

The Christian and Politics

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There is a widespread popular belief that "Religion & politics don't mix", or that "the Church should keep out of politics." The historical origins of this belief are clear: ^{firstly} the struggle of the nation-state to free itself from the dual control of pope & emperor, together with the wresting of territories from the direct administrative control of bishops & abbots in some areas; secondly, the general divorce between the personal sphere & the public sphere which accompanied the rise of capitalism and of the "protestant ethic". Religion & moral questions ~~in general~~ became strictly limited to the personal sphere, & outside this sphere, in his economic & political activities the individual is seen as being obliged to submit himself to the patterns & norms of his society. That is, the ideological justification for the split between morality & politics lies in the assumption that a certain form of society is natural, & quite independent of the individuals in it. Just as it would be ridiculous for the

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church to debate whether or not ^{you} ~~one~~ should obey the law of gravity, so it would be ridiculous for the church to debate whether or not you should obey the laws defining "success", & the way to achieve it, in a capitalist society. In ^{the} medieval period society was seen as a personal hierarchy, & one's position in it was defined in terms of specific relations to other specific individuals. In ^{the} capitalist period, however, society is seen as ^{an} impersonal entity, & what happens in it is blamed on impersonal forces - in particular, on "the market". This position reaches its apogee in 19th century laissez-faire liberalism, which depersonalises not only society but the individual as well; the individual becomes a purely mechanical object which reacts automatically to a given situation in terms of material self-interest. "Immorality" becomes simply the attempt to interfere with the natural order - Herbert Spencer attacks the British parliament as immoral because it passes a law making it illegal to adulterate foodstuffs before selling them!

This attitude did not develop as clearly as I have put it here. Rather there grew up within the church ^{general} ~~as~~ unwillingness to talk about political

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problems, & among politicians a general suspicion of clerics who did.

Should christian churches involve themselves in political problems? That is the wrong question to start off with, for first we must ask "Can a christian church ^{in fact} divorce itself from politics?"

The basic in christian moral precept is "Love your neighbour". Many moralists think they can start as soon as they have enunciated ~~such~~ this precept, or at least as soon as they have proved it. ~~But this is only the very begin~~ They assume that once you know that you should love your neighbour you will have no trouble acting correctly in particular situations.

But in fact, once you know that you should ^{love} your neighbour you are only at the very beginning of moral theory. Leaving aside the problems of individual psychology involved in deciding what factors make it possible to love at all, there

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remains a ^{number} ~~variety~~ of difficult problems of complex difficulties. In order to know how best to express my love for my neighbor I must know a) the nature of my present relationship to him - the extent to which I am factually responsible for his situation; b) the exact nature of his situation; c) the reasons why his situation is as it is, & so the ways in which his situation could possibly be changed.

Let me illustrate this with a simple, uncontroversial example drawn from XIX England.



§ (8)

on him. ... He was free from anxiety and the need to establish his own identity, but he was above all free for his neighbour .. He was, apparently, a man free to give himself to others, whoever they were. He lived thus, and he was put to death for being this kind of man in the midst of fearful and defensive men. (122-23). Thus what made Jesus free to love his neighbour was essential his personal independence, his freedom from the encumbering formulae of tradition, and from conventional definitions of status and prestige.-- what one might call his ideological independence.

Th be ideologically independent isn't as easy as it sounds. There seem to be a few people--what Colin Wilson calls Outsiders-- who can somehow naturally think for themselves, who just naturally see through the ^{veil} fail of what is politely called common-sense, but which is usually the sum of the superstitions of the ages. But for most of us there is a necessary process of liberation. And the first step in this process of liberation is the reflective analysis of ones assumptions about values, about ways of behaving. Being ideologically independent does not mean ~~xxxx~~ being independent of ideologies, since it is impossible to think and act independent of assumptions, it means trying to discover ^{the} right assumptions. It means thinking critically about yourself and about your society.

19 ~~xxxxxxx~~ I will illustrate the second part of the problem-- the question of what sort of behaviour should express my love for my neighbour-- with an example. Let us say you are good church going, christian factory owner in 19c England. In a slump, you have to lay off half of your employees, who are after all, your neighbours. How should you now set about expressing your love for them? What you do, assuming of course that you are acting in good faith, will depend on how you

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understand the situation. Why are the workers out of work? It is easy to see that it is because the country is in the middle of an economic slump. But why is there a slump? There are two kinds of answer, and your behaviour will depend on the kind you give. Your analysis of society may lead you to conclude, as did the bulk of 19c thinkers, that slumps are caused by the inevitable working of a natural economic system over which ~~he~~^{you} have no control. In this case your love will take the form of woolly socks and hot soup once a day. On the other hand your analysis of society and the social structure may lead you to conclude that the social structure is not natural and inevitable at all, that slumps are the result of a man-made political system, for which ~~I~~^{you}, as a factory owner, ~~am~~^{are} very much responsible, and which could be other than it is. In this case, ~~my~~^{your} love would take the form of combining with my ~~your~~^{you} neighbour in order to overthrow the system and to replace it with a new, more ~~human~~ rational and human one.

To love your neighbour you have to know who or what is responsible for his suffering, and how it could be alleviated. and this means that you need a theory of politics. Otherwise you will just go along with the assumptions and limitations imposed by your society, and you may turn out to have been slowly murdering your neighbour, rather than loving him.

Christianity contains and implies no ~~particular~~ particular political theory, and yet ~~it~~^{unlike} it is allied with a political theory it is impotent.

So I would like now to deal with a few points which I think are essential to political theory, and hence also to living christianity.

The key point here is that it
 is not a question of whether or not
 it is desirable to have a political
 theory. The point is that it is
 inhuman to not have an implicit
 or explicit political theory. The
 man who distributes hot soup to the
 poor is "ideologising" about his society
 just as much as is the revolutionary
 who wants to change it. Both are making
 assumptions about ends, & also about
 the nature of present society & of the
 potential for change contained in it.
 Moreover, the person who doesn't even
 distribute soup to the poor is
 also "involved in politics", & is also
 "ideologising". All his actions towards
 other people - & even spending your whole life
 alone - a case is a way of relating to
 other people - express certain assumptions
 about society. & don't ^{just} ~~simply~~ mean

by this that they use conventional
 rules of speaking, of greeting, have
 social pecking-orders & so on. I mean that
 they assume that master-servant or
 capitalist-worker or peasant-trader relationships
 in the form ~~the~~ in which they find
 expression in their particular societies, are
 natural relationships, & so they accept
 them & act them out. And of course in
 acting them out they are creating these
 social relationships & so creating a certain
 political structure.

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The first point is that there is no such thing as a natural social order - tribalism, feudalism, capitalism, socialism - none of these forms of social organisation are natural in the way that, for example, the bee-hive is natural to bees. The social institutions are created by the way in which men behave in that particular society, and for example ~~private~~ the social institution "private property", for ~~example~~ ^{any}, owning a piece of land, is simply the activity of keeping other people off it & keeping its produce for myself - of course it has been institutionalised in laws, but these ~~laws~~ laws are man-made, & only mean anything in so far as people live the laws - I could behave toward the piece of land in quite a different way - perhaps encouraging other people to come & enjoy it

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(10) or else giving away all its produce apart from my basic needs. It is possible to behave like this, & obviously if ^{everybody} ~~people~~ did we would have an entirely different type of society.

So people create social ^{institution} ~~behaviour~~ by their own free actions. On the other hand, it is obvious that they don't create them consciously & intentionally - or at least that they don't always do so. Rather, they learn ways of behaving from their environments, adjust these ways to meet new circumstances, & in general ~~make~~ create history & their societies blindly. ~~They don't~~ They don't realise that they are doing so. In addition, the way in which the results of their acts combine with the results of other people's acts often produces totally unforeseen results, & institutions

(11) which ~~has~~ seem to have a life of their own. For example, in capitalist society the Market, although it is nothing but the sum of the acts of the buyers & sellers, is often spoken of as though it ~~were~~ ^{were} an autonomous entity, for whose activities nobody is responsible.

So people create their own society without recognising it as their own creation.

But it is their own creation, & it could be different.

~~in an~~ alternate end p

This brings me to the second point that I want to discuss - the question of violence. If we men are responsible in this factual sense for their societies, then it is necessary to redefine the concept of violence. For if men are responsible for the way in which their society is organised, then they are also responsible for the ~~death~~ ^{avoidable}

death & suffering which results when from society is ~~not~~ ^{not} consciously organised that particular ^{form of} organisation. In a country like S.A. the people who control & govern the country are directly responsible for the thousands of children who die annually from bronchitis, enteritis, malnutrition, or even just plain neglect. And they are responsible not ^{only} in the negative sense that they don't allocate the money necessary to alleviate the suffering - not in the sense that a man is "responsible" for a death if he fails to save a drowning man - but in the positive sense that they continually create & recreate the conditions which cause these deaths - they are continually pushing people into the water. And this applies not just to infant mortality rates. It applies also to phenomena such as the high alcoholism rate in the slums of Cape Town, the murder rate in Soweto.

We know that this type of behavior occurs on a statistically significant scale only in certain socio-economic conditions, & these socio-economic conditions are man-made - & in S.A. they are white man made.

All this adds up to violence on a vast scale - the structure of the society is violent, & this structural violence goes far beyond the occasional violence used in putting down attempts to change the society. So in any case

In any consideration of the morality of violence this "structural violence" must be continually born in mind.

This is a problem which is becoming more & more important in the world today - particularly, for example in L. Am., where the catholic church is faced with the problem of how it should relate to revolutionary movements willing to use violence to overthrow unjust & destructive oligarchical governments & regimes.

The second implication of the fact that we are totally responsible for the shape of our society, but nevertheless create it blindly, is that we could work together & create it consciously. And obviously only in a socialist society, a society in which people work together in the conscious attempt to build a new society planned in terms of human needs, would it be possible to solve to get rid of "structural violence". ~~There are two~~

There are two reasons why I think a Christian should be a socialist.

The first one is that, as the French Bishop pointed out in a pastoral letter a couple of years ago, the idea that the profit-motive should be the main spring of society is

in contradiction with christian ethics.
 The second one is that, as I have said,
 in a non-socialist society one is objectively
 responsible for the suffering wrought by
 the mode of racial organisation, even if
 one wishes to love ones neighbour. At the
 very best one is in the position of
 alternately pushing someone into the
 water & pulling him out again.

The next point I want to
 discuss is Marx's famous accusation
 "Religion is the opiate of the people"
 This statement is, I think, at least
 $\frac{7}{8}$ ^{the} truth. There are ^{several} 3 different
 ways in which religion acts as an opiate
 of the people.

First, religion has ~~been~~ sanction has
 been, & often still is, given to particular
 forms of racial organisation - prob ^{ably} ^{of} ^{the} ^{most} ^{favoured}

17 Secondly the concept of a transcendent God, interpreted as not being of this world, has at times lead to an almost manichean contempt for this world - as T de C puts it - "In the past, adoration was the preference of God to things by refusing them to him & by sacrificing them to him". This world becomes "the vale of tears", or a sort of ordeal by fire prebatory to heaven, and people are told that if they ~~will have their rewards suffer down here~~ they will have their rewards in heaven. So religion becomes something into which one flees from the problems of this world.

A third way in which religion can become an opiate - & this is of course particularly noticeable in some forms of protestantism - is when it serves not only as a solace to the afflicted, but

also as ^{on the part of the offenders} an excuse ^{for} avoiding their responsibility for the situation - which they argue is "the will of God"

And a fourth form of opiate is the opiate administered ^{by religion} to the ^{well-intentioned} liberal in virtue of the fact that religions which are linked to no political theory are ethically emasculated, in the sense that to have no explicit political theory is to accept implicitly the political theory which finds its expression in the status quo. This means that acting, he thinks, morally within the context of his religion, the individual may think that he is alleviating suffering & loving his neighbour, whereas he is really leaving untouched the root causes

of his neighbour's sufferings.

Thus religion can & has & does act as an opiate in the following ways

- 1) It ~~sometimes~~ gives specific religious sanction to ^{particular, & unjust,} a form of society.
- 2) It keeps oppressed people quiet by promising them pie in the sky.
- 3) It is used by their oppressors as an excuse for not thinking about their responsibilities.
- 4) It sometimes emasculates the acts of well-intentioned people by posing as a complete ethical theory when it isn't.

And in connection with this last point I want to finish off by reverting to the point with which I started the second half of my

paper - the question of ideological independence, of freedom. For in the sphere of politics ideological independence is particularly difficult to acquire - & this, of course, is the reason why Christians often quite unintentionally remain the victims of ~~their~~ ideological ideologies.

The reason for this special difficulty in the sphere of politics is that it is in this sphere that we are most unrelentingly submitted to a process of indoctrination - an indoctrination which is ~~not~~ only partly intentional, but nevertheless highly successful.

And I'm not talking in part about current Affs. & the distortion of news. This indoctrination is much

more subtle. It consists in the fact that everything you hear or read - news items, articles, speeches, stories, films - take for granted & imply certain basic political attitudes & political premises. One is simply impregnated with these premises without even being invited to think about them.

So the last & vital step in the process of self liberation must be the activity of struggling to uncover & analyse these deep-seated political presuppositions, since without this one's ethics, & one's attempts to serve others, are infantile.

Summary

- ① God-talk ~~either consists~~ is either completely meaningless, or else consists in referring to some phenomenon or fact as God, & implying that you are thereby saying something more about the fact, without saying what it is that you're saying about it. meaningless talk is irrelevant.
- ② What is relevant is the problem of this world, of man. This problem can only be solved by exploring this world in the light of reason, not by referring to the gospels, since the gospels only express an ethic - a good ethic, but one that is powerless unless it rests on an accurate analysis of the situation.

③ The an analysis of the political situation shows that men are responsible for the suffering caused by the ty violence of their societies, & that the only way out of this, the only way to love one's neighbour, is through the attempt to build a socialist society.

④ Religion has often, ^{revel} & often still ^{revel} as an opiate & as an obstruction to this endeavour.

What ~~is~~ ^{should be} relevant to the members of an organised church should be the attempt to turn their religion from being a tranquilliser to being a revolutionary stimulant.

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It is only if the injunction "love your neighbour" is understood in the context of the assumption that the political structure is a stable constant, rather like the geographic structure, that it becomes possible to imagine that it has no political implications. If my socio-economic relationships to my neighbour are assumed to be immutable, then loving him boils down to strictly personal things like kindness & politeness. If, on the other hand, these structures are seen as changeable, then the decision to love your neighbour immediately requires an analysis of the way your socio-economic relationship to him - a political analysis.

It is not adequate just to describe the relationship between you & your neighbour. In order to genuinely evaluate it you must be able to off compare the given relationship with other possible ones. In order to find out what is possible you

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you have to study the historical origin of the present situation, as well as which means not only, say the particular class structure, but also the particular ways in which the individuals react - since this latter is no more an immutable given than is the class structure.

The point, once again, is not just that an ethics-religious theory should also involve an attempt to formulate a political ideology. It is that it is impossible for it not to do so. The alternatives are not ideology or no ideology. They are thought-out ideology or unconscious acceptance of the ideology which finds its expression in the status quo. A Christian church cannot in fact divorce itself from politics, from political action, & from the responsibility of thinking about politics. "Not to be involved in politics"

means in fact to support the politics of the status quo, to accept as immutable the limitations placed on human relationships by the social structure, & so to reinforce the social structure by acting in terms of it.

~~I would like now to suggest a few~~

I have already mentioned what seems to me to be the central fact about any ^{socio-}political structure: it is not natural. It is created by the way in which men behave. This means that men are not only morally but also factually responsible for what happens in their societies. a slump is not an earthquake. A high crime rate, a high infant-mortality rate in a relatively developed country like South Africa, these are not natural occurrences, they are caused by men's actions. Crime proliferates

in certain socio-economic conditions. A high infant mortality rate is a product of poverty, which is itself usually the product of a certain way of dividing & control of the means of production. In a country like India poverty is not simply the result of overpopulation. It is the result of the fact that the economic surplus which is produced is consumed by a relatively small, wealthy section of the population, instead of being productively reinvested, & of the fact that little or no attempt is made to release the productive energy of the peasants in the creation of a new type of rural society. These are failures on the part of people, & they are failures which are typical of nearly all under-developed countries, as well as of developed countries which have large poor sectors. In countries like India, Brazil, Bolivia, Greece, South Africa, or even the UK & the US the resources & the potential resources just are not used to solve the problems of poverty, & hence of

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suffering & death, which exist in those countries.