

FROM PIETY TO POLITICS

PIETY

The Latin term *pietas* originally referred to the honor and respect shown to parents. Today, however, a person who is called pious will likely be someone who displays a high degree of religious devotion. When around 7:00 a.m. I sit at my kitchen table for breakfast, I see my neighbor Estelle drive off for her daily attendance at Mass. When I recently returned home from a stay in the hospital, she assured me that she had said regular prayers for me. In my book, she is a devout Catholic.

When I used to visit my Dutch uncle Dirk for dinner, he asked a blessing before the meal, and afterward he read a passage from Scripture followed by another prayer. I always thought of him as a pious Calvinist. When someone is said to have had godly parents, it may refer to a quiet spirituality that suffused their whole lives, including the way they raised a family and treated others. The appearance and dress of chasidic Jews is a public expression of religious devotion. So are the regular daily prayers of Muslims, practiced wherever they may find themselves at the stipulated moment.

Numerous forms of piety and spirituality can be found among the adherents of many different faiths. Today, spirituality can mean a host of different things to different people—some not specifically religious at all. In Christian-theological context, however, the word “spiritual” includes a very specific meaning, referring to the belief that a life has been touched by God through the presence and the power of the Holy Spirit. It involves experiential religion as well as lifestyle. More often than not, it also involves participation in a community of faith.

In accordance with “New Testament” usage of the word *pneuma* to refer to the divine Spirit, the apostle Paul on several occasions refers to believers as *pneumatikoi* (I Corinthians 2:15; Galatians 6:1). The idea here is that faith itself is a gift of grace received through the Holy Spirit. God is at work in a human life. In the words of John Wesley, a heart is “strangely warmed” and a mind is enlightened. True, a person’s response is also involved; but in the final analysis, faith signifies more than giving intellectual assent to certain doctrinal propositions. All Christian believers can be called

pneumatikoi, which does not necessarily mean that each and every one of them has had a life-shaking mystical experience.

Already in the 2nd century, more elitist notions infiltrated the life of the church. For instance, the sect of the Gnostics referred to *pneumatikoi* as a select group of enlightened ones who were endowed with special spiritual insights. They also defined the spiritual realm in contrast to the material and physical realities, thus putting the biblical doctrine of creation in question. Salvation then comes to mean escape from the shackles of bodily existence. Marcion, a famous heretic of that day, taught that the “Old Testament” and large sections of the “New Testament” lacked true spirituality and should, therefore, no longer be considered authoritative sources of divine revelation. Plato was thus in the process of replacing Moses and the prophets.

The loss of the “Old Testament” earthiness and “this-worldliness” so deeply rooted in Hebraic thinking would prove to have serious consequences for church life and teaching through the centuries. Not only did sin become identified with sexuality; but a spirit of other-worldliness also often led to a lack of social responsibility.

Furthermore, any form of spiritual elitism is bound to lead to self-righteousness and eventually to a separatist mentality. Jesus had his arguments about *halakhic* interpretations of the Torah with the *Perushim* of his day (Sabbath observance, divorce). These were folk whose piety in some cases led to a holier-than-thou attitude. It is, indeed, sad but true that many churches have been fragmentized and ghettoized in the name of spirituality. The story of Saint Francis of Assisi (1182-1226), a lover of all creatures great and small, and founder of the Order of Friars Minor, offers a sad example. Soon after his death, a dispute arose among his followers as to whether there could be any accommodation of the rules (particularly the rule of poverty) to new circumstances as the movement expanded into more urban regions. Those who resisted any change and advocated separation from the Order were called “Spirituals” (*Homo Spiritualis*) by some of their sympathizers. However, their behavior seemed to contradict the gospel message of love espoused by the great saint.

Finally, as we shall see, an excessive internalizing of the gospel focusing almost exclusively on the inner life can breed both fanaticism and rationalism. Experiential religion can be immensely enriching, but mystical ecstasy cast loose from any source of authoritative truth has often led to bizarre aberrations. On the other hand, “inner light” religion has at times extolled the light of human reason to the exclusion of divine revelation. During the French Revolution the Goddess of Reason was enthroned in the Notre Dame de Paris, and soon thereafter the guillotines started to operate nonstop. As Karen Armstrong observed in her book *The Battle for God*, reason at times has lost its mind. So, a caveat is in order. That, however, should not be interpreted as an outright condemnation of the church’s rich tradition of experiential religion.

PIETISM

When various forces of piety and church renewal converged into a movement, as happened in the 17th century, we have what came to be called Pietism—a reform

movement seeking to reform the Reformation. Of course, similar events under different names have happened in other periods of history.

Montanism in the 2nd century is an example. Montanus, the founder of the sect, claimed to have received new revelations directly from God through the Holy Spirit. Not only that, he even claimed to be an incarnation of that Spirit or *Paraclete* mentioned in the Gospel of John (14:16)—a claim that was accompanied by ecstatic visions and prophecies.

In the 15th century, one could point to the *Devotio Moderna* and the Brethren of the Common Life who sought to lead people to a more personal relationship with God. Thomas à Kempis, author of the classic devotional *The Imitation of Christ*, was a member of that community. Some hundred years later, Ignatius Loyola, a contemporary of Luther and founder of the Society of Jesus, wrote his *Spiritual Exercises*. He taught a down-to-earth kind of spirituality, emphasizing that one could live a fully spiritual life while fully engaged in the mundane realities of the world. The humanist Desiderius Erasmus was among his admirers.

Pietism was, in effect, a form of protest against certain positions of the Protestant Reformation and developments that occurred thereafter. One can study the Reformation from a variety of perspectives: doctrinal issues, ecclesiastical implications, cultural and social-economic consequences—to name just a few. One way to describe the post-Reformation era could be to point out that it yielded two hundred years of bitter theological disputes and devastating religious wars: Catholics against Protestants, Reformed against Lutherans, the emperor and the princes meddling in church affairs and persecuting dissenters.

The Peace of Augsburg (1555) was supposed to bring about some kind of coexistence between Catholics and Lutherans, but the principle of *cuius regio, eius religio* (the ruler determines and enforces the prescribed religion of the land) was hardly conducive to harmony. In 1648, at the end of the Thirty Years War, the Peace of Westphalia sought to secure a certain balance of power on the European continent, but conflict and unrest continued in many places. Two years after the horrors of the 1572 St. Bartholomew Massacre of Huguenots, the Edict of Nantes granted Protestants some limited rights that were again revoked in 1685 when Protestantism was outlawed in France.

Periods of tumult and uncertainty tend to generate a greater receptivity to apocalyptic-eschatological teachings. Things seem out of control and beyond human repair; and the word goes out that these must be the Last Days marked by cataclysmic events as prophesied in the Book of Revelation.

Furthermore, a dynamic spiritual-intellectual movement like the Reformation is often followed by organizational power struggles and hair-splitting arguments about credal details. A dry and cerebral brand of scholasticism, delivered from pulpits in long and didactic sermons, tends to breed a longing for less church structures and more emphasis

on personal faith and a life-transforming religion. The doctrine of the Holy Spirit (pneumatology) and the reality of rebirth then come to the fore.

These developments did indeed take place in the Pietist reform. Philip Jakob Spener (1635-1705), a pioneer in the movement, wrote his *Pia Desideria* (pious or heartfelt desires) in 1675. It was a plea for church reform and less confessionalization of the faith in rigid formulas. A famous motto of the Reformation had been *ecclesia reformata quia semper reformanda est* (a church is truly reformed if always in the process of being reformed). That is precisely what the Pietists believed they were experiencing. They were engaged in Act II of the historical drama that was staged by their forebears, and more acts were to be played out before the final fall of the curtain of history.

RADICAL PIETISM

The Holy Scriptures tell us to test the spirits and see whether they are from God (I John 4:1). In order to do that, one must have some kind of authoritative standards, because it can be all too easy to confuse our own wild *Sturm und Drang* feelings with revelations from God.

High voltage chiliastic expectations about the imminent dawning of the millenium seem particularly strong around the turn of centuries. For instance, a severe case of apocalyptic fever broke out around the year 1500. During the 1490s, the Dominican friar Girolamo Savonarola was preaching his fiery gospel about the Last Days. As usual, ecstatic visions and claims about direct communications from God soon followed. The religious and secular authorities saw him as a disturber of the peace, and in 1498 he was burned at the stake.

Radical Pietists also proclaimed that the arrival of the Kingdom of Zion was near, and so was the demise of the established churches that were referred to as the Great Whore of Babylon portrayed in the Book of Revelation. These people were no longer interested in reforming that which, they believed, God had already rejected in his wrath. The pull of separatist forces became ever stronger. Prophets, “drunk with the Spirit,” urge the “awakened” to depart from this nest of wickedness and join a fellowship of true believers. In 1618 (as the Synod of Dort was battling the Armenians and arguing about predestination), Johannes Valentinus Andreae published his *Christianapolis* and founded the Christian God-loving (*Gottliebende*) Society—designed to form an ideal community dedicated to charitable causes and social reforms. Utopian schemes have a tendency to downplay the reality of sin, to claim for the here and now that which is promised for the future, and thus to spawn excesses. On the other hand, when Pietism becomes a form of spiritual navel gazing and the mystical experience loses the ethical dimension, then faith loses its moral fiber.

In England of that day we encounter small groups of believers who called themselves “Philadelphians.” The name refers to the church in Philadelphia mentioned in the Book of Revelation and commended for the faithfulness of its members in the face of persecution. Among those latter-day Philadelphians, who later influenced developments

in Germany and elsewhere, ecstatic prophetic utterances were often accompanied by sensational manifestations such as physical contortions and convulsions.

The *ecclesiola in ecclesia*, a small gathering of the reborn in fellowships devoted to prayer, Bible study and the nurturing toward holiness of life, became the ideal model of church life. All institutional elements found in the traditional churches (church order, canon law, even the sacraments) were avoided as corrupt human inventions that diverge from original Christianity. Only the invisible church of the Spirit was to be considered as true to the “New Testament” model. Gnostic aversion to anything that has concrete embodiment has plagued churches through the centuries.

What starts out as a spark of reform and resistance may in due time cause a blaze of explosive religion. The Alumbrados, referred to as the *Illuminated*, represented a 17th century movement of people who sought spiritual fulfillment through absorption of the soul into the Divine Essence. Becoming one with God involved an extreme form of passivity bordering on psychological self-annihilation. In such a state of bliss, called “quietism,” people are judged to be totally free, including liberation from accepted moral norms. One is thought to have transcended conventional ethics.

Weird and wild things can happen in the extremist world of mystical ecstasy. For instance, in the year 1700 (another turn of the century!), Eva von Butlan gathered a Philadelphian society in the town of Allendorf. The community eventually came to be known as the Society of Mother Eva, who assured her followers that the millennial reign had already begun in their midst. In their presumed state of supreme sanctification, the old moral codes were turned upside down. The new freedom allowed for “pure sex,” which was achieved through intercourse with Mother Eva. In our own day, we learn about apostate Latter Day Saints who live in an exclusive community named the “Yearning for Zion Ranch” where polygamy is practiced, including sex with teenage girls. Sex in such prematurely established New Jerusalems, one suspects, has more to do with the spirits that dwell in our deep dark selves than with the Holy Spirit of God.

Philadelphian and other excesses did not help Pietism’s reputation, as the powers that be were quick to claim that such practices were the inevitable result of any spiritual reform movement that did not follow the conventional path of establishment Christianity.

POST-SEVENTEENTH CENTURY PIETIST STIRRINGS

Apocalyptic prophecy preaching continued in the 18th century and is still a regular feature on Christian TV today. In 18th century France, Protestants found themselves in dire circumstances as the rights granted them in the Edict of Nantes in 1598 were revoked in 1685. The Camisards, a sort of underground resistance movement, led a revolt in 1702 under the leadership of inspired “prophets” who spoke in tongues and went into trances. Persecution, they assured their followers, is a sign of the Last Days. The Communities of True Inspiration that gathered around them engaged in much praying, singing, *agape* (love) feasts, frequently combined with a good deal of frenzied behavior.

The French prophets traveled far and wide to spread their gospel, particularly in Germany, and it was in those circles that the term “Pentecostal meetings” was introduced into the ecclesiastical vocabulary. In general, however, it can be said that movements emphasizing “baptism of the Holy Spirit” and revival found their most fertile soil in England and the United States. Their strong missionary drive has contributed greatly to the growth of Christianity across the globe.

Among the 18th century figures of interest, Count Nicolaus Ludwig Zinzendorf certainly deserves mention. He was born in the year 1700, and the great Pietist pioneer Philip Jakob Spener became his godfather. His early education took place in Halle, a major center of Pietist sentiments and scholarship.

In 1722, a small group of Moravian Brethren, followers of the pre-Reformation reformer Jan Huss who was burned at the stake, appeared at the Zinzendorf estate. They advocated a simple kind of Christianity modeled, in their view, after the “New Testament” church. The Herrnhut community, established on Zinzendorf’s property, became a center for small renewal groups across Europe, emphasizing a personal relationship with God, a devotional life, and social work among the poor and marginalized. In short, it was Pietism with a social gospel.

That kind of Pietism was also very evident in the life and work of John Wesley who was born in 1703 and became the “father” of Methodism, although he himself remained a life-long member of the Church of England. As a student with very limited means, he always made sure that some money was left for alms giving.

During a brief stay in the United States, Wesley too developed a relationship with Moravians. As a matter of fact, it was during a Moravian meeting in 1738 that he had his Aldersgate experience and “felt [his] heart strangely warmed.” As already suggested, Wesleyan spirituality stood for “practical holiness,” highlighted in his case by the fact that the last letter he wrote just before he died dealt with the topic of slavery which he opposed with a passion.

It might be worth mentioning in passing that Wesley, as well as Luther and Zinzendorf, all wrote hymns that are sung in churches of different theological traditions till this day. The role and power of music and song in reform movements, both religious and secular, should never be underestimated.

The names of Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield are usually associated with the 18th century Great Awakening in America. Historians have argued pro and con about the impact of those revivals on the anti-slavery movement and the Civil War. Few, however, dispute that this pietistic movement with its itinerant lay preachers, populist impulses, and its minimizing of denominational loyalties and class differences has impacted society and its mores in many ways. A new spirit of individual worth and independence, based on the belief that one is a child of God and bearer of the divine image, would eventually have social as well as political consequences.

At the opening of the 19th century, Jacob Albright, a Pietist of German descent with Methodist holiness leanings, began an evangelistic outreach in Pennsylvania. This led, in 1816, to the founding of The Evangelical Association that eventually took on the form of a denomination. In addition to Methodism, the church's theology incorporated elements of Reformed and Lutheran streams of thought as well. For instance, its eschatology was rooted in the federal or covenant theology espoused by the Dutch scholar Johannes Cocceius (1600-1669)—a theology that put strong emphasis on “salvation history.” Eschatology now took on a Kingdom of God perspective that was less focused on the imminent apocalypse, and more inclined to look at history as the realm in which believers can embody a Kingdom vision in the here and now. History “between the times” is the age of the Holy Spirit, and hence the age of mission and service to the Kingdom. Through the work of the Holy Spirit, manifestations of God's promised future occur as those believers become God's coworkers in their daily lives. A Judeo-Christian vision of mission has always encompassed nations and cultures. “I give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach the end of the earth” (Isaiah 49:6).

After a series of unions, splits, and reunions, the Evangelical Association became part of the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) in 1946, which in turn would unite with the Methodist Church in 1968 to create the United Methodist Church. The Brethren tradition had a strong social gospel and anti-slavery component, and stressed a prophetic witness to the state as an essential element in a confessional faith. In a theology of the Kingdom of God, holiness of life involves more than the individual as the sanctifying power of the Spirit takes on social and political dimensions.

The focus on politics became quite pronounced in 19th century Holland. From the 1830s to the 1880s, the Protestant church in the Netherlands with its Calvinist orientation went through times of turmoil and conflict. First came the movement of spiritual renewal and Pietist inclinations called the *Réveil*, to be followed in the second half of the century by the *Doleantie*. The choice of the word *Réveil* instead of revival sought to convey the idea of awakening a church that is slumbering rather than one that needs to be revived from the dead. *Doleantie* (from the Latin word *doleo*—to be saddened), on the other hand, refers to an actual split (albeit reluctantly) under the leadership of Abraham Kuyper. His theology stressed both the antithesis between the regenerate and unregenerate, and the organization of separate political parties, educational institutions, labor unions, etc. Kuyper the theologian would eventually become the politician *par excellence* and Prime Minister of Holland, thus reinforcing the relationship between piety and politics.

In Germany we see the establishment of the Bruderhof Community by the Blumhardt father and son team of Johann Christoph (1805-1880) and Christoph Friederich (1842-1919). Here again, we find the Kingdom of God motif woven into their theology, stressing the transforming and healing power of the Holy Spirit. “Jesus is Victor!” became the battle cry. Their sympathy toward certain socialist views was a testimony to their this-worldly piety.

Christian confession and theological reflection never take place in a vacuum. There is always a social-political and cultural context—a *Sitz im Leben*. That was true of the “primitive church,” a model that some pietistic souls seem to want to duplicate. Although those post-resurrection followers of Jesus did not produce a fullfledged theology of politics, neither did they escape the political realities of their day. Their context was the Greco-Roman world and the Empire. Nietzsche pictured his ideal human being (*Übermensch*) as “a Caesar with the soul of Christ.” That does not describe the ruler in Rome at that time or, for that matter, any ruler since.

The very gospel those early Christians preached had political implications. If Jesus is Lord of lords, then what about the claims of the emperor and the attitude of believers toward the governing authorities? The emperor got the message, and considered it to be dangerous. On that point, he was surely right! The biblical message about the reign of God and the lordship of Christ was subversive in the context of the *apotheosis* of the Roman State. The persecution that followed could no doubt have been avoided if those Christians had remained silent vis-à-vis the state while focusing on the salvation of souls. Instead, they prayed for the rulers (I Timothy 2:1-2), but also announced the claims of God’s Kingdom to them (Ephesians 3:9-10). They did that in the name of Jesus who taught his disciples a prayer in which the Kingdom motif is predominant.

When we come to the first half of the 20th century, we encounter two of the most prominent theologians of that day who were both deeply involved in the church resistance movement against Nazism and were also critics of Pietism: Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer. Both had been exposed to Pietist sentiments in their home surroundings, which is reflected in the evangelical tone often found in their writings.

Here I shall limit the discussion to Karl Barth. For many years he had a close relationship with the Blumhardts and, like them, had distinct socialist sympathies. His attitude toward socialism, however, can be described as eclectic and pragmatic rather than dogmatic. In other words, he did not genuflect at the altar of the Bolshevik Revolution. As a young pastor in Safenwil, Barth had worked in solidarity with the labor movement in an effort to secure more health-enhancing conditions in the workplace. Over the years, he would preach more sermons from pulpits in prison chapels than from those in Cathedrals. In short, he was fully engaged in the intellectual as well as social-political and cultural context of his day.

First and foremost, however, he was a theologian who had come to recognize the bankruptcy of the prevailing liberalism in his day. In response, he developed a Christ-centered theology of revelation that was based on his belief in the authoritative and self-authenticating Word of God.

Because of the sheer volume of Barth’s writings and the dialectical nature of his approach, one runs the risk of making any brief summary of his thought somewhat of a caricature; but that is the chance we have to take here. While Barth’s oeuvre presents us with a highly integrated whole, he was not a strictly systematic theologian. Openness to the Spirit allows for an element of playfulness in one’s theologizing. We must always

hear anew, always again be liberated from our preconceived notions and our imprisonment in theoretical castles.

Yet, Barth was passionate about his calling as a theologian in the service of Christ's church. What is the word – the “decisive word” – that we Christians must hear before we speak to the world? While the gospel does indeed concern the world, it is at the same time in conflict with all existing world orders. Furthermore, while the gospel concerns the inner life, it at the same time reveals the darkness that dwells there. Finally, while the gospel has everything to do with politics, it must never be made subservient to politics. This “Yes” and the “No” must exist in tension because our feelings, our intellectual schemes (*Weltanschauung*), and our actions always stand under the judgment of the sovereign and disturbing Word that surprises and makes free.

In order to be effectual, the Word of God does not need the support of our inner feelings. As a matter of fact, the impulses of our pagan hearts are often precisely the ones that lead us astray, and sometimes in disastrous ways. Some theologians who submitted to the Nazi *Blut und Boden* heresy were pious folk too. When the blood in the veins and the sacred fatherland become the source of a mythical faith, the concentration camps are not far away. If the Spirit doesn't get into our blood, the demons well might.

Political theology can all too easily be turned into an ideology, and the prophetic word into propaganda. When the younger Blumhardt turned from socialist sympathies to party politics, and became a Social Democrat member of the Württemberg Diet, Barth became concerned. The problem was not his engagement in politics, but rather that he seemed to conflate the Kingdom of God too closely with an eschatology of a socialist society.

Finally, a pietistic faith can become so preoccupied with “method” and a programmatic approach to holiness that it is no longer open to the radical voice from “beyond” that comes to us, questions us, bids us to say ‘Yes,’ and tells us to go venture forth into God's future. Biblical faith must always remain a daring adventure like it was for father Abraham who obeyed the voice and pursued the promise of the heavenly city, but who kept his feet solidly on the ground and his eye on his sheep.

Sometimes Barth the author of the magisterial *Church Dogmatics* seems to contradict or brush aside the Barth of action. The tension was always there. Still, passivity in the face of state tyranny and idolatrous totalitarianism was never an option. He drafted the *Barmen Declaration* as a word spoken to the Nazi state in the name of the God of Israel, the God of the Bible.

THE RELIGIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT TODAY

“History does not repeat itself, but it does rhyme” (Mark Twain). As we have entered the 21st century, we find ourselves in a historical context that is quite different from the one faced by Barth and his associates in the first half of the 20th century. Still, there are parallels; and that raises the question whether some of his warnings are still relevant for us today. He certainly did not stop the march of Pentecostalism, a movement that bears

many of the marks of Pietism. Before we discuss that topic, let me point to a few historical dynamics that I believe characterize our *Sitz im Leben*.

a) Globalization

A good deal of globalism talk is focused on markets and international enterprises. The widespread diffusion of technology has created a worldwide economic interdependence. All this was foreshadowed some centuries ago when powerful commercial interests sought to conquer, colonize and control whole continents. The 19th century missionary movement, initiated mostly by Evangelical associations, and subsequently co-opted by denominational establishments, spread the gospel to the far corners of the earth. In the post-colonial era, those missionary outposts of Western Christianity developed into independent churches eager to cultivate indigenous expressions of their faith and theology. Pentecostalism, with its rather loose institutional structures, has proven to be uniquely situated to contextualize the gospel in local cultures.

b) Secularization

Since the Enlightenment and the domination of its spirit of rationalism among some intellectual elites, it has frequently been argued that science, education, and improved economic conditions would bring about a slow but steady decline of religious faith. Looking at Europe, one might be tempted to conclude that this prophecy has come true. In Western Europe particularly, we have witnessed an enormous decline in all forms of congregational participation and church practice (baptism in particular). From a global perspective, however, it can hardly be maintained that religion is moribund. Religiosity, sometimes in neo-Pagan dress, is flourishing even in some of the most inhospitable environments.

The global church is growing at a rapid pace in Latin America, Africa and parts of Asia. Western Christianity is no longer where the action is. Pentecostalism must be seen in that context.

c) Public Religion

It is often claimed that religion is a very personal thing, and should therefore be treated as a private affair. From a biblical perspective, nothing could be further from the truth. Both the “Old Testament” and the “New Testament” have much to say about the personal and even mystical dimensions of faith without ever implying that it can therefore be confined to the private sphere. The prophetic and apostolic witness is implicitly a public affair.

In the United States it is widely accepted that religion has a public role, even though there may be profound disagreement about how that should be worked out in practice. Since Evangelicals emerged during the 1970s from their self-imposed ghetto existence, they have entered the political arena with lobbying efforts on behalf

of certain policy positions—just as the “mainline” folks had done for years. These opposing groups differ on priorities and strategies, but still agree on the basic principle of political activism and the need for a voice in the public square.

Furthermore, disputes about details are raging not just between these two factions, but also within each group. Should political action be based on a carefully articulated public theology and, if so, what kind of action and what kind of theology? In May 2008, a group of Evangelical leaders issued an “Evangelical Manifesto” in

which they implicitly accused some of their co-religionists of politicizing the gospel by engaging in party politics. “That way faith loses its independence,” the document declared, “the church becomes ‘the regime at prayer,’ Christians become ‘useful idiots’ for one political party or another, and the Christian faith becomes an ideology in its purest form.” However, the signatories themselves remained committed “to a vision of public life in which citizens of all faiths are free to enter and engage the public square on the basis of their faith.”

Pope Benedict XVI agrees. In that same month of May, he addressed the United Nations as follows: “The full guarantee of religious liberty cannot be limited to the free exercise of worship, but has to give due consideration to the public dimension of religion, and hence the possibility of believers playing their part in building the social order.”

Once it is agreed that that the gospel and Christian theology have public policy implications, the question still arises as to how this insight is to be applied. Some would claim that God-talk is *ipso facto* a discussion stopper, and the religious voice should therefore be toned down for the sake of civil discourse. Furthermore, positions should be supported on the basis of a generally accepted “public reason” rather than references to religious authorities and theological arguments.

Should the Christian voice be conveyed exclusively through individual believers and/or associations rather than through church channels (bishops, synods, ecclesiastical-ecumenical bodies)? Some, fearing a re-emergence of “Constantinianism,” argue that the church should focus on its own identity as a unique community created by the Spirit. Let the church be the church, and let its life be a witness to the world! Any notion of transforming the structures of society, it is said, will only lead to the church’s marginalization as just another social organization. The United States can literally boast of hundreds, even several thousand, Christian action groups identifying themselves as either conservative or progressive, and advocating causes from the minimal wage to global warming. It is my impression that the atmosphere of hyper activism and constant money raising leaves little time and energy for theological reflection beyond the most superficial and sloganeering kind.

A small conventicle of pious folk may avoid dealing with such issues—an option not open, however, to a movement like Pentecostalism that is already having a

transforming impact on whole societies, and that in some regions of the world is in direct confrontation with militant forms of Islam.

d) Islam

Islam is on the march, and the revival of the idea of an Islamic state is an inescapable reality in today's religio-political context. Throughout its history, with only a brief interruption after World War I, an Islamic state has been the accepted norm in the Muslim world. Rulers were expected to govern in line with *Shari'a* law as interpreted by a select group of wise men and scholars. This arrangement was not just imposed upon the population. Rather, popular piety was suspicious of any attempt to reform the system in line with Western ideas of constitutional law.

The counterbalancing role of the scholars has been considerably curtailed in the recent moves toward a *Shari'a* controlled state. The issue of checks and balances remains, therefore, a crucial one in the religio-political context of our day. Autocratic rule raises questions about the legitimacy of the government in the eyes of a restless population. For people of other faiths, the implications of *Shari'a* law with respect to their freedom of religion and civil rights is a source of constant concern. In some regions of the world where Christianity and Islam are both growing at a rapid pace, tensions and even conflicts are already the order of the day.

PENTECOSTALISM

On April 18, 1906, San Francisco suffered a disastrous earthquake. That same day, the Azusa Street Revival took place in Los Angeles, an event that many consider to be the spark that ignited an explosive spiritual movement across America and the world. It is all part of a continual chain reaction, as the Spirit of God moves through history and ignites spiritual revolutions.

The Book of Acts, chapter 2, records the story of how on the day of Pentecost (Shavuot, a Jewish harvest festival) the Holy Spirit stirred mightily among the post-resurrection community of Jesus' disciples. The early church interpreted the experience as the fulfillment of a prophecy in the book of Joel declaring that one day God's Spirit would be "poured out on all flesh." The account in Acts refers to some remarkable phenomena that accompanied the event. A number of spectators thought that the strange behavior manifested in Jerusalem that day was a sign that those people were drunk before lunch. The *Los Angeles Daily Times* reported "the wild scene last night at Azusa Street," adding in an editorial comment that "a new sect of fanatics is breaking loose."

We have already noted some of the marks of a "rebirth" experience: baptism of the Holy Spirit, speaking in tongues, end-time prophecies, and various forms of healing. Sometimes unrestrained emotionalism leads to convulsions, holy laughter, or even the bizarre practice of snake handling. Some observers, referring to "holy

rollers,” have concluded that all charismatic Christians are a little crazy; but that is a very superficial way of looking at the Pentecost story in its broader manifestations.

The danger, of course, always exists that instead of waiting for the movement of the divine Spirit, people moved by a desire for sensationalism and self-interest will apply their own techniques for stoking up the fires of emotionalism. In those circles of ministerial manipulators one will rarely see the society-changing aspects of Pentecostalism. It should be noted, for instance, that the Azusa event was interracial, an experiment in Christian radicalism that was unfortunately not sustained when the movement spread to other regions where segregation was accepted as the norm even by most churches. What did survive, however, was a spirit of caring for the less fortunate among us.

Ever since the days of the early church, the gospel of Christ and the forces of spiritual renewal have often found the greatest receptivity among the poorer segments of the population. Today, Pentecostalism is literally reshaping the religious, economic, and political landscape of large sections of the global South. As an increasing number of middle-class folk and professional people are drawn to the movement, its influence among the intellectual and cultural elites is growing as well. The 18th century German Pietists often contrasted the church as *Gemeinschaft* (fellowship) with the church as institution, the latter being viewed as inherently oppressive. Many Pentecostal churches today provide a community of mutual caring that also uses organizational structures to serve the social needs of the larger community, thus demonstrating that the Christian faith can be counter-cultural without necessarily being other-worldly or socially reactionary. It is, therefore, not surprising to find a recent book co-authored by Don Miller, focusing on *Progressive Pentecostalism*.

Piety does not *ipso facto* mean political detachment, nor does political involvement come without risk. With large numbers, in some cases even majority status, comes greater responsibility and greater exposure to corruptive influences. Believers are not spared the seductive pull of greed and elitism. Some Pentecostal leaders who have reached the pinnacle of government and military power are not exactly good advertisement for the idea of “rule of the saints.” Frederick Chiluba, president of Zambia, declared his country to be a Christian nation in which all public schools were ordered to teach the gospel of Christ. In 2007 he was convicted of stealing millions of dollars from the public treasury. Pentecostal preacher-general Laurent N’Kunda of the Congo and Rios Mott of Guatemala, too, are not the best models of Christian leadership. When power is combined with the belief that one has a direct line to God, things can get treacherous.

Issues related to the interaction between religion and politics or church and state confront Christians all over the world—East, West, North, and South. Barth and his colleagues wrestled with those issues in the context of their day. The world church today – the *ecclesia catholica* – must seek answers for our day. We need each other. Building on theological reflections that come to us from the past, we listen to new

voices that come to us from Africa, Asia, and South America. The Lord of history and the movement of the Spirit are not dependent on a Euro-American strategy. The *oikomene*, the whole wide world, is part of God's design to transform all things into the Kingdom of God. "Behold," says the Lord, "I am making all things new" (Revelation 21:5).

A SUMMING-UP

Let me conclude this discussion with a few comments and questions. What may seem as straying from the piety/politics theme will hopefully be seen as just a little detour on the way to the final destination.

- 1) The Bible declares in no uncertain terms that God reigns and that Jesus is Lord. What does that mean? Is there a reality quality to that language, or is it basically a bit of poetic license? The first thing to be said is that God wants to reign in our hearts, and Jesus wants to be Lord of our lives. When that happens, people do not doubt that it is really real! The mystical stirrings of the soul, guiding one's will and shaping one's life, are marvelous to experience. Even a cursory reading of the scriptures, however, will make it clear that much more needs to be said. The God of Israel is the Lord of the universe, the Creator of heaven and earth who holds the destiny of nations in his power and will bring forth a new heaven and a new earth in the Kingdom of God. God's dealings with the world are historical and eschatological at the same time.

God is the God of the covenant who wants to dwell among his people for the purpose of saving the world. At the dawn of that covenant history, God has a promise for Abraham, *and* for his family, *and* for generations to follow, including all the nations of the world—a magnificent vision of universal *Shalom*. That is the central theme of the biblical narrative: the calling and history of Israel; the coming of Jesus and his messianic ministry; the resurrection, lordship of Christ, and outpouring of the Holy Spirit; the Church and its mission; all point to and serve that future as well as turn believers into futurists.

Now, it seems to me that, once we really think through those fundamental biblical themes we reach the inescapable conclusion that from the perspective of a theology of the Kingdom of God, history is just as important as our hearts and society as much in need of redemption as our individual souls. Furthermore, the state will become the City of God (the New Jerusalem) while the Church will be no more, because all of life will be saved and God will be all in all.

- 2) If the above thesis has any validity, then the question arises as to whether, according to the divine intention, the state has any role to play in God's Kingdom activity with the world. The "New Testament" uses the word *exousia* (power, authority) in a variety of contexts. Jesus taught as one having *exousia*; he endowed his disciples with *exousia* as they are sent on a mission; through the

Church, the wisdom of God is made known to the “principalities and powers” (*exousiae*) of this world, etc.

The apostle Paul states in his letter to the Romans that God has endowed the governing authorities with *exousia*, a power that in the state’s case includes coercive force for the sake of maintaining an orderly society. The *use* of such power then becomes the crucial issue. Niccolo Machiavelli wrote what is perhaps the most famous guidebook on that subject, entitled *The Prince* (1513). In his view, a ruler must at least give the appearance of being pious in the eyes of the populace, and secondly must use any means to stay in power, including ruthless ones if necessary. Serving the public was not mentioned as an urgent priority. From a biblical perspective one could say that Machiavelli was engaged in a de-theologizing of power. The way later tyrants would put those “principles” into practice gave Niccolo’s family a bad machiavellian name.

The apostle Paul does the exact opposite by introducing terms like *diakonia* (see the word “diaconate”) and *leitourgia* (see our word “liturgy”) into the discussion on the role of government (Romans 13). It appears that political terminology and church language both apply when one thinks biblically and theologically about human participation in the *missio Dei*. Church and state are both part of a historical dynamic; and because both are in their very nature culture-shaping forces, their interaction is a given. The state functions with, and the church functions without the power to coerce and enforce the rule of civil law. What we see is a duality without dualism, distinctions with a common source of ultimate authority. The question whether the governing authorities or even church authorities recognize that and draw appropriate implications from it is, of course, another matter. Issues of church and state are ever up for debate.

- 3) If the above thesis has any validity, then the next question to arise is whether the prophetic-apostolic proclamation presupposes some form of what has somewhat problematically been called “Christendom” (it was basically a “Judeo-Christendom”). Are there, one cannot help but wonder, any expectations as to what should happen? What difference will it make—personally, socially, culturally, politically? Some will claim that what historically has happened is a form of Christendom called “Constantinianism” and that it was all bad—destructive to both true piety and sound politics. As I see it, the question at stake is this: Does God desire that the message of the Bible and the Judeo-Christian tradition find some sort of expression or reflection in society and its culture? Or is the divine redemptive purpose satisfied with transformations in the human soul and the church?

President Theodore Roosevelt wrote movingly about “the soul of the nation.” How should one define that biblically and theologically? Do we as pastors and *theo-logoi* (God-speakers) have a meaningful word to say about the spiritual-moral foundations of the state and the commonwealth? Do we still dare to raise such issues publicly? Among the religious leaders on the world stage who

dared to talk openly about such matters I count the late Pope John Paul II. He eloquently and passionately called on the continent of Europe to return to its spiritual roots and their Judeo-Christian heritage. The European Union discussed this sensitive issue at length when they considered the shape of their Constitution; but in the end the secular view won out, and they remained silent on the matter.

The experiments with various forms of Christendom over the past 2000 years have not established the Kingdom of God on earth. Far from it! All embodiments of any faith in a sinful world are at best fragmentary—a torso. That, however, does not mean that we should settle for the so-called “neutral state” as a safe haven from religious distortions, because such a safe haven is nowhere to be found.

- 4) Let me be clear about the neutral state: It is a fiction—an intellectual fool’s paradise designed for unthinking minds and often promoted by people whose plans for society are anything but neutral. The question that cries out for an answer is this: neutral with respect to what? Values? Convictions? Any kind of worldview? It does not take a Ph. D. degree to recognize that the legislative process and every law of any consequence that is passed is literally loaded with presuppositions, theological/ideological baggage, and sometimes a mix of biases.

The question that really counts is this: Where do the norms come from? Surely, not from nonchalantly neutral minds. Tax laws tell a lot about what people believe on a host of issues: human nature, people’s needs, fairness, justice, and what have you. That is even more true in the case of marriage, family legislation, and the never-ending debate about abortion.

Do we derive our norms from counting noses? From the quicksand of human emotions, or the shifting sands of public opinion? Do we turn to Karl Marx’s *Das Kapital* or Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*? Are philosophers perhaps our best authoritative sources? Some of the greatest philosophical minds have thought hard and long about the nature of the state: Plato, Spinoza, Hegel. Unfortunately, none of them turned out to be a particularly good friend of personal freedom.

A truly neutral state would represent power minus principle. It usually is a short distance from normlessness to nihilism and, because a vacuum must be filled, finally to dictatorship after the public looks for a savior to control the chaos—if need be by controlling the minds and consciences of citizens in the process. In short, the naked public square will become the scene of naked power and brutal oppression. Today, Islam is THE world-historical challenge to the notion of a neutral state. But, is it an alternative we can live with?

- 5) The Church's power and authority lie in the living Word of God, activated by the Holy Spirit. With Torah in hand (the only Bible they had), the earliest followers of Jesus entered the Roman Empire proclaiming the good news about the Kingdom of God and the name of Jesus (Acts 8:11). As a result, the world was changed, because the Word of revelation created its own realities. Please, hold the red flags, but the term "prophetic theocracy" strikes me as perfect to describe those historical developments. Some signs of God's reign were established upon the earth. There was no "rule of the saints," nor a church in any position to impose its will—just the Word and the Spirit or, if you will, the Word/Spirit dynamic operating on the stage of history through the instrumentality of a tiny and often threatened minority of believers.

Now we move from the Roman Empire to our post-modern world. The differences are immense, but the challenges remain the same. The means of communication have grown exponentially, and so has the competition—the cacophony of voices and noises reaching the ears and hearts of humanity even into the smallest hamlets on the planet. Is the worldwide Christian community equipped for the task? We have the means, but what about the message? Do members of the one *ecclesia catholica*, even know how to talk with each other about the deep things of God? The tongue of Pentecostals often sounds foreign to Catholics and vice versa. The disputes and divisions between churches, often rooted in past Western history, have been exported to other continents as if they are part of the gospel.

The scandal of Christian disunity is like a countersign to the gospel of the Kingdom that we preach and, therefore, gives tremendous urgency to the ecumenical imperative. Ecumenicity is both a goal and a gift. Only if we learn to wrestle with God's Word together, and wait together to receive a "decisive word" for our day, shall our mission reflect the message of *Shalom* given us in the Holy Scriptures.

The organized ecumenical endeavors of the post-World War II era, while not to be despised or discounted, are in need of a critical review. Financial pressures and structural issues have a way of weakening the vision, although poverty and loss of organizational power may, by God's grace, also offer a new opportunity to re-direct the focus away from bureaucracy and budget toward a deeper common search around the Bible. In the world of the Bible, churches will hopefully also re-discover their heritage in Israel and the Hebraic thought world that suffuses the scriptures of the "Old" and "New Testament." The search for unity while neglecting the core questions about the relationship between Church and Israel has been one of the saddest aspects of church history, and also one of the great failures of recent ecumenical efforts.

The words of our Lord that "salvation is from the Jews" require our deep reflection on the whole world of Torah as the essential background for our

understanding of the Kingdom of God revealed in the Messiah. There we learn what the biblical view of redemption encompasses. At the heart of it all we find the saving realities of atonement, reconciliation, and forgiveness. Thus the gates of grace are opened for the sanctification of the world. The last word about the visible and touchable realities of this earth does not belong, at least from the point of view of biblical faith, exclusively to science and technology. The Creator/Covenant God of the Bible is making all things new. In the end (*eschaton*), there will be glorification when God will be all in all and, as the Bible states so poetically, peace and justice will kiss each other. The ecumenical as well as social-political implications of a Hebraic perspective for our message and mission are profound.

- 6) A final word about the big picture and cosmic vision offered us in the Bible. Eschatology and pneumatology have been recurring themes in the foregoing discussion, both topics that have often either been neglected in dogmatic theology or treated in overly personalistic and sometimes sectarian terms. But the themes are central to the gospel of the Kingdom of God. The redemptive presence of the Lord of history through the Spirit introduces a spirit of expectation into all of Christian life and thought. Pietism and Pentecostalism have both made valuable contributions to the subject, and we owe them a debt of gratitude for that. As we wrestle with the Word in ecumenical fellowship, seeking for a common word to speak to a world in need, they in turn can be enriched by perspectives from other theological traditions, both Protestant and Catholic.

We read in Paul's letter to the Romans that the creation itself is longing for the recreation of all things (Romans 8:18ff.). The biblical theme of "all things" (*ta panta*) has not always received the attention that it deserves in theological discourse. In the biblical revelation, the theme is found in both christological and pneumatological contexts. As to the former, a few key texts like the following give us plenty to think about--John 1:1-5, I Corinthians 8:6, Hebrews 1:1-4, and Colossians 1:15-18.

The *ta panta* emphasis contains a message that is immensely world-affirming. We learn to embrace the world and all that it has to offer because of faith in the reign of God, the lordship of Christ, and the "New Age" to come. The Spirit of God puts us in an eschatological frame of mind. It orients us toward "the things that are to come" (John 16:14)—makes us dream dreams and see visions. Then the Spirit puts us to work as partners of God (I Corinthians 3:9). That idea of "partnership" is particularly important in the worldview of our Jewish brothers and sisters.

Some 18th century Pietists were greatly excited when they discovered the notion of *apokatastasis panton* – the restoration of all things – in the "New Testament" (Acts 3:21). They rightly read a biblical universalism into the text. However, they then focused their attention on an exclusively soteriological

interpretation: in the end, all people will be saved--i.e. there is no eternal damnation. Many complained that they said more than the Bible allowed. However that may be, from the perspective of the gospel of the Kingdom they did not say enough, because biblical universalism has a cosmic dimension to it. Theological reflection on that theme with emphasis on the “all flesh” and “all things” aspects of the outpouring of the Spirit, opens wide pneumatological perspectives. It can also, one should keep in mind, become highly speculative. To ignore the vision that it contains, however, leads to a truncated gospel of the Kingdom of God.

Many today seem to worry about the Church’s declining influence and its loss of voice. In our striving to be faithful servants of the Word and the world, we do indeed need all the diverse insights of the people of God across the globe. The challenges, however, should not deter us from assuming the tasks before us with joy—both as *theo-logoi* and as activists on behalf of the Kingdom. Where there is a vision, there will be a voice. God himself will take care of the influence.