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# Church, State and Citizen: Christian Approaches to Political Engagement

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# Church, State, and Citizen

*Christian Approaches to Political  
Engagement*

Edited by

SANDRA F. JOIREMAN

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## Introduction

*Sandra F. Joireman*

Religion in general, and Christianity in particular, has remarkable vigor in American politics. It motivates individuals to act on both domestic and international policy issues and encourages a wide range of political behavior, from voting to lobbying or protest. The faith of various Christian politicians has been both a subject of public interest and an issue in political campaigns. In the United States, the public expects that candidates will declare their religious beliefs in any description of qualifications for political office. This is unusual in the politics of developed countries.<sup>1</sup> The recent emphasis within the popular press and some academic writings on the importance of the Christian vote or the Christian political lobby can lead one to the impression that there is one type of Christian voting behavior or one kind of Christian political lobbying. Yet careful observers of Christian political behavior have noted that in the past few years there has been increasing variation among different factions of North American Christians over specific policies (Guth et al. 2005). Moreover, Christians of a variety of persuasions are becoming involved in policy areas that have not previously been thought to be of concern to Christians, such as international human rights issues (Hertzke 2004). This diversification of political advocacy illuminates what has always been present within Christianity—an array of positions regarding the role of the state and the role of the individual Christian citizen within the state. There is no one “Christian” approach to politics. Rather, Christians evince multiple approaches to the state and political

action, extending from the extreme of rejection of state authority to support of everything a state decides, based on the belief that it has been sovereignly appointed to its role.

In his 1951 book, *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr articulated five ways that Christians thought about how to understand themselves in relation to the world. “Culture” to Niebuhr was more encompassing than popular practices and trends; he used the word *culture* to denote the social and political spheres. His categorization illustrated divisions among Christians in terms of how they view the world. Niebuhr noted, “So great . . . is the variety of personal and communal ‘beliefs in Jesus Christ,’ so manifold the interpretation of his essential nature, that the question must arise whether the Christ of Christianity is indeed one Lord” (Niebuhr 1951: 12–13). Niebuhr’s work was an epiphany for many, a moment in which it became clear why there could be such oppositional political opinions among people sharing the same core beliefs. Niebuhr influenced the thinking of generations of Christians, both scholars and popular readers. This book stands on Niebuhr’s shoulders, as contributors describe Christian approaches to the state from several traditions. While we stray intentionally from Niebuhr’s limited categorizations of Christian political belief, we seek to clarify both the theology and the practice of Christian approaches to the state and citizenship. In so doing, we undertake the goal of articulating complex and nuanced Christian beliefs about government and the proper role of the Christian as a political actor and citizen.

Often, Christians disagree about what appropriate political action might look like for reasons that are rooted in theological positions formed by particular historical moments. These theological differences have evolved in local contexts, prompting adherents to form contextually sensitive viewpoints on politics that have relevance today. Understanding the theology and history behind political beliefs is the first step toward more informed discussions, and even constructive disagreements, about and between these traditions.

### The Changing Map of Christian Faith

Christianity is diverse. Nowhere is that more apparent than in the United States and Canada, where waves of immigrants transplanted their own particular expression of Christianity. In any given city or town in North America, it is possible to find ten or more different Christian traditions. To an outsider, these different churches or denominations appear similar. They share a core theology regarding the Trinity, God’s role in creating the world, and Jesus’ death and resurrection. Agreement exists on many statements in the Apostles’ Creed, but

the validity of the Apostles' Creed as a summation of Christianity and its use are debated. There are immense differences between Christian traditions in worship practices, the frequency and nature of Communion, formality, use of sacraments, the nature of preaching, use of the liturgical calendar, and beliefs about the accepted sources of revelation. There are also differences in styles of governance, decision making, and the weight given to tradition and history. Variations in the form of worship can be so extreme that a Christian from one tradition may feel not only ill at ease with the services in another tradition but also confused. Dissimilarities among the Christian worship traditions are indicative of differences we see in other aspects of the faith. One of the goals of this book is to identify, for both Christians within these traditions and readers who are not, where the points of difference lie and their causation. We believe this will benefit constructive dialogue among Christians, as well as between Christians and those with other beliefs.

Christianity is changing. Its geographic center is shifting away from North America toward the global South. As the geographic center changes, so does the nature of the dominant form of Christianity, because the Pentecostal and evangelical movements are seeing the most growth. As we search for a greater understanding of Christianity and its implications for political action, we need to remember that the patterns of interaction between individual Christians and the state that we see in North America will be replicated in other settings around the world where theological positions are shared but the context is different. Although the role of religion in U.S. politics may appear peculiar when it is compared with religious expression in European states, where the percentages of practicing Christians in the population are relatively low, it is familiar to those who study religious influences on politics in the developing world, where religion has more salience.<sup>2</sup> As Christianity is experiencing its greatest growth in the global South, it is there we should expect to see a growing role for faith-related political action. Strong theological voices from Africa, Asia, and Latin America are already defining the terms of key issues and conflicts within the Christian tradition (Jenkins 2002). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the African bishops' role in the current Anglican controversy in the United States. It is also evident in the Catholic tradition because a growing church in the global South has meant that issues such as debt relief are being articulated as Catholic concerns in North American churches. Theologies may initially be established in a Western context, but in those traditions that are flourishing overseas, theologies are being reinterpreted in ways that stretch the control over orthodoxy that is a historical artifact of the Western church. Understanding how theology affects politics in the North American context is important for any attempt to predict the political effect of the growth of Christianity on the global South.

## On State and Nation

The political scientists who have contributed chapters to this book are all Americans and, for the most part, are writing from within the American context and from within their own theological traditions. However, as comparativists and specialists in international relations, they bring understandings of the concepts of state, nation, political action, and the nature of the global church that are intentionally broader than the American context and historical setting. Only one of the traditions considered in the following chapters, Pentecostalism, developed primarily in the United States. The rest were formed in political and historical contexts outside North America, which has influenced their theologies of political engagement.

To those studying international politics, the terms *state* and *nation* are not interchangeable. A state is a legal entity, a territory with a people inside its borders and a government that has the recognition of the United Nations. Max Weber has famously called the state “a compulsory association which organizes domination. It has been successful in seeking to monopolize the legitimate use of physical force as a means of domination within a territory” (Weber 1994: 310–311). Weber indicates that what distinguishes a state from other organizations is that it can use force to control its population, defend its borders, and mount challenges to the sovereignty of other states. He is clear in his definition that the ultimate form of control is violence and that the state has a legitimate claim on its use. This expression of political authority echoes Romans 13, the critical New Testament passage regarding the role of the state.<sup>3</sup>

For rulers hold no terror for those who do right, but for those who do wrong. Do you want to be free from fear of the one in authority? Then do what is right and he will commend you. For he is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. (Romans 13: 3–4, New International Version)

The state is a political entity. It has authority and can legitimately use force, for good or for ill. Yet, the realm of the political is more encompassing than that of the state alone, and some political positions developed by Christians are not based on a theology of the state alone but on understandings of citizenship and the responsibilities that come with it.

A nation is a psychological or emotional attachment to a particular group of people. It is a shared fundamental identification. For example, we use *nation*

correctly in the sense of Navajo nation, meaning a group of people with a shared identity that takes precedence over other interests and values. We can think of states that contain many nations, that is, groups of people whose primary affiliation is to a smaller political group. Patriotism is a particular expression of nationalism—a feeling of allegiance to the state and solidarity with those living in the state. Not every state elicits this sort of allegiance from its population, although according to Ernst Haas, the strongest and most effective states work toward encouraging an emotional attachment to the state among the population (Haas 1997). Rwanda fell into violence because allegiance to the ethnic group (nation) was stronger than allegiance to the state.

The distinction between state and nation becomes important when we look at Christian political theology. For example, in this volume James W. Skillen discusses instances in which nations of people adopted an understanding of themselves as the “new Israel.” In these instances, the boundaries of national or group identity were determined by a theological belief in predestination. On the other hand, an Anabaptist understanding of the state results in great discomfort with any expressed allegiance to the state or nation.

## Developing Themes

The chapters that follow present seven different Christian approaches to understanding the state that have been influential in North America. These particular traditions were chosen to demonstrate the breadth of positions regarding the appropriate relationship between the church and the state. Each approach is authentically Christian, and the range of traditions represented, though not exhaustive, captures much of the disparity within the larger Christian tradition.<sup>4</sup> In addition to specific denominations, there are also important Christian movements represented here: Anabaptism, evangelicalism, and Pentecostalism. The latter two movements in particular have had a tremendous impact on American politics and will continue to influence political expression in the United States and around the world in contexts such as Asia and Africa.

The chapters in this book follow a loose chronological order and demonstrate how ideas about the appropriate role of the state and its importance changed significantly over time. In the last two chapters on evangelicalism and Pentecostalism, the focus changes toward a political activism and understanding that is more individualistic and pietistic, less reliant on a clearly articulated theological position. This shift is noteworthy because of the tremendous influence that Pentecostalism and evangelicalism have had in the past decades. To the extent that these are the Christian traditions growing most rapidly in

the world, we are seeing more Christians with increasingly individualistic and theologically unreflective approaches to political action.

This book's chapter authors are all writing from within the tradition they discuss with three specific tasks. Their first goal is to identify the history leading to the formation of the tradition. Their second task is to identify that tradition's theological distinctives, which are often linked to the historical moment when the tradition was formed. Their final and perhaps most significant task is to discuss how these theological beliefs regarding the appropriate role of the state and the citizen influence political action. The point of these three tasks is to show the different theological demands with their resulting political actions and to help both Christian and non-Christian observers understand what they are looking at when they see radically different political actions all explicitly or apparently motivated by faith.

Beyond these three clear goals, the chapters weave in several subthemes related to Christian understandings of state and citizenship. Although each Christian group recognizes the Bible as fundamental to their beliefs, each treats it differently. For example, should the whole Bible be viewed as equally authoritative for the life and theology of the church (Reformed, Lutheran)? Or should the New Testament, in particular the life of Christ portrayed in the Gospels, be the hermeneutic lens through which the rest of scripture is interpreted (Anabaptist)? Should individuals be encouraged to confidently interpret the Bible on their own (Pentecostal)? No Christian tradition would deny the importance of scripture, but it is treated differently in each.

Each chapter also addresses the proper understanding of government and the hierarchy of authority and identifies how a believer should understand the responsibilities of the church, the state, and the citizen. The Catholic tradition has much to contribute to this discussion because the Catholic Church preexisted the institution of the modern state and has had to adapt to its modern significance. Some Christian groups have a very low view of the state, such as the early Swiss Anabaptists, who argued that government is "outside the perfection of Christ." Others, such as Anglicans, believe that it is the responsibility of the state and the church to cooperate in constructing the polity.

A related question that comes out of these religious traditions is how we judge the actions of a government. Do we follow Martin Luther's argument and judge governments not by the high standard of Christian love but by the lower standard of justice? Many of the chapters provide a particular understanding of war flowing out of the tradition's understanding of the state. Here we discover clear differences between Christian understandings of what the social contract entails. The Reformed tradition is the most hopeful regarding the use of the state in doing good and helping to create the Kingdom of God on earth. Other



traditions fall into a continuum regarding their position on the use of the state for good and the role that citizens might play within it.

The authors articulate a limited role for government.<sup>5</sup> They may differ over where to place the limits of government, but boundaries for the appropriate role of the state are present in every tradition. This idea of limited government has its foundations in the Christian doctrine of *imago dei*, the belief that human beings are made in and bear the image of God. If it is accepted that citizens of a state are made in the image of God, then the protection of basic human rights follows. This affirmation does not imply the full panoply of internationally recognized legal norms, but an implicit social contract—the exchange of protection for obedience. As Christianity permeated the political cultures of Western Europe, more individual protections developed. Christianity, specifically Protestantism, laid the foundations for democracy to flourish through an increased emphasis on the importance of individual conscience and the priesthood of all believers. Peter Berger rightly notes that these two beliefs led to an emphasis on literacy and education so that church members could read and understand the Bible for themselves. This increase in literacy and education fostered societies in which democracy could thrive (Berger 2004).

Moreover, political scientists have noted the importance of associational life to democracy (Putnam 2000). The divisive nature of the Protestant experience had the beneficial side effect of creating a rich associational life as Protestantism moved out of Europe and into North America and what was the colonized world through missionary activity and immigration. Protestants met together in Bible studies, small groups, aid societies, and sports leagues through their churches and denominations, creating a strong and varied associational life, or civil society. This associational element of Christianity creates conditions conducive to democratic development (Woodberry and Shah 2004).

## Theological Traditions

The following chapters demonstrate that Christianity provides a theological foundation for the state, although moving beyond this broad statement to the specifics of the social contract unearths disagreements between the traditions. Catholicism must come first in an analysis of church traditions, as it is impossible to understand the Reformation and what followed without a discussion of Catholic beliefs on hierarchy, authority, and the appropriate role of the state. Lutheranism and the Reformed tradition were the two major branches of the Protestant Reformation that began in Europe in 1524. Anabaptism, as the “radical fringe” of the Reformation, began at about the same time. Anglicanism was born

of a political struggle shortly after the Reformation and had little to do with theology, yet over time it developed into a distinct branch of Protestantism.

All these faith traditions emerged in Europe and were exported to North America via immigration and to the rest of the world through missionary activity and colonization. Evangelicalism bridges the European and North American continents because its roots are both in the Wesleyan movement in England and in the Great Awakening in the United States. Pentecostalism is peculiarly American and, not surprisingly, bears the stamp of American individualism in its theology.<sup>6</sup> It emerged out of the Holiness movement of John Wesley and had its signature emersion in the Azusa Street Revival of 1906. Since that time, Pentecostalism and the charismatic movement indirectly spurred the popularity of nondenominational churches in the United States and attracted hundreds of thousands of followers in the global South.

In chapter 2, Robert B. Shelledy discusses the Catholic perspective on the state and tracks its changes through time. He emphasizes the struggle the Catholic Church has had with wanting to establish Catholicism as the state religion while, in different contexts, desiring the promotion of religious pluralism. Shelledy notes that Vatican II changed how the church interacted with states. *Gaudium et Spes* freed the church from working exclusively through the state in each country and allowed it to permeate society in unique ways. The result is a Catholic Church that has become serious about religious freedom around the world and sensitive to the common good, broadly conceived. The Catholic Church has become an advocate for the political and economic well-being of individuals living in the developing world. Shelledy also points out the effect that Catholic social thought has had on bringing the Catholic Church into the modern era.

Martin Luther challenged the authority of the Catholic Church to interpret scripture for all its members. Luther's emphasis on the Bible, captured in the famous epithet *sola scriptura*, formed the basis of all of his theological and political contributions. Luther was familiar with the Augustinian formulation of two realms of authority, the temporal and the spiritual. Yet Luther moved beyond this dualism, arguing that these two worlds could not be completely separate. In chapter 3, Timothy J. Lomperis argues that Luther's understanding of the temporal and spiritual worlds as intertwined amounts to a "fused paradox" that compels Christians to lead lives of service in a world controlled by the devil. Lomperis traces the contemporary manifestations of this theological belief in the strong commitment to education and service among American Lutherans.

Whereas Luther had a clear belief in the devil and his control in the world, the other major strand of the Reformation, the Reformed tradition, focuses on evil in its human manifestation of sin and the "total depravity of man."

In chapter 4, James W. Skillen identifies unique political problems caused by the strong emphasis on predestination in the Reformed tradition. Skillen posits that the emphasis on predestination has historically been linked to groups believing that they are somehow ordained by God to be the new Israel. The danger of “chosen people myths,” well documented in the literature of comparative politics, suggests perilous consequences, from exclusion to genocide (Smith 1992). Skillen argues for a Reformed political perspective that moves beyond predestination and the depravity of man and focuses on creation. If human beings are made in the image of God and every sphere of life can be reformed to better mirror God’s image, then Christians have a particular role in governing to reform, so as to bring creation more in line with God’s character. Skillen questions whether this can be done through the modern system of nations and states that we have. He argues that although the goal of the Reformed Christian in governance is clear, the institutions for achieving that goal are unspecified. Skillen’s emphasis on creation as a theological distinctive of the Reformed tradition provides a new perspective on how Christians can envision their role in governance and politics.

Anabaptists read the Bible with a hermeneutic that privileges the life of Christ. Anabaptist political thought is often narrowed to pacifism, its most obvious political marker, but Anabaptists also have a complex understanding of citizenship and a unique view of the role of government. The Anabaptist break with the Reformation took place over the appropriate roles of the church and the state, specifically related to baptism, tithing, and the swearing of oaths. Today, Anabaptists in a variety of denominations still struggle with the appropriate role of the state. In chapter 5, I present a contemporary Anabaptist view of government; that it has a role of providing order so that the mission of the church can be fulfilled. This conception of the rightful place of government in service to the church sets Anabaptists apart from other Christian traditions. Anabaptists believe that the church should be the primary community for the Christian. This opinion has led to both pacifism and an understanding of citizenship in heaven that affects their political behavior in ways ranging from ambivalence about politics to protest against policies viewed as harmful to the worldwide church.

Only a few years after new Christian churches originated in the Reformation, ecclesiastical change continued in Europe with the birth of the Anglican Church in England. King Henry VIII did not agree with Martin Luther and did not support what was happening with the church in Germany. However, the establishment of an autonomous church in England had more to do with English politics and the future of the Tudor monarchy than with theological disagreements. Anglicanism developed theologically under Elizabeth I, embracing

a strong support of the state by the church. In chapter 6, Leah Seppanen Anderson argues that conceptually, the state and church were to cooperate to provide “good governance and sound religion.” As Anglicanism expanded through the British colonial project, it became more diverse, and the church changed to accommodate its varied constituencies. The first shoots of evangelicalism sprang up within the Anglican Church through the work of John and Charles Wesley in the 18th century. Although the work of the Wesleys later gave rise to Methodism, they never formally left the Anglican Church; they argued that the revivalist movement was well within the bounds of Anglicanism. Many evangelicals since have found a haven in Anglicanism, yet it is precisely the strain caused by the conservative evangelical branch of Anglicanism that has led to the present major conflicts within the global Anglican communion. The Anglican Church struggles to maintain the diversity resulting from its tremendous growth outside England in the 20th and 21st centuries.

Evangelicalism leavens each of these traditions in some form as a “tendency” demanding the primacy of biblical authority, personal salvation, and sharing the gospel message with others. In chapter 7, Timothy Samuel Shah traces the history of evangelicalism from its “prehistory” in the 17th-century Dutch Mennonites, through the life and work of John Wesley and the Great Awakening, into the contemporary era. Though, as with some of the other traditions detailed in this book, there is no unified tradition of political thought within evangelicalism, Shah notes that one can see certain political predispositions in the evangelical tradition that privilege the preaching and spread of the gospel over political goals. Yet by the 18th century, we can identify trends in evangelical political action that followed certain themes: a belief that the state should protect religious freedom, a concern with the virtue of the citizenry, support for limited government, and political action to alleviate human suffering.

Evangelicalism and Pentecostalism are both movements that draw adherents from particular denominations but can also claim supporters across a variety of Christian traditions. Pentecostalism has become one of the most rapidly growing Christian traditions, particularly outside Europe and North America (Barrett et al. 2001). Pentecostalism emphasizes the active role of the Holy Spirit in the life of a believer and the “second work of grace”—the baptism in the Holy Spirit. For Pentecostals, reading scripture is supplemented by the revelation that the Holy Spirit gives to the individual believer. In chapter 8, Stephen Swindle astutely notes that the authority given to individual revelation precludes a coherent view of the appropriate role of Christian citizenship in relation to the state, as each believer may be led by the Spirit to a distinct opinion. The status given to individual interpretation makes Pentecostal political behavior varied and unpredictable. The political unpredictability of Pentecostalism is

also found in nondenominational churches that might not call themselves Pentecostal but privilege the role of individual revelation in a similar manner.

In the concluding chapter, Mark Amstutz discusses the similarities in political approaches that exist in the traditions that are discussed in the book. He draws out four themes: the dignity of person, the universality and persistence of human sin, the need for a limited state, and the church's priority of proclaiming the gospel. Amstutz reminds readers that no single tradition expresses fully the divine strategy of redemption and that they are not fixed, but dynamic and responsive to a changing world.

The following chapters are not written by theologians. They are not authoritative statements of faith. Rather, they are informed reflections on the political implications of theological beliefs written by political scientists within these traditions. Each of the authors has tried to capture the essence of his or her Christian tradition, which is not an easy endeavor for denominations or movements that intentionally construct a broad theology of politics to promote inclusion. Different opinions and disagreement with those articulated are to be expected, particularly in terms of the perceived political implications of the traditions. Our hope is that these essays contribute to a fruitful conversation on the diversity of political manifestations of Christian faith and how the changing composition of the church might affect theological development in North America and elsewhere.

#### NOTES

1. It is not exclusively the case for Christians, and the impact of other religions in American politics and in the lives of politicians can also be noted.
2. See, for example, the work of Stephen Ellis and Gerrie Ter Haar on the role of religion in Africa (Ellis and Ter Haar 2004).
3. Romans 13 was certainly not referring to the modern state as we now know it, an entity that came into existence with the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648. However, it is referring to political authority more generally.
4. There is an intentional focus on the Western church in this book and no attempt here to integrate the position of the Eastern church on the role of the state after the Great Schism of 1054. One could make an argument for presenting even more denominational positions, but they begin to collapse into one another. Though there are some fine points of division, for example, within the Reformed tradition, Skillen's chapter captures a broad outline of beliefs that would be recognizable to Presbyterians and those in the Reformed churches.
5. Although we see in the Catholic tradition a changing position that has embraced the notion of religious freedom after Vatican II. Prior to Vatican II, the limits on the state were less obvious.
6. Though there are examples of Pentecostal experiences in churches all over the globe around the turn of the 20th century.

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