

The Relevance to Politics of Religion's "Impossible" Ideal

Religion and politics mix—sometimes for good, sometimes for ill. And, at least from the perspective of any Christianity worth its salt, they must. Authentic Christianity is not primarily about the hereafter, but about life on earth, including how we regard and treat our fellow human beings and the rest of creation. That necessarily implicates our politics, which has to do primarily with how we order our lives together.

This inevitable intersection of politics and religion should not be mistaken for an easy accommodation, however. Far from it! The more sublime forms of religion continually hold before us a vision of life in its fullness (Christianity calls it the Kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, or--to use a more contemporary and congenial metaphor--the commonwealth of creation), and invite us to aspire toward that vision. Christians pray weekly for God's reign to come "on earth as it is in heaven." Never mind that we may never perfectly incarnate the vision. To paraphrase Robert Browning, "Our reach should exceed our grasp, or what's a heaven for?"

The degree to which Christians are willing to make their peace with the world as they find it varies greatly. Never suppose, however, that any worldly state of affairs comes even remotely close to embodying the divine kingdom, or commonwealth, intended by God.

Many realists dismiss or abandon religion's vision as an impossible, and therefore irrelevant, ideal. Impossible?—perhaps. Irrelevant?—not at all. The religious vision motivates and inspires. It also provides an enduring critique regarding all that is less than it might be.

Politics, on the other hand, remains the art of the possible. It is wrong, even idolatrous, to invest our politics with messianic pretensions. Politics and politicians perennially fall short of our highest aspirations.

In this election year, there are crucial differences between the major party candidates for President. But both John McCain and Barack Obama are far from ideal. Sadly, both have become rather uninspiring, and increasingly disappointing, since effectively securing their respective party's nominations. Investing too much of our hopes in them will bring disillusionment. Neither candidate will be ushering in the commonwealth of creation. It remains extraordinarily important, nonetheless, to be actively engaged in political life, helping to shape the way we and the rest of the world will live together. Let the presumably impossible ideal serve as warrant for, not enemy of, the best available possibilities.

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