

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF POLITICS

by Rousas John Rushdoony

The Reverend Rousas J. Rushdoony, theologian and prolific author, delivered this paper to Hillsdale College students and faculty during the third seminar of The Center for Constructive Alternatives, The Politics of Babel: Utopia Revisited?

The salutation *hail* or *ave* comes to us in two dramatic instances from the first century. The gladiators of the arena, in the Roman games, paraded before the assembled throng with a fifty-piece band playing a march. As they came to the emperor's private box, they halted, raised their right hands straight out, and chanted "Hail, Caesar! We who are about to die salute you!"¹ In Nazareth of Galilee, the angel Gabriel appeared to the Virgin Mary, declaring, "Hail, thou that art highly favoured, the Lord is with thee: blessed art thou among women." (Luke 1: 28). Both salutations were religious. The Roman games were from the early days of Rome, the royal era of Romulus and Targuin, a basic religious practice of the state. According to Grimal, "their religious character is undeniable."² In these two *hails* we have symbolically set forth, the battle of 20 centuries, the battle of Christ versus Caesar, of man under God versus man under the state.

The era of Christ's birth was alive with the expectation of a world savior. It was the time of *advent*, and the Roman poet Virgil used the word *adventus*. When Augustus assumed power, Virgil hailed him thus: "This is the man, the one who has been prophesied." The turning point of the ages has come. In the year 17 B.C., at the appearance of a strange star, Augustus inaugurated a twelve-day Advent celebration, and heralds were sent all over Italy to announce the ceremonies. The Roman college of priests, headed by Augustus, gave the masses absolution from past sins. The coinage hailed Augustus as "Son of God."³

Stauffer has tellingly summed up the imperial gospel as it was proclaimed on Roman coinage:

Two related coins from Spain direct attention to world history. One is like a summary of the scenery on the armour of Augustus: the sun-god

is soaring up with his crown of sun-rays and his outspread heavenly mantle, with the capricorn below, and between them the single word AUGUSTUS. The other shows the capricorn again, this time with the emblems of world dominion, the helm and the globe, and above them the emblem of the king of paradise, the cornucopia with the diadem, and again the single word AUGUSTUS. The symbolic meaning is clear: a new day is dawning for the world. The divine savior-king, born in the historical hour ordained by the stars, has come to power on land and sea, and inaugurates the cosmic era of salvation. Salvation is to be found in none other save Augustus, and there is no other name given to men in which they can be saved. This is the climax of the Advent proclamation of the Roman empire.⁴

In not too many years, a disciple of Jesus Christ was to declare, in a challenge to the religious and civil leaders of Judea, and to all authorities: "Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved" (Acts 4:12). Warfare between Christ and Caesar was thus inevitable. Two rival gods claiming the same jurisdiction over man. It was not a struggle between church and state but between two kingdoms each claiming ultimate and divine powers, Rome and the Kingdom of God.

The Roman poet Ovid (Publius Ovidius Naso, 43 B.C. - A.D. 18) began his *Metamorphoses* with an account of creation. Ovid held to the primacy of chaos, with all being in total disorder and randomness. Out of this chaos, God and Nature emerged to impose an order and division on chaos. Of the ages which followed, the iron age, the last, saw disorder again enter into the scene. The purpose of Rome, however,

im·primis (im-pri' mīs) adv. In the first place. Middle English, from Latin *in primis*, among the first (things). . .

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is to control chaos and the barbarians. In writing of the murder of Julius Caesar, Ovid had Jove hail him as a new god, and his heir, Augustus, as the world ruler and conqueror of "wild and barbarous nations".

..... The universal plat
 Of all the earth inhabited shall all be his; the sea
 Shall unto him obedient be likewise,
 and when that he
 Hath 'stablished peace in all the world,
 then shall he set his mind
 To civil matters, upright laws by justice for to find;
 And by example of himself all others he shall bind.
 Then having care of time to come and of posterity,
 A holy wife shall bear to him a son that may supply
 His careful charge and bear his name;
 and lastly in the end
 He shall to heaven among the stars
 his ancestors ascend. ⁵

Thus, in this evolution out of chaos, divinity was manifested where power was most in evidence, supremely in the Roman Empire and the person of the emperor. For the Romans, *numen*, power, or will, was everywhere present in the universe. The important thing is to organize this power through the state and to make the state the central and essential agency of power. In the second century, Aelius Aristides, in celebrating the power of the Roman Empire, declared that Rome had brought order to the world:

. . . you have measured the whole world, spanned rivers with bridges of divers kinds, cut through mountains to make level roads for traffic, filled desolate places with farmsteads and made life easier by supplying its necessities amid law and order.

Everywhere are gymnasia, fountains, gateways, temples, factories, schools and it could be said in technical phrase that the world which from the beginning has been labouring in illness has now been put in the way of health . . . Cities are radiant in their splendour and their grace, and the whole earth is as trim as a garden. ⁶

An inscription on a colonnade dedicated in North Africa hailed Diocletian as the Lord "by whose virtue and foreseeing care all is being reshaped for the better."⁷ This was the goal. An evolution out of chaos had led to the possibility of order; the mission of Rome was to provide that order. In modern terms, man now had the opportunity to remake himself and to guide and direct his own evolution by means of an omnipotent state. The state thus had a radical priority over man, and man was subordinated to the state. As Grimal noted,

This Roman morality has a very distinct aim—the subordination of the individual to the City. The ideal remained unaltered down to the latest period, in spite of all economic and social changes. Even in Imperial times, when a Roman spoke of *virtus* (the word from which 'virtue' is derived and which properly signifies the quality of a man, *vir*), he was less likely to mean conformity to abstract values than spontaneous assertion by action of the essentially virile quali-

ty of self-mastery—granting to feminine weakness, with a certain contempt, the characteristic of *impotentia sui*, inability to control its nature. In all this we find no values of a religious order in the sense understood by modern thought. ⁸

Moreover, as Barrows tells us, *piety* for the Romans meant subordination to that which has a binding power over us. A religious man for the Romans was the man of the highest "pietas", and the word *religion* probably comes from *religare*, to bind, or binding power. ⁹



In classical antiquity, the state was always seen as the ultimate order and the essential environment of man. From the Biblical perspective, the state is and must be a religious institution, i.e., under God, and acting as God's ministry of justice (Romans 13: 1-6). It has a strictly limited sphere and is under law, God's law, and it is under God's order, not itself the source of order. While the ancient city-states located divinity variously in relation to the state (i.e., in the state, the ruler, the office, etc.), in essence they held in some form that the state was god walking on earth.

As against this, Biblical faith asserted that the source of ultimate order is not the state but God. Ultimacy and ultimate order are transcendent rather than immanent. For the state to claim jurisdiction beyond its realm is sin. The Bible gives us numerous examples of what constitutes signal evil on the part of the state. Drafting youth for non-military services to the state and taxing beyond the head tax to as much as 10% (a tithe) of a man's wealth or income is cited as evil (I Sam. 8). For the state to claim a priestly role, and the control of religion, is evil (II Chron. 26: 16-21). Expropriation of property by the state is a very serious transgression (I Kings 21). Debasing the coinage is charged against Judah as part of God's indictment ("Thy silver is become dross," Isa. 1:22). Much, much more could be cited. ¹⁰ Suffice it to say that the state is at every point under law, God's law.

The state thus is not the *source* of law but an administrator of one aspect of God's law. This difference between Biblical faith and the doctrine of the state in antiquity and today is of critical importance.

To understand the significance of this difference, let us note, *first* of all, that *the source of law in any society or system of thought is the working and actual god of that structure*. Where man is the ultimate source of law, there man is god. Where Nature is seen as the ultimate source of law, there nature has been deified. Where the state is the ultimate source of law, there the state is the actual god of man and society.

For the Christian, God is the highest good, and man is a creature of God, created in His image. For Aristotle, "the state or political community . . . is the highest good of all, . . . and embraces all the rest."¹¹ Man is a "political animal," a creature of the state whose life is defined by the state.¹² "Neither must we suppose that any one of the citizens belongs to himself, for they all belong to the state, and are each of them a part of the state."¹³ For Aristotle, therefore, law and morality have a social reference and statist purposes.¹⁴ When Aristotle wrote his *Nicomachean Ethics* he made it very clear that ethics is a branch of politics because a private good can only be secondary to the statist good. Moreover, "what is good for a nation or a city has a higher, a diviner, quality."¹⁵ Education thus in morality or goodness is best undertaken by the state and should be a function of the state.¹⁶

Clearly, the modern state follows the classical model rather than the Biblical one. It controls education, has largely taken it over, and it defines law, not *ministerially* but *legislatively*. The difference is fundamental. Where law is ministerial, the premise is that a higher law exists, and that it is the duty of man and the state to know and apply that higher law. Man cannot create law, because he is under law, and, in every area of his life, physical, biological, economic, moral, and political, moves under law that has its origin beyond man and the natural order. Law is thus transcendental in its source and immanent in its application. It requires study, application, and amendment so that the truth of God's law can be better approximated. To cite a specific example, the Ten Commandments declare, among other things, that "Thou shalt not steal." This means that private property has God's sanction as the legitimate means of ownership, and that all violations of the various God-given norms of property, as set forth in the Torah and illustrated throughout Scripture, are violations of a standard which has its validity grounded in the very nature of things by God's creative act. The *ministerial* function of the state is then to expedite the freedom of private property and to protect it. If, however, we deny a transcendental source for law and ground law (and property) in custom, mores, or the will of the state, then there is no moral mandate for the state to respect private property. Then the function of the state with respect to law is *legislative*, i.e., law is what the state declares it is. Instead of the state using its legislative powers ministerially, it uses

them legislatively. The state then, instead of passing laws to conform with ultimate, transcendental law, *creates* law. There is no possible appeal against the legislative state if its premise is true. Right is what the state does. Hallowell has documented the development of liberalism into National Socialism in Germany.¹⁷ When the liberals denied the authoritative restraint of God and His law-word, they freed the state to be its own god. Instead of fostering freedom, they made possible 20th century totalitarianism. If there is no absolute standard, then good and evil are merely what will work for man or the state, and he who exercises the greatest power will make his definition work best. As Hallowell said,

Truth and falsehood, right and wrong, beauty and ugliness, become relative to individual perspective, and, with no objective standard of truth, good, and beauty, there is no way of saying that what appears as falsehood, ugliness, or brutality viewed from one standpoint is not, indeed, viewed from another, truth, beauty, and heroism. Pragmatism ends, like materialism, by placing human acts beyond absolute judgments of good and evil.¹⁸

Second, it follows from this that a man cannot validly or legitimately argue against his god. St. Paul made this point clear, in discussing predestination, i.e., God's sovereign government and fore-ordination of all things:

Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?

Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honour, and another unto dishonour? (Rom. 9:20-21)

It is for this reason that, in Marxist societies, no right of dissent from the state is allowed. Former prisoners of the Marxist states have reported that the premise of all questioning on arrest is to gain or force a confession of guilt, because the state cannot be questioned even as to the legitimacy of its use of the power to arrest. Where the state is the ultimate order, then the state not only acts as the umbrella, containing all things under itself, but also as *the infallible* word in all things. St. Paul spoke of God as He in whom "we live, and move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). The state, by controlling education, the family, economics, property, and all things else, makes itself the god in whom all things have their being. As such, it is beyond criticism. In democratic states, where the divinization of the state has not proceeded to its logical conclusion, the ability to criticize still remains. With every year, and every administration, the controls are increasing; as more data is classified, the area of knowledge and the ability to criticize is lessened. Without a reversal of the religious premises, the goal is the progressive divinization of the state.

Moreover, where God's absolute law is denied, the ability of man to criticize the state is diminished and denied. If there is no absolute God and His law, then there is no absolute standard of right and wrong that

I can appeal to against the tyranny of other men and the state. If I deny God, I also deny to myself the logical right to make any judgment about the state, for I have then no law or standard that transcends the power of the state. Thus, I may resent being arrested and sentenced to death for political dissent, but, without a transcendental norm, I have no absolute ground for any objection. The executioner has the law behind him, ostensibly the only law that exists, since, if I deny God, I deny any valid transcendental norm as well. On these premises, for a time at least and to this day, according to some reports, the Soviet Union requires many political offenders to "confess" their crime and assent to the infallible judgment of the state. This was the point developed by Arthur Koestler in *Darkness at Noon* (1941). The old Bolshevik, in his public statement before the court, confesses that he had thought of holding out and dying without complying to the demand for a confession, but he could not justify it. He had no absolute right or wrong to appeal to, and, being in the minority, was without any justification.



If I ask myself to-day, "For what am I dying?" I am confronted by absolute nothingness. There is nothing for which one could die, if one died without having repented and unreconciled with the Party and the Movement. Therefore, on the threshold of my last hour, I bend my knees to the country, to the masses and to the whole people. The political masquerade, the mummery of discussions and conspiracy are over. We were politically dead long before the Citizen Prosecutor demanded our heads. Woe unto the defeated, whom history treads into the dust.¹⁹

Rubashov had earlier reacted out of a background of Christian civilization, indignant at evil; on sober reflection, he saw no ground for holding out. Between an ultimate and "absolute nothingness" and the power of "the Party and the Movement," the only power he could recognize as valid was the Party. Men cannot make a stand against evil in terms of

"absolute nothingness." If a social order is truly beyond good and evil, not only is God then dead, but man also. Some French thinkers have recognized and developed this thesis, Malraux among them. "Malraux was one of the first to see that the 'death of God' involves that of Man." The connection, he held, is a necessary one.²⁰

Third, in a society which is beyond good and evil, there is no valid moral protest because society is then also beyond morality. No values remain; all, including freedom, are gone. The state is god, the state is the source of law, and the state determines what is desired, and what goals are to be pursued. In the modern state, this means a scientific establishment; it can mean scientific socialism. In any case, where the view is scientific, the actions of the state are then *experimental and hence non-moral*.

To illustrate: in January, 1968, I was one of three speakers at a Northern California forum, with a state senator presiding. After the meeting, a state school teacher, who had been unable to gain the floor during the question period, came to me angrily, outraged at my defense of freedom. In a sentence, her thesis was this, "In the modern world, freedom is obsolete," and for anyone to suggest freedom as a live option was to be guilty of charlatanism. For her, the only tenable social order was a scientifically planned society, and such a society requires an experimental approach and controls, not freedom. Her thesis was a logical one, once her denial of God and God's transcendental law are granted. A world beyond good and evil has no need for morality or law; its function as a scientific society necessitates an experimental approach. In a scientific experiment, all factors must be controlled. Hence, freedom is obsolete in a scientifically controlled social order.

The social protest of modern youth is thus an anachronism; it presupposes a Christian moral order while denying the God thereof. It denounces an unconstitutional war as immoral, when by the logic of its humanism it cannot appeal to any moral standard. To be beyond good and evil is to think non-morally and therefore technologically. The student protest movement of the 1960's was, however, anti-technological but also anti-Christian. It rejected the Christian faith of its grandfathers, but also the new technological faith of its fathers. "Do not fold, staple, or mutilate" became a symbol of the hated technology. In his Yale University commencement speech of 1962, President John F. Kennedy had placed politics beyond good and evil and in the realm of technology. Roszak rightly described the speech as an epitome of "the voice of the technocrat in our society." Kennedy suavely declared, in words designed to smooth over the fact that moral issues were irrelevant while at the same time dropping them,

Today these old sweeping issues have largely disappeared. The central domestic problems of our time are more subtle and less simple. They relate not to basic clashes of philosophy or ideology, but to ways and means of reaching common goals—to research for sophisticated so-

lutions to complex and obstinate issues . . . What is at stake in our economic decisions today is not some grand warfare of rival ideologies which will sweep the country with passion, but the practical management of a modern economy. What we need are not labels and cliches but more basic discussion of the sophisticated and technical questions involved in keeping a great economic machinery moving ahead. I am suggesting that the problems of fiscal and monetary policy in the Sixties as opposed to the kinds of problems we faced in the Thirties demand subtle challenges for which technical answers—not political answers—must be provided.²¹

Roszak's own development since then emphasizes the schizophrenic nature of the movement. His hostility to technology has only increased. He has sought for answers in a mystical faith which has no criterion for good and evil while insisting on a moral judgment with respect to all things. Roszak rightly criticizes Sir Francis Bacon as a fountainhead of our modern problem, and he cites the evil inherent in Bacon's idea of "no other criterion of truth than the bluntly operational one: if it works, it is true," or in Bacon's own words, "Truth and utility are here the very same things."²² Roszak's own position is no less relativistic and as dangerous: for him, truth and experience (mystical experience) are the very same things.

Fourth, every system of thought has its own concept of ultimacy, and, in all, the locale of ultimacy is also the source of determination, for ultimacy requires it. In Biblical theology, all things are created, predestinated, and governed by the sovereign God. Predestination is an inescapable concept; it is simply a declaration that somewhere an ultimate law, force, cause, power, or direction governs all things. If this be denied to God, predestination then accrues to some other agency. The results are various: doctrines of Karma, fate, dialectical materialism, naturalistic determinism, and so on. If one form of the doctrine is denied, it is implicitly in favor of another form. In the modern form, it usually means total planning by the sovereign state. Whereas a theistic transcendental predestination is internal and non-coercive, the immediate determinism of the state is external and coercive. It means that the state competes with man for control of the same ground.

Fifth, every law order is a religious establishment; the important question is, of which religion? There can be a separation of church and state, but a separation of religion and the state is impossible. Every law order is simply a moral order enacted. Law says that certain things are forbidden, and it establishes penalties for infractions, and procedures for enforcement, trial, and appeal. Every law is grounded on a concept of moral order. The basis of civil law in the U.S. has historically been, until recently, a common-law Christianity, and the courts at one time were ready to recognize that our laws embodied Christian premises. In dealing with the Mormon plea of religious liberty to practice polygamy,

the U.S. Supreme Court recognized that total religious liberty would mean that any practice conceivable to the mind of man could be a part of some religious practice, i.e., human sacrifice, theft, murder, ritual prostitution, etc. The decision of the court is of interest in that, on this occasion, the court took refuge in the priority of the state rather than its fidelity to a particular religious tradition. Such a premise meant the possibility of the state as the ultimate arbiter of all things. The court declared in part:

Suppose one religiously believed that human sacrifices were a necessary part of religious worship, would it be seriously contended that the civil government could not interfere to prevent sacrifices? Can a man excuse his practices . . . because of his religious belief? To permit this would be to make the doctrines of religion superior to the law of the land; and in effect be to permit every citizen to become a law unto himself. Government could exist only in name.²³

The court assumed at that time the validity of Christian morality without acknowledging it, and it also posited the priority of the state.

This does not alter the fact that every law order is a particular kind of moral order even when, as in the scientific socialist state, it denies the validity of morality and moral judgments.

But this is not all. Every moral order is an aspect of a theological order, so that a political society is a form of theological order. The theology can vary: the state can be Buddhist, Shinto, Moslem, Christian, humanistic, or anything else, but in each case its law-order represents a moral and theological structure, a working concept of ultimacy and of values.

For this reason, the gladiators of the Roman arena paraded to the emperor's box, raised their right hands straight out, and chanted, "Hail, Caesar! We who are about to die salute you!" This amazing act was natural and moral to all concerned. They were, after all, honoring the genius and power of Rome. As gladiators of power, they religiously greeted the supreme symbol of power in their world, the emperor.

In the modern world, we have the messianic fervor of election campaigns, in which the candidates present themselves as heroes whose election will mark the advent of a new world. The religious fervor of partisans is the mark of a political theology. Modern man's religious hope is in politics, and the result is the politics of Babel and the growing confusion or confounding of man's hopes, and his enslavement. In effect, modern man, with his political faith, says to the state, "Hail, Caesar! We who are about to die salute you!"

Some years ago, Micklem wrote an indifferent book with an excellent title, *The Theology of Politics*. He did express the belief that a better theology could lead us to a better social order.²⁴ Again, as Richard Weaver's title stated, *Ideas Have Consequences*. What we think about God will extensively determine what we do about all things else.

This is not to say that faulty theologies about God, with dangerous admixtures of Plato and Aristotle, cannot and have not led to serious problems in history. The abandonment of Christian premises, however, has led to the enthronement of a new and dangerous god, the state. Malraux was right: belief in a death of God philosophy leads to the death of man.

¹ Daniel P. Mannix: *Those About to Die*, p. 27. New York: Ballantine Books, 1958.

² Pierre Grimal: *The Civilization of Rome*, p. 332, 456. New York: Simon and Shuster, 1963.

³ Ethelbert Stauffer: *Christ and the Caesars*, pp. 81-88. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1955.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁵ Ovid: *Selected Works*, p. 389f. London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1939.

⁶ R. H. Barrow: *The Romans*, p. 127. Chicago: Aldine Publishing Co., (1949) 1964.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁸ Grimal, *op. cit.*, p. 100.

⁹ Barrows, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

¹⁰ See R. J. Rushdoony: *Institutes of Biblical Law*. Nutley, New Jersey. The Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing Co., 1972.

¹¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, Bk. I, p. 51. New York: Modern Library, 1943.

¹² *Ibid.*, I, 2, p. 54f.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Bk. VIII, 1, p. 320.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, II, 9, p. 108f.

¹⁵ J.A.K. Thomson, translator: *The Ethics of Aristotle*, Bk. I, ch. 2, p. 26f. London: Penquin, (1953) 1958.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, X, 9, p. 311f.

¹⁷ John H. Hallowell: *The Decline of Liberalism as an Ideology, With Particular Reference to German Politico-Legal Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1943.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

¹⁹ Arthur Koestler: *Darkness at Noon*, p. 178. New York: Signet (1941) 1948.

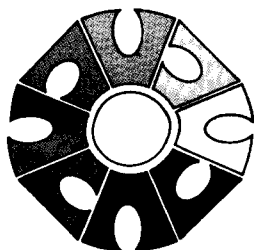
²⁰ Everett W. Knight: *Literature Considered as Philosophy*, pp. 182, 276. New York: Collier Books, 1962.

²¹ John F. Kennedy, "Yale University Commencement Speech," *New York Times*, June 12, 1962, p. 20; cited in Theodore Roszak: *The Making of a Counter Culture*, p. 11. Garden City, New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1969.

²² Theodore Roszak: *Where The Wasteland Ends, Politics and Transcendence in Postindustrial Society*, p. 149. Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972.

²³ United States v. Reynolds, 98 United States Reports 145; cited by Leon Whipple: *The Story of Civil Liberty in the United States*, p. 272. New York: Vanguard Press, 1927.

²⁴ Nathaniel Micklem: *The Theology of Politics*: London: The Religious Book Club, 1941.



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