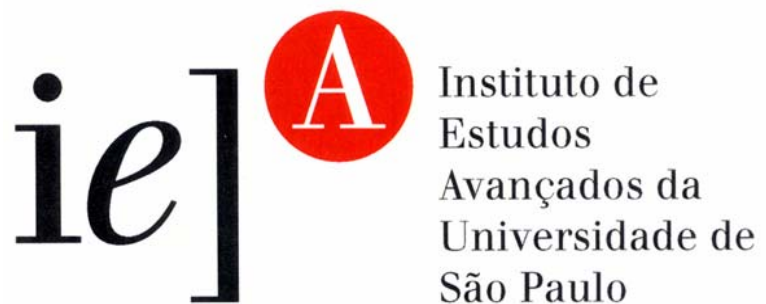


Five Theses on the Relation of Religion to Politics, Illustrated by Allusions to Brazilian Experience

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1. THE PERSONALITY THESIS

An exemplary experience of possibilities of personal connection of intense and transfiguring relationships among individuals -- is a central part of the visions developed by the historical religions of salvation. Each such vision promises a happiness dissolving or attenuating the conflict between our need for one another and the jeopardy in which we place one another. To experience some measure of this reconciliation is to become free; the promise of happiness is a promise of freedom. The narrative structure of belief in the historical religions exhibits a world in which this promise of happiness makes sense. The ethical imperative in the historical religions shows how this world can be made real, strengthening its purchase on everyday life.

Such an interpretation of religions certainly privileges the forms of religious consciousness placing the personal above the impersonal (e.g. the religion of the bible over the doctrines of Plato or Spinoza). It may, however, embrace even those religions, such as Buddhism, that reject the all-the-way-down reality of individual experience, for what the narrative structure of such religions seems to deny their ethical imperative may reaffirm. Moreover, this understanding of religion also suggests a way to evade the choice between metaphorical and literalist accounts of religious belief.

The basic relation of religion to politics arises from the formative role assigned to exemplary personal relations in religious experience and vision. The most significant form of political theology is not the official teaching about the state, but the image of possible human association that is acted out in the community and the deeds of believers. For example, in Brazil the pentecostal movements, making conversions by the millions, offer practical liberalism communities of the elect, marked by the qualities of self-reliance, trustworthiness, self-cultivation and mutual respect missing from a world of patrons and clients in which power, exchange, and sentiment remain mixed up. By contrast, the radicalized Catholic Church promises progress through prophetic resistance and

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confrontation and through engagement in "secondary associations" with an adversary relation to the established powers of government, capital, and television.

2. THE DEMOCRACY THESIS

The moral and political ideals of a culture have often amounted to a transaction between the vision of exemplary personal relations voiced by an influential religion and the concerns of dominant classes. Thus, nineteenth-century bourgeois conceptions of married happiness built a precarious bridge between Christian hopes and Victorian realities. However, the connection between the democratic project and the religion of the bible is more intimate and internal than this history of equivocations and attenuations might lead us to expect. The nature of this link is best illuminated by first probing the troubled relation between two master themes of the religion of the bible: the idea of spirit as the infinite caught in the finite, as transcendence over context, and the organization of moral experience around love rather than altruism.

What is the connection between these two themes? According to Hegel, love is the relation in which we most fully recognize and accept one another as spirits, that is to say as beings whose powers of insight, association, transformation, and self-transformation outreach all the practical and discursive worlds we make and inhabit. The trouble with this Hegelian formula is that we are not yet fully these context-transcending beings; we must become them. One way in which we do so is by advancing the democratic project, understood to include the progressive freeing of activity and relationship from a background grid of entrenched social division and hierarchy. The religious element in the democratic project is the search for social arrangements that make ourselves more fully available to one another as the context-transcending individuals the religion of the bible proclaims us to be. The weak point, however, is the failure to translate this asserted connection between religious vision and democratic progress into a promising institutional conception.

The consequences of this failure are manifest in the Brazilian dealings between religion and politics. Three political theologies are on offer in the country.

The first such theology is the residue of the traditional social teaching of the Catholic Church. The interwar corporatist communitarianism of "Quadragesimo Anno," with its design of a "third way" between capitalism and communism, lost its attraction, first, because of its proximity to fascist corporatism and, second, more profoundly, because of its unwarranted reliance on established economic institutions corporations and unions of

workers and employers -- as an adequate template for the communitarianism it proposed. This neofeudal doctrine has been followed by a demand for social solidarity increasingly devoid of institutional content, other than the content supplied by the familiar tax-and-transfer programs of contemporary social democracy and by claims of social rights, unsupported by the proposal of economic institutions capable of ensuring their effective enjoyment of such rights.

The second political theology is the attempt, characteristic of the pentecostal movements, to secede into a purified world of reciprocal respect and self-improvement, exacting occasional concessions from the state while accepting its given structure. But the unchallenged and unchanged larger world strikes back against the little worlds of the would-be secessionists and self-improvers, imposing outward constraints upon their development and arresting, in the chains of outward control and inward submission, the dynamic of exemplary personal relations.

The third political theology is the liberation theology of the radicalized Church. Its political instrument is the de facto partnership between the Church and the PT (Partido dos Trabalhadores). Unlike the other two political theologies, it does renounce institutional conservatism and confronts entrenched power. However, it does so without proposing any real set of institutional alternatives in the organization of state, economy, civil society, and family. The commitment to a practice -- grassroots organization and self-organization -- fills the void left by the absence of a reconstructive vision. As a result of this default, a growing divergence arises between the transformative or prophetic intention and the redistributive or ameliorative content of the social campaigns in which the radicalized Church engages. The grassroots activism degenerates into a new form of guidance, in which the activist priest or partisan replaces the patron. Thus, the institutional emptiness of the third political theology ends up complementing rather than contradicting the institutional conservatism of the other two political theologies.

3. THE MACRO-MICRO THESIS

Tocqueville remarked that the French Revolution was momentous because it combined a political revolution with a religious revolution. The rational kernel in the mystical shell of the idea of political revolution is, today, the macropolitics of institutional change; in the idea of religious revolution, the rational kernel is the micropolitics of change in the dominant styles of personal relationship and expression. What this translation leaves

out on the religious side is the element of urgent and enacted belief, making sense of the imperative of change and rooting it in a larger vision of human possibility and solidarity.

The energizing link between macropolitics and micropolitics, although conventionally acknowledged to be indispensable, is in fact rarely secured. Where one of these forms of politics becomes strongest, the other often remains weakest. As a result, programs of institutional change are 'commonly perverted or reversed in their effects by the style of personal association that they have left unchanged. Cut off from hopes of social reconstruction, the cultural revolutionary politics of personal relations turns inward toward private experimentalism and narcissism.

A religious consciousness, when freed from the spiritual defect of world abandonment and from the political defect of institutional fetishism, can resist this severance of macropolitics from micropolitics. Its overriding political work is to remind the institutional imagination of the recalcitrant realities of personal need especially the need of people for one another while challenging the narcissistic perversion of individual emancipation and experimentalism. To accomplish this work, however, the religious consciousness requires insight into social and institutional possibility. But there is no place in contemporary high culture where it can safely find such instruction. It must somehow compensate for the consequences of this intellectual absence by developing surrogate practices of institutional imagination.

In Brazil, as in much of the world, the bridge between macro and micropolitics remains unbuilt, in part because religion has failed to build it. The political theology of the pentecostals focuses on a microworld exempt from the macroworld it has failed to challenge or change. The political theology of the radicalized Catholic Church reduces the problem of reshaping the macro and microworlds to the promotion of a practice of engagement and resistance. The political theology of the traditional Church has retreated to the nostrums of tax-and-transfer social democracy after having lost confidence in the formula of corporatist communitarianism. All three political theologies are now institutionally empty. Their institutional emptiness weakens their prophetic force and disorients their political vision.

4. THE ANTIPARTICULARISM THESIS

A religious experience grounded in the personalist dynamic of transcendence and love is ultimately subversive of ethnic, national, cultural and gender privileges and

exclusions even when it seems to give such distinctions a religious meaning and value. This subversive potential has two main roots in religious experience at least, in the experience of the religion of the bible. The first root is the effort to act upon the insight that there is more in us than in the particular discursive and practical worlds we construct and inhabit. We can develop arrangements respecting and moderating this disproportion. The second root is the impulse to make ourselves practically and passionately available to one another as individuals rather than as placeholders in the divisions and hierarchies of society and culture.

The historical religions seem to differ in their explicit valuation of the significance and finality of national distinctions: Christianity and Buddhism on one side; Hinduism and Judaism on another; and a broad range of religions (e.g. Japanese and African) in between. However, even in the supposedly particularizing and exclusive religions, prophecy opposes to the mystery of national election and distinction (related to our embodied and situated character) the countermystery of our power to act on the knowledge that the divisions within mankind belong to the plot rather than to the message and must in the end be defied.

The privatization of religion in contemporary liberal-democratic societies muffles this subversive and universalizing impulse by compelling it to speak in the public world a purely secular language of rights and enlightenment. The most ferocious religious assertions of particularism are thereby deprived of their religious enemies. Moreover, the institutional emptiness of the dominant political theologies makes these theologies powerless to resist what is becoming the dominant form of group chauvinism in the contemporary world: the assertion of an abstract will to collective difference, which becomes ever more intense as actual differences of custom and sensibility wane.

One people struggles to be apart from its neighbors less because it has a distinct form of life to maintain than because it does not have one but wants one or wants to think it already has one. The peoples who have done best at sustaining practical autonomy are the most relentless pillagers of world practices and institutions, in the opportunistic search for what works best. The failure to develop or sustain real differences makes the assertion of these imagined or desired differences all the more relentless: abstract identities, unlike concrete arrangements, lie beyond compromise or recombination, and impotence makes for rage.

The more fully and freely religion engages in politics the less likely it is to join this battle solely on the particularizing side. The better a political theology equips itself with an institutional imagination the more it can help develop different forms of life and

strengthen, with this experience of collective power, the magnanimity of the self-possessed.

The religious life of the Brazilian people allows us to see these circumstances from yet another perspective. The absence of a real struggle within and outside religion between universalizing and particularizing tendencies helps keep the level of religious energy low for the vast majority of Brazilians. Both traditional Catholic religiosity and its pentecostal rival enter social life in a way that is neither political nor strictly privatized but rather domestic: a set of ritual practices, half-believed beliefs, and fragmentary commonalities, reinforcing family life and quieting everyday despair. What the traditional Catholic rituals and beliefs do for the salaried middle classes, their pentecostal counterparts have come, increasingly, to do for a mass of workers trying to lift themselves up to a condition of self-reliance and self-improvement. High-energy religion exists at the margins. Low-energy religion remains the rule. This generalized religious demobilization, obscured by the more notorious religious conflicts, highlighted in the contending political theologies, is both cause and consequent of the suppression of problems of race and gender.

5. THE MISSING AGENT THESIS

As the content of religious belief shifts, so must the agents of religious action change. Who are the agents of a practice of religion placing exemplary personal experience at the center, recognizing the relation of faith to democracy, connecting the large world of institutions to the small world of personal relations through a practice and vision of social reconstruction, and letting loose the particularism-subverting force of its prophetic intimations?

The modern history of religion has seen the diffusion of the idea of the priesthood of all believers. But there are two problems. The first problem is that the religion described in the first four theses requires that all believers be prophets as well as priests. The second problem is that the characteristic experience of living faith has today become one in which the same people are simultaneously believers and nonbelievers. Neither the church nor the political party nor the partnership between the two can adequately speak for such a religion and such an experience. Who then can?

The moral and psychological danger is that such a religion may provide the vehicle and opportunity for charismatic leadership not just in politics narrowly understood but in every setting of social life. The followers of the charismatic leaders, like the workers

mobilized by the prophetic activists of the radicalized Church in Brazil, then feel torn between the sense of being inspired and the sense of being excluded from the power and the grace of original inspiration. The antidote is to link the large world of institutions and the small world of personal relations in ways that make people parties to conflicts of vision and remind them of their power to resist, transcend, and connect, diminishing reliance upon the privileged agency of charismatic leadership. To that end, we need political and economic institutions and styles of personal association accelerating experimentalism in every domain of social life. In such a way we give practical effect to the idea of making everyone a prophet. (See theses on "the programmatic path of the left now.")