

BRUCE REICHENBACH’S “CITIZENSHIP, THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN, UPSIDE-DOWN ETHICS AND STEWARDSHIP”

Discussant Comments by Brian Shapiro

Reichenbach explores how the themes of citizenship and the Kingdom of Heaven can help us understand how people and institutions should collaborate to promote the common good. The political theme of citizenship invites us to ask probing questions about what it means to belong to a community and how social critique can or should promote theologically meaningful societal transformation. Implicitly, we also are invited to ponder the essential differences, if any, between people and institutions. Below I propose some discussion questions to address what I believe are incompletely resolved problems and issues.

Four Essential Attributes of Citizenship

Reichenbach describes what he calls the four essential attributes of citizenship, and uses those attributes to define what people and institutions must do in order to promote the common good.

According to the first attribute of citizenship, citizens must identify with the organizations and societies in which they participate. What does “identification” actually mean here, and what does it mean to “belong”? I believe that Reichenbach puts too much weight on citizens buying into currently existing social institutions. For example, although he acknowledges that there is a role for what he calls “constructive criticism”, he then contrasts constructive criticism with what he calls “self-interested” criticism. This implies (correctly, I believe) that not all critiques are legitimate. But when is the quarantine on critique not legitimate? Some concrete examples would help to illustrate just how far Reichenbach is willing to travel down the path of transformative social critique. Toward the end of the paper, however, Reichenbach asserts that “organizations...can be addressed prophetically and radically changed”, and he disagrees with Luther (through Lazareth) that “Men are to accept the social structures for what they are...and try to act as responsible Christian citizens within them.”). Indeed, without sufficient (and perhaps theologically informed) critique, we risk embalming unjust and corrupt institutions. Consider for example what Moses would have done or not done if he had instead accepted the institution of bondage in Egypt “for what it was”. In that context, what would it mean for him to act responsibly? The creation story in Genesis Chapter 1 provides one possible answer: Created in the image of God and commanded to subdue the earth, humankind is obligated to use science and technology to promote human dignity and freedom. This tells us that Moses’ vocation obligated him to emancipate his people from slavery. The conversation between Moses and God in the Book of Exodus is, according to some modern Biblical scholars, a narrative artist’s masterful way of portraying Moses’ prophetic calling.

Altogether, I believe that Reichenbach’s essay as currently formulated does not sufficiently explain what it means for citizens to identify with their societies, and when from a theologically ethical perspective it is or is not advisable for citizens to engage in such identification. It also is not clear what role critique should play in promoting the theologically appropriate transformations necessary for citizens to participate in the Kingdom of God (or enter the

Promised Land). These incompletely resolved issues provide opportunities for further discussion about (for example) prophetic critique and its role in the Specht-Broholm threefold model.

Discussion Questions

The general concern is to shape institutions to make them accountable and serve others. The following questions are generically framed in terms of “contemporary institutions”. For additional focus, the questions can be framed in terms of theological perspectives on contemporary business and other economic institutions.

1. How do contemporary institutions stymie human development?
 2. How do contemporary institutions obstruct transformative social critique?
 3. How did widespread failure to critique and reform contemporary economic institutions contribute to the global economic crisis?
 4. Theologically speaking, what must people and institutions do to effectively overcome institutional resistance and transform unjust institutions and practices?
-

Four Essential Attributes of Citizenship (continued)

A second attribute of citizenship entails that citizens enjoy rights and privileges. These rights and privileges ideally will provide security, support the dignity of people, and enable human development. In order for citizens to be fully human, they must be part of a community (see also Discussion Question 5, below). A third attribute of citizenship acknowledges that rights imply obligations. These obligations require individuals to attend to the common good --- in a manner that benefits both the community and its individual members. Finally, the fourth attribute of citizenship entails that citizens should be involved in the affairs of their organizations and society. I interpret this to be a special case of obligations (the third attribute). Involvement in the affairs of one’s organizations and society again raises questions about what citizen identification actually means and what role critique ought to play in the humane transformation of institutions and society.

Discussion Questions (continued)

5. What role does theology play in covenantal faith communities’ ability to promote the common good? (Note, for example, that the moral-ethical commandment to be a good steward of creation is derived from Genesis Chapter 2’s account of a God-seeking Adam.)
6. Reichenbach asserts that a person who violates a society’s accountability norms forfeits his or her citizenship. Is this really true? If we use a society’s accountability norms to evaluate a person’s conduct, are we not thereby presuming that the person in question still is a member of that society?
7. How do the four attributes of citizenship help us distinguish between the loving critic and the uncritical lover (cf. the paper by Specht and Broholm, titled “*Toward a Theology of Institutions*, in this conference).
8. What roles should forgiveness and reconciliation play in reducing a person’s social or spiritual alienation?
9. Given that the very concept of accountability is culturally determined, and given the multicultural nature of many of today’s societies, what role should theology and religion play

in establishing, enforcing, and transforming norms of expected behavior in a pluralistic society?

Institutions as Citizens

Reichenbach uses the four attributes of citizenship to develop an analogy between institutions and persons. This analogy yields some helpful insights, but institutions and people also differ in crucial ways.

Discussion Questions (continued)

10. The Golden Rule requires us to treat other people as ends, and never only as means. But does it make sense and would it be helpful if we also treat institutions as ends, and never only as means?
11. Reichenbach quotes again from Lazareth: “The church can Christianize politicians and economists but not politics and economics.” This quote implies an essential distinction between people and institutions, a distinction that Reichenbach does not advocate. In what manner should the distinction or non-distinction between people and institutions influence how we understand and promote societal transformation?
12. Administrative practices can be emancipatory when they liberate people from having to constantly communicate and negotiate. Examples include budgeting, planning, performance measurement, and evaluation techniques. But administrative practices also tend to depersonalize human relationships. How might theological perspectives counteract this depersonalizing tendency?