

# Engagement and Services in the Public Square in a Globalized World: A Christian Think Tank Perspective

Todd Huizinga

Good morning and many thanks. It is a joy and an honor for me to be here and to have the opportunity to exchange thoughts and views with you.

The title of my presentation is “Engagement and Services in the Public Square in a Globalized World: A Christian Think Tank Perspective.”

I would like to begin with some observations from the Bible. What does the Bible say about politics and government? It doesn't make many direct prescriptions in that area. Politics is not a primary concern of the Holy Scriptures. In fact, one could say that one of the Bible's messages is “Do not set your heart on politics.” Jesus' kingdom is not of this world. Biblically, politics is *not* the way to achieve a truly transformed world.

Romans 13 contains perhaps the clearest, most direct statement in the Bible about politics, government and the role of the Christian in political life. The Apostle Paul writes: “Let everyone be subject to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established....whoever rebels against the authority is rebelling against what God has instituted.... For the one in authority is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer.”

Based on Romans 13, the great reformer Martin Luther in his tract “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation,” writes matter-of-factly: “The worldly authorities have the sword and the switch in their hand in order to punish the wicked and protect the righteous.” And that's it, more or less.

I don't want to oversimplify things or uncritically apply Romans 13 or Martin Luther to the very different context of our time, but as a general principle it seems clear: the Bible's ambitions for politics and governing are very sober and modest. The biblical vision of the best political regime would be no more and no less than one which provides a framework of stability and order within which people can go about their lives and serve God and their fellow human beings.

Using Luther's phrase about punishing the wicked and protecting the righteous as a jumping off point, I would say that a Christian perspective on political engagement should have as a primary

focus to restrain the evil in human beings and in human institutions, as far as this is possible for us as fallen creatures in a fallen world, in order to create as much space as we can for the good in the political, social and economic spheres. In other words, in developing a Christian perspective on political engagement we should concentrate on how best to create the political framework that will allow human beings in this fallen, imperfect world to pursue the good in as unimpeded a way as possible.

And that brings us to the question, what is the good that a Christian perspective on political engagement should aim to make possible and promote?

When we look at things with this question in mind, the Bible has much to say – indirectly but at the same time right on the mark -- about politics.

Here are some passages that speak particularly powerfully to me:

James 1:27: Religion that God our Father accepts as pure and faultless is this: to look after orphans and widows in their distress and to keep oneself from being polluted by the world.

Psalm 12:5: Because the poor are plundered and the needy groan,  
I will now arise,” says the Lord.  
“I will protect them from those who malign them.”

Micah 6:8: He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.  
And what does the Lord require of you?  
To act justly and to love mercy  
and to walk humbly with your God.

These passages bring us back to the heart of the matter: whether we’re talking about several thousand years ago or about today’s post-modern, globalized world, thinking about a Christian perspective on political engagement means thinking about: “What does the Lord require of you?” It means practicing humility. It means loving God and your neighbor. It means looking after orphans and widows in their distress.

In that light, I’d like to do four things in the rest of this talk: First, I’d like to touch briefly on the question “what is freedom?” in the light of the Christian view of the human person, and look at how this freedom – true freedom – applies to the requirement of the Lord that we look after the orphans and widows and protect the poor and the needy. The second and third issues that I’d like to discuss represent two of the primary challenges to which a Christian perspective on political engagement must respond: the new human rights and the ideology of global governance. Regarding human rights, I’d like to pursue the basics of the following question: what are human

rights, and what have they become, especially in the secularized West. Regarding global governance, it is a concept that is in the air in our globalized world. I would like to critically examine it. Fourth and finally, I would like to conclude with a plea for more international cooperation among Christians on issues of public life and political engagement.

First, what is freedom? Freedom is not what most people think it is. In thinking about freedom, we need to bear in mind the Christian view of the human person. As image bearers and servants of God, we are free creatures who bear both inestimable dignity and great responsibility before God and our fellow human beings. Lord Acton, a nineteenth-century English Catholic historian and thinker after whom the Acton Institute is named, said, “freedom is not the power of doing what we like, but the right of being able to do what we ought.” The “right to do what we ought” brings to bear the intimate connection between freedom and responsibility. You might say, with many Christian thinkers of the past and present, that freedom and responsibility are two sides of the same coin.

But here’s a key, sometimes seemingly almost forgotten, aspect of the concept of responsibility as it applies to political engagement. Responsibility does not just mean responsibility before God and our fellow human beings, but also responsibility for oneself. As the sociologist Charles Murray writes, “...self-respect, intimate relationships, and self-actualization -- require freedom in the only way that freedom is meaningful: freedom to act in all arenas of life coupled with responsibility for the consequences of those actions....When the government intervenes to help...it not only diminishes our responsibility for the desired outcome, it enfeebles the institutions [family, church, local associations] through which people live satisfying lives....When the government says it will take some of the trouble out of doing the things that families and communities evolved to do, it inevitably takes some of the action away from families and communities. The web frays, and eventually disintegrates.”<sup>i</sup>

Thus, thinking about politics from a grounding in the Christian faith implies limited government. And it must be limited for the very reason that politics should be a politics for the poor and the needy. The best help that politics can offer the poor and needy is to help create possibilities and incentives to enable them to look after their own needs with dignity and responsibility. The social safety net, for example, while of course necessary, should be a net that catches people in times of acute need, but not a net that entangles people and holds them forever.

And that has implications not only for domestic politics, but also for international development policy. The people themselves, and their dignity, have to be at the center of development policy, creating the conditions in which people can flourish and prosper by their own efforts and in their own way. We should be very wary of bombastic declarations of the “international community” that from the outside impose on people grandiose plans to transform the world.

And we know that creating conditions that allow people to prosper by their own efforts works, and ambitious government-to-government aid programs do not work. As Arthur Brooks, the president of the American Enterprise Institute, points out, the world has experienced an 80% reduction in extreme poverty since 1970. That is a success story that one doesn't often hear. Brooks shows that this success has occurred where four conditions are fulfilled: free trade; private property rights; the rule of law and the entrepreneurial spirit. There are many examples. Take Korea. Sixty years ago both Koreas, North and South, were approximately equally poor. South Korea then chose the path of the rule of law and free market. North Korea remains the most unfree country in the world. North Korea's per capita GDP is \$1,800 and South Korea's is \$30,000. Africa, to a large extent, is the counterexample. By and large, few countries in sub-Saharan Africa have a functioning free market system. Trade is restricted. Markets are undermined by government corruption and overregulation. As Arthur Brooks notes, that is why extreme poverty continues in Africa, despite 1.7 trillion dollars in aid over the last 50 years.<sup>ii</sup>

Thus, we have to avoid policies that replace local knowledge with top-down planning and pursue policies that allow people to plan, work, act and build their lives in their best interest.

And all of that is the moral rationale for limited government and free markets, and for the eschewal of large-scale, top-down planning and projects. Government and politics must see to the rule of law and reliable private property rights, promote free trade and leave space for the entrepreneurial spirit so that it can then largely get out of the way so that people can pursue their potential in a way fitting each of their gifts and life conditions.

The second topic of this presentation is the question of human rights.

Unfortunately, the answer to the question: "what are human rights?" is not self-evident. What you think human rights are depends on what you think human beings are. And exactly that -- the view of the human person -- has undergone a transformation, especially in the West. As we see all around us, there has been a turning away from a culture fundamentally based on the Judeo-Christian world view, firmly rooted in tradition and truth, to a secularized culture characterized by relativism, love of novelty and -- as the highest imperative -- freedom of choice. That has had far-reaching effects on how human rights are understood.

Based on the concept of the absolute autonomy of the individual -- freedom of choice carried to the extreme -- the "new human rights" are *transformative* and *liberationist*.

The most important among the new human rights are women's rights, children's rights and LGBT rights. And how are these new human rights transformative and liberationist? These rights demand a transformation in the understanding of what people *are* -- in order to re-define them as autonomous individuals who can change their very nature according to their unlimited

freedom of choice and thereby radically liberate themselves from the constraints of tradition and society.

Women are liberated from their children via their freedom to choose to abort their unborn children. Children are liberated from their parents via the right to freedom of choice that is attributed to them long before they are able to handle such supposed freedom. And LGBT people are liberated from physical reality itself via the right to determine their own gender identity in denial of the empirical fact that human beings are either men, or women.

The new human rights ideology is deeply destructive. It deconstructs human nature. It must remain a primary task of Christian political engagement to oppose this new human rights ideology with commitment and persistence -- and above all, with love.

And now I would like to turn to the next part of my presentation and say a few words about *global governance*, a political project that is closely connected to the new human rights idea.

In this age of globalization, global governance is in the air. We need global solutions for global problems, they say. The nation-state alone cannot solve these global problems, nor can it manage global interests, they say. Therefore “global governance” is needed, they say.

Now, what is global governance? No one knows exactly. My informal definition would be: “Global governance is the attempt to establish a global rule of law, not by instituting a ‘global government,’ a global state, but rather by building an ever more comprehensive network of international institutions and organizations that administer an ever growing body of international law that is binding on nation-states, and binding not only in their foreign policy but also in significant areas of their respective domestic policy as well.” The key is the development of a global rule of law, whereby, again, no one knows exactly what this global rule of law will look like in the end -- assuming an end should ever be reached at all.

Allow me to clarify here: I am not objecting to international cooperation and international agreements between and among democratically accountable nation-states. Neither am I questioning the value of international organizations that serve their democratically accountable member states. Unfortunately, however, the global governance agenda appears to be harboring much higher ambitions.

After all, the agenda is never-ending. Human rights must be guaranteed, poverty must be eradicated, misery must be done away with, and the planet must be sustainably protected. That’s why the global do-gooders need more power, in order to ensure *all* good things for *all* the peoples of the world.

And here, under the category of “all good things,” the new human rights come to the fore. The notion of global governance as it has developed so far, is, as I said, closely connected with the new concept of human rights that I was just describing. The global governance movement links human rights to the global development agenda. One can see that in countless projects, events and documents that have served as the milestones of the global governance movement.

But the new human rights, as I argued earlier, rest upon a relativistic foundation, a world view which denies not only the objective truth of a creator God, but also the existence of any objective truth at all. This opens human rights up to complete re-definition.

And who will undertake this re-definition? Those who hold political power. Once one has given up on the idea of objective truth valid for all, and embraced relativism, power – in principle if not in practice – can only be attained and maintained by force. Just as ominously, relativism offers no objective basis for limiting political power once it has been attained. After all, relativism recognizes no truth above the political authority and independent of it that could effectively limit its extent.

And with the global reach of communications, transportation, trade and ideas, the global rule of law expands geographically as well. Just as the power of politics to define human rights is unlimited, it also becomes impossible to limit the power of government – or of “governance” -- to a particular geographical area or a particular people. In the final analysis, global governance turns out not to arise out of a laudable desire to make life better for people the world over, but to be an unlimited arrogation of power that claims for itself – under the banner of universal human rights -- the competency to re-define truth and justice.<sup>iii</sup>

A Christian perspective on political engagement must resist such a power grab, especially in the age of globalization.

Now I would like to conclude my remarks with a plea for more international cooperation among Christians on issues of public life and political engagement.

As Christians in a globalized world we face many challenges. It’s up to us, in all humility and sobriety, to call the world back to the truth, in order to protect and promote the social and political achievements – such as liberty, the rule of law, and the respect for true human rights -- that have arisen in the world largely through Christianity. We must try to act as salt and light in the public and political realms, in the knowledge that the world will never be transformed by politics. We can only hope to help restrain evil enough to make more space for the good. It is a never ending task. And it will be different in each political and social context.

In undertaking this task we must make it clear that we are working for the good of all people and not lose ourselves in what we are against.

And wherever we are, we must think hard and long about we can best accomplish this in a manner respecting pluralism. We are not political conquerors. Jesus said, “My Kingdom is not of this world.” As the Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper said approximately a century ago, our vision of pluralism must be to seek a position of parity and not to seek a position of political or legal privilege. We must try to bring “the full weight of our convictions” to bear in public life while we seek at the same time to promote the conditions that will allow others to do the same.<sup>iv</sup>

All over the world the concepts of freedom, dignity, responsibility and justice are being re-defined – distorted and disfigured into the opposites of what they actually are. In order to be a blessing to our fellow human beings we must do what we can, under God’s Lordship, to retain and protect real freedom, dignity, responsibility and justice in the world. Now as ever and in this globalized world, a Christian approach to political engagement urgently demands close international cooperation among Christians in the public square.

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<sup>i</sup> Charles Murray, *Coming Apart: The State of White America, 1960-2010*, (New York: Crown Forum, 2012): 281-82.

<sup>ii</sup> See Arthur C. Brooks, *The Road to Freedom: How to Win the Fight for Free Enterprise* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

<sup>iii</sup> The sections on human rights and on global governance are based almost entirely on Todd Huizinga, *The New Totalitarian Temptation: Global Governance and the Crisis of Democracy in Europe*, to be published by Encounter Books in February 2016. It contains many excerpts from the draft manuscript, to be used only with permission of Todd Huizinga and Encounter Books.

<sup>iv</sup> See Jonathan Chaplin, “The Full Weight of Our Convictions:’ The Point of Kuyperian Pluralism,” *cardus.ca*, November 1, 2013. <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/4069/the-full-weight-of-our-convictions-the-point-of-kuyperian-pluralism/>.