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An Old Course in a Country New

Political theology between quietism and theocracy.

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Damned if you do, damned if you don't. That, all too often, has been the fate of political theology.

Theology in the contemporary West has faced two main reproaches. First, that any kind of engagement in politics betrays *theocratic* pretensions. Second, that Christianity is fundamentally *quietist*—that is, always acquiescing to the status quo.

Consider the public reputation of Christianity when it comes to two particular areas of life. First, on matters of gender and sexuality, progressives fear that imposing arcane regulations derived from ancient sex codes on the modern world will restrict human liberty. As the public debates over gay marriage in the early 2000s clearly demonstrated, painting the traditional Christian position on the goods of marriage as fundamentally parochial aided the cause of changing marriage laws in Western countries. The mere impression that the theological convictions of the few could rule the many undermined efforts to show how the traditional definition of marriage emerged from multiple thick traditions of thought and practice. This is the theocratic suspicion.

But it's quite the opposite with the environmental movement. When it comes to the effort to stave off climate disaster, the common perception is not that Christianity is too political but that it is *not political enough*. Christianity has been criticized for being too otherworldly to care about the fate of the planet. This is the quietist charge.

So the two charges make opposing claims. The second reverses the first. The first insists theology stay out of politics and mind its own business. The second rebukes theology for having stayed out of politics and minded its own business. Theology is damned if it does politics, damned if it doesn't.

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The Logic of the Theocratic and Quietist Critiques

According to the first charge, political theology is a bogus project because any theological contribution to political debate immediately runs the risk of unacceptably conflating spiritual and temporal power. If religion is not strictly quarantined, if theology is not kept out of the public square, then the freedom of society will be fatefully compromised. This is the reasoning:

1. Christian theology appeals to divine revelation, which, unlike reason, not everyone in a given society has accepted or could accept.
2. Politics is necessarily about how *everyone* in a given society is ruled.

Therefore

3. Deriving political principles from Christian theology leads to people being governed by principles they do not or could not accept.
4. People being governed by principles they do not or could not accept equals tyranny.

Theocracy, so the fear goes, involve rulers simply reading off God's will for human beings and then enforcing it with the coercive power at their disposal. Realizing the kingdom of God on earth is thought to be the aim. In practice this privileges an authority, usually clerical, that cannot be held to account because it lies beyond "normal" rationality. If the matter of how best to organize our common life has been secretly settled, what scope can there be for argument? What room for challenge? If a government's source of authority is divine, there is little need for checks and balances. You need checks and balances only if there's a possibility of human error. But if the divine will is clear and intelligible, and if its application to all the situations that arise in a society is uncomplicated, there need be no institutional apparatus to qualify it,

to compensate for failure.

This concern about the imposition of a supposedly unmitigated divine will is the theocratic charge, and it is so deeply engrained in the late modern Western psyche that usually when it is made, it is not named. In politicians' speeches, in judges' verdicts, in op-eds, the critique is presupposed even if "political theology" or "theocracy" is not mentioned.

But the quietist charge is just as powerful. It contends that political theology is simply a contradiction in terms. Political theology is a project doomed from the outset because Christian theology is presumed to be hopelessly otherworldly. The argument goes like this:

1. The Christian religion is preoccupied with the next world.
2. If you are preoccupied with the next world, that preoccupation will undermine your commitment to (changing) this world.
3. Politics is about (changing) this world.

Therefore

4. Christians are not committed to politics.

According to this suspicion, since Christians supposedly take only a passing

interest in this passing age, any expression of a desire to engage politically is actually an instance of bad faith. Alleviating suffering, eradicating poverty, ameliorating corruption, speaking truth to power, striving to make government more participative, mitigating the effects of inequality, establishing social justice—theology essentially resigns itself from these tasks. Why? Because, according to the critique, the coming kingdom that believers hope for will not be one they build themselves. The coming kingdom will not be the product of human agency but, rather, is properly viewed as "catastrophic," ushered in extrinsically by divine agency. Thus the future provides a pretext *not* to act in the present. This world is to be waited out, not worked on. This world provides an arena for individuals to win or receive entry (depending on your perspective) into the next.

The Origins of the Theocratic and Quietist Critiques

We shouldn't be surprised, then, when we see widespread cultural confusion about the status of theology in contemporary life. In this essay, my hope is to show that if we better understand the way previous generations of political theologians resisted the charges of theocracy and quietism, we stand a better chance of perceiving which Christian approaches to politics in our time honour that tradition and most accurately represent the import of our faith.

I should first say more about the provenance of these critiques. Who voices them today? Given how strongly opposed they are, one could be forgiven for

assuming that the two dismissals emanate from a separate set of critics. But one would be wrong. Take the influential intellectual historian Isaiah Berlin. With one breath Berlin can characterize political theology as deeply paternalistic—those influenced by the Bible, he argues, will conceive of the law as the commands of a father and leave "the presence of immediate authority unquestioned"—and then with the next breath endorse Machiavelli's view that Christianity tends to encourage a "quietism or indolence" that "crush[es] men's civic spirit." Similarly, in an essay on the legacy of John Paul II, the late political philosopher Tony Judt can ascribe to the Polish pope "an unconcern verging on contempt for the things of this world" before crediting him with the fall of Communism!

Contradictions aside, in the main the theocratic charge is levelled by classical liberals, while the quietist charge comes from the left. We will again take these in turn.

The suspicion that political theology leads to theocracy is a distinctly liberal one. At the turn of the twentieth century, it was this fear that motivated the anticlerical legislation introduced by liberal republican administrations across continental Europe. In France, under *Émile Combes's premiership, the policy of laïcité mandated the expulsion of all "unauthorized" religious orders and the closure of twelve thousand Catholic schools.* The root suspicion was that the public presence of the church effectively kept alive the fateful possibility of a return to the theocratic union of throne and altar that characterized the early nineteenth

century. (We will return to this below.) In Britain, by contrast, where the church remained formally established, concerns about theocracy surfaced as concerns about law. After the Second World War, liberalism came to dominate the landscape of both legal philosophy and public policy in the wake of the Wolfenden Committee's adoption of J.S. Mill's "harm principle" in its landmark report of 1957. Appointed by Parliament to consider the law and practice related to homosexuality and prostitution (both illegal at that time), the committee pronounced that "the function of the law was not to intervene in the private lives of citizens" and thus its remit should not extend to forms of sexual behaviour regarded as wrong by religious tradition.

The suspicion of theocracy also stems from modern Europe's "creation myth," the powerful story according to which the wars of religion between Catholics and Protestants in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries proved decisively the irrepressible danger of public faith. "If there were to be any prospect of achieving civic peace," writes Quentin Skinner, a contemporary historian of the early modern era, "the powers of the State would have to be divorced from the duty to uphold any particular faith." Toleration, individual rights to private worship, the separation of church and state—all of these could be guaranteed only if the secular state ended theocratic rule. For liberals schooled in this story of how we have arrived at our modern institutions, political theology is fundamentally regressive. In an increasingly secular age, even to entertain explicitly theological conceptions of the most pressing issues of our day is to revert to everything we were trying to escape.

If the theocratic suspicion of political theology is levelled by liberals, the quietist charge comes from the left. Karl Marx famously asserted that religion is the "opium" of the people. And the point about people on drugs is that they check out. They withdraw from the world, take trips away from it, seek refuge in hallucinatory realms. By analogy, religion for Marx stops people from taking action in the real world. Satiating mankind with ideas, incessant commentary, and endless interpretation, faith diminishes political engagement. Under the influence, people decline the opportunity to shape their earthly destinies.

Marx's conception of religion crops up wherever adherents advance and implement his ideas. The Austrian Karl Kautsky told a story according to which Christianity started off as "a fighting organization" (even evincing signs of proto-communism) until, when the hoped-for revolution failed to arrive, becoming "politically conservative or indifferent." When "confidence in the coming of the 'Kingdom of God' here below faded," the dream was "transferred more and more to heaven"; the messianic expectation of the future "took on these celestial forms." In pre-revolutionary Russia, similarly, Marx's opium becomes Lenin's liquor, which the ruling class dispenses in order to keep the masses "submissive and patient while here on earth, and to take comfort in the hope of heavenly reward." In France, the most famous philosopher of the twentieth century, and its most famous atheist, Jean-Paul Sartre, coupled existentialism with Marxism to declare that Christianity in principle and in practice generates despair of and for *this* world. Finally, in Britain, where Marxist influence in the twentieth century was strongest in the field of history,

scholars referred back to and saw quietism wherever they looked. So E.P. Thompson in *The Making of the English Working Class* maintains that Methodism played a powerful role in preventing the working class from taking action against industrial capitalism. Reminding us that "the Methodists—or many of them—*were* the poor," Thompson argues that Wesley's religion of the heart, experienced by people as "emotional and spiritual paroxysms," effectively rendered docile those people under its sway. The most vital religious movement of the British nineteenth century was a "form of psychic exploitation" that "stifled the revolutionary impulse."

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German Protestant Strategies for Political Theology

Before we come to the shape that modern political theology actually took, it is worth stepping back to consider whether these are diametrically opposed positions. Is there a third option? A way for faith to engage actively in the world yet without tending toward theocracy? Perhaps faith can be *social* without being political. Could theology adhere to a fundamental distinction between church and state (thus refusing to weigh in on questions about government from a confessional basis) while, through its manifold ministries at work in civil society, proving itself energetic enough to defy the quietistic charge?

I want to reflect on this third option by way of the following passage, which the author titles "The Church's Claim on Government":

> The Church has the task of summoning the whole world to submit to the dominion of Jesus Christ. She testifies before government to their common Master. She calls upon the persons who exercise government to believe in Christ for the sake of their own salvation. She knows that it is in obedience to Jesus Christ that the commission of government is properly executed. . . . Only the Church brings government to an understanding of itself.

One doesn't have to self-identify as a political liberal to find talk of "summoning the whole world to submit to the dominion of Jesus Christ" deeply disconcerting. Doesn't the demand that government officials believe in Christ "for the sake of their own salvation" sound unforgivably theocratic? What about the idea that government cannot understand itself apart from the church? Who could say such a thing?

It was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who wrote this from Tegel Prison in 1943, when the government in question was Hitler's. Bonhoeffer had been incarcerated for his participation in a failed plot to assassinate the *führer*. He was executed months later.

The problem with my third option above, with its clear delineation between the realms of civil society and politics, is that it delights dictators. To insist the church "know its place" in order to avoid a return to theocracy negates the possibility of speaking truth to power, a task Bonhoeffer and other members of the Confessing Church took up at the cost of their lives.

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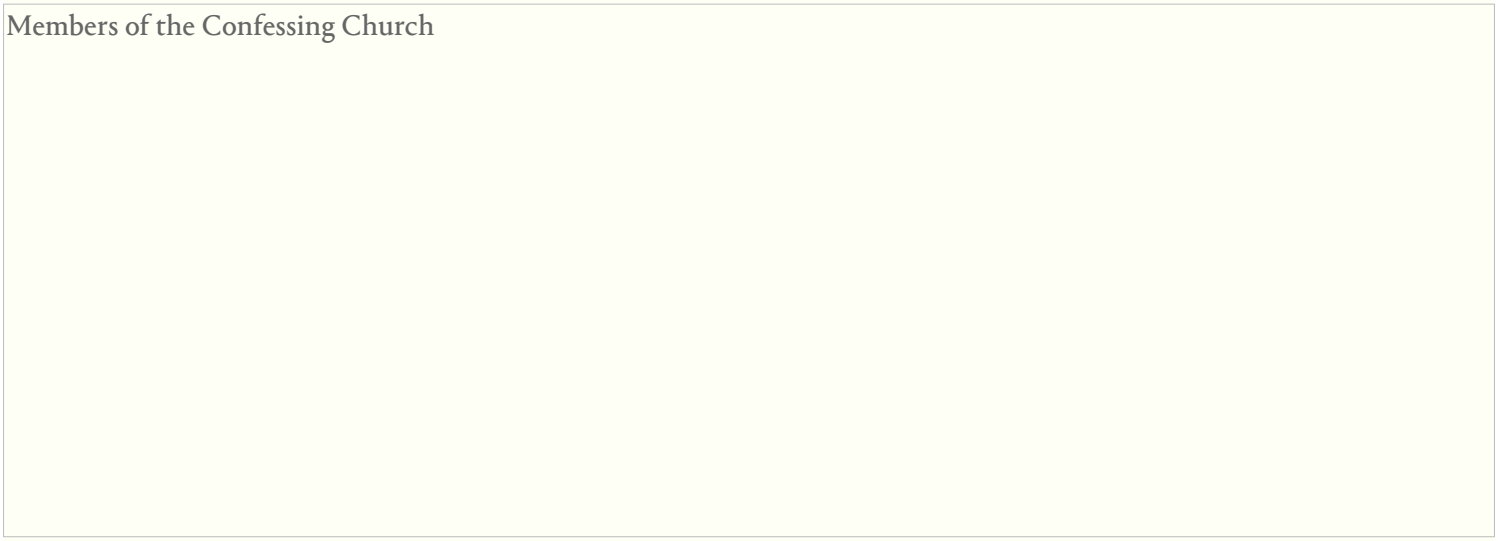
Returning to the shape of modern political theology: in the twentieth century, political theology properly begins with a young theologian's horrified reaction to his German teachers' acquiescence in the ideology of war. In 1914 Karl Barth found himself appalled by "my theological teachers whom I had greatly venerated." Those men represented the finest flowering of nineteenth-century liberal Protestantism, and this is where it had led them—to a profound

collusion with the state and with German nationalism. Barth couldn't believe the ease of the intellectual capitulation, how quickly and unquestioningly the state's initiative was accepted, how the legitimacy of the German position was simply taken for granted. And Barth's disbelief precipitated a personal crisis he recollected later in life: "An entire world of theological exegesis, ethics, dogmatics, and preaching, which up to that point I had accepted as basically credible, was thereby shaken to the foundations."

What had been lost in this world, as Barth could now see, was the radical independence of the word of God. For liberal Protestantism, human culture had taken priority over divine revelation. In response Barth asked, "Is there in the Christian experience of God a foundation and normative position on the phenomenon of social and national life?" The answer Barth eventually arrived at is that the state must be regarded "as an allegory, as a correspondence and an analogue to the Kingdom of God which the Church preaches and believes in." The state, whether it knows it or not, thus participates to some way in the mission of Jesus Christ. For instance, since the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost, the church "will always insist on the State's special responsibility for . . . the poor [and] the socially and economically weak."

Then, in 1933, Shakespeare's words were felt once again: "in cities, mutinies; in countries, discord; in palaces, treason." For Barth, the rise of Hitler had a terrible sense of déjà vu. And another young theologian, aged twenty-seven at the time, was as disoriented as Barth had been twenty years earlier. Bonhoeffer,

a Lutheran minister and a precociously brilliant lecturer at the University of Berlin, watched in horror as the student body flocked to the *führer,* gathering en masse to salute the new Reich chancellor with "Heil Hitler!" as the dean of his theology faculty draped a swastika banner over the front entrance of the building. When the churches then fell into line, allowing themselves to be amalgamated into a national *völkisch* church, Bonhoeffer couldn't believe what he was seeing: "Even the most intelligent people have totally lost both their heads and their Bibles." And when he read a rival movement advise the Confessing Church to remain unpolitical, Bonhoeffer was furious: "Here the church capitulates before politics!"



Members of the Confessing Church, 1936.

The occasion for Bonhoeffer to develop this political theology more fully came in April 1933, when the Third Reich passed the Aryan Paragraph. Ordering the removal of all Jews from the civil service, the law applied to the churches too, in receipt as they were of government funding. In an essay titled "The Church

and the Jewish Question," Bonhoeffer attacks those using the church-state distinction as cover for quietism. The Reformation church might have been hesitant to become directly involved in political action, he admitted, but there *are* times when the church is called to hold the state to account:

> As church it will only ask whether or not the state is creating law and order. In doing so the church will, of course, see the state as limited in two ways. Either too little law and order or too much law and order compels the church to speak.

Too little law here equates to a group of people being deprived of their rights (that is, the state failing to provide even minimal protection to a contingent of citizens). *Too much* law is the state using its coercive power to prescribe how the church treats its members, thus limiting its freedom to proclaim its message (the implication of the Aryan Paragraph).

Catholic Strategies for Political Theology

So at this vexatious time, in what were Protestant heartlands, political theology was characterized by its vociferous opposition to quietism. In the Roman Catholic world, by contrast, political theology in the twentieth century developed in profound reaction to the opposite danger—theocracy.

After the paroxysms of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, the Restoration of 1815 saw an attempted return to a theocratic union of throne and altar across continental Europe. With Enlightenment political ideas and

ideals seen to have been discredited by the French Revolution, order was to be restored by re-establishing absolute monarchies backed by divine authority and the official church. This was the agenda when, in 1818, France was brought back into the diplomatic fold under its newly restored Bourbon king, the new Quintuple Alliance (France, Russia, Austria, Prussia, and Britain). In France the church used the state to introduce the death penalty for anyone who dared to desecrate the Mass. In the newly restored Papal States, Jews were forced into ghettos and compelled by law to attend Christian church services and listen to sermons. In 1832 Pope Gregory XVI castigated in resounding terms any country that "desires to separate the Church from the state, and to break the mutual concord between temporal authority and the priesthood." As the nineteenth century progressed, however, it became clear that, in the era of the rise of the nation-state, the supposed union of throne and altar was in reality becoming the subordination of the altar to the throne.

And so (contrary to the standard English-speaking histories of the period) the Roman Catholic Church, rather than closing in on itself in the last third of the nineteenth century, began to relinquish its theocratic aspirations. At the First Vatican Council (1869–1870), for the first time since before the emperor Constantine, the rulers of the nations were not invited to a church council. Seeing how dysfunctional the relationship between church and state had become, the church strove to refocus on its spiritual role. Accordingly, Pope Pius IX made it clear that the doctrine for which the council became famous, papal infallibility, related only to the sphere of faith and morals. In no way, Pius

reassured the watching world, did papal infallibility "[reassert] a right to depose sovereigns and to release people from their oaths of allegiance." This work to better separate out "jurisdictions" was then consolidated by the remarkable pontificate of Leo XIII (1878–1903). Insisting the mission of the church must centre now on "faith embodied in the conscience of peoples rather than restoration of medieval institutions," Leo duly told conservative French Catholics to give up their dreams of overthrowing the secular Third Republic and restoring a theocratic throne-altar union.

Crucially, though, in no way did the opposition to theocracy drive Catholicism toward quietism. The very pope who finally relinquished dreams of a return to the throne-altar order, Leo XIII, issued in 1891 the incendiary encyclical *Rerum Novarum*—those "new things" of which we wrote being the crises thrown up by rapid industrialization across Europe. Pope Leo gave, for the first time, singular attention to the rights and duties of capital and labour. "Let no one think," *Rerum Novarum* declares, that "the Church is so preoccupied with the spiritual concerns of her children as to neglect their temporal and earthly interests." The thought of a factory worker who, owing to a surplus of labour in his town, "freely" accepts wages he can't live on should keep Christians up at night. "Some remedy must be found for the misery and wretchedness which press so heavily at this moment on the large majority of the very poor." That remedy lay neither in a fatalistic acceptance of laissez-faire economic liberalism nor in the intoxicating dreams of state socialism. It lay in workers, under "the guidance and encouragement of the church," freely forming labour

organizations to engage the owners of their companies. For Pope Leo, there is undoubtedly a role for government intervention. Sending a seven-year-old down a mine has to be made illegal. Yet the central suggestion of *Rerum Novarum*, concerning the burning question of the resolution of labour conflicts, identifies an answer beyond the state.

Despite the impetus *Rerum Novarum* gave to social action, the consequence of the modernist crisis under the anti-intellectual Pope Pius X (1903–1914) postponed until after 1914 the kind of sustained reflection that allows us to speak of Catholic social thought as a distinct political theology. Political theology "became empty of sense and was buried in silence" until the emergence of the Sicilian priest and activist Luigi Sturzo (1871–1959). Hailing from an aristocratic family in rural Sicily, Sturzo was so aggrieved by the poverty he encountered that he felt compelled to throw himself into social action. He formed a young workers' movement and established a network of small banks for tenant farmers to access affordable loans to buy seed. Armed with *Rerum Novarum*, Sturzo soon stirred up his fellow clergy, while his organizing efforts (to the annoyance of the authorities who arrested him in 1899) went from strength to strength. In 1903 he led a strike of eighty thousand peasants, protesting against exorbitant rents. But Sturzo soon decided the problems plaguing Sicily were systemic enough to warrant a government response. So he sought local office. Before long, the corruption of national politics, as one scholar puts it, "backed by the Mafia, countenanced by the Church, and suffered by the people," had convinced Sturzo of the need for a

new political party. After the First World War, a new pope, Benedict XV, let Sturzo found one. The Partito Popularo Italiano went on to win 20 percent of the vote, a fifth of the seats in parliament, becoming the second largest party after the Socialists.

In his important work *Church and State* (1939), Sturzo places "Christian Democracy" in the context of the church's historic relation to politics. He recognizes how dysfunctional Catholicism had become during the nineteenth-century Restoration. "The embarrassing union of throne and altar" had led to religion becoming merely "the instrument of the absolute monarchies." And the result of confusing "the religious plane . . . with the political" had been to "widen the gulf between the people and the church." "Christian Democracy"—in the form of both social action and new political parties across Europe—was a providential means of restoring that ancient link. And whereas before the First World War these parties had focused on *social* legislation, after it they had endeavoured "to form their own school of political thought on the problem of the State." Sturzo cites the Partito Popularo's 1919 manifesto:

> For a centralizing State, seeking to restrict all organizing powers and all civil and individual activities, we would substitute a State truly popular, recognizing the limits of its activity, respectful of the natural centers and organisms—the family, occupational groups, townships—giving way before the rights of human personality *and encouraging its initiatives*. (emphasis added)

In making this principle ("subsidiarity," as it will later be called) the centrepiece of his party's platform, Sturzo was doing something fascinating,

and quite paradoxical. He was saying that Christian political action was required at the highest level (a general election!) in order to defend it at the most immediate—that is, to defend initiatives closest to the ground. In an age that now tended toward the totalitarian, Christian Democratic parties wanted to come to power in order to suppress it.

Tragically for Italy, the Popular Party, as it is known in English, having joined each of the six cabinets that governed Italy from 1919 to 1922, then fell before the power of Mussolini. Sturzo, who had explicitly condemned Fascism, fled into exile. But his agenda would outlast his fate. Subsidiarity was enshrined at the heart of Catholic social teaching with Pope Pius XI. It is a fundamental injustice, Pius pronounced in 1931, "to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do." For human beings to make decisions of substance concerning their lives is a basic human good. Those decisions should therefore be made at the most immediate level possible. Power should be distributed among human-scale communities, the plurality of institutions in which men and women find themselves embedded, by nature or by choice—their families, guilds, unions, charities, schools, firms, hospitals, and churches. And such a vision, expressed politically as a plea for a robust pluralism, emanated not only from the order of things but also from the gospel. For had not the apostle Paul, in his conception of the mystical body of Christ, taught that the health of the whole body depends on every single part working in and of itself?

German Protestant and European Catholic political theology charted a path, then, between the Scylla of theocracy and the Charybdis of quietism. Contemporary Anglican political theology does the same. One key consequence of its retrieval of premodern political thought has been the demonstration that any truly Christian political settlement—that is, any settlement compatible with a belief in the unique identity of Jesus Christ—*cannot* be theocratic.

In his seminal book *The Desire of the Nations* (1996), Oliver O'Donovan makes Christology the linchpin of his political theology. First, O'Donovan probes how spiritual authority and temporal authority—respectively, the authority to *convince* and the authority to *command*—come to be combined uniquely in Christ. Jesus arrived on the scene announcing the arrival of the kingdom of God. He then revealed this kingdom by way of teaching and miracles. Yet we would be mistaken, O'Donovan contends, to see Jesus's ministry in terms of the exercise of purely spiritual power. "What is this word? For with authority and power he commands the unclean spirits" (Luke 4:36 RSV). This authority and power characterizes the entire ministry of the "priest-king." Temporal and spiritual power are fused together, inseparable. So Jesus may have resisted the zealot program many tried to foist on him. He may have refused to take up arms. But that doesn't mean he was not political. On the contrary, he continually challenged existing structures of authority; he proclaimed judgment against the governing establishment; and, finally, through his death

and resurrection, he "disarmed" *this* world's "principalities and powers and made a public example of them" (Colossians 2:15).

If temporal and spiritual authority were uniquely combined in Christ, then theocracy is in fact blasphemous. If the church wields coercive power, it acts as if the revelation of God's kingdom in Christ was not unique. It acts as if other regimes, at other times in history, can directly mediate God's rule. Instead, O'Donovan insists that "applied to political authorities, the term 'secular' should tell us that they are *not* agents of Christ." The Christ event forever desacralizes politics. The role of government is stripped back, drastically reduced, radically chastened. Earthly rulers are left with one job: to render the corrective judgments necessary to preserve social order and create space where the gospel can be freely spoken of and freely received.

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Now, for O'Donovan, it's only when we've digested this ideal in its purest form that we can go on to identifying "the false steps of Christendom." We might think of the fateful mistake of Emperor Justinian (483–565) when he changed

his own job description from merely facilitating the church's mission to reinforcing its discipline (when, speaking of his subjects, he declared his first duty was "how their souls may be saved"). That mistake was to assume a spiritual authority that is not for a political ruler to assume. Justinian's use of state power to stamp out heresy and paganism across his empire was an undeniably tragic moment in the history of Christianity, as was Charlemagne's forcible conversion of the Saxons two centuries later. But, O'Donovan insists, there was more to Christendom than such famous abuses. What we see in the West's turbulent history of church-state relations is a truly dialectical struggle. When the power of secular rulers became too bloated, the church reasserted its authority—for example, in the papal revolution initiated by Gregory VII. Conversely, when the church became too worldly, as it did under the late medieval popes, it was up to the Reformers to restore the equilibrium.

So a proper Christology grounds vigilance about claims of power, whether made by the church *or* by secular rulers. The state, too, must not surpass its authority and forget its place.

But speaking truth to power—this task O'Donovan perceives is necessarily a negative one. This doesn't make it any less urgent, but it does call for a complementary and more constructive vision of how the church can engage in politics. Social critique is crucial, but does it not need to be counterbalanced by social action?

Another Anglican political theologian, Luke Bretherton, attempts to fill this vacuum. What does it mean, Bretherton asks, for today's church to answer Jeremiah's ancient exhortation to "seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile" (Jeremiah 29:7)? The situation of Christians in the West in the twenty-first century is analogous to the Israelites exiled in Babylon: "Jeremiah's call to seek the welfare of Babylon comes to a defeated, subjugated, and marginalized people struggling to make sense of what has happened to them. Today, similarly, the church no longer has priority and Christians are not in control." With quietism the greater danger, the prophet Jeremiah's call becomes particularly resonant. "The salience of Jeremiah 29 is its call to become part of the public life of the city and to reject the false prophets who perpetuate illusions of escape into a private world of gated communities, religious fantasies centered on Christ's immanent return."

For Bretherton, community organizing is one concrete model of how churches can become part of the public life of the city. First shaped in the mid-twentieth century by a secular Jew, Chicago-based organizer Saul Alinsky, community organizing has now spread across the world. Organizing constitutes a form of intensely local, grassroots, predominantly urban democratic politics whereby organizers function as kinds of agitators in specific areas, first bringing together often disparate local communities and institutions—mosques, synagogues, churches, schools, colleges, unions, housing associations—and then developing from among them local leaders. All this is to enable people living in poverty to act for themselves and obtain, as Alinsky put it, "some

measure of control over the conditions and decisions intimately affecting [their] everyday lives." Although it takes place in the realm of civil society, organizing is thoroughly *political* because it involves "confrontation with the structures, institutions, and people who oppose a just and common life"—for example, low-wage employers or usurious lenders. For Bretherton, such initiatives afford opportunities for churches to "realize obligations of neighbor love in the public sphere" and thereby "overcome the privatization of religion in modern liberal politics."

In early January 1934, Adolf Hitler held a meeting with the Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller, the founder of the Confessing Church in Germany, and with other vocal opponents of the nascent Nazi regime. Hitler exploded in anger: "You leave concern for the Third Reich to me and look after the Church!" As we saw earlier, a resolution by the church to restrict its concern to the realm of civil society delights dictators. Both Mussolini and Hitler were drawing on the liberal critique of theocracy when they insisted the church stay out of politics. So it is significant that the most influential modern political theology, avoiding both theocracy and quietism, also breaks out of this other "civil society" box critics would place it in. German Protestant, Catholic, and Anglican political theology worked to awaken the church from its slumber and speak truth to power.

Theocratic and Quietist Temptations Today

Today, though, are theocracy and quietism merely interesting intellectual artifacts, or have we any reason to fear they might, as Kent puts it in *King Lear*, "shape [their] old course in a country new"?

In the United States, given the country's foundational separation of church and state, and given the conditions of secular modernity, it may seem there are more urgent threats than theocracy. Yet with the liberal project currently lying concussed, blindsided by the dramatic rise of popularism, on the religious right there is a new ideological energy. But it is no neoconservative resurgence we are witnessing. Galvanizing the right is nostalgia not for Ronald Reagan but rather for Pope Gregory XVI.

Increasingly popular in Catholic legal circles, "integralism" is defined as a tradition of thought that, "rejecting the liberal separation of politics from concern with the end of human life, holds that political rule must order man to his final goal." *Must order*: the imperative mood is ominous. Man's "eternal end"—his salvation, his transformation—integralism declares state business. Tearing down the historic cordon sanitaire protecting private belief, the coercive state is to take an interest in the cure of souls.

What would the subordination of temporal to spiritual power actually entail? Answer: the full co-optation of the state by the Roman Catholic Church. Integralism's answer to the fundamental political question, the question of the Boundary ("who's in and who's out"), is clear. As Alan Fimister and Thomas

Crean say, "The sovereign may forbid those who are not monotheists, or who deny the immorality of the human soul . . . from becoming representatives of the people, or judges, or from voting." Integralists dream of a day when the unbaptized are not only disqualified from acting as political representatives; non-Catholics are to be denied citizenship altogether! And though Jews are to be granted freedom of worship ("because the testimony to Christ of their rites and inspired Scriptures is the more powerful as coming from those who do not profess faith in Him"), they are nevertheless banned from proselytizing.

In twenty-first-century America, integralists invite suspicions of mere posturing. Their proposals sound as ludicrous as they are extreme. Catholics remain a minority (20 percent of the population), and a miniscule minority of that minority have an appetite for subordinating the state to the Roman Catholic Church. Yet the idea that a democratic deficit is a problem, that a legitimate integralist state would require popular support, is precisely the kind of liberal assumption questioned by integralists like Harvard Law School's Adrian Vermeule. Exhilarated by the exhaustion of liberalism in our moment ("liberalism is visibly sagging and collapsing around us, having undermined its own foundations"), and scornful of the suggestion that a "bottom-up" localism replace liberalism, Vermeule volunteers this prescription: "What is to be done? My answer is that the state will have to be *reintegrated from within*, by the efforts of agents who occupy strategic positions within the shell of the liberal order." Vermeule imagines Christians coming to occupy "the commanding heights of the administrative state." As the ruling elite, Christians would be in positions

to impose their agenda on a helpless populace. “The vast bureaucracy created by liberalism in pursuit of a mirage of depoliticized governance may, by the invisible hand of Providence, be turned to new ends, becoming the great instrument with which to restore a substantive politics of the good.”

If integralism represents the theocratic impulse in our time, is there a corresponding quietist temptation? I think there is. One of the most fateful realities to which the church of today can succumb is capitulating to what I have elsewhere called “package-deal politics.” Polarization, or political tribalism, has come to warp the way we deliberate about all manner of “third rail” quandaries, how we face up to a plethora of controversial, morally charged political, economic, and cultural questions—questions such as the wisdom of sex-reassignment surgery, how to respond to the climate crisis, widespread objectification of partners in consensual sex, the sheer scale of abortion, the pernicious depth of racial injustice, the transhumanist project to enhance human beings, downward pressure on wages resulting from capital’s capture of productivity gains, gun violence, and a criminal justice system that enforces a kind of “civil death” for ex-offenders. Every conceivable position on these incendiary issues is bundled up into “package deals” and distributed to either end of the political spectrum. Accordingly, my political identification—whether I see myself as on the right or the left—can determine every view I take on most fundamental questions we face. The way I vote means I’m urged to click “accept all” to the terms and conditions of the whole deal. For example, say I passionately support Palestinians whose rights are systematically

violated and I defend affirmative action to the hilt. Am I simply to inherit a view which says that it is advisable to legalize marijuana? Conversely, say I bemoan identity politics, worry about immigration, and am passionate about family values. Do I not feel pressure to support greater sanctions on the unemployed simply because that's part of the package deal?

This clustering of causes is of course the result of politicians building coalitions, making compromises, pandering to different caucuses. (President Nixon, for example, cynically reversed his pro-choice position to win over FDR Catholic pro-lifers.) But the problem with the church subscribing to ideological settlements that are the direct result of cut-and-paste politics is that these settlements are profoundly incoherent, often forcing dire contradictions on us. Why, for instance, are the very people so adamant about protecting the lives of the unborn the most resistant to policies that regulate the purchase and use of lethal weapons? Or, on the other side, why are anti-consumerists not anti-consumerist when it comes to sex? The danger of subscribing to these package deals is that we accept certain views simply because they have been tacked on to others for contingent historical reasons—which, bluntly, increases the chances of us *getting it wrong* on any one of these issues. The church is called to think for itself, to "understand the times" (1 Chronicles 12:32) on its own terms, rather than believing that one political party's platform, or one pole of the political axis, will capture in its entirety Christian witness on social questions.

It is quietist, then—a withdrawal, a capitulation—to outsource our thinking to

ideologies in this way. Yet the opposite response to tribalism—the church withdrawing from the culture wars altogether and instead agreeing to disagree while focusing on preaching the gospel to a lost world—in fact constitutes just as much of a capitulation. This is quietism too. Because for Christians to walk away, to disengage from the sites of contestation adumbrated above, is to forget that there are indeed political, social, and moral implications to the gospel. What if those Christians appalled by slavery had thought abolition too controversial, too divisive a cause to canvas publicly? What if the abolitionists had been deterred by their worries they would put opponents off the gospel? What if civil rights activists had decided they should just keep their faith's exposure of injustice to themselves, settling instead for building intentional communities and living out their faith in peace and quiet, merely modelling to the world what the gospel looked like? Doubtless, there is indeed a need for the church to do things differently, to move on from the vitriol and end the hateful way in which public discourse is conducted in our culture. There is a need for the church to bring a spirit of nonviolence to public action *and* public speech. Yet that is different from the church deciding to stay silent on normative issues surfacing from our life in the world.

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Faced as we are with the twin temptations of theocratic integralism and quietist package-deal politics, we would do well to treasure the witness and relearn the instincts of modern political theology—whether that of German Protestants Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, of European Catholic social thought, or of the contemporary Anglican tradition. The church must see politics as *part* of its overall mission while realizing that it must not strive to seize power. The church's responsibility is to serve without submission.

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