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Constituting a Political Community Guideline #1 for Government and Citizenship

by
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Earlier this year, the Center for Public Justice posted on its website the first eight *Guidelines for Government and Citizenship* where they can be read or downloaded (www.cpjustice.org/guidelines). The aim is to provide a quick reference for those who want to know where the Center stands on various issues. The eight *Guidelines* posted thus far will not be the last. A new one on religious freedom will soon be ready and others will follow as we complete work on them.

The aim of this and subsequent articles in the *Public Justice Report* is to offer some commentary on each of the *Guidelines*. In addition, each *Guideline* is accompanied by a few “implications” and suggestions “for further reading” to provide additional insight into the meaning of the compact paragraphs that constitute each *Guideline*. Both the implications and the suggestions for further reading are still under development and will be expanded in the months ahead.

The first *Guideline* is titled simply “Political Community.” It begins with the statement, (1) “The political community—government accountable to citizens, and citizens under government—constitutes one of the most important institutions of contemporary life.” That statement may seem obvious, but we should periodically take time to reflect on the fact that many people in the world enjoy relative peace, stability, and flourishing societies and economies because they live in relatively sound political communities. The citizens of those political communities are willing to submit to their governments because they have means of holding them accountable and they have laws that make it possible for them to enjoy the benefits of a public life shared in common with all other citizens. By contrast, the reason for much of the violence, instability, poverty, and lack of education in many other parts of the world is the lack of sound political communities. The obvious question that follows from statement number 1, then, is this: what makes for a good and just political community.

2. Why do political communities exist? The second statement of the *Guideline* asserts that political communities exist because “God created us with this capacity” and therefore humans have the responsibility to establish them to uphold and enforce public justice for all.

This statement carries a very big burden, given a long history of political development and of Christian contributions to that development in the West. Most Christians in the United States would probably say that the reason for the existence of political communities is either that God ordained government because of sin or that free individuals create political society in order to have an umpire to protect their lives and properties. Neither of these answers, as you can see, suggests that God *created* us to be political creatures. The first answer goes all the way back to Augustine. The second answer, as far as the United States is concerned, arises chiefly from arguments offered by John Locke and modern “contractualists.”

The Center for Public Justice certainly recognizes that there is an important retributive and restraining function of government due to human sinfulness. But we believe that this function, which requires police and military forces, is not the original purpose and deepest meaning of political community. And though we recognize that, historically speaking, people do *form* political communities, it is not the act of historical formation that establishes the capacity and meaning of such communities. By analogy, one can say that a couple that decides to marry *forms* their own marriage, but they do not create the institution of marriage. Marriage and political community are possible, we argue, because God created human beings to be marital and political creatures.

The third statement of this Guideline begins, (3) “The mutual obligation of citizens and public officials exhibits a covenantal character, pointing us to the accountability of government and citizens to God.” In using the biblical word “covenant” we are building on the previous statement about political community. God made humans for communities of public justice, therefore as citizens we are obligated from the start to see that our political order is one that does justice to all.

One of the problems with the contract-theory of political society in its American version is that it disconnects government and the political community from any accountability to God. The connection to God exists for individuals, who supposedly have certain inalienable rights from God. And government is accountable to citizens because government is created by the sovereign people. But since the Creator is not the originator of political community, there are no covenantal obligations of political society to God.

Likewise, one of the problems with the idea that God ordained government only because of sin is that there are no positive political obligations citizens have toward one another and toward God. Accountability arises only with respect to criminal law or laws concerned with disturbing the peace or breaking contracts. We argue to the contrary that just as humans were created for family life and education, for working together and building organizations of all kinds, so too, men and women are made for political community. And that

kind of community has its own covenantal characteristics that demand mutual accountability between citizens and government as well as accountability of the political community to God.

The fourth statement of this *Guideline* states (4) that a political community is a “public-legal community different in kind from nonpolitical communities and associations such as families, churches, businesses, and many kinds of voluntary organizations.” The word “republic” carries this meaning within itself because it derives from the Latin words *res publica*—a public thing. This means, for example, that the limits of government come not only from what government should *not* do, but also from what government *should* do. A just political community helps to make possible the open space needed for families and churches and enterprises to develop their own God-given responsibilities. But these limits to government’s reach derive not only from the freedom the other institutions should enjoy but from the political community’s own character, obligations, and purpose. Government exists to provide public-legal order and the public well-being of its citizens, not to run families or churches or business enterprises. For the political community to be just and good it needs to fulfill its own calling “to enforce public laws for the good of all.”

5. “A sound and healthy republic is one in which government recognizes and protects by law the independent, non-political responsibilities that belong to people. . . . At the same time, the constitution of a political community must ensure that all citizens can participate freely in the political process through effective democratic representation.” These two sentences in the fifth statement of the *Guideline* develop the points that have preceded it. To say that there are limits to what government can do is to insist that public laws make clear how non-governmental organizations and responsibilities are to be protected. It is not enough to say that church and state should be separated; we have to go on to see how the public-legal order recognizes and protects the church’s independence.

Likewise, it is not enough to say that people should be free to carry on their economic, ecclesiastical, and business lives. The same people who are family members, church members, and employers or employees also happen to be citizens in their political communities. They simply wear different hats with regard to different kinds of responsibilities. Therefore, in some of their capacities, people need to be free from government’s direct rule, but in their civic capacity they need to be free to participate vigorously in the political process itself to fulfill their civic responsibilities of helping to make the political community itself a just one. And if all citizens should be free to participate in political life, then, as the statement says, they should “enjoy equal treatment in the rights, privileges, and benefits of the republic’s commonwealth, for the sake of the common good.”

6. The final statement of this *Guideline* emphasizes the fact that the American republic like every other political community exists in an international arena of many political communities. That is why “our republic is accountable to more than simply the will and interests of its people as expressed through lawful domestic processes.” In this shrinking world the United States is a part of an ever increasing number of international organizations,

from the World Health Organization to the World Trade Organization. Moreover, American citizens are increasingly connected with people in other parts of the world at educational, scientific, and religious-institutional levels.

This is where public justice takes on an international meaning, and increasingly so with each passing day. The government of a political community like the United States should be held accountable by its own citizens, and vice versa. But all such governments in the world also bear obligations to other political communities and to their people. It is unjust for the pollution from one country to degrade the air and water of another country. It is unjust for the economic policies of one country to keep another country's economy from developing. So we can say that just as citizens and governments bear covenantal obligations to one another and to God, so political communities bear covenantal obligations to one another and to God, since they live together in one world under one God.

Precisely how the nations of this world should hold one another accountable through international and transnational organizations is not a question addressed by this *Guideline*. But the larger global horizon must be in our sight even as we work to understand what a political community should be as a public-legal community of justice.

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