

Political Power and the People of God¹

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Thomas A. Idinopulos and Roy Bowen Ward point out, in an otherwise faulty appraisal of a work by Rosemary Ruether, that "doctrinal formulations (or reformulations) will not end anti-Judaism, much less antisemitism because history shows both to be complex phenomena which depend heavily on political, social, and economic factors, as well as on the intellectual and theological developments which gave expression to them."² This passage reflects the importance of a theology of politics.

The phrase "theology of politics" stands for the responsible application of theological and moral principles to the political domain, the domain of power. A theology lacking relevance to the political realm is not worth anything. As Alistair Kee writes, the "question is not whether political theology is still theology, but whether anything that is without political significance deserves the name 'theology.'"³ A purely theoretical or academic theology is a form of idolatry and even blasphemy, because it takes the name of God and subjects it to the imaginings of the human mind and the ideological self-deifications of the human spirit.

As so often, Irving Greenberg contributes positively to the rethinking of theology in the era after the Holocaust, in this instance through his commentary upon a Jewish woman and her child. The scene is Auschwitz, following upon a horrifying train journey.

In this state, when she suddenly understood where she was, when she smelled the stench of the burning bodies -- perhaps heard the cries of the living in the flames -- she abandoned her child and ran.

Out of this wells up the cry: Surely here is where the cross is smashed. There has been a terrible misunderstanding of the symbol of the crucifixion. Surely, we understand now that the point of the account is the cry: "My lord, my lord, why have you abandoned me?"^[4] Never again should anyone be exposed to such one-sided power on the side of evil -- for in such extremes not only does evil triumph, but the Suffering Servant now breaks and betrays herself. Out of the Holocaust experience comes the demand for redistribution of power. The principle is simple. No one should ever have to depend again on anyone else's goodwill or respect for their basic security and right to exist. The Jews of Europe needed that goodwill and these good offices desperately -- and the democracies and the church and the Communists and their fellow-Jews failed them. No one should ever be equipped with less power than is necessary to assure one's dignity. To argue dependence on law, or human goodness, or universal equality is to join the ranks of those who would like to repeat the Holocaust.⁵

The worst fate that can befall any people is to be bereft of political sovereignty. As Richard L. Rubenstein says, "theologians or moralists may argue that all men possess some God-given irreducible measure of dignity, but such talk will neither deter future emulators of the Nazis nor comfort realistically their victims. . . . Human rights and dignity can only be attained by membership in a community that has the power to guarantee those rights."⁶ It is, indeed, a moral responsibility for a people not to be weak. This duty is owed, not alone to themselves, but also in a sense to their foes and detractors, lest the others be tempted

into aggressive acts against them. Significantly, the black leader Eldridge Cleaver, who often speaks in these terms, emphasizes that the Holocaust has taught him that if you go along, or have to go along, with tyranny, you simply cannot live. His conclusion was "Black power," in order to encourage the white brethren to be and to behave like decent human beings.⁷

The primary way for the Christian community to relate to Jews today is from the standpoint of a theology of politics rather than from that of religion. For the erstwhile political powerlessness of Jews has only guaranteed their persecution and suffering.

The Jewish people have at last gained the power that can help keep their enemies at bay, their human foes and their divine protagonist. True, the theology of politics cannot be permitted to mean the theologizing of politics. That is to say, theology cannot rightly subject the political domain to the dictates of religion -- for example, by claiming absolute rights, in the name of God, for a particular people to a given land. There are no absolute human rights to anything. All human rights are limited and partial. Nevertheless, through Israel, Jews are enabled to fight for their lives. This, as Pinchas Peli attests, is the very "essence of Israel's meaning."⁸ Men do not live by bread and bullets alone, but without them, they become ravening wolves or helpless victims. Those who are bothered by a stress upon sovereignty as the central meaning of the state of Israel have failed to take to heart the Jewish story. Eretz Yisrael forms the answer to almost two thousand years of Jewish defenselessness. Within it is contained the most effective reply to those who talk glibly of the "power of the Cross," of spiritual force as the answer to physical force and armed aggression. These persons are not simply wrong in an empirical or political sense. They are, objectively speaking, obscene; that is to say, they are threats to the human creation of God. There is a parallel in the pacifism advocated by some Christians -- pacifism in the sense of a political instrument, in contrast to the vocational pacifism of individuals -- and the Christian effort tacitly to abolish Jewry through missions. If the latter represents a "spiritual Final Solution," pacifism as an advocated policy directed to Jews reestablishes the threat of a physical Final Solution. Auschwitz throws into clear relief, and once and for all, the demonic character of much Christian spirituality, a type of spirituality that, when applied to Jews, is best summed up in a certain cynic's definition: Christianity is that religion which teaches that the Jewish people are to turn the other cheek.

A perfect illustration of double-standard Christian morality is a piece by a Quaker professor named Calvin Keene. Having sought to dispose of those Christians who relate the reestablishing of the state of Israel to the will of God, Keene introduces his own version of a covenant of demand by declaring that Israel is to be "evaluated" and "the future of this new state" is to be "determined" by "its practice or lack of practice of justice, mercy, and righteousness."⁹ The revealing element is not so much what he tries to demand of Israel as what he fails to ask of the Arabs. Evidently the latter's hostile policies toward Israel are quite acceptable. That Keene should refuse to apply his Quaker-pacifist demands to the Arabs suggests that his hidden purposes are not in fact the making of peace, but instead the end of Israel, which has been turned into defenselessness through the implementing of his brand of "Christian" perfectionism.

Of course, we must not be oblivious to the universal temptations of power. Due to its ontological status as a creation of God and not God himself, human statehood or sovereignty may never be exalted into an absolute.¹⁰ Nor can we ignore the incapacity of power to resolve problems of ultimate human meaning and the purposes of life. Power is to be lived with in ways advocated by Reinhold Niebuhr.¹¹ It is neither to be idealized into some kind of messiah, nor disdained as some kind of devil. Power is to be utilized as an instrument for the restraining of human sin and the channeling of human creativity in a world that will never be perfect.

Even though the Christian church has, overall, partly corrupted the Jewish doctrine of God, the church has, overall, contributed much to the doctrine of man, thereby helping to refine Jewish anthropology. Much of the Christian insight into human social and political life lies in teaching us to be suspicious of men and their motives, particularly of ourselves. The French Christian scholar Fadiey Lovsky writes that the Holocaust comprised the most striking historical demonstration of "the hereditary reality of human sin."¹² Although the symbolism of sin as a "hereditary" taint wrongly obscures human responsibility for evil, it does have the virtue of pointing to human solidarity in sin.

Power has the best chance to achieve relative responsibility under a system of political democracy, since in that system the destructive dangers and the constructive opportunities of power are alike taken into account. Democracy is a creative alternative to two extreme political views, absolutism and anarchism. Political absolutists, whether of the older kingly and historically tyrannical sort or of the newer totalitarian type, pretend that the masses of humanity are either too evil or too stupid to govern themselves. At the other extreme stand the idealistic anarchists of history who teach that governmental rule is really not required because human beings are, in essence, too good to have to be subjected to arbitrary and artificial political restraints. Against both views Reinhold Niebuhr affirms that "man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary."¹³ In theological language, man is made in the image of God, yet he is also a sinner. He is capable of honoring and achieving a certain measure of justice; hence, the masses of men can rule themselves. But rule is needed, government is necessitated, because men also lord it over their fellows. Accordingly, a political structure of "checks and balances" is required, to protect us from other men and to protect other men from us. Absolutism is unduly pessimistic about man; anarchism is unduly optimistic. Alone among political systems, democracy takes seriously both the heights of human constructiveness and the depths of human sin. None of this is to suggest that there is any such thing as the Christian political system. All human systems stand under the judgment of God. Democracy is more a method than a doctrinaire claim.

In the frame of reference of international affairs the challenge of justice is to render every nation its due -- to ensure it of whatever it can legitimately claim simply by virtue of being a nation (a minimal standard of living, the capacity to defend itself, the right to participate in the counsels of nations, and so on). The prime question of international relations is how can power be utilized to contribute to justice among the nation-states? The general answer must be not through annulling power (which would be to turn away from the exigencies and responsibilities of the real world), not through uncontrolled power (which would

mean imperialism and international anarchy), but rather through manifold structures of balanced or mutually trammled power. With the aid of these structures, human collectivities are able to maintain a tolerable coexistence. In sum, the key to relative justice among the nations must always remain the art of compromise.

Because the prevailing emphasis in this book is upon a theological way of looking at life, it is appropriate to include a word about the relation between the ultimate resources and promises of faith and the sphere of political action. There are two polar types of religious believers: those who stay aloof from the world and remain "pure," but thereby commit the sin of irresponsibility; and those who plunge into the world and inevitably, therefore, take upon themselves the dirtiness and nasty compromises of the political scene. The difficulty with many religious people, as Arnold Nash used to say, is that they are always committing the wrong sins rather than the right ones. Martin Luther offered a curious word of advice to his brother Christians: "Sin bravely, if also you have brave faith." All men sin. The question is whether we are going to be irresponsible sinners, those who sin but not bravely, or responsible sinners, those who sin bravely.

There is a final mercy that God in his grace makes available in the realm of human power relations. The political man of faith lives ~~in~~ with an uneasy but easy conscience, uneasy because he inexorably falls short of every ideal, but easy because he is assured that the Ruler of the Universe accepts him nonetheless. To those who take on political obligations, a strange assurance comes. Perhaps it can best be called "the peace that passes all understanding." In a word, the ultimate resource behind sustained political action is the divine forgiveness.¹⁴ (But is this not the hidden resource behind all that we say and so, the final power that enables life to go on? If so, there ^{is} some hope for us all, even for those who unintentionally betray the truths of God.

Footnotes

1. Excerpt from A. Roy Eckardt with Alice L. Eckardt, LONG NIGHT'S JOURNEY INTO DAY: LIFE AND FAITH AFTER THE HOLOCAUST, Detroit: Wayne State University Press (forthcoming).

2. Thomas A. Idinopulos and Roy Bowen Ward, "Is Christology Inherently Anti-Semitic? A Critical Review of Rosemary Ruether's FAITH AND FRATRICIDE," Journal of the American Academy of Religion, XLV, 2 (June 1977), 209. Ruether clearly shows that human behavior cannot be separated from human beliefs. The former follows the latter, rather than the reverse. In arguing that political factors, instead of theological ones, were the real root of tensions between Christians and Jews, Idinopulos and Ward fail to see that the original struggle was thoroughly religious. Social prejudices and political rivalries were ancillary to the church's main goal of establishing itself as the true -- that is, God's -- instrument of salvation. In their endeavor to undermine Ruether's understanding that "the anti-Judaic structure of Christian thought . . . has retarded Christian theological maturation," the two critics trivialize her challenge to a genuine Christian metanoia.

3. Alistair Kee, editor, A READER IN POLITICAL THEOLOGY, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1974, p. ix.

4. Here is the place where Jürgen Moltmann's emphasis upon the Godforsakenness of Jesus on the cross gains its force, in contrast to his

erroneous effort to extract ultimate theological significance from Jesus' cry of abandonment.

5. Irving Greenberg, "Cloud of Smoke, Pillar of Fire: Judaism, Christianity, and Modernity after the Holocaust," in Eva Fleischner, ed., AUSCHWITZ: BEGINNING OF A NEW ERA?, New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1977, p. 54.

6. Richard L. Rubenstein, "Some Perspectives on Religious Faith After Auschwitz," in Franklin H. Littell and Hubert G. Locke, THE GERMAN CHURCH STRUGGLE AND THE HOLOCAUST, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1974, pp. 265, 266.

7. We are indebted to Irving Greenberg for this item concerning Eldridge Cleaver.

8. Pinchas Hachohen Peli, "The Future of Israel," Proceedings of the Rabbinical Assembly 74th Annual Convention, 5-9 May 1974, Lake Kiamisha, N.Y., p. 15.

9. Calvin Keene, "Prophecy and Modern Israel, The Link, X, 3 (Summer 1977), 1-3.

10. Uriel Tal, "Möglichkeiten einer jüdisch-christlichen Begegnung und Verständigung, Jüdische Sicht," Concilium (Mainz), 10. Jahrgang, Heft 10 (Oktober 1974), 606. Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr: "patriotism transmutes individual unselfishness into national egoism" (MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY: A STUDY IN ETHICS AND POLITICS, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941, p. 91). Niebuhr understood sin as "the hidden pride that insinuates itself even into our most selfless endeavors. And this pride is particularly dangerous at the collective level" (June Bingham, "Carter, Castro and Reinhold Niebuhr," The Christian Century, XCIV, 28 [14 September 1977], 776).

11. See, among others, these works by Reinhold Niebuhr: THE CHILDREN OF LIGHT AND THE CHILDREN OF DARKNESS: A VINDICATION OF DEMOCRACY AND A CRITIQUE OF ITS TRADITIONAL DEFENSE, New York: Scribner Lyceum Editions, 1960; CHRISTIANITY AND POWER POLITICS, Hamden Conn.: Archon Books, 1969; MORAL MAN AND IMMORAL SOCIETY; and THE STRUCTURE OF NATIONS AND EMPIRES: A STUDY OF THE RECURRING PATTERNS AND PROBLEMS OF THE POLITICAL ORDER IN RELATION TO THE UNIQUE PROBLEMS OF THE NUCLEAR AGE, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1959.

12. Fadley Lovsky, written communication, 1 December 1975.

13. Niebuhr, THE CHILDREN OF LIGHT AND THE CHILDREN OF DARKNESS, p. xiii.

14. On the link between politics and forgiveness, our debt to Reinhold Niebuhr is as great as it is obvious. See especially his essay "The Peace of God" in DISCERNING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946, pp. 174-194.

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