

“But if they say we are not even to believe...”¹
Stanley Fish and the Bankruptcy of the Liberal Option

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Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?"
And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets."
He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?"
Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God."
And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.
And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.
I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."
Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Gospel of Matthew 16:13-20

“To know the reality of a religious tradition, one must know it from within.”

Franz Rosenzweig, Letter to Eugen Rosenstock, 7 November 1916

“We can build only on the ruins of the spectacle.”

Guy Debord, “Questionnaire on Situationism”

¹ Augustine of Hippo, “On the Profit of Believing” (C.L. Cornish, trans.), para. 32.

1.

To die for a cause is impressive, but it is not martyrdom.

Martyrdom is the peculiar name the Church gives to those who have died in a particular way. To die for a cause is not the same as dying for the Truth. To die *for a cause* is not, necessarily, to be a martyr.

Or, to put it another way, in the words of William T. Cavanaugh, “[t]he body of the martyr is...the battleground for a larger contest of imaginations, that of the state and that of the church.”²

What Cavanaugh is arguing in the section of his book *Torture and Eucharist*, from which I lifted that quotation, was that, in the mid-1970’s, the military state of Chile used “strategies of disappearance and torture as ways to *deny* martyrs to the church.”³

The martyr is the name the Church gives to the one who dies—is killed—testifying to the reality of the Church-as-life, and furthermore testifying to the reality of Jesus Christ as the way and the truth of that life.⁴

Cavanaugh draws a contrast between what occurred in Chile and what occurred in the first centuries of the Christian witness in the Roman Empire. For Cavanaugh, the Chilean model is much more insidious because it is less *public*. Roman persecution of the Church galvanized and made visible the suffering of the body. The Chilean model *dismembered* the body and left it—for a time—without recourse.

But there is—and Cavanaugh’s book is a testament to this—a clarity which arises, albeit *eventually*, even in the midst of this more insidious, less public form of

² William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics, and the Body of Christ* (Malden: Blackwell, 1998) 65.

³ Cavanaugh, 59.

⁴ I make this definition with awareness of the thorough—and differing—examination it receives in Cavanaugh’s work, cf. *Torture*, 58-71.

persecution. It is still possible, given the stark fact of intolerable violence on the part of the state, for the Church *eventually* to begin the process of *naming*; of naming it's lost and 'disappeared' members *as martyrs*.

2.

When contemplating the Christian response to a violent state, we are well to turn (as my colleagues have often reminded me) to the likes of one such as John Howard Yoder. The Church (and these are Yoder's sentiments, mind you) should definitively *interfere* with the state when its practices stray from the moral and ethical commandments that form the core of what might be termed a 'Christian public witness.' Yoder states unequivocally, in his book *The Christian Witness to the State*, that "it is possible for the Christian or the Christian church to address the social order at large or to the state criticisms and suggestions concerning the way in which the state fulfills its responsibility for the maintenance of order."⁵

I point this out because the criticism Yoder advocates here is *substantive*. This is not armchair quarterbacking; he spends a good two-thirds of the book outlining ways in which the Christian precisely can *interfere with* and *influence* the outworkings of political policy in a modern democratic nation like America. While this may seem unremarkable at first, the point bears emphasizing. Keep it in mind for what I will say a moment from now: Yoder on no uncertain terms is an advocate for Christian interference with the business-as-usual of the state.

Moreover, this firm witness (as opposed to what we might call a weak or a 'boutique' witness) is grounded in a clear sense of the identity of the believer *as believer*, and the Church as universal. As he puts it: "The validity of our witness to society,

⁵ John Hoard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 5

including the critical address to the state and the statesmen [sic], hangs on the firmness with which the church keeps her central message at the center: her call to every man to turn to God and her call to those who have turned to God to live in love.”⁶ I want to linger on his language a moment: note the terms here include the words *critical*, *firmness*, and *every*. *Every* person should, in Yoder’s view, turn to God. This is a view we hold *firmly* as Christians, and it forms the bulk of our *critical* (and that word, coupled with *firmness*, implies ‘transformative’) witness to the state.

I make these points to emphasize that Yoder, in this book, is calling the Christian to *do something*.

3.

Ah, but then there’s America.

America, you see, is not the visible torture state that was the Roman Empire, nor is it the invisible torture state typified by late-20th century Chile. Both of those regimes were about the business of dismembering the body of the Church, each in their respective fashions.

In fact, I would argue, it is precisely the task of *any* secular state to be about the business of dismembering the body of the Church (we might, following Yoder, claim that this is because the Church is a more true *polis* than any secular state,⁷ or we might argue that the dismemberment arises for more insidious reasons, but either way), and this brings us to America.

To be a member of the Church, in the way Yoder advocates, presupposes a relation to a Truth that is not an ironic relationship. It is an identity that transcends the

⁶ Yoder, 36.

⁷ Yoder, 18.

identity that is presupposed in American liberal democracy; it cuts across the grain of the notion that one is first-and-foremost an individual, un-named and unbidden by any covenantal allegiance. As Alexis de Tocqueville put it, America enacts radically the precepts of Rene Descartes, and as a result “everyone shuts himself tightly within himself [sic] and insists upon judging the world from there.”⁸ Rather than humanoids—beings comported by the *Imago Dei* and oriented *coram Deo*—we are *humonads*: left to ourselves, in the words of Milton, “self-begot, self-rai’d”.⁹

This reduction to radical individualism is one of the key features of American liberal democracy that Stanley Fish (in the articles I have directed you to and many others) interrogates. The American humonad is a being strictly divided: there is that of you which is *public*, and that of you which is *private*. To use the words of Steve Allen,¹⁰ the former is the realm of *facts*, and the latter, *opinions*. In other words, the public is where we do things—untainted by ‘irrational opinion’—and the private is where we *believe* things—and, following Jefferson, we can pretty much believe anything we like, because those beliefs, ideally, will have no substantive consequence upon the ‘marketplace of ideas.’ Fish, examining some recent decisions by Antonin Scalia, puts it this way: this “impulse to divide comes from the side of the civil, [and thus] *its* values will be normative and religious values will either be accorded a ceremonial but empty honor or regarded as a trivial expression of individual taste, or condemned”.¹¹

I submit to you that, while its expression is far less violent (the whole of the Enlightenment and its attendant liberalisms are, after all, attempts to be, one might say,

⁸ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Part II, Book 1, quoted in Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, 7.

⁹ John Milton, *Paradise Lost* V, 860, quoted in Stanley Fish, *The Trouble With Principle*, 244.

¹⁰ I get this from an album of my childhood, Steve Allen’s *How to Think*.

¹¹ Fish, *Trouble*, 173, my emphasis.

ontologically cordial), the American humonad is cousin to the Roman and the Chilean—and in no wise a distant cousin. From the standpoint of the body of Christ, the current state of liberal democracy in America is to the Central American *junta* what the *junta* is to Roman torture theater: a more subtle and effective form of the same desire, the desire to deny the reality in which the Church can name its body.

4.

Fish criticizes Michael McConnell for not “recognizing the shape of his own interests as a committed Christian”,¹² and rightly so: what McConnell (and those like him) want is a Church free from direct confrontation with the secular state. But, Fish reminds us, “the freedom thus gained is the freedom to be ineffectual”.¹³

While I have some sympathies with Yoder’s work on Christian witness, it is telling to me that, in his discussion of ‘radical pacifism’ there is no mention—at *all*—of martyrdom. Yoder envisions a political arena in which the gravitas of moral compunction can still be effective politically, an arena which *might* have existed in the mid-‘60’s, when he wrote the book, but was rapidly being dismantled and is now evaporated.

What made Archbishop Romero a *saintly* man was his work with the poor. What made him a *saint* was his work with and through the Church. What made him a laudable man was his desire to work against his station and to advocate for the ‘least of these’; *what makes him a martyr* is that he was killed performing the Eucharist. We find it difficult, however, to make a public case for this distinction. The biopic on Romero makes him a champion of *human rights*, of *freedom*, perhaps even of a certain brand of

¹² Fish, *Trouble*, 253.

¹³ Fish, *Trouble*, 254.

revolutionary—all these are viable categories to classify Romero within the current cultural rubric. In such a cultural representation, however, the Church can only be seen as a vehicle (at best) or a hindrance (at worst) to these other, principled ends. Romero was a man, acting alone, discovering the secret humanism (universal and portable) at the heart of Christ’s message, *despite* his place in the hierarchy of the Church. Or so, at least, Hollywood (and Thomas Jefferson¹⁴ would have us believe.

The ‘Hollywood imagination’ infects us all, to some degree. We see it in Yoder’s inability to invoke the Church’s earliest and most effective form of radical pacifism. We see it again in the latter half of the Fish essay, “Why We Can’t All Just Get Along.” The litany of writers Fish rehearses all start by defying liberalism and end by incorporating it into the heart of their arguments. Or, as Luke puts it, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” [12:34 NIV]. We are children, each of us, of the Enlightenment. We treasure above all (as did Lord Chamberlain) ‘peace in our time.’

The Church at peace with the secular state is a Church that will not encounter the confrontation, the conflict that produces martyrs. If by chance or grace it does occur that a member of the body is killed in the act of testimony to the Church-as-life, and to Jesus Christ as the Way and the Truth of that life, the Church at peace with the secular state will have no words to name this event *as* martyrdom. The dead will be humanists, freedom lovers, revolutionaries, *but they will not be, by our own testimony, martyrs.* *This* is the inheritance we gain as liberalism’s children.

“A faith”, Fish reminds us, “at peace with freedom and modernity is a faith that has given up its franchise and has made itself into something occasional and

¹⁴ Erik Reece, “Jesus Without the Miracles: Thomas Jefferson’s Bible and the Gospel of Thomas.” *Harper’s Magazine* December, 2005.

cosmetic...this vague, nonbinding, light-as-air spirituality, the chief characteristic of which is that it claims—and believes—nothing.”¹⁵

We are unable to name the dead as martyrs because, in our peaceloving hearts, we have lost the ability (some would say *desire*) to *believe* the Church-as-life, and Jesus Christ as the Way and the Truth of that life. We are afraid of belief because, as our culture has told us, belief is no different than opinion, and opinions don’t have currency in the marketplace.

This is why I am in complete agreement with Fish when he says that, as Christians, “[w]hat [we] should want is not an expansion of the marketplace of ideas, but its disbanding and replacement by a regime of virtue as opposed to a regime of process. [We] should want an end to the public/private split which, by fencing off the arena of political dispute from substantive determinations of value, assures the continual deferral and bracketing of value questions.”¹⁶

We have been given a sham language, with sham distinctions, by our ‘buying in’ to the Enlightenment and its attendant liberalisms. We have allowed the atheists to give us our dualisms. We have forgotten what Augustine, dear old Augustine, knew so well: that belief *is not* (as Scalia so baldly puts it) “mere opinion.” Moreover, it is not opinion *at all*.¹⁷ Belief, for Augustine, is submission to the legitimate authority—the legitimate *reality*—of the Church. Or, to put it in the words of Michael Janofsky, “He does not

¹⁵ Stanley Fish, “Postmodern Warfare: the Ignorance of our Warrior Intellectuals.” *Harper’s Magazine*, July, 2002, p. 37.

¹⁶ Stanley Fish, “Why We Can’t All Just Get Along.” *The Trouble with Principle*, 253.

¹⁷ Augustine of Hippo, “On the Profit of Believing” (C.L. Cornish, trans.) para. 25.

view his home runs as merely a part of athletic competition. They are part of his religious existence.”¹⁸

What we must recover is the reality that the alternative to the Church, from where we stand, is not secularism, but *paganism*. We are faced on all sides with a society of the Spectacle, bread and circuses, the brandings of Mammon and the ‘Kingdom of the Givens.’ In such a state, Yoder’s call to “the Christian or the Christian church to address the social order at large or to the state criticisms and suggestions concerning the way in which the state fulfills its responsibility for the maintenance of order,”¹⁹ is not only impossible, it’s laughable. Our respectability in the marketplace is too important to us. We ignore the man over there with the whip of cords, overturning the tables. It is evident where *our* zeal is.

Fish accuses us of as much. “It is simply too late in the day to go back...The loss is not simply a matter of historical fact; it is inscribed in the very consciousness of those who live in its wake.”²⁰ I have spoken to you, and I believe him. Oh, you long for a Chile, but you are so comfortable in this *pax Americana*. From our professors lips we hear it: it is not our place to change hearts or develop virtue or, God forbid, *disciple*. It is not ours to be effective. *What say you?*

As for me and my house... Augustine speaks it best: “Give me a lover, and he will feel what I say. Give me one that longs, one that hungers, give me one that is on a pilgrimage in the wilderness...give me such a one, and he will understand what I mean.”²¹

¹⁸ Janofsky, quoted in Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?*, 270.

¹⁹ John Hoard Yoder, *The Christian Witness to the State*, 5

²⁰ Fish, *Trouble*, 262

²¹ Augustine of Hippo, *Homilies on the Gospel of John* 26.4