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Loving God, Fearing the State

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Joy is to theology what fear is to political philosophy, the central organizing concept around which everything else revolves. Not all theologies, of course, strike one as necessarily joyful; expressing disdain for the world we sinful humans have built is first-order business, not only of strict forms of Calvinism, but of any religious orientation focused on the consequences of Eve’s unfortunate taste in fruit. Nonetheless, the point of it all, and especially the point of both Jewish and Christian efforts to wrestle with the mysteries of the divine, is to underscore the importance of our love for God — and of His for us. Love is the outward manifestation of the inner experience of joy. Loving God we love everything, and love sustains the happiness we feel.

Search nearly all the great works of political philosophy, and one will not, save perhaps in Rousseau, find much about love, let alone joy. (Happiness is reserved for the utilitarians, suggesting how shallow an ideal it can be.) Machiavelli, without much doubt the founder of modern political philosophy, wrote comedies and possessed a brilliant wit, but when it came to joy, indeed to nearly all things Christian, his skepticism was as pronounced as his secularism. Maurizio Viroli’s *Machiavelli’s God*, the authoritative text on the Florentine’s religiosity, never mentions the word “joy.” “Fear” is another matter; Viroli’s book contains 58 references to this far baser emotion, not surprising for a thinker best known for telling princes that they are better off being feared than loved. In the very chapter in which he offers this advice, moreover, Machiavelli assigns to fear a theological-like status. Because men are “thankless, fickle, false, studious to avoid danger, [and] greedy of gain,” a ruler who seeks their love can obtain it only temporally: love given turns easily into love taken away. Fear, by contrast, “bound by the apprehension of punishment which never relaxes its grasp,” is, like the joy the Christian feels in God’s embrace, a more permanent, and therefore
more reliable, emotion, one not likely to be tempted by the worldly matters surrounding us.

Although Augustine drew a sharp distinction between the rival cities of man and God, he also viewed the citizens of the former, even at the height of the barbarian invasion of Rome, as still among God’s creations and therefore as still capable of redemption. No such salvation is possible in the state of nature so many political philosophers imagine, a place in which our lives are, in Hobbes’s famous words, “solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.” Unlike God, whose love redeems us, the state’s main purpose is to protect us; under its guidance, we survive, we do not flourish. We fear God because we fear everything. God separated night from day, but in Hobbes’s word, darkness hounds us whatever we do and wherever we go. Compared to Hobbes, the most unforgiving of Christian theologies is still too optimistic. We never experience joy because we cannot even know what it is. Hobbes is the single most important anti-joyous thinker in the Western canon. No one, not even Nietzsche, comes close.

For contemporary readers, shaped by the violence of war, revolution, and totalitarianism, our most influential political philosopher of fear is the twentieth century proto-fascist thinker Carl Schmitt. Schmitt’s state competes with God to claim absolute sovereignty over human beings; when we gaze in awe at the power exercised over us, our eyes turn to he who holds the final power of decision in this fallen world, not to an invisible force in a more ideal, and in that way even crueler,
one. Believe in God if you choose, Schmitt teaches us, but do not confuse His realm with that war-by-other-means known as the political. On that turf, one is either a friend or an enemy, and if the latter, one’s obligation is not to love but to be prepared to vanquish. There may have been joy in Mudville but there is none in the dystopia Schmitt imagines our actually existing world to be.

Theology and political philosophy, then, are organized by two different, and competing, understandings of human nature, both, in most cases, dark, but one at least offering the possibility of light. No wonder that a political theology, meant to bring aspects of both into some kind of creative tension, so often becomes difficult, if not impossible, to formulate. A jealous God fears the absolutist state and the absolutist state wants nothing to do with a defiant God. When we are fearful, we cannot trust the experience of joy and we are joyous only when we escape the suspicion required for politics, if, in fact, we ever really can.

Faced with such an imposing choice, political philosophy typically chooses the state: given our unruly nature, power must be untamed to keep us in line. In Marxist and neo-Marxist writings, the state claims the absolute authority to remake the society; one reason writers in this tradition admire Schmitt is that, for all his reactionary sympathies, they see in him the ruthlessness of all forms of Leninism. Much the same can be said for the anti-liberals of the right; fascism is the ultimate triumph of the profane over the sacred. Mussolini may have entered into a covenant
with the Catholic Church, but he also understand it as a powerful rival, while Hitler sought nothing less than a new religion to replace the Christian one.

We have been called together at this conference to reflect on the theology of joy as a transformative movement. Does it make sense, in this regard, to turn the tables on the political and look for joy in the power of God rather than of the state? When the state engages in explicit evil, the obligation, serious Christians believe, is clear: We have the example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and other members of the Confessing Church who risked or gave their lives for Him. Even in less dramatic times, similar choices have been made: the pacifism urged by Stanley Hauerwas, for example, is as admirable to anti-war secularists as his religious-based reasoning is puzzling. Living in a time of overwhelming state power, joy, for those who think this way, flows from the conviction that an all-encompassing transcendence awaits. “Full of joy,” Bonhoeffer wrote in his final letter to his friends from Tegel, “we are enabled to believe that there was and is One to whom no human suffering or sin is foreign and who in deepest love accomplished our redemption. Only in such joy in Christ the Redeemer shall we be preserved from hardening ourselves where human suffering encounters us.”

Since there is so much to admire in the courage of a Bonhoeffer, or even for that matter a Hauerwas, one might be tempted to share their conviction that a transformation into a more joyous existence lies in the realm of unshakeable faith. I believe this the wrong conclusion to draw. The absolutism involved in rejecting the
political for the theological bears too much similarity to the rejection of the theological by the political. The conditions Bonhoeffer faced may have justified his choice, but those who live in liberal democratic societies that allow for the popular election of leaders and at least some expression of dissent and discontent face different choices. To be sure, they are confronted with the power of the state, and there are times when its power appears overwhelming. But absolutism, the refusal to bend and accommodate when faced with an opposition that shares, to whatever degree, one’s own humanity is to make democratic governance, and therefore its stability it offers, impossible. Aide from an all-too-dogmatic libertarianism that treats nearly every act of the state as an act of evil, and in that way resembles the religious absolutism of a Hauerwas, liberal democratic citizens both fear the state and seek the collective rewards it can provide. When political evil is not as total, resisting political evil is not as liberating. What we require under such modern conditions, I believe, is the understanding that the political and the theological can work together only if the power of one, or preferably both, is tamed.

We do have a political philosophy whose guiding objective is the taming of both kinds of power: it is called liberalism. Liberal political philosophers insist on the possibility of a private realm in which we possess the capacity to resist the power that both government and God claim over us. By no means does this require the abolition of Godly authority: His power remains in His hands while we retain the power to honor Him as we think best. But liberalism does change the way we experience joy.
In addition to the joy we feel by loving God and admiring His works, a joy accessible as well to those living in pre-liberal societies, we who are modern also feel the joy of knowing that we are active participants in choosing the God we worship. Converts in particular experience this dual blessing, but so do evangelicals who undergo the process of welcoming Jesus into their hearts. Only those who praise God so vividly and enthusiastically can know whether their enthusiasm is due to the choosing or the choice. The fact that so many of them have fled one religion in order to accept another suggests that the process may be as fulfilling as the result.

One of liberalism’s greatest accomplishments is the separation of church and state. Although church-state separation might seem to allow religious dissenters to express themselves in ways approaching zealotry, its more common consequence is to allow passion to express itself in ways resembling Weber’s ethic of responsibility rather than his ethic of ultimate ends. In a liberal democracy lacking an established church, religious organizations and individuals must engage with political intuitions and practices to obtain recognition, protection, and exemption. There is, in such a process, a form of joy unattainable when religion is directly supported by the state. Members of minority religions, in particular, find themselves taking pride in their acceptance by the majority and in that way feel the satisfaction of a job well done, the rewards that comes with achieving, rather than merely receiving, political success. Joy can be this-worldly as well as other-worldly; indeed, in modern liberal
democracies, the former may contribute more to the strength of religion than the latter.

Joy, in short, is not a constant, an emotion that expresses itself in the same way irrespective of history and context. There was a time when the joys of faith tended toward the monastic or the ecstatic; one turned one’s back on creature comforts and in that way experienced the sublime. Nothing could compare to God’s glory, not military victory, not the accumulation of riches, not sexual pleasure. Basking in His presence was reward enough, as unearned, at least in certain faiths, as it was unexpected.

For some individuals, even those in a modern society, more joy is to be had through an ascetic rejection of the secular world and all of his temptations. But for the great majority, who almost never see a conflict between Christ and culture, or whatever form the same conflict assumes in non-Christian faiths, it becomes exceptionally difficult to separate the joy one feels from the love of God than the joy one feels for the love on children, popular entertainment, or good work. When faith in God is conceived of as the highest and most sublime joy we can experience, more mundane forms will inevitably be treated as lacking in grandeur. But rather than lamenting how the world of politics has fallen from the sublime, we may be better of appreciating how the profane affairs of everyday life in modern society take on religious coloration. Because the worth of nearly everything in the modern world is
determined by counting, we should never forget that thinner forms of joy spread widely may be preferable than thicker forms reserved only for the righteous few.