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A review of Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibility of Faithful Witness*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. xv + 251 pp. \$39.95. ISBN: 978-1-405-19969-8

Luke Bretherton's *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* masterfully draws together the work of theologians, past and present, with case studies of Christian action in the current political context. In a work that is both attuned to the ways in which Christian individuals and communities try to navigate complex forces within contemporary Western society, and committed to a rigorous working-out of the theological resources available to such individuals and communities, Bretherton provides direction for Christians who feel called to work for the common good but who struggle to grasp what shape that work should take in the political and economic order of a global society. In both its content and its style, this work is a compelling contribution to the growing field of contemporary political theology.

Structurally, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* invites the reader in and guides her carefully through a complex analysis of Christian political action. Bretherton elegantly sets up and closes each chapter—and the book as a whole—with a summary of his intentions and arguments. He begins with a preface that reflects on his own life growing up in West London, watching his parents come together with Christians of various races and social classes to engage in community organizing and charitable work at a local level. Such a beginning both clarifies Bretherton's commitment to Christian political action and reminds readers that churches have always worked through various channels to care for others in their communities. The question this leads the reader to, and which Bretherton takes up in the work as a whole: is what they might do *now*?

Both individual Christians and Christian churches, Bretherton argues, find themselves caught up in a variety of social forces which can seem overwhelming. (We may note here that Bretherton is interested in "churches" as visible communities, which claim Christian identity; he does not here become involved in debates over the nature of "the church.") These forces are "church, civil society, the market, and the state" (1). Members of other religious traditions would, presumably, labor under the same forces with some other designation substituted for "church," but, in keeping with his title, Bretherton remains focused on Christianity throughout. Following Augustine's exegesis of Jeremiah's admonition to Jewish exiles to seek the welfare of Babylon, he claims that Christians deal

with social forces as those who live out their lives in two places simultaneously: the “city of God” (3), a community of true peace under God, to which Christians owe their real and final allegiance; and “the earthly city” (3), an unstable, unjust, and unpeaceful society, whose welfare Christians should nevertheless pursue.

The heart of this book is its careful theological reflection on case studies; in four chapters, Bretherton thoughtfully analyzes Christian action on the local, national, and global levels. Asking how churches can participate in the political sphere without succumbing to powerful governmental and economic forces, he first examines partnerships, increasingly popular in both the United States and the United Kingdom, between governments and religious communities. Governments hope that partnerships with what Bretherton calls “faith designated groups” will help them promote social cohesion while respecting diversity, but often, faith designated groups instead bow to pressure to look more like government: they compete on the state’s terms for funding, and they must describe and justify their actions with reasoning stripped of theological commitments.

Bretherton hopes for a different way of envisioning churches’ political action. He points to the work of Stanley Hauerwas, John Paul II, and Oliver and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan as sounding a warning to churches at risk of being co-opted by state concerns, but he does not endorse any of these authors’ notions of what churches should be and do. Instead, to demonstrate how some Christians and churches are already seeking the welfare of the earthly city while remaining true to their vision of the city of God, he turns to a description of churches that participate in local community organizing using the methods of activist Saul Alinsky. Here Bretherton stresses the act of *listening*, to the Word of God as well as to people in the community, as the foundational political act. By emphasizing the empowerment of community members and challenging the totalizing forces of market and state, these churches are able to “deploy their own language and symbols” (97) while participating in political action.

Next Bretherton turns to the national community, focusing on various churches’ response to refugee policy in the U.S. and U.K. As a faithful middle way between unbending commitment to state sovereignty over borders and a liberal cosmopolitanism that would do away with borders altogether, Bretherton draws upon Augustine and Aquinas to advocate for “Christian cosmopolitanism” (132), which recognizes that “there is a common teleology which orders the good of a particular community as being fulfilled in the good of humanity which is itself fulfilled in communion with God” (131). Christian cosmopolitans work for the good of their particular national communities, but always in light of their concern for the good of humanity. What refugees most need is inclusion in a stable polity—a state that protects its members and, indeed, controls its borders. Thus, Christians ought to advocate for policies that favor inclusion of refugees, but not those that break down the sovereignty of the state altogether. Bretherton’s example is the Sanctuary movement in the United States in the 1980s, a case of churches appropriately resisting certain state policies while respecting the role of the state as a stable community of law.

Finally, Bretherton turns to a matter of global concern: economic life, and specifically “political consumerism” (175). He suggests that Christians might show faithful witness in the context of global capitalism through their market transactions—specifically, through supporting equitable economic relationships between producers and consumers. Here Bretherton speaks of individuals rather than church communities, and in the case study he takes up the practice of consuming “fair trade” products. Political consumerism, he claims, is indeed a *practice*, which can cultivate virtues of mindfulness and care for others. It articulates the economic sphere as a moral arena and seeks to embed economic transactions in a (morally meaningful) political and social web of relationships. Bretherton does not claim that practices of political consumerism will upend economic life as we know it, but he hopes that even the small ways in which Christians engage in virtuous economic activities may help them wield some influence in pursuit of a more just and loving economic order.

The accessibility and style of this work, its ability to draw together abstract theological thinking with detailed reports of churches’ and individuals’ work on the ground, is perhaps its greatest strength, providing a satisfying and instructional read for multiple audiences. Theologians will benefit from Bretherton’s deep engagement with theological thinkers, and many might do well to emulate his careful application of theological themes to concrete political action. Christians who want to engage in political action for the sake of their neighbors, but who worry that any such action will be co-opted by outside forces, will benefit from the examples Bretherton describes and from his commitment to a theological explanation of how such faithful witness is possible. Those who wonder whether Christians can participate in politics on their own terms without seeking theocratic power will see examples of Christians who are doing just this.

No one work can answer all questions, of course, and Bretherton leaves readers with some significant ones. Though the work is clearly directed at Christians, it would be helpful to know whether Bretherton thinks it is possible for members of other religious traditions to undertake their own authentic political activities. If so, how could Christians work with those of other religious traditions for the sake of the earthly city? Furthermore, while Bretherton chooses his case studies carefully, it is disappointing that he can point only to the actions of individual Christians as having anything to do with global economic forces. Given Bretherton’s concern with churches as communities of worship and action, here he seems to retreat into a model of the individual (formed in community, to be sure) as consumer that could be better balanced by attention to communal practices of consumption. And finally, the theme of “hospitality” is mentioned in the work and certainly influences Bretherton’s discussion of care for refugees, but this theme does not seem to be as prominent in *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* as Bretherton would like it to be. As he notes, he has developed a theme of hospitality in earlier work, as “the normative pattern of faithful relations between Christians and those who are strangers to them” (19), and perhaps Bretherton would consider, in the future, playing out the theme of hospitality more explicitly in relation to Christian action in the political sphere. For now, though, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics* provides readers with an excellent model of political theology that

successfully weaves together deep theological reflection and a generous analysis of the faithful work of Christians and churches in the interlocking circles of local, national, and global community.

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