

Connections

Politics — the Art of the Impossible

The trouble with realism is that it leads to cynicism. Politics—if one connects the word with moral values—is an impossible art. The governed, or at least a good proportion of them, are always seeking ways of getting around even reasonably equitable laws, and it takes only a flimsy excuse for their proportion in the population to rise. The governors are corrupted not only by their power but by the process they must go through to acquire it and the efforts they must make to maintain it. Even if they are reasonably decent men, their egos will thicken in defense against the incessant, often unreasonable criticism by their challengers for power, since the latter's aim is gaining office, not improving government. To want to redirect these energies, to seek to change this perverse structure, is to make oneself everyone's enemy.

In another day one might hope to avoid pessimism because of ignorance. Xerxes' cabinet ministers did not, in retirement, tell their version of the truth of the Greek Campaign, and despite the harshness of the biblical prophets one might still imagine that David was the model of the Messiah. Myth and legend, the image-making devices of a less programmed time, kept us blissful. Today, theory and practice alike conduce to skepticism about the possibility of politics. The psychologists say men are brutish; the sociologists find them mindless; the historians show them to be foolish. Daily our newspapers and telecasts show our venality and violence—even without a Jack Anderson spectacular or the leak of a Top Secret document. Worse, in the 1960's we had thought that things could be changed by personal effort and acted on that faith—only to see the French realism about permanence amidst change proved true here. For all our effort, things are morally pretty much as revolting as they were. This paralyzing consciousness presses in from every side. I doubt that there are many people so invincibly ignorant that they are not affected by it.

So the prudent will avoid politics and seek more satisfying pursuits. The only good secular reason for submitting oneself to the thankless task of government is to satisfy our ego. Someone has to do it and I trust me far more than anyone else I see around. Fortunately, in the United States the people do have some power, so such self-serving can often be deflected into social benefit. But as Reinhold Niebuhr never tired of pointing out, the self in its pride regularly vitiates the good it creates. The ego has power—but it corrupts the best of us.

In the biblical view we do not institute government because man is a social animal but, regardless of what we think of one another, because God binds us together and commands us to care for one another. He calls us to the politics of transcending our immediate interests so we may create a righteous society. Should we be frustrated or fail, that will not diminish His rule. Should we triumph, we will not yet have established His Kingdom. It is for Him to bring the Messiah. Until then, He asks us to do the just and loving deed, in the community as well as between persons. There, in the action we take, we win such merit as men may gain and claim our share in His messianic work. This, at least, is the Jewish teaching.

Such a faith makes politics a duty, yet subordinates the ego to the Lord of Creation. It is an attractive concept—so much so that, long before American Presidents invited preachers to breakfast, rulers sought to make men think they lived by it. In one Mesopotamian rite, four thousand years old or more, the High Priest on New Year's Day would administer a symbolic slap to the king—with what force and to what effect one can easily imagine. The self does not hesitate trying to use God for its purposes; the best of religious ideas is not people-proof. Today, in a time when almost no one can stand up to the State, much of the work of religion must be the cultivation of realism about men and their will to power. That is, it must engage in prophetic criticism of those who govern us. But if that is all it does it will only reinforce our disgust with politics and our desire to flee from it. So, in a time when realism has led to widespread cynicism, religion must equally be a source of idealism. That is, it must draw on its transcendent authority to proclaim our duty and hence our ability to build a humane society.

Some will find it typical of the current complexity of what should be simple that religion is asked to be realistic and idealistic about politics at one and the same time. Yet this dialectic attitude is hardly new. The Bible is essentially Torah and Prophets, law and critique. No Jewish Sabbath day or holiday service would be complete without a reading from both sections. And the relation of religion to politics in our time will be incomplete without a similar creative tension.

