

From Swords To Plowshares
A Theopolitical Imagination of the Beauty of Redeemed
Society

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The Argument:

What follows is a series of meditations on the question, “Can beauty and political justice coexist?” or, from another perspective, “What will society look like in the postmillennial kingdom?” Some answers are ventured, some conclusions are gestured at, but none are forced, nor is a step-by-step line of argument easily discernible (though I think a distinct ordering principle will be discerned). Nevertheless, all the thoughts and quotes put forth here are here for a reason. In these meditations, I will suggest that as Christ’s kingdom comes, it need not erase all civil government, until, at the consummation, Christ takes his seat visibly among us and God is all in all. We know from the prophets that the kingdom shall be beautiful and glorious, and as we envision this, it is hard to imagine much of a civil government, much of a system of political justice, because we associate it so much with violence and ugliness. Premillennialists believe in a literal reign of Christ, though the function of it is a bit difficult to discern, amillennialists believe it is all only spiritual. What do postmillennialists believe? (By the way, I shall assume some kind of postmillennial perspective throughout, without trying to prove it at any point.) I suggest that we should believe that political rulers shall still govern as the kingdom progresses, and will not entirely give way to an ecclesiastical order, but that they shall no longer through war, but through peace. Beauty is closely associated with peace, and the beauty that the kingdoms shall manifest shall be a beauty of peace and harmony. This will require the transfiguration, the fulfillment, of the political sphere, so that the purpose of civil government shall gradually cease to be the defense of justice by the sword, but the active propagation through peace, the ordering and adornment of society with beauty. Justice is meant to be beautiful, beauty is meant to be peaceful, and we may trust then that the terrible swift sword of justice will give way to a different kind of justice, without meaning that all civil justice must disappear. We may not know precisely what this will look like, but this is where the Old Testament prophets point us, and we should follow with faith and excitement.

1

Auden began his famous poem:

*She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees
Marble well-governed cities
And ships upon untamed seas.ⁱ*

We have a word for the kind of world imagined here—utopia—the dream that has haunted man’s memory for millennia. More may have given us the word in 1516, but Isaiah and Virgil each dreamt of it too—“nowhere” perhaps, but not “nowhen,” sure to come one day on the heels of a Messiah—a world where beauty and justice reign supreme.

2

*A plain without a feature, bare and brown,
No blade of grass, no sign of neighborhood,
Nothing to eat and nowhere to sit down,
Yet, congregated on its blankness, stood
An unintelligible multitude
A million eyes, a million boots in line,
Without expression, waiting for a sign.ⁱⁱ*

This is perhaps a bit closer to our experience—a dystopia, a wasteland wrought by single-minded pursuit of utopian dreams. Auden attaches no name to this nightmare and he need not. We recognize it as all too common—the world of Stalin, of Hitler, of the statist dream turned into a nightmare. Even in its more benign forms, our modern world has come to share the ugliness of this vision—how petty, stale, flat and unprofitable are all the uses of this world, where the fair city has been replaced by a faceless bureaucracy, and the fragrant air of peace is tainted with the rancid odor of commercialism.

3

Achilles’ shield, in the *Iliad*, presents to our view those two ends men so earnestly desire:

Beauty and Justice. The lovely description of the vines and olive trees, next to “two beautiful cities full of people,” where young women dance, beneath the radiance of the

heavenly bodies, shows an ideal society adorned with beauty from head to toe. But it is just as important that these marble cities are “well-governed,” and on the shield Hephaestus etches a scene of a law-court, where justice is being practiced.

4

But now, says Auden,
Out of the air a voice without a face
Proved by statistics that some cause was just
In tones as dry and level as the place:
*No one was cheered and nothing was discussed.*ⁱⁱⁱ

Justice has earned a bad name, it seems. Hauled into action to do the dirty work whenever the politicians want an excuse to strengthen their power or weaken their enemies, Justice is looking a bit ugly and battered now. She no longer rolls down like waters, or rides out on a white horse with eyes like a flame of fire and a sword in her mouth, but hides faceless in bleak courthouses, behind a row of vacant jurors.

5

Behold! the tears of the oppressed, and for them, no comforter. In the hand of their oppressors, power, and for them, no comforter. (Ecc. 4:1)

Perhaps the modern world is no more warped by injustice than the world at any other period in history, but technology has made us painfully aware of its scope...and painfully capable of propagating it. So often we lobby for our politicians to bring justice to the oppressed, but when the dust clears, it seems, injustice sits enthroned in twice as great a palace as before. The more we grasp for it, it seems, the more justice slips through our fingers.

6

Beauty possesses more than a passing connection with justice. We sense instinctively that nothing unjust will long remain beautiful. This is Dorian Gray’s triumph—the ability to hide the ugliness of his sin and thus be supposed pure on account of his beauty alone. But even he cannot do it forever. Aestheticist Elaine Scarry argues for such a connection in her little book *On Beauty and Being Just*.

7

Can we recover a link between beauty and justice in the light of modernity's dystopia, the aspirations for justice that have led us deep into ugliness? It seems hard to imagine social beauty anymore. Beauty as a spiritual phenomenon we can imagine—God is beautiful, a soul might be beautiful; Beauty as art we can imagine—the physical raised to an almost spiritual plane. Beauty of the natural world we readily grant, the beauty of a flower or a forest or the Grand Tetons. You can put that beauty on a postcard. People can have beauty, too, as individuals, not just in terms of physical features, but even in terms of personality. But peoples cannot have beauty; nations cannot have beauty. We are frightened at the suggestion, having seen too many racists and tyrants extol the intrinsic beauty of their peoples.

8

Can we reimagine a beautiful society, harmonious, happy, prosperous, glorious, radiant, and welcoming? Only in the afterlife, it seems. In this world, sin must continue, which means the ugly obligations of justice shall continue.

For man's grim Justice goes its way,

And will not swerve aside:

It slays the weak, it slays the strong,

It has a deadly stride:

With iron heel it slays the strong,

The monstrous parricide!^{iv}

(Oscar Wilde, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol")

9

Coastlands shall hope for me, the ships of Tarshish first, to bring your children from afar, their silver and gold with them, for the name of Yahweh your God, and for the Holy One of Israel, because he has made you beautiful....Your gates shall be open continually; day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring you the wealth of the nations, with their kings led in procession....The glory of Lebanon shall come to you, the cypress, the fir, and the pine, to beautify the place of my sanctuary, and I will make the place of my feet glorious." (Is. 60:9, 11, 13)

10

Do we read this as a description of a literal earthly society? Well, it depends. Dispensationalists might, but for Reformed types, there are usually two options. One is to see it as spiritually fulfilled in the life of the Church, so, for example, silver and gold, cypress, fir, and pine represent spiritual gifts like sanctification and whatnot. The other is to place it on the far side of the consummation, in the new heavens and the new earth, in which case we don't have to spiritualize nearly as much, but we do have to find some other meaning for "the wealth of the nations" and all that, since we wouldn't imagine that there are nations anymore.

11

Dispensationalists do accept that this is a literal earthly society, a beautiful, just, and blessed realm. Do they just have more faith? Well, certainly about some things. The problem with the dispensationalists is that they feel the only way to achieve such beauty is to compensate by an overload of ugliness somewhere else. So they gleefully revel, with a sort of fiendish bloodthirsty delight, in projections of billions of rotting corpses and rivers of blood bathing the bomb-blasted land, before, suddenly, all shall be washed clean and good and beautiful.

12

Does justice play a part in this dispensationalist millennial kingdom? One wonders. Their justice is the justice of Reading Gaol, which "with iron heel slays the strong." Their justice knows nothing but the blood-red sword. Once the tribulation is done and the sword is put away, what is to take its place? How does the king reign with justice and equity when he has no foes to slay?

13

Even Roderick Campbell cannot escape this troubling dichotomy. Postmillennial though he is, he believes the Old Testament prophecies of restoration must be spiritualized if the New Covenant is to be rightly understood. "The glory of the New Covenant and the other new things, which we have been discussing is wholly different from the visible and external glories of the old symbolic economy with its earthly priests, kings, thrones, and conquests."^v Wholly different? For Campbell, as the kingdom comes, it remains fundamentally an invisible kingdom, though visible bits might shine through. All talk of cities, nations,

prosperity, rulers, must be taken according to its proper spiritual sense, that is, to refer to a triumphant moral and spiritual order in the lives of men on earth.

14

Exegesis of this kind is no doubt necessary to some extent. Campbell points out, as have others, that attempts to reconcile the various prophecies of the kingdom, if taken strictly literally, end in comical contradiction, just as would a picture of the bride in Song of Solomon whose hair is like a flock of goats. The question is whether all of the blatantly political language in the prophecies of the coming kingdom has any recognizably political referent at all.

15

Ezekiel's prophecy of the restoration of Israel reads almost like a government development report on the planning of a new city:

"Alongside the portion set apart as the holy district you shall assign for the property of the city an area 5,000 cubits broad and 25,000 cubits long. It shall belong to the whole house of Israel.

"And to the prince shall belong the land on both sides of the holy district and the property of the city, alongside the holy district and the property of the city, on the west and on the east, corresponding in length to one of the tribal portions and extending from the western to the eastern boundary of the land. It is to be his property in Israel. And my princes shall no more oppress my people, but they shall let the house of Israel have the land according to their tribes." (Ez. 45:6-8)

And so it continues for eight chapters or so.

16

"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, and on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness, from this time forth and forevermore. The zeal of the Lord of hosts will accomplish this." (Is. 9:6-7)

17

"From sea to sea, and from the river to the ends of the earth," we are told, "He shall judge thy people with righteousness, and thy poor with judgment. He shall bring peace to the people, and the little

hills, by righteousness. He shall judge the poor of the people, he shall save the children of the needy, and shall break in pieces the oppressor. They shall fear thee as long as the sun and moon endure, throughout all generations. He shall come down like rain upon the mown grass: as showers that water the earth. In his days shall the righteous flourish; and abundance of peace so long as the moon endureth.” (Ps. 72:2-8)

18

For the prophets and the people of the Old Covenant, the reign of the Messiah was not conceived simply as some generic “kingdom” which could be construed as a spiritual reign, or even as a general cultural dominion; but nor was it primarily conceived in the crassly nationalistic and militaristic terms that we often characterize as the first century Jewish messianic expectation. Above all else, the Messiah would come to inaugurate just judgment, to set to rights the oppression of the poor and widows which the nations practiced, and which Israel too had fallen into.

19

Going through the prophets with an attentive eye and an open mind, we find the concern with just judgment is everywhere. It is for material injustice that the Jews are being judged, and it is to rectify this that the Messiah will come and deliver the oppressed with justice and shower them with material prosperity. Isaiah is full of this:

“Woe to those who decree iniquitous decrees, and the writers who keep writing oppression, to turn aside the needy from justice, and to rob the poor of my people of their right, that widows may be their spoil, and that they may make the fatherless their prey!” (10:1-3)

This is the problem in chapter 10, and what is the answer in chapter 11?

“[The Messiah] shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.” (11:3-5)

20

Godly men and women have unwittingly contributed to the propagation of injustice by their belief in the “spiritual fulfillment” of prophecies like Isaiah 11. If we take it out of its context as a response to chapter 10, then we can read this as a judgment on sin generally and a

vindication of the righteous at the last day. On such a reading, healing people's hearts is our main concern as Christians, and helping their bodies or economic conditions, or freeing them from oppression, is simply not a major concern for us, and should be best left to non-religious groups interested in such causes.

21

Good Christianity, according to folks like Darryl Hart, has nothing to do with bringing good news to the poor, with binding up the brokenhearted, proclaiming liberty to the captives, or the opening of the prison to those who are bound, unless by this we mean the poor in spirit, those whose hearts are broken by wickedness, those who are held captive by Satan, and those who are in the prison of sin. Governments take care of the rest.

22

Happy to oblige when they are asked to meet such a need, secular governments have willingly stepped in to bring utopia through purely political ends. No totalitarian regime ever gained power by saying it wanted to create a dystopia—invariably, they offered a future of justice and prosperity. Many were lying no doubt, but it is surprising how many horrible tyrants have actually believed that they were trying to bring about utopia.

23

Human plans for utopia seem to take two distinct forms—political utopianism and apolitical utopianism.

24

Hauerwas provides an example of a kind of Christian apolitical utopianism, arguing that the Church's task is to stand against the necessarily oppressive state and bring in the kingdom through peace and through a refusal to employ the ordinary tools of justice:

"The church must learn time and time again that its task is not to make the world the kingdom, but to be faithful to the kingdom by showing to the world what it means to be a community of peace. Thus we are required to be patient and never lose hope. But hope in what? Specifically, hope in the God who has promised that faithfulness to the kingdom will be of use in God's care for the world. . . . Christians cannot seek justice from the barrel of a gun; and we must be suspicious of that justice that

relies on manipulation of our less than worthy motives, for God does not rule creation through coercion, but through a cross.”^{vi}

25

In the case of the apolitical utopians, governments are precisely the problem; rather than being the prosecutors of injustice, they are the perpetrators of it. The apoliticists believe that the supposedly benevolent shepherd’s staff of the state, gently guiding the people into green pastures, is actually a rod of iron, shattering them on the anvil of its own ambitions. Their utopian dream involves the leveling of all political organization, the demolition of all hierarchy and power, after which all men will live as brothers. Of course, for secularists this dream is always self-defeating, as the French Revolution and its long line of ever-pettier descendants found. This is because these apolitical utopians often share with the political utopians the claim that massive violence is needed to end violence.

26

In the case of the political utopians, the terrible swift sword of war or the benevolent regulations of a bureaucratic behemoth will save us from ourselves. Men are nasty, brutish creatures, but with proper control and tutelage, the more optimistic will claim, they can be brought to live together in an organized peaceful society. The state will see to it too, whether through socialism or through capitalistic regulation, that the proper economic conditions for peace and prosperity. This kind of utopianism, in some form, is shared by thinkers as diverse as Marx, Hitler, Barack Obama, John Locke, Abraham Lincoln, and Hegel. Nor it is a merely modern phenomenon—it is as old as the world, the dream of ancient man as well as modern.

27

In Book Six of the *Aeneid*, Virgil puts his faith in Augustus as the bringer of a new utopia:

*This is the man, this one
Of whom so often you have heard the promise,
Caesar Augustus, son of the deified,
Who shall bring once again an Age of Gold
To Latium, to the land where Saturn reigned,
In early times. He will extend his power*

*Beyond the Garamants and Indians,
 Over far territories north and south
 Of the zodiacal stars, the solar way,
 Where Atlas, heaven-bearing, on his shoulder
 Turns the night-sphere, studded with burning stars.^{vii}
 (Aeneid VI.1063-71)*

28

Jewish messianism around the time of Christ was too political. Redemption would occur, utopia would be born, through a Christ who rode forth as a triumphant military leader, trodding down his foes in the winepress of his wrath. They were sorely disappointed when their Christ declared that his kingdom was not of this world.

29

John Nelson Darby, father of Dispensationalism, was disappointed too. Surely Christ was speaking only about a temporary situation. Darby and his followers have succeeded in introducing a strain of political utopianism on steroids into evangelical Christianity. According to this picture of history, all will be made well when Christ returns as a physical conqueror to set up a physical kingdom where he shall physically judge his enemies and enforce justice. The real problem here is not so much the picture of the millennium as how we get there. This is where the worst parallels with political utopianism come in. Virgil's utopian prophecy in the *Aeneid* continues:

*At that man's coming even now the realms
 Of Caspia and Maeotia tremble, warned
 By oracles, and the seven mouths of Nile
 Go dark with fear....
 Do we lag still at carrying our valor
 Into action? Can our fear prevent
 Our settling in Ausonia?^{viii}
 (Aeneid VI.1073-6, 1084-6)*

Augustus would bring peace, yes, but by trampling all the other nations underfoot. The Dispensationalist Christ must first blast half of mankind into oblivion with brimstone or

nuclear weapons or some other implement of mass destruction, and then must ride out to slay all foes in his wrath, before he can begin his peaceful administration. After all, doesn't the Bible say, "From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations"? (No matter that the sword is the Word.) Hitler would've admired this guy's style.

30

Just because we wish to avoid the political utopianism of dispensationalism is no reason to flee to the opposite extreme. And I don't just mean amillennialism.

31

"Kingdoms that will not serve you shall perish; those nations shall be utterly laid waste." (Is. 60:12)
The Gospel, we might want to say, triumphs over the kingdoms of the earth; their time is over, they are no longer needed when the Gospel comes to full growth, because all people shall serve the Lord in the beauty of holiness, and the ugliness of the sword shall have passed away.

32

Killing is all that governments are good for, we might be tempted to say. The magistrate has the sword of justice, and he will wield it mercilessly until he is dethroned. We're back to the "grim Justice" with its "iron heel" of the "Ballad of Reading Gaol" not the justice of Psalm 98: "He will judge the world with justice, and the peoples with equity." This kind of justice is only for God, not for men.

33

"Kiss the Son, lest he be angry." (Ps. 2:12)

What does this command, directed at the "rulers of the earth," ultimately mean? Do they kiss him in submission or in surrender? Have they given up their dominion forever to Him who has everlasting dominion, or have they laid their garments at his feet as his vassals, to execute justice in his name?

34

Late modernity has grown cynical. We have seen too much of the ugliness of wars fought in the name of justice in our century to have enough faith to imagine that peace on earth will

ever come while the nations last. Perhaps then, at root, the same suspicion underlies dispensationalism, amillennialism, and apolitical postmillennialism. The dispensationalists can't imagine a just, harmonious, and beautiful society that is not directly presided over by the Son sitting on a throne. The amillennialists don't think it's going to happen on earth at all, not in any kind of ultimate sense, so they hope only for a spiritual society. The apolitical postmillennialists believe that civil order will give way to ecclesiastical order as the kingdom comes.

35

Lying under all this is the question raised at the beginning of this book—can justice be beautiful?

36

“Lifesaving reciprocity”—that is how Elaine Scarry describes the inherent tendency toward justice and equity in beauty. There is, she says, a “fairness not just in the sense of loveliness of aspect but in the sense of a ‘symmetry of everyone’s relation to one another.’”^{ix} “The attribute [for beauty] most steadily singled out over the centuries has been ‘symmetry’.”^x This, she believes, provides a path for connecting justice and beauty, and that beauty’s exaltation of harmony and equality may help us to pattern justice after its image. She even hopes that “It may happen on occasion that the fair political arrangement itself (not just the laws prescribing it or guaranteeing it) *will* be condensed into a time and space where it becomes available to the senses, and then . . . its beauty is visible.”^{xi}

37

Many might doubt even that “it may happen on occasion,” but Scripture assures us that it will happen, and it will endure. Of course, we’ve seen that hermeneutics can spiritualize anything if it wants to, but Scripture appears to be replete with pictures of a beautiful political society, a justice that embodies beauty.

38

Mount Zion, the City of God, is pictured as a beautiful woman when the fulfillment of God’s kingdom comes:

“And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.” (Rev. 21:2)

“Awake, awake, put on your strength, O Zion, put on your beautiful garments, O Jerusalem, the holy city.” (Is. 52:1)

“For Zion’s sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem’s sake I will not be quiet, until her righteousness goes forth as brightness, and her salvation as a burning torch. The nations shall see your righteousness, and all the kings your glory, and you shall be called by a new name, that the mouth of Yahweh will give. You shall be a crown of beauty in the hand of Yahweh, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.” (Is. 62:1-3)

39

Most of the time we probably don’t notice the key feature of the subject of these verses: it’s a city, a political society organized together under rulers. Merely a metaphor?

40

No metaphor is more common for the Old Testament prophets, when speaking of the restoration of Israel, than that of the city and its environs.

41

“No more shall violence be heard in your land, devastation and destruction within your borders; you shall call your walls salvation, and your gates Praise,” (Is. 60:18)
says Isaiah.

And Jeremiah says:

“And this city shall be to me a name of joy, a praise and a glory before all the nations of the earth who shall hear of all the good that I do for them. They shall fear and tremble because of all the good and all the prosperity I provide for it.” (Jer. 33:9)

42

Not to mention Ezekiel’s prophecies, which speak of a very elaborate city.

43

Other civic and political images abound in the prophetic promises. Isaiah 35 describes the restoration of Israel as the end of wilderness—civilization shall conquer the wilderness and drive out the wild beasts:

“And a highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Highway of Holiness; the unclean shall not pass over it. It shall belong to those who walk on the way; even if they are fools, they shall not go astray. No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there.” (Is. 35:8-9)

Isaiah 60 speaks of the restoration in terms of the glory of Solomon’s reign:

“Foreigners shall build up your walls, and their kings shall minister to you... Your gates shall be open continually, day and night they shall not be shut, that people may bring to you the wealth of the nations.” (Is. 60:10-11)

44

Of course the point here is not to suggest, in dispensationalist fashion, that the kingdom of God shall be a literal city. That would be much too small a redemption. Christ’s kingdom will reign over the whole earth. But these passages picture this redemption in very political terms. It is the city that shall be made beautiful, a politically ordered society, not a post-political utopia. As O’Donovan puts it,

“[this argument] does not suppose a literal synonymity between the political vocabulary of salvation and the secular use of the same political terms. It postulates an analogy—not a rhetorical metaphor only, or a poetic image, but an analogy grounded in reality.”^{xii}

45

Only through the reordering of the political in justice and righteousness, not through the destruction of all political order, shall society be beautified as God has promised. But how will this beauty take shape? The link between justice and beauty, that Scarry groped for, has been demonstrated, but not pinpointed.

46

“Peace on earth”

What a powerful slogan, sung by the angels at Christ's birth, and hung over a million nativity scenes since. Unfortunately, this notion has been cheapened into a laughingstock—one need only think of the movie *Miss Congeniality*, where every beauty queen says that the most important thing to her is "World peace." Is world peace possible? We tend to scoff at the idea as a leftist agenda. But Christ did come to bring peace on earth. True, not immediately—"I came not to bring peace but a sword"—God always divides before he reunites, but the testimony of his words, those of the prophets, and the rest of the Scriptures is clear: "And he came and preached peace to you who were near, and peace to those who were far off." (Eph. 2:17)

47

Peace is the highest aspiration of every society, claims Augustine, and this aspiration is answered by the heavenly peace of the Gospel:

"Anyone who joins me in an examination, however slight, of human affairs, and the human nature we all share, recognizes that just as there is no man who does not wish for joy, so there is no man who does not wish for peace. Indeed, even when men choose war, their only wish is for victory; which shows that their desire in fighting is for peace with glory. For what is victory but the conquest of the opposing side? And when this is achieved, there will be peace."^{xiii}

48

Powerful men, Augustine realizes, desire peace, just as the weak do; only they do not desire it with equality. For the godless, peace for some can only come at the cost of a lack of peace for others, or perhaps the peace of slavery. It is a tribute to the transformative power of Christianity over society that so many now aim for a general peace of worldwide brotherhood—Virgil couldn't have conceived of this.

This pagan peace is not a beautiful peace; it is the peace of the cease-fire, not the alliance. Beautiful peace is peace joined with justice—it has the symmetry which Elaine Scarry so lauds.

49

Quakers and their ilk, like liberal lobbyists, have given the quest for peace a bad name among most Christians. Most of us insist that war is simply necessary, as long as sin reigns in this world, until Christ returns. That may be true; war may not end entirely as long as

this world endures, but we must take seriously Scripture's promises that iwar will no longer reign, but will submit to the peace the Messiah offers. Both Isaiah and Micah repeat the

promise,

"He shall judge between many peoples, and shall decide for strong nations far away; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." (Micah 4:3)

50

Quaint metaphors, only, we reply. Rhetorical figures only, dramatic exaggerations. (Note that we cannot reply here with the favorite argument that this refers only to the spiritually understood eternal state, because why should there be swords around to beat into plowshares there? Or why should there be plowshares? And certainly why should there be nations?) But the promise for peace is deeply interwoven with the prophecies of the kingdom. One of the Messiah's names is Prince of Peace, and "of the increase of his government and of peace there shall be no end." (Is. 9:7) Isaiah also says, "Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream." (Is. 66:12) Ezekiel gets in on the act too: "I will make a covenant of peace with them. It shall be an everlasting covenant with them. And I will set them in their land and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary in their midst forevermore." (Ez. 37:26) St. Paul himself quotes Isaiah's prophecy, "How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace" (Rom. 10:15, from Is. 52:7)

51

Quotations like these should help us recognize that this theme—the beautiful reign of peace in the eschatological kingdom, is crucial to understanding the beauty of the redeemed society. Peace, harmony, rest is part of what we all desire in beauty. Of course, there is more to beauty than that, there is dynamism and tension, but always seeking a resolution into peace.

52

Resolution is what makes beauty in music possible. Music started with simple harmonies and unisons, and composers soon realized that tension, as well as peace, was necessary to create beauty. Composers developed ever more elaborate means of creating tension and

resolution in their music, until finally in this century, composers gave up on the need for resolution, and opted for perpetual tension. Whatever music after this point was, it certainly wasn't beautiful.

We mustn't be so foolish as to insist that all tension is ugly—all of God's story is beautiful in a way, but resolution of that tension in cosmic peace and harmony is God's beautiful end of that story.

53

Remembering the descriptions of the temple (both in Exodus and Ezekiel), we can confidently pin down symmetry and balance as a criterion of Biblical beauty, so it is no surprise that the beauty of the eschatological bride of Christ should be the order and harmony of a peaceful city. Scarry explicitly identifies peace with beauty as well: "Beauty is pacific: its reciprocal salute to continued existence, its pact, is indistinguishable from the word for peace."

54

Redemption, then, is more than the salvation of souls—it is the salvation of society.

Redemption will be accomplished when "justice shall roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream," (Amos 5:24) when the kings of the earth wage war no more and no longer persecute the widow and the fatherless. Redemption will accomplish the beautification of human society through peace.

Peace, then, is the link we have sought between beauty and justice. The goal of justice is equality, harmony, the protection of peace and the restoration of peace when an imbalance has been introduced. Justice may often wear for us the ugly mask of retribution, and carry the fearful sword of punishment, it may even often be turned aside to oppression, but the goal of justice is peace. And peace, harmony, resolution is a core quality of beauty. The kingdom of God will be beautiful and just by being a peaceable kingdom.

55

Surely this is all fairly obvious. Peace will reign in Christ's kingdom; he shall accomplish justice for his people, they shall be made beautiful and prosperous. So what? Will any disagree with this?

56

Societal peace is not the same as political peace. Apolitical utopians readily embrace the vision of the peaceable kingdom, but believe that this kingdom only comes by the destruction of the political. No true union of justice and peace, justice and beauty, is possible for them, not at least, in the sense of active justice. Justice as a quality of fairness is just fine, but justice as the active judgments of political organizations must pass away—it is too much tainted with the violence of the sword. Peace, then, in one sense, is the cessation of justice, for characters like Hauerwas at least.

57

So what is the solution? Can the sword ever be wholesome? Or rather, can the state ever lay down the sword without ceasing to be the state? We have just made above the rather obvious statement that justice aims at peace; Augustine, above, made a similar observation even about the wars of the Roman Empire: the goal of the magistrate's sword is peace. The problem is what to do if it ever succeeds—what if there is peace on earth? What then?

58

The problem is well summed-up by a delightful Demotivational poster I once saw:

“Consulting:

If you're not part of the solution, there's good money to be made in prolonging the problem.”

59

This is the temptation that all governments run into—they have to do their job of creating peace well enough to keep their job, but not so well that there are no longer any dangers to protect against, no longer any need to create peace. The gospel and the prophets promise that the time will come when, at least to a vast extent, their goal of creating peace will be so fully realized that the majority of current political functions will become unnecessary. So will political organizations simply wither away, gradually becoming no more than symbolic figureheads and then losing even that role as the Church takes over society? That is certainly the dream of the apolitical utopians. But Old Testament prophecy paints us such an unambiguously political picture. How do we reconcile this? Can political society find a role for itself once the swords have been beaten into plowshares? Will the state be satisfied as an agricultural supply company?

60

Transfiguration—that is what is needed. All creation yearns for transfiguration, yearns to be remade into the image of that for which it was always intended, in short, to receive its glory.

Glory, suggests Doug Jones, is the beauty of that-for-which-something-was-meant—“the glory of young men is their strength”; “the glory of kings is to search things out.” The glory of God is the revelation of His presence and the praise of his people. And where glory is in

Scripture, beauty is never far away. Indeed, part of beauty, suggests Jones, involves this notion of transfiguration into glory. The beautiful image does not simply present a thing as it appears, but points us towards its true fulfillment, its glory; it transfigures the thing according to its created *telos*.

61

Up until now, we have seen the state as nothing more than the wielder of the sword. Paul did not encourage his hearers to look for anything different:

“For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God’s wrath on the wrongdoer.” (Rom. 13:1-4)

Paul’s words have carried great weight for centuries of political thought. But what if he speaks only of a temporary state of things. What if the political powers might persist through eternal peace? This would be a transfiguration into beautiful justice indeed, an active, creative justice which beautifies society from glory to glory, rather than a purely responsive justice, which merely repairs the effects of crime.

62

Unclear as this notion is, it seems that Scripture calls us to something like it. Over and over in the prophets, the picture we see is one of a city, a city governed in justice, a city ruling over nations who no longer practice oppression, where the law stands, but as a law of good news, an evangelical law proclaiming peace. The eschatological kingdom, it seems, is a kingdom indeed, presided over by Christ ultimately, of course, but before he takes the crown

directly, by his ministers. It is a kingdom in which godly rulers give judgment and bring order and beauty to the society of men which is steadily growing into a city of just men made perfect.

63

Underemphasized as it often is, we must pay attention to the main emphasis of Isaiah's great Messianic prophecy, which we have already quoted:

*"For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and **the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, on the throne of David and over his kingdom, to establish it and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and forevermore.**" (Is. 9:6-7)*

64

Valiant warrior though he was, Faramir of Gondor saw that the true glory of a kingdom was peace, not war:

"I do not love the bright sword for its sharpness, nor the arrow for its swiftness, nor the warrior for his glory. I love only that which they defend: the city of the Men of Numenor; and I would have loved her for her memory, her ancients, and her beauty, and her present wisdom. Not feared, save as men may fear the dignity of a man, old and wise."^{xiv}

65

Vainly some may object that these political prophecies do not refer to nations, but to the Church. Even if that is so, then the Church is to become a political society, a society governed by laws, and concerned with the administration of justice and the propagation of peace, with the civilization of the wilderness and the subjection of the nations. And while it is possible that all civic duties in society, as well as all spiritual duties, would be overseen by the Church as the Church, we should imagine some kind of division of labor would be likely. Will there be magistrates at all, or merely prince-bishops? Or even if there are only prince-bishops, this title recognizes two distinct functions, though combined in one man.

Either way, the political function endures.

Oliver O'Donovan makes a telling critique of such ecclesial politics (for example, of the Hauerwasian type: "The term [political] is, however, overextended when it is embraced by

an approach to theology which has no interest in political questions as such, but merely professes an ecclesial anti-foundationalism, the political content reduced to the banal reminder that theology must relate to some community of discourse.”^{xv}

66

Violence and the state are inseparable, we are tempted to assume. This certainly seems to be the suggestion of political theologians such as William Cavanaugh. But why?

67

William Cavanaugh advocates what he calls “Eucharistic anarchy” suggesting that the political act of the Eucharist, in binding together divided peoples, “challenges the false order of the state.”^{xvi} His main argument is that the state preaches a false unity for society, one built on violence, and that the gospel shows us a more excellent way. While his central point is a valuable one, it leaves us wondering if there is to be more to society, after the destruction of the state, than simply the society of worshipping believers. Is this all the social cohesion that is needed? If we assume such a view of political society (though Cavanaugh does distinguish between government and “the state” in theory, he fails to flesh this out), then the state *must* disappear. The society in its place, with the Church at its head, will then be only analogically political.

68

Why assume this to begin with, though? Why not have the theopolitical imagination, to borrow Cavanaugh’s phrase, to imagine the political transfigured in beauty, robed in peace, yet still functioning politically, still ordering society and executing justice, though under the tutelage of the Church.

69

“When thou tookest upon thee to deliver man, thou didst not abhor the Virgin’s womb. When thou hadst overcome the sharpness of death, thou didst open the kingdom of heaven to all believers. We believe that thou shalt come to be our judge. We therefore pray thee, help thy servants, whom thou hast redeemed with thy precious blood. Make them to be numbered with thy saints, in glory everlasting.”

Oliver O'Donovan opens his landmark work *Desire of the Nations* with this early Christian hymn, and points out, "It is striking how much political vocabulary the second stanza of the *Te Deum* contains.... The general picture is a political one, quite clearly: there is a ruler; he has achieved a decisive public act of liberation; by that act he has founded and sustained a community."^{xvii}

70

Xerxes ruled over 120 satrapies from Greece to India, whose ministers executed justice over many peoples in his name. Shall not Christ one day be served by hundreds of rulers executing his judgments in His name over every people?

71

"Xenophilia is commanded us: the neighbour whom we are to love is the foreigner we encounter on the road," says Oliver O'Donovan. *"It is essential to our humanity that there should always be foreigners, human beings from another community who have an alternative way of organizing the task and privilege of being human, so that our imaginations are refreshed and our sense of cultural possibilities renewed. The imperialist argument, that until foreigners are brought into relations of affinity within one cultural home they are enemies, is simply a creation of xenophobia. The act of recognition and welcome, which leaps across the distinctive friendship of hospitality, is a fundamental form of human relating."*^{xviii}

72

Xenophobia, perhaps, is what perpetuates the supposed inseparability of political society and the violence of the nation-state. Every political society, we think, must be defined to exclude or subjugate foreigners. But need it be so? O'Donovan shows us a more excellent way. It is not necessary, as Cavanaugh suggests, for individual societies to wholly dissolve into the one grand transnational society of the Church. Let us not forget the axioms of beauty laid down before. Beauty consists of harmony and symmetry, but never in uniformity. Individual political societies must not be completely replaced by the Church, for there must remain relationality and dynamism if the kingdom of Christ is to be truly beautiful.

73

Yoder has influenced a great deal of recent political theology and Christian ethics with his notion of the martyr church, and his claim that Constantine knocked the Church off-course by identifying it with the powers of this world.

74

Yet what's the use of being a martyr Church if the martyrs are never vindicated? If, like Christ, they do not destroy the powers by their death at the hands of the powers? Leithart, in *Against Christianity*, and O'Donovan, in *Desire of the Nations*, contend for a robust Constantinianism, that recognizes, in the words of O'Donovan, that Constantine "was the logical conclusion of [the Early Church's] confidence in mission, the confirmation of what they had always predicted. The kings of the earth had come to bow before the throne of Christ, and the empire they had served had lost its most powerful agents. . . . Christendom meant not the church's seizing alien power but alien power's becoming attentive to the church."^{xix}

75

Yoder and his Anabaptist theology embraces a dualism which cannot envision the beauty of a transfigured political society, the beauty of enacted justice in submission to the righteous King of Kings. As Leithart points out "There is an incoherence in the work of Hauerwas, Yoder, and others who would defend the Church as *polis* but attack the idea of a Christian civilization and a Christian political order."^{xx} The Church is prophet against the political powers of the age, but precisely so that those powers might bow the knee and exercise just judgment under Christ's dominion. "Will the king always refuse to listen? Says who? And, when the king begins to listen, must the Church fall silent, so as to avoid becoming a chaplain? To keep her integrity, must the Church *refuse* to succeed?"^{xxi}

76

Zion shall be given beauty for ashes, and all her glory shall be restored to her. Does this include the glory of the city, the glory of the kingdom, the glory of the law going forth in

justice and equity? The kingdoms of this world have become the kingdoms of our God and of his Christ, but cannot Christ have vicegerents?

77

Zealots in the time of Christ thought that the Messiah's kingdom would be just like Rome's, only bigger and stronger. We know they were wrong, but were they wrong to suppose it would replace Roman rule, and accomplish the Roman goals of peace and justice better than

Rome ever could? O'Donovan, as always, sums the issue up nicely for us:

"Let us be clear that political theology...does not suppose a literal synonymity between the political vocabulary of salvation and the secular use of the same political terms. It postulates an analogy—not a rhetorical metaphor only, or a poetic image, but an analogy grounded in reality—between the acts of God and human acts, both of them taking place within the one public history which is the theatre of God's saving purposes and mankind's social undertakings. The kingdom of God is not a mere kingdom, but it is a real kingdom. The point is not to reduce the semantic range of speech about God's acts to the limits of our commonplace political discussion—that would be reductionism indeed!—but to push back the horizon of commonplace politics and open it up to the activity of God."^{xxii}

78

"Zion shall be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness....For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of Yahweh from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore." (Is. 1:27; 2:3-4)

Now what could be more beautiful than that?

Endnotes

- ⁱ W.H. Auden, "The Shield of Achilles," in *Poems* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 177.
- ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*
- ^{iv} Oscar Wilde, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol," in *Collected Works* (New York: Barnes and Noble Publishing, Inc., 2006), 1005.
- ^v Roderick Campbell, *Israel and the New Covenant* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1945), 185.
- ^{vi} Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom* (London: SCM Press, 2003), 103-4.
- ^{vii} Virgil, *Aeneid*, translated by Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), VI. 1063-71.
- ^{viii} *Ibid.* VI.1073-6, 1084-6.
- ^{ix} Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 95.
- ^x *Ibid.* 96.
- ^{xi} *Ibid.* 103.
- ^{xii} Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of Nations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 2.
- ^{xiii} Augustine, *The City of God*, translated by Henry Bettenson (London: Penguin Books, 2003), 866.
- ^{xiv} J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, collector's edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 2003), 280.
- ^{xv} O'Donovan 4.
- ^{xvi} William Cavanaugh, "Beyond Secular Parodies," in *Radical Orthodoxy*, edited by John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999), 194.
- ^{xvii} O'Donovan 1.
- ^{xviii} *Ibid.* 268.
- ^{xix} Peter Leithart, *Against Christianity* (Moscow, Canon Press, 2003), 129.
- ^{xx} *Ibid.* 137.
- ^{xxi} *Ibid.* 135.
- ^{xxii} O'Donovan 2.