Christian Ethics: U.S. Foreign Policy, Abortion, and Racial & Ethnic Injustice
Faith, Politics, and Justice – HANDOUT
Mako Nagasawa, Harvard University 10/22/04

Issues in the United States We’ll Consider
1. Foreign Policy
2. Abortion
3. Racial & Ethnic Justice

What We Look for in Scripture: Basic Attitudes Towards...
1. Other Nations
2. Wealth, Justice and Mercy
3. Minorities Within the Nation

Evaluating Church History:
The Early Church (33 – 313 AD): A Transnational Reconciliation Movement
1. Other Nations: Transnational, Reconciling
2. Wealth: Anti-materialistic, Justice and Mercy
3. Minorities Within: Inclusive, Politically plural

The Medieval European Church (313–1600 AD): A Gradual Convergence with Empire
1. Nationalistic, Imperialistic
2. Materialistic
3. Exclusive, Politically theocratic

The Lutheran & Reformed Trajectories (1517–present): State–Church Unions
1. Nationalistic, Imperialistic
2. Materialistic
3. Exclusive, Politically theocratic

The Radical Reformation Trajectory (1525–present): Counter–Cultural Societies
1. Not sure: too small
2. Anti-materialistic, Justice and Mercy
3. Inclusive, Politically plural

The Contemporary Catholic Church (1960–present): Transnational Catholicism
1. Leaning towards Transnational
2. Leaning towards Justice and Mercy
3. Not sure: too large and varied

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1 e.g. Mt.5:38 – 48; 6:14 – 15; 28:16 – 20; Lk.4:14 – 30; 6:20 – 49
2 e.g. Lk.12:13-34; 14:1-24; 18:15-19:10
3 e.g. Lk.9:51-56; 10:25 – 37; 14:12-14; Rom.11
4 I examine European Christianity because (1) it has the longest history of where ‘Christianity’ came into political power, and (2) it has had the biggest influence on U.S. religious and political culture.
The Religious – Political Cultures of the United States

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Issues in the United States Interacting with Jesus’ Teaching
1. Foreign Policy: Other Nations, Wealth
2. Abortion: Minorities Within, Wealth
3. Racial & Ethnic Justice: Minorities Within, Wealth

Select Bibliography

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Political Science/History/Sociology
- Michael Klare, Resource Wars: The New Landscape of Global Conflict
- Kevin Phillips, Wealth and Democracy
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- Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West, The Future of the Race
- Robert Wuthnow, God and Mammon
- Michael Emerson and Christian Smith, Divided by Faith
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Introduction
When I was an undergrad, I majored in Public Policy, which was a blend of political science, economics, sociology, ethics, and statistics. I was hoping at one point to be involved in educational policy. The political involvement my wife and I find ourselves in now is about Boston public schools and the zoning debates, which I’ll touch on later.

We’re here to talk about ‘Faith, Politics, and Justice: Do They Go Together or Are They Like Oil and Water?’ Polite society tells you to avoid these issues. And there’s no simple answer. This was the most vexing question ever in the history of the Christian church, and I’m going to attempt to give an overview in about 40 minutes!

Let me say in advance that I am not going to tell you who I am voting for or who I think you should vote for. I think Christians can vote for different candidates for various reasons. What I want to do is to help you develop a basic Christian theological framework for understanding politics and political action. I want to give you some basic framework for understanding where Christians went wrong in history. Then I want to talk in more detail about three concrete issues.

To help us see the overall trajectory of Christians and politics, turn to the handout I gave you. What we’re going to look at is the teaching of Jesus and activity of the early church around three basic attitudes: attitude towards other nations, or people who are not your people; attitude towards wealth, justice, and mercy; and attitude towards minorities within your nation, or other people who are in your society. Then we’re going to apply our findings to the topics of foreign policy, abortion, and racial and ethnic justice.

REVIEW HANDOUT

Foreign Policy:
The two main kingdom principles in evaluating our role in foreign policy are transnational reconciliation and anti-materialism for the sake of justice and mercy. Consider: Reconciliation would have been an important move after World War I. But unfortunately the U.S. joined the European powers in taking vengeance on Germany and tightening control over the world scene as arranged by the imperial powers. Woodrow Wilson was a Christian, but he fell into that trap. This set the stage for World War II and the very bloody revolutionary movements around the world.

After Sep.11th, President Bush asked for war powers to invade Afghanistan, and only one person in Congress, Barbara Lee, Democrat from Oakland, voted against it. She also voted against going to war in Iraq. She is an African-American Christian. I believe not only that history will vindicate her as being right pragmatically, but that Jesus will vindicate her over Bush and Kerry as being right theologically. To be a Christian in politics is to seek peaceful, diplomatic solutions, to work against the spread of militant nationalist ideologies of all forms, and not to launch one nation against another. But I don’t want to seem idealistic, as if every global conflict can be solved without bloodshed. The goal is not necessarily to solve problems, although we want to do that as well. The goal is witness. Allegiance to Jesus also means allegiance first to his people around the world as an independent community, and to the mission of that community, which is to call all people to Jesus. For that reason, I don’t see how we can side against another people.

There’s a bumper sticker that says ‘When Jesus said love your enemies, he probably meant don’t kill them.’ Jesus calls us to love our enemies, care for all people, to seek reconciliation, even on the global level. After Sep.11th, President Bush could have spoken of these things. He would have lost his job, without a doubt, but he would not have oversimplified evil, he would not have contributed to more casualties, he would have been able to spend money in more constructive ways. He might have won a spiritual and moral victory, here and abroad. Here is where faith and politics are like oil and water. You can be involved in public service, but you cannot ultimately serve two masters. You cannot ultimately serve the community of the transnational church and its mission of multi-national, multi-ethnic reconciliation and serve the community
of the nation with its tendencies towards self-interest and ethnocentrism. As a Christian, you can only go so high and for so long in national politics. You should be involved; you can even make your career one of public service. But your upward climb will be limited because Jesus calls you to hold in your heart more people’s interests than the ones who voted for you.

‘Patriotism’ in all its various forms elevates ‘our people’ over ‘other people.’ One person I’ve talked to admitted that his fundamental feeling is that one American life is worth more than 10 Iraqi lives. ‘Patriotism’ also tends to make killing others acceptable while at the same time making dying for peace and reconciliation appear unreasonable. These two ethical moves alone are crucial steps away from Jesus’ ethics. Jesus put ‘our people’ and ‘other people’ on the same level and called us to love all humanity; he made dying for peace and reconciliation perfectly acceptable, but killing unacceptable.

Let me flesh out why foreign policy will always be a place of conflict for Christians keeping in mind Jesus’ teaching on wealth. Unfortunately, Christians in the U.S., and both Bush the Protestant and Kerry the Catholic, are defending materialism by ‘defending democracy.’ Although I do think the U.S. has done some positive things in the world, I basically agree with the critics that U.S. foreign policy is largely guided by a ravenous desire for oil and global dominance over resources, for example in Vietnam in 1965. The discovery of oil off the coast of Vietnam drove the Vietnam War, which Martin Luther King, Jr. rightly criticized. Oil and other natural resources is why the U.S. has set up dictators who oppress people but welcome American companies. This has been true for decades under both Republicans and Democrats but especially true under Bush and Cheney who come from oil families.

George Bush Sr. once said to other heads of state while he was President, “The standard of living of the U.S. is not open for debate.” This materialism has been clearly adopted by most politicians including his son. In early 2001, Vice President Dick Cheney drew up a national energy plan adopted by this Bush administration. The Cheney plan was criticized for proposing drilling in Alaska and also because Cheney got help from Enron in writing the plan. But it also has huge foreign policy implications. In essence, the Cheney report makes three key points: (1) The U.S. needs more oil. (2) The U.S. needs to get oil from new sources in Central Asia and Africa. (3) The U.S. cannot rely on market forces alone to gain access to these supplies.

So, as part of the so-called ‘War on Terror,’ the U.S. has focused military attention on terrorism in oil-rich countries. People who suffer but have nothing to offer the U.S., like the Palestinians, typically get no attention. On the other hand, in 2001, the U.S. gave a $100 million grant to Colombia not to help with its civil war or fight drugs, but to guard the Cano Limon oil pipeline from terrorist attack. This happens time after time. Now it’s happening in Nigeria and Central Asia. If the U.S. gets oil from some oppressive government, the U.S. will have friendly relations with them. I am not advocating war at all, but I am concerned that the U.S. has friendly relations with Saudi Arabia, despite the fact that Saudi Arabia is more repressive than Afghanistan, despite the fact that Saudi Arabia propagates the most extreme and dangerous form of Islam (Wahhabism), despite the fact that Saudi Arabia finances some of the most reactionary madrassas schools around the world, despite the fact that Osama bin Ladin is Saudi and maintains all kinds of connections with rich Saudis (not with Afghans who have no money), despite the fact that 15 of the 18 hijackers were Saudi, despite the fact that Saudi Arabia has gross economic extremes of a wealthy oil class and everyone else. Why? Because Saudi Arabia possesses 25% of the world’s known oil reserves. So we support countries who give us oil, despite terrible governments and human rights abuses. And finally we actually support terrorism against governments that don’t want to sell us oil, as in Venezuela. Christians should be the first to point out hypocrisy like this.

5 Back in the 1965, a massive petroleum deposit was discovered off the coast of Southeast Asia, namely Vietnam. American oil companies rushed in. Henry Cabot Lodge, LBJ’s ambassador to Vietnam, said here in Boston in 1965, ‘He who holds or has influence in Vietnam can affect the future of the Philippines and Formosa to the east, Thailand and Burma with their huge rice surpluses to the west, rubber, oil, and tin to the south. Vietnam thus does not exist in a geographical vacuum – from it large storehouses of wealth and population can be influenced and undermined.’ Thus, the U.S. must hold these areas ‘at any cost.’ The Vietnam War and our destabilizing SEA governments was our attempt to do this. Martin Luther King, Jr. rightly criticized this on Christian grounds.
Jesus regards the standard of living in the U.S. as very open for debate, and, in fact, expendable for the sake of his mission bringing transnational reconciliation across the globe. It is always our calling to look to the interests of others. That is why foreign policy will always be an area of conflict and criticism for Christians. Being faithful to Jesus’ vision for his people and his mission through them will eventually – not at every level, but eventually – bring us into conflict with national interests.

Abortion:
The second issue I want to touch on is abortion. Abortion raises principle number 3: the treatment of minorities, in this case the unborn. Unless you side with Peter Singer and believe that infanticide is okay, we clearly believe that a woman who gives birth to a child and then kills that child in the toilet or in a garbage dump is guilty of murder. Our legal system already recognizes that. But what is that same baby one day before it is born? My daughter was born on October 24, 2002 by a c-section, which is an invasive procedure designed to bring her out of the womb alive. But if an invasive procedure was done one day earlier designed to bring her out of the womb dead, would that be okay? I don’t think so. Whether or not that baby is in utero or outside its mother means little to nothing from an ethics standpoint. An embryo can develop outside of a mother’s womb for a while, and the development of artificial wombs will one day make the concept of ‘birth’ irrelevant but the concept of ‘when did this life begin’ will be extremely relevant.

I and many other Christians believe that life begins at conception, for two main reasons. First, because on a scientific level, it is arbitrary to try to break it up. The development of a human life is best described as an unfolding process from fertilization to the first cell division to the formation of organs to birth to puberty all the way to old age. Second, because in the Judeo-Christian tradition, you can’t ultimately separate the body and the soul. In Genesis, God made the physical world good, including the human body. And God affirms the physical by the bodily resurrection of Jesus, who is now in a body that death and decay cannot touch. That means that body and soul go together, in creation and in resurrection. That strongly suggests that as soon as a life is physically conceived, it has a soul. Indeed, a very early church document called The Didache, or ‘the teaching’, says, ‘You shall not murder a child by abortion nor kill that which is begotten’ (2:2). It’s not considered New Testament Scripture, but it is significant for historical purposes that a fair number of the earliest Christians considered abortion to be wrong, and they addressed it when the Christian faith spread to places where abortion was practiced.

The trimester system established by Roe v. Wade is utterly unscientific. There is nothing special about the 3 month periods of a full term pregnancy. What is scientific is that we know the fetus’ nervous system is identifiable at 23 days. And a common pragmatic consensus can be built around the idea that a brain and brain activity constitutes a person unequivocally. I believe that saying ‘life begins at conception’ isn’t enough because of a consistency problem in ethical thinking. If you cut off my arm, there is no legal and social question that I’m still a person. If you shut down my nervous system, it’s not clear what I am from a social and legal point of view. I don’t want to debate the finer points of that. I am just pointing out that for all intents and purposes, legally and socially, a functioning brain and nervous system unequivocally constitutes a person. At the other end of life, in cases of people in vegetative states, it’s not clear that having a body on life support without a functioning brain is a life. So back to the beginning of life: I think the outer ethical limit of an abortion is 23 days, unless there is potential physical harm to the mother. You don’t have to stand in a faith tradition to say that, and that’s why Christians ought to propose this. This may not be completely satisfying to those Christians who believe that life begins at conception, but I think Christians who argue that aren’t considering the case at the other end of life where you may again have a physical body without a functioning nervous system and brain. So my position has more consistency with the ethical problem at the other end of life: We are in fact unsure of what a person without a nervous system is from a social, legal, and ethical standpoint; and other values enter in to the decisions, like the relational cost and financial cost of maintaining a person’s body alive in that state.

On a policy level, we enter into competing values and the political pluralism with other faiths and no faith. Are there cases where a mother’s rights do outweigh the life of the unborn? For her safety, I can agree with that. For her reproductive rights, that involves assumptions that I disagree with but I’m cautious of just sweeping aside. If abortion is illegal, then would it just happen anyway under unsafe conditions? I think
so. In abortion, there are immediate competing ethical values having to do with the mother, which is not true with embryonic stem cell research, where there are no immediate competing ethical values. So as we start thinking on a policy level, we need to factor in these competing values.

But that’s not all. Abortion also raises principle number 2 – justice and mercy and anti-materialism. Studies put out by Sojourners and Professor Glen Stassen indicate that abortion rates have gone up since President Bush has taken office. In 2000, the incidence of abortion was at a 24 year low and was declining. Since Bush has taken office, abortion has climbed to alarming levels. About 52,000 more abortions happened in 2002 than was predicted by the previous decline. Why?

First, two thirds of women who abort say they cannot afford a child (Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life Web site). Average real incomes have decreased, and for seven years the minimum wage has not been raised to match inflation. With less income, many prospective mothers fear another mouth to feed. Second, half of all women who abort say they do not have a reliable mate (Minnesota Citizens Concerned for Life). Men who are jobless usually do not marry, and unemployment rates have increased. Not since Hoover had there been a net loss of jobs during a presidency until the current administration. In three of 16 states with available data, marriages increased in 2002 than in 2001, and in those states abortion rates decreased. In the 16 states overall, there were 16,392 fewer marriages than the year before, and 7,869 more abortions. As male unemployment increases, marriages fall and abortion rises. Third, women worry about health care for themselves and their children. Since 5.2 million more people have no health insurance now than before this presidency – with women of childbearing age overrepresented in those 5.2 million – abortion increases.

The U.S. Catholic Bishops warned us that this would happen if support for families with children was cut back. What does this tell us? Abortion and economic policies for jobs and health care are not separate issues; they’re related. So Christians need to get behind more consistent and coherent proposals to care for life at all its stages, and we need to pressure both Republicans and Democrats to do so, too.

Racial and Ethnic Justice:
The third issue I want to touch on is racial and ethnic justice. Obviously this is directly related to attitudes towards issue 2 (wealth) and issue 3 (attitudes towards minorities within a nation). Racial and ethnic injustice is almost without a doubt the most problematic aspect of American history and politics. During World War II, my dad and his family were interned in the Japanese American camps. They lost their family hotel business, were humiliated in the camps, had to start over in Skid Row when they got out, and experienced deep family problems due to the stress of rebuilding their lives. My grandfather died at 58 of a heart attack. In the early 1990’s, the government issued a formal apology for this and gave each survivor $20,000. That hardly covered the wages lost during the internment, and it failed to consider the people who died in the intervening 45 years, but the principle and language was called restitution. It wasn’t pity, it was restitution; it wasn’t welfare, it was restitution. In Canada, Christians have actually contributed politically to the giving of lands back to Native Canadians. Restitution. In South Africa, some headway has been made through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Yet no agency or representative of the United States has ever offered restitution to minorities for America’s racist past. No public official to my knowledge has given a detailed accounting of the evils of racism, or published a study of the institutionalization of white power, or formally apologized for land seizure, genocide, slavery and segregation. Instead, such studies are done by universities – this explains the antagonistic culture between liberal-leaning universities and conservative government officials and constituents. And policymakers in the U.S. have instead developed welfare, which is based on the language of pity, which therefore makes it morally optional.

In Scripture, Zaccheus in Luke 19 is the chief tax-collector who comes to Jesus and gives 50% of his wealth away, and promises to give restitution: 4 times the amount he has defrauded anyone. On the personal level, Jesus calls his people to care about reconciliation through restitution, not through merely through verbal apology. On the policy level, we are protecting certain minority groups from being further marginalized. And because capitalism has the weakness of exacerbating historic injustice, restitution must happen in some form. Once we agree on that principle, we can disagree about the finer points of how and where that should happen. For example, I appreciate Bill Clinton’s ‘empowerment zone’ idea to help
distressed communities start local businesses, or individual development accounts (IDA’s) to help people save for college or a first home, or other welfare-to-work programs.

Does that mean you have to be for ‘affirmative action’? No, but you do have to be consistent: The public school zone where I live is the worst school zone in Boston. Why? It’s complex. All over the country, schools are funded by local property taxes, and residential segregation divides the funds unequally. This was severe in Boston, so in the 70’s, Boston tried bussing white and black kids into each others’ schools; that caused race riots and white flight out of the city. Now, the majority of students in Boston public schools are black. They still get bussed from one end of the city to the other; kids spend up to 2 hours on a bus everyday; they’re antsy. Meanwhile parents cannot get locally involved and do all the invisible things they would do because their kids’ schools are too far away. The average tenure of a new teacher in the Boston public school system is 2 years. The U.S. claims to be a meritocracy where it just matters how hard you work. That is simply not true. Jonathan Kozol shows how unjust public schooling is in the U.S., in books like *Savage Inequalities* [and especially his latest book *Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America*, my note, 2006]. Many studies show that the single most accurate predictor, and often the single predictor, of people’s future socio-economic success is your parents’ income.

On the aggregate, GPA, SAT score, everything varies according to parents’ income (starting with Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America*, 1977). In effect, we have affirmative action all over the public school system, starting with preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school! It’s just – largely – for middle and upper white class people! And maybe some wealthy Asian-Americans, too. And that’s at a stage of kids’ development that is much more significant than college. So if you have strong emotions against affirmative action for ethnic minorities at the college level, that’s fine IF AND ONLY IF YOU HAVE FAR STRONGER EMOTIONS against affirmative action for white kids at the preschool, kindergarten, and elementary school levels!

That’s why race and structural, institutionalized racism continue to affect many people’s lives, in terms of how long you can expect to live, how much environmental pollution is in your neighborhood, whether you’ll be subjected to hate crimes, how much violence is in your community, what kind of schools will be available to you, whether you can pay for SAT prep classes, whether colleges will give you a legacy admission, how much you’ll be paid at work, and how you’ll be treated by the police and the courts. It may not always be clear what to change, but it is clear that change must happen.

Since Republicans as a whole tend to be more criticized for not caring about the legacy of racism, I want to say that it is possible to be a Republican and care about these things. I encourage you to read Kevin Phillips’ books *Wealth and Democracy*, and *The Politics of Rich and Poor*. Phillips is a Theodore Roosevelt style populist Republican who is very concerned about the concentration of wealth and its effects on democracy. Senator John McCain in 2000 ran for President on a platform like that. If you take those populist Republican principles and apply them consistently, I do think many of the issues surrounding race, class, and inequality would be addressed.

**Conclusion**

So there’s a treatment of Jesus’ teaching, church history, and applied to three contemporary issues. All in less than 1 hour! Obviously I’m not comfortable with either the party, and I don’t think you should be either. I think that we need to be engaged with people in both parties on as many issues as we can. Christians should participate meaningfully in political processes, at different levels, and at many levels, but without compromising Jesus’ vision for his people and for the world. And I hope this time has been helpful for you to see Jesus’ vision and his ethics and to help you chart a course through political involvement.