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The Dynamics of Tension: Normative Dimensions of Religion and Politics

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Government seems to me a part of religion itself, a thing sacred in its institution and end. For if it does not directly remove the cause, it crushes the effects of evil and it is as such (though a lower yet) an emanation of the same divine power that is both author and object of pure religion... But that is only to evil doers, government itself being otherwise as capable of kindness, goodness, and charity as a more private society. They weakly err that think there is no other use of government than correction which is the coarsest part of it. Daily experience tells us that the care and regulation of many other affairs, more soft and daily necessary, make up much of the greatest part of government and [this] must have followed the peopling of the world had Adam never fell and [it] will continue among men, on earth, under the highest attainments they may arrive at by the coming of the blessed Second Adam, the Lord from Heaven.

William Penn, Preface to the Frame of Government of Pennsylvania (1682)

Penn's rather sanguine view of government assimilates it to both religion and private life. Yet there is something to be said for it. Government does outlaw (some) sin, and it does regulate (not always softly) matters of food, clothing, and shelter. Government acts on the border of private and public life; yet it forms its own border with religion. I intend here to examine the dynamics of the transactions across these borders. These transactions at their best reflect a creative tension between religion and politics.

1. General Considerations

This tension is often misunderstood as strain between private and public life. Yet, I shall argue, religion is a constant reminder of the unity of public and private, but also of the boundary between them. Private and public life need each other, but they are different realms. The validity and the distinctive character of each contributes to a healthy society. Religion affirms the public/private distinction, but also the need to cross the boundary.

Because religion suggests that culture is not divine (at the most, it is the direct will and creation of the divine), religion more directly than other systems of value insinuates the tension between culture and something higher than culture. Although religion is linked to culture...
and frequently coopted by it, the "higher" religions and religions with more reflective traditions more emphatically suggest tension with culture. The inherent dynamic of religion's orientation to a transcendent source of being, independent of human control, opens the path toward cultural conflict. As much as culture takes upon itself divine color, it cannot hide its human roots.

Though the tension between the divine and the mundane sometimes manifests itself as stress between private and public life, the individual person, where the competing attractions of culture and the sacred intersect, really is the locus of tension. Machiavelli, for example, denouncing Christianity's public effects, clearly understood that the strain was not between private religion (Christianity) and public good (the republic), but between the different public demands of Christianity and the republic on the individual. Machiavelli rejected Christianity for its cultural consequences. The unique perspective of religion reveals the person as a field of cross-cutting tensions between the divine and culture in private and public life.

Because religion touches (sometimes unconsciously) the core of a believer's character, it bears upon the moral boundaries of public and private life. The role of politics in creating social peace and justice depends upon personal interior peace and justice. Government and politics can contribute to, as Penn argued, but cannot bring men and women to virtuous living or inner tranquility, for they cannot prescribe all virtuous actions or proscribe all vice. Moreover, political life cannot bring final beatitude.

Although religion and public life intersect, religion fundamentally reminds us of the limits of politics and of the nonequivalence of politics and public life. In the American tradition, for example, the Bible has reminded us "that public spirit will always be opposed by private interest," that law and coercion must supplement public virtue and participation, and that "the larger the political society, the greater the tension between body and spirit, private feelings and public duties." We must remember that religion points resolutely to life beyond politics. It reminds us that public problems and their solutions are not entirely political. Indeed, the distinctive contribution of religion to public and private life, to individuals and to culture, is to refer them to what is beyond politics.

Two (or more) forces pulling in different directions define a tension. Sometimes its stress holds things together, for example, a rubber band. But sometimes it causes things to break apart, as when a spring snaps from being wound too tightly. To understand the religion/politics tension, we must define the directions in which each pulls. We must also show how tension between them permits each to work better.

Religion brings politics to awareness of the highest, lowest, and most mysterious features of life, especially of the lofty and the mysterious. Politics, better acquainted with the lowest, brings religious passion and self-assurance to awareness of the middle ground between the highest and the lowest; that is, it teaches religion the necessity and the art of compromise. Moreover, some of the highest and lowest things are already at home in politics—honor, bravery, lust
for power, and the passions of blood and soil. Politics can make religion alert to these, and to their danger.

Religion pulls toward the transcendent, toward principles, virtues, ideals, and perfection. Unrestrained by tension this religious dynamic produces fanaticism. Religious passion finds it difficult to compromise, to acknowledge how striving after perfection founders on human weakness. Politics, however, demands compromise, for the key fact of politics, especially of participatory public life, lies in confrontation with the ideas and the interests of others, with the mosaic of human frailty and plurality.

Just as religion would avoid compromise, politics would avoid righteousness. Politics pulls toward the vague middle ground, toward indifference and cynicism. Left to itself, politics seeks the easy, painless way. High principles make for difficult political choices, for it is painful to confront higher things, to acknowledge the possibility of something better and to accept the discipline necessary to reach it. Religion in public life can teach politics about the higher things and stimulate, even embarrass, politicians and citizens to discover them.

The tension produced by these conflicting natural tendencies defines their relationship as both competitive and cooperative. The danger of misunderstanding the relationship between religion and politics comes when we forget that it must include both cooperation and competition. When the tension is lost, the two either fly apart or, worse, collapse together. The latter is the world’s too frequent condition. As Roland Robertson observes, “... [R]eligion is being politicized and politics (as well as economics) is being sacralized intrasocially and globally.” The Unification Church worldwide and religion in Iran currently exemplify politicized religion; sacralized politics takes form in totalitarian ideologies. Both of these forms of lost tension obscure the border between religion and politics. These territories should remain distinct, but mutually interactive.

2. What Religion Teaches Politics

In a skeptical and relativistic age religion challenges easy moral relativism and indifference. As Hadley Arkes remarks, “... [M]oral ‘relativism’ has become the secular religion these days among those with a college education.” Religion contests the cynical and egoistic political consequences of this relativism by advancing in public debate principles claiming sacred roots.

Thus, despite the exaggerated claims and extreme lengths to which some religious groups have gone in policy debates, it is healthy for a political system (and for citizens) dangerously close to “interest group liberalism” to face demands for unilateral disarmament, feeding the hungry and taking care of the sick, full employment, action against cocaine, marijuana, teen pregnancy, and pornography, cessation of abortion, and an end to capital punishment. The debate sparked by religious campaigns to confront the political system with these issues is uncomfortable, but the debate at least revives substantive political issues and principles and pushes fundamental questions of justice and peace to the forefront of attention in a system characterized by self-
satisfied, cynical boredom with any issues but self-interest. Similarly, instead of deploving the debate over the judicial principles and substantive views of Robert Bork, President Reagan's Supreme Court nominee, we should welcome such debate as the true substance of public, political life.

Neither politics nor political theory is to judge the truth of competing religious claims. I recognize that religious groups disagree on matters of principle and policy and that they themselves pull in multiple directions. However, even their advocacy of conflicting principle is vital, for genuine public life depends on matters of character and virtue and pertains to substantive issues over which citizens interact and confront each other to create a common good out of conflicting interests and principles. Politics must not deplore or dismiss religious competition, but rather moderate its worst passions.

The approach to justice in the 1986 pastoral letter on the economy issued by the United State Catholic Conference illustrates my point. I do not intend to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of that statement or the debate it occasioned or even to reveal my agreement or disagreement with its positions. The point I wish to emphasize is Gerald M. Mara's contention that the letter contains an account of justice superior to such liberal, political treatments as Rawls's, for the letter addresses the urgency of justice. Political theorists' accounts of justice tend to be abstract and categorical. They supply no urgent motivation to act against injustice. The bishops' statement is substantive and sensitive to historical conditions. Moreover, it furnishes for those who agree with it urgent motivation to political action.

The bishops' theory of justice is not philosophically unchallengable. Yet their account of justice, like that of the Hebrew prophets, resonates with the passion for justice. A religious dimension advances in policy debate the passion for justice neglected by "neutral" theories and interest-group politics. Justice touches the feeling heart as well as the calculating head, and religion can push the public to take that fundamental emotion into account.

Similarly, the radical activity of those religious groups and individuals acting outside ordinary politics—such as Gandhi, Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Mitch Snyder, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—can goad formal, bureaucratic political institutions to take account of a higher spirit and a good greater than rules, efficiency, and the letter of the law. Sparks often fly in such encounters, just as they fly in the creative tension of a steel blade pressed against a sharpening stone.

Let me advance an even more controversial example of the kind of contribution religion can make to politics in a liberal democratic society, one itself in some tension with the preceding paragraph. Though religious groups may take obedience too far, liberal society needs religion's lessons in obedience. For liberalism tries to abolish obedience by making the legitimacy of rules depend upon the satisfaction of interests. Rousseau, no liberal but here in the liberal spirit, wanted to find a way to make it possible in civil society to obey only oneself.

Liberalism tends to undermine the public grounds of obedience, leaving it only, for example, for the private life of the family. Even in private life, however, increasing public requirements for procedural
rights hedge obedience. Yet, as Milgram’s experiments show, a deep human propensity to obey authority remains even in liberal society.\(^{10}\) “Blind” obedience, frowned upon by liberal principles, goes underground and emerges in strange places, not least of which being cultic forms of religion, such as that of the Reverend Jim Jones, and claims of obedience to demons in cases of strange, often violent behavior. Though I realize that these brief illustrations do not constitute proof, traditional Western religions could perform a public service in reemphasizing discipline and obedience with respect to religious principles, rules, rituals, and behavior. Bringing obedience above ground makes it more likely to find appropriate outlets.

If it enters policy debates on politics’ terms, religion gives up its claim to uniqueness, becoming one more interest group trapped within the limited alternatives offered by modern ideologies. To accept these alternatives would be to resolve the tension between religion and politics by surrender. It would abandon the cold, lonely marches on religion’s border with politics for the warmth of the political capitol. I contend, on the other hand, that religion must maintain its claim to a truth higher than politics. This perspective does not mean that politics can or should judge that truth, only that religious claims should force politics to a higher level than it otherwise would discover. Its truth claims do not relegate religion to the private sphere. The proper ground of these claims is the public/private border, not the heartland of private or of public life.

This argument suggests that religious persons should approach politics from their particular faith perspectives, from their own truth-claims. Politics will water-down those claims sufficiently without religious groups themselves attempting to find a lowest common denominator set of religious or moral beliefs. Religious groups become properly political and place the necessary pressure on politics when they advocate their distinctive principles on matters of public concern (this latter phrase is vital) and when they live faithfully their distinctive beliefs about the transpolitical.\(^{11}\)

Religions should not promote all of their beliefs in political debate. Doing so confuses the territory of religion with that of politics. Rather, those religious beliefs and principles that most touch public concerns, for example, justice, freedom, respect for life, peace, the place of sin, death, and the meaning of human sociability, should enter political debate in order to draw politics beyond the level where it otherwise would settle. Privatization of religion is dangerous, because it allows politics itself to become privatized and self-absorbed. As George Armstrong Kelly observes, “If privatization has pushed religion out of the public sphere, it is currently turning politics into an I-Thou relationship or a sphere of indifference.”\(^{12}\) Reduced to administration and interests, politics becomes as secularized and squeezed of meaning as private religion. Politics without high principles is a dull but dangerous business for anyone not driven by consuming ambition, greed, or need for recognition.

3. What Politics Teaches Religion

But religion without politics is also dangerous. I have alluded
previously to religious fanaticism. Messianism without a messiah sweeps all principle before it. Religious persons often divide the world into two camps, fellow believers and those outside the faith. Toward the former the appropriate attitude is familiarity and community, including both affectionate feelings and (at times) discipline. Attitudes toward the latter, however, include attempted conversion, conquest and enslavement, and withdrawal. Relationships with outsiders governed solely by their lack of faith allow no public bond between believers and non-believers. What remains are only the deadly, dichotomous categorizations: us and them, believers and heathens, friends and enemies.

Public life creates other possibilities. The first is “stranger.” The fellow believer is known as one of the group, and the heathen is known through stereotypes. The stranger, however, is mysterious and unknown. He may be one of us or one of them, a potential friend or enemy. Or, the most radical possibility of all, he may just be himself, different from us, but related none the less. Public life, especially in the form of politics, requires interaction with strangers. For politics is full of strangers, people with ideas, customs, interests, emotions, and beliefs different from, and sometimes at odds with, our own. Entry into a political relationship with strangers dispels some mystery, but does not eliminate it. Strangers still remain different. Nevertheless, politics opens a middle camp between friends and enemies, and, because both friends and enemies trade with that camp, the world seems less black and white, the grounds of fanaticism less solid.

Indeed, politics requires everyone to spend some time among strangers and to discover their own strangeness. Politics is self-discovery as well as self-display. Believers who enter politics enter the strangers’ camp and discover things about strangers and about themselves that alter their frame of reference and call for less singleness, for more tolerance and civility. Ultimately, believers might even learn that they are strangers to themselves and that God is also a stranger, for the God completely known does not transcend human control. Politics can teach religion humility and the tolerance that is humility’s natural partner. It may teach the believer the limits of his belief. 14

Politics can teach religion how to live with pluralism. As religion can reconcile politics to mysterious forces beyond its control, so politics can reconcile religion to facticity, to the hard places against which the tide of religion crashes. Religious ideals meet recalcitrant political reality and the strangers who live there. The principles, values, excellences, and virtues of religious life cannot suffuse public or private life with the wave of a wand or a word of blessing. Use of coercion is always a temptation for frustrated virtue, a temptation to which even the most perceptive (witness Augustine) can succumb. In authoritarian, totalitarian, or oligarchic regimes, use of coercion finds ready justification. A political regime, however, supports resistance to imposed religious ideals, blunts the weapon of coercion, and teaches religion other methods for dissemination of belief. As William Penn suggested in the headnote, coercion is the coarsest part of government; so political regimes restrict its availability.
When politics involves the encounter of strangers on a common ground where they must interact peaceably, it learns compromise. Compromise is a lesson religion too must learn, though it does not like the name and tries to find synonyms, like "prudence" or "pastoral solutions." The full excellence of religious ideals is seldom achieved. As J. Budziszewski argues, "... Real excellence is apt to be a rare item, more like leaven than like flour. Cultivating the excellences will always be of the first importance, but we should also be prepared to curb and channel the flows and eruptions of passion." Compromise is one way, a distinctively political way, of resolving the tensions between religious ideals and recalcitrant facts.

This role for politics allows religion to be religion; it allows all religions to advance their views strongly. Religion entering politics should not be wishy-washy. But politics and the necessity of compromise force religious groups to recognize the plurality of the political world, especially the plurality of religious groups strongly advancing distinctive views. The point is not for religious groups to compromise their principles in order to enter the fray, but for politics to force compromise at the level of policy. When religious groups recognize and acknowledge both politics as a form of public life and the recalcitrant facticity of political life, they can begin, not to change their principles, but to find ways of applying them to policy that are acceptable to other citizens. They can begin to learn political civility, tolerance, and the art of compromise. Observe the course of the Reverend Jerry Falwell in moderating his policy proposals on abortion and other agenda items of the New Religious Right from the late 1970s to the late 1980s.

In the previous section I used the Catholic bishops' pastoral letter on the economy to illustrate the contribution religion can make to politics in introducing high conceptions of justice into political debate. Let me use the same example to illustrate what political life can teach religion. The bishops' letter is particularly vulnerable to criticism in light of the social and economic realities of modern, post-industrial society. The pastoral letter does not address these realities creatively, nor does it reflect the limitations of social and economic resources for realizing the principles of justice. The passionate concern for justice that is the bishops' special contribution must meet the social realities that are politics' special concern. Both are necessary for creative policy-making.

There are two fundamental dangers of public religion: religious domination of public life and the affiliation of religion with political ideology. Both dangers stem from religious passion. The first occurs when religion is able to use government as a means for realizing its vision. The second occurs when religious passion is coopted (often willingly) by a political ideology and used for the ideology's ends.

The realities of participatory politics moderate the proclivity of government and political ideology to inflame or coopt, and sometimes to be coopted by, religious passion. First, politics tames religious passion for reasons suggested above. Passion must put on decorous clothes to appear in public. Moreover, religious passion encounters the seawall of interest-group reality and of counter passions in other religious and non-religious groups. The garb of moderation and the
confrontation with other interests and passions means that religious passions must actually become moderate or, more precisely, seek more moderate, tame expression and more limited goals. The realities of pluralism make it less likely that government or ideologies will be able to enflame religious fervor or to be coopted by such emotions more than temporarily. There are too many influences on the state for religion to dominate more than briefly.

This is as it should be. Religion should expect to be only one voice (though actually itself many) in political life. It can help to move policy in certain directions, but it cannot expect to determine the outcome of political debate.

One unfortunate, but unavoidable, consequence of the political taming of religion is that both good and bad religious passions are tempered. Politics is, in this sense, indiscriminate. Given politics' haphazard effect, what counts is the character of citizens. Ultimately, the people must separate the wheat from the chaff of religious ideals and passions.

There is no guarantee of popular virtue, but preservation of the good and discarding the bad finally depends upon it. The mechanisms of public life cannot make such judgments, but only furnish the space, time, and civility needed for character to work. The many political devices for channeling passion known to the ancients and moderns are prone to fail, to lose sight of excellence. Compromise itself cannot be a final ideal, for compromises must be judged better and worse. We come full circle from what politics teaches religion to what religion teaches politics. Religious vision can help to judge and call to account political compromise, keeping the aspiration toward excellence before citizen attention.

4. Conclusions

It seems to follow that, if religion is public in the ways I have specified and if it makes the political contributions I have described, then it should be admitted to political life on precisely the same terms as other groups. Yet an important consideration militates against this simple conclusion. Religion is fundamentally private as well as public. Religion is a distinct realm from politics. Inviting it too far into political territory runs the many risks of politicized religion and chances dilution of its distinctive qualities.

Religion should not be excluded from politics, but kept at arm's length. The relationship between religion and politics should imitate that of partners in a dance of approach and flight, a ballet expressing the tension between attraction and repulsion. Neither partner must dominate, if the dance is to continue. Religion and politics challenge and test each other; that is their special dynamic.

Let me return to the metaphor of the border. What is vital is that religion and politics meet, not in the center of each other's territory, but at the border. This leaves sufficient mystery for mutual attraction. Religion beckons from the periphery for politics to come seek its ideals; politics cajoles religion to shed its unrealistic ideals and recognize the goods of plurality, civility, and tolerance. Such transac-
tions across the border also produce just enough knowledge for mutual repulsion. Religion knows well the temptations of power. Politics recognizes the fanaticism of religion and flees it. Religion exists on a double border: the boundary between private and public life and the boundary with politics. Life on the border is never easy, but religion should remain there. To confront politics wholeheartedly, though not to enter it fully, constitutes its political mission. To abandon either private or public life is to betray its essence.

The lines of influence between religion and politics do not run one way. Politics, and culture generally, shapes religion as much as religion shapes politics. Not every political influence on religion is beneficial. Evidently, religion can learn the worst aspects of politics as well as the best. The point is that the debate about religion and politics, and the speculations of political theorists, have neglected the positive influences in each direction, the creative tensions characterizing this encounter.

FOOTNOTES

2The perspective of this paragraph was suggested by H. Richard Niebuhr's discussion of the tension between Christ and culture, Christ and Culture (New York: Harper Colophon, 1975), esp. Ch. 1.
7I do not contend that religious groups alone keep substantive, principled issues before the public. Nor do I contend that religious groups are the most important actors in this respect. Rather, my point is that religion can and should contribute by pushing politics to confront such principled issues, even though a democratic politics oriented toward compromise finds them disturbing.
9See Glenn Tinder, "Christianity and the Welfare State," unpublished paper. To say this is not, of course, to endorse Fawn Hall's theory of action outside the law.
12Kelly, Politics, p. 186.
14On God as stranger, see Palmer, Company of Strangers. I do not argue that humility and moderation are learned only in politics, but that in regimes with a genuine public and political life politics is a readily available teacher.
16With respect to the idea of politics welcoming the sharp advocacy of religious
views, I am indebted to the remarks of Senator John Danforth and Representative Lindy Boggs during an interreligious forum on religion and politics at St. Alban's Church, Washington, DC, March 17, 1987.

17 For criticism along these lines, see Henry Briefs, "The Limits of Scripture: Theological Imperatives and Economic Reality," in Deeper Meaning of Economic Life, ed. Douglas, pp. 57–96.

18 These points are difficult to prove conclusively, but the actual political behavior of American religion suggests their truth. Religious groups rise and fall in influence, and the virulence of their expression wanes as it breaks against the hard rock of competing interests and the labyrinthine ways of law-making.

19 See Budziszewski's account of these devices in Resurrection, Chap. 5.

20 The temptations of Christ, especially the third, are instructive in this respect. See Matthew 4:1–11. (In Luke 4:1–13 the most political temptation is the second.)