The Illusion of Christian Democracy

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At the conclusion of a symposium on his book Christian Faith and Modern Democracy*, Robert Kraynack recapitulates his argument regarding the tension between Christianity and modern liberal democracy. He acknowledges the significance of Christian personalism as a challenge to the thesis of his book, but replies that Christian personalism is ultimately self-contradictory as basis for politics.*

Christian Faith and Modern Democracy was intended to stimulate a lively discussion about the fundamental issues of religion and politics today. Judging from the statements of the eight scholars in this symposium, I can say that it has succeeded in that respect. All of the participants have written responses that critically engage the issues of the book and raise the discussion to a very high level. I am honored to be taken so seriously by this distinguished group of scholars.

At the same time, I am acutely aware of the fact that none of the scholars has been persuaded by my central argument–that contemporary Christians have allied themselves too closely with modern liberal democracy on the mistaken assumption that Christian teachings about human dignity, equality, and freedom are basically compatible with the principles of liberal democracy. I also note that none of the scholars in the symposium (except for Gary Glenn) appears to be convinced by my argument that the mistake is mainly due to the influence of Kantian ethics on Christian theology–an influence that has produced a less spiritual and more ideological Christianity than the faith of earlier generations because it has largely abandoned the Two Cities doctrine (the distinction between the city of God and the earthly city) and diminished the role of prudence in Christian politics. Most of the scholars do not seem to be as worried as I am that Christianity has been transformed into a religion that sounds more like the "gospel of democracy" than the "gospel of Christ" or more like Kantian liberalism (with its emphasis on rights, dignity, consent, and progress toward perpetual peace) than the natural law of St. Thomas Aquinas (with its emphasis on virtue, character formation, the common good, and the inherent

limitations of the temporal realm).

Despite these reservations, most of the scholars agree with me that significant challenges to Christian faith are posed by the mass culture of modern democracies and by the underlying philosophy of liberalism that equates freedom with personal autonomy and that promotes excessive materialism and even a "culture of death" in the name of social welfare. Several of the scholars strongly endorse my criticism of contemporary culture for undermining Christian teachings on the family and the Church and for degrading the human soul. David Crawford, in particular, expresses appreciation for my analysis showing that “liberalism reconfigures Christianity into its own interpretation of man” – a reduction of Christian faith from below, as it were.

But the scholars of the symposium do not believe that the new alliance of Christian faith and modern democracy is inherently problematic. In their view, the only problem is a confusion of ideas in which modern democracy is justified by appealing to the false anthropology and false metaphysics of Enlightenment liberalism rather than to the authentically Christian argument that has been developed over the last centuries. Their remedy is to teach the correct argument based on the Christian idea of the “human person” or “Christian personalism" which promotes "personalist" democracy–a Christian version of democracy based on the dignity of the human person made in the image of God who is also the possessor of inviolable human rights.

Following the developments of Christian personalism, Ken Grasso defends the "Catholic human rights revolution," Norris Clarke argues for the Thomistic notion of Christian freedom, Tim Sheratt vigorously defends the concept of "Christian democracy," and Jeanne Heffernan says we need to follow Tocqueville in promoting more and better Christian democracy than we presently have. Greg Beabout also argues for Catholic personalism by saying its conception of freedom is part of the “virtue tradition” rather than the Kantian liberal tradition. Similarly, Gary Glen argues that Catholicism has its own version of natural rights (derived from neo-Scholasticism) that includes moral duties and the social nature of man. Robert Hunt defends John Courtney Murray’s project of an authentic development of Thomism in the direction of

liberal democracy, and David Crawford argues for a version of Catholic "communio" in which the “culture of love” will make democracy an earthly approximation of the divine communion of the Trinity.

In short, the scholars of the symposium believe the main challenge for Christians today is simply "getting it right" rather than re-thinking the whole alliance of Christianity and liberal democracy. None of these scholars therefore sees the need for recovering the Augustinian doctrine of the Two Cities and the prudential approach to politics that I advocate; and very few seem disturbed by my conclusion that the modern democratic age may be nothing more than a temporary blip in the long history of civilization with no special significance for salvation history.

Taken together, these critical reactions to my book are very significant and require a serious response. I would like to offer one general response in defense of the Two Cities doctrine and then focus on some particular points of disagreement about the theology and politics of Christian personalism.

The Two Cities

The general response that I have to my critics is that they underestimate the radical nature of Christian faith in relation to politics and, therefore, they are unable or unwilling to stand back from our age and judge it from the perspective of eternity. This exalted perspective is the true meaning of the Two Cities doctrine that I argue should be (and traditionally was) the guiding star of Christian politics. This perspective needs to be recovered so that we are not misled by false claims about Christian imperatives for democracy while also recovering the genuine prudential argument for constitutional democracy that makes it worthy of our allegiance in the earthly city.

The Two Cities doctrine teaches these lessons because it distinguishes the city of God from the earthly city and maintains the absolute primacy of the spiritual realm (directed to eternal life), while still demanding a high degree of love and devotion for the temporal realm (directed to earthly happiness). The crucial corollary of the Two Cities doctrine is that Christian

faith does not have a direct political teaching and its conception of divine law (the revealed law of God in the Bible) does not contain a civil or legal code, as does the divine law of Judaism which prescribes a legal code (*halakah*) for the Chosen People or the divine law of Islam which prescribes a civil code (*sharia*) for a theocratic Islamic state. As the Gospels and Epistles indicate, Jesus perfects the divine law by reducing it to the two great commands of love – loving God with all one's heart, mind, and soul and loving one's neighbor as one's self – which do not automatically translate into specific commands to set up a monarchy or a democracy or any particular economic system (such as capitalism or socialism) or even to require a new arrangement of classes based on social equality. Jesus did not say, for example, that God's command of universal love, especially for the poor and humble over the rich and powerful, required the common people to rule politically in place of Caesar, nor did Jesus say that the duties of charity to the poor implied setting up a social welfare state. Even Jesus' preaching about the coming kingdom of God did not call for the end of the Roman system of slavery and patriarchy. Instead, Jesus said to render to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's, and He asserted that his kingdom is not of this world. This distinction (later formulated into the Two Cities by St. Augustine and the Two Powers by Pope Gelasius and the Two Kingdoms by Martin Luther) implied different duties for the spiritual and temporal realms while recognizing that both realms are ordained by God — a system of dual authority under one God that is conditional but still binding in the present fallen world until the Second Coming.

What does this doctrine mean for politics? It means that, unlike the spiritual realm which is governed by divine law, the temporal realm is based on prudential applications of natural law adapted to the concrete circumstances of time and place, creating civil or human law. Hence, divine law does not translate directly into civil law, even though the boundary lines are imprecise and the two may overlap in some areas, as for example, in the area of family law and sexual ethics where divine law influences civil law in some circumstances. But the distinction of the two realms is definite enough to indicate that the temporal realm (where prudence is the supreme virtue) has flexibility that does not exist in the spiritual realm (where the dogmatic

certainty of eternal truths reigns supreme). By using prudence to apply natural law, Christian statesman and church leaders can recognize a variety of legitimate political regimes: as long as a regime pursues the limited ends of the temporal realm and does not try to usurp God's realm, it has legitimacy as political authority.

This is the main point that the scholars in the symposium do not acknowledge: Christianity does not favor one political regime over another as a matter of divinely revealed law or as an imperative about building the kingdom of God on earth. At the same time, political questions are not matters of indifference because they involve important choices for temporal happiness; but these choices are prudential judgments rather than spiritual duties or categorical imperatives, and they may justify different regimes in different circumstances, including constitutional monarchy in some circumstances or constitutional democracy in others or even moderately authoritarian regimes which respect the spiritual realm in certain times and places.

The contemporary demand for "Christian democracy" is therefore mistaken because it contradicts the proper distinction of the Two Cities. It also turns the commands of Christian divine law into a political ideology that unjustifiably gives one form of government greater spiritual significance than it deserves, leading to exaggerated claims like "democracy is evangelical" (or Gospel-inspired) as Jacques Maritain was fond of saying or to Tim Sheratt's assertion that Paul could not have meant what he said when he exhorted slaves to "obey their masters." Such statements miss the Christian view of democracy as merely one among several legitimate forms of government, and by no means the best, although constitutional democracy is acceptable in the present circumstances if it is properly limited under God and does not become a kind of democratic tyranny that utterly shuts down the spiritual realm. By insisting that Christianity requires democracy as the sole legitimate regime consistent with the divine law of universal love, the scholars of this symposium have made us blind to the real weaknesses of democracy in relation to Christian faith, for example, the hostility of democracy to the concept of hierarchy which is so important for the Church and for the perfection of the human soul. The Two Cities doctrine helps us resist these tendencies by preserving the enduring tensions between

Christian hierarchies and the democratic leveling of our age.

In recovering the perspective of the Two Cities, I have been criticized by David Crawford and Jeanne Heffernan in particular for exaggerating the differences of the two realms and treating them abstractly as separate spheres of action. Crawford argues for a deeper unity (or integralism) of the two spheres based on the words of John Paul II that "‘the Incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into unity with God not only human nature but … everything that is flesh: the whole of humanity, the entire visible and material world.’ " Likewise, Heffernan accuses me of turning St. Augustine’s conditional distinction of realms into Luther’s radical separation of the Two Kingdoms–a denial of a more fundamental unity which connects Christian ethics and democratic politics.

In response to these criticisms, I would say that Crawford and Heffernan actually concede the major premise–that Christian divine law does not directly translate into human or civil law (despite what some Christians might have claimed in promoting theocratic unification of the realms). As Crawford notes, I argue for “the distinction but not the complete separation” of the two realms; and I affirm that the state is not a purely secular or human creation because it is ordained by God for its own limited purposes. But Crawford takes my insistence on proper distinctions to mean that I have missed the deeper unification of the two realms modeled on the Holy Trinity. In making these assertions, Crawford allies himself with the “communio” movement of David Schindler and Hans Urs von Balthasar which holds that the evangelizing mission of Christians is not merely to convert individuals but to propose “the form of trinitarian communion to worldly structures and the whole of human reality,” creating a “culture of love.”

The problem with these beautiful phrases is that they are very fuzzy when applied to politics. Crawford says nothing more specific about the community of love than: “the state will not disappear…rather it becomes *more human, more of a state*.” Does this mean that the state will rely on love-power rather than on coercive power–the hallmark of the state in the fallen world? Crawford knows that the need for coercive power will not cease until the Second Coming, so we will always have a division of authority into two realms: the spiritual realm,

relying on charity, holiness, and grace vs. the temporal realm relying on force, violence, prisons, fines, and penalties (including the death penalty), producing a rough approximation to justice in the imperfect world of sin. Caesar's realm – the coercive and juridical state – cannot operate according to the rules of the Sermon on the Mount, so the culture of love will never overcome the conditional dualism of the temporal age. We can strive to make the state and the international arena as just and peaceful as possible, but, to do so, we will need military power, legal sanctions, and the balance of powers–even the United Nations will not be sufficient to keep peace by the speeches and resolutions of the General Assembly.

Likewise, Jeanne Heffernan is mistaken in thinking that Christianity overcomes the division into spiritual and temporal spheres and can avoid separate groups within each of the realms. Some groups are properly structured as corporate hierarchies rather than as democratic societies modeled on Tocqueville's voluntary associations or town meetings. In the last chapter of my book, I distinguish the spheres of spiritual authority–the Church, the family, and charitable organization-from the spheres of temporal authority–the state, the economy, social classes, and the military–and discuss the structures of authority appropriate to each sphere. As everyone knows, the Catholic Church is a corporate hierarchy, whose authority flows from the top down, though of course its governance includes General Councils that involve participation on many levels and local parishes and cults of saints that involve lay participation. But participation in the Church is through a multi-tiered hierarchical structure, in "communio" with the bishops and pope rather than simple democratic participation. Moreover, the Christian family is a hierarchical, even a patriarchal structure, with the father designated by God as the head of the household, governing in loving partnership or "communio" with his wife over the children. The democracies of the Western world have subverted these essential hierarchical elements of Christianity, and therefore liberal democracy is a mixed blessing for the Catholic Church, even when democracy is functioning properly.

In summarizing my views of the Two Cities, I would remind Christians today that the proper distinction of God's realm and Caesar's realm is not an obsolete idea (a relic of the early

church in the Roman Empire or of the middle ages when popes and kings battled for supremacy). Rather, it is the most enduring and reliable guide for Christian politics in every age because it keeps us from divinizing the state – whether it is the emperor or king (creating sacred kingship) or, in our days, democracy and the United Nations. These institutions may be necessary in the fallen world for keeping civil peace and moral order (including responsible freedom) and requiring a certain amount of civic piety that reminds people that the state is "under God." But it is a mistake to claim that any form of government is required by Christian divine law or by claims about the coming of the kingdom of God.

Christian Personalism

The critics might reply, however, that the link between Christian faith and modern democracy is not made primarily by extending the divine law or the kingdom of God into politics. It is made by a new and heightened awareness of human dignity--"the dignity of the human person" and the inviolable rights of the person as a creature made in the image of God. This newly discovered dimension of the *Imago Dei* is what Christian "personalism" has added to the political and social teaching of the churches, committing Christians to democracy and human rights as a moral imperative of human dignity. Here, I would like to point to the Kantian connection as the underlying inspiration behind the theology of the human person, despite the denials of Christian scholars; and I would like point out how the subtle incorporation of Kantian ethics has led to the inner surrender of Christians to the surrounding culture, despite the claims that "we're different."

For example, Robert Hunt criticizes my prudential approach to politics because he says I have not grasped how Christianity has transformed politics. Using a quote from John Courtney Murray, Hunt argues that Christianity has "taught the individual his worth, the dignity of his person, the equality of all men, and the unity of the human race." This growing awareness of the dignity of man has led to the demand for personalist democracy; and Hunt cites Brian Tierney's formidable scholarship to support the view that personalism began in the Middle Ages and is not

merely a product of Kantian liberalism. Gary Glenn argues along the same lines by appealing to the Neoscholastic theories of Suarez and Bellarmine, which he says combines the natural rights of individuals with moral duties and the social nature of man directed to the common good. Ken Grass also argues for a “Catholic human rights revolution" that is based on the value and dignity of each and every human person as a "unique and irreplaceable self" who deserves constitutional protections. Another advocate of personalism, Tim Sheratt, feels that I have neglected the achievements of Christian democratic movements based on Abraham Kuyper’s sphere sovereignty and Pope Leo XIII’s subsidiarity.

Let me respond by acknowledging that Christian or Catholic personalism is the most powerful challenge to my thesis because it offers the hope of a Christian-inspired democracy that avoids a secular liberal culture in which freedom is reduced to personal autonomy and selfish individualism. My main criticism of Christian personalism, however, is that it contains a contradiction at the heart of its conception of freedom that makes personalism untenable as a political philosophy and puts contemporary Christians in a perpetual state of war with themselves, defending and then denouncing the culture of rights and losing their self-confidence in battles with secularists over the proper use of rights.

The problem can be seen in Norris Clarke's meditation on the Thomistic view of freedom which never quite faces up to a crucial ambiguity: Is Thomistic freedom an absolute or a conditional good? Does it have intrinsic value as an end-in-itself, or is it a means to higher ends? Clarke rightly notes that Thomas Aquinas regarded freedom of the will as an intrinsic part of man's dignity as a rational being made in the image of God. Modern Catholic personalism finds a root in the Thomistic idea of the respect owed to human beings as creatures higher than the animals and lower than the angels, based on the human capacity for intelligent and free choice of the good. But it does not follow (and Thomas Aquinas never claimed) that this conception of man's dignity as a rational being with free-will entails human rights. The reason is that Thomas Aquinas did not think freedom of choice necessarily deserves respect as an end in itself; the respect it deserves depends on the degree to which freedom of choice attains (or at

least seeks to attain) the true good and final end of man. Clarke seemingly admits this point when he says, "freedom is not a self-sufficient, self-explanatory value by itself. It is ***freedom-for-the-good***" (emphasis in the original).

My question is whether the "freedom-for-the good" is compatible with the doctrine of human rights. Clarke says that freedom amounts to a human right because it "transcends the claims of all human authority" and because God Himself wants the "freely given response of love" from human beings: "Mere obedience to God without this element of freely given consent is not part of God's plan for drawing human persons to union with himself." Leaving aside the whole problem of divine election in the Bible (in which God often makes demands against the will of the chosen person), I would point to the inconsistency in Clarke's admission: "this does not deny a certain subordination of the individual person to the common good of a political society in certain temporal matters." But the subordination of the person to higher goods in certain temporal matters is inconsistent with claims of rights. And such subordination to higher goods is rightly demanded in other matters as well. Freedom-for-the-good implies demands of duties before claims of rights in spiritual as well as in temporal matters; and it moves Clarke's Thomistic freedom away from democracy and human rights in the direction of a corporate hierarchy which may impose on individuals for their own good. In this light, political freedom is a good only in so far as it promotes virtue, meaning rational and spiritual perfection; freedom is therefore a means to higher ends, a conditional good that deserves some recognition but is not an inherent right. The conditionality of freedom is the reason why St. Thomas Aquinas was not, in principle, in favor of natural rights or human rights. For him, the common good, understood not only as the "unity in peace" of society but also as the shaping and molding of character for rational and spiritual perfection takes precedence over natural rights and leads Aquinas to advocate constitutional monarchy over liberal democracy and a corporate common good over natural rights. This crucial point is missed or omitted by Norris Clarke.

In wrestling with the same problem, Gary Beabout is a more consistent but less faithful to contemporary Catholic personalism. Beabout sees the contradiction between freedom as an end-

in-itself or absolute good that must be respected as a human right and freedom-for-the-good as a means to higher goods (and therefore not a human right but a conditional good subordinated to the true hierarchy of ends). Beabout resolves the contradiction by asserting that Catholic personalism is "part of the virtue tradition" and not really part of the human rights tradition of liberalism at all because it offers freedom as "a gift and a task" not as a right. By taking this route, Beabout is more consistent logically but less accurate in capturing the ambiguity of recent Catholic doctrine. He completely neglects the language of Kantian rights in much of Catholic social teaching, for example, in Pope John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* (1963), which asserts "Every human being is a person…endowed with intelligence and free will. By virtue of this he has rights and duties of his own … which are universal, inviolable, and inalienable … [including] the right to respect for his person" as well as a host of economic and political rights, such as religious freedom and democratic participation. Beabout's resolution misses the ambiguity of Catholic personalism which tries to combine rights and duties in an inconsistent formulation that is continuously at war with itself, affirming and denying human rights from one moment to the next.

This crucial ambiguity is why we need to re-think the whole relationship of Christianity with democracy and human rights. As Ken Grasso admits, when modern Christians are faced with the choice between rights as ends-in-themselves and rights as means to higher duties, they almost always choose the former and then exercise their rights in accordance with the prevailing norms of mass society. The "hard truths" and demanding spiritual duties of Christian faith are the first to go by the board. The equation of Catholic personalism with the respect for human rights thereby turns Catholicism into another version of liberalism -- a mirror of the prevailing culture rather than the authoritative judge of the prevailing culture. Sadly, this trend is reflected in the recent Church scandals as well as in the depressing conclusion of Alan Wolfe's recent survey of religions attitudes in America, *The Transformation of American Religion: How We Actually Live Our Faith* (2003). Wolfe assures readers, and especially his secular readers, that they have nothing to fear from Christian believers because even traditional Christians ("the

religious right") have completely assimilated the values of modern America: “In every respect of the religious life, American faith has met American culture–and American culture has triumphed.” This domestication of Christian faith, he wryly notes, has occurred under the auspices of religion itself, by a process that looks like internal self-surrender. While Wolfe does not name the process of surrender, we can now recognize it as the abandonment of the Two Cities doctrine and the elimination of the tensions of dual citizenship that results from the incorporation of Kantian liberalism into contemporary Christian personalism. It is this process that we need to resist.