

# God and Man and Politics

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# the weekly Standard

## The City of Man

*Religion and Politics in a New Era*

*by Michael Gerson & Peter Wehner*

*Moody, 144 pp., \$19.99*

It is commonly supposed that liberal democracy gives rise to a dangerous and insuperable conflict between faith and politics. Many progressives, even as they regard democracy as an all-embracing belief system, contend that to respect the separation of church and state, it is necessary to banish not merely religion but also religiously inspired language, thought, and conduct from politics. Libertarian conservatives often adopt an adversarial stance toward religious faith because they identify it with a determination to expand government by authorizing it to implement a divinely sanctioned moral order. And not a few religious conservatives, by equating liberty with libertinism and equality with leveling, provide support for the view that liberal democracy and religious faith can at best enjoy a cold peace.

Our universities reinforce these common opinions. The liberalism of John Rawls—which has long dominated in philosophy departments, the theory wing of political science departments, and law schools—regards religious opinions as unwelcome in the public sphere because they rest on assumptions that not all citizens share. In the academy, Rawlsian liberalism's most popular competitors, postmodernism and multiculturalism, also encourage the exclusion of religion from public life. Postmodernism purports to authoritatively and absolutely discredit

all absolutes, foremost among them religious faith. Multiculturalism officially proclaims respect for all cultures but, in practice, treats Western civilization (and within it, Christianity) as uniquely corrupt and corrupting.

Add to all this the failure of our universities to make study of the fundamentals and history of religion an essential part of liberal education, and it is small wonder that the conviction that liberal democracy and religious faith must adopt an adversarial stance toward each other is especially strong among the educationally well-credentialed.

Contrary to the common conviction, Michael Gerson and Peter Wehner show in this succinct, measured, and incisive volume that Christian faith is compatible with, indeed can exemplify, the liberal and democratic spirit. What's more, Gerson and Wehner suggest—both by their supple argument and generous tone—that Christian faith, when true to its sacred sources, may provide indispensable support for liberal democracy.

*The City of Man* is part of the Moody Cultural Renewal series, which “brings biblical thought to bear on matters of contemporary concern.” One of the general editors of the series, Timothy Keller, senior pastor at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York and bestselling author of *The Reason for God*, observes in the foreword that “in each society, time, and place, the form of political involvement has to be worked out differently, with the utmost faithfulness to the Scripture, but also the greatest sensitivity to culture, time, and place.” Keller, as well as Gerson and Wehner, emphasize that the political moment is a challenging one for Christians: Progressive mainline Protestant churches are declining, conservative evangelical churches are growing, secularism remains on the rise, the leaders of the religious right of the 1970s and '80s are fading from the scene, and conservatism is enjoying a popular renewal in significant measure in response to President Obama's transformative domestic agenda.

The authors are experienced public officials and serious thinkers. Gerson, a former policy adviser and speechwriter to President George W. Bush, writes a syndicated column; Wehner, former deputy assistant to President Bush and director of the White House Office of Strategic Initiatives, is a senior fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, prolific blogger, and regular contributor to magazines and newspapers.

Gerson and Wehner are also evangelical Christians, and they have written *The City of Man* to address the challenges that conservative Christians, in particular, face in fulfilling both their religious obligations and civic duty. But their analysis will be of interest to all who wish to understand the place of religion in a free society.

The authors bring to their task a keen appreciation of its complexity. They know that faith is personal but that political theology—religious teachings about political life—has public consequences. To take two opposing cases: Whereas German Christians in the 1930s were encouraged by their faith and some religious leaders to accommodate Nazism, in the 1950s

and '60s African-American and mainline Christian churches inspired the overturning of discriminatory laws. The authors know that men and women of faith are prone to conflicting mistakes: Some invoke religious authority for partisan ends and enlist it on behalf of schemes of oppression while others cover themselves in religious authority to justify turning away from political life and to ignore grave affronts to human dignity. And the authors know that the Bible is multifarious and appears contradictory, not least in its admonitions both to reform civic life *and* withdraw from politics.

Gerson and Wehner follow Saint Augustine, who taught that the tension between faith and politics is real—as is the connection between them. The City of God should be the object of man's highest hopes, according to Augustine, but while dwelling in the fallen and flawed City of Man, human beings should pursue justice, of which politics and government are a necessary part, in light of man's ultimate ends but also in awareness of the deficiencies of human nature.

Gerson and Wehner offer five propositions or precepts to guide the harmonization of politics and religious faith in a free society. First, the state's powers and responsibilities, which begin with protecting citizens, differ from the moral obligations of individuals and, therefore, political morality differs from individual morality. Second, and similarly, the duties of the church, which has responsibility for a diverse community of believers, differ from those of individual Christians. Third, while Scripture sheds light on the spirit in which politics should be practiced and on the principles that should guide social life, it does not articulate a plan for good government, issue public policy prescriptions, or prescribe the prudential steps necessary to achieve even those ends on which Christians tend to agree. Fourth, the obligations of a Christian citizen are relative to the regime under which he or she lives: In a liberal democracy, which respects rights and is grounded in the consent of the governed, citizens are generally obliged to respect the law even where it is necessary to change particular policies and enactments. In an authoritarian or totalitarian state, which “engages in acts that are intrinsically evil,” it may become necessary to resist the law and rise up against the state. And fifth, it is a mistake to suppose that one can read God's will in earthly events.

Such considerations have not always governed Christians in their role as citizens, and the authors are acutely aware that Christian involvement in American politics over the past 40 years has left much to be desired, religiously as well as politically. At the same time, Gerson and Wehner show sympathy for the religious right's original grievances arising, in the 1970s, out of the progressive elite's aggressive use of public policy to impose their views on the country. They also credit the religious right with reintroducing into public debate the importance of character, discipline, and authority. And they stress the diversity of strands within the evangelical movement—pointing out, for example, that as early as 1973 the Chicago Declaration of Evangelical Social Concern called for assisting the poor and oppressed and overcoming racism. But Gerson and Wehner firmly reject the religious right's “narrow agenda,” its tone, at once “apocalyptic, off-putting, and counterproductive,” and its

theologically misguided determination to view America as a Christian nation rather than as a nation “informed by a Jewish and Christian understanding of human nature” and, therefore, “designed to be a nation where all faiths are welcomed, not one where one faith is favored.”

Christian conservatives’ political views, though, have been “changing and maturing.” They remain firmly set against abortion, and opposition to same-sex marriage is strong, even as a new attitude of tolerance toward gay marriage is emerging. Other issues, moreover, are coming to the fore: These include protection of the environment, defense of religious freedom and relief of suffering around the world, and, not least, reversal of the Obama administration’s spending increases and expansion of the federal government, which Christian conservatives see as a threat to prosperity and freedom. At the same time, newer leaders such as Rick Warren, the bestselling author and senior pastor of Saddleback Church in southern California, have brought a less partisan and more positive tone to public debate.

The moment is ripe, Gerson and Wehner argue, to build on these developments and craft a new approach. In foreign affairs, Christians should embrace that form of American exceptionalism that sees the U.S. role in the world as a “calling, rooted in the philosophy of the founding, to defend and exemplify” the principles of human freedom and equality. Whereas philosophical schools (Rawlsians, postmodernists, multiculturalists) tie themselves in knots to coherently justify the moral premises of liberal democracy, their defense, argue Gerson and Wehner, should come readily to those who have learned from the Bible “that men and women are created equal in worth, in the image of God.”

In addition, Christians should develop a well-rounded view of the state, one that recognizes the reality of power and respects the ends to which power is properly directed and by which it is rightly limited. The first end is the establishment of order, grounded in the rule of law and devoted to securing basic rights. Order must be supplemented by a dedication to justice which, the authors emphasize, as a result of Jewish and Christian teaching we understand as centrally concerned with “caring for the weak, the disadvantaged, and the oppressed.” Both order and justice depend on virtue. Indeed, the authors agree with James Madison’s contention (in *Federalist* 55) that self-government, more than any other form, depends on citizens’ virtue. And they reaffirm the opinion, generally held by the Founders, that religion, which must remain independent of the state, is vital to the inculcation of the virtue on which self-government depends.

Finally, Gerson and Wehner argue that, despite the biblical strictures about the snares of wealth, Christians today have good reasons to defend capitalism. Through the unrivaled economic growth it generates, capitalism has created large middle classes, lifted countless people out of poverty, unleashed great scientific and technological advances, and fostered a climate friendly to freedom in which individuals learn to pursue their interests and take responsibility for their lives. They emphasize the vital importance, amidst capitalism’s

constant churn and change, of social safety nets and market regulation, while stressing that the need for them does not count as an argument against capitalism but rather for prudence in the enactment of necessary and just laws.

Prudence, the authors note, must also govern political rhetoric. In entering the public square of a free society, and in making their case to fellow citizens, many of whom will not share their religious beliefs, Christians should emulate two heroes of freedom, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr. Their “lives were committed to reversing two great sins in American history, slavery and segregation,” write Gerson and Wehner. Both “used religious symbolism and biblical language to state their case even as they spoke in a style and parlance that resonated with all people, not just people of faith.”

The authors’ new approach to faith and politics is a model of moderation in the service of self-government. It depends on a recovery of the venerable teaching of St. Augustine and its thoughtful application to today’s circumstances. And it performs the enlightening service of demonstrating that Christians can not only accommodate the principles of liberal democracy without compromising their faith, but that their faith, well understood, prepares them to be among the most subtle and effective guardians of liberty and democracy.

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