

**CIVIL SOCIETY, CIVIL RELIGION**, by Andrew Shanks, *Blackwell*, Oxford, 1995. Pp. 255. Pb. £13.99.

This book is billed by its publishers as 'in significant respects carrying forward the debate initiated by John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, albeit in a very different way.' And so it does. Shanks develops an interesting and passionately engaged argument for a 'civil theology' corresponding to 'civil society' which would address the ills of society. He opposes this to a 'confessional theology' which is church-bound and therefore unable to contest the social space made up of differing confessional identities, for the church is simply one of the many identities that constitutes this social space.

Civil theology is therefore trans-confessional theology, and its basis lies in a three-fold conviction. First, that Christian confessional theology 'is a response to revelation in an event of the ancient world', whereas civil faith 'by contrast, is a response to revelation in other memories: those, namely, which provide the main reference points for understanding what it means to be a citizen *today*' (211). Second, 'today' is contextualized by the totalitarian nightmare of two world wars and the various responses to this history; some of the latter possessing 'revelatory quality'. (4) Third, that the 'healing of memories' (5) is the prime goal of such a civil religion, in contrast to say Bellah's notion of civil religion which tends to be deployed in a Durkheimian fashion to sacralize good social order. Shanks is keen to maintain the critical independence of civil society from the 'state', for in its 'solidarity with the shaken' (drawing on Jan Patocka), civil religion may find itself in deep conflict with the state—and of course confessional religion.

Shanks proceeds with his argument by means of searching out revelation in modern history with the question: 'what then *ought* to compel us?' (21). He looks to the differing analyses of Hannah Arendt and Simone Weil in response to Nazi genocide. The answer seems to lie in the construction of a free space for unrestrained political discussion, in Arendt's terms: isonomy (no rule). (It is odd that Shanks never discusses Habermas, as the telos of his civil religion is not unlike Habermas' ideal speech situation—with similar attendant difficulties.) And from Weil, he learns the importance of conferring authority on the ethos of isonomy, orientating it towards the absolute. But before proceeding further, Shanks turns to a critique of confessional 'exclusivism' via a discussion of Kierkegaard and Barth. (When he criticises Milbank later in the book, he regards Milbank's problems as similar to those of Barth [162] a point to which I shall return.) What is at stake here according to Shanks is the renouncing of a 'church versus world' attitude, so that we cultivate our 'dual loyalties' to church and civil society (69). Shanks then traces anticipations of civil theology in the works of Machiavelli, Hobbes, Spinoza, Rousseau, and most importantly Hegel (who dominates the direction of the book). He explores Jan Patocka's notion of 'the solidarity of the shaken' to further develop his sketch of what kind of community

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would form this civil religion. In the penultimate chapter, he attends to the virtues required to discern and maintain the solidarity of the shaken as a 'solidarity in maximum exposure to the negativity inherent in any heightening of historical consciousness', for it is only thus that the properly religious narratives of civil religion can be formed (136). Otherwise, most of us are all too liable to bury such painful memories, evading their challenge and failing to transform ourselves and our communities.

Here his heavy reliance on Hegel is clear, especially in the formulation of the first two of his three cardinal virtues of discernment. The first is the virtue of free-spiritedness, 'an opening to those aspects of reality rendered difficult to recognize by their being overlooked' (139). Complementing this is the virtue of a critical flair for tradition, the celebration of a 'rooted creativity' (159). Rooted cannot be taken as 'confessional', as Shanks tries to show via his criticism of Milbank, for confessional commitment apparently excludes civil commitment (162–65). The third virtue, which is in serious tension with his Hegelianism, is drawn from Levinas and is the virtue of generosity: responding unconditionally to the vulnerable demand of the Other—even and especially the outsider. Shanks once more highlights the difference between civil theology and confessional theology at this point: 'In civil-theological terms, the discernment in question becomes a, so to speak, "civil" discernment of revelation; that is, discernment in identifying the proper content of civil religious narrative. "Revelation" is what such virtue draws to our attention, or rather compels us to consider, in our capacity as citizens. Unlike confessional theology, with its founding revelation preserved in given texts, civil theology always has to identify revelation afresh, in this way' (138).

The final chapter is a little too brief and fails to pull together all the threads of Shanks' interesting argument, but it is clear that civil religion envisaged by Shanks also influences the churches, and vice versa, so that there should be a dual resistance to idolatry in both church and civil society.

What is one to say about Shanks' provocative argument? It certainly does highlight a lacuna in the church's role in civil society and the way that many churches operate as if they were not part of political practices. However, as an Anglican vicar in England, it is curious that Shanks has no sustained discussion about the role of the Church of England in civil society where in some respects a confessional theology has the possibility of direct participation in civic life. What is compelling is Shanks' solidarity with the underclass of history, and in keeping alive these memories, seeking 'revelation', the opportunity for healing and transforming communal memories. His non-confessional resurrection of the Hegelian dialectic, taking up the entire sweep of history as the site of the possibility of the revelation of Spirit, which binds and heals nation states without nationalism, is audaciously hopeful. In a Europe, to whom this book is addressed, still ravaged by genocide, racism, and militarism,

Shanks' intentions are timely. But I have deep reservations about the whole project, not least because I would identify myself as a confessional theologian—the sort that Shanks thinks politically impotent.

To put it starkly, Shanks seems to produce an odd and dangerous dichotomy between natural theology and revealed theology. The latter is for confessional groups and the former is for everyone—and hence universally accessible and therefore the source of our divided world's unity. Typically, what such a trans-confessional (sic?) theology fails to see is its *own* confessional self-exaltation. Why replace one confessional group with another when confessionalism *per se* has been labelled a bad thing? Shanks unwittingly perpetuates precisely the apolitical Christian theology he seeks to avoid in suggesting that the authentic site for political theology is civil theology and not confessional theology. The roots of this confusion become evident when we look at his criticism of Karl Barth and John Milbank, both of them confessional political theologians.

Shanks directs three main criticisms against Barth. Even acknowledging Barth's retrospective admission that he should have affirmed a strong solidarity with the Jews in the 1934 Barmen Declaration, Shanks asks, 'was not that natural reluctance also backed up by a theology based so strictly on confessional difference? One is, after all, far more likely to have some sentiment of solidarity with people with whom one is already actively engaged in dialogue, as fellow-citizens and equals' (84). But the causal/historical claim implied in this is difficult to maintain in any strict sense, notwithstanding strong elements of Christian anti-semitism. Engagement with society from a particular perspective does not *per se* eradicate difference and solidarity with others, and it is surely clear from various Latin American and European liberation theologies that ecclesial base communities can be precisely the site for such engagements? The critical question revolves around the organising focus of any particular perspective and how that focus deals with the outsider, with difference. Clearly Nazis would fall foul of Shanks' strictures, but Shanks seems to imply, in his related second criticism, that Christianity too lacked this ability: 'where in the tradition was there any actual analogy that the theologians might have drawn on, for the particular self-sacrificial intervention on behalf of the outsider?' (84). This is a very strange question indeed, especially in the context of Barth, for in the *Church Dogmatics*, 3.1, Barth develops precisely the insight that Jesus' cross is that move into the 'far country', the identification with the 'outsider', as the manner of revealing God's love. Hence, it is only from within this confessional stance that Barth was able to resist Nazism and to offer such political analysis, however defective. Shanks seems to block off the developments of such a confessional theology without adequately tackling the Christological basis of Barth's thought.

His third criticism compounds this when in favourably comparing Bonhoeffer with Barth, he writes: 'Barth is also a very vigorous champion of political solidarity with the oppressed, as such. Only, he does not make this the *central* thrust of his theology, as Bonhoeffer does. For in

his thought such solidarity still continues to be methodologically subordinated to the demands of church loyalty' (86). What Shanks fails to register is that for Barth it is only through loyalty to Christ, which is thereby church loyalty, that really profound solidarity with the oppressed is possible, for it is only through Christ that the humanity of God becomes evident—and thereby the depths and demands of such solidarity are the more terrifyingly clear.

Two related issues are at stake in all this. Firstly, has Shanks misrepresented confessional theology and thereby failed to recognize its potential to address precisely the questions he struggles with? I have been suggesting that this is the case. (This is not to obscure the difficult unresolved questions for confessional approaches regarding the nature of their loyalties to society.) Secondly, does Shanks' project for a civil theology founder as a result? I think it might and for the following reasons.

One way into this issue is to register his criticism of Milbank's Augustinian project, which he sees as a 'propaedeutic to Barthian dogmatics' (162). He is unhappy with Milbank, for from a 'civil-theological perspective the fundamental problem is much the same as with Barth' (162). That is, the 'solidarity that such thinking points to as its ideal is not the solidarity of the shaken—but a solidarity among *saints*. Saints, to be sure, are also shaken. They are shaken out of the easy ways of what St Augustine calls "the earthly city": its banality and vainglory, its complacent reliance on coercive violence to maintain order. And yet this shakeness remains limited by their inhibiting loyalty to a church-ideal entirely dedicated to the preservation of confessional, as *opposed to civil, tradition*' (162). It should be noted that the ecclesologically minded Augustine identified saints outside the visible church without embarrassment, but he also realized their ontological relation to the church precisely in their saintliness. More importantly, surely the character of some saints has been precisely in their solidarity with the shaken (outside of the church) from a confessional basis—as is the case with Saint Jane Frances de Chantal, Saint Hedwig and the uncanonized Mother Theresa? What Shanks plays down is that the constant narration of the vision of the heavenly city in Milbank's theological politics (always in differing contexts and therefore differing narrations) is itself the contribution, the only contribution, that such confessional theology can make. I am sometimes left wondering what resources civil theology draws upon for the healing process envisaged by Shanks, other than a cocktail of an implicit non-institutionalised form of Christianity and an unshakable confidence in unfettered public discussion. Shanks seems oddly to identify confessionalism with inward looking sectarianism, despite important literature on this debate, much of which questions such a reading. (In this respect, it is puzzling that Stanley Hauerwas is so favourably cited by Shanks as Hauerwas is often seen as an arch confessional sectarian.)

But there is a deeper methodological point at stake, and it is raised in Milbank's criticism of Hegel which would be, in my opinion, the single

most incisive criticism of Shanks' book. This is hardly surprising, given Shanks' Hegelianism. Shanks summarises the point admirably. Milbank 'attacks what he calls the Hegelian "myth of negation": that is, the "myth" that, without any prior commitment to a particular tradition, it is possible to construct a universally valid ideal framework for *sittlich* consensus simply by way of a process of dialectical negativity'. In actual fact, Milbank argues, all that this really does is to hand a methodological victory to that very "Cartesianism" the de-traditionalizing impact of which Hegel is otherwise so anxious to overcome' (165—citing Milbank, pp.153–57). Shanks seems to do precisely this: establish the possibility of revelation (what he calls negative revelation) prior to any particular tradition (what he calls civil theology's 'pre-theological' task—137) which will shape our communal action, despite our confessional stances. And the very assumption of such pre-theology presupposes the Cartesian de-traditionalized subject. Shanks' claim to take tradition, or rather in his civil mode, different traditions, seriously, is problematic when his Hegelianism comes to the surface. Consider the following where Shanks is defending Hegel against Milbank's criticism, arguing that Hegel indeed takes authority and tradition seriously: 'Thus [Hegel] invokes, for this purpose, nothing less than the accumulated *auctoritas* of all the traditions within history, in so far as their claims are not in direct competition with those of Reason, or claiming to pre-empt it, but are simply intended as an opening towards Reason: prior to any actual arguments, each in their own way authoritatively compelling attention to the open question of Reason's requirements' (164). If one replaces Reason with isonomy in the above quote, one would have outlined Shanks' position and the tyranny of this new confessionalism claiming to be trans-confessionalism comes to light, as does the Cartesian subject (but now in solidarity). However, one further and final question remains: what is the theological status of isonomy, especially as Shanks seems, at times, to equate it with 'revelation' (39, 208)?

In an interesting footnote, Shanks makes his sole attempt to relate the 'pre-theological' civil revelation with confessional Christian revelation: 'the virtue of transcendent generosity corresponding, primarily, to the first person of the Trinity; the virtue of free-spiritedness to the second; and the virtue of flair for tradition to the third?' (243, note, 160). But this correspondence prompts a question: is the content of civil revelation the same as that found in Christianity (which then conflates natural and revealed theology and renders Christianity subject to the revelatory control of isonomic civil religion); or is what is found in civil religion a faint vestige of the life-giving Trinity, which has only been prioritised thus by virtue of Christian revelation? The latter way of answering would be a confessional theologian's praise of this book, and the former type of answer seems to be the unwitting direction of the book's Hegelian argument.

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