

# Reviews

**CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVES ON POLITICS** by J. Philip Wogaman, *Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, Kentucky, 2000. Pp. 374, \$22.00 pbk.*

Political culture affects the way that Christian thinkers view the connection between religion and politics. J. Philip Wogaman, formerly professor of Christian social ethics at Wesley Seminary, offers an American liberal perspective in *Christian Perspectives on Politics*, a revised and expanded edition of a well annotated work first published in 1988. In the USA, the “friendly” separation of Church and State means that politics and religion often go hand in hand. Wogaman advocates the involvement of Christians in politics, whilst being generally opposed to Christians identifying with a particular political party. He is currently the ‘President’s (Clinton’s) pastor’, a role which no doubt calls for a political astuteness all of its own. His book is a good introduction to political theology although it deals mainly with thinkers who have published in the USA. Perhaps a revised edition could have taken into account the recent interesting contributions by European writers such as Fergusson, O’Donovan, Hastings, Manent, Küng and Boyle. Their exclusion means that certain topics such as the global ethic and nationalism (of less interest in the USA), receive less attention in this work.

In part one of this four-part work, the author provides a general introduction to political theology with a brief history of political thought and an analysis of the concept of state, which he defines as “society acting as a whole”. He sees sovereignty as a useful if “partly mythical” term. A new chapter (ch.3), very briefly but fairly, summarizes the significant points in the history of Christian political thought from Augustine to Vatican II.

The purpose of this work is “to interpret the meaning of politics from a moral/theological frame of reference”, but there are serious differences among Christians which require a clarification of “the ultimate grounds of their faith and action.” Thus part two attempts to identify the five main “Generating Centers” or currents of Christian Political Thought. These are the perspectives of Christian pacifist and anarchist writers, of liberation theologians, of Neo-conservatives, of evangelicals, and finally of “mainstream liberals” like himself.

Wogaman offers us his own position on political structures in part three and his approach to particular political issues in part four. He addresses not only the perennial question of how church and state should relate to one another in a pluralist society, but the more

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interesting question of how civil society is perceived in theological terms. Wogaman asks whether the church is exclusively the bearer of God's redemptive action in human history and suggests that it is not, although he is quick to point out that religious groups have usually been at the forefront of political change, especially in the area of civil rights. Whilst reminding us of the weaknesses in existing democratic systems, he finds himself in agreement with Walter Rauschenbusch, that democracy which embodies equal civil rights and participation in political power is "more fully in accord with Christian insight than any alternative", although "it may be best ...not to treat democracy as an absolute".

The chief question in political theology is one of 'authority', or in Wogaman's words, "how to bring order out of the vast number of Christian symbols and doctrines that are potentially relevant to politics". Whilst he states that a political ethic must be validated by theological tradition, perhaps with one eye on fundamentalism, he is wary of investing too much authority in 'church' as such. He identifies a number of key doctrines such as the sovereignty of God, creation, and original sin, as the "entry points" for political debate. Such doctrines are to act as guides to political ethics, but may be set aside when applying them directly would in fact lead to "deviation from real Christian faithfulness". That of course begs the question. Wogaman presumes the moral agent will just recognize 'Christian fidelity' when he sees it.

Christians are not only faced with the question of which political goals they should pursue, but also the question of whether those goals can be shared by others in a pluralistic society. Wogaman suggests civil society is helped to discover its transcendent purpose and meaning through a common dialogue in which Christians bring the insights of faith, hope and charity to the political process.

There is much here with which one can agree, but Wogaman seems to blur the important distinction between the matter of moral judgment, which for some includes moral absolutes, and the pursuit of ethical policy through debate and democratic decision-making in a wider pluralistic community, which may not recognize such moral absolutes. He states that "a democratic society is well served by a citizenry not fanatically attached to single issues or causes but capable of rounded judgments." But are 'rounded' judgments always right ones? One suspects that, for Wogaman, at least by default, the democratic process becomes the ultimate arbiter of what is right and wrong, because for him all other moral decisions are ultimately those of individuals. If there is much to be said for democratic decision-making in questions of both a moral and political nature concerned with the organization of political life, such as civil rights and the provision of welfare, it remains the case that many Christians, as he is aware, will be unhappy to accept that the democratic process can, for example, decide the fate of the unborn. Thus, when he writes concerning these

pleasure, as if it is the pleasure that is morally important, while the human being is not."

This is a text well worth offering to busy students, healthcare professionals or interested readers who would like a clear concise introduction to the issues surrounding life or death decisions in a healthcare context from a Catholic perspective. I hope it finds its way on to many reading lists and that it is read as widely as it deserves to be. Any introduction leaves much more to be said (in this case not least from a specifically theological standpoint), but a good introduction can help dispel pseudo-questions and direct our attention to the real matters of substance. Even those who would disagree with the conclusions of some sections of this little volume can welcome the clarity with which the arguments are set out. This makes it possible to disagree and to see where and why one disagrees. For someone who agrees with the conclusions presented, it provides not simply a stock of useful arguments, but further, a profound understanding of what human values are at stake. The fundamental issue is nothing less than a matter of life and death.

DAVID ALBERT JONES OP

**A BRIEF, LIBERAL, CATHOLIC DEFENSE OF ABORTION** by Daniel A.Dombrowski and Robert Deltete *University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, 2000. Pp. 168, £17.00.*

As the title suggests, this book is a defence of abortion in what the authors see as Catholic terms. They regard the views of Augustine and Aquinas on delayed hominization as 'one of the best kept secrets in the history of Catholicism'. There is, they think, a 'pressing need for something like [this] book', which defends not only delayed hominization, but abortion on demand before the foetus is between 24 and 32 weeks old. Late in pregnancy the foetus has the same moral status as the non-human animal; abortion at this stage is wrong unless (e.g.) the child is seriously disabled. However, early in pregnancy the foetus is compared to 'grass' or a 'plant', and its life is not seen as calling for any particular respect.

The book begins with a description of the views of Augustine and Aquinas, the latter more clearly in favour of delayed hominization than the former. The authors state correctly that abortion, for Augustine and Aquinas and for the Church in general, was seen as immoral in terms of sexual ethics, quite apart from the question of killing a child with a rational soul. In a later chapter, the authors set out their own sexual ethic which is (not surprisingly) fairly broad-minded. Pornography is fine in moderation, as are contraception, homosexual sex and premarital sex (the latter can, indeed, enhance a 'rich spiritual life'). The authors' description of sexual ethics of a more traditional type is, to put it charitably, confused: sex must be 'for the purpose of—or at least with the possibility of—pregnancy'. Moreover, there is, the authors suggest, no room in traditional sexual ethics to condemn non-