

POLITICAL SCIENCE

FAITHFUL LEARNING



Cale D. Horne

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT POLITICAL SCIENCE IS . . . AND ISN'T

Casual conversations among strangers inevitably turn to work. When I find myself in such conversations with fellow Christians, once they discover that I am a political scientist I usually receive follow-up questions. I'm asked about the latest "breaking news" story coming out of the 24-hour news cycle, queried about whether I've read so-and-so's latest book or blog post on politics according to the Bible, or—most awkwardly—carefully probed to see whether my own political leanings are of the "right sort." I don't mind these kinds of discussions, and often enough they can be quite fun, but I do get the sense that the askers usually think that these things constitute what I *do* as a political scientist. But oftentimes my answers are a little disappointing: I don't follow the 24-hour news cycle all that closely, nor do I follow blogs, and only very rarely do I read popular books on the Bible and politics. At the end of the day, I'm not all that political in the everyday sense of the word.

I firmly believe that Christians can be concerned with political affairs from the local to the global. I say "can" rather than "should" or "must" because it seems presumptuous to think that our poorer brothers and sisters around the world, concerned with the full-time work of subsistence, are somehow less faithful as followers of Christ because of their ignorance of and disengagement from political affairs and their inability to articulate how political and other spheres of life pertain to their Christian faith. I mention this explicitly because the fact that the vast majority of Christians past and present have been unable to concern

themselves with politics often seems lost on the champions of Christian political engagement. This should give us pause before we make any sort of cultural engagement a matter of basic duty. Rather, Christians who are in a position to be engaged in politics should feel the liberty to do so, for insights from political science can direct us toward productive avenues for faithful engagement as well as help us to avoid the all too frequent conflation of faithful engagement with faith-distorting entanglement. As Jay Green, the editor of this series on faithful learning, suggests, I argue that serious engagement with the academic study of politics may indeed “cultivate and nourish our faith in Christ” when we choose to enter the arena of government and politics.

Despite American Christianity’s enduring interest in the political world—including perennial debates over whether, how, and why believers should engage in the contemporary political discourse—very few among us have a sense of how the academic study of politics may contribute to or even clarify these debates. In fact, I would argue that very few Christians have even a general grasp of what the academic study of politics (most often termed “political science”) is, though many may presume to know. In keeping with the theme of the Faithful Learning series, I outline in this booklet the broad contours of the discipline, present a Christian framework for approaching political science rooted in antithesis and common grace, and illustrate the potential for faithful learning in and through the study of politics as an academic discipline.

Simply defined, political science is an empirically based, theoretically driven social science addressing human endeavors of a political nature. Broadly speaking, the discipline seeks to understand the patterns of cooperation and conflict among people and groups—the conditions under which individuals or groups of individuals with divergent

interests will (or will fail to) cooperate in order to achieve common goals.¹ In the words of famed political scientist Harold Lasswell, “The study of politics is the study of influence and the influential,” or, as the title of the now-classic book from which this quotation is drawn suggests, political science is the study of “who gets what, when, how.”² The answers to these core disciplinary questions, and the policy efforts designed to reinforce or alter the answers to these questions, have profound implications for the world we inhabit.

Three of the discipline’s four subfields address areas of substantive concern: in the United States (American government), within states generally (comparative politics), and between states (international relations). The fourth subfield, political theory, takes up conceptual (and sometimes normative) concerns and undergirds the other three.³ Like other social sciences, political science is motivated by *empirical puzzles*—things we observe in the political world that don’t make sense in an easy or obvious way. For example, a comparativist (that is, a specialist in comparative politics who compares the inputs and outputs of different political systems) might seek to explain why democracy succeeds in one country but flounders in a similar country. Or an international-relations scholar may wonder why democratic states rarely, if ever, seem to go to war with one another, though they tend to be more war prone than their nondemocratic neighbors. The explanations to these

1. This is not to suggest that cooperation is intrinsically or normatively good. Individuals might cooperate, for example, to instigate and carry out genocide. Rather, cooperation should be thought of as the means by which people who possess different wants and goals come together to get more of whatever good they would otherwise have.

2. Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1936), 295.

3. Some political scientists regard research methods as a fifth, distinct subfield.

puzzles adopted by political elites and the public at large can seriously impact government policies, economies, and societies—and, ultimately, communities, families and individuals. Getting it right matters.

As I mentioned above, political science as a discipline is theoretically driven and empirically based. Theories in the social sciences are stories we tell about the world to explain the often puzzling things we observe in the world. From a given theory we derive hypotheses—empirically testable propositions of the theory that allow us to know whether this explanation is wrong.⁴ We test hypotheses *empirically*—that is, using information we observe about the world (data) and specific tools to gather and manipulate data for hypothesis testing (research methods). Data and the methods used to draw inferences from these data may be *qualitative* (e.g., single case studies, comparative case studies, historical process-tracing, counterfactual analysis) or *quantitative* (statistical analysis, computational network analysis, simulation), and frequently research is comprised of some combination of the two—the line between qualitative and quantitative research is often blurry. Significantly, both qualitative and quantitative methods apply the same logic of empirical inquiry as summarized above.⁵ Choices

4. We can never demonstrate that a hypothesis is “right,” but only whether it is “wrong” or “not wrong.” This is not because of a commitment to some sort of pop-postmodernism in which we can never know truth, but because the social sciences, like all empirically oriented disciplines, must operate according to the logic of empirical inquiry. Hypothesis testing can only tell us that a given explanation is wrong/not wrong (never right) because an infinite number of other explanations always go untested. Testing one or several of what seem to be the most likely explanations does not provide enough information to rule out other, untested explanations. The logic of hypothesis testing is related to the principle of *falsifiability*: hypotheses must be constructed in such a way that we can know by testing the hypothesis whether or not the explanation proposed is wrong.

5. Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing Social Inquiry: Scientific Inference in Qualitative Research* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994).

about methods, then, depend on what is appropriate given the research question in view.

This approach to understanding politics is far removed from the experience of most Christians. Many of us think of politics in terms of daily headlines, newsfeeds, sound bites, and talking heads. The issues are ever changing and are rarely explained in terms of underlying institutional processes, the psychological dynamics of decision making, or long-term historical trends. We may also regard politics as an ideological battleground—a sphere to be reclaimed (or avoided) and rebuilt (or abandoned) according to a (usually vague) biblical template. Regardless of one's theology or place on the ideological spectrum, there is a baptized political movement to match, ranging from the theonomic reconstructionist and Christian America movements on the political right to the various strains of transformationalism and liberation theology on the left.

Despite their radical differences, all such movements have at least two features in common. First, adherents tend to value the political interpretations of their anointed leaders over the careful study of professional academics, which is deemed irrelevant at best. Second, and more fundamentally, these movements reflect a common discomfort with just how little the Bible really says about politics.⁶ Rather than revealing the larger story of the redemption of God's

6. The contemporary obsession with proof-texting our way through all things political seems contrary to the simplest statements of Reformed orthodoxy: "Q: What do the Scriptures principally teach? A: The Scriptures principally teach, what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man" (Westminster Confession of Faith [WCF] Larger Catechism [LC], Q&A #5). A recent and highly popular example of what I would regard as a kind of discomfort with how little the Bible says about politics is Wayne Grudem's *Politics—According to the Bible: A Comprehensive Resource for Understanding Modern Political Issues in Light of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010). Another example, from another part of the political spectrum, is the work of Jim Wallis, beginning with his *Agenda for Biblical People* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976).

people, the Scriptures become a blueprint for political (in) action—something for which they were never intended. Indeed, to reinterpret the Scriptures to reinforce one’s political agenda is not merely exegetically unsound, it is sacrilegious. How dare we “spin” the Word of God to advance our political agendas!

As an alternative, I propose that we employ the historic Christian framework of antithesis and common grace to the academic disciplines, including the study of politics. By taking seriously both antithesis and common grace, Christians have a framework not only for *critiquing* the discipline but also for conscientiously *embracing* many of its premises, methods, theories, and findings. To the extent that the discipline operates within the bounds of common grace, it has a role in the unfolding of God’s providential order and should be embraced by Christians interested in faithful learning. The result, I believe, is an enriched understanding of both the academic study of politics and the relationship of this study to our faith.

In the final analysis, the academic disciplines (though fallen and flawed) are expressions of human learning graciously granted by God to sustain his appointed order until that final day. If we understand the essence of history as the *unfolding revelation* of the redemption of God’s people, the disciplines—even when wielded by the pagan—are instruments for the sustenance of creation, and thus for *our* own sustenance, as we move through creation to consummation. Like the rain that falls on the just and the unjust alike, the disciplines are good gifts from God. When the disciplines are properly understood through the framework of antithesis and common grace, believers individually and the church corporately do not need to be shielded from them, but can be blessed by them.

“The world, imperfect as it is from the rational point of view, is the result of forces inherent in human nature. To improve the world one must work with those forces, not against them.”

HANS J. MORGENTHAU, *Politics Among Nations*

FAITHFUL LEARNING IN POLITICAL SCIENCE

IF YOU LIKE TO FOLLOW POLITICS, you might not think your interest is anything noteworthy. Aren't plenty of people invested in politics, including many Christians? But most people understand it, through headlines and soundbites, as a chaotic battlefield—two sides trying to “win.” We've all heard opinions from talking heads . . . but why leave politics up to them? Political science says we don't have to!

Cale Horne reminds us of the science behind politics—a deliberate study that forms theories from data. In addition, he explains how Christian students can understand this science in a way that others can't. Discover how we can use political science not as an instrument of “war” with the “other side” but as a means of common grace as we lovingly engage with the world around us.

THE FAITHFUL LEARNING series invites Christian students to dive deeper into a modern academic discipline. The authors, scholars in their fields, believe that academic disciplines are good gifts from God that, when understood rightly, will give students the potential to cultivate a greater love for God and neighbor.

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