

RELIGION'S FATAL TEMPTATION: **Political Power**

How the Ghost of Faust Haunts Our Pulpits & Weakens Moral Authority

Commentary & Analysis



By Jay B Gaskill

(the author at Normandy)

The legend of Faust depicts a frustrated scholar who yearns for power, pleasure and recognition. Of course, he was an obvious target for seduction by the Dark Side. Faust willingly made his bargain with the Devil, in effect gaining the power to compel the world to grant his wishes. But he faced Hell when that famous deferred payment came due (as it always does).

For historical, cultural and personal reasons my analysis is centered in the Judeo-Christian experience. The Faust problem can infect any spiritual tradition but the secular humanist tradition of the American and European intelligentsia was an outgrowth of modern and postmodern Christian ethics, cleansed of “superstition.”

My thesis: Modern religious leaders are at risk of falling into the Faustian trap whenever they attempt to influence government power in lieu of pursuing direct ministries to individuals. Under modern conditions, the temptation to enlist government power is strong, because it represents a way to “leverage” smaller charitable resources to compel the use of much the larger appropriated resources available to government via taxation.

But why not use church energies and resources to attain political influence as long as the goals are good ones? When political power is directed at collective outcomes and not individuated justice, it inevitably substitutes general “benefits”, bureaucratically administered, for individual acts of kindness and charity.

Real charity is a free, love-motivated relationship between giver and recipient, one that potentially can change both for the better. Government programs and policies inevitably benefit targeted groups by taking resources from another group. Such collective, compelled benefits produce two-edged resentments by embedding a sense of unfairness among the involuntary “donors,” and promoting a corrosive sense of entitlement among the inevitably dissatisfied recipients. But note, this critique, intended to be a narrow one, is about authentic ministries, not about the merits of particular welfare programs.

You may recall this oft-quoted passage from Charles Dickens’ story, “*A Christmas Carol*”.

“At this festive season of the year, Mr. Scrooge,” said the gentleman, taking up a pen, “it is more than usually desirable that we should make some slight provision for the Poor and Destitute, who suffer greatly at the present time. Many thousands are in want of common necessaries; hundreds of thousands are in want of common comforts, sir.”

“Are there no prisons?” asked Scrooge.

“Plenty of prisons,” said the gentleman, laying down the pen again.

“And the Union workhouses?” demanded Scrooge. “Are they still in operation?”

“They are. Still,” returned the gentleman, “I wish I could say they were not.”

“The Treadmill and the Poor Law are in full vigour, then?” said Scrooge.

The existence of the welfare state has made Scrooges of many of the liberals who supported it¹ yet the need for one-on-one charitable relationships has only increased. Both giver and recipient benefit from individual acts of kindness and charity.

Faust sold his soul. The story is still relevant, even compelling because, in spite of modernity, we humans have not lost our innate belief in the reality of soul and evil. The very force of the Faust legend requires us moderns to acknowledge the reality of Evil as an existential and spiritual threat, and to recognize the deep and abiding value of the individual person, as a uniquely valuable soul in relationship with the Eternal.

¹ See the author’s essay, *Liberalism as a Secular Religion*, <http://jaygaskill.com/liberalismasreligion.htm> . And note the growing recognition that charitable giving is less common among liberals, as in this 2014 report: “Less well-off families from red states donate a relatively higher – and growing – proportion of their money to charity, while those at the top have been giving a smaller share as their income has increased, a new extensive study has revealed. ... The most generous state is Utah (with a giving rate of 6.56 percent), which is dominated by Mormons, who have to give a tenth of their income to their church. On the other side of the scale is New Hampshire, where less than a third of the people say they believe in God, and which donates 1.74 percent of its incomes to charity. Similarly, the cosmopolitan, urbane San Francisco and Boston are at the bottom of a similar ranking for cities, while the Southern and Central strongholds of Salt, Lake City, Birmingham, Memphis, Nashville and Atlanta are among some of the most generous.” <https://www.rt.com/usa/193952-charity-conservatives-religion-utah/>

Modern religious institutions and communities exist in a hostile or indifferent secular culture. They do not live or die based on how well they might fill the role of cheaper, adjunct social service agencies. No, they thrive or wither away based on how well they perform their historic functions: As communities of mutually supporting believers, as the carriers of ancient but still relevant moral wisdom, as centers of ethical education and spiritual guidance, as sanctuaries of the good and the holy in a hostile or indifferent world.

Christianity and its parent, Judaism, are essentially and historically based on individual relationships. We think of Martin Buber's paradigm relationship, the I to thou, and I to Thou triad (Buber's insight was a three part relationship, I to the other person and I to the Divine Person²)

The difference between religions and the current iterations of secular humanism are about the focal point. In one, the focus is on an individual, on his or her moral development and behavior. But in most versions of modern secular humanism³, the focus has shifted to the material circumstances of collectives, of large numbers, of "the masses".

It is one thing for a religious leaders and congregations to criticize individual political and government leaders for corruption, repression and immorality, but quite another to attempt to use religious "power" as just one more interest group with a cause.

But Faust risked his very soul. Can excessive involvement of church and welfare state lead to that? Let me defer that core question for a moment while we set the context.

Human dignity finds its strongest support in Christianity and Judaism. It is at its greatest peril in the great secular mass-movements. A political church risks interest group entanglement, a trap to be sure. Yet religious leaders are more prone to this kind of thing now than ever before. After all, aren't they just pursuing the greatest good for the greatest number by more practical means?

What context is missing here? In 12 century Europe, a single priest might stop a sword-wielding miscreant in his tracks with a single phrase: "**Stay thy sword or I will deny you absolution.**" Flash forward: The priest would be dead. No wonder some members of the cloth are tempted to

² **Martin Buber** was arguably the most famous Jewish religious philosopher of the 20th century. His masterwork, "I and Thou" (*Ich and du*), published in 1923, first reached the English speaking world a 1937 translation. In Buber's view, all our person-to-person relationships are either "I to Thou" or "I to it". But only our meaningful relationships confer the status of "I" to ourselves, and this can happen only when we confer the status of "Thou" to the other person. Buber was a relational theist (my term). For him, G-d is the omnipresent (though not always noticed) Thou. As he put it, "The extended lines of [our meaningful] relations meet in the eternal Thou. Every particular Thou is a glimpse though to the eternal Thou...." (*"I and Thou"*, Scribners, London - New York 1937-1957), Part Three, page 75.) When in Oxford, I picked up a really brilliant analysis of Buber's work: "*Buber On God and The Perfect Man*" by Pamela Vermes (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, London - Washington 1994), a must read for Buber fans. JBG

³ For an in-depth account, see the author's article, *Reflections on Human Dignity*, <http://jaygaskill.com/ReflectionsOnHumanDignity.pdf> .

turn their persuasive powers on secular leaders. ...Even if it turns out to be a Faustian temptation?

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries, a cultural sea change swept over the US and Europe. Secular considerations now dominate. Traditional religions have lost traction. Belief in any life beyond the grave has dwindled. Notions of evil as an existential and spiritual reality are discarded in favor of a medical model. The notion of ultimate moral accountability is dying. The very idea of transcendence, if not rejected outright, has devolved to a subjective experience, on a plane with our appreciation of a beautiful sunset.

The dominant culture in the sophisticated West is increasingly skeptical and indifferent to the deeper claims of faith. This has created a hostile work environment for our most authentic moral voices, because the credibility of divine authority underpinning morality has been undermined. The new culture is also an inhospitable social environment for personal, one-on-one kindnesses, because large scale, bureaucratic “humanitarian” institutions are now assumed to be “doing the same work.” Moreover, the impersonal bureaucratic redistribution of resources has given rise to the seductive notion of “social justice”⁴ in church and synagogue settings. Someone’s “mere” donation of hands-on effort, time, caring and money for actual people in need, however meaningful, is too often thought to be insignificant compared to the power of governments. The transition of congregation to advocate is a power lure, however benign it appears at first. After all, one can vastly multiply results by harnessing the political process. But this is a classic power seduction. If you doubt the soul-cost of this sort of thing, consider a scene we can witness more and more frequently: The spectacle of demonstrators ignoring the plight of poor people in poor neighborhoods, except and unless they are “poster children” for a cause. And left behind? Traditional churches, increasingly empty, their congregants – former and current - increasingly empty of spiritual solace and inspiration. ...Yet, I believe that this, too, will pass⁵.

As I write this, followers of the Christian tradition are honoring Lent, a 40 day period during which they/we are invited to cut back on various distractions and temptations in order to focus on the core concerns and connections of a spiritual and moral life. The Lent tradition mirrors the biblical account of Christ’s 40 day “retreat” into the wilderness, during which he was tempted by the Devil with promises of worldly power, ending in Jesus decisively rejecting a secular, worldly kingship. The rejection of such power lures and the embracement of individualized morality are at the very core of Judeo-Christian traditions.⁶ This is our back to the future moment.

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[] Read more about the author at <http://www.jaygaskill.com/Profile.pdf>

⁴ See the author’s article, *Compassion vs Social Justice*, <http://jaygaskill.com/CompassionVSocialJustice.pdf> .

⁵ See the author’s article, *The Demise of Atheism as a Belief System*, <http://jaygaskill.com/PopGoesPEAS.pdf> .

⁶ See the author’s article, *The Case for a 21st Religious Renaissance*, <http://jaygaskill.com/Renaissance.pdf>