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What's Happened to Real Politics?

Political philosopher Kenneth Minogue once wrote that Marxism “supplied its followers with a politics, a religion, and a moral identity all in one. For this reason, it was not a political doctrine.” He went on. “Political doctrines give reasons: they talk to each other. Marxism could only declare the truth.”

Listening to this summer’s “town hall meetings” on healthcare, one could be forgiven for thinking that Americans, evangelical Christians included, have either abandoned politics, or taken their politics straight from the Marxist playbook. The fear, anger and misinformation these forums generated crystallized the parody that is contemporary politics.

In the same passage quoted above, Minogue recalls a politics in which “one might be a passionate liberal or conservative, support parliament or the king, advocate or oppose the extension of the franchise, and so on, without in any way imagining that these enthusiasms constituted a revelation.”

How have Christians contributed to the absolutist style in politics? We are, after all, in the business of revelation, of declaring the truth. When evangelicals returned to politics after decades in the wilderness, politics itself was undergoing dramatic change, from the compromises of Depression-era economics to the uncompromising imperatives of civil rights. Evangelicals, galvanized by criminalized school prayers and decriminalized abortions, spoke the latter language. Has this version of Christian politics become an anti-politics, marked by an unwillingness to acknowledge that public institutions, no less than private initiatives, have a role to play in justice and creation care?

If government is to do justice, it must acknowledge multiple human responsibilities: the responsibility of parents to raise children, of economic institutions to generate prosperity, or the responsibility of

individual persons to care of their own bodies, for example. When government finds ways to nurture civil society it honors its own limits and civil society’s competences. But nurture and justice call for action. Both are compatible with extending solidarity to society’s weakest members, be they poor, unfortunate or unborn. Even free markets, as we learned to our chagrin in 2008, need rules, which in turn need enforcement.

None of these undertakings is free from constraints—resources are limited, needs unlimited, institutions and individuals fallible. None of these undertakings can be accomplished except in a politics of talking, listening and “giving reasons.”

In the 2008 elections, a modestly larger percentage of younger evangelicals voted Democrat compared with 2004, especially in swing states where the Obama campaign worked hard to attract them. Most younger evangelicals hold orthodox views on the destruction of fetal life. Many also express concern for ecological restoration and good environmental stewardship.

The good news these younger evangelicals may bring to politics has little to do with shifts in party affiliation, however, for the new vehicle for political action is no less fraught with contradictions than the old. It rests instead on a more evident desire to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ over every area of life. Such a desire opens the door to seeing government as a divine office, not a dispensable one. An office that calls for the virtues of endurance, patience, and cooperation—virtues that enable the collective judgment that is the essence of real politics—is imperiled by their absence.

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