

TOWARD A THEOLOGY OF THE STATE Part 3

By John M. Frame

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The State And Religion

Does God permit the state to make a religious commitment? Does he command it to? In a word, yes to both questions.

In the first place, God calls all human beings to repent of sin and to put their trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior. Those who have believed in Jesus are to do all things to his glory (1 Cor. 10:31; cf. Rom. 14:23; 2 Cor. 10:5; Col. 3:17,24). Anything the believer does, therefore, must be done according to God's standards and out of a motive of love for him. This principle certainly bears on any human associations, whether for business, education, charity, worship, art, recreation, study, government or whatever. The believer must press the royal claims of Christ in all areas of life. And to do that is, of course, to work toward Christian standards and practices in all those associations, so that there will be Christian businesses, Christian schools, Christian media, Christian charities, Christian churches, Christian art, Christian recreations, Christian scholarship, and, of course, Christian government. Why should government be any different from any other project in which the believer is involved? If we promote Christian schools because Christ is to be Lord of all of life, doesn't the same argument apply to government? And once Christian standards become the norm in such institutions, why should that institution not formally recognize that commitment by confessing Christ?

In the second place, God claims families with a special zeal. He chose the process of childbearing as the means by which his Son would enter the world and announced that fact at the beginning of redemption (Gen. 3:15). He saved the family of Noah from the flood (6:18; 7:1,13; 8:16ff.), and he gave to that family dominion over the earth and the right to avenge bloodshed (Gen. 8:20–9:17). He called Abram, promising to bless his offspring, and to bless all nations through that offspring (Gen. 12:7; 15:4ff.). God commanded as a sign of the Abrahamic covenant an injury to the male organ of generation, and he commanded that that sign be applied to all of Abraham's family including the young children (17:9-27). Similarly, Israel, the family of Jacob, was to circumcise its males on the eighth day of their lives (Lev. 12:3) to acknowledge God's claim upon all their seed. (Cf. also the consecration of the firstborn by ransom of his life, Exod. 13:12.) Certainly, then, there is nothing strange about a family head professing

faith in God on behalf of his household. “Choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve,” said Joshua, “but as for me and my *household*, we will serve the Lord” (Josh. 24:15).

Household commitments, indeed household baptisms, are also found in the New Testament (Acts 2:39; 11:14; 16:15,31; 18:8; 1 Cor. 1:16). To me and others, these references are a strong argument in favor of infant baptism: surely first century Jews would have understood these events as a continuation of the Old Testament practice of claiming households for God and of administering the sign of the covenant to all those in the household. At any rate, God continues to call families. The importance of the family to God is not exhausted when the “seed” of Genesis 3:15 comes in Christ. Rather, Christ himself, now at the right hand of God the Father, continues to work through families to extend his kingdom throughout the earth (Matt. 28:19ff.). And indeed, his goal is not only to rule families, but extended families, tribes, nations (Pss. 2; 72; 110; Matt. 25:32; 28:19; Rom. 4:17ff.; Gal. 3:8; Rev. 2:26; 12:5; 15:4; 20:3; 21:24ff.; 22:2).

On my earlier account, states are family governments. If a family is to profess Christ as Lord, its government must do the same. If a tribe or nation is to profess Christ as Lord, its government, the state, must do the same.

A non-Christian family-state should also profess its religious commitment. For there is no neutrality, for states any more than for individuals. Those who are not for Christ are against him. A non-Christian state is, of necessity, committed to something other than the God of Scripture, and in honesty it ought to confess that fact. In practice, it may be difficult for some states to formulate their religious commitments, because of multiple religions among the citizens and rulers. But even a state in such a situation can tell us what it is *not* committed to. If it wishes to profess Christ despite the diversity of individual commitments, it should do so; if it wishes to deny the authority of Christ over it, it should indicate that as well.

The State, the Church, and the Kingdom of God

The kingdom of God is that sovereign exercise of God’s rule “where not merely God is supreme, for that is true at all times and under all circumstances, but where God supernaturally carries through his supremacy against all opposing powers and brings man to the willing recognition of the same.”¹ What is the relation of the state to that kingdom?

As I mentioned earlier, God uses the family as a means to bring his salvation into the world. The family was the vehicle for the incarnation. After Jesus’ resurrection, the kingdom grows as God claims families for himself and, in time, nations.

¹ Lost reference. Please contact the author if you know its location.

The state also serves the kingdom by extending the righteousness of God in the earth (Matt. 6:10). When the state acquits the innocent and punishes the guilty, it is a ministry of God (Rom. 13:1-7). As states come more and more under the influence of God's word, their judgments will become more and more righteous.

The family, therefore, and the state as the government of the tribe, does play roles in God's redemptive kingdom. Family and state are not our saviors from sin, but they are tools, as well as objects, of God's saving rule.

Beyond this general role, we find in the Old Testament that God made special use of one particular family, the family of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He chose them from among all the other nations to be his uniquely holy people (Deut. 7:6). In the tabernacle and temple, God dwelled in the midst of Israel as in he dwelled in no other nation. He gave them special blessings of protection and provision. He gave them human gifts: prophets, priests and kings. He gave to them the unique blessing of written "oracles of God" (Rom. 3:1ff). And indeed, because of their special holiness he also punished them for their sins with swiftness and severity (Amos 3:2, see our earlier discussion).

The "special holiness" of Israel reflected in the law is, I think, essentially the special presence of God in the tabernacle and the temple, a presence which created a "zone" of holiness within which persons, animals, houses and the like had to be ceremonially pure. Israel's laws had to account for that reality, just as the laws of all nations must account for the real situations of those nations. (Not to be irreverent, but if Beaver County had a population of 100,000 elephants, there would have to be numerous laws regulating the comings, goings, diets, training, disciplining, etc., of elephants. Israel's problem was similar, but much more awesome in its implications.)

God blessed Israel by his special presence so that Israel could fulfill the promise to Abraham that in his seed all the nations would be blessed. Israel enjoyed God's special friendship, not for its own sake, but so that it might be a witness to the nations of God's grace and judgment (Isa. 43:10ff; 44:8f) and, eventually, so that they might present to the nations their Messiah as King of kings and Lord of lords. Ultimately, Israel bore false witness, and they lost their special standing with God. Though many Jews believed in Jesus, the nation's rulers rejected him; and thus God rejected them.

But the people of God continued in a new form. The church, composed of Jews and Gentiles (with, of course, their families) as equal members of one body, was the "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16). The olive tree of Abraham continued, but with some old (Jewish) branches broken off and some new (Gentile) branches grafted in (Rom. 11:11-24). The church received the titles of Israel: "a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God" (I Pet. 2:9f; cf. Ex. 19:6; Tit. 2:14).

The new form of the people of God involved many new things. No longer was there a literal tabernacle or temple; Jesus himself was the temple, and he dwelt, by his spirit, within his people, so that in a sense *they* became the temple (John 2:19ff; 1 Cor.

3:16f; 6:19; 2 Cor. 6:16). Nor were the new people of God identified, even roughly, with a particular group of clans or tribes; it became an international body destined to cover the globe (Matt. 28:19f). It had a government, as did Israel, but that government did not possess the power of the sword (Matt. 26:51), but “only” the “sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (Eph. 6:17). It conquers through love, rather than by violence (Matt. 5:38-48; Rom. 12:9-21).

No modern nation, or its government (state), then, will ever play the distinctive role filled by Old Testament Israel. God’s purposes now are wider and broader; the whole world is the Promised Land (Matt. 28:19ff; 1 Cor. 3:21ff; Eph. 6:3 (cf. Ex. 20:12)). We need no longer the types and shadows of the tabernacle and temple, for we have the reality in Christ (Heb. 8-10). Modern nations still play the very general kingdom role noted earlier, as objects and tools. But even believing nations, if such there be, will not play the distinctive role of Israel, and therefore their governments, the “states” will not need to take those purposes into account as they rule.

In the modern world, then, each Christian is a citizen of two nations: An earthly nation like France, England, or the U. S. A., and the heavenly nation (Eph. 2:6) (not of this world, John 18:36), the church. Though we belong entirely to Christ, we do not on that account renounce our citizenship in the earthly nations, any more than we leave our earthly families. Indeed, we seek to be good citizens, for those earthly nations themselves, and their rulers, received their authority from God (Rom. 13:1-7). The church has its national and tribal leaders, its elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3), who not only preach and teach, administer sacraments, etc., but also provide services that the elders and kings provided in Israel. They resolve disputes (1 Cor. 5:1-6:8) and lead in battle (Rom. 13:12; Eph. 6:10-18; 1 Thess. 5:8).

The state also continues to have its leaders, who perform the corresponding services for their clans. We seek as much as possible to be obedient to both, though we are first of all citizens of heaven. When we have disputes we can’t settle with other believers, we take them to the church elders; when we have similar disputes with unbelievers, we take them to the state. When we seek leadership in the battle against Satan, we turn to the rulers of the church, for the state can’t help us there; when we seek defense against physical attacks, we turn to the state, for the church has no swords, and we, being also citizens in good standing of the earthly nations, have as much right to their protection as anyone (Acts 25:11). We know, however, that when the church wins *its* battle, no more swords will be needed; so the spiritual battle is still the ultimate one.

Church and earthly nation are related, then, as two different families with overlapping members, occupying the same territory. They both serve the kingdom of God, but it is misleading, in my view, to describe them as two institutional forms of the kingdom coordinate with one another, as is often done in Reformed literature.² The

² This sort of representation is common in both the Kuyperian-Dooyeweerdian and the Christian Reconstruction traditions.

church is the organization that has as its goal the spreading of God's kingdom through the earth. The state, if it is not a Christian state, does not share that goal at all, but may in spite of itself perform some services to the kingdom of God. If the state *is* Christian, it will represent the church in its earthly concerns, using earthly tools denied to the church as such, defending it from physical attack and so forth. It will be a kind of adjunct tool for the church, not an institution coordinate with it.

I should say more about what a Christian nation and its state, as government of a Christian nation, might be like.

(1) Then the nation and church will have approximately the same membership.³

(2) Would such a nation be a "holy" nation? Not in the sense that Old Testament Israel was, for there will be no tabernacle or temple. But since the church is a holy nation, and the membership of nation and church are virtually the same, we can speak of the nation being "holy" because of the presence of Christ in his people in that place through the Spirit.

(3) The church elders would come to overshadow the state courts, pretty much the reverse of the situation today. The church elders would settle most disputes within the society. But some state courts would remain (staffed by Christian elders probably, for who else would be wise enough to solve disputes in a godly way?) to serve the small unbelieving remnant of the population.

(4) The legislative and executive branches of the state would seek to bring the laws of the land (and their implementation) into accord with biblical standards. They would still not put all of Old Testament law literally into practice. They would have to re-apply those laws, making allowance for the lack of a tabernacle or temple (see above), and taking account of other situational changes.⁴

(5) How should such a Christian government treat the non-Christian religious minorities? Many today reject the very idea of Christian government out of fear that such will lead to a renewal of the religious wars of long ago, or to Christian Ayatollahs. They fear the sort of religious persecutions many came to America's shores to escape. That fear seems even more legitimate when we consider that in the Mosaic law there were death penalties both for false worship and for seducing others into the worship of false gods (Deut. 13:1-18; 17:1-7).

I agree with Vern Poythress that these death penalties are based upon the special holiness of Israel. When God condescends to live in the midst of a nation, as did

³ As in Old Testament Israel, not everyone in the nation would profess faith.

⁴ E.g., relevant cultural changes. Since most people today do not entertain guests upon their roofs, we would not want a law which literally said the equivalent of Deut. 22:8; but we would want to incorporate the principle behind that law, namely that of maintaining safe facilities.

God in Israel, it is particularly insulting to permit people to commit idolatry. It pollutes the holy land where he dwells. That rationale for the punishments of Deut. 13 and 17 does not apply to modern states. I agree with Poythress, therefore, that the simple acts of publicly worshipping false gods and of inciting others to do so should not be punished by the state.

However, to say this might lead some to believe that in such a Christian state all religions should be treated on a precisely equal basis, with no favoritism shown to any of them, any such penalty being, in effect, a “penalty for false worship.” That would please the “principled pluralists,” and it would bring some satisfaction to those who hold Kline’s position. But I cannot accept it, for it would in effect make a truly Christian state impossible. A Christian state, if that name means anything at all, is a state that observes Christian standards in formulating and implementing the law. To do this is already to “discriminate,” to give a privileged position to one religion over another.

To make the same point from another perspective: all sin, and therefore all crime (crime on God’s standards being a subset of sin) is religious. The murderer is a rebel against the true God, who says, “You shall not kill.” Similarly the thief, the false witness, the rapist rebels. People who do such things are saying in their heart “there is no God” (Psm. 14:1), though they know in their hearts that God is real (Rom. 1:18-21). Wickedness, evil, greed, depravity, all sins, come from the fact that people “did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God” (Rom. 1:28-32). Therefore, to punish murder is at the same time to punish the murderer’s religious decision to ignore God; it is to punish the religious statement the murderer makes through his crime. In *his* religion, murder is not wrong, at least for him. In punishing him, the state is telling him that at *this* point, at least, he may not put his religion into practice.

This sort of issue, of course, comes up very explicitly in the news from time to time. A Jehovah’s Witness refuses a blood transfusion to his dying child, parents in a healing cult refuse medical treatment to their children, and fanatical polygamists in Utah kill off disloyal former followers. Even now, though American law lacks a full Christian commitment, it discriminates against religiously motivated actions of that sort. Defenses of such behavior based on religious liberty are unacceptable. But the same thing happens, essentially, in all criminal cases: the state is pitting its religious commitment, such as it is, against that of the accused.

A godly state, therefore, would be discriminating all the time against false religion. If such discrimination is unavoidable even for non-Christian states, surely it is impossible for a Christian state. The only question, then, is how far may such discrimination go?

It by no means follows from these remarks that no toleration of false religion is possible within a Christian nation. I have said already that the mere acts of false worship and of seduction to false worship ought to be legally tolerated by a Christian state. Indeed, even Old Testament Israel, which executed those who worshiped falsely in public, tolerated the presence of “aliens” and “sojourners,” even those aliens who had

not professed faith in the true God by circumcising the males of their households. These were given explicit protections in the law (Lev. 19:33; 25:6; Num. 15:16; 35:15).

This toleration in Israel depends logically upon the important distinction between sin and crime. Many human actions are sins against God that are not crimes punishable by the state. The law of Moses lists many sins to which no penalty is attached. The same distinction must be made by any modern nation that would strive to emulate the “general equity” of the Mosaic law.

Keeping that distinction in mind, I would think that a modern Christian state ought not to try to punish unbelief as such or even the expression of that unbelief in false worship or religious propaganda. It ought, however, to punish the expressions of false religion in such crimes as murder and theft.

I think too that it would be legitimate to limit the influence of false religion in society through other means. A “Christian state” is, at minimum, a state committed to follow the Word of God as its chief authority in all governmental decisions. Such a commitment would doubtless be articulated in a written constitution, to which public officials would be expected to subscribe. As the rulers of Israel were required under God’s covenant to obey his law, and as modern American officials are required to preserve, protect and defend the Constitution of the United States, so, it seems to me, public officials in a Christian state ought to be expected also to subscribe to the constitution of that state which would, of course, entail a Christian profession of faith.

How theologically detailed ought that profession to be? It depends on how broad the Christian consensus is at the time. The denominationalism of the present-day church is, in my estimation, a terrible scandal for many reasons, and one that makes it difficult, to be sure, to conceive of such a thing as a Christian state. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a Christian state existing until God removes from us in large measure the curse of denominationalism. But should my imagination be too pessimistic in this matter, and should we have the opportunity to lead the nation to a Christian commitment in our present divided state, I would say that the various Christian groups will simply have to see what they can agree upon and hope that over time that agreed content will expand.

At any rate, I would see nothing biblically objectionable, and much positive value in, requiring of public officials a profession of faith in Christ and a commitment to follow biblical standards in their public decisions.

Take the argument one step further: why not also require a public profession as a qualification for the privilege of voting? That idea may horrify some, but it should be considered seriously. Scripture does not require the idea of “one man, one vote” democracy. Scripture allows, I think, many specific forms of government (monarchy, oligarchy, aristocracy, democracy, etc.). Reasonable people, I think, will agree that democracy often fails in certain kinds of cultural settings (e.g. Haiti, Latin America, Africa, prewar Germany), that sometimes nations require more powerful leadership than democracy allows, simply to avoid chaos. Successful democracy requires a literate and

knowledgeable electorate, relatively immune from temptations to pursue private interests by political means and relatively willing to accept defeat in the interest of maintaining public order. Many traditionally democratic nations such as Britain and the U. S. compromised their democratic traditions during war (remember, e.g., the internment of Japanese-Americans, the recent “states of emergency” in Northern Ireland). Democracy has much to be said for it in many contexts, and I certainly defend its continuation in the present-day United States; but it is not an eternal absolute. The scriptural requirement is not that government be democratic,⁵ but that government be just, according to God’s standards. With that in mind, we might ask if the right to participate in government should be limited to those willing to support and defend a Christian constitution. Scripture leaves us free to qualify democracy in this way, and I think such a qualification would do much to prevent the erosion of Christian values within the political process.

Doubtless more could be said as to how much tolerance/intolerance ought to be permitted in a Christian state. I won’t try to give a complete account here. It should be evident, however, that the question is not a simple one of “shall we tolerate or not?” Rather, there are many degrees and kinds of toleration in many different situations, as is recognized by the law of Moses. All of that would have to be worked out carefully by the founding fathers of a Christian commonwealth.

Summary and Conclusion

I have suggested that the state is essentially the government of a tribe or clan with, to be sure, some difference from the nuclear family in its rights and powers. Theologically, states are the government of the earthly tribes, which will in time be superseded by the government of the heavenly tribe, the church. Until that time, however, a Christian state may serve the church by resolving its temporal disputes with worldly powers. To carry out this task faithfully, it must be obedient to the law of God in Scripture, carefully applying that law to the present situation, taking account of changes both in redemptive history and in human culture.

⁵ Although as I mentioned earlier, the people ought to have some say in the establishment of a particular political order, as in Israel’s ratification of the kingship. Thus I insist (with the theonomist tradition) that there ought to be a popular consensus in favor of Christianity before a Christian constitution is actually adopted by a nation.