

Why Political Pluralism Comes from the Christian Faith

Part One: The Political Posture of the Early Christian Church

General Observation: The Union of People, Religion, and Nation and the Justification for Wealth

For most people for most of history, religions were ethnic and national. So where do we get the idea of ‘freedom of religion’ or political pluralism in religion? Christianity.

What We Look for in the New Testament and Subsequent History: Attitudes Towards...

1. Other Nations (Outsiders)
2. Wealth
3. Minorities Within the Nation (Neighbor)

The Early Church (30 – 313 AD): A Transnational Reconciliation Movement

1. Other Nations, Outsiders: evangelistic, reconciling, transnational¹

Luke 6:27 But I say to you who hear, love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, ²⁸ bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. ²⁹ Whoever hits you on the cheek, offer him the other also; and whoever takes away your coat, do not withhold your shirt from him either. ³⁰ Give to everyone who asks of you, and whoever takes away what is yours, do not demand it back. ³¹ Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. ³² If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. ³³ If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. ³⁴ If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. ³⁵ But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. ³⁶ Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

2. Wealth: a pilgrim mentality, value sacrifice & generosity, demonstrate justice and mercy²

Luke 12:13 Someone in the crowd said to him, ‘Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.’ ¹⁴ But he said to him, ‘Man, who appointed me a judge or arbitrator over you?’ ¹⁵ Then he said to them, ‘Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions.’...²⁴ Consider the ravens, for they neither sow nor reap; they have no storeroom nor barn, and yet God feeds them; how much more valuable you are than the birds!...²⁷ Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; but I tell you, not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. ²⁸ But if God so clothes the grass in the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, how much more will He clothe you? You men of little faith! ²⁹ And do not seek what you will eat and what you will drink, and do not keep worrying. ³⁰ For all these things the nations of the world eagerly seek; but your Father knows that you need these things. ³¹ But seek His kingdom, and these things will be added to you. ³² Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has chosen gladly to give you the kingdom. ³³ Sell your possessions and give to charity; make yourselves money belts which do not wear out, an unfailing treasure in heaven, where no thief comes near nor moth destroys. ³⁴ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Luke 14:33 So then, none of you can be my disciple who does not give up all his own possessions.

3. Minorities Within: evangelistic, politically inclusive, politically plural³

Luke 9: 51 When the days were approaching for his ascension, he was determined to go to Jerusalem; ⁵² and he sent messengers on ahead of him, and they went and entered a village of the Samaritans to make arrangements for him. ⁵³ But they did not receive him, because he was traveling toward Jerusalem. ⁵⁴ When his disciples James and John saw this, they said, ‘Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?’ ⁵⁵ But he turned and rebuked them, and said, ‘You do not know what kind of spirit you are of; ⁵⁶ for the Son of Man did not come to destroy men’s lives, but to save them.’ And they went on to another village.

Luke 14:12 And he also went on to say to the one who had invited him, ‘When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, otherwise they may also invite you in return and that will be your repayment. ¹³ But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and

¹ e.g. Matthew 5:38 – 48; 6:14 – 15; 28:16 – 20; Luke 4:14 – 30; 6:20 – 49; 24:35 – 53

² e.g. Luke 3:10 – 14; 6:20 – 49; 12:13 – 34; 14:1 – 33; 16:1 – 13; 18:15-19:10; 21:1 – 4. Contrast Qu’ran Surah 4:1 – 14

³ e.g. Luke 9:51 – 56; 10:25 – 37; 14:12 – 14; 15:1 – 32; Rom.9 – 11

you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.’

Romans 11:28 From the standpoint of the gospel they [Israelites who do not believe in Jesus] are enemies for your sake, but from the standpoint of God’s choice they are beloved for the sake of the fathers;²⁹ for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable.³⁰ For just as you once were disobedient to God, but now have been shown mercy because of their disobedience,³¹ so these also now have been disobedient, that because of the mercy shown to you they also may **now** be shown mercy. (emphasis mine)

Summary: The Church & the Nations

The New Testament writers speak of the trans-national body of Christ as a real community, not merely a theoretical construct on which to hang the local church (as in much of the Protestant tradition, which I must say regretfully as a Protestant). Thus, Christians are called to have higher loyalty to the global body of Christ than to their nations of origin, even in times of war and conflict between nations. This does not settle all questions of conduct, but it has gone a long way to shape Christian responses to various conflict situations.

1. Forgiveness of one’s enemies and detractors is fundamental to being in Christ and participating in the mission of the body of Christ. Lack of forgiveness and apathy towards the work of reconciliation call into question one’s being in Christ. The early church called Roman officers engaging in warfare to resign if they became Christians.⁴ This continues the implications of the teaching of Genesis 1 – 11: God invests His image in each and every human being, giving each intrinsic value; God calls each and every person, since we are in His image, into the responsibility of recognizing and honoring the image of God in another. We would therefore expect Christians to play more human rights-oriented, civil rights-oriented, and mediating roles in politics, like Canadian Christians working for land to be restored to First Nation peoples.
2. At times, the Bible portrays God as supporting a people (an ethnos) in their hope for freedom (e.g. Israel’s exodus), resembling the idea that a people can engage in revolution against a state. The Bible also speaks of states as having some sovereignty (Romans 13), supporting a medieval, traditional view of the divine right of kings. This partly explains the tortured and conflicted path the church has taken, at times supporting regimes and at others revolution/civil disobedience. These Scriptures are valuable but are not the whole biblical picture, even Romans 13, which merely reiterates the basic thought of ‘a life for a life’ from Genesis 9, but does not give Paul’s comprehensive thought on the Roman Empire. Thus, the fundamental tension between classical conservatism and liberalism, i.e. the medieval view of authority from above and the Enlightenment view of authority from below, is left unresolved in Scripture.
3. We need a normative framework for the church drawn from Jesus’ ethical commands. From an ethical standpoint, it needs to be more of a bottoms-up deduction upholding Jesus’ ethics versus a tops-down general deduction about theories of ‘the state’ or ‘the nation’ or ‘the corporation’ that always tends to diminish the radical ethics Jesus hands down to us. This is because ‘patriotism’ in its various forms elevates ‘our people’ over ‘other people,’ and makes killing others acceptable while at the same time making dying for peace and reconciliation appear unreasonable. These two ethical moves alone are crucial steps away from genuine New Testament ethics. Jesus put ‘our people’ and ‘other people’ on the same level and called us to love all humanity; he made dying for peace and reconciliation perfectly acceptable, but killing unacceptable.
4. Financial sharing across the body of Christ universal is both taught and assumed in the New Testament. This is most evident in Jesus’ teaching on table fellowship (in Luke 14:1 – 33; 16:1 – 9; 18:15 – 19:10) and

⁴ Dale W. Brown, “Pacifism” in *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics & Pastoral Theology*, p. 645. Contrast Qu’ran Surah 4:74 – 76. See also Roland H Bainton, “The Early Church and War,” in *Christian Life: Ethics, Morality, and Discipline in the Early Church* (NY: Garland Publishing, 1993), p. 193 – 216; John C. Cadoux, *The Early Christian Attitude to War: A Contribution to the History of Christian Ethics* (London: Headley Bros. Publishers, 1919); William L. Elster, “The New Law of Christ and Early Christian Pacifism” in *Essays on War and Peace: Bible and Early Church*, edited by Willard M. Swarthy (Elkhart, IN: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1986), p. 108-129; Adolf Harnack, *Militia Christi: The Christian Religion and the Military in the First Three Centuries* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1981); John Helgeland, Robert J. Daly & J. Patout Burns, *Christians and the Military: The Early Experience* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985); Michel-Jean Hornus, *It Is Not Lawful For Me to Fight: Early Christian Attitudes Toward War, Violence, and the State* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press), 1980.

the church's early shared life (Acts 2, 4, 6). Paul's collection among the Gentiles for the Jewish believers (e.g. 2 Corinthians 8 – 9, Romans 15) demonstrates unity across the broader body. We must be very cautious not to smugly justify capitalism, socialism, etc. on biblical grounds because all such systems reflect a 'settlement ethics' and not a 'pilgrim ethics.' The teaching of Genesis 1 – 11 on the intrinsic value of human life over against the social order, along with the pilgrim ethics of the New Testament, its radical generosity towards the poor, and hard stance against greed seem to require evaluating all human economic conduct against the treatment given *the poorest and most vulnerable persons*.

5. Therefore, we can say that nationalism, ethnocentrism, and tribalism are major political ideologies that compete with the group identity intended by the corporate 'in Christ' language of the New Testament (see 'rulers and authorities' in 1 Corinthians 2:6 – 8; 15:24; Ephesians 1:21- 23; 3:10; 6:12; and 'elemental things of this world' in Galatians 4:3 – 9; Colossians 1:16; 2:8; 2:15; 2:20). These collective political group ideologies are idolatrous. Just as 'authority from above' was idolatrous in the first century, 'authority from below' creates the idolatry of the nation, ethnos, clan, and/or tribe. Apparently, Christians in the West tend to assume that once 'the state' was de-mythologized, this was a mark of the church's victory and that the church's political problems were essentially solved. I contend, rather, that the mythology just shifted location and the critical discourse did not keep up.

Summary: The Church & the States

If Jesus is Lord of the church, and if Jesus will be the only Lord of the future, how does the church relate to other voices of authority? This is a vexing problem that has always posed a challenge for the church.

1. *External orientation:* The proper way to frame this discussion is not in terms of 'church and state.' It is, in part, 'church and *states*.' This multiple-state-at-a-glance view helps us avoid an idolatrous patriotism and a naïve theocratic approach. It properly sees the church as a trans-national community competing with other political allegiances (e.g. tribe, ethnicity, nation). As a trans-national community, we are concerned about the state's influence in engendering patriotism and promoting international conflict.
2. *Internal orientation:* As resident aliens and pilgrims subject to local governments, we affirm in general the institution of the state, as a temporal institution, even as we engage & critique specific aspects or actions of the state.

The full expression of Christian political theology derived from the New Testament must start with 'church, *states*, and *Israel*.' The apostle Paul firmly believed that 'Israel according to the flesh' (by which he meant multi-ethnic Judaism, practicing physical circumcision) was the object of both compassion and evangelistic mission (e.g. Romans 11). Caring for Israelites at the political level would have led naturally towards extending political recognition to other religions as well. This would have led to a political pluralism, not a political theocracy where non-Christians were disadvantaged in various ways. The shift to political pluralism would have saved Europe all the wars of religion.⁵ The Diaspora Jewish community especially was the victim of Gentile Christian anti-Semitism.

Christians must stand against the state's role as an agent of a dominant powerful group to 'purify' the nation, whether along racist lines (e.g. the government of the State of Israel treating Palestinians or other non-Jews as second-class citizens; the U.S. and non-white communities) or religious (e.g. Iran's treatment of Christians or the Philippines' treatment of Muslims). As Jesus practiced inclusiveness in table fellowship, we support efforts to make political processes more inclusive of the disenfranchised, the alien, the poor (e.g. the Civil Rights Movement), and the non-Christian (e.g. Indonesia). *Conversion and blasphemy should not have civic punishments*. These efforts are minimum ethical expressions of the Christian community within any given society and are symbolic expressions of a non-coercive invitation to join the Christian community.⁶

⁵ See O'Donovan, *The Desire of Nations*

⁶ See also Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*

Part Two: The Political Posture of the Christian Church in the West⁷

The Medieval European Church (313–1600 AD): A Gradual Convergence with Empire

1. Other Nations: Nationalistic, imperialistic
2. Wealth: Concerned with social stability, settlement ethics (vs. pilgrim ethics)
3. Minorities Within: Exclusive, politically theocratic⁸

Exception: Catholic Poland from the 13th to 18th centuries (1) welcomed Jewish refugees; (2) had no nationalized view of land (significant!) but instead a network of independent nobles with a comparatively weaker central monarchy; and (3) extended considerable political equality and rights towards Jewish settlers, although a few urban riots occurred against Jews (in 1348 – 9, 1407, 1494); the Jewish Hasidic Renaissance flowered in Poland.

The Lutheran & Reformed Trajectories (1517–present): State–Church Unions, then Pluralism

1. Other Nations: Nationalistic, imperialistic (Reformed churches failed to do global missions for 250 years, until the remarkable missionary William Carey)
2. Wealth: Allied with aristocrats and merchants against Catholic landowners, concerned with social stability, settlement ethics (vs. pilgrim ethics)

The influential political philosopher John Locke, one of the first Enlightenment philosophers, wrote in 1690: ‘God gave the world to men in common; but since he gave it them for their benefit, and the greatest conveniences of life they were capable to draw from it, it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. *He gave it to the use of the industrious and rational, (and labour was to be his title to it)...* That was his property which could not be taken from him where – ever he had fixed it. And hence subduing or cultivating the earth, and having dominion, we see are joined together... So that God, by commanding to subdue, gave authority so far as to appropriate: and the condition of human life, which requires labour and materials to work on, necessarily introduces private possessions.’⁹

3. Minorities Within: Exclusive, politically theocratic. Reformed theology beginning from John Calvin repeated the Augustinian mistake of synthesizing church and state, using the civic code of the Mosaic Law as the political blueprint for the church to implement within any given nation. It is vital to know how to argue with this theological orientation.¹⁰

Exceptions: Roger Williams in Providence, Rhode Island (1636) was a political pluralist who did not follow the theocratic model of John Winthrop. The English Bill of Rights (1689) made England tolerant of religious diversity between Protestants and Catholics. The English Bill of Rights and the American Bill of Rights became the models for the rest of Europe, Canada, and Australia to adopt.

The Radical Reformation Trajectory (1525–present): Small Counter-Cultural Societies

1. Other Nations: Not sure; too small
2. Wealth: pilgrim (vs. settled), value sacrifice & generosity, justice & mercy
3. Minorities Within: evangelistic, politically inclusive, politically plural

⁷ I examine European Christianity because (1) it has the longest history of where ‘Christianity’ came into political power, and (2) it has had the biggest influence on U.S. religious and political culture. We do not see the same patterns in Asian and African Christianity during this time period.

⁸ In *City of God*, Augustine argued that the state should punish Christian heretics. This opened the floodgates for the violent utilization of the state by the church against other communities of faith.

⁹ John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, 1690, V.34 – 35, emphasis mine

¹⁰ Sebastian Castellio (1515 – 1563) argued with Calvin. See *Concerning Heretics: An Anonymous Work Attributed to Sebastian Castellio* (New York: Octagon Books, 1965); and Roland Bainton, *The Travails of Religious Liberty* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1951).

The Contemporary Catholic Church (1960–present):

1. Other Nations: Leaning towards transnational
2. Wealth: Capitalism qualified by strong justice and mercy concerns

The original source of all that is good is the very act of God, who created both the earth and man, and who gave the earth to man so that he might have dominion over it by his work and enjoy its fruits (Gen.1:28). God gave the earth to the whole human race for the sustenance of all its members, without excluding or favouring anyone. *This is the foundation of the universal destination of the earth's goods.*¹¹ In this sense, it is right to speak of a struggle against an economic system, if the latter is understood as a method of upholding the absolute predominance of capital, the possession of the means of production and of the land, in contrast to the free and personal nature of human work... Such a society is not directed against the market, but demands that the market be appropriately controlled by the forces of society and by the State, so as to guarantee that the basic needs of the whole of society are satisfied. The Church acknowledges the legitimate role of *profit* as an indication that a business is functioning well. When a firm makes a profit, this means that productive factors have been properly employed and corresponding human needs have been duly satisfied. But profitability is not the only indicator of a firm's condition. It is possible for the financial accounts to be in order, and yet for the people — who make up the firm's most valuable asset — to be humiliated and their dignity offended... In fact, the purpose of a business firm is not simply to make a profit, but is to be found in its very existence as a community of persons who in various ways are endeavouring to satisfy their basic needs, and who form a particular group at the service of the whole of society. Profit is a regulator of the life of a business, but it is not the only one; other human and moral factors must also be considered which, in the long term, are at least equally important for the life of a business.'¹² In addition to the irrational destruction of the natural environment, we must also mention the more serious destruction of the human environment, something which is by no means receiving the attention it deserves.¹³

3. Minorities Within: politically inclusive, politically plural

Though undeniably late in coming to this position, the Catholic hierarchy in its Second Vatican Council simultaneously modernized itself and moved back to its biblical roots, especially on its teachings of human dignity, human rights, peace, and social justice. 'Most strikingly, the Church came to endorse religious freedom – the right of people to choose and to practice their own religious faith – as a human right.'¹⁴ The Church finally shed its 'Christendom model' theology, wherein the Church occupies, or should occupy, a privileged religious place in society. Since then, the Catholic Church has been a leader in democratization and freedom movements all over the world. Catholics stood in opposition to dictators in Lithuania, Ukraine, South Korea, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Ecuador, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Peru. In cases where Catholics once enjoyed a privileged symbiotic relationship with dictators, they withdrew from those relationships and opposed the dictators: in Spain after 1970, Portugal, and the Philippines. In Africa, where the Catholic Church was independent from the state at the time of democratic changes, it very actively agitated for democracy: in Congo, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Mozambique, South Africa, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. As a result, political scientist Samuel Huntington said that the period 1974 – 1991 was 'overwhelmingly a Catholic wave' of democratic movements.¹⁵ The position of the Catholic Church on religious freedom has been vital to the stability of these nascent democracies.

¹¹ Pope John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, IV.31

¹² *ibid*, IV.35

¹³ *ibid*, IV.38

¹⁴ Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York & London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), p.111

¹⁵ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), p.76. quoted in Toft, Philpott, Shah 2011, p.111

The Religious – Political Cultures of the United States

Dominant Protestant Fundamentalism (Politically Nationalistic and Theocratic)	Christian Streams Against Dominant (Politically Pluralistic, Social Justice-Oriented)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Nationalistic, Imperialistic 2. Materialistic, Capitalistic 3. Exclusive, Politically theocratic 	Roger Williams, Quakers, Mennonites, Historic Black Church, Methodist abolitionists, Dorothy Day & Catholic Worker Movement, a few evangelical voices

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