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The
Window of
Vulnerability

A Political Spirituality

The Three Theologies

When I was studying theology at Göttingen in the fifties there were—apart from the fundamentalists, whom nobody took seriously—two relevant positions, represented by Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. At the beginning of the sixties, especially in the wake of the student movement, these two positions and their controversies faded into the background. There followed a long period in which the theological landscape was obscure: no mountains stood out plainly, there were no works that caused schools to form, no controversies that went to the root of things, or at least that is how it appeared. Instead, there were rediscoveries, cautious approaches to empirical reality. Developments were made in connection with the human and social sciences: psychology, sociology, social psychology, and psychoanalysis. The thesis of the secularization of Christian faith, so celebrated at the time, seemed to be corroborated within the theological discipline itself.

At the beginning of the eighties this diffuse situation changed. There are now three discernible theological tendencies, which I will call, respectively, conservative, liberal, and radical. I could as easily call them orthodox, liberal, and liberation theologies. In considering all these “file drawers” or categories, it is important to keep in mind the connection between the theological and the political. The three theologies are basic theological-political models that apply to both those realms, theology and politics. They are not fundamental theological convictions that could then find a political application as well, though they would not need to do so. Nor are they, as the conservatives like

to say, political options that deck themselves out in a few theological garments. Instead, there are basic theological decisions behind the political conflicts. Tell me how you think and act politically, and I will tell you who your God is.

An anecdote from the sixties will illustrate this. A pastor who worked in industry was interviewed on television about worker participation. He said, standing before the factory entrance: "There ought to be a sign here saying, 'You are now leaving the democratic sector.'" The next day he was called in by his superintendent and told that an objection had been received from the highest level. "From the highest level? Do you mean God? or the bishop?" he asked. Answer: "No, the board of directors."

The disagreement among the three positions really is theological-political. Every serious theological proposition has a political point directed at the state of the world. The statement that "the earth is the Lord's" (Ps. 24:1) disputes the ruling power of the directors of multinationals. In the death of Jesus, however it may be theologically interpreted or spiritualized, Pontius Pilate and the power of the state are always present.

I have debated with myself whether I ought to speak of only two current theologies, which I would then have to call theology of liberation and theology of the bourgeoisie; or whether I should use more nuance and include in the picture the two very different developments of bourgeois theology in the conservative and liberal camps. In the framework of a biblical discussion for the Church Congress at Düsseldorf in 1985 I used the reduced model and described the two principal theologies of today as two confessions that can no longer be categorized within the confessions of the sixteenth century, when Christians defined themselves as Catholic or Protestant. For the readers of this book, however, the more differentiated analysis seems to me more useful; I am addressing myself to readers who are confronted in their daily lives with both types of bourgeois theology and who often may even be rubbed raw by their conflicts, though they themselves hope to see bourgeois theology overcome by liberation theology.

I. Neoconservative Civic Religion

Conservative or orthodox theology takes the Bible and dogmatic tradition as its starting point. Faith means believing acceptance of the truth revealed in the tradition; or, in the words of the first thesis of

the Barmen Theological Declaration of 1954: "Jesus Christ, as witnessed for us in the Holy Scriptures, is the one Word of God whom we are to hear, to trust in life and in death, and to obey." These are the words of a theology from above, anchored in conservatism and stamped by Karl Barth's neoorthodoxy. People are made subject to "revelation," they are to "hear," "trust," and "obey." Other "events and powers, beings and truths," as we read in the explanatory repudiation attached to this thesis, *cannot* be recognized as revelation. In the context of the struggle with Nazism and its German Christian adherents it was obvious which "truths" (for example, the superiority of the Aryan race), what "other powers" (such as Blood and Soil), and what "beings" (namely Adolf Hitler, the Führer) were meant here.

But outside this historical situation the thesis is theologically ambiguous. Orthodoxy does not reflect on its own cultural prejudices; instead, it transfigures them. It does not think in terms of the sociology of knowledge and has no suspicions about its own ideology. It carries on its reflection without a context, and consequently it is possible that the thesis once directed against the German Christians may be interpreted today in neoorthodox and conservative terms something like this:

Jesus Christ is above all worldly systems. Taking his side means refusing to get involved in the struggles of this world. Every kind of political engagement on the part of the church is to be condemned; being a Christian sets one definitively at a distance from any sort of practical engagement in political questions. Christ transcends culture and history. He is a changeless, autonomous divine being beyond all our hopes and visions—which, accordingly, are to be regarded as purely ideological opinions, all of them equally far from the one Word of God.

The lack of context in this orthodox and neoorthodox theology is dangerous, and this includes its fetishism about words. By this I mean its inability to recognize what was originally meant in the Bible when it is given different expression. There is a certain kind of inflexibility, fettered by tradition, that reifies certain concepts such as Christ, salvation, and justification by faith alone, as if they no longer needed to become flesh; as if their mere recitation enunciated the faith with all the clarity necessary. Spiritual rigidity and an addiction to the repetition of what has been clearly stated in the past are characteristic of this bent. If a New Testament concept such as *agape* is now translated as "solidarity," because the traditional rendition with "love" does not

transmit the content of the word clearly enough, theological conservatives become anxious, for theological-political reasons.

Biblicism is literalist and clings to the letter of the written word in the context of a particular cultural situation in the lower middle class, which sees itself threatened by economic and social decline, isolation, and dissolution of its traditional values—those of sexual morality, for example. Conservative theology reacts to this threat with word-fetishist repetition that more often silently presumes (instead of naming) the ideological content (such as parental rule over the young; compulsory assignment of roles to women; distance and hostility toward all forms of political expression, from letters of protest to silent vigils). Sin is localized in the heart of the individual and not in economic structures. Peace is to be realized in the family and in the upbringing of children. Everything outside the narrowest circle of individual and family life already belongs to “politicization” of faith and is rejected. The idea that individualization itself is the most dangerous ideologizing of faith is to be firmly denied.

And yet the conservative position today is not confined to defining, rejecting, and drawing limits. At least in the United States the religious Right has become newly aware of its economic and political power. Since the beginning of the eighties the religious Right in the United States has discovered a new offensive political role through its alliance with the extreme political Right. Whereas at an earlier period, in the Pietist era of the eighteenth century, devout fundamentalists were known as the “silent ones in the country,” today their piety has become earsplitting, demanding, publicly visible, and voicing claims to authority.

The previous American president, under the pressure of these groups whose ultraconservative capital helped him gain power in 1980, propagated the neoconservative ideology and religion more and more visibly. In his speech to the National Association of Evangelicals, Ronald Reagan said: “I do believe that HE has begun to heal our blessed land.” He meant by this not only economic growth as a reward for the true faithful (a popular form of the Max Weber thesis!), but also the “spiritual reawakening” of America. He said in Columbus, Ohio: “Americans are turning back to God. Church attendance is up. Audiences for religious books and broadcasts are growing.” This process of healing, according to Reagan, began with his presidency. The time before it was gloomy and lost. America, said Reagan, “did seem to lose her religious and moral bearings—to forget the faith and values that made us good and great.” “But the Almighty [a word Hitler used

more and more often in the last years, after Stalingrad] who gave us this great land, also gave us free will—the power under God to choose our own destiny. The American people decided to put a stop to that long decline, and today our country is seeing a rebirth of freedom and faith—a great national renewal.”¹

George Gilder produced an economic primer for the neoconservatives, entitled *Wealth and Poverty*,² which expressly concluded that a particular faith was required to stabilize the system: the belief that it was good to work hard and invest, and that it was necessary to keep women and other troublemakers under control. As symptoms of America’s moral decline Reagan mentions pornography, drug addiction, and the collapse of the family, which once was “the cornerstone of our society.” His view of history is as follows: “All our material wealth and all our influence is based on our faith in God and the basic values that follow from that belief.”

What are these values that form the new civic religion? They are the traditional ones: nation, work, and family. In this context I recall a historical parallel drawn from the period of German occupation of France. Between 1940 and 1944, France had to mint new coins that no longer bore the motto *liberté, égalité, fraternité* (liberty, equality, brotherhood), but substituted the conservative trio *patrie, travail, famille* (fatherland, work, family).

Those are the religious values of neoconservatism. “America is great because America is good,” as President Reagan said to the evangelical leaders. The country of these good and just people, which guarantees world peace, must be made strong by means of the greatest collection of armaments in history. Americans are encouraged to believe in the moral superiority of the United States, and the organs of Christian religion are made instruments of this purpose.

The military-political doctrine of national security has replaced the older political values and convictions of democracy, freedom of the press, and human rights; instead, “national security” has become the foundation of policy. A threat to national security is the greatest risk, and its betrayal is a capital crime. We have to keep in mind that the disappearance of human beings, torture, and murder in Latin America and in other Third World countries are ordered and justified in the name of national security. The concept of national security is smeared with the blood of a hundred thousand victims. The crimes of the police and of governments of terror, and the crime of the so-called democracies, namely, arming themselves and others to death, are committed in the name of national security. The quest for national

security is part of the new conservative ideology with its rhetoric of strength, its threats (open or concealed) to those who think differently, its reduction of every conflict in the world to the East-West struggle, and so on.

The program has a military exterior, but at the same time it has a religious and cultural interior. The fundamentalist movement, massively funded by the extreme Right, belongs in this context. This movement has also annexed to itself the traditional conservatives who understand themselves as "nonpolitical." Thus the Christocentrism of neoorthodoxy serves as an effective tool against the liberation theology groups who oppose racism and sexism as sin. God's peace is distanced to the greatest extent possible from the question of further acquisition of armaments, and the doctrine of justification "by faith alone" is not supposed to have anything to do with the real ideology of security, nuclear deterrence, where we in fact put our trust in life and death. Denial of reality and repression of one's own part in its construction are necessary preliminaries if the house of neoconservative civil religion is to be built up. Orthodox theology (with its Christocentrism, its distance from the world, its confusion of sin and powerlessness, its anthropological pessimism, its sexism) takes care of this preliminary work, even if it does not engage in the construction of the ideological house itself.

In developed neoconservative civil religion, hard work is enthroned next to national security as the highest value. There is no sympathy for those who do not work. In the context of Reaganomics this meant, in politico-economic terms: no health care for the mass of the old, the sick, and the so-called unemployable; no more food stamps because—as Edwin Meese, Reagan's White House aide, opined, there is no hunger in the United States, not even when people are buying cat food in order to have a little protein. The denial of reality, the refusal to acknowledge certain things that do not accord with the ideology, is in my opinion characteristic of aggressive neoconservatism and differs from older forms of conservatism that still maintained a certain sense of reality, however restricted. In West Germany, for example, the demands of Heiner Geissler, the general secretary of the Christian Democratic party, that a distinction be drawn between good unemployed people and bad people unwilling to work represents a step in the same direction.

The third value in neoconservative civic religion is the family and, within it, the woman's role. Being religious means keeping women in their God-given place. It is not the atomic bomb that threatens our

survival! No, love between two men or two women endangers everything we have achieved! The moral scandal of our times is not the starvation of millions of children in the Third World as a result of our masterful economic planning, but the destruction of unborn life! Unemployment is not the problem, pornography is! Neoconservatism and the new civic religion promise security through nationalism, work, and family. It is a vision for the haves, not for the have-nots. It will ensure that we keep what we have.

2. *Helpless Liberalism*

Liberal theology is disgusted by the recent rapprochement between orthodox fundamentalist Christianity and national might. It is marked by the critical spirit of the Enlightenment: biblical criticism, critique of domination and of institutions are indispensable to it. Therefore liberal theology approves the separation of church and state as a fundamental principle. And in fact it was absolutely necessary for an economic and sociopolitical system that functions according to the principles of the free market economy to distance itself from the moral, religious, and transcendent dimensions of human existence.

At an early stage of liberalism, the rising middle class was the bearer of an enlightened vision of an autonomous society that would no longer be ruled by the church or by the strange alliance of nobility and clergy. It was in the interest of the liberal state to protect itself from a church that was regarded as power-hungry; it wanted to let the church be church, at a safe distance from the world of politics.

Today, as we approach the end of the liberal epoch (a phenomenon especially noticeable in the United States at the present time), it is just the other way around: the church, as a middle-class institution, has an interest in keeping itself apart from the political and economic decisions of the modern state. Official Protestantism, which we have to regard as a middle-class religion, has retreated to the moral and transcendent aspects of Christian faith; it has silenced its socioeconomic demands for the whole of human life and society.

During the French Revolution and the beginnings of Jeffersonian democracy it was the state that desired and needed freedom from unenlightened and unscientific clericalism. The church, in its middle-class Protestant form, accommodated itself to the demands of modernity, the Enlightenment, and the sciences. But in the process the church lost its critical and prophetic voice, because it recognized the division of life into two worlds, one devoted to economics and politics

and the other private, with religious matters confined to the latter. Each world had a certain autonomous identity; taken together they represented the historical reality of the bourgeois era.

But this prestabilized harmony was deceptive. It yielded nothing for the human rights of racial minorities like the Jews in Europe or blacks in the United States. It did nothing for the poor; neither for the landless peasants nor for the industrial proletariat did the separation of church and state function positively to achieve emancipation, nor even conservatively to protect them—to say nothing of the marginalized masses we find in the Third World today. The bourgeois liberal ideology insisted that the secular and sacred dimensions of the modern world had created a historical situation in which the state took care of economics and politics, while the church protected and saved the souls of private persons. But this liberal myth never really functioned for the oppressed. As state oppression took new forms in the twentieth century, such as concentration camps, and as torture became a normal means of interrogation, the myth of separation of church and state collapsed, and at least some parts of Christianity rediscovered their own visionary demand to change not only private individuals, but the machinery of society as well.

The collapse of liberalism, brought on by twentieth-century Fascism, challenged and polarized the church—in Nazi Germany, in Franco's Spain, and today in South Africa and Latin America. The beautiful harmony of separation of church and state could not survive in the face of the growth of totalitarianism in the state. And the church, under Hitler, Franco, Pinochet, Somoza, and (increasingly) the CIA, saw itself challenged by violations of human rights. A political apparatus that demands absolute obedience and total submission to its ideology forces the church at the present time to review its own liberal history; the political debate in the United States, in my own observation, is being increasingly theologized.

★ We are living at a time when two religions, the religion of the state and the religion of resistance, are struggling with one another. This means the end of the liberal era and specifically the falsification of its thesis about the secularization of society. History has refuted those who thought that religion would die of itself, that it was irrelevant for politics and individual decision, and that the Enlightenment, as one favorite tenet of intellectuals held, would ultimately make religion obsolete. In this sense the presuppositions of the liberal era are no longer valid. We have to ask whether a theology can maintain its integrity within an amicable separation of church and state. It could

not do so in 1933; liberalism was more or less a failure in that situation, just as liberal theology had failed in 1914 (to Karl Barth's disgust!) at the outbreak of World War I. Today theology is under heavy pressure to restrict itself to individual souls. The church is to make the meaning of life clear to the unemployed; under no circumstances should it ask questions about the causes of unemployment.

The second key point about liberal theology is its individualism, by which one may most easily recognize it. It regards the human person as a separate being that finds comfort and peace of soul in believing. Modern life treats us all harshly enough—stress, competition, and human loneliness are enormous—and it is precisely in this area that the Christian religion ought to offer us consolation and healing as our salvation from evil. In this perspective, the kingdom of God is totally suppressed in favor of individual salvation. "Deliver us from evil" is more important than "Thy kingdom come," although in reality the two petitions belong together. Bourgeois theology is the work of the androcentrically thinking middle class: white, relatively well-to-do, shaped and determined by men. It disregards the suffering masses of the earth; the starving appear, if at all, as objects of charity. Otherwise, problems of sexual ethics or of death and dying are much more important for this theology than are social, political, or economic questions.

3. Theology of Liberation

Besides these two theologies there has been, for about twenty years now, a theology that is not done by white, relatively well-to-do males: the theology of liberation. In this theology, faith is not experienced first of all as a consolation for an ordinary and often wretched life, but as a way of living, hoping, and acting. It means a revolution in human hearts corresponding to the words of Jesus to a man who had been lame for many years: "Get up! Take up your bed and walk!" (Mark 2:9) Christ doesn't just console, he changes our lives. Just as for Jesus' first disciples—poor and ignorant people, the majority of whom were women—in the communities of faith springing up at the base, we see emerging a way of living and sharing with one another, of organizing, celebrating, and struggling together. In a great many cases this new kind of life causes the Christians to be despised and avoided, to be barred from many occupations; in the Third World, persecution, torture, and death for the faith are more and more common.

Liberation theology is happening among the poor, in the South African townships, in the refugee camps in El Salvador, among the women textile workers in Sri Lanka. But that in no way means that it is unimportant for us here. We are, after all, not without our share in the misery that is the lot of people in two-thirds of the world today: we are part of the problem. Our country's representatives at international conferences, those sponsored by the United Nations, for example, usually vote with the representatives of the USA against all proposals made by the poor countries for the sake of changing the politico-economic situation. We are not spectators, we are not victims—we are the culprits who cause the misery. Therefore theology of liberation is not some kind of fashionable theology that we can take or leave alone. It is God's gift to us today, an expression of the faith of people in the First World as well, those who live for the sake of liberation from the terrible role of those who plunge the innocent into misery, condemn children to death, and repress the hopes of the poor through police states, military dictatorships, and open warfare.

Liberation theology, too, orients itself to the one Word of God, Jesus Christ. But it does not leave this Word to stand without a context, as if it were suprahistorical or addressed to the depth of the individual soul. The one Word of God in the understanding of liberation theology is the messianic praxis of Jesus and his followers. Christ is not the one Word of God because he is formally superior to all other ideological or religious demands, or because he, in contrast to all others, speaks of God. The foundation of faith is not that it was Christ who spoke with divine authority; the foundation of faith is the praxis of this poor man from Nazareth who shared his bread with the hungry and made the blind see, and who lived and died for justice. Listening to authority does not get us anywhere, but praxis does. It is a basic principle of liberation theology that the poor are the teachers. So we are learning today mainly from and through the poor: not technology, not facts, but faith and hope.

Recently a young Swiss teacher asked me, in the course of a conversation about the situation of the peoples oppressed by Western nations, where I found any reason to hope. At first I wanted to say to him: "From my faith in God, who has already rescued an oppressed people once before from slavery to a powerful military state!" But then it occurred to me that it is really not "my" faith that supports me. It is the faith and hope of the poor who do not give up. As long as they do not despair and surrender, as long as they go on, we haven't the least right to whine, to speak resignedly out of our analysis that

counts money and weapons but does not reckon with the pride of the oppressed and their willingness to struggle, and to say there is nothing we can do!

Radical theology goes to the roots of our fear of powerlessness and assures us that "all things are possible," as it says in one of the liberating stories in the New Testament.

4. *Distinguishing God from the Idols*

This description of the present theological situation would be incomplete without the practical-missionary dimension. How do people get from one camp to the other? We have to look for connections, passages, conversions. Christian Beyers-Naudé, for example, was a conservative South African theologian from an old Boer family who, at the age of fifty, became a liberation theologian fighting against apartheid. Are there rebellious traits within orthodox theology that can prevent its being incorporated in Western anticommunist ideology? Where are the bridges between critical left-liberal positions and the praxis of liberation? What parts of these differing positions do we find in ourselves?

One sign of false religion is that in it, God and Satan are indistinguishable. That applies also to the fundamentalists who predict the end of the world as God's will and work toward it with their politics. God, for them, is neither love nor justice, but sheer power. The militarization of the whole world is the accomplishment of this God; strength is his highest ideal, violence his method, security his promise.

The movement for more peace and justice that is producing a kind of liberation theology among us has freed itself from this God. This liberation means turning away from false life and turning toward another form of life.

What is at stake is a lifelong conversion.

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Notes

1. *New York Times*, 7 March 1984.
2. George Gilder, *Wealth and Poverty* (New York: Basic Books, 1981).

Søren Kierkegaard and the Concept of Anxiety

I was twenty years old when I discovered Søren Kierkegaard. I was mired in one of those deep crises of meaning and identity that afflict young people in our culture. It was 1949, and one of the philosophical conclusions drawn by my generation from recent events in Europe was existential nihilism. Sartre, Camus, and Heidegger described where we were. Kierkegaard was counted the father of these fathers, but I knew, after the first twenty pages, that he had something—hidden? withdrawn? only indirectly communicated?—that the fathers had not handed on to us: radical religion; transcendence of the factual situation; passion for the unconditional. I read in Kierkegaard about the five foolish virgins in the gospel who had the door shut in their faces because they had no oil, that they had become “unrecognizable in the spiritual sense because they had lost the eternal passion.”

Kierkegaard seduced me into religion. I devoured him. Today I could say that I fell in love with Søren. Is there really any better way to learn something? At that time I would have rejected this expression as inappropriate. But my fantasies as I read, my intensive dialogue with Søren over a period of months, tended in a quite unscholarly direction: If I had been Regine . . . why was it necessary to break the engagement . . . what does sexuality mean when someone has found “his category” . . . why does Søren, who is certainly not brutal or trivial, say these insulting things about women? . . . I submerged myself in Kierkegaard.