

A
CHRISTIAN
PERSPECTIVE
ON
POLITICAL
THOUGHT

Stephen Charles Mott

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Political
Thought

Stephen Charles Mott

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**A Christian Perspective
on Political Thought**

To Sandy

Acknowledgments

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The book is dedicated to Sandra R. Mott, my wife and *copine*. She cares deeply, competently, and creatively for many people within a wide web of relationships to family, students, colleagues, church, and sick children and their own families. Knowing her gives me hope for my visions.

Beverly, Mass.
August 1992

S.C.M.

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**A Christian Perspective
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Introduction

The Importance of Political Ideas

Like air and water, politics is something in which everybody has a self-interest. Limits of supply also characterize its concerns; decisions must be made about them. Politics often even treats water and clean air. It deals with subjects in which the whole society has interest and which have consequences that affect the whole community or a substantial portion of it.¹

Political action is influenced by ideals as well as by material desires and self-interests. People care about the nature of the society in which they live, not just about what it does for them as individuals. Widely shared values and collective purposes, even public moods, exert influence on political choices with a degree of independence from the actual needs of a citizen. For example, support for policies regarding health care or employment does not necessarily correlate with the degree of a family's needs in those matters.

People have a desire for public policy that is good by their standards. Public policies give expression to the public's general notion of the kind of society in which they want to live, what things are right and wrong, and what values the government should nurture and protect—whether these values are generosity, self-reliance, or courage. Racism and sexism in employment practices do not rise from market forces; rather, they reflect what the employer values, as well as what he or she wants to protect. Ideas of property influence how goods are distributed in the market. Conceptions about what is a fair wage and what rights exist for free education, free health care, or employment have a similar economic and political influence.² By their ideas about the way society should be, people have been deeply moved to hold on to their present arrangements or to struggle for change.

Ideologies provide a particularly powerful arrangement of ideas about society. *Ideology* is the picture of how society should be and how such a society is justified.³ It is an interconnected set of ideas and beliefs that articulates how the basic values of a group of people apply to the distribution of power in society.⁴ An ideology is the vision that gives a cohesive shape to social values and the dream of how the social order is to be organized by those values. Ideologies shape cultures in many ways that are not political, but law also gives expression to the society's social imagination and becomes an instrument of its realization.⁵

An ideology is possessed by a group, which uses it in relating to other groups and in dealing with conflicts within itself.⁶ Values are both determinants of behavior as well as weapons used by contestants.⁷ An ideology is not held with disinterestedness. It requires a commitment, even partisanship.⁸

The social import of social visions can be illustrated by an example that is

removed from our present vested interests. In June 1381 peasants incensed by the implementation of a poll tax marched on London with demands that included the abolition of serfdom. On one side was the massed rebellion of peasants with the potential of drawing discontented urban artisans to their cause; on the other side were the armed might and political expertise of the state and the aristocracy that formed it.

On each side the quest for or the use of power was motivated by a view of society and an ideal of how power should be distributed in a society. The lords had a corporal view of society. They drew upon the Apostle Paul's teaching about the church as a body. Society is a body. The head is the prince. The heart, eyes, tongue, stomach, and intestines are all the nobility and the officials. The feet are the peasants. In this body, of course, "the number of feet exceeds even the centipede." God was at the apex of the corporal hierarchy of society. From this viewpoint a difference in function meant a difference in privilege and power. Maintenance of this inequality was right and important. Society was a hierarchical reality independent of individuals, who had little import apart from their place within it.

The peasants had been stirred by the preaching of a priest, John Ball. He had used social images taken from biblical passages on the creation and the last days. Creation reflected the equality of all people in that they have a common Creator and are equal in the sight of this Creator. The proper application would be a classless society. The unequal distribution of property was contrary to the will of God; thus, the oppressed who overthrew concentrations of power were being obedient to the will of God. The time for judgment was here. John Ball had been preaching these themes for twenty years before the uprising.

In both the case of the lord and of the peasant the actions taken were governed by views that were felt to be grounded in Christianity, yet the differing social consequences drawn were momentous. This is often the case with ideologies. How is one to choose between them? In this book we will evaluate prevalent traditions of such views about life from the standpoint of Christian theology.

Part of the stagnation of the American governmental system at end of the twentieth century is the paling of ideology. People lack a compelling vision of what society should be and hopes of what it could be. Public visions are replaced by private visions of personal and family comfort. The future means little more than retirement. People do not possess a common dream that could motivate them to make personal sacrifices on behalf of the needy, schools, libraries, or parks, or even the infrastructure of their economy.

At the same time the collapse of the Marxist statist economies has opened up the questions of ideology. Is there clearly only one remaining vision, that of a mixed capitalism that has lost its barbs? Are there other visions that could better motivate action toward social goods neglected in triumphal capitalism? Is a fresh vision called for with new emphases and new approaches?

Politics Expresses Theology

This book makes two significant assertions about politics. The first is that politics is about theology. Politics summons and activates one's fundamental precepts

about the nature of human relationships.⁹ The French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, notes that in politics there is an oscillation between the general principles that one holds for the economic and social world and one's immediate experience of social life. Political choices more than any other "involve the more or less explicit and systematic representation an agent has of the social world, of his position within it and of the position he 'ought' to occupy."¹⁰

What constitutes good public policy in one's mind is influenced by upbringing, social class, and religious, ethnic, and regional identity.¹¹ The interplay between one's sense of social oughtness and one's own social position warns us that an argument for the importance of political ideas should not lead to slighting the influence of social relations. In asserting the importance of theology for politics, we do not ignore the Marxist awareness of how politics reflects the aggregate of production relations.¹² That the peasants and the lords in our example from the Peasants' Revolt held the views that they did and not vice versa is not surprising. There is a correspondence between one's visions and one's actions. The predominant cultural perspective of a society will be one that justifies its class structure.

People are influenced both by their social interests and by the cultural code in which they perceive and interpret them. Not all peasants or all lords would hold the views that surfaced in the Peasants' Revolt. In fact, most oppressed people acquiesce in a view of the world that justifies their predicament. The viewpoints of the major groups in our lives exert a great influence on our perspectives. While a group's outlooks are significantly swayed by the economic relationships of its members and other factors that are to its advantage or disadvantage, such forces are only part of the influence upon its values. In addition, individuals can separate themselves and transcend the prevailing views of their origins. Intellectuals from the bourgeoisie may struggle on the side of the proletariat.

When social ideal and self-interest are aligned, the impact upon motivation is powerful. Once a political ideal or a religious ideal is possessed by an individual or a group, it compels political action more strongly than do self-interest and deprivation alone.

Another way to express this tension is that society holds together by power as well as by its cultural values. For example, government is respected because it has power to enforce its laws and because respect for governmental authority is a value of the culture; this value has been given a universal basis.¹³ In addition to various forms of power, political and social conduct is controlled by a common orientation to reality, nature, and human existence. As this orientation is grounded in religious belief, it expresses theology.

The science of politics from this perspective is not simply a study of order, authority, and efficiency. Since social ideals and moral values influence the public conduct of people, ethical categories are necessary for understanding political actors and government.

Government is not immoral. The conduct of monarchs, politicians, leaders of state, and citizens is not such that all behave on the level of the lowest possible moral denominator so that moral distinctions are meaningless.

Government is not amoral. To cite Thomas Aquinas' appropriation of classic political thought as an example, governmental action involves responsibility and a choice of means, and the means depends on ends that are moral.¹⁴ The people

engaged in politics are moral agents, attracted to both good and evil. They are confronted with challenges that go beyond the categories of technical efficiency. Because people are moral beings and need to integrate their world, they will defend their actions with reference to a broader and more abstract conception of reality and will be confronted with an image of what is right. Such an image is reflected politically as ideology. Since people will act morally or immorally as well as efficiently or inefficiently, a failure to deal with the basic ethical and theological questions of politics can lead to shoddy thinking or acting.

Charles McWhorter, an aide to Richard Nixon when he was vice president and later a loyal supporter, was interviewed during the Watergate crisis under Nixon's presidency. He was asked why there were so many charges of corruption flying about if, as McWhorter claimed, Nixon had been scrupulously honest when vice president. McWhorter responded, "There seemed to be an emphasis in the Administration on how to get results, and there were not enough people on the staff asking whether it's right or wrong."¹⁵ In contrast, the classical view is that politics is the doctrine of the good and just life, a continuation of ethics.¹⁶

As Christians, we must be concerned about what is the proper expression of our faith. What elements of our theology do we summon for politics? What is the consistent expression of these elements? What do they say about the nature of the good life? What is justice?

The answers are not more relative than other forms of theology although they may be more subjective and more complex. God has an objective will for these matters too. There is truth to be secured in exegesis and theological thinking as they apply to political ethics. Christian theology must set forth a clear demonstration of the values and perspectives that Christianity offers for political decision making.

Politics means the selection of common goals and deciding upon the ways of moving toward them. It involves coordinating the activities of organized society on the basis of these common goals, not merely seeking effective responses to immediate circumstances. Simply "to follow the road" is not sufficient; to know where the road leads and to decide if that is the destination we choose is also necessary. Christian activism, therefore, must be preceded by theological reflection in order to provide what R. H. Tawney described as a "clear apprehension of the deficiency of what is and the character of what ought to be."¹⁷

This book pursues the theological and ethical tasks of discerning the structures of the common life and defining their direction. Paul Ramsey called such reflection and articulation the church's business in politics. Christian political thought clarifies the values of the common life and the range of legitimate alternatives in approaching them.¹⁸ This study, therefore, is not a treatment of isolated political issues; rather, it is the development of fundamental elements of a social and political philosophy and a critical application of them to leading political standpoints.

Part I presents a Christian political theory. In it I set forth criteria that Christians should use to evaluate political theory. The criteria are the understanding of power, human nature, the nature of group life, justice and love, government, and time.

The emphasis in this approach is to develop Christian political theory by drawing substantially upon a theological and biblical perspective. In turn we attempt to broaden the perspectives of theological knowledge by relating it to the fields of polit-

ical theory, public policy, and law. Other recent Christian writings on politics have a different strength in their helpful use of social scientific data to evaluate the effectiveness of political economic theories and of philosophical categories to clarify the arguments of their advocates.

One nevertheless cannot relate theological and biblical materials to political theory without fully engaging the social sciences, including history. A Christian interpretation of the fundamental elements of politics requires the religious sources of knowledge found in Scripture, theology, church history, and Christian experience. It also requires corroborating and expanding insights from political theory, sociology, anthropology, economics, psychology, and secular history.

Scripture provides essential conceptions for understanding the foundations and principles of politics. In using the Bible, however, one must be as much aware of where it does not apply as of where it does. I have described more fully elsewhere what might be called a dialogical approach to biblical hermeneutics.¹⁹ Simply, the ultimate authority of Scripture as it has been heard and read in the Christian's basic experience of life creates certain unformed perspectives that affect how she or he perceives the social world. Such a perspective would include a sensitivity to the poor, for example. This leads to an awareness of the plight of the poor in one's own world. The Christian then reads Scripture more intentionally; because of this experience, relevant biblical materials that otherwise might be neglected receive attention. This new reading of Scripture guides further observations of current society. One returns again to Scripture with expanded questions and ideas. Careful exegesis reveals which of them are appropriate to the intentions of the authors of the Scriptural passages examined. The process of hearing, observing, and asking continues.

The interplay of hearing the Bible and experiencing society comprises only two elements of the dialogue. The careful use of reason, particularly as theology, guides the process. The thought and practice of Christians who went before in the history of the church, as well as that of fellow members of the present church, confirm one's interpretations. Observations of society include the tools of the social sciences. The guidance of the Holy Spirit must be prayerfully sought throughout the process of interpretation.

Part II of the book applies the critical framework to an evaluation of political ideologies. The ideologies treated are traditional conservatism, liberalism, democracy, laissez-faire conservatism, Marxist socialism, and socialism. In the epilogue we briefly use fascism as a case study to draw observations about the corruptibility of political ideologies and the readiness of the church to face such questions.

My approach is to deal with the ideologies in their fundamental, historic forms rather than in the mixed forms in which they are most present to us. I believe that this approach is helpful in disclosing the distinct ethical issues. A characteristic of this book is the theological and ethical evaluation of the ideologies in their basic forms. It also has a historical approach, concentrating on classical thinkers and ideas within each vision. In contrast, several recent Christian publications highlight thorough analysis of contemporary political and economic positions.

The stakes are high for achieving a valid application of Christian thought to politics. A wrongly conceived system of belief presents several perils for political thinking. One hazard is an incomplete or incorrect understanding of our theology. An

example would be to consider justification before God by faith alone as granting release from responsibility for the world.

Another danger is to apply theological concepts that are not relevant to the political question at hand. The Calvinist doctrine that the number chosen by God for eternal salvation is limited does not settle the question of the inclusiveness of participation in political decision making, the issue of democracy.

A third peril is to ignore concepts that are relevant, such as the social justice of the Old Testament or the biblical concern for the physical body.

There also can be wrong applications of concepts that do have genuine significance for political thought. The concept of God's monarchy, which is a ground for criticism of human government, does not provide a model for authoritarian structures of human government. The commandment, "Thou shalt not steal," is not a refutation of socialism. Human dignity does not proscribe all forms of economic restraints by government.

The lack of thinking by Christians about the relationship of theology to politics produces naïve political thinking and wrongly directed political acts. The serious problem of the lack of Christian involvement in the struggle for social justice arises. Some Christians simply separate themselves from social questions. They find what Jacques Ellul describes as a cheap yet absurd feeling of relief from responsibility for anything public.²⁰ Other Christians have not withdrawn from political engagement yet have not examined what a Christian direction in politics might be.

Some Christians engage in politics very consciously as Christians yet their political positions do not appear to be in accord with a careful application of valid theological guidelines for Christian political thought. Christians can be very intentionally involved in politics as Christians without their politics being Christian. Differences will exist among the readers and the author in identifying to whom that description applies. Being genuinely grounded as a Christian means that this judgment must be made by a sincere examination of carefully established principles of Christian political thought, not by party or class loyalty or commitment to a particular issue or cause.

A disavowal of political ideology is a form of separation from politics. Idolatry and pretense to universality in any ideology must be challenged, but one must then not remove oneself from any association with current ideologies. Míguez Bonino correctly questions if it is possible "to claim a solidarity with the poor and to hover above right and left as if that choice did not have anything to do with the matter."²¹ In a musical, Joseph says, "Any dream will do." He is mistaken, however, as he would be if he said all dreams are the same and equally illegitimate. "The content of the dream makes all the difference."²² While rejecting any sacralization of ideology, we, again with Míguez, must recognize the place of "historical, analytical and ideological mediations" and "resolutely use the best *human* politics and economics at our disposal."²³

Our purpose in analyzing different options in political world-views is not to identify bad ones to be discarded and good ones to be accepted. Rather, to deepen our understanding of social life and to become more effective political actors, we seek to evaluate critically all options, to learn from their strengths, to be warned by their weaknesses.

Such an eclecticism reflects a certain theology of culture. It assumes the unity of truth. All truth, although broken and scattered in our fallen world, is united in God and can be used by God's children. The human creators of political culture are made in the image of God. Although culture is fallen with the human race, there is a scattered perception of truth even apart from special revelation; however, it is imperfect for social life and insufficient for salvation.

Response to such evaluations may instead be commitment or recommitment to one of the political orientations or to reform it from within. It also may mean seeking new social emphases within a mixed system in which one lives. Emerson's observation of liberalism ("reform") and conservatism would be appropriate for this alternative. ". . . Each is a good half, but an impossible whole. Each exposes the weaknesses of the other, but in a true society, in a true [human being], both must combine."²⁴ From gazing at these visions, some might rather dream new dreams. They may search for a new form of society, drawing upon vital elements of past visions.²⁵

Politics Is About Power

Politics also involves the collective effort to protect life from the threat that resides in the egoism of human groups. The common good cannot be guarded unless power is used against power. Accordingly, the second basic assertion that our treatise makes about politics is that politics is about power. Christian reflection must also expose the egoism in human group life and clarify the ground upon which government must rest.

By emphasizing the importance of politics in this study I am not returning to the old view of history that saw the elements of history as primarily the acts of individuals in and around political office. Politics is important because it is the expression of so much else, not because it is the single significant factor in history.

Theology gives direction to politics; the content of politics is power. The political process is the shaping, distribution, and exercise of power. Power is a handle that opens politics up to a broader perspective. It goes far beyond what we learned in high school civics about politics (knowing the names). Power is a concept that involves sociological analysis, economic analysis, and even theological analysis. Relationship to power is important in education, art, religion, and urban sociology.²⁶ Our concern is not a description of the political system—who are the members of the cabinet and who appoints whom—but an ethical comprehension of the sources of power, the distribution of power, and the validation of power.

Power is a critical component of both international and domestic political activity. The international dimensions of politics and political theory, however, are not treated adequately within this study. This is a limitation. The nature of politics and the role of political visions in these areas are not any less in need of such analysis.

We face a crisis of power. The first aspect of this crisis is the pride of power. In our lifetime we have repeatedly seen excessive power used for insignificant and questionable ends. As a consequence, there also is a crisis in the validation of power. Many feel the Christian position to be the rejection of power altogether. The mis-

uses of power lead to a moral repugnance about power and a retreat from power—and in reality a retreat from politics. There never is a power vacuum, however. Simply to reject power allows the pride of power and the concentration of power to go on unchecked. We need to understand power—its dangers, its checks, and its necessary and proper use. This understanding requires the perspective of Christian theology.

Value of Evaluating Political Theory

The study of political thought makes several contributions to effective leadership in the church and in society. People are hurt by the way power is used. The exercise of power, therefore, is a moral issue and thus a religious issue. The impetus of our study is a moral and religious concern that life in society conform more closely to goodness and justice.

Power is used according to different views of politics. Christianity is used to uphold many of these views. People are hurt because of distorted views, supported by bad theology. Christians are challenged to identify where they stand in the conflict of political ideologies. Accordingly, an alumna of my seminary, doing evangelism in Colombia, South America, wrote to me about the importance of this type of study for students preparing for foreign missions.

To enact social justice is to shape the practice of power. Responsible exercise of power for the sake of the Reign of Christ can be assisted by critical knowledge of traditions of the employment of power. Christian citizens must know how to draw upon their Christian resources in addressing political decisions. Members in the church who are called to careers that involve influencing public policy require this preparation in a special way. What is available often fails to be rooted deeply in theology or Scripture. There is need within the church for substantial works that address public values while drawing deeply upon biblical and theological resources and the traditions of the church. Such a work would contribute both to theological scholarship and to the understanding of faith and mission.

Finally, a mature understanding of political culture based upon Christian reflection will provide a more effective context for carrying out the dimensions of our callings that are not political. We will more fully comprehend the needs of the people with whom we serve, teach, and disciple and the challenges of the society that we share with them.