

## POLITICAL THEOLOGY: A PROTESTANT VIEW

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When the topic of "political theology," of which I am to deal with the sub-species Protestant political theology, was selected some months ago, I don't think anyone could have dreamt of how topical a topic it would be at this time. I am thinking, of course, of the phenomenon of the emergence of the new religious right. This has been so far as I can see, the most discussed facet of the whole political scene in these last few weeks in America. On the one hand we have the Moral Majority movement of Jerry Falwell, and similar movements; then, in order to make it ecumenical, we have on the other hand the good Archbishop Humberto Cardinal Medeiros making an intervention in order to, in effect, dictate the successor of Congressman Drinan in Boston through a pronouncement read in the pulpit a Sunday or two ago. Accenting this ecumenical dimension, one religious writer has spoken of the new religious right as "a noisy coalition of Protestant fundamentalists, conservative Catholics, Orthodox Jews and Mormons" who, he said, "have brashly vowed to restore the nation to decency and righteousness by marching from the pews to the polls on election day."

Now, in addition to the limited time we have to deal with this, I have to state that I am neither an historian, a journalist, nor a sociologist, and therefore I can't shed any particular light on this from an empirical point of view. I don't know any more than the rest of you about the true strength of these movements, or how they are likely to affect the coming election or American politics beyond that. But I do want to offer some theological reflections on this whole situation. First, however, let me point out how ironic it is that the problems should arise, on the Protestant side, from the Conservative Evangelical quarter, because for so long our complaint has been that these people lacked a political dimension to their theology. Why, we asked, did they restrict themselves to questions of individual salvation and fail to realize that the Christian gospel also has implications for the social, economic, and political order? Now that they are drawing these implications, most of us are very unhappy with them. So, it seems it's the old question of whose ox is gored!

The basic problem with Protestant social ethics or political theology of this type, I would suggest, is the absence, paradoxically, of what Tillich calls "the Protestant principle". What does he mean by the Protestant principle? It is really the reverse side of the principle of justification by faith. It is by grace that we are justified, and not by merit or works; therefore, no human power, no human scheme, no human program, no human opinion - even one's own - dare be absolutized, but rather all must be held under the transcendent judgment of God. As both the Psalmist and St. Paul insist: no human being dare boast in the sight of God. "None is righteous, no, not one; ...

all have turned aside, together they have gone wrong; none does good, not even one." (Quoted from Paul, Romans 3:10ff, who is quoting word for word from Psalms 14 and 53.) This is a fundamental Judaeo-Christian insight. Now when it says that "no one does good, not even one," this is of course subject to misinterpretation. It does not mean that no one does any good, but that no one does only good; and furthermore, even the good that we do do is not goodness in the perfect sense that the holiness of God demands. Therefore, to repeat, all human persons, all human powers and all human programs are under judgment; and we cannot give uncritical fealty to any of them. Nor can we proclaim a one-to-one relationship between the will of God and the details of any such program. As John Anderson said: "I have searched the New Testament and have searched it again, and I do not find there any reference to the Panama Canal."

As Tillich points out, the Protestant principle in this sense is really the same as the prophetic principle. It is to the Hebrew prophets that we owe this insistence that all things human -- including priests as well as princes -- must be kept under the judgment of the transcendent love and wrath of God. The problem is that in the history of Protestantism, as well as the rest of Christianity - and of Judaism - this principle has had to struggle with another, which we may call the theocratic principle. (In his writing, so far as I know, Tillich doesn't precisely use this juxtaposition of terms, but the notion, I think, is certainly implicit in his thought.)

According to the theocratic principle, there is a one-to-one correlation between the will of God - or the power of God - and some particular human entity:

- whether it be the king, as in the "divine right of kings" (which in the Western world was a classic expression of the theocratic principle);

- whether it be the Byzantine Emperor, functioning as surrogate for the great Christos Pantocrator, whose figure is spread across the domes of those great churches;

- or whether we find the same thing in modern secular guise in the form of a Lenin or Stalin to whom similar devotion and adulation is given as a direct pipeline to divine truth, understood in the secular sense; or on the other hand, whether it be a Hitler, a Franco, or an Idi Amin. All of these did their work implicitly under the rubric of the theocratic principle.

It is fascinating to note what we are now seeing in China, in the "demythologizing" of Mao and Maoism, as we may call it, that is going on. We could say that what we are seeing there is the rebirth of the Protestant principle or the prophetic principle - although the degree to which it will be institutionalized in the form of a pluralism of political parties or full freedom of speech remains to be seen. (It is crucial that a principle find residence in institutions, or else its purchase on history is very fragile.)

What is distressing, to return to the home scene, is the apparent rebirth here in the United States of the theocratic principle, as expressed in this new Holy Alliance of religion and politics that is being proposed by figures such as those that we referred to at the beginning, and also as it is expressed in extremisms of various kinds, with or without a religious guise (for they amount to the same thing).

One of the most chilling comments in recent political history, in my opinion, is the one made by Leon Jaworski just a week or so ago when he announced himself as founder of "Democrats for Reagan." When asked how he could reconcile this with his bitter criticism of Ronald Reagan last spring as an extremist, Jaworski replied: "I'd rather have a competent extremist than an incompetent moderate as President". That will go down in history along with "We had to destroy the village in order to save it".

I would suggest that extremism can be understood as a contemporary equivalent to the ancient phenomenon known as idolatry - whether it be idolatry of a nation, race or economic system. Over against it stands the prophetic, alias the Protestant, principle. But it is very difficult to maintain this critical stance today, because in an "age of anxiety," people have a very low tolerance for ambiguity. If time and resources permitted, one could try to unpack such a statement in terms of cultural and social-psychological analysis, and this needs doing. In the face of a moral pluralism in our culture which many have viewed as a degeneration into moral nihilism; in the face of the overload of input provided by the mass media; in the face of the radical openness of life-styles that have been promoted by major streams of influence in our culture, there is a deep anxiety on the part of many people, which I think accounts in part for this phenomenon of the new religious right. There are a lot of things going on that people are very worried about, and here they see what we consider simplistic solutions, but what for them seem vigorous, clear-headed solutions being proposed. In an "age of anxiety", people have a very low tolerance for ambiguity. Things have got to be black or white, good or evil, demonic or divine.

It is fascinating to me to notice how this kind of moral and metaphysical dualism has come to the fore most strongly today in a very interesting place - namely, Iran. You will remember when we all studied the Hebrew Scriptures and the history of Israel, the question always arose: how did the original unity fail, and the one reality come to be split into notions such as heaven and hell, angels and demons, salvation and damnation? It was always attributed to what was called "Persian dualism." It is precisely there, in Persia, that this dualism has re-emerged with a vengeance, only now with a new cast of characters in the role of demons (viz., the Americans - although we now are sharing that category with the Iraqis, as you know). And just as vigorously as the enemy is rejected as satanic, there is an equally uncritical affirmation and acceptance of whatever emerges from the theocratic source, which in this case is the Ayatolla - who is really viewed as a kind of Christ figure, as transparent to the divine. According to Christianity there has been only one historical figure of whom that could be said, and even this transparency to the divine appears in the form of an incognito which resulted in a cross. So much, from a Christian standpoint, for any kind of ecclesiastical, theological or political triumphalism!

It is this about which Tillich is reminding us, and about which he viewed it as his role to remind Protestantism. It was a matter of recalling Protestantism to an awareness of its own principle, and the implications of this principle for a radical critique, first of itself; secondly of Christendom as a whole; and thirdly of all the powers that be - and of the powers that wish to be. For neither can an uncritical allegiance be given to revolutionary movements, which is a common weakness in liberation theology.



Now if I may apply this to the question of attitudes toward the State of Israel, in which we all are so deeply interested, there is a grievous problem both with regard to supporters of Israel here and, frankly, with regard to Israel itself. To a considerable extent it is the Conservative Evangelicals who form the new religious right who are often the greatest friends of Israel. Indeed, they are often as uncritical in their support of Israel as they are in support of the particular program that they are espousing here at home and that they are identifying with the will of God. Why this fervent support of Israel? I haven't been a close student of this, but as I understand it, it is rooted in their eschatology, according to which the return of the Jews to the Holy Land is a sign of the imminent second coming of Christ, or as Martin Marty has put it, "the big bang over Jerusalem." Marty has warned those Israelis who welcome this support uncritically to be aware that what these evangelicals are really looking for is that big bang over Jerusalem. Of course, there is also within certain circles of Judaism itself a similar belief that the return to Zion is the prelude to the coming - in this case, the first coming - of the Messiah. In either case, whether on Jewish or on Christian grounds, what is happening is that historical events are given a metaphysical and eschatological interpretation which prevents one from looking at them critically. Protestants of the Tillichian and Niebuhrian sort, who really understand and try to think out of the position of the Protestant principle, cannot and will not yield such uncritical assent to any regime, at home or abroad. Hence, at the present time in many instances, they will be found among those who are critical of Israel, even harshly critical of Israel - that is to say, of Israeli policy and actions.

It seems to me that we should always distinguish between the Israeli reality and the Israeli regime, and that it is possible to be fervently affirmative of the Israeli reality while being not only mildly, but even fervently, critical of the Israeli regime at any given time. It also seems to me that in Israel itself there is a struggle going on right now in the Israeli soul and in the Israeli body politic between the theocratic principle and the prophetic principle -- and so much rests upon the outcome for the future of Israel, for the internal character of Israeli society, and for its capacity to sustain the support of its friends around the world.

Let me just comment on two other matters. Regarding the National Council of Churches, I do think that part of the problem is, to use a sociological phrase, a classic instance of the "circulation of elites." The National Council has, to no small extent, become a world unto itself and has an ideology unto itself. Although it is a Protestant organization, if the Protestant principle is at work within it, so far as the question of Israel and the Middle East is concerned, up till now it seems to have worked in a very one-sided manner. Yes, the prophetic criticism is exercised, but only in one direction. That, I think, is in turn influenced by the effect of liberation theology, which creates a mental and theological alliance, as it were, with the cause of the Palestinians - Palestinian liberation being viewed as one of the many examples of a case of the oppressed to whom we should throw our support.

This one-sidedness of the application of the Protestant principle must itself be radically critized, because this principle is expected to operate in both directions. As Scripture says, "The word of God is living and active, and sharper than any two-edged sword". It does not have just one edge! The National Council pronouncements on these questions are, I would say, illustrative of "political theology" in the worst sense (or have been; perhaps there will be a change).

In conclusion, I want to comment on the term "political theology" itself. So far as I know, this term arose in the works of Johann Baptist Metz, a European Roman Catholic theologian, although, as he and others point out, it is of much older, even pre-Christian, provenance. It occurs in Hellenic and Roman philosophical theology. The original intention of those who adopted this term was excellent. It represented an effort to overcome the privatization of theology. Christian theology and Christian faith, it was the intention to say, have relevance to the life of the organized human community, the polis, and not just the life of the individual or of the church; and this we would surely affirm. But in America this term is so easily susceptible to misinterpretation that, in my judgment, it is hardly usable, and should be dropped, because the phenomena that would most logically be covered by such a term as "political theology" would be the very sort of things that we have been discussing here - the uncritical politicizing of the pulpit in the hands of a Jerry Falwell or even a Humberto Cardinal Medeiros. Some greater distance between the pulpit and the polling booth is called for.

In this connection, one might even want to call upon the much-despised Lutheran "two kingdoms" doctrine to assist us in making the necessary distinctions. John Anderson, if I may quote him again, put it rather well in his address to the National Religious Broadcasters Association in Washington earlier this week. This was a courageous address, given the audience. In a memorable turn of phrase, he stated: "When a preacher becomes a politician, he diminishes the independent prophetic quality of his message; and when a politician becomes the instrument of a church, he or she forfeits the mandate bestowed by the election."

With this greater sense of separation or distinction in mind, one might discuss not political theology, but simply the relation of theology and politics. A third way of phrasing it, which I think comes closest to the heart of the matter, is to speak not simply of theology and politics, but of a theology of politics. This is, I think, the preferable equivalent to the term "political theology." The phrase "theology of politics" implies that out of the resources of the theological tradition, one will be able to illumine and interpret at a profound level that aspect of the human reality that accounts for there being such a thing as politics at all, and that accounts for its being the sordid and glorious, tragicomical kind of thing that it is.

Reinhold Niebuhr was one of the greatest - I think the greatest - practitioner of this kind of theology of politics. In so many ways the fundamental principle out of which he operated was precisely the Protestant principle in the sense in which we have used it. Whether he learned it from his friend Paul Tillich, or from Martin Luther, or from Augustine, or

from the prophet Isaiah, I'm not sure, probably from them all. But he was a master practioner of it. I would like to read you in closing an eloquent and memorable paragraph from his book THE IRONY OF AMERICAN HISTORY that epitomizes this view (p. 63):

"Nothing," he says, "that is worth doing can be achieved in our lifetime. Therefore, we must be saved by hope. Nothing which is true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history; therefore, we must be saved by faith. Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone; therefore, we are saved by love. No virtuous act is quite as virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as it is from our standpoint; therefore, we must be saved by the final form of love, which is forgiveness." This, although it may seem rather abstract, is, I think, a very beautiful expression of the beginning point of a theology of politics based on the Protestant principle - which, although it may bear that label, is in fact the prophetic principle that is common to us all.