



September 24, 2010

Radical Responsibility for the Presence of Justice

(Editor: This is the fourth in a dialogue series of contributions on the nature of pluralism in American politics.)

In his contribution to this dialogue on political pluralism, Ashley Woodiwiss observes that the economic downturn and the popular and political responses to it disclose the fragile and fleeting forms of earthly safety and security. He diagnoses the conflicts and tensions of the contemporary situation as a consequence of fallen human nature. The phenomena—social disorder, violence, fear—are understood as the rule rather than the exception for human societies.

This observation is not unique to Christianity—Homer and Qohelet also knew this was the way the world was. But from the bare *fact* of fallenness and the resulting brokenness of our spheres of social life, we are not justified in inferring a *norm*. Fact: “In this world you will have trouble.” What follows? So you ought to keep your head down and do what good you can when the opportunity arises with the resources you have at hand? No, that’s prudence, not good news. Rather, what follows is a subsequent fact: “But take heart! I have overcome the world.” Christian hope contextualizes and relativizes the Fall.

What the Classical tragedies dramatize about social justice—its fragility and elusiveness—only bring into greater relief the limits of justice under the supervision of human politics. . . we might even say the infirmity of justice. Justice is underwritten by the violence of both the velvet and iron gloves of social, economic and political power. But justice does not heal or bring wholeness, it does not repair the broken, it does not restore the lost or the dead. The human heart longs for more than justice. Often its demands for “Justice!” are a cry for the very things that justice cannot deliver.

The clear-sighted realist observes the material and ideological social fractures and finds that human relations normally and necessarily take the form of conflict and violence. But what is natural is not thereby good, nor is the necessary thereby legitimate. We cannot escape necessity, but we *are* free to struggle against it on behalf of the right and the convivial.

We are free to create crisis and tension through non-violent direct action, and we are free to seek redress within the system of institutionalized justice available to us. Wherever we are—in Babylon the imperial capitol or in Birmingham, Alabama in 1963—we cannot retreat from our far-reaching obligations to others. For the Christian to think and act politically, she is invited to reorient her social, economic, and political vision through the person of Jesus himself, to see justice and peace in light of his person, and through him to see the possibility of civil society in light of the kingdom of God which he brings near through forgiveness and reconciliation.

I’m rather fond of the thesis that Athens and Jerusalem conspired to put “the old gods” of Olympus out to pasture, and with them the vendetta, vigilante, and *lex talionis* systems of retributive justice. So the obvious critical question is: why have faith and reason failed on their promise (if promise they did) to overcome socio-political structures of injustice and oppression, often contributing to their perpetuation? Why have Christian conceptions of political society often legitimized structural inequalities of power based on differences of race, class, ethnicity, and gender? I see these critiques as indicative of the limitations of both pluralist and agonist programs for confronting the contemporary challenges that face us, and each ought to be interrogated in light of the ethics of the kingdom of God in the Gospels.

Jacques Ellul wrote in the late 20th century that the world was facing the awful possibility of the *deus absconditus*, the withdrawal and absence of God from contemporary life. His diagnosis was that we are now living in an age of abandonment caused primarily by the fact that Christians and the Church “do not know how to be what God expects of them.” Perhaps his pessimism is unwarranted, but his remedy is sound: Christian hope even in the dark night of the world’s soul is to be found in the rediscovery of the Christian’s radical responsibility for the presence of the kingdom.

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