

"On Politics as a Christian Vocation"

Does religion have any proper place in U.S. politics?

If Christians have a political vocation (because the Christian witness is properly concerned with the rightness of social and political structures as well as with individual or personal salvation), is their vocation consistent—and if it is, how is it consistent—with the disestablishment and freedom of religion stipulated by the First Amendment to the Constitution?

Is a religious based politics (which is another way of saying "politics as a religious vocation") consistent with the constitutional basis of our common life as American citizens?

Religious plurality opened the door to fundamental political conflict and ruinous religious wars. Why? Because underlying religious plurality is a plurality of fundamental authorities, conflicts between which cannot be commonly, i.e., rationally, adjudicated.

By contrast, democratic principles of justice are meant to be rational principles, as distinct from authoritarian ones.

However deeply rooted it may be in modern moral thought—being, in fact, a political expression of the dominant modern approach to morality itself—the separationist view of the First Amendment is profoundly at odds with the Christian faith, which asserts that nothing in the world can be properly separated from the God who is decisively disclosed in the Christian experience of Jesus. Thus, so far as Christians are concerned, principles of justice have no basis at all unless they are authorized by the will of this God.

For modern thought, however, all religious appeals are authoritarian rather than rational, because religious belief, by its very nature, appeals to authority. Such an understanding of religious belief has been widely held throughout the history of the church and is widely held even in modern Christian theology. In the last analysis, this is why modern thought simply assumes the same understanding.

Hartshorne's singular contribution, in the context of modern moral and political theory, is to offer a philosophical argument for (1) a different conception of religious belief in the divine purpose as not being dependent on authority based ^{on} a special divine revelation; and therefore also for (2) a rational understanding of the comprehensive good. His convincing criticism of traditional concepts of God is equaled by the systematic formulation of an alternative. On this alternative, the idea of a God who is the primal source and the final end of all things is rationally argued for as something that all human beings commonly experience insofar as they experience a perfect individual who is supremely temporal, whose all-inclusive love precedes everything that happens and to whose all-inclusive love everything that happens makes an everlasting difference. Our comprehensive purpose, then, is to maximize the difference we make to this perfect individual, i.e., God, through what we contribute to the world.

Hartshorne thus effectively challenges the pervasive modern assumption that no understanding of the inclusive good can be rationally defended by showing that the affirmation of a divine purpose is not necessarily committed to an idea of God that transcends reason. The question of the comprehensive good is shown to be a rational question, not just a question of authority, and thus of conflicting and nonadjudicable authorities. But, then, one is free both to reject the separationism that holds religion and politics to be separate and to accept democracy as a form of government by way of rational discussion and debate. Indeed, far from having to keep one's religious beliefs out of politics, one is free to insist that the democratic discourse through which political decisions are taken is not full or complete without rational debate about the comprehensive purpose. One is free to enter into the common agreement that democracy requires—that all truth is to be sustained by way of rational discussion and debate—and thus fully participate in the political process, advocating one's own beliefs about the good in commitment to the way of reason.

Different ways of referring to "the comprehensive purpose" or ^{to} ~~the~~ "God":
1

"the good that directs all of one's life," of which there are "differing understandings"

"an inclusive good"

"an inclusive purpose that all human purposes ought to serve," a common understanding of which "was taught and sustained by the authority of the medieval Catholic Church"

"a good directing life as a whole"

"overall purpose or purposes"

"a providential or divine purpose"

"the inclusive good," all understandings of which "are, in a broad sense, religious"

"the good that directs life as a whole"

"the ultimate nature and destiny of human life"

"a divine purpose for all things"

"There can be no comprehensive good without a transcendent purpose."