

## Wonder

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Title: **The Problem of Partisanship** Author: **Dr. David Wagschal**

It has become commonplace to note the increasing polarization of American politics. You don't need to follow goings-on in Washington closely to sense the increasingly divisive, reactionary and vitriolic nature of political discourse – certainly political commentators bewail it constantly. It seems that political positions and policies demand ever more absolute and exclusive adherence, and that dialogue with contrary opinions has become a sign of moral weakness. Gone are the days, perhaps, of the art of gentlemanly opposition, and of the value of compromise and balance.

Of course we might question whether the golden days of civil discourse ever really existed. We might also wonder if policies and positions of the two major parties are really much farther apart today than in the past. But the *rhetoric* of opposition – the tendency to demonize one's opponents, to exaggerate differences, and to not want to be seen to (openly) enter into dialogue – does seem more pronounced today than in recent memory.

This is worrying.

Modern western democracies, especially in the New World, have evolved since the 18<sup>th</sup> Century as systems very good at allowing individuals and communities of different values and backgrounds to coexist together peacefully. They do this by demanding a “buy-in” on a few basic principles. These include the rule of law, the idea of representative government, and the observance of a number of fundamental human freedoms. Less obviously, they presume an institutionalized – almost ritualized – system of political opposition. Instead of hoping that elected representatives will all agree on everything, modern democracies expect the opposite: different views are the normal state of affairs. Like-minded individuals are expected to organize into opposing parties, and legitimate political power is exercised in the back-and-forth between these parties.

In this type of system the parties are expected to compete with each other. Power is fundamentally “agonistic”. Indeed, the healthy operation of the system is dependent upon people taking these parties seriously, investing time and energy in setting their agendas and policies, and in “fighting” for their views in the political arena – becoming partisans, as it were. But partisanship has its limits. Tacitly the party in power is always supposed to garner some degree of consensus among the opposition (otherwise its measures will simply be reversed later), and the opposition is expected to remain fundamentally loyal to the government (“Her Majesty's Loyal Opposition”, to use the British phrase). Most importantly, all parties are supposed to believe that it is only in the give and take of the party system that responsible and legitimate government can take place. Confrontation is never meant to reach the point that one denies the opposition's right to exist legally, morally, or otherwise. Compromise and balance are supposed to be key *values*, as only in dialogue can good government happen.

This system is not, I think, an idealistic one. It is not designed to produce an idyllic state of consensus, or promote the development of the perfect state, or even, ultimately, to promote a relativistic political ideology (although many think it can and should do this). Its goals are more pragmatic: it is meant to limit violence and provide civil stability. It is designed to channel human opposition and contrariness into a workable and even productive form.

If the vitriolic nature of contemporary civil discourse is a sign that we and our politicians are beginning to lose faith in this system of “ritualized opposition” – and the pragmatic values of dialogue and compromise that underpin it – our civic system may be in for some very serious trouble.

What are Orthodox Christians to make of this? How are we to participate responsibly in civil society in such a climate?

At first glance the Orthodox tradition does not seem to offer much guidance. Orthodox Christians have historically lived under autocratic Christian regimes that have not been interested in fostering the type of pragmatic pluralism that is the cornerstone of our modern American civic system. Quite the contrary: they have been very focused on promoting a maximal vision of a specifically Christian monoculture, with a very defined and carefully regulated set of beliefs, behaviors and values. The imposition of an ideal uniformity has been a much higher priority than a pragmatic management of diversity.

This heritage might encourage some Orthodox Christians to participate in our political system in only a reactionary way. One might, for example, opt to withdraw completely for civic life, as this system has little room for a one-sided enforcement of Orthodox values. Alternatively, one might feel justified in engaging in precisely the type of vitriolic partisan behavior we now see, since this ultimately undermines the values of dialogue and compromise on which the system is built but which seem so dissonant with the imperial traditions of our Orthodox past.

Interestingly, however, both these options have generally been avoided by the American Orthodox community. The tradition of Orthodox political engagement in America has been – or at least so it seems to me – exceptionally sober and “mainstream”. We tend to participate (or not participate) in our political processes to the same degree and in the same way as the general populace. The hierarchy has also tended to keep the respectable distance from politics that our system demands, speaking out only occasionally on critical moral issues, but generally very careful to allow Orthodox citizens the freedom necessary to participate credibly in the political arena. Our parish clergy – like judges or members of the military – are likewise restrained in expressing political opinions. In short, the Orthodox have generally emerged as conscientious and moderate upholders of the American civil system, and of the calm, gentlemanly atmosphere of dialogue and “managed diversity” it requires.

Why is this? Some who advocate for a more strident, partisan Orthodox voice in the public sphere might see this as a “selling out” to social/moral relativism, or perhaps an exaggerated need to “fit in” on the part of Orthodox immigrant communities. They might find it questionable that we do not seem to believe sufficiently strongly in our own values to fight for them in a more

open and direct way, or question how we can even participate in a system that makes us “dialogue” on non-negotiable moral and social values of our faith.

I think, however, that the political sobriety of American Orthodox communities manifests a very wise traditional Orthodox instinct: to witness to Christ by being exemplary citizens. This instinct is evinced in our constant prayers for civil authorities (even non-Orthodox ones), and in the injunctions of Scripture to “honor the emperor” (even a pagan one) and “to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s”. From the ancient Christian apologists, to the Fathers of the Christian empire(s), to our modern Orthodox forefathers in America, our instinct has almost never been to subvert, negate or radically change the existing political order but to transform it and perfect it – in effect, to do it better than anyone else, and to make it as Christ-like as possible. In our American context, extreme partisanship or non-participation *are* subversive of our political order, and thus have been, and probably should be, avoided. Instead, we have tried to find a way of participating in a political discourse of dialogue and compromise that is authentically Orthodox (ironically, the great Hellenistic-Roman political ideals of the Christian empires have perhaps helped us here: consensus, *symphonia*, harmony). Thus we have entered the give-and-take political world of the mainstream in order to move the political and moral agenda in a Christian direction *from within* – and not simply been content to throw stones at it from without. The cynicism and relativism of the system do not always make this participation easy – and I’m not sure we’ve yet to be very successful at it – but ultimately we know that this task is an essential part of becoming and remaining Orthodox Christians in America.

None of this means that the Orthodox are unable to offer sharp critique of the *status quo*, or even in exceptional circumstances to engage in “civil disobedience” or even radical rejection of the existing order. This has certainly happened in the past. But it does mean that our tradition has fixed the political priority for Orthodox Christians on participation and engagement with the mainstream – and thus on society’s total transformation. The Church knows that partisan sectarianism or extremism is too likely to reduce the Gospel to a set of narrow and human political “positions” which deprive it of its universal power and applicability. The danger is too great that the Gospel could be identified with a human “party”, and that the scandal of the Gospel becomes the scandal of the Church’s political positions, not the scandal of the cross.

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**Discussion Questions:**

What is the scandal of the Cross?

How does life in our pluralistic reality differ from our Church's historically autocratic, Christian, monoculture?

Where does our relative silence in the political arena as Orthodox Christians come from? Is it a good thing or not?