

AMERICAN POLITICS AND CHRISTIAN ETHICS

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Many of us are like the legendary Rip Van Winkle who slept through the American Revolution. When he went to sleep the country was governed by King George III. By the time he awoke the stars and stripes were flying. For many Christian pastors and laity, they too have been slumbering through a revolution. Having abandoned social responsibility in the 1970's in favor of private pietism and self-discovery movements, and having surrendered the political arena in 1980 to the voices and forces of the Moral Majority and its allies, we now discover in 1982 a new world—a world where:

- Unemployment nationwide is 9%; among blacks it is 17%; every indication is that things will get worse in the immediate days ahead. With every 1% increase in national unemployment, it is said there is a 4.1% increase in admissions to state mental hospitals; 4% increase in state prison admissions, and 5.7% increase in the homicide rate.¹
- The Equal Rights Amendment appears doomed to failure. Women will continue to be denied full constitutional protection of their rights.
- School segregation is being condoned and tax exemptions are being granted to the most racist of organizations in the name of religious freedom.
- Government programs designed to aid the poor and the disadvantaged in the society are being dismantled at an incredible rate, while the middle and upper income persons are preparing to enjoy the benefits of less taxation.
- The campaign for human rights has been silenced. Physical and psychological torture has reached “epidemic proportions,” according to Amnesty International. Savage barbarity has increased in more than 30 countries.

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¹Frank Trippett, “The Anguish of the Jobless,” *Time*, January 18, 1982, p. 90. Statistics are drawn from a study over a 34 year period by sociologist M. Harvey Brenner of John Hopkins University.

- The arms race is escalating world-wide while countries stockpile weapons in the name of preparing for peace.
- *The Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* has now moved the dial on the doomsday clock of nuclear annihilation to “two minutes before midnight.”² With nuclear proliferation escalating and popular government leaders loosely talking about the possibilities of fighting “limited nuclear wars,” is it any wonder opinion polls show 73% of the American people believe nuclear war is probably likely in the next ten years.³
- Even the dead are having a harder time. In Los Angeles, for example, “coroners expect the bodies of approximately 1,000 penniless veterans to pile up in the county morgue because officials cannot afford to bury the veterans on newly reduced federal allowances.” The Commander of the American Legion calls it a ‘national disgrace.’

It is in this context that we approach the subject of “American Politics and Christian Ethics.” On the eve of a potential apocalypse, let us hear anew the question posed to Jesus centuries ago: “and who is my neighbor?” The Good Samaritans of our time are not only those who bandage the sores of the wounded in the ditches of our world, but who also seek to translate the meaning of “neighbor love” into the political systems and structures of our age.

Unfortunately, the attitude most often expressed is that politics is “too dirty” and corruptive of good persons. It is work to be shunned by the honest and the upright. Anyway why get involved, since little can be done—it doesn’t make much difference who is in office. Christian faith and life are viewed almost, if not completely, as incompatible with the exercise of political power.

Add to these attitudes the excesses of right-wing preachers in America who have merged religion and politics, plus the zealous extremism of Islamic clergy in Iran, and the case contending Christian clergy should be active in politics increasingly finds a limited audience of enthusiastic supporters. Yet, in my judgment, never has there been a more critical time in human history for lay persons and pastors to exercise a political role. Never has the need been greater for persons in the vocation or avocation of politics, who will bring to public issues an intelligence and conscience shaped by Judeo-Christian values.

Therefore, let me share with you certain critical perspectives on the relation of American politics and Christian ethics, with the hope that this will stimulate reflection on the crisis facing our nation and evoke from our consciences a sense of political responsibility and action.

²“The Clock Stands Still,” *The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists*, Vol. 38, No. 1, January, 1982.

³“Likelihood of Nuclear War,” *Gallup Report*, No. 189, June, 1981, p. 27

Politics: An Obligation, Not An Option

First, political involvement for laity and clergy is an obligation, not an option. The degree and style of participation will vary immensely, but politics must not become another spectator sport in America. Too many people are sitting on the sidelines cheering (or more often jeering) the gladiator politicians in the public arena. Voting statistics give overwhelming evidence that America has become more a nation of “residents” than “citizens.”

Critical to the functioning of a democracy is the involvement of its citizens in the processes of government. Most basic is the right and responsibility of voting. Only 52.3% voted in the 1980 presidential race—the lowest ever! In 1976, seventy million eligible voters did not vote. Jimmy Carter won election to the presidency with less than 28% of the citizens voting for him. Should it have been a surprise that he didn’t do well in popularity polls and couldn’t seem to enact legislation or command leadership?

Some Christians reject political activity as being incompatible with their faith and ethics. This posture of politics being “too dirty” and their life being “too pious” is a dangerous cop-out for any citizen. Taken literally it means turning over the most powerful functions in a society to those with the lowest ideals. If those persons by expectation are likely to cheat, to tax unjustly, to wage war, or whatever, then the “pious” are far from showing neighborly love and their own abdication of responsibility is unloving if not “dirty.” In other words, there is no escape from living in the world, being touched by a mixture of good and evil in all of our actions or inactions.

Vocation and Avocation of Politics

Second, the Church in the 1980’s needs to highlight the vocation and avocation of politics as appropriate means for Christian witness and participation in the world. Legitimizing and honoring these roles could do much to stimulate a new level and quality of leadership for the nation.

Not everyone is summoned to the vocation of politics. Christian teachings have always emphasized that both the functioning of the church and the society require persons to utilize their talents and interests in many different ways. Each person serves God in his or her own calling. Martin Luther abolished the distinction between religious and non-religious callings, arguing for “a ministry of the laity.”

Yet politics cannot be restricted only to lay persons. Many clergy are respected political leaders in their local community—at the precinct level, on school boards, and within city councils. Many have taken prominent roles in the life of the nation right from the beginning of our history, including John Witherspoon, a Presbyterian minister, who signed the Declaration of Independence. As Reverend Andrew Young, now mayor of Atlanta and former Ambassador to the United Nations, once declared: “There comes a time in a

democratic society when you have to do more than just preach. You have to see that the Kingdom of God becomes incarnate in the life of society. And that means politics.”

At this point the church can do the nation a great service by re-emphasizing the value and honor of the political profession. By moving off the sidelines, pastors can demonstrate by their own involvement that politics is a high calling, one way to translate the rhetoric of love into the reality of justice. If politics be “too dirty,” nothing can help clean it more than an invasion of high ideals. A pastor friend of mine, Richard Fisher, once announced for public office declaring:

God did not express himself in a resolution. . . . For me to seek to be a responsible disciple in a broken world means that I must be willing to choose those actions which are incarnational and which share in the brokenness, even if it means being labeled “American” and “Democrat.” These labels do not define the limits of my loyalty (in the same way that “Jew” did not define the limits of Jesus’ concern); rather, they are the vehicles through which I seek to live out my commitments. To be concerned religiously about the life of man is to be active politically in the life of man.

The Church and Partisan Politics

Third, ministers as individuals can be involved in partisan politics, but the corporate church should generally avoid such identification. The Gospel should not be politicized or reduced to an ideology; there are no clear Christian policies or politics. The independence of the Christian church from the political structure is strategically important.

In the judgment of John Bennett “the greatest moral error of the Moral Majority is its tendency toward a narrow, chauvinistic nationalism.”⁴ The trans-national and trans-cultural ecumenical perspective and its transcendent loyalties enables the church to be both a free servant and critic of the state, depending on the situation and the church’s choice. Traditional and constitutional guarantees of religious liberty and separation of church and state in America safeguard this freedom, yet do not prohibit a high degree of cooperation for the common good.

The biblical, theological, and historical foundations of the church are deeply identified with not only individual salvation but the social gospel’s concern for the political and social order. The Old and New Testaments are rich with political imagery and events, insistent God is at work in the world and the Christian’s task is to discern God’s will and join the Divine in human activities. “In the present extremely perilous situation of America and the

⁴John C. Bennett, “Assessing the Concerns of the Religious Right,” *The Christian Century*, October 14, 1981, p. 1021.

world,” as sociologist Gunnar Myrdal views it, “the servants of the church cannot afford to turn their interest merely to the salvation of the individual forgetting that society must be radically transformed. The church must stand up for human ideals and their realization through policies by governments local, state and federal, for which they share responsibility.”³

The corporate church can revitalize politics by an infusion of its values, insights, criticisms, and motivating powers. In exceedingly rare instances, it might be appropriate for a church body to endorse a particular political candidate, but usually the case against a church blessing one politician or party is compelling. Rather the church can be most effective by focusing on important human issues, by selective and informed political action, and by encouraging persons to enter the vocation of politics. For the sake of individuals, society, and the church itself, the church must witness to and take risks for its highest ideals.

Ministers, of course, can avoid partisanship, but the likelihood of this strategy being particularly effective is questionable. Political work is enacted through political parties. Without demonstrated loyalty few are able to effectively influence leadership or legislation.

What is tragic about the politics of the Moral Majority and the various other Christian conservative political movements is not their involvement in the body politic, but in their mistaken and simplistic notion that they possess “the” Christian position and this must be legislated into law. Illustrative was the Christian Voice scorecard in the last election that rated congressional leaders on the basis of ten to fifteen votes, claiming the will of God correlated with one specific position. This theological arrogance has to be called into question in light of the fact that the lowest ratings went to Reverend William Gray, a Baptist minister, and Father Robert Drinan, a Catholic Jesuit, while the highest ranking was won by Congressman Richard Kelly, later convicted in the Abscam scandal!

Republican Senator David Durenberger of Minnesota has warned against the “phony prophets” who are oversimplifying religious beliefs and specific legislation. Speaking at a church forum on “The Christian and Politics,” he said:

I don’t mind the Falwells telling people to get involved in the political process. But I get upset when a group like Christian Voice says I voted wrong on a Department of Education bill and, therefore, I’m not a Christian. Well, I can find a message in my Bible telling me how to live my life, but I cannot find anything in there about Taiwan or whether we should have a Department of Education.⁴

³Gunnar Myrdal, “A Worried America,” *The Christian Century*, December 14, 1977, p. 1166.

⁴Robert J. Hagen, “Senator Warns of ‘Phony Prophets,’ ” *Minneapolis Tribune*, October 27, 1980, p. 4B.

The great irony is not that the "Bible Vote" types are involved in politics but that they have forsaken the spirit of the Gospel. As one Senate insider said recently: "I get a real feeling of vengeance from them. They see the world without compassion, and they do it with such Christian fervor."

The Moral Ambiguity of Politics

Fourth, all political issues are morally ambiguous; it is often impossible to discern what is precisely right or wrong. Theologian Paul Tillich asserts that all "life is marked by ambiguity"⁷ and this truth is most painfully evident to the politician who finds that no matter how hard one tries, all the short and long-range consequences of any action or inaction cannot be foreseen and evaluated. In Peter Berger's words, "politics is always the practice of the possible, not the search for absolute moral purity. Put differently, the political actor and the saint are mutually exclusive human figures."⁸

Politics operates primarily by power, rarely by grace. Self-interests more than utopian idealism define the rules. To the victors belong the spoils. These are the unwritten laws of partisan politics and only the naive should expect otherwise. Coercion, not simply persuasion, is integral to the political art. While this can and often must be tempered by mercy, the Christian pastor in politics should remember this will be considered the exception, not the normative rule itself. (Reagan supporters just don't hand out scarce political convention tickets to Anderson's friends; judgeships are divided by party loyalty; choice appointments are kept in the political family!)

Only on very rare occasions is it simply a matter of absolute good versus absolute evil. The civil rights struggle of the 1960's represents the premier example—the closest instance—when the ambiguities or distance between Gospel and public policy were minimized. Today the struggle to stop the nuclear arms race may be another illustration of absolute good versus absolute evil. As a grim bumper sticker proclaims: "Nuclear war...when you've seen one, you've seen them all."

Perhaps an even stronger case can be made for the argument that one can identify absolute evil. The Holocaust—the deliberate extermination of some six million Jews—epitomizes systematic political immorality. In contemporary times the increased barbarity of human torture is illustrative of public policy equable with absolute evil.

But in most instances of political judgment, it is difficult to distinguish for certain what is good or bad, since usually the two are intertwined. To be sure, this quandry is present in all human social life, but the focus is keener

⁷Quotation of Ray Denison in Bill Peterson's "The Senate's Thunder on the Right has a Contralto Overture," *The Washington Post*, January 17, 1982, p. A2.

⁸Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, Vol. II (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 132.

⁹Peter L. Berger, *Pyramids of Sacrifice: Political Ethics and Social Change* (New York: Basic Books, 1974), p. 225.

when one exercises power over other people and stands accountable to others beside oneself. Will the nation's best interest be served by a new SALT agreement or by building more neutron bombs? Would the poor be helped by massive new programs, even if the cost should stimulate higher inflation? Is not strict environmental protection good for the country, or does it protect the rich and penalize the have-nots? In every case, the equation who suffers and who benefits must be asked.

Quite often in public policy disputes, the interaction of powers is strident. Christians who champion cooperation and cherish reconciliation find themselves caught in conflicts of shattering intensity. In the struggle for resolution, relationships can be damaged and friendships destroyed. Once, because of my public support for the Panama Canal Treaties, I got a letter addressed: "Dear Member of the Benedict Arnold Treason Society." The high cost of political participation is to live amidst these ambiguities, knowing whatever one decides or does will meet opposition and anger and even possible political excommunication.

While acknowledging the reality of these risks, I don't believe they should be blown out of proportion. Many pastors avoid political involvement precisely out of fear of financial retaliation in their churches, and some lay persons seek to intimidate and threaten because they know pastors are quick to be conciliatory. My own experience has been that if you treat persons of opposite political persuasions fairly, avoid preaching politics from the pulpit, ensure balanced presentations of issues, and demonstrate thoughtful competence in your own position, the chances of estrangement are minimized. In fact, my life has been enriched by knowing and working with persons whose political philosophies are radically different than my own, but who share a basic love of politics and concern for the country and the world community.

The Noble Art of Compromise

Fifth, compromise in politics is not a dirty word but a noble art. It is what saves societies from being ripped apart and shredded. Literally, it is impossible for everyone and every interest to have their own way, regardless of how certain they are about having the truth or the perfect solution.

This equipose—or balancing of interests—makes sense from the perspective of society, but can weigh heavy indeed on the individual conscience of the lawmaker who has had to yield on a matter of principle. Some would rather fail than compromise. President Woodrow Wilson was certain he was doing God's will; making it nigh unto impossible for him to compromise on major questions. Many a noble and needed idea or program flounders and falls in the legislative process because the architects are unable to deal with conflicts and find acceptable compromises. Former Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, understanding both the perils and promise of compromise, believed it was

“better to gain a foot than to stand still, even when you seek to gain a mile.”¹⁰

Committed Christians in politics often find compromise intolerable, rigidly bound to past promises and guilty about infidelity to sacred values. But in reality all people compromise. Even most Christian pacifists presumably pay their income taxes rather than go to jail, even though everyone knows a substantial portion of the federal money goes to support destruction and the arms race.

Compromise from a theological point of view might even be viewed as a means of God's grace. No one is so perfect as to have one's way all the time; conflict is a way of checking human arrogance, compromise a method of give-and-take. The dogmatism and selfishness of groups and individuals, who would impose their wills on others, is limited by other groups and persons with similar objectives. This forces a flexibility and cooperation in social and political life, creating a tolerance and understanding in human affairs.

Unbridgeable Gaps Between Norms and Reality

Sixth, the pastor in politics must face the perplexities of unbridgeable gaps between ethical norms and political realities. If one accepts the reality of ambiguity in political life, in contrast to asserting that issues can be neatly divided between good and evil, then the problem of coping with the distance between ethical norm and political reality is indeed serious. Substantive problems don't usually yield to quick solution by *simply* leaning on the Ten Commandments or the Sermon on the Mount—though the insights of both can be crucial for resolution.

Many in the Christian community would disagree with this analysis. The right-to-life movement is certain abortion is always wrong. The Moral Majority is absolute that homosexuality is “perversion,” and the pacifists are committed to the conviction that bloodshed, killing, and war are always, in each and every circumstance, contrary to the will of God. For these Christian ethical norm and policy directive are one.

The Christian realist perspective, on the other hand, has always emphasized the distance between ethical or religious norm and political realities. God is the only absolute; all else is relative and under God's judgment. Making an absolute identification of Christian ideals with particular human policies or programs is impossible. There is no assurance a person will know definitely whether a commitment to “feeding the hungry” means endorsing the “food stamps” program or not. Caring for the “widow and the orphan” may or may not mean a guaranteed annual income. Even though one doesn't know for absolute certainty what course of action is precisely right, a choice must be made in light of one's highest ideals and with the best judgment possible.

¹⁰Hubert H. Humphrey, *The Education of a Public Man: My Life and Politics* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1976), p. 137.

By emphasizing the distance between ethical norm and political reality, the intention is not to discourage action or to suggest that ethical ideals or Christian values are irrelevant to the political process. Quite to the contrary, these norms are essential for a "vertical" or transcendent reference point in decision-making, even when they are experienced in tension to the "horizontal" realities of the political world. Rather this emphasis on unbridgeable gaps is a needed precaution against blessing every proposed policy or baptizing every program, simply because of its good intentions or worthy Christian goal. Even the most committed proponent of a particular piece of legislation needs to remember no one knows the exact will of God or the perfect solution to human problems. Still, with Dag Hammarskjöld, I affirm "In our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action."

Developing A Political Ethic

Seventh, the revitalization of the democratic political process in America necessitates the development of a political ethic, compatible with Christian faith yet appropriate to a pluralistic society. In large part the crisis of political faith facing America today is an ethical problem. The widespread cynicism and devaluation process was prompted by the failure of politicians to be persons of moral integrity and by the advocacy of public policies often destructive of ethical ends. The political currency was debased because persons in high office deliberately misled the people with lies, repeatedly broke promises, violated laws, profited from public funds, and promoted an unjust and self-defeating war in southeast Asia.

This ethical crisis does not stem fundamentally from a lack of consensus as to what the fundamental social values are for Americans. There is a high degree of national support for the values of individual freedom, the idea of justice, the sacredness and dignity of each person, the need for equal opportunity, and the dreams of brotherhood and sisterhood. Neither does the crisis come because of a lack of consensus among ordinary citizens about such ethical duties as telling the truth, keeping promises, not harming others, helping your neighbor, and promoting peace. These are the ethos of every community and the sea upon which law floats. In the words of John Gardner: "This society is suffering not from confusion, but from infidelity."¹¹ Unfaithfulness to these and other virtues is what necessitates a more conscious attempt to state and live by a political ethic. What is needed is a re-creation of these values in the society and body politic.

In developing an appropriate political ethic, the values and insights of Christian social ethics are a primary resource. Yet in a pluralistic society like America it would be inappropriate to expect persons of other faiths or no religious faith to accept an ethic solely dependent on Christian revelation.

¹¹John W. Gardner, *Self-Renewal: The Individual and the Innovative Society* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1963), p. 157.

Moral truths can be known apart from Christian faith, though for the believer Christian faith reinforces and strengthens commitments to these truths. Public policy debates or actions can hardly be determined or explained if they are based simply on feelings of Christian "agape" love or the level of Christian maturity of the actor. Few would feel comfortable with a Secretary of State announcing foreign policy based on his or her perception of what God is doing in human history. An Islamic state might act confidently executing traitors or chopping hands off criminals by appealing to the Koran, but a secular state ought not to make laws or to take actions, such as banning pornography or endorsing prohibition, simply because of certain Biblical interpretations. Christians may disapprove certain dominant cultural norms, without insisting on writing its doctrinal dissent into law.

Reason, not revelation, must serve as the common basis for a political ethic in a pluralistic, secular society. Good reasons must be given for every action; explanations that can be defended and discussed by persons of different faiths and of no faith. This by no means excludes or downgrades Christian faith. "Reason," Walter G. Muelder points out, "opens the door to Christian experience and revelation but insists that they establish their claims by the same norms as judge all counter-claims."¹² For the believer the coherence of claims made outside Christian revelation with those made by Christian faith serves to verify and reinforce the truth, adding power and motivation for decision and action.

This position is related to the philosophical tradition of natural law, the conviction some type of moral law in nature is knowable with varying degrees of clarity by human reason. In the Western experience of politics natural law doctrines have served as a basis for legal systems, a rational structure for ethics, and a universal theory for human rights. It is a check against the disciples of Niccolo Machiavelli in every era who would claim no higher authority than the law-giver or legislator. It insists that those in power can and must be judged by a standard of justice that transcends the particular political leader. The Christian may choose to state it this way: through creation has been revealed God's moral will, the knowledge of which is available to all persons, regardless of whether they understand or accept the redemption and revelation of Jesus Christ.¹³ Obviously for the Christian both doctrinal dimensions are important for understanding and developing a political ethic. Yet the Christian should be humble enough to recognize how repeatedly in human history it has been persons of other faiths and of no faith who have, as John Bennett notes, "been bearers of moral values to which Christians have been

¹²Walter G. Muelder, *Moral Law in Christian Social Ethics* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1966), p. 54.

¹³For an interesting discussion of this topic, and criticism of some evangelical political ethics, see Paul B. Henry, "Love, Power and Justice," *The Christian Century*, November 23, 1977, pp. 1088-1092.

blind only too often, though these values have roots in the Christian tradition.”¹⁴

Two further dimensions are implicit in developing a political ethic for a pluralistic society. On the one hand, the ethic is supportive of the idea that democratic government should be based on the consent and the participation of the people. “No man,” said Abraham Lincoln, “is good enough to govern another without that other’s consent.” Yet, on the other hand, this ethic insists that majority rule should not endanger the rights of minorities within a society.¹⁵

Otherwise, inevitably, the overwhelming tendency of the majority is to operate with a utilitarian ethic—“the greatest good for the greatest number”—which invariably means the minority suffers injustice, a loss of liberty, or at least a disproportionate share of the cost versus the benefit of a particular public policy.

The merit of this type of political ethic is inclusiveness for all within the democratic body politic. The accent is on a common core of ethical experience and truth, not dependent upon a particular religious revelation. By emphasizing the role of reason as the mediating instrument between conflicts and claims, a level of tolerance and civility is expected. By insistence on government by consent and constitutional protection for minorities, none are excluded from the political process.

Bias Toward the Poor

Eighth, a Christian in politics must never forget the Biblical bias toward the poor. Taking a clue from Jesus’ relationships with the discouraged and downtrodden of his society, along with the thundering prophetic voices of the Old Testament against injustice and insensitivity to the needs of the poor, Christian theology and ethics has a decided leaning toward the “underdog.” God does not love the victims of society more than others, but because God is a righteous God, concern reaches out especially for persons, races, classes, and nations in need. Jesus even suggested God was incognito in the hungry, naked, sick, poor, and imprisoned of this earth (Matthew 25:31-40). Theologian Karl Barth said:

The Church is witness of the fact that the Son of God came to seek and to save the lost. And this implies that—casting all false impartiality aside—the Church must concentrate first on the lower and lowest levels of human society. The poor, the socially and econom-

¹⁴John C. Bennett, *Christian Ethics and Social Policy* (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1946), p. 123.

¹⁵See John C. Bennett, *The Christian As Citizen* (New York: Association Press, 1955), p. 55, and Philip J. Wogaman, *A Christian Method of Moral Judgment* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1976), p. 200.

ically weak and threatened will always be the object of its primary and particular concern, and it will always insist on the state's special responsibility for those weaker members of society.¹⁶

The politician should expect from the church pressure for the state to assume this special responsibility. Inflation hits the poor and the pensioners hardest; the rich have ways of dealing with higher prices. Famine strikes the most impoverished nations; the well-to-do peoples always have enough and more to eat. America consumes 40% of the world's resources, but only has 6% of the world's population. The church, said Walter Rauschenbusch, must fight for the "underdog" since "the strong have ample means of defending their interests and usually enough power left to guard their unjust interests too."¹⁷ This theme manifests itself repeatedly in Christian thinking today, especially in the writings of "liberation" and "political" theologians. These movements of thought are having a profound impact, especially among Third and Fourth World Christians, as they struggle to overthrow the political oppressions of the past. In America these chords are struck most often in the writing of "black" and "feminist" theology—both stimulating needed changes in church and society.

"Love of neighbor" thus includes far more than just the person who happens to live nearby or one's fellow citizen, or the man the priest and Levite passed by. It includes the enemy in war, as well as the poor and the minorities of the society. In the energy debate the concept has even been stretched so as to encompass not only the immediate but also future generations. The waste products of nuclear energy linger for centuries. Thus Bruce C. Birch argues:

There are few entities less powerful than the poor of our planet, an unborn infant or a tree, but it is within a definition of our neighbor which includes these powerless ones that the church must wield what actual or moral power it possesses.¹⁸

These issues become more baffling as complex questions arise. The love ethic alone does not provide sufficient guidance for making such critical decisions. Societies functioning on love without law exist only in utopias, heaven, or in the coming Kingdom of God. To deal with conflicting interests, the concept of justice is critical. Justice remains distinct from "agape" love—a method for providing what is due each person or group, a way of finding relatively fair solutions, and a means of ensuring greater equality of distribution for resources and rights.

¹⁶Karl Barth, "The Christian Community and the Civil Community," *Against The Stream* (London: SCM Press, 1934), p. 36.

¹⁷Walter Rauschenbusch, *Christianity and the Social Crisis*, edited by Robert D. Cross (New York: Harper and Row, 1965; first published in 1907), p. 361.

¹⁸Bruce C. Birch, "Energy Ethics Reaches the Church's Agenda," *The Christian Century*, November 1, 1978, p. 1036.

The norm of neighborly love propels many persons into politics. Large scale human suffering and injustice cannot be solved by individual charity or church missions; major political decisions and resources are required to win the great battles against hunger, disease, and oppression. Politics, therefore, provides a great opportunity to love one's neighbor.

Those of us who have been involved in the practice of politics perhaps know best that the Christian pastor-politician has no surefire formulas for success and can make as many or more mistakes as any other. The person of faith, however, recognizes God's love means mercy and forgiveness. The moral burdens of political responsibility—of making proper decisions, of choosing between lesser evils, of facing severe criticism, of living with controversy, of even doing the undesired—all weigh heavy on the soul of a conscientious politician.

Under such circumstances one can appreciate anew Martin Luther's unusual advice: "Sin bravely." Or put another way, do your best and accept God's grace. Forgiven and renewed, one can be ready to face the next political tensions and tasks.

In Conclusion

By integrating faith and political action, and reconciling the divorce between ethics and politics, the church by word and deed can help create a spirit of hope. Unless we believe things can be better, it is unlikely they will become better. "Certainly all historical experience confirms the truth," says Max Weber, "that man would not have attained the possible unless time and again he had reached out for the impossible."¹⁹ Idealism can become realism. The captivating power of this conviction arouses adrenaline and excites the voter and the politician to new plateaus of responsibility. The Church can play a major role in inspiring America:

To dream the impossible dream
To fight the unbeatable foe,
To bear with unbearable sorrow
To run where the brave dare not go.
To reach the unreachable star!²⁰

Fortunately, throughout human history Don Quixotes have emerged in our midst—what someone labeled idealistic knights among somber book-keepers—who have refused to accommodate themselves to the cynicism and pessimism of their culture and contemporaries. America's founders dreamed of democracy and individual rights lesser minds would have judged im-

¹⁹Max Weber, *Politics As A Vocation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972), p. 55.

²⁰Lyrics of "The Impossible Dream" by Joe Darion (New York: Sam Fox Publishing Company, Inc., 1965).

possible—yet their vision became a reality. Pope John XXIII had an impossible dream of renewed church—yet his vision has to a degree become a reality. Martin Luther King, Jr. spoke of an impossible dream when he led the 1963 March on Washington—yet that dream, despite persistent racism, has become more of a reality today than when he spoke. To think of the Church as the conscience of the nation may seem like a romantic dream—“tilting at windmills”—yet it represents America’s great and best hope. For as a theologian, Jurgen Moltmann, reminds us, “Hope alone is to be called ‘realistic,’ because it alone takes seriously the possibilities with which all reality is fraught.”²¹

Years ago Robert Kennedy spoke a timeless truth, saying: “Each time a person stands up for an ideal or strikes out against injustice or seeks to improve the lot of others, he summons forth a tiny ripple of hope. . . and these ripples build a current that can strike down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.”

As Franklin Littell once wrote: “The greatest gift to the totalitarians is religious and political indifference and apathy. At the last judgment the balcony-sitter may plead, ‘I never harmed a fly.’ But the Judge will say, ‘The fly that you never harmed carried the plague to millions.’ ”²²

The Church is a unique institution in America, free from the state yet free to be the “servant-critic” conscience of the state. The unanswered question remains: “Will we meet this responsibility or simply say, ‘I never harmed a fly?’ ”

²¹Jurgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope* (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1967), p. 103.

²²Franklin H. Littell, *Wild Tongues: A Handbook of Social Pathology* (Toronto, Canada: The Macmillan Company, 1969), p. 125.

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