

The Church as Mediating Institution: Theological and Philosophical Perspective

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The church is sometimes considered to be a rather stodgy institution. It is generally taken for granted in American society—something everybody, or at least many, many people, participate in, but nobody talks much about. Yet it is fraught with all sorts of implications for social policy and the general shape of society. At a time when many categories of leadership in this country have fallen in public esteem, a beginning observation on the church might be that the most recent Gallup poll shows clergy persons at about the top of the list in the respect and trust of the American public.

But our present concern is with the church in its capacity as a mediating institution. The role of mediating institutions in a democracy is not altogether a new theme, of course. It has antecedents in political thought going back at least to Aristotle's criticisms of Plato's *Republic*, and it has reappeared wherever thinkers have criticized unrestrained expressions of idealism in political thought—in Edmund Burke's critique of the French Revolution; in the doctrine of subsidiarity in Roman Catholic encyclicals (which in some respects was also a reaction against the nineteenth-century climate growing out of the French Revolution and Marxism); in the Protestant doctrine of "orders" developed by Emil Brunner; and in various other places. Despite this history, though, the present state of national and world politics makes our topic peculiarly ripe for new reflection.

I am generally in agreement with Peter Berger's view of the importance of mediating institutions both empirically and normatively. I am fully persuaded that intimate association is necessary to authentic human existence, and that without institutions fostering such association, political democracy would not be long sustainable. This said, we must acknowledge that the concept of mediating institutions is more complex than it might appear at first. Such institutions cannot stand alone. Indeed, the very term "mediating" suggests the importance of linkages. That is, these institutions are mediate between what and what? How do they link people with one another and with other kinds of institutions?

I would like to begin by considering three important linkages involving mediating institutions, without which I think one can never understand the situation of the church.

Linking People with One Another

The first of these three linkages is the primary one of people with one another. Without some nurturing association with other individuals, we could not exist as real human beings. At this most intimate level of society, where people interact face to face, the individual and social aspects of human nature are most fully joined. I want to stress this point, because it is commonplace in twentieth-century ideological debate for people to neglect either the individual or the social aspect of human life.

What we might call the individualistic heresy is illustrated in the writings of Ayn Rand. It appears also, to a lesser degree, in the philosophical writings of such economists as Milton Friedman, Ludwig von Mises, and George Stigler, who once wrote, "Our very concept of the humane society is one in which individual man is permitted and incited to make the utmost of himself."¹ Such individualism—heavily anticipated, of course, by John Locke—values society as the sphere of interactions for mutual benefit. We exist in society as traders; we do things for others in exchange for what they do for us, and we all benefit thereby. Now, this is a dimension of the truth, but it is only a half-truth, because it neglects the extent to which we *are* one another.

The opposite of this view we might call the collectivist heresy. It appears in various intellectual outgrowths of Rousseau's influence, including a good bit of Hegelianism, a good deal of Marxism, and ultimately, of course, fascism. One remembers the words of Mussolini: "The fascist conception of life stresses the importance of the State and accepts the individual only insofar as his interests coincide with those of the State, which stands for the conscience and the universal will of man as a historic entity."² That extreme view would seem to be very far removed from the spirit of, say, Cuban or Chinese Marxism; and yet wherever the claim is made that we are making a new socialist man, there are undertones of this kind of collective spirit, which need to be watched rather carefully.

Is human nature simply a function of the social collectivity? Again,

¹ George Stigler, "The Proper Goals of Economic Policy," *Journal of Business*, July 1958, p. 714.

² Benito Mussolini, *The Political and Social Doctrine of Fascism*, trans. Jane Soames (London: Hogarth Press, 1933).

there is a profound half-truth here. Aristotle was right: Man is, by nature, a social or political animal. There is a sense in which we exist only as we belong to society. The very forms of our thought are cultural, that is, socially derived. Even our personal identity, our sense of who we are, is based substantially on our perceptions of how we are perceived by those whose response matters most to us.

But the individual and social aspects of human nature are such that we cannot have one without the other. It seems to me a good deal of ideological confusion would be avoided if we recognized this polarity, that human nature is both essentially social and essentially individual. It is like the playground game of seesaw: you need a kid on each end of the board. Pure individualism flies in the face of all human experience; an unqualified collectivism lacks the generating personal creativities. Neither has ever existed in pure form, nor could they.

Furthermore, both individualism and collectivism ultimately reduce humanity to abstraction. As Karl Barth observed, we need to see "the man in humanity and the humanity in man."³ This is really my main point: the fully personal and the fully social character of human life cannot be realized abstractly. They must find realization where we can know others and be known by them as we engage in social interactions. That can best occur on the level of the mediating institution. Thus, the first form of mediation these institutions can provide is links between and among persons.

Linking People and Power Centers

The second important linkage in which mediating institutions can function is the one connecting people with the focal points of social power. A great temptation when we talk about mediating institutions is to overlook those centers of power, concentrating our sentimental attention instead on the humanizing functions of smaller-scale associations. The problem with that is that humanizing also requires a sense of participation in ultimate social power. When people feel alienated from social power, they may find some spiritual relief in group life, but it is the kind of relief Marx was referring to when he called religion the opiate of the people. Links between or among individuals cannot assuage the alienation that comes from being subjected to power one cannot affect. One may have a very fine neighborhood government or local community organization, but one feels alienated nevertheless when that government or organization is continually overwhelmed by outside powers over

³ Karl Barth, *Christ and Adam*, trans. T. A. Small (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1956), p. 91.

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which it has no control, such as city hall, the feds, large corporations, or other large collectivities. The local mediating institution takes on something of the character of a game—an interesting game to play, but one that lacks authenticity because it does not plug into the mainstream of important decision making.

This is a position I can speak of with some feeling because, as a citizen of the District of Columbia, I have no personal representation in the Congress of the United States. I can vote for a president of the United States, and I can vote for the school board, or take part in our well-devised neighborhood government. But when Congress meets to decide important legislative issues—for example, when the Senate discusses whether it will ratify the SALT treaty, or when the House of Representatives initiates tax legislation—there is nobody in the House or in the Senate who needs to worry one fig over the opinion of Philip Wogaman. And when I think of writing a letter to my congressman or to my senator, there is no congressman or senator to whom I can write.

There is another way of expressing the feeling of alienation that is generated by involvement with a mediating structure with no ultimate connection to the center of power. It is also a feeling of being unable to help determine the course of human history. I don't suppose many people give that much thought, particularly those who do not in fact participate in the disposition of social power. Yet this is precisely when we most lack a sense that our lives finally have contributed something enduring to the human enterprise.

Mediating institutions play a highly significant role in relating people to the centers of power, so long as those centers are substantially democratic. As part of a mediating institution, the individual can have a discernible effect on group policy, which in turn may have sufficient weight to have some discernible effect on the large-scale policies of the impersonal, remote political and economic institutions. One of the movement songs of the 1960s referred to the futility of any one person's efforts alone to bring in the new day of justice, but it went on to the refrain, "But if two and two and fifty make a million, we'll see that day come around."⁴

Besides the weight of numbers, mediating institutions also have the capacity to project their leaders onto a wider stage with a certain base of support behind them. And, of course, they are important schools for politics, too. Back in the 1940s, Harold Stassen—who was then a dominant figure in American politics—once remarked that he had

⁴ From the song, "One Man's Hands," words by Alex Comfort, music by Pete Seeger (Fall River Music Inc., 1962).

never had to learn anything new about politics after he left college. Within that microcosm, where he was active in student government and served as student body president, he saw all the dynamics he later encountered on the much vaster scale of state and national politics. Most of the people who are active and effective at the summits of American politics today have résumés studded with participation in mediating institutions. These include church groups as well as political organizations.

As vital as mediating institutions can be, they can only work effectively if we attend also to the way the ultimate centers of power are structured, and to the way our activities within the mediating institutions relate to those structures. Although none of the large-scale institutions of economic and political power in modern society are very responsive to ordinary people, the greatest hope in a democratic society is for a sufficiently strong and sufficiently responsible government to control the other massive centers of power.

Some people contend that government cannot solve all of our problems because government *is* our problem. This view may not be altogether wrong; but I think it would be a mistake to place more trust in the automatic workings of those large-scale institutions that are not formally accountable to people than in those that could be, or are. It would be particularly ironic and tragic for us to allow our commitment to mediating structures to lead us to dismantle the basis of our power to affect human history through the state. The state remains the most promising agency for real social responsibility—more so, for example, than the free, but usually deeply biased, market, although that market has an important role to play. The great advances of the 1960s and 1970s in civil rights and environmental protection would never have been possible without the mobilization of power at the federal level, nor would the economic protections for individuals effected by the New Deal.

Mediating institutions, then, are not an alternative to the great centers of power; they are an important avenue into the responsible control of those centers. In marking off this avenue, we must be particularly mindful of the role of the democratic state.

Linking People with Sources of Meaning

There is a third important linkage involving mediating structures: the system of connections between people and sources of meaning and value. Human fulfillment in small associations is not enough, and a sense of historical accomplishment is not enough, if people cannot believe that their lives have enduring purpose and that the values by which they live have some ontological status. We seek identity in our roots, in a

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sense of heritage, but that heritage must have some relationship to ultimate reality. It is more than knowledge of our ancestry, more than affirming our ethnic background, and more than feeling comfortable in our daily interactions. I find it intriguing that people have had to create halls of fame for baseball and football to supplement the pleasures and meanings players and spectators can derive from a given game and season. Any social structure or social activity that lacks an ultimate point of reference can never be fully meaningful.

Here again the mediating structure is very important. Unfortunately, the ultimate frame of reference is not something we can reduce to an accessible scientific form. Our brains are not large enough, and our lives and history are not long enough, for us to identify and integrate indubitable metaphysical truth. We are continually forced to interpret the whole of reality on the basis of those aspects of experienced reality we consider decisive as clues to all the rest. This means we are also dependent on myth and story, the traditions centered on remembered and imagined events taken by the community to be enduring revelations of ultimate meanings and values.

Mediating Structures and Theological Orientation

The mediating structures, then, are part of three important linkages: the interpersonal linkage, the linkage with social power, and the linkage with sources of meaning and value. We feel alienated from society when any one of these three linkages is weak or missing, and the more serious condition of anomie generally reflects trouble with all three simultaneously. Intimate group life based on common, universal meanings will result in alienation if the group experiences itself as powerless. Such alienation can only be overcome through political activity; or it can be bypassed if the group fosters some form of eschatology in which divine power is expected to intervene in behalf of a faithful, but politically weak, people. Alienation also can occur when politically active individuals pursuing broad social goals have very little interaction with other people at an intimate level. Or people can become alienated who have intimate associations with others and access to political power, but find themselves unable to believe any longer in the myths and traditions giving meaning to their existence.

All three of these linkages, as I have termed them, have theological importance. Theology is itself expressible in many ways; it depends on our particular traditions and on the insights we find most persuasive. Obviously there is not time here to outline a systematic theology for mediating structures; but several theological problems associated with the

linkages are fundamental to the church, as it sees itself as a mediating structure.

First is the question of God. God-talk often has been greeted with faint embarrassment in discussions of moral and political philosophy—sometimes even in discussions of theology. When it appears at all, it is often received in the spirit of Voltaire's remark that you can kill a flock of sheep with incantations if, at the same time, you feed them enough arsenic.

The Marxists have gone further, regarding professed belief in God as a projection of the human essence in fantasy, in an alienated state in which the human essence cannot find concrete realization. Marx has written quite a poignant passage about the weakness of humanity and about its need for this opiate to provide some relief from the pain and suffering of its alienated existence. God is viewed as a pain-killing narcotic at best; at worst, God increases man's alienation by projecting the human essence out, away from the concrete.

All of us, of course—Marxists included—must own up to some epistemological limitations as we confront the ultimate character of reality. It is arguable that a view of man that sees reality centered in conscious intelligence, purpose, and benevolence is no less rational than one that sees blind, irrational, material forces at the center of things. Neither of these views, nor any other, can be proved conclusively on the plane of human reason.

Right now, though, I am less concerned with the truth or error of particular views than with their consequences in relation to meaning and alienation. I would dispute the Marxist view that God is an alienating projection, even though a good deal of theological expression and popular piety may be exactly what the Marxists describe. Instead, it seems to me that without God there can ultimately be only alienation. The Marxist can deal with the first two linkages, those representing interpersonal associations and power. I do not see how the Marxist can satisfactorily deal with the third. For, in a nontheistic universe, all is ultimately lost.

Now, the quality and character of the mediating institutions in any society seem to depend greatly on the theological meanings that society subscribes to. Some theological watersheds, of course, cut across religious and denominational lines. Perhaps most decisive for the mediating structures is whether the society's theological perspective is one based on grace or works, to use St. Paul's terminology. Some years ago, I asked a Christian acquaintance in one of the eastern European countries what she and her theologian husband considered to be the greatest theological flaw in the communism of their country. She remarked that

they had often thought about this question, and their conclusion was that it was the communists' inability to accept forgiveness. I thought that was a really interesting observation. It suggests the importance to a society—Marxist or any other—of the moral orientation reflected in its mediating institutions. Are people relating to life on the basis of an anxious striving for salvation in some form, or are they responding to a gift of salvation?

A good deal would seem to be at stake, then, in whether a society's mediating institutions are the kind in which people can find human acceptance without worrying about whether they deserve it. One remembers Robert Frost's celebrated comment, "Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in." Mediating institutions perform a profound theological role when they serve as places where people can find a basis for understanding and accepting grace—and also, then, a challenge to respond to grace.

Christianity in the Political Sphere

The views I expressed earlier on linkages with centers of power are widely accepted today among theological ethicists, but they are being challenged by those who dispute human responsibility to manage history. A serious case has been made by John Howard Yoder and some other contemporary evangelical theologians that we should express our faithfulness to God primarily through the church and nongovernmental activity, leaving the final management of history to divine action.⁵ Yoder is convinced that faithfulness to God will lead us into relevance, as it did Jesus; in fact, he points out, Jesus never would have been crucified had he not been relevant politically. If we are faithful to Jesus, we will inevitably act out our freedom from subservience to earthly powers. Perhaps we, like Jesus, will have to pay dearly for this challenge to vested interests. But we—again, like Jesus—should avoid those mechanisms of violence normally associated with the exercise of political power.

The implications of this position for mediating institutions would seem to be that Christians ought to concentrate all their efforts at the level of the mediating institution. We should live there the reality of the Kingdom of God, allowing the light, so to speak, to break forth from that order of life in such a way that the course of history will be affected in God's own time and in God's own way.

⁵ John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Erdmans, 1972).

Although I am attracted by elements in Yoder's thought, I do not believe his case for Christian neglect of the centers of power is convincing. In the first place, he fails to address the question of God's purposes in creating our physical world. If we believe that fulfillment in this sphere is a decisively important aspect of God's purpose, we then must ask: What is it to God that millions of people in Bangladesh never even get a start in life, but suffer from malnutrition and die? Does it matter that vast numbers of people are frustrated politically, or are oppressed politically, or labor under other conditions that seem to be contrary to God's purposes? Insofar as those things are important, one must then ask: Should not Christians, faithful to God's purposes, act in this sphere? I am afraid that Yoder's rather extreme statement of pacifism may amount to a blank check for human suffering as a result of Christians' opting out of responsibility in the political arena. That is not his intention, but that may be the effect. I would argue that God's management of human history must be implemented pretty much by human hands. We may not understand the whole grand design, but we do well to try to understand and act on as much of it as we can.

Moreover, of course, we can hardly eschew the political order and still live and function within society. Society is too tightly wired together for that. Almost everything we do contributes in one way or another to the functioning of the state. Conscious participation in the political order by ethically sensitive people can help to humanize it, to make it more responsible, more sensitive, less violent.

The Church as Mediating Institution

It should be clear from everything I have said that the church, at least in many of its manifestations, when it is true to its nature, is the quintessential mediating structure in society. Religious groups are by definition the bearers of human tradition concerning ultimate meaning and value; and, by common practice, they are organized in local, face-to-face, associational form. The second linkage, that with political power structures, has been established or neglected by religious groups in a wide variety of ways through history. But the opportunity is clearly present for the church to function in that linkage, and to fulfill the role rather well.

To play a mediating role in a democratic society, must the church be democratic in its own organization and modes of action? In a truly democratic society, in one sense it is and in another sense it is not required to be. It must be democratic in its membership: people can choose to belong and they can choose to drop their membership. But for this very reason, the leadership need not be democratic. Because a

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truly democratic state will not require any particular accountability from the church beyond the freedom of people to belong or not, even a very autocratic leadership can be taken to be democratically selected and sustained.

That said, I do not doubt for a moment that democratic societies are best sustained by mediating structures that are also democratic. For one thing, the structure of a church or other mediating institution tends both to represent and to reinforce the values of its members. This may be particularly true for churches, whose doctrine of their own nature has one foot in a central theological vision and the other foot in an order of discipline. For instance, it may prove difficult for the members of a church to accept a two-sided doctrine of human nature—Reinhold Niebuhr's "Man's capacity for justice makes democracy possible, but man's inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary"⁶—if their leaders fail to be accountable, thereby implying that they are exempt from the otherwise universal human inclination to sinfulness. In such a situation, the medium may prove to be the real message.

An undemocratic church also deprives its people of a valuable opportunity to develop the skills they need to participate in the democratic political process. When such a church encourages its members to enter the political arena, it may contribute more to social dissension and further alienation than to healthy political action, because the members' tendency is to move from the passivity and unthinking obedience they have learned within the church into unreflective support for some narrow political cause.

Separation between Church and State

This leads us to the difficult issue of the church-state relationship. On this topic I would like for the moment just to make a few very basic points.

First, a good deal of nonsense has been written about the non-establishment clause of the First Amendment and about the supposedly absolute wall of separation between church and state. There is, of course, no way church and state can be separated in any literal sense where both are aspects of the same society. At times, the principle of separation has been taken to mean that the state is committed to secularism—that it is and ought to be hostile to religion. The churches could scarcely function effectively as mediating structures if that were the case.

In those societies where the state really is secularist—I mean mili-

⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), p. xiii.