

What Atheists Know

by Kenneth R. Craycraft, Jr.

"When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber."

—Flannery O'Connor

The Politics of Virtue: Is Abortion Debatable?

by Elizabeth Mensch and Alan Freeman
Durham: Duke University Press;
264 pp., \$14.95

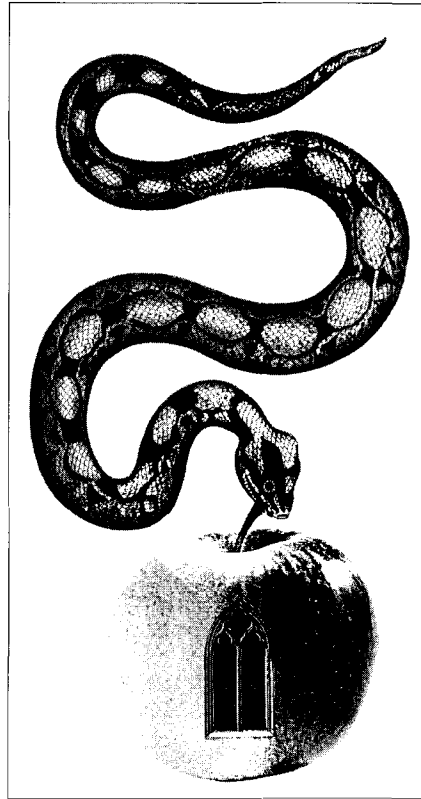
Fullness of Faith: The Public Significance of Theology

by Michael J. Himes and
Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M.
New York: Paulist Press;
224 pp., \$14.95

In response to the charge of obsession with a "single issue," pro-life activists contend that the abortion debate is really paradigmatic. As Joseph Sobran suggested several years ago, "The debate about abortion is really the kind of debate America shies away from: a debate about what man is, and what society should be." That is, abortion is a surrogate for the larger, and more abstract, question of the nature and purpose of human existence. When pro-life and pro-abortion advocates scream at one another, they use the image of abortion, but they are really arguing about a whole host of issues, such as marriage, sexuality, euthanasia, religious commitment, freedom, and "rights." As it turns out, one's stance on abortion is a highly reliable indicator of where one stands on these and on other moral, cultural, and political problems.

But the abortion argument is paradigmatic of another, more serious problem: the incommensurability of the moral schemes and paradigms each side invokes. Words like "freedom," "choice," "life," "human," "justice," even "male" and "female," when used by the two sides, are barely more than alphabetical

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Igor Kopylovsky

accidents. The content each side ascribes to these words renders them different symbols, pointing to different and mutually exclusive moral "realities." Thus, the fundamental question at issue is not "what value does one ascribe to human life?" but "to which moral-linguistic community do you belong?"

But the problem gets even stickier for those on the pro-life side. For while they certainly do not intend to invest their words with the same meanings as the pro-abortionist rhetoric has, in large part the pro-lifers have lost the game by conceding the legitimacy of that language in the first place. Or, more precisely, the pro-life side has allowed itself to be seduced by a rationality detrimental to its case. When it adopts this rationality, but still tries to cling to moral notions foreign to it, it makes coherence literally impossible—with the result that the shouting gets louder and the shooting

more common.

This double jeopardy is best illustrated by the phrase "right to life," so often used by the antiabortion side. The pro-abortion argument is that the fetus can legitimately be considered an intruder on the rights of the woman who must carry it to term. If she so decides, this violation of her rights can be seen as qualitatively similar to a physician deliberately injecting a virus or bacterium that causes prolonged, chronic disability. No one would deny that she has the "right" to rid herself of this virus by any medical means at her disposal. So too the fetus, as an intruder upon a woman's personal autonomy, is subject to her right not to be so burdened. The pro-life side thinks it can trump this argument by defending the "rights" of the unborn child. The rights of the mother—so the argument goes—end when their exercise results in the death of another "rights-bearing" individual. But by granting the legitimacy of a rationalistic scheme based upon the recognition of "rights," they have rendered their argument incoherent and lost the battle.

The argument from "right" implies that the fetus and mother are autonomous individuals with moral claims against one another. When pro-lifers argue that the fetus has a right to life, they simply cannot avoid the implication that this right is exercised as an intrusive claim against another person, a claim the other person has the greater right to deny. For the fetus to "claim" its right, it must positively transgress the woman's rights of autonomy and self-expression. But since in any rights-based argument the strong presumption of justice is always against the active trans-

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gressor and for the passive victim, the woman has the greater right to rid herself of the transgressor by whatever means are necessary.

The grand and vicious irony is that when the pro-life side rails against *Roe v. Wade*, it accepts the moral rationality that necessarily leads to the conclusion of *Roe* and its companion decision *Doe v. Bolton*: that a woman has the right to terminate a pregnancy for any reason she deems sufficient, up to the moment of birth. The pro-life side cannot win the debate by framing its argument against *Roe* in this way, since this moral rationality was designed specifically for the conclusions to which it leads.

The problem is that the pro-life side wants to communicate its opposition to abortion in terms that the pro-abortion side will accept. (This desire is decidedly not reciprocal; pro-abortionists have no desire to convince anyone of anything, which is, ironically, another reason why they are winning the war. As the bumper sticker says, "Abortion: On Demand, Without Apology.") But in their attempt to make themselves intelligible, they must adopt the moral-linguistic scheme that ineluctably leads to radical pro-abortion conclusions. That is, in their pursuit of a universalist, inclusionist rationality accessible and reasonable to everyone, the pro-life side succumbs to the highly particular, exclusionist rationality of secular Enlightenment liberalism.

Thus, Elizabeth Mensch and Alan Freeman's *The Politics of Virtue: Is Abortion Debatable?* is less an exploration of the subtitled question than an intelligent and convincing explanation of its negation. The problem is not the difficulty of getting the two sides to talk dispassionately to one another, but rather the lack of the *sine qua non* of real debate: a shared moral rationality and language. "Our goal is not to advance one side or the other in the abortion debate," Mensch and Freeman explain at the outset, "but rather to explore whether we are necessarily stuck with the grim and destructive fact of moral incommensurability." The authors hope their book will be seen "in the service of replacing stark incommensurability with something closer to mutually respectful dialogue." But try as they might, and as loath as they are to admit it, their book is testament to the fact that, indeed, abortion is the supreme symbol of mutually intolerant modes of moral and po-

litical discourse in America today.

If this is ever to be overcome—especially from the antiabortion side—it will not be in the current terms of the "debate," nor will it be in service to a universalistic morality. The only way for the antiabortion side to "win" is for it to abandon all hope of convincing the pro-abortionists on their own terms, and to reaffirm a *better* moral rationality, which would never accept abortion as a viable means of birth control or as a legitimate expression of a woman's moral being. It must give up on the supposed moral universalism that has, ironically, led to the highly fractious and subjective individualism of current American moral and political debate.

Mensch and Freeman do an excellent job of accounting for this irony in their discussion of "natural law" in 20th century political discourse. Often mistaking a Kantian epistemology for a truly Thomistic one, many Catholic scholars have aggravated the situation by appealing not to a Thomistic dialectic of natural law and revelation, but rather to a lowest-common-denominator—or *universal*—rationalist moral system to which every human could subscribe, regardless of the moral or cultural community he represented. The problem is that this appeal to universalism ends up by divorcing morality from the authority of tradition, which finally leads to rampant individualist subjectivism and relativism. If sheer reason, unaided and untutored, is the basis of ethics, then ev-

ery individual is his own moral universe. The appeal to particular, normative moral traditions, embedded in authoritative rational communities, is a violation of universalism and thus of individualism as well.

There have been many contemporary attempts to make the Roman Catholic Church relevant to the prevailing political and moral ideologies. For in order to speak in supposed "universalist" terms to the prevailing moral and political culture, Christian theologians have been all too eager to embrace foreign moral languages in place of their own—a subject which brings us back to the contradictory aspect of "right to life" arguments. Alleged appeals to natural law or (more commonly) to "natural rights" are, in effect, appeals to particularistic moral languages which have been highly successful in selling a very seductive bill of goods. When theologians attempt to "translate" the language of Christianity into the language of prevailing rights arguments, they effectively abandon any standing to criticize the ideologies that spring from these concepts. As Mensch and Freeman note, many denominations and theologians offer "no explanation for their actions except an increasingly secular political vocabulary of social justice." The "increasingly secular vocabulary of clergy, while not necessarily offensive, hardly differentiated the church from liberal secular culture generally." Theology thus is rendered incapable of saying "more than what atheists already

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know.” “This problem of translation reveals the extent to which the church/state dilemma . . . is a problem of epistemology itself,” the authors explain.

Thinkers engaged in reasserting the fact of religion as a legitimate source of moral knowledge in the public arena insist that it find some conceptually neutral language in which to express this knowledge. Mensch and Freeman cite Richard John Neuhaus, who wants the believer and nonbeliever to “engage one another in a shared world of discourse.” But there are at least two problems with Neuhaus’s solution. First, it would give the nonbeliever absolutely no stake in trying to find a “moral Esperanto” (to borrow a phrase from Princeton philosopher Jeffrey Stout). Why should he abandon the secular political and moral discourse that works just fine, thank you, in achieving his political and moral goals? Second, and more importantly, such attempts at “translation” as Neuhaus and others advocate always fail because they allow the secular moral culture to be the judge of what is “rational” and what is not. The reason why secularists and Christians do not communicate is precisely because they do live in different “worlds of discourse.” When it comes to the question of whose rationality will prevail, the theologians always blink.

They blink because their nerve fails;

not to grant secular moral and political culture its role as the arbiter of rationality is to risk sounding sectarian, and thus becoming irrelevant to public discourse. The result, of course, is that the church thereby “relevantizes” itself into irrelevance; and *Fullness of Faith* is an example of just such a failure of nerve. On its surface, the book looks like a studied attempt to avoid this tendency. The authors, Michael J. Himes and Kenneth R. Himes, O.F.M., want to show how such distinctly Christian doctrines as Original Sin, the Holy Trinity, and the Incarnation of God in Christ can take publicly significant forms in American political discourse. But *only after they are translated into terms that a secular liberal democratic polity can accept*. Or, to be more exact, only by showing how these doctrines are easily metamorphosed into good Democratic political theory.

In a classic case of the political tail wagging the theological dog, Himes and Himes want to join in the “quest . . . for a Catholic social theory which can support and enrich liberal democracy yet oppose the individualism and myth of self-interest which historically has undergirded liberal institutions.” Thus, they go to great pains to show that the Trinity calls us away from the radical individualism of Hobbes and Locke. But they spin away from those philosophers only to go reeling into the arms of Rousseau, the champion of positive rights.

The authors’ goal is not to suggest distinctly Christian critiques of existing political and social realities, but rather to show how the realities of which they approve can be undergirded by certain understandings of Christian doctrine, an agenda that turns theological method on its head. They begin by investigating the social and political policies which they like, and then show how God likes them, too. For example, the authors wish to command a certain brand of “communitarianism,” as opposed to individualism. But in so doing, they ignore two important things. The first is that communitarianism is a variety of liberalism, beginning with the same basic anthropological presuppositions: liberalism with a smiling face. But, more importantly, the authors’ need to translate Christianity into political terms is the result of their failure to take seriously the fact that the Church is its own political system, with its own grammar, rationality, and language. Their method

is to show not what a politics of, say, the Incarnation should look like, but rather why the Incarnation undergirds the legitimacy of political patriotism. Rather than spell out the distinct ecclesial politics of the Trinity, the authors tell us how the Trinity is really a metaphor for universal human rights.

The authors’ purpose is a noble and important one. They want to show that “the Catholic theological tradition and its consequent social teaching offer a distinctive vision of human life, human community, the goals of a just society.” But they do not adequately consider the possibility that the Church does not merely offer a vision of these things, but rather is a unique instantiation of a particular way of human living; instead, they offer distinctly theological words and phrases as a means of substantiating *another* political reality, and, in so doing, they allow this other reality to transform theological language into a “universal” political language that any “rational” person can accept. But what, then, is the point? Secular politics is not interested in any theological justification of its existence. And if theology merely serves to show how secular politics has been right all along, why do we *need* theology? Obversely, public theology, rather than presenting the church as a distinct political society which calls all other politics into question, teaches Americans to be good (communitarian) liberals.

When such a transformation occurs, theology quickly loses its ability to stand as a prophetic voice against all other politics but its own. It forgets how to say “No!” When theology sees itself as serving a broader public good—noble as that might sound—it must render this service in ways that the broader public will find acceptable. That is to say, it must sacrifice itself to secularity for the purpose of universality. For instance, it reminds us that we ought to be self-giving and compassionate, yet we soon forget why. It tells us to be loving, but fails to explain the boundaries or parameters of that love. It tells us to be tender, but when tenderness is changed into some mythical universalist ethic, cut away from the source of tenderness, we soon learn that it allows us to kill rather than to suffer (or to suffer suffering). It is no small irony that law professors Mensch and Freeman appear to recognize this truth more clearly than theologians Himes and Himes.

LIBERAL ARTS

TRANSGENDERISM

According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, the city’s Board of Supervisors voted in December to make it illegal for employers, landlords, and public officials to discriminate against members of the “transgender community.” An editorial in the newspaper complained that San Francisco had waited too long to join Santa Cruz, Seattle, and Minneapolis, which already accord special legal protection to “transsexuals.” The editorial concluded by quoted Terence Hallinan, the chief proponent of the measure: “We are creating a civil right and it will affect attitudes all over America.”

Sins of Omission

by John Lofton

The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind

by Mark A. Noll

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans;
288 pp., \$19.99



The *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* is that, as Mark Noll puts it, “there is not much of an evangelical mind”; that, despite all their other virtues, “American evangelicals are not exemplary for their thinking, and they have not been for several generations”; and that, at a popular level, “modern American evangelicals have failed notably in sustaining serious intellectual life.” Writing as “a wounded lover,” he adds: “The general impact of Christian thinking on the evangelicals of North America, much less on learned culture as a whole, has been slight . . . there is a long, long way to go.”

This is, alas, true. But the problem Professor Noll identifies is far worse than a scandal: it is a sin. When our Lord was asked what was the great commandment in the law, He replied, quoting Deuteronomy 6:5: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind” (Matthew 22:36-37). And in I Corinthians 10:5, Paul commands Christians to bring “into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ.” Thus, the widespread failure of Christians to think Christianly—according to what the Scripture says—is a violation of God’s Law, which is sin. And we see this sinful failure all around us virtually every time a prominent Christian speaks out about anything. In an address last September in Washington, D.C., to the “Christian Coalition” he founded, Pat Robertson told his audience (to a reported standing ovation) that all his group wants to see is “the kind of government and values we had during the Eisenhower administration of the 1950’s.” Really? The Lord Jesus Christ died a hideous, painful death on the

Cross, and millions of Christian martyrs have been subsequently murdered, for the purpose of reestablishing the great Christian Republic of Ike?—the Eisenhower who, as President, on December 22, 1952, remarked: “Our form of government makes no sense unless it is founded in a deeply religious faith, *and I don’t care what it is.*” (Emphasis mine).

Professor Noll says that by an evangelical “life of the mind” he means “the effort to think like a Christian—to think within specifically a Christian framework—across a whole spectrum of modern learning, including economics and political science, literary criticism and imaginative writing, historical inquiry and philosophical studies, linguistics and the history of science, social theory and the fine arts.” He adds: “The scandal of the evangelical mind is a scandal from whichever direction it is viewed. It is a scandal arising from the historical experience of an entire culture. It is a scandal to which the shape of evangelical institutions has contributed. Most of all, it is a scandal because it scorns the gifts of a loving God.” Indeed. And I have seen such scorn exhibited—as Howard Cosell used to say—up close and personal. At a Heritage Foundation conference in 1990, at which Fred Barnes of the *New Republic* defended “Big Government conservatism” as a viable new strategy for the right, I asked Barnes (an evangelical Christian) two simple questions: What, specifically, does your faith have to do with your views regarding civil government? And: From your Christian perspective, are there specific things the federal government is demanding that ought not to be rendered to Caesar? Here is Barnes’s answer in its entirety: “Well, let’s see. I was a conservative before I was a Christian and my views haven’t changed since becoming a Christian. So, uh, uh, are there things the government does now that, well, uh, uh, I certainly don’t favor some of the grants by the NEA—which if Bush has his way will continue. That’s one example. But, no. Do I, in thinking about politics, and what I’m for or against, get out the Bible and read it? No.”

Some answer from a Christian.

Barnes’s reply was delivered with an expression of utter disgust. I remember wondering as I left this gathering: if Barnes, a Christian, doesn’t read the Bible, God’s Word, to learn what he’s for and against in politics, what *does* he read? The *New Republic*, I suppose.

But things were not always thus. Professor Noll contrasts the modern, mindless evangelical Christian with the views of a true Christian thinker, John Calvin, who, he says, in combining a high view of God’s sovereignty with an earnest appreciation of the human intellect, sought “to bring every aspect of life under the general guidance of Christian thinking, to have each question in life answered by a response from a Christian perspective.” As a consequence of Calvin’s influence, “Protestants were encouraged to labor as scientists so that their scientific work could rise to the praise of God,” each exploration “showing forth His glory.” And “at least some statesmen and theologians among the early Protestants carried on the same sort of enterprise with respect to government. They not only worked to make political and social organizations reflect the norms of justice they found in Scripture but also examined the contrasting rights of individuals, kings, and parliaments, and contributed to theories about democracy and the existence of republics. In general, they did what they could to make life in society reflect the goodness of God.” And there are, by God’s grace, such men today who “stand in the gap” (Ezekiel 22:30) and continue John Calvin’s legacy, men who are attempting to develop a Christian mind and apply God’s Word to every area of thought and life. But they fail to receive the credit they deserve from Professor Noll. For example, he only says of Dr. R.J. Rushdoony—head of the Chalcedon Foundation with which I am associated—and of the late Cornelius Van Til, a professor of apologetics at the Westminster Theological Seminary,

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