

AMERICAN YOUTH AND THE PROBLEM OF GOD: A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION*

An axiom of political theology: Every theological utterance is understood within a socio-political matrix. The theologian who does not decipher the socio-political bearing of theological utterances does not account for their full significance.

The problem of God is in part a problem of a new, powerful religion which has superseded Christianity; and it is in part a problem of politics. It is a problem of experience rather than a problem of theory.

It is not true that action, in all respects, precedes theory; but in some respects it does (*actio sequitur esse*). On the one hand, before we begin to theorize we have already been acting for many years, and we have already absorbed into our tissue the socio-political project of the culture to which we belong. In this sense, we are in action long before we begin to theorize, and our theories acquire a context from the praxis of which they are a part.¹ On the other hand, fidelity to the drive to understand leads us to that dark night beneath the depths of our culture, beneath the depths of our own instinctive actions.² Fidelity to understanding—through theory and imagination—may precede action and lead in fact to dramatic breakthroughs in the future possibilities of action. In this sense, reflection often precedes and liberates action.³

In some ways, then, action is first; in others, theory is first.

* © by Michael Novak. This essay is incorporated, in a somewhat revised form, in *All the Catholic People* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971).

¹ I have elaborated this point in a criticism of Lonergan which *The Commonwealth* entitled "The Lonergan Explosion," (May 29, 1970) 268-70; and in the paper (unpublished) I presented at the Lonergan Conference (April, 1970) entitled "The Political Theology of Bernard Lonergan."

² Further elaborated in my *The Experience of Nothingness* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

³ This side of the issue is overlooked by activists and organizers, as for example Jerry Rubin in *Do It!* (New York, 1970).

1. THE INVISIBLE RELIGION

When those on the left use the word "youth," they are commonly thinking of the astonishing outburst of radical politics among college youth in elite colleges during the late 1960s. There is good reason for singling out youthful elites, whose contribution to leadership in the future may be presumed to be unusually significant. But the social bias involved must not be overlooked. Among voters between twenty-one and thirty in the presidential election of 1968, for example, a higher percentage than in other age groups did not vote; and among those who did, George Wallace found greater support than in any other age group.⁴ California is a pacesetter for the nation's youth, and there are signs that in 1971 electoral politics is decidedly "in" again, and that high school students are enrolling overwhelmingly—from 3 to 1 to 90 to 1 as Democrats.⁵ But the main point to be stressed is that the word "youth" demands some care. Which youth? Where? In what socio-political context?

Peter Berger pointed out in *Movement and Revolution*⁶ that one must distinguish youth culture, the movement, and radical politics. Of these, by far the narrowest circle is the last. Many who consider themselves part of "the movement"—for peace, for ecology, for social change—are by no means radical in their politics. The largest circle by far, however, is that of youth culture—those millions of young people, especially those in college, whom a number of contemporary pressures continue to separate for a long time from the acculturation of adulthood. They are too old to maintain the affectionate home life of their childhood; too young to have to accept the impersonality and compromises of bureaucratic life. They blow back and forth like the leaves of Dante's Limbo.

For economic necessity and economic affluence have created a new institutionless world into which many young people are thrown

⁴ Scammon and Wattenberg, *The Real Majority* (New York: Coward-McCann, Inc., 1970), pp. 46-53.

⁵ Steven V. Roberts, "Youths on Coast Swell Voter List," *New York Times*, May 23, 1971.

⁶ With Richard Neuhaus, (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1969). See also my *Politics: Realism and Imagination* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971) pp. 140-62.

for the period of their twenties. There is no need of them in the labor force and the general affluence so far guarantees that they will not starve. Their parents no doubt showed more respect for their individuality, and treated them more reasonably, than any parents in the history of the race. Vice President Agnew refers to this change in the dignity accorded children as "permissiveness." But there is evidence that the causes are structural and economic as well as psychological. Hence, as the industrial revolution and the enlightenment discovered childhood, and as the period during and after World War II discovered teenagers, so now technetronic societies have invented twentyhood.

It used to be that young men of sixteen or eighteen were thrown a spear or a shovel and told to go to work. And they commonly took wives and soon had children whose lives were dependent on their skills. Today, sexual experience is through technology readily available apart from marriage; and young men of the middle class are economically marginal. Past determinants of maturity, therefore, are no longer at work. Many young people at twenty find themselves thoroughly dispensable—at least as dispensable as used cars, houses, neighborhoods, landmarks, whole sections of cities. They are brought up, moreover, in the most atomic and lonely of societies in human history.⁷

I am speaking, of course, of middle class young people, among whom teachers of theology are most likely to work. I am speaking not so much of the most ideologically informed, but of that great majority who have not yet come to political, ideological consciousness. Indirectly, what I say bears on the poor, the black, and even on the lower middle class white who does not go to college; but my main focus is on the white middle-class college population.⁸

Nearly all young people today feel a great insecurity, a sense of transience, a feeling of homelessness.⁹ In every social class, there is a feeling of "things coming apart," of uncertainty, anger, and hos-

⁷ Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness* (Boston: Beacon, 1970).

⁸ See Peter L. and Brigitte Berger, "The Blueing of America," *The New Republic*, April 3, 1971, pp. 20-23.

⁹ Robert Bellah, 1970 Dudleian Lecture at Harvard, "No Direction Home" (unpublished).

tility. For the upper middle class in elite schools, especially, no profession seems pure, noble, humane; every avenue into the future seems either tainted, or blocked, or threatened. Should a young person become a lawyer, a doctor, a scientist, a clergyman, a worker, a soldier, a politician? Whichever way a young person turns there are influential others who accuse him (her) of "selling out," of contributing to the problem rather than to the solution; there is little sense of dignity, or security, or inner peace, and much self-doubt. Youth is classically a time of uncertainty. But twentyhood is prolonged uncertainty, and it occurs today in the midst of vast cultural uncertainties as well.

The dominant religion in America, meanwhile, is not Christianity. It is, rather, and at its best, the "civil religion," the religion of the "American way of life," of which Robert Bellah has written.¹⁰ It is, at its worst, the "invisible religion" of which Thomas Luckmann has written.¹¹ The characteristics of this dominant religion bear upon young people in an especially grinding way.

The invisible religion of America is a pervasive pragmatism and a thorough ordering of life. As much as possible, the sacred is driven out. What Harvey Cox once called "the profane, the pragmatic and the secular" nearly fills the background consciousness of young people at suburban and urban high schools. On the one hand, cars, peers, money, activities, television, movies, music mark their faces with a certain hardness. On the other hand, many have been deeply affected by the gentleness and softness symbolized by Woodstock. Their childhood world was highly relational, at least in the limited sphere of the small family.

Many of the young grow up to an astonishing degree apart from contact with adults. Many suffer from suburban deprivation. Essentially, most know asphalt streets, lawns, automobiles; few know woods, fields, farmwork, mountains, sea. The adults from whom they might learn human motivations and angularity are their parents; a few of their parents' friends, glimpsed casually; their busy teachers; and television characters—few have lived in extended families or tightly knit neighborhoods. Most know little of hunger, disease,

¹⁰ *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), pp. 168-89.

¹¹ *The Invisible Religion* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1967).

hardship, death, agony or other disasters which have been the common inheritance of most of mankind. Thus they scarcely know a world in which wisdom is wrested from pain, a world in need of crucifixion and redemption, a world of profound tragedy. The middle class young are in some respects remarkably innocent; in others, far more experienced than their parents were at a comparable age.

According to the invisible religion, especially as it is lived and taught by the Americanized middle classes, slow but steady progress is always being made. Life is inherently reasonable. Humans are fundamentally good. Failures or betrayals result because somebody "blew it." (They had it made, and they blew it.) The interior life of participants in the invisible religion is flattened down—little of the orneriness, stubbornness, eccentricity, angularity, passion or madness of those of our grandparents or uncles who came from "the old country." Their descendants are smoother, more tolerant, hang loose, play things by ear, learn early not to be obdurate or obstinate, learn how to be liked. Until the advent of "the crazies," those among them voted by their schoolmates as "having the most personality" would in other generations in other places have been thought to be exactly the persons of *no* personality. They smile a lot. Like Miss America, television personalities, and successful politicians.

The invisible religion in America hangs around all of us like the invisible gas of which Bernanos wrote in *The Diary of a Country Priest*; tasteless, colorless, it seeps into our lungs; or settles on our shoulders like ash. Although a great many young Americans contemplate suicide, although excruciating loneliness is designed into the structure of our lives, although pervasive neuroses and uncertainties are everywhere manifest, the invisible religion insists that life is rational, that things will get better, that it is our patriotic duty to love our land or leave it—and that one must not talk about the underground impulses, madresses, and evil secrets of the heart. No one in high school does. It is not the wise, the good, the American thing to do. There is often great rage just under the surface of the skin.

Meanwhile, Americans long to maintain that the intimate group to which they belong is fundamentally good, decent, and humane. Evils are projected outwards upon others of evil will. *Others* are the source of evil. "The system," or "outside agitators."

A fundamental instinct of life in America is pathos. The category "victim" is a favorite self-image. The classical political emotion of the Protestant bourgeoisie dominates discussion: moral indignation. In most situations, the conservative is indignant at troublemakers; the liberal is indignant at extremists; the radical is indignant at corruption. The inmost secret of the pathetic way of life is the category "victim": *I, who am good, have been wronged! I, poor racist, imperialist, fascist, male chauvinist, am so terribly sorry!*¹² The most American characteristic is to indulge in feelings of guilt, and to manipulate others through guilt. We are a nation of preachers. A tragic sense would lead us to expect less of ourselves. The pathetic sense leads us to a novel *delectatio morosa*: "Tell me again how guilty I am." "Make me feel guilty again."

What does it mean for immigrants to "become Americanized"? In part, it means to be shaped to the demands of the invisible religion. The motifs are vaguely related to Christian motifs, especially to motifs of Protestant Christianity. It is important to see—with more nuances than there is time to linger upon—that such Americanization afflicts some Americans of all social classes and all political persuasions. The invisible religion is not the property of "middle America" or of "the silent majority." It unites conservatives, liberals and radicals alike in a great national liturgy. Each is the indispensable demon for the others. The fundamental belief of each is that when the others are at last converted and become like them—or at least when their side *wins*—the sun will rise behind the peaceful hills.

The difficulty the invisible religion makes for the problem of God is pervasive and fundamental. In the invisible religion, there is little room for experiences that are not rational, ordered, and instrumentalist. In the large organizations to which Americans necessarily belong, people frequently feel "used." Emotions are a threat to objectivity. Upward mobility entails constantly shifting priorities and values. Technology and advertising make everything dispensable. We *say*, of course, that each human person has an inalienable dignity.

¹² An example from Harvey Cox: "As a male and probably as a chauvinist (though I'm working on it), I was shaken and awakened . . ." his review of *The Follies*, "The Cultural Captivity of Women," *Christianity and Crisis*, May 31, 1971, p. 112. Guilt can be a fruitful emotion; also destructive.

Yet there are almost no visible signs, no ceremonies, no rituals in which the everlasting, permanent, and indestructible dignity of persons is celebrated. Instead, everything we touch is marked for obsolescence, discarded, replaced. The average American friendship, according to a major women's magazine, lasts 2½ years. People move away from one another. Friends are dispersed across the city or the nation. Transience is our style. "Freedom," according to an astute observer in *Psychology Today*, the *Stimmen der Zeit* of the invisible religion, is now defined as "the ability to move."¹³ Durkheim saw the periodization of history as nomadic, agrarian, and industrial; and now we have become nomads again.

The consequence is a vast internal emptiness. There is no home. There is no "sky god." The time of confidence, direction, clear imperatives dissolves into a time of vulnerability, wandering, and rage. In the vacuum it is not the mother goddess Earth, really, who wins allegiance; nor even the temple prostitutes, whose task was, like a sensitivity session or T-group, to arouse deadened feelings in order that religion might again become possible. Baal calls, "Freedom now!" Life is precious and short. Hence the demand for a non-repressive society. "Keep your motherfucking hands off me! Let me live!"¹⁴ "Power to the people!" "All power to the imagination!" Or, on the other side: "The great mass of lawabiding decent people out there know the power of one four-letter word: VOTE!" "Law and order."

Abyss cries out to abyss. The heavily structured public society, and the intensely individual private society. The invisible religion depends upon a heavily organized, disciplined bureaucracy and yet extols the right of each individual to do whatever he damn well pleases.¹⁵ The nation comes apart.

2. THE POLITICAL DILEMMA

The invisible religion is the Anglo-Saxon way of life as it has developed in America: the cult of the individual, together with the

¹³ Eugene Jennings, "Mobicentric Man," July 1970, pp. 35-36, 70, 72.

¹⁴ See the extraordinary interview with David Harris in *American Report*, April 30, 1971.

¹⁵ See Marshall Berman's extraordinary study of radical individualism, *The Politics of Authenticity* (New York: Atheneum, 1970).

cult of objective technique. Both of these cults are hostile to the sense of community on which Christianity depends. Among many, the impact of the invisible religion is indifference to Christianity. The experiences in which Christianity might take root do not occur. The soil is too thin.

Among others, contempt for the invisible religion generates well-worn¹⁶ responses. The classical American response to over-organization is a revival movement based on the cult of immediate experience. When the cities become effete, go west, young man! Seek the land without fences. But immediate experience leads to sectarian fracturing; and the sects oscillate between a-political and highly political religious feeling. Such a pattern is once again being played out today.

Pentecostalism, the "Jesus freaks," the human potential movement, ecology, dropping out, and radical politics—in each of these the importance of awakening primal experience is high. Each takes the form of invoking a new awareness, a conversion to a new way of perceiving reality, and a revivalist, missionary outlook. Each is a pursuit of enlightenment and salvation. Each offers salvation both to self and to the culture. *The Greening of America*, like *The Secular City*, like *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, is not so much an argument or a theory; it is a tract. Its fundamental appeal is not that one should argue with it sentence by sentence, but that one should become converted and live. To fasten on single propositions is to be uptight; acquire a new consciousness first, and then state the propositions better if you can.

For religious studies the present turmoil opens fruitful possibilities.¹⁷ We live during a rare conjunction of favorable stars. The chief theological arguments of our time are, in their consequences, acutely political. The chief political arguments of our time are, in their depth and form, theological problems. What shall we become? For what vision shall we give our efforts and our lives? What does

¹⁶ On reflection, it occurs to me that "groovy" may be a metaphor deriving from the fit of a needle to the track of a long-playing record: a delicate fit, a touch "in tune with" its receiver.

¹⁷ The scope of religious studies is specified in my *Ascent on the Mountain, Flight of the Dove* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

it mean to be humane, authentic, fully human, under conditions of cultural and social turmoil?

To avoid political judgment today is to speak of God only in the abstract, remotely, without seeming to be in touch with reality. It is to speak of an unreal God. On the other hand, to talk about God in the teeth of such winds is to struggle like Demosthenes with pebbles in his mouth beside the sea: excellent practice.

Let me, then, cut quickly through comments that might be made about the various revivalist movements named above. The deepest argument cuts as follows: Does believing in God entail joining a revolutionary movement? That is a fundamental way of grasping what is wrong with the invisible religion.

To believe in God is not to say "I believe in God." As far as the grammar is concerned, anyone can say those words. Is the test, then, to say them and to *feel* them? But feelings are notoriously deceptive. To feel them in a certain way, during prayer perhaps? But prayer, too, is notoriously various: there are good prayers and inauthentic prayers. How does anyone *know* that he believes in God, and is not deceiving himself?

The problem of God is not fundamentally a problem about how to speak; it is fundamentally a problem of how to live.¹⁸ We can easily conceive of persons "believing in God" without ever uttering the word "God" and even feeling something mysterious, comforting or terrifying when they do so—and nevertheless being in bad faith. Not everyone who says "Lord, Lord!"—we have it on good authority—enters the kingdom of heaven.¹⁹

St. John's first letter is remarkably succinct. What does it mean, he asks, to believe in Jesus Christ? You must live as Jesus lived. The man who says he loves God but hates his neighbor is a liar, and the truth is not in him. To believe in God is not to say words but to act; it is to act, precisely, for one's fellow man.²⁰ And what, today, are the acts needed by our fellow men?

¹⁸ This point is enlarged in my "Newman on Nicaea," *Theological Studies*, 21 (1960), 444-53 and "The Christian Intellectual—According to Origen," *Spiritual Life*, (1969), 279-91.

¹⁹ See my *Belief and Unbelief* (New York: Macmillan, 1965).

²⁰ 1 Jn 1.

The demands of humans are for the first time in history planetary. The voices of poverty and brokenness and injustice come to our ears from every continent. To believe in God today is to act effectively in response to those voices. We are called so to act, not out of charity but out of justice. The issue is not aid; the issue is an equitable distribution of the fruits of the earth.²¹ It is a theological maxim of the first importance that the goods of the earth are not owned by any human. They can be held in stewardship, they cannot be possessed.²² The goods of the earth belong, properly, *to the human race as a whole*. How can the goods of this planet be distributed equitably for all men? (At present, for example, one per cent of the U.S. population absorbs twenty-five per cent of consumer goods in America.)

For humans to say that they believe in God, but to fail in duties of stewardship for the entire human race, is to stand in a doubled meaning of the phrase in "bad faith." Thus, one crisis of faith in our time grows out of false faith—belief in an empty God, belief from which justice and love do not flow. Many *purport* to be living in God and God in them. They seem to be, instead, walking idols.

But there is another crisis of faith in our time. It grows out of a total identification of religion with politics. Belief in God is made equivalent to political action. Authentic faith is made identical with reformist or revolutionary action. Belief in God is politicized from the point of view of the future; that is to say, from the Left. A seesaw effect is thus created with the politicization of belief nourished by the Right.

There is no way of separating politics from religion. Every attempt to preach "the pure gospel" passes an implicit judgment on the powers of this world. Either it reinforces or it weakens the structural injustice of inherited arrangements. The Right legitimizes

²¹ Dom Helder Camara, *Revolution Through Peace* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

²² Guido Gonella cites Pius XII: ". . . goods, created by God for all mankind, should be equally available to all, according to the principles of justice and charity." And Aquinas: "Temporal things given to man by God are his as regards possession, but as regards use they are not only his but also others'" (*S.T.* 2-2, 32, 5, ad2). *The Papacy and World Peace* (London: Hollis & Carter, 1945).

what is; the Left legitimizes the future. Every act of legitimation involves an appeal to a transcendent order, a higher law, in the name of which one might give one's own life. It is as though Left and Right seized opposite arms of God and tried to pull God in their direction. (One modern word for God is "History" written with a capital "H.")

A more profound political theology would, however, appeal to a God beyond the God of politics, a God under whose judgment the humans who struggle in history on opposite sides are still humans. On neither side do humans become pigs or beasts, even when their actions are inhumane. Even the Nazis, despite their chosen bestiality, remained human beings; corrupted, wanton, cruel, to be opposed to the death, but humans.

The total politicization of life, whether in the name of the Right or in the name of the Left, is not and cannot be Christian. A sign distinguishing authentic from inauthentic Christianity is a steady insistence upon treating one's political opponents, despite provocation, as human beings. An evangelical injunction effectively bars the total politicization of Christianity: "Love your enemies. Do good to those who hate you." Christianity has in the past assumed both conservative and revolutionary forms, and both sorts of forms are subject to corruption. Conservative or revolutionary, the Christian is committed to a God who transcends political factions and who judges all men equally.

A sign of authenticity in Christian political partisanship is the resolute avoidance of description through moral abstraction.²³ To picture one's political opponents as representing Evil, Injustice, Death is to presume to speak in the name of God, and thus to be guilty of idolatry. To call one's friends and fellow partisans the forces of Conscience, Goodness, Decency, Justice, Progress is to presume too much.

The temptation to abstraction is, of course, inherent in action. Simple, absolute moral appeals catalyze urgency and boldness. They provide a "charismatic" shorthand. It is necessary, however, to test charismata; not all are genuine or, in Christian terms, of God.

²³ Cf. Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage, 1956),

Napoleon, Hitler, Mussolini, "Papa Doc" Duvalier and many other passionate leaders in history have had charisma.

It is one thing for men of mature age to speak in abstractions of forces of Life and Death, Justice and Injustice. The effect upon young persons in their twenties, the age of moral abstraction, the age of good soldiers and good militants on all sides of every passion, is devastating. Young people do not have a complicated and dense experience of life. They receive abstractions purely and simply. To say to them that the government of the United States has become an empire of Death is to coerce their consciences. For who, faced with absolute evil and being of tender conscience, can do other than throw his life into the wheels?

What does belief in God entail at the present time? We work in a dark night, each uncertain of his own judgments.²⁴ Many feel a great need to purify themselves, to give meaning and clarity to their lives. Many seek a strong, clear commitment. Sectarian bitterness is intensified. Many daily thank God that they are not as reactionary, or merely reformist, as other men. The ascendant pose is "lefter than thou."

Some good men, like the Berrigans, are moved by intense political-religious passions to cut a clear swathe through history. They oblige others to reflect and to take a stand. But what stand ought others to take? What does belief in God entail, especially for the young?

First, the invisible religion must everywhere be unmasked, not least in the churches. It is a most powerful religion, deeply embedded in our economic and social structure.

Second, the traditional American turn to the primacy of immediate experience, to sectarianism, to conversion, radicalization, and revivalism must also be transcended. There is not much point, either theological or political, to cycles of over-organization and rebellion against organization. This division is itself a main pillar of the invisible religion.

Third, the planetary situation of the young people of the United States must be grasped: their incomparable wealth, power, skills;

²⁴ Daniel Berrigan's latest title is appropriately called *The Dark Night of the Resistance* (New York: Doubleday, 1971).

their responsibility for all their brothers and sisters. How can any young people claim to believe in God if they do not labor to effect an equitable sharing of the planet's resources?

Fourth, to effect an equitable sharing of the world's resources, not out of charity but out of the strictest sense of justice, present arrangements of world power and interest must be altered. That is to say, political action is required. Such action is required, not least, in the United States.

Fifth, political judgments are necessarily contingent, ambiguous, and full of risk. Those whose training is theological or moral commonly make simplistic political judgments; they tend to be absolutist and fanatical. They often wrestle against themselves in order not to perceive the world through lenses of moral abstraction.

Sixth, persons in power in bureaucratic democracies become implicated in special corruptions different from those involved in other political systems. Abuses of power and trust in a democracy are not as open and flagrant as those in a dictatorship, but they may be just as pervasive and efficacious. They need to be unmasked and effectively opposed.

Seventh, the actual workings of power and interest in bureaucratic democracies do not coincide with the propaganda about the virtues of democracies. Neither an informed public opinion, nor "good men" in office, nor "a constituency of conscience" are strong enough in the balance against entrenched powers and interests.²⁵ Thus, a theological criticism which concentrates on "awakening" individual consciences and raising levels of "awareness" is like a theology of good sentiments and warm feelings: it does not go deep enough to be authentic.

Eighth, it is not at all a plain fact that an equitable distribution of the world's resources is an historical possibility. That requires an act of faith beyond the act of faith in God. Belief in human progress and human perfectibility is important to the Left; belief in tragic brokenness and incompleteness is important to the Right. Young middle class Americans today have grown up in such private contexts that their expectations of justice, fairness, beauty, and love are

²⁵ See the criticism of electoral politics made by Garry Wills in *Nixon Agonistes* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), pp. 434-55.

unprecedented in history—except that they are so typically American. Robert Jay Lifton, for example, writes eloquently of “a new history;”²⁶ in an earlier America, it was “a new world,” “a new paradise,” “a new Eden.” There is still the pursuit of the little green light beckoning through the mist.

Ninth, Christian theology holds that men can and must make progress toward building up God’s Kingdom, “on earth as it is in heaven.” As distinct from some other world religions, Christianity places upon men responsibility for the shaping of history. On the other hand, Christian theology does not anticipate the advent of a Kingdom of justice, truth, freedom, and love on this earth. We work toward it and are judged accordingly; but its fulfillment is neither in our hands nor promised to us.

Tenth, politics is not the whole of life.²⁷ A wholly politicized life makes a caricature of a man; it, so to speak, Nixonizes him. Politics lies in the field of earthly, non-transcendent, temporal, and ambivalent arrangements. There has never been, is not now, and never will be a political order exhaustively representative of the Gospels. One cannot ask more of politics than it can give. It is neither food nor drink for the soul. It is an instrument of, but not the substance of, the building of a world of justice, freedom, truth and love. City hall, congress, and “movement” are to humanism what chancery, curia, and progressivism are to church: in neither case the heart of the matter.

Eleventh, the need of countless human beings on this planet for food, income, justice, liberty, and self-expression is enormous. It is, some argue, no greater than it ever was; the difference is that we are far more conscious of it. (Many young people do not recognize that conditions in Europe and America two centuries ago were as economically oppressive as those still borne by millions elsewhere). On the other hand, the growth of the United States as a world power coincides with the growth of technology in alleviating some human problems (lowering death rates, for example) and in adding to others (impersonal and vast methods of military control). As the

²⁶ *The Atlantic Monthly*, October, 1969.

²⁷ See Peter Berger, in Berger and Richard Neuhaus. *Movement and Revolution*, *op. cit.*

first technological world power, the United States is a major part of the network of economic control upon the planet. Moreover, in the United States itself, centers of economic power have disproportionate power over internal and external political life.²⁸

That is to say, twelfth, that freedom and justice are under economic siege both in the United States and on the planet as a whole. Economic "principalities and powers" hold us, to some degree, in thrall.

3. BELIEF IN GOD

Conclusions from these twelve presuppositions are not easy to state succinctly or simply. The question of belief in God is not *identical* with the question of political stance. Belief in God transcends any and all political positions. On the other hand, belief in God is *not separable* from political positions. Political choices are ways of expressing in concrete institutional history the sense of reality, story, and symbols to which one is committed.²⁹ It is the responsibility of theologians to draw out the hidden connections between religious choices and political choices, so as to minimize "bad faith." The slogan carved in stone over the portals of many parochial schools, "For God and Country," for example, fails to suggest the probability that national power and the Gospels will very often be at variance.

In order to believe in God, must one be a revolutionary? We might imagine a person deeply committed to the view that civilization is gossamer and that a breakdown in mutual trust is always at hand. In his eyes, riot, hostility, rage, and terror are always just around the corner. His political views, consequently, tend to emphasize the importance of authority, law, order, and stability. He concedes that there are many bitter injustices in the social order; in fact, that is his very starting point: injustice is endemic to social orders, indeed endemic to individual humans. Men are inherently rapacious, untrustworthy, stiff-necked and fickle. In a word, one can

²⁸ See, among others, G. William Domhoff, *Who Rules America?* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967).

²⁹ See my *Story in Politics* (New York: CRIA publications, 1970).

imagine a vivid belief in God wedded to a profound and chastened political conservatism, without bad faith.³⁰

One can just as easily imagine belief in God wedded to political radicalism; and—to complicate the matter—one may imagine the union of God and Left as a union in "bad faith." For example, a clergyman loses his faith in the transcendent, in the sacraments, in his own sacred role, in the Word of God. He discovers the human potential movement, or the anti-war movement, feels an internal liberation, experiences a new kind of enlightenment, and finds a new identity and new scope for action. Now whenever he says "God" he means either a feeling of community between people or fidelity to a political program. "God" is reduced to a transaction between humans. But the clergyman goes on using "God" language for emotions, purposes, intentions and activities that are exhaustively described by others in a secular language which does not refer to God. It is quite possible that the clergyman is engaged in "mystification" if not in outright "bad faith."³¹

There is a difference between saying that to feed the hungry, etc., is a *sign* that one loves God and saying that such acts are *identical with* love of God.³² To show the difference, two opposite contexts must be used. In one context, the argument is that belief in God refers to some special transcendent, private, "supernatural" experience; the emphasis is on how *different* the believer is from the humanist. In that context, I note how *in action* and *in experience* both believer and humanist may be indistinguishable, although the *interpretation* each gives his (her) actions and experiences differs.³³

In a second context, however, the argument is that belief in God is exhausted by actions and experiences of a certain humanistic sort; the emphasis is on *the identity* of the believer and the humanist. In that context, I note that the interpretation one gives one's

³⁰ Peter Berger, a conservative, and Richard Neuhaus, a radical, evince political disagreement while in theological "good faith." See their *Movement and Revolution*, *op. cit.*

³¹ See the caricature by Dorothy Rabinowitz, "The Activist Cleric," *Commentary*, Sept. 1970, pp. 81-83.

³² Karl Rahner asserts this identity in "Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God," *Theological Investigations VI* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1969) pp. 231-49.

³³ The argument of *Belief and Unbelief*.

actions and experiences *in the long run* affects their character.³⁴ Specifically, the interpretation according to which when I feed the hungry and the like God is living in me and I in God, adds a profound dimension to my identity, to my connections to the past and the future, and above all to the sense in which I am not my own master. Autonomy and theonomy both differ from heteronomy; but they are not equal to each other.³⁵

Revolutionary activity, therefore, is not the equivalent of believing in God. But it often is a legitimate and powerful expression of belief in God. What are some of the conditions under which revolutionary activity becomes such an expression? One watershed is, of course, the conviction that such activity makes the human condition more expressive of justice, truth, freedom and community, and not less so. Revolutionaries and reformers are often enemies of each other, each believing that the other causes more harm than good. Conservatives commonly believe that the present, however unjust, is more expressive of justice, truth, freedom and community than the future aspired to by reformers and revolutionaries.

There is, in a word, a realm which is not "beyond" politics, since it of necessity must express itself in and through concrete political choices, but which "transcends" politics. It is the realm in which men, of whatever diverse political persuasion and concrete judgment, are brothers. It is the realm of the dynamic, attracting term of human development: unity as one human race. It is the eschaton already active in our midst, not a promise merely, but a dynamic principle of communion.

This principle of communion must be testified to, not in words but in action. It cannot be testified to by those whose political choices are masked, hidden, unexamined, theologically unconscious; for they are living in "bad faith." Theological consciousness is not complete until it includes political consciousness. For political action is the basic structural modality through which belief in the communion of the human race expresses itself. Christians must elaborate the political consequences of their personal and communal theological

³⁴ The argument of "The Odd Logic of Theism and Non-Theism," *A Time to Build* (New York: Macmillan, 1967) pp. 60-69.

³⁵ See J. Maritain, *Integral Humanism* (New York: Scribner's, 1968), pp. 27-34; also Paul Tillich, *The Protestant Era* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962) pp. 44ff; 55ff.

positions; they cannot pretend that political expression and theological position are separate and independent. Since the same person is at once a theological and a political animal, integrity demands a conscious connection between his theology and his politics.

There are, however, many theologies and many political positions. Sectarianism and fanaticism are models neither for the kingdom of God nor for a humane political society. On the other hand, the danger with too managerial a pluralism—a benign *laissez-faire*—is that it dissipates both political and theological passion. Doctrinal pluralism is a basic tenet of the invisible religion. The good fruit of such a position is tolerance, variety, and wider insight. A corrupt fruit is the one-dimensionality of the merely practical, the evasion of radical differences, the homogenization of everybody. It is in such a sense that Garry Wills calls Richard Nixon “the last liberal.”³⁶

We cannot in conscience speak of belief in God to young people today without at the same time speaking of politics. We have an obligation to speak each in his (her) own voice, elucidating our theology and its connections to our politics, and obliging our students to do the same. The fact that no one of us should be coerced, morally or physically, into a theology or into a politics that do not express our own inmost convictions does not mean that we should not argue passionately. To believe that each person is free is not to believe that each person is correct, nor is it to believe that matters which cannot be univocally settled are matters of indifference. The passion of believing oneself correct and being willing to die for one's views has both theological and political importance of the highest conceivable order. Such a passion is saved from fanaticism by the effective recognition that other good men hold other views with equal passion and equal right.

Human beings on this planet are, and ought to be, diverse. Animated, civil conversation is an alternative to murder. The construction of a social order in which such conversation is an ordinary exercise is the goal toward which belief in God commits us.

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³⁶ *Op. cit.*