Fusionism, Dominionism and the Contemporary Resurgence of Catholic Integralism

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Abstract

Over the last decade, Catholic commentators in the United States have debated the appropriate relationship between the Church and the liberal state. One hitherto dominant group, known as fusionists, have argued that the state ought to remain religiously neutral. An emerging group known as integralists, however, have claimed that this is impossible. Instead, they argue that the Catholic Faith should form the basis for law and public policy. Opponents of integralism have linked the movement to a supposed Protestant counterpart, dominionism. In reality, the two movements are very different, with dominionists attempting to realize the Kingdom of Heaven on earth, and integralists having more modest goals.

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I do not believe that any historical concept other than katechon would
have been possible for the original Christian faith.
—Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth*

Introduction

A spectre is haunting American Catholicism—the spectre of *integralism*. The Catholic commentariat in the United States has been intensely debating the appropriate relationship between the Catholic Church and the liberal state since roughly 2014. Advocating a radical reimagining of this relationship are a group identifying themselves as *integralists*, who believe the Catholic Faith should form the basis for all law and public policy. Opponents of integralism have attempted to link its contemporary resurgence to the "fundamentalist" Protestant movement known as *dominionism*, which seeks to realize Christ's dominion over the earth. As I will demonstrate, however, integralism's sudden resurgence has much more to do with the collapse of the so-called *fusionist* consensus in American conservatism, and with the alternative conception of freedom it has exposed. By contrast, it has little to do with Protestant dominionism, with which integralism has less in common than one might think, representing a radically different politico-eschatological outlook—the one an attempt to immanentize the eschaton, the other to restrain it.

A Brief History

The idea that the temporal or secular power of the civil authority ought to be subordinated in some way to the religious or sacred authority of the Church is not new. Sometimes known as the "Doctrine of the Two Swords", Pope Gelasius I gave it perhaps its earliest explicit articulation in AD 494. In a letter to the Eastern Roman Emperor Anastasius I, generally known as *Famuli vestrae pietatis* (its opening words, meaning "your family's servants") or *Duo sunt* (meaning "there are two"), the pontiff claims the world is ruled by two distinct powers, or "swords": the sacred authority of the Church, and royal authority of the monarch, and the latter must be

subordinated to the former. The subordination of the temporal power to the spiritual one did not go uncontested during the pre-modern era, as anyone familiar with the Investiture Controversy knows. Nevertheless, the idea did help structure relations between the Catholic Church and the State (or at least its predecessors) for much of the medieval and early modern periods, particularly following the Gregorian Reforms of the late 11th and early 12th centuries.

As a distinct movement under its current name, true integralism emerged only in the late 19th century in response to the radical social upheavals that followed the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, which increasingly called into question any subordination of the temporal power to the spiritual one. Derived from the French "intégrisme", it is a name signifying, firstly, a desire to safeguard the Catholic Faith's *integrity*, and secondly, a conviction that Catholicism represents the *integral* (i.e., essential) basis for the organization of society. What integralists desire is not an ecclesiocracy, in which priests exercise political authority directly (think of Vatican City or the Prince-Bishoprics of the pre-Napoleonic era), but rather a system in which religious doctrine informs secular (i.e., non-clerical) rule. The movement had its greatest successes in Western European countries such as France and Spain, with the *Partido Integrista Español* (or "Spanish Integralist Party"), founded in early 1889, being the first to adopt the title formally. Its influence on both civil and ecclesiastical affairs peaked in the first half of the 20th century, particularly during the pontificate of Pope Pius X (1903–1914), before suffering something of a decline in the wake of the Second Vatican Council and its various liberalizing reforms. Integralism did not disappear entirely with the Second Vatican Council however, and several integralist groups did emerge in the years following the council. Nevertheless, it is only recently that the debate over integralism has once again spilled over into mainstream publications.

Exit Fusionism, Enter Integralism

It may seem surprising integralism would begin its resurgence under the United States' first (at least nominally) Catholic Vice President, Joe Biden, and continue even after his

election as the country's second Catholic President. For American integralists however, the election of a second Catholic President who actively opposes socially conservative policies is evidence of the corrupting nature of engagement with liberal politics on its own terms. In their eyes, Biden has shown the liberal state is far from neutral, demanding they compromise on the principles of their faith if they are to play a prominent role in civic life. In its revaluation of the liberal state's supposed neutrality, integralism—and its relatively sudden rise to prominence—must be understood relative to the ongoing breakdown of the hitherto dominant ideological tendency in American conservatism: fusionism.

A fusion of social conservatism and economic liberalism has dominated American conservatism since the 1960s. It is a synthesis developed at the magazine *National Review* under the editorship of William F. Buckley Jr. and associate editorship of Frank Meyer. From the beginning, this fusionism faced criticism from Catholic conservatives such as L. Brent Bozell Jr., who argued a libertarian conception of freedom was inherently incompatible with the formation of virtuous citizens. Nevertheless, for the time being, the fusionists won out. The synthesis continued to dominate American conservatism, reaching its apex during the Reagan era. This situation was not to last, however. In the words of E. J. Dionne, "the glue that held fusionism together was anti-communism". It has therefore been living on borrowed time since the end of the Cold War, deprived of its longstanding constitutive opponent. Economic prosperity and the threat of Islamic terrorism succeeded in maintaining the consensus for a time. However, with the post-2008 deterioration of the American economic situation, and the receding threat posed by radical Islamism, fusionism has grown untenable. It is in this context conservatives have begun openly debating the merits of the social conservative alliance with libertarianism. These debates have been accelerated further by the election of Donald Trump. While Trump himself has only broken with the consensus in part, and often only rhetorically, he has nonetheless helped lay bare the growing weakness of the ideology.

When, in 2019, a series of conservative intellectuals issued a manifesto "Against the Dead Consensus", a disproportionate number

of them were Catholic. These included integralists such as Sohrab Ahmari, an Iranian-American writer and Catholic convert. It is Ahmari who has come to best embody the anti-fusionist, integralist-adjacent party in the debate over the future of American conservatism. Their libertarian-conservative opponents, by contrast, are led by political commentator David French, a Calvinist. The dynamic between "Frenchists" and "Ahmarists" reflects a divergence between one Protestant conception of freedom and its Catholic counterpart. For Frenchists, freedom is individual autonomy; for Ahmarists (and integralists in general) it is the right to act virtuously. This distinction is important because it shapes each group's approach to using state power. Frenchists remain deeply suspicious of any attempt to employ law or public policy to win victories in the so-called "Culture War", fearing this will endanger the neutrality of the state and backfire against them. Ahmarists, by contrast, argue the state remaining neutral in such affairs is impossible. Instead, they believe conservatives must do everything they can to seize control of the state and its bureaucratic machinery for their own purposes, before it is too late.

If any Protestant–Catholic dynamic *can* explain integralism's meteoric rise to prominence, it is the dynamic between the Frenchists and Ahmarists; between two wildly divergent conceptions of what it means to be free, and what this in turn means for how citizens relate to the state. It is a difference the fusionist consensus has succeeded in masking for more than half a century, but one which we can increasingly expect to see come to the forefront as that consensus continues to dissipate.

Two Political Eschatologies

Not all critics of integralism have been conservative fusionists like David French. Perhaps integralism's most prominent critic is the Italian Jesuit priest and journalist Antonio Spadaro, who is known to be a confidant of Pope Francis. Writing in the influential Jesuit periodical *La Civiltà Cattolica*, Spadaro and Marcelo Figueroa argue "[t]he religious element should never be confused with the political one", and "[c]onfusing spiritual power with temporal power means subjecting one to the other." Yet it is only by recognizing a

distinction between the two powers that integralists can argue one should subordinate the other. Subordination necessarily presupposes difference. More importantly for our purposes, Spadaro and Figueroa argue similarities between integralists and the "fundamentalist" Protestant movement known as "dominionism" have engendered a "surprising ecumenism" between them. Since Spadaro and Figueroa provide no evidence of this ecumenism in practice, we must constrain ourselves to addressing their claims regarding the parallels between them. However, whatever cooperation does exist, there remains a fundamental disjunction between the two ideologies.

Dominionism (or "dominion theology") denotes a loose grouping of theocratic Protestant ideologies that have emerged in the American context. Its name derives from the King James Bible's rendering of Genesis 1:28:

> And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.

For dominionists such as the late Calvinist pastor R. J. Rushdoony (perhaps the ideology's most prominent champion) this is generally interpreted as a command to establish a "theonomy", in which society is governed in accordance with divine law as laid out in the scriptures. While this may bear a certain resemblance to the integralist vision of a Catholic-informed legal system, they in fact differ in two significant ways. The first is that integralists do not aim to apply divine law directly. Rather, following St. Thomas Aquinas, they see the divine laws of scripture as a reflection of a more general natural law which ought to inform the civil laws of the state.

The second difference, and the more important of the two, touches upon their eschatologies. In his magnum opus, *The New Science of Politics*, Eric Voegelin criticized the tendency of various modern political ideologies to *immanentize the eschaton*. That is, to attempt to realize the end of history within history itself, and to create heaven on earth. Voegelin was principally focused on the scientistic movements of the 19th and 20th centuries, such as

positivism and Marxism. However, he also reached back further, pointing to explicitly religious movements such as Puritanism, and to its Hobbesian antithesis. As their name suggests, dominionists wish to bring about the dominion of Christ on earth. More importantly, they believe by realizing the Kingdom of Heaven in the here and now, they are in fact hastening the *Parousia,* or "Second Coming" of Christ. I suggest it is precisely this sort of immanentization which characterizes dominionism, and which is absent from integralism.

Integralists are certainly not unconcerned with man's "end", or *telos*. Writing for the integralist website *The Josias,* Fr. Edmund Waldstein, a monk of the Cistercian Order, offers the following three-sentence summation of the ideology:

"Catholic Integralism is a tradition of thought that, rejecting the liberal separation of politics from concern with the end of human life, holds that political rule must order man to his final goal. Since, however, man has both a temporal and an eternal end, integralism holds that there are two powers that rule him: a temporal power and a spiritual power. Since man's temporal end is subordinated to his eternal end, the temporal power must be subordinated to the spiritual power." However, while they believe civic life should be shaped by their end, integralists do not attempt to realize the end itself within history, and it is here that they differ from dominionists.

In contrast to dominionists, integralists envision an entity capable of restraining the (in their eyes) antichrist-like figure of the liberal Leviathan. This view is articulated explicitly by Adrian Vermeule, Ralph S. Tyler Professor of Constitutional Law at Harvard and perhaps integralism's most prominent living theorist. In a piece written for the *Catholic Herald,* Vermeule raises the possibility of creating a "katechon for the liberal State". The term *katechon* is a biblical one, denoting "that which withholds", an entity capable of restraining the antichrist—and, inadvertently, delaying the Parousia. What integralists aspire to then is, at most, what Vermeule calls an "indefinite truce" with liberalism (not exactly the Second Coming).

While the katechon long characterized pre-modern Catholic political theology, it has entered contemporary integralist discourse primarily through the work of Carl Schmitt. Importantly, Vermeule's Schmittianism is not an anomaly, and others have remarked upon the role of Schmitt's thought in contemporary integralism more broadly. Schmittian concepts such as the katechon thus have a broader purchase in integralist thought.

Moreover, Catholic thought in general remains deeply suspicious of any attempt to immanentize the eschaton. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states:

"The Antichrist's deception already begins to take shape in the world every time the claim is made to realize within history that messianic hope which can only be realized beyond history through the eschatological judgment. The Church has rejected even modified forms of this falsification of the kingdom to come under the name of millenarianism. . . ."

One practical upshot of this is integralism cannot assimilate itself to movements with a palingenetic nationalist character as easily as dominionism, with its palingenetic aspirations. For example, this perhaps helps explain the reticence of some integralists to wholeheartedly embrace former President Donald Trump in a way their dominionist counterparts have found relatively easy.

I do not want to suggest the differences between dominionism and integralism foreclose all possibility of cooperation between their proponents. On the contrary, as Schmitt notes in *Roman Catholicism and Political Form*, the Church can and has always cooperated with widely divergent ideological blocs. It is, in his words, a "*complexio oppositorum*", or complex of opposites. Perhaps more importantly, he notes that "[i]n the tactics of political struggle, every party with an established world-view can form coalitions with the most disparate groupings," and integralists are certainly no exception to this rule. Limited cooperation between integralists and any other group, even if it did exist, would therefore not necessarily indicate any similarities between them.

Conclusion

Integralism's contemporary resurgence has little to do with Protestant dominionism, with which it has less in common than might at first appear to be the case. It has everything to do with the collapse of the fusionist consensus and the alternative conception of freedom it has brought to light. A misguided focus on supposed parallels with dominionism can only serve to obfuscate such truths. To understand the role of religion in contemporary American politics, we must appreciate the diversity of ways in which different religious groups express themselves politically, from their differing conceptions of freedom to their differing political eschatologies.

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