

EDITORIAL

***Politics and Passion* by Michael Walzer**

Michael Walzer's famous article "The Communitarian Critique of Liberalism" has been the source of widespread comment, admiration and discussion ever since it was first published in 1990. Its topic is central to how we understand politics and morality in our global community. Its thesis has provoked far-reaching debate. Professor Walzer's most recent book *Politics and Passion: Toward a More Egalitarian Liberalism* is a welcome extension, and in some instances fascinating development, of the key issues and questions in the earlier article. We are delighted therefore that we have the opportunity to present here a critical exploration of this important work by leading contemporary theologians. Furthermore it is a genuine pleasure that Professor Walzer has responded to these studies. Our enormous gratitude goes to all the contributors in this special issue for their careful and diligent work. The articles that follow are highly engaging and stimulating. In addition our especial thanks goes to Professor Walzer who took the time in his very busy schedule to read the contributions and respond to them in detail. The results of this dialogue are a significant contribution to the contemporary discourse of theology and politics.

In the original article of 1990 Professor Walzer argued that communitarianism could best be understood as a corrective to liberal theory and practice and not, in his words, as an independent, free-standing "doctrine or substantive political program."¹ In the book his intention was to develop and extend this thesis. This in part is done. Walzer argues that there is a central fact with which our associational life has to contend, namely that,

over much of its range, it isn't the work of that liberal hero, the autonomous individual, choosing his or her memberships, moving freely from group to group in civil society. Instead, most of us are born into or find ourselves in what may well be the most important groups to which we belong—the cultural and religious, the national and linguistic communities within which we

1. M. Walzer, *Politics and Passion: Toward a More Egalitarian Liberalism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), p. x.

cultivate not only identity but character and whose values we pass on to our children (without asking them).²

This is not to say that there cannot be movement between social hierarchies or cultural identities but it is not as simple or prevalent as liberal theorists sometimes assume. Rather the major question for liberalism is how it takes account of the resilience of local identities within democratic politics. The autonomous individual, should there be such a person, might be free to exercise choice. The members of what Walzer refers to as “involuntary associations” are not free because the social and cultural groupings into which they are born are not equal. Contradicting Rousseau’s famous dictum, Walzer states that “we are not born free.”³

This was the starting point of the book being considered here. But it was not all Walzer attempted in the work. As he himself states, the book developed beyond the boundaries of the original article to encompass a severe critique of liberalism. He became engrossed with the problems of “social democracy” and its relationship with liberalism. The difficulties start with those areas which are beyond liberalism’s parameters, what Walzer calls the “exclusions of liberal theory.” These he lists: “involuntary associations; collective powerlessness; the problems posed by cultural marginality; the hierarchies of civil society; the politics of social conflict; and the force of passionate engagement.”⁴ These make the struggle against inequality more difficult than it has to be. Walzer’s conclusion is that liberalism, in its usual contemporary expression, is “an inadequate theory and a disabled political practice.” He explains his reasons, which are worth quoting at length.

It is inadequate, first of all, because inequality lives within and among those involuntary associations whose importance is insufficiently acknowledged in liberal theory; and those same associations are the main protagonists of multicultural politics, which is one of the forms (though contestable and contested) of contemporary egalitarianism. Standard liberalism is inadequate also because liberal theorists, while they have sometimes challenged, have only more recently begun to engage creatively with, the more problematic features of multiculturalism and of civil society generally. And it is inadequate because in the thoughtful discussions that liberal theory favors under the name of “deliberation,” the discussants rarely address successfully the actual experience of inequality or the fight against it, even when they reach egalitarian conclusions. Finally liberalism is inadequate because the social structures and political orders that sustain inequality cannot be actively opposed without a passionate intensity that liberals do not (for good reason) want to acknowledge or accommodate. Accommodation is especially difficult when passion is, as it commonly is, the product of our attachment and belongings.⁵

2. Walzer, *Passion and Politics*, p. x.
3. Walzer, *Passion and Politics*, p. 2.
4. Walzer, *Passion and Politics*, p. xi.
5. Walzer, *Passion and Politics*, pp. xi–xii.

In place of the standard liberalism which Walzer critiques is a “hardheaded” multiculturalism, what he calls a “meat-and-potatoes multiculturalism,” which would serve not only the cause of liberalism but also the hopes of egalitarians. What is needed is a liberalism, if it is still that afterwards, which is “politically more engaged, sociologically more informed, and psychologically more open.” These are the necessary features of a doctrine which is “capable of encompassing, explaining, and supporting democratic mobilization and solidarity.”⁶ The priority here is the political effectiveness of the doctrine for bringing about greater equality, an end which does not need any further justification because its product is better quality human lives.

This is an all too brief summary of what Walzer investigates and debates in the book. The work itself is worthy of detailed study. Furthermore it is not our intention to engage critically with Walzer’s analysis and the more substantial ideas developed in the book. The contributors to the issue do this with great skill and insight. Rather, having laid out the general landscape of the discussion, we want to say something about its relevance and importance to this journal. Why did we choose this book for a special issue?

In chapter 5 of his book Walzer argues that there are values in politics which are often in tension with “reason.” These are: “passion, commitment, solidarity, courage, and competitiveness (all of which require qualification).”⁷ These values, Walzer states, “are exemplified in a wide range of activities in the course of which men and women sometimes find occasion to reason together but which are better described in other terms.”⁸ He then lists and discusses these activities. They are: political education; organization; mobilization; demonstration; statement; debate; bargaining; lobbying; campaigning; voting; fund-raising; corruption; scut work; and ruling. What this list illustrates is that politics is not, in Walzer’s image, the same as the jury room. Rarely does a deliberate weighing up of the evidence lead to a final judgment which settles the matter once and for all (barring appeal). Politics does not reach final settlements, it does not pass sentence like the courtroom. Politicians may make laws but they can be challenged, amended and repealed. Politics is a fluid, mobile business in which reason or “deliberation” is but one facet of the process. And it is not always the most important facet.

What Walzer has done is reveal the place of communitarian passion in the liberal or social democratic polity. The rationale for this is equality. Without the recognition of global identity empowerment the emancipation agenda will stall or fail. Prosperous multiculturalism is the starting point for any (liberal) hope of an end to inequality.

6. Walzer, *Passion and Politics*, p. xii.

7. Walzer, *Passion and Politics*, p. 92.

8. Walzer, *Passion and Politics*, p. 92.

The interesting question for us here at the journal is what this means for theological reflection upon political life and activity. Reading Walzer's book we were reminded of the initial set of themes we set out for the journal in 1999. These are, and we quote from the guidance notes for contributors:

how change is instigated and implemented in society; political presentation; iconography in political debates; myth and reality in policy formation; changing political identities; principles, conviction and expediency in democratic processes; ideology and pragmatism; the meaning of community/ies; realism, non-realism and political ethics; social identity; pluralism, relativism and political constructs; motivation, desire and personal pleasure in politics; power, illusion and the will of the people; political charisma(tics); policy formation and political projects; inclusivity and exclusivity; vision and process; innocence and culpability; critical and constructive engagement; coalition and partnership.

We were writing from our experience in a Christian political organization. What we were conscious of was the limited nature of the theological resources available to us as people engaged in political activity. There was no absence of material telling us what was wrong with society and how we needed to work for and witness to an alternative political order. There was a strong sense that the people were *not* in peril because there was no vision. Quite the opposite. Church leaders and theologians are prepared to "speak out" about the injustices of our global and national social and political orders. But what about the actual business of politics? What about the campaigns fought and waged, about the need to make compromises, to build alliances and to suffer short-term defeats for the sake of longer-term gains? When is it right to lobby privately and when is it right to demonstrate publicly? What are the ethics of the relationship between private conversation and public speech? These were areas we knew were central to the political process but which did not seem to cross the radar of theological comment.

So we established a journal to give people a forum to pursue these questions. We like the articles which focus on the theological issues raised by specific political events, campaigns and leaders. Seven years into the journal's life we celebrate those occasions in which people have grappled with the theological meaning of the issues they have wanted to promote and campaign for. The history of political ideas and movements has thrown up rich and fertile ground for theological reflection. In amongst all this we have also been subject to events. The presidency of George W. Bush would have been an important event in the life of political theology whatever had happened. That the presidency has been so dominated by the war in Iraq has made it only more poignant and important for our discipline. The question of war and its justice is a recurring and important theme for us.

It is perhaps now clear why *Politics and Passion* is an important book for us. Its political and ethical discussions begin where we believe political theology should begin, in the actual experiences of people and their efforts to change things. It is a book which takes seriously the human nature of politics, because it is concerned with real people not liberal (i)dolls. So we welcome its publication. We are delighted that leading theological voices were prepared to engage with the text and that Professor Walzer was able to respond. We hope that it will inspire and motivate theologians to reflect upon the business and messiness of political life.