
PUBLIC FAITH IN ACTION

**How to Think Carefully,
Engage Wisely,
and Vote with Integrity**

**MIROSLAV VOLF AND
RYAN McANNALLY-LINZ**



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*To Jürgen Moltmann,
for your ninetieth birthday*

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INTRODUCTION

This book grew out of a series of Facebook posts designed to help guide Christians in the United States through the maze of issues that were debated during the presidential election in 2012. The posts found global resonance (they were even published independently in an Italian translation), and they did so partly because they, like the present book, addressed the US situation but weren't tied too closely to it. Instead, they offered a Christian perspective on issues of interest in many parts of the world. The posts appeared on Miroslav Volf's Facebook page, but Ryan McAnnally-Linz was closely involved in their drafting. When Brazos Press expressed interest in publishing them in revised and expanded form, we decided to coauthor the book.

As its title suggests, this work is a companion volume to *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (2011). The goal of *A Public Faith*, which sums up in accessible form results from many years of Miroslav's research and for which Ryan served as research assistant, was to explore the place and the role of followers of Christ in pluralistic societies today. It argued against both exclusion of religions from public space and saturation of public space by a single religion. It sketched a vision of a publicly engaged Christian faith that affirms pluralism as a political project, and it argued that the Christian faith's deepest

convictions support just such an approach to public engagement.¹ The present volume continues where the first ends. It explores what kind of virtues and commitments should inform the public engagement of the followers of Christ. Hence the title: *Public Faith in Action*. For responsible public action we need what these two books together provide: a vision of the place and the role of Christians in today's pluralistic societies and an articulation of the relevant virtues and commitments that should guide them.

Before you read the book, it's important for us to clarify what we mean by "public." As we see it, the word *public* doesn't name an isolated part of human life that can be dropped into its own little basket next to other baskets for family life, church life, club life, and so on. The public can't be neatly separated out and dealt with apart from the rest of life, as we might separate the whites from the colors when we do laundry. That said, the public doesn't swallow up the rest of life either. It's not just another word for the whole of life. Rather, the public is one dimension or aspect of human life, the one that involves issues and institutions concerning the good of all, the common good. The public is life seen as life *together* in society. Correspondingly, public faith is faith concerned with responsible shaping of our common life and common world.²

Every part of life has a public side. All of life is shot through with public significance. Sometimes this public side is obvious, as when a person votes or runs for office. Other times, it's harder to discern but is there nonetheless, as when someone decides whether to send her children to private rather than public school. Even the shape of our most intimate desires says something about and makes a difference for our common life.

Public life isn't just for politicians or celebrities. Each and every one of us lives a public life because every life has a public dimension running through it. Every life contributes, however faintly, to public life writ large: governments, economies, educational institutions, media, and the like. So it's not just that anyone and everyone *can* engage in public life; we all inescapably do so. To take

an extreme example, when devoted Christians left their homes and families and possessions to dwell as solitary monks in the deserts of third-century Egypt, they saw themselves as withdrawing from the “world.” But even that withdrawal was a public act. It communicated just how far, in their opinion, the society of the time fell short of the demands of the gospel. If today you decided to give up on “politics”—to stop voting, to quit reading the headlines, to studiously avoid conversations about taxes and health care, to hunker down and just go about your business as best you could—you wouldn’t be entirely escaping from public life. Rather, you would be living a certain kind of public life, a limited, largely passive, and likely irresponsible public life, but a public life nonetheless.

This book is primarily about *active* public life, not about the passive public life we might lead by saying nothing and doing nothing about things of common concern. This book is about the public lives of ordinary disciples of Jesus Christ and the public goods those lives should promote. It’s about the Christ-centered convictions that should shape our judgments and also the Christ-like character that should shine in our actions. It’s about faithfulness at the ballot box and at the neighborhood association meeting. It’s about the big issues of national and international affairs—migration, tax policies, war and peace—and about the small contributions to a flourishing public life we make with our attitudes, our purchases, and our conversations.

The book is divided into three parts. Part 1 discusses the big-picture *commitments* that orient faithful Christian public life. Reading this part first will help you put later chapters in context, but we’ve written the book so that you can dip into chapters one by one if there are some questions that interest you more than others.

Part 2 examines the *convictions* that should shape our engagement with specific matters of public significance. Some of these chapters contain fairly definite recommendations about public policy, but their overall purpose is not to lay out a policy platform; rather, it is to sketch out how life together and its institutional

implementations might look today if they reflected, however broadly, the coming kingdom of God. Each chapter in part 2 starts with a succinct formulation of a relevant conviction, something we can keep in mind as we advocate for a policy or assess a candidate for a public office. The main body of the chapter seeks to explain and justify the conviction. The chapter ends with a section called “Room for Debate” that presents questions that remain open even if you’re convinced by the rest of the chapter. These questions show that there are usually several steps between the convictions we’re discussing and the sort of proposals you’re likely to hear on the campaign trail.

Part 3 considers some of the virtues, or qualities of *character*, that we ought to develop and live out in our public lives. Faithfulness to Christ is about more than having the right beliefs and doing the right things. It’s about being formed into a certain pattern of character so that we become witnesses to Christ in the whole of our lives.

This book could have been a lot longer than it is. It covers quite a bit of ground in a few pages. We have intentionally kept it short—with each chapter offering a quick guide through some of the most important issues facing the world today. There is, of course, much more that can be (and has been) said about everything we’ve written on. We’ve done our best to give you a solid foundation for thinking through these issues, but reading this book won’t make you an expert on any of them. To help get you started if you want to dig deeper into any of the subjects we discuss, we’ve provided a short guide at the end of each chapter, an annotated list of a few articles and books on the chapter’s subject (most of which were prepared by a pair of extraordinary researchers, Ryan Darr and Toni Alimi). We hope you’ll pick up a couple of the resources on these lists as you continue to explore what it means to put your public faith into action.

We’ve written this book from within particular contexts. For instance, we both reside in the Northeast of the United States,

we both have lived in non-Western countries, and we both come from and belong to streams within the Protestant movement in Christianity. These contexts have inevitably shaped what we write. That's as it must be. To speak as a human being is to speak from a particular place at a particular time. To author a wide-ranging book such as *Public Faith in Action* is also to write as a nonexpert. That, too, is as it must be. We live in an exceedingly complex world, and knowledge about it is highly specialized. Public engagement as citizens of modern democracies, however, requires us to know what bearing Christian faith has on all aspects of life. We are all amateurs when it comes to at least some aspects of public life.

Writing a book constrained by limits of both location and expertise is a risky, open-ended venture, one that invites readers to join the endeavor—to interpret the text from their angles and for their places, to supplement, to amend, and even to contradict. More generally, understanding any text or any speech is not a matter of seeing a fixed, unchanging essence that the words express but rather a question of “knowing how to ‘go on,’” as Rowan Williams puts it, echoing the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951). To understand is to be able to interact, to carry a conversation forward.³ In writing this book, our goal is not to end a conversation but to enrich it, not to achieve passive submission but to invite critical discussion.

We hope that our reflections will be relevant and helpful for people trying to serve Christ in many different places and situations. It is, however, up to *you*, the reader, to discern how our arguments and stances relate to your communities as well as to discern things to which limitations of context and expertise, and even our sinfulness, have blinded us. Take this book as an invitation to conversation. If you're not convinced by something we say, try to convince us (and others). If you are convinced, tell us (and others) what it means for you and your communities. Above all, take the book as an invitation to action: see what happens when you follow Christ into public engagement.

PART 1

COMMITMENTS

1

CHRIST THE CENTER AND NORM

A basic commitment underlies this book: Christian faith has an inalienable public dimension. Christians aren't Christ's followers just in their private and communal lives; they are Christ's followers in their public and political lives as well. Christ must be the center and norm for Christian public engagement because Christ and his Spirit are at work, not just in our hearts, families, and churches, but also in our nations and the entire world. We don't need to waste words defending this commitment; most Christians today embrace it. But it is important to be clear about what the commitment means, for it both sets the course of Christian public engagement and places limits on it.

At first glance Jesus Christ seems a remarkably odd choice for the role of determining the shape of our political lives. He calls "blessed" those who are meek, the pure of heart, and the persecuted (Matt. 5:5, 8, 10). He stoops down to wash his disciples' feet (John 13:1–17), he often shies away from public attention (e.g., Matt. 8:4; Mark 1:43–45), and he rebukes his followers for trying

to use the sword (the classic symbol of political power) to rescue him from an unjust arrest (Matt. 26:52; Luke 22:51; John 18:11). His whole way of speaking, his bearing, and his mannerisms often seem unworldly, more saintly than kingly. And his message seems, frankly, too radical to apply to political life. “Turn to them the other cheek,” he says (Matt. 5:39 NIV). “Do not judge” (Matt. 7:1). “Love your enemies” (Matt. 5:44). How could any of that possibly have something relevant to say to the rough-and-tumble, publicity-seeking, deal-making world of public life and engagement?

On closer examination, however, Jesus’s life and message are unmistakably public, even political, though not in the usual sense of the term. After all, the core of Jesus’s preaching is that “the kingdom of God has come near” (Matt. 4:17; Mark 1:15). Whatever else it might be, *kingdom* is surely a political term. In line with the political character of the kingdom, the book of Revelation portrays the final advent of God’s reign as the “holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God” to be established on earth (Rev. 21:2). We get our word *political* from the Greek word for “city” in that verse (*polis*).

Christ, the Spirit, and the Kingdom

On its own, Jesus’s delivering the message of the kingdom wouldn’t justify our making *Jesus himself* the norm for public engagement. Couldn’t Jesus have been just a prophet of the kingdom, merely sketching a vision of it, or a philosopher of the kingdom, merely explaining and justifying its constitution? Or might he be an example for us to follow? In fact, he is more than that. The kingdom Christ proclaimed is inseparable from who he was during his ministry and crucifixion and who he continues to be after his resurrection. Jesus insisted on a close tie between himself and the kingdom. Rejecting the charge that he cast out demons by Satan’s power, he said, “If it is by the finger of God that I cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come to you” (Luke 11:20).

The kingdom has come in Jesus's own activity. You cannot have the kingdom without having Jesus Christ; you cannot have Jesus Christ without having the kingdom. Consequently, his entire life is of public import.

As Jürgen Moltmann has argued in *The Crucified God*, Jesus's "way to the cross" was a path of conflict with the religious and political rulers of his day, who saw his teaching, his ministry, and his very life as a threat.¹ From Herod's desperate attempt to kill the infant Christ to the Romans crucifying him for insurrection under the mocking sign, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews" (Matt. 27:37), the powers that he considered him a problem to be dealt with, violently if need be. Expanding on Moltmann's thesis, Michael Welker has shown that Christ was crucified under the auspices of a broader set of public institutions and agents—not just religion and politics but also law and public opinion.² Their role in the crucifixion reveals just how susceptible to corruption these structures of human life are. Christ's entering the conflict with them, making the conflict part of his mission, and engaging in it in his own way marked by nonviolence brings the corruption of the public structures of human life under God's judgment.

The way the conflict between Christ and public institutions and agents of his day turned out might seem to leave little room for Christ to serve as the norm for political engagements. After all, he seemed to have been defeated. But in fact, the conflict serves as a model for his followers in their own times and places. For Christ's death on the cross was a *central victory* in a series of victories over corrupted forms of human life. In the Acts of the Apostles, we read that "God raised him up" and that he now sits "at the right hand of God" and pours out the Spirit so that his mission can continue in the world (Acts 2:24, 33).

Christ, then, is alive and at work in the world through the Spirit. His death did not expose him as a false pretender to kingly rule, nor did it bring his rule to an end. To the contrary, Jesus's resurrection and ascension confirm and establish his rule in a new way. Christ

is exalted into universal lordship, a lordship that is “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion” (Eph. 1:21). In the image of 1 Corinthians 15, he governs the kingdom until its eschatological fulfillment, when he will hand it over to the Father. As the conflict-heavy language of this passage (“after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power” [v. 24]) and Colossians 2:15 suggests, Christ’s mission remains one of resistance to sin, unmasking the corruptions and pretensions of earthly powers. But it is also one of bringing about foretastes of the kingdom in history. Christ works not only against but also within institutions and agents concerned with common life. Sin corrupts them, but Christ is at work redeeming them.

The kingdom that Jesus brought near is radically different from run-of-the-mill political regimes. It wasn’t established as one more kingdom alongside others in the way that Rome was founded in 753 BC and then struggled for supremacy with Carthage and other political powers. Nor did it succeed other regimes in the way that one government administration follows another. Rather, the kingdom is the ultimate goal of all history and all creation. It is the fulfillment to which everything is being drawn. It is the indescribable future when God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28).³ This kingdom is not only final (it can never be undone) and universal (it will extend across the whole creation), but it is also all-encompassing. It *includes* but also far *exceeds* all that we usually classify as “public,” its reach extending from our most intimate desires to the fate of the entire cosmos.

Christ and Public Engagement

All this is not to say, however, that there is no difference between Christ’s work in the church and in the wider world. Karl Barth (1886–1968) provides a helpful image for understanding what the universal work of Christ means for the relationship between Christians, the church, and political societies. Christ, he says, is like the

center of two concentric circles. The smaller circle is the Christian community, which knows that Christ is the center and aims to live in light of that knowledge. The larger circle is the civil community, which has Christ as its center even though it may not know it. Christ's rule in the outer circle is neither identical with nor completely different from his rule in the inner circle, but it is analogous to it.⁴ As a *community*, the church is of major public significance, a point many theologians have made in recent decades. But the edges of the church are not the limits of Christian public engagement. As participants in the civil community, Christians strive to bring it into greater conformity to the character and rule of Christ.

Christians ought to be active in the “outer circle” because *Christ calls us to follow him in our whole lives and to work in the power of the Spirit wherever he is at work*. Throughout the Gospel stories of his life, Jesus calls people to follow him, to orient their lives around him, in ways that leave no part of their lives untouched. Discipleship affects family life (Matt. 10:37). It affects relationships with wealth and possessions (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13). It affects work (Mark 1:16–17). It affects social life (Matt. 5:42–48). And so on. The point is: if we are committed to following Jesus in the power of the Spirit, we are committed to letting him determine the character of our whole lives—no exceptions. We are his disciples in our judgments, words, and deeds that affect the common good, just as we are his disciples in every other aspect of our lives.

Commitment to public engagement as Christ's disciples draws us to the Scriptures as the touchstone for discerning Christ at work. Christ in the world cannot be different from Christ in the Scriptures. For *Christ always remains true to himself*: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Heb. 13:8). His character as we see it in Scripture is consistent with his character always and everywhere. Granted, we should expect Christ to surprise us—not just because we can never fully comprehend him but also because the situations in which he is at work are changing. To give the same talk to two different audiences is to give two different talks; to act

in the same way in two different situations is to act in two different ways. Nevertheless, we can be confident that Christ will never turn on a dime and become someone antithetical to the Christ we see in Scripture. For example, in market economies he won't command acquisitiveness instead of generosity; in bureaucratized social-service systems he won't say that compassion is obsolete; and to citizens under threat from terrorists he won't claim that it's just fine to hate those enemies instead of loving them.

Putting all these observations together results in the following line of thought: Because (a) Christ is working everywhere bringing about anticipations of the kingdom of God, (b) we are called to follow wherever Christ is working, and (c) the character of Christ as testified to in Scripture faithfully expresses his character as it is always and everywhere, we can conclude that (d) *the person of Jesus as we encounter him in Scripture and discern him at work today through the Spirit is the norm for our public engagement.*

Although Jesus brought the kingdom of God in his life, death, and resurrection, the kingdom will be fully actualized only at the end of history. We live, therefore, within a field of tension: the kingdom is in some sense actual “now,” but in another sense it is still “not yet.” The transition to the full actuality of the kingdom of God is not a matter of gradual progress within history as we know it. Rather, the change is so stark that Scripture talks about it as a “new creation” that God makes out of the “old” one (2 Cor. 5:17; Isa. 65:17). Consequently, we shouldn't think of any human community, whether the church or a civic community, as progressively “expanding” the kingdom of God on earth, as some conquering force might. For the most part, Christians have rightly abandoned the false dream, associated with progressivist accounts of history, that if we just keep working at it, eventually, one stone at a time, we will build the New Jerusalem. According to the book of Revelation, the holy city must *come down from God* (Rev. 21:2).

Our primary stance toward the kingdom, therefore, ought to be one of hope, an eager expectation that God will bring to

completion the kingdom work begun in Christ's incarnation and continued through the Spirit. To hope isn't merely to dream, of course. To hope is to live into the reality of the kingdom that we hope for. That kingdom is the fundamental aim of human existence and the deepest longing of human hearts. Those who follow Christ in the power of the Spirit should let it determine the character of their lives and their projects. Even though we cannot make the kingdom arrive, our lives and our world, including our political societies and global realities, can reflect some of its character. In the next chapter, we will briefly explore that character and how we can reflect it.

Resources for Further Reflection

Introductory Reading

- Evans, Rachel Held. "Are the Teachings of Jesus Too Radical for Public Policy?" *Rachel Held Evans* (blog), April 22, 2009. <http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/jesusandtorture?rq=public>. Prompted by discussions with friends about poverty and torture, Evans critiques the tendency to let other scriptural passages trump Jesus's teachings in Christian debates about public issues but also wonders whether Jesus's teachings might actually be too radical for earthly public life.
- Stringfellow, William. *A Private and Public Faith*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1999. Stringfellow makes a compelling argument that the task of Christian life is to discern and follow the Word of God (Christ) in the common life of the world.
- Volf, Miroslav. *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good*. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011. This book collects and synthesizes Miroslav's reflections on the stance that followers of Christ should take toward public life, arguing in particular against idleness and coerciveness and for thoughtful engagement.

Advanced Study

- Barth, Karl. “The Christian Community and the Civil Community.” In *Community, Church, and State: Three Essays*, 149–89. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004. One of the most influential theologians of the twentieth century offers an account of the relationship between the church and civil communities and a vision for responsible, faithful Christian public engagement.
- Mathewes, Charles. *A Theology of Public Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Building in particular on the thought of St. Augustine, Mathewes argues that public engagement enriches Christian faith.
- Moltmann, Jürgen. *Theology of Hope*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993. Moltmann’s groundbreaking book reoriented theological reflection toward the expectation of the coming kingdom of God. It concludes with reflections on the public implications of Christian hope.
- Tanner, Kathryn. “Politics.” In *Christ the Key*, 207–46. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010. In line with the title of her book, Tanner argues that Christ’s ways of relating to the Father and the Spirit, as well as to other humans, are key for understanding what Christian engagement with political communities should look like.