Douglas Farrow

Desiring a Better Country: Forays in Political Theology. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015. Pp. 188. Hb, \$100 CAD; Pb, \$29.95 CAD.

Desiring a Better Country: Forays in Political Theology by Douglas Farrow is a stimulating, well written collection of essays addressing issues relating to religion and public life. Farrow is a Canadian theologian at McGill University and, unsurprisingly, much of the material discussed in the book reflects his own Canadian context. Yet, as the author himself points out, the issues it deals with also have considerable application to the situations facing the US and Europe.

The book consists of five somewhat loosely linked essays followed by a lengthy appendix. For me, as I suspect would be the case for many readers of this journal, chapters 4 and 5 are the most interesting part of the book because in these chapters Farrow engages in a kind of dialogue with and critique of the great Jesuit theologian John Courtney Murray (1904–67), well known for his influence on *Dignitatis humanae* at Vatican II. Farrow's stance towards Murray is somewhat ambivalent. On the one hand, he draws heavily from Murray's famous book of 1960 *We Hold These Truths* (New York: Sheed & Ward) in support of his own views.

For example, following Murray, he emphasizes the Gelasian dyarchy (from Pope Gelasius I in 494) or "the doctrine of the Two," which inaugurated a distinction between the sacred and the temporal authorities and asserted that the spiritual authority, "by virtue of its higher responsibility—a responsibility for things eternal, not merely temporal or secular—is the greater" (80). Like Murray, Farrow also attaches great significance to the closely related principle of the freedom of the church, the *libertas ecclesiae*, asserted so strongly by Pope Gregory VII in the eleventh century and by Pope Leo XIII in the nineteenth. This is the freedom the church possesses by virtue of her "divine mandate" from Christ "to enjoy that full measure of freedom which her care for the salvation of men requires," as *Dignitatis* puts it (paragraph 13). This includes the freedom of the church to preach the gospel in full freedom and to oversee and regulate its own internal organization without interference from any external power, including the state. Finally, Farrow also holds with Murray that the Gelasian principle and the *libertas ecclesiae* contributed enormously to the rise of Western constitutionalism and the armature of political freedoms we enjoy today, notably including the right to religious freedom.

On the other hand, Farrow charges Murray with supporting a religiously neutral state and with proposing a mistaken interpretation of the meaning of religious freedom as this principle is promulgated in *Dignitatis humanae*. At first glance, Farrow's critique of Murray may seem surprising. After all, Farrow

acknowledges that in *We Hold* Murray asserts that “the sovereignty of God” (165n31) is a vital feature of the American consensus, and he is well aware of course that Murray was one of “the main architects” (64) of *Dignitatis*. However, he contends that Murray, while never adopting “the anti-religious neutralism popular today” (165n31), proposed an ideal of a state favorably disposed toward religion in general, but neutral in regard to the different denominations (an approach characteristic of the early American conception of church-state separation). For Farrow, this position reflects a form of indifferentism, the belief that one religion is as good as another, something the Church long condemned. In Farrow’s view, it is impossible for the state to be neutral towards different religious traditions. Moreover, in articles written during the Vatican Council and its immediate aftermath, Murray proposed a justification for religious liberty grounded not only on the inviolable dignity of the human person, but on the limited power of the state, including its incompetence to evaluate claims to religious truth. According to Farrow, this reduces religious freedom to an immunity, a negative liberty, a freedom from state interference, whereas he contends that *Dignitatis*, while not proposing a return to the confessional state, understands religious liberty as a positive freedom that calls for a state that is more actively supportive of religion, particularly of the Catholic Church. Indeed, in Farrow’s view, the dignity of the human person is not sufficient on its own to serve as the foundation of religious freedom; ultimately, religious freedom cannot be secure unless the freedom of the church understood in the robust sense Farrow gives to it, is embraced by the state.

At the heart of this dispute, I think, is a disagreement over the meaning of the Gelasian dyarchy and the *libertas ecclesiae*. For Murray the Gelasian principle, as applied to contemporary times, reflects a distinction between the sacred and the secular in which the sacred is represented by the church and the other religious traditions in society and the secular is represented by the state. Consequently, the *libertas ecclesiae* is simply the freedom of the church to carry out its salvific work without interference while the state carries out its own proper tasks in accordance with the natural law. For Farrow, in contrast, the Gelasian dyarchy, “the doctrine of the Two” reflects Gelasius’s assertion that “Two there are,” that is, the Catholic Church and the state, not “many there are” (159n51). The freedom of the church thus requires more than non-interference from the state; it requires some kind of support and acknowledgment from the state of the salvific mission that the church has been given by Christ.

I think Farrow is probably correct that *Dignitatis* understands religious freedom more as a positive freedom and envisions a more supportive role towards religion on the part of the state than Murray favors (in this connection, it is important to remember that although Murray played a large role in the crafting

of *Dignitatis*, the document is the work of many hands, and that Murray's minimalist conception of the state was not the dominant view). At the same time, Murray's contention that the modern state is simply not competent to assess the truth claims of differing religious traditions is a cogent point to which Farrow does not provide an adequate response. Moreover, Farrow's claim that the right to religious freedom ultimately depends on the state's acknowledgment of the church's mandate entrusted to it by Christ threatens to undermine *Dignitatis*'s assertion that freedom of religion is a fundamental human right; for if the right to religious freedom depends on the state's acknowledgment of the church's mandate from Christ, then that right would extend only where that mandate is acknowledged, leaving the rest of the world bereft of that right. A further difficulty is that Farrow leaves quite vague just what his proposed state recognition of the *libertas ecclesiae* would look like in practice. He insists he is not calling for a confessional state, which is what one might expect here, but he never specifies what the arrangement he is proposing would look like institutionally.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that each chapter of the book includes a number of frequently lengthy endnotes that constitute part of the argument of each chapter, forcing one to go back and forth constantly to follow Farrow's argument. This, along with the rather disjointed way the chapters are linked, make greater demands on the reader than is desirable. Nevertheless, this is a very stimulating book well worth the attention of anyone interested in examining contemporary church-state and church/society issues from a conservative Catholic point of view.

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