

By William Clancy

PITTSBURGH — Patriotism, Samuel Johnson said, is the last refuge of a scoundrel. Religion, in the rhetoric of American politics, is surely the first refuge of self-righteous patriotism.

One of the persistent and depressing obscurities in our national life is the use made by politicians of what Winston Churchill called "the God bit."

American statesmen invoke the Deity to cast a smokescreen of rectitude over their fumbleings toward survival. The prestige of the Almighty's high office is used to canonize policies that, at best, are reasonably enlightened but, at worst, are cynically immoral.

In the name of a principle—separation of church and state—we deny the use of public funds for the teaching of purely secular subjects in church-related schools. But we seem to expect our Presidents to worship publicly each Sunday, and our Presidents, in turn, find it easy and unembarrassing to suggest God's support for their policies—from the waging of wars against "Godless" enemies to the granting of pardon to a predecessor whose crimes have been neither cited nor acknowledged.

Dwight D. Eisenhower instituted the practice of opening his Cabinet meetings with prayer and, during his Administration, much of the official rhetoric of the cold war invoked poor God as an American ally.

During John F. Kennedy's brief tenure, God was discreetly kept off White House invitation lists, but during Richard M. Nixon's Administration the

White House was turned, once a week, into an interdenominational chapel.

There, on most Sundays, scrubbed worshipers heard respectable clergymen preach comfortable sermons on those moral virtues Mr. Nixon tried so hard to put forward as the mark of his Administration. Mr. Nixon himself, at the conclusion of his first major address on the Watergate affair, piously called down God's blessing upon his listeners.

And now Gerald R. Ford shows signs of surpassing his predecessors in reliance on the Deity's advice. His pronouncements to date imply that God is a member of his policy-planning staff.

His first address to the Congress suggested that, following the Nixon trauma, no atheists were left in America, and in the text of his statement of pardon for Mr. Nixon, God and prayer are woven in as threads of grace, holding together, and giving ultimate sanction to, a decision otherwise compounded of human elements.

The Bishop of Rome—the Pope—styles himself "servant of the servants of God." By suggesting, in his pardon statement, that his decision was inspired by convictions he felt "not as President, but as a humble servant of God," Mr. Ford again theologizes politics and introduces into Presidential preachment an analogue to the papal style itself.

Both the religious and the nonreligious should demand an end to such nonsense. Neither God nor man are honored or well-served by it.

It is a truism to observe that we live in a postreligious world, and the con-

tinuing political effort to elicit the support of a hidden God (whose ways are mysterious) is worse than an anachronism; it is blasphemous misuse of what religious men regard as sacred.

Now, that which is sacred cannot be casually approached or touched. Certainly it cannot be "used" or marketed. The sacred can be spoken of only with reticence and awe. It cannot be made the easy associate of men's designs.

In the public policy and style of a secular society, God should not be invoked as a convenience or cited as a platitude. God, by any theological definition, is not comfortable.

The dangers of continuing the present stance of public piety in Washington are real. First, "God" is made an accessory to the sordid as well as to the noble facts of our national life. Second, the implications are clear that only believing, churchgoing citizens are "true" Americans.

The first is a debasement of God and his freedom; the second is a diminution of man and his freedom. The one is antireligious; the other is anti-human.

Presidents grant pardon for the crimes and follies of their fellow citizens, even unrepentant predecessors in office. But if God is made a partner in such matters, who shall grant a pardon to God?

The Rev. William Clancy, a former editor of Commonweal and Newsweek, and founding editor of Worldview magazine, is now Provost of The Oratory, in Pittsburgh.