

I would like to thank the Circle of Peace for inviting me to speak this evening. I count it a high honor.

On the Politicization of Christianity

In the autumn of 312, the Roman general Constantine defeated a rival general, Maxentius, at the battle of the Milvian Bridge, thus making himself emperor of Rome. After the battle, Constantine claimed that he had won the battle under the express direction of Jesus Christ, who had appeared to Constantine in a vision.

Various historians have doubted Constantine's story of his miraculous vision of Christ, telling him to "conquer by this," either the sign of the cross or a Chi-Rho. Perhaps the story was invented or embellished after the battle. Perhaps the chief miracle in the story is that Maxentius somehow decided to engage Constantine's army outside the fortifications of the city rather than relying on a superior defensive position. What is undoubtedly true is that after Constantine won the battle and made himself emperor, he intended to rule as a Christian.

Pacifist Christians have often claimed that the conversion of Constantine brought about a terrible corruption of Christian moral theology. They tell a story something like this. The good news as preached by Jesus and his disciples was a gospel of peace that rejected participation in war, and for three centuries the Christian movement largely held true to its peaceable roots, in spite of periodically intense persecution. With Constantine, however, the church suddenly turned in a diametrically different direction. Christians were now welcomed into governmental positions, they served in the army, and they fought wars. Church leaders such as Augustine invented a new moral theory, the theory of just war, to accommodate the changed historical situation. The theory of the just war has dominated Christian moral theology from the fourth century to the present. However, though it was invented and refined by centuries of theologians, the just war theory has never been anything but a failure. It is, in fact, a corruption of the gospel.

Now I myself am a pacifist Christian, and I have some sympathy for the pacifist interpretation of Constantine. Nevertheless, I want to make clear that my talk tonight is not about that. My topic is the politicization of Christianity, so I have to start with Constantine, but I do not want my remarks to be mistaken as one more speech by a peace Christian against just war theory. Let's leave that discussion for another time.

Within a few months of taking the throne, Constantine was asked by church leaders in North Africa to resolve a dispute. I won't go into the details of the *Donatist* controversy tonight. Suffice it to say there was a split in the church in North Africa, with two men, Donatus and Caecilian, as rival bishops. The Donatists asked the new emperor to rule against Caecilian because, they said, he had been consecrated as bishop by a "traitor," that is, one of the church leaders who handed over the scriptures during the recent persecution under emperor Diocletian. Constantine referred the question to a council of bishops, and they ruled against Donatus and in favor of Caecilian. The Donatists refused to accept the decision, even when a second council endorsed the first decision. Constantine was not pleased with Donatist obstinacy, and he threatened to go to North Africa to deal with the situation personally. Listen to his words.

I am going to make plain to them what kind of worship is to be offered to God...
What higher duty have I as emperor than to destroy error and repress rash indiscretions, and so cause all to offer to Almighty God true religion, honest concord, and due worship?

Constantine here expresses what might be called the “normal” position, speaking historically, about the politicization of Christianity. Before Constantine, there were no Christian rulers. And I think it is fair to say that for fourteen centuries after Constantine, almost every Christian emperor, king, queen, prince, prime minister, governor or noble would have agreed with him. I think we can put it more strongly: until the seventeenth century, many Christian rulers would have *taken it for granted* that their highest duty as rulers was to “repress rash indiscretions, and so cause all to offer to Almighty God true religion.” Let us call this a ruler’s “Constantinian Duty.” In practice, of course, kings and princes often failed to live up to their Constantinian Duty; that is, they pursued wealth, glory, power, dynastic succession, or simple pleasure rather than their number one responsibility of making the people worship rightly. But they would have agreed, at least publicly, that a ruler’s first job is to support right religion.

Part of our theme tonight is “the need for introspection.” As a modern person living in a liberal democracy, you may find Constantine’s paternalism off-putting. But imagine yourself living sometime in the thousand years after Constantine, a sincere Christian and born into a position of political power. Given the burden and privilege of power, should you not use it to promote the faith? I think we can sympathize with Constantine and others like him who thought their Constantinian Duty outweighed all others.

Christian rulers no longer believe it. For example, in 2008, Mr. Obama and Mr. McCain ran for president of the United States as Christians. If either of them had been asked, he would have emphatically denied that it would be any part of his business as president to cause or promote “true religion.” Former President Jimmy Carter, who, perhaps more than most U.S. presidents, has explicitly linked many of his public activities to his Christian faith, would undoubtedly agree with Obama and McCain. These political leaders do *not* think they have a duty as president to promote true religion. Similar observations could be made about Christian politicians in Canada, the U.K., the E.U., and many other places.

Further, none of these Christian political leaders spend any time worrying about their Constantinian Duty. Just as Constantine was sure that he had a Constantinian Duty, these political leaders *take it for granted* that they don’t.

The change from Constantine’s view to the modern view came in the eighteenth century, and it can be traced to more than one cause. On one hand, the philosophical movement we call the enlightenment sought to replace appeals to religious authority with appeals to reason. Intellectual leaders thought that if the public square could be made a place of reason rather than religion, then peace would prevail.

Second, and more important for our topic tonight, a strong motive arose within Christianity to deny the Constantinian Duty. Consider these words from John Locke:

The care of souls cannot belong to the civil magistrate, because his power consists only in outward force: but true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind, without which nothing can be acceptable to God.

Another seventeenth century voice, William Penn:

I shall not at this time make it my Business to manifest the Inconsistency that there is between the Christian Religion, and a forced Uniformity; not only because it hath been so often and excellently done by Men of Wit, Learning and Conscience, and that I have elsewhere largely deliver'd my Sense about it; but because Every free and impartial Temper hath of a long time observ'd, that such Barbarous Attempts were so far from being indulged, that they were most severely prohibited by Christ himself....

It may be that this idea first arose within Protestantism, especially versions of Protestantism that emphasize the individual's free, uncoerced response to God. But the idea spread, and today most branches of Christianity endorse it. Notice Locke's reasoning: it is because Christian faith "consists in the inward persuasion of the mind" that it would be wrong for a ruler—a Christian ruler, mind you—to try to make the people worship right. And Penn said that Christ himself prohibited "barbarous attempts" to compel religious conformity. The Constantinian Duty is no duty at all for Christians who understand faith in this way.

Here is a historical irony. John Locke himself wrote that the Protestant Christian government of England should not tolerate Jews or Catholics! He said this, not because he thought it was the government's job to correct their beliefs, but because Locke thought Jews and Catholics would not be loyal subjects to a Protestant king. There is an inconsistency here, but perhaps no worse than that of other men who proclaimed the equality of all while practicing slavery. And perhaps there is a warning here for those of us today who blithely proclaim our belief in religious freedom while endorsing state actions that encroach upon it.

We see, then, different periods in the politicization of Christianity. In the first three centuries, Christianity was relatively un-politicized. The very early Christians refused to say, "Caesar is lord," so they could not participate in Roman government, for example, by serving in the army. Christians might fear the state or pray for government officials, but for the most part they were outsiders to government.

With Constantine, Christianity entered a second phase during which it became highly politicized. Church and government were entangled in myriad ways. Popes and bishops tried to tell kings and emperors what to do, while kings and emperors sometimes killed, kidnapped, or threatened popes and bishops. If anything, the entanglement of church and state was even more pronounced in the eastern part of the empire and in the Byzantine Empire that followed. I will not take time to tell of the many evils that sprang from the entanglement of Christianity and the state in these centuries: wars, inquisitions, pogroms, and crusades.

In the eighteenth century a third era began, in which the entanglement of church and government has been greatly reduced. Christians hold government positions of many

kinds, but they do not think it proper to use the power of the state to promote right religion.

Someone might object that my three-phase summary of history greatly oversimplifies the politicization of Christianity. You would be right. Someone else might object that I have overstated the modern disentanglement of Christianity from government. You would also be right. But my overly simple history has this merit: it illustrates the wide variety of views among Christians when it comes to the question of political power. And this should lead each of us to carefully consider his or her own view.

Some Christians, like those of the first three centuries, reject participation in the state, because the state often demands allegiance that should only be given to God and because the state uses violent, coercive power. Other Christians, like Constantine, embrace participation in the state; they assume Christians can resist the idolatrous demands of the state and they believe the power of the state can be used to accomplish good things, even holy things. Still other Christians, like William Penn or Jimmy Carter, pursue a middle path. On this view, Christians may participate in government, but they must observe limitations on the use of state power.

Most Christians today, if asked to choose, would identify with the third option. Especially in liberal democracies, most of us think it is irresponsible not to concern ourselves with government to at least some degree. We participate in government as Christians, not merely as citizens. Simultaneously, we recognize limitations on the use of state power that we must obey if we are to be faithful to Christ.

Fundamentally, we must observe and protect *freedom of religion*. Genuine faith in Christ cannot be compelled. Therefore, precisely because we want people to have genuine faith in Christ, Christians must insist that the government respect religious freedom for all people.

Can we go beyond religious freedom? I think so.

Jesus commanded his followers to love their neighbors, and this explicitly includes those who are not Jesus' followers. In the political realm, love for neighbor means that Christians must support *justice*, that is, a fair distribution of opportunity, responsibility, and reward; *peace*, that is, freedom from acts of violence from others; and what used to be called *common weal*, that is, the living-well together of a community. These are components of the biblical notion of *shalom*. I suspect that Jews and Muslims would also endorse the prophetic notions of justice, peace and common weal, but it is my privilege to speak for Christianity.

Please note there is a problem here, a huge and wonderful problem. Jesus' command moves us to pursue justice, peace, and common weal, but Christians disagree with each other both theoretically and practically in regard to these key ideas. They also agree and disagree with their non-Christian neighbors about justice, peace, and common weal.

I call this a wonderful problem, because it invites all of us to explore together the meaning of justice, peace, and common weal. It is entirely possible and reasonable for us to agree that these things are legitimate goals of government, even when we disagree fairly substantially about how to go about achieving these ends.

How silly it would be if I thought, as an individual, that I know best how to achieve shalom! Surely I need to learn from other people, particularly those who

disagree with me. (This is a theme developed in my book, *The Virtue of Civility in the Practice of Politics*.) The fact that I follow Christ does not change this truth; I need to learn from those who disagree with me.

It would also be silly, I contend, for we who are Christians to think that we already know best how to achieve justice, peace, and common weal. We need to learn from those who disagree with us.

Nothing I have said implies that Christians should cease to be Christians and think as Christians when they enter the public square. I firmly disagree with those who say that Christians must restrict themselves to so-called secular reasons when they participate in politics. But when Christians participate in the political arena, we must do so with a firm grasp on Christian truth. If we want our neighbors to believe in Jesus, we must insist that they have genuine religious freedom; for without freedom they cannot find an “inward persuasion of the mind.” If Christians aim to obey Jesus, we must try to learn what justice, peace, and common weal are, and we must do what we can—without impinging on religious freedom—to achieve some measure of these prophetic values.

Thank you for your kind attention.