Can Christians join the overlapping consensus?
Prospects and pitfalls for a Christian justification of political liberalism

Paul Billingham

Abstract: The success of political liberalism depends on there being an overlapping consensus among reasonable citizens—including religious citizens—upon principles of political morality. This paper explores the resources within one major religion—Christianity—that might lead individuals to endorse (or reject) political liberalism, and thus to join (or not join) the overlapping consensus. I show that there are several strands within Christian political ethics that are consonant with political liberalism and might form the basis for Christian citizens' membership of the overlapping consensus. Nonetheless, tensions remain, and it is not clear that Christians could wholeheartedly endorse the political conception or give unreserved commitment to political liberal ideals.

One of the central questions that political liberalism seeks to address is: "how is it possible for those affirming a religious doctrine that is based on religious authority, for example, the Church or the Bible, also to hold a reasonable political conception that supports a just democratic regime?"[1] Or, in another formulation: "how is it possible for citizens of faith to be wholehearted members of a democratic society who

---

[1] John Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, exp. ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), p. xxxvii.

endorse society's intrinsic political ideals and values and do not simply acquiesce in the balance of political and social forces?"[2]

A crucial part of the political liberal answer is the claim that there can be an overlapping consensus among reasonable citizens—including reasonable religious citizens—upon principles of political morality. Political liberals have done little to show that citizens holding particular religious doctrines could join this overlapping consensus, however. Many have sought to show that their view—and especially the requirements of public reason—does not place excessive burdens upon religious citizens. There is a large literature discussing whether public reason makes severe, unfair, identity-splitting, or integrity-compromising demands of the religious. Even if political liberalism is not excessively burdensome in these ways, however, this is insufficient to show that religious citizens have positive reasons to endorse the view, or lack strong reasons to reject it, based upon their own comprehensive doctrines, as is required if an overlapping consensus is to obtain. Little attention has been paid to this further issue.

This paper begins to address this lacuna, by considering resources within one major religion—Christianity—that might lead its adherents to endorse, or to reject, political liberalism. There is a rich tradition of theological reflection upon politics within Christianity, much of which considers similar questions to those that political liberalism seeks to answer. I examine some of these materials here, in order to consider the prospects for a Christian justification of political liberalism. I do not provide a definitive answer to the question of whether 'all Christians' should join the overlapping consensus. Given the variety within Christianity, such an answer is surely impossible. But I do identify several strands within Christian political ethics that are consonant with political liberalism, and might form the basis for Christian citizens' membership of the overlapping consensus. I also show that certain apparent conflicts can be addressed. Nonetheless, tensions remain, and it is certainly not clear that Christians could give 'wholehearted' endorsement to a reasonable political conception, or unreserved commitment to political liberal ideals.

The paper proceeds as follows. First I explain the place of the overlapping consensus within political liberalism, in order to show how my question arises and why it

---

[2] Ibid., pp. 458-9.

matters, and offer some methodological notes and caveats with regard to my approach to theology. I then discuss a series of ideas within political theology. These include Christian understandings of the source of political authority, the role of government, and citizens' freedom and equality. Throughout, I identify potential points of conflict, but also various ideas that are congruent with political liberalism. Indeed, I argue that Christians have strong reasons to endorse some version of liberalism, and some reasons to favour political liberalism in particular.[3] However, I end with a final caution regarding this conclusion.

Political Liberalism and the Overlapping Consensus

Political liberalism seeks to show how there can "exist over time a just and stable society of free and equal citizens,"[4] despite what John Rawls calls the 'fact of reasonable pluralism'. This is the fact that under liberal institutions individuals will come to affirm a great variety of incompatible 'comprehensive doctrines'—religious, philosophical, and moral doctrines that give an account of value and ideals of character and conduct across all domains of life. This fact creates a problem for liberals, who believe that citizens' status as free and equal means that political institutions and organisation must be in some sense justifiable to each citizen.[5] For *political* liberals, the consequence of reasonable pluralism is that the justification for political arrangements cannot depend upon any particular comprehensive doctrine—"any particular ideal of what constitutes a valuable or worthwhile human life, or other metaphysical beliefs."[6] Instead, political justification must be made in terms of distinctively 'political' principles and ideals that can be accepted by all reasonable citizens, whatever their

---

[3] Throughout, I use the term 'political liberalism' to refer to the kind of view associated with Rawls and his followers—what might otherwise be called 'public reason liberalism'. I use the unqualified term 'liberalism' to refer to the wider family of views that prioritise individual freedoms, basic rights, the rule of law, democratic decision-making, and so on. Political liberalism is distinguished by its distinctive account of legitimacy. It is important to emphasise this point, since many theologians use the term 'political liberalism' to refer to what I am calling 'liberalism'.

[4] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 4.

[5] The classic statement is Jeremy Waldron, "Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 37(147) (1987): 127-150. See also Jonathan Quong, *Liberalism Without Perfection* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), pp. 1-2.

[6] Quong, *Liberalism Without Perfection*, p. 12.

comprehensive doctrine. This idea is expressed in Rawls's 'liberal principle of legitimacy': "our exercise of political power is proper and hence justifiable only when it is exercised in accordance with a constitution the essentials of which all citizens may reasonably be expected to endorse in the light of principles and ideals acceptable to them as reasonable and rational."[7] Rawls interprets this requirement as meaning that political justification must proceed in terms of public reasons, which are drawn from reasonable political conceptions of justice: "only a political conception of justice that all might be reasonably expected to endorse can serve as the basis of public reason and justification."[8] Such conceptions are 'political' in three respects: "their principles apply to basic political and social institutions"; "they can be presented independently from comprehensive doctrines of any kind" (i.e. they are 'freestanding'); and "they can be worked out from fundamental ideas seen as implicit in the public political culture of a constitutional regime, such as the conceptions of citizens as free and equal persons, and of society as a fair system of cooperation."[9] Political conceptions are 'reasonable' when they include what Jonathan Quong calls the 'three general liberal principles':[10] "first, a list of certain basic rights, liberties, and opportunities (such as those familiar from constitutional regimes); second, an assignment of special priority to those rights, liberties, and opportunities…; and third, measures ensuring for all citizens adequate all-purpose means to make effective use of their freedoms."[11] Rawls hopes that all reasonable citizens can come to accept such a reasonable political conception of justice and to base their political advocacy upon it, thus fulfilling the 'duty of civility' by providing public reasons for the policies that they support. Exercises of political power will thereby be justified in ways that are acceptable to all, satisfying the liberal principle of legitimacy and realising a just and stable society in the face of reasonable pluralism.

On this picture, justice and stability are achieved by means of an 'overlapping consensus'. Citizens with a wide range of comprehensive doctrines all come to endorse a shared view of political morality, each from within their own broader worldview.

---

[7] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 137.

[8] Ibid., p. 137

[9] Ibid., p. 453.

[10] Quong, *Liberalism Without Perfection*, p. 175.

[11] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 450.

Citizens do not simply acquiesce to the balance of political forces, or accept political liberalism for pragmatic reasons. Instead, each finds resources within their distinctive viewpoint that support the core ideas of political liberalism: the liberal principle of legitimacy, idea of public reason, reasonable political conceptions of justice, and so on.[12]

The precise relationship between each citizen's comprehensive doctrine and political conception can vary somewhat. Ideally, the former directly grounds the latter: citizens' comprehensive doctrines provide reason to hold that political arrangements should be justified using public reasons, such that they respect the limits imposed by the liberal principle of legitimacy due to "a balance of reasons as seen within each citizen's comprehensive doctrine."[13] But individuals can be part of the overlapping consensus as long as their comprehensive doctrine does not conflict with political values—or, indeed, as long as such conflicts are not too common or severe, and are usually resolved in favour of the political conception.[14] The key is that the overlapping consensus is not simply a compromise between people holding different views. It rests upon the totality of reasons specified within each comprehensive doctrine, which enable each individual to endorse political liberalism. This is what enables society to be 'stable for the right reasons'; that is, stably committed to a reasonable political conception even as the balance of political forces change, and this due to free, principled, endorsement rather than coercion or oppression.

The success of political liberalism depends on whether an overlapping consensus can be realised. Yet political liberal theorists have said surprisingly little about this question. Rawls sketches an account of how an overlapping consensus might develop, noting in particular that most individuals' comprehensive views contain "a certain looseness"[15] that enables them to be bent toward a political conception over time, given certain speculations about moral psychology. This is in effect a 'just so' story,

---

[12] There is some debate as to the precise subject of the overlapping consensus. See Quong, *Liberalism Without Perfection*, chapter 6. I think Rawls is clear that the overlapping consensus covers all of the fundamental ideas of political liberalism. For example, see *Political Liberalism*, p. 149. This debate does not much matter for my purposes here, since I focus on the compatibility of Christianity with the general political liberal approach to politics, and the view's core underlying ideas.

[13] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 169.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid., p. 159.

offered to provide us with some reason to think that the idea of the overlapping consensus is not hopelessly utopian.[16] Rawls goes on to comment on how several kinds of comprehensive doctrines can relate to political liberalism, showing that there are resources within various views that can support it. But there is no detailed argumentation here, just some quick comments, such as that utilitarians might see a liberal political conception of justice as "a satisfactory, perhaps even the best, workable approximation to what the principle of utility… would require."[17] With regard to religious doctrines, Rawls notes that "all the main historical religions"[18] admit of an account of free faith, which can "lead to a principle of toleration and underwrite the fundamental liberties of a constitutional regime."[19] While suggestive, this clearly falls short of providing an argument that the adherents of any particular religious tradition can endorse political liberal ideas. The claim that an overlapping consensus could exist remains a "hope,"[20] or an "educated conjecture."[21] Much work remains to be done to explore whether this hope could be realised. Such work must proceed by examining the compatibility of specific comprehensive doctrines with political liberalism, and thus the possibility of their adherents joining the overlapping consensus. That is my project here, with regard to Christianity.

Samuel Freeman calls the overlapping consensus "a hypothesis about the kinds of conceptions of the good that will be fostered by a well-ordered society."[22] The idea of a 'well-ordered society' introduces a complication we must note. Rawls's well-ordered society is one whose political and social institutions are governed by a reasonable political conception of justice, where all citizens endorse, and know that all other citizens endorse, that conception, and where citizens thus "generally comply with society's basic institutions, which they regard as just."[23] Such a society will be stable if citizens' endorsement of the political conception endures over time—i.e. if citizens

---

[16] Rawls introduces it as a response to the utopianism objection. Ibid., p. 158.

[17] Ibid., p. 170.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid., p. 145.

[20] Ibid., pp. 40, 270.

[21] Ibid., p. 15.

[22] Samuel Freeman, *Justice and the Social Contract: Essays on Rawlsian Political Philosophy* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 170.

[23] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 35.

growing up within the society develop comprehensive doctrines that support the political conception. Strictly, then, Rawls's 'overlapping consensus hypothesis' concerns citizens who have grown up under just institutions. This means that we cannot simply read an answer to the question of whether adherents to any particular comprehensive doctrine such as Christianity can be part of the overlapping consensus from the level of support for political liberalism among Christians in the real world.[24] Even if few current Christians are political liberals, perhaps a form of Christianity that supports it would develop within a well-ordered society.

Nonetheless, it remains a relevant question whether citizens of the well-ordered society could have recognisably Christian views. If the success of the overlapping consensus within the well-ordered society was predicated on no citizens being Christians then this would be a problem for Rawls, since it would mean that such a society could only be achieved through the demise of one of the largest and most historically and culturally influential comprehensive doctrines within contemporary liberal democratic societies. This would cast serious doubt on political liberalism's adequacy as a response to pluralism and credentials as a theory that shows how the exercise of political power can be justified to all citizens despite such pluralism, since it means that this achievement depends on radical departures from the kind of pluralism that we see in contemporary societies and that was (at least part of) the original motivation of the project. Even when the theory is framed in terms of the well-ordered society, therefore, it is still important to look at Christian political theology to see whether there are ideas within it that could plausibly lead Christians to be reasonable citizens of that society. The focus on the well-ordered society means that we are not simply measuring what proportion of current Christians endorse political liberalism, and that the overlapping consensus hypothesis is not falsified simply by finding that there are some strands of Christian theology that conflict with political liberalism. But the plausibility of that hypothesis still depends on there being some supportive strands, which could plausibly form a case for the political conception within the well-ordered society.

---

[24] Paul Weithman, *Why Political Liberalism?* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 346.

Before considering whether there are such strands, a few more preliminary comments are in order.

First, the question of whether adherents to a particular comprehensive doctrine could endorse political liberalism arises for all such doctrines, but I focus exclusively on Christianity here. Christianity is the most numerically, historically, and culturally significant religion within Western societies, and so it is an important test case for political liberalism. Further, there is a well-developed Christian political theology literature, which can form the basis for this inquiry—as well as some existing work on the (in)compatibility of Christianity with political liberalism. Clearly this does not imply that other religions—and non-religious comprehensive doctrines—are unimportant, or that there is not important work to be done examining the same questions in relation to those worldviews.[25]

Of course, Christianity is very diverse, with disagreement both within and between the many Christian denominations. My aim is therefore not to show what 'all Christians' must believe about politics. Instead, I will explore various strands of Christian political thought, from a range of theological traditions.[26] Many, although not all, of the theologians I engage with fall within the 'Augustinian' school of Christian political thought, due to this being particularly prominent within recent scholarship. Augustinianism is itself broad, however, as we will see.

Second, I am undertaking this inquiry as a political theorist, not as a theologian. My aim is to explore a question that arises within a particular political theory—political liberalism. The ideas of that theory thus constrain and shape the inquiry. This might make the discussion somewhat unsatisfactory to theologians. My analysis might seem

---

[25] There is some existing literature on political liberalism and Islam. See Andrew March, *Islam and Liberal Citizenship: The Search for an Overlapping Consensus* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009); Abdullahi A. An-Na'im, "Islamic Politics and the Neutral State: A Friendly Amendment to Rawls?" in Tom Bailey and Valentina Gentile (eds.), *Rawls and Religion* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015): 242-265. There is also literature on political liberalism and feminism. See Amy Baehr, "Perfectionism, Feminism and Public Reason," *Law and Philosophy* 27(2) (2008): 193-222; Lori Watson and Christie Hartley, *Equal Citizenship and Public Reason: A Feminist Political Liberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

[26] One important theological concept that I do not discuss here is 'natural law', because I have examined the relationship between natural law and political liberalism in my "Public Reason and Religion: The Theo-Ethical Equilibrium Argument for Restraint," *Law and Philosophy* 36(6) (2017): 675-705.

to be insufficiently deep, or to draw upon a mix of theological ideas that could be inconsistent at a deeper level. Certainly I do not develop a single coherent theological account. I believe that my approach fits my aims and has value, however, even if it also has drawbacks.

Third, I focus on arguments made by academic theologians. This might raise concerns about whether those arguments match the beliefs of 'ordinary' Christians. If there is significant divergence here, then the compatibility or otherwise of academic theology with political liberalism might tell us little about whether ordinary Christian citizens might endorse the view. Notwithstanding this concern, there are good reasons to focus on academic arguments. Theologians have thought about these issues more deeply, and usually have a more developed moral and political philosophy integrated with their theology. If we are to consider the best of Christian thinking then it is appropriate to turn to theologians' views. Further, those views do have influence on the beliefs of ordinary Christians, often mediated through the teaching of priests and church leaders. Identifying strands of academic theology that can support political liberalism would not be the same as showing that any particular Christian individual should do so. But it could suggest that political liberalism does not inherently conflict with the Christian faith, such that Christians could join the overlapping consensus.

Fourth, I will talk about 'theological' arguments, ideas, resources, etc., when referring to those involving explicitly theological concepts—God, Scripture, church teachings, religious beliefs, and so on. This does not imply that Christians cannot accept 'non-theological' arguments or ideas. Indeed, as Nigel Biggar notes, some questions are purely 'philosophical', in the sense that theology does not contribute anything specific to answering them.[27] Biggar argues that Christians should strive for theological *integrity*, for the conformity of their moral and political beliefs with their theological ones. But integrity does not necessarily mean *distinctiveness*.[28] As Richard Bayer puts it, "few Christians would interpret fidelity to their beliefs as a necessary rejection of all values

---

[27] Nigel Biggar, *Behaving in Public: How to Do Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2011), pp. 10-11. Biggar's example is "what makes it valid to distinguish an evil that is intentionally caused from one that is caused deliberately but unintentionally" (p. 11).
[28] Ibid., p. 8.

not explicitly theologically derived."[29] What Christians can and cannot accept in terms of political morality is shaped by theology. But it is not an insurmountable problem if there are no decisive solely theological arguments for political liberalism, or any particular reasonable political conception of justice. Any complete 'Christian' argument for political liberalism will undoubtedly combine 'theological' and 'philosophical' elements, so we should not imagine that all the work must be done by the former. The important question is therefore whether there are theological arguments that support (or oppose) the central ideas of political liberalism, and whether the theologically-warranted understanding of those ideas is compatible with political liberal interpretations, such that Christians might be persuaded by philosophical arguments for why these ideas lead to political liberalism.

Finally, I should acknowledge at the outset that many theologians, including most of those I mention below, in fact reject Rawlsian political liberalism. We will see some of the reasons for this below. But perhaps the most common reason is opposition to the idea of public reason "on the grounds that it severs many citizens' deepest religious or moral commitments from their political deliberations and actions."[30] Oliver O'Donovan presents this objection forcefully. If people "are to achieve any moral or intellectual integrity, their political reflections must be coherent with the wider-ranging trains of thought by which all human beings have to live."[31] Public reason, meanwhile, bypasses citizens' moral traditions and identities, offering "us 'reason' as a predetermined quantity, ready sliced and ready packaged... It does not invite us to a discursive engagement as human thinkers with other human thinkers on matters of common concern."[32] As a result, public reason is "devoid of reasons that could lead us to act,"[33] since its 'reasons' "do not derive from, or connect with, first-order reasons."[34]

---

[29] Richard C. Bayer, "Christian Ethics and "A Theory of Justice"," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64(1) (1996): 45-60, p. 53, fn. 6.

[30] Jonathan Chaplin, "Governing Diversity: "Public Judgment" and Religious Plurality," in Robert Song and Brent Waters (eds.), *The Authority of the Gospel* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2015): 122-142, p. 122.

[31] Oliver O'Donovan, "Judgment, Tradition and Reason: A Response," *Political Theology* 9(3) (2008): 395-414, p. 409.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Oliver O'Donovan, 'Reflections on Pluralism', *The Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 29 (2008): 54-66, p. 57.

[34] Ibid., p. 58.

"My chief objection, then, to a religiously neutral 'public reason,' after the manner of Rawls, is that it is neither public nor reason."[35]

The idea of the overlapping consensus is meant to provide a response to exactly this objection. Political liberalism does not demand that one leave one's comprehensive doctrine behind when entering the public realm, in order to appeal to a pool of reasons that are disconnected from one's fundamental beliefs. Instead, one should endorse a political conception as coherent with, or even supported by, one's comprehensive doctrine. Political conceptions achieve 'full justification' only when this is the case—only when they are accommodated within comprehensive doctrines.[36] Political conceptions must be 'freestanding' in the sense of being capable of *presentation* independently of any particular comprehensive doctrine, such that their normative force is not ineliminably dependent on any such doctrine But individual citizens should endorse such conceptions *from within* and *on the basis of* their comprehensive doctrines. Citizens should not split themselves into a public and private identity; they should have a unified identity that *includes* a desire to cooperate with others on terms all can accept, and thus an acceptance of the restrictions that this places on political advocacy. In other words, Rawls *agrees* with O'Donovan that the rules governing public conduct must connect with citizens' wider and deeper commitments, so that their moral identities can encompass both. Further, Rawls's duty of civility permits citizens to present religious reasons within public deliberation at any time, subject to the proviso that public reasons are offered "in due course"[37]—which I take to mean at the point that political power will actually be exercised, such as when citizens (justify their) vote. This requirement to ultimately present public reasons before political power is exercised is itself something that citizens should endorse from within their comprehensive doctrine, as members of the overlapping consensus.

Of course, this Rawlsian story can succeed only if citizens can accept this view of political morality, given their various comprehensive doctrines. Christians can only join the overlapping consensus if their political theology is compatible with Rawls's conception of fair terms of cooperation, the liberal principle of legitimacy, and the

---

[35] O'Donovan, "Judgment, Tradition," p. 409.

[36] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 386-7.

[37] Ibid., p. 462.

idea of public reason. As David Hollenbach states, "if a secular understanding of the public role of religion makes demands that Christians cannot accept on their own terms, Christians will not be able to accept these demands."[38] O'Donovan would argue that political liberalism is incompatible with Christianity in precisely this way. But to explore this question we must consider theological materials, rather than short-circuiting our inquiry by assuming that the kinds of political reasoning required by political liberalism simply must be incompatible with Christian thought because they are not directly derived from it and place certain constraints on religious reasons' role within public justification. It is possible that a distinctly Christian politics aligns with political liberalism. But to find out, we must turn to theology.

The rest of the paper is structured around themes in political theology, which I examine in order to explore the possible points of support for, and tension with, political liberalism. At times this means the discussion will delve into theological debates, but the aim is always to relate these back to political liberalism. I structure the discussion in this way, rather than structuring it around various political liberal commitments, because I expect that most readers will be unfamiliar with the theological material. I seek to build a picture of a Christian view of politics, to show the theological paths one might go down in order to ultimately accept or reject political liberalism. For this reason, I start with the question of the source of political authority, which both lays the ground for what follows, and highlights a fundamental objection that theologians often press against all forms of liberalism (albeit mistakenly, at least in the case of political liberalism, as I will argue).

The Source of Political Authority

Perhaps the most widely-discussed passage in the New Testament addressing Christians' relationship to politics is Romans 13:1-7. Widely diverging interpretations of this passage have been offered, justifying a range of political positions.[39] One thing that it clearly teaches, however, is that political authority is established by God: "Let

---

[38] David Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), p. 114.

[39] Nick Spencer, *Freedom and Order: History, Politics and The English Bible* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011) documents the range of interpretations of such passages over time.

every person be subject to the governing authorities; for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God."[40] Rulers are commissioned by God to judge right from wrong and punish wrongdoers, thus establishing peace, order, security, and justice. They are "the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer."[41] God authorises governments to perform this task of judgment.

An implication of this is that we do not have a choice about whether to live under political authority; it is a "providential gift."[42] Along with other aspects of the social order, it is "a gift to be received and appreciated,"[43] rather than something arising from individuals' unconstrained choice or created by human artifice. As Jonathan Chaplin writes (expounding O'Donovan), "the generative source of political authority is divine action, and this excludes the idea that political representation amounts to any kind of popular *authorization* of the office of government itself."[44]

This does not mean that we have no choice regarding the forms of government that we live under or who holds political office; humans clearly design specific political forms, and the people's recognition of leaders' standing as their representatives is an important part of what authorises their rule.[45] It also does not mean that God has directly appointed every political leader; as O'Donovan puts it, rulers being 'God's servant' "does not imply a *special* intervention of the divine to appoint a particular ruler, but a *general* provision of non-reciprocal relations under which we may flourish."[46] In both of these senses, political authority is still a "human institution,"[47] in the apostle Peter's words. Indeed, Nicholas Wolterstorff argues that Paul's statement that "those authorities that exist have been instituted by God" does not mean "that whoever occupies some position of governmental authority does so because God has

---

[40] Romans 13:1. Unless otherwise stated, Biblical quotations are from the New Revised Standard Version.

[41] Romans 13:4.

[42] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 2005), p. 129.

[43] Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 279.

[44] Jonathan Chaplin, "Representing a People: Oliver O'Donovan on Democracy and Tradition," *Political Theology* 9(3) (2008): 295-307, p. 297.

[45] See O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, chapter 9.

[46] Ibid., p. 129.

[47] 1 Peter 2:13.

put him in that position," but that "whoever finds himself in such a position, however that came about, has a commission from God, an assignment, to serve God by exercising governance over the public for the purpose of executing anger on wrongdoing."[48]

Nonetheless, this providentialist view of political authority has led some to see liberalism as fundamentally flawed, because liberalism holds that individuals are the ultimate source of political authority and governments have authority only due to citizens' consent.[49] Modern liberalism is based "upon an illusory human subject who constructs order and denies transcendence,"[50] on "the notion of the abstract will, exercising choice prior to all reason and order, from whose *fiat lux* spring society, morality and rationality itself."[51] Social contract theories have faced particularly fierce criticism. They seem to conflict with the view that "while the people can acknowledge and even control the legitimate use of political power, they neither create it nor alter its function. Its creation and purpose are already established by God."[52]

Political liberalism can evade this objection, however. Its central claim concerns the legitimacy of exercises of political power, rather than the generative source of political authority. There is no contradiction in holding both that governments must enact laws that fulfil the liberal principle of legitimacy and that God's authorisation is the ultimate source of those governments' authority and purpose. Indeed, many political liberals endorse the natural duty theory of political obligation, which has clear similarities with providentialism. It holds that individuals have natural duties to act justly toward one another, which can only be fulfilled through the establishment of political institutions, with the authority to issue binding directives. Thus, in Rawls's words, we have a duty "to support and to comply with just institutions that exist and apply to

---

[48] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and The Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 95.

[49] For a helpful summary, see Elizabeth Phillips, *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T&T Clark, 2012), chapter 6.

[50] Christopher J. Insole, *The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defence of Political Liberalism* (London: SCM Press, 2004), p. 1. Insole defends liberalism against such assertions, which he attributes to theologians such as O'Donovan, Robert Song, and John Milbank.

[51] O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, p. 274.

[52] David Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 36.

us."[53] We have obligations to obey this political authority whether or not we consent(ed) to it. Society does not spring from individuals' 'abstract will', but rests on unchosen obligations to realise justice. On this view, the origins of political authority lie in our natural duties of justice, while the liberal principle of legitimacy is one of the constraints that applies to such authorities, in the light of reasonable pluralism.[54] One could hold a structurally similar view involving providentialism: the origins of political authority lie in God's authorisation, while exercises of political power are constrained by the liberal principle of legitimacy. Political liberalism therefore need not rest on the kind of account of political authorisation that theologians critique, and is compatible with providentialism.

To be clear, this argument is only intended to show that political liberalism is not straightforwardly incompatible with providentialism. This in itself does not show that Christian theology contains elements that might actually support political liberalism. Further, one might suspect that those who embrace providentialism will, as a consequence, hold a view concerning the legitimate exercise of political power that conflicts with the liberal principle of legitimacy.[55] If political authority is a gift of God, then why tolerate those who do not believe in God or act sinfully? Or, at least, won't a theological account of political authority lead to a principle of legitimacy whereby legitimate laws must directly express God's will, promote piety, and deter sin? The following sections seek to show that this need be the case. Providentialists can be liberals, and Christians have strong theological reasons to support liberalism, which could also lend support to political liberalism. The next section makes this argument by examining a second key theme of Christian political theology: the 'descralisation of politics'.

The Desacralisation of Politics

As well as authorising governments, Romans 13 also teaches that political authorities are *subject* to God. They are his servants,[56] accountable to his will. They ought to act

---

53 John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1999), p. 99.

54 See Quong, *Liberalism without Perfection*, pp. 126-35.

55 I owe thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this worry in these terms.

56 See Romans 13:4.

only within the domains, and for the purposes, that God has authorised—within their specific God-given role. This idea is also reflected in Jesus' response when asked whether faithful Jews should pay taxes to the emperor. Having established that Roman coins displayed Caesar's image, Jesus tells his audience to "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's."[57] Political authorities make legitimate demands upon us, which we should willingly obey. But Jesus adds: "and [render] to God the things that are God's."[58] Some things are owed to God, not to Caesar. Indeed, if coins should be given back to Caesar due to bearing his image, then as God's image-bearers humans owe *themselves* back to God. God is the one who merits humans' complete allegiance and ultimate loyalty. Political authorities do not. They cannot define individuals' most important or fundamental identities. Political identities are always secondary and relativised by the Christian gospel. Further, what can be achieved through politics is importantly limited. Politics has no salvific power. It achieves only penultimate goods, by issuing penultimate judgments. It cannot establish the kingdom of God.

This is what is meant by the desacralisation of politics. Political communities cannot be vehicles of salvation or places where the kingdom of God is realised. As David Fergusson puts it, "the kingdom of God is ultimately an eschatological reality not to be confused with any penultimate political state."[59] The pervasive effects of sin, the difficulty and ambiguity of all human moral judgment in a fallen world, and the state's constant tendency to seek to take the place of God and demand undue levels of loyalty, all place severe constraints on the power that political authorities ought to exercise and what can be achieved through such power. This does not mean that politics is divorced from morality or that states cannot realise greater or lesser degrees of justice. Christians can still "work for the transformation of social life into a more fitting reflection of the good that is their ultimate hope,"[60] in Hollenbach's words. But they do so while recognising the inherent limits of politics. They are "required by their faith to reject any attempt to achieve the full common good, as it is understood

---

[57] Mark 12:17 (English Standard Version).

[58] Ibid.

[59] David Fergusson, *Community, Liberalism and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998)*,* p. 158.

[60] Hollenbach, *Common Good,* p. 134.

theologically, by political means."[61] As Eric Gregory states, "earthly politics cannot fulfill the deepest longings of a human person or community."[62]

This idea of desacralisation is further supported by considering the nature and role of the church—the alternative *polis* of believers in Jesus, membership of which is based on faith rather than place of birth, national identity, or political citizenship. The church is always distinct from society or state, and it has been entrusted with the task of preaching the gospel of Jesus and his kingdom. Membership in Christ replaces all other political identities, such that the state cannot "act as a focus of collective identity."[63] Gregory writes that 'Augustinian liberals' "for theological reasons, … neither expect nor want the state to become a confessing religious community."[64] Even while they hope for as many individuals as possible to confess faith in Christ, they recognise that church and society will never be identical.[65] As Nick Spencer puts it, "it is the word, rather than the sword, which is to be deployed in determining religious loyalties."[66] Indeed, Wolterstorff highlights the fact that the existence of the church always *creates* pluralism and religious fissure. As a result of the presence of the church, "the state cannot express the shared religious identity of the people, since there is no such identity."[67] This age will always be a 'mixed age', where those who are and are not members of God's people live together within society. The Christian understanding of 'the secular' is that it is constitutes this age or time, the *saeculum*: "a shared time afforded all humanity by the common grace of God,"[68] as Gregory explains. This is a time where good can be done, and political authorities have a legitimate God-given role to play. But that role is always limited, and always relativised by Christians' "ultimate loyalty to a community beyond the state"[69] and hope of a future, eschatological, age where full justice and goodness will be realised, when Christ returns. "The

---

61 Ibid., p. 132.

62 Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2008), p. 79.

63 O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, p. 148.

64 Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, p. 8.

65 See O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, p. 251.

66 Nick Spencer, *How to Think About Religious Freedom* (London: Theos, 2014), p. 17.

67 Wolterstorff, *Mighty and The Almighty*, p. 123.

68 Gregory, *Politics and the Order*, p. 78.

69 Ibid., p. 79.

'secular' refers simply to that mixed time when no single religious vision can presume to command comprehensive, confessional, and visible authority."[70]

As should be clear, these ideas form the basis for a strong theological defence of liberalism, as the political theory that consciously seeks to limit state action, rejects attempts to impose any single comprehensive doctrine upon citizens, and protects the freedom of religious institutions. Liberalism resists the tendency for citizens' good to be identified with the good of the political community, or for their political identities to be seen as fundamental or ultimate. It recognises that citizens have a life beyond the purview of state power, and permits them to pursue and prioritise religious and other comprehensive commitments. As Charles Mathewes notes, "what liberalism fears is precisely the absolutization and theologization of the state."[71] Liberalism follows Christianity in desacralising politics. Christians thus have strong reasons to endorse liberalism.

These ideas could also be used to support political liberalism. A central political liberal tenet is that in the light of pluralism citizens should not seek to enforce their understanding of the good through politics, but should instead cooperate with others on the basis of reasons acceptable to all. One might argue that this is what Christian political conduct in the saeculum involves. As we will see later, some theologians do make this move.

We should not be too quick here, however. Desacralisation is associated with a rejection of 'coercive salvationist' policies—i.e. enforcing specific religious practices—and 'comprehensive perfectionist' policies—i.e. seeking to make people fully virtuous. But rejecting these kinds of policies is not the same as rejecting all religiously-grounded political advocacy or endorsing the need for a distinctively political conception of justice. As Andrew Lister notes, "not just any decision made on the basis of a religious reason involves the attempt to shift the distribution of belief in favour of this reason. Policies motivated by religious reasons may simply aim at what is right, in the eyes of those with the views in question."[72] A defence of *liberalism*, with its set

---

[70] Ibid.

[71] Charles Mathewes, "Augustinian Christian Republican Citizenship," in Michael Jon Kessler (ed.), *Political Theology for a Plural Age* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013): 218-249, p. 229.

[72] Andrew Lister, *Public Reason and Political Community* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), p. 33.

of basic rights and liberties, including freedom of religion, should not be conflated with a defence of *political* liberalism, with its distinctive claims about justice, stability, and legitimacy.[73]

Gregory explicitly makes this point. He joins Rawls in rejecting a perfectionism that tries to maximise the achievement of human excellence. Indeed, he "reject[s] the actual possibility of moral perfection in this life."[74] But this does "not require rejecting a perfectionist ethics that calls citizens to aspire to a better quality of political loving in relation to a transcendent good."[75] It does not mean rejecting all policies that seek to promote virtue or flourishing, or that discourage practices that diminish it, such as those associated with moderate forms of liberal perfectionism.[76] In other words, it does not require accepting the need for laws to be justified by public reasons.

This is not to say that Christians should hold this kind of view, or to deny that the ideas explored in this section take us some way toward a theological case for political liberalism. But to complete that case we would need to know more about what political authorities are authorised to do. We have seen that Romans 13 both authorises and limits governments; political authorities' status as "God's servants" both legitimises their function and constrains their reach. But we need to look further at what this constraint involves.[77]

The Role of Government

Here we encounter a central debate in Christian political theology, between those who hold that governments have a primarily negative role, in restraining evil and preventing injustices, and those who hold that they have a more positive role, in promoting virtue or the common good. On the former view, a consequence of the fact

---

[73] Rawls arguably makes this mistake when he jumps from the idea of 'free faith' to political liberalism.

[74] Gregory, *Politics and the Order*, p. 73.

[75] Ibid.

[76] See ibid., pp. 9-10.

[77] Kyle Swan, "Can a Good Christian be a Good Liberal?" *Public Affairs Quarterly* 20(2) (2006): 163-173 argues for political liberalism based on Paul calling the Roman political authorities 'God's servants'. I critique Swan's argument in my "Justification to All: Liberalism, Legitimacy, and Theology" (DPhil thesis, University of Oxford, 2015), pp. 226-235.

that politics "is not a vehicle for building the kingdom of God on earth" is that "it can be nothing more than a remedial structure for securing some modicum of peace and relative justice in a fallen world."[78] According to the latter, the desacralisation of politics is compatible with the state actively promoting citizens' flourishing, or orienting them toward the good. This section will sketch some of the contours of this debate, in order to explore how it maps onto possible support for, or rejection of, political liberalism.

Wolterstorff offers an important recent statement of the former view, which builds on Paul's statement that the government is "is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer"[79] and Peter's similar claim that it is "sent by [God] to punish those who do wrong."[80] For Wolterstorff, this shows that "the God-assigned task of government is to exercise governance over the public for the purpose of curbing wrongdoing,"[81] which he understands as rights-violations, by deterring and publishing it. Wolterstorff draws two implications from this. First, given their task to curb wrongdoing, governments must not become wrongdoers themselves. They are not authorised to perform wrongful actions, so must be rights-honouring and rights-limited. "The authority of the state is limited by the rights of the members of the public."[82] States that perpetuate injustice act outside their legitimate authority, issuing directives they are not morally permitted to issue, and which thus do not obligate obedience. Second, Paul does not say that the state's role is to provide a good life for all or promote citizens' virtue. "The God-given task of government is not to pressure citizens into becoming virtuous and pious; its God-given task is instead to pressure citizens into not perpetrating injustice."[83] "God authorises and enjoins the state to be a rights-protecting institution,"[84] not a virtue-promoting one.[85] Another social institution has the role of enabling people to live good, God-pleasing lives—the church. This further means that the institutional autonomy of the church, and religious

---

[78] Mathewes, "Augustinian Christian Republican Citizenship," p. 234.

[79] Romans 13:4.

[80] 1 Peter 2:14.

[81] Wolterstorff, *Mighty and the Almighty*, p. 90.

[82] Ibid., p. 93.

[83] Ibid., pp. 98-9.

[84] Ibid., p. 99.

[85] Importantly, Wolterstorff does not think this means the liberal state is 'neutral'. See ibid., p. 155.

freedom of individual believers, must be protected.[86] In sum, the state is "limited in exactly the sort of way that our liberal democracies are limited."[87]

The is a powerful theological argument for liberal democracy, anti-perfectionism, and the primacy of justice within our account of legitimate government action. Christians who hold this view of the role of government might well be sympathetic to political liberalism. Strikingly, however, this is not true of Wolterstorff. Indeed, he is a prominent and persistent critic of political liberalism. He argues that the search for reasons acceptable to all reasonable citizens is doomed to failure, unless we idealise this justificatory constituency in radical ways, which contradicts the original motivation of seeking justification to all.[88] And he rejects the Rawlsian duty of civility as imposing undue burdens on citizens' integrity.[89] Citizens should be permitted to deliberate and vote on the basis of their religious and other comprehensive beliefs, which can properly inform their views of justice. In other words, there is no need for state action to be justified using conceptions of justice that are 'political' in Rawls's sense. The state is limited to curbing injustice, but the conceptions of justice on which it acts need not be freestanding from comprehensive doctrines. Notably, however, these objections to political liberalism are more philosophical than theological. They challenge the philosophical coherence and normative attractiveness of the view, without drawing directly on theological resources.[90] Wolterstorff's explicitly theological

---

[86] See ibid., pp. 124-9.

[87] Ibid., p. 150.

[88] Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Understanding Liberal Democracy: Essays in Political Philosophy*, ed. Terence Cuneo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), Part I.

[89] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "The Role of Religion in Decision and Discussion of Political Issues," in Robert Audi and Nicholas Wolterstorff, *Religion in the Public Square: The Place of Religious Convictions in Political Debate* (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997): 67-120.

[90] This can be seen by consulting the pieces cited in the previous few footnotes. This is not in any way a criticism of, or a problem with, Wolterstorff's approach. Political liberalism will need to be philosophically as well as theologically attractive if Christians are to have all-things-considered reason to endorse it. They certainly should not endorse it (and nor should anyone else) if Wolterstorff's objections are sound and decisive (which is not a matter I can consider here). My point here is simply that Wolterstorff has not provided distinctively theological reasons for rejecting political liberalism, and in fact those who endorse his political theology might find it consonant with political liberalism. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing me to clarify this point.

account of political morality is certainly amenable to political liberalism. Christians who endorse that account might thus find reason to endorse political liberalism.[91]

Theologians who endorse a more expansive, virtue-promoting, role for the state would challenge Wolterstorff's identification of wrongdoing with rights-violations, noting that Paul does not explicitly delimit wrongdoing in this way. A more capacious view of wrongdoing makes room for a more ambitious political practice, such as Gregory's moderate perfectionism. Gregory grounds his view in an Augustinian moral psychology of love. Following Paul Ramsey, Gregory holds that it is Christian love that both provides a justification for the exercise of coercive political power and accounts for the limits that ought to be placed on such use of force.[92] Humans "are best understood in terms of the loves they embody and express,"[93] and politics has a role in shaping and directing those loves. "True virtue is a matter of loving well and loving freely. Justice is about getting our loves arranged in the appropriate manner, giving and receiving love in the right sorts of ways."[94] The wrongdoing that the state can address thus goes beyond merely preventing violations of others' rights. Gregory stresses that he is concerned with "a love appropriate to political citizenship in a liberal culture."[95] This means resisting paternalist moralism and coercive perfectionism, and maintaining the Augustinian emphasis on the limits of what politics can achieve in the light of sin. Nonetheless, he develops "a morally ambitious ethics of citizenship"[96] based on an account of neighbour-love, which "is not focused solely on justice as fairness"[97] but is concerned with addressing "social conditions that frustrate human flourishing."[98] This love-informed conception of the just society clearly goes beyond the 'political', both in terms of the duties it places upon citizens and in violating the freestandingness condition. It also supports (non-coercive) perfectionist policies that cannot be justified within the bounds of public reason. Gregory's view

---

[91] Although they, like everyone else, also need to overcome Wolterstorff's philosophical objections if they are to endorse political liberalism all-things-considered.

[92] Gregory, *Politics and the Order*, pp. 185-188.

[93] Ibid., p. 12.

[94] Ibid., p. 22.

[95] Ibid., p. 157.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid., p. 194.

[98] Ibid., p. 171.

is thus a clear example of an account of the role of government that conflicts with political liberalism.

Another prominent theme within the more positive view of the role of government, especially within the Catholic tradition, is the 'common good'. The central idea here is that individual well-being depends upon social relationships and goods that can only be achieved in common. Political life should promote the common good, by both facilitating the provision of communal goods and encouraging a sense of solidarity and interdependence that causes citizens to value, and play their part within, the common good. Hollenbach develops an account of contributive and distributive justice grounded in such an ideal: all have a duty to contribute to the provision of basic goods that all require (e.g. housing, jobs, education), and some goods should be equally available to all (e.g. healthcare) while others can be distributed in relation to productivity.[99] This account reflects the United States Catholic Bishop's statement that "basic justice demands the establishment of minimum levels of participation in the life of the human community for all persons."[100]

Common-good-based accounts of politics might seem likely to be perfectionist, and thus another site of conflict with political liberalism. This is certainly true of some. Yet Rawls lists "Catholic views of the common good and solidarity" as potential members of the family of reasonable political conceptions of justice, "when they are expressed in terms of political values."[101] Hollenbach's example supports this. His ideals of solidarity and the common good are informed by his theology, but are defined in a non-comprehensive way that plausibly means that they fall within public reason, especially since he consistently emphasises the importance of individual freedom within—and as a contributor to—the common good. He seeks to "develop an understanding of the common good of a pluralist society,"[102] "the common good of a community of freedom."[103] Indeed, he explicitly endorses Rawls's proviso as a requirement of reciprocal respect, while also noting that we should expect religious visions of the common good to shape our societal understanding of what counts as

---

[99] Hollenbach, *Common Good*, pp. 195-197.

[100] In their 1998 declaration 'Economic Justice for All'. Quoted in ibid., p. 198.

[101] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 451-452.

[102] Hollenbach, *Common Good*, p. 68.

[103] Ibid., p. 136.

politically reasonable, and thus our conception of public reason.[104] Some political liberals might be uncomfortable with this idea. Rawls seemed open to it,[105] however, and such openness is undoubtedly a prerequisite for Christian endorsement of political liberalism.

An interesting implication of this discussion is that the theological debate concerning the role of governments cuts across the debate concerning political liberalism, rather than straightforwardly mapping onto it. While views that limits government to restraining evil and securing justice are certainly amenable to political liberalism, some who endorse such views nonetheless reject political liberalism, opposing the restrictions that it places upon religious reasons within political deliberation and decision-making. Meanwhile, Christian perfectionist views like Gregory's conflict with political liberalism, but other more positive views of the role of government, such as Hollenbach's, adopt an account of the common good that can fit within a political conception of justice. Part of the reason that this is possible is that Rawlsians have a capacious view of justice, which enables various ideals within the Christian tradition to find 'political analogues' that can be included within public reason. This might raise a concern that the overlap between views like Hollenbach's and political liberalism is merely coincidental, and not the basis for stable endorsement of the kind required for membership in the overlapping consensus. Two responses are possible. First, even accidental overlap might be enough for such membership, since it at least means that one's comprehensive doctrine does not (frequently) conflict with political liberal duties. Second, the consonance between Hollenbach's view and political liberalism, at least, runs deeper than this. He is explicitly concerned with "the task of forming and sustaining a society in which people from diverse religious and cultural traditions can live well together"[106] and values freedom, equality, respect, and reciprocity.

In sum, Christians who hold both a more limited and more positive view of the role of government might find reason to endorse political liberalism. There are thus several paths by which Christians could join the overlapping consensus; but there are also prominent political theologies that make this impossible.

---

[104] Ibid., pp. 167-168.

[105] See Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, p. 452.

[106] Hollenbach, *Common Good*, p. 169.

Citizens as Free and Equal

Thus far I have focused on theological views of the role of politics and government. But we might also ask about the Christian view of persons, and whether it supports the central political liberal ideal of citizens as free and equal. At first glance, the answer to this seems clearly positive. Christians have strong reasons to endorse ideas of human freedom and equality. Humans have a dignity and worth bestowed upon them by God, as creatures made in the image of their creator and loved by him. They also have a shared vulnerability and complicity in sin. Theologians have drawn on these ideas in various ways to generate support for familiar liberal freedoms.

For example, *Dignitatis Humanae*, the Declaration of Religious Freedom issued by the Second Vatican Council, proclaims a "right of the human person to religious freedom" that "has its foundations in the very dignity of the human person as this dignity is known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself."[107] Our dignity means that we are "endowed with reason and free will," so bear personal responsibility for discerning and acting upon truth. We are obligated to seek after truth, but can only do so in a way that is in keeping with our nature if we are free from coercion in religious matters.

Wolterstorff defends liberal rights based on the great evil of violating a person, which fails to acknowledge their dignity.[108] A person's normative identity is tied up with her physical body, inner life, deeply held religious and moral convictions, and cares, concerns, and attachments—her deep investment in the world.[109] Violations of any of these things violate the person. Christians should support liberal rights due to the way they protect people from such violations.[110] Robert Adams makes a similar argument: "The distinguishing mark of the freedoms that most deserve protection is that they are most closely connected with our personhood and the significance of our lives, so

---

[107] Available at http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html.

[108] Nicholas Wolterstorff, "Do Christians Have Good Reasons for Supporting Liberal Democracy?" in his *Understanding Liberal Democracy*: 305-328.

[109] Ibid., pp. 321-324.

[110] Ibid., pp. 325-328.

that it is more plausible to say that something sacred has been violated if coercion denies them to us."[111]

Christopher Insole places more emphasis on human frailty, arguing that an appreciation of our creatureliness leads to political moderation. The fallen nature of humanity and the world means that truths about justice and goodness are often difficult to discern. The natural moral order is obscured, and we should recognise our limitations in apprehending it. There are clear affinities with Rawls's notion of the burdens of judgment here.[112] Our epistemic limitations, combined with a God-given impulse to strive for meaning and purpose, should lead us to expect a diversity of comprehensive doctrines—without thereby positively valuing this outcome, or seeing all such doctrines as providing a true perception of reality.[113] The political implication of this, for Insole, is an aversion to coercion, and particularly to coercion that imposes one's conception of the good on others. Such coercion "tramples upon the frailty and vulnerability of our shared human condition, all of us complicit in sin, and dependent upon the grace of God."[114] "From a sense of humility and fellowship in sin, we are called to show love to our neighbour by exemplifying self-restraint, self-examination and charity."[115]

While both Wolterstorff and Insole thus endorse liberalism and reject coercive perfectionism, they part ways in their evaluations of political liberalism. Insole explicitly endorses Rawls's claim that reciprocity requires that laws be justified by reasons that all citizens can be expected to accept. Laws cannot permissibly be justified by sole appeal to "distinctively and irreducibly religious reasons, reasons that arise from a special authority supposed to derive from scripture, a particular tradition or inspiration, and which cannot be assented to by someone who does not assent to this

---

[111] Robert Merrihew Adams, *Finite and Infinite Goods: A Framework for Ethics* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 328.

[112] As noted by Insole, *Politics of Human Frailty*, pp. 47-48; Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, pp. 66-67.

[113] See Chaplin, "Governing Diversity," pp. 126-129.

[114] Insole, *Politics of Human Frailty*, p. 63.

[115] Ibid. For another argument focused on human limitations, in particular on our susceptibility to pride, see Paul Weithman, "Toward an Augustinian Liberalism," *Faith and Philosophy* 8(4) (1991): 461-480.

authority."[116] One might plausibly argue that such a conclusion also follows from Wolterstorff's account, because subjection to laws that cannot be justified to an individual by reasons that she accepts violates her personhood. Wolterstorff rejects this, however. In his view, one's personhood is respected as long as basic civil liberties are protected and laws are enacted through deliberative democratic procedures. Only coercion that constrains deep commitments or attachments, such as denials of religious liberty, violates persons. Basic rights prevent this kind of coercion; no further reason-based conditions on legitimacy are necessary. Thus, while the Christian view of human freedom and equality can be interpreted in ways that support political liberalism, not all theologians accept that interpretation.

Indeed, Christians might have theological reasons to be suspicious of the political liberal understanding of freedom and equality, given its connection to ideas of autonomy. Political liberalism is not grounded in any 'ethical' notion of autonomy, which values individual reflection, considered choosing, and an attitude of revisability in relation to all of one's commitments as a central feature of the good life. But political liberalism is concerned with *political* autonomy. This is realised in our capacity as citizens when we enjoy the rights and resources that enable us to be equal participants in political decision-making and when we act from principles that we would give to ourselves, which requires that political decisions are justified using reasons we find acceptable.[117] This political autonomy is central to the Rawlsian notion of citizens as free and equal.[118] It means that citizens are able to see political demands as self-imposed, thus enabling reconciliation with that subjection.[119] But, as Weithman notes, "the question of why autonomy is valuable has to be addressed from within different conceptions of the good."[120] And there might be reason to doubt that a Christian conception of freedom and equality can include political autonomy.

---

[116] Insole, *Politics of Human Frailty*, p. 62.

[117] Rawls, *Political Liberalism*, pp. 77-78, 455-456.

[118] For two recent articulations of the connection between political liberalism and political autonomy see Paul Weithman, "Autonomy and Disagreement about Justice in *Political Liberalism*," *Ethics* 128(1) (2017): 95-122; Blain Neufeld, "Shared Intentions, Public Reason, and Political Autonomy," *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 49(6): 776-804.

[119] Weithman, "Autonomy and Disagreement," pp. 121-122.

[120] Ibid., p. 120.

To see why, consider O'Donovan's conception of freedom. He writes:

"We discover we are free when we are commanded by that authority which commands us according to the law of our being, disclosing the secrets of the heart. There is no freedom except when what we are, and do, corresponds to what has been given us to be and to do. 'Given to us', because the law of our being does not assert itself spontaneously merely by virtue of our existing. We must receive ourselves from outside ourselves, addressed by a summons which evokes that correspondence of existence to being."[121]

Freedom consists in living in accordance with the given moral order, the 'law of our being' that has been established independently of us, by one who is outside of us—God. "Moral freedom can never be established on a basis of self-sufficiency and independence from the world."[122] "Our *freedom* as agents depends upon our acting in accord with reality."[123] In other words, there is no value in acting on principles that one would give to oneself, if those principles do not accord with the God-given moral reality. This is not to imply that there is a single blueprint for how the basic structure of all societies should be arranged. O'Donovan recognises the role of human decision-making in shaping the specific form that political and social institutions take. But here he strikes a distinctively communitarian note: societies have particular historical ways of existing, traditions, which constitute ongoing modes of functioning that define the common good of the collective.[124] Individuals find freedom through participation in communications and cultural practices within a community whose traditions they identify with. "Freedom is the self-realisation of the individual within social forms."[125] "Social identity, then, is an important contributing element in the freedom of an individual."[126] Of course, a society's way of life is not an ultimate good in itself; it must be appropriately related to moral truth. This gives room for

---

[121] O'Donovan, *Desire of the Nations*, p. 252.

[122] Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, 2nd edition (Leicester: Apollos, 1994), p. 120.

[123] Ibid., p. 109.

[124] O'Donovan, *Ways of Judgment*, pp. 70, 149-150.

[125] Ibid., p. 69.

[126] Ibid., p. 71.

individuals to challenge society's traditions. But they must do so by the standards of the God-given order, if this challenge is to promote freedom.[127]

In the light of this, O'Donovan sees the role of political authorities as being judging wrongs, in order to defend the common good, which is defined by God's revealed moral truth, as mediated by a people's particular traditions.[128] It is through issuing such judgments that political authorities secure citizens' freedom. Citizens' obligation to comply is grounded in political authorities fulfilling this God-given role. Such obligation is not the same as compulsion: "to do something one is obliged to… is to do it freely, not under compulsion."[129] The obligation is "laid upon us by the authority,"[130] but compliance should still be a free action, and "to oblige us freely to do something, authority must present us with a reason for doing it."[131] In the words of Romans 13:5, we should obey "because of conscience." But this does not mean that governments must give conspicuous and clear reasons for every dictate, much less reasons that all citizens can reasonably be expected to accept. We often rely on authorities to show us the reasons for acting, and usually a general recognition that the government is serving the common good by protecting society against wrongs is sufficient for citizens to act freely in fulfilling their political obligation. O'Donovan therefore unambiguously rejects the liberal principle of legitimacy.

I have offered a very condensed sketch of aspects of O'Donovan's complex account of freedom, political authority, and their relationship, to show how it conflicts with political liberalism. We should be clear that O'Donovan is not a straightforward perfectionist: he does not believe that governments should promote citizens' virtue or encourage individual piety.[132] Further, various critical questions can be pressed against O'Donovan's view, especially with regard to its compatibility with pluralism.[133] Accommodating disagreement concerning the right and the good undoubtedly puts

---

[127] Ibid., p. 75-76.

[128] Note that O'Donovan's government 'protects' rather than 'promotes' the common good, placing it on the 'negative' side of the debate discussed in the previous section.

[129] Ibid., pp. 129-130

[130] Ibid., p. 131.

[131] Ibid., p. 130.

[132] Although he does endorse a confessionally Christian (but still secular) government, at least in some times and places.

[133] Chaplin, "Representing a People", pp. 305-307.

pressure on the connection between true freedom and political authority, since it means that a society's traditions and common good must be defined rather loosely, so that they do not require much moral agreement.[134] But the key point for our purposes is that his understanding of freedom means that he would place little value on Rawlsian political autonomy, and leads him to reject political liberal claims about legitimacy.

I have focused on O'Donovan's view here since it is particularly well-developed and influential. The general lesson is that Christians might well conceive of freedom as involving conformity with God's will. In order to nonetheless endorse political liberalism, they must hold that this conception of freedom should not be determinative in structuring political life, and that Rawls's conception of political autonomy does have value within its limited domain of application. One might draw on various theological resources that we have already encountered in order to make this kind of argument: the limits of what can be achieved through political power; individual creatureliness, with its dual components of dignity and fragility; sin's distortion of moral perception. Such an argument can also draw on the fact that what political autonomy ultimately requires on Rawls's view is regulation by a reasonable political conception of justice—one that includes the three general liberal principles.[135] Christians have strong theological reasons to endorse those principles.[136]

Even then, however, Christians attracted to something like O'Donovan's view will struggle to endorse what Weithman calls the 'regulation condition' for political autonomy: "Citizens treat the fundamental terms of their association as regulative in practical deliberation, and they take the authority of those terms to be justified by the fact that the terms would be collectively self-legislated."[137] The fact of idealised collective self-legislation will not have this normative role. Nonetheless, given the actual content of reasonable political conceptions of justice, and thus of the fundamental terms of association in a political liberal society, such Christians perhaps could still

---

[134] I discuss this in more detail in "Justification to All", pp. 183-192.

[135] Listed above, on p. 4.

[136] For example, O'Donovan's discussion of material distribution implies endorsement of the adequate all-purpose means principle. See *Ways of Judgment*, pp. 45-48. And we have seen that Christians can endorse liberal rights.

[137] Weithman, "Autonomy and Disagreement," p.103.

endorse such a conception. They might even view such a conception as having a sufficient connection to moral reality and the community traditions of a liberal democratic society that a basic structure regulated by it does enable freedom. Even if political autonomy does not have the independent value that it does for Rawls, there might be a contingent alignment here that enables such Christians to be members of the overlapping consensus. If so, then one of the deepest barriers to such membership might be overcome.

Final Cautions

I have noted some points of tension, and even conflict, between Christian political theology and political liberalism, but also identified various areas of agreement and possible paths to endorsement. It is quite possible that the former could be overcome and the latter developed in order to generate support for political liberalism. Even then, however, Christian theology will always strike a note of caution. Even liberal states, and even political liberalism, contain what Mathewes calls "the inevitable tendency to make our political identity our essential, existential identity," which "Christianity always condemns as idolatrous."[138] There will always be tensions between faithful Christianity and any particular political theory or programme, because the distorting effects of sin and ambiguities of moral judgment are abiding features of life in this age. Christians are always wary of "false pseudo-resolutions"[139] that seek to manufacture a complete harmonisation of loyalties, identities, and commitments. The church acts as a standing rebuke to the state's ever-present temptation to offer a complete community. Christian faith thus "renders commitment to our common republic complicatedly ambivalent."[140] James Smith uses similar language: Christian theology "encourage[s] a certain kind of holy ambivalence about our relationship to the political, a sort of engaged but healthy distance rooted in our specifically eschatological hope."[141] As does Gregory: "Christian political theology, given concerns for

---

[138] Mathewes, "Augustinian Christian Republican Citizenship," p. 220.

[139] Ibid., p. 223.

[140] Ibid., p. 243.

[141] James K.A. Smith, *Awaiting the King: Reforming Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2017), p. 16.

idolatry, does not seek permanent coalitions with particular political arrangements or theories."[142] Christians cannot 'baptise' Rawls—or any other political theory. Mathewes emphasises that this is a good thing, which keeps politics honest and stops the state from claiming total allegiance. However, as Patrick Neal highlights, it also seems to conflict with Rawls's hope that citizens will be 'wholehearted' members of the well-ordered society. While they might be able to endorse political liberalism, they cannot "profess 'wholehearted' allegiance to any political regime, or any set of principles specifying a political regime."[143] Their commitment will always be qualified and hedged. Neal adds, however, that in his view no other political theory can do better in this regard. "Political liberalism is not bad as a theory of the just political state; but it's still just a theory of the political state. One's deepest duties lie elsewhere."[144]

Perhaps Rawlsians can accept this limitation on Christians' commitment. Rawls's notion of 'wholehearted' membership might not imply an unrevisable or uncritical allegiance that would contradict the provisionality that I have highlighted. Nonetheless, this does complicate our picture of membership of the overlapping consensus and limit the kind of authority or priority that Christians can ultimately give to political values. There is a sense in which Christian citizens must always keep their distance from any political theory or regime, resisting the temptation to "reinterpret Christianity in terms of a dominant secular discourse of our day."[145] No political regime in this age is 'final' or achieves complete justice; Christian politics is always the politics of imperfectability.

This also points to another remaining concern with political liberalism: that it ultimately demands too much agreement upon political values and ideals. Even taking into account the possibility for reasonable disagreement about the interpretation and weighing of political values, and thus the range of reasonable political conceptions of justice, the domain of the 'reasonable' is still significantly limited, such that citizens

---

[142] Eric Gregory, "Christianity and the Rise of the Democratic State," in Michael Jon Kessler (ed.), *Political Theology for a Plural Age* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013): 99-107, p. 105.

[143] Patrick Neal, "Political Liberalism, Public Reason, and the Citizen of Faith," in Robert P. George and Christopher Wolfe (eds.), *Natural Law and Public Reason* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 2000): 171-201, p. 174.

[144] Patrick Neal, "Is Political Liberalism Hostile to Religion?" in Shaun P. Young (ed.), *Reflections on Rawls: An Assessment of his Legacy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009): 153-175, p. 174.

[145] John Milbank, quoted in Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, p. 130.

are expected to exhibit fairly high levels of agreement regarding which reasons satisfy the liberal principle of legitimacy. Many critics have questioned the viability of the distinction between 'public' and 'non-public' reasons.[146] But even if it is viable, the idea that all reasonable citizens could perceive and agree upon this distinction might be too idealistic for Christians to accept, in the light of their doctrine of sin and eschatology. The peace and justice achieved by human societies are always more partial, fragile, and limited than Rawls's well-ordered society, with its stability for the right reasons. This is what motivates Jeffrey Stout to label Rawls's view a 'poor man's communitarianism',[147] and Wolterstorff to claim that it is "still looking for a politics that is the politics of a community with a shared perspective,"[148] which pluralism makes impossible. The Christian view might be less optimistic and more agonistic. It might look more like what I have elsewhere called an 'argumentative democracy'—a view that I attribute to Wolterstorff.[149]

For example, Biggar argues that the nature of the agreement that Christians should expect to find with non-believers "is not Rawlsian, but Augustinian. It is not whole and stable, but partial and provisional." It is always "an imperfect compromise, subject to criticism."[150] Part of Biggar's point here might be compatible with political liberalism: citizens will have comprehensive views that go beyond the subject of the overlapping consensus and sometimes conflict with it, and even within the overlapping consensus their interpretation and weighing of political values might be shaped by their comprehensive doctrines.[151] But Biggar is also arguing that any overlapping consensus will itself be incomplete, and unable to contain all relevant political disagreements. While citizens should appeal to shared ideals and public reasons where they can, not all political debate or decision-making will be able to occur within that

---

[146] The best of these is Christopher J. Eberle, *Religious Conviction in Liberal Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), pp. 195-293.

[147] Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), pp. 73-74.

[148] Wolterstorff, "The Role of Religion," p. 109.

[149] Paul Billingham, "Does Political Community Require Public Reason? On Lister's Defence of Political Liberalism," *Politics, Philosophy & Economics* 15(1) (2016): 20-41.

[150] Biggar, *Behaving in Public*, p. 43.

[151] I discuss whether this kind of shaping is permissible within Rawls's political liberalism (and argue that it is) in Paul Billingham, "Can My Religion Influence My Conception of Justice? Political Liberalism and the Role of Comprehensive Doctrines," *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 20(4) (2017): 403-424.

currency. In a similar vein, Michael Lamb has recently argued that Augustine's position is more resonant with Cass Sunstein's 'incompletely theorised agreements' than Rawls's overlapping consensus.[152]

This brings us back to the central objection to political liberalism that I mentioned near the start: that political liberalism "severs many citizens' deepest religious or moral commitments from their political deliberations and actions."[153] I noted that the overlapping consensus provided a solution to this. But this solution might depend on a degree of optimism about how much political agreement can be achieved, and a level of commitment to the settled nature of that agreement, which itself cannot be accepted by Christians. Perhaps this kind of provisionality and ambivalence is still compatible with membership in the overlapping consensus, as long as one does endorse a reasonable political conception of justice. But if it is not, then it seems that accepting a Rawlsian political morality might require Christians to place more faith in politics than is theologically warranted, such that political liberalism can indeed only succeed by severing Christians' deepest commitments from their political understanding. Ironically, then, it might be that the biggest obstacle to Christian membership of the overlapping consensus is precisely the level of *faith* that Rawls's view demands.[154]

Magdalen College, University of Oxford

paul.billingham@politics.ox.ac.uk

---

[152] Michael Lamb, "Between Presumption and Despair: Augustine's Hope for the Commonwealth," *American Political Science Review* 112(4) (2018): 1036-1049.

[153] Chaplin, "Governing Diversity," p. 122.