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THE WAR BETWEEN THREE TYPES OF RELIGIONS

by Gary North

This essay describes a clash between two religions, with believers in a third religion standing on the sidelines, waiting to see the outcome of the clash. The Bible presents it as the archetypal clash in history between these two religions. This confrontation has been going on since the Garden of Eden.

The first of the conflicting religions is power religion, the religion of Satan and his representatives. The second is dominion religion, the religion of God and His representatives. The testimony of the Book of Exodus is clear: **those who seek power apart from God are doomed to comprehensive, total defeat.** The third is escapist religion, which attempts to seek a middle position between these warring camps, but which is ultimately an ally of the power religion.

Those who seek God are called to exercise dominion, and they shall be victorious over the enemies of God. But this victory takes time. It is not achieved instantaneously. It is the product of long years of self-discipline under God's authority. The power religionists do not want to wait. Like Adam in his rebellion, sinners choose to dress themselves in the robes of authority, so that they can render instant autonomous judgment.¹ They do not want to subordinate themselves to God.

What about escapist religion? It is a religion which proclaims the inevitability of external defeat for the people of God. The defenders of temporal impotence thereby become the allies of temporal power. This religion was dominant in the lives of the Hebrew slaves. They became easy prey for the power religionists. But when the power manifested by dominion religion overcame the pagan power religion, they grudgingly followed the victors. It is much the same today.

It is necessary to survey briefly the first principles of these three religious outlooks.

1. Power Religion

This is a religious viewpoint which affirms that the most important goal for a man, group, or species, is the capture and maintenance of power. Power is seen as the chief attribute of God, or if the religion is officially atheistic, then the chief attribute of man. This perspective is a satanic perversion of God's command to man to exercise dominion over all the creation (Gen. 1:26-28).² It is the attempt to exercise dominion apart from covenantal subordination to the true Creator God.

What distinguishes biblical dominion religion from satanic power religion is **ethics**. Is the person who seeks power doing so for the glory of God, and for himself secondarily, and only to the extent that he is God's lawful and covenantally faithful representative? If so, he will act in

terms of God's **Bible-based ethical standards** and in terms of a **profession of faith** in the God of the Bible. The church has recognized this two-fold requirement historically, and has established a dual requirement for membership: profession of faith and a godly life.

In contrast, power religion is a religion of **autonomy**. It affirms that "My power and the might of mine hand hath gotten me this wealth" (Deut. 8:17). It seeks power or wealth in order to make credible this very claim.

Understand that wealth and power are aspects of both religions. Wealth and power are covenantal manifestations of the success of rival religious views. This is why God warns His people not to believe that their autonomous actions gained them their blessings: "But thou shalt remember the LORD thy God: for it is he that giveth thee power to get wealth, that he may establish his covenant which he swore unto thy fathers, as it is this day" (Deut. 8:18). God's opponents also want visible confirmation of the validity of their covenant with a rival god, but God warns them that "the wealth of the sinner is laid up for the just" (Prov. 13:22b). The entry of the Hebrews into Canaan was supposed to remind them of this fact: the Canaanites had built homes and vineyards to no avail; their enemies, the Hebrews, inherited them (Josh. 24:13).

Those who believe in power religion have refused to see that long-term wealth in any society is the product of ethical conformity to biblical law. They have sought the blessings of God's covenant while denying the validity and eternally binding ethical standards of that covenant. In short, they have confused the fruits of Christianity with the roots. They have attempted to chop away the roots but preserve the fruits.

2. Escapist Religion

This is the second great tradition of antichristian religion. Seeing that the exercise of autonomous power is a snare and a delusion, the proponents of escapist religion have sought to insulate themselves from the general culture—a culture maintained by power. They have fled the responsibilities of worldwide dominion, or even regional dominion, in the hope that God will release them from the requirements of the general dominion covenant.

The Christian version of the escapist religion is sometimes called "pietism," but its theological roots can be traced back to the ancient heresy of **mysticism**. Rather than proclaiming the requirement of **ethical union** with Jesus Christ, the perfect man, the mystic calls for **metaphysical union** with a monistic, unified god. In the early church, there were many types of mysticism, but the most feared rival religion which continually infiltrated the church was **gnosticism**. It proclaimed many doctrines, but the essence of gnostic faith was **radical personal individualism**—personal escape from matter—leading to **radical impersonal collectivism**: the abolition of human personality through absorption into the

1. Gary North, "Witnesses and Judges," *Biblical Economics Today*, VI (Aug./Sept. 1983), pp. 3-4.

2. Gary North, *The Dominion Covenant: Genesis*, vol. 1 of *An Economic Commentary on the Bible* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1982).

Godhead. It proclaimed retreat from the material realm and escape to a higher, purer, spiritual realm through various "Eastern" techniques of self-manipulation: asceticism, higher consciousness, and initiation into secret mysteries. Gnosticism survives as a way of thinking and acting (or failing to act) even today, as Rushdoony has pointed out. The essence of this faith is its **antinomianism**. Gnostics despise biblical law. But their hatred for the law of God leads them to accept the laws of the State. Rushdoony writes: "Gnosticism survives today in theosophy, Jewish Kabbalism, occultism, existentialism, masonry, and like faiths. Because Gnosticism made the individual, rather than a dualism of mind and matter, ultimate, it was essentially hostile to morality and law, requiring often that believers live beyond good and evil by denying the validity of all moral law. Gnostic groups which did not openly avow such doctrines affirmed an ethic of love as against law, negating law and morality in terms of the 'higher' law and morality of love. Their contempt of law and time manifested itself also by a willingness to comply with the state. . . . The usual attitude was one of contempt for the material world, which included the state, and an outward compliance and indifference. A philosophy calling for an escape from time is not likely to involve itself in the battles of time."³

Their **denial of the continuing validity of biblical law** has led them to deny the relevance of earthly time. By denying biblical law, they thereby forsake the chief tool of dominion—our means of using time to subdue the earth to the glory of God. The basic idea which undergirds escapist religion is the **denial of the dominion covenant**. The escape religionists believe that the techniques of self-discipline, whether under God or apart from God (Buddhism), offer power over only limited areas of life. They attempt to conserve their power by focusing their ethical concern on progressively (regressively) narrower areas of personal responsibility. The "true believer" thinks that he will gain more control over himself and his narrow environment by restricting his self-imposed zones of responsibility. His concern is self, from start to finish; his attempt to escape from responsibilities beyond the narrow confines of self is a program for gaining power over self. It is a religion of works, of **self-salvation**. A man "humbles" himself—admits that there are limits to his power, and therefore limits to the range of his responsibilities—only to elevate self to a position of hypothetically God-like spirituality.

Escapist religion proclaims institutional peace—"peace at any price." Ezekiel responded to such an assertion in the name of God: "... they have seduced my people, saying, Peace; and there was no peace" (Ezk. 13:10a). Patrick Henry's inflammatory words in March of 1775—"Peace, peace—but there is no peace"⁴—were taken from Ezekiel and Jeremiah: "They have healed also the hurt of the daughter of my people slightly, saying, Peace, peace; when there is no peace" (Jer. 6:14). This rival religion proclaims peace because it has little interest in the systematic efforts that are always required to purify institutions as a prelude to social reconstruction.

In short, escapist religion calls for flight from the world, and because man is in this world, it calls for a **flight from humanity**.⁵ Its advocates may hide their real concern—the systematic abandonment of a world supposedly so corrupt that nothing can be done to overcome widespread cultural evil—by appealing to their moral responsibility of "sharing Christ to the world" or "building up the Church" rather than

rebuilding civilization, but their ultimate concern is **personal flight from responsibility**. It is a revolt against maturity.⁶

3. Dominion Religion

This is the orthodox faith. It proclaims the sovereignty of God, the reliability of the historic creeds, the necessity of standing up for principle, and the requirement that faithful men take risks for God's sake. It proclaims that through the exercise of saving faith, and through ethical conformity to God's revealed law, regenerate men will increase the extent of their dominion over the earth. It is a religion of conquest—**conquest by grace through ethical action**. The goal is ethical conformity to God, but the results of this conformity involve dominion—over lawful subordinates, over ethical rebels, and over nature. This is the message of Deuteronomy 28:1-14. It is also the message of Jesus Christ, who walked perfectly in God's statutes and in God's Spirit, and who then was granted total power over all creation by the Father (Matt. 28:18). I am not speaking here of the Second Person of the Trinity, who always had total power; I am speaking of Christ's nature as a perfect man, who **earned** total power through ethical conformity to God and through His death and resurrection.

Dominion religion recognizes the relationship between **righteousness and authority**, between covenantal faithfulness and covenantal blessings. Those who are faithful in little things are given more. This is the meaning of Christ's parable of the talents. The process of dominion is a function of **progressive sanctification**, both personal-individual and institutional (family, church, business, school, civil government, etc.: Deut. 28:1-14).

God and History

Sometime in the early 1970's, before the idea of Christian reconstruction began to spread, Rushdoony remarked that the Christians of our day believe in God but not in history, while the humanists believe in history but not in God. This summarizes the two poles of a false Hegelian dichotomy.

Liberal humanists, both classical and modern, until quite recently have believed that there is a possibility of personal and social progress. The Darwinian concept of evolution was grounded in a vision of progress and change which had been articulated by eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers, especially those social philosophers in the tradition of Scottish rationalism: Adam Ferguson, Adam Smith, and David Hume. Even the conservatives, following Edmund Burke, believed that slow, organic progress is possible. But what liberalism has never believed is that this progress is based on exclusively Christian foundations. Liberals clearly have rejected the idea that biblical law is a God-ordained tool of man's progressive dominion under God. They want historical progress without the God of the Bible. They believe in history but not God.

They share their antinomian perspective with the escapist religionists who also reject the legitimacy of biblical law in New Testament times. But the escapists are more consistent than the humanists. They have understood the relationship between **ethics and social progress**. They have denied the possibility long-term social progress through antinomian moral advance. They do not believe that there will be widespread ethical progress, so they reject the hope of widespread social progress.

The humanists want to reconstruct society's institutions. This, they believe, will lead to the transformation of mankind. Theirs is an "outside-in" redemption: "Change mankind's environment, and you can thereby change man's nature." They are therefore **environmental determinists**.

The fundamentalists have always seen this as sheer nonsense. They defend an "inside-out" religion. They argue that without widespread personal regeneration by God, soul

3. R. J. Rushdoony, *The One and the Many: Studies in the Philosophy of Order and Ultimacy* (Fairfax, Virginia: Thoburn Press, [1971] 1978), p. 129.

4. Norine Dickson Campbell, *Patrick Henry: Patriot and Statesman* (Old Greenwich, Connecticut: Devin-Adair, 1969), p. 130. The substance of Henry's famous St. John's Church speech, which mobilized the Virginia Assembly, was reconstructed by a later historian, William Wirt, but is generally considered representative. This was Henry's famous "Give me liberty or give me death" speech, one of the most famous speeches in U.S. history.

5. R. J. Rushdoony, *The Flight from Humanity: A Study of the Effect of Neoplatonism on Christianity* (Fairfax, Virginia: Thoburn Press, [1973] 1978).

6. R. J. Rushdoony, *Revolt Against Maturity: A Biblical Psychology of Man* (Fairfax, Virginia: Thoburn Press, 1977).

by soul, there can be no lasting social progress. At the same time, they also reject the idea that most men will, at any point in history, actually be converted. They therefore reject the idea of long-term social progress. All signs of progress are illusions, temptations, and snares. This illusionary world of external, visible progress will lead to ethical rebellion and judgment. Thus, there is no way to redeem society. They reject history because of their view of God—a God who has turned over the major institutions to Satan and his forces.

Their God is at war with history, for Satan is the prince of this world, the arena of history. God supposedly has voluntarily decided to lose this battle until the final judgment. Only an interim period of progress may take place, argue the premillennialists: the millennium, in which Jesus Christ will rule in person, imposing His will on His enemies. In short, they believe in the power religion after the Rapture, and in the escapist religion before the Rapture. (Amillennialists do not even have hope in an earthly millennium. They are "premillennialists without earthly hope," as Rushdoony once remarked.)

The American Civil War

We can see the effects of this dichotomy between God and history in the rise of the Social Gospel movement in the North in the late nineteenth century, and in the rise of fundamentalism in the South. The Civil War was over. The great emotional outburst, both North and South, was also over. But what had taken place between 1861 and 1865 had radically altered the shape of American religion and also of American civilization.

The North

In the North, the victorious promoters of abolitionism felt compelled to seek out new fields of conquest, new areas of social concern. The Unitarians had been intellectually dominant in the abolitionist crusade, but there were very few of them, and most were centered around Boston.⁷ The "shock troops" of the abolitionist crusade had been the evangelicals—people like Theodore Weld and Lewis Tappan. (Not, it should be pointed out, Charles G. Finney, whose perfectionist theology had led thousands into abolitionism, but who was personally skeptical of the "great crusade.") Winthrop Hudson's summary in his standard textbook, *Religion in America*, is excellent, and I cite a lengthy section:

Utopian communities and novel sectarian emphases were not the only expressions of religious ferment. Most of the enthusiasm generated by the Second Awakening was devoted to more conventional enterprises in which the concerns of the evangelically awakened often paralleled those of the heirs of Channing. The revivalists were generally postmillennialists who assumed that an era of peace, justice, and goodness would precede the return of Christ. Consequently where there were revivals, there must be reform. Every aspect of society began to be subjected to eager scrutiny in order to scour and purify the earth in preparation for God's final act of redemption. Scarcely any phase of American life was left untouched. Temperance, Sabbath observance, world peace, profanity, vice, women's rights, slavery, the condition of penal institutions, educational innovations—all became objects of concern. The whole impulse was carefully articulated in a series of related societies and closely integrated with revivalistic efforts, as was made clear in 1835 by Theodore Dwight Weld (1803-95) in a letter to Lewis Tappan: "God has called some prophets, some apostles, and some teachers. All the members of the body of Christ have not the same office. Let Delevan drive temperance, McDowell moral reform, Finney revivals, Tappan antislavery, etc. Each of these is bound to make his own peculiar department his main

business, and to promote collaterally as much as he can of the other objects. I have no doubt that Finney has erred in not giving as much collateral attention to antislavery as the present crisis demands. And I am equally certain that I have not done as much collaterally to promote temperance and revivals while I have been lecturing on slavery as I ought." The revivals provided the impetus, summoning men and women to battle against sin; and the reform movements were the implementation of the thrust toward the coming kingdom of righteousness. The task of those who enlisted in the struggle was put succinctly by Finney: "Every member must work or quit. No honorary members."⁸

Once the Civil War was over, what did Christians do with their awakened sense of social concern, and their awakened sense of power? The answer among urban churches was the social gospel—**salvation through statist legislation.**

This transformation of the dominion religionists of the North into power religionists is one of the most significant events in American history. I believe it is one of the most significant events in Western history. The distinctly religious events that led to the Civil War transformed the thinking of the participants. Just as the first Great Awakening of the 1740's and 1750's under Edwards and the itinerant revivalists disrupted the concept of the holy commonwealth in New England, and also led to a wave of nationalism—the creation of the American civil religion—so did the second Great Awakening destroy the more orthodox theological foundations of the Constitutional settlement, while it simultaneously created the basis of a new American civil religion, this one overwhelmingly secular.

What were the common features of the two Awakenings? First, **postmillennialism**. Men were confident that their efforts in the realm of preaching would bring in the kingdom of God. Second, **antinomianism**. They did not believe that Old Testament law was morally and even legally binding on New Testament churches and institutions. Edwards expected the "sweetness" of the emotional transformation associated with revivalism to conquer sin in every convert's life, and also conquer sin in society's institutions. Finney expected moral renewal to accomplish the task of bringing in the kingdom, and he used emotion to bring men this moral renewal. **Emotion, not biblical law, was the focus of both revivalist experiments.** It was **lawless optimism**. When the flames of emotion had departed, as they must, what was left? First, there were **burned-out former converts**. Skeptics. People who had tried what they had been told was Christianity and which turned to dust in their mouths. The let-down created the burned-over districts.⁹ Second, there were those people who had been given a larger view of the socially transforming effects of religion. This impulse after the first Great Awakening led in part to the American Revolution. In the second Great Awakening, it led to increased social concern, especially as viewed through the glasses of politics. Theological antinomianism was steadily transformed into a new theology, **salvation by humanistic law**. The religion of humanity replaced the religion of the Bible.¹⁰ The dominion religion disappeared in the North.

The South

The defeat of the Confederacy created a shift in authority in the South's political and intellectual leadership. The

8. Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965), pp. 197-98.

9. Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1950).

10. Ralph H. Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought: An Intellectual History Since 1815* (New York: Ronald Press, 1940), ch. 15: "The Religion of Humanity." See also R. J. Rushdoony, *The Nature of the American System* (Fairfax, Virginia: Thoburn Press, [1965] 1978), ch. 6: "The Religion of Humanity."

7. Otto Scott, *The Secret Six: John Brown and the Abolitionist Movement* (New York: Times Books, 1979).

Southern Presbyterians and Episcopalians had been the source of most of the South's leadership before the War. After the War, the locus of power shifted to two new groups: the Populists, who initially were not the wildly anti-Negro racists that the Populist Party became in the late 1890's, and the "redeemers," as historian C. Vann Woodward has called them: intellectuals, generally non-religious, and defenders of the "New South," meaning an urbanized, economically modern South.¹¹ Both groups were far more statist in outlook than defenders of the antebellum Democracy.

Prior to the War, there had been a major political division in the South, just as there had been in the North, between the Whigs and the Democrats. The Whigs were high tariff advocates, and defenders of Federally funded "internal improvements," meaning roads, canals, etc. Their leader had been Henry Clay. A minor Whig political figure in Illinois had been a young Congressman, Abraham Lincoln. The Democrats were heirs of Andrew Jackson and the older John C. Calhoun (prior to the War of 1812, his perspective had been closer to what became known later as Whiggism): hard money, anti-central bank, low-tariff advocates of limited civil government.

In the North, the Republican Party became the heir of the Whigs. The North's Democrats remained faithful to the old tradition, with Buffalo's "veto mayor," Presbyterian Grover Cleveland, winning the Presidency twice, and going on to veto almost 600 bills—second only to Franklin Roosevelt, who had over three terms to veto over 600. In the South, there was a fusion of Whigs and Democrats during and after Reconstruction.

Prior to the War, the leading southern Presbyterian theologians had been postmillennial optimists. This perspective remained dominant throughout the nineteenth century, although some mildly premillennial views began to be expressed after the War.¹² But Presbyterian leaders had linked their Christian vision of victory to the Confederacy, and after this dream was smashed militarily, their pre-War optimism was severely damaged. They no longer spoke with confidence about the Christian basis of civilization. They called increasingly for separation of Christianity and State.¹³ Power and influence shifted to new groups, as Woodward has chronicled.

The result was the **disestablishment of dominion religion**, and the triumph for over a century of escapist religion. The political power religionists made an implicit alliance with the escapists: they would run Southern political, economic, and educational institutions, including the major newspapers, while the fundamentalist escapists would dominate the popular culture. It was **fundamentalist**

culture and humanist civilization, often going their own separate ways, but always meeting in this century on the weekends in the grandstands every fall, cheering together at the Big Game: Friday night high school football and Saturday afternoon college football. Then came the Dallas Cowboys to complete the weekend. The public schools shoved Jesus into the weekend in the late nineteenth century, and then football confined Him to Sunday morning and evening in the twentieth.

The power religionists always had more trouble in the South than in the North because Southerners perceived their position as defensive. They did not trust Washington. This defensive mentality prevailed until after the civil rights movement had forcibly integrated the South, and had spread to the North, burning everything in its path—a kind of reverse Sherman's march. In the late 1960's, we did not see the burning down of the South's black ghettos, as we saw in the North and in Los Angeles. Since 1965, the South has steadily regained its self-confidence. But today, the unstated alliance between the escapists and the humanists has begun to break down. It will continue to break down, as the New Christian Right makes inroads into the older pietistic fundamentalism.

Thus, in the North, the humanist power seekers and the Social Gospel power seekers combined to eliminate the influence of both the dominion religionists and the escapist religionists. In the South, the escapist religionists combined with the power religionists to bar the door to the dominion religionists, who had already begun to retreat voluntarily anyway. In both regions, Christian civilization disappeared.

Conclusion

The combination of eschatological optimism and greater confidence in biblical law (sometimes brought back under the rubric of "biblical principles") has begun to bring back a revitalized version of Christian dominion religion. This is what has terrified the humanists. This is why they write books such as *God's Bullies*, *Holy Terror*, and the latest pot-boiler, by a woman named (appropriately) Flake: *Redemptorama* (Anchor/Doubleday, 1984). The humanists sense the political results of these changes, but they cannot quite explain their origin. Neither can many of the fundamentalist participants. But the change is taking place.

One religion is on the offensive, dominion religion. Two allied religions are on the defensive, power religion (humanism) and escapist religion (traditional fundamentalism). Both are fighting against the newly revived orthodoxy. We are in the very early stages of this confrontation, but since 1973, the rise of the New Christian Right, with its underlying call to break the unstated alliance between the power religionists and retreatists, has threatened the very fabric of the American civil religion.

If the next Christian revival does not use emotionalism as its tool and antinomianism as its creed, the era of self-conscious Christian civilization will begin.

11. C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1951).

12. James B. Jordan, "A Survey of Southern Presbyterian Views Before 1930," *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction*, III (Winter 1976-77).

13. Jack P. Maddex, "From Theocracy to Spirituality: The Southern Presbyterian Reversal on Church and State," *The Journal of Presbyterian History*, 54 (1976), pp. 438-457.