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Author(s): Emilie M. Townes

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**Response to “Social Science,
Christian Ethics and Democratic Politics:
Issues of Poverty and Wealth” by Mary Jo Bane**

Emilie M. Townes

As a social ethicist who uses an interdisciplinary framework as part of my method, I see that all epistemologies lead us to ethical issues, because knowing is, itself, an act that has consequences for the knowing subject and for the community. This ethics of knowing has extraordinary relevance as we unfold ourselves into a troubling twenty-first century, with contested political races, massive voter registration drives now being countered with massive disenfranchisement, and a pliant public and press who often seem interested only in who will win the game rather than discuss the morality of its existence. The sad part is that this is nothing new for poor communities or colored peoples (no, these are not always the same) in this country. It is just that this time it was national, it was public—and the same damned thing happened in broad daylight that usually takes place in some misbegotten metaphorical or actual backwoods.

The act of knowing is always contextual, always fraught with our best and worst impulses. It is never objective. It is never disinterested, no matter how many rational proofs we come up with to argue to the contrary. It would seem that the same can be said of policy analysis as Bane’s succinct analysis of Eugene Bardach’s model and public policy analysis in general suggest. I agree deeply with Bane’s assertion that religious viewpoints are present but implicit and unexamined in public policy debates. Where I want to trouble the waters a bit more is in our assumptions about the nature of the individual, the state, the church, and the poor, for these are *very* contested terrains within religious disciplines generally and within Christian ethics in particular.

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So my remaining remarks are not so much about the particulars of Bane's paper as they are about a key issue I find implicit in her paper: Just who are we as religious folk when we enter discussions of public policy?

I.

We human beings are prone to radicalizing certain behaviors: we can turn initially positive knowledge into negative values, and we can make good things emerge from disastrous quagmires. But just as epistemologies are contextual, so are all our other reference points for living, and we become dangerous when we fail to recognize this about ourselves and then suffer the temptation of absolutizing our knowledge. For instance, it is ironic to this American Baptist that the modern day Protestant work ethic has moved so far from John Calvin's ideal. Calvin's ethic is one of grateful obedience that leads to self-denial: He held together love of God and love of neighbor which extends charity to our neighbor and shares with that person our blessings. However, there is a tension in Calvin's moral command to pursue one's vocation in the world with vigor because it is a sign of being chosen by God *and* Calvin's moral injunction against ostentation and spending. Weber's point is that a religious ethic can legitimate a socioeconomic form that is not a part of its original intent.

My point is that Weber's thesis leads to public policies that are often unaware of the kind of religious values that form their roots, and the makers of these policies are ill-equipped to critique their assumptions because they cannot remember what they never knew.¹ For many, if not most, Protestants, a major part of who we are religiously in the United States stems from an enlightenment conception of the self in which there are natural inherent rights for all people, and each person is an independent unit who is an autonomous, self-determining ego. Key here is the notion of autonomy; in Protestant religious understanding, such autonomy represents a concern for principles of authentic belief and practice. It is validated by an appeal to human experience and reason, and has unleashed a rampant individualism in many of our private and public beliefs and practices, stressing personal responsibility and despising any hint of dependency. Stressing personal responsibility while detesting dependency encourages conceiving society as a necessary evil and monitoring it so that it does not inhibit personal freedom. Society should not get in the way of our individuality or our ability—often seen as God-given if not ordained by God—to use reason and personal experience to justify all manners of private behavior and public policy, especially those that enhance life and respect the dignity and worth of all persons and those that see difference and attention to context as anathema.

Stressing personal responsibility while detesting dependency often wedges the diversity of humanness into a stultifying and in some cases death-dealing homogeneity that is only healthy for a precious (and elite) few. So as Protestant

Christianity has defended the autonomy of the individual in order to stress the value of every human being, our freedom, and the great respect owed to each and every one of us, we have come to radicalize this notion so much that we are now reaping a bitter harvest from the unrestrained exercise of our passion for possessing, for self-assertion, and for power as individuals, as a nation, and in our social institutions.

But not so ironically, the Protestant work ethic helped build large segments of our culture and society, and it carved out enormous national wealth based on a capitalist economy. It has often been one of the engines fueling some movements for social change such as the civil rights movement; recent movements in public housing complexes, often led by women, to take back and define their living spaces; and economic empowerment in which churches set up independent corporations to address community problems and issues. These movements rest, to varying degrees, on the values of hard work and thrift.

The difference between these movements and an understanding of society as a necessary evil is in their very understanding of society. In many, if not most, segments of dispossessed communities, the notion of uninhibited personal freedom remains a utopian folly. Advancing public policies that see society as a necessary evil has truncated the lives of the poor; many black folk see current public policies as forms of genocide. This is even more deadly when we consider those public policies that have a direct impact on the lives of black women and children: welfare, health care, reproductive health, childcare, domestic and sexual violence, and the prison industrial complex. In effect, women and children are at the mercy of public policies that stress equality and personal liberty, but the religious values that are at the core of these policies—an appeal to the person as an independent unit, the autonomous, self-determining ego, stress on personal responsibility, the abhorrence of dependency—believe a basic inability or unwillingness to recognize structural sins and/or inequities that demand public policies which move beyond the notion that government must work through individuals who care about themselves first and foremost.

We need public policies that are more complex than the incremental conversion of individual souls; far too much of our current public policy debates concentrate on individual morality. Public policy reflects the working out of our national value judgments. As Bane notes, it is rare that the specific moral and civil religious implications of such judgments are made explicit. Some religious values emphasize personal or private moral norms, other religious values emphasize public morality such as social justice, poverty, corporate responsibility, working conditions, health care, and war.

II.

To return to Calvin, if we value and respect our neighbors, then we must take seriously a sense of accountability to and for one another—not only as individuals, but as a society. One of the earliest words I learned in church was love; I also learned that to love without justice is asking for trouble. Justice is the notion that each of us has worth, that each of us has the right to have that worth recognized and respected. Justice lets us know that we owe one another respect and the right to our dignity. Justice can lead to public policies that claim rights as a part of the assertion of our dignity and well being. Justice is relational, not autonomous: it leads to a sense of caring that is actualized in accessible and affordable health care and childcare and the development of an urban and rural development policy that is systemic rather than episodic. It recognizes the actuality of our interdependence.

So as we engage with notions of democracy and public policy within conscious religious frameworks, it is crucial that we make explicit our conception of the good—not in terms of how the state sees it, but in terms of how we understand it from our various religious worldviews—and realize that we will not always agree. Most importantly, for those of us who are middle class Christians, we need to bring the poor to the center of our questions, our options, and our decision-making—not theoretically, but concretely. We have a maddening tendency to be troubled by poverty and constrained opportunity, but we rarely do more than listen to those who must endure and survive inequities. Perhaps one of the reasons we remain skeptical about the government's ability to do much about poverty is that our theological worldviews do not offer us much of an alternative, either.

If we keep the unrestrained autonomous self on our collective eyeball, if we refuse to yoke our individual selves and concerns with the matrix of life with others, we will never be able to engage truly in democratic politics with a spirit of justice or peace. Our traditional religious discourses will take us away from our daily needs. We will be even more complicit with the dominant political powers, for religious folk and religious discourse—and religion itself—will no longer be the “sigh of the oppressed” or “the heart of the world without a heart” as Feuerbach said so well. We will not be able to offer any genuine alternative to the way public policy has been formed, because we have become absorbed by the consumer market. We will lose our essence, our salvific power. We, as people of faith, will end up with no heart.

III.

As we enter analysis, policy formation, and articulation now in more conscious ways as people of faith and faithlessness, we must begin with a consideration of the good and wrestle with this, sometimes even with twisted hips. But begin we must, for it is my hunch that, in teasing out a conception of the good that is not bounded by our individual skin but that is within a collective ethos of individuals, groups, cultures and the like, we can discover what faithful citizenship truly means.

NOTE

¹ Katie Geneva Cannon, "Remembering What We Never Knew," *The Journal of Women and Religion* 16 (1998):167-177.