# Religion and Politics: Revisiting an Old Problem in Light of Different Models of Thought

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*Secularisation theories often fail to distinguish between, on the one hand, the justified differentiation of religion and politics and the separation of church and state, and, on the other hand, the uncritical contentions about the marginalisation and privatisation of religion. In response to J. Casanova's interpretation of the disestablishment of Catholicism and his argument for a more active involvement of religion in civil society, this article revisits several models of thought with regards to the relationship between religion and politics (e.g., separation, fusion,* status confessionis*, Max Weber's thesis in Politics as Vocation, civil religion, public theology, political theology, and mediation models such as Christian democracy and liberation theology). Taking into account the merits and weaknesses of each model, an argument is made for a complex approach of the participation of Christians in politics which moves beyond confining religion to merely the sphere of civil society.*

## Politics and Religion after Secularisation

The relationship between religion and politics is a complex matter. Both are not clearly fixed, unchangeable realities but phenomena in evolution. This evolution is, however, not always adequately understood by contemporary secularisation theories which, according to José Casanova[1], often create confusion between three different interpretations: (1) secularisation as a process of functional or structural differentiation, shaping a situation in which both politics or the state and religion can claim their internal and lawful autonomy,

1. José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 19-39.

an evident manifestation of which is the separation of church and state; (2) secularisation as decline of religion in general or institutionalised religion in particular; and (3) secularisation as privatisation of religion.

According to José Casanova, the differentiation thesis is still an adequate representation of reality, but this is no reason to conclude that secularisation "*necessarily* entails the marginalisation and privatisation of religion."[2] The thesis on the marginalisation of religion is simply contradicted by facts. Longitudinal studies demonstrate that there is, for example in North America, no discernable decline of religion[3]. In Western Europe, the situation is somewhat different. For example, a study issued by the Dutch Scientific Council for Government Policy argues that religion in the Netherlands is simultaneously characterized by a progressing secularisation and the emergence of a 'post-secular society' in which a renaissance of religion manifests itself mainly outside the realm of classical institutionalised religion, while this form of religion remains crucial for the well functioning of the Dutch society[4].

The most problematic interpretation is "secularisation as privatisation of religion" thesis. This is again contradicted by facts. Since the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, most armed conflicts where intra-state and partially influenced by religious sentiments. Since the publication of Gilles Kepel's diagnosis in 'The Revenge of God', the return of religion on the international and national political scene is generally acknowledged by scholars[5] and confirmed by historical events. Clear examples are the tragic events of 11 September 2001, the struggle for power by the extremist Taliban in Afghanistan and

2. Ibid., 7.

3. Ibid., 28.

4. Gerrit Kronjee en Martijn Lampert, *Leefstijlen in zingeving*, in Wim B.H.J. van de Donk, A.P. Jonkers, G.J. Kronjee en R.J.J.M. Plum, eds., *Geloven in het publieke domein. Verkenningen van een dubbele transformatie* (Den Haag/Amsterdam: WRR/Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 171-208.

5. In most cases, it is not religion as such but a dangerous mix of ethno-centrist or nationalist motives and religious sentiments that causes intra-state violence. See, for instance, Scott Appleby, *The Ambivalence of the Sacred. Religion, Violence, and Reconciliation* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littelfield, 2000).

Pakistan, the regime of the Ayatollahs in Iran, the impact of the Christian Right on U. S. politics during the Bush era, the proposal by the archbishop of the Church of England to discuss the possibility of a partial adoption of the *sharia* in the juridical system of England, etc. There are also the non-violent revolutions generated by church communities, such as the peaceful demonstrations by Christians in the Thomas church in Leipzig which triggered the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, and the non-violent overthrowing of the Marcos dictatorship in the Philippines in 1986.

Such events have generated publications with titles such as 'religion the missing dimension of statecraft' or 'faith based diplomacy'[6].

## *The Focus of this Article*

It is, however, not sufficient to acknowledge that religion plays again a significant role in politics, we also need to discern in what regards the re-entry of religion in the public sphere can be justified. In order to do so we need to distinguish "three differentiated arenas: the state, political society and civil society."[7] While, according to Casanova, religion (as 'disestablished religion') must withdraw from the first two arenas, it still has a legitimate place in civil society. This raises two questions: is the political involvement of religion indeed limited to only the civil society? And, notwithstanding this question, what does the return of religion in the political sphere mean for a transformative presence of Christian churches or groups in the public sphere? In order to clarify these questions, I will scrutinize the main models of thinking on church and politics which have been proposed in the course of the history of Christian theology and I will try to discern what lessons can be learned from them with regards to the contemporary situation.

6. Douglas Johnston and Cynthia Sampson, eds., *Religion, the Missing Dimension of Statecraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994) and Douglas Johnston, ed., *Faith-Based Diplomacy. Trumping Realpolitik* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

7. José Casanova, *Public Religions*, 61.

## Different Models of Thought

The historical theological models can be ordered according to a way of reasoning proposed by Michael Walzer. Imagine the different models of thinking about the relationship of religion and politics "as if they were laid out along a continuum" marked off "according to the degree of coinciding or separating both"[8]. Starting with the two ends of the continuum, we can distinguish two extremes: to the left the absolute separation of religion and politics, and to the right the fusion of both.

## The Separation of Religion and Politics

The left extreme of the continuum is the separation of religion and politics. Throughout the history of Christianity this model has been articulated via several theological sub-models. Its most obvious expression is the modern separation of church and state, which can take different forms.

### *Civitas Dei and Civitas Terrena*

The separation model finds its roots in the distinction made by Augustine between the *civitas Dei* (the city of God) and *civitas terrena* (the realm of secular politics). This distinction has remained influential until today, not only in the Protestant traditions (and not least in Milbank's radical orthodoxy), but also in the official social teaching of the Catholic Church as it is for example articulated in the encyclical *Deus caritas est* of Benedict XVI. Particularly in the second part of this encyclical the former head of the congregation for the doctrine of the faith makes a remarkable distinction between the task of the state to ensure justice, and the duty of Christians to practice charity. In *Deus caritas est*, the distinction between the two realms, when not understood in the light of later nuances in *Caritas in veritate*, might serve as a justification of a problematic shift in official catholic social

8. Michael Walzer, "International Society: What is the Best We Can Do?" in *Ethical Perspectives*, 6: 3-4 (1999), 201-210.

thought, from a justice discourse focusing on the action of the Church for justice to a charity discourse which makes abstraction from the structural and institutional context of the Christian praxis. Such a focus on charity, when detached from its dialectics with justice, risks to become the ally of the libertarian reduction of justice which advocates for a free and paternalistic transfer of goods from the benevolent wealthy to the poor who have to simply depend on the free will of donors. As the libertarian philosopher Robert Nozick puts it: "from each as they choose, to each as they are chosen"; clearly the libertarian alternative to the socialist justice principle of "to each according to their needs, from each according to their abilities."[9]

The tendency to limit the task of the Church community to merely charity and to convey the action for justice to the state is, for example, quite prominently present in the official *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Catholic Church* (2004), a document which does not mention the crucial document *Justitia in Mundo* of the 1971 Synod of Bishops. In the chapter on the principles of Catholic Social Teaching, justice is degraded from a 'principle' to a 'fundamental value of social life', which is quite alien to the tradition, and subordinated to charity[10], while, at least once, the document reintroduces the pre-Vatican II concept of the church as *societas perfecta*. Together with John Paul II's plea for a witnessing church and a heroic morality, this might be interpreted as a step away from a 'denominational' church to a 'sectarian' church –in the descriptive meaning of the word as articulated by Ernst Troeltsch[11]; and as such this has more affinity with the 'church as contrast society model'

9. I have articulated this thesis in detail in Johan Verstraeten,"Justice Subordinated to Love? The Changing Agenda of Catholic Social Teaching since *Populorum progressio*," in Johan De Tavernier, Joseph Selling, Johan Verstraeten, Paul Schotsmans, eds., *Responsibility, God and Society. Theological Ethics in Dialogue* (Leuven: Peeters, 2008), 389-405.

10. In the compendium love is described as "the highest and universal criterion of the whole of social ethics" (no. 204), as something that "presupposes and transcends justice" (no. 206). The most controversial statement is the exclusive one: "Only love, in its quality as 'form of the virtues', can animate and shape social interaction…" (no. 207). The problem here is the word 'only'.

11. Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches*, Volume 2, (Louisville/London/Westminster: John Knox Press, 1992; reprint of the original translation from German by Olive Wyon published in 1931), 461-467.

proposed by Stanley Hauerwas or J. Milbank and the radical orthodoxy movement, than with classical Thomist or scholastic thinking. According to Stanley Hauerwas, Christian social ethics should not be based on a dialogue with the secular world. Its task is "*to reassert the social significance of the Church as a distinct society with an integrity particular to itself.*" Christians must discover that "*their most important social task is nothing less than to be a community capable of hearing the story of God we find in scripture and living in a manner that is faithful to that story.*"[12] In so far as the distinct character of the church does not lead to a separation from the politics of the world, there is no problem[13], as Gerhard Lohfink argues about the "non-violent church as contrast society", since those who follow the particular Christian way of life still inhabit the real world which they transform and challenge by their simple presence. In this way one can say 'Gottes lösung ist ein politicum' (God's solution constitutes a political fact).

However, when the 'church as contrast society' becomes a counter-society of its own, with a 'counter ontology' and 'a counter' ethics, and constitutes itself as sociolinguistic reality of its own (Milbank)[14] or as a sort of pre-Vatican II type of 'fortress against the evil world' or, in the terms of the Compendium, a *societas perfecta*, she runs the risk of shaping, in the name of its distinct character, a world on itself, with its own established institutions and ethos of caritas, which communicates to the world via exhortations to and participation of Christians as individuals, without them being inserted in the complex political contexts of today as a transformative Church community and without paying attention to the institutional aspects of Christian action in the real world.

## Two Regiments

Another version of the separation thesis is the protestant 'two-kingdom theory', which is erroneously attributed to Martin Luther. In his nuanced theory of the 'two regiments' (*zwei Regimente*) Luther

12. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character. Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethics* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 1.

13. Rolando Tuazon, "Narrating Christian Social Ethics from the Margins," in *Hapag* 4:1-2 (2007), 27-60; here in 38.

14. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

distinguishes the 'worldly regiment' from the 'spiritual realm'[15]. The spiritual sphere refers to the interior life of both the citizens and the prince. It is not based on power but on the ethics of the gospel. The worldly government is based on the use of the sword and concerns the exercise of political power. The prince as individual person is both a 'world person' and a 'Christ person', but his public office must not be based on religious motives. On the other hand, his use of power is not to be based on a sort of amoral Machiavellianism but on moral norms, more precisely on natural law and reason[16]. Throughout his life as a reformer Luther has remained very consistent in his refusal to confuse religion with politics. This is the reason why he rejected the use of political power by the papacy and this was also the reason why he advised the German princes to combat the revolutionary peasants and Anabaptists, not because of their faith, but because they created disorder in society.

## *Two-Kingdom Theory*

Luther's nuanced distinction became an extreme 'two-kingdom theory' during the Nazi period. While in Luther's opinion the power of the state is still subjected to the non-arbitrary normative framework of natural law, the theologians of the 'Reichskirche' (Lutheran Church of the German Empire) have interpreted the 'two-kingdom theory' in terms of a strict separation between state and religion to such an extent that the citizens were called to obey the state and its positive laws, even when these laws, as expression of the sovereign will of the legislator, were discriminatory against the Jews and thus unethical. Simultaneously, Christian faith life became completely ruled out from the public realm and exiled to the private sphere.[17] This absolute privatisation of faith destroyed the very possibility of church resistance against radical social evil.

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15. Martin Luther, "Von weltlicher Obrigkeit, wie weit man ihr Gehorsam schuldig sei (1523)"in Karin Bornkamm, Gerhard Ebeling (Hrsg.), *Martin Luther. Ausgewälte Schriften*, Band IV: *Christ sein und weltliches Regiment* (Frankfurt: Insel Verlag, 1982), 45.

16. Hans-Walter Schütte, "Zwei-Reiche-Lehre und Königherrschaft Christi " in *Handbuch der Christlichen Ethik*, Band 1 (Freiburg/Basel/Wien: Herder, 1978), 339-353.

17. Ibid.

One might think that the radical interpretation of the 'two-kingdom theory' ceased to exist as soon as the Nazis were defeated. Nothing is less true, since it has re-emerged in another, more secular and moderate form in the liberal method of avoidance. In order to find a normative basis for 'liberal democracy', liberal philosophers have ostracised the so-called 'religious convictions' from the discussion on how to justify the procedures for a just exercise of political power. In a more nuanced form, the liberal theories require that, before religions can participate in public discussions, religious ideas have to become comprehensive doctrines which accept to thinning out the conflicting thicknesses of their convictions.[18]

Despite the nuances, particularly in the work of J. Rawls, the liberal model leads in fact to a reduction of political ethics to an application of formal procedures and not a vision based on a shared understanding of the common good. In fact this leads to a reduction of the political realm to an 'amoral' sphere "from which moral or religious considerations ought to be excluded." The consequence is "that religion, like moral virtue, became so sentimentalised, subjectivized and privatized that it lost not only public power but also inter-subjective public relevance."[19] If that is true, religions become not only silenced in the public sphere, they also become powerless and incapable of "maintaining the very principle of a *common* good, against individualist modern liberal theories which would reduce the common good to the aggregate sum of individual choices" and so public "morality dissolves into arbitrary decisionism."[20]

## The Fusion of Religion and Politics

### *Unmediated Approaches*

Moving now to the right end of the spectrum, we can situate the opposite model which is the fusion of religion and politics, church and state. This model can take different forms, from theocratic

18. Richard J. Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons. An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 32.

19. José Casanova, *Public Religions*, 64.

20. Ibid., 229.

systems in which political power coincides with the religious power, to all sorts of Caesaro-papist options. The theocratic model, which we find in situations where extreme fundamentalists or extremists take over the state, is characterized by a fundamental lack of mediation: political decisions are taken directly in the name of God and His revealed law, or at least, the theocrats give that impression, even when their explicit appeal to God or his law is nothing else than a mask for their will to power (I can refer here to the cynical attitude of the Taliban who finance their violent struggle for power with the sale of hard drugs).

Whatever might be the case, in a theocratic constellation, there is no room for modern freedoms such as the freedom of speech, freedom of opinion, or freedom of religion. One of the remarkable characteristics of the contemporary version of the theocratic model, at least according to Anthony Giddens, is that it cannot be interpreted simply as a return to the past, since the recent fundamentalist revolutions are post-modern reactions to the universal dominance of the western 'discursive arrangements' of the global capitalistic economy[21]. In this regard, there is more at stake than merely a religious question.

## *Moderate Forms*

The tendency to confuse religion and politics does not always take the form of a radical theocracy. It is also present in moderate forms, and as such it is not completely alien to the history of modern Catholicism. One can refer here to the pre-Vatican II preference for catholic states and catholic political parties (a preference which harmed the first political parties of Christian workers, such as the condemnation of Daens and his Christian democrats which were seen as a threat to the interests of the Catholic Party in Belgium); the Christ King ideology and its influence on, for example, the extreme right movement of Charles Maurras in France; the proclamation by Pius XI of the autocratic government of Dolfuss in Austria (before the takeover by the Nazis) as 'the realisation of the *Quadragesimo anno*

21. Anthony Giddens, *Beyond Left and Right. The Future of Radical Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 48.

state'. Another example is the theology of some of the catholic new movements such as *Comunione e Liberazione*, where the presence of Christ in history is interpreted as a 'totalising fact', a thesis which leads to a lack of critical mediation between spirituality and political action.

Equally problematic in this perspective is the active collaboration of catholic movements such as catholic action movements in fascist regimes (which has been the case in Italy, Portugal, Brazil, Spain, etc.) although, it must be admitted, the participation of Catholics in Catholic governments has not always been without critical distance or positive results on the long term. In Spain, for instance, Opus Dei members of government under Franco have actively contributed – against the extreme right phalanx- to the process of democratisation, although this was not directly based on the authority of the Church for it has happened with due respect to the right sort of autonomy of the political sphere.

### *Intervention in Political Matters by the Hierarchy*

Another manifestation of this model is the direct religious intervention in politics, not on the level of the state, but on the level between the state and the civil society, the level of the party political struggle for power or the political struggle during elections. An example is the direct intervention by bishops in the elections by way of advices to vote for particular candidates or against a candidate which does not fully support their pro-life agenda. My critique here does not concern as such their specific moral concern or their preaching of a moral message, but their direct intervention in the political sphere, which is a violation of the separation between church and state.

### *The* Status Confessionis

There is, however, an exceptional case, where the identification of faith and politics becomes not only an acceptable, but perhaps even an unavoidable must: the *status confessionis*. In the protestant tradition, the proclamation of the *status confessionis* means that a political choice and a faith decision coincide when a government, legislation

or political system becomes so terribly inhuman that it is clearly not compatible with Christian faith. This was the case with the racist policy of Nazi Germany. While the mainstream Lutheran Church justified the Nazi policy on the basis of the two kingdom theory, the Confessing Church (*Bekennende Kirche*) to which Bonhoeffer belonged, proclaimed in its *Barmer Thesen* that the acceptance of the discrimination and persecution of the Jews was ipso facto a betrayal of the gospel. In this regard the *status confessionis* necessarily implies the *status separationis*: according to the *Bekennende Kirche*, Christians who accepted Nazism and its racist laws had *ipso facto* excluded themselves from the Church community. A similar *status confessionis* was proclaimed against the apartheid regime in South Africa by some members of the World Council of Churches: the 'yes' to apartheid was automatically a rejection of Christ and his gospel.

I think that Catholics should not exclude the possibility of a *status confessionis* as a source of resistance in cases such as genocide, massive and systematic crimes against humanity, systematic use of torture, systematic oppression of the poor etc., in short in situations where references to the autonomy of the political order or the state have become cynical. But in such cases the faith decision about a political state of affairs is not simply an unmediated faith decision, because the 'yes' or 'no' to Christ can only be justified after a careful analysis of the inhumane character of the situation; as such, the *status confessionis* takes the form of a mediation based on an analysis of the signs of the times in the light of the gospel, or, better yet, in light of a discernment based on a combination of a socio-political and hermeneutic mediation[22]. In Catholic Social Thought, there is no direct or unmediated faith decision about political state of affairs possible.

Interpreted as such, the *status confessionis* has some affinity with the extreme emergency acceptance of revolution by the CELAM conference at Medellin where the very cautious warning of Pope Paul VI in PP 31 became a more positive statement by reversing the

22. I have extensively explained the meaning of 'scrutinizing the signs of the times' in Johan Verstraeten, "Catholic Social Thought as Discernment" in Johan Verstraeten (ed.), *Scrutinizing the Signs of the Times in the Light of the Gospel* (Leuven: Peeters/University Press, 2007), 1-14.

order of the phrase: "If it is true that revolutionary insurrection can be legitimate in the case of evident and prolonged 'tyranny that seriously works against fundamental human rights, and which damages the common good of the country', whether it proceeds from one person or from clearly unjust structures, it is also certain that violence or armed revolution generally 'generates new injustices, introduces new imbalances and causes new disasters'; one cannot combat a real evil at the price of a real evil."[23] From what follows it is clear that the acceptance of violence ("building a regime of justice and freedom while participating in a process of violence") is reluctantly and only *ultima ratio* accepted, but with a preference for peace and non-violence.[24] In this regard, the 1986 non-violent revolution against the Marcos regime is a good example.

Thus far, the two extreme models of separation and fusion, and their respective sub-models. Let us now again turn to the left of the spectrum and pose a crucial question: which models help us to overcome the separation of politics and religion?

## The Tragic Hero of Max Weber[25]

### *Politics as Vocation*

A first attempt to bridge the gap between politics and religion is via the courageous attitude of a politician with a genuine 'calling' or 'vocation', the politician who combines the ethics of political responsibility with the ethics of religious conviction. One the one hand, the ethics of responsibility is very different from what Weber describes as "the a-cosmic ethics of the sermon of the mount". The 'genius or demon of politics' is, according to him, poised in an

23. Donal Dorr, *Option for the Poor: A Hundred Years of Catholic Social Teaching* (Dublin: Gill and MacMillan, 1992), 209-211.

24. Ibid., 210.

25. I have articulated this theme in more detail in Johan Verstraeten, "The Tension between 'Gesinnungsethik' and 'Verantwortungsethik'. A Critical Interpretation of the Position of Max Weber in 'Politik als Beruf'," in *Ethical Perspectives* 2:4(1995)180-187.

"interior tension with the God of love, a tension that can collapse at any moment into an unendurable conflict." Weber nevertheless maintains that having a conviction is as important as the courage to use force. The ethics of conviction provides the politician with fundamental moral ends which act as safeguard against pure Machiavellianism. On the other hand, the ethics of responsibility is a guarantee against a lack of realism. The courageous combination of both is, according to Weber, the characteristic of the mature politician who dares to "stick his hands into the spokes of the wheel of history".

## *'Tragic Hero' Model?*

But, following Michael Walzer, is the solution offered by Weber really possible? How can one simultaneously save the purity of one's soul and act with dirty hands? Is Weber's mature politician not a tragic hero who finally fails in his or her endeavour to realise the aimed good? Is this tragic hero not a powerless liberal individual who has no grip on the institutional and structural context? Is he not a lonely and powerless hero who, like St. Thomas More, courageously defends his religious convictions in the political realm but whose life ends on the scaffold? Is Weber moreover not too much influenced by the specific context of Germany in the aftermath of the First World War, when anarchy governed the streets of Berlin and violent groups were trying to conquer power? Is that not the reason why he puts so much emphasis on the use of force? Does Weber not overlook the normal course of democratic decision making?

It is not possible to discuss these questions here at length but a few observations are necessary for our purpose. First, the real intertwining of politics and religion requires a more extensive mediation than merely the conscience of the individual politician and urges us to discern on which level Christian communities can operate 'politically', hence the question: what is the institutional context for Christian political action? Second, the tragic hero need not be a lonely individual. Courageous attempts to realise justice in complex political contexts are always carried by movements and not by individual politicians alone. The subject of history is not the individual, but the historical carrier of transformative or status-quo confirming praxis. And in as far as individual heroic politicians are leaders of

these movements their action is always inspired by a living tradition and a community which carries it. In this perspective, one must investigate how a Christian Church community can become or join (1) a historical transformative movement or (2) become an inspiring, sustaining and, where necessary, correcting and forgiving community for political leaders who in their zeal for justice are acting with dirty hands. Here the questions are: what is for example the historical position of catholic movements? How can the Catholic faith community contribute to the education and formation of genuine political leaders who are capable of 'doing the right thing' instead of acting according to the politics-as-usual format?

Some aspects of Weber's solution merit to be kept in mind:

(1) In situations of total anarchy and manifest or institutionalised violence, it is impossible to protect life and the good life without gaining political power or without courage and resistance to fear. In order to do good in a violent context, a Christian politician cannot have clean hands or a 'pure soul'.

(2) In order to avoid Machiavellianism, it is necessary that politicians are guided by moral values and this is impossible without an inspiring community.

(3) Christians who enthusiastically join revolutionary movements should keep in mind Weber's warning against "romantic emotions of those who let themselves be carried away in revolutionary adventure". They have the responsibility to take into account the real and evil consequences of the use of violence.

(4) In some situations, when effective action is not possible and all power is lost, a courageous politician can play a crucial historical role as a witness of the human values that are at stake. In this regard the assassinated Oscar Romero is a good example. Although he was not a politician in the strict sense, he was a bishop who fully took political responsibility in a situation of chaotic violence and did not fear to stick his hands into the wheel of history, and as such he was historically effective on the long term as witness of the possibility to maintain respect for life and justice in the middle of a violent chaos.

These comments on the solution of Weber bring us to the next two positions: one, a step way from the right (civil religion/public theology); the other, a step away from the left (political theology).

## Civil Religion

### *Rousseau*

In its most elementary form, civil religion is a form of ideological use of religion in support of the state. In theology it can take the form of a 'public theology'. According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the concept of 'civil religion' needs to be distinguished from what he calls the religion of the priest, the religion of man and the religion of the citizen. In chapter 8 of *Du Contrat Social* (On the Social Contract) Rousseau explains that the religion of the priest should be rejected because it puts people in a situation of a double loyalty, a dual sovereignty, and thus causing a perpetual conflict. It fails to produce loyal subjects.[26] The religion of the citizen should equally be rejected because it sacralises the nation and the state, and leads to "intolerant national chauvinism and sanguinary jingoism."[27] Idem with the religion of man which worships humanity as holy, sublime and true and transforms all the human race into brothers[28] - a religion which I do not reject despite Rousseau's opinion that it is politically useless since it has no particular connection to the body politic of a particular state.

The only valid option is civil religion, which Rousseau defines as a "purely civil profession of faith, the articulation of which is the business of the Sovereign to arrange, not precisely as dogmas of religion, but as sentiments of sociability, without which it is possible to be either a good citizen or a faithful subject."[29] The question however is whether this sort of civil religion "as conceptualised at the state level as a source integrating normatively the political community" or "sociologically at the societal level as a force integrating normatively the societal community" is likely to reappear

26. José Casanova, *Public Religions*, 59.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid., 60, but I have made corrections to Casanova's translation.

in modern societies.[30] For Casanova, the answer is clear: "to postulate the existence of such a civil religion is theoretically untenable and normatively undesirable."[31] In his book, *The Good Society*, Robert Bellah seems to agree with him:

> A simple functionalism regarding religion only as a contribution to social integration is manifestly false, since religious groups have frequently voiced disruptive demands that polarized society and led to severe conflict (as in the case of the religious abolitionists). But even a subtler functionalism that evaluates religion only with its contribution to the social good, whether integrative or disruptive, also distorts the deeper meaning of the religious life. In all the biblical religions, the ultimate loyalty is to God (…) and not to America.[32]

The point is that, according to Bellah, religious communities are not only concerned with the common good of the nation "but to the common good of all human beings". Their loyalty goes more to God than the state, and, against Rousseau, one can say that precisely that is the best of their contribution. "To forget this", contends Bellah, "is perhaps the most important thing we need to understand about the role of religion in society."[33] Its role is consequently as much critical as integrative, hence the necessity of a critical political theology.

## *Public Theology*

This critical political theology should, however, not be confused with the explicit functionalist use of religion in the neoconservative 'public theology'. Public theology in the general sense is

> a way of doing theology that has its focus on issues of public concern in the contemporary world. Public theology engages critically with Christian belief and practice in relation to public affairs. It does

30. Ibid., 60.
31. Ibid., 61.
32. Robert Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, Steven M. Tipton, *The Good Society* (New York:Alfred Knopf, 1992), 181.
33. Ibid., 182.

> so through theological reflection, inter-disciplinary discussion and inter-faith dialogue with those who have a shared concern about public issues in other disciplines and from other perspectives.[34]

The neo-conservative version of public theology is, however, an attempt to use theology as a provider of meaning or as a legitimisation for the political order. This has a positive side, since these theologians reaffirm the role of religion in the public sphere. Their common denominator is the idea that patriotic virtues cannot be cultivated without a common ethical-religious framework which provides the state with 'meaning' and with a critical distance ('nation under God').

In its liberal expression, public theology takes the form of what Michael Novak has called 'the empty shrine', the recognition of 'the reverential emptiness' of an imagined shrine which is the sacred basis of a pluralistic society.[35] The empty shrine represents a rejection of a "socially imposed vision of the good": the state does not have the right to define what the good of society should be. This is the theological legitimisation of the neutral state we have seen and rejected earlier. In its more problematic radical form, public theology becomes a plea for a critical patriotism based on the idea of "a nation under God" and a constitution whose values are exclusively grounded on the Judaeo-Christian tradition[36]. This idea, as advocated by Richard John Neuhaus, tends to legitimize the exclusion or political marginalisation of citizens who belong to non-Judaeo-Christian religions. In a context where the 'war on terrorism' is waged this idea constitutes a threat to the Muslim population. Imagine the same idea for the Philippines!

But this is not all. There is in the so-called public theology a striking contradiction. Advocates like Michael Novak love to quote authors who refer to the American Revolution and independence as a sort of historical liberation theology. Novak, for example, refers to Jefferson's words about "The God who made us free" and to the words of John Adams as quoted by Arendt: "I always consider

34. From http://www.div.ed.ac.uk/theolissues (accessed October 6, 2009).

35. Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1983), 68.

36. Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*, 61.

the settlement of America as the opening of a grand scheme and design in providence for the illumination of the ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish part of mankind all over the earth." Is it not contradictory that those who, on the one hand, proclaim that God has made them free from 'the bondage of Europe/Egypt' deny the right to liberation to people who are not U.S. citizens, on the other? Such a contradictory way of thinking is not a genuine political theology.

## POLITICAL THEOLOGY

Political theology is mainly a product of German theologians such as Metz, Moltmann, Sölle and Eicher. Its main tenets can be summarized briefly as follows:[37]

(1) The privatisation of religion should be rejected because it makes resistance against structural violence and against inhumane policies impossible, as the powerlessness of the privatised Christian churches during the Nazi time demonstrates;

(2) In order to realise the ideals of the enlightenment, one needs more than abstract ideas, but the realisation of the political conditions for possibility of real freedom;

(3) The eschatological proviso cannot be an ideological instrument against the political involvement of the Church. The promises to which the proviso refers are "not an empty horizon of religious expectation" but a "critical liberating imperative for our present times" which impels us "again and again into a new critical, liberating position over and against the present social milieu around us and its established conditions."[38] Nevertheless, the proviso also serves as critical leverage against the identification of inner-worldly technological or political claims to bring ultimate salvation.

37. Our summary is mainly based on Johann Baptist Metz, *Zur Theologie der Welt*, translated in Dutch: *Theologie over de wereld* (Brugge: Desclée de Brouwer, 1970).

38. Johan Baptist Metz, "Religion and Society in the Light of a Political Theology" in *Harvard Theological Review* 61:4 (1968) 507-523; here, 513-514.

> For Metz, the Kingdom of God is not a pure utopia achieved by means of human progress.

A genuinely critical political theology insists on maintaining the tension between the 'yet' and the 'not yet', but such strong insistence is combined with ideology criticism, particularly in the form of a critique against the use of religion to legitimize the established order. Such a use, Peter Eicher contends, is in fact nothing else than the realisation of the interests of the ruling classes or simply, as Emmanuel Mounier puts it, of the 'established disorder'. In this regard we can paraphrase the words of Aloysius Cartagenas about Catholic Social Teaching: theology should "resist the temptation of being in the business of repairing the status quo simply because certain norms or criteria have failed or are not implemented in the face of complex and deeply rooted problems."[39] Consequently, for political theology, the Church should be a company of critics which refuses the usurpation of the shared understanding by the powers that be. One can call this 'semantic vigilance'.[40]

Despite the fact that the German political theology has contributed to the 'disestablishment of Catholicism'[41] its programme has in a certain regard failed. Not because of its lack of theoretical consistency, but because of its practical weakness: political theology has not been developed in connection with a real subject, with a real political carrier. As an academic programme it failed to associate itself with real epoch making historical grassroots movements. It remained quite marginal, with one exception: its direct influence on the liberation theologians who studied in Europe and developed a new theology as rational and evangelical articulation of the praxis of basic ecclesial communities, and had become the allies of the poor in their struggle for liberation.

This brings me to the next two models, which are characterized by an attempt to mediate faith and political praxis: Christian democracy and liberation theology.

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39. Aloysius L. Cartagenas, "The Challenge of Interdisciplinarity to Catholic Social Teaching" in *Hapag* 4:1-2 (2007) 103-131; here, 127.

40. Johan Verstraeten, *Catholic Social Thought as Discernment*, 11-13.

41. José Casanova, *Public Religions*, 62.

## Two Different Mediations of Religion and Politics

### *Christian Democracy*

To the right there, is Christian Democracy which has the advantage to mediate between faith and politics via humanist or personalist political ideas, often based on the work of Jacques Maritain (cf. 'Integral Humanism') and Emmanuel Mounier. It is an ideology in the positive sense as described by the document of the CELAM conference at Puebla in 1979, being "necessary for social activity, insofar as they are mediating factors leading to action."[42] It has an affinity with official Catholic Social Teaching insofar as it has adopted ideas such as the peaceful collaboration between the social classes (typical for a 'people's party'), care for the common good, solidarity and subsidiarity. Simultaneously, as a political movement, Christian democrats claim full autonomy vis à vis the *magisterium* of the church[43].

In the context of Europe, Christian democratic parties have contributed to realising an alternative to the Anglo-Saxon capitalism. Together with social democratic parties, they introduced the 'Rhineland economic model' which constitutes a mixed economy, combining the free market with the achievements of a social democratic social assistance state corrected by the principle of subsidiarity. Despite their genuine attempt to mediation, the Christian democratic parties failed however in other continents for at least two reasons: (1) They were not capable of taking into account the reality of conflict, particularly in societies characterized by structural injustice. In such a context its harmony model created a false representation of reality. (2) Their concrete party-based political praxis as 'people's parties' is moreover a problematic mix of quite different interests which often contradict the confessed principles.

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42. Cited in John Desrochers, *The Social Teaching of the Church* (Bangalore, 1982), 346.

43. One can note here that the political autonomy of the first Christian democratic parties, which in fact were Christian workers parties acting politically against the interests of the bourgeois Catholic Parties of that time, were rejected by Leo XIII in his encyclical *Graves de communi re*, which states that workers have the right to create their own unions in the social sphere but not their own political parties.

As such, Christian Democracy is often caught in an internal tension or conflict between several fractions. Its Christian workers' wing, for instance, tends towards a social democratic policy, its employers' wing tends to adopt libertarian and free market oriented options, and the farmers' wing defends often a protectionist policy. Only in Europe has the Christian democracy resulted in the creation of the Rhineland model which has, in this context, still not lost its relevance. Casanova's judgment is in this regard too negative. According to him, Christian Democracy, like Catholic Action, has, as part of the European system of pillarization, no future. Hence he concludes that "the age of 'reactive organicism' has come to an end". Although I accept his thesis on the "disestablishment of Catholicism", his judgment underestimates the resilience of the Christian democratic model in Europe. On the other hand, Casanova is right that Christian democratic parties have lost their monopoly position as unique parties for Christians. Their social organisations with which they are connected (such as the Christian workers movement) claim autonomy vis à vis the Christian Democratic Party political establishment (although in some countries they are part of it) and, as a matter of fact, individual Christians can choose political affiliations with other autonomous parties, including the social democratic ones.[44]

## *Liberation Theology*

Liberation theology mediates faith and politics in three ways: the socio-analytical, hermeneutical and practical.[45] The socio-analytical mediation starts from a critical analysis of society in terms of oppression from the perspective of concrete grassroots experience

44. Let us not forget that in the encyclical *Quadragessimo Anno* of 1931, and despite its rejection of socialism, the *magisterium* acknowledged the positive aspects of social democracy: "socialism inclines towards and in a certain measure approaches the truths which Christian tradition has always held sacred; for it cannot be denied that its demands at times come very near to those that Christian reformers of society justly insist upon (no. 113)"; but this is contradicted a few paragraphs after when the magisterium held that "socialism, if it remains truly socialism (…) cannot be reconciled with the teaching of the Catholic Church because its concept of society itself is utterly foreign to Christian truth" (no. 117).

45. Leonardo Boff and Clodovis Boff, *Introducing Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1987).

and the historical movements of the poor. The analysis of the situation is not based on a functionalist or harmony model but on a conflict model. In so far as the analysis has been articulated in terms of a Marxist class struggle or of *dependencia* theories, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has criticized it, at least, on two occasions.[46] Moreover, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church has failed to understand the real implications of the practical mediation based on the (preferential) option for the poor, as well as the rich insights gained from the hermeneutic mediation rooted in the scriptures.

Be that as it may, one point merits our attention here: the political relevance of liberation theology, particularly with regard to the attention paid to the historical movements of the poor and to the creation of the institutional conditions (against the oppressive structures) for a full participation of the poor as subjects in political emancipation. By acknowledging the epistemic and political privilege of the excluded other (the economic poor, excluded, oppressed women, indigenous peoples) liberation theology recognizes that "their struggle for life, truth, justice and peace, becomes concrete manifestations of God's in–breaking into human history."[47] Adopting the perspective of the poor, liberation theology contributes to a "critical (re)interpretation of tradition along with all its canonical texts and other narrative resources."[48]

## Conclusion

There is not a single, uniform, univocal way to connect Christian faith with politics. Most models have both weaknesses and strengths. Moreover, in order to avoid a new political 'establishment' of the Church as defender of the status quo, the proposal of Casanova to focus on action in the civil society has its merits. The civil society produces indeed the 'humus' in which democratic human politics can flourish. It is in this space that social action, critical

46. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has issued two documents with regards to liberation theology, *Libertatis nuntius* (1984) and *Liberatis conscientia* (1986).

47. Rolando Tuazon, "Narrative Christian Ethics from the Margins," 59.

48. Ibid., 60.

reflection, and the production of new ideas which include the privilege of the excluded can take place. It is in the civil society that the church community participates "in the transformation of the world" as a "constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation."[49]

But a political action that goes beyond the sphere of the civil society remains also necessary, both on the level of the political society as well as on the level of the state. Without being nostalgic, one needs to recall how Europe has paid a high price for the disappearance of the former 'pillar system' through which the Christian community participated in the political society. In some European countries a 'pure liberal politics' has been either installed or propagated with the aim of eliminating all 'interest groups' such as catholic or socialist unions, middle class organisations or social housing corporations and health-care organisations (which all had representatives in the political institutions such as parliament or government). This was justified with the argument to 'restore' a pure relationship between individuals and a minimal state serving the interests of individuals seeking to maximize their self-interest. In countries where a 'middle field' organisations have been eliminated or disappeared from the political and civil society, the result has been the creation of a 'social graveyard', depriving or diminishing the power of the workers and the poor to negotiate their legitimate interests.[50] In countries where there are no social movements with corresponding participation in power and political institutions, it becomes utterly difficult to realise social rights, such is the case in the US before Obama where health care insurance was not accessible for all citizens, or in the UK where the privatisation of housing deprived (despite the intentions) the poor from the possibility of becoming owners. While Casanova is right that the political action of Churches cannot be taken any more according to the way of the established Churches of the past, it is also true that it remains necessary to maintain the crucial idea in Catholic Social Thought that politics

49. 1971 Synod of Bishops, *Justice in the World*, section 6.

50. Herman de Dijn, *Religie in de 21e eeuw. Kleine handleiding voor voor- en tegenstanders* (Kapellen: Pelckmans, 2006), 97-120.

must be more than a relationship between individuals and the state and that it includes the complex middle field between individual and state, including ways to participate actively in those institutions where power enables people to take decisions (*Centesimus annus* chapter 5).

The political challenge in this context will be both critical and constructive. In the light of political theology and liberation theology, the Christian community must be critical of any use of Christian ideas as political ideology (in the sense of 'false representation of reality' or 'false consciousness', a discourse which hides the real interests and conflicts). We must suspect any theology which is used as instrument for the maintenance of an unjust order or a political system that excludes the poor. But simultaneously, the Christian community must become a community in which critical political leadership is generated and sustained, both by movements and by individual leaders who are not afraid of sticking their hands into the wheel of history. After having made a careful analysis of the particular context, Christians are also called to join the historical movements and parties which defend the excluded others. In this regard it will not always be possible to avoid conflicts. Covering up such conflicts in the name of peace or harmony, leads to a false reconciliation.

In short, an incarnate presence of Christians in politics is impossible without an immersion in the political reality: we cannot be guilty bystanders. But simultaneously, we must acknowledge that each political realisation of justice will never be just enough and that it always will be necessary to humanise it towards an always greater humaneness. In this regard we will need political love, which humanises political justice[51].

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51. It is necessary to distinguish 'love' as virtue which humanises justice from within (and connects it with mercy), from love as alternative to justice or love as exclusively a matter of charity.