

DISSENT AS CHRISTIAN VOCATION

Byron C. Bangert

My title for this paper is inspired by a recent book by Franklin Gamwell, who teaches theology, ethics, and philosophy of religion at the University of Chicago Divinity School. Gamwell titled his book Politics as a Christian Vocation: Faith and Democracy Today. His purpose, he says, is “to clarify whether and, if so, how active participation in contemporary politics is a Christian calling. Politically, the discussion is focused principally on the American republic. But that focus itself requires address to general questions about the life of Christian witness.”¹

Several features of Gamwell’s argument should be noted. The first is that he does not mean by “politics” some specialized profession, but rather “political activity,” understood as “the deliberate attempt to influence or help shape political rule and, thereby, to determine the consequences of political order for all affected by it” (3-4). Clearly, Gamwell means by politics more or less what we who are American citizens tend to regard as the responsibilities of good citizenship in a democratic republic. The question is whether Christians are in some sense *obliged* to engaged in the sorts of political activity associated with such citizenship, or whether they may elect to be politically quiescent. In other words, Gamwell is not asking the question whether it is simply OK for American Christians to be politically active, but whether indeed they ought to be politically engaged as an expression of their Christian witness and practice. He argues that they are generally under such obligation “because they are called to pursue the community of love and to act for justice as general emancipation” (5; cf. 91)—and, of course, because the most appropriate and effective way to do so within a democratic republic is by means of political activity.

Most of us probably take it for granted that to be good citizens we must be actively engaged in some form of political activity. If so, that is probably due to our understanding of the requirements of a healthy democratic society, not to any particular religious convictions we may happen to hold. It is central to Gamwell’s approach that he does not assume that politics is a Christian calling. His project is to argue for political activity specifically as a Christian calling, not simply as an option, and not merely as an obligation of democratic citizenship. He argues, in fact, that the majority voice within Christianity has been one that has not seen politics as integral to the common witness of Christians. Rather, Christians have been primarily concerned with common life only within the religious community, Augustine’s “City of God,” not the “City of (Hu)Man(kind).” The larger political and social structures within which the Christian Church has found itself have typically been viewed as God-ordained, and not as orders to be altered or transformed by Christian endeavor. Christians were likely to regard themselves as called to political activity only if and when the political and/or social orders were seen to interfere directly with the practice of true religion. In short, says Gamwell, “Christians for whom politics is a common Christian vocation differ with a profound tradition in Christian thought and practice” (18).

¹(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

There is much more to Gamwell's argument, having especially to do with how the essence of the Christian faith is to be understood, that I must gloss over in this paper. Suffice it to say that *if* the claims of the Christian faith are not subject to rational argument, and thereby subject to validation or invalidation, democratic political activity cannot belong to Christian vocation. *If* Christian claims are incorrigibly suprarational, then they cannot be argued in democratic political discourse, and Christians, as Christians, have no way to engage in the sort of political activity that democracy requires. Gamwell claims that the explicit knowledge and self-understanding given to Christians is available to all human beings. "For Christians," he writes, "Jesus Christ represents explicitly the love and calling of God that humans experience everywhere" (75-76).

This may be the most controversial of all Gamwell's claims, but it is key to his argument. The point is that Christians are not faced with a choice either to invoke or to set aside some specially revealed knowledge or understanding in order to participate as Christians in the public square. They need become neither religious imperialists nor faux secularists in order to engage in political discourse in democratic societies. Here Gamwell is entering into a much larger and on-going conversation about the place of religion in American public life, a matter about which I can say little in this paper. The burden and balance of Gamwell's argument is to make the case that under current political circumstances in America, or in any comparable democratic republic, it is now possible for Christians to give a different answer from that which has historically been given to the question about politics as a common Christian vocation.

I assume a somewhat different burden in this paper. My question is not about politics and political activity in general, but about dissent in particular. What sort of calling, if any, do Christians have to dissent? Let me first be clear that I understand dissent to designate the expression and articulation of a contrary point of view. It does not necessarily entail resistance, or even civil disobedience, both of which connote more active forms of opposition. Nonetheless, dissent may be highly consequential. In regimes where dissent is severely suppressed, a public act of dissent may result in permanent silencing of the dissenter. Occasions may arise in such contexts where Christians feel called to stand against the ruling powers, but it would be hard to argue that Christians in such circumstances have a general calling or vocation to dissent. To speak meaningfully of dissent as a calling, one must envision a society or context in which dissent is at least minimally tolerated. Since dissent does not necessarily implicate other forms of engagement in the political process, however, I do not see it as limited to democratic societies. Nor do I think dissent must meet all the terms of democratic political discourse as suggested by Gamwell, for example. Nonetheless, I want to make an argument similar to Gamwell's regarding the common calling, under current circumstances in America, for Christians to be dissenters. I want to argue for dissent as a subspecies of political activity that is currently incumbent upon all American Christians. In other words, I view dissent as a common Christian calling in America today.

It would appear that the dominant expressions of Christianity within contemporary American culture are anything but dissenting. They seem to be largely supportive of the current political regime. The privatization of religion in America doubtless helps to account for this

circumstance, but I confess that this is hardly an adequate explanation. Christianity contains some not insignificant traditions of dissent that one might have supposed would have precluded the current ascendancy of the religious right. There is, on the one hand, the tradition of prophetic discourse, exemplified in such figures as Moses, Nathan, Micaiah (I Kings 22:5-28), Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah, not to mention Jesus of Nazareth, each of whom is portrayed as bearing the burden of speaking on behalf of God, and thus of “speaking truth to power.” It is too simple to equate prophetic discourse precisely with dissent—sometimes the prophets have very hopeful and agreeable things to say—but prophetic discourse is always an antidote to the parochial, the self-serving, and the routine. As such, it tends toward social critique rather than endorsement of, or acquiescence to, the prevailing order.

Christianity also has within it a tradition that tends to place a form of dissent at the center of its understanding of the Christian faith. The radical or left-wing manifestations of the Protestant Reformation, especially those elements that call people out from the world to live a life apart, are familiar examples of this tradition. The historic “peace churches” trace their roots to the radical reformation, and from there to the New Testament. So do some Baptists and other sects that continue to emphasize the importance of “separation” from the world. For good or ill, however, the separatist impulses within some forms of Protestant Christianity have been transmuted into a basically conservative moral and fundamentalist theological agenda, while today’s “peace churches” are subject to the same political and cultural pluralism found in mainstream Christianity. In short, there are few *bona fide* expressions of dissenting Christianity still alive today.

Now, I do not think that all Christians are called to be prophets,² nor do I endorse the separatist impulses of some elements of the radical Reformation and “New Testament Christianity.” Nonetheless, it seems to me that dissent deserves a place of privilege in normative Christian thought. My grounds for this are based on what theologian Paul Tillich called the Protestant principle. According to Tillich,

“The Protestant principle, in name derived from the protest of the ‘Protestants’ against decisions of the Catholic majority, contains the divine and human protest against any absolute claim made for a relative reality, even if this claim is made by a Protestant church. The Protestant principle is the judge of every religious and cultural reality, including the religion and culture which calls itself ‘Protestant’ . . . It is the guardian against the attempts of the finite and the conditioned to usurp the place of the unconditional in thinking and acting. It is the prophetic judgment against religious pride, ecclesiastical arrogance, and secular self-sufficiency and their destructive consequences.”³

I have some qualms about Tillich’s theological construal of the Protestant principle, but I believe

²This despite Moses’ ejaculation, “Would that all God’s people were prophets!” (Num. 11:29).

³The Protestant Era, trans. by James Luther Adams, abridged edition (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 163.

he rightly identified what must be a central principle of any form of Christianity that takes seriously what has traditionally been called the sovereignty of God. The language of sovereignty tends to carry with it certain unfortunate connotations regarding the nature of God's power, however, so I propose that we speak of God instead as the Ultimate Personal Reality. In light of the Protestant principle, it is central to the Christian witness to protest—to dissent--against any and all ultimate claims made on behalf of finite entities and powers, and to do so precisely in affirmation of the singular Ultimate we call God.

Now, this Protestant principle, taken seriously, is a two-edged sword. On the one hand, it authorizes the religious believer to challenge all pretense and arrogance of secular rule. It rebukes the demands of all principalities and powers for absolute allegiance. It exposes self-righteousness as blindness and error. It dismisses claims on behalf of patriotism against dissent. However, the Protestant principle also cuts against all ecclesiastical privilege. One cannot consistently invoke this principle and then declare, "Thus says the LORD!", as some theologically evangelical, and even more liberal, critics of the current administration may be wont to do. Religious dogmas, especially when based on claims to special knowledge, insight, or understanding that are accessible only through suprarational faith, are rendered suspect by the Protestant principle. Religion has no infallible, nor even inherently superior, purchase on the truth. The Christian who takes seriously the Protestant principle will be a dissenter from certain epistemological claims of ecclesiastical authority as well as the imperial claims of the ruling powers. Insofar as he or she feels called to articulate dissenting views within a democratic political context, he or she will be obliged to do so in terms that have currency as valid forms of argument in the public square.

To summarize my argument thus far:

- 1) Contemporary Christians in America have a vocation to engage in political activity.
- 2) That vocation includes a calling to dissent whenever and wherever excessive claims are made by or on behalf of finite entities and powers.
- 3) For fundamentally theological reasons, including the Protestant principle (and grounds laid out by Gamwell that I cannot elaborate here), Christian engagement in politics, including dissent, within a democratic republic such as America must be undertaken in terms that are subject to rational argument, and therefore subject to validation or invalidation in public discourse.

There are three final points I wish to make. First, there is some reason to be queasy about my argument. Look at what engagement in politics by the religious right has wrought! On the one hand, valorizing the political activity of religious people hardly looks like a good idea if this is going to be the result. On the other hand, it looks as if any religiously-based counter-movement worth its salt is going to need more adrenaline than my anemic take on Christian prerogative provides. Environmental thinker Bill McKibben recently had a piece in *Harper's Magazine* in which he identified politically left-leaning evangelicals as the only likely source for an effective religious rejoinder to the right. In his words,

the mainline Protestant churches that supported civil rights and opposed the war in

Vietnam are mostly locked in a dreary decline as their congregations dwindle and their elders argue endlessly about gay clergy and same-sex unions. . . . Plenty of vital congregations are doing great good works—they're the ones that have nurtured me—but they aren't where the challenge will arise; they've grown shy about talking about Jesus, more comfortable with the language of sociology and politics. More and more it's Bible-quoting Christians, like [Jim] Wallis's Sojourners movement and that Baptist seminary graduate, Bill Moyers, who are carrying the fight.⁴

Personally, I do not think politically progressive evangelicals are going to carry the day. In any event, they do not provide a viable theological option for me. But it seems to me that Christians of all varieties, as well as thoughtful persons of no particular faith perspective, should be able to distinguish between that which is ultimate, and may justifiably exercise an ultimate claim upon us, and that which is limited, finite, and fallible. It seems to me that most Christians, as well as those who are not, must not be totally impervious to the truth, totally immune to argument, totally beyond the reach of reason and the press of actual lived experience.

Second, the unholy alliance between the religious and the political right, or what Kevin Phillips in his new book calls the "American Theocracy," makes obvious what I believe has long been the case, namely that the rise of the American empire warrants, and indeed mandates, the assertion that there is a common calling for all Christians to dissent from the current political regime. Moreover, by the current political regime I do not mean merely the current Republican administration, but the entrenched political establishment and the pervasive ideology of American exceptionalism that undergirds it.⁵ So long as we Americans think we are better than the rest of the world, so long as we assume the privileges of hegemonic power and unfettered sovereignty, so long as our government exercises power coercively in ways that are fundamentally undemocratic and self-aggrandizing, American Christians will be called to dissent.

Obviously, the religious right will have none of this. (Some no doubt would argue that it is their witness against abortion, same-sex relations, and secular humanism that faithfully represents the authentic tradition of dissent within Christianity today.) I understand that, if the experience of history provides any indication, the claim I am making about the sort of dissent now required will never be accepted by a majority of Christians. Consequently, the majority of American Christians will probably never assume this "common" calling. However, I make this claim, not as a matter of political strategy, but as a matter of seeking to be faithful to my own religious heritage and self-understanding.

⁴"The Christian Paradox," *Harper's Magazine*, August 2005, 37.

⁵Standing before a brilliantly illuminated Statue of Liberty on the first anniversary of 9-11-2001, President Bush addressed the nations with these words: "Ours is the cause of human dignity: freedom guided by conscience and guarded by peace. The ideal of America is the hope of humankind. That hope drew millions to this harbor. That hope still lights our way. And the light shines in the darkness. And the darkness will not overcome it. May God bless America." Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*: "A tyrant must put on the appearance of uncommon devotion to religion. Subjects are less apprehensive of illegal treatment from a ruler whom they consider godfearing and pious. On the other hand, they do less easily move against him, believing he has the gods on his side."

Finally, Christians in America today must, in the words of theologian David Griffin, “consider whether the situation created by American imperialism creates a *status confessionis*, a confessional situation.”⁶ On two previous occasions in recent history a significant though minority group of Christians came to such a conclusion. The first, in Germany in the 1930s, arose in response to National Socialism, and was led by such theologians as Karl Barth and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who concluded that National Socialism violated basic principles of the Christian faith. The second occurred four decades later in South Africa.. Church leaders and theologians came to the conclusion that it was not possible to be neutral, or to hold differing opinions, regarding the system of apartheid. Rather, a faithful Christian witness required its public and unequivocal rejection. The question we now face, as Griffin states it, is “whether an examination of the facts of the American Empire, in conjunction with a re-examination of our Christian faith and American ideals rooted in it, should lead us ‘publicly and unequivocally’ to reject the present world order . . .”⁷

Personally, I believe that the present world order begs for change and that, sooner or later, change that is massive, disruptive, destructive, and distressing will be forced upon us if we do not make significant changes ourselves. Griffin is working on a critique of American empire with a proposal for global democracy. Sociologist and social critic Robert Bellah urges the replacement of nation-state power politics with transnational institutions.⁸ Surely, however, any public call for an unequivocal rejection of the present order will be met with less than equanimity in a nation where citizens who did nothing more than be among the first to dissent against the war in Iraq have had their patriotism called into question. Our current situation would seem to be one in which some of the very conditions that have created a *status confessionis* are also conditions that would seem to doom the efforts of Christians to speak and act accordingly. We face the terrible irony of being subject to conditions in which democracy is being steadily eroded, due in large part to the imperatives of Empire, making it increasingly difficult for public expressions of dissent to gain a fair and reasonable hearing.

In any event, all Christians continue to have a common calling to exploit such possibilities as can be found to dissent against the prevailing principalities and powers that constitute the American Empire. Whether it would serve any useful purpose “publicly and unequivocally” to reject the present order is not clear. It is only clear that the present order cannot be justified, nor can it be sustained, and that people of faith (and people of reason) are called to articulate an alternative version and vision of the world. They are called to dissent, as they are called to political activity in general, making their arguments with respect for their fellow citizens, engaging to the best of their abilities in the practice of democracy.

⁶The 2003 Brennan Lectures, Lecture 1: “Empire Now and Then, Jesus, and the Reign of God,” 1, presented at Christ Church Cathedral, Louisville, Kentucky, June 1, 2003.

⁷Ibid., 1-2.

⁸In Wes Avram, editor *Anxious About Empire: Theological Essays on the New Global Realities* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2005), 26.