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Redeeming Politics

Peter Iver Kaufman

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INTRODUCTION

HOW SHOULD we think of redeeming politics? In the history of the Christian traditions, from the time of Constantine's conversion to that of Oliver Cromwell's civil war, Christianity and politics were often so closely joined that it is difficult now to tell whether we are looking back at religious or political convictions. That made me curious about apologetic strategies that inspired such convictions and Christian political cultures they created. To ward off imprecision on the route from curiosity to the conclusion of this presentation, I formulated and offer here some preliminary redefinitions.

Political culture is said to refer to activities "in principle open to intervention or control on the part of the state."¹ Although this reference seems eminently adaptable, two difficulties arise if we accept that meaning of political culture in the inquiries that follow. (1) In principle, no activity is beyond government intervention in absolutist regimes. *Redeeming Politics* investigates ideas about rule and redemption that animated an assortment of absolutist regimes, so we would have to call all culture political culture. (2) Moreover, as it now stands, the definition obliges users to contemplate the extent of government control and intervention. To be sure, the study of church-state relations has been well served by exercises of this kind, yet it is not my purpose to add to their growing number. My case studies were composed and assembled primarily to examine unifying ideologies and discover how ideologues staged the courtships between their gods and governments. Having set that course for *Redeeming Politics*, I need a different definition of political culture. In this volume, then, the term refers to any set of doctrines, images, and institutions used by apologists and administrators to distribute or redistribute their governments' powers to intervene and control. Hence, the definition encourages concern with conspicuous and spirited claims to divine sanction, with the realm once identified as *Staatssymbolik*, where ideologies idealize political power, institutionalize charisma, and rewrite history.²

I want to define *ideology* in terms of those three functions, but first in terms of the function that seems most problematic because charisma and institution are generally classified as incompatibles. Despite Max Weber's

¹ Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Cambridge, 1985), p. 211.

² See Abner Cohen, *Two-Dimensional Man* (London, 1974), particularly pp. 21–22, 102–6, and John B. Thompson, *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley, 1984), pp. 133–39, 158–60.

editorials on the process of socialization, theorists usually associate charisma with socially disruptive behavior. Lately, however, Edward Shils has explained how charisma also “maintains and conserves” social orders, how institutionalized charisma enables officials to perform their vicarial and custodial duties with an authority closely connected (at least in citizens’ imaginations) with some sanctified ideal. Delegates, documents, and commissions thus acquire the same authority as the theophanic monarch, the inspired council, or the general and glorious will of the people they are thought to represent. Shils gives a memorable illustration. He observes that most citizens today, although more sinned against than sinning, still recoil from uniformed police officers. Approaching officers prompt awe, anxiety, and perhaps resentment traditionally reserved for the tremendous power at the center or summit of government. The uniforms bring that power over the people closer to the people, and when resentment becomes so strident that respect turns into disrespect, and disrespect into defiance, we may infer that ideology no longer possesses the voltage necessary to illumine the charismatic qualities of government.³

Ideology makes a critical contribution to the maintenance of order. It discourages disaffection to the extent it can establish its canonicity and reshape the history of a given government so that present and anticipated conditions appear as natural developments from a venerable past. To that end, ideology may suggest history is the playbook for God’s providential work that rewards the righteous and punishes the wicked. Ideology occasionally celebrates a purpose fully realized. Sometimes it refers to a purpose, reward, or punishment only partially revealed to (and by) ideologues and their patrons; the promise of greater things to come then sanctifies the way things are. The range of variations is too great for a single definition to compass, yet ideologies’ histories have a common theme or orientation. Their narratives invariably give the governments they eulogize the appearance of necessity.⁴

Such talk of appearances, however, raises an important question: Do ideologies always promote false consciousness? Undeniably, specious rationalizations and outrageous self-deceptions often pass as history and political theory, only to be savaged once scholars have appropriated more fashionable ideologies by wrapping them in their own explanatory models. Are we then to conclude that political societies’ self-presentations are always untrustworthy? Perhaps so, but when I write of ideology’s functions, I do not refer to self-promotion in the narrowest sense. Ideology’s third function, that is, its license to rewrite history from inception to end,

³ Edward Shils, “Charisma, Order, and Status,” in his *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology* (Chicago, 1975), pp. 259–60, 266–67.

⁴ See, for example, Richard Faber, “Der kaiserlich-päpstliche Dualismus im Hochmittelalter,” in *Staat und Religion*, ed. Burkhard Gladigow (Düsseldorf, 1981), pp. 79–81.

indicates we are dealing with more than a cluster of loosely packaged falsifications. Instead, we encounter what Karl Mannheim called "the total conception" of ideology.

Mannheim was extremely ambitious. He held that ideological structures could be mined to recover a society's "total mental structure."⁵ As enchanting as that prospect may be, *Redeeming Politics* undertakes to discharge a more modest commission. We will not try to find out what whole societies thought. We are looking for enduring categorical structures that appealed to those ideologues who tried to influence citizens' thinking, structures that unquestionably influenced the formulation of Christian sociolatriy.

Sociolatriy once meant service to society, but most dictionaries have dropped the entry. In the case studies that follow, however, I have repossessed the word and modified its meaning. *Sociolatriy* refers here to a type of ideology that associates salvation with political idealizations, symbols, and spells circulated to inspire loyalty, obedience, and service. Salvation, then, comes to depend on the perpetuation of the current distribution of political power or on citizens' support of some proposed redistribution. Frequently, Christian sociolatriy makes Christendom's leading political figures (or leading dissidents) sacred messengers or substitute messiahs. Polemics against sceptics are laced with religious curses. After dramatic political conquests, sociolatriy generally sports universalist pretensions; during political crises its claims are sometimes adjusted and counter-claims introduced. We will find that narrative (or ritual) decorum as well as historical context colored and conditioned sociolatriy's triumphalist propositions and solemn condemnations, that sociolatriy is a remarkably adaptable kind of ideology. But what is central to our definition is the patent assumption that salvation is corporate and, in some respects, political as well as eternal. To be redeemed, a community's politics must be ordered according to a divine plan, which ideologues are always ready to supply or revise.

Our story of ideologues and ideologies begins with the fourth-century historian and apologist, Eusebius of Caesarea, and with two Constantines, the one he commemorated and the one he invented. Actually, we could argue that the story of Christian sociolatriy began with the New Testament, particularly with advice offered in St. Paul's letter to Christians in Rome. In the thirteenth chapter, the apostle enjoined believers to obey civil authorities because God had appointed them to keep things civilized until the second coming of Christ. That injunction has never ceased to generate controversy. Earliest exegetes found it difficult to reconcile the apostle's endorsement of the prevailing powers with politi-

⁵ See Mannheim's *Ideology and Utopia* (London, 1936), pp. 49-53, 67-74.

cians' conspiracies against the new religion. Some interpreters preferred to underscore St. Paul's assurances that "every rule and every authority and power" would soon be destroyed (1 Corinthians 15:24).⁶ That strategy, however, seemed obsolete by the early fourth century, when apologists for Christianity could be far more explicit than St. Paul about the empire's role in redeeming God's faithful followers: not long after the conversion of Constantine, the empire was a Christian empire. Eusebius soon transformed the first Christian emperor into a redeemer. And those changes arrest our attention in the first chapter because they determined the trajectory of Christian sociolatriy from that time forward. Even today, the Constantine Eusebius constructed towers over the history of the Christian traditions.

Constantine's record of conquests was truly impressive, and the conquests together with the emperor's conversion to Christianity convinced apologists a new age had dawned. Subsequent disappointments, notably the invasion of Italy and sack of Rome early in the fifth century, posed problems for those intent on reviving enthusiasms identified with earliest Christian sociolatriy. They had to redefine conquest to keep alive Eusebius's ambitions for a universal Christian empire, to sustain the illusion of a new age when the realities of rule and misrule seemed to shatter the dreams of their patrons and peoples.

The second and third chapters of *Redeeming Politics* discuss several revivals and redefinitions. The series starts with the responses of two fifth-century apologists, Paulus Orosius and Salvian of Marseilles, to the empire's humiliations and concludes with the predictions of a fledgling dynasty in England, eleven hundred years later, with promises that "florishyng" Tudor roses would soon be planted in all the courts of western Europe. Our discussion is by no means exhaustive, but it shows how readily nostalgia for empire and the romance of conquest merged with hopes and plans for political and religious redemption. We will see how comfortably medieval visions and deceptions, which constitute the history of Christian sociolatriy and a significant part of the history of human imagination, nestled in Constantine's shadow.

The fourth chapter reviews the story of Oliver Cromwell's New Model Army. It suggests that soldiers, just as generals or emperors, could lay claim to Eusebius's legacy, that Protestants as well as Catholics could settle in Constantine's shadow. Following the trail left by William Dell, one of the army's most influential preachers, we will survey the history of Puritanism at Cambridge and correlate Dell's spiritualism with the devel-

⁶ For the early instances of Pauline exegesis, see Werner Affeldt, *Die weltliche Gewalt in der Paulus-Exegese* (Göttingen, 1969), pp. 86–90, 105. To sample contemporary arguments against the authenticity of the Pauline endorsements, consult Walter Schmithals, *Der Römerbrief als historisches Problem* (Gütersloh, 1975), pp. 191–97.

opment of Puritan sociolatriy. From his parish, Dell wrote of the Holy Spirit's work in the world, yet he confessed he had not experienced it until he enlisted as chaplain in the New Model Army. The soldiers' discipline and the army's string of conquests persuaded him that he walked among saints, on the threshold of a new age. Dell and his colleagues believed their realm's redemption was at hand. When conquest gave way to the politics of compromise, however, the troops divided into factions, and we find that the Puritan preachers' democratization of Christian sociolatriy depended on unanimity and solidarity easier to maintain while fighting than while debating over the fruits (or spoils) of conquest.

Emperors and armies, their conquests and apologists, parade through significant chapters in the story of redeeming politics. We should not forget, however, that churches were also in the business of redemption and very frequently in the throes of political controversy. Our fifth and sixth chapters retrieve Catholic and Protestant ecclesiologies to attest the versatility of Christian sociolatriy and the ease with which clergy could adapt some of its themes to different claims for clerical rule.

The fifth chapter sketches the development of the imperial papacy during and shortly after the pontificate of Gregory VII. Gregorians were among the most resourceful impresarios of redeeming politics; their arguments for papal supremacy in the eleventh and early twelfth centuries profoundly influenced the history of Catholic and Protestant traditions. The sixth chapter lands us in the sixteenth century, in John Calvin's Geneva. It features Calvin's objections to the papacy's imperial pretensions, but we will concentrate on the imperious character of Calvin's redeeming politics. His doctrine of election virtually transformed his city into a church. He held that God appointed two ministries in Geneva, ordained preachers to inspire moral regeneration and magistrates to preserve civil order. The chapter investigates how and why the two became one, how and why the ministries became nearly indistinguishable in Calvin's rhetoric of reform and, after 1555, in the Genevan consistory's surveillance of public morality and political behavior.

Redeeming politics was conditioned by theorists' inclinations (and incentives) to idealize the political authority of soldiers, saints, emperors, magistrates, and popes. But should authorities' prestige be badly bruised, apologists either had to adjust or abandon their claims. We might expect that severe crises of confidence doomed Christian sociolatriy; the final two chapters, however, demonstrate that sociolatriy actually survived considerable adjustments and revived even among critics who ostensibly abandoned it.

Unlike several apologists mentioned in our second chapter, Augustine, bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa, believed that the political crises of the early fifth century undermined ideals associated with Constantine

and Eusebius. His monumental *City of God* is generally read as a formidable sentence on Christian sociolatriy. I have collected evidence for a somewhat different interpretation of Augustine's treatise, evidence that also yields a fresh perspective on his career and his own redeeming politics. The empire's distress unquestionably tempted him to jettison some of sociolatriy's prominent themes, but he revised others and reconstructed justifications for the current coalition between politicians and prelates. Augustine insisted that the Bible promised Christianity dominion over all culture and that such dominion was unthinkable apart from a Christian political culture.

To the most radical religious reformers in the sixteenth century, Christian political culture was an abomination. They were incensed when more moderate associates tried to win politicians' support for the reform of worship, theology, and church polity. They maintained that the Bible prohibited compromise, and even commerce of any kind, with the corrupt and corrupting world of politics. The eighth and last chapter explains how they came to that conclusion. It also reveals that the most violent critics of Christian sociolatriy, who thought their colleagues' partnerships with political authorities locked the body of Christ in an unwholesome embrace with the body politic, were themselves unable to relinquish redeeming politics when they came to govern their own fugitive communities.

There are many contemporary analogues to the radicals' efforts to separate religion from politics, some apparently more successful than others. Often it is said that religion inhabits a universe where people are exclusively preoccupied with otherworldly powers. They may try to make those powers manageable, responsive to human need, or they may try only to make them philosophically respectable and responsive to human curiosity. Alternatively, citizens in that universe could choose to reconcile human societies to the inscrutability of their gods and to the unpredictability of divine intervention. Whatever the strategy, religion's universe is dominated by revelation. Questions of truth are either answered directly or tabled until additional disclosures enlighten religion's officials and theorists. Politicians, however, are thought to have settled in a different universe, where they grapple with questions of expedience and prudence rather than with questions of truth. Politics reconciles citizens to their corporate life and to tactics that harness wealth and power to each government's pursuit of the collective good (or to governors' pursuits of their own advantage). Whereas revelation determines the contours of religious life, reason determines the course of political life.

The contrasts are neat, commonplace, and cocksure. Nonetheless, having reiterated them in his paper on "the spiritual aroma" of political cultures, Raymond Firth immediately and justifiably became suspicious of

their validity and usefulness. As others before him, however, Firth found it was easier to dispute make-do distinctions than to offer a more adequate grid.⁷ The interpenetration of religion and political culture defies precise conceptualization. Boundaries between piety and practical affairs may be drawn, but not defended, without great difficulty. As often as some Christians rehabilitate familiar dualisms and contrasts, marking off the church's work from the government's goals, other Christians discover ways to dissolve the dualisms and present political societies or particular political decisions as divine and redemptive revelations.

The case studies in *Redeeming Politics* record some of those discoveries. Scholars tend to invoke the word *theocracy* when they encounter governments that register claims to divine sanction for their laws, leaders, and luck. I use the word *sociolatry* to denote an apologetic strategy that fuses statesmanship and Christian sociolatry. By exchanging an "ocracy" for an "olatry," however, I hoped to learn more and say more about the interpenetration of religion and political culture, to compile evidence that political idealizations and Christian traditions significantly influenced one another as well as the history of the human imagination. Not all the evidence is here; as I reread *Redeeming Politics* what most impresses me (and depresses me) is how much has been omitted. Byzantine caesaropapism, Hohenstaufen chronicles, Renaissance revivals of the ideal of empire, along with countless conquests and crises, should find space in more comprehensive reviews of political theology. Moreover, the limits of my commission and competence were quickly reached while I examined certain fundamental apologetic strategies and their settings, and detail was sometimes sacrificed to delivery. Omissions certainly will tell against *Redeeming Politics* unless we think of it as a modest proposal, prompting readers to reflect on the conflation of religious and political convictions and inviting them to qualify and revise as they measure the shadow Constantine casts over history and over the varieties of Christian political culture.

⁷ Raymond Firth, "Spiritual Aroma: Religion and Politics," *American Anthropologist* 38 (1981): 583-84.