

THEOCRACY IS NOT A FOUR-LETTER WORD

I want to put in a good word for the theocratic idea. The very concept seems to have become the subject of a scare campaign. Sneer remarks about “Christian Taliban” and the like are being used as a discussion stopper, a technique to brush off an opponent with whom one happens to disagree regarding the interaction between religion and politics. The opponent is called a theocrat or a christocrat in order to imply that he/she is an enemy of freedom, and an imminent danger to American democracy. It is so tempting to live by the illusion that one’s own position is pure and ideology-free, a rather common infliction that can lead to mindless slogans and/or a malfunctioning of a person’s moral compass.

The word “theocracy” is not a four-letter word. It literally means the “reign of God” and expresses something fundamental about the God both Christians and Jews worship. It essentially says that God, the sovereign Lord, is at work in history to redeem the world. Israel’s poets have sung about it, and prophets have proclaimed the message with words that still resonate today. “Say among the nations, ‘The Lord reigns’” (Psalm 96:10). “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” (Isaiah 52:7) According to the New Testament gospels, Jesus took up that theme not only by preaching the Kingdom of God, but also by manifesting its transforming power in his own life and ministry.

Theocracy—what a wonderful word it is, so richly charged with joyful news! During times of theological and ideological disputes, it is not uncommon to see perfectly fine words devalued and even avoided. I remember parishioners during my early years in the pastorate who were determined to replace “catholic” with the much tamer word “universal.” Closer ties with the Roman Catholic Church over the past decades have tended to considerably cool down such overreactions.

Or consider the word “liberal” with its glorious root meaning of freedom. Some of my once proudly liberal friends are now calling themselves “progressives,” seemingly avoiding the designation “liberal” like the plague. There is a special irony in the way the idea of liberalism has evolved. Nineteenth-century classical liberalism referred to an Adam Smith type free market economy. Eventually, that system was more or less pushed aside by a social-economic philosophy that emphasized the need for government programs in order to alleviate problems attributed to that original brand of liberalism. In the words of Pete Seeger’s song, “Turn, turn, turn—to every thing there is a season.”

Ironies abound as well regarding the negative attitudes toward anything even remotely associated with the theocratic idea. First of all, over the past decades the notion of the Kingdom (reign) of God has gained a renewed respectability in theological writings that

seek to be relevant to worldly realities. Secondly, all the alarming language about theocracy is being voiced as religious establishments are increasingly involved in lobbying activities. Even Evangelicals have belatedly joined their Christian and Jewish colleagues in such officially endorsed and financed activities. Those folks come to the seats of power with a faith-based perspective and, to the extent that they are effective, inject a dose of theocracy into the body politic.

A broad definition of theocracy might read as follows: Any expression of what is perceived as the divine will that is embodied in the public realm and its laws is a form of theocracy. There is room for a good deal of relativity here. In the final analysis, it is all a matter of degree. As policy decisions are made and legislation is passed, what role might the advocacy of a Judeo-Christian worldview play in the process of its adoption? If that is not supposed to happen, why waste precious resources on those religiously oriented lobbyists who walk the corridors of power in Washington?

Theocracy is more a matter of a religio-political dynamic than of a political regimen—at least, from a biblical point of view. Israel’s theocracy was not a closed system. The often tense interactions between prophet, priest, and king might be described as “prophetic theocracy,” based upon the belief that the Word of the Lord has world-historical implications. An absolute theocracy is at heart a form of idolatry, with usually totalitarian tendencies. Both church and secular history show us what happens when humans start playing God.

The New Testament used moderate terminology when speaking about the presence of the reign of God in the world. After all, the Kingdom of God is first and foremost an eschatological reality, the promised future when universal *shalom* will be established upon the earth. However, at the center of biblical thinking lies the belief that, from time to time, God’s tomorrow enters our today. There are breakthroughs of the Kingdom of God, which are seen as God’s Spirit at work in our midst. Israel gloried in those manifestations of God’s presence in its historical experience. The “New Testament” speaks of “signs,” divinely powered signposts pointing to the promised future. It also speaks of “first fruits” as representative of the coming harvest, or a “down payment” on a heritage that is signed, sealed and guaranteed by God’s covenant faithfulness. In other words, one could speak of a “realizing eschatology” in the sense that we see the real power of God’s kingdom at work in the world and experience it in our hearts. It is really real! Rather than meaning that we have “arrived” and have utopia in our grasp, however, it should be received as a vision that beckons us to pursue the journey of faith with renewed vigor.

Father Abraham has showed us the way. He bet his future on God’s promises, and ventured forth in faith even though the facts of life did not seem to confirm what he had been told. Martin Buber called him a “nomad of faith,” and the paleontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin called those who follow in his footsteps “pilgrims of the future.” A vision of the future both draws and drives those who seek to serve the Kingdom of God. It is a very broad vision, involving nations and their cultures. “Nations shall come to your light, and kings in the brightness of your rising” (Isaiah 60:3). That vision of

Israel's prophets is reflected in what we read about the New Jerusalem in the final chapters of the New Testament: "The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it" (Revelation 21:24).

The Bible is a book of dreams, but it is not a pipe dream or pie in the sky kind of book. The rulers of the world, including politicians, are part of the picture. Holy Scripture has much to say about sin, but the real story is about the transformation of all things. That includes our social orders; so that a commonwealth of the nations may be established upon the earth, and humanity may live in the *shalom* of God's Kingdom. Such is the message we proclaim to the powers of this world. Faithful proclamation, however, involves practice; and that means becoming partners with God in what in Judaism is called *tikkun olam*, the healing and mending of the world. Every time Christians pray, "Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven," they utter what is in effect a theocratic prayer.

As the apostle Paul saw so clearly, a theocracy-driven life is one of faith, hope, and love. The person of faith looks back and says, "Behold the works of the Lord." Faith is trust in the God of the covenant who has acted in history and has demonstrated his faithfulness. Based on God's "past record," people look to the future believing that life and all the things of this world have a purpose and a goal: the reign of the divine will upon the earth. Knowledge that the One who is Lord of both the past and the future is willing and able to deal with our troubled pasts and our fears of the future enables the believer to embrace the present moment in joyful love—a love that leads to a daring life.

Of course, ideas can be dangerous--theocratic ideas, perhaps, most of all. There is not one belief or theory that is immune to distortions by extremists. For instance, at first sight the idea of a neutral state may seem so much safer. But, is it? How secure can a citizen feel in a society where no authoritative norms are recognized, where relativism prevails, and arbitrary rule has replaced established law? Governments never operate in a value-free zone; a vacuum will inevitably be filled. The more complete the neutrality, the closer we move to the chasm of nihilism.

As to the religious Right versus the religious Left, we should not fool ourselves into believing that one is intent on transforming the culture, while the other is focused on the preservation of freedom. In the vast majority of cases, both sides have designs on changing laws in order to achieve their faith-based vision of a better world. Where they differ is on philosophical presuppositions, political priorities, and biblical interpretation; and these are not minor matters. Such diverse conclusions from people who appeal to the same scriptures may be confusing to some, while the fact that each side's position tends to reflect the platform of a major political party may look suspicious to others. However, a healthy democracy can handle such peculiarities of *homo politicus*. On the American scene, at least, there is no indication of a religiously motivated coup d'état by either party. Advocates on all sides accept the voice of the people as expressed in their votes. While eternal vigilance is ever called for, it would seem that for the time being we can rest at ease that our religious freedoms are secure. With all due respect to my brothers and sisters in the Christian and Jewish communities who constantly sound the alarm, I

must be blunt and say that your hype sounds too overwrought and-dare I say it- a bit hysterical.

In light of the challenges posed to both Christianity and Judaism by the forces of an aggressive secularism and a militant Islam, a preoccupation with vocal but politically rather ineffective Christian advocacy groups strikes me as highly problematic. The Rev. Pat Robertson's run for the presidency did not go very far, but the principles enunciated in Ayatollah Khomeini's 1971 book on "Islamic Government" are now the law of the land in Iran, and admired by multitudes in the Muslim world. As a result, Shari'a law is imposed and clerical authority rules supreme. Rather than declaring insights derived from the Bible to be off limits in our political discourse, Christians and Jews should search for ways to show how Torah principles and Gospel insights about the Kingdom of God are relevant to today's postmodern world--that is, *because and as long as* they are free of any notion of ecclesiocracy or "rule of the saints."

A "prophetic theocracy" is at heart about the power of the divine Word. "All daring rhetoric," wrote Walter Brueggemann in his book *Texts under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodernism* (1993), "is in some sense evocative of reality and constitutive of reality." Things can hardly get more daring than the message received by the prophet Jeremiah: "Now I have put my words in your mouth. See, today I appoint you over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to pull down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant" (1:9 and 10). From the perspective of "Realpolitik," this must have sounded like an absurdity; but amazing things can happen when God puts words in people's mouths. It may just turn out that the Word of the Lord is indeed "like fire...and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces" (23:29)—the rock of (post)modernity not excepted. The question is whether we believe it.

We hear much about the disestablishment of the churches and how religion has lost its voice and its influence in the public realm. Only loss of a daring faith will cause religion to lose its voice. Loss of influence in terms of political clout is not exactly the kind of thing prophetic faith is concerned about. An oft-repeated statement may sound trite, but remains true: It is not whether we are successful that counts, but whether we shall be found faithful, including – I believe – to the prophetic-theocratic vision.

