

1998

The Relevance of Religion to a Lawyer's Work

Peggy T. Cantwell

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr>



Part of the [Law Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Peggy T. Cantwell, *The Relevance of Religion to a Lawyer's Work*, 66 Fordham L. Rev. 1333 (1998).
Available at: <https://ir.lawnet.fordham.edu/flr/vol66/iss4/26>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by FLASH: The Fordham Law Archive of Scholarship and History. It has been accepted for inclusion in Fordham Law Review by an authorized editor of FLASH: The Fordham Law Archive of Scholarship and History. For more information, please contact tmelnick@law.fordham.edu.

The Relevance of Religion to a Lawyer's Work

Cover Page Footnote

Associate Pastor, Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church, Austin, Texas. M.Div.:D.Min., Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. My thanks to Professor Russell G. Pearce for his vision and courage in leading us in this dialogue.

THE RELEVANCE OF RELIGION TO A LAWYER'S WORK

*Peggy T. Cantwell**

INTRODUCTION

THE relevance of religion to our lives in any dimension—in society, in vocation, in personal relationship, moral obligation, whatever it might be—depends on how we define religion. The root of the word suggests reverence, something to rely on, commitment, bound to, devotion to faith in God. The New Testament uses the word sparingly.¹ The Bible is clear that religion is not a matter of a system but of a relationship; first, our relationship with God, and second, the relationship we have with each other. This is formulated and repeated again and again in both the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament.²

In my own tradition, which is Christian, we are invited and commanded to come to God in personal faith and commitment. Our lives in every aspect are involved in that commitment and are to reflect and demonstrate the character and style that are distinctly shaped by our faith. In our professions, if that relationship with a living God does not manifest itself in our choices, our decision-making processes, and our conduct—it really is not faith or relationship at all. It is perhaps some kind of sterile philosophy or credal statement that does not actually cut into the fiber of our lives. If religion is simply a ritualistic formulation or a philosophical concept, it will not give us power for living, nor joy in our relationships, nor wisdom by which we may move with distinction and hope in the world.

As it relates to a lawyer's work, these same principles apply. The bottom line is that if religion is to be relevant to the lawyer's work, it must be true religion: a personal relationship and interaction with God that penetrates our lives. My understanding of how religion may be relevant to the lawyer's work is here addressed in three parts: 1) The privilege and opportunities of the lawyer; 2) The value of persons; and 3) The possibility for transformation and hope.

* Associate Pastor, Westlake Hills Presbyterian Church, Austin, Texas. M.Div.; D.Min., Fuller Theological Seminary, Pasadena, California. My thanks to Professor Russell G. Pearce for his vision and courage in leading us in this dialogue.

1. *James* 1:26-27; *Acts* 26:5; *Colossians* 2:18-19 (New Revised Standard Version 1989). All Biblical citations and quotations in this article are from the New Revised Standard Version.

2. For a few samples, please see *James* 1:26-27; *Mark* 7:7-9,13; *Zechariah* 7:9-11; *Amos* 5:21-24; *Joel* 2:12-13; *Deuteronomy* 8:17-19; *Deuteronomy* 30:6, 15-20, *Micah* 6:6-8; *Malachi* 8:6.

I. THE PRIVILEGE AND OPPORTUNITIES OF THE LAWYER

Because of the cultural demands on a lawyer for high education and for an understanding of the various strata of society, sociologically and professionally, the attorney is in a position to reach people at many different levels. Often, people come to a lawyer at particularly stressful points in their lives or at times of transition and/or times of personal hurt or fear. The attorney has a unique privilege to hear someone share confidences at levels deeper than the usual superficial cocktail party or conference room exchange. If the attorney is willing to honor the person and listen to her story, the attorney has an opportunity to enter into the life of another person and participate with that person in a critical time. This is an opportunity many seldom experience.

There is a further opportunity for the lawyer to impact someone's life by explaining the sort of participation the lawyer and client could have together in that particular situation. There is the possibility to bring the client to a new level of viewing her situation, to identify alternatives before the client in this particular instance, and to help her explore possible strategies. This is a meaningful opportunity to help the client escape the gridlock of stress, to see the bigger picture and to move with positive energy in new ways.

The lawyer lacking the sense of the power and presence of God in her own life will, in all likelihood, have no comprehension of what this privilege and opportunity represent. The person who omits God from her life tends to view everything in a mechanical way—with a certain cause and effect, win or lose application to most situations. That person is often in jeopardy of missing the great possibility of exercising privilege and opportunity.

II. THE VALUE OF PERSONS

In order for the lawyer to comprehend and appropriate the special quality of her privilege and opportunity, that lawyer must possess a sense of the uniqueness and value of the person who comes as a client. My experience suggests that a person who is not in touch with the power of the living God will be dead to God in her own mind and spirit and will miss the value of her own personhood for that reason. Such a lawyer, whose self-esteem may not be intact because of a missing connection with God, may not view the client who comes with the appropriate awe of that client's value and uniqueness.

This will speak volumes about the relevance of religion to the work of the lawyer. There is no way to create a climate of genuine relationship with a client if a professional does not recognize the high value of that client. The client must be viewed as a human being who is absolutely unique in this world and who has intrinsic value quite apart

from the circumstances or other factors of that person's character, personality, and background.

Today, most sociologists tell us that one of the greatest problems in our culture is the prevalence of low self-esteem. Thus, when any person comes into contact with another who treats her with appropriate value, interest and honor, there is a spark which suggests a helpful relationship beginning from the very first meeting.³ The recent rage for "values" has often omitted the individual value of persons.⁴ It is, therefore, most important that we approach one another with a high esteem for the other.

In this subject of the relevance of religion, I would prefer using the phrase "personal relationship to God" rather than "religion." The reason for this is that no one is really without religion. The humanistic person, the devout atheist, the person caught up in various cultic practices—all these people are "religious." This is substantiated in various disciplines. It is substantiated most clearly when we simply observe people. Everyone has something she worships. That may be money or youth, education or position, prestige, power, the postulation of a scientific theory, even the worship of a "no god." What we worship is that which motivates us, that by which we make decisions and establish priorities. Some force or concept, some person or creed drives us and therefore can rightly be identified as the thing or person we worship.

A personal relationship to God gives us a new perspective of everything and everyone. It will give the lawyer a new viewpoint of her own value and profession, colleagues, support staff, expertise, and training. This new viewpoint will be relevant to every facet of the lawyer's activity and thought, whether at home or at her law office.

With this new perspective, all circumstances and challenges take on a new dimension. The lawyer—indeed, people in any profession—will realize that just because a thing can be done does not necessarily mean it is the best choice. In the same manner, realizing that an action is accepted socially does not mean it is appropriate. Just because a certain behavior is legal does not mean it is moral or ethical. A true sense of oneself and others deepens, widens, and enriches every situation and every decision.

Eventually, we see that the value we place on ourselves and on others gives new purpose and meaning to life. The work of law is no longer simply the mechanism of law. It becomes a meaningful investment in people. It becomes an adventure of daring to risk oneself to serve others. It gives a new meaning to leadership. Jesus Christ said that the person who wants to be a leader—the person who wants to

3. See *Romans 15:7*; Lewis B. Smedes, *Shame and Grace* 105-07, 143-45 (1993); Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart* 98-99 (1985).

4. Os Guinness, *The American Hour: A Time of Reckoning and the Once and Future Role of Faith* 340-46 (1993).

win—must be willing to serve others.⁵ Such a concept cuts across the grain of our cultural mindset; yet, it was modeled by Jesus. He came to serve and give His life as a ransom for all people. It is this kind of servant leadership which will revolutionize the law profession and other segments of society as well.

Max De Pree, former chairman and CEO of Herman Miller, Inc., a billion-dollar furniture manufacturer and author of several books on leadership, expands on this idea and helps us see where such a concept of leadership can lead. "Leadership," De Pree says "is an art. A leader must become a servant . . . leaders have an obligation to ask the right questions . . ."⁶ The question raised by this radical philosophy of leadership is: who has the courage to enter into leadership with a new set of definitions, a unique value and honor of all persons, and a new willingness to invest himself/herself. The value of persons is a central component in our structure for all of life. It is most certainly an essential component in a service profession such as the law.

III. THE POSSIBILITY FOR TRANSFORMATION AND HOPE

To bring hope and meaning to a world depressed, isolated and yearning for intimacy is a reality for the lawyer who will grasp the truth which a personal relationship with God offers. This may sound a bit elevated and noble for the role of a lawyer. Because of the unique interaction which the lawyer can build with a client, if the lawyer is willing to invest in the client and is willing to enter into a genuine partnership with the client to work through the circumstance, I believe that it can bring hope to both parties. The world is so convinced that there really is not any meaning beyond that which they can see. To begin to realize that there can be a genuine caring relationship in something that is normally viewed as a very mechanical exchange would give birth to new energy in the life situation of each party.

The fact is, as we move in various small personal ways in individual situations, we may have cosmic influence in the culture and in the world. Each one of us thinks that our particular situation is too small or too local to have major relevance in the world. The truth is, that minor occurrences can be of enormous importance in each person's life and that life has particular importance in that person's sphere in the world. Each small decision, each interaction can have a lifetime of consequences.

I think the forces of our culture have tried to convince us that we can not impact society, and that what we do does not make any difference. This is, of course, untrue at the individual level. It is equally

5. *Mark* 9:33-35; 10:43-45; *Matthew* 20:26-28.

6. Max De Pree is author of the best selling books *Leadership is an Art* (1989) and *Leadership Jazz* (1992). His new book *Leading Without Power* was published in October, 1997.

untrue in the sphere where one touches many other lives. The culture has tried to convince us that we must conform to the image it sets for us or we do not have a chance of being successful, happy, and fulfilled. The truth is that all of society's promises have failed miserably; they have neither been satisfying nor fulfilling. Rather, the allure of modern culture has increased frustration and caused a sense of desparation. The technology which promised to bring progress continues to increase isolation and confuse our reality. On a recent edition of *Nightline*, several high-tech leaders expressed their fears concerning the dangers of creating false realities that persuade people to believe and act upon that which they think they have seen, when in fact the "seen" people or situations are not real but manipulated.

The lawyer who is willing to try new avenues—not remaining trapped by the mechanics of the codes of rules or the habits of his colleagues and predecessors, instead exploring the possibility of relationship with her client—has a significant window through which transformation may be discovered and experienced.

Often, a concern is articulated that many lawyers work in large corporate structures where the lawyer feels far removed from clients, it is difficult to foster individual relationships. I would suggest that even in such a setting, investment in interaction with co-workers, staff, and supervisors will provide deep and meaningful professional relationships that will influence the work of the lawyer with her client. There are a variety of levels where the dynamic of the lawyer's relationship to God will impact the lawyer's work.

The underlying principle is that if we submit our minds and patterns of conduct to a new view of ourselves and of all people we work with at every level, God will do a new work in us and through us.

Alasdair MacIntyre provides an interesting commentary on current definitions and models that eliminate, or at least blur, our value of others. MacIntyre insists we must return to something new, otherwise, we are not dealing in reality.⁷ The transforming power of God can penetrate in ways beyond our human ability to calculate or measure. A person can never know the reality of that truth until one dares to apply a new manner of leadership and a new definition of value.

It is precisely because the lawyer works in the field of law, often in corporate or other settings which tempt her with the possibility of corruption, that the lawyer can draw on the law and experience to address certain situations with new meaning. The lawyer may pierce problems, conflicts, and disputes with a beam of light that will astound and impact the world.

Another benefit of this new way of approaching persons is that a lawyer who dares to deal in a different way with his clients sets a

7. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* 29, 103-13 (1981).

model for her colleagues. The world is somewhat bereft of people who have the courage to pursue their vocation in a context of moral ethics and an understanding of the grace and wisdom of God. Often, I think people are afraid to explore that. It would seem they are afraid that if they do not conform, they will miss the chance to be powerful or successful. They are afraid they will be the object of ridicule, perhaps even persecution, in some way. The man or woman who dares to exercise the freedom to examine things in new ways becomes a remarkable model for others.

CONCLUSION

If you are a lawyer, the possibility for transformation and pointing to hope in a hopeless world is in your hands. Thus, living religion—a personal relationship with the living God—*is* relevant to the work of a lawyer.