

Politics as a Christian Vocation

Faith and Democracy Today

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Contents

<i>Preface</i>	<i>page</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Introduction</i> The Present Purpose		1
1 Render to Caesar		7
I. THE EARLY ACCOUNT		9
II. ASSESSING THE EARLY ACCOUNT		15
III. THE MODERN DIFFERENCE		21
2 Government by the People		28
I. POPULAR SOVEREIGNTY		30
II. THE CONSTITUTIONAL TASK		34
III. THE UNION OF "WE THE PEOPLE"		43
IV. DEMOCRACY AND THE WAY OF REASON		48
3 Faith and the Way of Reason		56
I. DEFINING THE QUESTION		56
II. THE MAJORITY VOICE		60
III. DISCOURSE AS A CHRISTIAN COMMITMENT		69
4 Justice in the Community of Love		79
I. THE COMMUNITY OF LOVE		82
II. THE PRINCIPLE OF JUSTICE		88
III. THE ULTIMATE GROUND OF WORTH		99
5 Religious Decisions at Stake		106
I. THE AIM AT JUSTICE		106
II. ALTERNATIVE IDEALS FOR COMMUNITY		113
III. POLITICS AS A RELIGIOUS QUESTION		123

Contents

6	Political Deliberations	130
	I. ABORTION	131
	II. AFFIRMATIVE ACTION	143
	III. ECONOMIC DISTRIBUTION	150
	IV. CONCLUSION	161
	<i>Appendix</i> On the Humanistic Commitment	165
	<i>Works Cited</i>	173
	<i>Index</i>	177

Introduction

The Present Purpose

United States politics has always been challenged by its relation to religion, because the First Amendment endorses religious freedom and thus religious plurality. During the past fifty years, this relation has become especially controversial because of increasing diversity among the nation's religions and the increasing consequence of government in our lives. In both larger public and specifically academic discussion and debate, views on the role religious convictions and arguments should or should not play in our common life range from the privatization of religion to its indispensable role in the pursuit of justice. Often, disagreements occur in the context of debate over specific political issues – for instance, the permissibility of abortion, the legitimacy and importance of affirmative action, the due forms of criminal justice, the fair distribution of wealth and income, the required treatment of our natural habitat, and the moral propriety of some given military engagement.

But if our politics must determine its relation to religious plurality, so, correspondingly, does any given religious community face the question of its relation to politics. This work pursues how Christians should ask and answer the latter question. I seek to clarify whether and, if so, how active participation in contemporary politics is a Christian calling. Politically, the discussion is focused principally on the American republic. But that focus itself requires address to general questions about the life of Christian witness. Clearly, the responsibilities of Christians in our setting cannot be clarified without asking about the meaning or content of Christian faith and what, if any, abiding relation to political community it prescribes. The answers

Introduction

given in this work to such general questions have, I believe, considerably wider importance. Still, my intent is to speak about Christian commitment today within the United States, and more basic understandings are pursued for the sake of relevance to it. Focused in this way, then, the book is about contemporary politics as a Christian vocation.

The idea of “vocation,” which means a calling or a summons, has a long history within the Christian community. In medieval thought, the term was typically reserved for a divine calling to specifically religious activities, especially to the priesthood or the monastic life, and bore hierarchical connotations. Having a vocation in this sense was being authorized for a higher form of service to God. Following the Reformation, “vocation” was released from its restricted usage and, correspondingly, from its hierarchical connotations. Summarily speaking, it came to mean, at least for Protestants, a calling to some distinct occupation or set of responsibilities as an occasion for witness to God’s presence and redeeming activity. Thus, any honest and useful work could be a Christian vocation. The difference between specifically religious and other callings important to human life and the human community became solely one of function, with no sense of higher and lower, so that, for instance, being a member of the clergy and being a farmer could not be ranked in terms of service to God (see Dillenberger and Welch: 49, 234–5). All Christians, we might say, were equally called to be Christians, and the differing vocations given to differing Christians were equally important forms of that more fundamental identity.

Subsequently, “vocation” also acquired a secular meaning, in distinction from designating a Christian calling to some kind of secular activity, and the term now sometimes signifies simply any occupation or business or profession. But there is, even in this secular usage, a legacy from the earlier religious import, because taking one’s work as a vocation often means that one is called to this kind of activity as a contribution to the common good. Whether one works as a farmer or teacher or artist or craftsman, one does so vocationally when one not only strives for success in that particular enterprise but also understands it in view of its importance to the larger context of our life together. In this sense, one might speak of differing kinds of activity as specifications of the moral vocation given to us all. Accordingly,

the secular idea of a specific vocation can be extended from application to one's principal work or central set of activities and used to designate any specific practice it may be morally useful or important to distinguish from others. Thus, one can speak of one's vocation to be a parent or citizen or friend.

Returning to the Christian context, we may also consider vocations that specify the Christian commitment and do not necessarily mark a form of work central to a person's life. They are distinguished simply because doing so is important to the inclusive purpose of the church. Some of these vocations may be given to Christians generally, whatever occupation or ministry may distinguish one Christian from another. In this sense, they can be called common Christian vocations. For instance, we might discuss being compassionate, the practice of serving those afflicted or grieving, as a specific activity to which Christians generally are called, even if they are not commonly called to receive specialized training in pastoral care or counseling. Similarly, we might speak of care for children, encouraging and educating their growth and integrity, as a common Christian vocation, even if some Christians will properly attend more fully than others to this task. Or, again, perhaps theology is a vocation of Christians generally, meaning that all are called to reflect for themselves, insofar as they are able, on the meaning and truth of their faith when these become problematic, even if only some Christians have the specialized vocation of being a professional theologian.

A common Christian vocation, then, is a Christian calling that does not distinguish some Christians from others by commission to specialized responsibilities within the Christian community or to a certain kind of secular work as one's principal occupation. In this sense, the present work asks about politics as a common Christian vocation. Hence, the discussion is not focused on politics as a specialized profession, whereby a Christian might seek or hold political office or in some other way choose participation in the formal political process as her or his principal work. To the contrary, our concern is how Christian faith relates to membership in the political community. Given that all Christians are citizens, does their calling to a life of faith include a common calling to political activity and, if so, toward what ends? In this formulation, "political activity" means the deliberate attempt to influence or help shape political rule and, thereby, to

determine the consequences of political order for all affected by it. If, for some or all Christians, the life of faith does not include a political vocation, we can still say that their faith implies something about their political responsibilities, namely, that they should be or may be politically quiescent.

In the United States and the wider contemporary world, many Christians believe that political participation is an obvious and, indeed, central part of the Christian calling itself. Hence, they may counsel, asking *whether* Christians have such responsibilities is hardly necessary. In fact, however, those so persuaded depart from a profound tradition in Christian thought, for which the life of common Christian witness does not include political activity. As I will discuss, this view stretches back to early Christian self-understanding, and, in the expression given there, I will call it the “early account” of Christian political responsibility. Its effect in subsequent Christian life and thought, right up to the present, has been considerable. I, too, will argue for an understanding contrary to that tradition. But seeing why the early account excluded politics from the common witness of Christians and why Christians today should reach a different conclusion is, I will try to show, important for explicating the political ends contemporary Christians should pursue.

This is because a clarified departure from that tradition requires attention to modern political communities that are or approach being democratic. I will argue that politics today is a common Christian vocation because the moral principles implied by Christian faith prescribe, at least in our setting, democracy as a form of political rule and thus democratic citizenship as a general form of Christian witness. As I will try to show in due course, however, this interpretation of Christian belief is controversial because the presuppositions of modern democratic politics, including especially the constitutional provision for religious freedom, are at odds with some basic understandings of their faith pervasively shared by Christians past and present. One prominent case in point concerns what Christians mean or think they mean in claiming truth for their convictions about God and human life. Democracy, I will argue, can only be politics through full and free political discussion and debate or politics by the way of reason; only those political claims that can be validated in reasoned discourse should direct the decisions or activities of the state. In contrast, the majority voice in the Christian tradition has denied

that the truth of Christian belief can be fully redeemed without appeal to God's special self-disclosure through Jesus Christ. Christian commitment to democracy also implies, in other words, a departure from this majority voice.

In sum, asking whether politics is a common Christian vocation will provide the context in which to spell out the nature of democracy, formulate its challenge, and reconsider the meaning of Christian faith. Proceeding in this way will prove useful because showing why Christian belief prescribes government by the way of reason is incomplete without explicating Christian conceptions of justice and the common good. I will argue that Christians generally are called to democratic activity because they are called to pursue the community of love and to act for justice as general emancipation. While confirming that politics is a common Christian vocation, then, the argument will also define the ends for which Christians should choose their political purposes.

Chapter 1 will review summarily the relation of Christian faith to politics as articulated during the early Christian movement in order to ask whether its exclusion of political activity from the prescribed witness of Christians generally should be accepted today. Chapter 2 will discuss the emergence of modern democracy, the character of a democratic political community, and its challenge to some inherited understandings of Christian faith. Chapters 3 and 4 will respond to this challenge by showing that Christian faith prescribes the way of reason and defines democratic principles of justice.

Chapters 5 and 6 will illustrate the importance of these principles to contemporary politics in the United States. Chapter 5 will discuss religious decisions at stake in public life today, in the sense that disagreements about particular political issues reflect the influence, however tacit, of conflicting ideals for the human community. This discussion centers on religious differences reflected in disputes about domestic political purposes. I believe that a similar and, in significant measure, overlapping analysis can be given with respect to issues concerning this country's relation to the larger world that have become prominent in the early twenty-first century. Seeking to provide that analysis would, however, substantially and unnecessarily complicate the treatment. My intent is to illustrate how politics implicates religious decisions and, thereby, to suggest how the

Introduction

political witness of Christians makes a difference of some moment in our contemporary public life. Chapter 6, then, will further illustrate the significance of these religious choices through comment on three specific political issues: abortion, affirmative action, and economic distribution.