On Roman Catholic Political Philosophy
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Adding the phrase “Roman Catholic” to “political philosophy” implies that political philosophy is a work of reason that, in its own order, reaches legitimate issues and problems that it cannot itself resolve. This phrase suggests that, contained within revelation, are responses to the unanswered issues as posed in political philosophy. These responses suggest that there is a coherent relation between reason and revelation that arises directly out of political philosophy as such.

Where do we find outside certain circles of present-day Western society any value system which does not rest on theoretical premises of one kind or another—premises which claim to be simply absolutely universally true, and which as such are legitimately exposed to rational criticism? I fear that the field within which relativists can practice sympathetic understanding is restricted to the community of relativists who understand each other with great sympathy because they are united by identically the same fundamental commitment, or rather by identically the same rational insight into the truth of relativism. What claims to be the final triumph over provincialism reveals itself as the most amazing manifestation of provincialism.

—Leo Strauss, “Social Science and Humanism”

No statistic aiming at a quantitative measurement of faith (for example, the number of people who participate in religious ceremonies) will get to the heart of the matter. Here numbers alone are not enough.

—John Paul II, Crossing the Threshold of Hope

I.

Whether precisely “political philosophy” in contrast to contemporary, though not classical “political science,” has a place within the “social sciences” is a controverted question, not least because political philosophy claims to be a pursuit of the truth of political things within the order of all things. “Faith,” as John Paul II remarked, is not, as such, subject to scientific analysis. It is a grace, a gift, not a thing with measurable quantity. The contradictions involved in the so-called “truth of relativism,” as
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Strauss put it, do not escape the purview of political philosophy. Just what “Roman Catholicism” has to do with political philosophy, moreover, is yet another issue. Obviously, its claim to truth is rooted in a revelation, which is not available, so it is claimed, to those who do not share its premises.

What I wish briefly to propose here is the following thesis: “Political philosophy stands at the juncture of philosophy itself and revelation.” Political philosophy does not have its origins in Weberian value neutrality conjoined with “scientific” analyses of means to achieve arbitrary “values.” Political philosophy precedes modern physical science. It does not have the same subject matter. It does not presuppose “science” but the common sense understanding of political things. The scientist himself first lives among human, not scientific, things. Political philosophy has its articulated origins in the trials of Socrates and Christ, in the Platonic reflections about the death of the philosopher in the best existing city of his time. Must the philosopher, the truth, always die in actual cities?

What guides my reflections here is the effort to state how reason and revelation can be related in a non-contradictory way so that philosophy remains philosophy and revelation remains revelation. Revelation is addressed to reason. It is intended ultimately to be understood, not simply to mystify. Intellects higher than human ones may exist, but they do not contradict reason; reason and revelation are not understood to have different ultimate origins. Philosophy, essentially, is openness to the whole, to the truth of what is, whatever be its source. To exclude revelation from philosophical consideration is itself to be unphilosophical, to study a part and not the whole. We do not claim that philosophy can understand the whole by itself. That would divinize philosophy. We do maintain that revelation can itself have an intelligibility to it that can address something brought up by reason. In principle, what is known by higher intellects could well inform lesser ones to know more.

Why does political philosophy stand as the “mediator,” as it were, between philosophy and revelation? It is because in political philosophy questions arise, the answers to which provide insight into the way philosophy and revelation relate to one another without violating the integrity of either. To be philosophy, it must be allowed to be itself. The same is true of revelation. It needs to be allowed to propose what it is. Both of these realities manifest themselves within historical, actually existing cities. The city has power of life and death over philosophers or believers. And this power can be and often is used to silence or restrict both philosophy and theology.

Obviously, in this context, I assume the truth of the Roman Catholic understanding of revelation in comparison to other concepts found in Christianity and other religions that claim to be “revealed,” basically Is-
lam and Mormonism. Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, and other positions are not strictly speaking revelations but philosophies and need to be treated at that level. Moreover, the examination of revelation by reason or philosophy needs to be part of the pursuit of truth as a whole. To provide for a place for this examination was the original purpose of universities. Revelation involves words and deeds, some of which at least could not be grasped immediately by reason. But it also contains other truths that reason can understand. This combination of things understood and of things not immediately understood gives us the impression that a common origin underlies both in a coherent whole. It also suggests that a higher reason is free to inform or instruct a more limited reason.

I will approach this issue through the eyes of the young Plato in his reflections on the public execution of Socrates, the philosopher, in Athens, the city of the philosophers. In my understanding, the death of Christ, some four hundred years later, was substantially over the same public issue, granting the existential difference between Christ and Socrates. Christ was tried under Roman jurisdiction, the fairest legal system in the ancient world. Some few, of course, find Socrates guilty as charged. He was, by local civic standards, a disturber of the peace. The fathers of the city saw him as a corrupter of their sons, the youth, the potential philosophers of the city. Christ was charged with disloyalty to Caesar and undermining the local laws. Both Socrates and Christ were unjustly found guilty in a political context that proceeded to execute them. It follows that truth can be seen, in some basic sense, to be in conflict with the city. It is the city that defines and has the power to establish what religion and philosophy may function within its limits, whatever be its truth. All cities are aware that philosophy and religion can beget extremists that must be dealt with.

Plato, as a result of his experience in Athens, held that the best city could only exist in speech, in philosophical argument. Christ was explained by the prophets and apostles. His existence in this world included the transcendent nature of His being. In either case, the city was controlled by custom, law, and power. Caesar held the sword, which St. Paul said should be used to protect us from “evildoers.” The Athenian assembly, by a legal vote, ordered Socrates to drink the hemlock. The power of the state killed the just men, and by so doing, legitimized every effort to define and limit the power of the state to what properly belongs to Caesar.

The question thus arose: “Are there any limits to the democracy, to Caesar?” In the persons of Thrasymachus and Callicles, Plato already understood the tyrannical implications when that question is answered negatively. In the Acts of the Apostles, Peter and the other apostles explained to the authorities that, in the case of conflict, they would obey God rather
than men (Acts 5:29). We now have democratic states that no longer accept Peter’s position.

Political philosophy—as Strauss said—does not concern itself with the philosophical conception of political things. Rather it deals with the political conception of philosophic things. It is a question of the relation between practical and theoretical intellect, to use Aristotle’s terms. That is, the common sense politician has to deal with actual philosophers, not a few of whom are distinctly odd, if not violent. The common view of the philosophers was that of the Thracian maidens who giggled when they saw a couple of philosophers fall into a ditch because while arguing they did not notice something everyone else noticed. The common conception of philosophers was, as even Paul hinted to the Corinthians, that they were “foolish.” They seemed to be disruptive of civic order whose keeping belonged to the politician, not the philosopher. The third choice would be that both philosophy and revelation were legitimate if they knew and kept their respective places.

II.

Plato wanted to know whether an actual city existed in which the philosopher would not be killed. He decided, after long argument, that there was none. The only city that is safe for the philosopher is the city in speech, in argument. The politician cannot destroy this city, but he can destroy the philosopher who thinks it. In all existing cities, the philosopher will be under threat unless he can persuade the politician, who is not a philosopher, but not necessarily unintelligent, that the city, to be itself, needs philosophy. The city exists to make all human goods possible, including philosophy, even if philosophy is not itself subject to the methods of politics.

The politician, for his part, knows that he has the power to kill or silence philosophers, whatever they maintain. This power means that the philosopher’s only defense is his freedom and ability to speak the truth, to persuade the politician that he needs to know more than what the city as such can provide. In the Gorgias, we knew the philosopher was dead when the politician refused to talk with him any longer. This need to educate the non-philosophical politician was also Aristotle’s point that the politician in knowing music and literature could begin to sense the need for things “beyond politics,” things that the city, to be a city, also needed.

St. Augustine took up this Platonic theme in the City of God, a book with practically the same title as the Republic. Augustine agreed with Plato that the philosopher was not safe in any existing city. But he disagreed with him in the specific location of the city in speech. The “city in speech” did indicate that existing cities were flawed, mostly oligarchies and de-
mocracies with tendencies to tyranny. Augustine was a realist. He also, like Machiavelli, saw what men did “do” to themselves and others. This realistic look at the cities of this world was familiar to Augustine under the influence of the doctrine of original sin.

Augustine also understood that a true “City of God” did exist, but not in this world. The whole drama of judgment, as it is found in the Republic and in Scripture, was designed to decide membership in this city or its opposite, the City of Man. Again to recall, the whole issue of the city arose over the decisions to kill Socrates and Christ. The only way that the world was not created in injustice, as Plato saw it, was if there was a final requiting for the puzzlement of Glaucon and Adeimantus about the common view that the just were punished and the evil rewarded for their deeds in the cities of this world. The best that existing cities could do was to prevent the worst, or much of it. Regimes were described according to how much they succeeded. Good regimes were rare, though they did occur once in a while, and the worst regimes usually did not last too long.

Aristotle had maintained, famously, that if man were the highest being, politics would be the highest science. Since he did not think man was the highest being, politics was not the highest science. We can reasonably conclude from this principle something higher than politics could be found, namely, metaphysics. Likewise, something transcendent that dealt with what metaphysics left open was also possible. For this reason, I have argued in At the Limits of Political Philosophy that issues like evil, death, and hell, all of which were first treated by Plato, have a legitimate place within political philosophy itself.

Politics, as opposed to political philosophy, describes the resulting regimes that are open to men who manifest various mixtures of virtue and vice in every regime. The classical division of monarchy, aristocracy, polity, tyranny, oligarchy, democracy, and mixed regimes, themselves based on the habits of actual citizens, remains the best description of actual regimes in this world. The universal acceptance of “democracy” as the universal “best” regime for all men is itself a product of the ideology that denies the existence of a transcendent order to which actual men are destined.

We can, I think, catch something of the significance of Roman Catholic political philosophy if we consider the argument that Benedict XVI provided in his “Regensburg Lecture.” In this academic lecture, Benedict was concerned to show the relation of revelation and reason. He showed this relationship in two ways. First, he pointed out that this relation was already in the Old Testament, especially in the name of God in Exodus. Secondly, Benedict argued that the direction of missionary endeavor in the
Acts of the Apostles was not arbitrary. While the Apostles were directed to all nations eventually, a certain priority was found. This priority was manifest when Paul was called to “go over into Macedonia.” We need to recall that Aristotle’s father was in the court of Philip of Macedon, while evidently Aristotle was a rather unsuccessful tutor for Philip’s son, the great Alexander. Aristotle never accepted Alexander’s notion of a world empire as the best city for men. It was in its Roman wording that Augustine translated Plato’s Republic as the “City of God,” a city that was not merely “of speech” or of this world.

But the essential issue was that Paul was sent to the home of the philosophers. It was Benedict’s wise view that until Catholic revelation had addressed itself to reason—and reason was lodged in Athens, not Jerusalem—it could not progress in the world. It needed a basis that was found in all men, at least potentially, so that revelation could present itself as coherent. But this approach also implied that what was addressed to the reason of the philosophers was itself coherent. It was based on logos. Indeed, the very center of this revelation was specifically called “the Word,” the Logos. Augustine had said that in examining Platonic philosophy that he did find the word. What he did not find was the word made “flesh.”

And it was this “being made flesh” around which much of the intellectual efforts of Catholic thinkers revolved. Indeed, most subsequent heresies were not and still are not so much over the existence of God as over the Incarnation of the Son of God into this world. This issue, I might add, is also the point of Benedict’s three-volume study Jesus of Nazareth. The conclusion of this book is that, after studying all the literature on the topic, there is only one conclusion, namely, that Christ is who He said He was. Benedict arrived at this conclusion only after having examined all the arguments that claimed that Christ could not have been who He said He was. In other words, Catholicism is very much a revelation that takes reason seriously.

III.

Lucy and Charlie Brown are at the stone fence. Lucy is pensive. With a forlorn look, head in both hands, she listens as Charlie Brown asks her: “Does it bother you to think that there may be people around who dislike you?” Lucy, surprised by the question, perks up. With Charlie Brown looking at her, she ponders it, as if the thought had never occurred to her: “Dislike ME? How could anyone possibly dislike ME? There’s nothing to dislike.” In the next scene, both Lucy and Charlie Brown gaze into the distance. Still incredulous, she tries to imagine how she could be disliked: “Jealous, maybe. . . . Yes, I could understand that. I can see how someone
could be jealous of me. . . . But dislike? No, that’s just not possible.” So in
the final scene, Lucy turns to Charlie Brown: “Now, let’s get back to your
original question.” To this, Charlie Brown, in complete consternation, can
only respond: “Forget it.”

What does this amusing scene have to do with our topic of reason and
revelation? It is, I suspect, for so many, simply incomprehensible that they
belong together in some basic fashion. Revelation does have a legitimate
place within political philosophy. Not to deal with it reveals a blindness
about the scope of the discipline. Lucy finds it unintelligible that anyone
could dislike her. Charlie Brown wonders, given her personality, if anyone
does like her. I conclude from this incident that sometimes we do not see
what is there, not because it is not there, but because we do not want to
know that it is there even if many others can see that it is.

The primary way that reason and revelation come together in such
a fashion that the integrity of neither is compromised is through the in­
completeness of political philosophy within its own order. Aristotle had
observed that if the gods could be expected to give us anything it would
be happiness. Likewise, at his death, Socrates assumed that he would, as
immortal, continue his life of conversation with the gods and heroes. In
his examination of the virtue of hope, Benedict XVI touched on the Pla­
tonic idea that the world would be created in injustice if all actual crimes
were not punished or all good works not rewarded. Obviously, this latter
requirement does not happen in the world, even when many philosophies
and ideologies seem to respond to its implicit demand.

Aristotle had concluded that man’s highest good was contemplative,
knowing the highest things in their causes, in a complete life, a life that
would include friendship. We add to these remarks that the state is not it­sself a substance, that it cannot itself be “happy” except in some analogous
sense. We see that philosophy presents us with many unanswered ques­
tions, but legitimate ones. While happiness seems to explain the end of
human moral actions, it remains vague. The death of Socrates and Christ
were real deaths. Yet, the sense of justice requires not that everyone be
vaguely punished or rewarded, but that specifically those persons who
were responsible. There is need for a universal judgment that is yet par­
ticular to the deed.

Benedict cites the two Marxist philosophers, Adorno and Horkheimer,
to the effect that they realized that their complaint about injustice did im­
ply not just the immortality of the soul but the resurrection of the body. It
was in human form that the crimes or virtues came forth. Of course, it did
not require Marxists to explain it to them for Christians to understand that
their revelation was addressed to a fundamental, unanswered human con­
cern, namely, the abidingness of our very individual and personal being. It is not the state that endures persecution or participates in joy. Such events always happen to a personal being. Civil societies are not in the category of substance but of relation. They make possible an order in which good and truth can actually exist. Truth only exists when someone is actually knowing it.

The question of love and friendship brings up the same issue. Obviously, we can only have a few friends. And even fewer good ones. Yet friendship seems to demand for its reality permanence and, in many cases, exclusivity. We are not to be friends with everyone for that would make it impossible to be friends with someone. The revelational tradition addresses itself precisely to these concerns. Friendship demands not merely immortality but resurrection. Justice demands particular judgment, not vague generalities. My point here is that philosophy at its best has presented for us many unanswered issues. The very life of philosophy brings these issues up in each life either directly through experience or indirectly through literature and reflection. The life that does not examine them, as Socrates said, is not worth living. Thus, philosophy by being philosophy contains unanswered questions. Yet, for philosophy, openness to the whole must remain “open.” Political philosophy, from its own origins, tells us of the city in speech and the deaths of Socrates and Christ in the best cities of their times.

So, in conclusion, why can there be a case for “Roman Catholic political philosophy?” It is because reason, in reflecting on itself, can see its own enigmatic incompleteness. It also sees the myriads of answers to these issues posed by past politicians and philosophers. Reason also, without necessarily requiring belief, can understand what it is that revelation, at its best, has proposed. Here, there is a body of knowledge in the world, claiming transcendent origin, that proposes a number of facts and positions that, when examined, do seem to make sense as answers to the unanswered questions as posed. What political philosophy cannot do is to conclude from reason to revelation’s truth. But what it can do is to recognize that the facts raised by revelation are possible answers to the questions as posed.

In other words, political philosophy provides a basis whereby revelation must be included within its intellectual sphere, while revelation must remain true to itself as it is handed down. Only in this latter form—in the Trinity, Resurrection, judgment—does the world of reason and revelation cohere in an openness to the whole. The believer is then not irrational in seeing the good sense of revelation. The philosopher understands that his questions do seem to have a coherent answer that does answer reason, but does not arise primarily from its reasoning. For its dimensions seem to be
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beyond human reason, but somehow not beyond reason itself. That is why, in the end, we speak of “revelation” addressed to reason when reason is most active in considering its own limits and unanswered questions. Political philosophy witnesses to the deaths of Christ and Socrates. Revelation is, at a minimum, a coherent answer to this witness. If the relation is held to be incomprehensible, it is most likely because we will not to see rather than because there is nothing there to see.

Notes