



Ways of Going Public in American Theology

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Two statements from American church leaders, made not long ago within days of each other, provoked the ire of the *Wall Street Journal*. One came from the Roman Catholic bishops and advocated a curb on the production of nuclear weapons. The other—signed by priests, rabbis, and a spectrum of Protestant clergy—warned against “efforts to engineer specific genetic traits into the germline of the human species” (June 17, 1983).

In an unusually grumpy editorial, the *Journal* carped at what it called “our hyperpolitical clergy.” It hinted that they, in the second of the two pronouncements, had come close to demonstrating “the makings of a modern Galileo syndrome.” Such a caution may indeed point to wise tactics as the churches take on scientists in public debate: by give-and-take rather than fiat. But the *Journal* seemed to have something else in mind, more like a reprimand to American churchpeople for venturing *at all* into public debate on issues of ethical import.

What was surprising wasn’t the cholera of the editorial as much as its assumption that American churchpeople are somehow far afield in addressing such matters as “the theology of arms control,” or “wrestling with the complexities of genetics.” Allowing for changes in technology and terminology, theologians have been speaking out publicly on such subjects for hundreds of years. Indeed, it comes to thousands in the case of Judaism: for “arms control,” read “swords versus plowshares,” and for “the complexities of genetics,” substitute the endless rabbinical debates on procreation, the emission of generative seed, and contraception. The “state of the art” on such ethical loci as the just war and medical ethics has been shaped fully as much by “public theologians”—from Thomas Aquinas to Joseph Fletcher, Paul Ramsey, and Richard McCormick—as by philosophers, political scientists, or journalists. (A churchman, Gregor Mendel, created the science of genetics—but let that pass.)

Nearly all versions of American Christianity have taken seriously the challenge of reflecting publicly on burning issues in the light of the gospel. They have done so in a bewildering variety of ways. Some fifty years ago H. Richard Niebuhr found out how diverse these ways were when he sought to explain, in

his *Kingdom of God in America*, how Christianity relates itself to American culture—a New World prelude to his noted typological study, *Christ and Culture*.¹ He first tried to see this relation encapsulated in the single theme of “the Kingdom of God on earth.” But there was too much going on. One could not force Puritans, Quakers, evangelicals, and leaders of the Social Gospel into so terse a unity. Yet he remained sure that the compendious theme of the Kingdom of God was a clue to the American religious experiment, just as, let us say, the theme of the

“vision of God” was a key to understanding medieval faith.

Niebuhr ended up proposing that the Kingdom theme is to be seen, in the American world of reference, as taking a trinitarian form appearing by epochs:

In the early period of American life, when foundations were laid on which we have all had to build, “kingdom of God” meant “sovereignty of God”; in the creative period of awakening and revival it meant “reign of Christ”; and only in the most recent period had it come to mean “kingdom on earth.”²

With some changes, we may adopt a version of Niebuhr’s typology to visualize the ways (or some of them) in which American religion now “goes public.” One change comes from Niebuhr’s later method in *Christ and Culture* (1951). Here he sets out a *bipolar* framework for the various types: Christ against culture, Christ over culture, Christ transforming culture, and so on. That tack seems especially appropriate for reflecting on the American religious situation, with its basic bipolarity (separation of church and state, juxtaposition of religious and secular). With rearrangement of the order, we may restate the themes of his American study as follows:

First, and by far the most influential way of public theology in America, is that of evangelical Christianity. It is a direct descendent of classical European theology in that it pits the gospel in one way or another over against the profane. Illustrating Niebuhr’s theme of “the reign of Christ,” it can be understood as the adversarial relation in American life between *the Christian and the secular*, the former destined to triumph.

A second approach, given characteristic form by prophetic voices of the nineteenth-century Social Gospel, continues this adversarial relationship, but re describes it. Coming to the fore here is not only the theme of “the kingdom on earth,” as Niebuhr maintained, but a new bipolarity: the conflict between *benevolence and selfishness*. This approach has by no means been superseded; it was at the heart of the social ethics of American neo-orthodoxy and also of the recent civil rights movement.

A third approach, recapitulating Niebuhr’s theme of “the sovereignty of God,” goes all the way back to Jonathan Edwards and the Puritans. It shares features of the first two approaches; it calls for conversion as well as benevolence (“to being”). But it describes the polarity between gospel and world in a way that is perhaps uniquely suited to American terrain. Here the struggle is joined

¹The first editions of these books by H. Richard Niebuhr were *The Kingdom of God in America* (New York: Harper, 1935) and *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper, 1951).

²H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Kingdom of God in America* (Hamden: Shoe String, 1956) x.

between the vision of the *public* as such, and the cramped world of *private systems*. The private system is the enemy of both the religious and the truly secular; the public is where the latter two meet. The public, moreover, at its limit approaches the neighborhood of the godly. In what follows, though I attempt to sketch the strengths and weaknesses of each approach to “going public” in American religion, I shall argue finally that the third of these ways—the public versus the private—is most appropriate to the American tradition of faith.

I. CHRISTIANITY VERSUS THE SECULAR

Much European theology, especially that most influential on American Christianity, was bent on sharpening the contrast between the divine and the human. One strand tells us how unlike are the “City of God” and the “City of Man.” In another, stemming from the Reformation, the kingdom of the gospel is contrasted with the kingdom of the law, the latter coming off as something of a jungle or pool of sharks. In a third strand, that of the sectarians, Christianity is a cell or island standing out in relief against a world impervious to the gospel.

Evangelical American theology takes over this contrast, but with two notable mutations. For Luther, the contrast was drawn in terms of belief: faith versus wrong belief (or sin). American Christianity seeks to draw an equally marked contrast, yet does so not in terms of belief or doctrine, but rather in terms of experience. On the frontier, and especially in the lexicon of the great revivals, the contrast is drawn between the saving experience of Christ and the experiential soul-death of the unregenerate.

This well-intentioned redescription, however, doesn’t produce the same result, the same clear-cut invidious comparison between gospel and world. Experience, unlike belief, is a “worldly” category, no matter which side of the divide it is on. Experience, to be sure, is transformed under Christian auspices, whereas the sinner is still lost. Yet the seeds of ambiguity, of crossover, are planted. What was, in terms of belief, a stark antinomy, now becomes a tug-of-war within the precincts of human experience. Grace, though as ever of divine origin, is no longer “wholly other,” for its operation now amounts to a modification of anthropology, or of the possibilities open to human existence.

Of even more importance for public theology is a second mutation, the necessity of redefining less pejoratively, on American terrain, such entities as “the City of Man” and “the kingdom of the law.” The profane becomes the secular. And with the sequence of ideas that led to the Bill of Rights, the secular begins to acquire its own dignity. It cannot quite be pictured now as the pluperfect opposite of the gospel, its mirror image etched in wickedness. Secularity is not the same thing as profanity.

Evangelical theology in America thus has had a daunting and frustrating task laid upon it. Charged by the classical heritage, it must attempt despite all to draw a line between gospel and secular, to fetch sinners from unregenerate to redeemed experience, to transform the secular into the Christian. The public goal of the churches, in this vision, is to “Christianize” the nation. But American ethics insists, in the face of this mission, on a countervailing vision: against secularizers, the relevance of the spiritual must be affirmed; against Christianizers, the integrity of the secular has to be championed.

At its best, evangelical theology testifies not only to the “reign of Christ,” but to the importance of public ethics. “Far from disdaining worldly affairs,” says Timothy L. Smith, “the evangelists played a key role in the widespread attack upon slavery, poverty, and greed.”³ At its worst, however, ridden by a supposed curse upon the secular, this theology has engaged in a caricature of Kierkegaard’s “teleological suspension of the ethical.” Ironically it has all too often succumbed to what Sidney Ahlstrom calls “a pervasive thinning out of evangelical substance, a tendency to identify religion with the business-oriented values of the American way of life.”⁴ To deny what is genuine in the secular, perhaps, makes us vulnerable to what is shallow in it.

II. BENEVOLENCE VERSUS SELFISHNESS

If the secular can no longer be contrasted in its entirety with the Christian, the next logical move is to accept those aspects of the secular that may be identified with the Christian, all the better to carry out the historic struggle with sin. What is left, that which is not congruent with the Christian, may then be more precisely targeted. Such a strategy was mounted by the nineteenth-century Social Gospel, and its choice of what was good and what was evil proved fateful for social ethics into our own day.

Two kinds of experience were singled out as the right and wrong stuff: benevolence and selfishness, both on the public, corporate level. Thus the evolution that had begun with the American evangelicals was continued: away from doctrine (faith versus unbelief) to new permutations of the motif of experience.

The continuity with evangelical thought is obvious in other ways too. Galvanized by the economic injustice of the post-Civil War American industrial system—low wages, long hours, company towns—Walter Rauschenbusch, too, preaches the wickedness of sinners. He, too, proposes to go about “Christianizing the Social Order” (the title of one of his books). Still, we have here a visibly different version of the struggle. If evangelical Christianity was tempted to go public by damning the secular—and sometimes suspending the ethical—for the sake of the religious, here the opposite tendency appears: to suspend the religious in favor of the ethical possibilities of the secular.

Rauschenbusch begins with a charter that, if taken at face value, the staunchest evangelical might endorse. “Christianizing the social order,” he says, “means bringing it into harmony with the ethical convictions which we identify with Christ.” At first glance, he carries on the tradition of conflict between Christian and secular, for he suggests that “we might draw from the Gospels a list of the Christian principles of social life and test the existing social order by them.”⁵

Yet Rauschenbusch also grants that “the existing social order” (which we might equate with the secular) possesses a certain moral integrity without being further transformed, converted, or regenerated:

³Timothy L. Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform* (New York: Abingdon, 1957) 8.

⁴Sidney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale, 1972) 899.

⁵Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order* (New York: Macmillan, 1923) 125, 127.

A fairly definite body of moral convictions has taken shape in modern humanity. They express our collective conscience, our working religion.⁶

What is the essence of this sector of public life that is already constructively Christianized? Sometimes Rauschenbusch speaks of democratic principles. Again he identifies it with the criterion of justice in economic matters. Above all, however, what is to be sought and commended is benevolence or love.

“Love is the Supreme law of Christ,” Rauschenbusch says, summing up a consensus that goes back to Washington Gladden and would go forward to the summaries of social ethics that guided the American ecumenical movement for many years. “The Kingdom of God implies a progressive reign of love in human affairs.”⁷ Rauschenbusch and his confreres thus transfer the

historic contrast drawn by classical American Christianity from the interface between faith and world to the intramural terrain of the secular. This was at once a daring, innovative move—and a dangerous one.

So concerned was Rauschenbusch to isolate and condemn the unregenerate parts of our society—i.e., those parts of it that are corporately selfish and unloving—that he now grants a ready *imprimatur* to other quarters. “The larger part of the work of christianizing our social order is already accomplished,” he proclaims. Perhaps, for our sensibilities, it is because these areas have backslid in our own day, but Rauschenbusch’s list of “the christianized sections of our social order” makes us rub our eyes incredulously. The loving sectors, as he gives them, are: family, church, education, and—believe it or not—“the political life,” which is accepted as “a fourth great section of our social order which has been christianized.” For us, so many disillusioning years later, the spectres of broken homes, child abuse, schools that are “blackboard jungles,” political scandals like Watergate, give the lie to any such claim. Yet we can see his point in pressing the contrast. Economic injustice, for Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel, is incomparably worse than any of the above. “Our business life,” Rauschenbusch concludes, “is the seat and source of our present troubles.”⁸

Rauschenbusch seeks here not only to make discriminating judgments about the virtues and vices of the secular, but to do so on Christian terms. He sees, that is, that in the American frame of reference the spiritual cannot be confined to the churchly; it spills over into the realm of the public, the realm destined to become the Kingdom of God. Whereas the Church breeds “priests and theologians,” those classical narrowers of the options, “The Kingdom of God breeds prophets,”⁹ those who go beyond sanctuary in the quest for righteousness as well as the sources of wrong.

In the end, the Social Gospel narrows Christianity at the same time it is seeking to broaden it. Rauschenbusch went public with a vengeance. But in identifying the Christian presence in the secular as benevolence, he relegated another instrument of the gospel, justice, to a subordinate role. Love, already to

⁶Ibid., 125.

⁷Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: Abingdon, 1960) 142.

⁸W. Rauschenbusch, *Christianizing the Social Order*, 155-56.

⁹W. Rauschenbusch, *Theology for the Social Gospel*, 137.

be espied, would roll—even over injustice. Christian social ethics to this day suffers from that same bias. “Secular” thinkers like the philosopher John Rawls and the psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg have argued, on the contrary, that justice may be the first and most important virtue of ethically responsible societies. Christians should at least accept the possibility that justice may in our society represent the gospel as truly as does love.

Finally, the Social Gospel tended to see love where it simply does not exist. To reify *agapē* as having won already here or there is seriously to disguise our plight. Hardness of heart, the temptation to “private systems,” as Jonathan Edwards was to put it, threatens every facet of our public life. Still, with the Social Gospel, the Rubicon has been crossed. The Christian and the secular no longer exist as separated riverine foes, hurling epithets to the opposite bank. The secular is potentially a part of the solution as well as apart of the problem. But a new criterion for

sorting out which is which is needed to replace “benevolence versus selfishness.”

III. PUBLIC VERSUS PRIVATE

Both evangelical religion and the Social Gospel were definitively shaped by nineteenth-century developments. For our third approach to public theology, we must go back to the eighteenth century and consider some tantalizing leads left us by the last great thinker of American Puritanism, Jonathan Edwards. Toward the end of his career, after the great harvests of the Awakening had shrunk and his Northampton congregation had dismissed him, Edwards engaged in a brief excursion into the nature of what he at one point calls “public affection or benevolence.” He entitled his essay *The Nature of True Virtue*. Written in 1755, it redescribes the path to sainthood in a fashion that furnishes us at least a suggestive approach to our third way of “going public.”

In this short, brilliant essay, Edwards modifies the classical Christian “twoness” or bipolarity—either/or: Christian or secular, benevolence or selfishness. He offers here what can be viewed as a *tripartite* ethics, dealing in turn with the general, the natural, and the private. This move enables him—or rather us, since he does not elaborate—to forge an alliance between the spiritual and the secular (his categories of the general and the natural), and to set them over against an unacceptable kind of morality, that of what he calls “private systems.” It is a striking innovation in the gospel-world confrontation.

The general. Edwards defines true virtue, the highest of moral concepts, as “benevolence to being in general.” He specifies that it is an aesthetic experience, a form of beauty—“the beauty of the qualities and exercises of the heart.” Such beauty can be understood in alternative, simpler terms, as classical theology had held: it is “love to God.” Yet God is open to more meaning than that. God is “the Being of beings, infinitely the greatest and best.” True virtue, then, is heartfelt (“cordial” still conveyed that idea in Edwards’ day, uncorrupted by letters that end “Cordially,” as in ours). True virtue is directed toward “the Being who favours being.” And this kind of allegiance—sprung from good will, aimed at the Being whose heart is most open—is always to be

contrasted with love to “particular beings.”¹⁰

The natural. Only certified saints, we might cynically speculate, are capable of such benevolence, that “consent...to being..., which...may be called the highest and primary beauty.” The natural, untransformed person (“secular man”—or humankind—as we should say) is quite incapable of this form of beauty. But Edwards does not conform to type; he does not draw the classical conclusion, that “natural man” is therefore devoid of worth or the capacity for “beauty.” There is a natural, secondary form of beauty, he tells us, that also can move in the same direction, appreciate in an outward (i.e., not heartfelt) way everything that true virtue calls for. One can consent to order, society, the *polis*—in short, the fullness of the public—Edwards seems to be saying, through conscience and the capacity for justice, if not through *agapē*.¹¹

“Secular man” has been distinguished from the saint in this analysis, for the run of persons has no transforming inner sense of the beauty of being in general. Yet “secular man” is also to be distinguished from those bottom-dwellers who sink their allegiance in the world of “private systems.”

The private. Though the subject comes up first as a footnote, it is soon apparent that Edwards' concept of the "private system" as that which "seems to clash with the public" is an important and necessary aspect of ethics. It is the unacceptable kind of ethics; it is anti-ethics. By "private system" Edwards intends "any system or society of beings that contains but a small part of the great system, comprehending the universality of existence." It is worth noting that the private here is a *social* idea, not limited in application to individual morality. Further, the private must not be thought of quantitatively, which was one of Rauschenbusch's errors in thinking of selfishness; no matter what the magnitude, the private is always "but an infinitely small part of this great whole we stand related to." The private, in fact, is *outside* both the secular (or natural) and the general (or godly)—which is not to say it can't infect either or both. Private affections will "set a person against general existence, and make him...an enemy to the public."¹² The same is true of what happens to groups when bedevilled by the temptation to premature closure. The private, in short, is the adversary—or to take it in the biblical sense, it is satanical.

Let us now think of the private as the enemy of both the general and the natural, as Edwards intended.¹³ We may then take the latter two concepts together and think of them as *jointly comprising the realm of the public*. In our own terms, the public encompasses both the religious and the secular; they are allied in opposition to the private. Edwards himself suggests this alliance, and the common enmity to the private. Godly persons, he says in a sermon, are devoted both "to the glory and honour of God, and to the public good." In other writings, Edwards speaks of human beings as "public persons" in a double sense corresponding to the secular and the godly. We are linked by creation with Adam, whom Edwards describes as the archetypal "public person." But our

¹⁰Jonathan Edwards, *The Nature of True Virtue* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1960) 54, 7, 3, 14, 12.

¹¹Ibid., 27.

¹²Ibid. 18-19.

¹³Ibid. 67, 69

true destiny is to be linked with the second "public person," Jesus Christ.¹⁴ Thus the realms of the secular (humankind in Adam) and of the godly (our destiny of union with Christ)¹⁵ are encompassed by the category of the public. The public is where sacred and secular meet. In our ordinary daily existence we are already in the domain of the public; at its limit our life as public persons approaches the godly.

By this redescription, we have opened up two new possibilities for religious ethics. First, religious ethics is now seen as a form of public ethics; religion is rescued in principle from Sunday morning. Second, the secular, as the allied sister realm of the public, is rescued from the wasteful relegation of the "profane" to damnation, as in much classical theology. For American religious ethics, then, we arrive at our fundamental axiom, which asserts the relevance of the religious and the integrity of the secular, both as elements of the public.

There are risks in this approach. The religious is visualized as the limit or destiny of the secular rather than as its stout adversary. The idea of the public can be debased. Some public schools are mediocre, some public housing projects sleazy, some public officials corrupt, some members of the public offensive or inert. Similarly, our choice of the private as foe of the public

can be misconstrued as ruling out the existential or personal (although no one who understands Edwards' notion of "cordial" union with being can make that mistake).

The challenge and benefits of this way of thinking of religious ethics outrun the risks. Today the churches are challenged not only to "go public," but to identify the hidden spiritual dimensions, the religious destiny, of public ethics. Let us take three of the most urgent, compelling forms of "public ethics" in America today: medical ethics, the civil rights movement, and the ecology ethic. Each has a "secular morality" to guide it. For medical ethics, it is the Hippocratic injunction to "heal, but do no harm." For the civil rights movement, it is Martin Luther King's ringing affirmation to oppressed persons that we are all "somebody." For the ecology ethic, it is responsibility for care of our global "commons," since "we're all in it together."

There is a religious *telos* for each of these claims of secular ethics. To heal and to do no harm, religiously speaking, is a mandate to co-creatorship with "The Being who favours being." For the oppressed person to be told "I'm somebody," has its final expression, Christians believe, in the "new being" offered in Christ. For us to think of what we have in common, as the ecology ethic beckons us to do, also invites us to think ultimately in terms of reconciliation—benevolence to all beings—and the spirit that brings it. The sovereignty of God, the reign of Christ, the kingdom on earth: all may be sought by "going public." If there is a periodicity about these three themes, as H. Richard Niebuhr suggested, it may now be the turn of the first of them again, for it is a revised Puritan ethics that I have sketched here.

¹⁴Jonathan Edwards, *Select Works II* (n.p.: Banner of Truth Trust, 1959) 240; *The Great Christian Doctrine of Original Sin Defended...* (New York: Leavitt, Trout, 1948) 404-405; *Treatise on Grace* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 1971) 96.

¹⁵Edwards was officially a double predestinationist, of course, but in a forthcoming essay, "Jonathan Edwards as an American Thinker," I argue that his commitment to American ideas erodes this position.