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Liberal Democracy and Christianity: The Church's Struggle to Make Public Claims in a Post-Teleological World

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The promise of modernity was to establish an objective grounds for knowledge and ethics, both freed from the fetters of tradition. This modern quest translated politically into the emergence of secularized states oriented towards creating conditions for free and equal individuals to flourish. The ravages of the 20th century effectively called the modern project into question. The fall of the Soviet Union marked the failure of modernity's most radical political project, the attempt, often through tyrannical means, to achieve utopian Marxist ideals that were constructed on putatively scientific grounds.

The shortcomings of modernity, however, can in no way be restricted to the failed socialist experiments. Liberal democracies in the West suffer from ever more apparent social breakdowns attested to by unprecedented divorce rates, widespread drug use, and a growing sense of alienation reflected in emergent nationalist movements. The outbreaks of various fundamentalisms in the world must be understood at least in part as reactions to the inadequacy of a secularized politics to respond to essential dimensions of what it means to be human.

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the question of the inter-relationship between Christianity and politics in the modern landscape. It is imperative first to try to grasp more deeply the dynamics of liberal democracy in general and the place it assigns religion in particular. As a result, this paper will begin with a brief look at the origins of liberal democracy. After this brief historical survey, it will seek to describe the implications of this regime

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for the church and the space it occupies in society. In the final section of the paper, it will attempt to make a constructive proposal as to what this relationship might look like in the present context.

I The Liberal Democratic Regime

The promulgation of the Edict of Milan in 313AD signified a watershed for the state's relationship to Christianity as it marked the beginning of a new period of cooperation between state and church, the advent of so-called Christendom. Perspectives as to whether this was good or bad vary greatly, but what is important to note is that this launched the state toward a more theocratic self-understanding; that is, the state began to assume more and more responsibility for perpetuating and advancing Christian spiritual and social ideals. However this may have worked in practice, it is vital to see just how significant it was for the church's own self-understanding. If before it was marginalized, it now had the benefits of state legitimation and increasingly the church itself was granted power.

It is against this background that one needs to understand the significance of the emergence of the liberal democratic regime. In the West, the Reformation subjected to doubt the possibility of a unified vision of the good that could unite and guide society. Although both sides remained self-avowedly Christian and, with the exception of the Anabaptist movement, saw the church and state acting in concert, the very fact of the breach raised questions as to how the authority of the church (or Scriptures for Protestants) could be brought to bear on the realities of society in a unified way.

This question acquired particular urgency during the Thirty Years War that saw Christian fight Christian in the name of the faith. It is this violent context in which modernity was born.[1] Witnessing firsthand the impotence of tradition to guide men to truth, Descartes turned to the autonomous human subject and his or her reason as the only certain means to discover truth.

This turn away from unifying tradition to the individual is mirrored in the emergent political philosophy of the day as well. Machiavelli, considered the father of modern political philosophy, argued that humans could prosper if they constructed their society not on the basis of how people should live but rather on the basis of how they actually live.[2] This marked a radical departure from classical notions of politics where regimes were called to craft laws and institutions that fostered virtue so that the well-ordered society could achieve a universally defined happiness.[3]

For Machiavelli, the human search for glory pitted individual against individual leading either to anarchy or to tyranny. The solution, for Machiavelli,

1 For a good account of the social context of the birth of modernity, see Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990), pp. 13-22.

2 Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), ch. XV.

3 See for example Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1985), X.1179b-1181b.

is not to educate ambitious princes as Plato proposed[4] but to create political institutions that pitted the ambitions of the princes against the desire for freedom among the general populace,[5] a solution that anticipates the division of powers so characteristic of modern democratic regimes.

This turn of the political regime from pursuit of ultimate ends received further development in Hobbes and Locke whose respective 'states of nature' both conceived humans originally living as isolated individuals. For Hobbes, the savage brute, as with Machiavelli, ends up in a war of all against all because of human vainglory. The insecurity of such an existence leads to the formation of the social contract whereby humans give up their absolute rights for the sake of self-preservation and are given in return freedom only insofar as this freedom does not infringe on the freedom of another.[6] This new regime does not seek to determine wider societal ends, but rather allows individuals to continue to pursue their own private ends as long as it is in a way that does not bring harm to others.

Locke's narrative of the state of nature, while differing slightly from that of Hobbes, also envisioned a degeneration into war and anarchy that leads warring individuals to enter into a social contract for the sake of their self-preservation.[7] Locke's vision of human natural rights went a bit further than Hobbes in its affirmation that beyond mere physical existence individuals had the right to a comfortable and economically prosperous existence.[8]

This is seen in Locke's shifting from Hobbes' right to self-preservation to stress the right to property. Property for Locke logically grows out of the right to self-preservation since it is property that gives humans the means to sustain themselves. However, property's value goes beyond this. If human industry and reason are applied, it becomes a means to accumulate wealth and security.

This new political vision is enshrined in the American Declaration of Independence in the well-known assertion that all men are endowed with the inalienable rights to 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'. Notice the character of this social vision that seeks to liberate humans from the precarious existence of the state of nature where life was under constant threat. Human freedom is still maintained, albeit now in a way restricted by the rights of my neighbour.

Significantly, the right to the 'pursuit of happiness' in many ways sums up the spirit of the modern liberal democratic regime. It refuses to define 'happiness' and even to invest itself in the enterprise of ensuring this end is satisfied. In so doing, it defers to the

4 See Plato, *The Republic* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1974), V.473d,e and the whole of VII.

5 Macchiavelli, *The Prince*, ch. IX.

6 Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), I.13-14.

7 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), II.2-3.

8 Locke, *Two Treatises*, II.5, 9.

individual the responsibility both of defining happiness and of attaining the happiness he or she has defined. That is, the broader society is no longer the place where ultimate ends are defined and is no longer responsible for creating the conditions for a virtuous life. Rather, it is now responsible for fostering an environment for individuals to freely pursue their own private visions of the good.

II Liberal Democracy's Failed Neutrality

Before we proceed to examine the implications of this shift for the interrelationship of Christianity and politics in liberal democracy, it is important to note that this abandonment of 'ends' is not quite what it claims to be on the surface. Despite the 'modesty' of their claims, the liberal narratives concerning humans and the origins of society in themselves actually have much to say about human nature and the ends to which we are designed.

First, while the social side of our humanity is generally acknowledged, it is the individual, and not society, that serves as the foundation for the new political arrangement. Such a starting point is obviously not morally neutral and has significant implications for how the individual as well as social institutions are conceived. For example, the current cultural shift towards individual self-expression is in no way accidental to democracy and has become the basis for the consumerist ethos as well as for the recent creation of new sexual identities. The notion of something like a fixed human nature seems to be completely lost in the current cultural climate that stresses self-creation.

Similarly, marriage is now conceived as a contract that remains valid only insofar as the interests of the two spouses are being fulfilled, in much the same way that the state is the result of a social contract between self-interested individuals. A sacramental understanding that sees the rite of marriage constituting a new spiritual and social reality no longer has a place in the public discourse. These competing conceptions have recently led to violent disagreements about what kinds of marriage the state should sanction. These are disagreements that cannot be resolved so long as marriage is being defined by the different parties in divergent ways.

Second, the assigning of determination of ends to individuals reflects a distinctly modern understanding of the autonomous human knower and actor. It assumes the individual can somehow divorce himself or herself from the social context in which he or she is embedded to rationally determine which ends to pursue and how to pursue them. In the public realm, this has led to 20th century political writers arguing that laws must be based on morally neutral grounds. John Rawls famously posits a 'veil of ignorance' that denies agents knowledge of their social position or their conceptions of the good in order to ensure neutral deliberation.[9] Such an approach has been rightly criticized for making any deliberation impossible since judg-

9 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 12.

ments require a framework in which goods are ordered in some meaningful way.

Finally, the stress on self-preservation or personal prosperity speaks of humans ordered to primarily material ends. Liberal democracy gives birth to the much maligned *bourgeois* individual who is oriented toward personal security and material comfort. Such an arrangement ignores possible transcendent ends around which a society could be arranged. To be fair, Locke argues that human laws must reflect the laws of nature created by God. However, these laws of nature are discerned through autonomous human reason, calling into question the extent to which truly transcendent ends are being served. Additionally, the impetus to form society, as we have already seen, is personal security and the preservation of property, that is, very material ends.

In this brief detour, we have seen how liberal democracy's self-proclaimed abstention from determining particular ends is a somewhat philosophical sleight of hand, since it makes the individual the starting point and the material world the primary concern.

III The Naked Public Square

This declared narrowing of vision on the part of the state to focus more on guaranteeing 'means' rather than on organizing politics toward certain defined ends has led to the formal exclusion of religion in political discourse, the birth of the so-called 'naked public square'. For many this has been a source of great frustration as the church's sphere of influence has shrunk. This shift, however, need not be perceived as wholly negative.

The theocratic aspirations of earlier regimes were not without their problems. Even laying aside the many instances where injustices were committed by so-called Christian states, there is the question as to whether the church should seek such a close marriage to the state in the first place. The theocratic ideal is eschatologically deficient as it seeks to remove the tension between the kingdom of the world and the kingdom of God. In so doing, the church, while receiving greater legitimation, tends to lose its distinct identity vis-à-vis the state and becomes a tool of the state for its own legitimation. The church utterly loses a prophetic voice whereby it can judge existing structures and practices.

Liberal democracy's putative refusal to determine ends in theory allows individuals to discover these ends in other communities. This is a space that the church can comfortably occupy. The church can function as one of these moral communities, calling people out of the world and into itself. This need not entail a narrowing of the universal pretensions of the gospel it proclaims. Indeed, many theologians have hailed the fall of Christendom as opening a new era where the church can once again be the church.[10]

10 One of the most prolific writers in this vein was the Anabaptist theologian, John Howard Yoder. See, for example, his essay, 'The Otherness of the Church', in *The Royal Priesthood: Essays Ecclesiological and Ecumenical*. Ed. M.G. Cartwright (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994). See also Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1983), pp. 96-115.

Having said this, the new freedom that the church wins with liberal democracy is not without tremendous cost. First, while liberal democracies generally accept the instrumentally useful role of religion as providing people with a moral compass, they strictly limit religion to the private sphere. Religion is merely a matter of subjective individual choice and cannot make any pretensions to enter into the wider public discourse. Thus, the space religion wins with liberal democracy to reclaim again its prophetic voice is lost with a concomitant privatization of religion.

This is not a deal that Christianity can accept. Despite modernity's attempt to reduce religious belief to subjective affection, Christianity believes of itself, as do most other religious traditions, that it speaks to more than merely subjective religious experience but dares to describe the world as a particular reality possessing a particular order. It also sees itself not as a mere means to the state's healthy functioning.

In fact, the church sees itself as providing the meaning and end of history and the state's function is to serve it by providing order while it carries out its mission in the world. It is no small irony that the very liberal democratic regime that sought to limit government and increase freedom ends up so limiting religious claims as to disfigure them beyond recognition.

IV Engagement in Liberal Democracy

How then might the church conceive of its place in a liberal democratic regime? First, while the church cannot accept its relegation to the private sphere, it need not reject the function of moral education that liberal democracy envisions for it. Modern democracies assume the presence of religious and other moral communities as places where moral formation occurs which is necessary to prepare people for citizenship. In fact, it has been argued that the dismantling of more theocratic feudal regimes without the concomitant empowering of civil institutions leaves societies particularly vulnerable to tyrannous regimes.[11] Jardine argues that this explains the difference between the relatively peaceful transition to democracies witnessed in England and the United States compared with the tours through tyranny that Germany and Russia took.[12] Thus, while the church may not accept being reduced merely to an instrument of the state as moral educator, it nevertheless can perform this vital role that does not in any way contradict its own

11 Alexis de Tocqueville very early on saw that the atomizing effect of liberal democracy on societies made them potentially vulnerable to despotism if a strong civil society were not present. See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (New York: Perennial Classics, 1969), II.IV.6. For more recent discussions on the importance of a vibrant civil society for liberal democracies, see Mary Ann Glendon. 'Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse', *The Essential Civil Society Reader: The Classic Essays*. ed. D. Eberly (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000), pp. 305-316; and Francis Fukuyama *The End of History and the Last Man* (New York: Perennial, 1992), pp. 322-27.

12 Murray Jardine. *The Making and Unmaking of Technological Society* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2004), pp. 121-23.

goal of the moral formation of its members.

That said, the church cannot accept religious claims being constricted to the private sphere and must demand the right to engage in the public discourse on its own terms. This is not a call to return to the model of Christendom. In the current pluralist, post-Christian world, it is no longer reasonable to hope for a homogenous moral community in any given state. While in certain states, a degree of homogeneity may be present, liberal democracy assumes the possibility for other actors to play a role in the public discourse as well.

Admitting the presence of other moral traditions, however, does not mean that public discourse should be advanced on purely neutral grounds, disallowing the participation of these traditions in their particularity. The naked public square that has emerged from this 20th century quest has left many societies bereft of the moral vocabulary needed to address the various ethical problems confronting us in this rapidly changing world. Ethical discourse assumes the presence of a tradition that provides it with its coherence.[13]

An important example of this in the international political discourse is the concept of 'human rights' that has proven so fundamental to the creation of international governing structures and legal codes. 'Human rights' in their original conception were taken to refer to an objective order in which humans enjoy particular prerogatives by virtue of this order. Thus, the US Declaration of Independence in its proclamation that all men are 'endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights' clearly locates human rights in the fact of human creation by God. To abstract this assertion of human rights from the tradition that provides its ground is to effectively render it meaningless.

One response has been to see human rights as a useful social construct for ordering the world, but this merely raises the question: If human rights are merely a social construct, then on what grounds can we insist on the universal observance of human rights? What happens if a nation chooses another social construct with a different construal of humanity? Human rights bereft of the traditions that give them content cease to function as a universal value that can usefully guide international relations.

While democratic regimes cannot privilege one tradition over another, allowing people to openly argue from their traditions might be one way forward. Essential to the success of moral engagement between traditions is that a given tradition possesses the means by which its arguments might be persuasive to others outside of the tradition. In the case of the Christian tradition, the natural law approach has historically been employed in this way. Natural law theory presupposes that this world possesses a certain creational ordering that is potentially open to the perception of those outside of the Christian tradition. As it is readily evident to all, the presence of such ordering is no guarantee that all will interpret this order adequately.

13 Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, 2nd ed. (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), pp. 218-25.

In contrast to Enlightenment employments of natural law, a more particularly Christian appropriation of natural law would argue that this ordering is most immediately understood only if one makes use of God's self-disclosure as we find it in Scripture and tradition. While this order may be discerned most fully only with the aid of revelation, once discerned, the character of this order may be vigorously argued by appealing to common human experience that is available to all.

Assuming similar resources exist in other religious traditions, social discourse would focus on finding areas of agreement on what it means to be human and how to create a just order that reflects this. Thus, each individual, while informed by his or her respective religious tradition, seeks to find common ground for dialogue by positing interpretations of our common experience. As government in liberal democracy is limited, the measure of our agreement can be limited to areas that affect our mutual co-existence. The boundaries of these areas will vary according to what kind of agreement is found between the traditions in question. State scope will necessarily be more limited in contexts where traditions are deeply at odds with each other.

This does not preclude the pursuit of more extensive understandings of the good; it merely rightly defers these pursuits to communities bound by shared belief. From a Christian standpoint, this reflects well the notion that the state's function is to maintain peace so that the church that constitutes the real end of history can carry out its mission without interference.

It is incumbent upon the church then to take seriously the task of transmitting its tradition in its fullness to its members so they can live in ways that reflect the comprehensiveness of the Christian vision. The church must not look to the wider culture to provide legitimation and must at times through its proclamation and practices openly contest understandings and norms that prevail in the wider culture.

A helpful example here is the ways in which liberal democratic regimes have posited the individual as the starting point. While this does not necessitate a purely subjective individualist approach that leads to each determining for himself or herself the good, liberal democracy seems to possess a certain trajectory of consciousness that makes claims to some objective good increasingly problematic. It also makes the formation and sustenance of substantive communities quite difficult since each community is conceived as a 'voluntary' association.

The church cannot accept either of these outcomes. While it calls individuals freely to repent, this can never be understood as a mere expression of private religious preference. It is a repentance to a new understanding of what the world is and what our place in this world should be. Similarly, the church cannot accept a person's involvement in the life of the community as subject to the mere whims of the individuals that constitute it.

The Church is more than a club of people who have a shared interest; it consists of people who have been united by the Spirit to Christ and this new ontological reality demands a corresponding way of life. To live otherwise is to live in disjunction with one's

own confessed beliefs. To live consistently with our confession, however, assumes a deliberate process of catechesis that instructs believers in the substance of their beliefs, including the ways in which they diverge from the broader culture, as well as a comprehensive approach to spiritual formation that habituates them to an alternative way of being and living in the world.

Conclusion

In closing, we see that liberal democracy has indeed opened up space for the church to be the church in ways that it had not been under Christendom. Its vision of the limited state is conducive to other communities such as the church providing the context for the discernment and pursuit of human ends. Liberal democracy also regards the church as one of the various useful communities necessary for its own flourishing. While the church can certainly perform this function, it can never accept its function to be confined to this. The gospel it preaches has universal import. From the church's perspective it is the state that is instrumental to the fulfilment of its mission. For effective co-existence, it is important that each respect their God-given roles in this world. To move beyond mere co-existence to mutual enrichment, the church must look within its own tradition to find means by which it can engage people from other religious traditions to pursue public ends.

In an age of increasing social fragmentation, the church, which proclaims a gospel of reconciliation where there is neither Jew nor Greek, neither male nor female, neither slave nor free, possesses unique resources to be a much-needed voice to advance justice and to effect greater social cohesion.