AN APOPHATIC APPROACH
How (Not) to Be a Political Theologian

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Trying to Understand Where I Belong Politically

I have recently discovered that I am numbered among those identified as “political theologians.” I must be a political theologian because there is an article, a very good article by Rusty Reno, on my work in The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology. Reno even begins his article with the astounding claim that “in the final decades of the twentieth century, Stanley Hauerwas articulated the most coherent and influential political theology in and for the North American context.” Rusty Reno is a theologian of rare intellectual judgment, so I assume he must know what he is talking about, but I confess for me the idea that I am a political theologian will take some getting used to.

I want to use this essay to explore why my identification as a political theologian takes, at least for me, some getting used to. To do so will require that I revisit some of the early developments in Christian ethics that shaped how I think about the fundamental political character of Christian theology. In short, I have always assumed that any theology reflects a politics whether that politics is acknowledged or not. Of course the crucial question is: What kind of politics is theologically assumed? In the tradition in which I was educated it was assumed that democratic politics was normative for Christians. Because I do not share that presumption, some think I have no politics.

In truth I have no stake one way or the other in being counted among those doing political theology. I have always resisted modifying theology
with descriptors that suggest theology is the possession of certain groups or perspectives. For me nothing is more important than the fundamental task of theology to be of service to the Church; it belongs to the Church. I am well aware that time and place do and should make a difference for how theology is done. But too often I fear that, when theology is made subservient to this or that qualifier, it has inadequate means with which to resist becoming an ideology.

It is true, however, that there is no “method” that can protect theologians from engaging in ideological modes of thought, even when they claim to be doing theology qua theology. Theology stands under the permanent temptation to “choose sides,” which means theology can become ideological long before anyone notices. I have no objection to calling theology “Christian,” but that description does not ensure that theology that bears the name will be free of ideological perversion. “Christian” is no guarantee that theology can be safeguarded against being put at the service of political loyalties and practices that betray the Gospel.

I resist using the phrase “political theology” for many of the same reasons I try to avoid the phrase “social ethics.” Ask yourself what kind of ethic would not be social? In a similar fashion I assume every theology, even theology done in a speculative mode, has been produced and reproduces a politics. If theology is done faithful to the Gospel it will not only be political but it will be so in a particular way. Thus, John Howard Yoder’s observation in *The Politics of Jesus* that appeals to Jesus as “political” too often are only slogans that fail to indicate the *kind* of politics Jesus incarnated.

Whether or not I am a political theologian depends on how “political theology” is understood. It is important to remember that the nomenclature, “political theology,” has only recently been reintroduced into discussions in theology and political theory. Indeed, as Elizabeth Phillips rightly reminds us, political theology did not originally come from Christian theology, but rather originated in Athens in which politics was understood as the art of seeking the common good of the polis. Phillips observes that task was later taken up by Christian thinkers such as Augustine who compared and contrasted Christianity to what had been done in the name of political theology. The phrase, “political theology,” however, has only recently been reintroduced into political and legal theory through the work of Carl Schmitt.
Schmitt maintained that all significant concepts that constitute the legitimating discourses of modern state formations are in fact secularized theological concepts. Phillips observes that this claim has given new life to diverse approaches to “the political”—not the least being the discussions and ongoing debates around Schmitt’s strong claim about the totalizing character of modern politics. Accordingly, political theology has become an attempt to identify how ideas concerning salvation and devotion to God migrated from Christian theology to the nation state. Schmitt’s work is quite controversial not only because of his association with the Nazi party but because of his Hobbes-like contention that the sovereign is known as the one who decides on the exception.

Paul Kahn argues that Schmitt’s understanding of sovereignty has structured an inquiry into the political that is a kind of mirror image of the political theory of liberalism. For Schmitt not the law but the exception, not the judge but the sovereign, not reason but decision determines the character of the political. Kahn argues that Schmitt’s inversion of liberal presuppositions about politics is so extreme one “might think of political theology as the dialectical negation of liberal political theory.” Given my identification as a critic of liberal political theory, some might, with some justification, think I am rightly described as a political theologian.

I doubt, however, I deserve such a description. I confess it is tempting to claim that identity as a way to counter the oft-made criticism that I am a “sectarian, fideistic tribalist” who is trying to get Christians to abandon the task of securing justice through participation in politics. It is true, moreover, that I find much of the work being done in political theology to be quite congenial to the way I think about the political challenges facing Christians in contexts such as America. But the path I have taken for how I understand the political stance Christians should assume in the world in which we find ourselves is quite different than those who now identify themselves with “political theology.”

In order to explain that “path,” as well as how I now think about the politics of Christian existence, I need to provide an account of how Christians in America became convinced they had a moral obligation to be political actors in what they took to be democratic politics. The expression “the politics of Christian existence” that I use to describe my position indicates my distance from the story I have to tell about how Christians came to ask themselves what political responsibilities they had as Christians. That
question would often produce investigations into the relation of Christianity and politics. From my perspective that way of putting the matter—that is, “What is the relation between Christianity and politics?”—is to have failed to account for the political reality of the Church.

My point is not unlike John Howard Yoder’s argument concerning the inadequacy of H. Richard Niebuhr’s “method” in Christ and Culture. Yoder argued that the very way Niebuhr posed the problem of the relation of Christ to culture failed to be properly Christological just to the extent that the Christ who is Lord is separated from Jesus of Nazareth. Yoder argued that Niebuhr’s account of Christ as the exemplification of radical monotheism failed to give adequate expression to the full and genuine human existence of the man Jesus of Nazareth. That Christological mistake from Yoder’s point of view shaped the problematic character of Niebuhr’s typology because recognition of Jesus’s full humanity is necessary to recognize that Jesus himself is a “cultural reality.” As a result, the Christ of Christ and Culture was assumed to be alien to culture qua culture, thus creating the problematic that shapes Niebuhr’s book.9

What I must now try to do is to tell the story of the “and” that created the question of the relation of Christianity and politics. I hope to show that, just as Yoder suggests the “and” between Christ and culture reproduced a Christ that was less than fully human, so the “and” between Christianity and politics assumed a Church that was fundamentally apolitical. Because I have been so influenced by Yoder I am often accused of tempting Christians to withdraw from participation in politics. Yet neither Yoder nor myself have assumed it possible to “withdraw” from the world, or even if withdrawal were possible, that it would be a “good thing.” Admittedly, as I will suggest in due course, Yoder changes how we as Christians are to understand “the political,” but he does so because of how he understands “the politics of Jesus.”10 But to show the difference Yoder makes, I need to provide a brief account of how Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr understood democracy as the politics that is definitive for Christians.

How Christians Became “Political” in America

The story I have to tell is not unlike the story I planned to tell by writing a book on the development of Christian ethics in America. In a chapter in A Better Hope entitled, “Christian Ethics in America (and the Journal of Religious Ethics): A Report on a Book I Will Not Write,” I explain why I
did not write the book. I did not write the book because I did not want to write about a tradition I thought had come to an end. That the tradition had come to an end had everything to do with what I took to be the storyline of the book. The storyline is that the subject of Christian ethics in America was first and foremost America. That such was and still remains the case means: Just to the extent Christians got the politics they had identified as Christian—that is, democratic politics—they seemed no longer to have anything politically interesting to say as Christians.

Put differently, I suggested that the book I did not write would ask the dramatic question of how a tradition that began with a book by Walter Rauschenbusch entitled *Christianizing the Social Order* would end with a book by James Gustafson entitled, *Can Ethics Be Christian?* The story I sought to tell was meant to explore how that result came to be by concentrating on people such as Reinhold Niebuhr, H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Ramsey, Jim Gustafson, and John Howard Yoder. Yoder, of course, did not stand in the same tradition as those from Rauschenbusch to Gustafson, but that was just the point: Namely, that only an outsider could offer the fresh perspective the mainstream theological tradition so desperately needed.

It is not quite true that I did not write the book I had planned. I did write a number of essays on Rauschenbusch, Reinhold and H. Richard Niebuhr, Paul Ramsey, and Jim Gustafson that developed some themes that the proposed book was to be about. What I failed to do, and the failure was intentional, was to bring these essays and chapters together in one book. I do not regret that decision, but that I did not write the book means I can use this opportunity to make explicit how the development of Christian thinking about politics resulted in the loss of the politics of the Church.

A strange claim to be sure. The social gospel was, after all, largely a movement of churchmen to convince their fellow Christians that they had a calling to engage in the work of social reconstruction. Of course the central reality for the social gospel was not the Church but the Kingdom of God. Yet Rauschenbusch claimed that the Church is the social factor in salvation. The Church is so because it “brings social forces to bear on evil. It offers Christ not only many human bodies and minds to serve as ministers of his salvation, but its own composite personality, with a collective memory storied with great hymns and Bible moral feelings, and with a collective will set on righteousness.”
Rauschenbusch appealed to Schleiermacher and Royce to emphasize that the Church is the social organism that makes it possible for us to share in the consciousness of Christ. According to Rauschenbusch, the individual is saved by membership in the Church because the Church is necessary to make Christ’s consciousness the consciousness of every member of the Church. It is not the institutional character of the Church, nor its continuity, its ministry, nor doctrine that saves, but rather the Church provides salvation by making the Kingdom of God present.

According to Rauschenbusch the Kingdom of God is the heart of the revolutionary force of Christianity. It was the loss of the Kingdom ideals that put the Church on her path to abandon her social and political commitments. As a result, the movements for democracy and social justice were left without religious backing. In the process many Christians lost any sense that social justice might have something to do with salvation. Christians thus failed to emphasize the three commitments that the Kingdom entails: (1) to work for a social order that guarantees to all personalities their freest and highest development; (2) to secure the progressive reign of love in human affairs so that the use of force and legal coercion become superseded; and (3) the free surrender of property rights, which means the refusal to support monopolistic industries.

All of which can be summed up by Rauschenbusch’s claim that the social gospel is the religious response to the historic advent of democracy. For Rauschenbusch the social gospel sought to put the democratic spirit, which the Church inherited from Jesus and the prophets, once more in control of the institution of the Church. Another word for salvation, Rauschenbusch asserts, is democracy, because Jesus’s highest redemptive act was to take God by the hand and call him “our Father.” By doing so Jesus democratized the conception of God and in the process not only saved humanity but “he saved God.”

The Christian’s task is to work to extend this democratic ideal. Rauschenbusch thinks the ideal that has been largely achieved in the political sphere, but now the same democratic ideals must be applied to the economic realm. That means Christians must work to see that the brotherhood of man is expressed in the common possession of the economic resources of society. They must also seek to secure the spiritual good of humanity by insuring such a good is set high above the private profit interests of all materialistic groups. Rauschenbusch was convinced, moreover, that these
were not unrealizable ideals, but possible achievements Christians could bring to fruition if the gospel was recognized to be a social gospel.

It is tempting to dismiss Rauschenbusch as hopelessly naïve, but that would be a mistake. His rhetoric invites the judgment that he is far too “optimistic,” but it should not be forgotten that after Rauschenbusch it was assumed by most people in mainstream Protestant denominations in America that Christians had a responsibility to be politically active in order to extend democratic practices. Reinhold Niebuhr will criticize Rauschenbusch for failing to account for the necessity of conflict and coercion for the establishment of justice, but Niebuhr never called into question Rauschenbusch’s fundamental insight that Christians have to make use of politics to achieve justice. As critical of the social gospel as he may have been, Niebuhr simply assumed that Christians must be politically responsible. Niebuhr’s chastened realism, to be sure, was a critical response to Rauschenbusch’s far-too-optimistic presumption that justice was achievable, but in many ways Niebuhr’s criticism of the social gospel was made possible by the achievement of that movement.

Of course it was sin that determined Niebuhr’s fundamental perspective on the necessity of politics. Because we are sinners, justice can be achieved only by degrees of coercion, as well as resistance to coercion. Thus his oft-made claim that “the political life of man must constantly steer between the Scylla of anarchy and the Charybdis of tyranny.”20 That alternative, anarchy or tyranny, was the kind of dualism Niebuhr often confidently declared were our only choices if we did not strive to sustain democratic life and institutions. Thus his contention that democracy is the worst form of all governments, except all other forms of government, because democracy provides an alternative to totalitarianism or anarchy.

For Niebuhr, Christians have a stake in democratic societies because, given the realism that the Christian understanding of sin requires, Christians know “that a healthy society must seek to achieve the greatest possible equilibrium of power, the greatest possible centers of power, the greatest possible social checks of the administration of power, and the greatest possible inner moral check on human ambition, as well as the most effective use of forms of power in which consent and coercion are compounded.”21 Democracies at their best are, therefore, able to achieve unity of purpose within the conditions of freedom and to maintain freedom within the framework of order.
It is particularly important to note that for Niebuhr democracy is a system of government that does not require the governed to be virtuous. Rather it is a form of social organization that limits self-interested men from pursuing their interests in a manner that destroys community. Of course a too-consistent pessimism concerning our ability to transcend our interests can lead to absolutist political theories. So Niebuhr is not suggesting that democracies can survive without some sense of justice. Rather he is reminding us that, as he puts it in what is probably his most famous epigram, “man’s capacity for justice makes democracy possible; but man’s inclination to injustice makes democracy necessary.”

The task of social Christianity for Niebuhr is not to advocate particular solutions for economic or social ills, but to produce people of modesty and humility about what can be accomplished given our sinful condition. It is equally important that some modesty be applied to the Church, which is no less under the power of sin. In fact, from Niebuhr’s point of view the sins of the Church may be even more destructive given the temptation to identify religious politics with the politics of God. For Niebuhr the task of the Church is “to bear witness against every form of pride and vainglory, whether in the secular or in the Christian culture, and be particularly intent upon our own sins lest we make Christ the judge of the other but not of ourselves.”

The contrasts between Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr are clear, though they share more than is immediately apparent. In particular, democracy plays a very similar role in their respective positions. The question of the relation of Christianity and politics is fundamentally resolved for Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr if the politics the Christian is to presume as normative is a democratic politics. Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr are vague about what makes a democracy democratic, but I hope enough has been said to show how the language of democracy became their way to assure Christians in America that they must “be political.”

The Difference Yoder Makes

I simply assumed, as I suspect did almost anyone who worked in Christian ethics in the second half of the twentieth century, that Rauschenbusch’s and Niebuhr’s different understandings and justifications of democracy were a given. Yet even before I had read Yoder I was beginning to explore issues in democratic theory that would make me worry about the
assumption that democracy is normative for Christians. For example, in the earliest article I wrote on Christianity and politics, “Politics, Vision, and the Common Good,” I began to worry about issues intrinsic to democratic practice and theory.25 The civil rights movement, the protest against the war in Vietnam, and questions of economic inequality made me question pluralist justifications of democratic processes. Drawing on the work of Robert Paul Wolff, Ted Lowi, and Sheldon Wolin, I began to explore what alternatives there might be to Niebuhr’s “realism.”

The article on politics and the common good was paired with another chapter in *Vision and Virtue* entitled “Theology and the New American Culture.”26 “Theology and the New American Culture” is probably best described as an attempt at theological journalism. Reinhold Niebuhr was the master of this genre, as he ably helped us see that what seemed to be quite theoretical issues in political theory had concrete manifestations. In “Theology and the New American Culture,” I was trying to suggest that the cultural despair that was so evident among many in the sixties was not accidentally related to some of the fundamental presumptions of liberal democratic theory and practice. Drawing on Philip Slater’s *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, I tried to show there was a connection between our isolation from one another and our inability to discover goods in common through the political process.

Somehow, and it may have come from reading the Social Encyclicals, I began to think there was a deep tension between liberal political theory and accounts of politics that appealed to the common good. Niebuhr’s political realism expressed in terms of interest group liberalism at best can give you an account of common interests. For Niebuhr, as well as more secular accounts of liberal democratic theory, there are no goods in common that can be discovered as well as serve democratic politics. The democratic state, as Ernst-Wolfgang Bockenforde has argued, is an order of freedom and of peace rather than an order of truth and virtue necessary for the recognition of common goods.27 Accordingly, defenders of liberal democracies seek to establish institutions that make possible the achievement of relative justice without people themselves being just.28

I observed above that I was beginning to explore critical questions essential to issues in democratic theory. That way of putting the matter is, I think, important because it indicates I was not calling into question the presumption that some account of democracy is important for Christians if we were to be politically responsible. *A Community of Character: Toward*
a Constructive Christian Social Ethic, a book published in 1981, included a chapter entitled “The Church and Liberal Democracy.” In that essay I began to try to distinguish democratic practice from liberal political theory.29 Drawing on the work of C. B. Macpherson, I tried to show how liberalism, particularly in its economic modes, subverted the democratic commitment to sustaining a common life necessary to make possible lives of virtue.30 Accordingly, I argued, just to the extent the Church is or can be a school for virtue, Christians can be crucial for the sustaining of democratic social and political life.

By the time I wrote A Community of Character I had read and begun to absorb the work of John Howard Yoder. What I learned from Yoder meant I was to be labeled a sectarian, fideistic tribalist because I was allegedly tempting Christians to withdraw from political engagement. Nothing could have been further from the truth. In fact the attempt to distinguish democratic practice from liberal political theory reflected my conviction that Christians could not and should not withdraw from serving their neighbor through political engagement. Some suggested the book I wrote with Rom Coles, Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations between a Radical Democrat and a Christian, represented a more positive approach to the political than my previous work.31 That may be true of the tone of the book, but I understood the conversation between Coles and myself to be the continuation of my attempt to find a way to talk about forms of democratic life that were not shaped by liberal presuppositions.

That is not to say, however, that Yoder did not make a difference in how I thought about Christian political engagement. Prior to reading Yoder I had the sense that my emphasis on the virtues meant that the Church was crucial to politics for the formation of lives of virtue. The Church became the polis that Aristotle knew had to exist but, in his case, did not. Accordingly Yoder’s ecclesiology supplied the politics I needed to make intelligible the stress on the virtues. That meant, as Dan Bell argues, that I had to resist any politics that portrays the Church as apolitical in a manner that leaves the formation of the body to the state. I refused any reduction of politics to statecraft in order to emphasize the political character of the Church as a political space in its own right.32

From such a perspective the moral emptiness at the heart of liberalism could be construed as an advantage for Christians if the Church was capable of producing lives that are not empty. Liberalism as a practice for
organizing cooperative arrangements between moral strangers could be good for Christians, though I think it bad for liberals. Indeed I thought my critiques of liberalism were charitable because my criticisms were an attempt to suggest to liberals that there are alternatives to a liberal way of life. Of course one of the difficulties with that way of conceiving the political mission of the Church is that too often Christians had policed their Christianity to make it compatible with liberal tolerance. The other difficulty being that the alleged indifference of liberal states concerning formation of “citizens” was anything but “neutral.” In fact, the liberal state is quite good at the formation of people with virtues to sustain war.

I do not mean to suggest that Yoder’s influence on me made little difference. In fact it made all the difference. Thus his claim:

To ask, “What is the best form of government?” is itself a Constantinian question. It is representative of an already “established” social posture. It assumes that the paradigmatic person, the model ethical agent, is in a position of such power that it falls to him to evaluate alternative worlds and to prefer the one in which he himself (for the model ethical agent assumes himself to be part of ‘the people’) shares the rule.33

Yoder’s challenge, interestingly enough, made me wonder—given my interest in exploring issues in democratic theory—whether, in fact, rather than being a “sectarian,” I did not continue to be a Constantinian.

Of course, if Alex Sider is right, and I certainly think he is, it is very hard to avoid being Constantinian. That it is hard to avoid being Constantinian is clear because, as Sider argues, even Yoder was unable to avoid that fate. According to Sider, Constantinianism is not so much a “problem” as it is a totalizing discourse. That means that the resources one has to map a way out of Constantinianism will themselves likely be implicated in Constantinianism.34 In short, Constantinianism conditions the possibility for its own investigation just to the extent it determines what is to count as history.35 That is why Sider argues that more fundamental than the distinction between transcendental and empirical uses of the description, “Constantinianism” is the distinction between historicist and eschatological discourse. That means for Yoder “the true meaning of history is in the church. And this history is, at least in part, one of disavowal and apostasy.”36 But the very narration of Constantinianism as apostasy reproduces a Constantinian view of history.
Sider’s account of the unavoidability of Constantinianism makes clear how, in spite of what I have learned from Yoder, I have in many ways remained a Constantinian. Yet I have never pretended that everything associated with Constantinianism is to be rejected.37 Certainly Yoder did not think such a rejection warranted or required because he often saw much good in some developments associated with Christendom arrangements. It is, moreover, important to note that Yoder’s observation about the question of what is the best form of government is one made in the context of his chapter, “The Christian Case for Democracy.” With his usual analytical power Yoder explores in that essay the limits and possibilities of appeals to the rule of the people, observing that it is by no means clear why rule by the people is a good; and how would we know it to be good if the people did rule?38

Yoder worries that the glorification of democracy as the rule of “the people,” as well as the presumption that democracy represents a form of government that does not suffer from the disabilities of other forms of government, results in uncritical support for wars fought in the name of democracy. So his strategy in his chapter on democracy can almost be described as Niebuhrian, just to the extent he seeks to humble the rhetoric surrounding the uncritical celebration of democracy by Christians. Yet he argues that if Christians accepted our minority status in societies, like those in North America, we would be free to hold rulers to account by asking them to rule consistent with the rhetoric they use to legitimate their power. What we dare not forget, however, is that the assumption that “we” the people are governing ourselves is actually not the case. We are governed by elites. Democracies are no less oligarchic than other forms of government, but it is true, according to Yoder, that democratic oligarchies tend to be the least oppressive.39

For Yoder the task is not to justify “democracy.” Rather he simply accepts the fact that we are told we live in a democracy. He is not convinced we know what that entails. But drawing on A. D. Lindsay’s argument in his *The Modern Democratic State*, that the origins of democracy were in Puritan and Quaker congregations where the dignity of the adversary made dialogue not only necessary but possible, Yoder argues the Church can serve democratic orders in a similar fashion by being a community that continues to respect the adversary both within and outside of the Church. From Yoder’s perspective the Church best serves the social orders that claim to be democratic by taking seriously the internal calling of the Church rather
than “becoming tributary to whatever secular consensus seems strong at the time.”

That is the strategy I have tried to adopt in my work. It is a strategy that makes any identification as a “political theologian” doubtful. There is much to learn from work in political theology, but the way I think about Christian political engagement is less grand than most of what is identified as work in political theology. For example, I think calling attention to the work of Jean Vanier has a political purpose. For it must surely be the case that the existence and support of the work of Vanier to secure homes for the mentally disabled indicates the kind of moral commitment necessary to sustain a politics capable of recognizing the dignity of each human being. But to hold up the work of Vanier as politically significant I am sure seems to many simply a way to avoid the primary political challenges before societies like the United States of America. That may be the case, but that is the way I have learned to think theologically about politics.

In *The First Thousand Years: A Global History of Christianity*, Robert Wilken observes that Christianity is a culture-forming religion. Consequently the growth of Christian communities led to the transformation of the cultures of the ancient world, which meant the creation of several new civilizations. At the heart of that process was language because, as Wilken suggests, “culture has to do with the pattern of inherited meanings and sensibilities embedded in rituals, institutions, laws, practices, images, and the stories of people.” Wilken’s description of the conceptual revolution brought about by Christianity rightly directs attention to the significance of language as the heart of politics. That is why I resist any attempt to suggest that the Church is one thing and politics something else.

Luke Bretherton puts this well when he suggests that “doing church” and “doing politics” are both about the formation of shared speech and action that forms a common world. Therefore, according to Bretherton, politics and ecclesiology name two mutually constitutive locations where a *sensus communis* can be forged. I take it to be that one of the characteristics of the culture currently described as democratic is the loss of elegant speech. It is not simply the loss of elegance that I lament, but the language used in politics is intended to obscure rather than illumine. If, as Bretherton suggests, ecclesiology is politics by another name, then the Church can serve the world in which we find ourselves by attending to our speech. Well-formed sermons may turn out to be the most important contribution Christians can make to a politics that has some ambition to be truthful.
To conceive Christian witness in this manner may seem insignificant and to require patience we do not have, but that is why Jean Vanier is so important. He is the culture Christianity produces.

The Church as Foot-Dragging

I am aware that these last suggestions may seem far too abstract, so let me try to suggest the kind of concrete politics I think they entail, at least for Christians in advanced capitalist societies, by calling attention to James C. Scott’s recent book, *Two Cheers for Anarchism: Six Easy Pieces on Autonomy, Dignity, and Meaningful Work and Play*. I am well aware that to identify with Scott’s account of anarchism will only confirm for many I am a “sectarian, fideistic, tribalist,” but I have long given up on any attempt to counter that charge. That I am directing attention to Scott’s book is not meant to suggest that he provides the only way to think about the political character of the Church—in fact, I am quite sympathetic to Luke Bretherton’s more robust account of what a Christian politics might look like.

One of the attractions of Scott’s account of anarchy is his reticence about any account of anarchy that tries to be comprehensive. Accordingly he describes his “method” as an “anarchist squint” that is intended to help us see what we might otherwise miss. Scott does not deny that Proudhon’s description of anarchism as “mutuality or cooperation without hierarchy or state rule” certainly captures some of what may pass as anarchy, but that description may not adequately suggest the anarchist tolerance for confusion and improvisation that accompanies social learning. Scott has no reason to try to nail down a definition of anarchism, being content to use anarchism to describe a defense of politics, conflict, and debate, along with the perpetual uncertainty and learning they entail. That means that, unlike many anarchists, Scott does not believe the state is always the enemy of freedom.

Scott’s project might be called an exercise in small politics. For example, he writes about his stay in Germany when he was trying to learn German by forcing himself to interact with fellow pedestrians in the small town of Neubrandenburg. He tells the story of crossing the street to get to the train station in obedience to lights that indicated when it was legal to cross the street. He reports that fifty or sixty people would often wait at the corner for the light to change even though they could see no traffic was com-
ing. He reports after five hours of observation he saw no more than two
people cross against the light. Those two who would cross against the lights
had to be willing to receive from those that waited gestures of disapproval.
Scott reports he had to screw up his courage to cross the street against their
disapproval. He did so, justifying his law-breaking performance by remem-
bering that his grandparents could have used more of the spirit of break-
ing the law in the name of justice. But because they had lost the practice
of breaking small laws, they no longer knew when it really matters to break
the law. Scott calls such practice of law breaking “anarchist calisthenics,”
implying that Germans could use the practice.48

Scott observes that, under authoritarian regimes, subjects who are
denied public means of protest have no recourse but to resort to “foot-
dragging, sabotage, poaching, theft, and, ultimately, revolt.” Modern forms
of democracy allegedly make such forms of dissent obsolete. But Scott
argues that the assumed promise of democracy that makes “foot-dragging”
no longer necessary is seldom realized in practice. He argues that what
needs to be noticed is that most of the political reforms that have made
some difference for democratic change have been the result of disruption
of the public order. Accordingly, Scott argues that anarchism at least is a
reminder that the cultivation of insubordination and law breaking is cru-
cial for the political developments we call democracy.49

Yet Scott observes that proponents of liberal democratic theory seldom
attend to the role of crisis and institutional failure that lead to political
reform. That liberal democracies in the West are generally run for the top
20 percent of those that possess wealth no doubt is one of the reasons for
the occlusion of crisis to account for democratic developments. Indeed,
Scott observes the greatest failure of liberal democracies is the lack of
protection they give to the economic and security interests of their least-
advantaged citizens. As a result, Scott argues, the contradiction between
the renewal of democracy by major episodes of extra-institutional disorder
and the promise of democracy as the institutionalization of peaceful change
is seldom noticed.50

Scott’s book is an account of episodes of foot-dragging and disruption.
In particular he directs attention to matters not often considered “political”
to illumine our political landscape in advanced industrial societies. For
example, he pokes fun at the use of quantitative measures of productivity
in the academy in order to show how democracies like the United States
have embraced meritocratic criteria for the elite selection and distribution
of public funds to create “a vast and deceptive ‘antipolitics machine’ designed to turn legitimate political questions into neutral objective administrative exercises governed by experts.”51 This strategy to depoliticize protest masks a lack of faith in the possibilities anarchists and democrats have in the mutuality and education that can result from common action.

Scott’s defense of anarchy, therefore, turns out to be a defense of politics. He observes that “if there is one conviction that anarchist thinkers and nondemagogic populists share, it is faith in the capacity of democratic citizenry to learn and grow through engagement in the public sphere.”52 Yet he argues that the formation of bodies wrought through populist politics is often defeated by something as simple as the SAT exam. For that exam serves as a way to convince middle-class whites that affirmative action is a choice between objective merit and favoritism. As a result, the SAT robs us of the public dialogue we need to have about how educational opportunity ought to be allocated in a democratic and plural society. Cost-benefit analysis often functions in a similar way to make the conflict needed seem petty.53

Scott ends his book by directing our attention to the role of history in modern politics. The purpose of enunciating histories is to summarize major historical events, making them understandable as a single narrative. As a result, the “radical contingency” of history is domesticated in an effort to underwrite the assumption that the way things turned out is the only way they could be. Such condensations of history, which fulfill the need of elites to project an image of control, create a blindness to the fact that “gains for human freedom have not been the result of orderly, institutional procedures but of disorderly, unpredictable, spontaneous action cracking open the social order from below.”54

I confess that it is with some hesitancy that I use Scott’s account of anarchy to exemplify what a Christian politics might look like. I worry that “anarchy” may suggest that I have no use for institutions that inevitably involve hierarchies of authority. I assume it is never a question of whether hierarchies of authority should or should not exist, but rather how authority should be understood as an aid for the discovery of the common good of a community. Indeed I am in deep agreement with Victor Lee Austin’s argument in Up with Authority that, because the common good of communities is not one isolated goal, “authority is needed because it is desirable that particular goods should be taken care of by particular agencies.”55 The
irony is that such an account of authority stands as a challenge, a challenge that may appear to threaten anarchy, in a liberal social order in which common goods by design are reduced to common interest.

The Church is rightly a hierarchical institution. It is so because the Church is a community that believes the truth matters. Accordingly, the saints and martyrs stand as authorities necessary to test the changes that the Church will undergo if it is to remain faithful to the gospel. Those singled out for office in the Church (to insure that the Church attends to the saints) must recognize that the exercise of their authority can never be an end in itself. But it is “political” in the most basic sense of what it means to be political and accordingly can serve as an example for the exercise of authority beyond the Church. If that is a Constantinian strategy, then I am a Constantinian.

Above I referred to Sider’s suggestion that Yoder’s anti-Constantinianism is best expressed in terms of the Church being the true meaning of history. That is an extraordinary claim, requiring a people to exist who know how to drag their feet when confronted by those who think they know where history is headed—which, I hope, is one way to say that the Church does not have a politics, but rather the Church is God’s politics for the world. If Christians are well-formed by that politics, they hopefully will serve the world well by developing an “ecclesial squint.” By doing so they might just be able to serve their neighbor by helping us see that “it did not have to be.” That, moreover, is the most radical politics imaginable.

Notes


13. See, for example, the chapter on Rauschenbusch entitled, “Walter Rauschenbusch and the Saving of America” in Better Hope, 71–108. I follow that chapter with another on John Courtney Murray and his role in drafting the encyclical of the Second Vatican Council, Dignitatis Humanae. Murray and John Ryan are part of the story I wanted to tell about Christian ethics as they represented the Catholic alternative to mainstream Protestantism. I have written numerous essays on Reinhold Niebuhr, but the two that are most relevant to this paper appear in Stanley Hauerwas, Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1997), 32–62. The same book also includes my essays on Jim Gustafson and Paul Ramsey. The essays I have written on Yoder are too numerous to list.


15. Rauschenbusch, Theology, 129.

16. Rauschenbusch, Theology, 142–43.

17. Rauschenbusch, Theology, 5.


22. Davis and Good, Reinhold Niebuhr, 186. This famous epigram is from Niebuhr’s Children of Light and Children of Darkness, a book he wrote after the Second World War to chasten what he regarded as the uncritical celebration of democracy.
23. It is to Charles Mathewes’s great credit that he develops what I take to be a Niebuhrian theme by suggesting that Christian engagement in politics is itself a discipline for the shaping of the Christian life. Christians must have virtues that will prepare them politically, but those same virtues will be honed through political engagement. I am sure Mathewes is right about that, but I suspect the ambiguity that is, according to Mathewes, intrinsic to political involvement can be learned from singing in the church choir—and I suspect Mathewes would agree. See Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).


27. This is Rhonheimer’s characterization of Bockenforde’s views in Martin Rhonheimer, *The Common Good of Constitutional Democracy* (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University Press, 2013), 74–75. It is extremely important to note that Rhonheimer argues against Bockenforde by suggesting that a modern democratic state’s attempt to secure peace is itself a good in common. Rhonheimer does not contest Bockenforde’s contention that truth is not the aim of democratic constitutionalism, but Rhonheimer argues that constitutional democracies rightly seek to secure a minimum morality, to ensure people can live together in peace. The institutions of societies so ordered, Rhonheimer argues, compensate for the deficit in individual morality. Rhonheimer’s is a powerful argument but I remain doubtful that peace is possible without truthfulness.

28. Some may think this an unfair characterization but John Rawls is admirably candid that his project is an attempt to give an account of justice that does not require those that enjoy the system of justice so created to be just. See John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), 54–65.

29. I am quite well aware that a phrase like “liberal political theory” does not do justice to the many forms of liberal theory. For the best account I know of the diversity of liberal theory, see Paul Kahn, *Putting Liberalism in Its Place* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Kahn argues that liberalism’s greatest deficit is its failure to account for the place of the will (and thus of love) in the politics of modern nation states. Kahn distinguishes between a liberalism of interest and a liberalism of reason. The former emphasizes the centrality of the market while the latter attempts to ground political life in a compelling foundation comparable to the sciences. Both these forms of liberalism fail to do justice to the will as the source of love necessary to ground politics. See Kahn’s chapter, “The Faculties of the Soul: Beyond Reason and Interest,” in *Putting Liberalism*, 145–82.
30. Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 72–88. I cannot believe I used the phrase “social ethic” in the title of this book. The use of that phrase is problematic because it cannot help but reproduce the presumption that there is another area of ethics that is not social. I am aware that Macpherson’s account of “possessive individualism” has been the subject of aggressive critique. I remain convinced, however, that the principal lines of his argument remain valid. For an insightful analysis of the question of the relationship of democracy to liberalism in my work, as well as Stout’s critique of my identification of democracy with liberalism, see William Cavanaugh, “A Politics of Vulnerability: Hauerwas and Democracy” in *Unsettling Arguments: A Festschrift on the Occasion of Stanley Hauerwas's 70th Birthday* (Eugene, Oreg.: Cascade, 2010), 89–111. In Aristotle Papanikolaou, *The Mystical As Political: Democracy and Non-Radical Orthodoxy* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), the author observes I have never “really taken the time to nuance what I mean by liberalism” (135). I do not think that a fair characterization. The problem is not I have not taken the time to give more nuanced accounts of liberalism. The problem is I have done so too occasionally. I should say I am quite sympathetic to Papanikolaou’s emphasis on the importance of spirituality for democratic politics and in particularly the politics of truth.

31. Stanley Hauerwas and Romand Coles, *Christianity, Democracy, and the Radical Ordinary: Conversations Between a Radical Democrat and a Christian* (Eugene, Oreg.: Cascade, 2008). For a very enlightening analysis of the relation of liberal political theory and democracy, see Alan Ryan, *The Making of Modern Liberalism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 21–107. Ryan rightly identifies liberalism as a “theory of the good life for individuals that is linked to a theory of the social, economic, and political arrangements within which they may lead that life” (15). He suggests that Rawls failed finally to separate his account of liberalism from a view of the good life. His account of liberal anxiety is particularly telling, as Ryan observes “liberals suffer a self-inflicted wound: they want the emancipation that leads to disenchantment, but want the process that emancipates us to relocate us in the world as well. Nietzsche and Weber are only the most eloquent among the voices that say it cannot be done in the way the liberal wants” (78).


35. Sider, To See, 121.
36. Sider, To See, 121.
37. In a number of essays I have tried to suggest that the polarization of Constantinianism and non-Constantinianism is often not very helpful in helping us to discern how Christians must attempt to find ways to serve their neighbor. Several chapters in Hauerwas, Better Hope were attempts to defy the assumption that anti-Constantinianism means that Christians have nothing useful to say to the politics of the world. Stanley Hauerwas, The State of the University: Academic Knowledges and the Knowledge of God (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007) may be more relevant.
38. Yoder, Priestly Kingdom, 151.
40. Yoder, Priestly Kingdom, 168.
41. I have written about Vanier a number of times, but I was honored to collaborate on Stanley Hauerwas and Jean Vanier, Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness (Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Press, 2008). I suspect, however, that the work of my students is more indicative of how to proceed than anything I myself have completed. See, for example, Charles Pinches, “Hauerwas and Political Theology: The Next Generation,” Journal of Religious Ethics 36, no. 3 (September 2008), 513–42. Pinches directs attention to Cavanaugh, Long, Toole, Bell, McCarthy, Shuman, Lysaught, and Johnson as representatives of this way of doing “political theology.”
45. Luke Bretherton, Christianity and Contemporary Politics (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010). Indeed, I think much of what Bretherton does in his book is compatible with Scott’s understanding of anarchism. For example, commenting on the significance of “ordinary time” Bretherton observes that attention to ordinary time “enables the valuation of the micro-political as just as important for conceptualizing faithful political witness as the set-piece relationships between church and state, and ordinary political actor as just as significant as ‘heroic’ figures such as Martin Luther King” (213).
46. Scott, Two Cheers, xii.
47. Scott, Two Cheers, xii.
51. Scott, *Two Cheers*, 111.
54. Scott, *Two Cheers*, 141.