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Roots of Service

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I

The thesis that I want to advance is a simple one: It is that service is rooted in religion. Service is religious in the sense that it expresses our bondedness with the universe (*religare*: to bind fast), and by extension with one another. Over time, service-oriented activities may become rationalized, institutionalized, and secularized. But the roots of service remain religious.

Now the problem with this statement in the context of a meeting on national service is that, in today's environment, discussions of national service must be conducted with only incidental reference to religion. Such discussions must honor the traditional "wall of separation" between church and state. Thus when representatives of religious institutions gather to debate the options of national service, their religious roots become liabilities. They must play the game according to the rules of a secular culture, or else drop out.

This dilemma carries over into the conduct of service activities. Programs of national service cannot be organized to "benefit" sectarian religious institutions. And the religious motivations of those who choose to serve are best kept in the recesses of personal conscience.

We need to challenge this anomaly. The need for a constitutional separation between the religious and the political spheres of life emerged from a long and turbulent history of religious imperialism. Today, however, we face a different kind of problem. We now live under secular imperialism. We have adapted ourselves for too long to a shallow and ultimately self-defeating definition of church-state separation, relegating religion to a strictly private sphere and erecting a public wall between religion and cultural life. I believe that despite the well-known dangers of attempting to transcend that wall of separation—dangers that could lead to the functional establishment of some religious perspectives over against others, or to the cultivation of a civil religion that sanctions some political perspectives over others—we are in fact now living with the dangers inherent in strict separation: the segregation of religious values and sensibilities from life in general; the gradual destruction of public life, without which democracy cannot continue to exist; and the elevation of the state to a level of absolute authority in its own sphere. Indeed, a strict wall of separation may contribute to the

phenomenon of implicit official

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sanctioning of those religious bodies that endorse the absolute authority of the state.

There has been some publicity recently about a study by Wade Clark Roof and William McKinney¹ on the evolution of contemporary Protestantism. One of their conclusions is that the liberal wing of the Protestant enterprise has succeeded over the past several decades in "graduating" people out of the church and into the world. Many of these graduates—or church drop outs—however, continue to apply the values of their religious heritage to everyday situations. Indeed, the comment was often heard in the 1960's, during the Civil Rights campaign, that while the Black church was highly visible and active in pressing for desegregation, the White church was involved more by implication than by corporate participation. But many of the white activists were *our kids*. They were out loving their neighbors, and we were proud.

Meanwhile, back in the white church pews, there was a "gathering storm" of official ecclesiastical reaction. Church "pillars" worried that the new generation was too caught up in the economic and political battles of the day, and stood therefore to lose its religious faith. And their

fears were well-founded. That fear and its apparent realization have resulted from the profound ambiguity plaguing the liberal church: it proclaims the world as God's arena, but it is prohibited from using the vocabulary of faith in discussing the realities of political and cultural life. But the 1960's did produce and shape several important paradigms of service in the American tradition: the Peace Corps and VISTA, and the tutoring and breakfast programs of the early SDS; all can be traced to concepts of service deeply rooted in the nation's religious heritage.

II

The early days of the American experiment faced less of a problem in reconciling religious roots with practical needs than we do today. Covenants, or binding agreements, were a central feature of community life. The nation was often described not only as a beacon of religious freedom but also as the subject of God's righteous judgment. Democracy had arisen out of the Reformation insight that God's covenant relationship extended to all creation, and that every individual was capable of participating in that relationship. Democracy is therefore a polity of service. In covenant, God's will resides in the people—the

gathered people who prayerfully consider their mutual responsibilities. The doctrine of God's sovereignty over all of life radically limited the sovereignty of every other authority, whether ecclesiastical or political, and thereby encouraged an ethic of mutual service among equals.

Use of the word "service," however, was less explicit in the 18th century than it is today. Religion, on the other hand, was a more pervasive reality. The basic religious concepts of sin and salvation were applied to both individual and community. The communal dimension of salvation required mutual accountability among neighbors—an accountability that translated into actions that would, today, be called service. In early rural America, for example, communal accountability was essential for individual survival.

But as the Jeffersonian ideal of a community composed of independent landowners began to erode, more and more people found themselves working in towns and cities for larger and larger commercial enterprises. Cash, and the personal accumulation of cash, slowly replaced community as the nexus of social relationships. By the early 19th century, Protestant ethics began to turn away from a

focus on the sin and salvation of community life and toward a preoccupation with individual ethics and economic gain.

Along with this transformation, there developed two nineteenth-century prototypes of service. One emerged directly from eighteenth-century Puritan Protestantism. This Anglo-American evangelicalism had adapted the Reformation concepts of sin and salvation to a radically individualistic ethic. The result was to shift the ground of social ethics from theology to the province of natural law, thereby correlating American Protestantism with the American enlightenment. The nineteenth-century evangelical movement has been described as the silent partner of American democratic faith and the source of its moral energy.² And indeed it was. It generated an outpouring of missionary zeal that in turn spawned the Abolitionist movement prior to the Civil War, and supported the education of Blacks after Emancipation; it fueled the forces of universal suffrage and the movements for prohibition; it spurred the development of public education. It followed pioneers through successive frontiers, "civilizing" the wild-and-wooly West; it gave rise to such classic American institutions of services as the

YMCA, to City Mission societies, to boarding houses for newly arrived immigrants and working women, and to settlement houses for youth. Evangelical Protestantism organized and gave direction to a vast array of voluntary service organizations, while at the same time, through the proclamation of its religious message, it kept feeding the springs of human motivation.

The second prototype of service in the nineteenth-century emerged from a different source, but produced similar results. German evangelicalism had grown out of pietistic, socialistic, and anti-democratic urges on the European Continent, and it brought to this sprawling, free-for-all nation a sense of ordered community. Among these immigrants the classic American drive for individual success was deliberately exercised within the context of a consciously-designed community life, complete with institutionalized health care, education, and care for the elderly. The spirit of capitalism was impossible to quench, but it was tempered by a spirit of religious socialism, of belonging to the community as a faith commitment. Its theological roots were the concepts of *Diakoinia* and *Koinonia*—service and community. Moreover, it is

through this European tradition that service is most closely identified with a commitment to peace.

So it is that in the relatively brief history of this nation, we find at least two religious roots of community service—sometimes intertwined, each growing more rapidly or more slowly in different periods. One is the voluntary association of missionary-minded individuals whose hearts had been warmed by the fires of evangelicalism, and for whom the state was seen as a political framework for social service and salvation. The other is the planned community of a collective society, within which all citizens play a service role, and for whom the state was seen as exercising the order of God's sovereignty.

This simplified and brief historical excursion is important in underlining three major points. First, the religious dimensions of American culture have played, and continue to play, a profound role in forming social character in the United States. Second, the idea of service, even in its most individualistic expressions, has always been tied to the nature of community life. Third, the idea of service stands in an ambivalent relationship to the political system, sometimes openly hostile

to political goals, at other times neutral, and at still other times willingly cooperative with political aims. In any case, the particularities of religious presence and forms of service in the United States have had a strong impact on the formation of our culture, and remain deeply imbedded in the American consciousness. Any discussion of forms of service appropriate for life today ignores this history at its peril.

III

At this point I turn to two Biblical themes not unrelated to the roots of American service. I referred earlier to the Protestant Reformers' recovery of the Hebrew covenant tradition as seminal for the generation of democratic political theory. The concept of *covenant* sets the entire human enterprise into relationship with a sense of ultimate reality. It introduces mutual responsibility as a fundamental category of existence. But *covenant*, in the Biblical sense, is not a *natural* phenomenon: It is created—initiated in history by the One Who is Ultimate. *Covenant* is accepted, broken, and restored in the give-and-take of historical life. It is a product of competing wills, never static, always assuming a new form. *Covenant*

rejects inherited authoritarianism on the one hand and, on the other hand, stands in opposition to the shifting sands of pragmatic contractualism.

In his book *Interpretation and Social Criticism*, Michael Waltzer describes how the covenant tradition worked in Hebrew society. That society, he writes, was a

... loose, localized conflict-ridden set of arrangements that stood at some distance from the unified hierarchies of Egypt and Assyria. The Bible clearly suggests strong lay and popular religiosity with two basic elements: individualized piety, and a common, but fiercely disputed, covenantal creed. The result was a culture of prayer and argument set apart from ceremony and sacrifice.³

In covenant with the Ultimate, human authority is always subject to challenge. Covenant recognizes the role of voluntary choice and agreement. But not without prayer and argument. Our choices are always subject to challenge from the Holy One. It was the constant role of prophetic interpretation to recall Israel to its covenantal roots.

It is only within this covenantal context that we can fully understand the doctrine of vocation or call to service. Every call is a challenge. It forces us to examine what we are doing with our lives by offering an

alternative. A vocation, by definition, cannot be unselfconscious. Engaging in vocation is an act of dissent from the conventions of social stagnation. Vocation results from responding to the inevitable arguments that arise within the covenantal community.

Covenant and vocation are two basic principles of public theology. Max Stackhouse, in his recent book *Public Theology and Political Economy*, puts it this way:

Those who are in positions of authority cannot lord it over others, for they are fundamentally in the service of purposes beyond their own. In addition, they are to assist [others] in becoming equipped for, finding, and living out . . . vocation. Further, if society at this or that stage of development is so designed that we or our neighbors are structurally prevented from becoming what we or they are called to be, then *society* is in error, and must be changed.⁴

Covenant is basic to the roots of service. Covenant is the relationship through which we are challenged to respond to the One Who is Ultimate by service to one another, and through which response we in turn challenge the unregenerated character of our society by promoting institutions of service.

The second Biblical theme basic to a radical understanding of

service has had a rich history of expression in American Life. The "kingdom of God" or to put it in words that are at once more contemporary and more ancient—the dominion of God—was a rallying cry for the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century social gospel, and has been a central motif for social activism through many generations. Whether expressed in terms of a warm and misty hope or in those of practical economic and political policies, the evocation of a world coming to completion pulls us toward history's goal.

The proclamation of God's dominion as drawing near is increasingly recognized as the heart of Jesus' ministry. Dominion refers both to the *rule* of God and also to the *place* in which that rule is exercised. In the words of New Testament scholar Burton Throckmorton,

Jesus did not understand the dominion of God to reveal God's power or to vindicate the righteous; rather, in the dominion of God salvation would come to the sick, the poor, the oppressed, and the unrighteous. The dominion of God encounters [us] and changes [our] perceptions of [ourselves] and the world. . . . It is where there is community. It is a new state of affairs, a fulfillment of the world. Therefore one "enters" it. . . . By various parables, Jesus creates the possibility of entering it, not as a state of existence, a *habitus*,

but as the possibility of allowing one's life to be determined by it.⁵

It is lamentable that in much contemporary preaching, the kingdom of God is often presented as a consumer commodity, something to be possessed by individual believers. But such preaching misses the point. The theme of God's dominion goes far back into Jewish antiquity, and was appropriated by Jesus from that history to mean *something by which we are possessed and through which community is realized*.

The orthodox Jewish scholar Pinchas Lapide, in his book *The Sermon on the Mount*,⁶ suggests that Jesus' teaching of the kingdom should be seen not only as the articulation of religious truth but also as a strategy for immediate survival, an outline of how to live faithfully toward fulfillment while enduring the suffering imposed by Roman oppression. For example, if a soldier asks you to go a mile, practice the presence of God's dominion by going two miles. This advice is given not merely as a call to altruistic service. It is presented as a concrete way of actualizing God's presence, of establishing a new relationship that challenges the soldier's authority, puts master and servant

in a reversed situation, allows God's rule to dominate the situation, and ultimately generates the power to overcome the authority of Rome, the symbol of political and secular power.

From this perspective, the dominion of God becomes a foundation for service, placing servanthood in the position of generating power. Serving redistributes power, not simply from the *haves* to the *have nots*, but from the *haves* to the whole community, within which all are equal. Service is then the practice of ultimate reality under the conditions and constraints of contemporary reality.

IV

Those of us who represent religious institutions find ourselves in a paradoxical situation discussing the possibilities for national service. American culture today is a battleground, where the forces of religious exclusivism contend with the growing dominance of secular vacuity. Meanwhile, the liberal, main-line religious traditions, which historically combined social service with religious fervor, appear today to be quite content in seeking social ends that are largely defined in secular political and economic language. As a result, we are

virtually without verbal or conceptual resources with which to discuss the ethical and directional dimensions of service. It is only in such an atmosphere that service in the Peace Corps can be misconstrued as being analogous to military service.

The problem we face is how to express the theological roots of service in a secular age without falling into the trap of religious extremism. It is as if we were in exile, cut off from the religious roots that have nourished our culture. How can we sing the Lord's song in a secular land?

Living within the covenant and under the dominion of God means that we are called to challenge, undermine, and break open the oppression of secular rule in American life without aiding and abetting the armies of religious exclusivism. In some ways, we may already be doing so. Given the forces of faith that have shaped our culture, it is clear that as a people, Americans do not want to be a wholly secular nation. The neo-evangelical movement of the late twentieth-century duly attests to an inherent resistance to secularism. But this neo-evangelical movement, instead of being the silent partner of democratic faith, has become the quite vocal partner of late capitalist and nationalist ideology.

It lends religious legitimization to a culture built on economic greed, political quiescence, and authoritarian social relationships.

Meanwhile, the economy that gave birth to this culture is itself undergoing a profound transformation. Thoughtful economists on the left, like Robert Heilbroner, and on the right, like Peter Peterson, are called attention to the national political consequences inherent in international capitalism. Domestic economic decision-making, they agree, must come under increasing political control. Will that control be democratic or authoritarian? Will that control be exercised by established corporate interests, or through responsible government means?

These questions are central to any discussion of the future of national service. The pattern of national service in an authoritarian, corporately-dominated national state will turn out to be quite different from service in a constituted democracy, whose scope extends to the full political and economic participation of all people. Indeed, the pattern of voluntary service promoted by religious bodies today will play a role in whether this nation moves toward corporate nationalism or democratic internationalism.

The emergence of the latter will

require a return to understanding the religious roots of service as an explicit and widely-articulated reality. We need a liberal religious revival. We need to reintroduce the vocabulary of covenant and vocation—of compassion and the dominion of God—into everyday political discourse.

An example of what I mean is found in the following excerpts from "The Biblical Imperative," the founding document of the Queens (New York) Citizens Organization:

We believe that God rules in the created order and in redemptive history, that God's intention is one of justice and equity. We, therefore, do not believe that our faith requires us to withdraw from engagement in the world or to concentrate on our personal salvation while the created order goes to "hell." God calls us to be active for the life of this world and this city. . . . We believe that poor and middle-class families have valid and complementary self-interests and that alliances can be made between them on the basis of shared concerns as well as shared ideology. . . . While we share many of the concerns about pressures breaking up the family, [about] radical change in culture brought about for fun and profit, and [about] the shifts in acceptable public behavior, we do not believe there are simple legislative answers to these pressures. We do not believe that change is bad of itself. Nor do we seek a religious empire or religious domination. But we do claim

vigorously the right to introduce our values into public dialogue.⁷

Another, more recent example, is found in the November-December, 1987 issue of the liberal Jewish Journal *Tikkun*. Editor Michael Learner here coins the term "Neo-Compassionism." Neo-compassionists emphasize

the psychological, emotional, ethical, and spiritual deficits of contemporary life. While a "Neo" doesn't deny the need for expanding social and economic benefits to the most oppressed . . . (the older forms of compassion), s/he insists also on the priority of a new kind of compassion: a compassion for the ways that our society, as currently structured, fails to provide adequate opportunities for nonalienating work and a fulfilling personal life embedded within an ethically, spiritually, and emotionally fulfilling social order. . . . A Neo-Compassionist politics will affirm the healthy part of the complex of reasons that draws people into religion and will fight for a progressive politics that acknowledges the spiritual truths in the religious worldviews, even as it rejects sexism, national chauvinism, and the uncritical subordination of intellect to an irrationally constituted authority.⁸

V

I believe that we are on the brink of a new era. For us to focus on service simply as a way to meet the unrealized needs of society, or to provide for the personal needs of youth, will not carry us very

far into this new era. The question facing religious interests is not so much how to react to current proposals for *national service* as it is how to generate a zeal for *public vocation*, how to issue a call for enlarging and extending public life as an expression of historic convenantal reality and the emerging dominion of God.

Finally, I believe that religious organizations here gathered need not only to critique plans for national service from the roots of their heritage, but also, and more importantly, to create new models and new paradigms for service. Our society will not be saved by national service. But national service may be saved by people of faith, people committed to

serving one another as a religious obligation.

The religious vision, finally, is not national but ecumenical, encompassing the whole inhabited earth. Public life today, and the quality of service that it requires, is international, intergenerational, and interfaith. Yet, as we survey the vast and wonderous opportunities before us, we do so as small and vulnerable individual souls, who must daily ask ourselves the ancient question from the *Pirkei Avot*: "If I am not for myself who will be? If I live only for myself, who am I?"

NOTES

¹ROOF, Wade Clark and William J. McKINNEY, Jr.; *American Mainline Religion: Its Changing Shape and Future*.

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²NICHOLAS, James Hastings; *Democracy and the Churches*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1951.

³WALTZER, Michael; *Interpretation and Social Criticism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987.

⁴STACKHOUSE, Max; *Public Theology and Political Economy*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1987.

⁵THROCKMORTON, Burton H., Jr.; "Evangelism and Mission in the New Testament," in *Prism: A Theological Forum for the United Church of Christ*. Vol. 2, No. 1, Spring, 1987.

⁶LAPIDE, Pinchas; *The Sermon on the Mount: Utopia or Program for Action?* Maryknoll, N.Y., Orbis, 1986.

⁷As quoted in CAMPBELL, David, "Church-State Separation and Competing Political Ideals: The Promise of Value-Based Community Organizing." Atlanta: Mercer University, pre-publication, MS, 1987.

⁸Editorial: "Neo-Compassionism," *Tikkun: A Bimonthly Jewish Critique of Politics, Culture and Society*. Nov./Dec., 1987.