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The State We Are In: Modernity, "Religion," and Churches of Christ

JEFF PHILLIPS

INTRODUCTION: THE STATE WE FIND OURSELVES IN: MODERNITY, THEOLOGY, AND "RELIGION"

One of the issues that the faithful church must always address is its proper relationship to the state. For many, seeking to be the church in the American context has meant struggling to come to grips with the challenge of "civil religion." What I want to suggest here is that we pause not simply to consider "civil religion" but to consider the modernist pedigree of our very notion of "religion." This may seem like an odd exercise at first. However, we live in an era that increasingly challenges the assumptions under girding modernity. Some may call this era in which we find ourselves postmodern. But whatever that may mean, our current context is still profoundly shaped by the particular notion of religion that was formed in the crucible of modernity. This notion was formed by a very definite set of assumptions about the proper relationship of church and state. And these assumptions, which shaped our notion of "religion," were rooted in the deprecation of the concrete church.

A faithful response must be aware of how often language bequeaths to us a set of embedded historical judgments and conceptual commitments. Some of these may sometimes serve us well, and some may not. To state this point more generally, our language is but one manifestation of our dependence on the past. Ludwig Wittgenstein offers a helpful picture of how our language bears witness to shifting contexts and historical circumstances. "Our language may be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight and regular streets and uniform houses."¹ This powerful picture communicates something of the way in which our language is shot through with narrative situated-ness. Language itself implies contexts we may no longer fully recall yet nonetheless impact our conceptual/imaginative frameworks. For instance, if we live in an older town we may no longer remember why a particular street changes names past a certain block—it simply does, and we learn to get around in light of the peculiarity.

Here I want to focus particular attention on the way in which "religion" (a seemingly innocuous word) gains its meaning within the context of the emergence of the modern era and its sensibilities. Our modern usage of the term is also related to terms like "private," and "public," as well as a whole narrative concerning the apparent necessity of secularization and the modern socio-political hope of autonomous universal reason. Moreover, we shall see that the rise of "religion" implies a certain theology of the church that modern political philosophers put forward in order to make room for their vision of the state. "Civil religion," when looked at from the angle of these considerations may well be a redundant term, for "religion" already gains its meaning within the dominant political context of the civic or "public" sphere.

In order to make this case I will first offer a very brief conceptual archaeology of "religion" and reflect on some of the consequences of the development of "religion" for ecclesiology. In conclusion, I will address

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1953, 2001), 18.

how the issues raised here may help inform on-going discussions about our current identity crisis within Churches of Christ.

A CONCEPTUAL ARCHAEOLOGY OF “RELIGION” AND THE STATE

It is best to begin with a reminder about the way in which familiar Enlightenment themes like universal reason coalesced with the rise of the modern state, religious violence and “religious war” among “Christian nations.” One of the many outcomes of this story that affected theology most profoundly is the rejection of faith in favor of reason. Another closely related outcome of this story, as we shall see, is the birth of our current notion of “religion.” However, it is important to remember that modernity (in all its variant forms) was not simply an account of pure reason or a list of various recipes for rationality. It was, and is, a social program. Merold Westphal summarizes well these properties of the Enlightenment soil in which various versions of modernity have flowered.

The horror of religious warfare and persecution hung heavy over European history, and when Enlightenment thinkers did not espouse an entirely anti-religious materialism, they sought above all to define a religion that would foster moral unity rather than immoral hostility within and among human societies. This political agenda had both epistemological and ecclesiastical ramifications. For it was believed that a non-violent religion could only rest on the universality of reason and not on the particularity of any special revelation; nor could it reside in any church or sect which claimed authority in matters of faith and practice on the basis of such revelation. In this context, Enlightenment rationalism (or the autonomy of reason) does not signify a rejection of the empiricist appeal to experience in favor of a purely a priori mode of thought; it rather signifies an appeal made by rationalists and empiricists alike *to limit religion on those grounds, whether a priori or experiential, which are available to all people, at all times, and in all places.* The contrast is not between reason and experience but between reason and faith, in so far as the latter is tied to special revelation and a particular “church.”² (emphasis added)

We find in Westphal’s statement many of the familiar motifs of the story of the Enlightenment and modernity. However, less familiar to some is the dichotomy Westphal describes between reason as “public” and religion as “private.” The goal of this distinction was the modern social hope of making “religion” non-violent. To put Westphal’s point in stark terms, in seeking to fulfill their political agenda, Enlightenment thinkers redefined—or by some accounts invented—our modern notion of “religion.” To vastly oversimplify a complex story, these thinkers sought to replace a fractured universal church with universal reason. Whatever did not comport with autonomous, universal, and natural reason—the realm of the public—must be held lightly, for it participates in that vague realm of the particular, historical, subjective, and emotive—the realm of the “private.” “Religion” can be safely practiced if cordoned off in this realm of the private and preferential. However, as Westphal suggests above, this maneuver was *not* simply a move toward the separation of church and state, nor merely a rearrangement of the medieval relationship of church and state. It amounted to the formulation of an ersatz ecclesiology, an artificial notion of church which was meant to

2. Merold Westphal, “The Emergence of Modern Philosophy of Religion,” in *The Blackwell Companion to the Philosophy of Religion*, Philip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, eds. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 112.

subordinate the church and depoliticize it. Hence the church was not only redefined. It was made malleable for manipulation by the state for its own ends.³

There are many things that could be said at this point about the virtues of the separation of church and state and the vices of the horrific practice of the church's use of its power to execute those it construed as heretics. Additionally, the fissure that came about during the period of the Reformation, however tragic, did offer opportunity for questioning the legitimacy of the pact that the church had made with the state. For example, the use of coercive power by the church to compel conformity was a practice rightly protested by some parties to the Reformation and early modern political philosophers. However, what is of concern here is the narrative *rationale* that arose during the early modern era which served as a basis for pushing the church out of the newly-minted "public" arena, and placing it instead inside a private religious container for safe keeping. For brevity's sake I shall refer to this entire shift and set of issues as the myth of the state as savior.⁴

The significance of this historical split between the public/secular and the private/religious still profoundly shapes our conceptual and theological imaginations today. Jeffrey Stout is one of the more astute (though not uncritical) contemporary adherents of the myth of the state as savior. He maintains that "[w]hat can be granted without hesitation is that liberal principles were the right ones to adopt when competing religious beliefs and divergent conceptions of the good embroiled Europe in religious wars." He further claims:

Our early modern ancestors were right to secularize public discourse in the interest of minimizing the ill effects of religious disagreement. In retrospect, they seem to have had little choice. Nor are we free to evade the conclusions to which new forms of reasoning led in theology—conclusions that . . . have left theology unable to step meaningfully again into the public arena. The theology that does step into the public arena pays a price for admission, and this price leaves theology too poor a thing to make much contribution once it has arrived.⁵

Thus, on Stout's reading, secularization, commitment to "public" reason, and privatization of religious belief were necessary to save the state from the church, but such an arrangement leaves theology with

3. A striking example of just such a political philosophy that depends on positioning, or more accurately, swallowing, the church is Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan*. A huge portion of this work is essentially a theological treatise favoring his view of the all-powerful sovereign to act as pastor and provider of security for the body politic. For several different (even rival) accounts of modernity as a social hope, the fate of theology in modernity, secularization and the notion of religion as private see Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle*, 3rd ed revised and expanded (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (Edinburgh, Scotland: T & T Clark, 2002); Jeffrey Stout, *Flight from Authority: Religion, Morality, and the Quest for Autonomy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981); Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1990); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); and Alasdair MacIntyre, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy and Tradition* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1990).

4. I am borrowing this title from William Cavanaugh's lengthy analysis of these issues from a chapter which bears this title in his *Theopolitical Imagination*, 9-53.

5. Stout, 241.

little, if anything, to say in the public sphere. Hence, the modern state is, of necessity, the only possible antidote for what seemed to be interminable religious (read Christian) violence and discord.⁶

However, the narrative of the state as savior is increasingly being called into question. One contemporary theologian who has challenged the adequacy of the standard narrative of secularization is William Cavanaugh. Cavanaugh is one among a variety of historians and interpreters who do not accept the view that state intervention by secularizing “public” space was necessary to keep the church from destroying the body politic. Rather, the creation of the modern state was dependent on the invention of a private sphere called “religion.” In challenging the myth of the state as savior, Cavanaugh counters that the appellation “Wars of Religion” is an inaccurate and anachronistic term, because early modern conflicts had little to do with passions run amok over doctrinal disagreement. The myth of the state as savior gets things exactly backwards. Cavanaugh claims that these wars “. . . were fought largely for the aggrandizement of the emerging state over the decaying remnants of the medieval ecclesial order. . . what was at issue in these wars was the very creation of religion as a set of privately held beliefs without direct political relevance. The creation of religion was necessitated by the new state’s need to secure absolute sovereignty over its subjects.”⁷ Moreover, this process of the state taking over the ecclesial order of the time was already well underway before the allegedly theologically inspired “Wars of Religion.” (Henry VIII’s England is but one example of this early shift in favor of the state.) The medieval view, whatever its flaws, maintained that the temporal and ecclesial authorities were two parts of one body with the ecclesial authority at the top. During the sixteenth century magisterial Reformation, the notion of one body was maintained, but the relationship was inverted with the prince at the pinnacle. As Cavanaugh notes “[t]he eventual elimination of the Church from the public sphere was prepared by the dominance of the princes over the Church in the sixteenth century.”⁸

The inversion of power that began during the Reformation eventually gave birth to the notion of religion (civil religion) in the thought of early modern political theorists like Thomas Hobbes.

The inversion of power that began during the Reformation eventually gave birth to the notion of religion (civil religion) in the thought of early modern political theorists like Thomas Hobbes. One can get a sense of this shift by comparing the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas’s use of *religio* and the use of the term by early moderns. As Cavanaugh notes, for Aquinas *religio* is similar to holiness or sanctity, yet *religio* (religion) deals specifically with the practices of the church. On Aquinas’s account *religio* names a virtue or habit of being directed to God by the practices of the church. As Cavanaugh rightly observes, “In Aquinas’s view virtuous actions do not proceed from rational principles separable from an agent’s particular history; virtuous persons instead are embedded in communal practices of habituation of body and soul that give their lives direction to the good.”⁹

6. It should be noted that Stout now claims to be more open to the possibility that religious voices can and should be heard in the public arena. Also he is more openly critical of the modern nation-state. However, he is still suspicious of those whom he thinks emphasize tradition to the detriment of liberal democracy. One of his primary targets for this critique is his long time friend and dialogue partner Stanley Hauerwas. Interestingly, much of Stout’s criticisms of Hauerwas have their root in Stout’s grasp of the theology of John Howard Yoder and the manner in which Hauerwas combines Yoder and Alasdair MacIntyre. See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004). See also Hauerwas’s rejoinder to Stout in his *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2004).

7. Cavanaugh, 22.

8. *Ibid.*, 26.

9. *Ibid.*, 33.

Aquinas's view is a far country indeed from what emerges from early modern political philosophers. Intermediate phases include Marcilio Ficino's early Renaissance notion of religion as something universal and native to all people. Religion therefore is not connected to any ecclesial context. Rather, it is interior and common to all. Ficino's notion of religion is strikingly similar to some contemporary religious pluralists who assume that whatever the historical vagaries, all religions at bottom are essentially the same. A further shift in meaning takes place during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries toward the notion of religion as a set of beliefs or propositions as witnessed to by the work of Hugo Grotius.¹⁰ By the time of political theorists like Thomas Hobbes, only the sovereign ruler of the state can distinguish true religion from superstition and fear. Interestingly, in the third part of Hobbes's *Leviathan*, he sets out to prove two main theses: 1) that being a Christian means adhering to one single proposition, that Jesus is the Christ and; 2) the Bible teaches that religious power must be subordinated to secular power.¹¹ However, for Hobbes the state power does not simply subordinate the church; the church is more or less absorbed by Leviathan. The sovereign is not only monarch but prophet and priest as well. Cavanaugh maintains that for Hobbes, ". . . the king reserves the right to police all charism and censor any public prophecy." This is in line with Hobbes's view that individuals are free to think what ever they will as long as they refrain from speaking such things in public.¹²

The upshot of all of the above material is that in the modern era "[r]eligion is no longer a matter of certain bodily practices within the Body of Christ, but is limited to the realm of the 'soul' and the body is handed over to the state." Additionally, under the distorting influence of the myth of the state as savior "[t]he concept of religion being born here is one of domesticated belief systems which are, insofar as possible, to be manipulated by the sovereign for the benefit of the state."¹³ Finally, the triumph of the modern notion of "religion" entailed a triumph over the political significance of the concrete practices of the church and, in a sense, increasingly rendered the church's call to socially embody the gospel mysterious, politically irrelevant—or worse, the height of social irresponsibility.

CONCLUDING UNSECTARIAN POSTSCRIPT?

Not only are the above issues of great significance for contemporary ecclesiology, they are also relevant to Churches of Christ and others who share the Stone-Campbell heritage. Consideration of one contemporary question may help clarify the interrelatedness of these issues. A question that in many respects cuts to the heart of the identity crisis among Churches of Christ and the church's reading of itself in relation to the state is the question of whether or not Churches of Christ consider themselves evangelicals. Richard Hughes claims that while restorationists (a category not limited to those in the Stone-Campbell tradition) are not evangelicals, it may well be the case that many in contemporary Churches of Christ could be adequately characterized as evangelicals. On Hughes's account the main distinction between evangelicals and restorationists is rooted in their differences over the Christendom story. Evangelicals under the influence of the Reformed tradition have always had a more positive view of the church's use of the coercive power of the state and a vision for the church gaining political control and influence so that it may exercise pastoral control over the larger culture. As Hughes points out, the Reformed model (along with other wings of the magisterial Reformation) is essentially rooted in a reconfiguration of medieval Christendom. By contrast, restorationists have been profoundly skeptical of the Christendom story. Moreover, restorationist-oriented

10. Ibid.

11. Wallace Matson, *A New History of Philosophy: Volume Two, From Descartes to Searle*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt Brace, 2000), 347.

12. Cavanaugh, 37. See also Part III of Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (New York: Penguin Classics, 1985) on his notion of a Christian commonwealth.

13. Cavanaugh, 35.

theologies cannot be seen as anything but inimical to the Reformed tradition's tendency to make use of the coercive power of the state in the name of God's sovereignty.¹⁴

Churches of Christ have had an increasingly ambiguous relationship to the notion of restoration that has in large measure fueled, if not generated, our contemporary identity crisis. It must be frankly admitted, however, that this ambiguity is an outgrowth of our legacy of exclusivist sectarianism, which has haunted our own theological imaginations. For many in Churches of Christ, it is sometimes difficult to hear that we need to reexamine our notion of restorationism when for many that notion has often been associated with stridency and obscurantism. However, not only does our current identity confusion call us to address the meaning of this central theme from our past (i.e. Hughes's question—a question many are asking—“Are Churches of Christ evangelical?”) but also the larger contemporary issue of how the church is to embody its witness in the world without having its identity predetermined by the powers. As a tradition, if we continue to maintain that there is something wrong with the Christendom story and the kind of association that the church has often had with the state in the history of the Western church, then we will likely find meaningful theological resources from our past for reinterpreting restorationism for the present.

There are many things that could be said at this point about what it might mean to correctively re-appropriate the restorationist motif; clearly these issues need to be at the forefront of ongoing dialogue. Whatever we may ultimately conclude about the usefulness of restorationism, the problem of sectarianism remains a temptation for theologies that do not embrace *all* of God's created order as their “public” domain, and embrace instead the state's narrowly limited, self-interested imagination as definitive of what counts as the public sphere—the sphere of culturally relevant responsible action. It is important to recognize that any theological tradition that does not imagine the “public” as including all of God's *oikoumene*, or household, is in danger of sectarianism. Therefore, even if we were to determine that restorationism cannot help but consign us to eternal theological bumpkinhood, we could not thereby think that we had washed our hands of the danger of sectarianism. Our way in the world is not set first by a theory of what is owed to whom in the “public” sphere; it is set by a person who owed us nothing and gave us the riches of heaven. Before such grace we are all God's public.

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14. Richard Hughes, *Reclaiming a Heritage: Reflections on the Heart, Soul and Future of Churches of Christ* (Abilene, TX: Abilene Christian University Press, 2002), 93-118. For an equally helpful and provocative perspective on the current situation in Churches of Christ see also Leonard Allen, *Things Unseen: Churches of Christ In (and After) the Modern Age* (Siloam Springs, AR: Leafwood Publishers, 2004).