

THE TEMPLE IN THE POLIS: FAITH IS NOT IDEOLOGY

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Nor does the Church close her eyes to the danger of fanaticism or fundamentalism among those who, in the name of an ideology, which purports to be scientific or religious, claim the right to impose on others their own concept of what is true and good. Christian truth is not of this kind. Since it is not an ideology, the Christian faith does not presume to imprison changing sociopolitical realities in a rigid schema, and it recognizes that human life is realized in history in conditions that are diverse and imperfect. Furthermore, in constantly reaffirming the transcendent dignity of the person, the Church's method is always that of respect for freedom.

– John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, 1991

Fervent Christians, in the name of love and freedom, have sometimes been guilty of shedding human blood. Faithful believers, invoking the Gospel, have drafted laws to segregate their fellow citizens into different classes. From the lips of the same people who declare that love of one's neighbour must extend even to one's enemies, one can nonetheless hear words of contempt for those who profess different views. Why? The more we seek a "new evangelization" or (to use the formulation of John Paul II) the louder we say with the whole Catholic community to all those outside it, "Do not be afraid to open the door to Christ," the more insistently we should pose this question.

To be sure, the Church has a human dimension, and to be "human" is to be born into sin. Although people of the church have written many beautiful pages in the chronicle of world events, ecclesiastical history is also a teacher of humility. The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965) reminds us that, "in the life of God's people pilgriming through the vicissitudes of human history, a way of acting often appears which is not quite conformable with the evangelizing spirit and even is opposed to it."

The fact that the Church is made up of people who can be *disloyal* to their professed values is only one objection that can be urged against its public influence. Many outside the Church rather fear that fervent believers, in the *name* of Christianity, will resort to force of law in order to burn heretics at the stake, teach contempt for others, or hinder freedom of conscience.

A spirit of hostility towards the Church has largely marked the post-Enlightenment epoch. Modern politics were in themselves partially constituted by the intention to free public life from religious influence – in public discussion, scientific research, and common opinion. Christianity is often considered merely a religious variant of the dangerous secular ideologies.

Yet according to John Paul II, there is a distinct difference between ideology and Christianity, and in *Centesimus Annus*, he unequivocally separates the one from the other. He cites as typical features of an ideology that: (1) it contains a conception of truth and goodness; (2) its followers believe that they are free to impose their conception upon others; (3) it expresses the whole of reality in a simple and rigid scheme. The Pope maintains that Christian truth does not fulfill the second and third conditions, and so Catholicism is not an ideology.

Theologians in the Middle Ages did not articulate the distinction between faith and ideology. One should not be astonished at this, for the theoretical difference between ideology and faith is not obvious, whereas the practical temptation to ideologize the faith is extremely strong. Nor did the modern philosophers who opposed the influence of Christianity on politics comprehend this distinction. The burden of their thought was antireligious, rather than anti-ideological. As a consequence, their teaching fostered yet more lethal ideologies. Only today, after many sad experiences of history, have we come to consider the problem of the difference between ideology and faith.

What is at stake here is more than Church complaints about the imposition of unwelcome limitations on its activity or about the biased presentation of moral and religious topics in the popular media. A whole culture now believes that both ethics and religion are, at most, private matters; consequently, it finds itself embroiled in self-destructive conflicts. This topic has been precisely and penetratingly described by outstanding secular thinkers, including Hannah Arendt, Daniel Bell, Albert Camus, Robert Nisbet, Allan Bloom, Irving Kristol, and also such Poles as Leszek Kołakowski, Czesław Miłosz, and Adam Michnik.

I. “Possession”: a necessary condition of ideology

What distinguishes Christianity from ideology? The key to the matter is the notion of “possessing” the truth. Ideologists and their followers (whether they be Muslims, Marxists, Christians, Freudians, or positivists) believe that they possess a truth that explains reality. They believe that they possess an

objective truth which other people, for reasons such as class, race, lack of intelligence, blindness of sin, caste, or nation, are not able to perceive. The attitude of the “possessor of truth” may manifest itself in the form of lofty contempt for the rest of mankind, but it is usually only a step away from imposing objective truth on the “subjectively” lost. (Those who are “objectively” lost, history teaches us, one may try to eliminate.)

Fundamentalism is connected with this attitude of *possessing* the truth, not with faith in the *existence* of absolute truth. Unfortunately, the view that faith and fundamentalism are precisely coincident is deeply embedded in contemporary culture. Each believer is regarded as at least a potential fanatic, whereas fanatical positivists or relativists (that is, people convinced that they have discovered an ultimate truth: that there is no absolute) are regarded as enlightened and tolerant humanists.

When John Paul II states that the Christian truth is not an ideology, he means something more than that the Church today understands very well that it is not possible to embrace the complexities of the world in simple and rigid forms, or that the Church has no wish to impose its conception of truth and good by force. The Pope here says that *by its nature*, Christian truth has the character that it cannot be “possessed.” Not only is fundamentalism not an integral profession of the Catholic faith, but it is an abuse of Catholicism. For Christian truth by its very essence has a complex, not to say a dialectical, character. It is absolute and revealed to the Church, but at the same time, the Church is not its “possessor.” The truth surpasses the Church immersed in history – for it is above man, above reason, above philosophy, above theology.

As Hans Urs von Balthasar put it, “The incomprehensible love of God, acting through the event of Christ, extols Him highly above all... philosophical images of God.” One of the most important challenges for the Church is to prevent this truth, revealed by God and not fully comprehensible to our intellect, from becoming simply an ideological version of Catholic dogma. The incomprehensibility of the biblical God has a meaning only as long as – again we quote von Balthasar – “dogmatic formulas prevent it from renewed rationalization... surround like cherubs with blazing swords, shocking for the Jews and Greeks, the madness of God’s love, not permitting any cabalistic or Hegelian storm of gnosis.” That is why negative theology is important: to judge what one cannot say about God. Even positive theology, when it predicates attributes of God through analogy, maintains that “although the similarity between the Creator and the creature is so great, the difference will always remain greater” (Erich Przywara).

The relation, therefore, between the truth proclaimed by the Church and the subsistent truth, God, is of this kind: First, the Church merely preserves the revealed truth, of which God is the only possessor. Secondly, this truth

surpasses the Church, one of whose important tasks is to defend this truth from being enclosed in purely human categories. Thirdly, the Church continues to grow in the knowledge of this truth, meditating on it with love, and at the same time aware that never in the course of history, while time and space exist, will this truth be known completely. As the Vatican Council teaches, “The Church in the course of time constantly aspires to the full truth of God.” Von Balthasar articulates this from a personal perspective: “A Catholic may claim the right to the title of being a Catholic provided that... he does not talk himself or others into believing that he has already achieved this”.

God’s truth, therefore, by its very nature is anti-ideological. It cannot, without being crippled, be treated as a closed conception which one may impose upon other people. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger reached a similar conclusion by considering the difference between the Magisterium of the Church and the ideological apparatus of the Marxist party:

That the teaching authority can come in danger of behaving like a party organ cannot be doubted. But that structurally it is something of this kind and thus an instrument of party constraint that is alien to learning must be disputed. The difference between the structure of a party constituted on ideological grounds and the Church lies precisely in the question of truth. Materialism... presupposes that what we have at the beginning is not reason but the irrational – matter. ... Reason does not precede man but only comes into being as a human construct. ... This means that truth is absorbed in the construct of the party and is totally dependent on it. The fundamental conviction of the Christian faith, on the contrary, is that at the beginning we have reason and with it truth; it brings forth man and human reason as capable of truth. ... The community of the Church is admittedly necessary as the historical condition for the activity of reason, but the Church does not coincide with the truth. It is not the constructor of truth but is constructed by it and is the place where it is perceived. *Truth therefore remains essentially independent of the Church and the Church is ordered towards it as a means.*

This basic fact – that Christian truth is first in relation to the Church and not embraced by it – is the source of the anti-ideological character of Christian faith.

One of the fundamental principles of the modern state is the detachment of religion from public life. This is probably the only feature that communism, Nazism, and liberal democracy possess in common. Totalitarianism attempts to supplant religion with its own ideology. In liberal democracy,

religion is treated as a matter of private opinion. Together with ideologies, conceptions of morality, and superstitions of all kinds, religion has no access to the public sphere, which in a modern state is supposed to remain “naked”.

Following an epoch of religious wars and persecutions, it is difficult not to admit that there was some justification for this stratagem. Nevertheless, based as it is on naive Enlightenment atheism (deism), this prescription is incoherent in theory and unfeasible in practice. A public square never remains naked. Even if religion sometimes (and the Catholic Church always) disturbed the founders of modern democracy, paradoxically enough, a “naked public square” meant for them a square in which the Christian criteria of good and evil were in play and Christian institutions and customs were established. In other words, the founders of liberal democracy wanted Christianity without Christ and the Church. After eighteen or nineteen centuries during which Europe had been formed by the teaching of the Scriptures, how could these thinkers have imagined a completely different world? Yet, from the point of view of intellectual cohesion, theirs was a breakneck construction. Despite the intentions of the founders of the modern state, it is not true that the public square is naked, that it has been cleansed from all ideologies, philosophical systems, and religions.

The offensive propaganda initiated by the Enlightenment elite, “whose only pabulum was anti-clericalism, who from anti-clericalism made only one program, who believed that anti-clericalism is sufficient in order to change governments, to perfect societies and to bring about happiness” (Paul Hazard) provided justification for the use of the most brutal methods. In practical life, the postulate of the “naked square” has been realized sometimes through executions, more often through administrative force (annulment of monastic orders, destruction of the educational system) or confiscations.

The Church, deeply rooted in the culture, politics, and economics of the Middle Ages, found itself suddenly attacked on all fronts and often responded nervously, aggressively, and without understanding the essence of the changes that were occurring. A serious discourse about the place of religion in social life is impeded to this day, owing to the fact that the public square has been built upon antireligious and anticlerical foundations. As a result, it has become a place of mutual accusation and debate between clericalists and anticlericalists.

2. Devastation of the public square

The argument for the naked public square presupposes two axioms: (1) the only real being is the individual; (2) there is no absolute. The contention behind these two axioms is this: If the individual were to achieve his fulfillment only as a member of society, it would be appropriate for society to cancel individual freedom, to constrain man. If a social group were to think that it possessed an absolute truth, it would be only a small step away from creating a totalitarian ideology.

These axioms seemed to provide an effective panacea for the blood-thirstiness of religious wars, as well as the peremptoriness of Church authorities. At the same time, however, these postulates have encouraged the erosion of family life, the loosening of social ties, a weakening of national identity, and the elimination of religion and morality from social life. The social philosophy on which the liberal democracies were built has already passed its period of fertility. Its creative tenets – the equality of citizens, protection of individual freedom, and respect for various convictions in the public square – have been absorbed. Nowadays, with ever-greater force, the tendency of liberalism to destruction is manifesting itself.

If the only real being is the individual and there is no important general norm of morality, value-in-itself is reduced to value-for-me. Ethics is a more or less enlightened egoism – in the best case, pragmatism. Since debate about public morality is impossible (for there is no such morality), moral discourse becomes political discourse. “Justice” depends entirely upon the number of adherents that can be mustered to support a given conception. Since the only real being is the individual, society is a collection of interest groups.

Because this is not an external disturbance in the functioning of liberal democracy but its natural effect, liberal democracy cannot effectively counteract the erosion of social communication and social consensus. Increased legislation is the only means of self-defence. It specifies with full particulars the rights of husbands in relation to wives and vice versa, protects children and parents from each other, adjudicates quarrels between the faithful and the hierarchical Church, legalizes business transactions with particular countries, regulates the conditions of employment, work, and pay, and determines immigration quotas, racial quotas, and sexual quotas.

The battle for favorable legislation becomes the highest norm of public life. Society is a congeries of pressure groups, factions, and political parties who account a law moral when it expands their power, and immoral when it limits their entitlements. Instead of preventing harm and protecting the innocent, this use of the law precipitates the destruction of the public square.

Laws that are not based on a persistently conserved and continually renewed moral consensus possess no authority.

When people regard the proclaimed law as the highest norm of social life, they begin to perceive themselves and others as simply allies or enemies. *What* someone talks about is unimportant. Instead, one asks whether the speaker is a man or a woman, black or white and are they Catholic or Protestant, a pensioner or a government representative, a member of some party, or a homosexual? Politics becomes the art of winning over the majority amongst all possible “minorities”.

3. Social conclusion

The time may be slowly approaching for the breakdown of inherited resentments. The Church has a deeper awareness that at the times when it ideologized its faith, this constituted a real danger to public life. The fact that it usually acted in good faith did not reduce the problem in the slightest, but made it even more dramatic. Religious resentments do not assist the proper development of liberal democracy, but rather destroy it completely.

On the threshold of a new and dangerous millennium, it is an anachronism to repropose 200-year-old solutions to the problems of the relation between Church and state, ethics and politics, education and social communication, or Christianity and public life. For a long time, public dispute has been dominated by people with a leaning towards either religious or relativistic fundamentalism, but the majority today opposes a fundamentalist approach, and dialogue in search of a new consensus is possible.

Both sides of the dialogue can endorse the view of John Paul II that

the postulate of neutrality connected with people’s outlook on life is correct mainly in this domain, that the state should guard the freedom of conscience and beliefs of all its citizens, regardless of which religion or outlook they avow. But the postulate not to permit under any circumstances the dimension of holiness to social and national life is a postulate of an atheistic state and social life, and it does not have much in common with the neutrality connected with people’s outlook of life. Mutual kindness and good will is necessary to obtain such forms of the presence of what is holy in social and national life that will injure nobody and make nobody an alien in their own land.

Without a broad social imagination, a significant dose of patience, the breaking down of many stereotypes and prejudices, and openness to mutual

understanding, kindness, and good will, this not unreasonable expectation does not have much chance of being realized. The creation of “forms of the presence of what is holy in social and national life, which will injure nobody” is very difficult, but badly needed both for the Church and for the democratic state.

4. Political conclusion

To promote this new consensus, a clear definition of the political role of the Church in a democratic society is necessary. The Church may opt to become the subject of a political game, participating in the mechanisms of legislation, exercising power in the state. But it could also consciously resign from a share in concrete legal solutions and political games and concentrate on the *metapolitical* sphere. The Church’s proper action in this sphere would be the renewal and building of social consensus, in the light of moral values and the vision of the human vocation proclaimed by the Gospel.

The Church cannot fulfill both a strict political role and a metapolitical one; that is, it cannot claim the right to be one of the elements in a democratic game and at the same time contest this game, stressing that it is a community of a different category. Out of loyalty to the Good News, the role of the Church in the sphere of politics must be precisely defined and limited. “The Church’s political stance must not be directed simply at the Church’s power,” Cardinal Ratzinger stresses. “This can become a direct contradiction of the Church’s true nature and would consequently go directly against the moral content of the Church’s political stance. It is guided rather by theological perception and not simply by the idea of increasing influence and power.”

In the light of what has been said, the most realistic solution seems to be to insist on the clear division of lay and clerical vocations. This division of vocations is not a reaction to a special political context, but flows directly from the hierarchical structure of the Church. (The assertion that the Church can serve contemporary democracy better by stressing its hierarchical structure than by succumbing to pressures for “democratization” might be surprising to some.)

The laity has full right to political activity, but only to act on its own account, without involving the authority of the Church. For the good of the evangelizing mission of the Church – even if they are operating in a party which calls itself “Christian” – politicians should recognize, as Cardinal Hoeffner puts it, that “such a party is neither a Church institution nor religious party nor a clerical one, but is a political party responsible for the good of the entire nation. When it defines itself as Christian that does not

mean that it finds itself under the care of the Church, but simply that it acquaints itself with the Christian principles of social teaching.”

At the same time, the clergy, representing the hierarchical Church, does not participate in the procedures of establishing law and political mechanisms. As the Pope puts it in *Centesimus Annus*, “The Church respects the legitimate autonomy of the democratic order.” The Church requires a kind of asceticism in the manifestation of its political sympathies. Even more, it requires a constant distancing from all party games, legislative processes, and electoral campaigns.

Any loss that the Church might suffer because of the reduction of its direct influence on politics is compensated by the clear demonstration that the Church is above politics. It is thereby manifest that the Church is opposed to the ideologizing of faith and to its transformation into a collection of political solutions. Only in this way can the contemporary world observe and understand that the Christian faith is not an ideology. In seeking “new forms of the presence of what is holy in social and national life,” the Church does not aspire to ownership of the public square. To yearn for a religious state is a simple contradiction of the mission of the Church.

5. Ecclesiastical conclusion

To better grasp its identity, the Church has recourse to the contemplation of biblical images, such as the sheep and its shepherd, the vineyard and the landowner. Each of these images presents a different aspect of the mystery of the Church. To set forth the proper relation of the Church to the democratic state, one may employ another great scriptural image: the temple. The image of the temple standing in the democratic city-state, the polls, brings to light features of the Church to which the symbols of the mystical body of Christ and the people of God do not advert. The latter emphasize the supernatural dimension and integration of Christ with the Church, on the one hand, and the earthly dimension and human community on its pilgrimage to a New Earth, on the other. But the image of the temple in the town – a clearly marked sphere of the *sacrum* is more the issue here than a separated, specifically built region – *situates* the Church in the world.

The Church is present in the world, where the powers of the hierarchy and the laity remain structurally divided, and the hierarchy respects the due autonomy of lay power. But the temple clearly cuts itself off from the town and is not subject to its laws. This does not mean that only the clergy have a right to enter the temple. Anyone may enter the temple, but then he is on non-political grounds. To paraphrase St. Paul: there is neither Pole nor Jew, feminist nor antifeminist, Christian democrat nor social democrat, for all are

one in Jesus Christ. The Church as a temple in a democratic city-state is the place of the real presence of God, the place of offering sacrifice, the place of teaching and prayer. The temple is also a special place for the dwelling of people who strictly identify their work and activities with the Church.

To acknowledge the relative autonomy of the political does not eliminate the tension between the *profanum* and the *sacrum*. The Church is in the world as well as above it: it serves the inhabitants of the polis, but is not subordinated to the political order. At times the most important form taken by its ministry to the world is to be “a sign which they will reject.” The Church serves the world best when it is fully itself.