

Christians and Politics

Some considerations

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Religion and politics are necessarily related. In Jesus' time religion and politics were not separate but bound together. Like the prophets of ancient Israel, Jesus was critical of the leaders of Israel for their failings. The early church communities were not in a position to influence the policies of the Roman Empire and often suffered persecution. This changed when the Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity. Christianity became the favoured religion and then the official religion of the Roman Empire. The long period of Christendom ensued with the church having a significant influence on political decisions. Church and state were closely allied.

At the time of the Reformation different approaches to the relationship between Christians and politics developed. The Roman Catholic church has always sought to have political influence. The Lutherans were dependent on State leaders for protection when they broke with the Roman Catholic church. Martin Luther developed the two-kingdom approach which distinguished between the roles of the state and the church. The Radicals of the Reformation went further and wanted a clear distinction between church and state with minimal influence between them. The Reformed tradition stemming from John Calvin had a stronger relationship between the church and state even to the point of challenging unjust leaders if necessary.

The Enlightenment brought the attitude that there was a difference between the political and social realm and the personal and private realm of life. Christian faith was relegated to the latter. Hence many people thought that politics and religion should be kept separate. This is still a common attitude. Faith is private and if it influences one's political decisions this is not discussed. Often political attitudes are governed by other ideologies rather than by Christian faith.

The Uniting Church comes from the Reformed tradition. The Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational traditions all had involvement in the political process. The Uniting Church from its inception has understood itself to have a role to play in public life influencing political decisions. A "Statement to the Nation" was issued at the inauguration of the Uniting Church in 1977. Uniting Church leaders have often commented on social issues seeking to have a democratic influence in the political process. In a post-Christendom era, the church has to present its arguments along with other voices. The Uniting Church has made many thoughtful statements on a range of issues that are useful to

consult. Most of these can helpfully be found in the book, *For a World Reconciled, Justice Statements from the Uniting Church 1977-2015*.

Uniting Church people are not Lutherans with their two-kingdom approach, not Baptists with their separation of church and state, nor Roman Catholics and Anglicans who assume they have a place in the political realm. Our theology is informed by Calvin and Wesley. Both of them were concerned about political issues such as refugees, prison reform and slavery. As Christians we should have a particular concern for 'the least' and using money for the well-being of others not just for ourselves and for the already rich and powerful. Jesus spoke about this and warned about the misuse of money in failing to care for others. This has implications for political and economic policy.

While many do not recognize it, Uniting Church theology continues to be informed by Calvin and Wesley and more recently by Reformed theologians notably Karl Barth and Jürgen Moltmann. Our context is different to Latin America but there is rightly an influence from Liberation theology approaches which emphasize that we should be on the side of the poor and oppressed, such as in relation to our Indigenous people. Similarly, liberation theologies from a feminist, black or Asian perspective have had an influence calling us to recognize discrimination and listen to all voices in our Uniting Church consensus decision making processes. We are a multicultural church that affirms the place of women in every area of the church's life.

Our Christian faith, particularly as Uniting Church people, should influence how we make decisions in every aspect of life including politics. It is a mistake to distinguish between the personal and the political with our faith not influencing the latter. Pentecostals may tend to do that but it is not appropriate. It is helpful to discuss issues and seek to discern what might be more in line with God's will for our society.

There is no clear position on Christians' political responsibilities. Nevertheless, our faith and discipleship should influence our political views and values and shape how we vote. It is a matter of looking to what the implications of different policies are and the kind of society we want. If we want Australia to be more like the kingdom of God, then we should consider the implications of policies with the following questions in mind: how will they impact 'the least', will they move us towards a more compassionate society, will they be fair for all people, will people be enabled to contribute according to their abilities, will they show we care for people in other countries and not just our own, will they be in accord with international standards especially as recommended by the United Nations?

In considering political policies it is helpful to draw on the notion of 'middle axioms' - working principles that provide guidance for Christians in public affairs but can also be recognised by those not of Christian faith. They can be deduced from higher Christian principles, such as love, justice, and reconciliation, and are in harmony with them, but are less abstract and provide a general direction for action. They are not as specific as actual prescriptions for action.

Middle axioms move us beyond the primary Christian value, namely to love God and love our neighbours as ourselves. Love needs to be expressed in more concrete ways. The middle axiom might be as follows: compassion and assistance for the disadvantaged, justice and a greater voice for indigenous people, treating all people equally, enabling everyone to participate in our society, rich organisations paying their share in taxation, concern for the intrinsic value and well-being of the environment and all creatures. As can be seen these are not specific policies but can be of assistance in recommending action and evaluating policies.

What factors actually shape a person's political views? Realistically a person's upbringing, their parent's views, their life experiences, socio-economic status, friends and social grouping to which they belong, education and training, all have influence. Nevertheless, our Christian faith should lead us to consider why we hold the political and economic views that we do and modify them in the light of what we understand to be God's desire for our nation. We can do so drawing especially on what Jesus did and taught, what the OT prophets said, our Uniting Church tradition, and seeking the Spirit's guidance in prayer and discussion with others.

As Christians living in a democracy, we are involved in the political process even if it is just by voting which is compulsory in Australia. It is not a matter of whether we should be politically involved but rather how we can be involved and how our faith should influence our political views and decisions. The considerations above are provided to give assistance to this.