

BOOK REVIEW

Franklin I. Gamwell, *Politics as a Christian Vocation: Faith and Democracy Today*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005. x + 185 pp. Pbk. \$21.95. ISBN 0-521-54752-0.

Gamwell is Franklin I. Gamwell is Shailer Mathews Professor at The Divinity School, University of Chicago where he has taught for many years. He is the author of four previous books on the relationship of religion to politics, including, most recently, *Democracy on Purpose: Justice and the Reality of God*. In this latest work, *Politics as a Christian Vocation: Faith and Democracy Today*, he bravely ventures where the wise or simply cautious fear to tread and the simple rush in. The amount of material to be addressed is overwhelming. Where to begin? The New Testament or the Hebrew Scriptures? The Middle Ages? The Enlightenment? Or some point closer to the present? Gamwell focuses on, and uses as paradigmatic, the early Church period in his first chapter (“Render to Caesar”). But with a surprising twist. He uses this brief overview of early Church relations to the political to argue that such positions are historically contingent and so not definitive for Christians living in a modern democracy. This leads logically to another question. How is Christian faith related to a democratic polity? Answering this question (chapter 2, “Government by the People”), he briefly outlines the rise and function of modern democracy and addresses the common North American political assumption that religion is “private” and therefore cannot be discussed publicly. Of course one consequence of this lamentable assumption is that all kinds of values are included in public debate except those grounded or connected with religious tradition. This exclusion is founded on the deeper prejudiced assumption that religion causes division—as if politics did not.

This focus leads to reflections on what ought to be the relationship between Christianity and democracy today. While much of this debate is conducted from the political side, Gamwell shifts the focus and asks why Christians should be involved in politics and on what grounds (chapter 3 “Faith and the way of reason” and chapter 4 “Justice in the community of love”). Gamwell argues that political involvement is now a Christian vocation because the moral principles implied by Christian faith, specifically love and justice, prescribe democracy as a form of political rule. He argues that only positions that can be supported by reason can be held in the public square. This requires modification of the Christian articulation of positions, from ones based on faith to ones based on public reason. A key point for Gamwell is his conviction that Christian conceptions of justice and the common good open out into wider conversations in which they are capable of helping us reach a moral consensus on divisive social issues. Thus chapters 5

(“Religious decisions at stake”) and 6 (“Political deliberations”) offer principles and then case studies on abortion, affirmative action and economic distribution.

Many democratic citizens, including many Christians, think that separation of religion from the state means the exclusion of religious beliefs from the political process. That view is mistaken. Both democracy and Christian faith, this book shows, call all Christians to make their beliefs effective in politics. But the discussion here differs from others. Most have trouble relating religion to democratic discussion and debate because they assume that religious differences cannot be publicly debated. Against this majority view, this book argues that Christian faith belongs in politics because it shares with democracy a full commitment to rational pursuit of the truth. The book then develops ideals of justice and the common good Christians should advocate within the democratic process and shows the difference they make for contemporary politics in the United States, focusing specifically on issues of abortion, affirmative action, and economic distribution.

After reading *Politics as a Christian Vocation* one realizes that this work is not simple or for the simple. The positions taken in the early Church regarding politics were historically contextual and so need not apply today. Other principles for political involvement are needed. For the non-Christian or secular politician, Christianity can contribute to modern democracy by speaking for the disadvantaged, and by upholding standards of equity and justice. But is this all that religion is good for? That depends on how far one—and one’s tradition—are willing to abide by a public criterion such as “reason” as motivation and guide for politics. Given the increasingly pluralistic society in the USA, is there any alternative? Perhaps one such possibility arises out of Gamwell’s experience with “Protestants for the Common Good,” a Chicago-based organization of laity and clergy. One might argue that his participation demonstrates that individuals are finally social beings and Americans are, as De Tocqueville recognized so long ago, a “nation of joiners.” What role, then, can and do voluntary associations play in the political process between the individual and the state in forming and promoting those common goods and justice for which all aspire and hope? Perhaps James Luther Adams needs to be examined once more as offering a route that mediates between the isolated individual and mass modern democracy. Gamwell has written a powerful book, one that might not provide all the answers but will certainly provoke debate and future resolutions.

Iain S. Maclean
James Madison University
macleaix@jmu.edu