



PROTESTANTS FOR THE COMMON GOOD

"People of faith advancing justice in public life"

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Some Things Abide, Some Things Change

by Chris Gamwell

Sometime during the national political campaign of 1960, when John Kennedy's Roman Catholic faith moved many citizens to doubt his presidential fitness, former president Harry Truman announced in typically blunt terms that those who vote for Nixon could go to hell. Kennedy wired Truman the following: "Dear Mr. President: While I understand and sympathize with your deep motivation, I think it is important that our side try to refrain from raising the religious issue."¹

At the birth of PCG, Donald Benedict deplored the absence of "serious religious reflection" on our political future. He thereby expressed, as so often he embodied, the standard to which PCG has aspired: this venture seeks to raise the religious issue. We claim for our common life a vision predicated on the promise and purpose of God's all-embracing love, by which we are called to become, insofar as possible, a beloved community—and without which our life together would be worthless sound and fury.

We don't mean that Christians alone can see this vision, as if good politics waits on control by persons who confess Jesus as their Lord. To the contrary, God's promise and purpose are ever-present in the deepest awareness, however dim or inchoate, of every human person, and Jesus in Christian experience re-presents God's love with clarity and power, the way a new dawn lights up the world we were in all the time. So, we are not troubled by critics for whom faith-based politics violates the separation of church and state. The First Amendment does not forbid religions from taking sides on issues of state; it forbids the state from taking sides on issues of religion. Politics without an ideal is lost at sea, and democracy welcomes all religious visions into public, where discussion and debate can discover the greatest truth about our lives because, at some elemental level, we all already know it.

Within that public forum, PCG has sought to apply Christian faith to present-day legislation and policy, advancing, insofar as we can, alternatives to laws and policies derived, wittingly or not, from false or misguided ideals—and in this have been especially attentive to issues of poverty and exclusion, acting for economic and social equality. At the same time, we have sought to expose those false visions—the false gods, as we see them—thereby to publicize the options. So, we mean "the religious issue" in a broad sense: any ideal or ideology for our life together becomes a religious voice.

Among the commanding religious temptations PCG found present 15 years ago was the political vision advanced by the Christian Right. Focused on its account of so-called “traditional values,” this movement gave Christian backing to a conservative moral stance attractive to many, whether Christian or not. For them, the whole point of community was to cultivate personal or private virtue—defined by certain standards for sexuality, family relations, the discipline of work, and personal piety. So, your station within the larger economic and social context—advantaged or disadvantaged—was not much important. Private moral character is what really matters.

Without denying the need for personal virtue, PCG found this narrow vision a debasement of the common good—and for many who helped launch our venture, resisting the Christian Right by raising a religious alternative was our animating reason for being. But some things abide and some things change. If the beloved community marks the permanent cause of PCG, the religious issue is not quite the same today. Not that either the Christian Right or the communal ideal of private virtue it sanctioned has vanished from our political life. But they no longer express the most threatening false god—and the change can be marked by noting first how during the 1980s and 90s that religious ideal unknowingly served the political goals of the rich.

For at least thirty years, the inequality of income and wealth in our nation has been escalating. Over this period, material gains overall have been impressive, but virtually all have gone to the top 20% and massively to the top 1%. The bottom 80% has been virtually stagnant, poverty has invaded more of “we the people,” and the poor have become more deeply poor. Various political forces have aided and abetted this widening gap, but one telling dynamic was how many who reaped economic rewards made common cause with the Christian Right—because shrinking politics into issues of private virtue drew public attention away from any move to mitigate the galloping disparity. Thereby, the rich could secure their own benefit while pretending to honor a larger communal vision.

As the public’s concern turned to national security, war, and, most recently, economic collapse, the sway of that narrow moral agenda has waned. But the momentum of maldistribution has swept the Christian Right into a revised ideology or religious vision, whose political agenda includes always lowering taxes, removing regulation on economic institutions, and rescinding most of the welfare state—all of these based on the touching faith that profit-seeking power will, when left virtually unchecked by governing oversight, somehow produce the common good. The complicity of this agenda with politics for the wealthy—“winner-take-all politics,” as one book calls it—seems clear. And the troubles expanding inequality spreads throughout our society—to the health and health care of our citizens, social support for the disadvantaged, funding for our educational system, justice in law enforcement, and democracy itself—seem undeniable. Still, this politics of inequity appeals far beyond the rich because it is packaged publicly in terms of a long and tempting tradition of American individualism: political community is said to be best when governmental activity is the least and freedom from it the greatest.

All too many fellow citizens see their freedom constrained above all by government and assume that flourishing demands downsizing the state. Far easier to attack governmental activities one can see than economic and social forces one cannot see. Indeed, more strident voices almost equate popular sovereignty itself with private sovereignty, as if democracy just *is* libertarian ideology, and thus laws and policies are simply unconstitutional when they fail to maximize the liberty of each to rule her or his life—as if government by the people cannot be government for the people unless it is minimal government. But that accounting is a muddle. Popular sovereignty is how we put the political question: what shall we do in common? Private sovereignty is how one ideology answers that question: leave everyone largely on their own.

The Christian faith, we believe, has a better answer: the good life God offers is a common enterprise. We have this adventure together, and our chance to flourish is mainly a gift from our wider human context. Freedom is empty without economic and social resources that empower achievement, and freedom is perfected when achievement aims to better others as well as self. So far from abetting ever more disparity, we become the best we can be when we bring forth a mutuality in which all have access to a common good. Government has a pivotal part in this pursuit. It is not the sole actor, and is, as all things human, subject to abuse and fault. But only the democratic process allows “we the people” to protect ourselves from inequity and act-as-one for the flourishing of all—and so government remains a vital agent for our public solidarity.

So far as I can see, this contest between private sovereignty and public solidarity marks a major—perhaps *the* major—religious issue now at stake for politics as a Christian vocation. But whether or not that is so, we can be sure of this: PCG will strive in season and out to act on the promise of God’s love and its call to the beloved community—and, thereby, help our republic exemplify, as Abraham Lincoln envisioned, “the last, best hope of earth.”

1. Bill Adler, ed., *The Kennedy Wit* (New York: The Citadel Press, 1964), 5.