



Paul J. Weithman

*Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship*

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Paul J. Weithman has written a very timely book. *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship* was released just before a maelstrom of debate occurred in Canada over legislating same-sex marriages. Canadian courts had earlier ruled that preventing homosexuals from marrying was a denial of their basic rights under the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Reading the writing on the wall, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien responded by promising legislation to allow same-sex marriages (the third country in the world to do so). His proposal was met with a flurry of opposition from religious groups, particularly the Roman Catholic Church. One bishop went so far as to tell the press that Mr. Chretien, a Catholic, was risking his eternal salvation by supporting the equality legislation. This position was in line with an edict issued worldwide by the Vatican in August which advised Catholics, especially Catholic politicians, to oppose same-sex marriage laws.

Virtually all the cutting edge social debates endemic to Western liberal democracies spark a torrent of reaction from religious groups: euthanasia, abortion, the role of women, and, of course, homosexual rights. They also spark renewed public discussion about the separation of church and state. For many secularists, the debate is a non-starter. A liberal democracy entails a commitment to liberty and equality and a strict separation of church and state. This means the policy decisions of government *must* be based on a logic accessible to everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs (an argument Weithman refers to as the “standard approach”).

Weithman, a philosophy professor at the University of Notre Dame, argues that the issue is much more complex. He approaches his subject from the perspective of citizenship, arguing that citizens of a liberal democracy *may* offer exclusively religious arguments in public debate and they *may* rely on religious reasons when they vote. Why? Because of the provisos he offers. One, they must sincerely believe that their government would be justified in adopting the measures they vote for. Two, they must be prepared to state their justification for adopting those measures. He refers to these provisos as principles of responsible citizenship. At stake, he argues, is the determination of who is accorded full participation in society.

Weithman’s exploration covers a lot of territory: from concepts of the democratic citizen, to dissecting Robert Audi’s argument on this issue from

a secular perspective, to putting John Rawls' position under a microscope. (Rawls argues that religious arguments for public policy may be applied as long as they are supplemented with "properly public reasons.") Each chapter is finely crafted, with particular attention paid to rephrasing the thesis and detailing the inadequacies and shortcomings of arguments promoted by advocates of contrary theory. Weithman builds his case, layer upon layer, with care and precision. It is especially refreshing to read a defence that points to the importance of distinguishing those who violate the obligations of citizenship from those whose politics we simply dislike.

Perhaps the most interesting chapter is one in which he examines the role that religions can and do play in promoting democracy. He argues that people develop a sense of themselves through being involved in churches and religious organizations, a reality that is particularly significant for the poor and members of minority groups. Democracy is promoted, he argues, because people can "realize" their citizenship through their religious involvement. They learn about issues, are regularly encouraged to vote, and often develop a personal sense of empowerment. "Churches do as well as virtually any other nonpolitical organization at fostering civic skills," writes Weithman, "and interestingly, they do far better than labor unions."

Although Weithman writes necessarily from the United States experience, his perspective is applicable to the role of churches in any liberal democracy. This depends, of course, on religious institutions accepting many of the values, and certainly the legitimacy, of a liberal democracy. In the light of the emergence of religious fundamentalism, this is not a small qualification.

One quibble: This is an important book that goes a long way in advancing thought and debate in this important area. It is unfortunate, then, that the book contains sentences like the following: "The disposition to comply with norms requiring accessible reasons in public political debate requires those who have other, nonaccessible reasons for their position to recognize that not all interlocutors regard their nonaccessible reasons as good ones for the political outcomes they favor." This is not an isolated example. However, it is ironic that a point about accessibility is so inaccessible. Had Weithman written in plain language, he would be assured a readership much broader than political philosophers.

That said, *Religion and the Obligations of Citizenship* is a fascinating, important work. There will no doubt be those skeptical of his thesis. But when questioning it, they should consider an observation once made about why the media were so slow to cover the civil rights movements. They were not paying attention to what was happening in Black churches.