

Oppressed Christians challenge religion professor's perspective on political realities

Life
lessons

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calling
faith.....
conviction

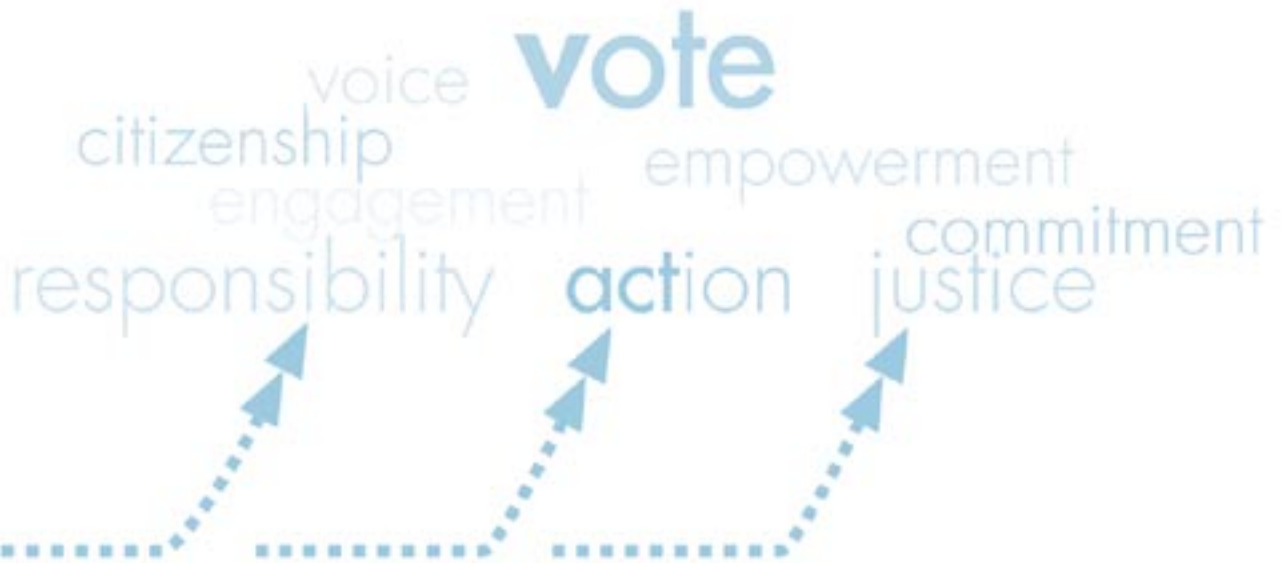
In spring 1971 I traveled with a small group of American Christians to then-communist East Germany for two weeks of church visitations. I was surprised at what I encountered, and at the effect it would have on me. I expected to find a few older women with scarves on their heads huddled in church basements reading forbidden Bibles and singing Paul Gerhardt hymns. What I discovered on that and many subsequent trips to East Germany was that there were vital groups of East German Christians, mostly young and middle-aged, who were reading the Bible (published in East Germany!) and exploring its relevance for the world, including the communist world. These Christians were virtually excluded from the political process in communist East Germany, but their banishment did not result in either resignation or other-worldly piety. They were, in fact, the most politically informed Christians I have ever been around. They also demonstrated the power of humor to unmask oppressive and unjust political structures. I still know many of them and I introduce Whitworth students to them when I lead the Reformation Study Program to Germany.

Subsequent events in East Germany, including the eventual fall of the Berlin Wall, confirmed many of the insights that I gained in conversations with these Christians. I find it ironic that those excluded from the

political process turned out to be such good interpreters of it. The single most important thing I learned from them was the challenge to think more theologically about political realities in the world.

As I seek to do that, three biblical texts seem important to me. One is Mark 12:17, "Give the things of Caesar to Caesar, and the things of God to God." This famous reply of Jesus acknowledges the legitimacy of human governments. It disavows political anarchy as well as totalitarianism. Governments today possess means of control that make anarchy less viable than in the past. The greater problem seems to lie in defining the just limits of government jurisdiction. The supposition that a government can provide a single comprehensive answer to human questions and needs is totalitarianism. Totalitarianism is political idolatry, a usurpation of the role of God. The totalitarianism I have in mind is not exactly expressed in Nazi or communist dictatorships, however. I am thinking of subtler forms of this





philosophy, such as abdicating moral responsibility by saying, “My country right or wrong”; or by regarding political dissent as unAmerican; or by indulging in a naïve nationalism that may have oppressive effects on other peoples and nations. In different ways, these practices invest the flag with an authority it does not possess. Indeed, the practice of placing American flags in churches – and usually quite near the altar – seems to

me to confuse the very thing that Jesus tried to distinguish in Mark 12:17. Christians do not owe the same degree of allegiance to the flag that they owe to Christ. What is made in the image of God owes ultimate allegiance to God.

A second biblical text is Romans 13:4, “[Governing authorities] are God’s servant to you for good.” Some people think Romans 13 obliges Christians to obey governments – even unjust governments – at all costs. The way I understand the text, it does not teach this. To obey anything other than God at all costs is idolatry. Paul declares that the purpose of government is to be a servant of God for the establishment of good. By the logic of Paul’s statement, when a government forsakes the cause of good it seems to have forsaken its divine authority. Paul does not say that a government must be aware of its role as a political intermediary of God in order for it to be a valid government; surely most governments are unaware of this function, and yet they may still fulfill it. Paul defines good not according to political theory but according to actual effect, i.e., honoring virtue and punishing evil. That is justice. Justice is the chief criterion by which a political order is deemed worthy or unworthy of existence in Scripture. Justice was the preeminent concern of the Israelite prophets (Isaiah 1; Micah 2). Justice was the primary expectation of the king in Israel (Psalm 72). Justice was paramount in

the ethics of Jesus (Matthew 7:15-27). If it is true that the chief criterion that validates a government is justice, then the acid test of any political system is not its theory but its practical results. I think this is why many Christians are distressed when a political party invokes the name of God, and perhaps even Christian theology, and yet advocates policies that seem neither Godly nor Christian. Politics is the art of the achievable. Which political

initiatives, programs, and policies, I ask myself, best correspond with the biblical mandate for justice?

My final text comes from the castigation of David after his murder of Uriah and his adultery with Bathsheba. “I anointed you king over Israel, and I rescued you from the hand of Saul,” says the prophet

Nathan, speaking for God. “I gave you your master’s house, and your master’s wives into your bosom, and gave you the house of Israel and of Judah; and if that had been too little, I would have added as much more. Why have you despised the word of the Lord, to do evil in his sight?” (2 Sam 12:7-9). Nathan registers God’s unambiguous displeasure with David’s despising and misusing power granted to him by God.

Now that the Cold War is mercifully ended and the Soviet Bloc is history, America is the sole superpower of the world. This reality lays a heavy burden on us as Americans. I am not especially proud of the way our country is currently handling this power. I fear that our power is frequently harvested for national privilege rather than for international responsibility. We cannot forget that an increasingly interconnected world is an increasingly vulnerable world. The deployment of our power in service of the virtues that promote a more just political, social, and economic order is ultimately in America’s best self-interest.

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