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Christian Realism and the Propriety of Political Involvement

DONALD D. COLE

Is it lawful for us to pay taxes to the emperor or not?" the teachers of the law and the chief priests questioned Jesus in Luke chapter 20 with the intent of tricking him into saying something that would cause him to be arrested. While we abhor their motives, we must acknowledge their cleverness in picking this question. Christians have long debated the proper relationship between the political and ecclesiastical spheres. Indeed this is one of the enduring issues of Western political thought and practice. Christian thinkers have offered a range of views. Although an oversimplification, the range has broadened as different questions have emerged in successive periods of history.

DOMINANT QUESTIONS THROUGH SUCCESSIVE PERIODS OF HISTORY

Through the Middle Ages, the dominant political question revolved around *authority*: what is the proper relationship between secular or political authority and ecclesiastical or spiritual authority? In the Reformation, the dominant question shifted to religious *toleration*. Should the secular governing apparatus mandate the free exercise of religion? These questions clearly overlap, but there is an unmistakable difference in focus.

A third dominant question emerged around the eighteenth century dealing with *individual Christian involvement in secular government*. What is the *propriety* of such involvement? Are Christians called to political involvement? If so, to what political purpose are they called? Or should Christians simply foreswear political involvement? It is the question of propriety that I explore in this essay. I contend that Christian involvement in politics and government is entirely warranted. The arguments I usually hear—both pro and con—I find compelling, but many of them strike me as overly simplistic or irretrievably detached from everyday reality.

THREE VIEWS NOT TO BE TAKEN LIGHTLY

Those who oppose the Christian's involvement in government and politics make points not to be taken lightly. Three of them stand out in my mind. First, involvement in the affairs of government draws one into a world of manipulation, inimical to the mind of Christ. That political activity is synonymous with manipulation is indeed the popular view of politics in America. And this view has grown increasingly popular over the past few decades. The picture is one of backroom deals, intimidation, arm-twisting, punishment of one's enemies, and a near total self-absorption on the part of all participants.



This picture is unacceptable to Christians and to all people of conscience. To Christians, it flies in the face of the historical (and preached) Jesus—the Jesus who embodied agape, a life of self-sacrifice, and a willingness to make himself vulnerable. It is also at odds with Paul's *picture* of Jesus who “did not regard

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equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave” (Phil 2: 6–7). The ethic of humbling oneself simply does not and cannot mix with the imperatives for successful political activity, as previously described.

The picture outlined above may well be accurate. I believe this to be a picture of fallen humanity. The lure into the world of self-absorption is not unique to politics and government. The opportunities for manipulation are ubiquitous. All human asso-

ciations—church, family, business, etc—are vulnerable to manipulation by individuals seeking their own advantage. Yet we do not propose the withdrawal from such associations because of that susceptibility.

Moreover, the picture of politics outlined above is not the only one available. Where one sees manipulation, another sees bargaining, compromise, and conciliation, search for common ground and contribution to the overall health of the community. This is the picture of politics painted by Aristotle. He saw the *polis* (state) as that form of human association uniquely situated to bringing out such estimable qualities. Accordingly, he wrote that “man is thus intended by nature to be a part of a political whole, and there is therefore an immanent impulse in all men towards an association of this order.”¹ We need not go as far as Aristotle in concluding that the polis is “the final and perfect association” to grant that political activity can be civilizing and moralizing.²

The second objection to the Christian's involvement in government is that it presupposes a loyalty to the nation-state that the Christian cannot give. The contention is that those participating in government must pledge their allegiance to that government, and other values they hold must yield to those pursued by the government. Nation-states, it is observed, are naturally disposed to pursue their own interests, and these are bound to conflict with the Christian ethic requiring love for all. Does not, they ask, Jesus' entrance into the world to die for all, without regard to race, color, nationality, etc., make irrelevant national affiliations? And does not one's service in a government thereby compromise one's commitment to a gospel message that is quintessentially global and transcultural?

One cannot deny that the gospel is global in every way. Nor can one deny the universal significance of Jesus' coming into the world. What else could Paul have meant in Galatians 3:28 when he noted that “there

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is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female?” But to say that these distinctions are irrelevant with respect to the reach of the gospel is not to say that such distinctions cease to matter at all. To maintain that loyalty to a government is incompatible with one's loyalty to Christ assumes these two loyalties to be conflictual. While this is a possibility, it is not the only possibility. When in Acts 4–5 Peter and John were commanded by the Sanhedrin to cease teach-

ing about Jesus, they replied, “Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge” (4:19). This clearly involved a case of conflicting loyalties. When presented with such a situation, the Christian's loyalty to Christ trumps everything else.

However, multiple loyalties do not necessarily conflict. When Jesus answered the question about payment of taxes, his reply was to “give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” This suggests that different loyalties can be parallel and offer no occasion for conflict. Not only can different loyalties be parallel, they can also be reinforcing or overlapping. That appears to be the situation Paul is describing in Romans 13. “Those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. . . . For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. . . . Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants, busy with this very thing.”

In summary, the relationship between/among multiple loyalties may be conflictual, parallel, or reinforcing. Only in the conflictual case would one’s loyalty to secular government compromise one’s loyalty to Christ. I see nothing in scripture that prohibits the Christian from embracing multiple loyalties as long as loyalty to Christ remains the sole *unconditional* loyalty. In the event of a conflict, all other loyalties must yield.

Finally, some oppose the Christian’s involvement in government because all secular government is predicated on coercion, or at least the threat of it. Given this view, political involvement is inappropriate in that it runs counter to one of the central themes of Jesus’ life and teaching: the commitment to nonviolence. Christians must direct their energies toward changing human hearts, not coercing actions.

Practical issues associated with the notion of coercion have troubled Christians from the earliest days of the church. Throughout history, some Christians have thought association with all forms of coercion to be wrong. Others have taken a somewhat narrower position, believing that association with coercion is wrong *for the Christian*.

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The Quakers, whose name is synonymous with nonviolence, struggled with this question in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in America. During that time, they were a formidable factor in colonial Pennsylvania politics. Respected for their piety and adept at coalition building, they were never comfortable with the coercive aspect of government. They acquiesced in, and even proposed, a number of measures designed both to enable government to proceed with its customary functions while they remained true to their principled opposition to force. Some Quakers, however, saw such measures as hypocritical. In 1756 with the onset of the French and Indian Wars, the Quakers were unable to reconcile their convictions with further involvement with government and resigned their elective offices *en masse*.³

The association with physical coercion is an inescapable feature of secular government. Noted political scientist David Easton today offered one of the most widely used definitions of politics in 1953: politics is “the authoritative allocation of values.”⁴ In the context of secular government, a decision or policy is said to be “authoritative” if it has standing behind it the possible use of “legitimate coercion” to ensure compliance.⁵ Taxes, the IRS reminds us, are not a free-will offering.

Does this reliance on coercion preclude a Christian’s participation in or involvement with government? I believe it does not, at least not necessarily. To foreswear involvement in government for this reason requires us to see Jesus as embodying a monistic value orientation: the promotion of nonviolence. Jesus unquestionably taught and lived an ethic of nonviolence, but we unduly constrain his significance if we view his life and legacy solely through this lens. Although it is easy to over-reach in interpreting Jesus’ behavior in John 2 when he found men conducting business in the temple courts, this story does illustrate that moral outrage can be accompanied by a coercive approach. This recognition does not devalue Jesus’ promotion of non-

violence any more than his periodic harsh language to the Pharisees causes us to cease viewing him as the exemplar of kindness.

Some will object that once we abandon an absolutist view of nonviolence, we become utilitarians. But the fact remains, we frequently have options before us that we did not choose, and in such cases, the best course is the one that does the least injustice. That may or may not nudge us toward political involvement. In short, circumstances matter, just as they did for Jesus.⁶

CHRISTIAN PARTICIPATION IN POLITICS IS DESIRABLE

So far I have outlined my disagreements based on the reasoning of those who hold that political activity is inherently inappropriate for Christians. But we can go further. I contend that Christian participation in politics/government is desirable because it can make a valuable contribution to human welfare. That said, it is equally important to appreciate the limits of what government can do and some of the risks that accompany political involvement. Consider first the desirability.

Christians have an obligation to nourish and enrich their communities by contributing their talents and energies toward resolving the problems besetting those communities. Although I do not share all his prescriptions, Duane Friesen's recent book, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City*, makes a useful contribution. "To be a Christian," he writes, "is to live on a boundary, a citizen of two societies. . . . Our identity as Christians is shaped by membership in two different sociological structures: the nation-state and the church."⁷

Friesen takes the situation of the Jews living in Babylonian captivity as a guiding metaphor for Christians today. Like the Jews, Christians are exiles in a foreign land. We are residents of a given earthly culture, but our ultimate citizenship is in heaven. Jeremiah's admonition to the Jews, eager to return to Jerusalem, was somewhat curt. To paraphrase, "You're going to be here for awhile. In the meantime, seek the peace and prosperity of the city where you dwell."⁸ Whatever Jeremiah meant with his admonition, he clearly was not counseling conversion to Babylonian gods. Just as clearly, however, he was urging participation in and contribution toward the betterment of their earthly community.

The experience of Daniel is a useful model. He was a distinguished public official who simultaneously maintained the highest personal integrity and faithfulness to God.⁹ Christians should take what Glenn Tinder has called "the prophetic stance." He notes that

Human beings live in society, and we meet them there or not at all. We cannot stand wholly apart from society without failing in our responsibilities to the human beings whom God has exalted. . . . This obligation gives rise to a political stance that is ambiguous and, in a world of devastatingly unambiguous ideologies, unique: humane and engaged but also hesitant and critical. . . .

. . . I believe that the primary political requirement of Christianity is not a certain kind of society or a particular program of action but rather an attitude, a way of facing society and of undertaking programs of action. Christianity implies skepticism concerning political ideals and plans. For Christianity to be indissolubly wedded to any of them (as it often has been: "Christian socialism" and Christian celebrations of "the spirit of democratic capitalism" are examples) is idolatrous and thus subversive of Christian faith. Political ideals and plans must vary with times and circumstances.¹⁰

It may be observed that contribution to one's community does not necessarily entail political involvement. That is true. There are many ways to contribute. But it *may* entail such involvement, and the failure to offer it can deprive one's community of needed talent. When Christians withhold their talents from public issues handled by governments, the problem is not so much that those issues are left to unprincipled people lacking any honesty and integrity. The problem is that the community's pool of talent and wisdom available to confront its problems is diminished.

This problem is compounded when one realizes that in democratic, post-industrial societies, the difference between governmental and non-governmental affairs is often seamless. Who will serve on school boards when capable people—Christians and non-Christians—simply say “no thanks” to a job where the only guarantee is criticism?

Denying needed talent to one’s community is not the only problem caused when Christians foreswear involvement in government. Issues of great consequence can be marginalized. Secular government addresses a myriad of issues directly related to “peace and prosperity”. Governments today predominate on issues ranging from aviation safety, protection from terrorist attack, and stability of the money supply to the provision of drinking water, control of illicit trafficking in narcotics, and the safe and secure dismantlement of nuclear warheads. Such issues can be ignored only if we are blind to the realities around us. And then there is “social justice.”

Political power can indeed be a powerful intoxicant, and those who are seduced by it are capable of inflicting harm even as they are convincing themselves of the worthiness of their cause.

The American civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s comes immediately to mind. Not to acknowledge government’s rightful role here would have been the equivalent of saying to African-Americans that they must wait another 50 or 100 years until the collective conscience of white America moved to grant them full membership in the country. That simply would have been unacceptable. While Martin Luther King, Jr. was the heart and soul of nonviolence, he appealed to conscience at least in part to gain entrance into the process of government. I am prepared to say that it was justified, and that it worked.

All these issues, and many more we could list, matter to living, breathing human beings. I am reminded of the pithy title of William F. Buckley’s collection of essays on American conservative thought in the twentieth century *Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?*¹¹ Christian realism mandates that we face and respond as best we can to realities as we encounter them. As Christians, our ultimate destiny is in heaven, but for now, we live here. And we have not the luxury of trivializing problems that are pressing in upon people. But we do precisely that when we withhold our involvement in the affairs of a government that could address them.

As important as government can be to the improvement of people’s lives, it is important—especially for Christians—to bear in mind that governments have clear limitations. Expectations about what government can achieve should be modest. While Christian anarchists and pacifists are wrong when they judge all uses of physical coercion to be inadmissible, they do force (?) us to acknowledge some unavoidable dangers. Accordingly, we should note that a failure to keep expectations modest carries with it two grave risks.

TWO GRAVE RISKS

The first is the risk to those drawn into government service. They risk succumbing to the lure of coercion simply because it is available. It may be that coercion cannot change human hearts, but it can change habits, and hearts have a way of following. The fact that coercion can be used for noble ends does not negate this risk. If anything, it increases it. People are, after all, moral animals who often seek moral justifications for their actions even when they are self-serving. Political power can indeed be a powerful intoxicant, and those who are seduced by it are capable of inflicting harm even as they are convincing themselves of the worthiness of their cause.

A second risk is that inflated notions about what government can deliver invites more issues onto the governmental agenda, which in turn may serve to undercut appeals to conscience that are much to be preferred in the resolution of problems. It is sometimes the case that when an issue makes it onto the government’s agenda, interested parties cease their dialogue and adopt rigid power postures, changing for the worse their previous relationship. Several years ago, someone propounded what is now called the Law of the

Instrument: those having the use of any instrument will find uses for it. The coercive apparatus of the state can be such an instrument in the hands of those who fail to appreciate its attendant risks.

Perhaps the most useful metaphor for the coercive aspect of government is the kitchen knife. It is useful for some tasks, not useful for others, but in all cases poses an element of risk. Those who ignore the risks or use it injudiciously are either victimized by it or find it no longer useful for its intended purpose.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Aristotle, *The Politics*, Ernest Barker, trans. (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1978), 7. See also Book III.
- 2 Ibid., 4.
- 3 Philip Abbott, *Political Thought in America: Conversations and Debates* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, 1997), 30–33.
- 4 David Easton, *The Political System* (New York: Knopf, 1953), 134.
- 5 I use secular government here to refer to the governing apparatus associated with nation-states and their political/administrative subdivisions. There are, of course, other secular organizations that have a governing apparatus (e.g., labor unions, corporations, civic associations, etc.), but they lay no claim to being able to employ “legitimate” physical coercion to achieve their ends.
- 6 I am no Rawlsian by any stretch, but John Rawls makes a similar point when he notes that “an injustice is tolerable only when it is necessary to avoid an even greater injustice.” See *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1971), 4.
- 7 Duane K. Friesen, *Artists, Citizens, Philosophers: Seeking the Peace of the City* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 2000), 211.
- 8 See Jeremiah 29.
- 9 See especially Daniel 6.
- 10 Glenn Tinder, *The Political Meaning of Christianity: The Prophetic Stance* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 8.
- 11 William F. Buckley, *Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970).

