
Wannenwetsch’s Political Worship is a daunting book. It takes the reader on a grand tour through a number of different disciplines (philosophy, systematic theology, ethics, homiletics, and liturgy); it gives detailed and sharp analyses of numerous experts in these various disciplines; and, on top of all this, it boldly sets out a distinct, new approach to ethics, one that springs from worship. This is a monumental work that really deserves more than a brief book review will allow.

Within the confines of this review, however, I will focus on what lies at the heart of the book. Let me explain first what it is that Wannenwetsch does not want to do. He clearly explains what political worship is not. It is not the same as political theology (12, 25-31, 101-2), in the sense that the church prescribes for
the state a certain political stance (though the church may have to speak into the secular *polis*, as Ambrose, Augustine, and Luther all did; cf. 131, 185, 255). Political worship is also not a form of motivation ethics that encourages thankfulness as the human response to divine grace. (The Heidelberg Catechism is partly to blame for the “slave morality” that this entails; 48-49.) Nor is political worship shorthand for an “ethic of principles,” such as that of William Temple, where individuals are supposed to implement the principles that the church enunciates (98). Each of these approaches falls prey to the temptation of functionalizing worship. Worship, for Wannenwetsch, is emphatically not a means to another end. Instead, it is—and here he employs Wittgenstein—a “form of life” in which we learn the grammar of the Spirit (40).

At this point, we arrive at what it is that motivates Wannenwetsch. He rejects both the foundationalism of liberalism (as it looks beyond worship to some rational foundation for our ethics) and the communitarian ethics of the postliberals (whose ecclesial “positivism” turns a particular community, rather than worship itself, into the foundation for ethics). In rejecting both (3-4), Wannenwetsch asks us instead to look to the actual worship practices of the church as the grammar that shapes us and trains us to make moral judgments and thus also prepares us for the political life outside the church. We could call this a post-postliberal approach. Wannenwetsch is interested in uncovering the political nature of our worship itself, rather than look to anything outside those worship practices. Of course, this requires that we get a clear sense of what these worship practices are, in order then to describe their political character.

This is where the book leaves me with a sense of frustration. The question I expected the book to answer was: What does the author mean by political worship? After finishing the book, however, I still had my uncertainties on this score. I wondered whether this lack of clarity perhaps was the result of the at times somewhat belabored style of the book, or of the translation, which in places is not as smooth as it could be. However, as I went over the book a second time, I began to realize that Wannenwetsch may deliberately have left his reader with a sense of ambiguity. By and large, he refuses to say what exactly constitutes this worship that he characterizes as political. While it is clear that he regards worship as the source of our ethics—the oft-repeated phrase is that ethics springs from worship (e.g., 18, 71)—he insists that the moral grammar of worship “cannot be tied down to some particular liturgical form” (18). Worship “does not depend on any ideal form” in order to effect the moral formation of believers (73). In other words, for Wannenwetsch, the political character of worship does not depend on a particular liturgical shape. Worship is political wherever “two or three” are gathered in Christ’s name (73). What this means is that we can never tie down the church in an institutional sense. There is no church as “an entity which is available in its historical actuality as the context for Christian ethics” (54). To pin down the church by means of an organizational profile, Wannenwetsch boldly asserts, leads to “Fascist-like tendencies” (54). Thus, the church is only there where worship happens: where the gospel
is preached and the sacraments are celebrated. In line with this view of worship, Wannenwetsch consistently argues that it is the people of God, guided by the Spirit, who are key to the liturgy. Throughout the book, we are being cautioned against the danger of clericalization (e.g., 56-57, 73, 102, 161-62), a problem that stems from at least the fourth century (162) and, in the case of the “patriarchalizing of the Church” can be seen already in the postapostolic period (167). The church ought to be guided by the “rule of the Spirit,” not by clericalizing and organizational rigidity. It is, therefore, by precisely not explaining what worship must look like that we retain its political character.

Perhaps we need to accept that worship—whatever it may look like—simply is political, so that its political character does not depend on the shape we give it. The problem with this is that it only explains some of Wannenwetsch’s wide-ranging book. This deliberate ambiguity, which seems to me certainly present in the book, bumps up against some very specific requirements of what political worship must, in fact, look like. The rule of worship is the biblical canon (34-36), and preaching definitely lies at the heart of Wannenwetsch’s political worship because it is by listening to the public Word that we regain the trust that we have unlearned through our hermeneutics of suspicion (281-97). One of the ways in which worship functioned politically in history was by means of “stational liturgies,” which moved from place to place in the city according to a fixed plan. These stational liturgies were political acts, as they “took possession successively of the spaces of the cities” (262). What makes the political order of the church particularly distinct, according to Wannenwetsch, is the way the church resolves its conflicts (155), namely, by means of the nonviolent practices of consensus building (298-307) and of forgiveness, which allows for a new beginning in the political community of the church (310). Furthermore, intercession, particularly for public authorities and the state, teaches people how to function as advocates for others (339-44). Finally, in a wonderful chapter on Sabbath celebration, Wannenwetsch explains that this celebration is a powerful sanctification of time, with the political effect of calling a halt “to the threatening of enslavement of the human being to technological civilization” (349). All of these are very particular characteristics of what worship should—or, at least, may—look like if it is to be political.

This list of items is revealing and increases my questions about the book. First, Wannenwetsch’s insistence that there are no particular liturgical forms that are necessary for worship to be political is difficult to maintain in light of the many liturgical forms that he himself regards as important or even indispensable. Second, one may well want to ask some questions about several of the forms of political worship that Wannenwetsch describes. Let me give a few examples. I seriously question what appears to be an a priori stance of absolute nonviolence. The consensus approach that Wannenwetsch presents seems insufficiently guided by the consensus of the norms of tradition, rule of faith, and authoritative ecclesial judgments. His sacramental theology is underdeveloped compared to his emphasis on the preaching of the Word (though the
preface promises that more is to come on this score). Third, the list is by no means uniform, which illustrates the difficulty in deciding what exactly it is that makes the church’s worship political. Is it confrontation with the “world” (a prominent aspect of the stational liturgies)? Is it the “training” that consensus building, forgiveness, and other practices provide for secular political action (something Wannenwetsch brings up a number of times [e.g., 21, 99, 229, 241, 315] and makes me wonder whether he has reintroduced functional worship through the back door)? Is it the relearning of trust through preaching intended to shape the character of the Christian citizens of the ecclesial polis? I suspect all of these are aspects that Wannenwetsch wants to affirm. The lack of clarity, however, on what it is that Wannenwetsch is after when he makes his plea for political worship seems to me a serious problem in this book.

This is not to deny that there is a great deal to be learned from it. Its breadth is impressive. Several of the interactions with other scholars yield sharp analyses and important insights. (I am thinking, for instance, of the careful and extensive discussions of Martin Luther, interspersed throughout; the readings of Hannah Arendt; the section dealing with Richard Rorty, 219-26; and the illuminating discussion on the differences between Oliver O’Donovan and Stanley Hauerwas, 256-60.) I am impressed with Wannenwetsch’s refusal to simply posit the church as the counterculture that rejects the politics of the state. He rightly regards the totalizing claims that our mass culture (society) makes as far more problematic than the state (207-18), and he gives a nuanced analysis of our “many-stranded citizenship” (140). The church, for Wannenwetsch, is one public, which needs to interact positively with others, such as the state (142-43, 236-38, 274-75). He even goes so far as to insist on the inescapability of the ambivalence of civil religion and daringly suggests: “The Church would acquire the characteristics of an idol itself if it tried to preserve its purity by refusing to enter into the ambivalence of civil religion which an involvement in the civil and public sphere brings with it” (266). The book is impressive both for its learning and for the many valuable insights it presents along the way. However, for a convincing argument that political worship leads to Christian ethics, we need more clarity on the question of what it is that makes Christian worship political.

—Hans Boersma