

GOD’S REIGN, GOD’S PEOPLE, AND WORLDLY GOVERNMENT

I am a Christian and I am a church member. In other words, I find my identity as a believer in a community of faith that I entered when I was baptized, and that has nurtured me through the years. I am also a citizen who is aware of and wonders about the wider community that exists around me. As Christian citizens we are confronted with questions that are at the same time very old and yet always new. For instance, is there a Christian perspective on politics or, perhaps better, are there biblical insights as to how a society ought to be ordered? If so, should Christian citizenship involve political engagement and possibly government service?

For the Greeks, who gave us the word “politics,” it was a matter of the *polis*. How to order a city-state in such a way that the community forms a commonwealth? How to shape a society in line with the ideal good—the *summum bonum*? At the time of Jesus, the focus on the *polis* had shifted to the Empire, and today we must increasingly think in terms of a global community of nations. Anyone – believer or non-believer – who has firm social-political views, will have made value and faith judgments about a host of fundamental questions. For instance, what is our vision of the future? What constitutes a just and fair society? What are the roles of power and coercive force? What kind of ruling authority can I in good conscience acknowledge and submit to? And, above all, what does it mean to be a human being who interacts with the world, or, in biblical parlance, with all of God’s creation?

Every political system and/or party is based on a theory of government that, in turn, is based on a belief-system. For Christians that theory is cast in the form of a theology. The primary focus is not on what our ideals are, but on what God has done and is doing. The emphasis is not on how we feel about ourselves, but on what the Bible reveals about us. The theme of “discipleship and politics” precedes the question of citizenship and politics. As a believer, I belong to God in a way that I could never belong to a nation.

For the purpose of this discussion, I will use the following topical outline:

- 1) Divine Reign and Righteousness
- 2) Israel and the Torah
- 3) The Christ and the Spirit
- 4) Sinners and Saints
- 5) Discipleship and Politics

Divine Reign and Righteousness

We start our exploration by talking about God. The story line of the biblical revelation is the drama from creation to the recreation of all things under the direction of the sovereign Lord of history. “The Lord reigns; let the earth rejoice!” (Psalm 97:1). “Dominion belongs to the Lord, and his rule is over the nations” (Psalm 22:28).

In the “New Testament” that same truth is usually expressed by using the term “Kingdom of God.” Some authors prefer the words “reign” and “kingship,” which is fine as long as it is not intended as a way of totally avoiding the connotation of “realm.” The God of the Bible is active in history as “the Holy One in our midst” (Hosea 9:11)—a stunning biblical claim, indeed.

Two other concepts are key to the picture of God’s Kingdom, namely “righteousness” and “law.” “Your righteousness is an everlasting righteousness and your law is the truth” (Psalm 119:142). The biblical drama is a story of redemption, and the three categories mentioned above are essential to an understanding of what that means. God’s law, as we shall emphasize throughout our discussion, embodies the divine righteousness. The gospel, too, is about God’s righteousness (Romans 1:16-17). How these biblical insights interrelate, and then also relate to our personal and collective existence, is the subject of this discussion.

Something must happen with respect to that law in order for the Kingdom of righteousness and peace to be established upon the earth. Why? Because God’s creation has been severely wounded by what God’s creatures have done or failed to do with the holy law of God. What is now needed, to use a term from the Jewish tradition, is *tikkun olam*—a mending of the world. According to the Christian understanding, God himself has taken the initiative in that process and thus we have received the gospel of the Kingdom, which is good news for the world—including the world of politics.

These then are the core questions we are concerned with: What is understood by redemption and how is it achieved? In what sense can it be said that the concepts of Kingdom of God, righteousness, and law are key to the biblical view of redemption, and how does all that relate to Christian citizenship and the laws of the land?

Israel and Torah

Mention redemption, and Christians may all too quickly be inclined to jump straight to the story of Jesus Christ. However, the true meaning of that story can only be grasped if we first fully immerse ourselves in the story of Israel and the Torah, which means “law” plus a good deal more. Consequently, when that word is used in what follows the reader should think of God’s commandments, statutes and ordinances *in the context of God’s total revelation to Israel through word and deed.*

Something happened in the Middle East that, according to the biblical witness, is of world historical significance: God elected the people Israel, and in their midst revealed himself as a God of the covenant—the Creator God who enters into a relationship with God’s creatures. Why the Jewish people? God knows! For us humans, that will always remain a mystery. God is the sovereign Lord, the Holy One who even in his revelation remains the Wholly Other One. “Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like you, majesty in holiness” (Exodus 15:11). What we *can* know about God, however, is what is needed for our salvation and service to the Almighty and the world.

What *is* revealed to us is that the God of the covenant is a gracious God whose very nature is love. “The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love” (Psalm 145:8). And because God is both great and good, God does not let his chosen people fend for themselves. They receive the gift of Torah, the law to guide them in the path of righteousness. In other words, the law is both a gift and an obligation. Here we meet the “God of pathos” (Abraham Joshua Heschel), not the Unmoved Mover of Aristotelian metaphysics. Israel’s poets and prophets found delight in God’s law. So did the apostle Paul. “The law is holy, and the commandment is holy, just, and good” (Romans 7:12). That, according to the “New Testament,” must be proclaimed as gospel truth.

The argument between Paul and his Jewish brothers and sisters was never about the sacred qualities of God’s law, but rather about the sinful nature of our behavior vis-à-vis that law. We simply are unable to pass the divinely appointed performance review. Both the “Old” and the “New Testament” define “sin” as transgression of the law (Psalm 11:10-11, I John 3:4). It is God’s will that a Kingdom of righteousness and peace (*shalom*) be established upon the earth—a world transformed into a new heaven and a new earth. In order for that to happen, God’s law, which is the Law of the Kingdom and embodies divine righteousness, *must be done and thus come to fulfillment* (find its full intent). That is where Jesus of Nazareth and the Holy Spirit come in.

The Christ/Messiah and the Spirit

According to Christian belief, the story of God’s revelation to Israel becomes concentrated in Jesus of Nazareth, son of Israel and Son of God. The Messiah becomes the representative of the nation. The name he received at birth already reflects the heart of the matter: “You are to name him Jesus,” the angel announces to Joseph, “for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). How will he do that? By fulfilling God’s righteousness as embodied in the law and by thus establishing a foundation for the coming Kingdom of God. Israel failed to “keep the entire commandment,” nor did it “diligently observe the words of [the] covenant,” and as a consequence the people have experienced the curse of exile and foreign oppression from a “grim-faced nation” (Deuteronomy 27:1; 29:1; 28:47ff.). Thus the law became a way to death rather than life (Deuteronomy 30: 15).

In the Christ/Messiah and the fulfillment of the law, the way of redemption was once again opened up to those who embrace the covenant in faith (Habakkuk 2:4). Furthermore, the parameters of the people of God were expanded to include the nations, and now the Church (*ecclesia catholica*) is invited to join Israel in its journey through history. The gospel, therefore, bears a distinctly Israelitish character, and so should Christian theology.

Jesus begins his ministry by focusing on our three key points. “I must proclaim the good news of the Kingdom of God...for I was sent for this purpose” (Luke 4:43). He further declared that he must “fulfill all righteousness” (Matthew 3:15) by fulfilling the

“law and the prophets” (Matthew 5:17-18). The Psalmist says that “the Lord is righteous and he loves righteous deeds” (11:7). The prophets of Israel even envisaged “a righteous nation that keeps faith” (Isaiah 26:2). God is pleased whenever his children act righteously. In the words of the prophet Nehemiah, God who is “great and awesome” keeps covenant and steadfast love with those who love him and keep his commandments (Nehemiah 1:4). Our Jewish friends call such deeds *mitzvot*. We take hold of the law of God. But, when we have tried our very best, we still fall short and miss the mark of holy righteousness or, in Jesus’ words, “all righteousness”—i.e. the full measure of righteousness as embodied in the law. Sin must be dealt with before divine righteousness can be established upon the earth.

Sin is a relationship-breaking force and the source of much estrangement. It is also a socially disintegrating force, the anti-power to the wholeness, harmony and peace that the Bible describes as *shalom*. Sin leads to the corruption of both the human heart and the historical process. The demands of the law, in all their complexity, can be summed up in one word: love. Love reflects the very Being of God, for God *is* love (I John 4:16). When sin takes over, the love of God and neighbor is replaced by a selfish *amor sui* and a *libido dominandi* (Augustine) that are destructive to personal and societal health. Above all, through sin guilt has entered the universe. Paradise is lost, or, in the words of the apostle Paul, we are now condemned to live “in this present evil age” (Galatians 1:4)—i.e. in a *state* of guilt.

Israel knows about guilt; paganism knows about fate and tragedy. Or, perhaps, it will wallow in an existentialist sense of absurdity. To acknowledge one’s sin and guilt shows a deeper and nobler humanity than being declared sick and hence free from responsibility. The “Old Testament” teaches us more in depth than depth psychology what the reality of guilt is all about. When all is said and done, we stand guilty before a holy God, and it is the law that persuades us of this fact. As Paul wrote in his letter to the Romans, if it weren’t for God’s law, we wouldn’t even know what sin is (Romans 3:20, 7:7). We might misinterpret it as just some unfortunate mistakes, or a flaw of character that can be corrected with good education or professional counseling. However, when we get hold of the law, we face more than a set of rules; we encounter the Ruler, a righteous and holy Lord and we find out that the law is more than we can handle. An act of God is needed to resolve the human dilemma.

The gospel tells us that God has indeed done that in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, whom we confess as the Messiah of Israel and Savior of the world. The cross was an act of sacrificial love (*agape*), the kind of holy love that does indeed fulfill the law and “all righteousness.” In that act of atonement, so clearly symbolized in the worship of Israel, we find reconciliation, forgiveness and freedom for the future. In forgiveness, God deals with our personal histories. In George Orwell’s book 1984, we read about the “mutability of the past”—people are “saved” by depriving them of memory. That is the deceit of totalitarianism. In fact, of course, we know that we can retrace our steps in space, but we cannot redo the past. Forgiveness is God’s way of doing precisely that in the miracle of divine grace.

But, there is more! When I receive assurance that my sins have been forgiven, that is a personal experience. However, when guilt as guilt before a holy and righteous God is atoned for, then that is a cosmic event. “Jesus Christ the righteous...is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world” (I John 2:2).

The law is still there as a guide, but no longer as a guilt-producer—what Paul called “the curse of the law” (Galatians 3:10-14). There is a new empowerment of life through the presence of the Holy Spirit in a person’s life. Paul talks about how “the just requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk...according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:4). Through the Spirit, the law seeks to gain a foothold in our lives as well as in the laws of our land. We should still “strive” for the Kingdom of God and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33) but now, instead of using the law as a ladder, we must let ourselves be led by the law of God and thus receive our status as a righteous person before God through grace (“the free gift of righteousness” – Romans 5:17).

Saints and Sinners

The story of atonement tells us how saints are made and what they are made of. There are no self-made saints, only saint/sinners (*simul justus et peccator*)—a mixture of sin and grace. We owe it all to what someone else has done. It is crucial that we keep that in mind when we reflect on the role of Christians in government. The proverb’s claim that “when the righteous are in authority the people rejoice” (Proverbs 29:2), can easily lead us astray with all kinds of wrong notions about “the rule of the saints.” Instead of seeking to be a servant community, the Church will then become a center of power and control. It is one thing to draw political implications from the confession that God reigns, but playing God is an entirely different matter.

The Reformer John Calvin has frequently been portrayed as a theocratic extremist who had Servetus executed for heresy. On a deeper study of the sources in their historical context, however, the truth usually turns out to be more complex than the popular image.

Calvin did view the magistrates as “vicegerents of God” who, from the perspective of the divine design for the world, were engaged in a “sacred ministry,” although rulers may not necessarily be aware of their role in God’s reign. Quoting Jeremiah 27:17 (“serve the king of Babylon and live”), Calvin even saw Nebuchadnezzar as serving God’s purposes.

In the context of the 16th century, which was not an era known for its tolerance, civil and ecclesiastical authorities did indeed exercise coercive force with respect to the religious beliefs that were allowed in the realm. Heresy was essentially treated as a very serious breach of the peace, an intolerable notion in Western democratic societies, but far from inconceivable in other cultures where Servetus-type situations still occur regularly. In the commonwealth of Geneva (15,000 residents), Calvin struggled with issues that remain with us today, but now on a global scale. We can learn lessons from the past without necessarily imitating that past or repeat its mistakes.

The main question is not whether religion and politics should interact (they do—always and everywhere), but how. Even when a state is secular by design, as was the case with Russian Communism, it still can be semi-religious in its ideology and heresy-hunting practices.

There are those who argue that any involvement by Christians in government will have a corrupting impact on both church and state. No doubt, the reality of sin tends to complicate matters.

In his recent book, *Incorrectly Political* (2007), Peter Kaufman discusses the cases of St. Augustine and St. Thomas More, both famous for a literary classic (Augustine's *Civitas Dei* and More's *Utopia*), and both former government officials. Furthermore, they both ended up with a rather skewed view of political involvement. Augustine stated that he was at first inclined to “sail to the sirens,” but then later became tired of serving the empire's propaganda machine with lies. Thomas More, while serving as the Lord Chancellor, came to the belief that we live in a “time of tears” and that “playing with politics is like playing with fire.” And, indeed, an ungrateful King Henry VIII had him executed.

Despite their disappointments, Augustine and More never gave up on the conviction that government has a role to play in God's reign. The problem – they believed – arises when people have too high expectations about transforming the social order. Therefore, they basically advised the saints to serve if one felt so inclined or called, but to save their best energies striving for the rewards of heaven. In short, above all seek to transcend the social-political order while at the same time working to transform it.

Discipleship and Politics

Some of the 16th century reformers advocated a three-fold “use” of God's law—as a mirror that convinces humans of their sinful nature; as a guide for believers in their life's journey, and as the *usus politicus* or a tool for government to restrain evil and chaos. The emphasis on the shadow side of existence is most appropriate when thinking about politics. The Bible itself is reserved in its language when talking about the presence of the Kingdom of heaven in the here and now—first fruits, signs, a down-payment on an inheritance that is assured, etc. The burning vision of a new heaven and new earth must be counter-balanced by a calm and sober eschatological reservation. But, in my judgment, that should not be overdone. Yes, sin is real. The shadows of the cross of Christ hang over existence in all its various manifestations. But, so do the light of the resurrection and the breath of the Holy Spirit. We are still called upon to “hasten the coming of the Day of the Lord” (II Peter 3:11ff.), but we should do it without being too much in a hurry and try to run ahead of God.

The prophetic-apostolic witness we Christians live by and proclaim, is immensely world-affirming. God has not given up on this world, and nor should we. There is a biblical positivism that trumps all negativities, and fills life with a *joie de vivre* that is

born of a well-founded hope. There is, therefore, no room for fate and a tragic view of history. The future does not belong to sin and suffering, but to the triumph of *Shalom*.

God spoke the Word of creation, the Word that was “heard” at the dawn of time. The late “Old Testament” scholar, Wilhelm Vischer, used to say that fundamentally it would suffice if we could but really hear the first “and God spoke,” for thereby we would comprehend the meaning of the entire Bible. But, the creative Word still speaks, and still creates new realities—through the Scriptures empowered by the Spirit. Therefore, I do not believe that the Torah of Israel and the *kerygma* about the lordship of Christ have only one function in the state: to restrain evil and chaos. How could we miss the message about justice, care of the earth, the unity of humanity, and so much more that are to be found in the gospel of the Kingdom? And how are we to deal theologically with such subjects without thinking and acting politically? We are not idealists of the utopian kind, but we are dreamers of the Kingdom. Medieval scholastic scholars used to write about the *visio Dei* as the end to which all human life tends, and that is attained through contemplation. I would prefer to speak of a *visio regni Dei*—a vision of the reign of God that inspires both heavenly dreams and worldly action. St. Ignatius was right when he wrote about *contemplatio in actione*.

Christian discipleship requires discipline, and most of all the discipline of wrestling with the Word before action is taken. The good news of the gospel is not a news release issued for public information. Rather, it is meant to produce a release of the power of the Kingdom—a *realis presentia*. In the words of the apostle Paul, the Kingdom of God does not consist of talk (or talking points), but of power (I Corinthians 4:20). The usual therapy and/or prosperity preaching tend to turn sermons into mere talks that lack the signs of a wrestling with the prophetic Word. Nor are “prophetic” proclamations composed by ecumenical committees in plush hotel suites necessarily born of a wrestling with the biblical message. I know; I have helped write some of them.

The Bible invites us to embrace the world and all that it has to offer. People of faith do not fear science or technology, but recognize the potentials for both good and evil. They do not turn a blind eye or lend a deaf ear to the needs of humanity and the aspirations and dreams that stir the souls of the saints and secularists alike. The whole world is seen as the “theater of God’s glory” (Calvin). Then, political engagement and government service may become a way of playing our role in the divine-human drama. Thus, as “co-workers for the Kingdom of God” (Colossians 4:11) in the manifold realms of human endeavor, we make our contribution to *Shalom*. The initiative lies with God; we add our part—*ad majorem* (note the comparative!) *Dei gloriam*.

