

DECISION-MAKING FOR AMERICA: POLITICAL-THEOLOGICAL INFLUENCES

I. POLITICAL THEOLOGY AS THE OFFSPRING OF FUNDAMENTAL THEOLOGY

What is political theology? Is it an application of social ethics? The following observations on the dialogue between theology and the contemporary American political scene is not intended to be a contribution either to political science or to social ethics. These remarks flow rather from fundamental theology, as does all of the "political theology" which has so far appeared: from Moltmann and Metz to Gutierrez and Segundo. Paul Tillich and Thomas Aquinas agree that it is difficult to treat any aspect of the Christian faith without treating the totality. In a sense, fundamental theology offers the foundation for every aspect of theology because it treats the questions of the *center of theology* (revelation) and the *edge of theology* (revelation in culture). For instance, the history and principles of moral theology belong to fundamental theology.¹ More significantly, fundamental theology treats of the thought-forms of a culture as related to the message of the writings of the New Testament; it treats of that dynamic which is the encounter of the gospel with different cultures. Part of that encounter is church and society or, better perhaps, gospel-faith in an individual's political decision-making.

From the point of view of the Catholic theologian, it is interesting that political and liberation theologies have arisen out of the new openness and fruitfulness of Catholic fundamental theology since Vatican II. At the same time, world political systems are in crisis. As our Bicentennial approaches, Robert Bellah is only one voice who presumes that the religious-political unity bestowed by "biblical religion and utilitarian individualism" is dying or is already dead.²

¹"Fundamental theology is to justify Christian hope in a given situation, it is there that we must sort out the relations between church and world. . . . A *fundamental theology* or a theology which reflects in a critical manner on the social and political implications of the Christian faith." C. Geffré, *A New Age in Theology* (New York, 1974), pp. 19, 87.

²R. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant* (New York, 1975).

II. THOUGHT-FORM AND THE TRANSCENDENTAL ANALYSIS OF RELIGION AND POLITICS

We are not concerned here with moral theology applied to political problems—as important as that is—but with something prior. Nor are we studying how church leaders deal pragmatically with political bodies—which is where the dialogue between American politics and Roman Catholic Christianity often ends up. We are interested in the personal, prior, religious *ways-of-thinking* which influence political decision-making.

Since Luther and Kant the history of Western thought (including theology) has been concerned with the subject-object schema.³ The positions of the Catholic magisterium in moral matters, the directives from bishops—these focus on the “objective” side of the political process: the votes, the public manifestation of political intent. Citizens and political institutions are seen as transparent areas to be conquered, or as neutral objects to be placed in correct patterns. The political opinions of Roman and Catholic moral systems have been highly objectivistic; the individual is a unit, a *tabula rasa* who through an “informed conscience” would apply given principles to issues.

When we turn to the subject, drawing upon that transcendental revolution of Kant⁴ determinative of so much of subsequent culture (present for theology in the influence of Heidegger, Rahner, and Lonergan), fundamental theology faced with American politics asks about *a priori* principles drawn from revelation which will influence the “horizon” or even become the stance of the believer at elections. This horizon (world-view as social and ontological) is the ground and the realization for revelation to join through personal faith with political hopes.

Does revelation contain the principles of our political theology? Revelation is present in the ambiguity and fruitfulness of its own written thought-forms; at the same time revelation is active in personal theology of people alive now. Revelation often both embarrasses and disappoints the moral theologian, for the lack of agreement of Christians over a biblical political theology can cause war and starvation.

³Cf. “Toward a Subjective Theology of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 36 (1975), 401-27.

⁴Cf. O. Muck, *The Transcendental Method* (New York, 1968); works by and on Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan.

The important subjective, personal, theological horizon in that very objective realm of politics is concretized in thought-forms. Ways of thinking (both political and theological), which influence the thinking of the individual American Christian lead to a transcendental analysis. As a part of his/her personal theology they will be prior to appeals by church or government to take this or that political action. Issues come and go, candidates and movements are always new. But there is as general theological personality, a religious orientation absorbed consciously and unconsciously by Christians touching the image of self and of the community. Where they exist, and as they exist, these theological-political thought-forms will be prior in influence to any summons from a church-body for change.

People act out of their world-view. Value-systems and thought-forms are important for human beings as they move amid the events of life. Our various understandings of time, of the future, of the relationship of individual to community are horizons. Each horizon illumines the objective world in a particular way; it does not fashion the objects of politics (for our concern, the political issues, the arguments on either side, the winning position), but within this or that horizon political goals and means take on a new appeal, new relationships, different emphases. They are seen differently.⁵ Not only post-Kantian philosophy but the social and behavioral sciences also describe horizons, thought-forms and models. Durkheim, Levi-Strauss, Berger and Luckmann have observed the network of symbols and patterns which make up the social consciousness of a period. Berger writes:

All social reality has an essential component of consciousness. The consciousness of everyday life is the web of meanings that allow the individual to navigate his way through the ordinary events and encounters of his life with others. The totality of these meanings,

⁵ "For the transcendental imagination is more than a mere subject of knowledge. Its task is to institute the horizon within which two beings, knower and to-be-known, can encounter each other and become opposed as subject-object. It renders the subject-object relation possible. . . . In this sense, the horizon renders it possible for the knowing subject to *be* a subject. . . . On the other hand, however, the horizon, as the domain of objectiveness, renders it possible for the being-to-be-known to reveal itself as opposed to the knower, so to *be* an object. This is the 'objective' aspect: the horizon constitutes the 'objectivity of the object.'" W. Richardson, *Heidegger: Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague, 1963), pp. 154f.

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different horizons which have been and still are influential upon the American political scene. The precise intensity and extent of their influence in elections can be measured only by sociological research. The nourishment of these thought-forms comes not so much from the writing of ethicists or the new political theologians, but more from the creeds and confessions of the churches, from the traditional ideology of a church. This political theology seems often to be supported secondarily by individuals with a prophetic or theological charisma, and primarily by the church body and tradition.

Religious ways of thinking must be taken into account by any movement—by politicians and by religious educators—which desires to promote a particular action-program, for political action has as its field coordinates anthropology and eschatology, the image of the person and the expectation of the future.

The four thought-forms are the Enlightenment, Roman Catholicism, the Calvinist tradition, and Martin Luther. First, we will list the thought-forms and their characteristics. Then we will raise questions about them individually and globally.

A. Enlightenment

The age of reason viewed man positively.¹¹ Man explains and governs the world by reason as God does. Since man's reason enables maximum activity and independence, society is a rational community of agents directed by enlightened self-interest. This self-interest is identifiable with the providence of God.

Nevertheless, man is not without his penchant for the irrational, even the non-rational: traditions, myths, group-movements, the darkness of history between Classical Rome and the late seventeenth century, above all religion. These incorporate the dark side of man, the source of his previous bondage. Some men bring the subjective, the non-rational into the community and so upset the order of enlightened self-interest. When a group clings to this irrationality, a contemporary "fall" occurs. The American balance of powers is the Enlightenment's corrective to

¹¹"In the Enlightenment, this emancipation was based upon man's courage to use his intellect without the guidance of others, to use his intellect publicly at all times." I. Kant, "Was Ist Aufklärung," *Werke*, 9 (Darmstadt, 1968), p. 53. See P. Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation* (New York, 1966); E. Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1951).

the Lockian fear of the irrational. Religion represents not the subjective (which the Enlightenment with Kant and others explored) but the irrational. Religion is ascribed to the individual's irrational phantasies. These are permissible within the private sphere. Since they are grounded upon nothing empirical or universal or rational, they have no role or application in the political sphere.

From a more refined theological viewpoint, the Enlightenment offers a positive image of man the citizen and his future. But this positive eschatology is largely direction to the present which will continue to improve. Man is the image of the God of Deism, while prophetic religion and any *theologia crucis* are eliminated from the public sphere. There is a tension between man's reason and self-interest and the growing health of the community, but suffering will have no role in the community. The community will be united by reason and will be nourished by self-interest.

B. Roman Catholicism

Although the Roman Catholic political ethic would seem to be based upon natural law, this stance is neither particularly Christian nor the only interpretation of natural law. "There is no monolithic philosophical system called natural law which is recognized by the majority of philosophers. The very term natural law can be misleading."¹² The following is, then, only a sketch of the general impression given after a century of intense interest in guiding Roman Catholic moral theology by the light of a particular interpretation of natural law. It is these characteristics which have been adopted by lawyers, doctors, priests and politicians.

God's plan (expressed with extensive Deist overtones) is universal, and universally acceptable and intelligible to all. This very universality and rationality makes this ethic something distinct from the Word of God in Christ and mankind's responding faith. Social moral theology has been the application of the big plan of natural law towards the limited and changing field of social concerns, an application aimed at sustaining Roman Catholic interests, i.e., interests of the Church or the imposition of a Roman Catholic ideology upon non-Catholics for the sake of cosmic purity.

¹²C. Curran, "Social Ethics and Method in Moral Theology," *Continuum*, 7 (1969), p. 62.

The Catholic thought-form values reason highly, as a positive image of man and a positive eschatology in theory. But in practice what dominates is a static view of man and a skeptical eschatology. Man is not trusted; the future is not expected to be substantially different from the past, that lengthy corridor of time where the Church has always played its influential role. The result of this conflict between ideology (Deistic natural law) and pragmatic politics (a skeptical religious anthropology and eschatology) is the separation between personal faith and practical politics prominent in the history of Catholicism involved in American politics. (So while the Lutheran, as we will see, separates politics and faith from the demand of theory, the Catholic effects this separation contrary to his theory but yielding to tough experience.)

The Catholic places the *bonum commune* equal to or above the individual. He or she prizes those human rights which have a biological foundation (e.g., the right to marriage) more than those grounded in reason and freedom (right to read "unacceptable" books).

This ethic is not as universal as its rationality pretends. The scope of the natural law is limited by certain prior principles derived from church practice and from Christianity.¹³ It lacks a genuine teleology; the view of the immediate and long-range future is weak. Only with difficulty can natural law come to grips with the category of changing human needs. Progress and change cannot be taken seriously, since nature nourishes a time-less present. The role of Christian faith is unclear. When Scripture is taken seriously it becomes a second law, a second rational system, but because of Scripture's inherent a-rationality and paradoxical nature, its words either reinforce the law of rational ethics or they become a word of advice rather than an eschatological norm of conduct.

C. The Calvinist Tradition

We are speaking of "Calvinism" in a broad sense, paying attention to these thought-forms not only because of their lasting contemporary influence, but because throughout the nineteenth century they fashioned a theological-political image of what the United States could or should be. These thought-forms are related to the Puritan tradition.

¹³Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 59.

They flare up in revivalism, and continue to have an impact in Southern and Midwestern politics.

Converted man is the citizen. The converted man mirrors in his external life the radical newness of his Christianity. Converted man can to some extent transform society into a positive, evolutionary society. The requirement for expressing political views and actions is the maintenance of this experienced rebirth. Hence public morality is necessary for political sense (Puritanism). Since citizens are the converted and public Christians, the eschatological society is imagined only with difficulty as being for other people. The new society of the converted is intended to be a city on the hill, a public institution—both theological and political—of the eschaton. Whereas in Europe this could only be partially realized, e.g., in France, Switzerland or Great Britain, in America the entire continent should become the elect city.

There were from the late eighteenth century to the Second World War revivals of this approach, for it was clear to the third generation that this universal elect city was not happening. Yet, revivalism was ambiguous; the believer might begin anew the political Calvinism described above, or might retreat and leave society. Revivalism personalized, individualized the broader hopes of an earlier time, grudgingly recognizing not only its non-universality, but the permanent existence of other groups.

D. Martin Luther's Law and Gospel

The well-known methodological device which characterizes Luther's Christian proclamation is the distinction between God's demand and God's gift, Law and Gospel. The Law reveals the illness, but the Gospel offers the medicine. Passing over the terminology of the three usages of the law (Melanchthon), we will concentrate upon Luther's two meanings for "law." For Luther, the existential, theological and proper meaning of law is "to accuse and condemn as guilty such as live in security that they may see themselves guilty of sin, wrath and death."¹⁴ So the law appears in our lives and times as human aspects gone sour and perverse. Sorrowed and frightened by this concrete contact with sin, we flee from its abyss. The second use and meaning for

¹⁴Luther, *Commentary on Galatians*, WA 40, I, p. 258. The theology of the Two Kingdoms, often singled out as the foundation for Luther's political theologizing, is as Forell and Wyngren indicate an application of the central framework of Law-Gospel.

"law" is a civil one. God has ordained civil laws to restrain the evil latent in men and women. We can see from the phraseology of law that laws aim at checking sin: do not kill, do not fornicate, etc. It is not true that Luther sees the political arena as a jungle or a hopeless chaos driving men backwards into the arms of the gospel. Politics is a place where a natural law is active, since man can reason that there is a God-given order to external, civil life. The peace (if not the progress) of society is good, and may be prior to the mercy of the gospel. "God, who by establishing the structures of this world to which man responds with his codes of law, has created the possibility for a life of relative peace and justice."¹⁵ This civil law is like natural law and is known by reason.

The problem which Luther's theology raises is not, then, the problem of reason and civil order, but of freedom and future action and change. If Luther's theology does not bring such a pessimism as has been suspected when he was accused of setting the civil order totally outside of the influence of grace, still the relationship of the civil order to the impact of mercy and grace (gospel) is not fully developed. "In the realm of politics it is perfectly proper to establish good habits by law. People may not become better before God if they do not steal or murder in fear of the police . . . but their communities will become safer."¹⁶

This lack of development and interpenetration between the civil order and the power of the gospel is illustrated by a series of dichotomies or gaps which Luther's theology suggests.

(1) *Knowing vs. doing*. This raises the issues of the nature of grace and of a socially developed Christian anthropology. To what extent is the Christian called in his new freedom to act in society?

(2) *Outer civic life vs. inner life of faith*. Is Christianity more than a passively received Word of mercy responded to by an individual faith? Certainly it is so for Luther, and he does not advocate a faith without works. Still his emphasis upon the sovereignty of God's act in justification is not satisfactory for the rest of Christian life. Fearful of becom-

¹⁵G. Forell, "The Political Use of the Law," *Luther and Culture* (Decorah, 1960), p. 12. Cf. G. Wingren, *Law and Creation* (Philadelphia, 1967); E. Schroeder, *Law and Gospel* (Philadelphia, 1967).

¹⁶Forell, "The Political Use of the Law," p. 18.

ing involved in a new external system of works-justification similar to medieval Christendom, Luther is often silent on the relationship of faith and trust (potentially quite private events) to the social scene.

(3) *Political issues of improvement vs. "simul justus et peccator"*. One sign of Luther's deep affinity with the Middle Ages is the lack of a developed interest in the secular future. Justification in this life and in the next are timeless moments of the present. On the other hand, social concern has been linked to the modern world's discovery of the future, and the expectation that people and institutions can, in the future, change for the better. The teaching of *simul justus et peccator* is a healthy corrective for overly ambitious social activists; not just the devil but mankind is fallen, and even under grace capable of only limited progress. But this corrective, this "Protestant protest" (Tillich) is not capable of grounding a political theology, for it undermines what is its essence: belief in the improving interplay of grace and human freedom in approaching history.

(4) *The denigration of law when used as the stimulus to grace*. In medieval theology, the world (law) is seen as the sub-structure upon which the organs of grace are placed. When Luther offers a more existential-psychological model of my experience of the ambiguity of life as a goad to turn in conversion to grace, an opposition can emerge between civil society and the inner life of faith. The structures of mankind and history are no longer seen as neutral and improvable but as happy failures, fortunate enemies who drive one to a deeper personal realization of fallenness and mercy. Clearly, this stance will influence any meeting between faith and politics.

IV. SOME IMPLICATIONS OF OUR SURVEY

There is a subjective political theology which is prior to political or moral principles and issues. It may well have a perennial, unreflexive effect, beyond specific arguments or movement, for the outcome of political campaigns.

Secondly, at the level of politically influenced belief, there has never been, for all Americans, uniformity. What Bellah and others decry as a breakdown is actually a thought-form which was accepted as a second religion, a civil religion, by Catholics as Americans. It never fully replaced their primary, more vital religious stance (which was kept, as

something irrational, out of the public sphere). So Catholics and others may look at the collapse of civil religion prior to the Bicentennial with some detachment.

Thirdly, coalitions are not simply movements of people formed around an issue, but unions of people who have a subjective connaturality which may be an ethnic background, a tradition, a set of religious beliefs and symbols. The political-religious thought-forms of the various American groups must be respected because they are influential.

V. PROGNOSIS: THE FUTURE OF THE GOSPEL IN AMERICAN POLITICS

A. *The Influence of Belief*

During the bicentennial year we find ourselves in tension between two uncertain forces. First, the previous consensus built on religion and politics under which America was to search out its future is collapsing, or has collapsed. Secondly, religio-political thought-forms—which would not have been acceptable to civil religion—are asserting themselves. What kind of prognosis can we give for the coming years? What kind of thought-forms will decline? Which will dominate? It may be that Christian influence upon the principles of political behavior will diminish, diminish not because they have, as before, allowed themselves to be absorbed by Deism or Americanism, but because they are too vague; or too sectarian, too radical. Is it not clear that since World War II the principles of the Enlightenment and Calvinism have received mainly lip service? A crass, materialistic pragmatism is the reality behind which diverse figures such as Kennedy, Johnson, Kissinger and Nixon have employed Metternich's approach of control by major powers for their ends. This is not surprising since the Enlightenment fostered an individual pragmatism of unlimited expansion along with a suspicion of man and a distrust of history. American policy would continue, then, to be the product of the strongest lobbies, the pawn of economic and political control. Jungle brinkmanship, detente, cold war, pay-off would be the rewards.

Some new power outside of the past forms of Christian and civil religion could appear: a charismatic movement in politics. New ideas from Eastern religions, or Socialism and Marxism would be examples of this. This is pure speculation, and unlikely before the strong rootedness

of the present American scene in its own conservative past. Bellah exaggerates the influence of ideas (Weber) over the actual resilience of institutions (Durkheim). One might see a union of some of the new religious trends after 1963 (communality, limited possessions, peace) with the demands of the urban ethnics amid an unworkable economy and so project a Christian socialism.

It is difficult for the Protestant churches to re-assume their dominant role in influencing politics. The theological thought-forms which were their strength in previous times are not so useful. With the decline of Calvinism as the universal eschatological sect, Protestantism seems to fulfill only the role of the "Protestant critique" (Tillich). A substantial revision of American political and economic life seems beyond its capabilities in this century. Lutheranism and segments of fundamentalism should be examined not as part of the WASP world, but as Protestant ethnics.

B. Roman Catholicism

Some Roman Catholic theologians have offered long-range, optimistic, political-theological systems: the enormous influence of Teilhard, the theologians of liberation by and for South America, the too-ignored teachings of the present pope and his predecessor. We should not underestimate the impact these broad projections have had, nor should we underestimate the gulf between them and their slow, multi-form implementation. The general impact of Roman Catholicism has been that of a power block intent upon enforcing its own ethical norms in the public area of sexuality, norms drawn upon its own theory of natural law. This approach ignores the interest and personality of others in a pluralist society; it is not clearly related to Christian sources, e.g., the New Testament, and is limited to one area of moral activity. Today American Roman Catholicism is in its approach to moral issues pluralistic. Organizations such as the USCC, CCUM, Chicano and Black interests, Center for Concern do not argue only from natural law or urban political pragmatism but from the ethical anthropology of the New Testament. There is then a Catholic ethical pluralism evident in politics where the newer currents are not so much opposed to natural law as indifferent to it.

If this new and biblical approach became the normal stance of Catholicism for the remainder of this century, the consequence might

be a polarization of the United States (which unlike South America is pluralistic in religion) into opposed politico-religious ideologies. For it is difficult to imagine for the United States a consensus based upon the New Testament. Yet consensus is primary. "It is one of the oldest of sociological generalizations that any coherent and viable society rests on a common set of moral understanding about good and bad, right and wrong, in the realm of individual and social action."¹⁷ In short, the impact of the theologians now active in politics and religious education would bring fragmentation and polarization for the country. Roman Catholicism would have received a new sectarianism as it lost its common ground with all civil religion. In this prognosis one could see a vigorous, more biblical Roman Catholic ethical position but with the counterbalance of a fragmented political and ethical scene in the United States.

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¹⁷Bellah, *The Broken Covenant*, p. ix.