

Churches and State

Olivier Abel*

RESUMO

Este estudo tem por objetivo comparar o longo período de turbulência religiosa que marca o início da modernidade, envolvendo a Reforma e a Contrarreforma, com o período atual, em que a relação entre política e religião vem se redefinindo de outra maneira. Vemos que os maiores pensadores da filosofia política moderna, de Maquiavel e Calvino a Hobbes e Milton, e de Spinoza e Bayle a Rousseau, tiveram de decidir sobre as relações entre o teológico e o político. Examinamos, também, os diferentes 'regimes' teológico-políticos expostos por Rousseau no final de seu *Contrato Social* (1762), comparando-os com os diferentes regimes que relacionam Igreja e Estado formulados pelo teólogo da resistência ao nazismo, Karl Barth, em texto de 1937.

Palavras-chave: teologia e política; Rousseau; Karl Barth.

ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to compare the long period of religious turbulence which marked the beginning of modernity, involving the Reformation and Counter-Reformation, with the current period, in which the relations between politics and religion have been redefined in another form. It will be shown that the greatest thinkers of modern political philosophy, from Machiavelli and Calvin to Hobbes and Milton, and from Spinoza and Bayle to Rousseau, had to decide on the relations between theology and politics. We will also examine the different politico-theological regimes discussed by Rousseau at the end of his *Social Contract* (1762), comparing them with the different regimes relating Church and State formulated by the theologian of resistance to Nazism, Karl Barth, in a 1937 text.

Keywords: theology and politics; Rousseau; Karl Barth.

THE THEOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL QUESTION, THEN

Modernity, both in its theological and political versions, is constructed on the separation between the political and the religious. On the one hand, the Renaissance, prepared by the long work of nominalist reduction, and prolonged until the Enlightenment, expressed how philosophy descended from the heaven of ideas to occupy the positive sciences and the terrestrial powers,

* Faculté de théologie protestante de Paris. 83, boulevard Arago. Paris – France – 75014. o.abel@free.fr

as in Machiavelli, Descartes or Copernicus, thereby entering in competition with the Church in the enunciation of what is legitimate – thus the difficulties of Galileo and Giordano Bruno.¹ However, on the other hand, – and this is called the Reformation and Counter-Reformation – theology by itself got rid of those dominions which it estimated were not under its jurisdiction to seek a space that was more free, more critical and more autonomous.

In this way, Calvin's protests against the political excesses of the papacy and the ecclesiastical excesses of magistrates are based on the same fundamental lines as Machiavelli. The latter incessantly defends political autonomy in relation to the Church, with religion being at most an ideological apparatus more or less apt to forge a civic morality. Calvin incessantly defends the autonomy of the Church in relation to magistrates: at the utmost the latter represent a judicial apparatus more or less capable of favoring the Church – but they should not interfere in ecclesiastic discipline as such. The Consistory had the right to excommunicate (to refuse communion, the Supper), without the interference of the public authorities. What was essential to Calvin's fight in Geneva was to defend the prerogatives of the Church in 'interior' questions of ecclesiastic discipline.

The principal difference is that, starting from the same observation of the fragility of politics, Calvin affirms much more than Machiavelli the necessity of the institution, in other words the need to think about the difference between magistrates and tyranny. It is necessary to think about the magistrates in their own rationality, irreducible to the games of force and to lies under the injunction of human passions. For Calvin the ethical community is in fact the *instituting* society, and both politics and ecclesiastics are forms of the instituted society.

This does not happen in a very subtle manner. Nor is it by chance that the birth of the modern state, like that of the modern 'subject,' was accompanied by tumults and the wars of religion. A mutation of the theological system was also necessary – and this mutation was not only the consequence, but at the same time the condition of this emergence.² The political concussions of the Renaissance and the Reformation formed a whole, as well as this interior separation, this *de-sacralization* of the political order, and this autonomy of 'judicial' laws of human cities in relation to ecclesiastic laws. To understand what is going on today, it is essential to know that secularization and *laïcité* were not simply imposed, but prepared by a deliberate 'theological' choice, which gave rise to modernity.

More profoundly, perhaps, there emerges a new relationship with the city

and with the Church, as it became possible to depart, to leave one's country or one's Church. By creating the possibility of exile, Calvin invents his solution to the dilemma of revolting or submitting to martyrdom. God is not restricted to our human ceremonies and laws, he is beyond this and everywhere. Individuals are freed to contract new alliances, free alliances and Calvin thereby prepares the way for all social pact philosophies: the great conflict of his interpretations when the English Revolution opposed Hobbes – who estimates with the absolutist doctrines that the pact happened once for everybody – and Milton – who considers the dissent and assumes that his pact should be incessantly reiterated. Churches and states cast asides their moorings in the middle of a great multi-secular debate between the centralizing territorial states and democratic and maritime empires, and also in the middle of the debate between institutionalized churches linked to the state and free, congregationalist churches.

THE THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL QUESTION, NOW

Such are the main lines of the modern politico-theological question, and of its knots and its variants. Today this separation is once again profoundly shaken, as if it had been led by both sides to dangerous impasses. On one hand, political secularization was curiously concomitant with its sacralization: the most secular states, the most atheistic (the Third Reich, Stalinist regimes, etc.) are also those which invented a type of civil religion with a fanaticism and totalitarianism which traditional religions had never desired. On the other hand, in favor of the myth of the disappearance of religion (analogous to the Marxist myth of the disappearance of the state), recently there has proliferated a 'it does not matter what' religiousness in forms of neo-Protestantism and Neo-Islamism, in rupture with their own traditions, and more generally a return to rites and superstitions, a synthesis which Bergson formerly called 'closed' religions.³ We will return to this a little later.

In a more profound manner, there also occurred there something similar to what happened during the transition to modernity. For a period that claims to be enduring, we are changing the type of regime in theological, political and subjective aspects at the same time. We are leaving the modern state, the modern subject, the voluntary God of modernity, to move to a regime which will still do not know how to name and which is also simultaneously occurring at the level of the 'technical' processes of globalization, and the complexity of 'ethnic' processes of Balkanization. This is our common problem. It is a mo-

ment that is still more dangerous because it is accompanied by a profound deregulation of the theater of war. We should remember that civil war is never far, a war which shatters us in the name of our 'gods,' our absolutes.⁴

It is not so easy to think of a balance between the theological and the political. The state wants to emancipate itself from religion, but it also desires a religion that will be complacent and docile. In addition, in every state a tendency can be found to provide a homogenous religious base, a type of civil religion, to return to Rousseau's term, which seeks to found a true patriotism, a social coherence based on the feeling of a common social good, but which is concerned with knowing how to achieve this without falling into nationalist fanaticism. The delimitation of political space assumes an almost religious orientation, which seems only possible if it comes from outside, from a transcendence.⁵ It is important not to underestimate this religion's base which belongs to the political, since from ancient Rome to the Soviet Empire there has been no political regime, which despite being secular has not been based on something of the sacred, sometimes much more intransigent when laicized.

It can also be said that religion aspires to a state which is agreeable and docile, but also desires freedom of conscience and the freedom to exercise its form of worship. What can also be observed is the tendency, due to the complexification of religious, linguistic and cultural cosmography, due to exchanges, immigrations, the multiplication of minorities of all types, to disassociate religion and the state, accelerating secularization and the real and profound pluralism of modern societies. However, how can this be done without resorting to a type of individualist relativism which undermines all forms of belonging? In addition, does doing this not involve the underestimate of the need for the delimitation of each society, the need for immunization which can protect the national community from generalized indifference and lack of civism?

My ambition is not to propose here a new equation which can answer the problem, but rather to examine some of the conditions, both political and theological, that we have to take into account to give greater depth to the question. To do this I would like to draw on two authors, one important in political philosophy and for the lay tradition itself, Rousseau, and the other for theology and for what he calls 'dogmatic ecclesial,' Karl Barth.

POLITICAL FIGURES OF RELIGION

It is notable that the greatest thinkers who founded modern political philosophy, from Hobbes to Milton, and from Spinoza⁶ to Rousseau, had to de-

velop opinions on relations between theology and politics, and about the hermeneutic stature of the scriptures. In accordance with the use of texts, we can effectively tend to Caesarian-Papist syntheses or to theocracies; but we can also content ourselves with interior and spiritual isolation in communities withdrawn from the common world. Since Gutenberg regular use of the scriptures has been necessary, and it can be seen that these thinkers did not hesitate to say what they expected from religion.

I will use here as a guiding thread the chapter on 'civil religion' which ended *The Social Contract* (Chapter 8 of Book IV).⁷ Its position as an epilogue, at the same time inside and outside, in which the place of politics is framed by being placed on stage in a meta-political edge or margin is by itself very significant. The paradox of *laïcité* can be found here: it is at the same time a neutral term, exterior to the problem, and a positive proposition about what religion should be. Kant uses this process in the four observations that finalize each of the parts of *Religion within the limits of reason*.⁸ What belongs to the actual religious order appears as a discourse about limits.

After looking at the history of different regimes in the politico-theological connection (with an interesting critique of the Hebrew, Roman, and English regimes, but also praising the initial Mohammedan regime), Rousseau prepared a typology of the types of connection between religion and state.

The first is the case in which religion is in part the religion of a city-state, a political religion, a religion of the divine protectors of the city. The gods are kings. The resulting benefit is political and religious cohesion and the courage this gives citizens. Fanaticism in relation to other city-states, superstition, and the difficulties to be overcome, since defeat extends to religious confidence, are the inconveniences.

The second model is the one in which two powers are irreducible to the other, the temporal power of the prince, the magistrate, and the spiritual power of the pontiff, the bishop. For Rousseau, this regime which dominated the history of Christianity, has no advantages, and places humans in perpetual contradiction with themselves, and only constructs hypocrisy, violence and instability.

The final one proposes a religion of pure humanity, which is the Gospel, understood in the inverse sense to all of Christian history. From the religious point of view it is better, but it is so dissociated from the political that it cannot serve as cement for any society, since it "relegates to laws only the force that they get from themselves, without adding any other," and disarms the citizen

in advance, who will not know how to defend his homeland except at the limits which are authorized for him by the love of enemies.

Based on this brief general overview, various observations can be made which we can use as maxims, to be kept in mind when we look at these questions. The first of these ‘political conditions’ for thinking about the problem is that no good solution exists. Each has specific inconveniences and it can be noted that Rousseau does not propose any hierarchy among these alternatives. It is as if each one in turn corrects the other two. Even the worst solution, that of the dual regime which characterizes historical Christianity can in certain aspects appear as the least worst, or at least has arguments which valorize it in light of the perverse effects of each of the other two. In relation to this, Rousseau is truly an author of the Enlightenment, who reflects on the plurality of the possible, a critical tradition which has frequently been forgotten in the middle of what can be called the French ideology loyal to *laïcité*.

The second observation is that he does not consider it apt at least in *The Social Contract* (however a reading of Rousseau’s other texts confirms this, in other registers) to eliminate all relations between politics and religion. He seeks to prove, against Bayle,⁹ “that no state is formed that is not based on religion.” Rousseau does not base the political pact on justice, on the equitable distribution of goods and positions, or on the mutualization of earnings. Rather, he bases it on a form of feeling of love. At its very foundation the pact is affective. Even justice in its heart involves a compassionate dimension, and the origin of societies is like the origin of languages, something which is more like amorous consent than a military or economic pact. This is because politics in its own rationality is inseparable from a base which appears affective and irrational, and which in Rousseau is profoundly religious. Love is this feeling or this force, sometimes terrible, which approximates being and makes them prove their similarities and their profound identity.

What would happen if we suppressed this religious base, this piety, this compassion, this affective base of societies? They would turn to utilitarianism and to the mutual instrumentalization of humans, to the selfish coldness in relations of strength – which cannot construct any life in common, no ‘general’ will. This is what is produced: the history of inequality between men is the history of this cooling. A ‘Rousseauian’ historian, such as Michelet, narrates the Revolution exactly as an irruption of a fundamental lapse. This enthusiastic desire, to which Kant referred in a positive manner, constitutes the mythical nucleus of Jacobin republicanism. It seems to me that this is the difficult point which Régis Debray had sought to rethink in his *Critique of*

Political Reason. Ricoeur had already observed in his May 1957 article in *Esprit* on the ‘on the political paradox.’¹⁰ No political rationality exists, even the most formal, which does not recognize its part of obscurity, of irrational force. The impoverishment of religion accompanies a type of devaluation of the word, of loss of confidence in the powers of language, a generalized ‘loss of credibility.’ I only believe in the word of another up to the point that I require their credit for my word. The republic cannot count on citizens gifted with civism and frugality, ready to endorse the general interest; democracy cannot count on activists willing to dedicate their time, their strength, and their passions to animate the discussion. However, the vivacity of republican-democratic consensus-dissent requires citizens to speak in the name of engagements worthy of credit. Politics can appear chilled if it loses this heat.

THEOLOGICAL FIGURES OF THE POLITICAL

The question is, thus, not solely political; the other half of the path is theological, since what is in debate is the complete theological and political equation, and as authors as different as Machivelli, Calvin, Hobbes and Spinoza have understood, the two sides are inseparable: it is necessary first to think of them together before separating the registers. If we do not reflect on the two aspects, if we deny the ‘theological’ part of the political, it is sort of as if we denied the specific irrational of each type of rationality, the registers will soon be confused: historical examples of the sacralization of the political are abundant, as strong as when we refuse to think about the ‘theological’ part of the equation.

However, just as political thought should reflect the religious dimension, theological thought should think about the political dimension of theology. In relation to this version of the question, we can start with the notable analysis which the theologian Karl Barth proposed about relations between “church and state yesterday, today and tomorrow.”¹¹ This text, which initially appeared in November 1936 in the journal *Evangelische Theologie* in Munich and was translated for a Swiss journal (*Les cahiers protestants*, April 1937), is interesting because of its context, as Karl Barth, expelled from the University of Bonn in 1935 by the National Socialist regime, against whom he had written in 1934 the Confession of Barmen, and since then had taken refuge in Basil, where he had found the network of a confessional church — a church which refused to render obedience to the Führer.

Karl Barth proposed a typology of the “forms which a church could adopt

in relation to the state, or which the state, in turn, could grant to the church.” As a theologian, he was not interested in what the church would be for the state, but what the church would be for itself, and what the state would be for the church: an officiating power, to which it is necessary to submit to preserve the world from chaos, though within the invisible and provisional limits which attribute to it the sole authority of Christ. The state can assume this function “with good will, indifference, or perverse purpose,” and it is in this way that “the national, free or confessional, forms of the Church are, in effect, purposes which come from outside and which the Church should examine... none of these forms is, in principle, better suited” than the others.

Let us look at this typology. In the first place, there exists the national church, present where the church is official and linked to the state. Nothing prohibits this in the scriptures, but nothing obliges it, and if a church must become a state church it cannot do this except in fidelity to the scriptures, “and not for reasons of order or of tradition.” This church has greater responsibility for openly making pronouncements if the state betrays it – otherwise it is the church itself which betrays to justify the establish order.

The second model is that of the free church, entirely unconnected to the state, and this appears to be very similar to the forms of the communities of the New Testament (before Constantine). The risk here is that the church lets itself be reduced to a private society which is not concerned with the religious necessities of its faithful as “the gospel has total pretension and the church is for this reason dangerous for the state.”

The third form of church in its relationship with politics is the confessional church. It occurs when “instead of supporting or tolerating the church, the state itself becomes, openly or secretly, a counter-church which combats the true church.” Karl Barth suggested that it was Germany to which he was referring. The church did not know, nor desired, nor refused to become confessional, and if it did this out of fidelity to the gospel, it would be subjected to persecution and the seduction of the lie, it would be abandoned by many, however if it kept itself on the surface it would be because it did not know how to sink.

We can note here that it is exactly in this context which Karl Barth writes:

The anti-Christian state is not yet truly anti-Christian, since it limits itself to using methods of oppression which take the church into account. What is most to fear is not open violence or persecution, but to the contrary, the temptation in which the state invites believers to construct alongside the church of Jesus Christ

a new, better or more beautiful Church – heretical, because it accommodates itself to the world or the nation. It is difficult to withstand the exterior pressure, but it is even more difficult to resist dissimulated interior lies. If the church should become confessional, it will experience long and painful downfalls: it will be abandoned by many believers who expected courageous decisions. Painful splits will occur. When peace reigns there will be no doubt – in national and in free churches – of the strength of attachment at the moment at which it occurs: many of the first will become last, though many of the last will become first.

In relation to this brief summary, we make some comments here which can help us highlight the theological conditions of the political problem. First, it can be noted that Karl Barth, supported by his reading of the Letter to the Romans, took advantage of a time of deviation, a distance, a long respiration, without doubt very useful in the times of anguish that were his: “yesterday, today and tomorrow.” Time is taken advantage of; it is not stated that the only valid church is confessional. It is a question of a historical moment. However, no longer as a free church or a state church, it cannot be stated that there is a single good solution, in other words, a perfect politico-theological equation: the best state is not forcibly the best for the gospel. Politics varies and the politico-theological is placed under the lens of the critical exam and the provisional. Each formula has its forces and its inconveniences — it may be possible to establish some bridges between Rousseau’s trilogy and that of Karl Barth. It is necessary to bear this observation in mind at a time when each church believes it has a ‘good relationship’ with the political. This relationship refers to historic situations which can change, and fidelity is found in these moments.

Second observation: it would not be appropriate for Karl Barth (not even the Karl Barth who in 1917-1918 had energetically censured the ‘God with us’ inscribed on the helmets and belts of German soldiers), to eliminate all relations between theology and politics. He is too much of a Calvinist to abandon the need for a state institution distinct from the church in its mandate, which is to preserve order and the equity of laws. What is better, and this is the touchstone of Karl Barth’s theology, is to want to think about the consequences of theology for the political, in other words not to abandon politics to the technocratic or demagogic politicians, but to think about a sovereignty of God which no terrestrial power can limit or take away. This is a discourse of the perpetual de-sacralization of the political, but also of the reinsertion in the political cycle of human consent and dissent. Essentially, it is contrary to the

image that remains, it is above all within politics that Christians should work for the autonomy of political rationality (a rationality without absolutes). It is only when all the possibilities of modifying the political from within have been exhausted that one can pass to a vigilant and confessional resistance.

THE THEOLOGICAL-POLITICAL PARADOX

For motives that were both theological and political, we have spent a long time captive of a ruinous alternative: whether to think about the state, the institution in a type of political conservatism, or to think about messianic revolution elsewhere, outside a rotting old world whose destruction better be hurried ... For us it is difficult to think at the same time of eschatology, and thus resistance, the *guerrilha*, and to think about the institution, the ordinary durable installation for various generations. It is however this set that the apostle Paul thought about, from what it seems.

This dual movement can be easily observed in the reading of the Letter to the Romans proposed by Karl Barth: it does not affirm the imperial authority of a political theology, under the risk of justifying with religion any political power (1919 reading), however, do not withdraw from politics on the pretext that the world is evil, under the risk of leaving everything to the whims of a power turned mad (1933 reading). Between the risk of the disaffection of politics and a sacralization of power, there is a movement, an 'inside and outside.' In May 1957, shortly after the Budapest coup, the philosopher Paul Ricœur wrote in the journal *Esprit* a text called "The Political Paradox," which ended as follows: "The central problem of politics is liberty. Whether because the state through its rationality concedes liberty in the interior; or because liberty through its resistance places an exterior limit on the passions of power."

We can extend these observations a little to the current day. What happens when churches withdraw entirely from their political responsibilities? We can return to a historic example. The separation between churches and state in France answered the need to separate radically different spheres, which history had mixed in access. It was necessary to return to Caesar what was Caesar's and to God what was God's, desacralize the state and return church to the critical liberty of primitive Christianity. Priests had to stop being public employees and religions had to become a subject of personal choice and come to maintain themselves. At the beginning a mutual liberation was discovered, and the emancipated churches continued with their work, supporting themselves on the sociological strength of the energy acquired, and being free dedicated

themselves to all sorts of disinterested actions. It can be said that the evangelical quality of churches improved.

However, over time this energy dissipated: selfless believers grew tired of not having alternation, the fabric of intermediate bodies unraveled, and all that was left were the activists, increasingly mobilized, ‘*crentes*,’ (true believers) wedded to their loyalty, or new converts of their own individual choice. It could be seen that this regime of separation between churches and state, which seemed so conformed to us to democratic modernity and the evangelic message at the same time, favors, despite us, our religions behaving in a more crisp, sectarian and restless manner. This did not happen without a profound crisis of the institution, understood exactly as what remains when everything settles, as this is more durable than our fleeting actions and words. It is as if the *presentism* which is so generalized in our epoch affects churches, reducing them to a type of charismatic or therapeutic charity, without any other dimension broader dimension of memory or hope. Religion perishes due to nervousness or by the flight to outside the world.

It can be seen that this ‘political’ crisis of churches is not disconnected from the discrediting of all democratic ‘passion.’ They are the two sides of the same sinking we are undergoing. And it is precisely from the two sides that it will be necessary to awaken unprecedented resources, indispensable to courage and to collective intelligence.

NOTES

¹ SERRES, Michel. Le savoir, la guerre et le sacrifice. *Critique*, n.367, déc. 1977, p.1070-1071.

² ABEL, Olivier. *Jean Calvin*. Paris: Pygmalion, 2009.

³ BERGSON, Henri. *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion*. [1932]. Paris: PUF, 2008.

⁴ ABEL, Olivier. Le conflit religieux fondateur de l’Europe. In: *L’Europe et le fait religieux*, actes du colloque de Rome. Préface de R. Rémond. Paris: Parole et Silence, 2004.

⁵ DEBRAY, Régis. *Critique de la raison politique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1981.

⁶ SPINOZA, Baruch. *Traité théologico-politique*. [1670]. Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 2010.

⁷ ROUSSEAU, Jean-Jacques. *Le contrat social*. [1762]. Paris: Garnier Flammarion, 2001.

⁸ KANT, Emmanuel. *La religion dans les limites de la simple raison*. [1793]. Paris: Vrin, 1963.

⁹ BAYLE, Pierre. *Commentaire philosophique sur ces paroles de Jésus-Christ ‘Contrains les d’entrer’, [1686]*

édité sous le nom de De la tolérance. Paris: Presses Pocket, 1992.

¹⁰ RICOEUR, Paul. Le paradoxe politique. *Esprit*, mai 1957.

¹¹ BARTH, Karl. L'Église et l'État, hier, aujourd'hui et demain. *Les cahiers protestants*, avril 1937. Karl Barth continues in his discussion of the theses of SCHMITT, Carl. *Théologie politique*, 1922. (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).