Author Meets Critics: A Theology of Public Life

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BOISI CENTER FOR RELIGION AND AMERICAN PUBLIC LIFE
BOSTON COLLEGE, CHESTNUT HILL, MASSACHUSETTS
OCTOBER 11, 2007

I very much appreciate Charles Mathewes' reflection on why and how Christians should be engaged in political life. I applaud the way he appeals to some of the central doctrines and practices of the Christian tradition to show both that Christians should take engagement in public life as a key part to their vocation, and also how he argues that these doctrines and practices require avoidi

become an agent. In a way that echoes Alan Wolfe's reflections on the "gift of society,"[2] Mathewes sees public life as a gift that makes freedom possible. One cannot be free in solitude or isolation. Withdrawal from public life locks one into one's own little world that is, in effect, a kind of prison. Social engagement can bring liberation, and so public life is primarily a gift and a form of grace, rather than a duty.

This leads Mathewes to see public life as a genuine mediation of divine grace. The argument that one meets God in loving encounters with other persons is not new in Christian theology. Mathewes, however, argues that the interaction with others in one's public life as a citizen can be an encounter with God. This is a distinctive contribution. Political activity can be "iconic" of God's presence in human life.[3] Thus Lincoln saw the U. S. civil war as an icon of God's judgment on slavery, and we can say that the civil rights movement of the 60s and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa were icons of God redeeming grace. A true politics will be "sacramental"—God presence with human beings is both symbolized by and realized in events of political life. Public life, when rightly conducted, should give expression to the values we see embodied in the liturgy of the Eucharist—creating community and feeding the hungry. Even more, political life is itself a liturgy in which God is actively present and in which citizens can give praise and glory to God while sharing the paschal death and resurrection of Jesus. This is an extraordinarily high valuation of political life.

Needless to say, Mathewes is aware this could be a dangerous stance. It could lead to

Mathewes's seeks Christian engagement in a transformative kind of politics. The religious image he uses for this politics is that of the Transfiguration. On Mt. Tabor, the glory of God was manifest in the humanity of Christ, but Christ lost none of his humanness. In the same way, political life can be the place where human freedom is achieved and where we encounter signs of ultimate meaning and of God, without abolishing the human limits of political stances by making totalizing, idolatrous claims about them. I strongly agree with these moves.

My one hesitation is with Mathewes' rejection of the distinction between the natural and the supernatural found in the Thomist tradition. I share Mathewes' desire to avoid separating public life from faith in a way that secularizes politics and privatizes religion. Some interpretations of the nature/supernature distinction end up doing this. Nature becomes the secular domain of politics, and because religion is supernatural it ends up above or outside politics, i.e. privatized. This way of understanding the nature/supernature distinction, however, is based on an erroneous interpretation of Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas differentiates the natural and supernatural, but he does not separate them into separate spheres. For Aquinas, supernatural grace is active and alive in the midst of all of human life. But the differentiation of nature from supernature allows Aquinas to avoid saying that theology provides all answers to all questions. It enabled Aquinas to learn from Aristotle, and also from Muslims like Ibn Sina (Avicenna) and Jews like Maimonides, without claiming that everything they had right they had somehow learned from Jesus Christ. At the same time, the fact that this differentiation was not separation meant Aquinas could still see grace active in Athenian politics and Muslim philosophy.

Mathewes certainly wants to learn from political thought that is not grounded in Christian theology. His appreciative though critical engagement with liberalism, communitarianism, civic republicanism, and agonism clearly show this. My question to him is this: does not your rejection of the natural - supernatural distinction drive you to interpret political stances as manifestations of either grace or of sin? And if that is the consequence, is it possible for you to sustain the kind of political respect for the other who is not Christian you want to maintain? I have my doubts about that.

Second, I wonder whether abandoning the nature/supernature distinction is not one reason Mathewes' book says so little about concrete political decisions and policies, such as those that arise in debates about how to deal with poverty in the U.S. today, or whether there is a significant difference between humanitarian intervention in Darfur and preemptive war in Iraq. Mathewes' is not doing ethical analysis of public policies, and I am not suggesting he should have written a book that does such analysis. But I do wonder whether his tendency to