POLITICAL UTILITY OF RELIGION IN AMERICA

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This paper intends to present an analysis of the present status of the complex question of the political utility of religion in America's liberal democracy. As always, it is instructive to begin with the understanding of this question put forth by the statesmen responsible for the founding of the regime. America, it has been truly said, was the first nation to be built self-consciously on a secular foundation.[1] The principles to which the regime is dedicated are derived from knowledge of "the laws of nature and Nature's God," which may be discovered through a rational inquiry into natural necessity. These principles, as the founders understood them, owe nothing to what has been revealed by the Christian God. They presuppose, instead, the replacement by Hobbes and Locke of the moral doctrine of Genesis with their teaching about natural rights and the State of nature. In America, priestly superstition was understood by the most sophisticated founders to give way to scientific enlightenment.[2] America is properly referred to as a liberal democracy, but it is often forgotten by those who do so that the term liberalism was used during the enlightenment to mean liberation from the moral and political authority of the Church.[3]

Although the founding may owe nothing intellectually to Christianity, even Jefferson recognized that the preservation of a secular republic requires Christianity's assistance. Because the theoretical argument supporting the regime owes too much to the liberation of self-interest and to assertiveness with respect to rights, it is deficient in terms of generating the moral qualities associated with the performance of necessary social and political duties. It is politically salutary for Americans to believe in an otherworldly divine justice which rewards republican or bourgeois virtue and in the Christian doctrine

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[1]See Harry Jaffa, *How To Think About the American Revolution.* (Durham, N.C.: Carolina Academic Press, 1978), pp. 142f.

[2]Consider the following from Jefferson: Letter to Pierre Samuel DuPont De Nemours (April 24, 1816), Letter to John Adams (October 28, 1813), and, above all, Letter to Roger C. Weightman (June 24, 1826).

[3]Walter Berns, *The First Amendment and the Future of American Democracy* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 1.

of love of God and neighbor in order to moderate bourgeois acquisitiveness in the service of what the duties of citizenship require.[4]

But, if popular acceptance of Christianity is a necessary precondition for republican decency in America, it can also be viewed as constant danger to the regime's orientation around material prosperity. Basically, as Hobbes and Locke first argued, if men take their souls too seriously and do battle over matters relating the proper road to salvation, the "arts of peace" connected with prosperity will atrophy. Even if concern with immortal souls does not lead to civil war, the focus upon eternal justice leads to a noble contempt for what is required of worldly success and of course, only worldly success is a legitimate public end in a secular regime.[5] Finally, the belief that the Bible reveals the knowledge necessary for human well-being deflects intellectual effort away from the scientific inquiry necessary for the technological mastery of nature, and such inquiry is the key to burgeoning material prosperity.[6]

The American founders, as a result, are best considered as intellectual heirs to the modern philosophical attack upon the political effects of Christianity, initiated by Machiavelli.[7] Machiavelli's purpose was to politicize minds that were excessively concerned with eternity, to lower their horizons in the service of earthly goals human beings can realistically achieve. Subsequent waves of modern thought have slowly worn away any reservations human beings might have about viewing this world as their one and only home. Modern thought, for this reason, seems to have culminated in the historicism of Nietzsche and Heidegger: What the human being is is not determined by some eternal essence but by the particular characteristics of one's historical time and place. Fulfillment must be achieved and understood within the context of one's particular set of historical circumstances or "world" in the Heideggerian sense.

Christianity, to repeat, appears to be necessary for the preser-

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[4]See Jefferson, Letter to Benjamin Waterhouse (June 26, 1822), Letter to Waterhouse (June 8, 1825), Adrienne Koch, *The Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1943), p. 31, for Jefferson's view of Jesus' teaching as "in perfect harmony with the moral need to regard others and to make their welfare count," and Harvey Mansfield, Jr., "Thomas Jefferson," *American Political Thought,* ed., Morton J. Frisch and Richard J. Stevens (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons. 1971), pp. 37-38 on the place of God's wrath in *Notes on the State of Virginia.* Even Madison's disestablishmentarian polemic, *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Sentments,* does not deny the political necessity of religious belief.

[5]See Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 207.

[6]See Berns, p. 55, Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America,* trans. George Lawrence (Garden City: Doubleday, 1969), p. 543.

[7]The authoritative exposition of this understanding of Machiavelli is Strauss' *Thoughts on Machiavelli.*

vation of American liberalism, but it is also potentially subversive of its goals. Consequently, part of the enlightenment project, to which the American founders contributed, has been to make Christianity "reasonable," that is, to reform it by purging those elements which militate against worldly prosperity.[8] Christianity, properly understood, does not conflict with the natural human devotion to commerce and comfort, and consequently, it need not stand in the way of earthly success.[9]

Today, it is possible to wonder, from even a strictly secular political perspective, whether this project to domesticate Christianity has not turned out to be altogether too successful. Theologians, responding to call of modern philosophy, have thoroughly "demythologized" Christianity in the light of what are believed to be unquestionable scientific truths brought forth by the enlightenment. The theologians of hope, the theologians of liberation, and so forth resolutely sought to eliminate all the allegedly illict or "Platonic" otherworldly elements of Christianity.[10] In accord with the full consequences of the truth of Heidegger's radically historistic teaching, one is led to believe that it is no longer safe to assume that God himself exists apart from the concrete dyamic of history. It is certainly difficult to determine whether many of the most influential contemporary theologians think Christians ought to believe in transhistorical divine justice or in any doctrine even remotely akin to the soul. As an unintended consequence of Vatican II, even Catholic theologians, who heretofore, through the doctrine of natural law, expressed a number of fundamental reservations to the modern understanding of human nature, appear to be succumbing quickly to the charms of historicism.[11] Only the evangelical Protestants hold out, with an admirable dogmatic obstinancy which is attracting additional Americans daily, but it is not clear how long fundamentalism can flourish in such an unfriendly intellectual environment.

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[8]For an example of Jefferson's attempt at a reformation of Christian doctrine, freed from all Platonism, see Thomas Jefferson, *The Life and Morals of Jesus Christ Extracted Textually from the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1951). For a commentary on Jefferson's "humanistic intrepretation of Christian morality," see Koch, pp. 23-38.

[9]Consider Tocqueville's thinly veiled description of the modern philosophical project, the purpose of which was to turn men away from thoughts "fixed on contemplation of another world" and toward "hunting for prosperity" (p. 743) and compare it with his own praise of American religion for "confining itself to its proper sphere" (p. 445).

[10]My understanding of the relationship between contemporary philosophy and theology owes much to J. Winfree Smith, " 'Watchman, what of the Night?' " *Essays in Honor of Jacob Klein* (Annapolis: St. John's College Press, 1976), pp. 141-150.

[11]The most influential example of this phenomenon is the enormous popularity of Hans Kung, *On Being a Christian* (New York: Doubleday, 1976). See the evidence gathered together in James Hitchcock, *Catholicism and Modernity* (New York: Seabury, 1979).

In view of the remarkable progress of this intellectual dyamic, no competent social or political thinker would argue today that Christianity presents a significant obstacle to the genuine attachment of Americans to the secular ends of the regime. Instead, the most important political problem seems to concern providing the means by which Christianity can possess sufficient strength to support the self-restraint necessary to pursue successfully those ends. From the perspective of regime preservation, the utility of Christianity drastically diminishes when it no longer provides certain moral answers or divine support for moral action.[12] It appears to be politically necessary to resist the always intensifying intellectual attack on the idea of Christian orthodoxy.

At this point, one might object that, given Christianity's advanced state of decay, it would be well to attempt to develop some other sort of support for the acceptance of moral duties. But surely it is futile to hope for a viable religious alternative to Christianity, because the sophistcated intellectual skepticism which increasingly dominates all areas of American life is incapable of generating genuine religious movements. The twentieth century experiments with the development of credible non-religious replacements for Christianity, moreover, have produced politically monstrous results. There is ample evidence for condeming all attempts to dethrone the Christian God with either the Historically Inevitable (Communism, Socialism) or with Resolute Self-Assertion in the face of existential groundlessness (Nazism, Fascism). Similar efforts by "secular humanists" such as John Dewey to transfer religious emotion to the cooperative use of the scientific method, although less dangerous, are far less plausible, if only because Dewey's "common faith" avoids any encounter with human death.[13]

The most sensible of "neo-conservative" thinkers today argue that, although the social and political crisis which arises with the decay of Christianity is a radical one, it is unwise to attempt any radical innovation in response to it.[14] They have learned the necessity of moderation almost too well from the consequences of the radical political experiences associated with the rhetorical extremism of Nietzshe and Heidegger, the two philosophers who have felt most deeply the meaning of the so-called "death of God." The best one can do, it

[12]See Tocqueville, pp. 442-445.

[13]See my "Programatism, Existentialism, and the Crisis in American Political Science," *International Philosophical Quarterly*, forthcoming.

[14]See, for example, Irving Kristol, *Two Cheers for Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1978), especially pp. 55-72. Kristol and Peter Berger are intellectual giants among the so-called neo-conservatives.

appears, is to awaken the makers of public policy to the fact that the preservation of the regime requires a vital Christianity.

Peter Berger and John Neuhaus, as perhaps the key element in their defense of "mediating structures,' have lobbied for the adoption of the "Kurland Rule" (put forth by legal scholar Philip Kurland) in the formulation of public policy. This rule states that "if a policy furthers a legitimate secular purpose it is a matter of legal indifference whether or not that policy employs religious institutions."[15] The First Amendment, Berger and Neuhaus suggest, ought not to be thought of as a justification for either an activistic judiciary or a meddlesome bureaucracy using the power of government to diminish the impact of Christianity on social and political life. The greatest danger, in this regard, is that the expanding scope of government will usurp all but the most narrowly theological functions of the churches. Consequently, religious institutions should not be discriminated against, because they are religious, in the distribution of federal funds for social purposes. The churches, further, should be given maximum possible autonomy in the use of funds, that is, public officials and bureaucratic experts should not use the power of the purse to attempt to secularize the orientation of religious institutions. Berger and Neuhaus even seem to want to go beyond Kurland by suggesting that in certain circumstances there might be good political reasons for the goverment preferring the use of religious institutions in the implementation of social programs.[16]

There is one very serious objection to this sort of strategy. Some Christian leaders argue that a place on the government payroll as an officially approved "mediating structure" will undermine the already tenuous integrity of the churches. They will be directed away from their primary purpose, which is to provide spiritual meaning, toward social service functions associated with the secular welfare state.[17] The worry here concerns the already potent tendency among well meaning Christians to historicize the church's mission. In addition to the theological developments already discussed, the facts of the Christian-Marxist dialogue, the more or less uncritical acceptance by the World Council of Churches of socialist ideology, and the political movements associated with Catholic liberation theology

[15]Peter Berger, *To Empower the peoples: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1978), p. 28. See Philip Kurland, *Religion and the Law* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1962).

[16]*Ibid.*, p. 12 and *passim.*

[17]See, for example, Dean M. Kelley, "Confronting the Danger of the Moment," *Church, State, and Public Policy*, ed. Jay Mechling (Washington: American Enterprise Institute, 1979), p. 19.

in Latin America, are the clearest evidence of this problem. The assumption by the churches of functions dictated by government policy and funded by public money would simply hasten the reduction of the Christian mission to secular and even atheistic purposes. In attemping to strengthen Christianity, the policies recomended by Berger and Neuhaus might have the unintended consequence of weakening it by contributing to the destruction of its spiritual self-understanding.

Despite the strength of this objection, some such policy is needed. Without it, there will be no public recognition of the political utility of the preservation of Christianity, and the growing social service bureaucracy will wield its power in ways antagonistic toward this preservation. Berger and Neuhaus, for this reason, go a long way toward restoring the wisdom of the founders concerning the relationship between secular political morality and religion in opposition to the moral obtuseness and political naivete of the First Amendment absolutists. Nevertheless, I find it difficult to believe that Christianity's deterioration can be reversed or perhaps even significantly retarded by such alterations in public policy. The dynamic involved, I have suggested, is primarily an intellectual one, motivated by intense self-criticism based on historicistic principles occuring within each of the mainstream denominations. As long as public policy remains within the framework of any reasonable interpretation of the First Amendment, it will have very little effect on the phenomenon of the progressive historicization of Christian doctrine.

Without denying some utility to the correction of misguided public policy, it must be argued that the fundamental project facing social and political thinkers today, Berger himself comes close to recognizing in other recent work,[18] is a restoration of the intellectual respectability of orthodox Christianity. A rational defense of the possibility of the truth of Christianity must be put forth which does not do violence to the way orthodox Christianity understands itself. This project might be understood as a politically necessary countermovement to the enlightenment project to discredit and domesticate Christianity. The proportions of any such endeavor are awesome; even many theologians would deny the possibilities of its success. I

[18]Peter Berger, *The Heretical Imperative* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1979). Consider Jay Mechling, "Myth and Meditation: Peter and John Neuhaus' Theodicy for Modern America" *Soundings* 62 (Winter 1979), pp. 338-368. Mechling's article is an interesting attempt to view Berger and Neuhaus' mediating structures project as part of a comprehensive effort on their part to reconstruct a viable religious myth for America. In my view, Berger's thought owes too much to the historicism and existentialism implicit in the Weberian sociological tradition to provide a successful intellectual foundation for such an effort. The critique of modernity which pervades all of his writing is simply not radical enough.

can only suggest a starting point: reflection on the possibility that Christianity has been almost the sole means of preservation of certain possibilities for human excellence which liberal democracy characteristically obscures or denies.[19] This reflection might lead to the conclusion that the doctrine of historicism can be shown to be radically questionable on grounds which owe nothing to revelation.[20] If this conclusion is widely accepted by competent thinkers, influential theologians might be freed from the perceived necessity of the truth of the historicistic insights of Heidegger or some of Heideggerized Marxism. The political requirements of this critical time seem to demand great thinkers, in whose thought this new competence and, in turn, a revitalized Christian theology can be grounded, because only great thinkers transcend the intellectual dogmas of the age.

[19]See, for the beginning of such an argument, Tocqueville, pp. 542-546.

[20]The best philosophic discussion of the questionableness of historicism is Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), pp. 9-34.