

A Community of Character:

**Towards a Constructive
Christian Ethic**

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4. The Church and Liberal Democracy: The Moral Limits of a Secular Polity

1. Christian Social Ethics in a Secular Polity

It has become commonplace that we live in a secular world and society. But attempts to describe and assess the significance of being "secular" are notoriously controversial.¹ I have no intention of adding further fuel to that particular debate. Rather I want to concentrate on a more limited, but I think no less important, set of challenges a secular polity, such as liberal democracy, presents for Christian social ethics.²

By calling attention to the secular nature of our polity I am not trying to provide or defend a theory about what it means to live in the "modern world" or to be a "modern woman or man." All I mean by secular is that our polity and politics gives no special status to any recognizable religious group.³ Correlatively such a policy requires that public policies be justified on grounds that are not explicitly religious.

American religious groups have been particularly supportive of this understanding of the secular nature of our polity, in that it seems to allow for the free expression of religious convictions without limiting any one group. Of course particular religious groups have in fact been discriminated against socially and politically, but such discrimination, we feel, is not endemic to how our polity should work. Moreover some interpret the secular nature of our polity, that is, our government's acknowledgment of its noncompetency in religion, as a profound confession of the limits of the state appropriate to a recognition of God's sovereignty or as a realistic understanding of human sinfulness.⁴

This positive evaluation presents a decisive challenge to Christian social ethics that we have seldom understood. Even as Christians recover the profound social significance of the Gospel, they find that the terms of expression and justification of those convictions must be secular. Many Christians assume

this presents no problem, as the inherent justice of our secular and democratic polity provides the appropriate means for the expression of Christian social concerns. Most recent Christian social ethics in America has thus derived from the largely unexamined axiom that Christians should engage in politics to secure a more nearly just society. Following the lead of the social gospel, social ethics presumes that the task of Christians is to transform⁵ our basic social and economic structures in order to aid individuals in need. Thus political involvement is seen to be the best mechanism to deal with, and perhaps even transform, structures of injustice.

While Christians have sometimes naively overestimated the extent of transformations, they have also developed extremely sophisticated and influential portrayals of the moral possibilities and limits of our polity. Reinhold Niebuhr took the enthusiasm of the social gospel and made it all the more powerful by suggesting the limits of what love could accomplish through the politics characteristic of our society. Niebuhr saw clearly that love without power is ineffective, but that power must at the same time limit the possibilities of the realization of love. Yet those limits do not lessen the Christian duty to use power to secure the forms of justice possible in our social and political system.⁶ To do anything less is to be unfaithful understanding of history and our involvement in it.

Moreover, from this perspective attempts by Christians to avoid political involvement because of the "dirty" nature of politics are rightly condemned irresponsible, if not unfaithful. Rather it is the task of Christians to be politically involved exactly because we recognize that our politics inherently involves compromise and accommodation. To withdraw from the political order to remain pure is an irresponsible act of despair. Even more, such withdrawal is self-deceptive as it creates the condition by which the political realm may claim unwarranted significance.

It is my contention, however, that Christian enthusiasm for the political involvement offered by our secular polity has made us forget the church's more profound political task. In the interest of securing more equitable forms of justice possible in our society, Christians have failed to challenge the moral presuppositions of our polity and society. Nowhere is the effect of this seen more powerfully than in the Christian acquiescence to the liberal assumption that a just polity is possible without the people being just.⁷ We simply accepted the assumption that politics is about the distribution of desires, irrespective of the content of those desires, and any consideration of the development of virtuous people as a political issue seems an inexcusable intrusion into personal liberty.

The more destructive result is that the church has increasingly imitated in its own social life the politics of liberalism. We have almost forgotten that

the church is also a polity that at one time had the confidence to encourage in its members virtues sufficient to sustain their role as citizens in a society whose purpose was to counter the unwarranted claims made by other societies and states. Indeed, only if such people exist is it possible for the state to be "secular." Because the church rarely now engenders such a people and community, it has failed our particular secular polity: Christians have lacked the power that would enable themselves and others to perceive and interpret the kind of society in which we live. Christians have rightly thought that they have a proper investment in making this, and other societies, more nearly just, but have forgotten that genuine justice depends on more profound moral convictions than our secular polity can politically acknowledge.

Christians must again understand that their first task is not to make the world better or more just, but to recognize what the world⁸ is and -why it is that it understands the political task as it does. The first social task of the church is to provide the space and time necessary for developing skills of interpretation and discrimination sufficient to help us recognize the possibilities and limits of our society. In developing such skills, the church and Christians must be uninvolved in the politics of our society and involved in the polity that is the church. Theologically, the challenge of Christian social ethics in our secular polity is no different than in any time or place-it is always the Christian social task to form a society that is built on truth rather than fear. For the Christian, therefore, the church is always the primary polity through which we gain the experience to negotiate and make positive contributions to whatever society in which we may find ourselves.

2. A Critique of Our Society

Insofar as many Christians assume that our liberal and secular society is at least neutral to, if not positively an advantage for, the church, we have failed to see and understand the depth of the moral challenge facing this society. Of course we all recognize our society has problems, but we assume our society and politics have the means to deal with them. We have no reason to question fundamentally our "form of government" or the "American way of life." Rather, as Christians we assume we have a stake in America's extraordinary experiment to create a free people through the mechanism of democratic government.⁹

We thus feel puzzled by critiques of our society such as that of Solzhenitsyn. For it is the brunt of his charge that a polity is ultimately judged by the kind of people it produces, and from such a perspective our society can only be found wanting. He suggests that for all the injustice and terror of the

Russian and Eastern European societies, they have been through a spiritual training far advanced of the Western experience:

Life's complexity and mortal weight have produced stronger, deeper, and more interesting characters than those generated by the standardized Western well-being. It is true, no doubt, that a society cannot remain in an abyss of lawlessness, as in our country. But it is also demeaning for it to elect such mechanical legalistic smoothness as you have. After the suffering of decades of violence and oppression, the human soul longs for things higher, warmer, and purer than those offered by today's mass living habits, introduced by the revolting invasion of publicity, by TV stupor, and by intolerable music.¹⁰

It is tempting to dismiss such attacks as failing to understand the character of the American people or our form of government. Some have suggested that Solzhenitsyn has confused a social and cultural critique with a political critique.¹¹ Yet to dismiss Solzhenitsyn in this way is but to manifest the problem he is trying to point out. For we have assumed that we can form a polity that ignores the relation between politics and moral virtue. In contrast, Solzhenitsyn takes the classical view that it should be the function of politics to direct people individually and collectively toward the good.¹²

Thus Solzhenitsyn's critique is radical insofar as it reaches to the roots "of our societal presuppositions. In effect he is suggesting that when freedom becomes an end in itself people lose their ability to make sacrifices for worthy ends. The problem with our society is not that democracy has not worked, but that it has, and the results are less than good.¹³ We have been freed to pursue happiness and "every citizen has been granted the desired freedom and material goods in such quantity and of such quality as to guarantee in theory the achievement of happiness. In the process, however, one psychological detail has been overlooked: the constant desire to have still more things and a still better life and the struggle to obtain them imprints many Western faces with worry and even depression, though it is customary to conceal such feelings. Active and tense competition permeates all human thoughts without opening a way to free spiritual development."¹⁴

Moreover, one of the great ironies of our society is that by attempting to make freedom an end in itself we have become an excessively legalistic society. As Solzhenitsyn points out, we feel there is little need for voluntary self-restraint, as we are free to operate to the limit of the law. Thus in condemning Richard Nixon, virtues of decency and honesty were invoked, but the legal system offered the only code by which the unacceptableness of those actions could be clearly and cogently expressed. An insightful commentator of the "Talk of the Town" column in the *New Yorker* observed that

Nixon's legal gymnastics to claim innocence in his interview with Frost was in a sense truthful in that he honestly did not know of any other moral framework by which to judge himself, truthful in that no other armature of principle was available to him on which to mold an understanding of his character. One searched for a hint of something in his character, some shred of belief or awareness, that might have given him the strength and the foothold—a motive to act differently; but, save for the misgiving that his strategy might backfire, no such motive was there.... And yet if one asked oneself what that foothold of belief might have been, there was no ready answer—only a prickling of dread. Each of us may have a sense of principle which he has generated himself, or has drawn from his particular background, but that is not a satisfactory answer here. What is called for is principles that can be pointed to as the mainstays of the culture, principles of which no disparate individuals but the society is the custodian. What is needed is something that could be called a tradition. Individual ethics can be very fine, but they cannot survive for long if they are not reinforced by the society, and even while they last they can have little public significance if they are not echoed in the general moral awareness of the world in which their possessor lives. Perhaps such an awareness does exist, but, if so, it has become so obscured that we cannot be sure what it is, or even whether it is there at all. Under these circumstances the only way in which we can clearly distinguish ourselves from Richard Nixon is by our view that the legal system is inadequate as a moral tradition. Unlike him, we are not at all comfortable when the legal system is made to assume this role. And we become even more uneasy as it occurs to us that there may be nothing sounder available to us.¹⁵

That our society has been brought to such a pass is no surprise to Solzhenitsyn, as he thinks it is the inevitable result of a social order whose base is the humanism of the Enlightenment, which presupposed that intrinsic evil did not exist, nor did man have any higher task than the attainment of his own happiness. "Everything beyond physical well-being and accumulation of material goods, all other human requirements and characteristics of a subtler and higher nature, were left outside the area of attention of state and social system, as if human life did not have any superior sense."¹⁶ But such presumptions are profoundly false and any politics founded on them can only lead men to destruction, for if humanism were right in declaring that man is born to be happy, he would not be born to die. Since his body is doomed to die, his task on

material goods and then cheerfully get the most out of them. It has to be the fulfillment of a permanent, earnest duty so that one's life journey may become an experience of moral growth, so that one may leave life a better human being than one started it.¹⁷

Now it must be admitted that for those of us identified with religious traditions the kind of rhetoric Solzhenitsyn used in his Harvard address is a bit of an embarrassment. It is frankly religious rhetoric and somehow we have come to think such condemnations of the political order a bit out of place. Such rhetoric is for matters personal and best left to those institutions that specialize in such matters—that is, the family and the church. Solzhenitsyn seems not to realize that our society's commitment to "religious freedom" is based exactly on the understanding that the church will not challenge the primary assumption of our system. The very materialism and banality of American life that Solzhenitsyn condemns is the price, and not a high price at that, we must pay in order to make the state neutral in matters moral and religious. Solzhenitsyn wrongly assumes that the characteristics of the American people he finds so unappealing are matters of public concern rather than religious concern. Politically we are right to take up a stance of self-interest; morally and religiously we know however that self-interest is not an appropriate form of life for the rest of our lives.

Thus we console ourselves with the idea that Solzhenitsyn has failed to understand the genius of our polity because he fails to see the moral advance represented by the amorality of our politics. His view of us is therefore too myopic and narrow and he fails to appreciate those "non-political" aspects of our lives that should qualify his overly harsh judgments about the shallowness of American life. Yet I think Solzhenitsyn's critique remains accurate,¹⁸ but to demonstrate that, it is necessary to pay closer attention to our profoundest political assumptions. For I want to suggest that the moral insufficiencies

Solzhenitsyn finds so destructive about our society are necessarily built into the founding assumptions of America and have been reinforced by our best political practices and philosophy.

3. The Moral Assumptions of Political Liberalism

The American political system has been the testing ground for the viability of liberal theory. To be sure, "liberalism" is a many-faced and historically ambiguous phenomenon, and historically and culturally there were many factors in American life that served to qualify its impact.¹⁹ But it is

earth evidently must be of a more spiritual nature. it cannot be unrestrained enjoyment of everyday life. It cannot be the search for the best ways to obtain

still the case that America, more than any nation before or after, has been the product of a theory of government.²⁰ Our assumption has been that, unlike other societies, we are not creatures of history, but that we have the possibility of a new beginning.²¹ We are thus able to form our government on the basis of principle rather than the arbitrary elements of a tradition.

Our assumptions in this respect profoundly distort our history, but their power is hard to deny. Liberalism is successful exactly because it supplies us with a myth that seems to make sense of our social origins. For there is some truth to the fact that we originally existed as a people without any shared history, but came with many different kinds of histories. In the absence of any shared history we seemed to lack anything in common that could serve as a basis for societal cooperation. Fortunately, liberalism provided a philosophical account of society designed to deal with exactly that problem: A people do not need a shared history; all they need is a system of rules that will constitute procedures for resolving disputes as they pursue their various interests. Thus liberalism is a political philosophy committed to the proposition that a social order and corresponding mode of government can be formed on self-interest and consent.

From this perspective the achievement of the Constitution is not its fear of tyranny, or even its attempt to limit the totalitarian impulses of the majority. Rather the wisdom and achievement of the Constitution comes from the guiding "assumption that only by institutionalizing the self-interest of the leaders, on the one hand, and of the individual citizen, on the other, could tyranny be averted."²² The ethical and political theory necessary to such a form of society was that the individual is the sole source of authority. Thus Hobbes and Locke, to be sure in very different ways, viewed the political problem as how to get individuals, who are necessarily in conflict with one another, to enter into a cooperative arrangement for their mutual self-interest.

Likewise, Madison assumed that "the causes of faction are sown into the nature of man," and since such causes cannot be eliminated without destroying "freedom," the primary task of government is to control the effects of conflict. He argues in the tenth *Federalist* essay that the chief advantage of an extended republic is that aggregates of self-interested individuals will find it difficult to interfere with the rights of others to pursue their self-interest. Thus, William Hixson argues, Madison justified his understanding of our political character on two suppositions, that the only possible source of public authority is the private need of the independently situated political actors, each of whom is vested with a right to act according to self-defined standards of conscience and interest, and second, that the only legitimate function of "the sovereign" is

the preservation of order through the management of conflict between such individuals.²³

The irony is that our founders thought that the system of competing factions would work only if you could continue to assume that people were virtuous. John Adams in his first year as vice-president under the new constitution said: "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our constitution was made only for a moral and a religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other." Yet the very theory that has formed our public rhetoric and institutions gives no sufficient public basis for the development of such people. It was assumed that in making "morality" a matter of the "private sphere --that is, what we do with our freedom-it could still be sustained and have an indirect public impact. But we know this has not been the case; our "private" morality has increasingly followed the form of our public life. People feel their only public duty is to follow their own interests as far as possible, limited only by the rule that we do not unfairly limit others' freedom. As a result we have found it increasingly necessary to substitute procedures and competition for the absence of public virtues. The bureaucracies in our lives are not simply the result of the complexities of an industrialized society, but a requirement of a social order individualistically organized.²⁴

Many of our current political problems and the way we understand and try to solve them are a direct outgrowth of our liberal presuppositions. For example, the American government is often condemned for its inability to develop an economic or energy policy, but such policies must necessarily be public policies. Just as it has been the genius of the American political system to turn every issue of principle into an issue of interest, so it has been the intention of our polity to make impossible the very idea of public policy or public interest. Public policy cannot exist because society is nothing more than an aggregate of self-interested individuals. The policy which is formulated therefore must be the result of a coalescence of self-interests that is then justified in the name of the greatest good for the greatest number (but too often turns out to be the greatest good for the most powerful). Liberalism thus becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy; a social order that is designed to work on the presumption that people are self-interested tends to produce that kind of people.

It is often pointed out that there is a deep puzzle about the American people, for in spite of being the best off people in the world, their almost *antic pursuit of abundance seems to mask a deep despair and loss of purpose. I suspect that our despair is the result of living in a social order that asks

nothing from us but our willingness to abide by the rules of fair competition. We have been told that it is moral to satisfy our "wants" and "needs," but we are no longer sure what our wants and needs are or should be. After all, "wants" are but individual preferences. Americans, as is often contended, are good people or at least want to be good people, but our problem is that we have lost any idea of what that could possibly mean. We have made "freedom of the individual" an end in itself and have ignored that fact that most of us do not have the slightest idea of what we should do with our freedom. Indeed, the idealists among us are reduced to fighting for the "freedom" or "right" of others to realize their self-interests more fully.

Such a system is defended because, whatever its faults, it is at least noncoercive. Therefore our public policies are formed in a manner that avoids as much as possible impinging on anyone's self-interest. As a result we fail to notice that "freedom" can become coercive by the very conception of "choice" it provides. For example, in his remarkable book *The Gift Relationship*, Richard Titmuss compares the blood distribution systems in America and Britain.²⁵ In Britain the only way one is allowed to obtain blood is through a voluntary donor who does not know to whom his or her blood is given. It is against the law to sell one's blood. In America we rely on diverse ways to obtain blood, ranging from voluntary programs to buying it. We feel that our system is inherently superior to the British because we do not prevent anyone from giving or selling their blood. We have a choice and are therefore free.

What we fail to notice is that by giving a "choice" we also create the assumption that blood, like cars and toothbrushes, can be bought and sold. We thus ignore the fact that the choice of selling blood trains us to see blood as simply one commodity among others. Put differently, what we have overlooked is that social policies should not only be efficient and fair, but they should also train us to have certain virtues as citizens. By concentrating on whether our policies are efficient, we have implicitly trained ourselves to assume that all human relationships should as much as possible take the form of an exchange model.²⁶ Thus Kenneth Arrow, in criticism of Titmuss' argument in favor of the British system, suggests

I do not want to rely too heavily on substituting ethics for self-interest. I think it best on the whole that the requirement of ethical behavior be confined to those circumstances where the price system breaks down. Wholesale usage of ethical standards is apt to have undesirable consequences. We do not wish to use up recklessly the scarce resources of altruistic motivation, and in any case ethically motivated behavior may even have a negative value to others if the agent acts without sufficient knowledge of the situation.²⁷

We should not be too hasty in criticizing Arrow's claim that the economic model should prevail for as many relations as possible, since he is stating the profoundest assumptions of a liberal polity. For liberal polity is the attempt to show that societal cooperation is possible under the conditions of distrust. The very genius of our society is to forge a political and social existence that does not have to depend on trusting others in matters important for our survival. Thus to leave our destiny to the gift of blood from a stranger simply becomes unthinkable.

Of course the more it becomes unthinkable to trust a stranger, the more we must depend on more exaggerated forms of protection. But the human costs of distrust are perhaps the most destructive. For we are increasingly forced to view one another as strangers rather than as friends, and as a result we become all the more lonely. We have learned to call our loneliness "autonomy" and/or freedom, but the freer we become the more desperate our

search for forms of "community" or "interpersonal relationship" that offer some contact with our fellows. Even the family is not immune from this development, since we now assume that children should have "rights" against the parents, as if the family itself were but a contractual society.²⁸

In spite of our claim that the family is the bedrock of our society, the family has always been an anomaly for the liberal tradition. Only if human beings can be separated in a substantial degree from kinship can they be free individuals subject to egalitarian policies. Thus we assume-and this is an assumption shared by political conservatives and activists alike-that it is more important to be an "autonomous person" than to be a "Hauerwas" or a "Pulaski" or a "Smith." For example, the Supreme Court recently held in *Planned Parenthood vs. Danforth* that a husband has no rights if his wife wishes an abortion, because "abortion is a purely personal right of the woman, and the status of marriage can place no limitations on personal rights."²⁹

Or, for example, Milton Friedman, the paradigm liberal whom we mistakenly call "conservative," claims that for liberals "freedom of the individual or perhaps the family, is our ultimate goal in judging social arrangements. In a society freedom has nothing to say about what an individual does with his freedom; it is not an all-embracing ethic. Indeed, a major aim of the liberal is to leave the ethical problem for the individual to wrestle with."³⁰ But Friedman fails to recognize that the kind of freedom gained by the individual in our society is incompatible with freedom of the family. A society that leaves the "ethical problem to the individual" cannot engender or sustain the virtues necessary for providing the individual or the family the power to resist the state.³¹

Shorn of particularistic commitments essential to our public life, we exist as individuals, but now "individuals" is but a name for a particular unit

of arbitrary desires. As C. B. Macpherson argues, liberalism's embrace of the market as the dominant institution of society involved a fundamental change in the conception of human nature. The traditional view of man was that of a being whose activity was an end in itself. With the rise of the market society the essence of rational purpose was taken to be the pursuit of possessions—we are what we own. But as soon as you take the essence of man to be the acquisition of more *things* for himself, as soon as you make the essential human quality the striving for possessions rather than creative activity, you are caught up in an insoluble contradiction. Human beings are sufficiently unequal in strength and skill that if you put them into an unlimited contest for possessions, some will not only get more than others, but will get control of the means of labor to which the others must have access. The others then cannot be fully human even in the restricted sense of being able to get possessions, let alone in the original sense of being able to use their faculties in purposive creative activity. So in choosing to make the essence of man the striving for possessions, we make it impossible for many men to be fully human.³²

Ironically, however, when such a view of man prevails scarcity becomes an ever-present necessity. For scarcity is a necessary social creation when men are defined as having unlimited desires. The genius of liberalism was to make what had always been considered a vice, namely unlimited desire, a virtue. Thus it became legitimate for us to assume that the governing law of human nature is "the insatiable desire of every man for power to render the person and properties of others subservient to his pleasures."³³ Indeed such a view has us so strongly in its grip that we are now unable to think what might sustain a society that did not make scarcity integral to its understanding of man. No matter how great our abundance, we assume it is necessary to make and want more, even if the acquisition of more requires the unjust exploitation of "less developed lands." In truth we have no choice, for in a social order where distrust is primary we can only rely on abundance and technology to be a substitute for cooperation and community.

The recent emphasis on "justice" in the elegant ethical and political theory elaborated by John Rawls might be taken to indicate that liberalism is capable of a profounder sense of justice than I have described. Without going into the detailed argument necessary to criticize Rawls, his book stands as a testimony to the moral limits of the liberal tradition. For the "original position" is a stark metaphor for the ahistorical approach of liberal theory, as the self is alienated from its history and simply left with its individual preferences and prejudices.³⁴ The "justice" that results from the bargaining game is but the guarantee that my liberty to consume will be fairly limited within the

overall distributive shares. To be sure, some concern for the "most disadvantaged" is built into the system, but not in a manner that qualifies my appropriate concern for my self-interest. Missing entirely from Rawls' position is any suggestion that a theory of justice is ultimately dependent on a view of the good; or that justice is as much a category for individuals as for societies. The question is not only how should the shares of any society be distributed equitably, but what bounds should individuals set for themselves if they are to be just. In an effort to rid liberalism of a social system built on envy, Rawls has to resort to the extraordinary device of making all desires equal before the bar of justice. As a result he represents the ultimate liberal irony: individualism, in an effort to secure societal cooperation and justice, must deny individual differences.

Perhaps Solzhenitsyn's critique is truer than even he suspected, for his criticisms reach to the basic moral presumptions of our society. Perhaps what he criticizes in us results not from our having been untrue to our best insights, but because we have been true to them. Of course, there have always been richer experiences of trust and community in our polity, but the problem is that such experience and community have no way to find political expression.³⁵ Thus blacks are encouraged to participate fully in our political process so that their interests might be known, yet there is no political recognition that history of their suffering might or should be recognized as a valuable political resource.³⁶ Such concerns make good political rhetoric, but have little to do with the reality of politics which deals with the satisfaction of interests articulated through group conflict and cooperation.

4. The Church as a School for Virtue

If this analysis of our society's polity is even close to being correct, then it is I by no means clear what the church's stance ought to be. The temptation is to assume that the task of the church is to find a political alternative or ways to qualify some of the excesses of liberalism. But such a strategy is both theologically and ethically problematic, for it fails to recognize that our society offers no ready alternatives to liberalism. We are all liberals. In fact for us in America, liberalism, a position dedicated to ending our captivity to nature, custom, and coercion ironically has become our fate. The great self-deception is in thinking that the tradition of liberalism gives us the means to recognize that it is indeed a tradition. Instead it continues to promise us new tomorrows of infinite creation. And the more we are convinced we are free, the more determined we become.

For the church to adopt social strategies in the name of securing justice in such a social order is only to compound the problem. Rather the church

must recognize that her first social task in any society is to be herself,³⁷ At the very least that means that the church's first political task is to be the kind of community that recognizes the necessity that all societies, church and political alike, require authority. But for Christians our authority is neither in society itself nor in the individual; it is in God.³⁸ As a result the church must stand as a reminder to the pretensions of liberalism that in spite of its claims to legitimate authority, some necessarily rule over others as if they had the right to command obedience.

The church also has a constitution that requires consent, but its constitution takes the form of the story of a savior who taught us to deal with power by recognizing how God limits all earthly claims to power.³⁹ Because we have been so called and formed, Christians should be free from the fear that fuels the power of coercion for liberal and illiberal states alike. The moral adventure represented by liberalism has been to diffuse the coercive nature of the state and society by developing a culture and government that left the individual to his or her own desires. As a result the coercive aspects of our social order are hidden, since they take the appearance of being self-imposed. Yet the distrust of the other inherent in liberal social and political theory cannot help but create powers that claim our loyalties and destructively run our lives.

Ironically, the most coercive aspect of the liberal account of the world is that we are free to make up our own story. The story that liberalism teaches us is that we have no story, and as a result we fail to notice how deeply that story determines our lives. Accordingly, we fail to recognize the coercive form of the liberal state, as it, like all states, finally claims our loyalty under the self-deceptive slogan that in a democracy the people rule themselves because they have "consented" to be so ruled. But a people who have learned the strenuous lesson of God's lordship through Jesus' cross should recognize that the people" are no less tyrannical than kings or dictators.

In the absence of anyone knowing the truth, it has been the liberal assumption that "the people," particularly as they balance one another's desires, limit the power of falsehood. The church accepted such a strategy because it seemed to express a humility about the status of the state that, if not founded on the confession of God's lordship, at least was appropriate to our conviction that God limits all earthly power. Moreover, such a strategy seemed to offer the church freedom to preach the Gospel in a manner few societies had ever been willing to allow. While reveling in such "freedom" we failed to notice that the church had again been coopted into accepting the assumption that the destiny of a particular state and social order was intrinsic to God's Kingdom.

The challenge of the political today is no different than it has always been, though it appears in a new form. The challenge is always for the church to be a "contrast model" for all polities that know not God. Unlike them, we

know that the story of God is the truthful account of our existence, and thus we can be a community formed on trust rather than distrust. The hallmark of such a community, unlike the power of the nation-states, is its refusal to resort to violence to secure its own existence or to insure internal obedience. For as a community convinced of the truth, we refuse to trust any other power to compel than the truth itself.

It is in that connection that the church is in a certain sense "democratic," for it believes that through the story of Christ it best charts its future. We rejoice in the difference and diversity of gifts among those in the church, as that very diversity is the necessary condition for our faithfulness. Discussion becomes the hallmark of such a society, since recognition and listening to the other is the way our community finds the way of obedience.⁴⁰ But the church is radically not democratic if by democratic we mean that no one knows the truth and therefore everyone's opinion counts equally. Christians do not believe that there is no truth; rather truth can only be known through struggle. That is exactly why authority in the church is vested in those we have learned to call saints in recognition of their more complete appropriation of that truth.

Put starkly, the way the church must always respond to the challenge of our polity is to be herself. This does not involve a rejection of the world, or a withdrawal from the world; rather it is a reminder that the church must serve the world on her own terms. We must be faithful in our own way, even if the world understands such faithfulness as disloyalty. But the first task of the church is not to supply theories of governmental legitimacy or even to suggest strategies for social betterment. The first task of the church is to exhibit in our common life the kind of community possible when trust, and not fear, rules our lives.

Such a view of the political task of the church should not sound strange to Christians, whose very existence was secured by people who were willing to die rather than conform to the pretentious claims of government. And we must remember that the demand that religion be freed from state control was not simply an attempt to gain toleration, but to make clear that the church represented a polity truer and more just than the state can ever embody. Simply because we live in a society that has institutionized "Freedom of religion" does not mean the church's political task has thereby been accomplished.

This kind of challenge is all the more needed in a society like ours that is living under the illusion that justice can be based on the assumption that man rather than God controls the world. As John Howard Yoder has suggested, "it is more important to know with what kind of language we criticize the structures of oppression than to suggest that we have the capacity to provide an alternative which would not also be a structure of oppression."⁴¹ As Christians we have a language to describe the problems of liberalism, but we have

become hesitant and embarrassed to use it. We must take courage from Solzhenitsyn's example and clearly say that the problem with our society and

politics is its sinful presumption that man is born to be happy, when he clearly has to die. A truthful politics is one that teaches us to die for the right thing, and only the church can be trusted with that task.⁴²

Moreover, by taking seriously its task to be an alternative polity, the church might well help us to experience what a politics of trust can be like. Such communities should be the source for imaginative alternatives for social policies that not only require us to trust one another, but chart forms of life for the development of virtue and character as public concerns. The problem in liberal societies is that there seems to be no way to encourage the development of public virtue without accepting a totalitarian strategy from the left or an elitist strategy from the right. By standing as an alternative to each, the church may well help free our social imagination from those destructive choices. For finally social and political theory depends on people having the experience of trust rather than the idea of trust.

But we must admit the church has not been a society of trust and virtue. At most, people identify the church as a place where the young learn "morals," but the "morals" often prove to be little more than conventional pieties coupled with a few unintelligible "don'ts." Therefore any radical critique of our secular polity requires an equally radical critique of the church.

And it is a radical critique, for I am not calling for a return to some conservative stance of the church. My call is for Christians to exhibit confidence in the lordship of Yahweh as the truth of our existence and in particular of our community. If we are so confident, we cannot help but serve our polity, for such confidence creates a society capable of engendering persons of virtue and trust. A people so formed are particularly important for the continued existence of a society like ours, as they can provide the experience and skills necessary for me to recognize the difference of my neighbor not as a threat but as essential for my very life.

¹ For an anthology that helps clarify many of the issues surrounding claims about "secularity," see *Secularization and the Protestant Prospect*, ed. James Childress and David Harried (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970). Too often discussions about religion and secularity are attempts, explicitly or implicitly, to make summary judgments, positive or negative, about our culture. I doubt that any one description, whether it be claims about secularity or that this is a post-modern culture, has the power to describe the diverse activities that make up our culture or any other. What we require are discriminating criteria that will let us get a descriptive as well as normative hold on those aspects of our society of particular importance to Christians.

² Nor do I intend to enter the debate concerning the existence, meaning, or status of civil religion in America. Robert Bellah is, of course, the primary focus of this debate. See his *Beyond Belief: Essays on Religion in a Post-Traditional World* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970) and *The Broken Covenant, American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury, 1975). Equally if not more important is the work of Sidney Mead, for in many ways Mead has argued more forcefully for the significance of a "religion of the republic." See his *The Lively Experiment* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963) and *The Nation with the Soul of a Church* (New York: Harper and Row, 1975). Nor should H. R. Niebuhr's *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper, 1937) be overlooked.

³ Some, of course, would question this understanding of "secular" on grounds that a secular society finally in fact, if not as a matter of policy, is biased against religion per se. Whether that is the case remains to be seen. It is certainly true that our country's toleration of "religious" symbols at our state ceremonies may, on a strict enforcement of the Constitution, be illegitimate.

⁴ John Courtney Murray bases his defense of democracy primarily on God's sovereignty and Reinhold Niebuhr places the emphasis on sin. There is much to be said for both accounts and neither is exclusive of the other. The primary difference between Niebuhr and Murray is not that Murray had a more optimistic view of man, but that Murray presupposed the necessity of the existence of the church to remind the state of its limits. In a peculiar way Niebuhr was more profoundly an American theologian, as America was his primary community. See Murray's *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1960) and Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Scribner's, 1944).

⁵ The popularity of the image of "transformation" in Christian social ethics has had the unfortunate effect of oversimplifying the description of social change and the church's relation to it. For it is assumed that H. R. Niebuhr's "type" or "image" of transformation is clearly normative for Christian social ethics, irrespective of the kind of society in which Christians find themselves. As a

result the "image" of transformation is too quickly accepted as entailing a strategy of involvement. What we fail to notice is that Niebuhr's account of the types failed to deal with a crucial problem—namely how to discriminate between different kinds of cultures and different aspects of any culture for what might be transformed and what might be accepted. Niebuhr's uncritical use of the word "culture" allowed him to load his case too simply against the "Christ against Culture" type and to present the "Christ transforming Culture" type in a far too uncritical light. It is not my intention to challenge the heuristic value of Niebuhr's typology, but to remind us that the account of types is not a sufficient argument for a particular social ethic. H. R. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper and Row, 1956).

⁶ See, for example, Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics, ed. Harry Davis and Robert Good (New York: Scribner's, 1960), pp. 70-130.

⁷ There is no inherent reason that liberalism or secularism should exclude a concern for the development of citizen virtues. I suspect that the past association of "morality" with "religion" accounts for the lack of emphasis on the development of virtuous people. For virtue, like religion, is relegated to the "private" sphere in order to make sure that the "freedom of the individual" is properly safeguarded. For a fascinating account of how these issues were formed in the Renaissance see Quentin Skinner's *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought, I* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 45, 92-101, 228-236.

⁸ The distinction between church and world is a complex one. Even though in some Christian texts "world" simply means those who reject Christ and is thus understood in a negative light, the world is also recognized elsewhere as God's creation. Moreover Christian judgment of the world is always self-referential, as we can never forget that the world is not "out there" but in us. The church must be separated from the world, for without separation we have no way to make discriminating judgments about the negative and positive aspects of the world. But the necessity of separation cannot blind us to the significance of the world for the church. For the church also learns what it should be from the world. The church's task is not to destroy or deny the world, or even to make it Christian, but to be a witness in the world of God's Kingdom.

⁹ One of the difficulties of American society and government is that rather than being a people prior to the state, as is true for most European countries, we had to found a state in order to try to make ourselves a people. Therefore where many societies can provide the mechanism for a strong government, knowing that social custom can still act as a limit on government, the United States had to resort to legal means to substitute for the lack of custom. We morally justified our legal arrangements by claiming they were necessary to protect, not society,

but the individual from government. Thus the only two entities recognized in our polity became the state and the individual. As a result more traditional political theory that makes the state one agency among others for the protection of the common good of a society, and not just individuals, simply does not apply to America.

In some ways our situation is even more complex, as America was originally a society profoundly underwritten by Protestant presupposition—America was the great experiment in constructive Protestantism. Exactly because our founders, irrespective of their own personal religiosity, could presuppose such a society, they thought all they needed to provide was a framework, a constitution for our society to work. But as we lost the social presuppositions supplied by Protestantism or as they were increasingly replaced by Enlightenment assumptions, the framework became what it was never meant to be—an end in itself.

¹⁰ Solzhenitsyn, address at Harvard University; *Harvard Gazette*, June 1978, p. 2.

¹¹ Indeed one of the problems with America is the divorce of political consideration from culture. One of the signs of this is the association of politics with issues of power rather than symbols. In such a polity symbolic acts are reduced to issues of maintaining or projecting an "image" rather than the articulation of our profoundest loyalties. Lincoln was one of the few American presidents who appreciated the symbolic role of the political.

¹² As George Will has suggested, "Men and women are biological facts. Ladies and gentlemen—citizens—are social artifacts, works of political art. They carry the culture that is sustained by wise laws, and traditions of civility. At the end of the day we are right to judge a society by the character of the people it produces. That is why statecraft is inevitably soulcraft." *The Pursuit of Happiness and Other Sobering Thoughts* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978), p. 3.

It is important to note that neither Will nor Solzhenitsyn argues (nor do I) that it is the function of the state to make people good, but rather to direct them to the good. Politics as a moral art does not entail the presumption that the state is a possessor of the good, but rather that the good is to be found in a reality profounder than the state. In the absence of such a good the temptation is for the state to try to create a cause that can serve as a substitute. Thus it is profoundly and chillingly true that there is nothing wrong with America that a good war could not cure.

¹³ Jimmy Carter promised us a government as good as the American people and it may be unfortunately true that is what we have. This does not mean that the American people are particularly bad, as they certainly are not. As many have pointed out, the American people continue to be extraordinarily generous and

kind. The difficulty is that we simply do not have any way to understand the political significance of such virtues. Politically we seem caught in a system that reinforces our assumption that our political task is to pursue our self-interests aggressively and fairly. In contrast, George Will argues that "politics should be citizens expressing themselves as a people, a community of shared values, rather than as merely a collection of competing private interests inhabiting the same country. Instead, politics has become a facet of the disease for which it would be part of the cure. The disease is an anarchy of selfinterestedness, and unwillingness, perhaps by now an inability, to think of the public interest, the common good. This disease of anti-public-spiritedness is not a candidate's disease. It is a social disease." *The Pursuit of Happiness and Other Sobering Thoughts*, p. 192. Will is one of the few American conservatives who seems to understand that conservatism in America is a radical position vis-a-vis our liberal heritage.

¹⁴ Solzhenitsyn, p. 1. Though often condemned for being too competitive, competition is one of our most important moral endeavors. For all societies need to provide a sense of participation in an adventure. Insofar as many feel they lack such an adventure, all that is left is beating the next person. Thus the dominance of the comparative mode in American life—we must be the first this or the best of that. It is very hard for us simply to be different and to enjoy that fact as an end in itself.

¹⁵ "Talk of the Town," *New Yorker*, May 23, 1977. pp. 24-25.

¹⁶ Solzhenitsyn, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ However I am in profound disagreement with Solzhenitsyn's more positive proposals as well as his understanding of the international situation. His hatred of communism and reliance on the "will of the West" to oppose communism gives far too uncritical support to some of the more reactionary political positions in our country. His profound commitment to Orthodoxy, I am afraid, remains still far too tied to Russia and Russian nationalism. For a good critique of Solzhenitsyn's thought on this point, see Andrei Sinyavsky, "Solzhenitsyn and Russian Nationalism," *New York Review of Books*, 26/18 (November 22, 1979), pp. 3-6. For an interesting critique of Solzhenitsyn's inability to understand the moral status of pluralism, see Martin Marty, "On Hearing Solzhenitsyn in Context," *World Literature Today*, Autumn 1979, pp. 578-584. However, also see John Garvey's "In Defense of Solzhenitsyn," *Commonweal*, 105/17 (September 1, 1978), pp. 553-555.

¹⁹ For example, C. B. Macpherson suggests that liberal democracy can mean simply the democracy of a capitalist market society (no matter how modified that

society appears to be by the rise of the welfare state), or it can mean a society striving to ensure that all its members are equally free to realize their capabilities. *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 1. It has, of course, been the thrust of Macpherson's work to show that liberalism as a political institution was transformed and perverted by capitalism and that now our task is to save liberalism from the perversion. For a critique of liberalism, and in particular Rawls, similar to my own, see George Parkin Grant, *English-Speaking Justice* (Sackville, New Brunswick: Mount Allison University Press, 1974). Grant makes the interesting point that Rawls' theory of justice is abstracted from any consideration of the facts of war and imperialism, pp. 44ff. I am grateful to Paul Ramsey for calling Grant's work to my attention.

A criticism of the following account of liberalism is that I take far too seriously philosophical theories of liberalism—i.e., Rawls, Nozick—and fail to pay appropriate attention to the historical experience of liberalism. For accounts of the latter one should not look to the philosophers but the work of cultural and social historians. Such work shows the American experience often provided a richer sense of history and the common good than the philosophical accounts of liberalism could give expression to. There is much to commend such a strategy, but it is my contention that it is no longer viable. For liberalism has become a self-fulfilling prophecy such that now theories of liberalism are not only descriptively powerful but shape our dominant public policies. Of course, much still occurs in our society that is not explicable from the point of view of liberalism and denotes fragments of other political moralities that have been present in American life and thought.

²⁰ I am not suggesting that the Constitution was the product of an explicit political theory in some deductive manner. Certainly the American form of society and government, like most governments and societies, was as much the product of historical accidents as theory. But our history has increasingly been interpreted and formed through liberal political philosophy. As Louis Hartz has argued in his now classic study, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and Company, 1955), even though life in the Puritan colonies and the South was in some ways deeply antagonistic to liberalism, liberalism became our dominant political tradition because we had no other tradition to which we might appeal. In the absence of any feudal experience, Americans simply have, in Hartz's phrase, a "natural liberalism" which they ironically dogmatically adhere to and defend.

²¹ Macpherson rightly observes that liberalism has "always meant freeing the individual from the outdated restraints of old established institutions.." *The Life and Times of Liberal Democracy*, p. 21. This has had a peculiar effect on the form of our political theory, as it tends to be excessively removed from the

actual process of our government and society. The latter are treated by political science and history, which often putatively claim to have no normative interests.

²² William Hixson, "Liberal Legacy, Radical Critique," *Commonweal*, 105/20 (October 13, 1978), p. 649. Thus Americans' paradoxical attitude toward politicians. They want only people of integrity to run for office, but they make them subject to a polity that defines the essence of the political as compromise and a willingness to subject one's own convictions to the interests of one's constituency. Perhaps that is one of the ways we have for devaluing the realm of the political—namely, we have created a system where only the morally compromised can be political actors.

²³ Hixson, p. 649.

²⁴ Alasdair MacIntyre argues further that the "lack of shared moral beliefs in our political culture—which in eighteenth century terms is part, although only part, of our lack of virtue—is a great threat and possibly even the great threat to our liberties. I shall argue toward the conclusion by suggesting that the consequence of a lack of shared moral beliefs tends to be either that government acts without the proper assent of the people to its actions, because lack of shared moral beliefs prevents the occurrence of the kind of political dialogue which would enable the people to understand the proposed acts of government or the government connives at the creation of false simulacra of moral consensus, moods either of public hysteria or of public fatigue, which happily are transitory, but which while they last deceive both the government and many of those over whom they rule. And when government fails because its policies lack proper support or because that support derives from false simulacra the temptation to government to act in covert and clandestine ways sometimes becomes overwhelming." "Power and Virtue in the American Republic" (unpublished manuscript), pp. 8-9.

²⁵ Richard Titmuss, *The Gift Relationship* (New York: Random House, 1972).

²⁶ Of course, in many ways there is nothing more human, as it seems to be our nature to deny that our security may rest in the hands of another. Thus it is a characteristic of human society to turn all gift relationships into exchanges. For example, it is very hard for us not to think of gifts as "putting us in debt" and thus at a disadvantage. We, therefore, quickly try to give something in return so that we will not be another's "debt."

²⁷ Kenneth Arrow, "Gifts and Exchanges," *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 1/4 (Summer 1972), p. 355. The power of the economic model is perhaps no better exemplified than in Arrow's assumption that "altruistic" behavior is a "scarce resource." Moreover, he seems to be right to claim that once you have

established a system that works on the presumption of self-interest, it becomes a disvalue for anyone to act "ethically," since such behavior is not predictable. Thus we have the odd state of affairs where a morally altruistic person must act self-interestedly, for not to do so is to act "selfishly."

²⁸ For a critique of "rights" language in relation to children, see my "Rights, Duties, and Experimentation on Children: A Critical Response to Worsfold and Bartholome," *Research Involving Children: Appendix* (Washington, D.C.: National Commission for Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research Publication, No [OS] 77-0005, 1977), article 5, pp. 1-24.

²⁹ For a spirited argument against this view, see Paul Ramsey, *Ethics at the Edges of Life* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 197M). pp. 3-18.

³⁰ Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), p. 12.

³¹ This is also the great dilemma of the "neo-conservatives." As Peter Steinfels points out, "The institutions they wish to conserve are to no small extent the institutions that have made the task of conservation so necessary and so difficult." *The Neoconservatives* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), p. 103. Particularly illuminating is Steinfels' analysis of Daniel Bell's work, for Bell's understanding of the "Cultural Contradictions of Capitalism" clearly makes him the most interesting of those loosely identified as neo-conservatives. Michael Walzer, in a review of Steinfels' book, points out, "What made liberalism endurable for all these years was the fact that the individualism it generated was always imperfect, tempered by older restraints and loyalties, by stable patterns of local, ethnic, religious, or class relationships. An untempered liberalism would be unendurable. That is the crisis the neoconservatives evoke: the triumph of liberalism over its historical restraints. And that is a triumph they both endorse and lament.... Neoconservatives are nervous liberals, and what they are nervous about is liberalism. They despair of liberation, but they are liberals still, with whatever longing for older values." "Nervous Liberals," *New York Review of Books*, 26/15 (October 11, 1979), p. 6.

³² C. B. Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 54. Many who seek to secure a more equitable distribution of goods in our society often fail to see that a "justice" so secured may well only reinforce a more fundamental unjust view of ourselves. The problem with American egalitarianism, as Michael Walzer has argued, is that egalitarians fail to see that different goods should be distributed to different people for different reasons. We have tried to avoid articulating or institutionalizing the criteria for such differences by making the ability to make money the common denominator for everyone, the assumption being that if everyone has a basic minimum of money, then the distribution of their other talents will take care of itself. But

such a system is inherently unjust, since many have no talent for making money. As Walzer suggests, "Equality requires a diversity of principles, which mirrors the diversity both of mankind and of social goods," but as a society we seem to have no way of embodying such diversity in our public policies, for the recognition of diversity seems to result in injustice and envy. "In Defense of Equality," *Dissent*, 20/4 (Fall 1973), pp. 399-408. To avoid envy a society must have a sense of those offices and tasks that receive special favor because of the service they perform for the existence of the community as a whole.

³³ Macpherson, *The Real World of Democracy*, p. 62. Though I am in deep agreement with much of Macpherson's analysis of the dilemma of contemporary liberalism, I am unconvinced by his claim that technology has now freed us from scarcity to the extent that we can now throw off our dependence on the market. Rather, I suspect, as his own analysis suggests, that we can only free ourselves from the coercion of the market when we are morally trained not to think of ourselves as deserving whatever we desire, or perhaps more accurately, when we learn to desire the right things rightly.

³⁴ This criticism may appear unfair to Rawls, as his own criticism of ideal observer theory and utilitarianism rests on those theories' tendencies to conflate into one, thereby eradicating their individual histories. Rawls' strategy, in contrast, is to try to provide an account of justice that will allow for the development of an appreciation for individual differences without envy. However, his attempt requires him to resort to the device of the original position that seems to entail exactly the loss of individuality he was trying to avoid. *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1972), pp. 184-192. Thus Robert Paul Wolff has argued that "Rawls conceives of the moral point of view as an atemporal vantage from which, like Lucretius gazing down upon the plain of battle, we contemplate all time and all space equanimously and isotropically. But human existence is not accidentally temporal; it is essentially temporal. What makes it a matter of justice how a subgroup chooses for the whole society is the fact that in principle that entire group could be included in the choosing. What makes it seem a matter of justice how parents choose for their children is the human fact that generations overlap, so that the children, the parents, and the grandparents must live for a time in the same world. What makes it manifestly not a matter of justice how this generation chooses for a generation far in the future is the certainty that they cannot share the same world, and hence could not even in principle gather together to share the act of choice. The veil of ignorance creates a choice situation in which the essential characteristics of human existence are set aside along with accidents of individual variations. What results, it seems to me, is not a moral point of view, but a nonhuman point of view from the perspective of which moral questions are not clarified but warped and distorted." *Understanding Rawls* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1977), p. 97.

³⁵ Some have argued, for example, that our American experience, especially as it is understood in terms of the theological notion of covenant, must be taken seriously as an important moment in God's history. Thus Richard Neuhaus' *Time Toward Home: The American Experiment as Revelation* (New York: Seabury, 1975), pp. 46-67. I do not have the space to deal adequately with the challenge of this position. However, without denying the power and profundity often associated with such attempts to understand theologically the American experience, I am often left wondering if they have anything to do with reality.

For a particularly provocative account of the political implications of covenant, see Robin Lovin, "Covenantal Relationships and Political Legitimacy," *The Journal of Religion*, 60/1 (January 1980), pp. 1-16. Lovin argues convincingly that political community interpreted in terms of covenant, in contrast to the contractarian tradition, has the advantage of not treating "the power of the state as some extraordinary menace, to be restrained from infecting the more creative institutions of family and culture. Like all other powers, the state must act in accordance with duty, but it also shares with other powers a creative role in establishing relationships of communication and obligation." Moreover, covenant reminds us that freedom emerges precisely at the point "that it is possible to speak meaningfully about duty as a reminder that covenantal freedom always contains an element of mutuality," pp. 9-10. Lovin also rightly suggests that equality understood covenantally is not, in the first instance, distributive, but rather that it is necessary to insure political participation. What Lovin does not do, however, is to provide an account of whether covenant is really an operative ideal in our polity or, even more important, what is the nature, status, and task of the church for such a polity. Also needing justification is the implicit assumption that the notion of "covenant" adequately sums up the "biblical" understanding of God.

³⁶ Such a recognition would require white Americans to claim the history of slavery as their history, rather than simply an unfortunate event that can now be forgotten. In effect we are trying to say to the American black community that now that blacks have allegedly the same opportunities as whites, slavery can be forgotten, for after all what is a little slavery between friends. In the face of what cannot be changed, we often think the only thing we can do is forget. but when we forget we lose our own history. What is required is forgiveness, but for forgiveness to work politically we must be the kind of people capable of making another people's history our own. For a remarkable account of the significance of forgiveness as an integral aspect of any political process, see Haddon Willmer, "The Politics of Forgiveness-A New Dynamic," *The Furrow*, 30/4 (April 19, 1979), pp. 207-218; see also my "The Necessity of Forgiveness," *Worldview*, 23/1-2 (January -February 1980), pp. 15-16. See also H. R. Niebuhr's provocative account of the necessity of shared history for community in *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1960), pp. 114-132.

³⁷ The claim that the first social task of the church is to be herself is not "sectarian" if by that is meant a retreat or withdrawal from the world. Indeed, I am in some respects deeply sympathetic with the social strategy that Max Stackhouse has called "conciliar denominationalism --that is, the combination of the free church tradition with a concern for the wider social order. However, as Stackhouse denotes, this strategy seems to entail two conflicting motifs: sectarianism and Christendom. Thus, a figure such as Rauschenbush "saw the necessity of the select body of believers anticipating the Kingdom in the word and deed in good sectarian fashion, and of taking the world seriously on its own terms, as did all visions of Christendom. " "The Continuing Importance of Walter Rauschenbush: Editor's Introduction, " in Walter Rauschenbush's *The Righteousness of the Kingdom*, edited and introduced by Max Stackhouse (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1968), p. 23. What advocates of this stance often overlooked, however, in their enthusiasm for liberal society was that such a society made the internal discipline necessary to sustain a free church as an independent and socially significant presence appear arbitrary and coercive. Moreover, they failed to see that the kind of "constitutional" democracy of the free church was radically transformed when translated into the language of liberalism. Thus Rauschenbush too readily assumed that his understanding of messianic theocracy could be institutionalized through the increasing democratization of institutions. And he failed to understand that a Christian social order that would "make bad men do good things" is antithetical to the moral presuppositions of a liberal society. The enthusiasm for the American experiment has been one of the primary sources for the failure of Christian social ethicists to appreciate the difficulty of making analogies between church (and Kingdom) and our society work. As H. R. Niebuhr has observed, Protestantism was hard put to provide principles for human construction, given the old societies in which it was born. In many ways one of the most healthy aspects of Protestantism was it was always forced to live in a world it had not or could not make. But with America the situation changed, as here Protestantism could finally turn from protest to construction and America, in fact, became, as I suggested above, an experiment in constructive Protestantism. See Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper Brothers, 1937), pp. 28-44. Therefore Christian social ethicists in America have never been clear what the primary object of their work should be-the church or America since attention to the latter seemed to be the immediate task of the church.

³⁸ To be sure, many of those active in the founding and development of American democracy assumed that the limits imposed on government were not based on the sovereignty of man, but because all government was subject to the Kingdom of God. See H. R. Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America*, pp. 75-87. However, the Enlightenment assumption of the sovereignty of man has

increasingly become the more prominent, as a "government under God" simply makes no sense in a pluralist society.

³⁹ This does not mean that Christians live in a night in which all "cats and/or nations are grey," (Barth). To be sure the church has a stake in developing relative criteria to distinguish between more nearly just and unjust, more violent and less violent, freer and coercive states. Nor would I deny that in many ways pluralist societies, such as America, provide a unique opportunity for the church. It is not pluralism itself that causes the problem but the theories of pluralism that we must reject.

⁴⁰ A. D. Lindsay has rightly argued that the key to democracy is discussion, but discussion can only be effective when we have genuinely different points of view. That is why equality is not only compatible with but demands differences. Perhaps the most significant thing the church can do for any society is to be a community capable of sustaining the kind of discussion necessary for the formation of good and truthful arguments and lives. See A. D. Lindsay, *The Modern Democratic State* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 249-286

⁴¹ John Howard Yoder, "The Christian Case for Democracy," *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 5 (Fall 1977), p. 220.

⁴² This does not mean, however, that the church expects little from society as a way of enhancing the moral role of the church. On the contrary the church wants whatever society in which it finds itself to live up to its highest aspirations. Even though this paper has been primarily negative, my primary intentions are positive. For it is my central contention that the church will serve our social order best when it is able to form a people who have something to offer our social order. I have tried to suggest that that "something" is nothing less than the virtues and trust necessary to sustain a polity capable of maintaining a rich pluralism of differences.