

[MJTM 12 (2010–2011)]

BOOK REVIEW

Francis Beckwith. *Politics for Christians: Statecraft as Soulcraft*. Christian Worldview Integration Series. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010. 175 pp. Pbk. \$18 USD. ISBN 978-0-8308-2814-2.

Politics for Christians is a must read for those of us whose minds are ideologically bricked in, with either a right or a left orientation. Beckwith has the unsettling talent of forcing open long-developed opinions and hardened prejudices. This “how-to” of participation in the political realm for Christians represents an antidote to the continuing tiff between the two ends of the political spectrum, that is, on the American scene. But it applies everywhere. It is an entreaty not only for bridling ham-fisted dogma, but for practicing sincere and reasoned engagement.

It seems the underlying concern that propelled Beckwith to write is that Christians are not aspiring to involvement in the affairs of state as in the past, and the state is in danger of almost complete secularization from the top down. If that should happen, even neutrality would disappear. For, as Beckwith is aware (p. 162), an atheist is better protected in terms of rights in a state grounded in theism than a Christian is in an atheistic state. Hence, Christian author Solzhenitsyn found no freedom to express his views in the old USSR while secular atheist Christopher Hitchens finds plenty of it in largely Christian America.

After an eighteen-page plea for Christians to stop compartmentalizing their faith and integrate their beliefs with their work, Beckwith defines the parameters of the discussion of this book. In a short chapter he comments on such wide-ranging topics as basic political philosophy, political economy, international politics, and law. He then engages Christians as to how they should involve themselves in a liberal democratic system.

The fact that Beckwith chooses to limit his discussion to a system of separate powers might also limit the book’s marketability to the United States, but Christians in other democratic systems such as constitutional monarchies, as in Canada or the

BECKWITH *Politics for Christians*

UK, will benefit too. Many Christians reside in liberal democracies where citizens play a part in the electoral process, shaping policy and enforcing laws. These systems allow Christians a level of involvement the ancient and medieval church would have thought unthinkable. While that is true, Beckwith cautions that Christians should know that laws and court opinions defended as liberating for one group may in practice nurture cultural and political hostility toward Christians. For example, a government that holds that a negative moral judgment of homosexual conduct is akin to racist discrimination will not for long remain tolerant of those who dissent for reasons that arise from sincere, biblical reflection.

In Beckwith's view, Kennedy's 1960 speech assuring American voters that his Roman Catholicism would have no impact on his judgment as chief occupant of the White House was a "terrible concession." The Kennedy Mistake, as he calls it, ought never pass the lips of a believing Christian. This is precisely what secularists want us to concede in order to receive permission for involvement. But if a believer participates in the political arena, she has good reason to assume that her theological and ethical presuppositions will inform her considerations of the common good. Why should she accept the secularist's limitations? Through the use of a case study approach, Beckwith encourages thoughtful Christians to keep the faith.

Recent application in the United States of the First Amendment guaranteeing religious liberty and the prevention of an established religion has stepped away from the original intentions of the Founders. Americans eventually came to understand religious freedom as a separation of church and state. But, says Beckwith, the Founders do allow for the widest possible free exercise of religion consistent with preserving and protecting the public good. In fact, this is the proper role of government. But here too, secularists have imposed their own bias on the intent of the Constitution, limiting faith-based participation. On the other hand, Beckwith rightly warns, Christians ought to be careful not to marginalize the voices of non-Christians, thus committing the same harm as secularists have committed against Christians. The liberties we wish to enjoy need to be available, in

a pluralistic society, to others who do not share the Christian worldview.

Beckwith believes that inalienable natural rights, based on natural law, presuppose the existence of God. To argue for natural rights while denying the existence of God is a dubious enterprise. Here, as elsewhere, Beckwith provides the Christian reader with biblical affirmation.

As the above samples of his thought show, Francis Beckwith's book is a valuable contribution to the discussion about Christians in the political arena. One needs to keep in mind that secularists need not read a book like this. It is Christians who are feeling pressed. Beckwith, from the outset, declares his conservative posture and it is this Christian conservatism that presents a challenge to the secularist. One needs to keep in mind also that there is no possibility of neutrality. Christians entering the political arena should not be so naïve as to think that secularism does not wish to dominate. At the same time, as Beckwith warns, Christians need to be wary of adopting the attitudes and tactics that are arrayed against them.

I would recommend *Politics for Christians* for anyone wishing to become aware of the challenges and the vagaries of the political domain. This is a solid and frank introduction with helpful analysis of historical precedents applied to today's world. The concerns are plausible. The book is well-timed. As the global shift of Christian influence seemingly continues southward and eastward, it is increasingly imperative that Christians involve themselves in politics as salt and light.

John Schuit
Emmanuel Bible College, Kitchener, ON, Canada