

Political Theory: The Place of Christianity

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IN AN ESSAY ON "Teaching History to the Rising Generation," Russell Kirk told of the textbook his daughter was assigned in the sixth grade of a Roman Catholic grammar school. "In the whole of the textbook, there is no mention of Christianity or Christ, no mention of Catholicism or of any other Christian or Jewish persuasion.... One is left to conclude that none of (the) large (historical) themes has been influenced by religion in any way."¹ The question can also be asked quite naturally at a higher educational level and not only in a parochial environment: Is the treatment of Christianity much better at the university level, and this not merely in history? In particular, is the academic discipline of political theory, with its various conferences, journals, departments, and curricula so designed in practice that it can be presented as if Christianity did not and does not exist? Anyone familiar with the field, no doubt, will suspect that the latter is largely the case. Christianity is not in practice seen to be connected with the core integrity of the discipline itself. At most, it is a marginal theoretic issue, of some importance in certain past eras, quite often with harmful results. There is, it would seem, some need to state the opposite position, at least for the sake of argument,

namely, that political philosophy cannot be fully itself without understanding the relationship of Christianity to its premises and contents. The relative neglect of Christianity must, then, itself be accounted for.

"Too much politics, like too much education, is a sign of social decline," V. A. Demant wrote in his essay "The Theology of Politics." "The temptation of the natural man is to seek one unifying principle short of God. This is sought in some immanent fact of the natural and historic process."² Politics remains the most natural and human substitute for God, since politics is, in its own right, a "unifying principle." This is why, intrinsic to itself, political theory requires a reason to be limited and *self*-limiting. The essential contribution of theology to political theory is, on this basis, philosophical. That is, by locating ultimate being outside of the legitimate tasks open to mankind to accomplish by its own efforts, theology at its best prevents political theory from becoming its own metaphysics, prevents it from being, again in Demant's words, "some immanent fact of the natural and historical process." For metaphysics, however it be called, is a discipline that presumes, on its own grounds, to account for all being—all natural and historical being, itself implicit-

ly identified with *that which is*.³ When this latter effort appears under the guise of political theory, it limits total reality to that which appears under the methodological processes available to the study of politics.

Without the transcendent, however, politics has no intrinsic limits, since in itself, it is, properly, the highest of the practical sciences, as both Aristotle and Aquinas held. Without a theoretic limit, politics naturally tends to become absolute, a discipline designed to place everything under its scope. On the other hand, an authentic political theory will be, even in its sense of its own reality, essentially "self"-limiting, to the extent it realizes that the whole of being and reality is *not* to be identified with that aspect of reality which is human, which deals with man as precisely "the mortal," as Hannah Arendt used to say.⁴ In this connection, then, we are able to suggest that to explore political theory is first to examine its natural and also extrinsic limits. The import of this position can clearly be sensed if we recall the traditional ideas that theology was the "queen of the sciences." We should not, then, easily pass over what Professor Leo Strauss wrote at the beginning of his *The City and Man*:

It is not sufficient for everyone to obey and to listen to the Divine Message of the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City. In order to propagate that message among the heathen, nay, in order to understand it as clearly and as fully as is humanly possible, one must consider to what extent man could discover the outlines of that City if left to himself, to the proper exercise of his own powers. But in our age it is much less urgent to show that political philosophy is the indispensable handmaiden of theology than to show that political philosophy is the rightful queen of the social sciences, the sciences of man and of his affairs.⁵

Whether, some twenty years later, the urgency is still in the direction Professor Strauss suggested, can be questioned. But

anyone familiar with the central line of Western tradition will immediately recognize in his reflections themes from Aristotle and Augustine, Plato and Aquinas.

Yet, it is safe to say that few Christian thinkers have recognized the enormous implications to theology contained in Leo Strauss' monumental works.⁶ For his subtle argument was to ask about the limits of the "queen of the social sciences," political philosophy itself, in order to allow a space for revelation or at least its possibility. He understood, in other words, that even on its own grounds, political theory could not account for everything that guided and influenced nature and man. Hence, in urging political philosophers to "discover the outlines of that City if left" to themselves, Strauss recognized that self-limitation was the natural consequence in a discipline that was not itself a true metaphysics. This both legitimated the enterprise of political theory itself, with its own relative autonomy, what the Christians called, "rendering to Caesar," while not requiring political philosophy to explain precisely everything, *all that is*, a task proper to man, even though not a political task. This is why Aristotle said that even the little we could know of the divine things was worth all our efforts, even though politics was "proper" only to man.⁷ In de-emphasizing the "handmaiden" relationship, Strauss evidently made a place for the same function within the discipline of political philosophy itself, or at least tried to.

Political theory, for its part, has also something very basic to say to contemporary theology and religion. From the ordinary viewpoint of the political theorist, theology seems presently to state its case before the world precisely in political terms and guises, yet with few of the limits to which political reflection, at its best, is subjected. This makes theology seem more and more unreal, even naive. It often advocates lethal policies in the name of "justice" without ever even suspecting where political things actually go, without ever having heard of the chapters in Plato and Aristotle on the decline of states. To-

day, it is not the theologian who complains about the encroachment of politics, but rather, the political theorist, surveying what is purported to be theological reflection, who wonders if theology has anything at all to say other than the political, a political that seems but a determined image of contemporary ideology. The curricula of theology or religion departments and seminaries often vaguely parallel those of government departments, with little clear notion of any differences in content or procedure. From the viewpoint of academic political theory, then, the major encroachment today is not from the political to the theological, but, particularly in the area of economics and development and "rights," in the founding and rule of the new and poorer nations, from the theological to the political. Theology almost seems to have admitted that politics is indeed an autonomous metaphysics, contrary to the tradition of Aristotle and Aquinas.⁸ Today, there are priests who want to become politicians (even after the papal decree to the contrary.)⁹ In the Christian tradition, however, as in the case of Ambrose of Milan, it was the politicians who became bishops and priests. The hierarchy of value was reversed.

What political philosophy has to tell religion, then, is the grounded estimate, based on judgment, experience, and law, of what can be expected in terms of virtue and practice from the generality of mankind as each person exists in a given culture. Ironically, this is what religion used to tell politics, before religion began to claim for itself the advocacy of the ideal human good, as it has tended to do more and more in conformity with modern revolutionary utopias, especially Marxism.¹⁰ To deny that men can always be "better" is, therefore, as "un-Christian" as to expect them actually to produce the Kingdom of God on earth.¹¹ "We can hardly measure what the modern doctrine of individualism must owe to the Christian belief that men are spiritual beings, born for eternity, and having a value incommensurate with anything else in the created universe," the great Protestant

historian, Professor Herbert Butterfield, wrote in his essay on "Christianity and Politics."¹² But, as he went on to suggest, the doctrine of universal sin, with particular attention to one's own sinfulness, was designed precisely "to be a serious check on the many evils and mistakes in politics." Likewise, G. K. Chesterton, in his still even more formidable *Orthodoxy*, found the political connected with this doctrine: "Christianity is the only thing left that has any real right to question the power of the well-nurtured or the well-bred.... If we wish to pull down the prosperous oppressor we cannot do it with the new doctrine of human perfectibility; we can only do it with the old doctrine of Original Sin."¹³ Only if *all* men and women are sinners can we realize that our governments, composed as they likewise are of these same men and women, must be designed to prevent these same people who actually rule us, even with our own advice and consent, from also abusing us.

Thus, by itself, politics could not know how valuable each person really was. All it could do is to project, with a Professor Rawls, that we all must be important because we all would, with various veils of ignorance, project the same fate for ourselves. Yet, neither by itself could politics know and account for the depths of evil and disorder that are operative and to be somehow expected among men. The holocausts we describe and acknowledge do not prevent their repetition among us. They only guarantee that the destiny of the sufferers cannot be finally accounted for by politics alone. The saint, Aquinas remarked, is above the law, because he observes the law, knows it, whereas the politician must account for the majority of us who are not saints.¹⁴ The politician who does not understand how men can abuse one another, who does not believe that holocaust is *possible*, is simultaneously a bad politician *and* a bad theologian. He does not know how to rule because he does not know what to expect.¹⁵ Thus, when once the truth of the value of each person *and* his concrete sinfulness is comprehended, it becomes the legitimate task of

politics to account for their realities within the political realm, to account for the absolute dignity and for the possibility of mass political destruction and the more frequent lesser evils.¹⁶ This is why, then, that politics ultimately does have something to teach theology even about itself. For it is the politician who must confront men also in their sinfulness, however it be called, while leaving a real space for their virtue, a space that does not "coerce" a particular definition of goodness on men. The politician must seek a "common good" even among the less than perfect, the kind of people Aquinas held to be the primary objects of civil law.¹⁷ The task of political theory, as Plato had already intimated in *The Republic*, the first book of the discipline, is to find a place for the Good that transcends the ordinary political experience of the normalcy of men. Specifically Christian political theory begins with the Incarnation, with Augustine's realization that the Good, happiness, was indeed a necessary aspect of human reflection and endeavor, but that its fullness was not proper to this world, not achievable by human, particularly political means.

In his still perceptive essay, "St. Augustine and His Age," the Catholic historian, Christopher Dawson, pointed out why the reality of transcendence, the dignity of the person, and the persistence of evil and sin—each a foundation of politics and of what is *beyond* politics—can become the basis of a new kind of social order that results from the effect of the Christian stimulus in the world. "In the West, however," Dawson wrote, "St. Augustine broke decisively with this tradition by depriving the state of its aura of divinity and seeking the principle of social order in the human will. In this way, the Augustinian theory, for all its otherworldliness, first made possible the ideal of a social order resting upon the free personality and a common effort towards moral ends."¹⁸ This idea that the social order was to be based upon the dignity of individual persons, who had the capacity to "will"—the philosophical discovery the late

Professor Hannah Arendt in her *The Life of the Mind* attributed directly to Christianity—this capacity to direct human actions to moral or immoral ends even within the political order, seemed to make political theory free from any scientific determinism, even from sociology or psychology.¹⁹ The "causes" of social disorder or progress, therefore, had to be located in the vices or virtues, in the various definitions men gave to the actual existential happiness which they individually sought, choices eventually reflected, as Aristotle knew in the First Book of his *Ethics*, in the forms of government described in *The Politics*.²⁰

"Value-free" political theory, consequently, as Professor Strauss and Professor Voegelin were quick to note in famous studies, explained everything but politics and that which transcended it.²¹ The late E. F. Schumacher, in his remarkable *A Guide for the Perplexed*, was thus mostly correct in his observation that "The modern experiment to live without religion has failed, and once we have understood this, we know what our 'post-modern' tasks really are."²² The post-modern endeavor for political theory is, consequently, precisely the rediscovery of specifically Christian political theory, a theory which does not, when it is itself, allow politics to become effectively a secular religion or substitute metaphysics, as it has, in effect, tended to become in the recent past, particularly in academic political theory. This would, likewise, be a theory that does not allow theology to destroy the things of Caesar.

There is, then, rather much truth in the ironical remark of Father Robert Sokolowski, Professor of Philosophy at Catholic University, when he remarked: "Perhaps we can say Christians forget that justice is a reflection of the image of the good and not the good itself. It is curious that Christians look for the divine in social order at a time when the social order itself has so much of the inhuman in it."²³ The rapid legalization of what were called in classical natural law theory properly "vices" has made it more and more im-

perative that political theory retain its principled foothold in theology and metaphysics, in a source that would prevent it from completing Machiavelli's modern project of identifying absolutely what men do with what they ought to do. The public order is more than ever being arranged so that we be not allowed to state the "untruth" of the laws and practices we have enacted against the classical norms.

"To speak knowingly the truth, among prudent and dear men, about what is greatest and dear, is a thing that is safe and encouraging." (#450) Such penetrating words of Socrates in the Fifth Book of *The Republic* of course, are very circumspect. For the number of "prudent and dear men," among whom Socrates felt himself to be discussing where political thought ultimately led, is indeed too few. When, however, this same truth is spoken among the multitudes, it can be quite dangerous, as Socrates himself soon was to find out. Realization of this very danger was the background of Professor Strauss' emphasis on "secret writing," about what he called "persecution and the art of writing."²⁴ The social sciences had to search their own limits because, if men suspected such limits led to or arose from revelation, they would, perhaps stubbornly, refuse the search for the truth. This is why it is no accident that both Paul VI in his Vatican II Document on Religious Liberty (1965) and John Paul II, in his Address to the United Nations (October 2, 1979), took special and careful pains, from the side of religion, to insist precisely upon the obligation of each person in himself not merely to pursue but to accept the truth on its own grounds, even the truth of revelation if it persuades. Truth may indeed make us free, but, as Solzhenitsyn and Strauss knew, it may also lead to persecution and tyranny by its rejection. The truth of political theory, from the viewpoint of the truth of original sin, may indeed lead to what does happen in actual political experience, to persecution of the just and the honest *because* they are just and honest. Man, in other words, always retains will as well as intellect.

The suspicion that the truth of political

theory was bound up with the truth of metaphysics and revelation, then, has been the guiding principle of Western political theory—Christian, Jewish, and Muslim—until the modern era, until what the textbooks call, from Machiavelli, "modern" political theory.²⁵ The modern theoretical project, however, the one that now normally dominates the discipline, is based upon the intellectual "autonomy" of political theory. This means that the discipline contains within itself not only an historical *canon*, as Professor Pocock called it, a baker's dozen of basic authors from Plato to Augustine to Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, and Mill, through which political theory is understood, but also a methodology and independent ground which is self-explanatory and self-justifying.²⁶ The extreme position was meant to be something quite different from Aristotle's notion of a "practical science," as he developed it in the Sixth Book of *The Ethics*. It is different because, for Aristotle, the ends of the practical sciences were found in the metaphysical order.²⁷ Man did not "make" himself to be man, as Aristotle said, so that politics presupposed what made man to be man. Man's relation to himself, in other words, was not primarily one of self-making, but of self-discovery. And we can, properly, only "discover" what we ourselves do not make. Political theory appears in most academic and scholarly programs as the "history" of political theory, even though Professor Strauss warned that political philosophy ought not to be confused with the *history* of political thought.²⁸ Usually, political theory will be divided into the following categories: classical Greek and Roman; Jewish-early Christian-Roman Empire; Feudal and Christian Medieval; Modern, and 20th Century. However, the same enterprise can be divided in another fashion, according to the themes of "The Great Political Thinkers." The narrative histories of Professor Sabine or the more recent work of Professor Sibley would fill in the gaps of practice and theory for the less than "great."²⁹

A third approach not infrequently used

would be the "isms" analysis, as, for example, that used by the late Professor Ebenstein.³⁰ Here, attention would be paid rather to a single doctrine or ideology with its contents and problems. We would find in such an approach treatments of capitalism, democracy, communism, nazism, fascism, socialism, nationalism, behaviorism, corporatism, authoritarianism, anarchism, internationalism, and, perhaps, "developmentism," in the various offshoots of Professor Rostow's now famous pioneer thesis about the "five states" of economic growth.³¹ Finally, not a few endeavors would like to exorcise altogether the "history" of political theory to replace it with some procedure subject to "verifiable," scientific tools. In this way, political theory would, presumably, declare its independence from the tyranny of the past, of revelation, of metaphysics, even of history.³²

In recent years, in most academic programs and official political science journals and associations, even in professedly "Christian" universities, a distinct intellectual "silence" has existed about the content and philosophical import of Christianity in political thought and affairs. One need only to inquire of even good undergraduate classes—it is little better in graduate classes—about the identity of the Good Samaritan or the precise meaning of the Incarnation, Original Sin or the "City of God," all the common fare of the West for centuries and centuries, to realize that the terms of shared discourse are no longer readily available in the general academic community.³³ Official political science journals will too often—there are exceptions—return essays on formal Christian political theory and its implications in the discipline with the polite suggestion that they would be more "fitting" for perhaps theological journals. (And, alas, the quality of political discourse in the theological journals is often appalling.) We no longer suspect that William of Occam, for example, in his analysis of the divine freedom, might have had something to do with the absoluteness of later, more modern political theory.³⁴ We do not see why the

denial of the divinity of Christ is related to salvific ethos in much modern ideology.³⁵

This severing of much connection of political theory from religion and theology, this studied "reductionism," however, has unfortunately served to separate them precisely at a moment when religion, under the curious aegis of "liberation theology," is gaining an unprecedented political influence.³⁶ One has only to glance at the average weekly religious magazine, Protestant or Catholic, or diocesan newspaper, to realize that the major drift is political.³⁷ Political theorists, for their part, find themselves ill-equipped to handle the political overtones of the murder in a Central American Cathedral of an archbishop or the elevation of a revolutionary priest to the Office of Foreign Affairs, or why it is not "illiberal" for the Roman Pope in Brazil to exclude the clergy from politics. Moreover, this self-isolation of political theory, the result of its own modernist methodology, is itself in part responsible for the radicalization of theology because this latter discipline almost never receives the sobering wind of analysis that ought to come from political theory at its best about what we might expect of men in the world.³⁸ Thus, contemporary theologians, when it comes to politics, too often are the successors of the Dr. Price who so incensed Edmund Burke in his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*: "It is somewhat remarkable that this Reverend Divine should be so earnest for setting up new churches, and so perfectly indifferent concerning the doctrine which may be taught in them."³⁹ Today's divines are equally earnest, though not equally unconcerned about the direction of the doctrines they espouse. Only today, they are concerned not with setting up new churches, but new governments and nations. Rendering to Caesar has become, paradoxically, a clerical occupation, or at least a clerical ambition, as the cynics have always suspected it would.

Ironically, then, the classical roles are almost reversed, so that religion lacks the "realism" once expected of it, that source of sensibility Reinhold Niebuhr once found

in Augustine.⁴⁰ The doctrine of the Fall did have political consequences in the very areas of property, coercive government, and labor, areas so related to modern theory and ideology.⁴¹ Political theory, on the other hand, appears unable to articulate a coherent version of man or common good that would permit "the political" to be less than a substitute metaphysics, as it has become implicitly in so much contemporary theory. This would seem to suggest that, even for its own health, political theory must have addressed to it certain basic ideas and religious affirmations that force and convince politics to limit itself to its own proper sphere.⁴² Likewise, religion will not long remain balanced if the experience of politics is not included as a basic element in the analysis of how religion impacts on the world, how human dignity is to be defended. The very nature of man's intellect does, in classical reflection, give him a real source for political knowledge.⁴³ "It may be accepting a miracle to believe in free will," G. K. Chesterton wrote in *The Well and the Shallows*,

but it is accepting madness, sooner or later, to disbelieve it. It may be a wild risk to take a vow, but it is quiet, crawling and inevitable ruin to refuse to make a vow. It may be incredible that one creed is the truth and others are

relatively false; but it is not only incredible, but also intolerable, that there is no truth either in or out of creeds, and, all are equally false.⁴⁴

The "miracles," "the wild risks," and the "incredibilities," which arise from a Western tradition that includes, to be itself, both faith and reason, seem precisely those innovations that allow us to keep our politics sane and sensible.⁴⁵

This, ultimately, is why Christianity cannot be avoided, along with the Old Testament, in the study of political theory, why religion needs to acknowledge that Caesar is to be rendered unto, within limits, to be sure.⁴⁶ This is why, too, the most remarkable part of Christ's famous distinction was not that God was before Caesar, but that Caesar did have a place by right. In limiting politics, Christianity limited religion.⁴⁷ Christian political theory is the intellectual limitation of the political precisely by removing from Caesar what is not his. In Aristotelian terms, this leaves the "highest of the practical sciences," the "queen of the social sciences," to be what it is. The "Divine Message of the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City," then, ought to be sought, even listened to by political theory, for that is part of its discovery of itself. This is the place of Christianity in political theory, and the place of political theory in Christianity.

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thodoxy, 1908, pp. 116, 141. ¹⁴Aquinas, I-II, 96, 2; 96, 5. ¹⁵Cf. J. Kirkpatrick, "Dictatorships and Double Standards," *Commentary*, November, 1979. ¹⁶Cf. J. Schall, "Displacing Damnation: On the Neglect of Hell in Political Theory," *The Thomist*, January, 1980. ¹⁷Aquinas, I-II, 96, 2. ¹⁸C. Dawson, in *St. Augustine*, New York, 1957, p. 77; cf. also J. East, "The Political Relevance of St. Augustine," *Modern Age*, Spring, 1972; H. Deane, *The Political and Social Ideas of St. Augustine*, New York, 1963. ¹⁹H. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, New York, 1978, Vol. II, *Willing*; V. Bourke, *Will in Western Thought*, Chicago, 1955. ²⁰Cf. J. Schall, "The Best Form of Government," *The Review of Politics*, January, 1978. ²¹Cf. L. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, Chicago, 1950; E. Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, Chicago, 1952. ²²E. F. Schumacher, *A Guide for the Perplexed*, New York, 1977, p. 139. ²³R. Sokolowski, Letter to the Author, 1979. ²⁴L. Strauss, *Persecution*

and the Art of Writing, Glencoe, 1952. ²⁵Lerner and Mahdi, *Medieval Political Philosophy*, Ithaca, 1972; L. Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli*, Chicago, 1958; McCoy, *ibid.* ²⁶J. Pocock, *Politics, Language, and Time*, New York, 1973, pp. 5-15. ²⁷McCoy, *ibid.*, pp. 29-60; E. Midgley, "Concerning the Modernist Subversion of Political Philosophy," *The New Scholasticism*, Spring, 1979. ²⁸Strauss, *City, ibid.*, p. 8; Pocock, *ibid.*, R. Dahl, *Modern Political Analysis*, Englewood Cliffs, 1976. ²⁹Cf. G. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, New York, 1963; M. Sibley, *Political Ideas and Ideologies*, New York, 1970; Foster and Jones, *Masters of Political Thought*, Boston, 1957; Elliot and McDonald, *Western Political Heritage*, Englewood Cliffs, 1957; L. McDonald, *Western Political Theory*, New York, 1968. ³⁰W. Ebenstein, *Today's Isms*, Englewood Cliffs, 1973. ³¹W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth*, London, 1960. ³²Cf. H. Eulau, *The Behavioral Persuasion in Politics*, New York, 1963. ³³Cf. J. Schall, "On the Teaching of Ancient and Medieval Political Theory," *Modern Age*, Spring, 1975. ³⁴Cf. J. Pieper, *Scholasticism*, New York, 1964. ³⁵Cf. "Neomarxistisches Jesusbild," *Stimmen der Zeit*, März, 1980. ³⁶Cf. M. Dodson, "Prophetic Politics & Political Theory in Latin America," *Polity*, Spring, 1980; Cf. also M. Novak, *The Theology of Democratic Capitalism*, forthcoming. ³⁷Cf. E. Norman, *Christianity and the World Order*, New York, 1979; J. Ellul, *The Betrayal of the West*, New York, 1978; E. Lefever, *Amsterdam to Nairobi: The World Council of Churches and the Third World*, Washington, 1978; J. Hitchcock, *Catholicism and Modernity*, New York, 1979. ³⁸Cf. M. Novak, "The

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