

AN AMERICAN POLITICAL THEOLOGY: THE CHURCH AND SOCIAL CHANGE

I recently learned a considerable amount of theology by talking with a theologian. Although that unusual possibility might seem too incredible for this group of professional theologians to accept, I would like to share with you a recent personal experience which gave me a great deal of insight into the theological process and product. Toward the end of April, the distinguished Latin American theologian, Juan Luis Segundo, came to the United States to deliver the Dudleian Lecture at Harvard University. After his stay in Cambridge and prior to his return to Montevideo, Segundo spent several days in Washington, D.C., with me and other members of the staff of the Center of Concern, the public interest group with which I work. One evening, he and one of our staff went to see the new Costa-Garvas film, "State of Siege," which currently is disturbing American political sensibilities. In the semi-documentary style made famous in his works "Z" and "Confession," Costa-Garvas has the "State of Siege" portray the 1970 incident of the kidnapping and assassination of a United States AID official involved in police training in Uruguay. The film is biased—it presents a sharply anti-American interpretation, and is clearly sympathetic to the urban guerillas, the Tupamaros. (By way of an aside, I personally feel that the film accurately and cogently presents an indictment of U.S. support of police repression in Latin America.) But in dramatic, gripping fashion, "State of Siege" shows the social and political struggle which is going on daily in Uruguay, indeed, throughout Latin America.

The film had a profound impression on Juan Luis Segundo. He remarked to us in subsequent discussions that it was impossible for him to view it only as a movie—for him it was real life. The movie recalled for him the incident, its aftermath in the state of martial law which continues to this day, and the tension which exists in the circles of government, military, education and Church. As I heard Segundo talk, I realized more deeply something that is evident in his writings—his theologizing is in the context of a real-life struggle with the public

issues of his nation. Even the traditional categories of church, grace, sacrament, salvation, and so forth, assume a new dimension because reflected on in a vital context of relating to the reality of social change. Segundo's theology is—in the sense I would like to use the word—a “political theology.”

This morning I would like to explore with you some of the elements which might be part of an “American political theology” and offer some suggestions about how we can go about formulating that theology. I want to admit at the outset something that will be evident at the conclusion. I am, by disposition, training, and practice, a political scientist first and a theologian second. So in the hallowed halls of a meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, I speak, if not with some hesitation, at least with some trepidation. (This is particularly true when I see in this room several of my former theology teachers and none of my former political science teachers!)

The subtitle of my reflections here is “The Church and Social Change.” I personally feel that the most important problematic of theology in the United States today is *ecclesiological*. It is the question of the nature and function of church in a time of social change, a time of serious challenge to the orders and structures of society, a time of great global injustice and great national apathy. What does it mean to be a “community of Good News” when all around us there is so evident a “community of bad news?” Where as a community do we stand? What do we say? What do we do? And who belongs to this community?

Answers to these questions are so important precisely because they touch the authenticity, the credibility of the Church's mission today. The 1971 Roman Synod of Bishops reminded us very clearly: “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.” It does not take a higher degree in theology to appreciate that where a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel is absent, the gospel simply is not present. And the Church—a community which celebrates the Word—is without form and substance. “Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world” are essential to the nature and function of the Church, not peripheral.

And so it is that the "American theologian in the service of the American church" (the theme for this 1973 meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America) should strive to help the Church understand how it is to be involved in this action, this transformation. For me, this is the task of an American political theology.

It should be clear that I do not understand "political theology" here according to the European, Metz/Moltmann model. For me, the strictures which Juan Luis Segundo laid against this model in his Duddleian Lecture make good sense. The eschatological emphasis of the Metz/Moltmann approach so relativizes concrete political choices as to render insight into specific policy of little or no meaning. Segundo stresses that the eschatological does not define the *content* of Christian theology but only its *form*, and suggests that Christian theology must be willing to relate more explicitly to the concrete, historical political option.

And so it is that I choose to mean by "political theology" the theological reflection brought to bear upon the problems—issues and structures—of contemporary public policy. By explicating the values of that policy, evaluating these values in the light of biblical values, and judging those systems which embody the values, the theologian strives to translate theology into policy. He or she does this not—and I want to make myself perfectly clear (to borrow a well-known phrase)—for the sake of specific political programs but for the sake of the preaching of the gospel. Constitutive to that preaching is "action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world"—very *political* tasks, indeed. Thus the American theologian who devotes his or her attention to an American political theology will of necessity be engaged in efforts to speak to issues of public values, to affect public policies, to have an impact on the constitution and operation of the structures of society. Political theology is, in my view, *political*.

Let me cite a few concrete problems of American public policy which I very strongly feel cry out urgently for theological reflection. I do not ask for a "theology of" these problems—I note that we are remarkably clean at this meeting of "theology of" titles—but for the kind of explicitation and evaluation of values and judgment of systems which embody these values which I have called the task of an American political theology.

(1) *Property*. We are long overdue in the United States for a thorough re-examination of the ethic and practice of private property. The character of property is crucial not only to the economic system of this country but also to social and political arrangements which underlie, surround, and follow from that system. The values which have traditionally been associated with private property—exclusive ownership; unrestricted control and disposition; laws for protection; inheritance, competition, consumption, power, prestige—these values need to be looked at in the light of the social demands which have always been referred to in philosophical discourse but not always implemented in the practical realities of our lives and institutions.

We live in an affluent nation where one-sixth of our people are considered poor; the structure of distribution of wealth in the United States is almost identical with the structure of distribution in India—we simply have a larger economic pie to cut up. The poorest fifth in our nation receives less than five per cent of national income; the richest fifth receive over forty per cent (top five per cent receives over fifteen per cent). On a global scale, we Americans, six per cent of the world's people, consume forty per cent of the world's goods; and American overseas investments make absolutely phenomenal profit returns. The public policy issues of tax reform, the free market system, corporate social responsibility, control of multi-national corporations, the very meaning of "capitalism"—these and many other topics are integrally related to our understanding of private property. These topics will benefit from a careful, theologically-informed examination. Can Catholic theology in this country say anything about private property?

(2) *Environment*. A little over a year ago, a study was released in this country which had profound theological implications. Entitled *The Limits to Growth*, this report out of MIT focused on the most pressing fact of our global existence—we live on a finite globe, with limited space and limited resources. The everyday consequences of that finitude have come home to us in recent months as an energy crisis has brought us cold furnaces last winter and idle cars this summer. Learning to live on this finite globe heightens the public policy issues of ecological deterioration, exhaustion of natural resources, and world's population which will double in the next thirty years. Can American Catholic theologians speak to the value questions raised by these issues?

For example, what about the life style of affluence and consumption and waste which characterizes the United States—at the expense of the rest of the world? Or another example, and a truly frightening one: in order to maintain the extremely high energy consumption rates which we Americans have grown accustomed to, the United States is now pushing ahead with atomic power reactors at a time when their safety is still severely questioned. In a very real sense, we tempt God for the sake of material progress. Or take the issue of population policy—central to the world's agenda because of the United Nations World Population Year and Conference to be held in 1974. Can Catholic theologians contribute positively to the population policy debate without being bogged down in continual re-hash of *Humanae vitae*?

(3) *Governmental Authority*. I work in Washington, D.C., and these days I am not accustomed to being at any meeting—public or private—for more than fifteen minutes and not hearing the topic of Watergate brought into the discussion. But my mention of the public policy issue of governmental authority is not meant to introduce here the theological aspects of Watergate—as deadly serious as that problem is. Rather, I want to focus on the whole question of the relation of citizen to government in circumstances where there is a conflict of conscience. We have seen in recent years two dramatic instances of that conflict in the United States, instances which need deep theological reflection. I refer to the issues of abortion and amnesty.

After the Supreme Court ruling in January, 1973, which removed almost all legal restraints on abortion, the American Catholic bishops dissented and in effect called for large-scale civil disobedience by urging Catholics to ignore the new legal situation. The topic of abortion needs theological clarification; but equally in need of clarification is the topic of individual conscience before publicly-accepted and governmentally-endorsed morality. The issue has been clearly a pressing one during the long and painful years of the Vietnam War. Public policy wracked the consciences of many of us—and continues to do so by the bombing at this very moment in Cambodia and the President's insistence on speaking of "peace with honor." That is why the issue of amnesty is so important today and so much in need of in-depth theological reflection. Such reflection and study has been asked of the

Catholic Theological Society of America by the Conference of Major Superiors of Men in their recent call for universal and unconditional amnesty in order to promote reconciliation. I hope that this group will respond positively to that request and thus advance the necessary public policy value clarification from the viewpoint of Catholic theology.

(4) *Rights*. There is another topic besides Watergate which continually comes up these days in Washington circles. That is the topic of China. What has occurred in the past twenty years in the People's Republic of China exercises a great fascination for us Americans. A gigantic, poor nation completely isolates itself and then develops in a way which effectively meets the problems of hunger and medical care, and begins significantly to deal with the problems of education and literacy. Almost every observer who returns from China—from Richard Nixon to Shirley McLaine—remarks on the apparent lack of crime, discontent, neuroses, dirt, and on the presence of a spirit of participation and sharing. There is in Mao's "serve the people" a tremendous emphasis upon what we in the West have traditionally referred to as "the common good," and what we in the United States—with a heightened spirit of individualism and "do your own thing" mentality—feel ourselves sorely lacking.

But what about individual rights, personal freedom, we instinctively ask. And herein lies a major question for public policy in this country in the next decade. Is it possible to promote social goods while still respecting individual rights? The tension between individual freedom and social needs is the classic dilemma of political philosophy. We have clear evidence today—for example, in the ecological deterioration of the globe—that suggests that the sum of individual choices does not in fact add up to the common good. As the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights approaches this December, much searching examination of this topic will go on. In the United States, this has public policy implications for how we deal with the diverse issues of racism, ethnic consciousness, poverty, urbanization, civil liberties, dissent, and so forth. Can American theologians offer insight into the values involved in these discussions?

Property, environment, governmental authority, rights. These are

simply four concrete problems of American public policy which are pressing us today. I can think of several more which are equally important, as I am sure you can also. As you might suspect, for each of the public policy problems I have discussed, I personally have some political reflections. I also have some theological reflections, growing out of my study and prayer over biblical and traditional development of the themes of the Kingdom. What I am suggesting in calling for an "American political theology" is that theologians in this country engage in the type of theologizing which will enable these and other priority public policy issues to be grappled with by the American Church, a Church which can then credibly relate to social change as the 1971 Synod has so urgently said it must. This is the kind of theologizing which the Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez has referred to as "the fruit of a confrontation between the Word accepted in faith and an historical praxis." "Historical developments," he goes on to say, "can help us discover unsuspected facets of revelation as well as to understand the nature of the Church in greater depth, express it better, and adjust it more successfully to our times (*Gaudium et spes*, No. 44). For this reason the commitment of Christians in history constitutes a true *locus theologicus*."

Let me say only in passing that there is another problem of the Church in time of social change to which I believe American theologians must address themselves. This is the serious ecclesiological problem of who belongs to the Church. The question is raised as a function of the earlier question, how does the Church speak and act in time of social change? If the Church speaks and acts explicitly, concretely, specifically, preaching and witnessing to the values of the Good News in contrast to many of the values of our contemporary society, it is bound to challenge, to antagonize, to alienate. Let us be honest. The Church will lose "members." And thus an old theological problem is raised in a new context: do we have a Church of the masses or a sign-community? In the context of social change, is it the task of the Church to be the great reconciler, keeping together persons of many divergent views and states of life, liberal and conservative, rich and poor, socialist and capitalist? Or should the Church take concrete stands as signs of the values preached, and recognizing that its role is not to be the Kingdom but merely functional for the Kingdom, be

ready to contain fewer numbers? This is, I repeat, an old problem. But it definitely assumes new urgency if we take seriously the recent Synod's charge to witness and to educate to justice.

In conclusion I want to offer two recommendations for theologians who would provide the American Church with the service of developing an American political theology. In June of 1968, the then-president of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Walter Burghardt, suggested in his presidential address, "Towards an American Theology," that Catholic theologians were failing to speak to the issues of the day because their work was still largely derivative, not interdisciplinary, and not collaborative. I suspect that these three areas of challenge continue to be areas to be worked on today, five years later. So I won't comment further on them, but rather mention two additional areas I feel need to be taken into account.

First, *the theologian needs to be despecialized*. When I did my degree in political science (prior, incidentally, to my degree in theology), I specialized in a couple of narrow areas; my subsequent university research was likewise specialized. Theologians also have specialized. Generally trained according to the university model, they have been provided with a vision of research and publication which has pushed them onto the frontier of knowledge in one small particular area of theology. This gives them great depth in a particular area. But when they consider reflecting on any other area—especially one outside the immediate field of theology—they are conscious of a lack of knowledge and competence as compared to their specialty. Hence they avoid such encounters and continue in their specialty. They tend to lose contact with the general range of problems experienced in society at large by persons who need their theological resources. And thus the thinking in their specialty can easily "lose touch" with and become unrelated and unavailable to the service of the Church in time of social change.

In order to assure that there will be theologians in the service of the American Church, therefore, I suggest that the theologian needs to be despecialized. She or he needs to step back from the secure area of her or his specialization and become involved in and reflecting upon some of the critical social problems and public policy issues of the day. I am not speaking just of interdisciplinary work—though that surely is

needed. Nor am I only emphasizing an experiential element—though, as Paulo Friere has so cogently reminded us, that is crucial to a full grasp of the meaning of “word.” What I am urging is an effort to relate as a well-trained, thoughtful and feeling person to the issues and structures which make up the contemporary pattern of social change. This effort at despecialization will both affect the way the theologian thinks about his or her specialty and will also contribute to the Church’s perspective and approach to its mission today.

Second, *the theologian must be aware of class bias and work to overcome it.* The socio-political-economic reality to which we are socialized in this country transmits to us a set of norms, values, attitudes, perspectives, behavior patterns, which form the basic consensus of society. We internalize them and live them inadvertently. A critical function must be exercised by us, bringing us to examine our personal mindsets, bringing to our consciousness the fact that we do not enter upon theological projects with unbiased tools or with “value-free” objectivity. In his Duddleian Lecture, Juan Luis Segundo has expressed very sharply this point:

I believe that theology has been and is undergoing—however renovated it feels and however scientific it presents itself—disastrous experiences regarding the interest which it is awakening. I believe that various theologies have not at all been taking into account one decisive possibility: that of having been unconsciously infiltrated by socio-political ideologies. Often the theology which believes itself the most scientific is working with concepts, with images, with logical and sentimental connections which do not come from the Gospel but from the mental mechanisms of the social *establishment*. For the profane [that is, for the public at large], theology thus comes to be one more element, the most esoteric, the most pretentious and exasperating, of the *status quo*.

Now there may be some among you who would say that the danger of the political theology I have been espousing here is that it too is infiltrated by socio-political ideologies, ideologies of the left. I am willing to hear your point, but argue—at another time—that my position is indeed an open one, and is fixed only on gospel values. Be that as it may, I think that you must agree with me that given the system of training and the academic milieu, by far the greater danger lies in the

theologian being unconsciously part of the *status quo* rather than being unconsciously in the *avante garde* of the revolution. And that is why I urge that the theologian must examine his or her mindset, be aware of class bias and work to overcome it, if he or she is to contribute to the Church in the time of social change.

Let me end my remarks here this morning by being more political than theological. Given the crisis in public values in this country at this moment, and given the discouraging absence of any public leader—in state or in church—who credibly speaks to the public values of justice and humanity, the need for effective value input into public policy debate has never been greater. I sincerely hope that American Catholic theologians will truly serve the Church—and the nation and the world—by entering that public policy debate through the vigorous development and articulation of an American political theology.

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