FAITH AND POLITICS

A Commentary on Religious, Social and Political Thought in a Technological Age

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covered by certain intellectuals and allegedly purged of Leninist and Stalinist corruptions, does not serve us in making the necessary empirical distinctions about the effects of industrialism, whether inherent in the technical process or in a social order.

It was from the very beginning too indiscriminate, too lacking in empirical precision, too much the weapon of the “class struggle” and the instrument of the revolutionary prophet who had transmuted atheism into a new religion. The priests of this religion are now the priest-kings of an empire based on utopian illusions, of a culture in which materialism has become the canonized philosophy. The vaunted affinity between empiricism and materialism has been transmuted into a new dogma.

The irony of these developments is complete. But preoccupation with the irony of these developments cannot obscure either the original humanistic passion of Marx’s enterprise or the dogmatic uses to which it was put and the dogmatic atrophy in which it has now been enmeshed. That atrophy was not a corruption, introduced by later Marxists, whether Lenin or Stalin. It was inherent in Marx’s transmutation of empiricism to materialism to revolutionary religious apocalypse.

The assertion is not too hazardous that the ecumenical movement has achieved more telling results in the field of Christian political and social ethics than in any other field of thought and life. These results may be briefly defined as the dissolution of traditional dogmas which Christian thinkers had inherited from the political right or the political left and a gradual elaboration of what Dr. Visser ’t Hooft has designated as “Christian pragmatism.” “Pragmatism” has been a Schimpfwort in Christian circles for some time. How then do we arrive at a “Christian” pragmatism? One can answer that question very simply by the assertion that Christian pragmatism is merely the application of Christian freedom and a sense of responsibility to the complex issues of economics and politics, with the firm resolve that inherited dogmas and generalizations will not be accepted, no matter how revered or venerable, if they do not contribute to the establishment of justice in a given situation.

Consider for instance the state of Christian social thought at both the Stockholm and Oxford conferences. The first of these at Stockholm was still laboring under secular illusions, which we would now define as “liberal.” One thinks for instance of the extravagant hopes which were placed in the League of Nations. At Oxford the atmosphere, in keeping with the mood of the time, when the second world war already cast its shadow before it, was
more realistic. But it was still necessary to entertain ideas which were derived from the right and the left in politics and to ask whether or not they were “Christian.”

We have now come to the fairly general conclusion that there is no “Christian” economic or political system. But there is a Christian attitude toward all systems and schemes of justice. It consists on the one hand of a critical attitude toward the claims of all systems and schemes, expressed in the question whether they will contribute to justice in a concrete situation; and on the other hand a responsible attitude, which will not pretend to be God nor refuse to make a decision between political answers to a problem because each answer is discovered to contain a moral ambiguity in God’s sight. We are men, not God; we are responsible for making choices between greater and lesser evils, even when our Christian faith, illuminating the human scene, makes it quite apparent that there is no pure good in history; and probably no pure evil either. The fate of civilizations may depend upon these choices between systems of which some are more, others less, just.

This Christian “pragmatism” has dissolved the certainties of Christian Marxists and Christian conservatives. Perhaps it would be more modest to assert that it has profited by the refutation of claims and counterclaims in actual historical experience. It has been Christian only in the sense that it drew upon Christian insights which were long obscured in the minds of even the most pious, but which have been clarified by historical experience even as they have clarified that experience.

There were those, for instance, who were so outraged by the injustices of a “capitalist” system that they were ready, though usually with some reservations, to embrace that part of the Marxist creed which promised a higher degree of justice through the socialization of property. Experience has proved that socialization does not remove economic power from the community. The nationalization of property may on the other hand merely cumulate both economic and political power in the hands of a single oligarchy. We know the baneful effects of this policy in the realities of contemporary communism. But even the more moderate and democratic socialism no longer offers the attraction to the Christian conscience which it once did. For it has become apparent that the measures which it may take to establish a minimum of justice in the community are in danger of destroying the freedom and spontaneity which its economic life requires. In the effort to correct unjust inequalities such measures may bind the community in a static equalitarianism. This will remind us that equality is the regulative principle of justice but that it is, like liberty and love, no simple possibility in any political community.

Other illusions of the left have been dispelled. Nationalism was once thought to be the product of capitalism and idealists embraced socialism for the sake of its alleged internationalism. Now the Socialist Parties are all tempted to espouse nationalistic interests partly because socialization means nationalization (a fact which throws many European socialists into opposition to such supranational institutions as the European Coal and Steel Community) and partly because socialists find the liberal Catholic parties espousing the cause of international cooperation. How strangely history dispels our illusions and punctures our pretensions!

It would, however, be quite wrong to espouse economic conservatism because of this disillusionment of the left or with the left. Conservatism in America and in some parts of Europe means the anachronistic espousal of physiocratic theories, which promise justice through the emancipation of economic life from every kind of political and moral control. It rests on the illusion that there are “laws of nature” in history, that there are “pre-established” harmonies in nature, and therefore presumably in history, which is equated with nature.

These physiocratic theories lie at the foundation of what has become the “philosophy” of the “free enterprise” system on which the whole bourgeois world has consistently prided itself, and which did indeed emancipate economic enterprise from irrelevant political restraints and encourage productivity through economic incentives.

But naturally the basic theory was as heretical, from the Chris-
Christian thought must not pretend that what we have described
as its growing pragmatism has not been influenced by this general
history in Western thought and life. But we must also recognize
that what has been wrought out has actually been a view of life
and the establishment of justice in a community which could have
been elaborated originally if we had had a clear biblical insight
into the nature of history, the freedom of man, and the corruption
of sin in that freedom, and had therefore realized that history
cannot be equated with nature; nor can the political judgments
which we make about our and each other's interests be equated
with the judgments which a scientist makes about natural phe-
nomena. In other words the process we have described has been
the gradual extrication of our thought from the baneful effects of
heresies about man and God which have infected it ever since
the French Enlightenment.

It would be wrong however to suggest that our civilization
gained nothing from this conflict of heresies, for they established
precisely that contest of political and social forces which was the
prerequisite of justice in our society. These developments were
not anticipated in the traditional "Christian" societies before the
rise of these heresies. If we ask why they were not anticipated
we will learn why it was necessary to challenge "Christian con-
servatism" before either political or economic justice could be
established. We are now speaking of "Christian conservatism" in
the traditional sense, and not in the sense which it has acquired
in America and some continental countries. For, according to that
connotation, this conservatism is only the religious sanctification
of laissez-faire economics.

This older conservatism may be defined as the religious sanc-
tification of established authority, which made it difficult to resist
such authority and to correct the injustices which arose from
permitting an unchallenged authority in the human community.
We must humbly confess the limitations of this conservative
approach to political problems, for they prove that Protestant
Christianity is not as directly related to the rise of free societies
as we would all like to believe. Ever since the Reformation this
Christian conservatism has made the mistake of interpreting the Christian reverence for orders in society, providentially established beyond the contrivance of men, as the uncritical acceptance of a particular authority and a particular order. We must remember that it required a whole century for later Calvinism to add the proper discriminations to the thought of Calvin and Luther, so that it was possible for Christians both to accept the providentially established order of a nation, and to resist a particular government for its injustice.

Upon this distinction between the principle of order and a particular government, established by seventeenth-century Calvinism in Scotland, Holland, France and England, the health of our whole free world depends. It is important to establish this point, because it contains both the resources of the Christian faith in the political sphere and the limitations of a conventional interpretation of that faith. The resource is a proper reverence for providential order and justice, established beyond the resources of the human agents, and not to be lightly challenged. The limitation is an undue and uncritical respect for any particular authority and a consequent disinclination to challenge it. Secular idealists are therefore right in drawing attention to the contributions which rational discrimination made to the creation of contemporary democratic institutions. But they are wrong when they conceal the fact that the worship of “reason” was as fruitful in generating modern tyrannies as the veneration of established authority was in preserving ancient tyrannies.

If we fully analyze the complex relation which exists between religious and rational factors in the establishment of justice, we must come to the conclusion that two elements are equally necessary for the solution of the problems of the human community. One is a proper reverence for factors and forces which are truly absolute; and the other is a discriminate attitude toward relative and ambiguous factors and forces. As Christians we insist that there be a proper reverence for the absolute factors, which might be enumerated as: (1) The authority of God beyond all human and historic authorities, enabling us to defy those authorities on occasion with a resolute “We must obey God rather than men.” (2) The authority of the moral law embodied in the revelation in Christ, which is to be distinguished from any particular version of that law which may have evolved historically, including the different versions of “natural law.” (3) The insistence upon the “dignity” of the person which makes it illegitimate for any community to debase the individual into a mere instrument of social process and power and try to obscure the fact of his ultimate destiny, which transcends all historic realities. This acknowledgment of the “dignity” of man must be accompanied in Christian thought by a recognition that this precious individual is also a sinner, that his lusts and ambitions are a danger to the community; and that his rational processes are tainted by the taint of his own interests. (4) Reverence for the “orders” of authority and social harmony which have actually been established among us, beyond the wisdom of man and frequently by providential workings in which “God hath made the wrath of man to praise him.”

Every one of these “absolutes” is in danger of corruption; which is why we cannot speak so simply of Christian “civic virtue.” Reverence for the will of God may degenerate into a too-simple identification of our interests with the divine will, a fact which may make conventional Christianity a source of confusion in the community. Reverence for the historical dignity of the person may degenerate into a “bourgeois” individualism in which the individual is falsely exalted above the community and the cause of justice. The moral law may be falsely interpreted from the standpoint of the interests of any portion of the community, and more particularly of the pious section of the community. Reverence for the principle of order may degenerate into an undue respect for a particular order, a form of degeneration which Calvinism, and later Lutheranism, overcame only at the price of bitter experience with tyranny.

If we summarize these developments we must recognize that the same faith which prompted reverence for the absolutes, which transcend the relativities of history, may also confuse the picture of the human community in its political and economic perplex-
ities by imparting religious sanction to one of the relative factors and removing it from the wholesome challenges which have been discovered to be necessary to prevent any power in the human community from becoming pretentious in its pride or vexatious in its power. In short we must face the fact that the Reformation did not draw sufficiently rigorous conclusions from its principle Justus et Pecator simul. For according to that principle the redeemed man could not be trusted to exercise power without sin. Therefore the checks upon his power were necessary, even if it was the power of government which was involved. It required a full century to gain the necessary discrimination for the distinction between the principle of order and the providentially established political order of a given nation, and a particular government, upon which close check must be placed and its power, in the words of Sam Rutherford, “measured out ounce by ounce.”

To this failure in discriminate judgment in our Reformation heritage one must add all those indiscriminate judgments which result from deluding political judgment from analogies between historically contingent social norms, embodied in the canon, and the contingent circumstances of contemporary life. After all, the original error in regard to government was due not only to a failure to distinguish between the majesty of government and the majesty of a particular government; it was also due to an excessive emphasis upon St. Paul’s admonition in Romans 13, an admonition which obviously had the immediate purpose of arresting “eschatological unrest” and which would, taken alone, disturb the scriptural “consensus” upon the attitude toward government. For that consensus includes two motifs. The one is appreciation of government as divinely ordained, and established by forces greater than the conscious contrivance of men. The other is a critical attitude toward government as inclined to usurp the divine majesty by its pretensions of pride and the injustices of its power.

The problem of relating scriptural insights to the flowing stream of human events is a very important one to this day. We cannot deny that frequently scriptural insights are falsely related to highly contingent situations, in such a way as to bring confusion into our judgments. We children of the Reformation pride ourselves on freedom from the inflexible standards which Catholics draw from their conception of “natural law.” But it must be confessed that an indiscriminate biblicism is as much a source of confusion as Catholic natural law theories.

In the history of the slow development of justice in the free societies of Western civilization, the secular section of our civilization claims that it provided exactly those discriminations which the religious elements found such difficulty in achieving. This is partly true but partly false. For modern secularism obscured its rational discrimination between constant and variable factors in the problems of the community by its worship of human “reason” as a source of virtue. This worship, which had its rise in the eighteenth century, failed to take account of the sinful corruption of reason, which made the “checks and balances” of justice as necessary in an “enlightened” as in an ignorant community. The observer of history will note that all the illusions which lie at the foundation of modern Communist tyranny had their inception in the eighteenth century worship of “reason” or “nature.” These illusions were insensible of the unique character of human freedom, and consequently of human history. Above all, they obscured the fact that sinful self-assertion might rise from the same human capacities which were praised as “rational.”

If the secular part of our culture derived grave errors from its worship of reason and nature, rather than the worship of God, it compounded those errors by its extreme voluntarism, which was blind to the workings of providence in history and thought that men could create both governments and communities by the “social contract.” This mistake, of imagining that men are in complete control of their historical destiny, reveals itself today in the secular proposals for “world government,” which our secular idealists press upon us, and they are disappointed when we refuse to share their illusions.

But we would do well to note that even the errors of the social contract theorists served some purpose when they were brought into contact with truth, which removed their evil effects. Thus
The principle of government “by consent of the governed” is a legitimate political principle of democracy, drawn from the illegitimate illusions of social contract theorists. In this way error contributed to truth and served to counteract the error in the Christian truth. For it was true that God established order in human society beyond the contrivance of men; and it was an error to give particular governments an undue reverence and deny the citizen the political power involved in the right of suffrage.

The manner in which the errors and truths of Christians and secularists, of later Calvinists and sectarian Christians, of Catholics and Protestants, have been used for the attainment of justice in a technical age, is itself a remarkable display of providence as contrasted with the wisdom and the foolishness of men. For it is quite apparent that no single force, whether pious or impious, could have accomplished what has been done.

The political and economic sphere, as a realm of relative and contingent realities and of ambiguous moral choices, makes discriminate judgment so necessary, because it is always important to distinguish between the constant and the variable factors, and between the ultimate and the proximate moral norms. This fact has led to one type of Christian politics, which merely asserts the moral ambiguity of all political positions and exhibits its Christian transcendence by refusing to make a choice “which the Pope or Mr. Truman could make just as well.” There is no particular wisdom in this kind of neutrality. It leads, in fact, to the political confusion before Nazism, which led to Nazism. Nor is it very helpful to introduce discriminations into the fields of judgment which are supposed to be uniquely Christian but which detract from consideration of the main problems of justice. The judgment, for instance, that Communism is preferable to Nazism because it is not morally nihilistic, or not militaristic, or that it does not intend to corrupt the Christian faith (its only purpose being to annihilate it), or that it is not anti-Semitic. All these judgments obscure the very significant fact that utopian illusions may be as fruitful of tyranny as moral cynicism. This fact is one of the most significant experiences of our day. Observers, whether theologians or rationalists, who obscure this fact do our generation a disservice.

Incidentally, it would be well for theologians and religious people generally to recognize that when they claim to make political judgments on hazardous issues from the standpoint of their faith, their knowledge of the Bible or their theology, they run exactly the same danger of seeking absolute sanction for their frail human judgments as our secular friends run when they claim “scientific” or “objective” validity for their judgments. Every judgment is hazardous and corrupted in the realm where we judge each other. Theologians are just as tempted to obscure that fact as “social scientists.”

In the contest between the free world and Communism, for instance, we have all the perplexities which have confused the consciences and minds of men through the centuries. If we become obsessed with the distinction between our righteousness and the evil of Communism we may reduce the conflict to one between two forces which Professor Butterfield has defined as “two organized systems of self-righteousness.” If on the other hand we insist that this struggle is merely one more illustration of the fact that all historic struggles are between sinful men, we run the danger of conniving with a vicious tyranny and playing traitor to the God of justice.

The sum of these considerations is that we have an obligation as Christians to establish and extend community and justice as far as lies within our power. We must obey the law of love under conditions and within limits which make no simple application possible. It is not possible because the sins of men, the persistence of individual and collective self-interest, force us to maintain order by coercion and may make resistance and war a necessity of justice. We assume our responsibilities in this community with many other citizens who do not share our faith. We assume them from the standpoint of a faith which discerns a mysterious divine sovereignty over the whole drama of human events, which ought not be surprised by any manifestations of evil history but is not prepared to yield to any evil for motives of self-love. We believe
that this majestic God who created the world and sustains it by his providence is finally revealed in Christ our Lord. We are protected by this faith from many aberrations into which the “children of this world” perennially fall: hope of gaining purely human mastery over the drama of history; hope that evil will gradually be eliminated from the human community by growing human goodness or by more adequate instruments of justice; trust in the power of human reason and blindness to the corruption of that reason.

These resources give us some treasures to contribute to the community in its struggle for justice. Among them are an understanding of the fragmentary character of all human virtue; the tentative character of all schemes of justice, since they are subject to the flow of history; the irrevocable character of the “moral law” transcending all historical relativities; and the hazardous judgments which must be made to establish justice between the competing forces and interests. We can tolerate all these hazards, relativities and tentativeties because we “look for a city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God.”

But we must also accept in all humility the fact that this Christian faith is mediated to the community by sinful men and that our sins frequently obscure the wisdom of the Gospel and interfere with the course of God’s grace to men. We must therefore also acknowledge that the community needs protection against our religious aberrations, against our tendency to fanatic intrusions into the tolerance which the community requires for its harmony, against our inclination to indiscriminate judgment.

In short, the health of any of our communities is best served if Christians try at one and the same time to bear witness to their faith, humbly accept treasures of wisdom which may be mediated to the community by those who do not share their faith, and welcome those policies of communal justice which are designed to correct the aberrations of men.

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MEN’S highest aspirations do not greatly change from generation to generation, but each age has its own perils and opportunities. What unites us with the aspiring souls of every age is our desire to be whole, to fulfill every capacity and develop every potentiality of the human spirit, and to bring abundance and wholeness of life to our fellows. Now, as always, the spirit of each individual is set in a society and in a universe, and the development of its capacities depend upon the adjustment of its life to both the world of men and the world which is at once more and less than man.

What distinguishes our life from that of our fathers is the fact that our sense of organic relationship to society and to the universe has been destroyed. We lack inner unity and spiritual vitality because we are not organic to our world. We are isolated souls who can find no inner peace partly because we are not at home in our universe and partly because we lack that natural relationship to our fellow men in which our fathers were prompted to the social passions and purposes which disciplined their lives. In our relationship to the universe we vacillate between megalomania and despair, lifting ourselves proudly and defiantly above the world of nature in one moment and sinking in confusion before her inexorable and blind fortunes in the next. In our relations to our fellow men only a small portion of our generation has achieved