

Religion

U.S. in Moral Plunge, Colson Says

■ **Society:** Imprisoned in the Watergate scandal, former White House counsel now ministers to inmates. He warns about the dangers of stripping away religion from public life.

From Associated Press

NEW YORK—Charles W. (Chuck) Colson, a man who has ridden a symbolic roller coaster from high to low and back up again, sees the country as plunging from high moral ground toward faithless ruin.

"We are stripping religion away from public life to our great and everlasting peril," he said. "It is the most self-destructive process the nation could embark on.

"We are trying to erase the indispensable role of religion in informing the moral consensus by which civilized society has survived."

Colson once hit bottom himself, spiritually and physically, a cynical White House counsel sent to prison. But he has regained a height, in service and honor, building an acclaimed, worldwide ministry in behalf of prisoners.

As winner of the \$1-million 1993 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, the previously imprisoned "hatchet man" for President Richard Nixon in the Watergate scandal said he was reclaimed by God's "amazing grace" to serve his truth.

Besides building Prison Fellowship into an international network for mending lives of prisoners and their families and seeking prison reforms, Colson also has turned out a dozen books on contemporary culture and faith.

"We live in a post-Christian age today," he said in an interview. "We've attempted to become a city of man without a city of God. We're stripping away our religious roots."

Colson cited the late world historian Will Durant's conclusion that no nation in history has survived without a strong moral code informed by religion and said this cohesive basis is being destroyed in the United States.

"We have embarked into a brave new world without moral directions, of values erased from teaching, of tolerance elevated above truth, of the expunging of the last vestiges of religious symbols in the country," he said.

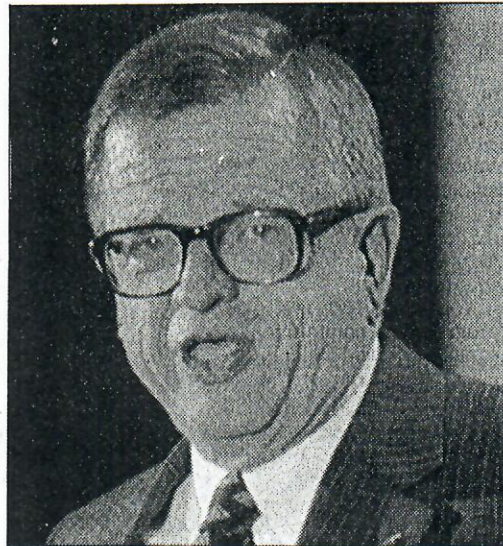
He cited numerous cases of prohibited religious mottoes or art from public buildings, parks and inscriptions, of banned carols and the Ten Commandments from schools, the elimination of group prayers at ceremonies and events.

Recalling that the late Supreme Court Justice William Douglas warned in the 1950s that such steps were creating not neutrality toward religion but a "brooding hostility" to it, Colson said:

"That's exactly what we've got now. We're no longer neutral about religion but hostile to religion. On most every front there is an increasing secularizing of America."

He said movies and TV entertainment usually treat religion as nutty or nonexistent, and it is marginalized or disparaged in other media, although 43% of adults attend worship each week.

"Among some of the media, there's a genuine



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Charles Colson addresses a news conference in February after winning the Templeton Prize.

hostility toward religion, seeing it as interfering with people's individual free choice of lifestyles," he said.

That aversion also prevails in the academic atmosphere of most secular universities, he said, and has reached the point that professors risk losing their jobs if they let it be known they are Christian believers.

"The basic presupposition has developed that we are no longer a Judeo-Christian culture," he said.

Colson, 61, a Baptist whose commitment to Christianity came during the Watergate crisis, considers himself an evangelical. But he is a special variety, advocating cross-denominational cooperation, Protestant and Catholic, to uphold biblical principles in society.

"God never intended us to be spiritual loners," he said. "That's one of the curses of modern evangelicals, their rugged, individualistic, entrepreneurial approach to Christianity. It's an abomination."

He tackles the problem in his latest book, "The Body," published by Word, stressing the essential unity of faith. "We have to see ourselves as part of one holy, catholic, apostolic church, as one body," he said.

Colson, who spent seven months in prison for obstructing justice, founded Prison Fellowship in 1976. Based in Reston, Va., its staff of 280 and about 50,000 volunteers work at 800 state and federal prisons. It has branches in 54 other countries.

It carries on a variety of programs, ranging from Bible study and work furloughs for community projects to readying prisoners for jobs.

Colson said the Templeton prize money will go into the fellowship's operation, as do royalties from his books. He limits himself to an annual salary of \$59,000.

Without religious underpinnings, society collapses, he said. "But the pervasive view in America today is that religion is totally private, something we don't talk about, something without any influence on life."