

Neoconservative Theology

PETER STEINFELS

Last November 10, I attended a press conference in New York City called by an organization with the promising title of Institute on Religion and Democracy (IRD). The day's business was the public presentation of a lengthy document on "Christianity and Democracy." The new organization's newsletter called this "a general statement of the Institute's philosophical and theological purpose." Its chief author, John Richard Neuhaus, a Lutheran theologian and social activist, called it "an invitation to Christian leadership in this country to consider the Christian stake and the Christian warrant for democratic government."

A welcome invitation, one would think, in a world and a nation where democracy is hardly secure and not always bolstered by religious leadership—and for the fact that the statement, like the Institute itself, claimed among its supporters a number of distinguished scholars and religious leaders: Neuhaus, Peter L. Berger, James Finn, former *Commonweal* editor now at Freedom House, evangelical leader Carl F.H. Henry, Duke professor Julian N. Hartt, Jesuit ethicist Theodore V. Purcell, Mary N. Temple of the Land Council, and others.

In some quarters, however, the invitation appeared to have already been spurned. During the summer of 1981 several agencies of the United Methodist Church and the United Church of Christ had sponsored a study of the newly created IRD. According to that study, the Institute was the creation of two broad groups, neoconservative intellectuals and lobbyists on the one hand, and dissident evangelical Methodists on the other. They were united in opposition to the support that various Protestant bodies had offered to Third World revolutionary movements, and both opposed a "leftward drift" in the churches. The report

further described extensive links between the IRD and the Social Democrats U.S.A., the Committee for a Democratic Majority, the American Enterprise Institute, and the Smith-Richardson Foundation, a major funding source for conservative and neoconservative operations. The week before the IRD's New York press conference, the ecumenical Protestant journal *Christian Century* had summarized this report and questioned the propriety of the tight connections between an ostensibly religious group such as the Institute and highly partisan political organizations such as the Committee for a Democratic Majority.

There were obvious weaknesses in both the commissioned report and the skeptical reception that the *Christian Century* and other mainline church leaders gave the IRD. The report, for instance, mapped an extensive network of "interlocking directorates" among IRD supporters and a variety of conservative institutions and activists. The problem, apart from occasionally fanciful connections, was that in the absence of some "control"—namely, a recognition of how extensively these kinds of interconnections operate at every point along the spectrum of American politics—the report conveyed the impression of an overwhelming conservative conspiracy rather than a powerful but legitimate political mobilization. The *Christian Century* editorial itself noted the danger of "guilt by association." It also admitted that there was nothing new or wrong about alliances between religious groups and secular "cause" organizations: "liberals have done this for years." Indeed, as an IRD spokesman was quick to point out at the November 10 press conference, James M. Wall, the *Century's* editor, had been Jimmy Carter's campaign manager in Illinois. It was difficult to tell exactly what fine line the IRD had crossed that previous political-religious alliances had not.

To an outsider, this negative reception could look a lot like church bureaucrats defending their turf—or their particular politics. Why should the IRD be discredited because of its genesis, its associations, or other political hats its adherents and organizers happen to wear? Why not judge by what the Institute itself said and did? This surely was the position of many of the Institute's supporters who could cite as evidence of the Institute's intentions and outlook the opening paragraphs of "Christianity and Democracy." "Jesus Christ is Lord," that statement began.

That is the first and final assertion Christians make about all reality, including politics. . . . Because the Church is pledged to the Kingdom proclaimed by Jesus, it must maintain a critical distance from all the kingdoms of the world, whether actual or proposed. . . . Christians must proclaim and demonstrate the Gospel to all people. . . . In obedience to this biblical mandate, Christians give urgent priority to all who are in need, especially the poor, the oppressed, the despised, and the marginal. The church is called to be a community of diversity. . . .

While our first allegiance is to the community of faith and its mission in the world, Christians do not withdraw from participation in other communities. To the contrary, we are called to be leaven and light in movements of cultural, political, and economic change. . . . Among Christians today, as in times past, there are significant disagreements . . . on how best to advance freedom, justice, and peace in the world. . . . Within our several churches disagreement about the meaning of social justice should not merely be tolerated: it should be cherished. . . . An open church welcomes dissent . . . makes decisions in the light of day . . . has leaders who are not afraid but eager to engage in the fullest consultation with all its members . . . addresses social issues not so much to advance a particular position as to inform and empower people to make their own decisions responsibly . . . understands that the church speaks most effectively when the people who are the church do the speaking, and the leaders speak most believably when they speak with the informed consent of those whom they would lead. . . . In these ways, an open church becomes a zone of truth-telling in a world of mendacity.

These are impressive affirmations. While refusing to identify Christian faith with any particular set of political institutions they endorse the Christian's engagement in political life. And the vision they advance of the church's inner life is rich in the elements of democracy: debate, diversity, open decision making, accountable leaders, extended consultation, empowerment of all the members, leadership by informed consent. Is it possible that a statement beginning so bravely and independently could really announce a narrowly partisan program?

Yes, it is. Despite its several qualifications and superficially restrained tone, "Christianity and Democracy" is ultimately a carefully crafted endorsement of the major premises of the Reagan administration's foreign policy. This can be analyzed as a five-step process.

Step one begins immediately after those opening paragraphs. "In this century of Hitler and Stalin and their lesser imitators the most urgent truth to be told about secular politics is the threat of totalitarianism." Having swept everything else from the political horizon except for this one "most urgent truth," step two is to narrow the focus even further: "Totalitarianism takes either leftist or rightist forms. . . . Today, however, the only global ideology that is committed to the monistic denial of freedom is Marxist-Leninism."

Step three is to introduce democracy, not as a possibility debated since antiquity, but as "an alternative to totalitarianism." Democracy is "limited government." It does not equate the state with society: it protects the independence and diversity of "many institutional and individual actors within the social order,"

and cherishes criticism and change. Democracy implies "some concept of the rule of law"; an "institutionalized division of powers within the government"; and a "process of appeal" finally subject to "democratic change." Also essential is freedom of assembly, speech, and press. And finally, it is stated that democracy requires an "institutional means for transferring the authority to govern," i.e., elections that are regular, contested, "as open as possible," and decisive.

Having posed the discussion against the background of the totalitarian threat and, as a consequence, having overwhelmingly described democracy in terms of limiting the state rather than of empowering the citizen, step four is achieved almost in passing. Democracy must not transgress the "autonomy" of economic life. True enough, the relationship between democracy and capitalism provokes "much debate" and "the state is necessarily involved in aspects of economic life." Nevertheless, "democratic governance exists only where the free market plays a large part. . . . Like political democracy, a market democracy is a process open to the future. . . . It works to the benefit of all, and especially of the poor." A market economy "may be" a necessary though not sufficient condition for democracy. Certainly "our bias" is in favor of it; capitalism "warrants our critical approval."

The next step requires that we come down to earth. "Ideals do not make their way in history except they be carried by persons and institutions." And while "no nation perfectly embodies the democracy we would affirm, and no nation totally represses freedom . . . certain distinctions can and must be made." Thus step five: "The United States of America is the primary bearer of the democratic possibility in the world today. The Soviet Union is the primary bearer of the totalitarian alternative."

I have stripped the argument to its skeleton. I have had to. Those who read it in full will find many observations there that are beyond reproach. But the essential points are undeniable. The paramount political struggle of our day, next to which all others shrink into insignificance, is that between totalitarianism and democracy. For practical purposes, totalitarianism is identified with Marxist-Leninism and with the Soviet Union. Democracy is identified with limited, constitutional government and with the United States. It is almost as closely identified with capitalism and the market economy.

One aspect of "Christianity and Democracy" does not fit so neatly into the pattern of Reagan foreign policy. Human rights are emphasized, and the fact that "some nations aligned with America . . . grievously and systematically violate [the democratic] ideal" is acknowledged. Furthermore, the churches are called upon to protest violations of human rights relentlessly and wherever they occur.

In protesting human rights violations, governments will of necessity take into account many considerations—political, diplomatic, military,

and economic. The ethics of the Church, however, are not the ethics of Caesar. . . . The witness of the churches should reflect an unwavering adherence to a single standard . . . whether the regime in question . . . fashions itself as rightist or leftist . . . friend or foe.

This witness, however, appears to be carefully circumscribed. The churches should identify and denounce violations of human dignity, but should they demand that anything specific follow from those condemnations? It seems not. "The requirements of national security and international order involve prudential judgments of tortuous moral ambiguity. . . . The Church . . . has neither competence nor responsibility to design or control the foreign policy of the United States." It is left to Christians acting as citizens to judge the wisdom and morality of their nation's foreign policy—although "agencies and leaders of the churches should address foreign policy issues in order to help Christians exercise their responsibility as citizens."

This section of the statement appears to apportion tasks and responsibilities among "churches," "the Church," "Christian citizens," and "agencies and leaders of the churches." Neither the distinctions nor the division of labor are made very clear. The problem is an age-old one—to allow for both "bold witness" and "prudential judgments." Nonetheless, this is at least an Elliott Abrams and not an Ernest Lefever version of the Reagan human rights policy, if not something entirely better.

Am I being unfair in characterizing "Christianity and Democracy" as narrowly partisan and seeing it as an effort to legitimize the administration's foreign policy? Some of its signers, such as Michael Novak and Peter L. Berger, have played visible roles in implementing that foreign policy and presumably would be unembarrassed about advocating it in any quarters. Others, however, would protest my characterization as an example of "guilt by association." They would insist that "Christianity and Democracy" is in no way special pleading. Rather, they would argue that the world view it articulates is in keeping with a broad range of informed opinion, both liberal and conservative, and if the conclusions it reaches resemble those of the Reagan foreign policy, this only reflects the breadth of that policy's intellectual underpinnings and not the narrowness or partisan character of the IRD.

A return to the text demonstrates that this contention is untrue. Consider step one, the assertion that "the most urgent truth" about politics in this century is "the threat of totalitarianism." For me, at least, that assertion needs no further demonstration—if, that is, I am obliged to choose *the* most urgent political truth, and to choose it for the whole world and the whole century. What does need demonstration is why I should do this.

There are, in fact, a number of urgent truths to be told about secular poli-

tics, and some more urgent than others at different times and places. The possibility of warfare on a vast and terrible new scale was a truth about this century's politics even before totalitarianism existed—indeed, such warfare was the fertile soil which nourished totalitarianism. If nuclear war devastates civilization in the next two decades, the survivors will no doubt have a different idea about what was “the most urgent truth” all along. Starvation, torture, terror of a brutal and old-fashioned sort—these are the most urgent political truths in some nations at the moment. And throughout the world, a host of other urgencies, however out-sized by totalitarianism, are nonetheless life-crushing: permanent unemployment, inescapable debt, religious and racial persecution, the ravages of disease, and natural disasters. It is certainly possible to keep, say, three or four of these urgent truths, each with its own degree of urgency and sphere of pertinence, in mind at the same time—and to frame reflections on democracy accordingly.

Not so, however, with “Christianity and Democracy.” If the threat of totalitarianism is the century's most urgent truth, we get no hint of what might be the second most urgent truth, or the third. One thing, and one thing alone, occupies the whole stretch of the political horizon; everything else is eliminated.

Each additional step carries the process of elimination a bit further: step two narrows the threat of totalitarianism to the threat of Marxist-Leninism. Step three defines democracy without reference to general and active participation in public affairs, or to civic education, or to a degree of basic equality, or to a number of other characteristics that political thinkers have long seen as fundamental of democracy. Step four eliminates all the problems that, historically, capitalism and the market economy have posed for pluralism, cultural diversity, the independence of the state, and the democratic ethos.

Step five reveals even more clearly how the argument of “Christianity and Democracy” rests on unstated premises—the premises, specifically, of the Reagan administration. It is not self-evident why two single nations—the United States and the Soviet Union—should be chosen as “primary bearers” of opposing ideals. Other historical units suggest themselves as equally likely (and equally unlikely) candidates. One could speak of the West as a whole as the “primary bearer” of democracy. One could speak of broad social movements; the movement for independent workers' organizations, for example, or the international network of human-rights organizations. Or one could question whether the anointing of “primary bearers” is necessary and justified at all.

At every critical juncture in the argument, vast and complex realities are pared down to a single element; the world's political problems to the threat of totalitarianism; the threat of totalitarianism to Marxist-Leninism; the definition of democracy to limited government; the role of capitalism to its autonomy from the state; the multiplicity of actual political forces to the two superpowers alone. “Christianity and Democracy” can reach its destination only because its choices

are relentlessly guided by the same world view that guides the administration.

The concluding pages of "Christianity and Democracy" further demonstrate the partisan nature of the enterprise. The signers pray that "we may always speak the truth in love." "We do not seek controversy." "The issues are not simple. Our answers are not infallible." These protestations are immediately belied by sweeping accusations: "arguments for oppression are pervasive in our several churches." The statement denounces a host of unnamed "apologists for oppression" and describes several forms that such apology for oppression currently takes. One form is "passionately anti-Communist." This is emphatically rejected—and just as emphatically dismissed from further consideration. "Much more respectable, influential, and common" are various forms of apology for oppression that come from the left.

The discussion in this section is remarkably confused and loaded with code words. Three forms of "apologies for oppression" are condemned. The first asserts that "liberal democracy is decadent and dying" and totalitarian revolution is inevitable. The second asserts that "we have no right to impose our values upon others . . . other people must choose their own form of government . . . other people do not share our concern for democratic governance and human rights." The third asserts that "faced with repressive oligarchies or militarisms, people often have no alternative to Marxist-Leninist revolution."

Most observers would probably willingly agree that the first of these is indeed an apology for oppression, although they might wonder exactly what "pervasive" voices are endorsing such a position. The second, which "Christianity and Democracy" brands as concealing "a host of cultural and . . . racial prejudices," actually combines two reasonable propositions about the right of self-determination with a dubious one about other people's lack of interest in democracy. The effect of this amalgamation is simply to ignore the complicated questions about the role of national self-determination in the world order—and to cast aspersions on any critics of U.S. intervention abroad who appeal to that principle. The third "apology for oppression" actually involves the empirical issue of whether a "middle way" between antidemocratic forces of the right and left always exists. It seems calculated to smear those who have argued, in cases like Vietnam, Angola, and El Salvador, that the faint hope of a democratic "middle" did not justify indefinitely prolonged military intervention on the side of authoritarian dictatorships. In general, these last two descriptions of "apologies for oppression" seem designed to incriminate a broad range of critics of American foreign policy.

"Christianity and Democracy" closes with another unctuous declaration of humility—"We are prone to err and we live by forgiveness"—followed by another effort to deny the partisan character of a partisan document—"The debate is not between liberals and conservatives, between left and right"—followed by a

prompt casting of its adversaries into the outer darkness—"The debate is between those who do believe and those who do not believe that there is a necessary linkage between Christian faith and human freedom."

That, of course, is not what the debate is about at all. It is true that the churches and church agencies harbor social activists with either a fellow-traveling or blindly sentimental attitude about the "progressive" nature of communist regimes. It is true that individual church leaders and sometimes larger committees have made naïve and misleading statements about the transforming possibilities or wondrous results of this or that leftist revolution—often, it seems, fired by some secular displacement of the Christian's hope in the Second Coming. This is not new. Hewlett Johnson, the Dean of Canterbury, who toured Russia enthusiastically in the thirties and declared that the Communists had "recovered much of the core of real belief in God," testified in 1949 that there was no slave labor in the Soviet Union, and altogether earned himself more lines in the *Soviet Encyclopedia* than Jesus Christ. And there were others like him. But whether then—as charged by various right-wing spokesmen—or today, such attitudes can be called "pervasive in our several churches" seems demanding of considerable evidence. No such evidence was forthcoming at IRD's November press conference. Indeed, its representatives appeared not only reluctant to provide more than a couple of random examples, they seem to have come totally unprepared to back their sweeping charges with specifics. The few instances they cited were all from Protestant churches. I asked whether they could specify some "apologies for oppression" pervasive in the Catholic Church, after all the largest denomination in the country. Two representatives of the IRD began to take issue with the American Catholic bishops' stance on Central America. I asked whether they meant simply to disagree with it, or whether they considered that position an "apology for oppression." They backed off, and suggested that Catholics were less subject to this kind of problem than Protestants. One of them referred sweepingly to liberation theology as rationalizing oppression and to Orbis Press, the publishing house sponsored by the Maryknoll religious order, as guilty of publishing much of it.

This was fairly pitiful stuff. Yet current developments in the Catholic Church—the Church's unprecedented opposition to U.S. policy in El Salvador, its growing reluctance to sanction nuclear arms, its significant support offered to low-income and minority groups—illustrate precisely what the real debate is about. It is a debate about risks: the risk of encouraging Soviet expansionism or accommodating its brutal veto over the democratic aspirations of Eastern Europeans; the risks of morally acquiescing in nuclear devastation; the risk of indefinitely prolonging, with American support, authoritarian regimes of injustice, and of co-

operating with anti-democratic and anti-religious forces in the struggles against such regimes; the risk of engaging in the heavily Marxist political discourse common throughout Third World social movements. The risk of burying real democracy at home beneath government by corporate managers. All these risks are linked, all pull and tug in complicated patterns. Evaluating them involves difficult factual judgments and, inevitably, assumptions based on one or another reading of historical experience.

It is one thing to feel dissatisfaction with the factual judgments of some church social activists or to desire that a more critical perspective on the history of leftist movements and regimes be registered in the deliberations of the liberally-inclined church leaders. It is quite another thing to reduce all these complicated questions to a grossly simplified, dualistic "debate" between those who do or don't believe in freedom and democracy.

A careful examination of "Christianity and Democracy" uncovers nothing to contradict the original suspicions raised by the founding of IRD: that it was a conservative-neoconservative alliance intended to advance a distinct political agenda while claiming only a broad Christian concern. Perhaps this will not prove to be the case in the long run. Perhaps the Institute will become more candid about its political viewpoint or it will limit itself to specific criticisms of church programs and policies without pretending that these are a matter of "apology for oppression." (It has issued two specific analyses, one arguing that the Catholic church in El Salvador looks favorably on the existing government; the other criticizing a National Council of Churches' study guide on Eastern Europe.) Perhaps the Institute will direct some of its energies toward monitoring right-wing and centrist shortcomings on human-rights issues. (No such efforts seem to be underway.)

In the meantime, there is a certain comic quality to the IRD phenomenon. A highly political and partisan organization marches under the banner of church independence. A group acclaiming the accountability of church leaders is responsible to a self-selecting executive committee of six individuals, two of whom have no previous record in any church activities, and one of whom was unable to sign the group's fundamental statement because of his religious uncertainties. A body asserting that the church should cherish diversity and disagreement about the means to social justice manufactures an arsenal of vague and damaging allegations almost certain to cast aspersions on a broad band of church leadership. Yet the IRD has talent, money, and a galvanizing sense of grievance.

The Institute on Religion and Democracy is obviously part of a larger movement in American politics and culture, the growth of a network of intellectual institutions that function to dampen outbreaks of fundamental social criticism. The theory behind this movement is by now well known: that a new class of educated and disaffected "brain workers," infected with the "adversary culture" they imbibed in college courses or absorbed from a hundred toxic residues of the New

Left and counterculture, will sap the foundations of American foreign policy and domestic economy—unless, that is, this new class can be isolated, browbeaten, discredited, lured, or taught its true interests in a well-financed “war of ideas.” The effective strategists of such a war, or so Irving Kristol advised his business readers in the *Wall Street Journal*, would be dissident members of the new class—to begin with, former leftist intellectuals like Kristol.

But the world of religion is puzzling. Certain segments of it are distressingly adversarial. A major segment, the Catholic Church, is becoming markedly more so. But the former leftists did not have the standing, did not speak the language, did not know where the bodies were hidden—in short, could not carry out the same kind of campaign in the churches that they were successfully waging in the political and university theaters. The emergence of a parallel “war of ideas” in the churches was slow to start. The American Enterprise Institute, several years ago, began to sponsor seminars on economics for church leaders. The new religious right offered some opportunities—but as many embarrassments. Only recently has the campaign gathered momentum. *The Ethic of Democratic Capitalism* and *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism*, two books providing a religious argument in support of the American corporate economy and both written by IRD advisers (Robert Benne and Michael Novak respectively) are appearing within a few months of “Christianity and Democracy.” The Institute for Educational Affairs and the American Enterprise Institute, two heavy backers of capitalist ideology, are publishing a new quarterly, *This World*, to focus on religion, morality, and economic issues. It has taken a while for the sponsors of the “war of ideas” to find its *condottieri* in the field of religion. The emergence of the Institute on Religion and Democracy is one of several indications that at last they have been found.