



Abstract from Article

POLITICAL AUTHORITY AND EUROPEAN COMMUNITY: THE CHALLENGE OF THE CHRISTIAN POLITICAL TRADITION

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Abstract

Today the whole of Europe, East and West, is caught up in the search for new political and economic structures, sadly, along violent and atavistic as well as peaceful and constructive paths. In the West the fulcrum of change is the halting movement of countries toward economic and political "integration" within the European Community. The issue of what form, or forms, the Community should take (whether federal, confederal, or more loosely associative) is understandably divisive, for its resolutions will determine the political shape, not only of the member states, but also of those western European countries (should there be any eventually) that remain either outside the Community or only partially integrated in it. Moreover, it will decisively influence the political and economic aspirations and possibilities of the Community's eastern European neighbours, and even of their Soviet or ex-Soviet neighbours. Thus are we justified in viewing the fate of the European Community as the fate of Europe. Consequently, it is a task of theoretical and practical moment to attempt to grasp the civilisational meaning of the projected European union with the help of some points of reference from western Europe's past and present. One of these points of reference is the approach to understanding political authority that held sway in western Europe (and parts of eastern Europe) up to the seventeenth century. This Christian tradition comprises part of the common political heritage of western European countries. Whether it can yet play a part in a unified Europe depends on how strongly committed western Europeans are to the greater stretch of their common past, and not merely to the more recent past which is continuous with present thought and institutions. My argument is that the future European Community will preserve and enhance the unique significance of its members' collective past only if it is founded on a recollection of the whole Christian political tradition of western Europe with its distinctive understanding of political authority. On the evidence of the present self-definition and performance of the European Community, the possibility of a politically efficacious recollection of Europe's past seems somewhat remote. Currently, the enterprise is being undertaken within the theoretical and practical constraints of democratic liberalism and a qualified free-market capitalism. Even objections to, and reservations about, the present and future European Community are being formulated within these constraints. Certain protests may intimate problems that cannot be accommodated by the prevailing doctrines (e.g. the defence of British parliamentary sovereignty), but these intimations, lacking the means of theoretical clarification, have the appearance of reactionary knee-jerks, expressing misplaced nationalism or xenophobic isolationism. The following seeks to provide a theological means of clarification by carrying out a critical analysis of the prevailing conception of political authority based on a rehabilitation of the older Christian tradition of political thought.

articles related to biblical political and constitutional theory.