Introduction

The infusion of public debate with religious arguments, though as genuinely American as apple pie, has in recent times generated a carefully articulated position for "checking religion at the door" before a citizen enters the public forum.[1] It would appear that at least in part this position is the liberal's response to the success that has accompanied the Religious Right's discovery of its public voice. As a result of the collective efforts of a broad coalition of Christian Evangelicals, elections have been influenced if not determined, judicial appointments have undergone uncharacteristically rigorous litmus tests, and local and state school boards have been pressured into aggressive tactics in the selection of science curricula and textbooks. The ironically un-liberal argument from the left seems to be this: Though for over two centuries, American political decisions have been hammered out on the anvil of religio-political debate, the civic manner in which that debate historically has been conducted is being threatened by a sanctimonious appeal to purportedly uncontestable biblical warrants for criminalizing abortion, banning gay marriage, and mandating the teaching of creationism in public schools. The argument goes on to claim that with the maturing of our culture into a post-Christian secularism and the increase in religious and ideological diversity (e.g., presently in the U.S. Muslims have come to outnumber Episcopalians), the free expression of religious ideas in public debate exacerbates civic tension and undermines a society's ability to solve its most urgent problems.

In the pages that follow I seek to make the case that religiously informed thought has played and can continue to play a constructive role in the public forum over domestic and international issues that are weighted with moral content. At the same time, the stark fact that religion has often been introduced into public controversies in

1. Richard Rorty, "Religion as Conversation-stopper."

a manner more manipulative and coercive than civil and engaging underlines the need to clarify what style of religious argument is proper, legal within our First Amendment tradition, and helpful in relation to the health and vitality of the Republic. Beyond the issue of what can be called the etiquette of public discourse is the equally controversial issue of the nature of a religious tradition's authority within the public realm, and it should be granted from the outset that in a religiously diverse society, all scriptures must be treated on an equal plain. As we shall see, widely divergent views emerge, ranging from the fundamentalist view that a given Scripture infallibly circumscribes divinely revealed truth that is normative for all human questions and social issues to the view that all scriptures are to be understood strictly as the products of human authors.

Inasmuch as my view occupies a position between the fundamentalist/absolutist and the humanist/relativist views, I shall seek to articulate a position that accepts a particular scriptural tradition, the Jewish-Christian tradition, as a reliable witness to divine purpose for human existence and the entire created order while affirming at the same time that any interpreter of that tradition participates fully in the epistemological limits that define the viewpoint of every human, no matter what his or her religion or philosophical position.

Because both facets of the problem facing the person of faith who seeks to explain the relevance of Scripture for our life together in a diverse society are complicated and resistant to any comprehensive answer, the chapters that follow are best viewed as explorations. But rather than haphazard, they seek to probe several of the questions that I believe lie at the heart of the question, what light does the Bible shed on life in our nation and world today? In terms of my personal scholarship, it can be viewed as a "trial balloon" sent out into the open skies of the public square in hope for constructive criticism and lively debate.