

Christian and Democrat? The Trans-Political Character of Christian Democracy

Timothy Sherratt
Gordon College

Those who take the possibility of Christian politics seriously will be impressed by Robert Kraynak's bold challenge to the personalist tradition in Christian thought and by his call for a return to the prudential tradition of Augustine's two cities. Kraynak's political thinking is hampered by the very strengths of the prudential tradition: the elemental distinctions between the two cities; between temporal and spiritual categories; and between the premodern and modern eras.

"The Church has chosen to speak in the language of Kantian Christianity about the human person rather than in the language of Augustinian or Thomistic Christianity about the limited ends of the temporal realm," writes Robert Kraynak.¹ Such language has led the Church to "set unconditional rules with little or no flexibility in application and requires one legitimate regime for all nations, a liberal democracy based on human rights, which is thought to be just because it is the only regime consistent with the dignity of man in his full moral maturity" (Kraynak, 230). The scriptures prescribe no particular form of government, however, and can be taken to proscribe only theocracy and totalitarianism. Those who take the possibility of Christian politics seriously will be impressed by such a bold challenge to the personalist tradition in Christian thought and by Kraynak's call for a return to the prudential tradition of Augustine's two cities.

The reader will struggle with Kraynak's work who does not appreciate, even if she does not share, the urgency with which he seeks the recovery of Christianity's other-worldliness. It is an urgency born of the conviction that the democratic age robs Christianity of its radical character, depriving us of "Christ the King," and "God the Father." Launching an essentially aesthetic attack on Kantian Christianity, in a manner that recalls Neil Postman's seminal *Amusing Ourselves to Death*,² Kraynak rues democracy's power to subvert holiness, dismiss

mystery, and obscure the reality of human dignity in a world "where market productivity is considered the primary measure of worth, and technical knowledge the only valuable knowledge, and speed and efficiency the highest priorities" (Kraynak, 242).

Although the Bible does not prescribe a form of government, prudence's "difficult trade-offs" indicate a preference for mixed government, a "constitutional monarchy under God" (Kraynak, 244). A polity that holds up a mirror to society's estates is conceptually pluralist, so let me begin on that common ground as a Christian pluralist who advocates confessional liberty and subsidiarity as political expressions of, and protections for, the transcendent dignity of persons. For the present, any further convergence between Kraynak's prudential politics and, say, Abraham Kuyper's sphere sovereignty may not appear possible because his Augustinian treatment of politics leaves precious little room for post-Enlightenment Christian political thought.

The trans-political character of Christianity is the issue as Kraynak looks down on Christianity's rapprochement with democracy from an Augustinian altitude. Warning of the ever-present lust for glory and domination that lurks in all human enterprises, Augustine was famously prepared to equate the heights of Alexandrian empire with the depths of petty piracy. Many Augustinians have read him as squeezing out of future consideration the entire western tradition of limited government and the rule of law. Thus they are not disposed to contemplate those sophisticated institutional arrangements by which confessional liberty and subsidiarity comprise a dignitarian³ approach to human freedom quite distinct from the "liberal tradition" whose Kantian underpinnings Kraynak accuses modern Christians of embracing.

As Jean Bethke Elshtain has shown us, there is another side to Augustine, Augustine the lover of God's creation, who delighted in its richness and diversity, and warned against sinful inclinations precisely because he loved the world.⁴ Thus Augustine can be the trans-political forerunner not only of prudence but also of checks and balances, and sphere sovereignty, and (aspects of) the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*, of all those means by which the lust for domination has been slowed and its force diverted to irrigate the common good. By all means,

the Augustinian should emphasize the identity of the emperor and the pirate; but he should also differentiate them if Christians are to make room for serious constitution-building. To dismiss the empire as piracy alone is to risk doing nothing more under God than perch six feet above contradiction shaking one's head sagely about original sin. At its worst, such an attitude may lead to a quite un-Augustinian dualism that withholds from human polity all the real virtues, and leaves it clutching the vices of a raw power struggle, with which the human polity readily fulfills all the dire prophesies made about it. Those who locate themselves in the 'two cities and prudence' tradition may be urged to appreciate the many ways Christian political theory has been constructive in response to modernity: to appraise its principles of confessional liberty and subsidiarity; and to examine its seasoned instruments for coming to terms with human dignity and fallenness in politics. Before the decades-old testimony of Christian Democracy succumbs to mass democracy, they might consider how Christian Democratic parties converted principle into policy for education, social service, health care, and foreign relations.

If the prudential tradition is not blind to the transforming capacities of Christianity, it prefers to spiritualize these and manifests ambivalence towards *political* transformation. This ambivalence is reflected in the New Testament foundations of Kraynak's argument. I will focus on the parables and on St. Paul's Letter to Philemon. Kraynak deploys the latter, which he says "every modern Christian should reread," to illustrate the distinction between spiritual freedom and political freedom. "The assumption is," Kraynak explains,

that Christian charity or brotherly love transcends the social order and does not

immediately affect the status of slaves because it affects the heart first and foremost, and it makes salvation more important than political freedom.

Nevertheless, Paul does not reject political freedom outright. Instead, he refers to it conditionally as an opportunity for proper use rather than as a right to be claimed (Kraynak, 54).

He goes on,

From these observations, I would draw the simple but momentous conclusion that the

Christian message in the New Testament is trans-political, though not entirely apolitical. (Kraynak, 54)

This reading of the letter as tolerant of slavery, is, I submit, a mistaken reading. Searching for and not finding an explicit condemnation of slavery, Kraynak affirms the consequent and puts the Christian imprimatur on the practice of owning other people as chattel--for the First Century A.D., that is. Since for Kraynak, the Christian is to obey God before claiming rights, the slave is not to seek liberty but whether enslaved or freed, is to seize the opportunity to make proper use of either condition.

Kraynak's treatment reads as if Paul's letter is written to Philemon, the master, not to Onesimus, the runaway slave. So he hops lightly over Paul's admonition to take Onesimus back, "no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord" (Phlm 5.16). The passage makes clear that the service Christians owe each other in Christ is slavery transcended: it is mutual service, it is laying down one's life for one's friend. Nor is this a spiritual service with no implications for existing social relations. Quite the reverse, in fact: Philemon cannot act on Paul's invitation to take Onesimus back without extinguishing the institution of slavery in his household. He cannot turn Onesimus out into the street, either. Brotherly love transforms the relations of slavery into obligations far more binding for both parties than ancient ownership or modern contract have dreamed of.

Ah, but there's the rub. Paul will not *command* Philemon to take back his slave--he appeals to him in love instead. But divine love extinguishes a slavery Paul will not explicitly condemn. There is no question of its extinction. Slavery cannot persist when the slave master tries to put Paul's invitation into practice. You cannot own a brother in Christ. By extension, can you own one made in the image of God?

Behind Paul stands Jesus, and in the characteristic teachings of Jesus, the parables, we find the essence of the obliquely presented but transforming love that is distilled in the Letter to Philemon. For the parables operate in much the same fashion, their teachings on many levels

announcing that the Kingdom of God, sown and growing in the world, is a kingdom in which power is perfected in weakness, the lost found, the last shall be first, and the innocent King lays down his life for his guilty subjects. "For the Son of Man also came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many."⁵ Trans-political but not apolitical--Kraynak is exactly right--the Kingdom of God is fully a kingdom but these very standards make a mockery of the chasm he insists must lie between monarchy and democracy and turn our attention to justice instead. When we take our bearings from the parables of the Kingdom, we are in a position to examine Kraynak's range of permitted political forms between theocracy and totalitarianism with an acuteness lacking in the prudential tradition.

We are able, for example, to take on simple democracy, dismiss it for the oppressive system it always threatens to be, and craft a just alternative without dismissing democracy out of hand. Imagine an Iraq turned over to the majority without regard for the multiple religious confessions, ethnic identities, and ideologically-based groupings present in the rubble left by the Baathist collapse.⁶ Tyranny of the majority would be achieved in short order. What measure of justice may be achieved in such circumstances calls for a sophisticated grasp of the relationship between democracy and justice. Elsewhere, I have called for a pluralist democracy in Iraq—to provide positive assurances that groups that organize may reasonably expect to gain legislative representation; and even stronger assurances that no one group may hold a monopoly.⁷ The instrument for achieving this end must be some form--there are many--of proportional representation. Typically, this encourages multiple parties and a consensus political culture, or at least a political culture in which those whose size prevents them from winning majorities of seats have no reason to think themselves losers by virtue of the bargains they may strike with the seats they do win. In Iraq's case, I would be happy to put this pluralist democratic proposal up against any of Kraynak's permissible alternative polities. My point, contra Kraynak's critique of contemporary Christian political thought, is that pluralist democracy draws on Christian resources that are trans-political--chiefly the *Imago Dei* and the 'cultural mandate,'⁸--that reject the underlying philosophy of liberal democracy, and that have already found mature political

expression.

It is a question somewhat beyond the bounds of this essay whether Catholic personalism with its emphasis on the creational dignity of human beings is more vulnerable to modern impulses than its neo-Calvinist cousin with its emphasis on human depravity. But it is the contention of this essay that Kraynak has not made his case that these traditions have been co-opted into liberal democracy. My rebuttal is based on a survey of the political developments by which Christian Democrats put into practice the strikingly parallel teachings of Leo XIII and Abraham Kuyper. Christian Democratic parties have made significant inroads into both the statist and libertarian expressions of modernity. This was not an accident but their express purpose.

In presenting the evidence, let me anticipate an objection. A superficial examination of the European welfare state might incline one to wonder whether Christian Democracy was not much *more* statist than American social democracy at its modernist zenith in the Great Society. Certainly the welfare state was much more firmly established and more extensive in Europe, including those parts of Europe where the Christian Democratic tradition and parties were most firmly established. However, and the qualification is a major one, the welfare state was achieved there by relatively little direct government control of social services, this despite social democratic and socialist pressures for such control. Instead, government contracted heavily with nonprofit organizations, and especially with religious nonprofits. So, to cite Charles Glenn's statistics, although some 70% of GDP was allocated by government in some way in Germany and the Netherlands, only around 10% of this was controlled by central government. Instead, nongovernmental organizations, with religious organizations prominent among them, took on the lion's share of program implementation.⁹ This low percentage is explained in part by the established subsidiarity principle, reaffirmed by Christian Democratic parties, that government may only provide a service directly if nongovernmental organizations are not in a position to offer it.

Although Christian Democratic parties have often entered center-right coalitions in

European governments, their family, education, and above all, economic policies have also countermanded libertarian impulses. European social capitalism is not a simple, Christian Democratic achievement, of course, but its corporatist norms owe much to Christian Democratic influence and went a long way to ensuring constructive dialogue between management and labor during the postwar period.

This kind of evidence demonstrates that it is a mistake to treat the Christian Democratic tradition as manifested in the parties, politics, and policies where the tradition has been influential, as the captive of liberal democratic imperatives, unless that term is taken in a much looser sense than any Christian Democrat from Leo XIII and Abraham Kuyper on have taken it. Both the Pope and the Dutchman were acutely and precisely critical of the foundations of liberal democracy.¹⁰ Both rejected the modern basis for rights. Both found in their parallel concepts of subsidiarity and sphere sovereignty the reconciliation of personal dignity and social justice under God. The pluralist democracy that has been developed on these foundations is not liberal democracy and it has been achieved without the need to "sever the Christian-democratic connection and start all over again" (Kraynak, 183). The unanswered question posed by Kraynak's book is why the trans-political but highly practical theory of Christian Democracy should be lumped together with the very model of democracy from which those thinkers strove explicitly to separate it.

This becomes all the more curious as the reader ponders Kraynak's consideration of the spiritual institutions of civil society: church, family, and institutionalized works of charity. Suddenly the neo-Calvinist feels common ground beneath his feet again. Kraynak proceeds to locate these essential elements of Christian constitutionalism as the permanent deposit of Christian revelation, "commanded by divine law and prior to and independent of the state." He develops a theory of the state as minimally required to protect these institutions from harm, a minimum that he thinks involves lowering the wall of separation to permit nondenominational prayers and, more substantially, promoting pro-family legislation including limits on feminist teaching.¹¹

What may be the most provocative aspect of Kraynak's book is in the end his strong suggestion that one may get to sphere sovereignty, subsidiarity, and perhaps the institutional expressions of Christian pluralism, by the prudential route. However, I do not think Christian realists will *easily* get there if they allow the Enlightenment transformation of social and political thinking to cast doubt on subsequent Christian political reflection on democracy. Augustine's greatness as a Christian thinker should not blind us to his failure to write a constitution for a post-Roman state. We are, arguably, much the poorer for this, for it would have shown us what a trans-political constitution might have looked like to Augustine. In my opinion, the greatness of Augustine's trans-political reflection on politics shows up most brightly in the application of personalist-subsidiarity principles to the politics of modernity with its individual rights, interventionist state, free market, and subjugated civil society.

On this same note, I wonder if Kraynak's call for "limited government under God" as the "general rule" rather than the "specific theory" of Christian politics, is not too abstract for its own good. Just as the political upheavals of postwar Europe required Christian Democrats to get their hands muddy, the challenge of Christian politics in the United States today has to do with a similar messiness: teaching Christian principles for politics in a political system where representation is constrained by single-member-district, first-past-the-post elections; weighing the resulting compromises of working within the inadequate two-party system whose parties merely reflect the libertarian and statist sides of liberal democracy; enacting confessional liberty and subsidiarity in social services and education--ideas that are 'orphans' to the American liberal tradition--and then defending them in courts that are not very receptive to the vision of state, citizen, and civil society relations they mirror.¹² American Christians do politics in conditions like these, without the doubtful luxury of starting over from some Augustinian no-place.

In the end, Robert Kraynak's political thinking is hampered by the very strengths of the prudential tradition: the elemental distinctions between the two cities; between temporal and spiritual categories; and between the premodern and modern eras. Appreciating the trans-political character of Christianity, he cannot quite imagine political institutions with genuinely

Christian foundations. There is a powerful and coherent language at work in the prudential tradition, but its promised constitutionalism turns out to be flimsy, issuing in some fairly draconian policies but institutionally diaphanous. Even a spiritual institution must acknowledge both its feet of clay and the need to get its hands dirty: as John Paul II once declared to an American audience, "As Christians, you know that all things human are the soil in which the Kingdom of God is meant to take root and mature!"¹³

Notes

1. Robert Kraynak, *Christian Faith and Modern Democracy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2001), 222. Subsequent references to this work will be noted in the text by the following: Kraynak.
2. Neil Popstman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Viking, 1985). The chapter on religion comes especially to mind.
3. As the author learned from a brief correspondence, the term was coined by Mary Ann Glendon. See her *A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (New York: Random House, 2002).
4. Jean Bethke Elshtain, *Augustine and the Limits of Politics* (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).
5. Mark 10:45 (*Revised Standard Version*).
6. Sadly, all may not be left to the imagination. These lines were written after General Garner had been recalled and his civilian replacement, Paul Bremer, was taking his place. But at this writing, it was far from clear that an Iraqi democracy would be so constituted as to protect the stake of ethnic and religious groups in Iraqi society or to prevent a classic tyranny of the majority, in this case in all likelihood, a Shi'ite democratic tyranny.
7. "An Iraqi Democracy Must Be A Pluralist Democracy," *Capital Commentary* (Annapolis: Center for Public Justice, May 5, 2003).
8. The 'cultural mandate' has its origins in Genesis 1:26-30. In Reformed thought, it is understood as expressing the basic human relationship to God's creation, for whose care, nourishment and replenishing, humans share responsibility.
9. See Charles L. Glenn, *The Ambiguous Embrace: Government and Faith-based Schools and Social Agencies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 131-134.
10. Kuyper, for example, helped found the "Anti-Revolutionary Party," to stand against the political heritage, in state sovereignty and individual autonomy, of the French Revolution.

Rerum Novarum was similarly positioned in its challenge to modernity.

11. He also commends Kuyper's sphere sovereignty and the Catholic principle of subsidiarity for articulating the appropriate associations of each level of political authority (Kraynak, 207) but he does not develop this appreciation at all.

12. I refer, of course, to Charitable Choice and its intended expansion in President Bush's "Faith-Based Initiative"; and to the piecemeal initiatives to give parents more control in choosing faith-based education for their children, initiatives upheld in part by the Supreme Court in *Zelman v. Simmons Harris* (2002).

13. Homily at Giants Stadium, New Jersey, October 5, 1995.