

# The Princeton Theological Review

Fall 2004

## The Body Politic and the Body of Christ

*Theological Reflections on the Political*

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# The Body Politic and the Body of Christ

The election is over. A winner has been declared. What now? The American people, who have been bitterly divided over the past few months, must now come together again and forge a new path of unity despite its ideological differences. Well, what about the church in America? The American church, in its Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox forms, was involved in the recent presidential campaign in ways never before experienced. With the conflict between Senator Kerry and the Catholic Church over the issue of abortion and the strong support shown to President Bush by Evangelicals, it seems as if the church has continued to make its presence felt despite continued claims that institutional religion is on the decline in America. Undoubtedly, the church has continued to take its faith strongly into consideration when making decisions in the voting booth. How does the faith of the church impact its political views? What does this reflection look like? Are there types of reflection more in accordance with the Gospel than others? How are we to know if deviations are being made?

While the answers to these questions are vast as they are different, *The Princeton Theological Review* has sought to contribute to this conversation in some small way by means of this issue. The PTR acknowledges the exigent nature of this topic and believes along with Oliver O'Donovan that, "Theology must be political if it is to be evangelical." In other words, Christian theology must confess that Jesus Christ is Lord over every aspect of existence including the spiritual *and* political dimensions of human life. In this context, the political should be thought of as the ordering of power relations (including cultural, economic, and social aspects) within a self-defined human community. We as the church have been called to reflect on the consequences of the Gospel for the organizing of communities and structures of authority in our midst. In this way, the Gospel could be understood as a theological proclamation with radical political implications.

Some shy from this conflation of theology and politics, and to a certain degree, their apprehensions are understood. Some of the worst atrocities in the history of the church have resulted from the direct identification of the Gospel with one political ideology or another. Peter J. Paris exposes such abuses in "The Theology and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Contributions to Christian Thought and Practice," where he shows how Dr. King's understanding of God as Liberator and Redeemer offered a corrective to

Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish anthropologies that allowed certain groups to be seen as less than the image of God. This deficiency in white Western anthropology contributed to the belief that certain groups inherently possessed the right to rule over others. Martin Luther King, Jr., as Prof. Paris demonstrates, helped to bring a source of dignity for all oppressed peoples into contemporary debates on theological anthropology. In light of such tragic errors, the church must continually seek to bring the Gospel to bear on all things political in ever more responsible ways. Through a Barthian approach, Todd V. Cioffi suggests one such way in "Developing a Political Theology: Some Considerations for the Church." This article claims that the intersection of theology (church) and the political (state) should be viewed through Chalcedonian lenses affirming "a distinction-in-unity and a unity-in-distinction" of the two realms. Through an analogical methodology, Barth proffers a way of thinking about the church-state relationship that refuses to collapse one into the other or to see the two as completely distinct. As the *Logos*, Christ serves as the center and foundation of both the church and the state which directly (church) or indirectly (state) witness to the glory of that center through their actions. As a result, both church and state serve the kingdom of God.

Another of Karl Barth's unique contributions to political theology involved his ability to ground his political convictions in a Reformed theological foundation, thus avoiding a dichotomy between theology and political ethics. In "The Pastoral Aspect of Political Theology," George M. Ahrend also seeks to overcome this *faux pas* in underscoring the need for the church to pursue a political theology within the wider context of the sanctification of the body of Christ. Through appealing to such authorities as Scripture and tradition, the sanctifying process results in transformation not through coercion, but through conversion. Political ethics too are caught up in this process of sanctification and thus are appropriated to serve the ends of the church rather than those of any one political ideology.

The resulting form of this process in which theology informs political ethics rather than the other way around looks quite different depending on the theological tradition from which one is operating. Joni S. Sancken offers a reflection on how her Mennonite theological tradition impacts her engagement with the political realm in her piece, "Can Anabaptist Mennonites be Involved in the State?" In this textual

space, she wrestles with the issue of the church's involvement with the state in what John Howard Yoder calls the "Constantinian age" of Christianity where the church has been all too ready to grant the state authority to act with divine sanction. Differences in political theology result not only from diverse theological heritages but also from geographical factors. Yuki Shimada, in "Embracing the Orphan," brings her own Japanese perspective to bear in her rumination on the intersection of the theological and the political. In her piece, she explores what the founding of a Japanese-American congregation in Philadelphia in 1944 and the words of an Iraqi nun in 2004 might have to offer us today in the midst of a nation bent on wreaking destruction on those whom have attacked it. The realization that all are aliens who live in this world temporarily by God's grace should bring us to care for the impoverished who are thousands of miles away just

as we care for the impoverished in our midst. With this in mind, how might our attitude change toward a war in Iraq that has taken the lives of thousands of civilians?

The staff of the PTR hopes that the readers will be edified and challenged by the contents of this issue. Our utmost desire is that not only clarity but also unity would be engendered through this collection of articles.

The last piece of writing in this issue is the sermon preached at the funeral of Scott Schuller, a staff member of the PTR who tragically passed away this last summer. It is to him that we dedicate this issue.



*Sam Houston, General Editor*

# The Theology and Ethics of Martin Luther King Jr.: Contributions to Christian Thought and Practice

by Peter J. Paris

Primarily a minister of the gospel of Jesus Christ and secondarily a social reformer, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s vocation was to clarify the nature of America's race problem and to inspire his people to struggle for justice guided by the vision of a just God who was incarnated in Jesus of Nazareth. Most importantly, King sought to give practical expression to the teachings of Jesus by adopting the strategy of non-violent resistance, which, he insisted, was inspired by the Sermon on the Mount, regulated by the principle of love (agape) and demonstrated best of all in the twentieth century by the public practices of Mahatma Gandhi.

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***In King's thought there is no discussion of God in abstraction from the human condition, and similarly there is no fundamental discussion of the human condition apart from God. In fact, the discussion of both God and the human situation is always in the context of some particular struggle for justice between races, classes, or nations.***

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Clearly, King's sacred vocation of liberating his people from racial oppression was coupled with the similar aim of liberating his nation from its captivity to the same evil force that had consumed its energies and devotion for several centuries. Gradually the logic of his struggle for racial justice would lead him to extend that concern to other forms of human oppression, such as apartheid in South Africa, world-wide poverty, and American militarism, all of which, along with racism, he viewed as interrelated phenomena. Like Jesus, King also taught his followers how to reconcile themselves to their enemies in the actual pursuit of racial justice. In doing so his ministry issued in a social movement, which, in fleeting moments, mirrored some of the marks of the *new creation* that Christ promised to inaugurate.

In King's thought there is no discussion of God in abstraction from the human condition, and similarly there is no fundamental discussion of the human condition apart from God. In fact, the discussion of both God and the human situation is always in the context of some particular struggle for justice between races, classes, or nations. In short, he claimed that there can be no rightful discussion of God apart from ethics, which is the art of enhancing the quality of our common life.

In keeping with the scriptural teaching of John 3:16, King believed that God's love is for the world and its redemption. Throughout his formative years, he had been nurtured in that belief through the symbiotic relationship of his family, his church, and his *alma mater*, Morehouse College. In each of those contexts the relatedness of religion to cultural and societal affairs was taken for granted, as was also the case with the graduate schools where he studied, namely, Crozer Theological Seminary and Boston University School of Theology.

In all of King's thought, speeches and writings no other theme was more pervasive than God's sovereignty and the obligations that follow from obedience and loyalty to God's purpose for the world. I contend that every significant concept pervading his works was derived from his understanding of God. Those concepts include the following: nonviolent resistance, love, hope, justice, power, human dignity, reconciliation, responsibility, freedom, morality, and redemptive suffering. Certainly, King stood in a tradition which believed on one hand that God constantly challenged the human community "to love mercy, do justice, and walk humbly with their God" (Micah 6:8), while on the other hand constantly corrected and forgave the community for its wrongdoing, unfaithfulness, and hard-heartedness.

Undoubtedly, King's theology was in continuity with the Jewish and Christian traditions. He believed in a God who not only created the world but

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who is an active agent in the world striving to redeem it from its own folly. Thus, his belief in God the Liberator and God the Redeemer respectively integrates the two cardinal theological doctrines of Judaism and Christianity. Moreover, God's justice is implied by both traditions.

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***... the nature of the imago dei in humanity means freedom, not reason, as so many have supposed. Thus, the struggle for freedom is the struggle for the restoration of true humanity, in other words, the imago dei in humanity. That struggle implies a partnership with God, who determined in creation both humanity's true nature and final end.***

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In order to show the relatedness of King's theology to historical contexts, let us approach our subject by a brief examination of the presuppositions underlying the worship experiences of Jews and Christians. In this exercise, we will see how King embraced the presuppositions of both Jews and Christians while drawing upon the resources of the African American Christian tradition as a necessary corrective to the anthropology affirmed by those traditions.

### **God as Liberator and Redeemer**

First of all, it is important to note that every experience of Jewish worship is an act of communal remembrance relative to the wondrous act of God who in the beginning of their history initiated and guided action that resulted in their deliverance from bondage. The act of worship signifies the worshippers reaffirming their covenant with God. Their vocation is to be a special people endowed with a special mission of faithfulness to the God of their deliverance through religious devotion and habitual acts of mercy and justice in the world.

King drew heavily on the Exodus event as both a religious source and a political symbol of inspiration and hope. Consonant with the tradition of many pre-eminent African American religious leaders, King viewed himself as called by God to be a prophet (i.e. God's spokesperson for justice). The words he uttered in his final sermon the night before his assassination

have gained a measure of immortality because they typify his prophetic self-awareness: "I have seen the promised land...I may not get there myself but my eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."<sup>1</sup> For King, the exodus was the paramount historical evidence that God is in control of history guiding it to its true end and that the victory of good over evil ultimately is assured. In that sense, he believed that goodness is at the center of history. That is what he meant by his frequently repeated words, "the arc of the universe bends towards justice." Also, "The Death of Evil Upon the Seashore," the title of one of his sermons, was another vivid reminder that God is actively engaged at the center of the universe in a perennial struggle against evil. In fact, King believed that the phrase "God is Spirit" means "God is freedom." Consequently, the nature of the imago dei in humanity means freedom, not reason, as so many have supposed. Thus, the struggle for freedom is the struggle for the restoration of true humanity, in other words, the imago dei in humanity. That struggle implies a partnership with God, who determined in creation both humanity's true nature and final end.

Second, it is important to note that every act of Christian worship presupposes the wondrous act of God's incarnation in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, whose life of perfect faith, hope and love led to his crucifixion and, subsequently, the final demonstration of God's sovereignty over all things including death itself-- the resurrection. Thus, Christian worship is always an act of grateful remembrance of God's redemptive act in history, the availability of God's grace in the present and God's eschatological promise of fulfillment in the future. Further, in many of the free-church traditions Christian worship presupposes God's personal and interactive relationship with humanity. This is manifested by the experience that King had while alone in his kitchen late at night, following the bombing of his home when his wife and daughter narrowly escaped death. That occasion constituted a conversion experience for him, one in which he accepted God's call to a prophetic vocation.

Third, the African American experience of worship presupposes God's wondrous act of solidarity with enslaved Africans in America who spent three centuries as chattel slaves and another century as racial pariahs. While in the cauldron of slavery, by some miracle these enslaved people discerned an understanding of God that contradicted the theology promulgated to them by their slaveholders and the latter's preachers. This new understanding revealed a God who affirmed the dignity of African peoples as created in the image of God and, hence, condemned

those who viewed them as an inferior race. King had been nurtured in that understanding, which had been concealed from the eyes of Euro-Americans by the racially segregated pattern of their social world.

Contrary to the racist tradition of slaveholders and racial segregationists, African Americans had kept alive a heritage in their churches that unified their theology and anthropology. That is to say, they believed that God had created one species of human beings and not two. Within their segregated confines, enslaved Africans and their descendents expressed their devotion to the liberating God in song and music, prayer and testimony, dancing and preaching, as well as various forms of resistance to the many acts of dehumanization perpetrated on them. Under the conditions of slavery African Christians had initiated various occasions for clandestine worship as alternatives to the liturgical practices of their slave masters. Most importantly, those occasions signaled an alternative understanding of the nature of God and humanity. The miracle that occurred was the creation of new songs while in bondage: songs of sorrow, pain, suffering, faith, courage and hope; songs that integrated the experience of suffering with their faith in a liberating sovereign God. In the year 1900 James Weldon Johnson caught that spirit in his immortal anthem of sorrow and hope, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, known today as the African American national anthem.

### **The Parenthood of God and the Kinship of all Peoples**

As stated above, King had been well nurtured in the theology and ethics of the African American Christian tradition, the basic principle of which I call the “parenthood of God and the kinship of all peoples.” That principle was institutionalized in the independent black church movement of the late eighteenth century and was normative for all of King’s thought and practice. Thus, the primacy of one God and one humanity has been the predominant worldview among African Americans from the beginning of their history to the present day. Their discovery of Biblical support for such a belief enabled them to embrace the Christian faith and view its essence as a critique of racist thought and practice.

Similarly, African Americans have always been deeply impressed with the profound Biblical messages of freedom and dignity that pervade the utterances of the Hebrew prophets including Jesus of Nazareth. Most importantly, they have been greatly moved by the prophetic concern for the poor, the outcasts, and the oppressed – concerns that issued in strong

condemnations of every form of social and religious injustice. Hence, all forms of worship in the African American Christian tradition presuppose God’s condemnation of human bondage and oppression, which was the Christian theology that enslaved Africans embraced on these shores. This was the impetus that motivated Richard Allen and others to remove themselves from the segregated sections of white churches and to found their own churches in order to institutionalize the gospel of freedom and justice for all regardless of race or social circumstance. This was also the motivation for women like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, Ida Wells Barnett, Mary Church Terrell, Nannie Burroughs, and a host of others in their courageous quests for human dignity and social justice. As stated above, their prophetic criticism of white slaveholding Christianity and the subsequent institutionalization of a non-racist anthropology in their churches is unique in American religious history. No Euro-American institution, Christian or otherwise, can lay claim to a similar non-racist tradition.

This new form of Christianity, institutionalized in the African American churches, portrayed God as the Liberator and Redeemer of all oppressed peoples who opposed all those bent on creating and maintaining structures of oppression. Henceforth, God became for African Americans the ultimate grounding for their fundamental understanding of human nature and history. Further, with few exceptions, the equality of all people under God has been and continues to be the fundamental principle of African American life both within and without their churches. Most importantly, African Americans have sought to bear witness to this tradition in the predominantly white denominations in which they have been called to participate.

Faithfulness to the black Christian belief that God is friend to all oppressed peoples has saved blacks from falling victim to fatalism and despair. In fact, that faith has provided them with theological grounds for the expectation that suffering does not last indefinitely. Because they believed that God was on their side, they felt destined to be victorious. Thus, King could say that even if he were killed, the movement itself could not be stopped because “God is on our side.” Expectation of a better world of equality and freedom for all – a world where every person would be enabled to flourish in spite of natural diversity - is commensurate with the eschatological hope in the eventual sovereign reign of God. This is the “beloved community” on which all of King’s endeavors were concentrated. All of this was implicit in his “I Have a Dream” speech, which was the

twentieth century's most celebrated rhetorical expression of the African American Christian tradition.

King's theological position was deeply rooted in the Biblical tradition. Yet, he drew upon the insights of philosophy, social science, literature and general historical experience whenever those findings supported particular Biblical understandings of God and humanity. Accordingly, he considered the Declaration of Independence, the U.S. Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and human conscience as sources for ethical judgment insofar as they were commensurate with the Biblical understanding of God and humanity. His doctrine of God was the final normative standard. Similarly, he could say in his first book, *Stride Toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story*, that the philosophy of the movement was the Sermon on the Mount (i.e. Christian love) and not primarily what many were saying it was, namely, nonviolent resistance, non-cooperation, or passive resistance. Rather, he insisted that Jesus was the inspiration of the movement; nonviolent resistance was the method regulated by the ideal of Christian love. In other words, he taught that God is love and the goal that love seeks is the restoration of community. Nonviolent resistance facilitates that goal. It is the means to the end, commensurate with the end but not synonymous with it. King also wrote in that same book that his two favorite scriptures were 1 Corinthians 13, "Now abideth faith, love, and hope," and the passage, "Then came Peter to him and said, 'Lord, how oft shall my brother sin against me, and I forgive him: till seven times?' Jesus saith unto him, 'I say not unto thee, Until seven times; but until 70 times seven'" (Matt.18:22). His ethical norm of forgiveness was derived from the cross where Jesus died forgiving his enemies - those who were putting him to death.

Now, King was not so naïve as to believe that all African American churches were equally faithful to their prophetic calling. Rather, he repeatedly said that there were three ways to deal with oppression: acquiescence, violent revolt, and nonviolent resistance. Concerning the first, he was fully aware of the fact that the lifestyles of vast numbers of African Americans and their churches exemplified this type of response. Repeatedly, he contended that those who cooperate with evil are as guilty as those who perpetrate it. Concerning the second, he was emphatic that violence breeds violence and is contrary to God's design for humanity. Third, his strong advocacy for non-violent resistance seemed to him altogether right because it was commensurate with all the redemptive values implied in the life and teachings of Jesus and his eschatological vision of the "beloved community."

Let us hasten to add that King's prophetic challenge was not to whites alone but also to blacks – those who were prone to acquiesce and those who advocated the use of violence. Time and time again he was pleased to speak about what he called the "New Negro," which symbolized all those who embraced the vision of the "beloved community," affirmed the philosophy of non-violent resistance, and resolved to never accept the conditions that rob people of their freedom and dignity.

### The Providence of God

King believed implicitly in the providence of God, which is another cardinal doctrine in the African American Christian tradition. God as almighty sovereign guide protects the universe like a loving parent and is always available to support and protect us both individually and collectively. Hence, God is viewed as the source of all goodness and the ground of all ethics

It is my firm conviction that God is working in Montgomery. Let all men of good will, both Negro and White, continue to work with him. With this dedication we will be able to emerge from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice.<sup>2</sup>

King taught that the God who guides, directs and protects persons as a divine parent is the same God who guides, directs and protects groups bent on actualizing God's purposes in the world

These months have not been easy. Our feet have often been tired. We have struggled against tremendous odds to maintain alternative transportation. We can remember days when unfavorable court decisions came upon us like tidal waves leaving us treading the waters of despair. But amid all of this we have kept going with the faith that as we struggle, God struggles with us, and that the arc of the moral universe, although long, is bending towards justice. We have lived under the agony and darkness of Good Friday with the conviction that one day the heightened glow of Easter would emerge on the horizon. We have seen truth crucified and goodness buried, but we have kept

going with the conviction that truth crushed to the earth will rise again.<sup>3</sup>

King believed that because God created humans with bodies, and since the body and the soul are integrally united, Christians should not ignore bodily needs, because the condition of the soul is largely dependent on the condition of the body. Similarly, he argued that the Christian church should not ignore social problems that threaten the well-being of God's creation. Thus, in relation to this matter, he reaffirmed Marx's critique of religion in the following statement

Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and yet is not concerned with the economic and social conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is the kind the Marxist describes as "an opiate of the people."<sup>4</sup>

### **The Problem of Theodicy**

In keeping with the faith of his ancestors, King believed that humans are not alone in the universe, and not cut off from the creative source of their being. Rather, that divine source is constantly active in protecting and leading the whole of creation to its rightful destiny. This does not mean that God prevents humans from experiencing evil (i.e. that which is contrary to their well being) but that God is present as a constant source of help when needed. Thus, God does not control the universe like a puppeteer because that would necessarily rob humans of their freedom and thereby destroy their humanity by turning them into puppets. Hence, God is very consistent, preventing humans neither from doing nor from encountering evil. Admittedly, we meet the problem of theodicy in this discussion: "Why does God allow evil to thrive?" or, "Why does God allow the just to suffer?" For King and the tradition in which he was raised, the personal experience of God's availability as a source of comfort and help to suffering people is their answer to the question of theodicy. What suffering people need more than anything else is renewed strength to confront triumphantly the existential threat to their lives - not necessarily to obliterate evil totally, even though that clearly would be their desire. But, more importantly, they want to persevere in the confidence that ultimately victory over evil is guaranteed. That is the nature of their hope: unwavering confidence in the source of their victory, God. Why the confidence? What is the ground of their hope? How do they know that God is on their side and not on the side of the evildoers? The answers to these questions constitute the substance of the inheritance that King received from his tradition, a

tradition begun in the hidden meeting places where his enslaved ancestors encountered a divine friend with whom they talked and in whom they rejoiced. That experience constituted the nature of their faith or confidence and its corresponding implications, namely, loyalty and obedience. As surely as God had spoken to Moses and had revealed God's sensitivity to the suffering and pain of the Israelites, Africans in American slavery had had a similar experience with God. They had believed beyond a shadow of doubt that God would deliver them from their bondage and give them a life of blessedness. Similarly, they interpreted the life and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnation of God in the world, not as a distant, powerful monarch, but as a poor, marginalized, oppressed outcast who suffered thirst and hunger and homelessness and abuse and crucifixion at the hands of the nation's powerful religious and political leaders. Both before and during slavery, Africans in America had experienced God as an authentic friend, as one who had accompanied them from Africa through the middle passage and had enabled them to survive. That was the evidence of God's true friendship, which, being divine, endures forever.

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***Clearly, love was King's dominant ethical, theological and political principle that permeated all his thought and practice. In fact, in his mind, the principle of love was implied whenever he spoke about non-violent resistance, justice, peace, "brotherhood," community, reconciliation, and freedom. All were derivative from his doctrine of God.***

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Thus, for them, evil was not a metaphysical problem but a daily experience inflicted on humans by humans. In the Biblical stories African Americans had discovered a kind of duality in God's goodness towards humans on the one hand and human opposition to God on the other. The clearest examples of that duality are found in the creation stories that characterize the origin of the world as a state of perfect harmony complete with natural abundance and human flourishing. Similar portrayals appear in the eschatological visions of both the Hebrew and Christian scriptures. In the creation stories humans are depicted as willfully disobeying God's command and, consequently, deliberately

thwarting the divine purpose and causing their own fundamental fault or sin.

The stories clearly teach that activity undertaken in opposition to God's purpose inevitably results in moral disruption. In other words, by opposing the creator's design the creature misses the mark and the cumulative effect of such continuous activities constitutes the nature of evil in the world. Thus, deeply rooted in what Paul Ricoeur calls the "Adamic myth" the African American Christian tradition emphasizes an anthropological understanding of evil. Humans participate in its cause, and history is its locus. This "Adamic myth" corresponds with traditional African religious thought, which views God as infinitely good and incapable of initiating evil.

Thus African Americans have always believed that humans are a major causal factor of evil in the world, the paramount example being slavery. Conversely, they have believed also that the good in the world invariably results from humans acting in concert with God's justice. Such activity implies partnership with God because humans cannot do it alone without excluding God from history and thereby deifying themselves. That was the original mistake. Since God will not act as a divine monarch and destroy human freedom by imposing the good on the world, humanity and God must work together in order to preserve the true nature of both God and humanity. It is God's nature to struggle against evil in God's own way. Since the universe was created with moral structure and humans were created in God's image, the partnership between them bestows dignity and freedom on humans as they develop the capacity to discern evil and to resist it.

This necessary partnership with God in effecting justice in the world enabled King to level strong criticisms against humanists who relied on the efforts of humans alone to achieve justice and peace. Similarly, he castigated those who waited upon God alone to restore the brokenness of creation and who believed there was nothing humans could do that would have ultimate meaning. The former attitude he associated with the Renaissance view of humanity, the latter with the Reformation view

The doctrines of justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers are towering principles which we as Protestants must forever affirm – but the Reformation doctrine of human nature overstressed the corruption of man. The renaissance was too optimistic, and the Reformation was

too pessimistic. The former so concentrated on the goodness of man that it overlooked his capacity for evil; the latter so concentrated on the wickedness of man that it overlooked his capacity for goodness.<sup>5</sup>

King synthesized the two positions into a third position including the limited perspectives of each. Humanity must cooperate with God in eradicating evil from the world. And cooperation will lead inevitably to the final victory. Thus, the theme song of the Civil Rights Movement expressed that message in the clearest possible way

*We shall overcome,  
We shall overcome  
We shall overcome, someday.  
Oh, deep in my heart,  
I do believe,  
We shall overcome someday.*

### **The Trustworthiness of God**

As divine friend, Africans in America discovered they could count on God's faithfulness because God was God and, unlike humans, God did not contradict God's self. As divine friend, God's power could be relied upon because God not only created the universe and all therein but maintains and preserves it from the beginning until the end of time. As divine friend, God's justice could be relied upon because of God's liberating activity in the experience of the Hebrews as depicted in the exodus, in the teaching of the prophets, and in the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. As divine friend, God's love could be relied upon because even while dying on the cross, Jesus, the incarnate God, exemplified divine forgiveness by praying for the forgiveness of his killers. Such an act demonstrated more clearly than any other his unceasing quest for the restoration of broken community. From the perspective of enslaved Africans, their suffering at the hands of evil was ennobled by the similar suffering of Jesus. Yet, let us hasten to state, neither African Americans nor Jesus ever romanticized suffering. It is evil inflicted on God's creation for the sake of destruction. Resistance to evil through the instrumentality of love is the message of the gospel. All who undertake such resistance, however, must inevitably suffer because they do battle against evil, which is a powerful force. Such suffering, however, King called redemptive.

Trust in God constituted the source of King's hope and that of the people who followed him. In this

faith and this hope we see the first principle of effectiveness in mobilizing his followers. This faith and this hope had been long established and regularly celebrated in the African American Christian tradition. Thus, they sang in slavery what they sang in the 1960's and even sing today

*Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,  
deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel,  
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel,  
An' why not a (sic) every man.  
He delivered Daniel  
from the lion's den,  
Jonah from de belly of de whale,  
And the Hebrew chillun  
from de fiery furnace,  
And why not every man?*

The question in this song, "Why not every man?," is not raised for the purpose of expressing doubt, but as a declaration of faith. That which God did for Daniel, Jonah and the Hebrew children evidences what God will do for all people. But God does not do it apart from human action, which is set in motion by desires and deliberate decisions.

The necessity of desire is extremely important because it alone sets human action in motion. In the absence of desire there can be no action. Love, justice, and power will move nothing apart from the impetus of desire. Desire is the first principle of action. Hence, psychology is our starting point, and the evaluation of the quality of desire is what we might call moral psychology, which is a constitutive part of ethics. Thus, King spoke often of the so-called "New Negro" who had emerged in the movement, a person no longer willing to be merely passive in the face of evil but one who had become emboldened by the activity of resisting evil in the service of expanding and enhancing moral community.

### **Christian Hope**

To hope is to desire that which is possible of realization. As desire can be weak or strong, good or bad, so also hope can vary both in intensity and in quality. Our hope can be either confident or weak. Christian hope in the eschatological vision of God's sovereign rule is often focused on that which God as God will do. The moral implications of Christian hope have not been well developed even though some of the groundwork for such has been laid by some of the theologians of hope spearheaded by Jürgen Moltmann and others.

Unfortunately, the "other-worldly" dimension of Christian hope has led some to personalize so-called salvation history and sacrifice social and political involvement in favor of personal salvation alone. King's theology argues the reverse, namely that the eschatological hope provides the foundational dynamic for social and political change because of its teleological status. That is to say, all historical matters are viewed as means to that final end. Similarly, King could say in his acceptance speech of the Nobel Peace Prize

I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right temporarily defeated is stronger than evil triumphant. I believe that even amid today's mortar bursts and whining bullets, there is still hope for a brighter tomorrow. I believe that wounded justice, lying prostrate on the blood-flowing streets of our nations can be lifted from this dust of shame to reign supreme among the children of men.<sup>6</sup>

In King's endeavor to console the family and friends of the children who had been martyred in the Sixteenth St. Baptist Church in Birmingham, he expressed the hope that they could find some consolation from the Christian affirmation that death is not the end but an open door to eternal life for those who die in the faith. Further, it was significant for him that the children had died in church reflecting on the meaning of eternal truths. Further still, he felt confident that their deaths might well lead the south to transform its negative history into a positive future.

### **Love, Power and Justice**

Building on the moral foundation of the Christian hope, which King internalized from the black Christian tradition, his theological ethic was based on the principles of love, justice and power, which were also rooted in his doctrine of God. King frequently acknowledged his indebtedness to various theologians who had influenced him immensely in his endeavor to make his faith intellectually credible. Yet none influenced him more than Paul Tillich in his understanding of the relation of these three ethical principles: love, power and justice. Note Tillich's influence in the following quotation

One of the greatest problems of history is that the concepts of love and power are usually contrasted as polar opposites. Love is identified with a resignation of power and power with a denial of love. What is needed is a realization that power without love is reckless and abusive and that love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice. Justice at its best is love correcting everything that stands against love.<sup>7</sup>

Tillich's analysis of power and its integral relationship with love and justice made an indelible impression on King for at least two reasons: first, few if any Protestant theologians have a positive theology of power; second, none has demonstrated the harmonious relationship of love, justice and power in God and the implications of that unity for Christian action in the world. Admittedly, Tillich's analysis relies on philosophical and theological methodologies the unity of which he called a method of correlation. Accordingly, love is defined as the reunion of the separated, represented Biblically by the theological symbol, Christ the Redeemer; power is defined as the capacity of being to pursue purpose, represented theologically by the symbol God the Creator; justice is defined as the form that the reunion takes in legal and judicial structures, represented Biblically by the symbol, God the Judge.

King's Tillichian understanding of love as an ontological principle and its correlation with the Biblical view of love as agape enabled him to see clearly that this type of love is different from sentiment. That is to say, our love for people is not rooted in warm feelings for them but in the necessity of reconciling those who are estranged for the sake of God's purpose for the world.

When viewed as the reunion of the separated, love not only reflects the reconciling disposition of African Americans towards their white oppressors, but also functions as an analytical principle. Thus, King was able to discern that those who habitually practice love become a loving people who cooperate with the divine power guiding the universe, while those who do not cooperate with that power become a hateful people. In light of the fact that we become what we do, King challenged his followers not to assume the character of their oppressors, and in turn, he challenged oppressors to cease their self-destructive activities.

Since hate cripples and destroys the doer as well as the victim, those who love not only preserve their own moral and spiritual integrity but also demonstrate to their oppressors the self-destructive nature of their hatred. Further, since love is at the heart of the cosmos, opposition to love implies hostility towards the whole of creation. Hence, King repeatedly contended that the struggle for civil rights was not the struggle for the redemption of black America alone but for the soul of America. Consequently, the goal King sought should never be viewed as merely utilitarian or pragmatic. Rather, his mission was a redemptive venture for all concerned: African Americans, the nation and the world at large. As such it was simultaneously theological, moral and political. In brief, the goal was to create, expand and preserve what he called the "beloved community" and the method of attaining it he called "soul-force," the power of the spirit to resist every type of human abuse and to struggle for the conditions that would enable all humans to flourish.

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***God and God's kingdom of love are at the heart of our universe as source and end. The Christian must be loyal to that center and strive to promote values that conform to that divine center. Hence, those who believe in God's sovereignty over the world should act against all who seek to establish a world based on principles that are contrary to God's rule.***

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King was convinced "that love was the most durable power in the world."<sup>8</sup> In fact, he argued that love is the true answer to all human strivings over the centuries for the *summum bonum* of life. Most importantly, as stated above, his understanding of love bore no hint of romanticism. Rather, he was fully aware that love always involves a willingness to sacrifice and he kept that fact in the foreground of his teaching. In fact, he called this willingness to suffer by many names: "creative suffering," "redemptive suffering," and "unmerited suffering."<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, love was King's dominant ethical, theological and political principle that permeated all his thought and practice. In fact, in his mind, the principle of love was implied whenever he spoke about non-violent resistance, justice, peace, "brotherhood,"

community, reconciliation, and freedom. All were derivative from his doctrine of God.

It is important to note that in King's understanding God supports those who oppose evil only when they act in love and for the sake of the restoration of community. Strength and courage come from their faith in God's being with them, and that faith is the sign of God's grace. The agents become new people in their fight for a righteous cause. Praxis has a reflexive effect. Engagement in a cause shapes and reshapes character.

Further, we dare not ignore the fact that King viewed God's grace primarily as the source of inner strength and stability; hence, it is a source for psychological well-being. Thus, the source of King's courage was the confidence that God is able to give us inner peace in the midst of the trials and burdens of life. He believed that such inner stability was Jesus' main legacy to his disciples then and now. God offers neither material resources nor a magical formula that exempts us from suffering and persecution. Rather, God gives the gift of inner peace.

God and God's kingdom of love are at the heart of our universe as source and end. The Christian must be loyal to that center and strive to promote values that conform to that divine center. Hence, those who believe in God's sovereignty over the world should act against all who seek to establish a world based on principles that are contrary to God's rule. This is Christian moral action – acting to realize God's will with the awareness that such action must take precedence over social conformity and respectability. In other words, all such action must be prepared to risk everything and not count the cost. In that respect the church should be the moral conscience of the nation and of the world.

King was prone to speak of justice as the means that love takes in constituting genuine community, which, incidentally, was for him the final goal of the movement. He viewed community as the state of true neighborliness, where individuals willingly desire to be united as brothers and sisters, mutually supporting one another in all things. Wherever true community exists one need not be concerned about justice because all of the members will desire the well being of one another. In other words, justice becomes an inner law written on the hearts of the people rather than an external law, which they inevitably will experience as an alien force. In this respect, he viewed the laws of desegregation as representative of external law; that is why many experience them as alien when they are forced to obey them. Thus, for King, the goal of racial integration is

synonymous with true neighborliness when justice is inner law written on the hearts of the people and, hence, wholly desired.

Under the influence of Tillich's thought and the teaching of the African American Christian tradition, King never discussed power apart from its integral relation to love and justice. From the beginning the power of the movement was spoken of as soul-force: the spiritual capacity to take a courageous stand for what is good and just and to do so without counting the cost. In the face of terror, the use of soul-force is prior to the demands for any kind of power, because the separation of power from love and justice can only lead to varying forms of domination as evidenced so clearly both at home and abroad.

Thus, I conclude the following: King's theology and ethics are illustrative of the African American Christian tradition; theology and ethics are inextricably united; and in the realm of race relations, the dominant theology of American Christianity has been abstracted from the moral practices of social transformation.



Excerpts taken from *Reformed Theology for the Third Christian Millennium: The 2001 Sprung Lectures*, edited by B.A. Gerrish. Copyright 2003 Westminster John Knox Press. Used by permission.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> James M. Washington, (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 268.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 460.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 460-61.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1968), 97.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>6</sup> Washington, 226.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), 37.

<sup>8</sup> Washington, 11 (King's sermon, "The Most Durable Power").

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 219 (King's "I Have a Dream" speech).

## Developing a Political Theology: Some Considerations for the Church

by Todd V. Cioffi

This past election year has been contentious, to put it mildly. One area of contention has been the role of religion in politics, particularly in the bid for the White House. The general impression was that George Bush is the most “religious” president in a long time, and often catering to the Religious Right. He identified himself as born-again, talked about his prayer habits, and suggested he was on a mission from God. Consequently, in a recent article in *The New York Times Magazine*, Ron Suskind wrote, “George W. Bush...has steadily, inexorably, changed the office [of the president] itself. He has created the faith-based presidency.”<sup>1</sup> John Kerry, conversely, was perceived as a shrewd politician, who, while having identified himself as a Catholic, kept his religious beliefs close to his vest for fear they would turn off his “liberal” base. According to *Washington Post* reporter Jim VandeHei, Kerry insisted that “religion is personal,” and in any case he is “not a spokesperson for the church.”<sup>2</sup> At best, it seemed, Kerry’s religious convictions entered the political arena by way of nondescript “values.” Needless to say, each candidate had his supporters and his detractors on the issue of religion and politics

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**... it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to get beyond the either-or of the debate between the likes of Niebuhr and Hauerwas. The former urges the church to seek political relevance and the latter ecclesial integrity, and there the debate stalls with no apparent hope for resolution.**

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Of course, wrangling over the relationship between religion and politics is not limited to election years, but represents a wider debate in our society. For many Americans, religion should not guide public policy and law, and for many others it should. One need only raise such issues as abortion, same-sex marriage, and stem-cell research to make the point. But for all the energy and passion poured into these types of issues, it’s simply not clear how or if the faithful should

weigh in. Yet, it’s not only the country that struggles with the role of religion in public life but the church, too. From sectarian withdrawal to conservative crusading to liberal tolerance, the church appears to be as vexed as the country on religion and politics.

With this in mind, I want to take up the issue of the relationship between the church and politics, and what it would mean for the church to develop a “political theology,” especially in the United States with its form of democracy. Resources abound for the task at hand, and so I will limit it to a current debate between Christian realism and what I want to call radical ecclesiology, or between the likes of Reinhold Niebuhr and Stanley Hauerwas. This is not to suggest that a debate between Niebuhr and Hauerwas exhausts the issue of religion and politics for the church, but I do think it begins to touch the major concerns of how (or if) the church should approach the political arena. To overly simplify, Niebuhr can seem to represent an approach to politics that, if need be, is willing to mediate the particulars of the church in such a way that the distinctive character of the church is compromised for political gain. For example, in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr contends that “The demand of religious moralists that nations subject themselves to ‘the law of Christ’ is an unrealistic demand, and the hope that they will do so is a sentimental one.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, the church is confronted with the messy reality of politics and if the church is to be responsible in the world and have some influence in the political domain, it must alter its distinctive aims for more practical ones – thus Christian realism. Then there’s Hauerwas. In *Resident Aliens*, Hauerwas, along with co-author Will Willimon, resists Niebuhr’s Christian realism, arguing that it is “basically accommodationist” and content with “running errands for the world.”<sup>4</sup> That is, Niebuhr wrongly assumes that the church’s main responsibility is to “underwrite American democracy.” Instead, “the overriding political task of the church,” as Hauerwas puts it, “is to be the community of the cross,” a “radical alternative” to the world – thus radical ecclesiology.<sup>5</sup> More on Niebuhr and Hauerwas in a moment.

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Unfortunately, it is quite difficult, if not impossible, to get beyond the either-or of the debate between the likes of Niebuhr and Hauerwas. The former urges the church to seek political relevance and the latter ecclesial integrity, and there the debate stalls with no apparent hope for resolution. So in an effort to move beyond this debate, I want to draw upon the political theology of Karl Barth, suggesting that he avoids the pitfalls of either thinning out Christian identity for public and political consumption or shoring up the Christian community and defending it from “the world.” In our context, this will mean that Barth offers a theological program that is both conducive to the best democratic ideals of our public discourse and political pluralism, and faithful to the integrity of the church. But before we get started with Barth, let’s begin with Niebuhr.

Reinhold Niebuhr’s most sustained treatment of religion and democracy is *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, published in 1944.<sup>6</sup> The main thesis of the work, as he puts it in the Forward to the reprint edition in 1960, is “that a free society prospers best in a cultural, religious and moral atmosphere which encourages neither a too pessimistic nor too optimistic view of human nature” (viii). What Niebuhr is after, according to Robin Lovin, a leading Niebuhr scholar, is a “realistic liberalism,” one that seeks a relative balance between the ambiguities of societal and personal vitalities.<sup>7</sup>

For Niebuhr, then, realistic liberalism, or democracy as he came to call it, seeks to avoid both an overly constraining view of political control, which issues in tyranny, and an unchecked view of human freedom, which ends in anarchy. Democratic ideals, therefore, will do justice to the “communal” nature of human life, implementing the necessary structuring of social life in order that common needs are met, and to the “spiritual” nature of human life, allowing for a relative freedom of society (3).

Yet Niebuhr is not convinced that modern democracy has the resources available to practice such ideals, and thus steer clear of the shoals of tyranny or anarchy. His greatest fear is that democracy will slide into anarchy, or the championing of human freedom at the expense of communal needs and order. This he lays at the feet of those whom he calls “bourgeois democrats” (4). A bourgeois democrat is one who believes that persons are essentially free, transcending natural, historical, and social processes. This promotes an “excessive” individualism, Niebuhr thinks, eclipsing the social, communal nature of human life (7). “If democracy is to survive,” he claims, “it must find a more adequate cultural basis than the philosophy which

has informed the building of the bourgeois world” (5-6).

The cultural basis Niebuhr found is religion. For, while religion offers “the ultimate transcendence [or freedom] of the individual over...communal and social” processes (79), it provides moral insight into the necessity of communal life, moving persons beyond a vulgar individualism and anchoring them in society (82). According to Niebuhr, “Religious ideas and traditions” are therefore “the ultimate sources of the moral standards from which” realistic liberalism or democracy should be derived (125).

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***... in the same way that the Council of Chalcedon in 451 declared that the two natures of Jesus Christ – divine and human – find union in the person of Jesus Christ, so, too, both the church and the world find union in Jesus Christ.***

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Niebuhr goes on to suggest that what is most important about the relationship between religion and politics is the attitude of humility that religion offers (150-51). He holds that Christianity pinpoints pride or the desire “to hide the conditioned and finite character of all human endeavor” as the quintessential sin (135). If pride is to be overcome, each religion, including Christianity, is to offer its most cherished truths tentatively, acknowledging limited knowledge on such matters, thereby creating a “spirit” of tolerance that can be emulated in the political domain (134-35). So Niebuhr writes, “The real point of contact between democracy and profound religion is in the spirit of humility which democracy requires and which must be one of the fruits of religion” (151). It seems that the operative idea here is that humble people are more apt to seek justice, and this is the foundation of realistic liberalism or democracy. In the final analysis, if the church is to be relevant to the political domain, it must promote humility and indeed justice. If it does not, not only will the church become irrelevant to politics, but more than likely democracy will succumb either to tyranny or to anarchy, and I suspect nobody wants to be guilty of that.

As already indicated, Hauerwas finds Niebuhr’s apologetic for democracy by way of Christianity a threat to the church, for it eviscerates the church of its unique character. According to Hauerwas, “[Niebuhr’s] account of Christianity has...been well-policed by the requirements of sustaining democracy as

a universal achievement.”<sup>8</sup> By Hauerwas’s account, Niebuhr seems to be more concerned about propping up democracy than maintaining the identity of the church. As expected, then, we get a very different picture of the church and politics with Hauerwas.

In his book *A Better Hope*, Hauerwas writes, “if the gospel is true, the politics of liberalism [or democracy] must be false.”<sup>9</sup> Although written in 2000, this is vintage Hauerwas. For instance, in *A Community of Character*, published in 1981, Hauerwas claims that liberalism “teaches us...that we have no story,” and that our lives, social order, and government are our own creation.<sup>10</sup> To Hauerwas, this is an affront to the Gospel, which holds that Christians are “storied” by God, Israel and the church. The challenge, Hauerwas claims, “is always for the church to be a ‘contrast model’ for all polities that know not God.”<sup>11</sup>

This theme is revisited and developed over and over again in Hauerwas’s works. In *The Peaceable Kingdom*, published in 1983, Hauerwas argues that Christians must choose either the Gospel or political liberalism. The reasoning goes like this: With the rise of modernity, religion was reduced to what is personally or socially functional, particularly in terms of religion becoming a source for ethics.<sup>12</sup> In America, it turns out that Christianity merely reinforces the “American way of life.” It is thought that democracy requires some sort of civil religion, some sort of transcendent critical principle that functions as a check on governmental and institutional power, and for Americans Christianity nicely fits the bill.<sup>13</sup> In his book, *Against the Nations*, published in 1985, Hauerwas argues that this results in a conflict between the church and the state. For the Christian’s loyalty ends up being directed toward the well being of America, particularly in terms of such democratic ideals as freedom, pluralism, and tolerance, and not toward the church.<sup>14</sup> The outcome, Hauerwas insists, is that “politics determines theology.”<sup>15</sup>

But things don’t stop there. What eventually ends up happening, Hauerwas notes, is that such “democratic thinking” infiltrates the church. For instance, in *Dispatches From the Front*, published in 1994, Hauerwas contends that the democratic ideal of popular sovereignty has permeated the church.<sup>16</sup> Such “empowerment of the ‘common man,’” says Hauerwas, “has robbed the church” of its authority and form of life. The democratic pursuit of one’s own interests has come to dominate the church. Returning to *A Better Hope*, Hauerwas laments that “political liberalism,” therefore, tends to shape “the agenda, if not the very life, of the church.”<sup>17</sup>

To some degree, I appreciate Hauerwas’s concern that Niebuhr calls for a relationship between democracy and religion that tends to compromise the church’s distinctiveness in order to prop up democratic ideals like freedom, pluralism, and tolerance. And yet at the same time, as Jeffrey Stout puts it in *Democracy and Tradition*, Hauerwas, or at least his rhetoric, leaves us with a rather “rigid dualism” between the church and the political arena,<sup>18</sup> giving the impression that politics ought to be of no concern to the church. But as suggested earlier, there is a way beyond the either-or of Niebuhr and Hauerwas, one that preserves the integrity of both the church and the political domain.

Here then is where I want to introduce the political theology of Karl Barth, suggesting that he may offer a way between the Niebuhrian and Hauerwasian horns of the dilemma. What I hope to show is that Barth avoids both a compromising assimilation of the church to the political arena, or what will now be called “the state,” and an excessive concentration upon the distinctiveness of the church at the expense of the state. What Barth allows for is a mutually edifying relationship between the church and the state while maintaining the distinctiveness of both institutions.

To begin, I want to sketch briefly the relation between the church and the world in Barth’s major work, *Church Dogmatics*. While my treatment of this material can only be cursory at best, it nonetheless will provide a basis on which to appreciate more fully Barth’s political theology. This will involve three steps.

First, in volume two, part two of *Church Dogmatics*, Barth roots both the church and the world in Christology.<sup>19</sup> Both the church and the world are *in* Christ and so their very being is dependent in and on him. As such, Jesus Christ is Lord of both, and any sense of an inflexible precedence of one over the other is ruled out in principle. What emerges is a patterned relationship between Jesus Christ, the church and the world. This pattern is a differentiated yet integrated whole. That is, in the same way that the Council of Chalcedon in 451 declared that the two natures of Jesus Christ – divine and human – find union in the person of Jesus Christ, so, too, both the church and the world find union in Jesus Christ. The church-world relation, in other words, forms a Chalcedonian pattern, a distinction-in-unity and a unity-in-distinction.<sup>20</sup>

Second, turning to Barth’s doctrine of the church as it unfolds in IV/1-3, we find Barth playing out what it means to say that both the church and the world are in Christ. Because Jesus is Lord of both church and world, he can call witnesses to himself both inside and outside the church.<sup>21</sup> As Barth puts it, Jesus

is not “idle” in the world, but is Lord of all men and women.<sup>22</sup> As such there can be reciprocity between the church and the world, whether in the form of civil or political life. And this allows what I want to call a qualified mediation between the church and the world, suggesting that while the church has a priority in providing a witness to the Word of God, Jesus Christ, in the world, the church is not the sole proprietor of such witness. According to Barth, the world can, and does, provide witness to the Word according to the grace of God.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, this is made most clear in IV/3.1 where this qualified mediation, as I am calling it, is developed by Barth in terms of “secular parables” or “parables of the Kingdom [of God].”<sup>24</sup> The thesis is, as we’ve noticed, that because Jesus Christ is Lord of both the church and the world, “true words” can be spoken both inside and outside the church through the agency of Christ in his prophetic office. In other words, Christ at times enables both Christians and non-Christians alike to speak true words about God, humanity, or creation. The way the church identifies these “true words” in the world is by way of analogy. The church compares and contrasts secular words to scripture and dogmatic teaching, and if a legitimate correspondence is discerned, then the church can claim to hear secular words of truth or secular parables of the Kingdom of God. In the end, while the church is a *direct* witness to the Word of God, performing a role not granted to the world, the world’s witness is *indirect*; it is parabolic, and yet it nonetheless shares with the church witness to Jesus Christ. What this suggests is the possibility of a mutually edifying relationship between the church and the world. The best example of such an edifying relationship is, according to Barth, the church-state relation. And with this, we turn to Barth’s political theology.

Perhaps Barth’s most systematic statement of political theology is his essay “Christian Community and Civil Community,” published in 1946.<sup>25</sup> In this essay, Barth holds that church and state can inform one another of an “external, relative, and provisional order of law” that reflects “the original and final pattern of...the eternal Kingdom of God and the eternal righteousness of His grace” (154). This is possible, Barth claims, because, as we have seen with his understanding of the church-world relation, both church and state share “a common origin and a common center,” Jesus Christ (156). Barth illustrates this by way of concentric circles with a common center. Christ is the center of concentric circles, which represent the Christian and civil communities. So, Christ is in the center, the church is the inner circle, and the civil

community is the outer circle, and something of a Chalcedonian pattern emerges. Because both communities find their center in Christ, both communities can witness to and serve Christ and his kingdom. Consequently, the state can offer an order and law that is a provisional humanizing of persons’ lives, and the church can recognize this as a “provisional sanctification,” as Barth puts it, of persons in the world (157).

Now, while Barth maintains that the “concrete attitudes to particular political patterns and realities...[should] remain a completely open question” (157) – and in fact the church should *not* have an “exclusive [political] theory of its own” or “establish one particular [political] doctrine as *the* Christian doctrine of the just State” (160) – he does suggest that democracy, or at least a form of government that has several democratic features, will more than likely be the most attractive to the church (181). The criterion that guides the church at this point is that of “analogy” or “correspondence” to the content of the Gospel (170). We’ll recall that “true words” or “secular parables” can be spoken in the world, and applied here the idea is that such words can come by way of the state. The state, therefore, can speak parabolic truth that the church can recognize, affirm, benefit from, and promote in the world as an analogue to the Kingdom of God. It is by way of analogy, then, that the church can move from Gospel to democracy.

Barth provides several examples of this. For instance, as the church is the gathering of a free association, so, too, the state should guarantee the freedom of its citizens to make lawful decisions in regard to certain spheres, such as family, education, culture, and the like (174). Or, as God justifies humanity against sin and death, so, too, the state should establish equal protection under the law for all persons, which moves in the direction of a constitutional state as opposed to one of anarchy or tyranny (172). Also, as the church seeks to identify and honor the variety of gifts of the Spirit in the church, the political sphere should seek to separate and share the different political functions of the state, such as the legislative, executive, and judicial tasks (175). Finally, as the church believes that the human word is capable of being a vehicle for the Word of God, so should the state allow for the “free human word in the political sphere” (176-77), for one never knows when true words of Christ will be spoken. These analogies, then, bear a “striking tendency to...what is generally called the ‘democratic’ State” (181). As Barth puts it, “the Christian view shows a stronger trend in this direction than in any other” (182).

But notice the tentative nature of Barth's endorsement of democracy. He is clear that "the essence," as he puts it, of Christian politics or political theology is not any one system, "but a constant direction, a continuous line of discoveries on both sides of the boundary which separates the political from the spiritual spheres" (180). Indeed, any correlation or analogy between the church and the state will always be open for discussion.

It is this tentative nature of his political theology that allows Barth to move between the Niebuhrian and Hauerwasian horns of the dilemma. On the one hand, Barth seems to agree with Niebuhr's concern that the church should look for ways to support the state, and even democracy, but not at the expense of distilling the Gospel, theological doctrine, and the like, to a set of pragmatic aims or, worse yet, an "attitude," even if it is one of humility. Rather, the church must enter into discussion with the state on an ad hoc basis, discerning those political ideals and so forth which best correspond to the Gospel. Furthermore, if analogy and correspondence are sought, rather than distillation to a set of values or common language, then it is clear that neither the church nor the state will have to give up its distinctive identity, but rather, will only have to correlate their concerns, language, and the like, becoming partners rather than merely accommodating (or being assimilated by) the other side. On the other hand, Barth could be seen as maintaining the distinctiveness of the church and Christian identity that would fall in line with Hauerwas's concerns. At times, Barth does think that the best political stance the church can take in society is by unwaveringly being the church: telling its own story, contrasting itself with "polities that know not God." This was certainly the case for Barth during the time of Nazi Germany. But if the claim is that Christians should maintain a "rigid dualism" between the church and the world *in principle*, as Hauerwas seems to suggest, then the church has overstepped its boundaries in claiming a precedence over the world that its being in Christ simply does not allow.

In the end, Karl Barth offers the sort of political theology that avoids the two potential extremes of draining the church and its theology of its distinctiveness and reconstituting it as moral support for political life, and of maintaining the church's distinctiveness at the cost of participation in our common political life. In this way, Barth offers a theological framework that can be both faithful to the integrity of the church and in our context conducive to the best democratic ideals of public discourse and political pluralism.

While I doubt that George W. Bush or John Kerry have read Karl Barth, or Reinhold Niebuhr and Stanley Hauerwas for that matter, I would like to think that they, and those presidential candidates who will play their roles in the future, would be open to considering a more thoughtful and rigorous discussion of the role of religion in politics. In fact, perhaps our society as a whole would be open to a more sophisticated discussion of religion and politics. This may be wishful thinking, but maybe the church can help.

One way of engendering such discussion is if the church is willing to take up a more sophisticated approach to the relation of religion and politics. At the moment, it appears that many Christians are simply satisfied either to hear that a presidential candidate prays daily or are relieved to know that a candidate doesn't cloud his or her politics with religion and merely refers to "values" and so forth. This isn't good enough, and the church ought to reject both approaches. This is why I find Barth's political theology so appealing. It allows for the sort of deliberation, whether theological, ecclesial, ethical, political, etc., that neither capitulates to political agendas nor defends the church's identity at all costs. There is a wisdom born of the Spirit that Barth's political theology encourages, and this is well worth the church's consideration.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Ron Suskind, "Without a Doubt," *The New York Times Magazine*, October 17, 2004, 47.

<sup>2</sup> Jim VandeHei, "Kerry Keeps His Faith in Reserve," <http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A53105-2003Jul14>, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932), 75. According to Richard Fox, the celebrated biographer of Niebuhr, Niebuhr's position in *Moral Man and Immoral Society* comes down to this. Much of the ethic of Jesus was "perfectionist" and reserved for the "rare individual" who is "heroic," and would be of no real value in the harsh realities of social and political struggle. In the end, such perfectionism is "impotent" and has "no place in worldly conflict." The best any of us, Christians included, can hope for is justice, not love. See Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1985), 141.

<sup>4</sup> Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: A Provocative Christian Assessment of Culture and Ministry for People Who Know that Something is Wrong* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1989), 32 and 94, respectively.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 47 and 45, respectively.

<sup>6</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and The Children of Darkness: A Vindication of Democracy and a Critique of Its Traditional Defense* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944). All references to this text will be noted parenthetically in the body of the paper.

<sup>7</sup>Robin Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 160, 168.

<sup>8</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, "Democratic Policing of Christianity," *Dispatches from the Front: Theological Engagements With The Secular* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 103.

<sup>9</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *A Better Hope: Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2000), 124. Quoted in Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 140.

<sup>10</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 84.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer In Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), 12.

<sup>13</sup>*Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>14</sup>Stanley Hauerwas, *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Minneapolis: Winston Press, 1985), 129.

<sup>15</sup>See *Resident Aliens*, 40.

<sup>16</sup>See 105.

<sup>17</sup>See 9. Quoted in Stout, 140.

<sup>18</sup>See 149.

<sup>19</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* II/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), 566-583, 631-661, 719-726. Hereafter Barth's *Church Dogmatics* will be cited by numerical reference to the volume and part.

<sup>20</sup>On Barth's use of a "Chalcedonian pattern" in his *Church Dogmatics*, see George Hunsinger, *How To Read Karl Barth: The Shape of His Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 185-88, 201-18. Thinking along the lines of Chalcedon, it may be thought that the church represents the divine nature and the world the human nature. But this is not quite the case. Rather, for Barth, if a Chalcedonian pattern depicts a relationship between a center and the periphery, or the divine and human, both the church and world constitute the periphery, or the human, and *only* Jesus Christ, the one Word of God, is the center. Hence, the church and world are unified, in that they find their center in Jesus Christ, and thus, offer a *differentiated witness* to Jesus Christ. While the church possesses a greater likelihood of offering witness to Jesus Christ, this may not always be the case. In fact, all witness to Jesus Christ short of the Eschaton is provisional, which suggests that the church and world possess a more fluid, complimentary relationship in offering witness to Jesus Christ.

<sup>21</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956), 650-725, and especially the sort of claim of Jesus Christ as Lord of all made on p. 661. Along these lines, Barth adds that the church cannot limit God's "hidden ways...in which He may put into effect the power of the

atonement made in Jesus Christ (jn 10:16) even *extra ecclesiam*, i.e., other than through [the church's] ministry in the world" (688).

<sup>22</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 724.

<sup>23</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.2 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1962), 740.

<sup>24</sup>Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV/3.1 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 38-135.

<sup>25</sup>See Karl Barth, *Community, State, and Church: Three Essays* (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1968). All references to this essay will be noted parenthetically in the body of the paper.

## Sermon

### “Who Gave You a Decree to Build This House?” An Election Week Sermon

*Preached by Christiane Lang*  
Miller Chapel, November 5, 2004

#### Ezra 5:1-5, 6: 14-15

“Who gave you a decree to build this house? What are your names?” These are not the questions a builder likes to hear. They are the kind of suspiciously neutral question posed a few months ago to a man in my brother’s Seattle neighborhood, a contractor who thought he could give his home a face lift, moving walls and digging pipelines, without buying permits. The intrepid builder perhaps underestimated his tree-hugging neighbors and city government. I am sure that the last thing he wanted to see was the city’s bright red, legally binding “Halt Work” sign posted quite visibly in his yard. I am certain that he did not welcome the question, “Where is your permit?”

Or, as the question read in Ezra: “Who gave you a decree to build this building?” Decades before this story takes place Emperor Cyrus had permitted some Jews to return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon. With Cyrus’s support the Jews had started rebuilding their devastated temple, only to stop for lack of enthusiasm. When our story begins God speaks through the prophets and commands the builders to get moving again. Only now, a new emperor is in power: Darius. And he is far away in Persia and has no history with this small group of settlers.

Enter the local Persian authorities, the eyes of a faraway Emperor, who come around asking questions. “Who gave you permission to build this? And what are your names?” The Jews explain that they are working under the protection of an old law, that they are servants of the God of Heaven and Earth, rebuilding this God’s house. The Persians, to be on the safe side, write home to check this story out. After all, who could keep track of all the petty histories of all the minor peoples shuffled around this great empire? Who could remember all the diplomatic concessions allowing such people to worship their local gods? Back in Persia evidence of Cyrus’s old law is discovered, lost out in Cyrus’s old summer palace. Apparently this old decree that made all the difference for the Jews was nothing memorable for the Persians.

It is sometimes tempting when we read the Bible to imagine God’s people at the center of world events. But here we see them at the margin of the map, falling off the edge of the civilized world. Here their affairs are deemed so trivial that the document legitimizing their very existence is stashed and forgotten. They exercise an autonomy so limited that they cannot even build their small temple without repeatedly obtaining permission. In Ezra the fortunes of the people of God seem to rise and fall at the whim of local and national leaders who barely remember their existence. At the center of world events? Clearly not.

Fortunately Cyrus’s old decree is found and Darius upholds it. With the Jewish settlers we readers heave a sigh of relief. God’s temple will be rebuilt. The future is secure. But with the next breath we have to wonder: What if, say, in the interests of the Empire, Darius had said “No”? What if, instead of hanging on at the margin, the returned exiles had been wiped clean off the map? Weren’t the people of God standing defenseless before the capricious throne of an indifferent empire? Don’t we all know that the future lies always at the mercy of the present, and that the present lies always in the hands of the powerful? With every fearful question we find ourselves closer to the edge of a high precipice buffeted by doubt. But as soon as we peer down into the shadows of that chasm and feel our feet slide, as soon as we feel certain only of uncertainty, the narrator of Ezra grabs us by our shirttails and hauls us back.

It is this narrator who insists on naming not an abstract God of heaven who makes cameo appearances to bless the empire. This narrator insists on naming the God of Israel: the God with a record of delivering people from bondage; the God whose eye, resting on the Jews, counters the watchful eyes of the Persian emperor; the God who is personally involved with God’s people, settled as they may be on the edges of the world’s map of concern.

We are rescued from our flirtation with despair because God plunges elbow-deep in world events. Notice this: as the narrator reports the completion of the temple we learn, through no particular parsing-out of responsibility, that the temple was rebuilt by the prophesying of the prophets, the labor of the elders, the command of God, and the decree of three emperors. While human kings and local leaders came and went, the same God was active. Somehow the divine

commander of this building project was also its architect and builder.

But God's activity did not mean human passivity. God's activity did not mean human passivity! Human prophets declared God's word. Human builders set stones. Human leaders made international and domestic policies and human subjects felt their impact. Human decisions matter as God freely builds a house in history. And not only that, but as God builds this house God also frees a people to joyfully join the construction effort, even at the risk of their own lives.

The narrator of Ezra insists that God's project, enacted though it may be through the spiral of human history, entwined though it may be with the stirrings of human hearts and the shifting of national interests, resisted though it may be by violence and indifference—this construction project cannot be halted! God's work of blessing in the world invites our work, but God's work is not enslaved to human political realities. God's plan is not enslaved to the winning of a military campaign. God's future is not enslaved to the outcome of an election. God's authority should bring our fears up short.

And if Ezra's story is not enough, we are given another. At the moment when the work of God seemed most at the mercy of human opposition, when political and military authority was most exploited, on that night, Jesus took bread and freely offered it. The very one who says, "No one takes my life from me. I lay it down of my own accord," *He* is the one offering the bread and the cup. By coming to this table, we affirm the strength of God's free decision to save. And by coming together to this table, we witness that the temple being built is not of stone, but of lives built together into a dwelling place for God. We are this temple and our building is for the sake of the world.

The church is interrogated: "Who gave you a decree to build this temple?" The church cries: "We are the servants of the God of history, we are the house of the God of Israel."



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## Reflections

### The Pastoral Aspect of Political Theology

by George M. Ahrend

“Political theology” is a phrase that did not enter common theological parlance until the 1960s. In the intervening time, it has been variously defined.<sup>1</sup> For the purpose of this article, however, it is sufficient to describe political theology broadly as the intersection of politics and theology, a topic at least as old as the Gospels. However, even when conceived in this broad sense, political theology often seems to be reduced to political ethics. The pastoral aspect of political theology is correspondingly minimized, and, if it is discussed at all, the discussion is usually limited to the teaching and preaching of political ethics, largely ignoring the important element of church discipline.

This article will focus on the pastoral aspect of political theology for three reasons. First, as mentioned above, the pastoral aspect seems to be neglected in much political theology. Second, this focus on the pastoral aspect of political theology seems to be in keeping with the mission and audience of the *Princeton Theological Review*. Third, this focus coincides with a growing trend in US politics. Prior to the most recent election cycle, political scientists observed that religiosity is the single most reliable predictor of voting behavior. Those who attend church regularly are far more likely to vote Republican or “conservative,” while those who never attend church are far more likely to vote Democrat or “liberal.”<sup>2</sup> This trend appears to have continued in the most recent election.<sup>3</sup> Given the importance of religion in determining voting behavior, those who are pastors (or training to be pastors) ought to be aware of their role in influencing that behavior.

The actions of certain US Catholic bishops in the most recent presidential election cycle illustrate a significant pastoral aspect of political theology. Ever since the US Supreme Court invalidated most restrictions on procured abortion in *Roe v. Wade*, the country has been divided over the issue of procured abortion. As is well known, the Catholic Church has been consistent in its opposition to procured abortion.<sup>4</sup> However, the most recent election cycle has been unique because the Democratic nominee for President, John Kerry, is a self-described pro-choice Catholic. While expressing his personal opposition to abortion during the campaign, Kerry simultaneously opposed

any restrictions on “choice,” and promised to impose a pro-choice litmus test on judicial appointees.<sup>5</sup> All the while, Kerry portrayed himself as a faithful, orthodox Catholic and he regularly received communion.<sup>6</sup>

In looking at pastoral responses to the politics of abortion within the Catholic Church, I recognize that some Protestant denominations in Europe and North America do not share the same degree of clarity and consensus on the ethics of abortion. Because I propose to focus on the pastoral aspect of political theology, I will not address this issue except to say that the lack of clarity and consensus on the issue is atypical of Christianity as a whole, both historically and geographically. From the beginning, Christians have generally viewed abortion as evil.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, while the nature of a particular ethical issue is relevant to pastoral care, the principles of pastoral care discussed below should be generally applicable, and we may thereby be able to learn from our Catholic brothers and sisters. The discussion that follows has been distilled from recent pastoral guidance by a number of US Catholic Bishops regarding the politics of abortion.<sup>8</sup>

All Christians have a responsibility before God to safeguard and promote the common good insofar as they are able. In a participatory form of government such as our democratic republic, this responsibility is almost as weighty for citizens as it is for political leaders. Political theology should always be concerned with helping Christians fulfill this responsibility.

Although the pastoral aspect of political theology is not limited to teaching and preaching political ethics, it certainly includes the teaching of political ethics. Knowledge and understanding of Christian political ethics is a necessary prerequisite for citizens and political leaders to pursue the common good. The teaching that leads to knowledge and understanding must be done within the context of the church that is being used by the Holy Spirit to sanctify its members, through prayer, other spiritual disciplines, and reception of the sacraments, among other things. Fruitful reception of the teaching is thereby inseparable from the process of sanctification. The teaching itself is not merely an appeal to authority, but also an appeal to Scripture, tradition, theology, and sanctified reason. In this sense, it is not coercion, but rather conversion. That conversion is ultimately accomplished only by the Holy Spirit, although the Holy Spirit does not despise, and in fact often uses, human means of persuasion. The teaching is not merely for the benefit of church

members, but it is also an important component of the church's witness to the world.

Importantly, teaching includes how to resolve competing ethical concerns. In this regard, the Bishops have distinguished the nature of those things that are intrinsically evil from those that are not. For example, in the most recent election some argued that capital punishment and the Iraq war are just as ethically problematic as abortion, and that it would therefore be appropriate to vote for an anti-death penalty or anti-war candidate even if s/he is pro-choice. To the contrary, "[a]lthough war and capital punishment can rarely be justified, they are not intrinsically evil; neither practice includes the direct intention of killing innocent human beings. In some circumstances, self-defense and defense of the nation are not only rights, but responsibilities."<sup>9</sup> "One cannot justify a vote for a candidate who promotes intrinsically evil acts which erode the very foundation of the common good," even if the candidate holds other views that do promote the common good.<sup>10</sup>

While a political leader should never promote immoral practices, a citizen may vote for a candidate who promotes a combination of moral and immoral practices under certain circumstances: "1) there is no viable candidate who supports the moral law in its full integrity; 2) the voter opposes the immoral practices espoused by the candidate, and votes for the candidate only because of his or her promotion of morally good practices; and 3) the voter avoids scandal by telling anyone, who may know for whom he or she has voted, that he or she did so to advance the morally good practices the candidate supports, while remaining opposed to the immoral practices the candidate endorses and promotes."<sup>11</sup> "This is not a question of choosing the lesser evil, but of limiting all the evil one is able to limit at the time."<sup>12</sup>

The nature of the ethical concern is not wholly unrelated to the extent to which it is implicated under the circumstances. Thus, the Bishops have also helped resolve competing ethical concerns by distinguishing the scope of abortion from other legitimate and important issues such as capital punishment and war. Since the U.S. suffers approximately 1.3 million abortions per year, a citizen should not vote for a candidate who supports abortion unless his or her opponent supports evils of a greater gravity and magnitude, something that is undoubtedly unlikely in the case of capital punishment or even the Iraq war.<sup>13</sup>

In addition to teaching and preaching, a discussion of the pastoral aspect of political theology would be incomplete without mentioning church discipline. Following St. Paul's model, discipline of a

member who does not accept church teaching must begin with private pastoral counseling. There are several purposes for this counseling. It is an individualized form of teaching in cases where the church member does not know about or understand the church's teaching. It is an opportunity to seek the individual's repentance in cases where s/he is unwilling to accept the church's teaching. It also provides an important opportunity for the pastor to discern the cause of the individual's inability or unwillingness to accept the church's teaching.

If an individual church member remains unable or unwilling to accept the church's teaching after receiving pastoral counseling, then the pastoral response will vary depending upon the circumstances. The pastoral response serves the same purposes as pastoral counseling, to educate the individual church member and to seek his or her repentance, but it will vary widely depending upon the needs of the individual. On one hand, the pastor may advise an individual to refrain from receiving communion to avoid eating and drinking judgment upon him- or herself.<sup>14</sup> On the other hand, the pastor may encourage the individual to attend church and receive communion more frequently in order to cultivate the grace that will eventually assist him or her to incorporate the church's teaching into his or her life. (Of course, the range of pastoral responses goes beyond communion.)

In formulating a response, the pastor always must be aware of the potential for scandal. Scandal refers to "an attitude or behavior which leads another to do evil."<sup>15</sup> This is precisely the problem that has arisen in connection with the candidacy of John Kerry. His insistence that pro-choice political ethics are compatible with his Catholic faith has threatened to mislead some of the faithful and to compromise the church's witness to the world. Some bishops have therefore called upon him to refrain from communion or have indicated that they would bar him from communion. It is not necessarily the case that Kerry's pro-choice political ethics, by themselves, require him to refrain from communion. Instead, it is his public position and the resulting scandal. As the Archbishop of Omaha writes, "If full communion with the church on all matters of faith is the only criterion for Catholics to be able to receive the Eucharist, then I would have to challenge a considerable number of people in the archdiocese about receiving the Eucharist regularly. My pastoral task is to try to bring people to an understanding and appreciation of church teaching so that they can embrace it with a good conscience."<sup>16</sup> Yet, in the next paragraph of his letter, the Archbishop



## Can Anabaptist Mennonites be Involved in the State?

by Joni S. Sancken

Mennonite Theology draws heavily on the understanding of two kingdoms: the earthly and the heavenly. Early Anabaptists easily maintained the boundaries between these kingdoms while publicly witnessing to the state even and especially during intense persecution. As pacifists, countless Anabaptists were martyred, which eventually caused the movement to turn in on itself for survival. In the centuries following, Mennonites and other Anabaptist groups immigrated to many nations, including the United States, which allowed them to freely practice their religion. While present day Mennonite theology holds that the church is clearly accountable to the kingdom of God rather than the earthly kingdom, modern Mennonites experience the state in ways that extend beyond the sword. They are beginning to understand the mission of the church as encompassing the state rather than ignoring it.

Because pacifism is one of the central beliefs of Mennonites and other Anabaptist groups, this has historically been one of the main obstacles concerning their involvement with the state. Before the Revolutionary War, pacifists in the United States were considered good citizens. However, this perception changed with war and Mennonites met with increasing societal pressure to join the military.<sup>1</sup> This pattern continued well into the twentieth century, causing many Mennonite groups to withdraw from American political life for fear that it would compromise their commitment to non-resistance. However, Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder offers a theological avenue for Anabaptist participation in politics that also preserves their unique witness to the state. Yoder compares the mandates of the church and state

The mandate of the church, the mandate to overcome evil, is the superior mandate; the mandate of the state, that of keeping evil in check, only has meaning because the church is accomplishing its mission.<sup>2</sup>

He goes on to point out that Jesus' instruction to "render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's and to God the things that are God's,"<sup>3</sup> shows that the state has limits in its power; its mandate not only consists of keeping external "evil in check," but also keeping its own organic evil in check.<sup>4</sup> The state can be beneficial when it operates within its boundaries. Yet it can be a vehicle of evil when it over-steps its boundaries and

claims "Caesar is Lord."<sup>5</sup> According to Yoder, the church is called to witness to both groups of people within the state: those who acknowledge a higher authority and exist for others and those who attempt to claim that power uniquely for themselves at the expense of their neighbors. However, since Constantine, there has traditionally been a tendency for the Church to grant the state permission to act with divine authority.

Despite this shift, which occurred when Constantine accepted Christianity and attempted to unite the aims of the church with the aims of the state, the state is still essentially a pagan institution and Anabaptists have consistently viewed it as such. Yoder acknowledges that non-participation is one way for Christians to relate to the state in order to avoid supporting a violent institution that has over-stepped its boundaries.<sup>6</sup> However, in the past 75 years American Mennonites have become increasingly acculturated into the mainstream, making non-participation a difficult option for all but the most conservative congregations. Most Mennonites oppose serving in the military, but some have held local government positions and many now vote in elections. Has the cultural shift within the Mennonite Church weakened its witness?

Closely following the life of Jesus is a traditional belief in Anabaptism. Such literal discipleship lies at the roots of Mennonite practices such as believer's baptism and pacifism. As Yoder points out, through the incarnation, Jesus himself was a political person. He didn't shy away from dealing with issues of law and politics. Yoder writes,

"The decisions of Jesus in the face of his political problems are a revelation of God's command in the realm of politics."<sup>7</sup> Jesus' words recorded in Scripture use political language such as "God's reign" or the "kingdom of God."<sup>8</sup> However, Jesus-style politics are in many ways the opposite of world politics. Jesus led as a servant and held power through defenselessness. According to Yoder, Jesus was political in his message but appears non-political in that he rejected the world's means for establishing his kingdom, and instead chose the cross.<sup>9</sup> If the church is to claim its identity as Christ's body then the church too must claim Christ's cross and its political nature. Christians often limit their understanding of the cross to include only unavoidable suffering from unexpected disaster or disease. However, as Yoder points out, Jesus could have avoided the suffering associated with the cross. For Christ, the cross was ". . . the cost of his obedience in the midst of a rebellious world. It will be no different for us."<sup>10</sup> This is part of the truth we

proclaim each time we commune together at the Lord's Table.

Because the state does not make this claim to share in the life and destiny of Christ, it is not bound by the politics of the cross. However, it can be possible for Christians to participate in the state as long as they don't have to compromise their witness to the life and death of Jesus. Where to draw this line is a matter of debate among Christians. In many churches, the political patterns of the state have influenced the way the church is structured or makes decisions. Historically, Anabaptist Mennonite congregations have tended to shy away from emulating state patterns by rotating non-professional leadership and making decisions by consensus. But as members move into urban areas and find work and family commitments limiting their time spent at church, more and more Mennonite Congregations are hiring professional clergy and are making decisions by majority vote. Further, during World War II and the Vietnam War, many Mennonites were drafted and chose to enter alternative service programs jointly administered by historically peaceful churches and the federal government. Today many congregations support members who are part of the Peace Corps or other non-military government programs. The Mennonite Central Committee, a Mennonite parachurch relief agency, has offices in Washington D.C. and at the United Nations in New York City. This committee lobbies on behalf of poorer nations and disenfranchised groups.

Modern Mennonite theology may have made accommodations to allow Christians some responsibility in involvement with the state, but Mennonite practice is another matter. Many present day Mennonites still see nonresistance as an absolute issue and do not vote in presidential elections because the job involves being "commander in chief" of the armed forces. Others choose candidates whose policies most closely line up with Mennonite values, realizing that the choice must be made for the lesser of two evils at best. Others frame their votes as an opportunity to say "no" to policies they believe to be counter to the work of the church—an outgrowth of the Church's previous role of saying "no" to the world. Regardless of the position they take on voting in any particular election, most Mennonites today still struggle with what it means to be both Christian and citizens of a powerful nation.<sup>11</sup>

As a Mennonite pastor, I see this struggle as a good thing. Historically Mennonites strictly believed in a two-kingdom theology, which separated them from the world. Today, the members of my congregation struggle with how to address both realms. Many

members of my congregation are teachers and social workers—professions that are clearly dedicated to improving the lives of people in this world. They cannot help but see some of the benefits the state brings to earthly existence and they accept the opportunity to participate. Yet Jesus offered alternatives to the power of the state. It is natural for the way of Jesus to meet with resistance. It is my hope that Anabaptist Mennonites will continue to struggle with their citizenship. We cannot become too comfortable with the means by which the state accomplishes its mandate in the world without compromising Jesus' call: "If any want to become my followers, let them take up their cross and follow me."<sup>12</sup>



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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Keith Graber Miller, *Wise as Serpents Innocent as Doves*, (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>2</sup> John Howard Yoder, *Discipleship as Political Responsibility*, (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 23.

<sup>3</sup> Luke 20:25.

<sup>4</sup> Yoder, 23-24.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Chris Edwards and Jim Bishop, "EMU Looks at Politics and Faith," *Mennonite Weekly Review* 11 (Oct. 2004), 1-2.

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 16:24.

## Embracing the Orphan

By Yuki Shimada

*"...[F]or the land is mine; with me you are but aliens and tenants." (Leviticus 25:23)*

*"For if you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place, in the land that I gave of old to your ancestors forever and ever." (Jeremiah 7:5-7)*

Recently, I met a pastor from a Japanese/Japanese-American Church in a suburb of Philadelphia. The church celebrated its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year; several Japanese Christians, including a Japanese seminarian from Princeton Theological Seminary, founded it in 1944. In 1944, the US and Japan were in the middle of a merciless, total war.

In Japan, we use the expression "to wash off blood with blood" to describe the intense cruelty of battles. That phrase expresses literally what was happening on those Pacific islands in 1944, when the blood of tens of thousands of soldiers on one side was shed to wash off the blood of tens of thousands of those on the other. After the attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese Air Force, the US government suspected Japanese-Americans on the US's west coast of conspiracy, confiscated their properties, and imprisoned them in detention camps, despite their American citizenship. In that year, the US Air Force killed millions of Japanese civilians as it bombed Japan's major cities, and the US government hurried to build an atomic bomb, ultimately killing thousands more. Meanwhile, in Southeast Asia, the Japanese army abused American prisoners of war; some were even handed over for live human experiments. It amazed me to discover a Japanese seminarian at PTS and a new Japanese church in Philadelphia in the midst of such animosity in 1944!     œ

In October 2004, Sister Olga Yacob, an Iraqi Christian nun, blessed the PTS community when she visited our campus to lecture for a second time. She spoke at PTS in April, 2003, just weeks after the outbreak of the war in Iraq. In the 2003 lecture, she was calm, but she confessed to us her great anxiety over the safety of her family in Iraq. Sister Olga had intimate knowledge of what it means to be an ordinary citizen in a country at war. She lived through the turmoil of the first Gulf War. She recounted the terrifying experience of fleeing into the desert to escape the bombings. We

learned that people slept there holding each another, so that at dawn they could know immediately from the warmth of the body in their arms that the person beside them was still alive. Many parents watched their children die in the desert during those months without sufficient food and water. "The smell of the bodies of the dead children remains with me even today," Sister Olga said.

Returning to our campus after traveling to her country last summer, Sister Olga said, "Hatred against Americans and Christians has become enormous among Iraqi people." She explained that most Iraqis live lives marked by fear and physical insecurity. They lack the most basic supplies, and they witness the daily devastation of their homeland. She described the seemingly endless line of Iraqi mothers hoping to gain access to the only oxygen masks in Baghdad for the sake of their dying children. She also talked about a "mis-bombing" that destroyed part of an elementary school building in Baghdad. Since Iraqi families are usually big and children often attend the same school, many parents lost several children in one day. All these miseries happened to ordinary citizens after decades of suffering through previous wars and economic sanctions. When the bombings started, Sister Olga told us, they could not understand why the US had attacked them. With no explanations for all this suffering, Iraqi people, especially the children, imagine only evil intentions in the US bombings. Sister Olga's seven-year-old niece, gripped by fear and anger, did not want to let her beloved aunt return to the country that had attempted to kill her and her family. "You cannot explain to a child why the war had to occur," Sister Olga remarked.

Children like Sister Olga's little niece have wronged no one, yet they experience enormous terror and suffering before they even start making choices in life. Perhaps they are too young today to know how to hate, but what about the future? Will we be able to condemn their hatred—we who stand by in the face of their suffering? "Brothers and sisters," Sister Olga asked, "Are you going to let your children grow up in a world that hates them?" Sister Olga encouraged us to confront the futures of our own children, who also have wronged no one. They now live in a world where millions are growing up to hate them. Researchers from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health in Baltimore, Maryland, estimate the number of death of Iraqis since the invasion in 2003 as over 100,000 (October 28, 2004, Reuters). How many of those people now abhor us, the countries and people that caused the deaths of their loved ones?

Sister Olga did not talk only about the Iraqi people. She also mentioned an American soldier, a young man she met at the border with Jordan. Realizing that Sister Olga was on her way back to the US, with his eyes full of tears, he spoke:

“Sister, may I ask you something?”

“Whatever you want,” Sister Olga replied.

“Could you bring my eyes back to my country? I do not think I can see it again.”

Everyone in this country seems to have become a “war critic” since the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The media discusses “democracy versus terrorism,” “freedom for the Iraqi people,” “strategy,” and so forth. Of course, the issue of national security is now a top priority for the nation. Why do I feel so empty when I hear those beautiful, “big” words, like “democracy” and “freedom for Iraqis,” especially when I hear them from those politicians who claim themselves to be “Christian”?

Sister Olga talked about her seven-year experience as a Christian spiritual advisor in a male prison in Iraq. Nearly all of the inmates were Muslims. One day, one of the inmates asked her, “Sister, which religion is more difficult, Christianity or Islam? We have many laws that we have to follow in Islam; but Christianity does not have such laws. It seems Christianity is much easier than Islam.” Sister Olga answered, “Only one sentence makes Christianity very difficult: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

Our Lord commands us to care for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, and not to shed innocent blood. The alien, the orphan, the widow, and the innocent are our neighbors; we ourselves have no rightful claim to land or possessions, because we ourselves are but aliens before our God. What is given to us is bestowed upon us as a gift to share with those who have less. When we safeguard a warm, secure home for Iraqi children like Sister Olga’s little niece, who shiver with fear and hunger in the ruins of Baghdad today, we remind ourselves that we and our own children are also aliens and orphans who live in this world temporarily by God’s grace.

By caring for Iraqi children, we not only care for someone who is anonymous and far away from our own lives, but we care for our own children. When we disregard the suffering of those children in Iraq, we fail to take responsibility for our own children. Any talk of “democracy” and “freedom” should be based on the awareness that “democracy” for ourselves and our children should be, and indeed is, connected to the very same freedom for children in Iraq, at least insofar as we call ourselves people of this God. Sister Olga’s niece,

as well as anybody else on earth, would not understand the explanation that the suffering and devastation that risks her very life is a necessary sacrifice for her own sake. What is the use of “democracy” and “freedom” if she loses her life before she enjoys the merits of these wonderful ideas? Given the Reuters report on October 28<sup>th</sup> stating that “the risk of death from violence in the period after the invasion was 58 times higher than in the period before the war,” are we not forcing ordinary people in Iraq to be saints when we ourselves are not saints, and to become martyrs for the sake of “democracy”? Who decides who is to die for democracy and who is to benefit from it? Can the person who makes such a decision be selected in a democratic way? ☪

When I spoke with the pastor from the Japanese church in Philadelphia, he told me about one of the church’s founders. This gentleman, who is now over 90 years old and living in Japan, visited the US to attend the church’s 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary ceremony. He still loves Princeton and its people, several generations later. He told the pastor that his weakened, old legs and body were healed as soon as he arrived in Princeton. He adores Princeton’s people, since they embraced him in 1944 when Japan was the despised orphan in the world. People received him as a human being, despite the fact that the government of his nation was an evil one. Since then, his church in Philadelphia has grown, offering a safe spiritual home for generations of people, who somewhat feel themselves to be “aliens” here. In this way, love and appreciation for people nurtures itself. Love grows as the gradual accumulation of countless small steps, rather than by drastic actions. Love for people grows secretly, and peacefully.

Turning our eyes back to Iraq, it is breathtaking how easily and quickly hatred can be inflamed. Whereas love for a certain group of people is rather fragile, hatred can last far longer and with much greater strength. Do we intend to continue to enrage the Iraqi people? Our chance to compensate their suffering and to restore their gravely violated dignity becomes slimmer each day. What can, and should, we do today? Our Lord is calling us today, speaking to us, “If you truly amend your ways and your doings, if you truly act justly with one with another, if you do not oppress the alien, the orphan, and the widow, or shed innocent blood in this place, and if you do not go after other gods to your own hurt, then I will dwell with you in this place.”



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## Book Review

### Democracy and Tradition

By Jeffrey Stout

Reviewed by Scott Collins-Jones

For me as a religious person, one of the definitive moments of the most recent presidential election occurred during the last debate. It was when a pro-life voter asked Kerry about his position on abortion. He expressed his Catholic faith in the sanctity of life as well as his own personal opposition to abortion. But he was quick to add that his belief was an article of faith, and thus it was disqualified from being the foundation for a public policy decision. Kerry was stating some things implicitly believed by many Americans and explicitly articulated by many political philosophers. The first of these is the notion that a modern liberal nation state ought to be “neutral” with regard to competing views of the common good. The second flows from the first, involving the commitment to a form of political discourse the foundation of which is a form of public rationality that by nature excludes forms of rationality that are “tradition dependent”, as many religious forms of rationality are seen to be. Thus religious people are free to participate in the public discourse meant to shape our political culture, but they cannot do so *as* religious people. To allow them to do otherwise will result in disagreements that “rationality”—at least the kind seen fit to govern civil discourse—cannot resolve. Religion, in the words of Richard Rorty, is seen as a “conversation stopper.” Religious people subscribe to what John Rawls calls “comprehensive doctrines”, the foundational tenets of which are not commonly shared by those in the public square. The notion that public conversation that is rooted in religious reasoning could lead to legislative action is often considered impractical at best and oppressive at worst. Hence the distinction Kerry was able to draw so easily between his own personal convictions and his political commitments.

The advantages of a highly secularized political conversation are readily apparent. One need not be an extremely astute student of European history to understand how difficult public discourse can be when the diversity of the public conversation’s participants are all Christians, let alone when Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, dissenters, atheists and agnostics are thrown into the mix. A minimalist form of public rationality rooted in the least common denominator

seems efficient if it is anything. But as Jeffrey Stout’s *Democracy & Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2003) points out, such a standard would rule out some of the finest public interlocutors in American history. The abolitionists, Lincoln, and Martin Luther King Jr. all used religious language rooted in religious or traditioned forms of rationality for the purpose of shaping the American political conversation in such a way that certain political ends could be achieved. Few see their influence as tragic or as betraying what is at the heart of American liberalism. And what about religious people who agree with Kerry’s public position on abortion for religious reasons? There are many in my own denomination, the Presbyterian Church U.S.A., who claim to be pro-choice not in spite of, but *because* of their faith commitments. Does this rule their position out of court simply because it flows from a “comprehensive doctrine” that is not commonly shared? Must such Christians express their commitments in terms that are less than or other than Christian in order to be responsible conversation partners in the public square? Jeff Stout would answer such questions with a resounding “no”, which is one reason why *Democracy and Tradition* is an important book for religious and secular citizens alike.

Stout points out some of the problems with a minimalist view of public rationality meant to serve constitutional democracies that are minimalist in nature, at least where morality is concerned. Secular rationality, as argued for by the likes of Rawls and Rorty, seems to serve a democratic society that is decidedly lacking in anything like a “unifying framework”. “In the eyes of many observers [modern democracies] seem to be inherently at odds with the substantive, comprehensive visions of the religious traditions” (2). Stout desires to make a case for a different understanding of both democracy and the public reason required to make it work. Rather than seeing democracy as something decidedly anti-traditional, Stout argues for understanding democracy itself as a *tradition*, “one that inculcates certain habits of reasoning, certain attitudes toward deference and authority in political discussion, and love for certain goods and virtues, as well as a disposition to respond to certain types of actions, events, or persons with admiration, pity, or horror.” Democracy’s ethical substance is more a “matter of enduring attitudes, concerns, dispositions, and patterns of conduct than it is a matter of agreement on a conception of justice in

Rawls' sense" (3). State neutrality and a strong reason/tradition dichotomy are only indicative of a Rawlsian liberal understanding of democracy, which should not be mistaken for democracy itself, any more than a peculiar Christian sect ought to be allowed to define the faith once for all in every time and place.

Stout agrees with Christian thinkers like Richard John Neuhaus, John Milbank and Stanley Hauerwas to the degree that they insist that ethical and political reasoning are "creatures of tradition and crucially depend on the acquisition of such virtues as practical wisdom and justice" (11). Where he disagrees with these thinkers, whom he labels the "new traditionalists", is on their insistence that modern democracy and tradition are antithetically related, with the former being an "inherently destructive, atomizing social force" (11). The ironic thing in Stout's mind is that the "new traditionalists" and the anti-traditionalists represented by Rawls and Rorty *share a quite similar view of democracy*. In fact the two movements seem to feed off of one another. As one recent commentator on Stout's work has put it, the more the law schools and political science departments teach Rawls, the more the seminaries teach Milbank and Hauerwas.

Stout contends that modern democracy is not simply an expression of secularism as anti-traditionalists claim and new traditionalists fear. Traditionalists see democracy as undermining its own existence by undermining virtues and practices, the very things that would give democracy a moral foundation in the first place. Traditionalists are suspicious of moral discourse that is not grounded in what Stout calls "true piety". Thus they are tempted to withdraw from the public square because of its contaminating factor. "Some traditionalists actively foster alienation from the citizenry's public discussion of divisive ethical questions while promoting identification instead with premodern traditions and religious communities" (12). For Stout, democracy is a tradition in its own right. Stout's own pragmatism, rooted in the thought of Hegel, Emerson, Whitman and Dewey is what he calls *democratic traditionalism*. It even has traditional virtues that sustain it: piety, hope and love. It also is committed to practices (largely discursive ones), directed toward tending to arrangements that they might be more just.

There is much in *Democracy & Tradition* that makes it worthwhile for a broad readership. Those with more philosophical inclination will be drawn to chapters 3, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12. Here one familiar with Stout's work will recognize his constructive postmodern pragmatic perspective and what it has to offer contemporary ethical discourse. Anyone with any

sensitivity toward issues of racial inequality and injustice will find the discussion in chapter 2 both informative and challenging. Chapter 8, entitled "Democratic Norms and Terrorism" is simply a must read for anyone concerned with protecting our nation's ideals as we protect the well being of its citizens. But perhaps it is chapters 4-6 that the Christian with orthodox sensibilities will find most interesting. It is in this section of the book that Stout lays out in detail his criticism of the "new traditionalism". Many evangelical Christians who are inspired by the vision of a more missional North American Church are drawn to the work of someone like Stanley Hauerwas, with his stark rejection of Constantinian Christianity and the call to embrace a radical narrative that calls for a community constituted by radical practices. But Stout challenges the notion that fidelity to the Christian narrative mandates infidelity toward democratic practices. The problem with Hauerwas is that he combines Yoder's Anabaptist ecclesiology (which Stout doesn't seem to find as objectionable as Hauerwas' appropriation of it) with MacIntyre's anti-modernity, resulting in an alternative community that seeks little or no engagement with the broader democratic culture. Stout doesn't think that orthodox Christianity requires such a posture toward democratic society. After all, Stout the democratic traditionalist finds kindred spirits in George Hunsinger and Nicholas Wolterstorff, both traditional Christians who make fine conversation partners in the democratic discourse. Neither their faith nor American democracy is worse off for the encounter.

What Stout offers to orthodox Christians in a post-Christian culture is a way to participate in the public square that honors God's call to the exiles in Jeremiah 29:7. Some will say that Stout's democracy is as far a cry from the everyday realities of democratic culture as Hauerwas' Christian traditionalism is. Stout may very well acknowledge that there is at least some truth to this. But Stout can respond by offering the hand of friendship to Christians, asking them to be fellow travelers with him in the democratic project, seeking the shalom of American society. We might do well to accept the offer, for this side of glory, it may be in this invitation that we find our shalom.



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### Suggested Readings in Political Theology

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## In Memoriam: Scott Adam Schuller

### **Clinging to the Promises, Living in Denial**

*Preached by Scott Collins-Jones*

August 14, 2004

#### **Luke 13:1-4; 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 15:19-28, 50-58**

I remember the first real conversation Scott and I ever had. Those of you who know either of us well won't be shocked to know that it was in a pub, over a beer. We quickly found out that we had something in common: the experience of attending a Christian college. Christian colleges are funny places. Any of you who have attended them can attest to that fact. We talked about things like the irony of reverse peer pressure. Our friends at state schools had to muster the courage to pray over meals in the cafeteria. Our agnostic friends at Christian schools had to muster the courage not to pray. I could never get over the scene of a friend who didn't believe in God with eyes closed and head bowed over every meal. We reminisced about over-sleeping and missing church, yet still showering and putting on a suit to eat Sunday lunch so that everyone thought you had gone to church.

But the thing that struck us both as the funniest and most absurd thing was a phenomena that many of our friends had experienced. Some of you no doubt have experienced it: being broken up with by the Lord. I shared with him the story of a mutual friend who called me one night to inform me that the Lord didn't find him attractive. This wasn't a divine revelation, an oracle coming straight down from heaven. It was a piece of his own constructive theology which was still in its embryonic stages. You see, he began dating a girl a few weeks before that night. When they got together she assured him it was also at the Lord's leading. When she broke up with him, that was in response to the Lord's direction as well. He got what many of us who have attended religious colleges call "the holy heave." His only conclusion was that while the Lord found him attractive a few weeks beforehand, he no longer did. So the Lord rejected him in the form of this young evangelical woman. Now, as a man that's been on the receiving end of his fair share of break ups, I could feel his pain. And as a graduate student in theology, I couldn't deny the impeccable logic of his thinking. It's just not the sort of logic that makes sense in light of the Gospel.

The sort of logic that thinks it can catch an unambiguous glance of God's providence in something like a college break up is the same sort of logic that we see in Luke 13. It seems to be behind the question the crowd puts to Jesus. They lived in a chaotic world, much like ours. They lived in a world where natural disasters claimed countless human lives, much like ours. They lived in a world where senseless dictators regularly spilled the blood of the innocents, just like ours. They even knew what it was like to live with the threats of terrorist violence. Even then the Middle East had its religious fanatics. In a world where so much goes so wrong so often, where life is so fragile, where death seems so common, it is at least comforting to be assured that what goes around comes around. It's nice when the sky is falling and all hell breaks loose to believe that bad things don't happen to good people. It's nice to believe that if we just look hard enough we can see God's intentions, we can discern God's logic in letting things unfold in ways that seem drastically unfair and unjust.

In July of 1984 David Jenkins was made Bishop of Durham in the Church of England. He had been accused repeatedly of heresy and blasphemy. He was the sort of bishop that made the Jesus seminar seem conservative by comparison. His consecration service was interrupted twice by demonstrators and then three days later, the very next day after the Archbishop of York preached in defense of the Durham appointment, the Durham cathedral was struck by lightning and caught on fire. Needless to say the editorial pages had a field day as various letters were exchanged attempting to figure out whether or not this bolt of lightning could be interpreted as a divine sign revealing God's apparent disapproval of the bishop's appointment. The Archbishop of Canterbury insisted that God was "on our side" because while the thirteenth century wooden roof was consumed in flames, the lovely rose window was spared. A letter from the cathedral staff encouraged parishioners to rest easy, because the cathedral was insured against "acts of God" anyway. Unbelievers had a great time with all this. One prominent British intellectual, an avowed agnostic, said that one lightning bolt was nothing more than coincidence. He assured the faithful, however, that if lightning struck every time Dr. Jenkins preached, he would then reconsider his theological commitments.

The most sensible thing spoken about the whole affair was uttered by Dr. Habgood, the Archbishop of York. When asked about the controversy

that ensued and about the theological validity of arguments put forth he replied: It seems to me that the Gospel is meant to put an end to all this sort of thinking.

He never explained what he meant by that, but I'll take a stab at it. Based on Jesus' response in Luke 13, it seems to me that the Gospel is meant to put an end to seeking to discern the mind of God through accidental contingencies of human history. Jesus responds sharply to the implication that somehow the children of Galilee might be thought of as less favored than those of Jerusalem. I think the point of Jesus' response is that it rains on the righteous and the unrighteous. The Gospel isn't necessarily an umbrella.

One of my favorite Scriptures is Deuteronomy 29:29. There Moses speaks to an Israel that is liberated, yet still wandering. He speaks to an Israel that is free from slavery, but still waits on the promise. He says to them: *The secret things belong to the Lord our God, but the things revealed belong to us and to our children forever....*

The problem with so much theology, particularly theology that deals with the problem of evil and suffering, is that all too often it focuses on the secret things, raising questions the answers to which belong to the Lord, and to the Lord alone. The problem with focusing on the secret things is that all too often questions about what we cannot know start to overshadow and eclipse what we can know. It seems to me that both Jesus' and the wise old Archbishop's responses to the crowds of their day serve to put an end to a sort of thinking that speculates on the secrets rather than clinging to the promises. For it is the promises that the Gospel has to deal with. The promises revealed to us give us what speculation on the secret things never can: the promises reveal that even in our darkest hour God is not our enemy or our accuser. The promises reveal that God is God for us in and as Jesus Christ.

Why are we so drawn to the secret things? Perhaps it is our spiritual DNA that we inherited from our first parents. God put a smorgasbord of good things before them, but they were irresistibly drawn to the forbidden fruit. God gives so many promises to stand on, so many revealed things to cling to, but we are drawn to the secret things.

When we speculate on the secret things we sometimes begin to wonder if God is our adversary after all. But the promises revealed shout back: if God is for us, who can be against us?

Speculation on the secret things can lead us to wonder if all hope is lost. But the promises revealed speak of a hope against hope.

Speculation on the secret things seems to enshroud us in darkness. But when we cling to the promises the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness does not overcome it.

Speculation about the secret things leads us to believe that as things have been so they shall be. It's the sort of thinking that leads you to believe that you can't change anything in this world. But the promises shout back to us that great mystery that the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be imperishable, and we shall all be changed. And all will change.

If you spent any time with Scott in the weeks before he died, you know how carefree he appeared. He didn't carry himself like a man plagued with the sense that potential doom was impending. He wasn't overly anxious; he didn't strike you as angst ridden. There was no self-pity, there were no "why me's." I have a confession to make: a few of us behind closed doors wondered if Scott was living in denial. I wasn't sure then, but I'm sure now. He was a man living deeply in denial. But not the kind of denial we think of when we use the expression. Scott's denial wasn't one rooted in self-deception. It was denial grounded in the truth. His was a bold and fearless denial. His was not a denial of the Gospel. His was a denial that came from trust in the Gospel.

Scott lived denying the fear and anxiety caused by thoughts of the hidden God of secret speculation. He had faith in the God of the promise. His trust was in the Risen Lord.

Scott lived in denial. He denied that life's fragile nature meant that it was any less grace filled. He refused to let life's fragility squeeze out the unspeakable joy that it can possess.

Scott lived in denial. He denied any notion that a life's duration measured its quality. He sucked the marrow from the bones of life. He knew that Jesus came that he might live, and live abundantly, and so he did.

Scott lived in denial. He denied the power of the valley of the shadow of death. He didn't let the shadow of the valley eclipse the light of love. He spent his last few weeks living and giving love to the one he loved: to his beautiful, beloved Stina. He lived in denial, choosing to love with reckless abandon.

Scott could live in denial because he could affirm the resurrection. He didn't just affirm it, he believed it, he felt, he lived it. Do you know what the most frequent command in the Bible is? What

imperative appears most often? What orders were given time and time again by the Lord, by his angels and prophets and apostles, and by Jesus? We are probably tempted to think, “Be Good.” “Be holy.” Or perhaps a negative command: “don’t do this or that.” It is none of these. The most frequent command in the Bible is, “Fear Not.” “Don’t be afraid.” It is a command that Scott, by the grace of Jesus Christ in power of the Holy Spirit, seemed to be able to keep almost effortlessly.

“If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile...”, says the Apostle. “But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead.” What sustained Scott wasn’t his faith, as powerful as that was. Scott was sustained by God’s faithfulness, revealed in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. It was because Jesus undertook the ultimate denial, the denial of the Father for us, that Scott could live the life of denial that we witnessed.

Paul instructs the Thessalonians not to grieve as others who have no hope. To grieve isn’t just human, it is faithful. We’ve lost one of God’s greatest gifts to us. We’ve lost the witness of the beautiful, courageous, joyful life that was Scott Schuller’s. But our loss has

been Scott’s gain. The hope that he saw dimly, as through a mirror, he now sees face to face. He no longer has just a foretaste, for he’s taken his seat at the heavenly banquet.

Both passages of Scripture that were read today end with a call for a response. The Gospel reading ends with a call to boldly seize the mercy God offers day by day in the midst of a broken world where life is fragile. The reading from Corinthians calls us to be steadfast, knowing that because of the hope of the resurrection our labor, our lives, our love, and even our losses are not in vain. The witness that was Scott Schuller’s life also calls for a response. His life calls us to forsake the secret things and cling to the promises. It calls us to live in denial. Not a denial of the Gospel, but the denial that comes from the Gospel. His faith points us to the faithfulness of Jesus Christ, the risen one. He was the hope of Scott Schuller, he is the hope of glory, thanks be to God. Amen.




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## Scott Adam Schuller

*Reflections from the Editorial Staff*

It is with great sadness that we note the death of Scott Adam Schuller, fellow classmate and a member of our editorial team, on the 11<sup>th</sup> of August due to complications during heart surgery. Scott was set to begin the 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the Master of Divinity program at Princeton Theological Seminary and had plans to pursue doctoral studies in missional theology.

Scott was held in high esteem in the Princeton Community. He somehow touched nearly every segment of seminary life. He was our intramurals teammate, Greek tutor, theology discussion partner, classmate, confidant, racquetball partner, counselor, barber, roommate, and most of all a true friend. His diligent devotion and service on behalf of his friends were always present. Scott’s love for us and his perpetual joy were rooted in the love of Jesus Christ. Scott truly did live a life of “denial” in the face of anxiety and fear. He lived life for all that it was worth knowing that it all was the gracious gift of his Lord and Savior.

We ask for prayer for his parents Gary and Linda Schuller, his sisters Laura Schuller and Kristen Pfeifer, his fiancé Christina Busman, his relatives, and his many friends in Beaver Falls, PA; Malone College in Ohio; Westmont College in Santa Barbara, CA; and here at PTS.

Those of us whose lives he touched will remember him with gratitude and affection, and we miss him a great deal. May he rest in peace.



*Matthew J. Bruce, M.Div. Middler*

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