

Christianity and the State

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Given the reality that man is a “political animal” (the natural state) or an outcast like a “bird which flies alone” as Aristotle put it in the 4th century BC,¹ we cannot ignore this factor in the human experience, and especially for those who have been given the responsibility to be “the salt of the earth” and “the light of the world” (Mt. 5:13-14). Given that God has established the state as a necessary factor to curb the depravity of humanity (Rom. 13:1-7), Jesus has cultivated an activism for his disciples in every area of life, notwithstanding the polis/politic. Therefore, it is incumbent for God’s people to be an influence in the culture in the most redemptive ways.

For two millennium this has been the case as God’s people have influenced the culture with respect to slavery, women’s rights, infanticide, abortion, education, human development, poverty, and medical care. No matter what the government or political situation, generally speaking, God’s people have been able to make a difference for the good of humanity. The concept of “redemption and lift” has been an obvious and undeniable reality: where ever God’s people have established themselves in a socio-economic-political environment they have elevated the culture. The “redemptive and lift” factor is significant in a culture as disciples have

¹ Aristotle, *Politics*, Vol. 1.

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the mustard seed or leaven effect on a culture.² (All things considered, the only variable may be the “fertility of the soil” of the culture.)

Only God knows, in the darkest challenges, of the most brutal totalitarian regimes how in small or even large ways the “light” and “salt” have been able to impact others (e.g., Nazi concentration camps, Solzhenitsyn in the gulag, disciples in North Korea). The apostle Paul is certainly one of the greatest examples of one who endured the harshness of the state and yet utilized his Roman citizenship as an advantage. The precedent was set by the early Christians who dramatically altered the Roman Empire. The 20th century has seen the fall of communism in Eastern Europe largely by the influence of the disciples of Jesus.³ This precedent continues to be the reality in most quadrants of the globe.⁴ The outcome: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ” (Rev. 11:15).

The Pastorate and the State

The pastorate must step up and provide the leadership for the churches to engage the culture with truth in every aspect. Ignatius, Bishop of Antioch, before his martyrdom by the evil Roman government, pleaded, “The world at its worst needs the church at its best.” How much more so true is this incumbent upon the pastorate. It is the pastorate that provides the church with the example to be active in the culture—“And what the priest do, the people do” (Hos. 4:9

² Robertson, McQuilkin & Paul Copan, *An Introduction to Biblical Ethics: Walking in the Ways of Wisdom*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, 2014), 554.

³ Charles Colson, *The Body: Being Light in the Darkness* (Dallas: Word, 1992), 51-61.

⁴ Os Guinness, *Renaissance: The Power of the Gospel However Dark the Times* (Downers Grove, Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 2012).

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NLT). The pastor's public and political theology must be proclaimed and modeled.⁵ Metaxas presents the example of seven men, who by their faith and leadership exemplified this (e.g., Wilberforce, Liddell, Bonhoeffer, Pope John Paul II).⁶ Thus, I would encourage the pastorate to resonate such examples.

Niebuhr and Os Guinness present a thorough treatment of the involvement of a Christian with the culture.⁷ Os Guinness advocacy of the "citizen" (vs. the tribespeople or idiot) is an excellent template as the disciple of Jesus attempts to engage the culture with competing ideas.⁸ The New Testament is full of educated believers who affected the culture (e.g., Tychicus, Luke, Paul). Paul was able to engage the intellectual Stoic and Epicurean philosophers at the Areopagus (Acts 17) because he had a competing education. Even the apostles, who had no formal education, had the ability to articulate truth in a cogent way (see Acts 4, 5). The pastor-theologian must set the tone for addressing the culture with truth that will shape public policy.

American Exceptionalism

America was founded on Judeo-Christian principles (vs. the Enlightenment as some would insist erroneously),⁹ which has led to the most free, prosperous, and creative nation in human history. This has resulted in the unprecedented historical note of American

⁵ Kevin J. Vanhozer & Owen Strachan, *The Pastor as Public Theologian: Reclaiming a Lost Vision* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 17-21.

⁶ Eric Metaxas, *7 Men and the Secret of Their Greatness* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2013).

⁷ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ & Culture* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1951); Os Guinness, *Impossible People: Christian Courage and the Struggle for the Soul of Civilization* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books, 2016).

⁸ McQuilkin & Copan, 541.

⁹ Peter Marshall & David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory*, 3 Vol. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009).

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exceptionalism.¹⁰ (On a personal note, my grandfather came to America from Poland for many reasons: to escape a certain death at the hands of Bolshevik communists, to practice his faith, and provide for his family. At the core of it was freedom. Why did he come to America? Why not some other country? It was American exceptionalism that drew him here.) It has been a blessing to be in a free and open society, but the challenge is apathy, and allowing the culture to impact the believer—this must not be (Jam. 1:27).

The idea of American Exceptionalism is different from nationalism,¹¹ because, for those who embrace this idea, it is one of utter gratitude to be so fortunate to have come to America or be an American; the evils of our history are noted (not expunged) and confessed; and constructive criticism of how things are expedited in America are allowed. American Exceptionalism is a recognition of how God has blessed America through the utilization of His principles.

Separation of Church and State: In the World, But not Of the World

The faith must not be separated from public life. It must influence the public square. The wall of separation between church and state is not a wall between the influence of Christians on the culture and even the state (e.g., running for political office). Christians must not allow shallow arguments to intimidate or dissuade them from a full involvement in influencing the state. The challenge may be maintaining faith with respect to the diabolic pressures of political

¹⁰ Dennis Prager, *Still the Best Hope: Why the World Needs American Values to Triumph* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012).

¹¹ McQuilkin & Copan, 541.

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influence (e.g., money, sexual temptation, compromise of biblical theology). Truly, one is entering the “lion’s den” and must be strong in the face of such depravity (Eph. 6:10-20).

John Adam’s statement that our Constitution “was made only for a moral and religious people,” is sobering, because if you do not have a moral and religious people, the form of a republican government (with democratic processes) cannot be sustained. Whenever the state has squelched religious influence, secularization by the state has had devastating effects. Fortunate is the populous when political leaders have encouraged the flourishing of religion (e.g., charitable donations, tax-exemption, pastoral housing allowances). This favor of the government now seems to be endangered unlike any other time in the history of our country.

The church has had to contend with various governments through the ages (e.g., totalitarian, monarchy, theonomy), and thus has had to work with “being in the world” but “not of the world” (Jn. 15:19; 17:14-16; Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 5:9-10; Jam. 1:27; 1 Jn. 2:15). Although God has not “revealed the preferred arrangement” possibly because “there is no ideal arrangement for fallen humankind,”¹² it seems the founding fathers of America, all of whom believed in a Creator (albeit some who were Deist),¹³ relied heavily on divine guidance and came up with a system of government that was conducive for expanding Christianity (e.g., founding of Christian universities, church plantings, writing of literature).

Dialogue and the Radical Left

The radical left destroys everything it touches (e.g., education, families, the economy, unborn) because it is not connected to God who gives wisdom—“the fear of the Lord is the

¹² McQuilkin & Copan, 533.

¹³ Tim La Haye, *Faith of our Founding Fathers* (Brentwood, Tennessee: Wolgemuth & Hyatt Publishers, 1987).

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beginning of wisdom” (Pr. 1:7).¹⁴ Since the radical left has no fear of God, they are not privy to His wisdom. Thus, they approach all issues in foolishness. The outcomes are indeed deplorable. Because of their denial of God, they are connected to the evil one and thus caught up in perpetual deception and lies (e.g., and absurd example—the Korean dictators are gods who do not even defecate) (Jn. 8:44). With respect to the radical left, as exemplified by the communist, Winston Churchill put it: “A communist is like a crocodile—when it opens its mouth you cannot tell whether it is trying to smile or preparing to eat you.” How incumbent to realize the depravity we are up against. This is a sobering reality. Jesus, mentioned something similar: “do not throw your pearls before swine, lest they trample them under their feet, turn and tear you to pieces” (Mt. 7:6). This calls for a wisdom with the world, especially the radical left, as we engage it.

Liberalism, which is different from the radical left is open to new ideas. Indeed, liberals can have dialogue and have historically done so over the centuries, since the beginning of Western civilization. But the radical left will not allow for public discourse or debate ideas because they do not have a rational basis or a moral foundation that can withstand scrutiny.¹⁵ It is unfortunate that the radical left will not allow in the civic public square for citizens the same rights as others for the “free exchange and analysis of ideas and the freedom to persuade others about them.”¹⁶ This is the reality of the totalitarian state that demands uniformity (not unity with diversity).

¹⁴ This is a perspective this writer first heard from Dennis Prager, the Jewish conservative talk show host and founder of PragerU.

¹⁵ Religious conservative speakers are denied access to speak at university campuses and/or are shouted down to prevent the ideas of such speakers to be heard. It is this writer’s opinion that Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez refuses to debate Candice Owens (even with the offer of \$100,000) because there is no substance behind her politics to defend.

¹⁶ McQuilkin & Copan, 543.

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For the radical left, for the most part, all they have is politics—politics has become their god and the utopia they envision is their secular kingdom.¹⁷ So, their energies are not so much focused on family (their energies are into killing unborn children); their energies are not so much into church—they have their “church”/the state; they do not give to charitable organizations but to political organizations to further their power. But their gods never deliver fulfillment in life, so, they are perpetually empty, angry and live as victims.

The Opportunity is in the Crisis

“The opportunity is in the crisis” as Os Guinness so often mentions. With a cogent message, the church stands poised to bring God’s wisdom to bear upon the issues of the day (e.g., homosexuality, transgenderism, same-sex marriage, the killing of the unborn, sexual exploitation of children, freedom of speech).

As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, “The church is only the church when it exists for others.” It is the activism of the church as salt, light, and leaven that will make all the difference in a culture. Will the public square remain naked?¹⁸ Not if God’s people will take their rightful place in the culture.

Jurgen Habermas, who eventually rejected the radical left (that initiated the Frankfurt School of which he became the leader), which pushed a Western Marxism, stated this: “Christianity and nothing else is the ultimate foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy, the benchmark of Western civilization. To this day, we have no other options. We

¹⁷ Herbert Schlossberg, *Idols for Destruction* (New Yor: Thomas Nelson, 1983), 184-205.

¹⁸ A phrase utilized by Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Michigan, 1988).

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continue to nourish ourselves from this source. Everything else is postmodern chatter.”¹⁹ As someone put it, “The world at its worst needs the church at its best.” When we are functioning at our best, the world is impacted the most. The church is the x-factor in the goodness of a culture.

McQuilkin and Copan advocate an open “civil public square”²⁰ (avoiding the sacred or naked public square), with a cogent and reasonable presentation of truth in a constitutional republic. However, it must be noted that there has been a dramatic shift in America, in which the radical left is tightening its grip on those who do not agree with them. A lot has changed since McQuilkin and Copan have written their perspectives in 2014. While their approaches are valid, it seems to this writer that this era will require a greater wisdom with public dialogue. So, what will that require.

First, all social and political efforts must be anchored in the gospel. Jesus must be at the forefront of all that the church does in touching the culture—even offering a “cup of cold water” in “His name” (Mk. 9:41). A spiritual message must accompany everything the church does in connecting with the culture.

Second, adorning the gospel with love and in the fruits of the Spirit (Jn. 13:35; Gal. 5:22-23; Tit. 2:10) calls for a higher level of discipleship in a culture that is negatively affecting God’s people.²¹ Getting specific with people is imperative. People cannot change what they do not identify. We must help people to identify what they must surely come to realize (as John the Baptist did with Herod, Mt. 14:4). It is how we address people. My late mentor use to say, “You

¹⁹ *The New American*, October 2022, 35. [I need further documentation for this citation, which will go into a revision of this paper.]

²⁰ p. 543.

²¹ Christopher Moody, *Disciple-making Disciples: A Practical Theology of the Church* (Franklin, Tennessee: Carpenter’s Son Publishing, 2021).

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can tell anyone anything if they really believe you love them.”²² So, love is the motivation in our interfacing with people.

Third, we must understand moral psychology and what motivates people in this culture. The social psychologist, Jonathan Haidt proposes an approach in this polarized and emotional era of public discourse to dealing with people in the marketplace of ideas that first focuses on their intuition.²³ He utilizes the metaphor of addressing the elephant versus the elephant rider. The appeal, he advocates must be first to the intuition/innate morality vs. the rational mind. This fits well the idea of a gospel that will be received not so much for intellectual reasons, but moreso, for reasons of the heart.²⁴

Fourth, Jesus must be our example (Rom. 8:29; 1 Jn. 2:6; 4:17). Jesus fit this idea of a “holy worldliness”²⁵ (1 Cor. 5:9-11). Jesus as our example in dealing with the state, the culture and individuals. He is the greatest example we could ever have. When Ruby Knell was integrating the William Franz Elementary public school in New Orleans facing a vociferous crowd every day, she often uttered the words on her way to class every morning, “Father, forgive them for they know not what they do.” Where did this little Christian girl, up against the cruel world, get this from? She got it from the example of Jesus.

Fifth, in this frenetic and secular culture, we must maintain our priorities. McQuilkin and Copan offer an excellent theological approach in living in the world with respect to an order of

²² Marlin S. Hoffman

²³ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013).

²⁴ McQuilkin & Copan, 553.

²⁵ Ibid.

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priorities in social responsibility: responsibility for self, family, fellow Christians, neighbors, society.²⁶

Sixth, in whatever venue we find ourselves, God’s people must prepare the “cultural soil” so there would tend to be a receptivity to truth vs. the delusion of the culture; and there must be a “faithful presence” and “holy worldliness.”²⁷ As someone observed: “Jesus sat with sinners, but he did not sin with sinners.” So, a disciple of Jesus must live the life, and talk the talk. In addition, preparing the cultural soil involves dealing with “false ideas [which] are the greatest hindrance to the reception of the gospel.”²⁸ A work must be done that prepared the “cultural soil” “so that the gospel will be readily understood and received—as true and life- changing.”²⁹

Seventh, this writer would suggest that there must be a clearer theological understanding/ balance regarding Roman 13:1-7 with respect to God’s establishment of the state.³⁰ Jewish thinkers would be appalled by the idea that God established the Nazi state, or turned off to the idea that God would have anything to do with Stalinism or Maoism, which amounted to the murder of around 110 million human beings. Is it possible that Satan could establish a government, just like he would establish a business? Are there better theological explanations to the presence of evil in governments? This writer thinks so.

Conclusion

²⁶ Ibid., 548-53.

²⁷ Ibid., 552-53.

²⁸ Ibid., 552.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., 555.

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As Edmund Burke put it: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”³¹ This includes words and actions (1 Pet. 1:13), for “faith without works is dead” (Jam. 2:17). We are currently in a vicious battle for the soul of America, and it will be the disciples of Jesus in utter activism that will keep evil in this culture at bay and establish a decency in the culture. The involvement with this constitutional republic is still a great option for the disciples of Jesus. But opportunity has a shelf-life; may we not miss it.

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³¹ There is a dispute about who originally made this statement.

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