

Christians

IN THE
Public Square

F a i t h T h a t
T r a n s f o r m s
P o l i t i c s

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Abingdon Press
Nashville

CHRISTIANS IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE
FAITH THAT TRANSFORMS POLITICS

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This book is printed on acid-free paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Marshall, Ellen Ott, 1970-

Christians in the public square : faith that transforms politics / Ellen Ott Marshall.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-687-64698-2 (binding: pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Christianity and politics—United States. I. Title.

BR516.M275 2008

261.7—dc22

2008022333

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For my parents, Karen and Phil

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A c k n o w l e d g m e n t s

This book began as a lecture delivered at the Claremont School of Theology in the fall of 2004. My first debt of gratitude, therefore, goes to faculty colleagues who both affirmed the lecture and challenged me to develop it further. I am particularly grateful to Andy Dreitcer for his ongoing interest in this project and to Rich Amesbury, Debbie Roberts, and Frank Rogers for their helpful comments on the manuscript. I value the input and friendship of these four individuals tremendously. I am also fortunate to have truly thoughtful students whose engagement with questions of faith and politics has informed my understanding. I am especially grateful to Katie Schubert for her research assistance and to Katy Scrogin for her careful proofreading and indexing. I also appreciate the support and freedom that Bob Ratcliff extended to me.

I continue to receive immeasurable support from my family and friends. I would be unable to pursue my vocation without their love and the many forms of care they provide. Tommy and Katherine add laughter and levity to my life, and they keep me connected to aspects of the world (like country music and princesses, respectively) that I would not follow on my own. In relationship to this book, I am especially grateful to my mom, Karen, who put her life on hold to be with us when the threat of preterm labor relegated me to bed rest and the arrival of our twins, Zoe and Steve, happily complicated our lives. During this time, Mom not only took care of

Acknowledgments

all aspects of our home life but also enabled me to finish the semester and this manuscript. I am profoundly grateful for her help and friendship, and I am genuinely humbled by the depth of her commitment to the people she loves. There is nothing romantic about my mom's form of commitment. She simply "sticks to it" regardless of the nature of the task and the temperament of the one cared for. Having someone like this to rely on is surely one of life's most precious gifts.

R e f u s i n g t o P l a y P o l i t i c s w i t h F a i t h

Conflicts and Confrontation

One Monday morning I received an email from a man who had heard me preach some of this book's content the Sunday before. He wrote, "When you started preaching, I thought, 'Here we go again—another liberal who is going to bash my conservative views.' But it wasn't like that at all." This is not a book intended to bash anyone's views. Indeed, it is in large part motivated by the lamentable observation that the expectation of "bashing" is so understandable. I have come to expect bashing whenever I hear a certain tone on the radio or television, whenever a certain position is mentioned in even the most cursory way, and whenever particular names, churches, seminaries, or organizations are referenced authoritatively. And I see similar expectations on the faces of my students every day. When one person begins speaking, those with different theological and political positions ready themselves for

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assault and rebuttal. In the next moment, as the listeners speak up, the postures become reversed.

We respond to this expectation of bashing by not listening to certain radio stations or watching certain programs, by refusing to read particular publications or listen to particular speakers, by avoiding people who believe “those” things, and by avoiding topics that “get us into trouble.” We spend as much time as possible with the programs, people, organizations, and literature that support our own point of view and bash the others. And we do much more than bash other views; we bash the people who hold them. If the only expectation were for disagreement, and if this is what we experienced, then there would be no need for this book. But we expect and experience hatred, personal insult, and offense to our deepest convictions.

On my way to work, I drive two four-year-old girls to preschool. Katherine is my daughter, and Ally is her friend. Every morning, there is some harmony and some kind of disagreement; sometimes the harmony dominates and sometimes the disagreements do. They disagree about whether the clouds are moving on Katherine’s side of the car or only on Ally’s. They disagree about which song to listen to next or which characters I should include in the story I’m telling. They disagree about whether the song goes “Scooby Scooby Doo” or “Scooby Dooby Doo.” Truthfully, there is no end to the subjects on which they can disagree. When I can, I try to help them come to some kind of agreement, but often their disagreements persist and even turn mean. They scold each other or declare that the friendship is over. And so, at least weekly, I find myself saying, “Girls? Girls. Girls! Really, you must find some way to disagree without being mean to each other. It is OK to disagree, but it is not OK to be mean.”

Although the subjects of disagreement addressed in this book are significantly more serious, my basic point is the same. We must find some way to disagree without being mean to each other. We must

identify ways to work for justice without being consumed by hatred. We must learn how to advocate a position without demonizing the person who thinks differently. And we must find language to express faith's influence on our politics without claiming to have sole or complete knowledge of God's will. In order to accomplish these tasks (or at least move in their direction), I recommend that we practice *agape* in situations of heated conflict, acknowledge and attend to moral ambiguity, and adopt a posture of theological humility.

Playing Politics?

This book assumes that people of faith must bring their religious convictions to bear on political matters. We must do so because our faith is a deeply held part of who we are and therefore cannot be excised. We cannot somehow cut off the "faith portion" and leave it at home or at church as we move out into public spaces. Indeed, the religious tradition that informs us personally informs the way we understand the world and our responsibilities to it. At a minimum, it is dishonest to keep this aspect of our identity and this informing source in stealth mode as we participate in democracy. Refusing to disclose the role of religion in our thinking also excludes faith from the process of critical reflection and engagement in which it must participate.

Those of us in the Christian tradition must bring our faith into the public square for another reason as well. I believe that at the heart of the Christian faith is a social gospel, a call to respond to the needs of the world and those who occupy it. This call has social, political, economic, and ecological implications, and we cannot live out this vocation fully without engaging politics, among other things. This underlying assumption propels me to address a "how" question rather than to debate a "whether" question. The question

driving this book is not whether to bring faith into politics, but *how* to do so without playing politics with our faith.

Playing politics with our faith means that we allow the religious tradition that informs us to be used instrumentally in a political process. This is not to suggest that politics is all bad and thus taints religion when they mix. The point is, rather, that there are problematic features of politics that make use of similarly problematic features in religion. This book focuses on three instrumental uses of Christianity in contemporary U.S. politics and recommends three corresponding commitments that, if practiced, can transform politics in some positive ways. These commitments are unconditional love, moral ambiguity, and theological humility.

The Politics of Division

The first problematic feature of politics is that it not only employs disagreement, but also tends to turn those disagreements into walls of division. Disagreement is an unavoidable and even integral part of a political process. This, in and of itself, is not a bad thing. People simply disagree about the best way to solve a problem, and they advance positions that eventually develop into legislation, and then we vote for those candidates who most closely align with the legislation we prefer. At its best, politics is a nonviolent process by which people work through their disagreements. The problem arises when different viewpoints become hardened to the point that the division sparked (or, more often, fueled) by disagreement becomes a permanent feature of the society. When this happens, politics becomes less a process of working through disagreement and more a battle to defeat the opponent. People then begin to respond to questions out of a fixed ideological framework rather than examining the actual substance of questions.

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Unfortunately, religion lends itself to such division quite readily. The texts, practices, doctrines, and theologies of the Christian tradition are full of language of division: elect and damned, righteous and unrighteous, good and evil, those welcome to the communion table and those not welcome, those who may be ordained to ministry and those who may not be. As we consider methods for bringing faith to bear on politics, we need to begin by acknowledging the rhetoric and practices of our faith that lend themselves to the politics of division.

Fortunately, there are also texts, practices, doctrines, and theologies of the Christian tradition that speak of inclusion, equality, and relationship. To my mind, one particularly powerful antidote to the politics of division is the virtue of *agape*, understood as unconditional love. This virtue (which is not unique to the Christian tradition) makes no distinction between persons and thus prompts us to respond not to the division, but to the common humanity buried beneath it. Chapter 1 focuses on *agape* as “love in action” by considering related concepts found in nonviolent resistance for social change. I turn to this literature of nonviolent social change because it describes individuals who enter into heated sites of conflict and face verbal and physical abuse, yet relentlessly advocate for a cause without “violence of fist, tongue, or heart.” In their particular contexts, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Thich Nhat Hanh, Desmond Tutu, and Dorothy Day—along with the countless volunteers who worked with them—transformed politics by exercising love in action, rather than furthering the politics of division.

The Rhetoric of Certitude

A second problematic feature of politics is that it privileges absolute statements over more nuanced or open-ended positions. As people disagree, debate, and lobby for votes, the complexities

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and ambiguities around positions recede into the background, leaving only rhetoric of certitude and simplicity. Effective advocacy and successful campaigns seem to require this language. Political candidates who talk about gray areas are perceived as wishy-washy, weak, or evasive. Advocating for a position against opponents who dogmatically present disagreeable views requires an equally dogmatic response. No one can compete in this political climate without employing the rhetoric of certitude.

Again, religion lends itself to this purpose quite well. Orthodoxies (right belief) of various kinds, for example, thrive on and maintain absolute distinctions between right and wrong doctrine. And, to be fair, one can say the same thing about orthopraxies (right action), an approach to faith with which I am much more sympathetic. Still, the distinctions are made as clearly as possible between right and wrong practice, defining the parameters for truly Christian behavior. At a minimum, some kind of absolute conviction seems to be a requirement of religious belonging: why be Christian if you are, for example, unsure about the uniqueness of Jesus Christ? Religion lends itself to the political rhetoric of certitude because it employs such language regularly in its texts, doctrines, statements, and practices. And, like the evasive politician, the questioning believer is received warily by religious institutions that perceive struggles with ambiguity as a sign of weak faith.

Fortunately, such absolutist tendencies in religion do not constitute the whole of the experience and practice of faith. Indeed, religious institutions themselves do not constitute the whole life of faith, which extends far beyond the tradition's institutionalized expression. In the experience and practices of faith, we find room for moral ambiguity and are even called to pay careful attention to it. Moral ambiguity is a feeling of tension, fragmentation, or uncertainty that persists as one wrestles with an ethical question and

even after one has reached a conclusion or made a decision. A residue remains in the form of lingering questions, grief, and doubt. This is the very stuff of faith: the struggles related to deeply held commitments, the questions about one's own behavior or that of a group to which one has been loyal, and the tension we feel between our own good fortune and the misery of others. If we reduce the experience of faith to the absolutist expression often present in our religious institutions, we lose an opportunity to bring faith into politics in a transformative way. We conform our faith to the politics of certitude so that we can compete in the game rather than embodying a faith that might actually change the game.

The Divine Endorsement

A third troublesome feature of politics is that it seeks endorsement as a way to strengthen power. In the height of a campaign season, we see this most clearly as candidates seek and celebrate endorsements from influential people and from organizations representing different segments of society. For the most part, this is a rather benign practice. It may result in people voting according to endorsement rather than issues, but following the lead of an organization or individual who articulates one's interests and convictions is not antithetical to the democratic process. The problem really emerges when religion enters this mix, as it is poised to do. To put it most simply, religion appears to offer a divine endorsement.

Religious history is filled with examples of political leaders who were draped with God's mantle by religious leaders who also benefited from a cozy relationship with the state. President George W. Bush is certainly not the first to claim that his policies align with Providence, nor will he be the last. And religious communities advocating for public policies that are consonant with their

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religious commitments regularly make the argument that *this* is God's politics.

Now, as indicated earlier, I think that Christians should seek public policies that are consonant with religious commitments, lest faith become devoid of all social import and public meaning. There is a social message at the heart of the Christian tradition, and Christians cannot embody that message without attending to the public policies and social institutions that govern people's lives. But, given the history of religious endorsement for violence, tyranny, and injustice and given the political hunger for endorsement, we must be exceedingly careful about the ways we seek and articulate consonance between religious conviction and public policy.

I believe that the strongest antidote to divine endorsement is theological humility, which begins with the honest admission that we do not know the mind of God. Our knowledge is limited and partial. What we see, even through the eyes of faith, is conditioned by where we stand. So, my understanding or interpretation of God's will, for example, is not the same thing as God's will. It is my understanding or my interpretation, and this holds true for everyone. The political context tempts us toward the strongest of theological statements, especially when our opponents are making them. Theological bravado serves the rhetoric of politics well. The antidote is theological humility, which I will describe in the third chapter as a posture that (1) admits limitations of knowledge and partiality of perspective, (2) explicitly and deliberately practices hermeneutics, and (3) remains transparent about faith commitments and accountable to other sources of knowledge. Theological humility is the most appropriate posture for faith in a pluralistic society because it inhibits religious authoritarianism.

Conformity or Transformation?

Unconditional love, attention to moral ambiguity, and a posture of theological humility are not ingredients for political success in the United States. These three things are not politically effective in the narrow sense of contributing to a legislative or electoral victory. The driving concern of this book is the instrumental use of religion in politics and the ways in which our religious expression in the public sphere betrays the best intentions of our faith.

The Christian mandate to inclusive love is betrayed by a religious expression that adopts the rhetoric of division. The necessary presence of doubt and contrition in the life of faith is betrayed by a religious expression that conforms to a rhetoric of certitude and self-righteousness. And the delicate interplay between reason and faith is betrayed by religious expression that uses theological bravado to offer the divine endorsement.

These three commitments—love, ambiguity, humility—may not be politically effective in a narrow sense, but they are politically effective in the much broader sense of carrying the potential to transform politics in positive ways. When we bring faith into the public square, we must embody love in action because unconditional love insists on a relationship that runs deeper than division. We must attend to moral ambiguity because acknowledging and working with the gray areas increases the chances of finding common ground with others and makes some form of reconciliation more likely. And we must practice theological humility because it is the best way to make faith commitments a part of a political conversation without imposing them on other people. In other words, theological humility enables religion to be a participant in pluralistic, democratic discourse and thus contributes to a relationship between religion and politics that is constructively and mutually

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critical, rather than either antagonistic or instrumental. I not only advocate these commitments as corrective to the instrumental use of religion in politics, but I also believe in their inherent value and potential to transform the process.

I do not envision an immediately apparent transformation, but the furthering of an ongoing transformative process. Transformation does not occur when we repeat the same patterns of behavior; rather it requires that we risk doing something in a new way. Thus, we further the process of transformation by continuing to disrupt patterns of behavior. What difference would it make if Christians entered the public square not as a force for further division, but as embodiments of a love that insists upon relationship? I think it would further the process of “transforming the human race into the human family.”¹ What difference would it make if Christians would speak about our convictions *and* our uncertainties related to public policies? I think it would further the process of transforming ideologically separated people into human beings with views that sometimes diverge and sometimes overlap, thus making dialogue, compromise, and reconciliation more possible. What difference would it make if Christians were honest about the limitations of our knowledge and the processes of interpretation involved in faithful discernment? I think it would further the process of transforming the public role of religion from that of imperial authority to participant in discourse, with the right of voice and the responsibility of openness to critical engagement from others.

We have the opportunity to contribute to such transformation every time that we engage someone whose views differ from our own. These engagements may take place in formal or structured interactions such as town hall debates or public forums on contentious issues. They may also take place as activists encounter their opponents in the context of a march, vigil, petition drive, or canvassing campaign. But

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these opportunities also arise every day in workplaces, at ball fields, in check-out lines, and on airplanes. The “public square” is not a neatly circumscribed area that we enter only at a specified time for a pre-planned discussion. Much more often, we find ourselves thrust into the public square by a comment or question related to a social issue. My use of the phrase, public square, denotes a circumstance more than a place, a circumstance marked by a plurality of views and by discussion of issues that affect people beyond the discussants. In this sense, the public square is everywhere, even though we are frequently surprised by its appearance around us. Whether we plan our entry into a structured public space or we find ourselves thrust into these pluralistic social debates, we must carefully attend to the form of our engagement with the people and issues we meet there.

When I preached the sermon that gave rise to the email mentioned earlier, I took Matthew 5:13-16 as my text. The familiar passage from Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount is a call to distinctiveness—to remain “salty” rather than become bland, to reflect a light rather than become covered or snuffed out. There are certainly deeds required of us to remain salty and well-lit,² but I take this passage to also direct our attention to the spirit in which we act. I do not believe that the call to distinctiveness requires withdrawal from society, politics, and culture. But I do think that we are called to behave within these structures in light of a story that extends beyond them. We must not allow religious and political differences to smother awareness of our common humanity. We must not allow the rhetoric of certitude and unequivocal posturing to bury self-critical reflection and empathy for others. And we must not allow the light of a gracious and loving God to be hidden under the bushel of antagonistic politics. All of this means that we must attend to the form of the faith that we bring into the public square. In this process of transformation, form is as important as content.