CHRISTIANITY AND THE POLITICAL ORDER

Conflict, Cooptation, and Cooperation

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Contents

Foreword xiii
Acknowledgments xv

1. Introduction 1
   Clarifying the Terms 2
   Politics Matters 4
   Two Distinct Realms but No Simple Division 5
   Secularization and Privatization 6
   Christianity Matters 7
   Christianity and Domestic Politics 8
   Christianity and International Affairs 10
   Plan of the Book 13
   Questions for Reflection/Discussion 14

PART I
BIBLICAL PERSPECTIVES

2. The Old Testament 17
   Politics and the Hebrew Tribes 17
   "A King Like Those of Other Nations" 19
   Saul and David 20
   The Monarchy under Solomon 23
   Reflections on the Monarchy 24
   Politics from the Divine Perspective 28
   Politics and Prophets 29
   Prophecy and Wider Social Criticism 32
   Conclusion 34
   Questions for Reflection/Discussion 35

3. The New Testament 37
   Jesus and the Reign of God 37
   Jesus the Messiah 38
   The Reign of God Is Like ... 40
   Jesus and the Politics of His Time 42
   Render to Caesar 44
   Interpreting Jesus 46
The Earliest Christians and the Empire 48
The Letter to the Romans 48
Revelation 13 52
Forming a Framework 55
Conclusion 57
Questions for Reflection/Discussion 58

PART II
HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES

4. The Patristic Era 61
   Christians and the Empire 61
      A New Order 63
      Eusebius of Caesarea (d. ca. 340) 64
      Ambrose of Milan (d. 397) 65
   Augustine (d. 430) 68
      Augustine and the Theology of History 69
      Augustine and Political Life 71
      Two Forms of Social Criticism 75
      Political Augustinianism 77
   The Patristic Legacy 78
   Questions for Reflection/Discussion 81

5. The Medieval Era 82
   "Two There Are" 83
      Sacerdotium: The Emergence of the Papacy 84
      Regnum and Imperium: The Power of Kings
      and Emperors 86
   Europe after Charlemagne 90
   The Investiture Controversy 93
      A Narrative of the Conflict 94
      Understanding the Controversy 96
      Theories of Authority 98
      Outcomes of the Confrontation 100
   The Political Ideas of Aquinas 101
      Zoon Politikon 102
      Questions of Governance 102
   Universal Papacy and National Monarchy 104
      A Narrative of Conflict 105
      Theories and Arguments 108
      Outcomes from the Confrontation 110
6. The Age of Reform

Religious and Political Change 117
Martin Luther (d. 1546) 119
Theology and Politics 121
The Peasant Wars 126
Luther’s Political Legacy 127
John Calvin (d. 1564) 128
Theology and Politics 130
Calvinism 134
Religious War and Its Consequence 135
The Theory of Divine Right 136
A Right of Rebellion 137
Jesuit Opposition 138
The Onset of an Idea 140
Other Traditions of Reform 140
Anglicanism and a National Church 140
The Radical Reformers 144
The Political Legacy of the Reformation 147
Questions for Reflection/Discussion 149

7. An Age of Revolution

The End of the Religious Wars 152
French Catholicism, the Revolution, and Aftermath 155
The Impact of the Clergy Constitution 157
Revolutionary Aftermath 160
Church and State under Napoleon 162
The Trend to Restoration 165
The American Revolution 166
English Protestantism in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries 167
Christianity in the New World 171
The Great Awakening and the Virginia Statute 176
A Constitutional Commitment 180
Church and State in the U.S. Context 182
The Public Schools Controversy 183
Making Sense of the First Amendment 185
An Ongoing Conversation 188
Questions for Reflection/Discussion 191

PART III
CONTEMPORARY PERSPECTIVES

8. The Nature, Purpose, Role, and Form of the State 195
   The Catholic Social Imagination 195
   The Nature of the State 196
      Society, Community, and the State 199
      Sovereignty and the State 201
   The Purpose of the State 203
      The Common Good 204
      An Evolving Idea 205
   The Role of the State 207
      Justice and State Intervention 208
      Subsidiarity and State Intervention 211
      A Balancing Act 213
   Democracy as the Form of the State 216
      Democracy and Catholicism 217
      Missing the Difference 220
      A New Context for Democracy 221
      Democracy and Protestantism 223
   Conclusion 228
   Questions for Discussion/Reflection 229

9. Why the Church Is Engaged in Politics 230
   Vatican II on the Church in the Temporal Realm 231
      Church as Sacrament 232
      Church as Servant 233
      Church as Communion 235
      Church as People of God 236
      Church as Ecumenical 238
   The Council on Church and Politics 239
      A Religious Mission with Political Implications 239
      The Council on Church and State 242
   Other Theological Themes for the Church's Political Activity 243
      Evangelization and Human Development 244
      Sin and Conversion 248
      Christian Love of Neighbor 250
   Conclusion 252
   Questions for Discussion/Reflection 253
10. The Church and Domestic U.S. Politics 254
   The First of Political Institutions 254
       Contributing to a Public Philosophy 256
       Public Virtue, Public Skills, and Public Spirituality 259
   Single-Issue Politics 262
       Causes of Single-Issue Politics 262
       Churches and Single-Issue Voting 265
   Responsible Voting 267
       Conscience and the Exercise of Prudence 269
       Guidance from the Tradition 270
       Considerations in Voting 273
   Law and Morality 275
       Different Approaches 276
       A Modern Thomistic Approach 279
   Catholic Politicians and Catholic Bishops 281
       Catholics in the United States 282
       One Source of the Tension 284
       A Second Source of the Tension 285
       Moving Forward 287
   Conclusion 288
   Questions for Discussion/Reflection 289

11. Christianity and International Politics 291
   Globalization 292
       Authentic Humanism 294
       Solidarity 295
       Common Good 297
   Justice 299
   Human Rights 301
   Participation 301
   Subsidiarity 302
   Human Rights 306
       The Evolution of Rights Language 306
       Human Rights and Catholicism 308
       Vatican II and Human Rights 310
       Postconciliar Catholicism and Human Rights 311
   Church Activity on Behalf of Human Rights 315
   War 317
       The Teaching of Jesus 317
       What Does Love Require? 319
       Just War and Pacifism as Ethical Traditions 321
       Catholic Theology and the Just War Tradition 325
Contents

Pacifism and the Catholic Tradition 327
Peace and Peacebuilding 331
Contemporary Catholic Teaching on Peace 333
A New Emphasis 334
Questions for Discussion/Reflection 337

Conclusion 338

Select Bibliography 340

Index 345
Introduction

Should churches and other houses of worship keep out of political matters or should they express their views on day-to-day social and political questions? That question regularly appears in an annual survey of American attitudes conducted by the Pew Research Center’s Forum on Religion and Public Life. For more than a decade a clear majority of those who were polled answered that the churches should express their views on social and political questions. Recently, however, the balance of opinion has shifted, and in the 2012 survey 54 percent of respondents thought the churches should keep out of political matters while 40 percent thought they should express their views.

There is uncertainty as to why the shift occurred in public attitude about the role of the churches in political affairs, although several factors may be involved. The most recent survey took place during an election year when people are sensitive to any risk of religion being used for partisan causes. In the past few electoral campaigns there has been a marked increase in political candidates talking about their personal faith convictions, and the survey reveals that is off-putting to a substantial majority of Americans. Also there has been a significant movement among voters self-described as “liberal” or partial to the Democratic Party who now view organized religion, especially Christian churches, as being more friendly to political conservatism. That has led rising numbers of the “liberal” segment of the population to be skeptical about the role of organized religion in politics. Finally, there are Christians who take offense whenever their religious leaders appear too partisan and seemingly ally the church with a specific party, issue, or politician.

There is fluidity behind the survey numbers reflecting public opinion. The views of Americans are a moving picture in reaction to events and personalities, whereas the survey provides only a valuable “still” shot of the public. For the present moment, nonetheless, there appears to be a rising tide of concern among Americans about mixing religion and politics. Yet separating the two

1. The Forum’s website is http://www.pewforum.org/.

2. Six percent of respondents were listed as “don’t know” in response to the question. A summary of the 2012 annual survey is found at http://www.pewforum.org/Politics-and-Elections/more-see-too-much-religious-talk-by-politicians.aspx. A complete copy of the survey is also available as a pdf document at the above site.
is nearly impossible, even if it were desirable. And there is no established and
firm consensus that such a divide would be desirable.

Politics has to do with how we ought to live together, how we should orga-
nize and govern our common life. The words “ought” and “should” in the pre-
vious sentence imply there is no clear, straight dividing line between politics
and morality. There is an inevitable moral dimension to politics because ques-
tions of justice, the nature of a good community, and the rights and duties of
citizens (as well as noncitizens) are fundamental to politics.

If there can be no bright line separating morality and politics, it is equally
ture there is no simple way to separate morality and the Christian faith. Indeed, Christianity has always understood itself as teaching and witnessing
to a distinct way of life. For many people, including a great many Americans,
there is a Christian dimension to the way they understand and live out their
ethical beliefs. It would appear, therefore, that efforts to remove all linkages
between politics and religion or, more specifically, politics and Christianity,
will prove to be difficult and likely fruitless.

**CLARIFYING THE TERMS**

One common bit of advice for those hosting a dinner party is “don’t talk about
religion or politics.” The assumption, of course, is that raising either topic leads
to argument rather than conversation among the guests. Presumably, putting
the two together would be positively combustible. When people suggest that
religion and politics don’t mix, or that religion should have nothing to do with
politics, what do they mean by “politics”? By “religion”?

Is politics always partisan politics, rival candidates seeking election to pub-
lic office? If not, then what is politics? The word comes from the Greek lan-
guage’s polis, meaning “city.” The famous cities of Athens, Sparta, Corinth, and
Thebes, for instance, were designated by the term polis, and the citizens of
these city-states were called politeis. Originally, therefore, politics was about
matters pertaining to the city, the conduct of public affairs as distinct from
private matters about personal life.

So running for public office or contesting an election is part of politics but
hardly all of it. Politics, more broadly understood, has to do with how a society
conducts its business, how people organize and govern themselves as a group.
Politics includes the entire range of “rules, practices and institutions under
whose guidance we live together in societies.” It has to do with knowing “who

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3. I do not claim that morality is logically dependent on religious belief. A great
many people do not believe in a religious foundation for their moral beliefs and activity.
My point is that Christians have always understood their religious beliefs as entailing
certain moral attitudes, values, traits of character, and principles.
can do what with whom, who owns which parts of the material world, [and] what happens if somebody breaks the rules." In sum, politics is about how we shall establish the processes of human cooperation necessary for people to live together.

From the outset of political philosophy, in the work of Greek writers such as Plato and Aristotle, there was a belief that the primary matter at stake in politics was justice. There might be disagreement and argument as to what justice meant and what it required, but such public discourse concerning justice was precisely what politics was about for the Greeks, and for just about every major political thinker since.

A few distinctions ought to be kept in mind by the reader of this book. Politics, as I use the term, is a more expansive realm than the state or the government. The state is the institution concerned with the law, the realm of public order, and the administration of public life. It is the key institution of politics but does not make up all of public life for there are other organizations and groups active in public life: families, corporations, schools, churches, fraternal and sororal groups, labor unions, voluntary associations.

The state is distinct from government, the latter term meaning those people who happen to be in authority at a given time in a society and are charged with running the structures of the state, that more permanent institution through which political authority is exercised. Government is the ordinary, everyday activity of enacting the aims of the state. Governments change regularly, but the state remains as long as the society effectively endures.

Another important word for this book is religion, which means a great many different things to people. Anthropologists, sociologists, jurists, psychologists, philosophers, and theologians all have their particular vantage on the phenomenon called religion, and those disciplines do not exhaust the differing perspectives. Some uses of the term are broadly inclusive, defining religion as just about anything that is of ultimate concern to an individual or group. Seen that way, religion need not be theistic.

Others, including myself, opt for a more narrow reading of religion, suggesting that it has to do with the human experience of the sacred or transcendent. Religion without God is a misnomer in the narrow interpretation. Since the subject matter of this work is Christianity and politics, it is clear that I will be following a more narrow view of religion than those who take the inclusive approach to religion. While there are reasonable grounds for adopting an inclusive view of religion in some scholarship, a book about Christianity will be concerned with a particular expression of religion, one that is convinced a

personal God engaged with human history exists and has revealed something of the divine self to creatures.

Another important distinction is between Christianity as a set of beliefs, ideas, and practices and Christianity as a visible set of institutions peopled by historical individuals. Or to put it simply, the Christian faith and a Christian church are not identical and coextensive. Christianity and politics, therefore, entails a larger framework of reference than church and state. The first pair has to do with the interaction of an array of thoughts and actions influenced by Christian faith with the public affairs of a society. The second deals with the interaction of two social institutions. At various points in this volume we will be discussing matters of church and state. At other points in the book we will be examining how Christian faith has shaped and been shaped by its engagement with the realm of public life.

POLITICS MATTERS

The simple reason for Christianity's engagement with politics is that politics matters. For Christians, politics does not matter as much as religion matters, but to say something is not the most important hardly results in concluding that it is unimportant. Politics matters because people matter; each individual human being matters as a child of God for those of the Christian faith. According to Pope John Paul II (d. 2005), "the name for that deep amazement at the human person's worth and dignity is the Gospel, that is to say: the Good News. It is also called Christianity." This papal perspective of Christian humanism helps to explain both the church's role in politics and why politics matters.

If one lives within the relative comfort and security of a nation such as the United States it is possible to imagine that politics is not that important since the changes in government do not dramatically affect the structures of the state. For many Americans, especially the nonpoor, everyday life may not seem to change dramatically as a result of a given political development. And so it is possible to convince oneself that politics is not really important.

Yet even a brief recall of events in the past century quickly dispels such a casual approach to the political realm. Consider the Nazi regime in Germany under which government agents systematically slaughtered millions of innocent people, especially Jews, gypsies, and others deemed inferior. Or think of Stalin's repression and murder of political dissidents, rivals, and "threats" to the state. Under Mao Tse Tung millions died from avoidable hunger due

5. John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis* (1979), no. 10. In keeping with the usual citation style for such documents all references to church documents throughout the book will be to the paragraph number, not page number, unless noted otherwise.
to policies that refused to acknowledge the human cost of the communist state’s reforms of Chinese agriculture and rural society. The political genocide that the Pol Pot regime inflicted on the Cambodian people in the 1970s amounted to millions dead in that nation’s “killing fields.” These evils were not historically necessary but resulted from political decisions. They are horrible reminders that politics matters, that good or bad governments can make a huge difference in causing untold misery or fostering human well-being.

Even within the recent history of the United States there are painful reminders of the difference that politics makes. The treatment of African-Americans under segregation, the sorry record of government policy toward Native Americans, along with U.S. foreign policies in Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Middle East stand as refutations of a glib dismissal of politics as “the same old, same old.” What a government does and does not do has a major impact on the everyday lives of ordinary people.

For Christians who stand in “deep amazement at the human person’s worth and dignity,” the political realm matters. It is true the Christian church has a spiritual mission, but it is also a mission with political overtones because the spiritual and the political meet in the human person, and the church must defend the dignity of the person. Likewise the essential criterion for any political regime, system, program, or policy is the welfare of the human person. Precisely because the spiritual and the political converge at the intersection of the human person there can be no indifference to the political realm on the part of church members.

Two Distinct Realms but No Simple Division

Politics matters to Christians, therefore, because it concerns the temporal well-being of God’s children. As with other Christians, Catholics have been encouraged to take an active role in building the earthly city. Indeed, the Catholic bishops who attended the worldwide conference popularly called Vatican II

6. Ibid., no. 13.
7. Ibid., no. 17.
8. Throughout the history of the Catholic Church there have been a series of meetings of the bishops throughout the entire world, or representatives of the global body of bishops. These assemblies, which may occur in multiple sessions spanning several years, are known as ecumenical councils. They are usually identified by the location of the meeting, e.g., the Council of Nicea or the Council of Chalcedon. The Second Ecumenical Council to be held at the Vatican from 1962 to 1965 is often referred to in shorthand as Vatican II. A result of that Council was the formulation of several influential documents that guided major reforms in the life of the Catholic Church in subsequent decades. One such important document was the Pastoral