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David G. A. Pfrimmer

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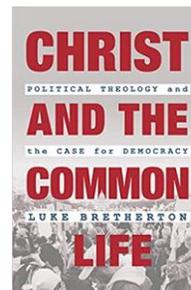
Book Review

Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy

Luke Bretherton

Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022

When I was a teenager, I enjoyed taking things apart to better understand how they work. Luke Bretherton's recently released (paperback version) of *Christ and the Common Life: Political Theology and the Case for Democracy* masterfully and forensically peels back the historical, philosophical and theological layers of "political theology" to better understand how it works. Bretherton provides an academically rich and impressive deep dive into the origins of the many moving parts, the essential concepts, and the necessary ideas for constructing a useful political theology for the common life.



For Bretherton, politics is more than statecraft or the domain of the state but involves Christians in a wider ecclesial and public project. Ultimately, he proposes a "Democratic Politics" that "refers to the forming, norming and sustaining some kind of common life between friends, strangers, enemies, and the friendless amid their ongoing differences and disagreements as they negotiate the asymmetries of various kinds of power" (p. 445). His approach is timely and necessary given the divisiveness and polarization evident today. What are some of the key insights of *Christ and the Common Life*?

God created humankind *homo politicus* (p. 362). People are *political beings* living in diverse and often contested civic communities. Such civic communities in Bretherton's view must take seriously the political realities of people's sinful and flawed nature while exercising love to, as Paul Tillich defines it, to 'reunite that which is separated.' In conflicted times, Bretherton offers an important reminder that *politics* is "understood as the negotiation of the common life between friends, strangers and enemies and the friendless" (p. 47). Living in a post-pandemic society where increasing things seem to be coming apart and where nothing-seems-to-work anymore, a political love that reassembles and sustains a common life is needed.

Who might be charged with renewing democratic politics? Bretherton argues Christians can through their mission as Spirit-led political beings with a divine purpose. The baptized have a civic identity and a political vocation. Politics is not a secondary or optional activity. The "promise of the politics" for society and churches themselves is that by cultivating peace, justice, and mercy, "some form of the common life can be discovered" (p. 48).

Bretherton's decidedly Trinitarian and high Christological focus provides an eschatological horizon that limits the claims of the state and the market. Politics is a very necessary means for discerning and furthering God's creative work in the world. As the saying goes, if you don't know where you are going, all roads look the same. In the Christ event Christians know who they are, where God wants the world to go and what is expected of them to get there.

The book is divided into three parts. Part One offers detailed case studies of various political theologies. *Humanitarianism* was a "revolution of moral sentiment" with the

conviction that people “should care for distant neighbours” and that such care could address poverty and suffering (pp. 51-52). *Pentecostalism* contests “Western rationalist epistemologies” and places “less focus on statecraft and more emphasis on how the unseen powers are the condition for the possibility of peaceable economic relations” (p. 124). Healing becomes a central mark of Pentecostal democratic citizenship. *Roman Catholic social teaching* discovered “society” as distinct from “the market and the state” and offered a role for the laity and affirmed the importance of labour for “human dignity” (pp. 160-161) thereby leading a transition in Catholic thinking about the relationship between church and state. *Anglicanism’s contemplative pragmatism* sought to coordinate the relationship between church, nation and state “within a coherent vision of good order and how that order was understood to be related to and a vehicle for the work of God in history” (p. 177). However, such a “providential reading of history” can and often did serve the nation and the church, particularly their colonial interests, rather than an authentic witnesses to Jesus Christ (p. 195).

Anyone who works ecumenically will find in these cases a particularly instructive well-nuanced understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each tradition. In addition, these cases provide an important template for developing a self-interrogating approach to other faith traditions not included here.

In Part Two, *Sustaining the Common Life*, Bretherton identifies “the challenges that corrode the common life over time amid the asymmetries of power and identifies the practices that sustain it” (p. 10). He juxtaposes *communion* that emphasizes “relational power” with others rather than *class* and power over others which can lead to class conflict. He argues for *secularity* that provides “mutual ground” rather than continuing the misguided *secularism* in North Atlantic countries that banishes faith from the public sphere. Finally, he distinguishes between *toleration*, a principled refusal to exclude people, from the *practice of hospitality* that welcomes strangers and enemies as guests “as a means for creating new worlds of shared meaning and action, especially in the face of unequal agency” (p. 286). All of these can be useful tools for building a common life.

In Part Three - *Forming the Common Life* - Bretherton details four necessary areas to be addressed in developing a compelling political theology. First, some “notion of a *shared humanity*... beyond parochial boundaries of kinship or locality” (p. 291) that is attentive to not only “biology” but “biography” (p. 301) Second an acceptance that all forms of *economic life* are “good or bad to the extent to which they are attuned to and participate in God’s *Oikonomia*” (p. 326). Thirdly, the “nature and basis of sovereignty are a central concern of political theology” (p. 359). In contrast to Hobbes, Bretherton argues for a “*consociational sovereignty*” or “distributed, bottom-up, cooperative, and pluralistic conception of sovereignty that incorporates custom and covenant alongside contract as a basis for public standing” (p. 398). Fourthly, a political theology must address the ambiguity today of various “forms of ecclesial and political populism” (p. 400). A populist impulse is “a perennial feature of Christianity” (p. 416) The question is, how do Christians deal with the toxic variants and develop “a mutually disciplining relationship between democracy and Christianity” (p. 443)?

Taking the components of political theology apart is one thing. Putting them back together to see if they work is another. In his final chapter, Bretherton “makes explicit (his) vision of democratic politics tacit throughout the book” (p. 445). “This vision can be briefly summarized as the need for a democratized economy, in a confederal polity, with a pluralistic

common life politics, undergirded by moral commitment to generating forms of shared flourishing that are ecologically attuned” (p. 464).

Bretherton makes the important point particularly in polarizing times, that realizing such a vision for democratic politics “requires people formed in a variety of virtues, with a moral vision to learning from and living with others, not like themselves” (p. 464)

This is an impressive and important book for a Christian audience. A colleague once noted that “A good sermon is not how it is preached but how it is heard?” In North Atlantic societies I wonder how Bretherton’s political theology might be heard by a growing public audience of the skeptically ‘spiritual-but-not-religious,’ those who have been scandalized (or victimized) by churches, or by vulnerable communities living on the margins of societies for whom the language, rituals, and many symbols are not meaningful reference points?

Princeton Professor Emeritus Max Stackhouse argues that to understand the “public role of religion,” we need to understand “the difference between three often-confused terms: ‘civil religion,’ ‘political theology’ and ‘public theology.’” Bretherton addresses civil religion but dismisses “public theology” as a “category mistake” that “translates theological forms into the idioms and frameworks of liberalism” (FN 14, 33). He might well have a case with some forms of public theology, but much of what he argues for as political theology resonates well with other more liberationist forms of public theology.

This raises a question. Is a key difference between political theology and public theology that they have different audiences? Bretherton’s political theology speaks provocatively to a church audience. On the other hand, a public theological approach may offer a more effective argument among the skeptical, scandalized, and vulnerable for Bretherton’s humbler role for Christians in public and political life. A Trinitarian and Christological approach may be a barrier for those who might be more supportive of Bretherton’s hopes for the common life. Being more open to a public theology articulation might be a way that Bretherton’s message could be heard by other important actors.

Bretherton has done a great service in providing a provocative, scholarly, and faithfully-informed argument in *Christ and the Common Life*. It is an important reference point for anyone trying to understand the contribution of Christians to politics in troubling and uncertain post-pandemic times.

David Pfrimmer

References

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Max Stackhouse, “Civil Religion, Political Theology, and Public Theology: What’s the Difference?” in *Christian in Public - Aims, Methodologies, and Issues in Public Theology* (Stellenbosch, South Africa: Sun Press, 2007).