

Religious Heresy, Liberalism, and Political Philosophy

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Eric Nelson, *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God*. Harvard University Press, 218 pp., \$31 cloth.

THOSE READERS OF A CERTAIN age who, as undergraduates in college, were rightly assigned to read Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* will without much effort recall certain phrases from the conclusion of that book. They are able to do so because those phrases, with their rhetorical flourish, are memorable, describing, perhaps too melodramatically, what is taken to be modern life. The most famous of those phrases is the description of the circumstances of our life as being an "iron cage," inhabited by, to refer to another of those well-known phrases of that conclusion, "specialists without spirit, sensualists without heart: this nullity imagines that it has attained a level of civilization never before achieved."

As famous as those phrases are and however much the latter's description of us deflates our self-estimation, more important for our consideration is the wrongly neglected observation made by

Weber following those previous characterizations, "modern man is in general, even with the best will, unable to give religious ideas a significance for culture and national character which they deserve." Weber was surely correct about the inability of today's intellectuals to engage seriously with religious ideas. As but one example of that inability, more than seventy years have passed since a picture of Reinhold Niebuhr appeared on the front cover of *Time* magazine. It is difficult even to imagine a theologian today having the influence that would garner that kind of attention. Who today, to take another example, reads and ponders that important work of Weber's friend, Ernst Troeltsch's magnificent *The Social Teachings of the Christian Churches*? We and our culture are worse off for being unable to give religious ideas the significance they deserve, for not taking religion seriously.

I do not wish these observations to be misunderstood. I am not calling for intellectuals today to become theologians; and I certainly do not think that our universities should take theological positions, even though not doing so raises another set of problems which cannot be

pursued here. I do, however, think that there should be rigorous, impartial exploration into the nature of religion: what it is, that is, in what ways it is distinctive from other orientations of the mind; why it persists; the changes it undergoes over time and from one civilization to another; its place in our understanding of what it means to be human; and, to return to Weber, its place in the development and continuation of a culture. One need not be a believer to recognize the importance of this engagement with religious ideas and the history of theological disputes. That this engagement is largely lacking is an indictment of today's intellectuals and universities. Needless to say, the Schools of Divinity have become a part of the problem of the lack of serious exploration of, and engagement with, the significance of religion as many of them appear today to be institutions of what often seems to be political propaganda. Thus, the appearance of *The Theology of Liberalism: Political Philosophy and the Justice of God* by the political philosopher Eric Nelson is refreshing, almost even startling, and certainly welcome, as this work emphasizes that religious ideas should be given the significance that they deserve for political theory and its history. This is not the first time that Nelson has drawn attention to the influence of religion and theology on political thought. He had presented this proper view in his earlier *The Hebrew Republic: Jewish Sources and the Transformation of European Political Thought*.

Nelson's argument in *The Theology of Liberalism* begins with the observation that the political convictions of "protoliberals" of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (for example, Milton, Locke, Leibniz, Rousseau, and Kant) and those who are their heirs (the latter often described as "classical liberals," standing for free markets

and trade, individual responsibility, and a limited state) were animated by the theological heresy known as Pelagianism. He continues by observing that once one sees that this early modern "liberalism" was Pelagian, one is in a better position to understand the recent disputes over what is just or fair that begin with John Rawls's *A Theory of Justice*. Those early protoliberals knew well that their arguments for individual liberty and responsibility were a continuation of the early fifth century dispute between Augustine and Pelagius over the nature and extent of sin and free will. Rawls, too, so Nelson argues on the basis of Rawls's undergraduate thesis, *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*, knew that those earlier theological disputes continued today, albeit in a different guise. However, in contrast to those earlier protoliberals, Rawls's understanding of justice was, according to Nelson, derived from his self-conscious repudiation of what actually was and is a complicated Pelagian theological tradition, and, thus, represents a departure from what had previously been understood as the liberal tradition, itself also by no means uniform.

Whether they know it or not, so Nelson continues, today's political philosophers take positions in that long-standing theological dispute. By not knowing, the recent positions taken by political philosophers over the nature of justice repeat, but superficially so, those much earlier theological arguments over sin and free will. An important conclusion of Nelson's argument is not over the specific determination of what is justice, as necessary as that determination obviously is and about which Nelson, a defender of that Pelagian tradition of an earlier liberalism, has much to say; but rather that to distinguish sharply between theology and political philosophy, as has taken place, is unproductive. It ignores the influence of

the former on the latter. However, it is by no means simply a matter of historical derivation; for as Nelson refreshingly put the matter in Chapter Four, “political philosophy has something to learn from theology.”

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The dispute between Augustine and the British (or possibly Irish) monk Pelagius was over the human capacity to choose what is right, and thereby overcome sin, or at least some aspects of sinfulness. Do we face the utter depravity of humanity—the original sin which, as such, is inescapable, so Augustine—or is there a human capacity in the free exercise of choice to overcome sin, so Pelagius? One gets an anticipation of the dispute over the nature and capacity of reason to organize rightly life and society through law in the exchange between Jesus and the Jews over what it means to be free, as recounted in John 8:31-34. Indeed, some of the early modern Pelagians were accused of being “Judaizers,” as Nelson notes in passing and as I discuss at some length in *Hebraism in Religion, History, and Politics: The Third Culture*, because of their distinction between righteousness, which was within their grasp even if always in need of adjustment given the uncertainty of the future, and salvation, which, as they were Christians, was beyond their grasp.

At stake here among the early modern, “protoliberal” Pelagians was a re-evaluation of reason. It was no longer the source of sinful pride or the means of self-deception. Through a turn to “natural reason” or, more theologically formulated, a doctrine of the “fortunate fall” that allowed humanity to be free so as to know sin and, thus, consciously reject it, or the recognition of the continual existence of two covenants—not only the new covenant of grace offered by the “good news” but also the still operative earlier covenant, either with Adam or Noah—these Pelagians and other Christian Hebraists opened up a reconsideration of law, good works, and ultimately a view that the relation between individual effort and reward is just.

Many complications ensued. They remain with us. Recognition that they do is the merit of Nelson’s book. One, but by no means the only, implication of the Pelagian view is that what accounts for sin is not that we are all descended from Adam, but rather the way society is organized. This is the position of Rousseau in his (second) *Discourse on Inequality*, which Nelson rightly characterizes as a Pelagian text (although one that, in contrast to the works of the earlier Pelagians, doesn’t draw a distinction between righteousness and salvation, the absence of which can have disastrous consequences as it arouses a totalitarian temptation). The political theorist George Armstrong Kelly had, approximately fifty years ago and on several occasions, referred to Rousseau as a Pelagian and Kant as a semi-Pelagian. My mention of Kelly is to observe that there really is nothing new in Nelson’s argument for those who have paid attention to religion and its influence on other spheres of human thought and action. That is why Nelson’s analysis of Pelagian liberalism, while certainly refreshing and welcome, is not startling. What is new is that an

established political philosopher at Harvard is calling upon his fellow political philosophers to pay attention to the history of religion and to learn from its theological disputes so that they can become better political philosophers. That by itself warrants praise.

The basis for Rawls's anti-Pelagian brief against the relation between individual merit and reward is that the very idea of individual merit is morally suspect because of the advantages arising from the accident of birth, the contribution of others to one's successes, and luck. However, as Nelson argues, even if a person has benefitted from the advantages of birth and social standing, just how is one to determine what percentage of that person's accomplishments was a result of that favorable initial condition or a result of that person's industriousness and, as is often the case, the unpredictable intuition or, if you will, the luck that an entrepreneur has to have in order to take advantage of an opportunity? To pose this question in this way is not to deny that attempts ought to be made to ameliorate initial states of inequality, for example, through legally mandated education of children; but it is to instill a deserved caution regarding the scope of those attempts.

That caution is all the more called for when, as is usually the case and one hopes is the case, those advantages accruing to a person were the results of the choices made by that individual's parents to sacrifice for the future of their child. In determining what is just, one had better proceed with the utmost caution in disrupting the relation between effort and reward, or, theologically formulated, between good

works and grace or blessing. A state mandated egalitarian redistribution, arising out of a desire "to level the playing field" will compromise both that industrious effort in pursuit of a reward and the sacrifices that parents make for their children. It will compromise what should, in fact, be encouraged, namely, the responsibility of parents for their children's welfare. After all, we do hope that parents sacrifice so that their children will have a better future, don't we? And shouldn't we approve of that sacrifice?

True enough, the result of those sacrifices, or theologically formulated "good works," will be an inequality of results, or theologically formulated "blessings," as some parents make greater sacrifices than others from which the children of those parents benefit. But is that inequality which includes the preference of parents for their children unjust? Nelson seems not to think so. Ultimately at stake here is a version of the earlier theological dispute over Pelagianism: the nature and extent of freedom, and the relation between "good works" and grace.

What are we to make of the apparent development of the political philosopher Eric Nelson in light of *The Theology of Liberalism* and his previous book *The Hebrew Republic*? Has he responded to Weber's lament by recognizing and exploring, as had Weber albeit with a different, wider focus, the continuing significance of religious ideas for our understanding of modern culture and politics? It appears so. While the subject matter of Professor Nelson's research is his own affair, I hope he continues this exploration; for there is much work, of considerable importance, still to be done. A