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The Second American Revolution?

Nick Van Til

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Nestor of the Dordt College Faculty, Nick Van Til is also no stranger to Pro Rege readers. Now Professor of History and Philosophy Emeritus, Van Til who have continued to teach, part-time, has more opportunity to write.

In his 1982 publication, *The Second American Revolution*, John W. Whitehead, a Christian attorney, attempts to establish three basic theses. (1) The American Revolution was basically a Christian movement based on Christian principles. (2) Since the first American Revolution, there has been a Second American Revolution so that our political principles now are based on secular humanism. The first revolution stands in sharp, antithetical contrast to the second. (3) It is high time that evangelical Christians begin to appreciate that sharp antithesis and become active in working out its social implications.

Even if one were chronically given to

speaking in superlatives, it would be difficult to praise this book more highly than Francis Schaeffer does in the "Foreward." Schaeffer's endorsement along with acknowledgement of debt to men like Harold O.J. Brown and R.J. Rushdoony led me to surmise that Whitehead's work would be an addition to that body of evangelical writing, now virtually a genre, which attempts to Christianize the early political philosophy of our country in order to set out its current secularism more sharply by comparison.

To put it another way, I would suggest that Whitehead has fallen captive to a captivating captation. The title *The Second American Revolution* implies that there has

been a radical movement away from the principles which were the foundation of the first American Revolution. We might ask, "If our present political philosophy as reflected in our laws and in Supreme Court decisions is thoroughly secular and stands in sharp contrast to our earlier philosophy, must we not conclude that the past was Christian and grounded on absolutes of the Bible?" Whitehead wants us to join him in answering "Yes" to that question.

I shall argue that we cannot whitewash our political background in order to make the present foreground stand out in a bolder and more secular relief. I believe that the only way one can affirm Whitehead's first premise is by succumbing to wishful thinking and to bring allegations of fact which cannot stand the scrutiny of careful historical research.

Early in his discussion Whitehead calls attention to the writings of Samuel Rutherford, a Scottish Calvinist, who set down his ideas on civil government in his work *Lex Rex*, published in 1644. Whitehead then makes this claim:

Rutherford's ideas lived on to influence later generations. His basic presuppositions of government based upon absolutes of the Bible was finally realized in Colonial America through the influence of two sources: John Witherspoon and John Locke.¹

The above statement should be corrected in two ways. First, it simply is not the case that the principles of American government as set down by the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the framers of the United States Constitution were based on absolutes derived from the Bible. The documents of American government do not reflect Christian theism generally nor the "absolutes of the Bible" specifically. Tying government "by the consent of the governed" to the "law of Nature and Nature's God" is a far cry from a recognition of the rule of Christ in every sphere of human activity, in-

cluding politics.

In a chapter entitled "The Christian Idea," Whitehead writes as follows:

Unlike the French Revolutionaries a few years later, the American colonists knew very well that if the unalienable rights they were urging for were not seen in the context of Judeo-Christian theism, they were without content.²

A little later Whitehead argues:

This Christian theism had so permeated the colonial mind that it continued to guide even those who had come to regard the Gospel with indifference or even hostility.³

Beginning with John Witherspoon, we find that not even that committed Christian theist could be relied upon to speak as such when he was discussing ethics and principles of justice. While his chapel messages may have reflected evangelical Christianity, Witherspoon's lectures on ethics reflected classical rationalism and his earlier association with Scottish common sense realism. In "Lecture IV" of his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* Witherspoon asserts:

From reason, contemplation, sentiment and tradition, the Being and infinite perfection and excellence of God may be deduced and therefore what he is and commands, is virtue and duty. . . . The result of the whole is, that we ought to take the rule of duty from conscience enlightened by reason, experience, and every way by which we can be supposed to learn the will of our Maker, and his intention in creating us such as we are.⁴

Because it is not specifically Christian, the three formulators of the Declaration of Independence would have no difficulty in concurring with Witherspoon's thought as to the

foundations of ethics and our knowledge concerning virtue and duty.

As a Unitarian, John Adams perhaps retained enough residual Puritanism to believe that man displayed a measure of depravity. Benjamin Franklin with his moralistic theism felt that his duty-bound conscience had impelled him to enough good so that the Creator as a great moral referee would abundantly reward him in the hereafter. With Socrates, he believed that the way to virtue is "right reason."

Whatever Madison's conviction might have been when he left college, it is certain that by the time he came to the Convention in Philadelphia, there had been decisive intervening pagan influences.

Jefferson, most responsible for the writing of the Declaration, should be categorized as an Enlightenment deist. He did a scissors and paste job on the gospels, reducing Jesus from Messiah to moralist. By the time he was thirty he had totally rejected the Christian faith and its biblical foundations.

During this period of his life when he had rejected the Christian system of ethics, the young Virginian found the moral props he needed in Homer's simple code of honor and friendship; in echoes from the Greek stoics discovered in Cicero, and through them also was revealed to him a conception of patriotism and devotion to public duty which was to mold the rest of his life.⁵

Jefferson lost his Christian moorings by reading Bolingbroke's *Letters on the Study and Use of History* while still at William and Mary College in Williamsburg, Virginia.

Perhaps, as Whitehead suggests, we can expect better from the College of New Jersey and James Madison, its protégé, as that college was Presbyterian. Whitehead hopes to find the influence of Witherspoon in the works of Madison who exerted a major influence in the formulation of the Federal Constitution. But again history does not fortify that hope.

Whatever Madison's conviction might have been when he left college, it is certain that by the time he came to the Convention in Philadelphia, there had been decisive intervening pagan influences. In her introduction to Madison's account of the Federal Convention, Adrienne Koch of Ohio University has this to say:

Through his friendship of Jefferson, Madison deliberately procured for himself a kind of five-foot shelf of books on the history of natural law, political history, economics, and science, ancient and modern confederacies, and the social philosophy of the Enlightenment, including the Baconist-inspired 37-volume set of the *Encyclopédie*, the Summa of eighteenth century knowledge. The two principal editors of the *Encyclopédie*, Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert, and many of its contributing *philosophes* were devotees of the scientific humanism of Francis Bacon, and no reader could miss the great pervasive evidence in the great work of Bacon's distinctive faith in the power of science and technology to advance and improve the daily lot of man.⁶

From the foregoing I think we can conclude that there is no historical foundation for Whitehead's opening thesis. There surely has been a great contrast between the political philosophy which formed the basis for our Federal Constitution and the present decisions of our legislators as well as the judges of our state and federal courts.

However, I do not believe the contrast takes the form of an antithesis between a "government based upon absolutes of the Bible" and one now based on humanism. Humanism already dominated the thinking of our late eighteenth century political leadership.

What then of the contrast? If we do not confuse total depravity with absolute depravity, we can look for contrasts between various forms of humanism. There surely is a marked contrast between eighteenth century deistic rationalism and the present atheistic irrationalism which seems to be the main-spring of current political thought and action. Given a choice, I would rather live in a society motivated by the humanism of Francis Bacon and the elitist hedonism of John Stuart Mill than in a society such as our present society which in many respects is the precipitate of the influences of evolutionism, positivism, pragmatism, behaviorism, and existentialism; a society which lives by the slogan, "If it feels good, do it."

The Christianizing of colonial political philosophy is not the only *tour de force* we encounter in Whitehead's presentation. He goes on to claim that the colonists were really not revolutionaries at all. He states:

They defended their homelands. As such the American revolution was a conservative counterrevolution. The colonists saw the British as revolutionaries trying to overthrow colonial government. If not seen in this light, the American Revolution does not make sense.⁷

Most students of American history will be surprised to learn that the signers of the Declaration of Independence were not revolutionaries. By the political standards of the divine right monarchs then ruling in Europe, the colonists were considered radicals, to say the least. The Suffolk Resolutions which the radical Sam Adams urged on the Continental Congress, giving the colonies the right to collect taxes in order to support a militia of their own, in England

looked like a revolutionary departure from royal and parliamentary control. From the perspective of the colonists their resistance was primarily an effort to lift the "tyranny" of taxation without representation.

Another allegation which I think most historians would dispute is stated in the following:

Religious liberty was a prime issue in the colonists' dispute with Great Britain, John Adams cited the attempt by parliament to force the establishment of the Church of England on the colonies "as much as any other cause" for the break. He said: "The objection was not merely to the office of a bishop, though even that was dreaded, but to the authority of parliament, on which it must be founded." Historian Carl Bridenbaugh wrote, "It is high time that we repossess the important historical truth that religion was a fundamental cause of the American Revolution."⁸

In the quotation above it should be obvious that the second statement of Adams indicates that the religious consideration was secondary to the objection against coming under direct control of the English parliament. If religion was a fundamental consideration it was only because it had to be included in that catalog of fundamental rights which in their bid for autonomy the colonists wanted to exercise for themselves, free from parliamentary interference. In that sense religion becomes a fundamental concern even though it was by no means the primary impetus towards independence. I know of no historian who would join Bridenbaugh in asserting that religion was a fundamental cause of the American Revolution, if fundamental is interpreted as meaning "primary."

In the course of establishing his second thesis that the thought and action of our present political leaders marks a regressive turn towards secular humanism, Whitehead

uses the Supreme Court as a kind of bellwether. Or to use another figure, in the drama of change from Christianity to secular humanism, the Supreme Court becomes the villain of the piece. As I already indicated there is every reason to conclude that there have been profound changes in the philosophy which gives impetus to current political decisions. Those changes are obvious in the decisions of the Supreme Court as well. For example, no right thinking Christian can concur in the Supreme Court's decision of 1973, *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortions on demand. It ought to weigh heavily on the social conscience of the United States as a nation and it should be opposed by Christians at every turn.

I believe that Whitehead particularly and evangelicals generally could reach more consistent conclusions on such topics as "public justice" and a Christian "plan for action" if they worked out of the principle developed by the late nineteenth century Dutch theologian-statesman, Abraham Kuyper, the principle of sphere sovereignty.

However, I think that Whitehead expands the list of Supreme Court decisions that Christians ought to resist beyond what is warranted. He does this because his view of the current demands of multiformity is too narrow. Concerning the First Amendment provisions for religious freedom, he writes as follows:

Thus the philosophical base of the First Amendment was that of *denominational pluralism*—a healthy coexistence between the various Christian denominations. Such practical denominational pluralism is not to be confused with the new concept of pluralism which commands complete acceptance of all views, even secular humanism.⁹

From the above, one might conclude that part of Whitehead's problem stems from the fact that he fails to distinguish between "acceptance" and "toleration." I don't think any of the Supreme Court decisions demand that we accept secular humanism, but we must tolerate it as a religious option for those who choose to embrace it.

As Francis Schaeffer does in his *A Christian Manifesto*, so Whitehead also suggests that things have come to such a pass that we ought to consider resisting the government's infringement of our religious liberties. Whitehead believes we are virtually being hemmed in by a host of decisions which reflect secular humanism as a kind of statist religion.¹⁰ He wants to use the Supreme Court decision of *Stone v. Graham* which struck down a Kentucky law requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments in public schools to test his case. Whitehead reasons that the decision goes directly contrary to the biblical command that we must teach our children the Ten Commandments. Whitehead concludes:

The time may have come when a local community or a state may have to disobey the Supreme Court or other federal and state agencies that act contrary to the principles of the Bible.¹¹

The gist of Whitehead's argument could be set down in a syllogism as follows: In all cases if the Supreme Court prevents us from obeying the commands of the Bible, it ought to be resisted. The *Stone v. Graham* decision is such a case. Therefore, the Supreme Court decision ought to be resisted. Because the conclusion of this syllogism is valid based on the premises, to disagree we must take exception to one of the premises as unreliable. In this case I would challenge the minor premise as unacceptable. The *Stone v. Graham* decision does not prevent us from following the biblical mandate which lays on us the responsibility to teach our children the Ten Commandments.

Later on when discussing the Christian "Plan For Action," Whitehead proposes support for Christian schools, but at this juncture and later as well it seems that he is proposing that we go back to a kind of *status quo ante*, to that earlier period in American history when white Anglo-Saxon Protestantism dominated public school policy and imposed its ethics.

In his discussion under the heading "Pluralism" in the chapter entitled "Plan for Action," Whitehead writes:

The church must beware of the concept of "Pluralism" as it is advanced today. I am not saying that we should be opposed to the fact that cultures and races are different, and they should be respected for what they are. This was the old concept of pluralism. But the new form is different. It says that a Christian should not seek to *force* his or her religious beliefs on another. Unfortunately this has led to a consensus within society that anything is acceptable. Nothing is right or wrong; it is only a matter of preference.¹² (Emphasis mine, N.R.V.T.)

In the same chapter under the heading "Lawyer," Whitehead continues:

Christian lawyers need to organize in local attorney groups not only to fellowship but to strategize on how they can influence their community. Imagine a strong local Christian lawyers' group threatening legal action against abortion clinics or *upholding the right of a Christian teacher to talk about Christ in the public school classroom.*¹³ (Again, emphasis mine, N.R.V.T.)

It is difficult to follow either Whitehead's argument or his recommendation in the above. Once again he seems to confuse the idea of "accept" and "tolerate." By

suggesting the notion of "force" he puts the church into a concept of theocratic society and for lawyers he proposes legal action where only moral protest is possible. At least, it would seem to me, that one cannot bring suit against an abortion clinic that enjoys legal status even though its actions involve moral atrocities. Nor can one well recommend legal action "upholding the right of a Christian teacher to talk about Christ in the public school classroom" when that teacher does not have that legal right.

I believe that Whitehead particularly and evangelicals generally could reach more consistent conclusions on such topics as "public justice" and a Christian "plan for action" if they worked out of the principle developed by the late nineteenth century Dutch theologian-statesman, Abraham Kuyper, the principle of sphere sovereignty. If he understood the proper sphere of the church, that is, ministering to the faith of its members, Whitehead would not introduce the concept of "force" into the discussion of the church and "pluralism." If he understood the duty of the state as that of maintaining its defenses, domestic tranquility, and public justice, he would not find the attempt of the Supreme Court at even-handed justice under the concept of objectivity, however misguided that concept may be, as an attack on the religious freedom of Christians.

If large numbers of Fundamentalists among the evangelicals did not confuse the proper spheres of the parents and the church in relation to general education, they would not be posing a contest between themselves and the state in the matter of such school regulations as to attendance records and general achievement. Both in Fairfield, Iowa, and Louisville, Nebraska, at this writing (November, 1982) Fundamentalists are claiming exemption from state regulations under protection of the first clause of the First Amendment which demands separation of church and state.

To the mistake of wrongly putting education under the church's sphere of activity is added the mistake of thinking in

terms of sphere isolation. In the Reformed tradition we have held that the right and task of education biblically, and therefore properly, is laid on the parents. This does not lead to the conclusion that the state is isolated from all educational concerns. For example, in Iowa the state exempts the Amish from attending school beyond the eighth grade but it should be obvious that the state could not carry out the responsibilities of its rightful sphere if no one attended school beyond the eighth grade. No post-eighth grade education would mean no nuclear physicists, so our country would quickly become the victim of nuclear blackmail.

Whitehead decries the fact that the Supreme Court has broadened the concept of religion as belief in God to religion as an ultimate belief.¹⁴ I think it is the failure to accept the broader definition of religion which in the past has prevented many evangelicals from discarding the myth of objectivity which has also been the basis for some of the Supreme Court decisions. For example, in the Supreme Court decision barring formal prayers from the public schools, Potter Stewart was the only justice who said that if Christianity was barred from the public schools then by default the field would be left to its chief competitor, secular humanism.

The solution, it seems to me, should not be found in an attempt to foist Christian prayers on non-Christian students, and thereby putting the question out of reach of the Supreme Court by making the decision an amendment to our constitution. We had one such earlier Fundamentalist-supported miscarriage of justice in the Prohibition Amendment which took away our moral right to use alcoholic beverages.

Public justice will not be served by misguided attempts to rechristianize the public schools by the use of non-sectarian prayers. The heroics of going to jail rather than complying with the reasonable state regulations for education will not be of benefit either. The solution ought to be a

system of schools which allows for the multiform expressions of faith found in our society. Justice would seem to demand that a multiform system of funding, such as a voucher system, should also become part of the educational solution. To those of the Reformed faith who have been pioneers in Christian education, it remains somewhat of a puzzle as to why Fundamentalists, and other evangelicals as well, were so late in establishing Christian schools. I think voting records would show that most evangelicals have not supported recent efforts to gain equitable funding for Christian education.

I think it is the failure to accept the broader definition of religion which in the past has prevented many evangelicals from discarding the myth of objectivity which has also been the basis for some of the Supreme Court decisions.

We ought to applaud Whitehead's effort to arouse Christians to a sense of their social and political responsibilities. However, it should have been done with better regard for historical accuracy, sound logic, and sound theology. The salting salt to which Whitehead refers should not take the form of new pressure groups, political action committees, or misguided attempts to bolster the efforts towards resistance against the state by those who are wrong in the first place.

The thesis which Whitehead develops with respect to the successive American revolutions is calculated to support the basic thrust of his book. Whitehead believes, and I think rightly, that it is high time for evangelical Christians to recognize the basic antithesis which exists between the Christian's religion and that of secular

humanism. Moreover, in all aspects of their lives, Christians ought to oppose the secular influences at every turn. To introduce a figure, far too long have evangelicals been adrift in the quiet backwaters of their pietism.

Even so, I have problems with this new emphasis on the antithesis. First, there is no mention of the antithesis which must be working itself out, or be worked out in the heart of the believers. There is no mention of the struggle which the apostle Paul so pointedly emphasizes when he confesses, "what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep doing" (NIV). That text ought to remind us too that the main battle line of the warfare instigated by the antithesis is to be fought by individual believers. They, working from a biblically informed conscience, must deal with the social context of their lives.

Moreover, I am not very hopeful concerning the direction this new emphasis on the antithesis is taking when on Sunday morning, (November 28, 1982) I saw Franky Schaeffer join Jerry Falwell to commend him on his courageous stand for the antithesis. My hopes are further diminished when on the same weekend Greg Dixon, secretary for the Moral Majority, and a group of like-minded ministers converge on Louisville, Nebraska, to support the Reverend Everett Sileven as he goes back to jail rather than accept any state regulations for his Faith Christian School. Concerning that confrontation, I must say that I do not believe we ought to dash off quixotically to do battle for a pseudo-antithesis. There are enough real ones to test our metal.

It is my belief that one should be less than enthusiastic about some of the aims of the Moral Majority. In the last presidential election it gave wholehearted support to the Reagan campaign because Reagan took a pro-life stand on the abortion issue and invoked the name of God from time to time. But as a caution, I think one should have to say that his goal of "making America great again" includes items which a Christian can-

not support.

Further, the Moral Majority, thinking in terms of the antithesis no doubt, quickly endorsed the new president of Guatemala, Efraim Rios Montt, merely on his reputation as a born-again Christian. That should lead one to fear that the new antithesis coalition may readily fall into a trap, that is, the black-and-white fallacy. When one is confidently sure that he is on the side of righteousness, it is easy to believe that there are no in-between gray areas with respect to moral decisions. My caution here does not imply that "yes" and "no" must be replaced by "maybe." It does suggest that we do not use antithetical thinking to find quick and simplistic answers for complicated problems.

A postscript: This book by Whitehead has been liberally punctuated, as it were, by the witty, pithy, trenchant cartoons of the *Chicago Tribune* cartoonist, Wayne Stayskal. If you are a social commentary cartoon aficionado, as I am, you may possibly find the cartoons worth most of the \$10.95 price of the book.

Notes

¹John W. Whitehead, *The Second American Revolution* (Elgin, Illinois: David Cook Publishing Co., 1982) p. 28.

²Whitehead, p. 32.

³Whitehead, p. 34.

⁴John Witherspoon, "Lectures in Moral Philosophy" as reprinted in *The Development of American Philosophy*, by Walter G. Muelder, Christine K. Sears and Anne V. Schlabach, (Cambridge: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1960) p. 107.

⁵Gilbert Chinard, *Thomas Jefferson* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press—Ann Arbor Paperbacks, 1979) p. 26.

⁶James Madison, *Notes Of The Debates In The Federal Constitution Of 1787*, Adreinne Koch, editor, (Athens, Ohio: University of Ohio Press, 1966), p. xiv.

⁷Whitehead, p. 158.

⁸Whitehead, p. 94.

⁹Whitehead, p. 96.

¹⁰Whitehead, pp. 114 and 148.

¹¹Whitehead, p. 158.

¹²Whitehead, p. 165.

¹³Whitehead, p. 173.

¹⁴Whitehead, p. 108.