

THE POLITICAL AB/USE OF GOD FOR YOUR CAUSE OF CHOICE -- ELLIOTT #2063

My text for this thinksheet might as well be the Jewish saying "The world is preserved by three things--by truth, by justice, and by peace." I targum, for here, as follows: The comfortable want peace without justice, for justice would be too expensive of their comforts; and they want peace without truth, for truth would reveal the flimsiness of their life's foundation. The righteous want justice even at the cost of peace, for they count the present public tranquility a lesser value than their push for a fairer social order; and they are suspicious of those who press for a cooler social analysis in the light of truth's demand of fairness to truth. And the pious consider both peace and justice secondary to devout faithfulness to the truth (seen as the true God or the god of Truth)....Or to put it all in god-terms: Shalom as prosperity is the god of the comfortable; Peace as nonwar is the god of the peaceniks; Justice is the god of the righteous (at the political level; at the level of personal behavior, Morality is the god of the righteous); and Truth (as true doctrine, or authenticity, or right relationship to reality) is the god of the pious (including the God-for-God's-sake devout and the truth-for-truth's-sake ivory-tower intellectuals and the honest-to-your-feelings New Agers)....Some of us, including me and Robert Coles, are--in this order--pious, righteous, and comfortable. He, sometimes called "the conscience of our time" for his children-of-crisis work, daily leaves his gorgeous semirural home to tool to Harvard in his BMW, but wears the inconsistency lightly, as indeed he must if he's to live comfortably as well as righteously and piously. Why live only one way, or only two ways at once, when you can live all the ways at once? Unless you are called, as I've no doubt some are, to live only one way or only two ways at once. ("Hypocrisy" is the word used against the three-wayers by the one wayers and the two wayers.)

1. All three of the lifestyles or lifestyle dimensions ab/use God for political purposes. "God," as the West's god of theism, leaves nothing out, Creator/creature comprehending reality; politics, as affecting total human existence, leaves nothing out; so how could politics, political speaking/writing, leave God out? Secularism tries to, and pays the price of shallow understanding of human affairs (eg, the USG's underestimation of Khomeini v. the Shah; or the present moral-spiritual wasteland of America's public schools). Theologians have a special responsibility to model, for the public, the proper political use of God and to attack political abuses of God.

2. PROBLEM: Theologians are themselves of 1, 2, or all 3 of the styles, and do their theologizing, modeling, attacking, from the particular perspective of their 1 or 2 or 3 commitment. Those with 2 or 3 dimensions are like those with only 1 in this: 1 dimension dominates. The comfortable preacher (say, in a glass cathedral) uses the divine sanction (which is a formal way of saying "uses God") to push his/r prosperity cult; the righteous preacher, to push justice above all (as, eg, Tutu); and the pious preacher, to push "spirituality" (or, if in academe rather than church, "value-free research"). Honorable theology is concerned to recognize and transcend context, commitment, perspectival bias, without loss of the unique contribution each person's situation affords. When successful at this, theology (1) frees from trendiness ("like clouds carried along by the wind," Jude 12; "like a wave in the sea that is driven and blown about by the wind," James 1.6) and (2) frees for prayerful, reflective searching out of God's will for one's participation in "the actions and passions of one's time."

3. Note that here I have set trendiness and prayerfulness over against each other. (Yes, the comfortable and the righteous are tempted to trendiness; and the pious are tempted to use prayer as a life-escape. But that's to be, for this thinksheet, a road not traveled.) In a tiny but great book, Moshe Greenberg displayed how "common man" extemporan-

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eous praying prepared the "spiritual loam" in which the prophetic message could sprout and grow (BIBLICAL PROSE PRAYERS AS A WINDOW TO THE POPULAR RELIGION OF ANCIENT ISRAEL, U. of CA Press/83). (The figure got to me: beginning with nothing but sand, I helped God prepare the physical loam^{some} some two dozen garden beds around our Cape Cod home.) What strikes me here is that everyday praying of ordinary people was the necessary condition for the effectiveness (such as it was) and preservation of the social-action preaching of the Prophets, who were concerned that God use his people (who preferred, of course, to use God!). Thus (I add), prayer as submission to God is prophylaxis against action demanding that God submit to our current "cause of choice" (to use, from Flora Lewis, the wry phrase---in her 31May86 column---to describe what's now all the rage on America's campuses, viz, divestment from S.Africa, and to contrast, with real "choice," such trendiness).

4. CASE IN POINT: Of these two CCT Letters to the Editor (26&30May86), only the 2nd uses God--abuses God, I say. The author appears to be pious but is actually righteous. He abuses also the Declaration of Independence (its context, its intent, and its content) to preach his cause, viz, antiabortion, whose banner and buzzword and audio-icon is "the right to life." He uses that phrase to interpret the Declaration, as an oldfashioned Lutheran sees the whole Bible through "justification by faith." It's bad hermeneutics and worse politics, amounting to verbal terrorism: go to hell, he tells me ("will someday be present at the judgment seat of the Creator"), calls me (an extreme libertarian!) totalitarian, exhibits no awareness that the Declaration is not a theological but a political document--concerned about the right to vote ("no taxation without representation" was the rebellious, democratic cry), which as God-given is "unalienable" (on which other rights--"life, liberty, and property (changed to "the pursuit of happiness")--depend). The right to vote, however, has been extended only to all adults--not to fetuses, or even children.

Rhetoric used to twist reality

Politicized phrases have power even when they have little other reality. And power based on the unreal is pernicious and demonic.

"The rights of the unborn," appearing often in your letters to the editor, is an instance of such a phrase.

1. The "unborn" are, categorically, "un-." They have no direct political significance. They are a negative factor, useful only in political rhetoric. No insult to political rhetoric! It's humanity's only alternative to violence. But any society is in big trouble when it confuses rhetoric and reality.

2. "Rights" are a political concept. "Right" is a moral concept, a radically different category. Whether abortion is "right" should not be confused with whether the "unborn" have "rights."

3. Human beings have "rights" only in the political sense of (the French Revolution, 1789; and an essay of Thomas Paine, 1791) "The rights of man." The reference is to human beings who have political power to promise and threaten, the

two ways of exercising political clout or (to put it more mildly) having political influence. As the fetus has no direct political power, it has no "rights."

4. Does the concept of "rights" apply in any way to the fetus? Of course! A fetus is biodependent on a pregnant female, who has "rights." So we arrive at the "right-to-life" deception.

In order to get public attention and gain political push, anti-abortionists displace "rights" from the pregnant to the fetus. And in the process they deprive the pregnant of "rights," specifically, the right to abort. This double dirty trick is an insult to truth and reveals the immorality of those who hypocritically claim morality for their "right-to-life" posturing.

No, I am not accusing all anti-abortionists of this double deception. Most of them are themselves deceived, dupes. But I am claiming that there is more honor and truth, more morality, in the "right-to-choose" movement than in the "right-to-life" movement.

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Governments don't grant rights

Willis Elliott's May 26 letter demonstrates that the totalitarian spirit is alive and well in Craigville. He says the unborn have no rights because they have no direct political power.

Mr. Elliott makes a fundamental mistake as to the origin of human rights. Governments may uphold and defend human rights or violate them or ignore them, but governments do not create and bestow basic rights, and cannot extinguish them.

Whence, then, do these rights come? Thomas Jefferson knew the answer and held it to be self-evident. Men are "endowed by their Creator

with certain unalienable rights"; foremost among these is the right to life.

Mr. Elliott would do well to recall the fate of those Europeans who, during the 1940's, lacked the "political power to promise and threaten," and the world's judgment upon those who murdered the powerless.

Though this world's judgment may never be passed upon those who murder the unborn, the world and all of us will someday be present at the judgment seat of the Creator, the author and guarantor of human rights.

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