

## **Rough, Sketchy, and Unfinished Notes on How One Might Think Christianly About Politics**

(originally developed for presentation to students)

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- I.** Who I am:
- A.** Canadian, new prof, interested in things political,
  - B.** But also a Christian—interested in considering how we as Christians are all dual citizens—citizens of a country but also citizens of the Kingdom. I find fascinating the question of how we can maintain this dual citizenship—I think it’s a vital question, but an enormously difficult one—and there’s a great deal of disagreement among Christians as to how this should proceed.
- II.** It’s a bit of a truism these days to say we live in a pluralist society, and indeed, many of our most controversial social questions concern these pluralities, concerning race, or gender, or religion.
- A.** But when considering the foundations of a state, another “pluralism” needs to be considered: the pluralism of social institutions. It would not take us long to develop a very long list of the many social structures in which we participate, many of which correspond to fields of cultural activity.
  - B.** Christian social thought has long affirmed the basic goodness of this plurality. Quoting one thinker (O’Donovan): “Unity is proper to the creator, complexity to the created world”
  - C.** Now many implications flow from this—but here’s another one: this diversity of institutions is itself created by God, instituted by his will, founded in the ordinances of God’s law. These things are not arbitrary.
    - 1.** And so is the state! The state is created by God to be used for his glory.
      - a)** nb: when I’m talking about the state, I’m not talking about the state of Pennsylvania or the state of NJ—I’m talking about the state in general—civil, political authority.
    - 2.** now I’m not going to venture into the question as to whether the state was created because of the fall into sin or whether there would have still been government even if the fall had not happened. This is a complex discussion requiring a great deal more theological/biblical study than we have time for.
  - D.** But the point is: the fact that God created politics means that it is creational—the state is not by definition, a gang of thieves, for instance—rather, the state has rightful authority, granted to it by God, who also gives it a positive task, a job to do, and standards that it must live up to. Accordingly, we as Christians must recognize that authority—it must be granted *legitimacy*. And I think biblical evidence supports this.

- III.** But when we Christians think about big concepts like *authority*, or (here's another one) *sovereignty*, then we rightfully tend to be very careful to consider what sort of authority we're talking about.
- A.** And one thing they're careful to maintain is that state authority is not an *absolute* authority. The state cannot claim authority over everything. And the reason that the authority of the state is limited is because Christians proclaim—have always proclaimed—that Jesus Christ is Lord and King, and the authority of Christ supersedes any authority that we might imagine here on earth. Whether our government is democratic or totalitarian, whether persecuted or free, Christians have trusted that Christ rules the world for judgement and blessing. That's what we mean when we talk about the Kingdom of God.
- 1.** There's a tendency out there sometimes to spiritualize the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God belongs to church, missions, devotions; things like politics, economics, media—they all are part of the "world".
- a)** I have a friend (mentor, really) who sees it as his life's work to heal Christianity of this sort of dualist thinking. Dualism, he says, spits in the face of God, because it denigrates God's good creation.
- b)** Think about it—if it is true that the state is part of God's good creation, then for us to declare it as not covered by God's sovereignty is to say that we're too good for politics: how offensive!
- c)** That sort of dualism, that separation of sacred and secular is fundamentally mistaken—in two respects. On the one hand, it confines the Christian faith only to a tiny part of all of created reality—and that can only result in a stunted Christianity. And on the other hand, the so-called "secular" world must function without benefit of a Christian perspective—the very perspective that best is able to understand what's going on!—and that can only result in a stunted world.
- B.** But (back to my point) how do we conceive of the authority of the state under the authority/Lordship of Christ?
- 1.** the point is that the authority of the state is limited—limited by the Kingdom, limited by the very creational norms with which it was established. So the state cannot claim for itself authority to do anything and everything. The state cannot tell the artist what to paint; it cannot tell the pastor what to preach; it cannot tell the professor what to teach. If it does, then we are certainly within our rights—indeed we have an obligation—to take the state to task *literally*, to remind the state what its task is.
- IV.** Which brings us to the next point, of course, which is: what is the task of the state?
- A.** well, perhaps most basically: keep order/peace and do justice.
- 1.** these two tasks are not completely separate of course—indeed they imply each other.
- a)** It's quite possible, for instance, for a state to keep order and not do justice, indeed we see examples of that all the time. I would argue, however, that over the longterm, if a state doesn't do justice, eventually it will not be able to keep the peace either.
- b)** similarly, even the task of keeping peace can be/should be an exercise in seeking justice. Righting wrongs, working for reconciliation is about keeping peace *and* doing justice.

- B.** Now here's another question: how is the state able to go about accomplishing this task? What tool does the state have that no other social institution has?
- 1.** Answer: the power of the sword. The state is granted the power of the sword to accomplish its goal—only the state is entrusted with the authority to use *force*, that is physical *force*, and sometimes maybe even *lethal* force, that is authority over life and death
    - a)** though reasonable Christians disagree on the lethal part—and I shall not wade into the capital punishment debate here. The point holds even if you are opposed to capital punishment—only the state, or an agent of the state, can *arrest* someone.
    - b)** I'm depending here on Romans 13 of course: the state does not bear the sword in vain.
    - c)** And this is a truth that is recognized even in mainstream, that is non-Christian, political science—the state, they say, is distinct because it holds a monopoly on the use of violence in a society.
  - 2.** Hopefully, the state does not need to use its power of the sword often. Indeed, I would argue that the state cannot rely totally on force to accomplish its goals—it requires something more: namely the conviction on the part of the people that obeying the state is the way to go. In other words, the state must have *legitimacy*.
    - a)** and here's the example I like to ask: you arrive at an intersection in the middle of the night. No one's around. Do you wait for the green light?
  - 3.** Neither authority nor legitimacy can really be understood without each other. Legitimacy is what turns power into authority. Without legitimacy, power is reduced to mere coercion.
- V.** So, now we've talked about the fact that the state is creational (that is, established by God), that it has its own distinct sphere of authority (though it's a limited authority), that the task of the state is to keep order and do justice, and that the state is entrusted with the power of the sword.
- A.** and when I refer to the *structure* of the state, I'm referring to all those things. The state, as a societal *structure* has those characteristics and those tasks. Other social structures (families, universities, chess clubs) have different characteristics and different tasks.
  - B.** And when I refer to *structural pluralism*, I'm referring to the fact that society is made up of all those different social institutions. And when I refer to *sphere sovereignty*, I'm saying that each of these institutions has its own responsibility and specialty, and other spheres/structures should not interfere.
- VI.** But there's another form of pluralism we need to talk about. How do we as Christians relate to those who do not recognize Christian principles? In other words, what do we do with *confessional pluralism*?
- A.** We develop an answer to this puzzler by considering some of the implications of the structural pluralism.
    - 1.** as we've described it, is it the task of the state to enforce a single religion? it most definitely is not. The state does justice to all, whatever their religious beliefs.
  - B.** Does this mean, religion must be kept out of politics? Certainly not! Because we need to figure out what justice demands—and for that, we need all the help we can get.

Religious people, as much as anyone, have to be out there calling the state to think about justice.

- C. The state is concerned with justice—and Christians have the responsibility and the privilege to be involved arguing for justice, and the Christian view of justice will emphasize a full respect for the rights and freedoms of those who cannot agree with the Christian confession.
  - 1. This is a tricky thing, but for Christians, *especially* for Christians, justice cannot mean just-us. Rather, beginning with the recognition that we live in a religiously-splintered world, surrounded by all sorts of faith communities—Christians then who are active in politics, *more than anyone*, need to be seeking justice—even for people who they disagree with most strongly on all sorts of things.
    - a) So back in Canada, I worked for a time for a Christian political action group—they were a group specifically seeking to call the state to pursue public justice in society.
      - (1) The project I was involved in concerned getting the government to recognize its involvement in how Canada’s aboriginal peoples—the Cree Indian tribe—were being systematically mistreated and disadvantaged in some negotiations over land claims in northern Quebec.
      - (2) These Cree bands held to a faith opposed to mine—namely, traditionally native spirituality, and indeed some saw Christianity as an hostile, oppressive religion.
    - 2. Indeed, I would argue that in politics, seeking justice for our neighbor is how we show love for our neighbor. The OT call to do justice for the widow and the orphan does not involve determining their faith perspective first (or their income level, or their race, etc.).
      - a) It is not Christian justice then for Christians to enjoy any political privilege at the expense of non-Christians.
      - b) Unlike the church, the state is not a community of Christian faith; it is a community of public legal care for all people which must not favour or persecute any particular group.
      - c) So the state can’t be about enforcing Christian doctrine on the population; rather Christians will be seeking policies that will protect, encourage, and open up life for all people, regardless of belief.
    - 3. (recall the parable of the wheat and the tares)
  - D. So should politics be “neutral”? emphatically not. Religion cannot be kept out of politics, nor should it. Should we hold to a separation of church and state? Yes, certainly—church and state are different institutions, with different characteristics, and different tasks.
  - E. The point: it’s not that when Christians pursue justice in this way, that they’re *compromising*—rather, seeking justice for all people is what Christian justice is all about.