

BRIAN EDGAR

A Review Essay: Four Views on Church and Politics

Good and Bad Ways to Think about Religion and Politics

Robert Benne

2010. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans

Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture

Wayne Grudem

2010. Grand Rapids: Zondervan

Christianity and Politics: A Brief Guide to the History

C.C. Pecknold

2010. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books

The Challenge of Pluralism: Church and State in Five Democracies, 2nd ed.

Stephen Monsma and J. Christopher Soper

2009. Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers

The various dualisms of church and state, religion and politics, faith and society, Christ and culture, and church and world express different dimensions of the same general relationship, one that is at the heart of the church's missiological task and thus the subject of perennial debate. The four books reviewed in this essay lay varied stress upon theological, historical, biblical and comparative resources but they all speak to this relationship in terms of contemporary secular society. There is a significant level of agreement—at least in theoretical terms—but the comparison also highlights the fact that there are a number of unresolved questions and issues relating, firstly, to the influence social and cultural factors have on the formation of identity and the use of core theological principles; secondly, the nature of the church as the body of Christ; and thirdly, the relationship between the various forms of secularism that exist around the world.

Robert Benne is Emeritus Professor and Director of the Roanoke College Center for Religion and the Society and his *Good and Bad Ways to Think about Religion and Politics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010) is a short book with

five chapters – really four plus a brief introduction justifying the writing of another book on religion and politics. It has chapters on “The Separationists” (both militant secularists and ardent religious people who sharply separate religion and politics) and “The Fusionists” (those who, in various ways, bring in religion and politics so close together they actually become one). Both approaches are seen as destructive to Christianity and a disaster for politics. He then shifts from analytical to constructive mode in a chapter on “Critical Engagement: Moving from Call to Public Policy” which argues that there is room for a critical engagement between Christian ethical thought and public policy. Then, in “The Practical Engagement of Religion and Politics” he presents a typology of four ways that religion affects politics, moving from those that are noncontroversial with a low profile, to the more controversial and high profile kinds of engagement. At the former end is an *ethic of character* where individuals have an indirect and unintentional influence on society. What he refers to as *the ethics of conscience* is the situation where religion intentionally connects its moral teaching to specific issues in the public sphere. The section on the third model – *the church as social conscience* – where the church becomes more persuasive in its approach has good advice on the formal role of the church where direct action is carefully modulated and occasional, often preferring the ministry of the church to come through individual members rather than corporate action. The final approach is designated *the church with power* where there is regular, direct and intentional action. He is less comfortable with this and, by and large, it is to be avoided. In a relatively just, pluralistic and stable society the first three modes should predominate. Nevertheless there are instances, albeit temporary and infrequent, where strong direct action may be necessary. His willingness to accept this as a possibility despite unease with it is indicative of his sensitivity to context.

Good and Bad ways to Think About Religion and Politics is brief, lucid, sensible and sensitive. It is self-critically Lutheran and its strength lies in the way in which Benne raises the question as to how clear the line of thought can be between core theological principles and specific public policy outcomes. He is sharply critical of both liberal and evangelical churches and socially conservative and socially progressive political agendas. In this regard, he argues, that there has been a good deal said about faith and politics that is genuinely bad. He demonstrates the way both conservatives and liberals become convinced that they are able to move in a straight line from biblical principles to certain types of political positions. It is this mode of thinking that creates dissension between individuals and denominational structures. Insufficient attention, he argues, is paid to the influence of intervening factors, such as family and regional culture and history, race, gender, class, peer group, religious tradition and levels of self-interest. These social factors

may well be observed in the external situation being evaluated while being unexamined in terms of their influence on the development of an individual's own position and the way he or she interprets the world. Implicit throughout *Good and Bad Ways to Think About Religion and Politics* is the question of self-identity and the context out of which one speaks. The desire for social involvement has to be balanced with the need to avoid the dangers of being too convinced of the rightness of any particular direct connection between biblical principles and party-political agendas. The question then is how then to proceed? With caution and a preference for theological consensus. And asking the question about the influences on one's own identity is itself useful, hopefully leading to engagement without too many simplistic, straight-line connections.

Wayne Grudem's *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010) is, on the other hand, an example of straight-line thinking. It is a detailed review of a wide range of public policies in the light of biblical thought and is self-confessedly Republican in orientation. Its 619 pages are divided into three parts. There are five chapters in "Basic Principles" on the role of government (examining unhelpful views about Christians and government; proposing a secularism that places the obligation on Christians and not the state to provide a social, moral compass; outlining biblical principles concerning government and arguing that the appointment of certain kinds of judges is the most important issue facing the USA today). The theological principles that make up Grudem's biblical "worldview" (concerning the goodness of creation, moral evil and human responsibility) are neither exactly the same nor inconsistent with Benne's biblical "core" (concerning the nature of salvation, humanity as exalted and fallen, and service) but the rest of the journey tends to move in different directions.

Part two deals with a range of specific issues including the protection of life; marriage; the family; economics; the environment; national defense; foreign policy; freedom of speech; freedom of religion; and special groups (discussing the responsibilities of bureaucrats; affirmative action for particular groups; farmers needs; tariffs on business products; medical practitioners; Native Americans; and gambling). It is no small thing for one person (especially one whose previous work has tended to be in other areas) to attempt to cover the nuances involved in this range of material. Part three provides some concluding observations on the media and the application of the issues discussed in part two to Democrat and Republican policies. He notes that almost all of his judgments align with Republican policies and he endorses them as "much more consistent with biblical teaching"¹ There is a final chapter on providence, the future of the US and the possibility of revival.

Politics According to the Bible has a huge agenda. Grudem is aiming to provide a resource for, amongst others, the pastors that he encourages to be involved in social engagement and it will be a useful resource for many people. On the other hand, because it is so detailed it is inevitable that it is not only exposed to Benne's criticism of the principle of straight-line thinking, but also to criticism by those who disagree with individual policies that are expounded. With regard to the former Grudem argues that it is not possible that anyone with a consistent worldview will be able to be even-handed in regard to these parties, one will inevitably fall one way or the other. And therefore he has no need to be apologetic towards those who disagree on specific policies. Those who want a defense of Republican policies will be pleased by it but others will not, though they may be challenged to think.

Grudem's biblical worldview and his view of government lead inexorably to certain policies. For Benne the question is the way that a person's biblical worldview and view of government is formed by their social and religious background. The influence of context on one's mode of thinking (which does not necessitate the conclusion that it is theologically wrong) is probably seen most easily by those outside. This book is, in the main, written for the USA and judgments about the validity of its support for various policies is best made by those involved but, as a non-American I would like to see a greater level of cultural awareness when he extrapolates and the American model becomes the standard for other parts of the world. It is a problem that the more confidently one moves in a straight line from biblical principle to policy outcome the more one will identify that outcome with the only right and biblical approach and the more difficult it becomes for others to determine whether what is proposed is being defended as biblical or as American. Although the discussion of health care is largely focused on the US debate Grudem does extrapolate in general about what governments ought to do and, without entering into the specifics of the debate, it is possible to observe that from an Australian point of view the assumptions upon which the Republican versus Democrat debate is founded seem unusual and unnecessary. We have parties that reflect the general values of Republican and Democrat but the health debate functions along different lines altogether. So too with regard to the attitude towards guns. When the discussion shifts from guns in the USA to the United Kingdom the advice is that, based on an Associated Press report of 253 more gun offenses (of what kind?) in London (a city of 12-14 million) in one year compared with the previous year, that the police there probably should wear guns as a matter of course.² It is also surprising to read that foreign aid is to be viewed as "a specific area that the United States can use to promote its own interests" albeit that this is immediately followed by a second thought "and also do good for other nations". Even that concession, however, is then undercut

by the very *first* priority in foreign aid being the provision of military aid.³

If then, the first major on-going issue for the current dialog between church and politics relates to the influence social and cultural factors have on the formation of identity and the extent to which this influences the ability to confidently connect basic theological principles with specific policy outcomes in a secular society, then the second issue relates to the perceived nature of the church. One of Benne's primary concerns is the way that denominational bodies of various theological and political persuasions make pronouncements on public policy and in that regard it would be useful to have a more extended reflection on the nature of the church. Grudem's approach is to focus on the role of individual lay people and pastors and in general, in contemporary discussion, more is said about the nature of the state end of the church-state relationship than about the church. This is where C. C. Pecknold's *Christianity and Politics: A Brief Guide to the History* (Cascade Books, 2010) can come in to help. Indeed, it clarifies the relationship between the church as the body of Christ and the modern state as a "body-politic". Pecknold is Associate Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at the Catholic University of America and his book is 174 pages of the history of selected moments in the relationship between Christianity and politics. It begins with the theo-political visions of ancient Athenian and Roman philosophers which sets the scene for early Christianity's introduction of a new political vision. There are chapters on Augustine's "two cities"; medieval Christianity; the beginning of the modern conception of the state; discussions of Luther and Machiavelli, and then Calvin and Hobbes; the eighteenth century and then a final summary chapter focusing on the role of conscience and seven historically orientated models of relating Christianity and politics.

It includes a focus upon the Christian contribution to the development of the modern nation-state and thus includes discussions of theological concepts that have been adapted including the notions of time, the eschaton, community, conscience and, especially, the "mystical body" of Christ and the church. Pecknold engages in a discussion of the work of Sheldon Wolin and Henri de Lubac on the socio-political adaptation of the mystical body, from its Eucharistic use, through its application to the church and then to Christian society as a whole and finally as a model for the imaginary "body" of the modern state. He is helpful in establishing the connection between ecclesiology and the form of secular society that emerged, and in his concluding chapter has sections on conscience and the church - but not the individualized conscience for, as he says, "We have forgotten the ends to which the conscience is directed and the ecclesial location of its formation."⁴ It is a brief, readable, historical and theological introduction to church state relationships. Those who wish to discuss the nature of the

relationship between church and state need to have a grasp on the nature of both those entities and Pecknold provides a good, albeit fairly focused, resource for thinking this through. *Christianity and Politics* brings us to the modern nation-state but in addition to an understanding of the theological background it is important to develop a sense of the way that the modern secular state has developed into different forms. One of the great difficulties in public debates about the nature of modern society is the assumption that there is one model of secularity when, in fact, there are very important differences between the various expressions of that which is involved in a secular society.

In this regard Stephen V. Monsma and J. Christopher Soper have provided a great help with *The Challenge of Pluralism: Church and State in Five Democracies*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009). This is a thoroughly revised and extended edition of the book that first appeared in 1999 and is a very useful resource. The first chapter is an introduction to their research on the nature of the relationship between church and state in secular societies – the plural is essential as it emphasizes the fact that there is no one model of secularism. The point is emphasized that the actual practice of the relationship between church and state has much to do with each nation's unique history, a point that connects with the general thesis of Charles Taylor that modern secularism is the result of newly constructed and historically dependent self-understandings.⁵ Modern secularism in its various forms and, consequently, our present spiritual predicament cannot be understood apart from history. Monsma and Soper ask three basic questions: firstly, how far can a democratic policy go in permitting religiously motivated behavior that is contrary to societal welfare or norms? Secondly, should the state encourage and promote consensual religious beliefs and traditions in an attempt to support the common values and beliefs that bind a society together and make possible limited, democratic government? And thirdly when religious groups and the state are both active in the same fields of endeavor, how can one ensure that the state does not advantage or disadvantage either religious or secular belief systems over others?

They explore the answers to this in five chapters on five stable, secular democracies, providing a brief description of the salient characteristics of the nation; an historical summary of church state relations; a discussion of how the country has handled the free exercise of religion, especially for minority religious groups; and then special attention is paid to policies as they relate to issues of education and religiously-based social service organizations. They examine the United States (which is characterized as involving strict separation), the Netherlands (principled pluralism), Australia (pragmatic pluralism), England (partial establishment) and Germany (partnership and autonomy) before a concluding chapter on church and

state in pluralistic democracies with a number of basic observations about what can be gleaned from this study. In eastern Australia there has recently been an extended debate about the role and the funding of chaplains in state schools. If only those participating in the public dialog had all read the case-studies on religion and education in this volume there would have been much more light than heat. Hearing, for example, the arguments in Germany that a failure to fund faith-based organizations while funding their secular counterparts is to be viewed as discriminatory might have meant avoiding the common claim that the *only* form of secularity involves the strictly separationist model. This book helps greatly in understanding the nature of secularism and brings together theoretical and historical arguments about the way that societies do, and could, operate.

These four books share a common concern for healthy, secular societies where religious faith flourishes and they are predicated on many of the same theological and biblical principles. Yet, as we have seen, there are significant variations with regard to the way that this works out in practice. There is a need for more work on at least three issues: firstly, the influence social and cultural factors have on the formation of identity and the extent to which this influences the ability to confidently connect basic theological principles with specific policy outcomes; secondly, the nature of the church as the body of Christ, involving individuals of conscience who are joined together by a common faith and yet often separated by subterranean and often unexplored dimensions of personal and social history; and thirdly, the relationship, in both theory and practice, between the various forms of secularism that exist around the world. When nation-states are fundamentally separated these variations are of little consequence but as the various parts of the world come closer together a dialog between them becomes ever more important.

Brian Edgar is professor of theological studies at Asbury Theological Seminary in Wilmore, Kentucky.

Endnotes

¹ Wayne Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 573.

² Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible*, 204-205.

³ Grudem, *Politics According to the Bible*, 450-451.

⁴ C.C. Pecknold, *Christianity and Politics: A Brief Guide to the History* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2010), 157.

⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard Univ. Press, 2007).