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Theology and the Church's political stance

The subject of theology and the Church's political stance presupposes first of all a clarification of the question of what is to be understood by theology and what by the Church's political stance. Only when these two have been defined at least in broad outlines can the "and" be defined which is probably this paper's real concern.

What is theology?

Let us start then by asking what theology is. The answer should first of all be in terms of intellectual history, that theology is a specifically Christian phenomenon which derives from the peculiar structure of the act of faith involved in Christianity: the special development that European civilization has undergone among the civilizations of the world and the special place it has gained among them are closely connected with the structure that prevails here. To go into greater detail, theology necessarily results from the fusion of biblical faith and Greek rationality on which even the historical Christianity to be found in the New Testament already rests. When the gospel according to St John describes Christ as the logos, this fusion come very clearly to light. The passage is expressing the conviction that in Christian faith what is rational, basic reason itself comes to light and is indeed trying to say that the foundation of being is itself reason and that reason does not represent an accidental by-product from the ocean of the irrational from which

everything really came. The fundamental Christian act thus hides a twofold statement:

1) In Christian faith reason comes to light; faith precisely as faith wants reason.

2) Through Christian faith reason comes to light; reason presupposes faith as its environment.

This creates a relationship of tension which ultimately lies behind the "and" of our subject; on this basis it must belong to the nature and essence of Christian faith to seek its own reason and in that reason itself, the rationality of the real. But in return it places the task on reason, as far as its search is concerned, to recognize in faith the condition for its own effectiveness to be possible and not to push its absoluteness to the point of dissolving its own foundation, for that would mean confusing itself with the divine reason and thus surrendering the communication with the divine reason from which it lives. This kind of self-limitation of human reason may strike the contemporary reader as pre-critical. But that it is ultimately indispensable at least as a structural model has been shown by Horkheimer and Adorno with their analysis of the dialectic of the Enlightenment: enlightenment lives from the idea of the absoluteness, or we can well say the divinity, of the truth. If it no longer recognizes this condition for itself and pushes its own absoluteness beyond this presupposed absoluteness of truth, then by internal logic it returns to the justification of the irrational and turns reason itself into an irrational accident.¹ To provide evidence of this one does not need to point to thinkers who have declared freedom and human dignity to be out-dated concepts and have explicitly put the irrational above the rational or have given the two equal standing. In quite general terms, when the big bang counts as the absolute beginning of the universe reason is no longer the standard and foundation of reality but the irrational; even reason is then only a by-product of the irrational, the product of "chance and necessity", indeed, the result of a mistake, and to that extent itself too

¹ Cf. R. Spaemann, "Die christliche Religion und das Ende des modernen Bewusstseins", in *Internationale katholische Zeitschrift* 8 (1979), pp. 268ff.; A. Görres, *Kennt die Psychologie den Menschen?*, Munich 1978, pp. 21ff.

something ultimately irrational.² It cannot then be seen why one should see in it of all things an enduring standard, a final court of appeal; since reason itself is irrational, the irrational in all its forms can claim the same rights alongside reason and with reason.

But let us return to theology. It rests on the presupposition, itself a matter of faith, that what is believed, the basis and foundation of everything, is reasonable and is indeed reason itself. Hence it belongs to faith to seek to understand its foundation and its content, and it is precisely this undertaking that we call theology: more precisely we talk of theology when this undertaking takes place in an organized manner and under commonly recognized and well-founded rules that we describe as its method. This means that theology takes up the fundamental question of Greek philosophy with which the human mind entered on a new stage of its history: the question of truth itself, of being itself. Christian theology does not just interpret texts; it asks about truth itself and it sees man (and woman) as capable of truth. I thus think Martin Krielle is right when he says that Christian theology, if it is functioning correctly, is to be seen as a force for enlightenment.³

Certainly what this shows at once are the problems connected with the concept of enlightenment. The further the Enlightenment progressed historically, the more it fell victim

² M. Krielle, *Befreiung und politische Aufklärung*, Freiburg 1980, pp. 248f.: "The idea that even before the big bang the logos existed from which everything came into being and without which nothing came into being, and that in some way this logos has its effects on human life — this or a similar assumption is today as it was before the minimum condition for respect for people. In the understanding of the political enlightenment 'human dignity' is a metaphysical concept. It becomes meaningless under the presupposition that man is 'merely' the result of accidental evolution." Cf. on the other hand the radically anti-metaphysical stance to be found in Jacques Monod, *Chance and Necessity: An Essay on the Natural Philosophy of Modern Biology*, translated by Austryn Wainhouse, London, 1972 (French original, *Le hasard et la nécessité*, Paris 1970), p. 114: "Even today a good many distinguished minds seem unable to accept or even to understand that from a source of noise natural selection could quite unaided have drawn all the music of the biosphere." On the emergence of life and of man cf. p. 137: "Our number came up in the Monte Carlo game."

³ M. Krielle, op. cit.: cf. "Politische Aufklärung gegen neuen Dogmatismus? Ein Gespräch mit Professor M. Krielle", in *Herder-Korrespondenz* 34 (1980), pp. 120–127.

to a narrowing down of the concept of reason: what is reasonable is what can be reproduced. This means that reason becomes positivist. It thereby limits itself to what can be repeated experimentally; but this has the consequence that it renounces its original question, "What is this?", and replaces it by the pragmatic question "How does this function?" Once again this means that, under the pressure of its standards of certainty, reason renounces the question of truth and investigates only that of feasibility. Thereby it has fundamentally abdicated as reason.⁴

This is precisely the point the development has reached for some time, and it is this that is tearing the university apart from within. The university arose because faith declared the search for truth to be possible and compelled this search, which then for its part demanded an expansion of its field into all the spheres of human knowledge and thus produced the various faculties, which were all held together in the diversity of their objects of study by being jointly oriented towards the question of truth; and the ultimate possibility of investigating this question they knew to be preserved in the faculty of theology. Because human knowledge was based on ultimate unity those who knew and those who were seeking to know could unite in the university of learners and teachers. The university is a product of the mandate of truth to be found in the Christian act of faith; when this context and connection is completely dissolved, there arises a crisis of the university that involves its foundations. The first stage of such a dissolution is to begin with when the question of truth disappears from the university as an unscientific question. The university falls under the law of positivism and thus becomes a conglomeration of technical departments in which the various specializations of positivist reason and functional thinking are further developed and make the greatest claims for themselves.

⁴ Cf. for the problems of modern scientific thought K. Hübner, *Kritik der wissenschaftlichen Vernunft*, Freiburg 1978. Important as an attempt to overcome positivism is Karl R. Popper, *Objective Knowledge: An Evolutionary Approach*, Oxford 1972. On rationality and religion see R. Schaeffler, *Religion und kritisches Bewusstsein*, Freiburg 1973. The standpoint of positivist thought is formulated afresh with crystalline clarity by Jacques Monod, op. cit., pp. 30–31. But Monod is honest and brings out the agony to which thought is condemned by such a ban on questions as appears imperative to him.

This was the situation of the German universities from the end of the war up till 1968. What is common to the individual departmental undertakings in this situation is not just the positivist limitation of reason, the ban on the question of truth. Given this kind of orientation of the university the charge of departmental lunacy is not totally uncalled for, because the positivist fundamental principle compels positivist compartmentalization and excludes as alien to its method the profounder question of the origin and purpose of the whole. To this extent the explosion of 1968 was not simply unwarranted but unavoidable on the basis of what was at stake. Contrary to appearances Marxist ideology, whose various different variants provided the criticism, remains ultimately inherent in the system.⁵ As materialism it necessarily rejects the primacy of the logos: in the beginning stands not reason but the irrational; reason as one of the development products of the irrational is ultimately itself something irrational. This means that things as irrational objects have no truth; only man can make truth, which is a human construct, and that means that in reality there is no truth. There are only human constructs, that is, the necessary bias of reason which recognizes in advance the force of development, anticipates it and thereby raises up the pressure towards freedom. Positivism can indeed be transcended on the basis of these presuppositions by instances of the bestowal of meaning which can then be represented as moral because they anticipate the law of development; from this depends the fascination of these attitudes and also the inevitable inferiority of all bourgeois arguments and analyses rooted in positivism. But what unites the different specializations in this case and raises them up once again to become a university is factional constraint, and hence the university as a locus of freedom for enlightenment is not restored but finally negated.

⁵ R. Spaemann, *Einsprüche. Christliche Reden*, Einsiedeln 1977, p. 8: "Among its roles this civilization also supplies the role of opposition, the role of criticism and of resistance that changes the system. Its official version is today Marxism. Its goal is all the same none other in reality than the perfection of that functional system of technical rationality."

Let us return to theology. If in a university constituted on positivist lines it is naïve enough not just to explain the historical conditions in which John could say: "In the beginning was the logos" but believes this statement, regards it as truth and on this basis enquires further after the truth itself, then it appears opposed to the system and does not fit into the self-understanding of a modern university. So it seems reasonable for it to align itself with the prevailing conditions. This is easier than it may seem to an outsider. Theology can quite simply, instead of seeking truth itself in its authoritative texts, explain the historical conditions in which these texts arose, try to reconstruct their original significance by using historical methods, and compare them critically with the interpretations which have come into being during the course of their history. That means that it can withdraw into an absolute compartmental professionalism and thus show itself to be fully adapted to the canon of positivist reason. It thus becomes of equal status to the other disciplines of learning. The only thing is that the special task that originally was placed on it and on philosophy now falls by the wayside: the question about the whole, transcending the separate disciplines, that is now no longer asked. In such a situation it is likely that even theology students become satiated with the forced professionalism of their teachers, see more true theology in the bias of reason for the better world of the future than in the clarification of historical or structural states of affairs, and understand theology as a practical science in the sense of this kind of option for a future world. The idea that orthopraxis precedes orthodoxy has its origin here; what is true must arise by means of a human construct for which a practical philosophy works out the instructions for action. Hence it is no accident that the student uprisings in Germany in 1968 largely began in the theological faculties because it was in them that the crisis of positivist professionalism was most keenly felt, and their confessional dimension, stripped of its claim to truth, could effortlessly be translated into a partisanship for a better world, a partisanship that at last was once again understandable.

The Church and theology

At this point the transition from theology to politics becomes visible, as does the internal principle of what is termed political theology. At the same time we come up against the phenomenon of the Church, which so far has not yet been explicitly dealt with. The Church must of course appear as an obstacle to the future everywhere that the question of truth is understood either as pre-critical naïveté or as bourgeois illusion. But from our considerations it has also become clear that in the first case people are left at the mercy of anonymous interests and in the second are delivered over to factional constraints, and so this accusation should not frighten us. In order to provide at least an outline of the Church's understanding of itself we must return once again to our starting-point, the description of the Christian act of faith. We said that faith demands and reveals reason, understands itself as the environment of reason, so that faith is not correct if the insights to which it leads are not at least rudimentarily reasonable, while on the other hand reason cuts the ground from beneath its feet if it does away with faith. Such statements do not presuppose an abstract reason which operates as it were floating freely without being conditioned by historical and social factors; this concept of reason can rightly be criticized as a bourgeois fiction. Rather what is presupposed is that reason needs historical and social conditions of life in order to be able to be effective as reason. Hence the community of faith, which is called the Church, belongs to the Christian concept of faith and of reason; according to this the Church is the environment in which living in keeping with the faith is possible as a community act and is also the historical condition for reason to be able to pose the question made possible by faith and to maintain its claim to truth. On the one hand this question of reason can only be asked as a community question, in the context of a community that guarantees the rationality of reason; on the other hand it must be placed by such a community within the personal responsibility of the person asking the question and be borne by this responsibility.⁶

⁶ Cf. J. Pieper, *Buchstabierübungen*, Munich 1980, pp. 32ff.

With this we come to the central problem of this essay. Critics of the new right hold against the Church that its relationship to science and learning is precisely the same as with Marxism: knowledge is linked to party doctrine. The tension between the Church's teaching authority and theological science accordingly has two different points of origin. The first is a tension that stems from the option for a Christianity understood as Marxism, as this has recently been formulated by Ernesto Cardenal, who sees two Churches as existing today: one which is an instrument of liberation and which, in keeping with the humanist impulses of Marxism, seeks to bring the society of the future into being—the kingdom of God, in Cardenal's view; the other that maintains society as it has existed up till now and is in reaction against this new Church. Here the tension is less one between the teaching authority and theology as one between two different realizations of the Church in which admittedly the teaching authority appears in some respects as the core of the reactionary concept of the Church. The other kind of tension between theology and the teaching authority rests on the train of thought portrayed above: the teaching authority appears as a party organ which aims to bind learning to an authority alien to it, to the "orthodoxy" of its party line.

That the teaching authority can come in danger of behaving like a party organ cannot be doubted. But that structurally it is something of this kind and thus an instrument of party constraint that is alien to learning must be disputed. The difference between the structure of a party constituted on ideological grounds and the Church lies precisely in the question of truth. Materialism, as we have already seen, presupposes that what we have at the beginning is not reason but the irrational—matter. Consequently reason is the product of the irrational: reason does not precede man but only comes into being as a human construct—"orthodoxy" can always be only the product of orthopraxis even if the blueprint of theory must squeeze in ahead of practice. This means that truth is absorbed in the construct of the party and is totally dependent on it. The fundamental conviction of Christian faith on the contrary is that at the beginning we have reason and with it truth; it

brings forth man and human reason as capable of truth. Man's relationship to truth is first of all essentially receptive and not productive. The community of the Church is admittedly necessary as the historical condition for the activity of reason, but the Church does not coincide with the truth. It is not the constructor of truth but is constructed by it and is the place where it is perceived. Truth therefore remains essentially independent of the Church and the Church is ordered towards it as a means. For this reason there is here a genuine "and"—theology *and* the Church's teaching authority as realities that are ordered to each other. Hence it is the Church's function to delineate the boundary where theology dissolves its own environment, the Church, and thus in the dialectic of enlightenment does away with the conditions for enlightenment. But it is not its function to prescribe for theology beyond the basic structure of the faith what its content and method should be. One must admit that, because this specific mutual relationship between the Church and theology is alien to both the positivist and the Marxist cast of mind and thus to the two fundamental attitudes predominant today, the danger from both sides is very great of failing to achieve this relationship; on the other hand the contrast to these two modern positions can contribute towards what is specific in the Christian position being first properly recognized.

The concept of the Church's political stance

With this we come to the final point of our considerations. After clarifying what theology is and what the Church is politically in relation to theology this seeks to describe how theology and the Church's political stance are related to each other. But first of all we must take a clearer look at the relationship of the Church to the political sphere. For this Christ's words remain fundamental: "Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mt 22:21). This saying opened up a new section in the history of the relationship between politics and

religion.⁷ Until then the general rule was that politics itself was the sacral. Admittedly the later ancient world knew free religious groups, what are termed the mystery cults, whose attraction depended on the decline of the state religion. But tolerance with regard to them rested on the presupposition that the state was recognized as the bearer of a supreme sacrality. It safeguarded the ethical binding force of its laws and with this the human guarantee of its cohesion by these laws and in them the state itself appearing as the expression of a sacral, divine and not purely human will; because they are divine they must continue unquestionably and unconditionally to bind men and women.

This equation of the state's claim on man with the sacral claim of the universal divine will itself was cut in two by the saying of Jesus we have quoted above. At the same time the whole idea of the state as cherished by the ancient world was called into question, and it is completely understandable that in this challenge to its totality the state of the ancient world saw an attack on the foundations of its existence which it avenged with the death penalty: if Jesus's saying was valid the Roman state could not in fact continue as it had done up till then. At the same time it must be said that it is precisely this separation of the authority of the state and sacral authority, the new dualism that this contains, that represents the origin and the permanent foundation of the western idea of freedom. From now on there were two societies related to each other but not identical with each other, neither of which had this character of totality. The state is no longer itself the bearer of a religious authority that reaches into the ultimate depths of conscience, but for its moral basis refers beyond itself to another community. This community in its turn, the Church, understands itself as a final moral authority which however depends on voluntary adherence and is entitled only to spiritual but not to civil penalties, precisely because it does not have the status the state has of being accepted by all as something given in advance. Thus each of these communities

⁷ Cf. for this entire section A.A.I. Ehrhardt, *Politische Metaphysik von Solon bis Augustin*, three volumes, Tübingen 1959 – 1969, especially volume 2, *Die christliche Revolution*, 1959.

is circumscribed in its radius, and on the balance of this relation depends freedom. This is not in any way to dispute the fact that this balance has often enough been disturbed, that in the middle ages and in the early modern period things often reached the point of Church and state in fact blending into one another in a way that falsified the faith's claim to truth and turned it into a compulsion so that it became a caricature of what was really intended. But even in the darkest periods the pattern of freedom presented in the fundamental evidences of the faith remained an authority which could be appealed to against the blending together of civil society and the community of faith, an authority to which the conscience could refer and from which the impulse towards the dissolution of total authority could emerge.⁸ The modern idea of freedom is thus a legitimate product of the Christian environment; it could not have developed anywhere else. Indeed, one must add that it cannot be separated from this Christian environment and transplanted into any other system, as is shown very clearly today in the renaissance of Islam; the attempt to graft on to Islamic societies what are termed western standards cut loose from their Christian foundations misunderstands the internal logic of Islam as well as the historical logic to which these western standards belong, and hence this attempt was condemned to fail in this form. The construction of society in Islam is theocratic, and therefore monist and not dualist; dualism, which is the precondition for freedom, presupposes for its part the logic of the Christian thing. In practice this means that it is only where the duality of Church and state, of the sacral and the political authority, remains maintained in some form or another that the fundamental pre-condition exists for freedom. Where the Church itself becomes the state freedom becomes lost. But also when the Church is done away with as a public and publicly relevant authority, then too freedom is extinguished, because there the state once again claims completely for itself the justification of morality; in the

⁸ For the patterns and problems of the historical development important material is to be found in U. Duchrow, *Christenheit und Weltverantwortung*, Stuttgart 1970; documents in H. Rahner, *Kirche und Staat im Frühen Christentum*, Munich 1961.

profane post-Christian world it does not admittedly do this in the form of a sacral authority but as an ideological authority—that means that the state becomes the party, and since there can no longer be any other authority of the same rank it once again becomes total itself. The ideological state is totalitarian; it must become ideological if it is not balanced by a free but publicly recognized authority of conscience. When this kind of duality does not exist the totalitarian system is unavoidable.

With this the fundamental task of the Church's political stance, as I understand it, has been defined; its aim must be to maintain this balance of a dual system as the foundation of freedom. Hence the Church must make claims and demands on public law and cannot simply retreat into the private sphere. Hence it must also take care on the other hand that Church and state remain separated and that belonging to the Church clearly retains its voluntary character.

The Church's political stance and theology

This also defines in its fundamental outlines the relationship of the Church's political stance and theology. The Church's political stance must not be directed simply at the Church's power; according to what has been said this can become a direct contradiction of the Church's true nature and would consequently go directly against the moral content of the Church's political stance. It is guided rather by theological perception and not simply by the idea of increasing influence and power. It must incidentally, following our considerations so far, take care for the safeguarding of the dual structure with regard to theology; the Church's ministry should not become a central committee of the party in relation to theology, a body that scrutinizes the party's ideology of the strategy of gaining power. As we have established, the Church understands itself rather as the actual environment of reason in its search for meaning. In keeping with this it must on the one hand warn reason against an abstract independence that becomes fictitious, but on the other hand it must respect the proper responsibility of reason

asking questions within the environment of faith. Just as in the field of the relationship of Church and state it is here also a question of safeguarding the duality as a fruitful functional relationship. Just as in that case two fundamental distortions of this relationship are possible. One is to be found when the Church's ministry cuts away the autonomy of theology and leaves it merely the task of looking for proofs of what the teaching authority has proposed; theology in that case is degraded to the function of a party ideology. But another distortion occurs when theology dissolves the Church or only accepts it as a supportive organization without spiritual content. Then it no longer reflects the spiritual basis of a living community; in this case its active agent is merely the private reason of the individual scholar, and that means, as has already been shown, that it becomes either positivist or ideological. But then it ceases to be theology. That means that by making itself completely autonomous it attains not some higher level but its destruction as theology. Whenever one of these two voices, that of the Church's ministry or that of theology, loses its autonomy then the other side also loses its essential content.

In concordats this particular relationship is translated into the legal form of the *nihil obstat*. As representative of the Church's ministry the bishop does not take a positive part in choosing the occupant of a professorial chair, but he has the negative function of a right of objection, whereby the freedom of theology on the one hand and its link to the Church on the other is in my opinion expressed with complete accuracy. If I have been right in what I said earlier about the significance of theology for the existence of the university and if for its part theology cannot exist without reference to the Church, then such an order of things ultimately serves the university as such and as a whole. Of its essence this relationship of tension will always be critical. But as long as it is critical it is also alive; this critical liveliness is ultimately what the relationship of the Church's political stance and theology is concerned with.