

# Christianity and Politics.

Colleagues,

She's back again. Who? Marie Failing. This time—on the day after Luther's 527th birthday—she reviews another book wherein Blessed Martin gets considerable attention, though she wishes the author had paid “closer” attention. When Prof. Failing is not treating us to such thoughtful analysis—as she also did just a fortnight ago with another Luther essay (ThTh 646)—she attends to her calling as Professor, Hamline University School of Law, and also Editor of The Journal of Law and Religion.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

*[P.S. Corrigendum. In my own venture into Reformation theology with last week's post, I quoted the English translation of Luther's Mighty Fortress line, “Das Wort sie sollen lassen stahn Und kein' Dank dazu haben,” as “The Word they still shall let remain, Nor any thanks have for it.” Art Preisinger passed on to me this note from his friend Ulrich Goebel, a knowledgeable scholar in the language of Luther: “Is Schroeder perpetuating the mistaken notion that Early New High German ‘Dank’ means English ‘thanks’? ‘Dank’ (a verbal nominative belonging to the verb ‘denken’) does not mean ‘thanks’ but ‘thought, reflection, reason’ in ENHG (as in modern German ‘der Gedanke’). In other words, this line is not confusing at all. It is a mistranslation.”*

*So possibly to be rendered: “They won't even give it a thought.”]*

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Now to Prof. Failing's prose.

**C.C. Pecknold, Christianity and Politics: A Brief Guide to the History**  
**(Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock. Cascade Books, 2010). \$23.**

It is always difficult to explain accurately how we got from Aristotle and Augustine to the sins of the modern world, particularly so in a short book, which CHRISTIANITY AND POLITICS is at 168 pages. However, sometimes the effort is worthwhile even if the history can only be sketched, if it helps to correct mistaken “common wisdom” or opens a new window that helps us re-think our past. And sometimes it is simply enough to provide a reasonably accurate reader to those who are not likely to go much further into the literature so long as the reading is indeed fair and reasonably thoughtful.

Pecknold’s book, which is aimed at providing such a sketch to undergraduates and such, starts out promisingly enough. It is written in an interesting and accessible style, and tells a few good stories along the way. Pecknold begins by sketching the Greek view of politics as “the highest good, the whole purpose of the community,” (2) a civil religion that became the stage where virtue played itself out toward a common good. From there he moves quickly to Rome, where the sheer vastness of empire and concentration of power destroyed citizens’ sense of community membership and eliminated the space for a “systematic knowledge and vision of the whole” (14) necessary for an authentic political philosophy. In the face of that decline, Christianity represents a “new and stunning vision” of the goal of politics (17) –the early church is a new form of community that comprehensively orders life in challenge to earthly politics because it offers “a dimension of HOPE” in a new telos, the calling of history toward true freedom in God’s new city. (20) As Pecknold describes it, participation in the resurrected life of Jesus (“corpus Christi”) has brought Christians into

communion with God and their neighbors who share “this communion of God’s love” (22) sustained by the Eucharist. Such a mystical union crossing old allegiances outshines the bonds Rome built on friendship and reconciliation, and challenges the empire’s comprehensive truth-claims with its own.

In Pecknold’s retelling, a critical mistake occurs when “the mystical body” (“corpus mysticum”) of the Eucharist, linking Christ’s historical body with the communion of the church, is unhooked from the Eucharist itself. By the 12th century, Pecknold writes (following Henri de Lubac) that the Catholic Church has become the “corpus mysticum” and the Eucharist the “corpus verum”, that is, simply an experience of individual piety. From there, it is easy to borrow the “corpus mysticum” into a temporal setting, where the church itself becomes responsible for making human communion possible, with authority to confer that mystical power upon secular leaders. For Pecknold arguing de Lubac, the “separation between the mystical and the real, or the personal and communal” then gives way to the development of the church’s “juridical, material” power. From there, it is an easy step to replace the church as the “corpus mysticum” with king and then with the nation-state, with the resulting corruption in the formation of human community and human loyalties.

I follow this tale with interest, but at the Reformation, Pecknold loses me. As a Lutheran laywoman, I often judge such histories by how close they get to understanding Luther’s theology, perhaps because if they get Luther wrong or sort of wrong, I wonder if they are simply working off other people’s histories rather than taking a fresh look at the evidence themselves. I’m a tell-tale Lutheran: I get more agitated by what I take to be inaccurate representations of Luther’s theology than by claims that he was responsible for all of the major ills (or advancements) of modernity. Perhaps because I

have no competence to judge proofs of Luther's effect on secular history, or am not quite sure why it matters. But theological misreadings are serious!

Pecknold's take on Luther is as follows: Luther transferred the Church's prerogatives to the State. A reformer and a "purist at heart" (!) Luther "sought a purified church that was free to be pure because the state was so strong," free from "scholasticism's speculative doctrine, free of philosophy, free of ecclesiastical authority and hierarchy, free from complexity, and most importantly of all, free from the corruptions of politics." (85) When the boastful Luther received pushback on his (perhaps originally legitimate) reform effort, he came to believe that "the only path to spiritual reform" was to reject external church structures in "favor of a more internalized, spiritualized, and 'democratized' form of the Christian life," the priesthood of all believers. (87) Luther shifted "the priesthood from a corporate, participatory identity to a highly reductive view of all individual believers as priests making their own private spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ" which provided "powerful support for his political claim that the hierarchy of deacons, priests and bishops ran counter to the gospel." (88) (From an Augustinian view, Pecknold writes, "a crucial problem with Luther's view of grace is his conviction that it is always unmediated, interior and invisible" rather than "necessarily mediated through Christ's body, in the one, holy, catholic church." 89)

So, Pecknold continues, Luther's attempt to depoliticize the church coupled with his recognition that some structure was needed to permit the church to flourish led Luther to transfer the church's power to the state, "effectively granting the 'temporary authority' a monopoly on power." (88) Thus Luther sets the stage for Machiavelli: Luther "plays a role in helping to give the state the power to form the conscience, the power to

collect mass allegiances, the power to form a people. The state is now unhinged from any other institutional authority that could morally check its power; the state is free to construct itself, and conduct itself, according to its own norms." As such, with the two kingdoms doctrine, Luther has made the church "so institutionally weak that it NEEDED the state," (91) at least for outward protection (while it would "inwardly rely upon Christ alone"), thus "entirely" spiritualizing the church and making "the church a servant of the state." (93) After that critique, Pecknold catches himself a little: it's likely that Luther fell "prey to unintended consequences."

What can one say! I must confess that, Lutheran sinner that I am, my first thought was, "I know where this is going. . ." and in this case, my terrible suspicions seem not so far off. In the end, recognizing that it will be "controversial to say so," Pecknold concludes that the divisions among Christians will not be healed unless modern Christians recognize their failure to grasp the importance of the papal office as "shepherd of conscience" and "advocate of Christian memory" and the necessity of reconciling the Church with "Rome as a visible sign of what is invisibly and organically happening in a global and distributive way in the worship of triune God everywhere." (164) Asking what place non-Christians have in this conversation, Pecknold suggests that they can take comfort in Pope Benedict's view that "religion always needs to be purified by reason" (151) though he also acknowledges that "reason always stands in need of being purified by faith; this also holds true for political reason, which must not consider itself omnipotent." (152)

In between, the story goes something like this: Luther set the stage for Machiavelli to re-define politics as institutional interest-conflict management and the virtues based on the needs of the state to survive. Calvin was a little better than Luther, because he recognized that "a conscience needed a community" of

church, civil society and civil government to discipline it in the virtues necessary to achieve the common good. Calvin's collective conscience morphed into Hobbes' social conscience which reduced itself to community as managing conflicting economic self-interest. Once we get to the "social contract," government becomes the tool of the wealthy and powerful few, and the good is defined via Locke as the pursuit of self-interest. Rousseau sees the need for humans to return to community, but rejects social institutions as interfering with that possibility, thus paving the way for "the personal roots of modern liberal democracy." Pecknold follows this theme to the work of Sheldon Wolin, who wants to unhook the concept of the mystical body from the king, economic liberalism, the nation-state or civil society, all poor substitutes for the Christian communion. Pecknold likes Wolin's yearning for something better, and his critique of the distortion of the "corpus mysterium", but he wants to describe more positively what we yearn for.

While I have given away the punch line to his proposal, Pecknold's book does remind believers that as the church, we need to imagine both visible and invisible ways of being in unity. He rightfully demands that Christians begin to remember that we are participating "in the communion of God's triune love" and that we must learn to "conform ourselves to [Christ's] presence with us," not as a sideline to our more important earthly life, but as life itself. I think Luther himself might approve of Pecknold's call that we should be changed by the encounter with truth poured out for us in the incarnation-if not the conclusions about the relationship of church and world that he comes to from that call.

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