CIVIL THEOLOGY RECONSIDERED: THE SALIENCY OF A VENERABLE TOPIC

Society never advances. It recedes as fast on one side as it gains on the other. Its progress is only apparent like the workers of a treadmill. It undergoes continual changes; it is barbarous, it is civilized, it is christianized, it is rich, it is scientific; but this change is not amelioration. For every thing that is given something is taken.

-- Ralph Waldo Emerson, Self-Reliance

I. Motivation of Research: Voegelin’s Grim Assessment

1. Crisis of Modernity
   • “How can a civilization advance and decline at the same time?”

2. The destruction of political science through positivism:

   Political Science was damaged by positivism in the last half of the 19th century and the early 20th century

   Trend continued with the behaviorist movements of mid-20th century till today

   • Positivistic assumptions:
     1) All sciences must emulate the mathematizing natural sciences.
     2) The methods of the natural sciences are the criterion of theoretical relevance.
     3) Metaphysical questions should not be asked (these are “values”).
     4) Realms of being not explorable by these methods are irrelevant or nonexistent—i.e., limit analysis to the readily observable or testable.

   • The subordination of relevance to method:
     1) Making method the criterion of science confuses means and ends and perverts science.
     2) Science is the search for truth in various realms of being
     3) Different objects require different means of investigation.
     4) Positivism disregards this elementary truth.

3. Political Science: The “restoration” of the craft

   • "Restoration" means a return to consciousness of principles, not to the content of earlier attempts—e.g., no “literary renaissance” or throwback to a “golden age.”
II.  A Venerable Concept: Plato’s Civil Theology

Mythological Theology ← Civil Theology ← Philosophical Theology

1. Mythological Theology:
   § Too simplistic (or “fantastic”) in the symbolization of reality—a false symbolization of reality.
   § Belief system of the mass of citizens
   § Based on rite and ritual

2. Philosophic Theology:
   § Critical examination of the structure of reality and the formulation of symbols to adequately describe, explain, and predict reality.
   § Belief system of indoctrinated elites—beyond the cognitive capacities of the mass citizenry.
   § Based on logic and knowledge—both acquired and intuitive.

3. Civil Theology:
   § A contrived civil religion, intended to provide the political society with a realistic mythology to bind society,
   § Minimum Dogma of beliefs; the masses are free to practice their own sacred practices as long as they do not interfere with the state cult.
   § Based on contrivance and mythopoeia (the making of myths) by philosophic/political elite (e.g., Plato’s “noble falsehoods”)

III. Beyond Bellah: Civil Theology in the Modern Era

1. The modern theological-political problem:

- For much of the history of human civilization, political problems have been theological problems.
- The separation of the purely political from the purely theological is a recent development that has only involved a relatively small span of human lives.
- When a society walls off the theological from the political, as is the case of liberal societies, the state must inevitably take upon itself the responsibility of transforming the moral and ethical components of arcane theological doctrines into rules of behavior enforceable by the state.

2. Two Manifestations of Civil Theology in the Modern Era:

- **Transcendent-theological form:**
  - An “organic” public piety that corresponds with Burke’s notion of a social order that is sacred, natural, and traditional.
  - Public piety is the outcome of several generation’s worth of accumulated wisdom.
  - Establishes a rhythmical configuration between state and society, along with a top-down balance between the infinite and infallible divine source of authority and the finite state.
  - A balance between pre-modern and modern political thought.
  - Associated with Tocqueville’s analysis of the American political community.

- **Immanent-anthropological form:**
  - A deliberate contrivance.
  - The intellectual legacy of individual thinkers intent on rationally distilling and justifying the particular content of truth for the masses of a given society.
  - To be implemented by the linear and progressive will of the state.
  - Is best understood as a modern intellectual contrivance, commonly writ ideology.
  - Associated with Hobbes, Locke, and most explicitly, Rousseau.
  - Also, ideologies of various sort.
IV. The American Experience

1. The United States provides the opportunity to explore both forms:
   - A “traditional” civil theology
   - A recent contrivance—or attempt thereof

2. The break-down of the traditional civil theology

3. The attempt by a faction of conservative intellectuals to rearticulate a viable civil theology for an increasingly modern society.

V. The Delicate Task of the Neoconservatives

1. The delicate task before the neoconservatives was how to restore virtue’s lost loveliness, a requirement essential in pre-modern political philosophy, while at the same time balancing “the requirements of modernity.”

2. Neoconservatives seek to restore virtue’s lost loveliness by promoting a new “myth of America.”
   - Leo Strauss
   - A Quasi-Platonic civil theology?
   - Reversing a decline in the “moral quality of life”
   - A neoconservative/Evangelical alliance?

VI. Civil Religion and its Critics

1. Criticism directed at the neoconservatives from outside conservative circles:
   - The cabal-like qualities of the neoconservatives.
   - Directed primarily at recent policy developments.

2. Criticism from inside conservative circles:
   - “Traditionalists” more accurately identify the serious problems associated with the neoconservative agenda
   - The neoconservative drift into ideology
     - Immanent-anthropological form
   - Russell Kirk recognized that the neoconservative intention to formulate an ideology, in essence, amounted to none other than the contrivance of a civil theology
   - Ideology, according to “traditionalists” is anathema to conservative thought.
• “What gives the neoconservative agenda an uncertain quality is not so much its intention to rationally contrive a civil theology for American society, which it attempts to do in Platonic fashion, but the tendency of neoconservative ideas to facilitate the drift of the traditional, that is, organic American civil theology, into ideology.”