

# Liberating Theology from Politics

by Fr. James Schall - September 8, 2008

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A friend recently sent me a remark by one Msgr. Alfred Gilbey, a onetime chaplain at Cambridge's Fisher House who was often called "eccentric" (but that mostly meant that he was a believing and practicing Catholic priest in a chaotic time). I'm sure his words will come as news to many. In an article in the *Modern Age* by Roger Scruton, Monsignor Gilbey is cited as saying, "We are not led to undo the work of creation or to rectify the Fall. The duty of the Christian is not to leave the world a better place. His duty is to leave this world a better man."

This passage is not unmindful of Plato, and the way Socrates *did* leave this world. It presupposes that we have some idea what a better man might be. It also presupposes that we have a choice in the matter, no matter what the form of civil society in which we chance to live out our days.

Likewise, Monsignor Gilbey's remark recalls the famous passage of Solzhenitsyn in the *Gulag Archipelago*. In the direst circumstances known in the modern world, the Russian novelist wrote:

It was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either – but right through every human heart – and through all human heats.

Ultimately, it is not the state, or the class, or the political party that matters. As the human substances that bear and transcend their reality, what counts is what we do in the state, class, or party in which we live, be it the best or the worst, or something in-between.

Scripture itself, if it tells us anything about end times, informs us that they will not be overly pleasant. The modern age has done everything in its power to tell us that we will all be better people – but only if we just redo the work of creation, or overcome the Fall, or reform our political structures, families, property, classes, or our political parties. We will, no doubt, be called "individualists" if we think that the task of saving our souls is rather what we should be about.

The implication of most modern ideology is that we can do nothing for ourselves until these magic reforms first take place. For many, this proposition comes as a relief as it dispenses us from doing much until things outside of us are better. These reforms, however, always end up with much blood on their hands, because they forget what passes through the human heart. The system, we say, was responsible, not the individual.

Along with Plato and Aristotle, the classical Christian view suspected rather that social reforms would be consequent on the inner reform of our souls. The problem that Christians had with the classical understanding of virtue was not that it was unknown. Rather, the question was: Why was it

so difficult to practice this known virtue? This latter difficulty could, in the Christian view, only be confronted with some understanding of the Fall and grace.

We have developed a system in which such ideas as virtue and grace are never so much as whispered among us. No guarantee, moreover, can be given that, if we choose to live a good life and persist in this life until our death, we will be praised by the world. Just the opposite is implied. We are warned that, like Christ Himself, we will be both misunderstood and persecuted, not only if we are bad (which we too often are) but if we are good. If I cannot strive to be virtuous until the public order is reformed according to some philosophically designed formality or other, there seems not much sense in trying. The Christian view of man rejects the premises on which this latter view is built, a view that pretty well dominates our modern culture.

In his book on *Eschatology*, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger wrote:

The rejection of chiliasm (Joachim of Flora, the idea that history will produce a Kingdom of God on earth) means that the Church repudiated the idea of a definitive intra-historical fulfillment, an inner, intrinsic perfectibility of history. The Christian hope knows no idea of an inner fulfillment of history. On the contrary, it affirms the impossibility of an inner fulfillment of the world. Does this mean that Christians, therefore, have nothing to do but sit around and wait? Quite the opposite: They, like everyone else, are to be judged by what they believe and do to themselves and to others with whom they live. In this same book, then-Cardinal Ratzinger mentions the *Gulag Archipelago* as an example of what happens when a this-worldly perfectibility is proposed by an ideological movement.

Cardinal Ratzinger then adds a significant reflection that is more than pertinent to our current politics:

The Kingdom of God is not a political norm of political activity, but it is a moral norm of that activity. Political activity stands under moral norms, even if morality as such is not political nor politics as such morality. In other words, the message of the Kingdom of God is significant for political life not by way of eschatology but by way of political ethics.

Politics is not an agent to bring about the solution of our personal relation to death, hell, heaven, and purgatory, the four last things. Rather, politics constitutes a finite, temporal arena in which the drama of each human life is played out in terms of how each of us lived in his actions, no matter where it is he lived and acted. This was the point of Monsignor Gilbey and Solzhenitsyn.

Some regimes will be better than others, as Aristotle already said. It is an aspect of general justice that we pay attention to this difference. But we can lose our souls in the best regime known to man and save it in the worst, and do one or the other in all the others known to history. When politics, even if democratic, claims to define what is good and what is evil by its customs and legislation, as much modern politics does, we have before us not "normal" politics but eschatological politics – the worst kind.

"It is healthy for politics to learn," Cardinal Ratzinger continues, "that its own content is not eschatological. The setting asunder of eschatology and politics is one of the fundamental tasks of

Christian theology." This is the true nature of the "liberation" of theology. Aristotle had already implied that politics is not metaphysics. The restoration of politics to *be* politics, as the arena in which the transcendent destiny of each is manifested, is the great work of political philosophy in our time.

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