

## **Church, State, and Citizen**

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

Sandra F. Joireman, ed.

New York: Oxford University Press, 2009

*Church, State, and Citizen* is a compendium of various essays that all address the issue of how Christians currently approach and have approached political engagement in the public sphere. Each of the essays is written from the perspective of a particular tradition within the Christian faith—such as Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Reformed, and Anabaptist—or from certain movements within Christianity that have affected the beliefs and practices of Christians across traditional denominational lines, such as Evangelical and Pentecostal movements. Thus, the book covers a wide swath of Christian traditions and even approaches the question of church and state from several different angles.

The stated intent of this book is to build upon H. Richard Niebuhr's book *Christ and Culture* by raising awareness of the diversity of ways Christians understand their engagement in the political arena. Its purpose, however, is not merely to inform Christians themselves about the various ways questions of church and state have been answered; it also desires to speak to those who are outside the Christian community and perhaps flummoxed by the great diversity of views found among Christians. Furthermore, the goal of the book is not merely to identify these divergences but also to explain why these differences have emerged by identifying the theological underpinnings and events that have shaped each of the Christian traditions.

In order to accomplish this task, each essay commences with a historical synopsis of the events and thinkers that birthed the particular Christian tradition under discussion, noting how these events and beliefs have shaped the respective tradition's approach to political life. After the historical introduction, the essays trace the development of thought into the contemporary era, giving ample examples of the way in which a particular tradition shapes political concerns in the present. By tracing the history and beliefs of the traditions over time, the essays elucidate the reasons why Christian stances on an ideal state are so varied. They explain why, for instance, Catholics reject a minimalist view of the state while others,

such as Evangelicals, desire the state's presence so long as it grants the greatest measure of freedom to its citizens. In addition, the essays also adumbrate how the various traditions portray the role of an ideal citizen. For example, they explain why the Anabaptist tradition advocates limited involvement in the political sphere while encouraging its members to robust involvement in peacemaking and relief efforts around the world. In addition, the essays cover a wide array of topics, not only addressing the question of church-state relations, but they also note the traditions' stances on war, individual freedom, poverty relief and others. Thus, the essays provide a thorough overview of the complexity within the various traditions.

The book certainly accomplishes its task of educating its readers regarding the diversity within Christianity and the various political emphases that result from the vast array of theological traditions. The brief essays are insightful not only for their contributions to understanding political concerns within each of the traditions but also for the historical background that they provide. These considerations alone make the book worth reading. In addition, the book has been written and edited in such a way that it hangs together well in spite of the wide variety of authors and viewpoints that have contributed to it. This unity arises from the manifold comparisons and contrasts that are made within the essays regarding the other Christian traditions, noting how political emphases align or contrast on particular issues. This characteristic gives it a unified feel, unlike many collections of essays that hang together simply because they were printed in the same volume. As a result, the book is well worth anyone's time who desires to learn more about the various ways Christians conceive of the state and proper citizenship.

At the same time, there are some things that might detract from the book's value. First of all, the book limits itself to a discussion of Western Christianity and focuses primarily on the Roman Catholic and manifold Protestant traditions. Oddly missing is any discussion of how Orthodox Christians might approach the political life. While Orthodoxy has not played a prominent role in western politics to date, the influx of immigrants from Orthodox backgrounds might warrant an essay on how this tradition engages the public sphere as well.

Another point worth noting is that the authors of the essays are social scientists, not theologians. On one hand, this means that the chapters often come with illuminating distinctions within political theory and comparisons to important political theorists who have taken similar positions in regards to the state. On the other hand, theological points of

inquiry are not as precise as they could be. For instance, the chapter on the Lutheran view of the state assumes that Luther had formulated his understanding of justification by faith *before* the writing of the Ninety-Five Theses, the timing of which is seriously debated among Luther scholars. By Luther's own recollection, his epiphany on justification by faith came *after* he composed the Ninety-Five Theses. However, such issues seem mainly peripheral and do not detract from the book's overall purpose.

Finally, most of the essays are written descriptively about the ways in which the different traditions have conceived of the relationship between church and state. However, James Skillen's chapter on the Reformed tradition ventures beyond a mere description of the Reformed tradition and issues a call for an altered theological view of the state that sees it more as an order of creation than an order of the Fall. This is, as Skillen acknowledges, a minority opinion within the Reformed tradition. While Skillen's article speaks to contemporary adherents to the Reformed tradition and calls them to reconsider a more helpful approach to the state, his essay might not give an accurate depiction of the current emphases of the Reformed tradition to those wishing to understand it. Consequently, it seems to lead to interesting conclusions among the other authors in the book about what the Reformed tradition has traditionally upheld in contrast to the other strands of Western Christianity.

In spite of these possible deficiencies, the book does succeed in its purpose of educating its reader regarding the variegated nature of Western Christianity's approach to political life from the perspectives of its various theological backgrounds.

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