James R. Thobaben

Believers and Engagement in Society
A Review Essay

A sampling of books from the perspectives of:

Mainliners
Secularists
Roman Catholics
Evangelicals

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Conflict, Justice and Character: A Never Ending Moral Problem

An organization of which I am a part — not an organizationally significant part, but a noticeable one — recently experienced tension to the point of genuine animosity amongst and within its various constituencies. Sometimes the disagreement was framed in us-against-them terms, sometimes 'why can't we all just get along,' sometimes with righteous indignation, sometimes with hesitancy. As should come as no surprise, those who felt the strongest, or at least spoke the most, tended to frame the differences in the stark language of black and white, yes and no, for and against. Shades of interpretation were often dismissed as a luxury or excessive cautiousness or even betrayal.

As discussions proceeded in meetings and in parking lots and over coffee, questions were asked — sometimes rhetorically, but sometimes in an effort to discern how individuals should respond to the conflict. Who had legitimate authority? Was the cause of one side or another just and, even if so, did the intentions of the various parties correspond to their claimed cause? Were innocent people (non-combatants) being hurt? Are the responses proportional? Intentionally or not, the criteria of Just Coercion were being debated in hallways and over lunch in the cafeteria: just cause, right intention, legitimate authority, last resort, reasonable chance of success, proportionality of response and cause, discrimination of non-combatants.

This all took place within a Christian organization. Everyone seemed to know that the preferable language for discourse should have been that of covenant, and the dominant virtues should have been kindness and respect. Sadly, though, it seemed many participants finally believed that such was just not possible. Some claimed the inability to use the language of love for all the other participants was based on the unjust actions of their opponents. Others shook their heads as if to regretfully concede that in a fallen world institutional realpolitik is simply and sadly inevitable.

In the end, some felt vindicated and some felt defeated. Some did, indeed, gain organizational power, and some lost. Unquestionably, feelings were hurt and relationships were damaged, perhaps irreparably. All (at least I hope so) felt they were dirtied by the process, even if they believed their actions were necessary.

Underneath this and all conflicts lie questions even more ethically
fundamental than the very important particulars that are "debated" in any specific case and certainly that were raised with this organization. Should Christians "fight back" – not "may" they, but "must" they? When is a position so righteous that it warrants fighting – to whatever extent (be that non-violent coercion or actual violence)? Should they "stand their ground" or "not leave an organizational (or geopolitical) vacuum?" When should injury be accepted for the sake of the Kingdom? When should wrongs be borne for the sake of one’s own character? When should Christians have an attitude that they should "win" even if winning is predicated on the destruction (physical, emotional, economic, organizational or even spiritual) of others? To what extent should Christians engage in politics – in their own institutions, among social groups, in society at-large? Does Christian faith really impact the way people pick sides, argue, and fight? Does it matter if that conflict is occurring within the Christian community as opposed to the "world"?

A Simple Categorization of the Current Literature

This is not a new genre of questions for believers; it has clearly been with us since the beginning of Christendom and was raised before that while the Church was yet a marginalized religious community. And, of course, one of the moral epistemological problems for the resolution of such concerns is that the New Testament is not explicit, or at least not exclusively so, on what the Church and individual believers should do to promote social justice, generally, and to positively impact organizations and governments, more specifically. Recently, there has been a growing effort within the body of believers to grapple again with these questions, seeking an answer applicable for this era. In fact, the writings seem to be pouring off the presses (or electronically shot through the ether).

The following, then, is not a synopsis of all that has been produced nor even a review of the field. Rather, it is a sampling that, hopefully, shows the various directions that authors seem to be taking and, as such, an opportunity to suggest that two foundational questions are being too often unaddressed by most of these authors. While of course boundaries are fuzzy and distinctions less and less clear the closer one looks, generally it seems that works are coming from four broad groups: Mainline Protestants (almost inevitably on the political Left), those who have withdrawn from Christianity or strongly reject it on the basis of the preferability of philosophical secularism (generally on the political Left, but more focused on the exclusion of Christians on the basis of their supposed irrationality), Catholic writings (from the political Left, the Right, and the Middle), evangelical writings (again, from the Left and the Right and in between, but primarily from right of political center). No doubt, legitimate criticisms
could be raised that the growing Eastern Orthodox Church presence in
the U.S. is not included as a category, nor the numerous other non-Christian
religious communities. Further, the categories are too broad, especially
the one named “evangelical” which includes among others the Holiness,
Fundamentalist, Pentecostal, and conservative Anabaptist traditions and
these, while overlapping, have different social ethical tendencies. Only
limited space can justify such, that and the desire to address the matter of
Christian social engagement specifically as a Christian and for Christians.
Most of the books considered are by single authors, with one particularly
important work being an anthology, Sider and Knippers, Toward and
Evangelical Public Policy.

A Cursory View of the Four Categories of Literature on Christian Social Engagement

Mainline Protestants have been addressing these questions at least since
the American Christian peace movement of the early 20th century arose
out of populist evangelicalism typified by William Jennings Bryan and was
soon woven into the Social Gospel. Now, though mainliners now seem to
be writing specifically in reaction to the real or imagined political presence
of evangelicals. Long having been legitimaters of and legitimated by
denominational bureaucracies, the precipitous decline of the latter and
rise to dominance within Protestantism of evangelicalism has drawn forth
a variety of responses. The spectrum is wide, from those who warn against
a coming eschatological disaster, bought on by conservative Christians
with hands dripping with oil and blood, to those who recognize that
doctrinally conservative congregations are growing because they meet some
need, be it social or spiritual or something else, and want the same for the
oldline. The best sources for these works are the oldline denominations
themselves. For instances one can look at materials from Episcopal Church
in America on the matter of homosexual practice (note, in particular, the
blurring of the moral distinction between civil and ecclesial categories in
consideration of the morality of civil protection/rights, civil marriage,
and ordination for practicing homosexuals) or, though less overt, that
available or recommended by the United Methodist Board of Church and
Society material on the same issues. These reveal a core argument for active
engagement of the church structures in critiquing the morality and changing
the laws of civil governance.

The counter-arguments to this denominational advocacy have come in
two forms, and the distinction is important to note: those who oppose the
substance of the pro-ordination/pro-marriage denominational
bureaucracy and those who question the organized church’s active
participation in civil arguments. The former come from those who tend to
advocate taking over the leadership of those denominations and are willing
to fight to do so. Tactically, this is a similar type of argument to that made by the current denominational leadership when it asserts that fighting for social issues is legitimate. The latter questioners tend to doubt that any ecclesial participation on the public square is right, either because they are strongly sectarian and favor some degree of societal withdrawal or because they favored a privatized version of American Protestantism.3

Another batch of books, articles and media commentary comes from those who, like some of the Mainliners, truly fear and/or hate evangelicals, but take their anti-advocacy stand without a strong religious self-identification of their own or assume an explicitly non-orthodox Christian position. While one is tempted to offer psychological and spiritual interpretations of their vexation (maybe some of their parents really were psychotic abusers who justified their cruelty with toxic religiosity), a more appropriate explanation can be drawn from sociology (using the very same class-structure arguments that in a watered-down form underlie so much of their own work). Evangelicals are challenging the cultural elite’s power, and the latter do not like it a bit. And, evangelicalism, it turns out, is not an opiate of the masses but human growth hormone for those that these elite deem obviously intellectually inferior (a bit of Social Darwinism almost always gets tossed into the mix). “They” (in their commentaries, evangelicals are rarely described in terms of citizens with a right to appear unfettered on the public square) have to be controlled. Seemingly panicky advocates for absolute separation not only of church and state, but church and culture, these writers and speakers appear to be as fearful of evangelicals as the evangelicals of years past were of dancing at weddings and wine at meals.4

For instance, a book like Joel Kilpatrick’s A Field Guide to Evangelicals and Their Habitat (2006) elicits from its target audience more nervous laughter of the fearful than satiric chuckling of the wise. His chapter on civic engagement is entitled “The Diversity of Evangelical Politics — From Right-Wing to Wacko.” But it would be wrong to use such an extreme example as typical of the type. Works by K. Phillips (American Theocracy) and Michelle Goldberg (Kingdom Coming) are intellectual efforts directed at policy makers, warning them to be careful. They echo the same near-paranoiac fearfulness, crying for answers to evangelicals and their seeming commitment to engage on the public square. A recent New York Times ‘op/ed’ piece put it well: “A deeper and far more unsettling answer [to secularized cultural elites] is that the popularity of the current counterattack on religion cloaks a renewed and intense anxiety within secular society that it is not the story of religion but rather the story of the Enlightenment that may be more illusory than real.”5 Still, as noted by both P. Dodd and by R. Douthat, these anti-evangelical works are analytically weak in a variety of ways, especially in their lack of sociological understanding of the
diversity among evangelicals, they nonetheless should not be entirely ignored by Believers for some of the criticisms are far too true of at least segments of the evangelical religious movement.6

At the edge of the anti-evangelical writings, and really outside the category, are those authors who want to distance themselves from a particular religion in the political realm, while encouraging personal, privatized religious practice with only vague expressions on the public square. Religion in general, they argue, provides a template or foundation for the moral shaping necessary for civic engagement. This is not a new argument, but rather echoes Locke and Thomas More. An effective piece at this boundary (one that attempts to be respectful of “religious” people while being all but dismissive of the exclusive claims of Christianity or, for that matter, Judaism and Islam) is Jonathan Miller’s The Compassionate Community: Ten Values to Unite America. Contrary to the anti-faith books that dominate this category, this is a book that may find greater acceptance among evangelicals and other Christians, though not written by one of them. Miller is Jewish (Reformed) and he uses Old Testament/Hebrew Scripture stories and commonalities with the teachings of Jesus, as well as using other sources, as a means to “reclaim” religious vocabulary for Democrats.7

Miller, of course, is not trying to connect with distinctly evangelical values, but rather to resurrect what used to be called the Judeo-Christian ethic. Essentially, his is an argument for middle axioms (shared moral values based on very different religious/philosophical foundations).8 It is something akin to the civil religion described by Bellah and others, though with greater intention on promoting a set of general values and less presumption that these are already held and functioning among most of the populace.9 His is a coherent argument and one that may appeal to those evangelicals who reject the various Reconstructionist positions.10 It has the distinct advantage of allowing social cooperation without requiring shared religion. Having said this, it is also true that evangelicalism is notably pragmatic and if ethical arguments yield moral positions that consistently correspond too closely to social issue positions acceptable to the left-wing of the Democratic Party, it is safe to say the work will be ignored or at least treated with suspicion. As with Wallis in the evangelical camp and Drinnan in the Catholic, it sounds different than so-called ‘secular humanism’ at first, but it may not be in civic practice (especially on the key evangelical social issues of abortion and what are called ‘family values’). Miller’s position on abortion and homosexual behavior may be problematic for more politically engaged evangelicals, though they seem to generally correspond with the cautiousness of most so-called ‘southern Democrats’ and may not be an insurmountable barrier to a hearing of his arguments
(nor his election, as the book seems to be tied to his testing the water for a run in the Kentucky gubernatorial election).

A third batch of books is coming from Catholic writers. Of course, American Catholicism and its understanding(s) of church-state-culture interface has gone through a lot of changes over the past 100 years, with urban Catholic authors identifying with European immigrants and the labor movement in the early part of the 20th century to those in the mid-century who took strong anti-Communist stands, to the materials coming out from U.S. Bishops and schools during and following Vatican II to the Dispensationalists’ American interpreters in the 70s, through Pope John Paul II. Now, there is a pope, Benedict XVI (Ratzinger), who, as an example, strongly suggested prior to his ascent to the papacy that American Christians consider a candidate’s position on prolife issues when voting for or against that person, especially if s/he claimed to be Catholic.11

Catholic authors write from the far Left, the far Right (especially on abortion related topics), and everywhere in between. Importantly, and regardless of significant variation on particular issues (including the extent to which Catholics should politically cooperate with evangelicals), the vast majority of American Catholics seem to write from a position that the Catholic Church is a competing denomination in the American religious marketplace or on the public square rather than the single authoritative voice to which the State must answer.12 The strongest voice on the Right is that of First Things and its editors and various contributing authors.13 Two decades ago the strongest voice on the Left would have been from The Catholic Worker, but now it seems that the Catholic Left voices that are more likely to be heard in public and ecclesial debates come from inside the political establishment, with a good example of being the recent work of Drinnan.

R. Drinnan’s work, Can God and Caesar Coexist?: Balancing Religious Freedom and International Law (2004). Drinnan is a Jesuit professor and former Democratic congressman, who seems to believe in the capacity of humans to develop formal structures that will genuinely improve the human condition. Today’s evangelicals – at least those who are not vigorous Dispensationalists – will agree, as would have the majority of those “awakened” during the Great Awakening or in the Wesleyan Revivals of the 18th century as well as revivalist evangelicals in the 19th century. But, Drinnan seems far more hopeful about the extent of this capacity of government (in this case, international “governments”) than the average evangelical (or one suspects the average American). Ironically, what is missing in Drinnan’s work, as in evangelical Left writings, is an honest consideration of what it means to be religious and to hold political power. They recognize the risks in their political opponents, but do not seem
clear that some of the same critiques might be true for them were they in control. "Is it an unrealistic dream," he asks, "to think that if the world guaranteed the free exercise of religion, the family of nations could live together in harmony?"14 This is not based in either Thomistic natural law or Lockean-Jeffersonian social contract theory. There is a difference between hope based in the Gospel or restraints based on a checks-and-balance system of power and 1930's pacifistic or 1960's wishfulness.15 Certainly, Christian child-like innocence is not the same as childish foolishness or ignorance of the potential for human sin; each Christian is, after all, to be "as wise as a serpent" as well as "innocent as a dove" (MT 10:16). Neither the State nor some international Super-State (especially one that does not seriously seek to protect the rights of individuals nor operate democratically – national regimes vote in the U.N., not their citizens) can make people good, though such may restrain evil and thus provide opportunities for being good. Writing as a true insider, Drinnan attempts to justify support for various international laws that will provide religious freedom apparently on the basis of mere social pressure rather than strong coercion. This less violent alternative is worth positing as more a proportionate response to oppression or as one more likely to succeed; some such international changes might help (though one suspects a great deal less than he hopes).

Drinnan is a difficult read for evangelicals (and, one would guess, a great many Roman Catholics) because of what come across as fundamental flaws exposed by examples used. For instance, he simultaneously asserts that polygamy is wrong, even if by personal religious choice, while calling for the acceptance of homosexual marriage (or perhaps even its endorsement) as a matter of religious tolerance.16 Still, while inconsistent and selective in what values and moral positions he thinks everyone should "tolerate," Drinnan does properly note that there have to be limits, for the sake of justice, to the power of States and Super-States. Societies are strongest when they maximize freedom while not falling into a moral subjectivity (the latter simply cannot serve as the basis for social order).17 The question remains as to when and how to draw the line between essential values and the need for toleration of cultural and personal difference.

A final group of books and commentaries are coming from evangelicals, in particular those living in the U.S. While most writing is directed to "the flock," the material is being produced with greater academic acumen and with an intensified belief that evangelicals have a "place" in the broader civic debates than the majority of that written fifty or even twenty-five years ago. Perhaps this is sign of organizational maturity for evangelicalism, or a return to the confidence that existed in its mid-19th century social morality.18 Perhaps it comes from anger over seven and a half decades of
marginalization, mocked by the cultured elites or deemed throw-backs by those envisioning a secular city, poor prophets they. Or, perhaps, it is generated by those who see themselves as “evangelical, but not ...” (fill in just about any term) and believe they must “speak up.” The latter are persons who want to describe evangelical alternatives that are not Republican, are not Mainline Protestant, are not anti-American, and/or are not collapsed into American patriotism. Perhaps, also, authors are writing and commentators are speaking because they want to recruit fellow believers for their socio-political causes. If the Carter campaign for the Democrats, the 1994 Congressional campaign for the Republicans, and perhaps the 2006 performance of the Democrats demonstrate nothing else, they show that U.S. evangelicals have moral positions that can be translated into votes — a lot of votes — but only if their “issues” are addressed in campaigning, in office, and, to some extent at least, in the personal behavior of the politicians.19

A publication like G. Hunter’s Christian, Evangelical, and Democrat (2006) falls into the “… evangelical, but not…” sub-category. Though it includes a healthy degree of suspicion about both political parties, it is an effort to persuade believers to act and to explain to non-evangelicals that one can be a believer and not a Religious Right Republican. An older book by J. Wallis, The Soul of Politics: A Practical and Prophetic Vision for Change (1994/1995) is a more definitive case of the “evangelical, but not …” type. In it Wallis presents the theological and more or less pragmatic reasons for stepping back from simple partisanship. Unfortunately, he then offers examples that strongly favor Democratic policy while only weakly noting the need for identifying with any position that might be described as broadly Republican (a fairly tepid opposition to outlawing abortion on demand, for instance). Wallis seems to want the evangelism/political activism balance of C. Finney, the dominant leader of both 19th century antebellum evangelicalism and of the abolitionist movement, but unlike Finney – because of emphasis and examples in the writing – will not likely find great acceptance among the vast majority of evangelicals. Perhaps in response to such criticism, Wallis, with C. Gutenson, has published Living God’s Politics: A Guidebook to Putting Your Faith into Action (2006) which does seem to return Wallis more clearly to his much earlier distinct position as critic of “both” sides while still asking for socio-political engagement from believers, though still with little of the spiritual conversionist (as distinguished from political evangelism) fervor that allowed Finney to have his social morality claims heard in the faith community. Connection with the broader evangelical community, though, remains doubtful.20 At times he still comes across as highly valuing alliances with persons “inside the Beltway” and with the well-heeled leaders of various constituency groups.
Maybe that is politically necessary, but, all particular moral issues aside, as some Republican politicos came to understand in 2006, that does not fit well with the underlying populism (read: “small town’ attitudes) of American evangelicalism.21

R. Balmer and D. Kuo write as evangelicals. Balmer asserts in Thy Kingdom Come a sort of anti-advocacy (to coin a word) against an evangelical-Republican alliance. His assertion that environmental issues may be a crack in that seeming alliance seems more accurate than some on the Right may want to accept, at least among those evangelicals not strongly enamored with extreme Dispensationalist theology. Along the same line, inappropriate personal moral behavior, according to evangelical standards, by Republican office holders may cause division or, more likely, cause some evangelicals “to stay home” unless they are genuinely antagonized by the opposing candidates. Kuo in Tempting Faith cannot quite decide if evangelicals have been betrayed by the current Republican leadership and that is correctable or if Christians should avoid getting their hands dirty with politics period. Good questions are raised; indeed, he raises one of the two most important questions about Christian political activity – “should Christians be engaged in the political process?” And, he speaks as an insider, but clarity in the argument is lacking. What is readily noticeable about these and other books like them is that they are offered primarily for advocacy for non-Right positions, but also, unlike those on the evangelical Left, seem to have an evangelistic purpose in that they tell those on the secularized Left that one can be a Believer without conceding to the politics of the Religious Right.

Books that are evangelical and clearly Republican are more numerous and, as one would suspect, more often seem to target a specific evangelical political sub-group. Generally these are less intellectually challenging works, or more accurately, tend to be simpler, favoring dualistic categorical political thinking. This is not because those on the evangelical Left are superior thinkers, but because much of the foundational theoretical work for evangelicals engaging in political discourse and generally siding with the Right was built by Francis Schaeffer, John Stott, and C.S. Lewis a quarter century or more ago.22 Democrats and others who want to defend a non-Right evangelical perspective have to be more intentionally nuanced given the last 30 years of American politics. They have to theologically and ethically explain why an evangelical Christian would or could hold a Leftist position, given the assumption (by both those on the political Right and the Left) that conservatives need not provide such for their position. If this were the time of Charles Gradison Finney or of William Jennings Bryan, the opposite would have been true – but, this is neither of those times.
Follow-up and alternative theoretical work on the Right is not lacking, though; having been performed by C. Colson and evangelicals writing in the Catholic journal *First Things* and the evangelical periodical *Books and Culture.* Additional critiques, variously distanced from socio-political identification with “evangelicalism” and / or social conservativism have been effectively offered by Marsden, Bethke Elshtain, and Noll among others.

Importantly, some excellent sociological works have been produced that are challenging the easy assumptions about evangelicals and politics. For a portrayal of the evangelical movement and its interaction(s) with the society, one is better served turning to sociology than to polemics, of either camp. To be blunt, the simplistic portrayals of the movement, including its politics, are often overly general and not infrequently wrong. Specifically the work by A. Greeley and M. Hout that uses General Social Survey data to describe, as the title says, *The Truth about Conservative Christians,* is a clear, though unavoidably (given the breadth of the movement) broad sociological description. The use of denominations in some of the analysis conceals, to some degree, the strength of religious faith and the tendency for that faith to be evangelical among a substantial number of those who are officially members of oldline Protestant denominations. Still, it is not a major concern. Works by J.D. Hunter, C. Smith, N. Ammerman, R. Wuthnow and W. Roof should also be examined. In addition, P. Berger’s responses in journals, interviews, and books to caricatures of evangelicalism and how it functions in society serve as important correctives to the casual generalization. None of these sociologists are clearly identified with evangelicalism, though some do self-identify as Christians.

*A Model for Understanding Evangelical Socio-Political Engagement*

The church’s role in society can be crossed with the actual political power of the church to locate the civic engagement of evangelicals. Using the Troeltsch Church-Sect model against a simply dichotomy of having or not having the power to genuinely influence politics, a typology for understanding the various declarations by and about evangelicals on the Public Square can be constructed. Troeltsch describes the State Church (in his work simply called “church,” but modified here for clarity), the Sect, and the Privatized Syncretist (in Troeltsch’s terms, the “mystic”; again for purposes of clarity, modified here). To these three was added the Denomination.

The State Church in Troeltsch’s model has low membership qualifications, but makes claims to uniqueness in society. Arguably, the civil religion of the U.S. past may have come close this, but a clearer example is the Church of England in that county. If the State Church has a dominant
presence, then it is Theocratic. Arguably the Church of England in the 16th century bordered on this once Henry VIII obtained power over it and certainly took that form under the Protectorate. The current Church of England, on the other hand, is fairly unimportant politically and can be called “Nominal.” Within the broad category of evangelicals, Reconstructionists do seem to want theocracy. However, the term is most often applied by opponents and clearly is not indicative of any significant portion of U.S. evangelicalism.

The “Denomination” was added, given the American Protestant spectrum, by H.R. Niebuhr to Troeltsch’s model; it is a church with membership qualifications and with a weak or no claim to uniqueness in spiritual authority. The Methodist Episcopal Church of the early 20th century was a Denomination with a strong political presence (as its building, designed to house the M.E. Board of Temperance, Prohibition and Public Morals, located between the Supreme Court and Capital as the only private building on Capital Hill indicates) and can be called a “Public Church.” Currently, the United Methodist Church is a Denomination with a leadership that is generally ignored by it dwindling membership and can be deemed “Marginal.” Many evangelical leaders do want their congregations to be “Public Churches.” This is true of the Christian Coalition, on the Right, and of Sojourners, on the Left. Public Churches do differentiate between faith and civic actions, and so will seek moral change through government but not spiritual change which is reserved for the Church. One argument within this category of evangelicals is whether the congregation as a group or only individual believers should have a public political presence. The Public Church model clearly dominates the writings of evangelical authors across the political spectrum.

The Troeltschian Sect has high membership expectations and claims exclusivity, and is in tension with or at least dramatically different than the culture and the civic powers. A Sect that wants to change society while maintaining its uniqueness is “Purifying,” such as the Salvation Army. A group that does not want to engage society politically (though it may economically and otherwise) is “Distinct,” with the Amish being the best example. Historically, evangelicals in the 19th century wanted to be Public but in the early 20th shifted over to Purifying or, more often, Distinct. As an example, it seems the Sojourners Movement was originally Sectarian but has become increasingly Denominational, while keeping its strong interest in influencing the State.

Currently, the vast majority of American evangelicals assume some validity to the American Social Contract, though they do not choose to interpret that contract in identical ways. Some prefer an expansive version that includes positive rights (rights of entitlement), while others tend to
more strictly favor an all but exclusively negative rights, limited government version. The former argue for the need to publicly care, including through government institutions, while the latter fear government intrusion, especially into religious practice. Most evangelicals actually seek a more moderated role for the state than that advocated by 19th century U.S. revivalism (which on most social issues was what would today be called "Left") or by Reconstructionism (which is far more "Right"). Both of those forms tend toward moral triumphalism which can hardly be considered a Christian virtue and which, contrary to what some high-profile evangelicals advocated in the 1980's and which leftist anti-evangelical critics lift up for fund-raising efforts today, is simply not typical of American evangelicals generally.

Troeltsch has another category, the Privatized Syncretist (Mystic), who is an individual with high religious experience, but without claims to unique authority for others and without any strong organizational affiliation. The best current example is what is called "New Age" and marked by declarations like: "I'm spiritual, but not religious." Among evangelicals this is not prevalent, but is not absent either. A noticeable number do not have specific church affiliations and a substantial number of those tend to describe their religion in therapeutic terms. If a Privatized Syncretist is politically active s/he can be called "Activist Therapeutic;" if not, then "Disengaged Therapeutic."

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<th>State Church</th>
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<td>Central</td>
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<td>Peripheral</td>
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*Modified from Thobaben, 1997*

*Alternatives to the Typical Denominational Model of the Public Church*

Generally, American evangelicals argue for a strong participation by the individual in public political discourse (though the actual participation may not match the rhetoric) and for some degree (though the exact extent varies significantly) of ecclesial organizational participation. Two questions, though, must be asked (and should be by all commentators writing as or to evangelicals); first, "Should Christians participate in politics as individuals and/or organizations at all?" While similar questions are asked by secularists, they do so out of fear and their own intellectual inadequacy. Christians should ask the question as Gospel ethics. The second question is, "If so, how?"

The Mainline denominations, when they were the Mainline, had
centralized authority and were engaged with political powers; and, they had a large, growing membership. Back then, the central authorities allied strongly with various political groups. The clergy tended to agree but with less vehemence. The laity, more or less, would follow. Now, these denominations have a membership that ignores the leadership or is angered by their politics and the younger clergy are rebelling against the leaders or simply affiliating with other denominational groups. The organizational decline has been stunning. Evangelicalism may be on a similar trajectory: vocal national leadership, with local leaders who tend to agree but not with the same fervor, and laity that may or may not go along. Currently there is a tendency for U.S. evangelicals, at least those who are Anglo/white to agree with their national leadership on social issues, but it may weaken as evangelicals become, using Troeltschian/Niebuhrian categories, less Sectarian and more Denominational in thinking.

Three arguments from the past are being currently re-presented as alternatives to politically assertive, centralized, religious organizations that seek influence (Public Churches or Purifying Churches) in civic debates and, to a lesser extent, influencing the votes of their own congregants. One option is the freedom of religious conscience (as personal expressions of social Christianity) model, drawn from Roger Williams (17th century) and explicated by C. Davis. Another is the pillar model based on the theoretical work of Kuyper (early 20th century), described and expanded by V. Bacote. A third position is that held by conservative Anabaptists and being raised in a highly modified form by Yoder and Hauerwas.

Yoder and Hauerwas both emphasized that the central moral issue for Christians is not what the State should look like, but what the Church should look like. Throughout their writings they assert that Christians can engage politically only as a community that is, before being concerned with candidates and votes, shaping itself as a community of character – with that character being distinctly and (arguably) uniquely Christian. Neither Yoder nor Hauerwas, though, satisfactory explain when sufficient character is present to allow engagement. Traditional conservative Anabaptist thought has discouraged any formal civic political participation because (a) the primary ministry of the Church to the world is through its example, (b) because the World is contaminating, and (c) because living in the Church and dealing with its internal politics is hard enough for the Believer. As one of the few prolific Amish authors has put it, “Our participation is politics is as a light to the World.” The one consistent way that those holding separatist positions can participate is through service outreach and, though not the Amish, evangelism.

Kuyper’s pillar model allows some degree of separatism, while still encouraging political participation on matters of common concern.
Bacote's work on Kuyper is academically focused, but with a political purpose. Bacote refers to his project as a work in "systematic theology, the discipline that attempts to interpret and articulate meaning, coherence, and implications of Christian claims [drawing on] other disciplines such as historical theology, philosophy, and biblical studies." Curiously, he leaves out of his list sociology and Christian ethics which may merely be an oversight, a hint of an institutional turf battle, or indicate an emphasis on deduction over inductive and synthetic approaches ("... but is distinct from them in its aim to present a synthetic, coherent, and contemporary picture of the faith"). If either of the latter two, this is an unnecessary assertion of grandeur for a sub-field of religious studies or theology or whatever term one prefers that is unneeded. Having made this unnecessary claim, Bacote actually uses well material from a variety of fields that intersect at the crossroads of human political engagement.

Kuyper's pillars are presented as a way for cooperation on the most fundamental concerns of society, while leaving the majority of value-based decisions to be decided, including how they will be institutionalized, by defined sub-sets of society. One might think of this, using Catholic thought, as a version of subsidiarity or (to use more recent language) mediating institutions. Or, those familiar with Walzer could think of the approach as spheres with some but limited interaction, though instead of differentiation by characteristics of exchange (economic sphere, political sphere, religious sphere, etc.) the distinguishing characteristic is the set of core values (Protestant Christian, Roman Catholic Christian, Sunni Muslim, secular humanist, etc.). Using the above-mentioned examples, it would be conceivable under such a model that homosexual marriage might be tolerated by a certain group, but not by others. Abortion, to the contrary, would become a morally and, finally, legally prohibited act on the grounds that all persons should be protected by the state and that the values of sub-sets of society cannot override the foundational values of the state. To be simplistic, there is clear distinction, strong though limited separation, and cooperation on core values of the State.

An extreme version of this could certainly be called "Balkanization." However, that branding would both disregard the theoretical limits Kuyper places on non-cooperation and the historical evidence from the Netherlands where Kuyper was Prime Minister in the first decade of the 20th century. Further, in the U.S., this tempered differentiation has occurred and without any severe problems with various evangelical Christian schools, recreational opportunities, etc. as well as equivalents among Catholics and the smaller Islamic and Jewish communities. The fact that these have been sustained among Catholics and Jews almost a century after the largest wave of immigration to the U.S. is also significant, as is the typically higher academic
performance of these schools and their success at producing "citizens." In a way, Bacote's Kuyperism is a milder version of Anabaptist spiritual separation, but with the understanding that the thin, broader social order must be protected by Believers as well as those of the World. For comparison, Woltestorff seems to endorse a version of the Kuyperian model, while very explicitly asserting it cannot go too far toward Anabaptist-like separation.  

Bacote's theological argument for advocating a version of Kuyperian socio-political order rests on the fact, according to Calvinism (and shared by many non-Calvinist evangelicals as well), that creation clearly bears the mark of its Creator, and that the created moral order is observable by all competent adults, at least to some significant extent. Perhaps differentiating it from some of the traditional understandings of Catholic natural law, Bacote argues that the Holy Spirit is still very engaged in an on-going creative engagement with the World, as well as the Community of Believers. Or, as Bacote nicely puts it, a public theology must address the fact that there is "divine involvement in the world 'already made' and the subsequent human response of engagement and development." One would wish that this activity of the Holy Spirit would not almost always be referred to as "preserving" in that sometimes it is very intentionally a directing Spirit. The most noted Arminian, J. Wesley used a similar argument, though claiming that the "prevenient" activity of the Spirit does not merely the restrain evil, but advocates among humans for the accomplishment of the not-yet-existing good. Bacote, perhaps out of an aversion to "open theology" or "process theology," clearly asserts that the Creation from the hand of the Creator contains the potential for development, in particular for human beings and their societies (and, interestingly, cites Pinnock in support).  

A voice from the more distant past, but one that might be more "tolerable" (word choice is intentional) to American Christians functioning under the U.S. social contract is the social ethics of Williams, excellently presented by James Calvin Davis in The Moral Theology of Roger Williams. Davis's book is strongly academically focused, but does include advocacy for a contemporary application of Williams by evangelicals. Williams stands as a strong, orthodox believer who refused to force civically unnecessary Christian moral positions on those who, though they might personally benefit, could function in society without them. His stand was simultaneously against the spiritual decadence of theocracy and against the denial of individual responsibility for proper moral behavior.

Davis correctly points out that, contrary to how he is often portrayed, Williams was not some late modern relativist who thought all moral positions were equally valid and that each individual should decide in
accordance with his/her own feelings. “Popular lore casts Roger Williams in the role of agnostic seeker…”\textsuperscript{[40]} In reality, Williams was located as a tolerating Puritan between the restrictive Puritans, personified in John Cotton, and the Quakers. “Williams did not come to his principles regarding religious liberty and separation of church and state by rejecting Puritan orthodoxy [but] precisely through the lens of Puritan beliefs…”\textsuperscript{[41]} Williams came out of exile, literally, as one committed to toleration that nonetheless required social engagement and cooperation. His argument for coincidence of the Christian understanding of conscience and the American tradition of freedom (as negative rights, specifically the right to freedom of religion and conscience) serves as an alternative to theological liberalism’s failed vision of an earthly Kingdom, and the current advocacy by some on the Right for a “Christian nation.”

Is There a Common Christian Morality of Civic Participation?

A few problems arise with almost every one the works read for this sampling of the field. They all stake out some position on the American political spectrum, but do not all properly address why and how Christians engage in conflict. To use traditional just coercion theory, this is the distinction between the justice of entering a particular conflict or any conflict \textit{(jus ad bellum)} and how one “fights” \textit{(jus in bello)} Two questions illuminate particular concerns.

The first question, too often ignored in these works, centers on whether or not Christians should be on the public square fighting over what they are fighting over. The vast majority of these works do not carefully address the non-participation position offered by historic Anabaptists and those in stricter subsets of the Wesleyan-Holiness, Baptist, and Pentecostal movements. Separatists, be they true pacifists or those who hesitatingly accept a just war ethic, avoid civic participation if for no other reason than to eliminate or minimize the problem of “dirty hands” (using more recent ethical language). The question can be applied to any community, even congregations and Christian organizations.

Every Christian author on social ethics should acknowledge and, at least to some extent, address this position. It is absolutely not the pacifism of the mid-20\textsuperscript{th} century oldlines, but is separatism first, with non-cooperation as avoidance of the instruments of the World. This would include limiting, to the extent reasonably possible, worldly models in the governance of Christians social groups. Counter-arguments can be made. For instance, no one entering civic or organizational politics can remain undirtied, but one can remain unstained. Further, to ignore injustice or morally misdirected leadership can be even more ethically contaminating. The question will not be resolved today to everyone’s satisfaction anymore
than it was during the Reformation between Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, and Grebel and his spiritual descendents, but it cannot be dismissed.

But, a second closely related question that is also ignored can and should be addressed and a common answer sought by all Believers. The question is simple: regardless of the extent of participation in political activities, how should Christians act while when they disagree over the actions of a family, an organization, or a state — any socially organized group?

The morality of those in civic discourse is, unavoidably, dirtied, by the expediency required for political compromise and winning in social conflict. This can impact the Believer’s virtuosity if not done with great care and humility. Christian character matters and concern for one’s personal imitation of Christ should condition, that is limit, one’s socio-political behavior. After all, there is absolutely no New Testament teaching that would lead one to conclude that full engagement in the political process is a higher priority than one’s following and imitating of Jesus in daily life. Absolutely none.

A few books address the question of character directly. As an example, Alan Stokely, in his work Jesus and Politics: Confronting the Powers, provides an excellent overview of the interaction of politics and religion in the time of Jesus. He correctly points out that Christians attempting to follow Christ in how they live out Christianity in a political world should “avoid some of our own Western cultural assumptions” and recognize that to Jesus’ contemporaries “religion and politics [were] integral because God’s purposes relate to the nation.”42 Today, God’s purposes still relate to the nation, but the nation and the religion and the individual relate to each other in very different ways than they did 2000 years ago. The priority for the evangelical must always be on the changed individual, not the politics of the State or the religious organization. It may well be, that the individual is called to participate personally, organizationally, or socio-politically, but it matters at the most basic level how one participates.43

All of which leads back to that institution of which I am a part. It is a Sectarian group, or at least used to be. Typical of many evangelical organizations, it is marked by doctrinal orthodoxy that now draws in many who are “middle of the road” and increasingly feel abandoned by oldline groups that have abdicated their responsibility to declare and live historical Christianity. All in this organization relish the expanded call, but disagree how that calling should be expressed in the broader society. Some still favor Sectarianism, with that group being divided between a “Distinct” near-disregard for the politics of civil society and those who want to raise high a “Purity” standard for the world to see and be shamed by. A growing group, though, is much Denominational in the Troetschian sense. They are less strict/rigid in personal behavior and in doctrine. They want to be a
"Public" church – some asserting the organization should be more socio-politically Right and some more Left. Usually there is great civility even while the various American political positions are strongly expressed. Yet, recently “parties” have formed over an internal “political” disagreement. Sadly, there has been little consideration of the virtuosity of behavior to which Believers are called, regardless of how they may disagree over socio-political or organizational politics.

The most basic moral concern for the Believer who chooses to engage in politics at any level, one that must take priority over any specific political conflict, is how s/he will live the life of Christ, how his/her character will manifest that of the God Who came to earth as a Servant in service to others. Taking sides in a political fight never matters as much as whether one is first and foremost imitating the Christ by the power of His Holy Spirit. In that organization, during those early days of the organizational fight, that was simply not the case.

Notes
1. Sidney Callahan, “To Bear Wrongs Patiently,” in With All Our Heart and Mind (Crossroad, 1988)

2. The last dominant figure to hold together pacifism (or an inclination toward it), social engagement, and evangelicalism was William Jennings Bryan. There is no little irony in the efforts of Oldline denominations to lay claim, albeit weakly as far as the evangelism component, to his heritage when it was their intellectual parents with highly secularized cultural elite friends who heckled Bryan, perhaps, to death. Specifically, in the misinterpretation of what he was asserting during the Scopes Trial, Bryan was portrayed as an anti-science hick, when he was actually concerned with the implications of Social Darwinism and atheism, not with scientific claims nor the age of the earth. His own fault lay in his misreading of the culture; it had changed from small-town populism to the cynicism of the urbane urbanists.

3. The use of the term “public square” for discussions of religious practice and morality in public settings was made popular recently by Richard John Neuhaus, both through a book and an on-going column.

4. The recent midterm elections may temper this anxiety – both because of the Democratic Party gains and possibly an unwillingness of white middle-class evangelicals to unreservedly show up at the polls and vote Republican. Maybe.


"Every election we get the Democrats writing off half the country to focus on 20 states to try to pull together the electoral map,” Miller said. “Not every evangelical is following Jerry Falwell or Pat Robertson and not every Jew is wanting to take God out the Pledge of Allegiance…. It's stereotypes on both sides we need to tear down.” (as quoted in: Jennifer Siegel, “Bible-toting Bluegrass Boychick Eyes Kentucky Governor's Mansion” Jewish Daily Forward 15 December 2006, http://www.forward.com/articles/bible-toting-bluegrass-boychick-eyes-kentucky-gove)
Interestingly, Miller’s book has an afterword by Al Gore and an endorsement by Tony Campolo on the cover. On the publisher’s website an endorsement by Bob Edgar, General Secretary, National Council of Churches sits alongside one from Senator Joe Lieberman.

8. The term “middle axiom” was apparently coined by J. H. Oldham, but was made popular among ethicists by John C. Bennett (Christian Ethics and Social Policy). For Bennet, a middle axiom is a provisional value or moral position. The term “middle axiom” though, has come to mean an intermediate position, almost like the ethical equivalent of an Aristotelian middle term in logic, that allows discussion of moral concerns among those who do not share common foundational values.

9. Bellah has, since the original publication, significantly modified his position on “civil religion.” The original argument, nonetheless, remains very influential. See: “Civil Religion in America” Daedalus, 1967.

10. Reconstructionism is the only truly theocratic argument made among evangelicals. Paradoxically, by taking the argument for the influence of Christianity in the political sphere to an extreme, the movement is actually anti-evangelistic. The pattern is not like the seeking of purity among Anabaptists, which in its extreme form with the Amish, becomes anti-evangelistic. The clearest arguments for Reconstructionism, which include a restoration of portions of Old Testament civil law, are found in Rushdoony. It is asserted by some Dominion theologians that Reconstructionism is not theocratic in an oppressive sense. A “softer” version of this theology (in post- and pre-millennial forms) influences the thinkers of the Religious Right.

11. “A Catholic would be guilty of formal cooperation in evil, and so unworthy to present himself for Holy Communion, if he were to deliberately vote for a candidate precisely because of the candidate’s permissive stand on abortion and/or euthanasia. When a Catholic does not share a candidate’s stand in favour of abortion and/or euthanasia, but votes for that candidate for other reasons, it is considered remote material cooperation, which can be permitted in the presence of proportionate reasons.” Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, ““Wrongness to Receive Holy Communion: General Principles” (June 2004) “Catholic Culture” http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc_view.jsf?RsNom=6041

12. The language of “public square” is used extensively by R. J. Neuhaus and others; the language of a religious and idea marketplace was used extensively by W. C. Roof and others.

13. A fine example recently published is: Robert P. George, “Public Morality, Public reason” First Things (167) November 2006 which considers specifically the moral reasonableness of prolife political advocacy.


15. The optimism of those eras did, indeed, facilitate a great deal of good, but finally required tempering with armed justice against the Fascists and Nazis in the 40’s and with maturity as the wistfulness of the Baby Boomers morphed from the idealism of the 1960’s through 1970’s and 80’s promiscuity and materialism.


17. Drinnan, p.144.

18. For the purposes of this review, the term “evangelical” refers to the movement (with its various components) that grew out of late 18th century Revivalism (specifically, the Wesleyan revivals and the Great Awakening, followed by the Wilderness Revivals/Second Great Awakening). Included as subsets of this category would be Fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, neo-Evangelicalism, the Charismatic Movement, etc., with the understanding that the lines between these groups have never been perfectly drawn and are becoming ever more permeable.

Unfortunately (and ironically given the history), few of the works surveyed sufficiently address the Wesleyan position. The closest is Stackhouse in Sider and Knippers, who mentions Wesley and refers to what is called the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. The article itself is excellent, but this is not an adequate understanding of Wesley’s epistemology nor his ethical foundations. Bacoe is very strong in his analysis of Kuyper, but the secondary-level reference to Stackhouse’s reference to the Quadrilateral is not a sufficient description of what is arguably the most important religious social movement of the 18th century (even in what would become the U.S.,
Whitefield was a Calvinist "methodist") and which was extraordinarily influential on Finney and other 19th century American abolitionists as well as the Booths in founding the Salvation Army.

19. While the material must be read with the understanding that the author(s) have a clear orientation away from / against several social values that are key to most U.S. evangelicals, the research led by Robert P. Jones, Ph.D., Director and Senior Fellow, Center for American Values in Public Life at People For the American Way Foundation is worth examining. Several of the studies conducted used variables that are often ignored in other surveys. Though the conclusions of the study are very much open to debate, the observation is useful to consider:

Our American Values Survey noted that when Americans "vote their values," they primarily think about the honesty and integrity of the candidate (39 percent), protecting personal freedoms and individual choice (23 percent), and eliminating poverty and guaranteeing access to health care (21 percent). Only 12 percent of Americans think primarily about abortion and same-sex marriage when voting their values. This largely remains true for white evangelicals; four out of five evangelicals think primarily about something other than these hot-button issues when voting their values. (Robert P. Jones, "Exit Polls Show the Partisan 'God Gap' Cut in Half from 2004" People for the American Way Website, http://www.pfaw.org/pfaw/general/default.aspx?oid=23047)

20. A indicator of the practical, albeit not theoretical, attachment to the Democratic Party can be readily discerned in the HarperCollins advertisement for the book:

After fifteen weeks on the New York Times Bestseller list, God's Politics not only changed the conversation about faith and politics in this country, it began a movement. All across the country, wherever Jim Wallis spoke, people were frustrated by tax cuts and budgets that widened the gap between rich and poor, aggravated by the government's lack of response to natural disasters, wearied of misinformation and the ongoing war in the Middle East, and exasperated by the impractical political rhetoric about sexual abstinence in lieu of policies that would strengthen more broadly family values and community health. (HarperCollins Website, "Book Description" http://www.harpercollins.com/books/9780061118418/Living_Gods_Politics/index.aspx)

21. A good commentary on the democratic (note small "d") tendencies of evangelicals as specifically manifested in their worship communities and the pragmatic entrepreneurialism of parachurch group leaders can be found in D. Michael Lindsay, 'Elite Power: Social Networks within American Evangelicalism' Sociology of Religion (2006, 67: 207-227). Though Lindsay's methodology does not properly account for the independent power within congregation nor the high fluidity at the boundaries of social power (specifically through authorship, videos, etc. and through "growing" a large church), it is still an excellent work.

While he occasionally uses vulgarity that unnecessarily alienate, the British / Irish musician Bono of U2 has recognized the need to tap into the leveling and populist tendencies of evangelicalism in order to speak to political and social issues, especially in the U.S.

22. Schaeffer probably would have disagreed with much that has been done politically by evangelicals in the Religious Right, still his core arguments presented in works such as Whatever Happened to the Human Race? remain significant within the evangelical academia even if not formally cited. Simply, Schaeffer favors a distinctly Christian moral understanding that can, not in spirit of but because of its unique foundation in Divine Truth, develop points of contract with those of the World on certain moral issues, including socio-political ones.

23. This is certainly not to imply that these two periodicals are propaganda organs of the Religious Right. Rather, they tend to advocate positions that coincide with positions held by the political right on social issues. There may be high variance with economic and foreign policy positions.

Further, First Things is edited by Richard John Neuhaus and articles often are written with an assumption of the Catholic notion of Natural Law. This is compatible with Calvinist General Revelation, which, in turn, is not entirely unlike historical Baptist, Pentecostal, and Wesleyan understandings of (to use the Wesleyan term) prevenient grace. The ethical arguments,
regardless of any epistemological and ontological disagreement, are very similar and the conclusions are often quite consistent with socially conservative evangelicalism.

24. Though some are dated, the following are quite useful:


J. D. Hunter *The Death of Character: Moral Education in an Age Without Good or Evil*, (Basic Books, 2000).


26. Virtually all sociologists of religion note the mastery of technology among evangelical leadership. It may be that all evangelicals reject some components of modernity if that term is understood as a narrow set of philosophical and ethical beliefs. On the other hand, some subsets of evangelicalism actually agree with portions of that philosophy, if not the ethics. Fundamentalists, as the best example, use reductionist reasoning as do advocates of scientism; they simply use different sets of data distinguished on the basis of an epistemological standard. More importantly, though, evangelicals in the broader sense (including Pentecostals, neo-evangelicals, etc.) have mastered not only technology, but also late modern organizational theory and technique. And, in comparison, it has surely been the organizational, and to a lesser degree the technological, incompetence of oldline groups like the UMC and Episcopal Church in America as much as doctrine and ethics that have led to precipitous decline and disavowal by the dynamically growing international churches of the same denominational families.


28. The term “theocracy” – as with many words borrowed for sociological typologies, can be defined in such a variety of ways that some might find the use here inappropriately broad. Nonetheless, it seems the best term to convey the basic concept. Perhaps the word “theonomy” (meaning ‘law of God orders or governs’) would be better, but that is too strongly associated with the Reconstructionist / Dominion Theology Movement.

29. The term “Public Church” is popular with some in oldline denominations who seemingly long for the “good old days,” but do not have any real civil political power over their congregants nor do political authorities pay them more than cursory attention.

30. David Kline, personal conversation in Holmes County, Ohio, August 2006.


33. The term “value-based decisions” is used here to avoid confusion. Evangelicals, of course, would agree with the vast majority of academic ethicists that laws are based on moral order. The term “morality,” unfortunately, is often used in the popular press and among politicians to refer to professional codes or personal moral issues such as alcohol consumption,
sexual behavior. Abortion, to evangelicals is not a personal moral issue, but a matter of rights (though it has been historically associated with what evangelicals consider immoral sexual behavior).

34. The concept of mediating institutions / structures, while existing previously, was made popular as an analytical category by the publication of Peter L. Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: the Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* in 1977 after they had abandoned Leftist politics in disillusionment. A second edition was published in 1996 which emphasizes that mediating institutions can be as bad as good, but some are necessary for proper social functioning (especially for the protection of rights).

35. Michael Walzer, *Spheres of Justice*. Kuyper also argued for this kind of sphere sovereignty along with the pillars, thus creating a social matrix.

36. Sider and Knippers, 141, 159.

37. Bacote, p. 17.


40. Davis, p. xi.

41. Davis, p. xi.

42. Stokely, pp. 37 & 38.

43. Though not specifically on the topic, a good recent work to examine is D. Kinlaw, *Let's Start With Jesus* (2005) on the matter of community and virtuosity.