The Quality of Politics in the Contemporary West

The Crisis of Political Imagination by Glenn Tinder. Charles Scribner’s Sons. $7.50.

by William Pfaff

Mr. Tinder remarks that the contributions most contemporary theologians have made to political thought have, in principle, been acceptable to atheists; those who have argued explicitly theological conclusions have condemned themselves to indifference or hostility. He undertakes that risk, even though he is a political philosopher rather than a theologian. He begins this remarkable book with an examination of the quality of politics and of political life in the contemporary West, but pursues his logic into theology and does not shrink from an assertion of prophetic faith. It remains to be seen whether his fate is to be ignored by both political men and theologians. But if he is ignored, it is a matter to be regretted, for this is a book of immense ambition, intelligence, and—to use the term the author would use it—of vision.

Let me give some sketch of Mr. Tinder’s argument, but with the warning that the argument comes to seem a kind of heroic (and necessarily failed) synthesis, a framework which sustains a discussion of great richness. The argument seems to me a failed one because these issues simply are not ones in which demonstration or conviction are really possible, only intuition or existential perception. The effect of a book such as this seems sure to be private, not public.

The argument begins with the fact of the mass of modern Western men’s significant alienation or disassociation from social groups—of nations, religions, social and political traditions; from “comprehensive reality,” which is to say the major truths and perceptions that are discovered through science, philosophy, art, and religious experience; and from natural reality, the environment of landscape and seasons. In this, Mr. Tinder makes with great competence and considerable originality, a case that, in general outline, has been argued before, in part or in whole, by men as varied as Marx and Marcel. (And Mr. Tinder’s intellectual links, it must be added, are to Marcel, more than to perhaps any other contemporary.)

But Mr. Tinder adds that the alienation and estrangement of which he writes are not those of an economic and social class. Class differentiation has, he insists, largely been overcome in one of the great accomplishments of modern politics, and the persisting concern with class and economic analysis in modern political thought is both obsolete and misleading. The party politics of recent decades have been formulated in terms of economic structure, whereas (whatever the shameful reality of poverty in the modern West), this is not, in principle, a real issue in our society. He is concerned with a “relatively new and undefined kind of disintegration in which, beneath an orderly social surface, [men] are subtly set apart from one another and from the world around them... estrangement without conflict and isolation without enmity.”

This estrangement, he believes, one result of the great achievement of individualism in the West—a political liberation and, as well, a liberation of sensibility and intelligence, but an ambiguous fulfillment. The problem we experience is to reestablish a community of liberated persons in succession to those communities of the past which provided an integration to their members but at heavy costs in freedom, exploitation of minorities or majorities, of class differentiation, of violence.

Individual freedom is a terrible liberation, then, nearly unbearable without the social and personal bonds, and the faith in transcendence, that existed in the past but have been eroded by the industrialism, the urbanism, the hyperbole of government and communications, that are part of the modern experience. The conventional remedies—or critiques: liberalism, socialism, conservative politics, are all either implicated in the disintegrative process or are irrelevant. The crisis is of the significance of the liberated person’s existence; and men today have an insecure belief in immortality, no reliable expectation of what history may bring, no confidence in the meaning of the past, a dread of the tragedy, the absurdity, the paradox and predicament, which haunt their individual lives and their political existence. Without confidence in an intelligible existence, men’s impulse may be to destruction, nihilism, or to violently redemptive political ideologies, to an anxious boredom that may erupt into any of these. Tinder remarks that whatever the danger of accidental nuclear war, “it is strikingly naive that so little attention should be paid to the danger that nuclear war will be initiated deliberately.”

To alienation, the responses of Rousseau, Hegel, and Marx, progenitors of modern thought, were all to recommend solidarity—a fateful choice. Most perfect human associations do not serve the personal quest that the liberation of human individualism has awakened. Man’s condition, perceived with deepened anxiety by the liberated person, is that he is a sin-
Mass disintegration, the pattern of subtle estrangements which isolate men despite apparent fellowship and order, is caused ultimately by the absence of an awareness of the Eternal in the present. The contemporary failure of political imagination, manifest especially in the captivity of political attention by foreign affairs and by the remaining problems of class disintegration, is due finally to the nearly unchallenged sway of the assumption that society is properly altogether secular. The notion that community depends on awareness of the Transcendent, on religious intuition, is drastically in conflict with prevailing social and political conditions.

It is, however, in line with principles which were, in various forms, common if not universal in Western political attitudes until a few centuries ago. It is symptomatic of the ossification of our political minds that the idea of religious community gives rise for the most part only to horrified thoughts of such trite specters as "theocracy" and "Caesaro-Papism." . . . The toleration and diversity of the modern world are true achievements of the spirit, and it is a perverse notion of spiritual progress which assumes that these achievements must be cast aside and return made to earlier spiritual forms.

—from The Crisis of Political Imagination.

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Ancients and Moderns
To honor University of Chicago's Professor Leo Strauss on his 65th birthday recently, more than a score of his associates and students contributed to a volume of "Essays on the Tradition of Political Philosophy." The final chapter is devoted to a complete listing of Dr. Strauss' own, very valuable works.

Principles of the Jewish Faith
"Modernity within traditional Judaism" is the description British Rabbi Jacobs gives to his approach to questions of religious belief. The principles of Jewish faith that he analyses and criticizes in the light of continuing religious scholarship are the thirteen enumerated by Moses Maimonides—principles which have, Jacobs states, "more or less won for themselves a permanent place in Judaism." This book has excited much discussion in England.

Neutralism and Disengagement
Paul F. Power, ed. Scribners, 169 pp. $2.50 (paper).
Gathered here, in an anthology prescribed for student use, are comments from leading political figures on the subject of nonalignment (and its cousin disengagement) as practiced by both the "developing" and the "developed" nations. Suggestions for further research and additional source materials follow the reading selections.

A Comparison and Evaluation of Current Disarmament Proposals as of March 1, 1964
Marion H. McVitty. World Law Fund, 43 pp. 50¢ (paper).
U.S. and Soviet proposals for general and complete disarmament, as submitted to the U.N., are compared in Mrs. McVitty's study with Grenville Clark and Louis B. Sohn's draft treaty for world disarmament and development. This booklet follows closely on the heels of an earlier Fund publication which contained the text of these documents.

Government Action and Morality
The author, a lecturer in moral philosophy at Glasgow University, analyses the nature of morality and the nature of liberal-democratic government before he examines the relationship between the two. Government action in international society as well as in the domestic sphere concerns Downie here.

The Chair of Peter
A Protestant wrote this narrative history of the popes and the papacy, originally published in German, which encompasses the period from the trial and crucifixion of Jesus to the accession of Paul VI in June 1963. Accompanying the text are a variety of illustrations and a chronological catalogue of the popes.

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