

“Christianity as the Seedbed of Human Rights: The Critique of Fascism by British Churchmen in World War 2”

Studs Terkel called World War II the “last good war.” Seldom in history have people believed with such deep certainty that a military conflict was a “just war.” Hitler was so deliciously evil that it was easy to depict his overthrow as a victory of divine justice. In a war for Christian civilization, one must be convinced that the culture for which young men are asked to die embodies Christian principles and values.

The feeling was widespread among the clergy and the religious people of Great Britain that the most important social, cultural, and political principles of Western civilization came from the Christian faith and were grounded in that faith. Nathaniel Micklem insisted that “our political philosophy, explicitly or implicitly, rests upon our theology. All political problems are at bottom theological.” Morale in wartime, said Sidney Berry, cannot be sustained by trivial and ephemeral things like an addition to our rations or a touch of added brightness to our entertainments. “To keep the spirit of triumph indomitable through the warring tests of the months and years demands from us all a deep faith that the things for which we strive are of eternal value, and that to lose them would be to lose everything.”¹

¹Micklem, The Theology of Politics (London: Oxford University Press, 1941), x; Berry, The Great Issue and Other War-Time Studies (London: Independent Press, 1944), 66.

Perhaps the most fundamental notion in this precious mosaic of Western ideas was that of individuality. The Hebrew-Christian view of man stresses the ultimacy and value of the individual human person. By contrast, the religious of the Far East stressed the All, the One, the Whole, and thus the individual had little permanence or value. For Eastern Pantheism the individual is a problem, but for the Jewish-Christian theologian particularity is not only fully real but also good in principle. The Biblical doctrine of creation gives sanctity to particulars; they are not lost in abstractions or drowned in categories. As John Henry Newman said, religion concerns the real and the real is always particular. Micklem maintained that, "The only centers of activity, of feeling, of function, of purpose which we know are individual selves. Groups or collectives such as states, churches, and nations are not subsistent metaphysical entities but only relations between individuals..²

So, reality is individual—what then? Next comes the idea of the value or dignity of the individual human person. It is one thing to say that reality is particular, but how do you prove that some particulars are more valuable than others? Enter the idea of the image of God! God made one particular creature special. He loves this creature, in a very special way. Jesus told his disciples that God notices every time a sparrow falls to the ground, but then he added, "Don't be afraid, you are worth more than many sparrows" (Matt.10:31). Theologian Alan Richardson argued that we respect the individual "because God cares for it . . . When every other reason for respecting the personalities of others has broken down, this will always endure; when every motive of self-interest, national interest, or class interest has disappeared, the Christian

²V. A. Demant, The Religious Prospect (London: Muller, 1939), 49-50; Mickley, Theology of Politics, 43.

commandment of love will still remain. On this foundation alone can a 'true humanism' be established and a world-community be built, which will transcend the 'natural' limitations of nationality, class or political creed."³

³Richardson, The Message of the Bible in War-Time (London: SCM Press, 1940), 53.

The political implications of individualism are clear: Man is particular and valuable in himself. He has rights against the state. The state cannot just treat him as a means for its own end, as occurs in fascism. In Demant's terms, "Man is a person sui juris ["of one's own right"], an absolute in his own way, relative only to God. He is a man before he is a citizen, he has rights before he has uses, he is free to determine himself before he can be treated as a producer." Archbishop William Temple adapted an expression from Jesus: "The State was made for men and women, not men and women for the State" (Mark 2:27).⁴

The Western belief in human equality lies implicit in this doctrine of individualism. The American Declaration of Independence says, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen begins with the assertion, "Men are born and remain free and equal in rights. Social distinctions may be based only on considerations of the common good." All this can ultimately be traced back to the Christian gospel: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal.3:27). Given enough time, this principle will level all false hierarchies; it will destroy nationalism, racism, elitism, sexism, and any other "ism" that posits an illegitimate value differential between individual human beings.

⁴Demant, Religious Prospect, 50-51; Temple, Citizen and Churchman (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1941), 27.

Archbishop Temple explained how the principle of equality made its way into the English coronation service. When the king is crowned, all people present render homage to him while he is seated on his throne. But right after that comes the order of Holy Communion, conducted in exactly the same manner as in any village church. The king drops to his knees, like any peasant, to receive the holy sacrament. In the eyes of God, therefore, king and peasant are equal.⁵

George Barclay used the case of King David to make the same point. It was quite normal, he observed, by the canons of Oriental kingship, for the ruler, who was usually considered divine, to take any man's wife if she pleased him. But when David took Bathsheba and had her husband Uriah killed, he got a visit from the prophet Nathan, who condemned him in no uncertain terms for his sin (2 Sam.12:1-14). David left us an account of his anguished repentance in Psalm 51. The point here is that Israel was not your typical Oriental nation, and David was not your typical Oriental king. Israel's people were a chosen people being trained by the righteous God. Because of this training, Israelites could not simply say, "The king can do his will because he is the law." They must say rather, the king sinned because he broke the transcendent law of God, a law that governs all men, including the king, who, by the Biblical doctrine of creation, is not divine. David was big enough to do what no Oriental monarch would do: He admitted that Nathan, one of his subjects, had the right to rebuke him.⁶

⁵Citizen and Churchman, 22.

⁶The Bible Speaks to Our Day (London: SCM Press, 1941), 13-14.

The next step is crucial—these valuable human individuals must be free! Several churchmen quoted Lord Acton: “Liberty is the central theme of all history.” St. Paul said, “Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor.3:17). Man is above all else a spiritual being, and the essence of spirit is freedom. As Kant argued, spirit is the realm where you cannot use force; if you try it, it always backfires on you. Frederick B. Macnutt maintained that, “Both freedom of speech and freedom of worship are necessary to enable the Christian to bear his witness and fulfill his fellowship with God and man in Jesus Christ.”⁷ Western people talk a lot about freedom, and folks from other parts of the world think this must be just an Occidental eccentricity, but as T. G. Dunning noted,

Freedom is not a democratic oddity, but something inevitable and fundamental to the life and destiny of man. God predestined man to be conformed to His likeness and so had to give to man some measure of His own responsibility and freedom. Spiritual ends must be freely chosen. We need not deny that for certain ends, a group of robots might be more efficient than a community of free and responsible beings. But those ends could not be human and spiritual. . . . We believe that the love of freedom is not a British trait, but a God-implanted instinct, and that in the end what really opposes Nazi slavery-morality is not British imperialism, but the very nature of man.⁸

⁷Four Freedoms: Atlantic and Christian (Leicester, England: Thornley, 1943), 64-65.

⁸Settlement with Germany (London: SCM Press, 1943), 47-48.

Demant reasoned that a democratic system of government is a logical development of the spiritual view of man. Liberty is man's conscious participation in power, that is, by making free, rational decisions man asserts himself, his circle of being, against the otherwise unfree, determined nature in which he lives. Man is a free creature, an island of volition in a sea of determined matter. Free choices thus display human power, hence authority is innate in man's rational, moral nature. Now, when several humans get together and discover this common trait they reason that each should have a part in the decision making that rules the group—hence you have a democracy. But this liberalism is rooted in a definite cosmology, one that makes the individual person special—a thesis denied by fascism, which sacrifices individual goals for social cohesion.⁹

Archbishop Temple explained that the true value of democracy is often missed by its advocates. Loose talk about the voice of the people being the voice of God (vox populi, vox Dei) is nonsense. The proper defense of democracy is not that the majority is always right, because they are often wrong. It is usually true, however, that the majority will not be as wrong as some of the minorities, and stability is what government is usually about. But the real defense of democracy connects good government to the spiritual nature of man and the need for human fellowship. By calling upon people to exercise responsible judgment on the matters facing the nation, reasoned Temple,

you develop their personal qualities. You make them feel that they belong to one another in this corporate society, and so you tend to deepen and intensify personal fellowship.

You are leading people forward from the relationship of the herd to that of real fellow-

⁹Religious Prospect, 35-38.

ship by the mere process of calling upon them to take their share in the government of the groups of which they are members. That is the real value of the thing, its educational effect upon the citizens, and through that, of course, you get a more alert, a more disciplined intelligence in the citizens—less liable to be swayed by mass hysteria and the like—less likely to be victims of propaganda, one of the subtle perils of democracy at all times—and through that once more you will get, in the long run, a wiser and better government because it is government by wiser and better citizens.¹⁰

¹⁰A. E. Baker, William Temple and His Message: Selections from His Writings (Harmondsworth, England: Penguin, 1946), 218-219.

Such reasoning was common among British churchmen during the war and it reminded many of them of the sage advice of the great French philosopher of the Enlightenment, Baron de Montesquieu (1689-1755), who said that virtue was necessary for a republic to survive, while a monarchy must have honor and a despotism fear (Spirit of Laws, III, 9). On this theme, Douglas Stewart observed that the modern state will necessarily become more powerful, as secularism increases, because the decline of religion makes the individual more unruly. State control must make up for the failure of self-control. "Let any generation spend its youth without religion and it will spend its age under a tyrant." The men of modern Europe may have decided to jettison the Christian faith, but "if so let them be under no illusions as to the results of such a decision. Secular freedom is always hovering on the brink of tyranny. Freedom imposes a moral strain which is intolerable without the dynamic of religion."¹¹

¹¹Personal Religion and the Future of Europe (London: SCM Press, 1941), 80-81/

Stressing individual freedom, however, can go too far. It can lead to an atomistic individualism, to an uncritical, unbiblical, antigovernment libertarianism that verges on anarchy. Temple warned that a liberty based on mere selfhood could tear a democracy apart, unless the “selves” are enlightened and taught to curb their desires. The state cannot possibly meet all the desires of all sinful human beings. Liberty rooted in the consciousness of our divine sonship provides a much more stable government. Your first duty is to God and this may require you to defy some earthly leaders, but it would never cause you to rebel against society itself, because society is a principle of union. The state is not an alien power; it is the organ of the community and exists to serve the community. Any individual who asserts his will against the law is displaying egocentricity. “The State which punishes criminals, thereby checking criminal tendencies and enlisting the self-regarding motives in the support of justice, is helping men and women to be true to their real nature as God created it.”¹²

Thus the freedoms enjoyed in Western, open societies can be traced back to Christianity. Micklem said that you cannot really trace democracy back to Athens, because the Greeks developed a society that held slaves and disfranchised women. “Not till the triumph of the Christian conception of the value of the individual life is the way prepared for a free society of free men.” Apart from man’s duty to God, he concluded, “there is no ultimate philosophical basis for his rights.” F. R. Barry agreed: “There is no security or guarantee for the Rights of Man or the claims of personality apart from that valuation of man’s life in the light of God and immortality which is the gift of the Christian religion.” Matthews insisted that apart from Christian philosophy, “the ideas of the value of persons as such, and the equality of all rational beings, on

¹²Citizen and Churchman, 29-30.

which democracy is founded, cannot persist, for in every other philosophy these ideas must appear as pleasing fictions. Phyllis Bottome said that Britons were fighting for something which was intelligible only “on the basis of faith in God and an understanding of men and women as children of God destined for eternal fellowship with him.” The “amen!” came from the American Bishop Fulton Sheen: “Never before has the cause of democracy been so coincident with Christianity.”¹³

¹³Micklem, Theology of Politics, 13, 69; Barry, Faith in Dark Ages (London: SCM Press, 1940), 24; Matthews, Foundations of Peace, 19; Sheen, Philosophies at War (London: Blandford, 1945), 112.