

# THE IDEA OF A POLITICAL THEOLOGY, I.

## Church Policy in International Politics

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There is a dimension of Catholic thought rooted in the Vatican Council that extends beyond it in a way that could have significant implications for the Church's role in the political order. The basis for a political theology lies in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*; the purpose of this document was to reformulate the perspective in which the Church understood and evaluated contemporary culture and defined her role in it. Many observers have singled out this document as the one with the greatest potential for shaping the long-range development of the Catholic Church. Unlike other documents of Vatican II, e.g., *The Constitution on the Church* or *The Declaration on Religious Liberty*, its focus was not retrospective (summarizing and stating authoritatively the theological work of the first half of this century) but prospective (setting an orientation for future thought and action in the Church).

The prospective focus of this document implies two consequences: first, the Constitution is less a blueprint for the future, exact in every detail, than an agenda, open to change and development; secondly, it would be a disservice to treat the Pastoral Constitution as the last word on how the Church should function in the socio-political order. The accomplishments of this document are limited but critically important: in open and optimistic language it acknowledges the problems and accomplishments of the modern world in all its technical complexity and terrifying potential; it declares the radical solidarity of the Church with the world; and it seeks to initiate a dialogue about the problems and possibilities both Church and world face in this post-modern period of history as they seek to serve their common constituency, the men of this age. The Pastoral Constitution is a declaration of intent to dialogue: the work of theology in the post-conciliar period is to give form and content to that dialogue.

*Beyond the Pastoral Constitution.* One of the first systematic attempts to give the orientation of the

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conciliar statement a more concrete character has been the call for the development of a political theology by Johannes Metz, a former student of Karl Rahner, now Professor of Fundamental Theology at Münster. Metz' initiative, most comprehensively proposed in the essay, "The Church and the World in the Light of a Political Theology" (in *The Theology of the World*, New York, 1969), should be seen first in its broader theological framework. Some of the specific themes of his article have been articulated by Protestant authors such as Jürgen Moltmann and Wolfhart Pannenberg; the general scope of his article involves post-conciliar themes explicated in Catholic circles by Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx. I will simply acknowledge this broader horizon here and concentrate on the substance of Metz' position, specifying its limits and indicating some potential implications for a style of Church teaching and action in international affairs.

Metz develops his argument for a political theology in terms of the *problem* calling for this form of theological awareness and the *purposes* which a political theology is designed to fulfill. For Metz, the idea of a political theology is not a new segment to be added on to the existing divisions of theology; rather, the term designates a basic orientation of the entire enterprise of theology—it is a method of interpreting theological thought so that it incorporates the existing situation of Church and world, "the political situation," as part of its exposition of faith.

Why is such a theological prism necessary today? This answer to the question constitutes the problem which a political theology is designed to meet. The problem is grounded in the collapse of the medieval synthesis of religion and society, followed by the rise of modern secular culture with its critical posture toward religion. The expression of this critique of religion found intellectual form in the Enlightenment and took its political shape from the nineteenth century. The critique categorizes religion as an ideology, i.e., a form of rationalization designed to keep man in bondage intellectually and determined to prevent change politically.

The purposes of a political theology are to respond to these two charges made most forcefully, according

to Metz, by Kant and Marx. Metz argues that a political interpretation of theology can fulfill a double purpose. The *internal* or critical function of a political theology is to redirect the focus of contemporary theology from a private to a public posture. This transition, this "deprivatization" of theology, is necessitated by the impact which postwar trends of existentialism and personalism have had on theology. On the Protestant side, the stress on the private aspects of faith has been reinforced by the Bultmanian view of faith as an existential decision resulting from the individual's encounter with God in splendid isolation from history. On the Catholic side, the postwar personalist reaction against a rationalistic interpretation of faith on one hand, and against a rigidly legalistic morality on the other, has also tended to place the emphasis on an interpersonal understanding of faith. Metz, himself a product of the transcendental school of philosophy and author of a volume on personalism in St. Thomas, is not unaware of the personalist-existentialist contribution to theology. His purpose in presenting a political theology is to prevent concern for the individual, narrowly conceived, from being the exclusive focus in which the meaning of faith is exposed to believers and unbelievers alike.

The life of faith finds its locus of origin and development in an institutionalized community of faith. The *external* or positive function of a political theology is to provide a rationale for this community of faith, the Church, to understand its position in society and its mode of action. A public faith is radically eschatological: its view of the Kingdom determines its stance in history. The Church is the community of faith seeking to bring its eschatological vision of the Kingdom to bear upon political society; the Kingdom of God is depicted in terms of the biblical promises found in Isaiah: peace, justice, liberty, reconciliation, and love.

To carry out its task the Church must become "an institution of social criticism" which exists neither above the world nor beside the world but *in* the world. The role of the Church as an institution of social criticism is to measure every political situation against the values of the Kingdom. To fulfill this role the Church needs a political theology. By preaching the meaning of the Kingdom and seeking to realize it in history, the community of faith moves history toward the perfection of the Kingdom which is realized fully through the Second Coming of the Lord.

Fulfilling the role of institution of criticism has implications for the Church's posture in society and for her self-understanding as Church. In terms of her

position in the political order, it requires *standing with* those who are denied a share in the values of the Kingdom by an unjust social structure; it also requires a *standing against* the forms and forces of injustice as they are incarnated in a given political context. In terms of her own life, the Church must continually reassess it in light of the basic problematic of a political theology: the relationship of theory and practice in the Church. To stand as a credible critic in society, her internal life needs to be purged of signs of injustice, collusion with oppressive powers in society, lack of honesty and quest for status and security—all of which have characterized the history of the Church at times and which stand as a constant threat to her fidelity to the Gospel and her authenticity as a sign of the Kingdom among men.

In skeletal fashion this summarizes Metz' proposal for a political theology in the Church. In terms of its premises and purposes, such a theology moves beyond the initial statement of the Church-world problematic of Vatican II. What it does not do is to move from the level of principle and purpose to the level of policy. This is the necessary next step. What are the basic elements needed for a formulation of a policy of political theology?

*Beyond Metz.* The move from premise and purpose to policy involves two stages: elaborating the *shape* of a political theology through an ethic, and coordinating a *strategy* of institutional action in the Church. In a recent essay on the Church in America, written from a Protestant viewpoint, James Gustafson concludes that the two requirements for effective Church action are (1) the development of moral discourse in the service of a more conscious and specific statement of the purpose of the Church, and (2) a clearer conception of the uses of institutional power in the Church in pursuit of its purposes. I will here use Gustafson's distinction in a Catholic context as a means of analyzing the shape and strategy of a political theology.

The task of giving an historical shape to the substance of a political theology involves the transition in theological language from ecclesiology to ethics, from a discussion of what the Church *is* to a discussion of how the Church should *act*. Ernst Troeltsch, the Protestant historian and theologian, illustrated in his monumental work, *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*, how an ecclesiological posture takes shape in a distinctive ethical position. When Professor Gustafson calls for the Church to conceive its purposes more clearly through the use of moral discourse, the same issue of ecclesiology and ethics

is at stake. Looked at in terms of Catholic theology and polity, the shape of a political theology involves two issues: the structure of a political ethic and the style of Church teaching in the political order. Metz makes reference to both points in his essay, but more elaboration is needed if the method of a political theology is to assume a concrete shape.

The extension of ecclesiology into ethics immediately raises the question of what structure of ethical discourse is to be employed. Catholicism, as Troeltsch has shown in detail, has traditionally responded to this question in terms of what John Courtney Murray used to call the tradition of reason in public affairs—the Natural-Law ethic. The position being proposed here is that, as a structure of analysis and argumentation, this ethic still provides the best basis for a political theology. The use of the tradition, however, cannot be uncritical; two points are pertinent.

## a critical use of the tradition of reason today. . .

First, it needs to be indicated that recent Catholic attempts to refurbish the tradition have fallen victim to Metz' charge about the privatization of theology. The past two decades have seen truly significant developments in Catholic circles, especially on the Continent, toward a recasting of Natural-Law thought. The thrust of this work has been directed at integrating contributions from personalist and existentialist philosophy into the rigid and static forms which Natural-Law approaches had assumed in the manuals of moral theology drawn up after the Reformation. Undoubtedly, these contributions have gone a long way toward counteracting Natural-Law formulations which transposed biology into morality and transformed moral law into a species of legal positivism. By mitigating or re-orienting these tendencies, the contemporary research has responded with partial effectiveness to the problem which provided impetus for its investigations, the birth-control question. The high visibility of this issue in Catholic ethics in the last decade has tended to constrict the efforts of critical research on Natural Law to the level of personal ethics: this constitutes the Catholic form of privatization.

One of the consequences of the birth-control debate, both pre- and post-*Humanae Vitae*, has been to distract attention from the primary contribution which a Natural-Law ethic can make today to raising

the level of moral discourse within and without the Church. The value of the Natural-Law ethic is that it is an institutional ethic, designed to deal with the moral questions and choices which arise in the structural problems of society at the national and international level. In a day when an increasing number of public questions contain a high "ethical content," and when a rising percentage of man's personal choices are shaped by the interlocking structures which frame his societal existence, an ethic which concentrates solely on interpersonal relationships contributes to a form of "false consciousness." It allows man to dwell on his ten per cent of personal freedom while ninety per cent of his life is shaped by structures and institutions which escape his scrutiny. A political ethic as an instrument of a political theology has to demonstrate a capacity for dealing with normative questions at the institutional level of existence. The essential thrust of a Natural-Law ethic proposes to confront these very questions of social, political, and economic structure. Yet a work of reconstruction must go on to prepare the tradition to meet these issues in their contemporary form.

This raises the *second* pertinent point about a critical use of the tradition of reason today. The "models" of political and social structure in terms of which the classical version of Natural Law was formulated have little, if any, relation to the shape of a modern bureaucratic state equipped with technological power and supported by a sophisticated economy; nor does the classical model have much empirical relationship to an international system which is geographically global, militarily nuclear, and economically linked by monetary, trade, and corporate systems while also divided by islands of affluence and oceans of poverty. Too often we still fail to distinguish the structure of the Natural-Law ethic from the historical shape it has taken at different stages of its development. The methodological concern which this distinction of structure and shape raises is not simply the historical problem of purging the system of anachronisms but also the analytical problem of how we relate ethical concerns to a growing mass of empirical data. Establishing a method and a framework for relating normative concerns and the data of the social sciences is a central issue for a political theology. Metz acknowledges this problem in his discussion of the encyclicals, but he does not specify what the problem implies for ethics and theology. Yet, the specifics of this problem set the agenda for a political ethic. How does "the ethical question" surface in policy discussions?

[to be continued]