

Now that sociologists have laid on us, in their own lingo, the multiple breakdown of moral authority in our individualistically clear and pluralistically confused society, a Biblical theologian should grid a theo-layer atop the sociological analysis. Here in this thinksheet I limit myself, within this project, to some remarks vis-a-vis where our society is vis-a-vis the authority of the clergy in matters of private and public morality:

1. Clergy and Congresspersons can be expected, on moral matters, to have the same level of courage--ie, on moral issues involving potential threat to their livelihoods. These two categories of workers in our society serve and are fed at the immediate behest of their clientele, yet are expected to exhibit a level of moral courage in public discourse superior to what the public expects of persons of other occupations. And public expectation of clergy moral courage is, though wistfully, even higher than in the case of congresspersons, our religions (Christianity and Judaism) being, among the world's religions, exceptionally moral, including the stressing of moral courage. But the economic sanction is not the only pressure on these two occupations toward moral timidity. Moral stands that irritate their constituencies, where they do not prevent the reelection of congresspersons and the continuation of clergy in their "livings," often erode the worker's "weight," "presence," plausibility, influence--so much that the worker's work diminishes in effectiveness, which is an experience so disheartening that the next time the worker faces a moral issue that may be in this sense costly, why not think twice about it and decide to be more "relevant" and "practical"? Why not go along (with constituents and colleagues) to get along (so as to continue to serve the clientele "effectively")?

2. Here the clergy occupation is the most complex in this or any society. You are to be with God and the people, which is easy if you identify the two (as some sycophants come close to doing). But if you're at least a cut above Elmer Gantry, you're to be secondarily with the people (who pay you) and primarily with God (who gives you "treasure in heaven"): prayer (communion with God) is a duty prior and superior to preaching-teaching-counseling-managing-leading. The relative closeness to God = a relative distance from the people, who experience this distance variously as holiness or coldness or anger and react to it with deference or hostility. (Yes, in another dimension you are friend, but--pray God!--that's not primarily what they pay you, as a religious leader, for.) Where there is little or no God-distance between employer (the laity) and the employed (the clergy), the latter will have little or no moral authority.

3. Institutional prestige (eg, the Roman Magisterium) formerly carried great moral weight the clergy of the particular institution-sect could wield. But that has greatly declined and even, as back-eddy, somewhat reversed. Now, in friendship-and-intimacy-hungry America, clergy are tempted to be all-purpose friends and intimates; and those who cleverly move into this warmth vacuum are considered "weighty," "worth hearing," "real rabbis-priests-ministers." Others become "important spiritual leaders" by taking low-risk stands against government nonsense and insensitivity, expressing God-distance as alienation from political power rather than as prophetic demand on their people. (Currently, these two are esp. cheap, low-risk crusades: abortion and S.Africa's apartheid.)

4. A religious leader is professionally in between the clientele and the society. Note "professionally": religious leaders, as human beings in a particular society, are members of that society--and as religious persons in a religious society are members of that religious society.

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The greater the clarity here in the minds of clergy and clientele (and the clergy could do a better job of teaching this clarity to their clientele and living it before God and the people), the greater the clergy freedom to take moral stands that put strains on the people.

5. The sociomodel in the clergy's mind colors moral perception and so affects moral courage/timidity. If you see, Jerome-like, society as in its "last days" (the apocalyptic model), you'll see things and take stands quite differently from if you see society, Eusebius-like, as fair game for Jesus' (read "your") take-over ("Christian America" or whatnot) or if you see society, Augustine-wise, as irradiated and interpenetrated by the City of God. These three historical theses subtend three distinct types of social policy in dialog with private and public moral decision-making and therefore with moral leadership--especially the moral leadership of the clergy, for they are the direct heirs of these three sociomodels that developed within Christianity in the days of the decline and fall of the Roman Empire. (I'm writing this Feb/86; ½ year from now, a great book on this will be published: Jaroslav Pelikan's THE SOCIAL TRIUMPH OF THE EARLY CHURCH, Winston-Seabury.) The receptacle or polyparadigm for much of today's political thinking on the globe, West/East and North/South, derives from Edward Gibbon's Enlightenment (secular) reaction-response to these three patristic views of power spiritual and political (THE DECLINE AND FALL OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE)....Here's my visual for the patristic positions:

On various issues, clergy will find themselves in various positions on the lozenge. Eg, a fundamentalist preacher who's currently attacking me on abortion is at #3 in his personal and public piety, at #2 on abortion (Constantinian coercion of society to his notion!), and at #1 in expecting the soon collapse of man's disorder and the soon Second Coming.

3. AUGUSTINE

2. EUSEBIUS

1. JEROME

6. The Roman Catholic hierarchy in America, sensing the growing distance between itself and our Catholic population, is anxious to recover its moral authority over the flock by (1) addressing the flock on intra-Catholic concerns and (2) addressing both the flock and the general society on intersections of Magisterial conscience and public power--spectacularly, nukes and \$ (the two Bishops' Letters of 1985, solid in "moral theology" but, in successive drafts, rather vapid on specifics). Two facts strike me as important here (in addition to the Bishops' providing a Catholic parallel to "the Moral Majority" and "the American Way"): (1) The two Letters are theologically faithful and intellectually cogent and competent and thus are good texts for study by Catholics and nonCatholics alike; and (2) Throughout both documents one can feel the eagerness to make a clarifying moral witness to our society (also in the eyes of Pope and world), but feel also the factor subverting honest clarity, viz, the multifaceted unclarity we're all up against when trying to define our situation vis-a-vis (the first document) "national security" and (the second document) "the poor."

7. Jewish religious leaders have, as an advantage we Christians don't, "peoplehood": group cohesion, rammed home with reminders such as Holocaust, is a mighty sanction for moral behavior, "moral" defined as (1) what's faithful to Torah as the historic community-glue, and (2) what's promotive of (a) Jewishness and (b) Jewish solidarity in spite of radical cognitive and political diversity.

8. Protestant religious leaders are, vis-a-vis, <sup>moral authority,</sup> in a more exposed position than that of Catholics (with their historic-and-living Magisterium) and that of Jews (with their peoplehood). We have to wing it pretty much on our individual own whether our church is of episcopal, presbyterial, or congregational polity. Heroes needed, but a scarcity thereof.