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11-16-2022

Piety and Politics: The Relationship Between Holiness, Spiritual Formation, and Socio-Political Engagement

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Recommended Citation

Howard, Evan, "Piety and Politics: The Relationship Between Holiness, Spiritual Formation, and Socio-Political Engagement" (2022). *Essays*. 13.
<https://pillars.taylor.edu/sr-lectureesays/13>

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**"Piety and Politics:
The Relationship Between Holiness, Spiritual Formation,
and Socio-Political Engagement."**

Introduction

So, I will begin with an advertisement and then we can move on with the rest of the talk. As you can see by the flyers on your chairs I have a couple of books coming out soon. The *Deep and Wide* manuscript is complete and is now in the copyediting stage. A few years ago Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, pioneer of the early 2000s movement known as “new monasticism” and a political activist, said, while driving me to the airport, "You know what we need from you, Evan, we need someone to show the relationship between monasticism and action."¹ After talking with others I found his question to be worth my attention and my response will soon be in print.

Some of what I have to say in this presentation is drawn from my work on that book. Yet with a couple of key differences. First, in this talk I will draw from a wider range of Christianity than monasticism. Second, whereas in *Deep and Wide* I identify a number of values that shape a Christian understanding of socio-political engagement, in this talk I will restrict myself to one: holiness. After taking a moment to clarify how I define “politics,” I will briefly summarize three elements of a Biblical framework that help us to make sense of the relationship between holiness and socio-political engagement. Then I will demonstrate how this relationship might work in practice: first with a few historical examples, and then with a spiritual formation experience of what I call “Political Self-Examination.”

¹See Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, *Reconstructing the Gospel: Finding Freedom from Slave-Holder Religion* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2018. Kindle), Loc. 1697 of 2685.

ones, for I am holy” (Leviticus 19:2; see 11:44). Yet Exodus and Deuteronomy proclaim that God has and will establish them corporately as a kingdom of priests, a holy nation (Exodus 19: 5–6; Deuteronomy 7:6; 28:9). The Lord who is holy, separate and distinct from all creation, invites a *people* to live into God’s image, becoming a *people* ritually and ethically consecrated, distinct from all the other nations of the world. Thus commandments regarding usury, or condemnations of oppressing the poor in the gates are not simply encouragements to private holiness, but are more so expressions of God’s desire to see a *people* after His own heart, who model by their ordered life together the values God values.

The New Testament preserves and develops this corporate theme. Just as 1 Peter 1:15-16 reaffirms for Christian individuals the Leviticus command to become holy *ones*, so also the same letter reapplies the proclamation in Exodus and Deuteronomy that the church now functions corporately as a “royal priesthood” and a “holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9). Remember, most of the epistles were not written to individuals but to *churches*, corporate entities. Paul’s vision was that Christian churches would embody God’s holy vision for a life together, a community that actively seeks to reconcile racial differences and that “does good” to all but especially the household of faith (Galatians 6:10).⁵ Gerhard Lohfink calls this the “social dimension” of God’s work: a work not just for the individual but the salvific creation of a new *people* who embody the heart and life of God.⁶

2. The (neglected) Missional Aim of Holiness

A second, and related theme to the corporate scope of holiness, is the missional aim of holiness. It is common to speak of holiness—shall I once again use the language of being obsessed with thinking

⁵Some commentators on the “do good” see a reference to finances and perhaps to the collection for Jerusalem. On Paul’s vision for a community that cares not only for believers but those beyond see, for example, Bruce W. Longenecker, *Remember the Poor: Paul, Poverty, and the Greco-Roman World* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2010).

⁶See for example Gerhard Lohfink, *Jesus and Community: The Social Dimension of Christian Faith*, trans. John P. Gavin (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 165 and elsewhere in this work. See also Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?: Toward a Theology of the People of God*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1999).

3. The Changing Environment of Human Socio-Political Engagement

We have learned that (1) Christian holiness has a corporate as well as a personal dimension and that (2) Christian holiness has a missional as well as a personal aim. Along the way I hope you have also seen that our growth in holiness, our efforts to live a life together distinct from those who surround us, naturally have “political” implications in the narrow sense. Jewish leaders and Roman officials both saw the Jesus movement not merely as another religious sect, but as a political threat. And they crucified him for that. Likewise the last nine chapters of the book of Acts recount the apostle Paul’s repeated encounters with various religious and government officials. In the end the Roman government imprisoned him, hoping that this would curtail the spread of his movement.

We need then to understand one more matter with regard to the relationship between holiness and politics. It is this: that God’s people through history find themselves—and live out their holiness—in a wide range of socio-political settings and with a variety of degrees of freedom to influence matters of statecraft. The Old Testament describes the Israelites as a collection of families or tribes. We find them choosing—for better or for worse—to submit to the governance of a monarchy, at times united and at times divided. Sometimes Israel and/or Judah were able to order their common life—and even to welcome aliens—with unhindered freedom. At other times God’s people were exiles, subject to the rule of others and blocked from the chance to order much of their own common life. And of course, neither Jesus nor the earliest Christians had any possibility—outside the exercise of civil disobedience (like violating the Jewish “blue laws”), symbolic action (like Jesus’s “triumphal entry”), and martyrdom—of effecting any real influence in government policy. Nonetheless, what the early Christians did was to

Cartwright, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), 149, 374; *A Community of Character: Toward a Constructive Christian Social Ethic* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 85. See also Stanley Hauerwas and William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony – A provocative Christian assessment of culture and ministry for people who know that something is wrong* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1989), 38; John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus: Vicit Agnus Noster* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1972), 153; Rod Dreher, *Benedict Option*, 101; Note the word “first,” not “only.” See also John F. Alexander, *Being Church: Reflections on How to Live as the People of God* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Press, 2012).

various members of the city council were sentenced to exile or death. This was just too much for the city. Something needed to be done. Before these death penalties were carried out, the populous of Antioch needed to persuade the imperial officials to allow bishop Flavian to appeal on behalf of the city and to refer the matter to Theodosius himself.

That is when the monks of the region arrived. John Chrysostom recounts, “After so many years’ seclusion in their cells, when they saw a dark cloud hanging over the city, at nobody’s request and nobody’s prompting, they left their shacks and caves and came flooding down from all directions, like so many angels from heaven.” These monks appeared before the officials, pleading on behalf of the accused. They argued that the desecration of the emperor’s image in the statues was indeed deplorable, but to further slay the image of God in these human beings created irrecoverable damage. They appealed to the Christian faith of the emperor. “If you refuse to exercise restraint,” the monks proclaimed in a pledge of solidarity, “we shall certainly die at their side.” In the end emperor and citizens were reconciled and the *polis* of Antioch was restored to – a humbled – normalcy.

Comment on the pursuit of holiness in early monasticism is unnecessary. The point here is to notice that somehow, in the midst of their ordered life of the pursuit of holiness, the monks perceived this circumstance as worthy of what we call today “direct action.”¹⁰ The Antiochene monks did not abandon their monastic calling for a life of politics. Indeed, their reputation born of habitual solitude strengthened their voice to the officials.

My second example is that of the structure of medieval society in general. The medieval church—and more particularly monastic communities—pioneered institutions of compassion which in their settings became the dominant providers of various forms of care for that place and time. It was not a matter of Christians lobbying princes or kings or nobles to establish social and educational services. Rather, in medieval Europe, the church simply *was* the “Department” of (no, let’s use the British term,

¹⁰I can imagine their process similar to that of the Cistercian community in 1996, remembered in the movie “Of God’s and Men,” to remain in Tibhirine, Algeria in the midst of civil war.

slaves. Abolitionism was not the political trend in 1748. In terms of interior matters, Woolman was deeply attentive to following what he called “the holy will” of God and was keenly sensitive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit within.

At the same time, his was not a private faith. Woolman was a faithful member of the Society of Friends (Quakers). Consequently his process of discernment regarding socio-political engagement was performed in the context of an accountable community. Woolman would first lift his concern to God and wait—sometimes for a year. Then he would bring a proposal before his congregation or a larger body, who had the role of either affirming or rejecting the idea and then issuing (if affirmed) the necessary certificates to indicate their support.

Although Woolman was patient in listening, he was certainly not “passive” in his socio-political engagement. He researched and published two essays on “Some Considerations on the Keeping of Negroes.” and distributed them among his peers. He spoke openly in meetings. He traveled from town to town visiting Quakers who owned slaves, explicitly trying to persuade them to abandon their participation in this abominable practice. At one point he drafted a petition to the Legislature “to use their endeavours to discourage the future importation of slaves.”¹³ His concern was for the ordering of society as a whole, but he also knew that he only had influence within his limited circle. Nevertheless his faithful and humble service proved effective. Four years after Woolman died the highest levels of Quaker leadership gave members two options: free your slaves or be disowned by the Society. This was eighty-seven years before the American Emancipation Proclamation.

Monks who choose to march. A medieval church who offers care. A Quaker tailor and minister who speaks out. In *Deep and Wide*, I divide these “ways” of socio-political engagement into five categories: we speak, we care, we model, we act, we pray. When I examined Christian history what I

¹³Phillips P. Moulton, ed., *The Journal and Major Essays of John Woolman* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1971), 109.

examination, while valuable, can become overly focused upon the interior of the individual such that we fail to see the connections between personal life and socio-political conditions. What might help then is an exercise in “political” self-examination.¹⁶ Inspired by Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1967 “Christmas Sermon on Peace,” let’s imagine we are back at home during breakfast.¹⁷

We begin our political self-examination with a simple prayer of openness to God’s Spirit. “Holy Spirit, I open myself to your ministry. Show me what I need to see. Let me feel what I need to feel. Give me an increased awareness of the gifts, the distortions, and the hopes that politically surround me. Thank you for your presence. Amen.” Then you begin with a simple awareness of your surroundings. What sounds do you hear? Do you hear a siren, or a wolf? You are listening to politics. (most people are aware of policing politics, but this past year Colorado voted to reintroduce wolves into wilderness areas – across the street from our ranch. I have heard and seen them). What do you see: buildings or trees? You are looking at politics (zoning regulations, building codes, logging permits). Then you turn to your meal. Eggs or bacon on your plate? You may be eating the politics of animal treatment. Are you having a drink with your meal? You might be drinking international trade (coffee, tea, cocoa, many juices). Thinking about going to work? Are you working from home or elsewhere? How will you get there? For whom is this means of transportation more or less available, and why? What do you do for work? Now you are facing questions of fair wages, employee safety, unionization and more. Just become aware of what surrounds your morning.

Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 168–75.

¹⁶Others writers have moved in this direction. I have been inspired in the development of this practice by the practice of writing an “ethnic autobiography” in Mark Lau Branson and Juan F. Martinez. *Churches, Cultures, and Leadership: A Practical Theology of Congregations and Ethnicities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2011), 216-224 and by discussions around the “Pastoral Cycle” and “Social Analysis.” For a summary and excellent contemporary presentation of the latter see Elizabeth Liebert, *The Soul of Discernment: A Spiritual Practice for Communities and Institutions* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015). I draw on Liebert’s work throughout *Deep and Wide*.

¹⁷See Martin Luther King Jr., “A Christmas Sermon on Peace.” in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James M. Washington, 289–302 (NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 1986), 254. Was this sermon an inspiration for the 1978 documentary “Guess Who’s Coming to Breakfast” (<https://vimeo.com/7320809>)?