . If an older person says the same thing it may be because of a considered atheist or secularist conviction, or simply because the person manages his or her life without perceiving any need to partake in church worship which may, in any case, be quite foreign to the individual concerned.

Coming more directly to Christianity as such: can we justifiably judge that it is never relevant; that is always is; or that it is for some people

and not for others? It would, on the face of it, seem odd to say of any religion that it has no bearing whatsoever on anything to do with the world as it is. Such a religion would be other-worldly in an exclusive sense; though even then it would presumably have a certain relevance to its human devotees, for it would at least constitute part of their identity. By contrast, as traditionally construed, the Christian claim is that the gospel of God's free and saving grace is relevant to all people in all ages in all places. It concerns their standing before God in this life and their eternal state; and it calls them into a new life of fellowship with the saints, visible and invisible, with the former of whom they are to engage in witness and service. If this is the case, we cannot say that Christianity is relevant only to some people and not to others. Of course, millions of people make a contrary judgment. Adherents of other faiths, secularists and others will, with varying degrees of politeness, deny the Christian claim. But denial is not refutation. It may, however, signal the beginning of a discussion in which the Christian will be called to give a reason for his or her hope.

In claiming Christianity's relevance in the sense described we are necessarily implying its usefulness for certain purposes—fulness of life, for example. But we are not indulging in the instrumentalist "use"/abuse of religion by thinking and witnessing in this way. Properly conceived, the gospel call is not an invitation to people to avail themselves of the fruit of faith without having the root of faith. In the light of God's gracious approach in Christ, and of his love supremely active at the Cross, the call is to repent and believe. New life and the fruit of the Spirit are the consequences of the divinely-enabled response, not a payment or reward for an unaided human vote for God.

As we live this new life in the company of the gathered saints, the implications (relevance) of the gospel will be worked out in practice. They concern, *inter alia*, going on to perfection, seeking first the kingdom of God, heeding the prophetic challenges regarding justice and peace. Since Professor Van de Beek would not deny any of this, I conclude that he overstates his anti-instrumentalist case in a disjunctive manner, and that a careful analysis of "use," "abuse," and "relevance" yields a more nuanced account in which the "either . . . or" is balanced by the "both . . . and." If the peril of the former is the godly ghetto, the peril of the latter is an activism ungrounded in the gospel: "We must, of course, go some way to meet the world, but when we do meet we must do more than greet. . . . Refinement is not reform; and amelioration is not regeneration."[13]

13. Forsyth, *Positive Preaching and the Modern Mind*, 89–90.

From the peril of the ghetto and the peril of ungrounded activism, good Lord deliver us. Rather, may we, by God's grace, know the joy and the challenge of that true piety before God that first honours him, and then inevitably becomes salt and light in the world—which is just another way of honouring him.

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