Does Mainline Protestantism Influence Conservative Political Theory? Conceptions of Religion in Hermann Lübbe, Richard Neuhaus and Michael Oakeshott

Dr. Maria Grazia Martino
Freie Universität Berlin
Ruedesheimer Str. 54-56
14197 Berlin
Germany

Abstract

From the 1960s on, mainline Protestant churches in Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom developed a left-wing politicization. This article investigates whether under these conditions mainline Protestantism is still compatible with Conservatism. For this purpose, it compares the understandings of religion and the Church hold by three Conservative and Protestant authors: Hermann Lübbe, Richard Neuhaus and Michael Oakeshott. The result shows three varieties: immanentization and politicization of Protestantism for Lübbe; immanentization of Protestantism by liberal theology without its politicization for Oakeshott; neither immanentization nor politicization of Protestantism, but continuation of a traditional theology and its role for the Church for Neuhaus.

Keywords: religion, church, neoconservatism, Lutheranism, Anglicanism

Introduction

Since the 1960s, mainline Protestant Churches in Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom (Robbins 2011:286) developed a rising interest in politics and a left-wing position. The close bonds between this denomination and the political left have grown into such an important part of Protestantism as to raise the question whether Conservatism and Protestantism are compatible. This article answers this question by examining the ideas on religion and the Church hold by three Conservative authors with a theological training: the German Reformed Hermann Lübbe, the American Lutheran Richard Neuhaus and the British Anglican Michael Oakeshott. These authors should show ways for the single believer to combine Conservatism and Protestantism. By mainline Protestant Churches, we mean the most institutionalized churches which originated in the Reformation: for Germany, the Evangelische Kirche in Deutschland (EKD); for the United Kingdom, the Church of England; for the US, the member churches of the National Council of Churches having their origin in the Reformation (Hart 2002:202). Politicization is defined as a rising interest in political questions and claims for participation (Siegfried 2011:31). Conservative authors from a liberal denomination have to balance their faith against their political position. This would be different with authors from the not predominantly left-wing Catholic, Evangelical or Orthodox Churches. Part one of this article exposes the different types of Conservatism present in the UK, the US and Germany in the last decades in order to know where within Conservatism to locate the authors. Part two presents the main features of mainline Protestant (Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed) theology in these countries until the 1960s. Part three presents the authors' understandings of religion and the Church. The conclusion compares the authors's positions with Conservative mainline Protestant theology.

1. National Traditions of Conservatism and Placement of Hermann Lübbe, Richard Neuhaus and Michael Oakeshott within them

German Conservatism after the Second World War is divided into Old Conservatism with continued emphasis on the strong state around Ernst Forsthoff (Hilger 1995:20), technocratical *Strukturkonservatismus* optimistic about progress and growth (which belongs to Neoconservatism, Lenk 1989:25), and *Wertkonservatismus* linked to the protection of creation (Schildt 1998:9). There also is a *nouvelle droite* which traces its origins back to the Conservative Revolution (Lorig 1988:11).

Contemporary American Conservatism consists of traditional Conservatives who reject New Deal politics, the "Moral Majority" gathering around single issues, and Neoconservatives (Lorig 1988:51). While traditional Conservatism is a reaction to the growth of the welfare state after 1945, the other two currents are products of the social changes since the 1960s. Many Neoconservatives are former Democratic Party members (Lorig 1988:38). They understand capitalism as necessary for democracy and trace back the loss of values to the growth of a left-wing and intellectual "New Class" (Lorig 1988:43 ff). British Conservatism can broadly be divided into Whiggery (Norton and Aughey 1981:64), which is founded on civil rights and rule of law (Podoksik 2003:162 f), and Toryism, a preference for traditional values of an ordered and more stable past (Norton and Aughey 1981:65). Within Whiggery, there are corporate Whiggery, which favors state interventions for economic growth and neo-Liberalism, which rejects state intervention (Norton and Aughey 1981:66 f). The three authors were chosen for the following reasons. Oakeshott is something in-between a Whig and a Romantic liberal (Podoksik 2003:166), since he accepts liberalism as far as it belongs to British tradition (Gamble 2012:161). Neuhaus is an American Neoconservative, calling for a renewal of traditional morals and favoring a market economy. Lübbe is chosen because he is classified by Lorig as the most preminent exponent of German Neoconservatism (Lorig 1988:104). Lübbe also stands for technocratical Conservatism as the most modern variety of Neoconservatism (Henkel 2013:313). Lübbe can be classified as a strong defender of modernity, while Oakeshott is only an implicit defender and Neuhaus a skeptical about modernity.

2. Mainline Protestant Theology before and Resisting Politicization

2.1 German Theology

From 1870 on, Confessional Lutheran theology and Positive Theology oppose historical theology. Positive Theology rejects a Christology which humanizes Jesus and an interpretation of history limited to immanence. It holds sin to be a reality. Scripture is the proof of truth of traditional Christology, including the incarnation, the virgin birth and the ascension; Scripture interprets itself. Justification doctrine is of central importance. Christ's essence cannot be grasped by historical research. Confessional Lutheran theology understands the Lutheran Confessions as binding and underlines a theology of office (Lessing 2000:38 ff). The difference between creation and redemption is important (Lessing 2000:238), and sacraments are favored over the sermon (Lessing 2000:58).

2.2 American Theology

American mainline Protestantism is mainly shaped by Reformed theology (Giussani 2013:3). Along the Liberal theology prevailing from 1850 on, an orthodox current in theology persists. The Conservative Old School of Princeton teaches that the Bible is infallible out of its divine inspiration (Holifield 2003:380) and that the Fall of Man perverted a perfect creation. Sinners are bound to their sin until God changes their hearts through Scripture, preaching and the sacraments (Noll 1985:18 f). After the First World War and the Great Depression, Neo-Orthodoxy with its exponents Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr develops. For them, all human thought and action is directed towards God. Sin is the failure to worship the real God. Christ's life, death and resurrection show that God's relation to man is greater than law (Reid 1985:289). The cross reveals that the ultimate value of God for man is forgiveness (Giussani 2013:119). Neo-Orthodoxy is replaced by Neo-Liberalism in the 1960s (Miller 1973:lxxii).

2.3 Anglican Theology in the UK

The Church of England lacks a dogmatic theology and classical theological texts apart from Scripture, the church fathers and the Book of Common Prayer (Chapman 2012:4 ff). Still, some larger developments in theology and some theologians such as Richard Hooker (1553-1600), Frederick Denison Maurice (1805-1872) and William Temple (1881-1944) can be identified as important. Hooker's main work is "The Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity" (Chapman 2012:103). God works through Scripture, laws and reason (Chapman 2012:48). Episcopacy is the best form of Church government because it guarantees authority and unity. The visible Church is recognizable by the profession of one Lord, one faith and one baptism. Sacraments are given to enable participation in Christ. Church ceremonies are justified to edify the faithful (Booty 1979:11 ff). From the 1830s on, the Oxford movement renews emphasis upon the Church and sacraments as means of grace (Page 1967:61). For its exponent Maurice, God has created and redeemed all mankind in Christ. Every Christian doctrine and human situation has to be understood in the light of the incarnation (Wolf 1979:74 ff). God is the creator, judge and redeemer of humanity. The state should give the church freedom in preaching the Gospel, the church should admonish the state (Thomas 1979:130). The 1888 Lambeth Conference adopts the Chicago Quadrilateral as definition of Anglicanism.

It acknowledges Scripture, the Nicene Creed, Baptism and the Eucharist and the historic episcopate (Chapman 2012:192 f). From the 1930s on, also the UK is influenced by the reaction against Liberal theology. The development towards Neo-Liberalism begins with John Robinson's "Honest to God" (1963), which describes his doubts about God's existence (Page 1967:116).

We can thus isolate as the essence of a Conservative mainline Protestant theology:

- a strong focus on salvation and on the hereafter
- a rejection of the historical method as a tool for approaching the truth about Christ
- faith as a way of approaching Christ, in which God reveals himself
- the difference between creation and redemption
- the Bible as God's whole and perspicuous revelation
- Christ's double nature
- history understood in a Christocentric perspective from the cross or towards its fulfillment at the end of times
- a theological justification of the current political order with a reference to its divine origin (Ro 13)
- a refusal to reduce religion to morality and social policy
- the distinction between law and Gospel
- a high appreciation of the church as institution, the ministry and church discipline
- a harmonic relationship between church and state according to the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, but a distance between church and parties and a reluctance to take its stance in political questions
- justification by grace alone
- the doctrines of the incarnation, cross, resurrection, virgin birth, ascension

3. Hermann Lübbe, Richard Neuhaus and Michael Oakeshott

3.1 Hermann Lübbe (1926-)

After a degree in theology and philosophy, Hermann Lübbe taught philosophy from 1956 on and served as a secretary of state for the SPD in the regional administration of North Rhine-Westphalia from 1966-1969 (Hilger 1995:12). His Neoconservatism is influenced by Ritter and other Right-Hegelians (Hohendahl and Schütz 2012:26). Lübbe understands himself as the defender of a liberal political culture which was realized in the German Federal Republic in the 1950s and 1960s. Who wants to be a Liberal after this period, necessarily becomes a Neoconservative (Lübbe 1987b:8). Morality stems from tradition and serves as a source for politics, economics and technology (Hilger 1995:97). It can only attenuate the side-effects of modern civilization, but never bring revelations like religion (Lübbe 1987a:87). Since moral norms can only be justified in concrete situations, political decision-making has no claims to truth. If new technical problems arise, it is not more morality which is needed, but more technical knowledge (Reese-Schäfer 2007:217 ff). Conservatism means the conservation of the essential and an awareness of the side-effects of necessary changes (Lübbe 1975:62).

Religion has to be preserved because it is a necessary cultural reserve for preserving a liberal political order (Lübbe 1991:29 ff). It is defined from its function of creating a stable society (Hilger 1995:292) and as a practice of dealing with contingency (Lübbe 1980:180). A definition of religion by its function to induce morality would declare all traditional religious doctrines as irrelevant for the fulfillment of this task (Lübbe 2014:393). Religious practice is thus reduced to affirmation of the status quo (Lohmann 1991:196). For Kleger and Müller (1986:87), Lübbe's Conservative political theology transfers God's transcendence into immanence as a consequence of the Christian faith's loss of authority because of secularization. Religious practice like voluntary work at church helps to deal with contingency and commits man's whole existence to God's will (Lübbe 1986:232 ff). As far as the old church hymns express prayers referring to these contingencies, they will never come out of fashion (Lübbe 1986:264). The secularization of Protestanism has enriched modern culture but decreased Protestant religiosity, so that the question about its future arises. This dilemma was brought up by liberal theology (Lübbe 1965:83).

3.2 Richard Neuhaus (1936-2009)

Richard Neuhaus was ordained as pastor of the Lutheran Missouri Church Synod in 1960. After some decades of congregation service, he founded the Neoconservative theological journal First Things. For Neuhaus, the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms does not mean a division between the jurisdictions. Jesus' kingdom encompasses all reality, Caesar's rule is a temporary one. Christians are ahead of time since they proclaim by faith what one day will be revealed to all (Phil 2,11; Neuhaus 1984:170).

Baptism and the Eucharist anticipate the kingdom of God (Neuhaus 1977:13). To mix the kingdoms up causes bad theology and social policy (Neuhaus 1977:22 f). The New Testament's statements on politics are multifaceted and thus impossible to be taken in by one political side (Neuhaus 1984:170 ff). Justification by grace through faith preserves the Christian from attributing salvation to a certain politics (Neuhaus 1977:32 f). Secularization is neither self-evident nor tied to religious freedom. The state should explicitly refer to the biblical God instead of a civil religion (Neuhaus 1977:24 f), since it is unable to provide moral values (Neuhaus 1984:133). All government has to recognize a law above its own laws, by following what Luther called Deus absconditus. It does not mean a theocracy, since no worldly power can legitimately equate its decisions with God's will, or a state proclaiming the Gospel, this would be a new totalitarianism (Neuhaus 1977:25). Church and state always have to find some kind of agreement. In the ideal case, church and state would be mutually recognized institutional actors (Neuhaus 1984:165). Since politics is concerned with the distribution and exercise of power, this process should be made as accessible and as just as possible.(Neuhaus 1977:58 ff). Since men are equal before God, public policy should not try to establish equality (Neuhaus 1977:67).

The church can relate Christian faith to public policy by prayer, preaching, civil virtue, advocacy and official leadership (Neuhaus 1977:34). Prayer can support or criticize a certain political order or policy. The church may join the position of some party but it should never be taken captive by one approach (Neuhaus 1977:35 f). The idea of a Christian party supported by the churches is alien to the American tradition, but there is no theological reason against it (Neuhaus 1977:56). Preaching means that the preacher is entrusted with a commission from Christ (Neuhaus 1979:147). Contemporary problems should not be addressed too prescriptively, otherwise, the distinctive feature of a sermon would be lost (Neuhaus 1979:171). The claim that the church should "deal with the real world" instead of worshipping is without fundament, since prayer and the Eucharist are the most real of the real world (Neuhaus 1979:130). Neuhaus takes his distances from the New Left who immanentizes Christianity and equates God with society (Neuhaus 1979:82). If liberal theologians equate man to God, secularization follows from Christianity (Neuhaus 1992:30). In the course of time, history of political ideas has accorded an ever larger part to the individual, a development culminating with Marx (Neuhaus 1992:28). Since evangelical Christians lack a vibrant ecclesiology, they turn the nation into their church (Neuhaus 2009:111). Neuhaus also finds harsh words against the Gospel of prosperity (Neuhaus 1979:126). Christian truth contrasts politicized evangelical fundamentalism, because this would suppress pluralism (Neuhaus 1984:19). If institutionalized religion is permitted to extend its scope to all human activities, religion itself becomes an idol (Neuhaus 1984:130).

3.3 Michael Oakeshott (1901-1990)

Oakeshott is difficult to classify on the left-right spectrum because of the complexity of his position.(Franco 2004:11). Lessnoff (1999) distinguishes between a liberal early and a conservative late Oakeshott (Isaacs 2006:2). The early Oakeshott is committed to rationalism and idealism (O'Sullivan 2010:2 ff). Sullivan even states that Oakeshott is best understood as a Christian thinker (Sullivan 2007:178). He was a practising Christian (Isaacs 2006:75), studied theology in Marburg and Tübingen and was a reviewer for the Journal of Theological Studies (Franco 2004:3). "Religion and the Moral Life" ([1927] 1993) depicts religion as the completion of morality, since morality is the endless search for the perfect good, and religion is what motivates the individual in this search (Oakeshott [1927] 1993:44 f). This essay does not mention God (Isaacs 2006:76), only that religious consciousness requires a belief in another object than oneself (Campbell Corey 2006:79). "The Importance of the Historical Element in Christianity" ([1928] 1993) explores the relation between historical thought and Christianity: "A religion must, somehow, represent to its believers the highest they can believe, the best they can desire. Such beliefs and desires do not remain unchanged, and so Christianity either is something which can maintain its identity and at the same time be the highest our or any age can believe or desire, or it fails to be a religion," (Oakeshott [1928] 1993:67). If a founding event were the essence of the religion, it could not change and the religion would not evolve (Sullivan 2007:184). Oakeshott denies that Christ's historical life continues to be important today (Franco 2004:37). Once a transcendental truth has been received and become a religion, its provision of sense is an essentially practical activity which becomes a tradition. Although God's impact on people's lives is felt, his existence is not affirmed (Isaacs 2006:81). In "Religion and the World" ([1929] 1993), Oakeshott suggests a new understanding of the terms "world" and "religion", so that "world" means a scale of values which prizes external achievement and sacrifices everything in the present to future results in this world, while religion values everything in itself (Oakeshott [1929] 1993:30). This essay neither mentions the Church, belief (Campbell Corey 2012:139 f), God nor a common good (Tregenza 2010:13).

After 1945, Oakeshott does not abandon the transcendent claims of religious truth, but he develops a skepticism which sees this truth as difficult to reach (Sullivan 2007:4). "The Tower of Babel" ([1948] 1991) describes how the idea of moral perfection developed in the first four Christian centuries. In the first days of the church, morality consisted in internalized behavior (Oakeshott [1948] 1991:470). Around the third century Christianity became an abstract ideology pursuing moral ideals (Oakeshott [1948] 1991:485). In "On Being Conservative" ([1956] 1991), Oakeshott shows that Conservatism neither requires religious beliefs nor the elimination of religion from public life: "Conservatives might even be prepared to suffer a legally established ecclesiastical order; but it would not be because they believed it to represent some unassailable religious truth, but merely because it restrained the indecent competition of sects and (as Hume said) moderated "the plague of a too diligent clergy"", (Oakeshott [1956] 1991:410). For Isaacs, all of Oakeshott's early essays on religion are absorbed into "On Human Conduct" (Isaacs 2006:4). There, faith is understood as reconciliation with the conditions of human life, such as disappointed hope, poverty, sin and feelings of guilt (Oakeshott 1975:82). Religion confers a sense to human life and offers a way of dealing with sin (Campbell Corey 2006:94). Sin is injustice committed toward God. Religion helps to overcome the consciousness of people's perishable condition by connecting them to eternity (Oakeshott 1975:85). There is no such thing as "the good" in absolute, but only "good in order to achieve this goal", (Podoksik 2003:148).

4. Result: Comparing the Authors with Conservative Theology

In the light of the history of theology, Oakeshott is the farthest away of the treated authors from Conservative theology. Even considering Anglican theology's eclecticism, his statements on religion and the church diverge more from it than this is the case for the other authors and their denominations. Neuhaus advances most positions deriving from traditional Lutheranism. Lübbe's doctrine is too vague to be traced back to a Protestant denomination, apart when he explains that the psalm texts and the hymn texts are the same in a Reformed context. Oakeshott's understanding of religion has little to do with Conservative theology. His idea of salvation in "On Human Conduct" differs from justification by grace and theology of the Cross. Were it not for the existence of sin, religion would be fully immanentized and transferred to society and relationships to other people. While Oakeshott underlines the importance of religion as practice and even rejects the belief in orthodox doctrines, Conservative theology requests such a belief. Also his view that transcendence is only involved when the religion is founded contrasts Conservative theology. The only moment when Oakeshott deals with the roles of Church and state is in "On Being Conservative", but this is only an implicit legitimation of the status quo. A comparison with traditional Anglican theology shows that Oakeshott has practically nothing in common with it and cultivates his own very liberal theology.

Neuhaus features practically all elements not only of Conservative mainline Protestantism, but also of Lutheranism: a traditional Christology and doctrine of the Trinity, the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms, justification by grace through faith and harsh words against God's immanentization by left-wing politicized churches. Particularly developed is his position on the Church's role in politics. Neuhaus deals with ecclesiastical law (acceptance of the separation regime), the value of positive law (there is a Christian natural law above it which the state should recognize), the party system (a Church party would be possible), policy positions (on justice, equality, the welfare state) and religious pluralism in the public sphere (all citizens should be allowed to bring in their values). His statements on policy are Conservative (e.g. against creating material equality), but a traditional Lutheran understanding of the Church's role prevails over Conservative policies. Lübbe mentions very few elements of Conservative theology. Perhaps we can attribute to him a theological justification of the current political order, but not with a reference to its divine origin (Ro 13), but in the sense that religion is a value resource for the liberal state. Apart from this, he justifies more the past political order of the 1950s than the current one. Another element of Conservative theology is the refusal to reduce religion to morality, but Lübbe develops no doctrine of Christ. He implicitely appreciates the institution Church and favors a harmonic relationship between Church and state, but he does not take a stance on in which political institutions, the party system or policies the Church should participate. When he asks the question brought up by liberal theology on the future of mainline Protestant religiosity, he implicitely concedes that secularization took place. But Lübbe does not suggest any solutions to this problem. Like Oakeshott, Lübbe is primarily interested in the function religion fulfills for people. But while Oakeshott examines religion's influence on people's behavior towards each other, Lübbe understands religion only as a resource for the individual, even when he/she is involved in church voluntary work.

Conclusion

All authors ask religion and the church to be present in society without encompassing it completely. All authors view the politicization of the church with skepticism, but because the politicization of the 1960s took a left-wing direction. Kleger's and Müller's (1986:87) point that Lübbe's Conservative political theology transferred religion's transcendence into immanence as a consequence of secularization is of central importance. It shows that immanentization and politicization of religion are both possible in a Conservative intention in order to legitimize the status quo, and in a left-wing intention, as done by many mainstream Protestant churches since the 1960s.

The three authors show several possibilities of combining mainline Protestant and Conservative positions:

- a Neoconservative politicization and immanentization of religion in order to legitimize the status quo. It uses a functional definition of religion and takes no substantial theological position (Lübbe's position). It is possible in all denominations and has nothing specifically mainline Protestant.
- an immanentization of religion without its politicization, instead skepticism in politics and a Liberal theology in religion (Oakeshott's position). There still is an understanding of transcendence, even if an anthropocentric one. In practice, the consequences for religion in society are the same as for Lübbe: mainline Protestantism slowly loses ground. Because mainline Protestantism has implemented liberal theology to the largest extent, this option is only possible in this Church, but it does not correspond to a Conservative theology.
- no politicization or immanentization of religion, but an affirmation of the Church's traditional scope of action (Neuhaus' position) according to the doctrine of the Two Kingdoms: the Church should support government institutions and give advice. Via these channels, it can promote substantial Conservative policies. This is both specifically mainline Protestant and consistent with a Conservative theology.

As a consequence of the churches' left-wing politicization, the Conservatives Gehlen and Scruton conclude not to need the churches or even Christianity any more (Müller 2007:76 f). To the extent to which the churches adapt to the present, they disqualify themselves as alliance partners for Conservatism. On the long run, this development would not only exclude a group of convinced Conservative believers from the church, but also break with the tradition of a good cooperation between the church and Conservatism.

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