A CONSIDERED OPINION

BY GLENN LOURY

"God Talk" and Public Policy

I am delighted to see this issue of the *Brookings Review* being devoted to the subject of religion in American public life. I say this not primarily because I am a believer, but because as a social scientist I now find it imperative to think seriously about the "God talk" we hear with increasing frequency these days and to consider what it might mean for formulating and executing public policy.

In recent years I have grown dissatisfied with the clinical, abstract accounts of human behavior that underlie our purportedly scientific study of society.

The human beings in these accounts are soulless creatures—utility-maximizing buyers and sellers, behaviorally conditioned violators of the law, genetically predisposed substance abusers, and the like. This brand of social science propounds theories about the mechanisms of human action that omit any consideration of what most makes us human—our awareness of our own mortality and our fitful, uncertain, often unsuccessful attempts to give our lives some meaning that just might transcend our pitifully brief existence. My sense is that this omission has left social scientists less well equipped to prescribe remedies for the most serious social problems that our societies now confront.

Permit me to offer an illustration. One of the leading social scientists of our time is James Q. Wilson, whose piece in this issue is worthy of particularly close attention. Over the years Wilson has written wisely and well about how parents discipline their children and about the consequences of such behavior for the later-life sociability of their charges. He has argued that regularly providing modest positive and negative reinforcements to a young child for good and bad actions lowers the risk of antisocial behavior as the child enters adolescence. Once allowed to develop, these antisocial behaviors are hard to change. So if the character-shaping tutelage of vigilant parents is missing in early childhood, the young adult who emerges may turn out to be incorrigible.

This is a matter of no small policy significance, since millions of children in the most disadvantaged quarters of our society are growing to maturity absent conscientiously applied parental discipline. And yet, a great many people connected with religious institutions are laboring, in the most marginal of American communities, to turn these "incorrigibles" in a different direction. These religiously inspired activists confront young adults who received neither proper nutrition in infancy nor sufficient verbal stimulation as toddlers, who never learned to internalize as second nature the difference between right and wrong, and who have committed the acts that incorrigible, undisciplined adolescents commit. Yet despite all that, with God's help, as they would say, these lives have been turned around.

What is interesting to me—as a social scientist, to be sure, but also as a citizen—is what I will call the anti-deterministic character in this way of thinking. Most social science offers deterministic accounts of human action, with some probability distribution around the predicted behavior that is meant to account for errors in our observations. Our theories say, in effect, that material conditions mediated by social institutions cause us to behave in a certain way. Yet surely it is more plausible to hold that material and institutional givens can at best establish only a fairly

Glenn Loury is University Professor, professor of economics, and director of the Institute on Race and Social Division at Boston University.

wide range within which behavior must lie, and that the specific actions within this range for any particular human being will depend on motivation, will, and spirit—that is, on what a person takes to be the source of meaning in his or her life, on what animates him or her at the deepest level.

If this is right, then what is crucial to grasp is the implication that the behavior of freely choosing, socially situated, spiritually endowed human beings will in some essential way be indeterminate, unpredictable, even mysterious. For if human behavior is in substantial part a consequence of what people understand to be meaningful, of what they believe in, then the processes of social interaction and mutual stimulation that generate and sustain patterns of belief in human communities become centrally important. But these processes—persuasion, conformity, conversion, myth-construction, and the like—are open ended. They are, at best, only weakly constrained by material conditions. That is, while what we believe about the transcendent powerfully shapes how we act in a given situation, these beliefs cannot themselves be deduced as a necessary consequence of our situation. We can always agree to believe differently, or more fervently—particularly if those with whom we are most closely connected are undergoing a similar transformation. Religious revivals and reformations can sweep through our ranks and change our collective view of the world virtually overnight. We can be moved to make enormous sacrifices on behalf of abstract goals. We are ever capable, as Vaclav Havel has said so well, of "transcending the world of existences."

I admit to being deeply moved by this fact about human experience—that we are spiritual creatures, generators of meaning, beings that must not and cannot "live by bread alone." I have seen the power for good (and for ill) of communal organization acting through the constitution of collectivities that are like-minded in their understandings about the meaning of life, about, as the believers say, "what God put us here for."

Until social science takes this aspect of the human drama with the utmost seriousness, it will do justice neither to its subjects of study, nor to the national community that looks to it for useful advice about a host of social ills.

I admit to being deeply moved by this fact about human experience—that we are spiritual creatures, generators of meaning, beings that must not and cannot "live by bread alone."

An important consideration here, of course, is the proper role of government. I would like to conclude with this observation: however one reads the Constitution, the fact is that, willy-nilly, government must play an important role in that process of belief construction and propagation. We are not going to withdraw from the public support of indigent families or public provision of educational services, or from the maintenance of civil order through the coercive institutions of policing and incarceration. Billions of public dollars will be spent, and public institutions are going to be created. This money and these institutions will interact, helpfully or not, with what communities of believers are trying to achieve. The centrality of religious experience in the lives of so many Americans must therefore be reckoned with by the prudent exponent of public policy.

For my own part, I pray that broadly based, deeply rooted, powerfully led, spiritually anointed movements in our most disadvantaged communities will not just be tolerated by our public institutions, but that as a nation we will find ways of supporting these communities of faith as they seek—in mysterious and unpredictable ways—to transform, and to transcend, the social reality. ■