

# *A Defence of the Christian State*

THE CASE AGAINST PRINCIPLED PLURALISM  
AND THE CHRISTIAN ALTERNATIVE

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## PREFACE

SHORTLY after the publication of the January 1997 issue of *The Evangelical Quarterly*, a British evangelical theological journal published by Paternoster Publishing, I was asked to respond to an article in that issue entitled "How Should Evangelicals Think about Politics?" by John Coffey. Initially, my intention was simply to write a short article as a critique. As this critique progressed, however, it became clear not only that it would be too long to submit as an article to *The Evangelical Quarterly* but that it was also incumbent upon me, as one who had undertaken to refute the theory put forward in the article in question, to provide an alternative theory to that being critiqued. I therefore decided to turn my response into an essay in two parts: the original critique of the principled pluralist position put forward by John Coffey, and an argument for what I consider to be the proper Christian attitude to political theory.

In doing this I have attempted to set principle against principle. I cannot stress too strongly, therefore, that the following essay is not meant to be a manifesto for Christians involved in the contemporary political scene. The argument of Part Two of this essay is an argument about principles, what ought to be, not what is or what is possible in the immediate situation or even in the near future. The principles set out there are, of course, principles that I believe Christians should espouse and work towards as the ultimate goal of Christian involvement in politics. In order to get from where we are to where we should be we must have some understanding of our ultimate destination. But the process by which we arrive at that ultimate destination will require short and medium term goals as well as long term, ultimate goals. It is not possible to move from where we are as a nation politically to

where we should be in a few easy steps. It would be difficult to do this even if there were a Christian consensus in society. It is far more difficult where the Christian consensus has collapsed, as it has in Britain during the twentieth century. The short and medium term goals of Christians involved in politics, therefore, will involve objectives that are not mentioned in detail in this essay and will not touch upon other issues that are mentioned. Nevertheless, the principles set out here are relevant to Christian involvement in politics. As short and medium term goals are achieved long term goals and ultimate objectives begin to come into focus and need to be articulated. It is my hope that this essay will help to inform Christian thinking about the issue of Christian involvement in political life and the necessary development of a Christian political philosophy if such thinking is to achieve any lasting success. Nonetheless, it must be understood that this essay is not intended to be a campaign manifesto. It is a discussion of ultimate principles.

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## PART ONE

### A CRITIQUE OF PRINCIPLED PLURALISM

*And account that the long-suffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. (2 Pet. 3:15-16)*

#### INTRODUCTION

IN the January 1997 issue of the *The Evangelical Quarterly*, John Coffey, in an article entitled "How Should Evangelicals Think about Politics? Roger Williams and the Case for Principled Pluralism"<sup>1</sup> argued the case that the State should be a secular institution and that "all religions [should] enjoy civil liberty and equality."<sup>2</sup> This position Coffey describes as "principled pluralism," and claims it is a position accepted by a growing number of evangelicals who maintain that Christianity should not be a State religion. Coffey's article is an attempt to defend principled pluralism "by adding an historical dimension to its case."<sup>3</sup> It was claimed that principled pluralism "has roots which run deep

<sup>1</sup> *The Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. LXIX, No. 1, pp. 39-62 (Coffey's article will be abbreviated as *E.Q.* throughout the rest of this essay). The complete text of Coffey's essay is reproduced in Appendix C, "How Evangelicals Shouldn't Think About Politics." Page numbers cited in this essay refer to *The Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. LXIX, No. 1 and are printed in the margins of Appendix C.

<sup>2</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

within the evangelical protestant tradition."<sup>4</sup> The author attempts to demonstrate this deeply rooted position within evangelical Protestant tradition by championing the political views of Roger Williams, an émigré to New England in 1630, whom Coffey refers to as a "puritan."<sup>5</sup> By raising the spectre of Roger Williams Coffey believes he has shown that principled pluralism is not a modern idea but a long established evangelical position, though not the most prominent position held historically by evangelicals on this subject. An attempt is made to deal with some objections to the principled pluralist position raised by those who have accepted what Coffey calls the "Constantinian belief that the conversion of nations to Christianity was God's providential plan and that Christians should work to maintain or create godly nations and states."<sup>6</sup> The author ends his article by suggesting that principled pluralism "is the most promising philosophy for evangelicals involved in politics."<sup>7</sup>

It is my belief that the author of this article has fundamentally misunderstood the issue he seeks to address and, consequently, has fundamentally misconceived the proper Christian attitude to the political sphere. It is also my belief that his position is a typical evangelical attitude in today's church, which understands little of the issues involved, little of the history of Christian political thought, and little of biblical teaching on the subject. Coffey's position, as set forth in his article, is a microcosm of the

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Given the nature of his views on the State/church relationship it is doubtful Williams could be considered a Puritan. Definitions of Puritanism vary. The strictest definitions maintain that "The Puritan party consisted of all those who believed in the maintenance of one National Church, and who desired that Church to be reformed after the model of Geneva" (H. G. Wood, "Puritanism" in James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* [Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark], Vol. X, p. 507b). A generally accepted wider definition would include the Independents (i.e. Congregationalists), but it is to be noted that Marprelate considered "no Brownist [i.e. separatist—SCP] to be a Puritan" (Christopher Hill, *Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England* [London: Secker and Warburg, 1964], p. 17). As will become clear, Williams' views on the church were extreme even by separatist standards and only the very widest and vaguest of definitions could place him squarely within the Puritan tradition.

<sup>6</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.



problems that beset the modern evangelical church in its attempts to articulate a Christian political philosophy. This essay will attempt to refute Coffey's thesis, first, by examining the premiss, method and exegetical basis of his argument; second, by examining and correcting some of the errors of the position he is attacking as this was articulated by the Magisterial Reformers; and third, by setting forth what I believe to be the Christian, i.e. the biblical, doctrine of the State, which is a modified form of the "Constantinian" position (Coffey's term, not mine) adopted by the Magisterial Reformers.

Before proceeding, however, the reader may wish to read Coffey's original article, which is reproduced in Appendix C. The reader should also bear in mind the following definitions of terms and concepts:

(i) In this essay I use the term "State" throughout to mean the civil government or magistrate. This concept of the State is a narrow one that is by no means shared by much of modern political thought. In the perspective of humanistic socialism, for example, the State is conceived in much broader terms, nearer perhaps to the concept of the nation than to that of the civil magistrate. As a Christian, I do not, of course, accept the socialist concept of the State nor its vision of society, since it is a reductionist vision of mankind and society, i.e. a vision that absolutises—and therefore idolises—one aspect of the created order above other equally legitimate aspects of creation that exist independently of the State. As will become clear in Part Two of this essay, such a reductionist view of human society, and the absolutist idea of the State that this implies, is the antithesis of the idea of the State predicated by the concept of sphere sovereignty developed by the Dutch neo-Calvinist school of philosophy represented by Abraham Kuyper, Herman Dooyeweerd, Cornelius Van Til et al. It is in terms of this Christian philosophy that I shall argue the case for a Christian State and demonstrate the invalidity of Coffey's ideal of a secular State. It must be noted here, however, that I use the term "State" as a synonym for "civil government" or "magistrate." *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*

of *Current English* (Eighth Edition, 1990) defines the State as “an organised political community under one government; a commonwealth; a nation.” I accept only the first part of this definition. The State is the *political government of the nation*, which is one aspect of society, one aspect of the nation. The nation includes all the other spheres of life as well as the political sphere. The State, therefore, should confine itself to the activities of a civil government or magistracy. However,

(ii) The concept of civil government or the State as a *ministry of public justice*, which is stressed constantly throughout this essay, includes the executive, legislative, judicial, diplomatic, military and law enforcement functions of the State. My restriction of the function of the State or civil government (magistrate) to that of administering public justice is not intended to exclude any of these necessary functions of the civil authorities; but it is intended to restrict such aspects of the State’s work to their proper sphere of authority. All these aspects of the function of the State find their purpose in terms of the establishment and maintenance of public justice.

(iii) I refer frequently to the “autonomy of human reason” or “autonomous human reasoning.” There is a sense in which it is correct to say that human reasoning is never autonomous, that human reasoning is *always* dependent upon God. In order to reason at all man has, in some sense, to think God’s thoughts after him, to use the words of Cornelius Van Til. Even when man denies God and the created nature of reality he has to work in terms of borrowed intellectual capital. It would not be possible to reason at all in a godless universe that was the product of a blind evolutionary process—if such a universe were possible—since it is God who gives meaning to all things by his creative act. There could be no rationality in such a universe and no human reason, just chance occurrences without meaning, which are not susceptible of rational analysis. Man cannot escape the God-created and God-centred nature of reality even in his attempts to deny God in his intellectual life. Man is dependent upon God epistemologically in every thought that he has, just as

he is dependent upon the constant sustaining power of his word physically (Heb. 1:3). God is the one in whom mankind lives and moves and has his being, intellectually, rationally, no less than physically (Acts 17:28). Nevertheless, in attempting to deny God men reason *as if* God did not exist and *as if* the cosmos could be understood independently of the God who created it and who alone can provide meaning for its existence. The *process* of reasoning here is not autonomous epistemologically. But the *assumptions*, *presuppositions* and *premisses* that motivate and guide such reasoning are such as deny God and *assert* the autonomy of human reason. Man *claims* to reason autonomously, and to the extent that his denial of God motivates and provides the presuppositions for his thinking he reasons erroneously. In such cases it is true to say that it is not so much the process of reasoning that is autonomous as that the presuppositions upon which the process of reasoning rests assume the autonomy of human thought, and it is in terms of these presuppositions that the process of reasoning takes place. As a result man denies the truth and asserts his intellectual autonomy. Mankind in sin seeks to establish his own domain of independence from God, to deny the claims of God upon his thoughts and actions. This is precisely what original sin is. Yet mankind cannot achieve such autonomy. Even in his rebellion he is entirely dependent upon God for existence and meaning. It is this process of rebellious reasoning that is referred to by the terms "autonomous human reasoning," "autonomy of human reason" etc. It is not meant by this that mankind can reason independently of God ultimately, that such autonomy is possible epistemologically; merely that this is fallen man's aim, the purpose of his rebellious intellectual endeavour to rid himself of God's sovereign claims over the whole of reality, including mankind himself, a rebellion that ends in futility and corruption, in an ethical and intellectual depravity that can only be overcome by man's repentance before God and the subjugation of his intellect to the authority of God's infallible word.

(iv) Throughout this essay reference is made to the *church* and the *sphere* of the church. By church here is meant the *institu-*

*tional* church, i.e. the visible body of Christ or community of believers organised as a legally defined societal structure for the purpose of maintaining the Christian public religious cultus. This definition of the church is not meant to be exhaustive. It refers only to the body of Christ as an ecclesiastical institution, not to the church invisible or the church universal. The church as the body of Christ in its fulness, of which the institutional church is an essential and important aspect, is conceived in much broader terms than this and cannot be reduced to the institutional church (Eph. 1:22-23; 4:11-16). In this essay, however, our concern is with the church as a *social institution*.

I  
THE QUESTION CORRECTED

§I Coffey's premiss

COFFEY poses the question: "is it theologically legitimate for Christianity [to] be a state religion?"<sup>1</sup> The way one answers this question will determine the kind of politics one pursues, says Coffey. Indeed. Coffey poses two basic answers to this question: "Yes," the "Constantinian" position, and "No," the principled pluralist position. Coffey suggests, however, that many evangelicals support religious liberty grudgingly, for pragmatic reasons; i.e. he suggests that they are pluralist in their politics, but not principled in their advocacy of pluralism.<sup>2</sup>

Coffey argues that the State should support religious pluralism and religious liberty. His ideal of the State is that it should be "non-confessional," i.e. that it should support no religion in particular and instead establish an environment in which all religions are treated equally by the State. However, the question that remains not only unanswered throughout Coffey's essay, but un-posed, is this: "Is it *possible* for the State to be religiously neutral?" Coffey seems not to have considered this fundamental question, which must precede the consideration of his question regarding the validity of Christianity as a State religion. If the answer to this question is "No" the whole basis of Coffey's argument falls to pieces and his political philosophy is shown to be inadequate. Coffey simply assumes that the notion of a secular State, i.e. a religiously neutral State, *is possible*. This assumption underpins his whole argument. And yet if it is shown that this assumption is incorrect the whole of his thesis lies in ruins.

<sup>1</sup> E.Q., p. 40.      <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Coffey does not use the term “religiously neutral State”<sup>3</sup> but the notion is present throughout his essay. Instead he uses the term “non-confessional state,” arguing that “toleration should be extended to all religions and that the state should confine itself to purely secular functions.”<sup>4</sup> This means that the State must not confess any god or practise any religion according to the dictates of any god, since for it to do so would be to abandon the principle of secularism in the State and religious pluralism in society, and thus the religious equality and freedom that these principles are designed to protect.

But the avenue the author pursues is a dead end. There can be no such thing as a non-religious State. All States are religious States. This is evident if we consider the simple question: What is the purpose of the State? How will such a question be answered? By what standard will the answer given be judged correct or incorrect? What authority will decide whether this question is correctly or incorrectly answered? This one simple question drives us back to our fundamental religious convictions. Does Coffey think that the conviction that the State should be “non-confessional” or “secular” is not itself a religious conviction? And if it is a religious conviction, the State cannot avoid being confessional. The question of the purpose of the State throws us straight away onto fundamental questions of right and wrong, and such questions are always religious questions; that is to say, the answers to such questions are always informed by one’s religious convictions. Even the notion that God does not exist posits a fundamentally religious world-view, namely, the idea that the world exists and can be understood independently of the God who created it. Such a perspective is just as religious as the Christian perspective, and just as confessional—i.e. it is a confession that there is no God and that all things find their ultimate meaning within the created order, not in the purpose of the one who created it. This is a universal negative religious presupposi-

<sup>3</sup>There is one exception, where Coffey says that “The neutrality of the state is a neutrality of *justification*, not a neutrality of *effects*” (*ibid.*, p. 59). See the discussion at note 99 on p. 94 below.

<sup>4</sup>*E.Q.*, p. 44f.

tion that shapes the world-view of those who embrace it. What we believe about these ultimate questions of being and meaning will determine our understanding of right and wrong and therefore our understanding of the purpose of the State. Even a State that denies the existence of any God and refuses to recognise any law above its own must, by adopting this very position, confess its faith in the autonomy of human reason, if nothing else. Such a State is just as confessional as a Christian State. It is a State that confesses autonomous human reason as the ultimate principle of interpretation for all things—man as the measure of all things. In other words it confesses that man is his own god, the very essence of original sin (Gen. 3:5). The religious neutrality that Coffey assumes as the basis of his argument is a myth that has been exploded by Abraham Kuyper and the Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition that Coffey claims some of the most prominent of principled pluralists are working from.<sup>5</sup>

No human being can be a-religious since mankind was created in God's image to serve his Creator and therefore created into a relationship with God. Man is religious by nature, as a result of the way that God has created him, and this religious orientation of man's being will manifest itself in the totality of his life. Man can disobey God and seek the meaning of his existence in something other than God. But all such disobedience is religious apostasy, i.e. *idolatry*. Nowhere in the universe can mankind

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42. For example, H. Dooyeweerd writes: "the State as such necessarily functions in the modal law-sphere of faith. In its public communal manifestations the body politic may recognize a God above it and above the entire world-order; or it may deify itself or human reason; or again openly declare itself a self-sufficient '*état-athée*' which only appeals to the belief in a social ideal and in man's autarchical power to realize it. But never can the State as a temporal societal relationship struggle free from the grasp of the sphere of faith, within which a higher will than its own has assigned a structural function to it. This is the astounding truth which must at least arouse every wavering mind from his dreams of political neutrality with respect to the life of faith. The State can no more be neutral in this respect than science. The political slogan of neutrality is as much under the leading of an attitude of faith and as certainly originates from a basic religious commitment as any other political conviction" (*A New Critique of Theoretical Thought* [The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1969], Vol. III, p. 502f.).

escape the God-centred nature of the creation, nor the religious nature of his own being, and therefore nowhere can he exist outside of God's will for his life. All of life is religious, since God demands man's obedience and worship in every facet of his existence, in thought, word and deed. Since man cannot, therefore, escape the religious nature of human life, neither can he escape the religious nature of political life. God created man at one and the same time both an individual and a social being. Human society is created by God just as the individual soul is created by God. Mankind's political life therefore must also find its meaning and purpose in the creative will of God, and with every political thought that he has and every political action that he takes man must seek to serve God according to his word. There can be no neutrality in any sphere of human life, political or otherwise.<sup>6</sup>

It should be clear from this that Coffey's principal question is entirely misconceived. The real question is not "Should the State be religious?" but rather "*Which* religion should the State obey?" Given Coffey's faulty premiss, however, i.e. the validity of the notion of religious neutrality in the political sphere, it is not surprising that his argument for principled pluralism is so confused, and so full of moral, philosophical and religious relativism. For example, Coffey argues that "the consensus needed in a liberal democracy is a narrow one, over the purpose and limits of the state."<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, Coffey fails to perceive the *religious* nature of this question. Consequently, he ends up promoting moral relativism in the name of Christianity and the secular State when he then goes on to say "It is not necessary to agree on the morality of sexual acts, for example, to reach some sort of agreement over the state's role in regard to them."<sup>8</sup> If the State does

<sup>6</sup> This more than anything has been the overriding message of the Kuyperian Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition to which Coffey refers. It is a matter of wonder that Coffey should claim this tradition as one of the sources of his notion of principled pluralism (see note 5 above). I shall deal with this misconception of the Kuyperian Dutch neo-Calvinist tradition in Part Two of this essay and attempt to show that it is just this Kuyperian tradition that provides us with the best model for developing a Christian—i.e biblical—view of the State.

<sup>7</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 57.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*



not have to determine its attitude to homosexual acts on the basis of morality on what basis should it determine its attitude to such practices? Does Coffey think homosexuals are going to agree with Christians about the rightness or wrongness of homosexual acts on some other grounds? "On some issues, of course—abortion is the notorious example," says Coffey, "such agreement will be very difficult to come by, because here it is very difficult to separate religion from morality and morality from politics."<sup>9</sup> Presumably, Coffey thinks homosexual acts (an issue of morality) *can* be separated from religion. It is just this assumption of the limited nature of religious belief and therefore of the religious neutrality of the political sphere with regard to such issues of morality that leads Coffey into moral relativism. Coffey is completely wrong about abortion. It is not very *difficult* to separate religion from morality and morality from politics on this issue; it is *impossible* to do so. And it is not only impossible to separate religion, morality and politics in the matter of abortion, but in the matter of sexual behaviour and every other issue with which the State must deal. Religion and politics are inseparable.

Since it is not possible to deal with the conundrum that Coffey has created from a non-religious perspective, i.e. without recourse to beliefs about the ultimate nature and meaning of reality, let us press on to consider the matter from the Christian perspective.

§2

*The role of religious convictions  
in determining the function of the State*

The purpose and function of the magistrate, it is true, is not to promote the Christian faith directly, i.e. by preaching the word of God or enforcing observance of the Christian public religious cultus. But the State must recognise the church as a public legal institution forming part of the societal structure of the nation. To

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

deny or even fail to recognise this public legal character of the church as an institution is to fail to recognise the lordship and sovereignty of Christ over the nation. Furthermore, the magistrate, when he pursues his calling in obedience to God's word, does support the Christian religion, in that he helps to preserve and uphold a social order based on the moral framework of the Christian faith and thus in which the Christian religion is able to flourish. Likewise, the result of the church's preaching of the gospel is to promote in its own way that moral framework in terms of which the magistrate is to pursue his calling. Church and state do not have the same functions and they must maintain a separation of powers. The State bears the sword, i.e. the use of physical coercion, which is an instrument that the church must not use. Instead the church uses the sword of the Spirit, the preaching of the word of God. But this separation of *powers* does not imply a complete separation of church and State.<sup>10</sup> Church and State in a Christian society have a reciprocal influence upon each other. Nor is such influence confined to church and State. The Christian family, also, has an influence on the church and the magistrate, in that magistrates and church leaders are brought up in families and therefore the quality of a nation's magistrates and church leaders will be influenced by the teaching and practice of the Christian faith as these are imbibed in the home. In turn the religious beliefs of magistrates and church leaders will help to maintain the social environment in which the Christian concept of family life can flourish. But again, there is a separation of powers and authority between family, church and State. Each has its own sphere, authority and means of enforcing discipline.

The church is commissioned to preach the gospel and administer baptism and the Lord's Supper. The State may not do this. What then is the function of the State? It is to uphold public justice and legal order in society (Rom. 13:3-4). But men are not in agreement about what constitutes justice; and it is one's *religious* convictions that determine one's view of justice. The an-

<sup>10</sup> The precise nature of the institutional link between church and State will be discussed in Part Two of this essay.

cient Greek or Roman father who exposed his child because it was born deformed, or for any other reason, understood this to be his right and that it would be unjust for anyone to abridge his freedom in this matter. The Christian thinks otherwise. Why? The problem is that justice is not a neutral concept. There is no universal agreement about what justice means. Of course, there are vague notions of what justice means that can be found common to many societies, and this is on account of the fact that man is a moral creature who cannot escape the witness that God has left of his own being in the created order, including the very nature of man himself. The work of God's law is written on the hearts of all men (Rom. 2:15). Thus, most societies consider murder to be immoral. But there is not the same consensus about what constitutes murder. There is not a unanimous understanding of this idea. Hence in ancient Greek and Roman society one could expose one's children with impunity. In a Christian society this is considered murder. There is no cross-religious consensus about justice, and this is because one's understanding of justice is always informed by one's religious convictions. What one considers right or wrong is determined by one's understanding of *who* ultimately determines right and wrong. The notion of justice posits a concept of ultimate and final authority, and men disagree about this. Therefore the Muslim can say: "I am commanded to fight against men until they bear witness that there is no God but Allāh, and that Muhammad is God's messenger; only by pronouncing these words can they make their property and blood secure from me."<sup>11</sup> This the Christian calls murder and theft, because the word of God, the Bible, calls it murder and theft, and for the Christian it is *God* in his word who determines what is right and wrong.

Of course, as already mentioned above, the Christian will also say that the work of God's law is written in the hearts of all

<sup>11</sup> Cited in Th. W. Juynboll, "Law (Muhammadan)" in James Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (T. and T. Clark), Vol. VII, p. 881a. This is a saying of Muhammad's that is recorded in a number of different hadiths: see *Sahih Bukhari*, Vol. 1, Bk 2, no. 24; Bk 8, no. 387; Vol. 4, Bk 52, no. 196; Vol. 9, Bk 84, no. 59; *Sunan Abu-Dawud*, Bk 14, no. 2635; Bk 19, no. 3061.

men. When men acknowledge certain things to be just or unjust that the Bible says are just or unjust we recognise this as a blessing of God's common grace to mankind, the result of the fact that mankind was created in God's image and that he has, therefore, a sense of morality. But as well as the creation in God's image the Bible teaches the Fall of mankind, a fall in which man's moral sense was corrupted and vitiated. The image of God in mankind was not destroyed by this fall, but it was polluted by sin. The essence of this sin is that man insists on determining for himself what constitutes right and wrong, good and evil, instead of accepting the authoritative word of God as that which defines right and wrong. This is what the story of the Fall is all about. The serpent tempted Adam and Eve to reject God's definition of right and wrong and define right and wrong for themselves. Then they would be as God, knowing, i.e. determining for themselves, what constitutes right and wrong without reference to God's word, God's law. It is this original sin that continues to vitiate man's ability to reason obediently about justice. Because the image of God in man has been polluted by sin men call murder justice and theft righteousness. Justice is therefore perverted. The only remedy for this perversion, the Bible tells us, is the corrective lenses of the Bible itself, the law of God. Only by looking into this word can our footsteps be directed according to the Creator's definition of right and wrong (Ps. 119:105; Pr. 6:23; Ps. 1:1-2 etc.).

This is why the kings of Israel were told to read and contemplate on the law of God continually, so that they would do *justice* (Dt. 17:18-19). Only in the Bible can mankind find an infallible rule of justice to correct the vitiating and polluting effects of sin upon the human conscience and consequently upon man's ability to reason correctly about justice. It is the acceptance of this truth that has made Western justice so much superior to the forms of justice found in un-Christianised cultures. The Western notion of justice was not plucked out of thin air by right-thinking men; it was imbibed from the church, from the disciples of Christ who taught justice to kings. All that was superior in Western justice

was the product of centuries of Christian belief.<sup>12</sup> It is naïve to assume that Muslims and Hindus will pluck the same notions of justice from thin air that modern Westerners think are the inevitable consequence of the application of pure reason. They will not. And this is because these notions of justice are not the inevitable consequence of reason—at least not in a fallen world. Rather, they are the consequence of the captivity of human reason to the word of God, the result of centuries of Christian culture and civilisation. The issue of justice is a religious issue. Hence the magistrate, who is a man created in God's image and who therefore cannot escape the religious nature of his being, must inevitably have recourse to his religious convictions as he seeks to understand and discharge the task to which he has been called. He may be quite unconscious of the way in which his religious convictions affect the work he does. That they will affect his work is inevitable.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, while the task of the magistrate is not that of preaching the gospel and leading men to salvation, it is nevertheless the case that the magistrate must undertake his task in terms of an ideal of justice that is religious. Justice is not a religiously neutral issue. Hence no State is a religiously neutral State. Secular humanist

<sup>12</sup> On the role of the Christian faith in shaping the English common law tradition see Stephen C. Perks, *Christianity and Law: An Enquiry into the Influence of Christianity on the Development of English Common Law* (Whitby: Avant Books, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> See E. L. Hebden Taylor, *The Christian Philosophy of Law, Politics and the State* (Nutley, New Jersey: The Craig Press, 1969). Hebden Taylor writes, "it is the Word of God alone which set[s] us in the light of the truth and which discloses to us that our life on this planet in its integral wholeness is the service of either the true God or of various idols and absolutizations of one or more aspects of reality. Christian political life is thus an aspect of our single-hearted service of God. . . all political action is religion, though we may not overlook the difference between true (real) and false (imagined) religion. Since all human life is lived out of the ineradicable and fundamental religious relation to God, all political life must express the *belief* of those who are engaged in it. This is true even where it is denied; its truth is its rootedness in the sureness of God's creation-ordinance for man. Thus the political life of mankind generally will disclose the same fundamental religious antithesis of direction that characterizes human life as a whole. In their faith, i.e., in their ultimate certainty, the 'ways' of men diverge. Faith, which is the gift of God through the regenerating power of the Holy Spirit, is the wedge that divides humanity" (*ibid.*, p. 594f.).

States that do not recognise God or any law above their own State law are not religiously neutral States. They are States that have absolutised autonomous human reason as the source of all truth. They are States whose gods are human reason, the human will, and the State itself as the ultimate embodiment, the incarnation, of the human will. This is clear from the history of those States that have systematically expunged the Christian God from their belief systems, e.g. the French Revolutionary State, the Nazi State, the Communist States, which have redefined justice on their own terms, terms that have been thoroughly abhorrent to those who have retained a Christian conception of justice.

We can go even further. No State, not even a secular humanist State, is a non-confessional State. All States confess their religious beliefs, their foundational religious convictions, though not all in the same way. The Constitution of the United States of America is famous for its negation of a Christian creed as the basis of its authority, identifying, instead of the God of Scripture, "We the People" as the ultimate authority and source of all law (and therefore god) in American society,<sup>14</sup> a notion that is embraced tenaciously in American life. In this sense America is a true democracy, since the voice of the people is the voice of god, both constitutionally and, for most Americans, practically. But this "We the People . . ." is a creed, a confession of faith. And consequently, the United States is a confessional State, though not a confessionally Christian State. Likewise, the French Revolutionary State confessed its religious belief system in the shibboleth "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity." Confession is unavoidable for the State just as religious neutrality is impossible. When any State undertakes to correct what it considers to be injustice and oppression and reorders the life of society in accordance with its own ideal of justice it confesses its basic religious convictions. Of course it may avoid traditional religious terminology, e.g. Christian terminology, and speak instead of "inalienable human rights" and the like, or it may even use

<sup>14</sup> On the United States Constitution see Gary North, *Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism* (Tyler, Texas: ICE, 1989), p. 374ff., 490ff.

traditional religious terminology but redefine this language completely, using it as a tool to overturn the old order. Either way, it confesses its basic religious convictions.

It is the acceptance of the erroneous idea of religious neutrality, the notion that there can be a State that is neutral with regard to religious convictions and therefore that can administer justice in such a way that religious beliefs are not determinative in the constitution of the State, that wrong-foots Coffey's argument for principled pluralism at every point. This is an error that is fatal to his entire thesis. At every stage of his argument the conundrum he sets out to resolve is misconceived and consequently his proposed solution is misguided. At each point of his essay the answer to his argument boils down to this one question—namely, “Is it *possible* for the State to be religiously neutral?”—to which Coffey seems totally oblivious, and yet which, if it were answered, would radically change the nature of the debate. If it is *not* possible for the State to be religiously neutral, the question “Should Christianity be a State religion?” would have to be addressed on a basis entirely different from that presented in Coffey's essay.

AN ANALYSIS OF COFFEY'S ARGUMENT  
FOR PRINCIPLED PLURALISM

## §1

*"The Question Posed"*

WE shall now look more closely at the case for principled pluralism as Coffey presents it in his opening argument, entitled "The Question Posed."

Coffey says that his essay "aims to encourage such [political] reflection by tackling perhaps the most fundamental question faced by Christians who think deeply about politics: namely, is it theologically legitimate for Christianity [to] be a state religion?"<sup>1</sup> As already mentioned above, however, this is not the most fundamental question facing the Christian as he thinks about politics. Behind it is the assumption of the possibility of religious neutrality in the political sphere. Perhaps Coffey thinks that those who believe the State should not be religiously neutral do not think deeply about politics. But the fact remains that Coffey's argument for a secular State is a religious argument, though not a Christian argument, at least not if we are to understand the term "Christian" in a biblical or historical sense. Here at the very beginning, therefore, we must question the position taken by Coffey and the principled pluralists as he presents their case, not simply on ethical grounds, but on logical grounds also. Coffey wants a secular State that is not based on religious principles. But the very idea of a secular State is a religious idea. Therefore the argument for a secular State invalidates itself. Ethically, however, the problem is much more serious. Coffey does not want the

<sup>1</sup>E.Q., p. 40.



State to be based on Christian ideals and principles. This means that some ultimate standard of justice other than the law of God must govern the State. But Jesus said that we are either for him or against him (Mt. 12:30; Mk. 9:40; Lk. 9:50; 11:23). There is no middle way. Therefore the State that does not serve Christ must serve some other god. The Muslim State serves Allāh. The humanist State serves—i.e. worships—autonomous human reason as this is embodied in the will of the people, natural law or the State itself. To put it bluntly, and in biblical terminology, the secular State is not a non-religious State; rather, it is an *idolatrous* State.

What Coffey's argument for principled pluralism asserts is that God is not Lord over all, that his lordship is circumscribed by human reason, that when it comes to politics man himself should determine what constitutes good and evil, right and wrong, without any reference to God's definition of right and wrong, that God's definition is *not* authoritative for man, that something other than righteousness as God has defined it in his law should govern the State. What this argument asserts, therefore, when all the rhetoric has been stripped away, is that only idolatry by the State can guarantee justice in society. If this seems absurd, it is because it is absurd. From the Christian point of view it is at best nonsense. There is no cogent argument based on Christian principles that can lend credibility to such a political theory.

Coffey continues: "This is not merely an academic question; it has great practical implications. In the first place, the answer we give may well affect (or reflect) our attitude towards the issue of religious liberty."<sup>2</sup> But if we start from a Christian point of view, i.e. a *biblical* point of view, liberty is defined by God's word. Those who reject God and his law claim liberties that God does not grant to mankind. God does not grant men the liberty to steal. Stealing is unjust. Therefore the State abridges no one's legitimate freedom when it denies him the right to steal. Rather, it protects people's freedom to possess their property in peace, as

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

is required by the Eighth Commandment. Of course many non-Christians agree that theft is wrong. But *what* constitutes theft? And *who* defines theft? Some people believe the State has the right to redistribute wealth and fund State welfare by taxing the rich at exorbitant rates. Others see this as legalised theft, and could justifiably base their position on biblical arguments, since the Bible does not permit the State to raise taxes except for the purpose of administering justice (Rom. 13:4-7). Whether one considers the State justified in pursuing such policies or not will be settled by recourse to one's religious convictions about the source and nature of the State's authority. But such an appeal to ultimate religious principles is not possible in Coffey's secular State, which must not have any regard to religious convictions in determining policy. If Coffey's religiously neutral State were possible, therefore, which it is not, it could do nothing, since in any and every sphere in which it acted it would be dealing with issues of justice whose very conception is ultimately based on religious principles.

Ultimately one's religious convictions will determine what one considers to be liberty. It is not simply "religious" liberty, i.e. the freedom to worship God or not according to one's conscience, that is a religious question; the issue of liberty in all areas of life is a religious question, i.e. a question that will ultimately be settled by recourse to one's religious convictions. The definition of liberty is a religious question. The logic of Coffey's argument seems to suggest that when the State proscribes certain types of crime, let us say shoplifting for example, it is acting against injustice in a non-religious way, that the definition of such a crime does not involve religious principles, whereas when the State prohibits blasphemy it is acting religiously. But this is not so. The prohibition on shoplifting is based on religious principle no less than the prohibition on blasphemy. Both types of crime involve definitions based on religious convictions about the morality of certain kinds of human behaviour. This was illustrated by the case of an Anglican priest who claimed that shoplifting from large superstores is not theft and that such shop-

lifting helps to effect a badly needed redistribution of economic resources in society.<sup>3</sup> In other words his basic religious convictions—socialist convictions—led him to view certain actions in a given context as acceptable that Christianity has always judged immoral and criminal. Men are not free, the Bible tells us, to steal with impunity, even if they are poor. And not only are they morally obligated to make restitution to those from whom they have stolen; the State must enforce such restitution (Pr. 6:30-31). Both types of crime—blasphemy *and* theft—are religious crimes, i.e. transgressions of God's law and therefore crimes against God (Pr. 30:9).

This question regarding liberty, what it means, how it is defined, will not easily go away for Coffey. The Bible says men should not be free to do certain things. Sinful men disagree and say their liberty is abridged by such restrictions. But liberty can only be defined properly by God, who created mankind for his own purpose. Outside the boundaries of this definition men do not exercise their liberty under God, they engage in rebellion against God, and where the Bible indicates that the magistrate must prohibit and punish such rebellion this does not constitute an abridgment of man's freedom but the legitimate suppression of evil-doing.

But, in fact, the concept of liberty that has been accepted in Western society has been based on Christian principles. It should not be forgotten that this debate could not take place in a public forum in some cultures because the religion from which the State derives its authority and mandate would forbid it. This freedom of discussion and debate, which Westerners enjoy and rightly

<sup>3</sup>Michael Horsnell, "Priest advocates shoplifting from 'evil' superstores," *The Times*, Saturday 15, 1997, p. 3. *The Times* reported the priest in question as stating that superstores are "places of evil and temptation." This would not have been the first time a clergyman decided that the way to deal with temptation is to give in to it, but the reasons given by this clergyman for his views on shoplifting were more ideological, involving a religious perspective that is socialist, not Christian. The Bible forbids theft (Ex. 20:15) and requires a thief to make restitution to his victim plus compensation of between a fifth and five times the value of the goods stolen depending on the nature of the theft (Ex. 22:1, 4; Lev. 6:2-5; Num. 5:6-8; see also note 1 on p. 163f. below).

prize, is not the product of unaided human reason. Communist and Nazi citizens did not enjoy this kind of freedom. One of the ironies of a "post-Christian" society is that so many attribute the benefits of Christian civilisation to man's own genius, to autonomous human reason. This is, however, a testimony to the pride and spiritual blindness of modern Western society, since the whole of history demonstrates that only where Christianity has had an impact on man's culture has there been such freedom.

This brings us to another problem, namely, the whole idea of a pluralist or multicultural society being anything more than a transitory phenomenon, a period in which various contending religions struggle for dominance in society. There has never been a pluralist society in history that has not been precisely such a transitory phenomenon, a mere stage in a civilisation's shift from one religion to another. A pluralist society is an inherently unstable society, a society in which the basic religious presuppositions upon which the social and political order rests are being overturned and replaced by alternative religious presuppositions. For a brief period, as the old order dies away and the various contenders for succession struggle for supremacy, there may be an illusion of multiculturalism, but eventually the dominant religious world-view begins to re-create society in its own image and enforce its own concept of law and order in the social and political spheres.<sup>4</sup>

The notion of a pluralist society is a kind of Utopian dream, a naïve dream—especially for the Christian—that sinful men can set aside their religious differences and come to a consensus, based on autonomous human reason, about how human society

<sup>4</sup>Where the new religious consensus is humanistic, such as in ancient Rome and modern Western society, there may be a superficial appearance of religious liberty. In such cases the State will permit its citizens to practise just about any religious cultus they wish as long as such religious practices are confined to the private and personal spheres and do not interfere with the public realm of the State—i.e. as long as the State (or Caesar) is recognised as the ultimate source of political authority, that which gives meaning and purpose to society, which is defined in terms of this humanistic idol. But such religious freedom is an illusion, as the early Christians in Rome discovered when they claimed that Christ, not Caesar, is Lord. Religion and politics are always mixed.

should be organised and ruled politically.<sup>5</sup> This Utopianism pervades Coffey's reasoning. But it is simply idolatrous to think that we can set aside God's will for the political organisation of human society; and it is absurd for the *Christian* to try to do so.

Coffey says that "Those who believe in the ideal of the Christian nation will probably devote considerable energy to the attempt to promote true religion through political and legal means."<sup>6</sup> But there is a definition problem at this point. Coffey does not say precisely what he has in mind here. If by this he means that such Christians will require the State to enforce observance of the Christian religious cultus by law and punish those who do not comply I would of course agree that the State should not do this, nor should Christians lobby the State to do this. Consciences cannot be compelled in this way, and it would be wrong to try and compel consciences in this way. But this is not the function of the State according to Scripture. It is the function of the church to preach the gospel and evangelise the nation, not the State. The function of the State is the administration of public justice according to God's law, which is a transcript of God's righteousness. The question is, *whose* notion of justice will prevail in the political sphere? Will it be Christ's, Allāh's or that of godless humanism? It is not possible to conflate all these different ideals of justice into the hotchpotch of political pluralism that Coffey proposes without detracting from the very essence of the

<sup>5</sup> E. L. Hebden Taylor writes: "The great illusion of modern post-Christian democrats and liberal humanists is that successful community can be created between man [*sic*] without reference to basic life- and world-views. Such persons expect men to live as brothers without believing in God as their Creator, to found a brotherhood of mankind without any common faith to bind them, to think as one while remaining utterly individualistic and self-seeking. Christians must bear witness to the fact that it is impossible to enjoy the fruits of Christianity without a living faith in Christ as Lord of life in its entirety. We must point out to the humanists that such secular values as 'liberty,' 'equality,' and 'fraternity' are miserable shadows of the Christian doctrine of the Fatherhood of God, the true brotherhood of man made possible by the death of Christ, and the real liberty wherewith Christ makes men free from the power and guilt of sin" (E. L. Hebden Taylor, *The Christian Philosophy of Law, Politics and the State* [Nutley, New Jersey: The Craig Press, 1969], p. 601).

<sup>6</sup> E.Q., p. 40f.

righteousness that is prescribed in the Bible as the ideal to which mankind should aspire in the political sphere no less than any other sphere. The Muslim has a different concept of justice from the Christian because he worships a different god. Likewise, the humanist has a different concept of justice because he worships a different god, i.e. his own fallen human reason. But it does not follow that because the Christian believes the State must pursue justice as defined by God's word he therefore also believes that the State should enforce observance of the Christian religious cultus upon non-believers. Yet Coffey's argument implies that it does.

Perhaps one of the most amazing statements in Coffey's article is his definition of the "Constantinian" position, which it is his purpose to prove unbiblical. Says Coffey: "The magisterial Reformation, as the name implies, was built on the Constantinian belief that the conversion of nations to Christianity was God's providential plan and that Christians should work to maintain or create godly nations and states."<sup>7</sup> He defines "Constantinianism," the object of his critique, as the belief that God requires Christians to work for the conversion of the nations. As we shall see, this is precisely what Jesus commissioned his disciples to do when he commanded them to go into all the world and preach the gospel (Mt. 28:18-20; Mk 16:15). Coffey admits that throughout history most Christians have supported this notion, even among those evangelicals who have had the closest affinity with the Radical Reformation.<sup>8</sup> But he contends that there has always been a minority tradition within evangelicalism that has rejected this notion and claims that "due in no small part to the growth of religious diversity and the secularisation of the state, the *cogency* of this position has become increasingly apparent."<sup>9</sup>

There are a number of problems with this argument: first, no explanation is given as to why the cogency of this position should be more apparent in an age of religious diversity. The

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41. <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 41f.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 42, my italics.

argument is a *non-sequitur*. Why does the current existence of religious diversity render the cogency of the principled pluralist position more apparent? Many would of course argue just the opposite conclusion, namely, that the existence of religious diversity has shown up the inherent weaknesses of religious pluralism, that in the spiritual anarchy that such a religious pluralism has created; the effectiveness of Christian influence in society has been vitiated. Why the cogency of the argument for principled pluralism should have become more apparent as a result of the growth of religious diversity remains a mystery to me, and I suspect it will remain a mystery to many others who consider this matter. Coffey drops a lot of names to support his assertion, but unfortunately no arguments are in evidence. What is the chain of reasoning that demonstrates the cogency of his position? If there are good reasons and arguments supporting this assertion why are they not given? What precisely is the connection between the growth of religious diversity in society and the apparent cogency of the principled pluralist position? Coffey does not say.

Second, the method Coffey chooses to argue his case for principled pluralism is an exposition of the political thought of Roger Williams (1604-1683), a man who lived in an age in which there was much *less* religious diversity and in which the State was not secularised. Given Coffey's point—for the sake of argument—about the cogency of the argument for principled pluralism in relation to increasing religious diversity in society and greater secularisation of the State, we must surely ask how an historical method that hinges on arguments that must appear less cogent, because extracted from a *less* religiously diverse context in which the State was *not* secularised, can be used to support the argument for principled pluralism, the apparent cogency of which hangs on a *more* religiously diverse context in which the State *is* more secularised. In other words, if the cogency of the principled pluralist position has become more apparent as a result of increasing religious diversity and the secularisation of the State, what value is there in using the political thought of Roger Williams to demonstrate the argument for principled pluralism

when the society to which Williams belonged and to which he addressed his arguments was less religiously diverse? According to Coffey the cogency of the argument for principled pluralism relies on a developing social context that was foreign to Williams. Is it not anachronistic, therefore, to use the arguments of Williams as a method of presenting the case for principled pluralism? If the cogency of this position is now more apparent why not simply explain the argument and demonstrate its cogency? Instead of doing this Coffey makes an attempt to add an historical dimension to the case for principled pluralism, an effort that is pointless given his premiss regarding the apparent cogency of his position. While we search Coffey's article in vain for a sustained and *reasoned* argument for principled pluralism, we are treated to this historical dimension, which Coffey as good as agrees cannot provide the degree of cogency that the position he is defending needs.

But, third, and more importantly, Coffey's argument for principled pluralism is here at loggerheads with Scripture itself. Coffey argues that the "Constantinian" position, as he terms it, which claims that the conversion of the nations is part of God's providential plan for mankind and therefore that Christians should work to create and maintain Christian States, is *not* biblical. Christians are not required to work for the conversion of nations, and God's plan for mankind's salvation does not involve the obedient submission of the State to Christ. Yet this is a flat contradiction of the words of Christ himself, whose Great Commission to his disciples clearly involves both of these goals: "Go therefore, and teach [i.e. make disciples of] all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:19-20). Our English versions render this inadequately since strictly speaking English has no verb meaning *to disciple*, the nearest being *to discipline*, which conveys a different idea. Most English translations (e.g. R.V, NASB, RSV, NKJ) read "make disciples of all the nations," which is much less precise than the Greek and can be interpreted as if Christ had



said "make disciples *from* all the nations." But the Greek does not say this; what it says is "disciple all the nations."<sup>10</sup> In other words, Christ commands his disciples to convert the nations. It is "all the nations," not merely Israel, that is the object of Christ's command to his disciples; and his command is that they should disciple, i.e. convert, the *nations*, not merely individuals from the nations. Moreover, the preceding verse puts this command in the most comprehensive light: "All authority is given unto me [Jesus] in heaven *and* earth" (Mt. 28:18). This is the reason why all nations are to be brought under Christ's government and made subject to his sway by means of the Great Commission.<sup>11</sup> Since Christ is Lord of *all*, with *all* authority in heaven and *on earth*, the whole nation, with all its institutions and spheres of life, is comprehended in this command. If not, and the State is not a suitable subject of Christ's authority, then Christ is not Lord of all and his jurisdiction is limited, i.e. he does *not* possess all authority in heaven and *on earth*. Therefore he may not encroach upon the legitimate and autonomous sphere of the State's authority and jurisdiction. This is precisely what Caesar claimed and the early church denied, and it was precisely this overt political confession of Christ's Lordship over the State that sent the early Roman Christians to their deaths. Such a denial of Christ's Lordship may seem cogent to those who advocate principled pluralism but it is not the doctrine taught in Scripture, either in the New Testament or the Old, which instructs the kings of the earth to do homage and kiss the Son (Ps. 2:11-12), i.e. submit themselves to Christ's authority and obey his law.

Given the fact that Coffey's position so categorically contradicts the plain meaning of Scripture in both Testaments, we are surely entitled to ask for some exegesis of a few texts at least,

<sup>10</sup> *Μαθητεύσατε* (aorist active imperative of *μαθητεύω*) means *be a disciple*. This verb is used in classical Greek only in an intransitive sense (H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Gospel of Matthew* [Winona Lake: Alpha Publications, Sixth Edition (1883) 1979], p. 527). In the koine Greek of the New Testament, however, it is used transitively to mean *make a disciple of*, taking as its direct object in Mt. 28:19 *πάντα τὰ ἔθνη*, "all the nations."

<sup>11</sup> Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 527.

such as Mt. 28:19-20 and Rom. 13:3-7 (and there are many others that *ought* to be dealt with thoroughly), if Coffey's insistence that principled pluralism is biblical is to be taken seriously. There is a host of questions arising directly from these texts if Coffey is correct. How is it that Christ did not mean what he so plainly seems to say in the Great Commission? How is it that Paul did not really mean what he said in Rom. 13:1-7? How is it that the kings of the earth are not, after all, to do homage and kiss the Son? Dropping the names of latter-day evangelical writers, even "eminent" ones, does not overcome this fundamental problem of exegesis. Neither is it a substitute for reasoned argument, and if it were the sheer weight of the names that could be dropped to tilt the balance in favour of the so-called "Constantinian" position would break the scale. If evangelicals are truly "Bible believers," as they claim to be, surely they should expect and require more than this as a "biblical" argument. Where is the exegesis?

However, for the sake of argument, let us follow Coffey's argument. He says: "The eminent evangelical historians, Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch and George Marsden, have defended the idea of a non-confessional state largely by demonstrating the abuses perpetrated in the name of 'Christian America'."<sup>12</sup> No Christian, surely, would deny that abuses have been perpetrated in the name of Christ. Religious dissenters have been unjustly persecuted by both Catholic and Protestant magistrates. But how does this fact demonstrate the cogency of the principled pluralist position, let alone its consistency with the word of God? Many fathers abuse their authority as fathers and treat those under their authority unjustly. Not even Christian fathers can claim sinlessness in their role as fathers. Does this mean that fatherhood is discredited or that the family as instituted in God's word is no longer valid? Should fathers refuse to inculcate and uphold Christian values and principles in family life because some Christian fathers have abused their authority? The idea would be absurd. And just as absurd is the notion that misfeasance by the

<sup>12</sup>E.Q., p. 42f.

State, perpetrated in the name of Christ, invalidates the existence of Christian States. Some ministers of the gospel abuse their authority in the church, and in the name of Christ. Does this mean that churches should not have Christian ministers and that they should employ instead "secular," non-confessional, ministers, i.e. ministers who profess no particular religious allegiance, require no biblical discipline and support religious equality in the church rather than belief in and obedience to the God of Scripture? No doubt all right-thinking Christians would laugh at such absurd reasoning. Yet such reasoning is every bit as absurd when applied to the State, which is doubtless why Coffey is so hard pressed to find any but a small minority of Christians from the Radical Reformation and their latter-day followers to support his case. The corrective to abuse is not non-use, but correct use. Is this kind of argument all that principled pluralists have to fall back upon, with the possible exception of the admittedly less cogent and basically anecdotal evidence of the case of Roger Williams? Demonstrating the existence of abuse of authority by Christians does not negate the validity of Christian government, in church, family *or* State, and neither does it constitute a valid case for principled pluralism. Moreover, precisely the same argument could be made against Coffey's secular State. What about the abuse of authority by secular States? Does Coffey think such abuse is impossible in a secular State? The evidence of history is that such secular States are worse, not better than Christian States. Does such abuse render the secular State illegitimate in Coffey's estimation? If not, why not? Why is it only Christianity that is singled out as the butt of such a preposterous argument?

Coffey says "Western evangelicals who long for godly nations have failed to think globally. They are misled by geographical parochialism and historical nostalgia for the Golden Age of Reformation Europe. Their selective memory seems to have edited out the witch-craze, the persecution of heretics, the religious wars, and the bitter disillusionment ultimately experienced by theocratic visionaries."<sup>13</sup> But just the same arguments can be

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

levelled against Coffey's secular State. What of the religious and ethnic persecutions in Nazi Germany and Communist Russia? The excesses and crimes of such secular States have been far worse than those of Christian States (though I do not deny that there have been abuses by Christian magistrates—but this is the result of sin, not the Christianisation of the State, which has, in fact, led to less abuse than in non-Christian States). Since Coffey accuses those who disagree with his principled pluralist position of having a selective memory I think it is only fair to point out that Coffey is guilty himself of doing precisely what he accuses others of doing. There is no mention in his essay of the crimes and atrocities committed by secular States. It is Coffey who has failed to think globally, not Christians who support a Christian State. Does he think the Nazis and the Communists, who established the most consistently secular States that have ever existed, did not persecute their heretics? What about the unjust persecution of religious dissenters in secular States? Perhaps Coffey should try out the logic of his argument on someone like Alexander Solzhenitsyn and countless others persecuted for their beliefs in Russia. The Nazis and Communists have committed far worse crimes and atrocities than any Christian State has ever done, more than the Inquisition did. These secular States have murdered millions.<sup>14</sup> Yet all Coffey can see is the witch-hunts of Christians. He seems to be totally oblivious to the witch-hunts of the secularists. Why is it Coffey does not argue that these invalidate the idea of a secular State? It is truly astonishing to read through Coffey's essay and observe how he argues. He sees only the speck of dust in the eye of those who have established Christian States yet fails completely to notice the log-jam in the face of those who have established and promoted secular States. His essay is a masterpiece of prejudice. He strains at a gnat and swallows a herd of camels. This myopia to the faults of secular States is a troubling aspect of Coffey's essay. Like the secularists who do not believe in Christ, Coffey has nothing but criticism

<sup>14</sup> For more on this see Alan Wilson, "Messianic Statism—A Political Terror" in *Christianity and Society*, Vol. VII, No. 4 (October, 1997), pp. 18-21.

for Christians who have sought to bring the light of God's word to bear upon the ministry of the State, and nothing but good to say of secularism; consideration of the abuses and persecution, the murders and genocide perpetrated by secular States is totally absent. Yet if the logic of Coffey's argument against the Christian State were to be applied equally to his own position rather than just being applied in a prejudiced way against Christian States, the secular State would come off far worse than the Christian State. In other words, if Coffey were to apply his own argument fairly to all contenders he would have to accept the Christian State as the best option, i.e. as that least likely to result in genocide and persecution. Of course he does not apply the argument fairly; he applies it in such a way as to prejudice the case for a Christian State.<sup>15</sup>

The case for principled pluralism needs to be made in terms of a reasoned and sustained argument based on Scripture, not on anecdotal evidence that men are sinners who abuse their authority. Such abuse of authority occurs in all kinds of States, including secular States. Coffey's argument here invalidates his own position, since if applied consistently in an unprejudiced way it would render all States illegitimate, including secular States. Again, therefore, we are faced with a lack of logical consistency in Coffey's case for principled pluralism.

In an almost ironic statement Coffey does seem to glimpse the problem that his historical case for principled pluralism is up against when, faced with no compelling exegetical arguments and forced to rely solely on a minority tradition based on the Radical Reformation, he says, "What is intriguing about these writers [i.e. a number of conservative evangelical theologians who support principled pluralism—SCP] is that most of them come from churches which would trace their roots back to the magisterial Reformation. For this very reason, they find it diffi-

<sup>15</sup> Of course I do not accept the logic of Coffey's position nor the grounds on which he argues his case. I argue the case for a Christian State on other grounds. But here my concern is to demonstrate the logic of *Coffey's* argument, or rather its lack of logical consistency.

cult to provide much historical support for their position.”<sup>16</sup> Coffey attempts to remedy this by expounding the political thought of Roger Williams, whose “argument for religious toleration and the non-confessional state” claims Coffey “was profoundly biblical . . . and . . . a far better guide for Christian political action than the Constantinianism of the magisterial Reformers.”<sup>17</sup> It is to Coffey’s exposition of Williams’ political views that we shall now turn. As we do so, the reader should bear in mind that Coffey has told us this is an argument that is “*profoundly biblical*.”

## §2

### *Coffey’s method: “Roger Williams (c. 1604-83) and the case against Constantine”*

The method Coffey chooses to make his historical case for principled pluralism is a consideration of the political philosophy of Roger Williams as set forth in his book *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for cause of Conscience, discussed, in A Conference between Truth and Peace* (1644). First, however, Coffey treats us to a few eulogies in honour of Williams that I think it would be remiss of me to pass over without some remark. Says Coffey:

Roger Williams is arguably one of the most remarkable and attractive figures in the history of evangelical Christianity. Not only was he among the earliest and most thoroughgoing champions of full religious toleration, he was also extraordinarily sensitive in his attitude to the American Indians. In an age when aboriginal peoples were usually despised as barbarous and deprived of their land without receiving anything in return, Williams took the trouble to master their difficult language, appreciate their culture and defend their land rights. Evangelicals who are looking for models of social and political righteousness would do well to study his example.<sup>18</sup>

Well, not quite. It is not what Coffey says about Williams here that is the problem, but what he does not say about him and

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

what he fails to say about the persecuting Puritans who are the target of his criticism. Williams was by no means alone in these qualities. The spread of the gospel to the natives was one of the desires that motivated the early Puritan settlers in New England. It was John Eliot, preacher at the congregation of Roxbury, Massachusetts, and one of Anne Hutchinson's inquisitors, not Roger Williams, who in 1646 established the first organised missions to the Indians.<sup>19</sup> Nor was Eliot's concern for the Indians a solitary example among the Puritans. The dedication in one of Eliot's tracts, written by a committee of English Puritans, stated: "God doth shew that he had merciful ends, in this their malicious purpose [i.e. the malicious purpose of the English authorities who drove the Puritans to emigrate to the New World—SCP] . . . so he suffered their way to be stopped up here and their persons to be banished hence that he might open a passage for them in the wilderness, and make them instruments to draw souls [i.e. the Indians—SCP] to him, who had been so long estranged from him. It was the end of the adversary to suppress, but God's to propagate the Gospel; theirs to smother and put out the light, God's to communicate and disperse it to the utmost corners of the earth."<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the Massachusetts Bay Colony charter stated that the principal purpose of the plantation was to convert the native Indians to the Christian faith,<sup>21</sup> and "The very seal of the colony reveals the typological imperative underlying this latter-day mission to the Gentiles. It shows an Indian man improbably beckoning across the Atlantic and begging, 'Come over and help us,' in an echo of the plea of the man of Macedonia to St. Paul in his dream (Acts 16:9)."<sup>22</sup> According to James Holstun, "The conversion of the Indians is a vital part of the

<sup>19</sup> H. U. Weitbrecht, "Missions (Christian, Protestant)" in James Hastings, *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark), Vol. VIII, p. 729a, 735a; James Holstun, *A Rational Millennium: Puritan Utopias of Seventeenth-Century England and America* (Oxford University Press, 1987), p. 104. According to Holstun, Eliot was known as "the Apostle to the Indians" and was the author of *The Indian Bible*, a translation of the Bible into Algonquian.

<sup>20</sup> Holstun, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

larger utopian project of New England. Bringing together the Algonquian remnant and the shaping authority of Scripture in a utopian site, the Puritans can see their flight to the New World as a millennial progress, their separation from the City of Man as a prelude and a means to the unification of the City of God."<sup>23</sup>

Whatever one thinks of the millennial drive behind this approach there is no denying the fact that the mission to the Indians was begun and sustained<sup>24</sup> not by Williams, but by the very Puritans whose rule Williams so vehemently criticised and objected to and from which he fled to Rhode Island. Coffey's brief account of Williams and his work is hagiographical and fails to do justice to the work of the Puritans whose model of government he is keen to discredit. Let us take a look at another, and more sober, assessment of Williams' career:

What the high school textbooks neglect to mention is that this bright young man [Williams], who fled Massachusetts at about age 33, was a professional emigrant. He could not settle down, intellectually or geographically. He fled England in 1630 at age 27. He could no longer tolerate the English church because it practiced open communion. He was offered the pastorate of a church in Boston, but he refused. The Puritans were "non-separating Congregationalists," and Williams could not tolerate this. He moved to Salem, and from there to Plymouth, the colony of the true separatists. He fled Plymouth in 1633. The Plymouth church, he said, was not sufficiently separatist. When visiting England, its members attended the Church of England. Too lax! He returned to Salem. Once outside of Plymouth's jurisdiction, he wrote a letter to Plymouth, telling the authorities that they had no legal title to their land because they had not purchased it from the Indians . . . At Salem, he

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 105.

<sup>24</sup> From 1649 to the end of the seventeenth century most of the financial support for the missions to the Indians came from the New England Company, an English corporation chartered in that year by the Long Parliament. The Company's directors were English dissenting Protestants. As well as receiving support from the Company, Eliot continued to solicit funding from wealthy friends and patrons in England. The Company paid the salaries of missionaries and funded the printing of literature and translations of the Bible into the native language of the Indians. See Mark A. Peterson, *The Price of Redemption: The Spiritual Economy of Puritan New England* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 186.



was again offered a pastorate, and he took it. (Why no concerns about its prior imperfection this time? Employment opportunities? A "bully pulpit" of a pulpit?) He fled Massachusetts in 1636 because the magistrates were about to send him back to England. Only after this did he begin his war of the pamphlets with Massachusetts. But he was careful always to flee the jurisdiction of the court he was about to savage. He understood the reality of hierarchy, and he hated it.

Here is the heart and soul of Williams' thought and early life: not his theology, not his political philosophy, but *his hatred of covenantal hierarchies*. . . He wanted no intermediary between his conscience and God's mind. God was to speak to Williams and everyone else directly, which meant that *God had to remain silent in public* . . .

When Williams began to preach publicly that the King's patent was invalid and that the Puritans of Massachusetts Bay, like the Pilgrims of Plymouth, also had no valid title to their land, and when he began saying that the Church of England was not a true church, he was brought under suspicion. He was attacking the King and his magistrates. He was attacking the English Church. In short, *he was attacking the fabric of English society*. Then all residents were asked by the magistrates to take an oath to support the colony against all enemies. He refused, saying that this was an oath, and that it was therefore an act of worship. It would have involved Williams in communion with unregenerate people, he said. This was a denial of covenant status to the civil realm . . . *Williams recognised the inherently religious nature of an oath*. He denied that civil government could lawfully require one. He then persuaded others of his view.

Next, he said that regenerate men and unregenerates should not pray together, and this included praying with wife and children. There should be no prayers of thanks after meals. All of Salem was aglow with his strange ideas. The colony was ready to split. What saved it from a split was that Williams continued on and on, claiming that all the churches of Massachusetts had given up congregational independence and were therefore not true churches. He rapidly lost his support, and when threatened with deportation to England, fled.

He rejected hierarchy, and he rejected the legitimacy of civil covenant sanctions. But this was not enough. He had to attack the hierarchical Church covenant, too. A few followers joined him in Providence. There, he became a Baptist. He would no longer baptise infants. He had himself and his followers rebaptized. But was his baptism valid? No, he then concluded, they must wait for God to raise up a new apostolic power. He withdrew from the church, and would take communion only with his wife. But then he reversed himself. *He would not*

take the final step in his war against hierarchy, i.e. abandon his family covenant. Therefore, having abandoned the principle of absolute separatism at this point, he then abandoned his separatism altogether. He finally concluded that no church can attain purity in this world, which is what the Church of England and John Winthrop had always maintained. From that point on, he would preach, pray, and take communion with everyone. All of this took place within one decade, 1630-40. But he never recanted his political views.

In short, by any standard, Roger Williams was a nut, a loose cannon rattling around on the deck. He had come full circle to a theologically corrupted form of Anglicanism—open church, open communion—although he still refused to join that national, hierarchical church. Meanwhile, he had left dizzy, disoriented followers in his wake. He had offered them a political philosophy of “principled dizziness,” pluralism, and it was much later to become the dominant political philosophy in Western culture . . . The legacy of Roger Williams is clear: *once you enter the Rhode Island wilderness, you lose your sense of direction.* To cross over into Rhode Island, you are required at the border to abandon man’s only valid compass, the biblical covenant.<sup>25</sup>

Williams was not quite the saint that Coffey paints him as. His brief biographical sketch is inadequate and gives a false impression of Williams. Williams was a restless spirit constantly in search of a new audience to which he could expound his latest doubts. Williams may have thought the Indians were able to rule themselves well without the interference of European Christians<sup>26</sup> but the noble savage theory has always lacked tangible supporting evidence, and this is true in the case of the North American Indians no less than other primitive peoples.<sup>27</sup> The

<sup>25</sup> G. North, *Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism* (Tyler, Texas: ICE, 1989), pp. 250-254. North cites as his sources the following works: Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1958); Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650* (Boston: Beacon Press [1933] 1959); *idem*, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition* (New York: Atheneum, [1953] 1965). For a discussion of some of the philosophical issues behind Williams’ political thought see E. L. Hebdon Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 496-521.

<sup>26</sup> Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for Cause of Conscience Discussed* (London: The Hanserd Knollys Society, [1644] 1848), p. 216. All page numbers cited in this essay for *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* refer to this 1848 reprint of the book.

<sup>27</sup> Evidence from Christian missionaries working in the Indian mission fields

Puritans had a more realistic, and a more biblical, view of human nature.<sup>28</sup>

We must question, therefore, not only Coffey's premiss, but his historical method also. His use of Roger Williams as the protagonist of his cause is flawed. The impression Coffey tries to create is that Williams, unlike the Puritan tyrants he opposed, was sensitive to the Indians and concerned about their well-being and rights. But the truth is not as complimentary to Williams, nor as uncomplimentary to the Puritans, as Coffey would have us believe, unless, of course, one believes that it was not proper for the Puritans to take the civilising light of the gospel to the American natives and that they should have been left in superstition and ignorance to die in their sin. This does have a certain consistency with the idea that Christ does not require his disciples to convert the nations, but it is hardly a compassionate approach by any Christian standard. Even on a purely materialistic level the Indians gained immeasurably from their contact with European civilisation.<sup>29</sup>

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of North America flatly contradicts the notion that the Indians were able to govern themselves in a civilised manner prior to the arrival of Europeans. The arrival of European Christians was the salvation of many indigenous peoples whose cultures existed precariously as a result of starvation or continual tribal warfare. It was precisely the arrival of European, i.e. Christian, civilisation that led to survival and prosperity for many such ethnic groups the world over from North America to New Zealand. Of course this does not justify abuse of power and injustice perpetrated by colonial authorities. But the notion that the American Indians were a peaceable and environmentally friendly race who lived in harmony with the earth and were able to govern themselves well is a myth. The Indians did not live off the land so much as starve on it. They were unable to eke out a decent living because they were unable to cultivate the land properly. Starvation often resulted in cannibalism. The idea of a pre-European golden age in North America is not supported by historical evidence. See also note 29 below.

<sup>28</sup> Holstun, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>29</sup> See R. J. Rushdoony, *The Myth of Over-Population* (New Jersey: The Craig Press, 1969), p. 1ff. Rushdoony, who was a missionary on the Indian reservations for many years and whose description of Indian life reveals a reality very different from popular politically correct ideas, asks: "Why were the Indians hungry, when they had the wealth of the Americas at their disposal? The answer is that their food supply was severely limited. A few animals, like the passenger pigeon, were seasonably plentiful, but they were not always available. Before the white man brought the horse and the gun to the Indians, buffalo

But perhaps it is here that Williams' and Coffey's real problem shows itself. It seems they do not really believe that the American Indians were in the grip of superstition and ignorance before the Europeans arrived with the truth, which alone could dispel the devastating consequences of such superstition and ignorance. Holstun points out that "The Puritans had an affinity for the utopian model of an ideal state that other colonies did not. Bernard Sheehan argues that they found uncongenial the complementary myths of the noble savage and the New World paradise that controlled at least the early phases of the promotion, conquest, and colonization of Virginia."<sup>30</sup> Yet it is precisely some form of noble savage theory that underpins Williams' and Coffey's political philosophy,<sup>31</sup> since it predicates the notion that men, even in the grip of the most vicious forms of paganism, have the understanding and wisdom to govern themselves wisely without any reference to the word of God, despite the Bible's own clear statement to the contrary (Dt. 4:7) and the historical evidence of tyranny and abuse from rulers who have rejected God's word in the government of nations. The point is made countless times in the Bible that only when men, including kings, submit to God and govern themselves and those under their authority according to his law will they find the peace and prosperity they seek.

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were much more difficult to hunt, and smaller game was normally depended on. In forested areas, game was scarce. Living off the land is a poor way to live and makes only a marginal and precarious existence possible. It was rarely done by white men. The fur trappers went into the wilderness with food and equipment as their capital: a grubstake made survival possible. Settlers moved out in large groups, with at least two years' income as capital, to clear, plant, and develop the soil. As the settlers developed the soil, the nearby game increased, because the food supply increased. Game drew close to settlements and multiplied and Indians drew close to settlers to get the game as well as the settlers' produce and animals. The coming of the white man developed the earth" (*ibid.*, p. 2f.).

<sup>30</sup> Holstun, *op. cit.*, p. 105.

<sup>31</sup> According to William Haller, Williams' book *A Key into the Language of America* (1643) was "one of the most unusual documents in the literature of the doctrine of grace and one of the earliest in the literature of the noble savage" (W. Haller, *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1955], p. 155).

And it shall come to pass in the last days, that the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established in the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow unto it. And many peoples shall go and say, Come ye, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; and he will teach us his ways, and we will walk in his paths: for out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. And he shall judge among the nations, and shall rebuke many peoples: and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. O house of Jacob, come ye, and let us walk in the light of the Lord. (Is. 2:2-5).

The fulfilment of this prophecy is an aspect of the Great Commission. The peace promised here is *not* the result of peoples being left in their ignorance to rule themselves according to their superstitions, but the result of the preaching of the gospel and the teaching of the law of God to the nations. The Bible speaks of no autonomy or self-sufficiency of the nations without God's word to rule over them as Coffey argues when he says that for Williams "The sphere of religion was one in which the state should not interfere, either to encourage diversity or to suppress it. Once this was accepted, there was every reason to expect that those of 'other worships or religions, Jews, Turks, or anti-christians', could be 'peaceable and quiet subjects, loving and helpful neighbours, fair and just dealers, true and loyal to the civil government.'"<sup>32</sup> The Bible flatly contradicts such a notion and commands all rulers to kiss the Son lest they perish from the way (Ps. 2:12). Perhaps Coffey should pay more attention to the Bible and less attention to television commercials holding out visions of "older and wiser peoples" than those of the Christian West.

But it is the contents of Williams' book *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* that is at the heart of Coffey's case for principled pluralism. In this work, says Coffey, Williams "maintained that toleration should be extended to all religions and that the state should confine itself to purely secular functions."<sup>33</sup> As we have already seen, such an ideal is impossible since any law code, no

<sup>32</sup> E. Q., p. 49.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44f.

matter how secular it may be judged by its authors and supporters, rests on religious presuppositions about the nature and meaning of life and it is these presuppositions that govern the law-making process. Coffey confuses a secular State with a non-religious State, a serious mistake. Religion is inescapable for man because he was created in God's image. Man cannot lead a meaningless life because he was created for a purpose. He will seek to find meaning and purpose for his existence either in terms of the creative will of God or else in terms of some idol that takes the place of God in his life. Man cannot escape this condition. It is a fact of his creation. His view of justice, and therefore his law making and his view of the State, will inevitably reflect his beliefs about the nature and meaning of life, and they will just as inevitably serve the interests of what man sees as the ultimate source of meaning—i.e. his god. Even the most atheistic of belief systems are therefore religious faiths. Man cannot escape the religious nature of his being. But Williams and Coffey seem to think they can create a State that does not take account of the religious nature of man, that man can, in the sphere of politics at least, escape the religious nature of the reality in which he necessarily lives and moves and has his being (cf. Acts 17:28). Not only do they think such a State is possible, they are convinced that such a State is the *biblical* ideal.<sup>34</sup> Yet a thorough examination of Coffey's presentation of Williams' argument reveals virtually no exegetical argument for this position whatsoever. Despite the claim that Williams' case for principled pluralism is far more biblical than the "Constantinian" position of the Magisterial Reformers, indeed that Williams' case is "*profoundly* biblical," there are only six specific references to the Bible in the whole essay,<sup>35</sup> none of which are the *loci classici* of the biblical doctrine of the magistrate. The most pertinent of the biblical texts on the magistrate are not discussed at all or even

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>35</sup> These are 1 Pet. 2:9 (p. 48); 2 Cor. 10:4 (p. 50); Eph. 6 (p. 50); Lk. 9 (p. 50); and Mt. 13 (p. 50 and n.49 on p. 51); 1 Cor. 5 (p. 55, n.58). See below for an exegetical analysis of these texts as they bear on the issue under discussion in this essay.

referenced. Given this fact we must ask: On what basis are we to assess the assertion that Williams' and Coffey's argument is *more* biblical than that of the Magisterial Reformers? If it were, surely there would not be this dearth of biblical exegesis to prove the case. It is a strange argument indeed that fails to cite or even reference those biblical texts that deal most directly with the subject under discussion when the author affirms so confidently that his argument is *profoundly* biblical. Discussion of Rom. 13:1-7 is nowhere to be found in Coffey's entire essay.

Coffey does give us, however, a brief and selective historical survey in which the woes and abuses perpetrated by Christian magistrates are dutifully rehearsed: "Whether in Calvin's Geneva, Knox's Edinburgh, Cromwell's London and Dublin, Winthrop's Boston, or in our own time, Vorster's Pretoria and Paisley's Belfast, Calvinists in power have wielded that power oppressively"<sup>36</sup> we are told. This seems to amount to nothing more

<sup>36</sup> E.Q., p. 47. Coffey is here quoting from R. W. Ruesegger, ed., *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer* (Grand Rapids, 1966). The cavalier way in which the names of Cromwell, Calvin et al. are here conflated with that of Vorster is regrettable. Perhaps Coffey has forgotten that it was Cromwell who opened up the way for the Jews to resettle in England, a fact that hardly sits well with this tactic of guilt by theological association. Furthermore, The Instrument of Government of 1653, under which Cromwell ruled England, Scotland and Ireland as Lord Protector, specifically stated, "That to the public profession [of the Christian religion—SCP] held forth *none shall be compelled by penalties or otherwise*; but that endeavours be used to win them by sound doctrine and the example of a good conversation" (The Instrument of Government, Article XXXVI in S. R. Gardiner, *The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution 1625-1660* [Oxford: The Clarendon Press, (1889) 1979], p. 416, my emphasis). These facts are not consistent with Coffey's caricature of Calvinist political rule. It is interesting to note that with regard to Cromwell's Protectorate J. R. Tanner contradicts this caricature completely: "The establishment of religious liberty as the sects understood it was dearer to the hearts of Cromwell and his advisers than any other single political object, and it might almost be said that the main purpose of the *Instrument of Government* was to make this unassailable for ever" (J. R. Tanner, *English Constitutional Conflicts of the Seventeenth Century 1603-1689* [Cambridge University Press, 1947], p. 181). It is of course true that there were persecuting elements among early Protestant and Puritan groups. This was particularly true of high Anglicans and Presbyterians in Britain. But it would be inaccurate to characterise either the Magisterial Reformation or Puritanism as a whole in such a way. A much more accurate assessment of Calvinism in this respect is given by Abraham Kuyper: "the underlying characteristic of Calvin-

than a repetition of the argument that the abuse of power by Christians in the past necessitates that Christianity should never again be allowed to become the religion of State. But again, there is no correlative assessment of the abuse of power by secularists and what impact this should have on the constitution of the State. Coffey never explains why he thinks abuse of power by secularists should not invalidate the idea of a secular State while abuse of power by Christians necessarily invalidates the idea of a Christian State. What's sauce for the goose is certainly not sauce for the gander in Coffey's book.

After this brief historical prelude Coffey sets out Williams' argument for religious pluralism in the State: "Williams believed that it was his responsibility to wake Christians up again, to make them aware of the fundamental difference between the old and new dispensations."<sup>37</sup> Under the old covenant the magistrate was commanded to promote true religion, but in the new dispensation of the gospel this was no longer the case. The "'pattern of the national church [of Israel] was a nonesuch', Williams declared, 'unimitatable by any civil state in all or any of the nations of the world beside'.<sup>38</sup> Israel's covenant was *utterly* unique, and this "utter uniqueness of Israel's covenant relationship with God was evident throughout the Old Testament."<sup>39</sup> Coffey gives as examples of this evidence the miraculous deliverance from Egypt, the divine provision of the land of Canaan, the terrible destruction of the Canaanites and the typological nature of the Jewish religious cultus, e.g. the requirement of ceremonial—i.e. ritual—holiness, the cult of the tabernacle and circumcision.

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ism must be sought, not in what it has adopted from the past, but in what it has newly created. It is remarkable, in this connection, that, from the very beginning, our Calvinist Theologians and jurists have defended liberty of conscience against the Inquisition. Rome perceived very clearly how liberty of conscience must loosen the foundations of the unity of the visible Church, and therefore she opposed it. But on the other hand it must be admitted that Calvinism, by praising aloud liberty of conscience, has in principle abandoned every absolute characteristic of the visible Church" (Abraham Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, (1931) 1976], p. 102). See also note 78 on p. 76ff. below.

<sup>37</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 48.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*



These ritual, typological aspects of Israel's cultus are then conflated with the magisterial office in Israel and it is assumed that the latter functioned in the same typological manner as the Temple cultus. "To make it [i.e. the magisterial office in Israel—SCP] a model for modern magistrates" we are told "was to underestimate the typological function of Old Testament Israel, and to minimise the gulf between the old dispensation and the new."<sup>40</sup>

But Williams and Coffey have greatly overstated their case here, and in doing so they have misrepresented the Magisterial Reformers and those who have followed their arguments for a Christian State. Coffey's argument falls down at a number of points: first, he asserts, in effect, that the Reformers had no appreciation for the discontinuities between the old and new covenants. This is simply not true. The Reformers were by no means ignorant of the discontinuities between the covenants. They gave much attention to this theme,<sup>41</sup> as have Christian theologians throughout the history of the church. They had, however, come to conclusions very different from those of Coffey, Williams and those who have adopted their arguments today. But it is not true to say that they did not appreciate or deal with the differences between the covenants and that Christians, therefore, needed waking up to these differences, as Coffey maintains. Of course, as a graduate student of the political thought of Samuel Rutherford we must assume that Coffey has *some* idea of the Reformers' teaching on this subject, if only as this was later reflected and developed by the Puritans. But in that case we must wonder why he should use such a misleading line of argument. Coffey's reasoning at this point seems to be a case of "What my net doesn't catch isn't fish." To disagree with the

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> See for example, John Calvin, *Institutes*, II.xi; Philip Melanchthon, *Loci Communes*, "The Difference Between the Old and New Testaments and the Abrogation of the Law"; *The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, Third Decade, Sermons Five to Nine; Martin Bucer, *De Regno Christi*, Book Two, Chapter LX; Article VII of the *Articles of Religion* of the Church of England (1571); *Irish Articles* (1615), V; *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), Chapters VII and XIX. See also Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, XII.viii.

Reformers or anyone else is Coffey's privilege; to imply they have not thought about something because they hold an opinion different from his own is not.

Second, however, Williams' perspective is an extreme form of dispensationalism. Israel was utterly unique, we are told. *Utterly* unique? Granted, there are discontinuities between the covenants. But do these discontinuities make the covenants *utterly* discontinuous? Are there *no* continuities between the covenants? Evidently not, according to Williams and Coffey. And it is here that the difference between the Reformers on the one hand and Williams and Coffey (and those who follow them) on the other appears, not in the Reformers' failure to recognise or consider the discontinuities. The Magisterial Reformers were more cautious than Williams or the Radical Reformers in their assessment of the differences between the covenants. They maintained that there were both discontinuities *and* continuities between the covenants, and, unlike Coffey, they went to the trouble of distinguishing the various components of the covenants, showing on the basis of scriptural exegesis what aspects of the old covenant they believed were discontinued and what aspects were continued or modified after the coming of Christ. They gave much thought to delineating the continuities and the discontinuities between the covenants. Williams' clarion call for all to adopt his own profoundly muddled notions about the utter uniqueness of the old covenant is hardly the great leap forward that Coffey portrays it as. It is not the Reformers and those who have followed their example in calling for the State to submit to Jesus Christ who need a rude awakening, but those who imagine that they are the only ones who have thought deeply about this issue.

Third, the "utter uniqueness" of the old covenant respecting the office of the magistrate is *not* evident in the Old Testament. Rather, the Old Testament denounces the nations for their failure to conform to God's law (Lev. 18:24-30; 20:22-23; Dt. 8:20).<sup>42</sup> The judgement visited upon Sodom and the expulsion of

<sup>42</sup> See also, for example: Ps. 2:10-12; 9:4-5; 67:1-7; 96:10, 13; Pr. 8:15-16; 14:34; Is. 49:22; 51:4-5; Dan. 4:25, 27, 37; 5:22-28; 6:25-26; Jonah 3:1-10.

the Canaanites from the land as a consequence of their sins are graphic illustrations of this. Therefore, since the nations are expected to submit to God and obey his law, the covenant with Israel with regard to the standard of civil righteousness (justice) required by God was not unique; rather, it was the pattern, the *example*, that Israel was to set for all the nations. This is *evidently* confirmed in the Old Testament. Jonah's preaching to the city of Nineveh and its subsequent repentance and deliverance from judgement (Jonah 3:1-10; 4:11) demonstrates that Israel's covenant relationship with God was not entirely unique.<sup>43</sup> How, in the light of these examples, can it reasonably be maintained that Israel's covenant with God as regards the obligations of magistrates was so totally unique that it was not to be imitated by any other nation? Exactly the reverse is taught by Scripture, namely, that Israel was to be a *light to the nations* (Is. 42:6), i.e. an example for the nations to *follow* (Dt. 4:6-8; Is. 2:2-5 etc.).

Fourth, Coffey has conflated two different institutions, the Temple cultus and the magistracy, in order to effect a superficial case for total discontinuity. But the magisterial office in Israel was not typological in the same sense that the Temple cultus was typological; it did not function in the same way as the ritual system.<sup>44</sup> These two aspects of Israel's constitution were distinguished from the very beginning. There is a clear distinction of function and a separation of powers between the priesthood and the Temple cultus on one hand and the magisterial office on the other (2 Chron. 26:16-20). Even the manner of appointment was totally different; the priesthood was hereditary whereas the magistrates were, prior to the monarchy, chosen by the people (Dt. 1:12-17), and later appointed by the king (2 Chron. 19:8). The Bible does not confuse and identify these two institutions in the way that Williams and Coffey have done, nor does the New

<sup>43</sup> See also: Gen. 12:3 (cf. 18:18; 22:18; 26:4); Dt. 4:6; 1 Kings 8:41-43; Ps. 22:27-28; 67:1-7; 72:8-11; 96:1-13; Is. 2:2-5 (cited above); 42:1-7; 49:1-4, 22; 51:4; 56:6-8; 60:3; 66:18-19; Mic. 4:1-3; Zech. 2:11; 8:20-23; Mal. 1:11; Rom. 2:19-20 (cf. Mt. 23:15).

<sup>44</sup> This is not to deny that under the old covenant kingship was typological in its own way. See note 47 below.

Testament teach that the church authorities superseded the magisterial office. These are two different offices that the Bible never confuses. The Temple cultus dealt with sacrificial rituals, which were intended to function as types, pointers to Christ, who would make a complete sacrifice for sin on the cross. It foreshadowed the sacrifice of Christ. Once Christ had made this sacrifice, therefore, the Temple cultus became obsolete. This is why the Temple cultus was typological. The magistracy dealt with the administration of public justice, i.e. crime and the maintenance of public order. These institutions deal with different spheres and what is normative for the one is not normative for the other. The Bible tells us that the Temple cultus has come to an end because Christ has made a sacrifice once and for all time for those who trust in him (Heb. 9:1 to 10:25; Eph. 2:14-16). But where does it tell us that the magistrate's duty to administer justice according to the righteousness (justice) revealed in God's word has come to an end because Christ died for the sins of his people? The Bible does not confuse and muddle these two spheres in the way that Coffey does. On the contrary it tells us that the magistrate is still under obligation to administer justice as the *servant of God* (Rom. 13:3-4), i.e. according to the standard of civil righteousness (justice) revealed in God's law. Coffey seems to think these two institutions can be identified as the same thing and therefore dealt with in the same way. But he needs to show first that they are of the same nature; second, that the Bible treats them as identical; and therefore third, that the end of the one (the Temple cultus) necessarily involves the end of the other (the magistracy under God's law). Coffey does not attempt to do this, he simply assumes their identity and expects us to do likewise. "The Jewish magistrate's punishment of heretics and idolaters, in particular," he says, "was simply a typical foreshadowing of the excommunication of heretics in the Church; it had no binding force for any other nation."<sup>45</sup> But where in the Bible are we taught this doctrine? Where are we told "in particular" in the New Testament that the kinds of idolatry and heresy that were

<sup>45</sup> E.Q., p. 48.

criminal offences under the old covenant are no longer to be considered criminal offences under the new covenant because the punishment of such crimes under the old covenant was typological?<sup>46</sup> Where are we told in the New Testament that the magistrate under the old covenant was a type of the church

<sup>46</sup>Not all acts of idolatry and heresy were criminal offenses under the old covenant; in fact very few were, though obviously some were. Sin must not be confused with crime. All crimes defined as such by God's word are sins; but not all sins are crimes. The magistrate dealt only with crime. We must also ask, therefore, which specific acts of idolatry and heresy Coffey is referring to. The sacrifice of one's children to Molech perhaps? (Lev. 20:2) According to the logic of Coffey's position this too, being a religious offence, is now outside the jurisdiction of the magistrate, who must not interfere with anyone's religious freedom. Of course the New Testament does decriminalise some offences, e.g. prostitution by a priest's daughter. Under the old covenant prostitution by anyone other than a priest's daughter, although considered immoral, was not a *crime*, i.e. it was not an offence that fell within the jurisdiction of the magistrate (though of course adultery was). But prostitution by a priest's daughter was a crime (Lev. 21:9). With the coming of Christ the Levitical priesthood, which was part of the typological system, came to an end, and therefore the crime of prostitution by a priest's daughter came to an end also. But this crime was clearly related to the typological nature of the priesthood (the severity of the punishment was probably aimed at discouraging cultic prostitution, e.g. Temple prostitution, cf. 1 Sam. 2:22, and the development of the hybrid Yahweh-Baal fertility cults to which Israel turned at various times, Judg. 3:17; 1 Kings 16:32 cf. 2 Kings 3:2; 2 Kings 23:7, 14; 2 Chron. 15:16; Ezek. 8:14). It does not follow that other crimes unrelated to the Levitical priesthood were to come to an end also. There is a *specific* link between prostitution by a priest's daughter and the Levitical priesthood. Prostitution other than by a priest's daughter did not fall into the same category. Also, the death sentence for sabbath breaking is cancelled in the New Testament (Rom. 14:1, 6, 10, 13; cf. Gal. 4:10). But again, the New Testament clearly and specifically places this crime in the realm of typological law, since it states that resting on the sabbath was a foreshadowing of salvation in Christ (Col. 2:16-17). But where does the New Testament put the ban on human sacrifice into the category of typological law? And if the New Testament does not place this crime *specifically* within the realm of typology we must then ask, Where does it identify the judicial law, under which this crime is subsumed, as a *category* within the typological system? The fact is that the New Testament does not make this identification. The theology underpinning Williams' and Coffey's assumptions regarding the unity of the magisterial and cultic aspects of Israel's constitution is not derived from the Bible. Unless a crime under the old covenant was related to the typological system it is not abrogated by the obsolescence of that typological system due to the coming of Christ and his propitiatory sacrifice on the cross. Hence Jesus upheld the death sentence for cursing one's parents (Mt. 15:3-4; Mk. 7:9-13 cf. Ex. 21:17; Lev. 20:9. However, the death sentence was a maximum sentence not a mandatory sentence, Num. 35:31).

authorities under the new covenant? In short, where does the New Testament confuse the Jewish magistrate with the church authorities and treat them as type and antitype, i.e. as different administrations or dispensations of the same office? Coffey does not say. We have only his word for it. There is neither a reasoned argument nor quotations from Scripture to demonstrate the validity of this identification in Coffey's essay, and this is because Williams' and Coffey's hermeneutic is faulty,<sup>47</sup> proceeding upon an assumption that is contrary to Scripture and reason,

<sup>47</sup> Coffey seems to have misunderstood the nature of the old covenant typology. The three-fold office of Christ as Prophet, Priest and King is represented in the old covenant by the *distinct* offices of prophet, priest and king. There was a typological aspect to each of these offices in Israel, which was fulfilled in Christ, the antitype of each. Under the old covenant, however, these offices were never combined in one person, since in the created order only Christ has total sovereignty (see the discussion following note 4 on p. 143). Neither were these offices typological in the same sense. They represent three distinct functions, each of which finds its fulfilment in Christ in a way that is proper to the office it performs: viz the priest is the one who mediates between God and man by making atonement for the sins of the people; the prophet is the one who reveals God's word to man; and the king is the one who administers justice in the earth. Hence, not only is each office distinct; the typology of each office is also distinct and specific to that office. Priesthood is not typological of Christ's prophetic office, as the one who reveals God to man, but of his priestly office, as the one who mediates between God and man by making atonement for sin; nor is kingship typological of Christ's priestly office, but of Christ as King, to whose law the kings of the earth must submit. Neither does kingship in the old covenant point to the Christian ministry of the church in the new covenant, but to Christ himself as King of kings and Lord of lords. But according to Coffey's understanding of the typological system the magisterial office is fulfilled by the Christian ministry, and since the latter's jurisdiction extends only to the institutional church Christ's kingship over the nation is denied. Coffey's understanding of old covenant typology is confused. The magistrate under the old covenant and the church authorities under the new are not type and antitype. The former, the administration of justice, cannot be fulfilled by the latter, the ministry of the church. Both types are fulfilled in *Christ*, who rules in both spheres as the sovereign Lord of all creation. Therefore the obsolescence of the old covenant sacrificial rituals, due to Christ's making atonement on the cross once and for all time for the sins of his people, which is the exercise of his priestly office, does not abrogate Christ's sovereignty over the State, which is the exercise of his office as King. To argue, as Coffey does, that the office of the magistrate (kingship) under the old covenant was typological of the Christian ministry is, in effect, to deny Christ's sovereignty over the State by restricting his jurisdiction to the sphere of the Christian religious cultus. But kingship under the old covenant was not typological of the priesthood; it was typological

namely, that the abrogation of the Temple cultus and ritual purity laws due to the death of Christ as the propitiation for sin necessarily entails the abrogation of God's revealed standards for public ethics. *Non sequitur*.

Fifth, the continuity of the new covenant with the old covenant is evidently set forth in the New Testament in the gospels and elsewhere. Love, the apostle Paul tells us, is the fulfilling of the law (Rom. 13:9-10), i.e. the *keeping* of the law.<sup>48</sup> Christ came not to abrogate the law, we are told, but to bring it into its fulness (Mt. 5:17). H. A. W. Meyer states that "The *πλήρωσις* [fulfilling] of the law and the prophets is their fulfilment by the re-establishment of their *absolute* meaning, so that now nothing more is wanting to what they ought to be in accordance with the divine ideas which lie at the foundation of their commands. *It is the perfect development of their ideal reality out of the positive form, in which the same is historically apprehended and limited . . .* This explanation, which makes absolute the righteousness [i.e. *justice*<sup>49</sup>—SCP] enjoined and set forth in the law and the prophets, is converted into a certainty by the two verses that follow."<sup>50</sup> Meyer further states that

The νόμος is the divine *institute* of the law, which has its *original document* in the Pentateuch. The further Old Testament revelation, in so far

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of Christ's kingship over the whole cosmos, and its fulfilment in Christ means that he has been given *all* authority in heaven *and* on earth, e.g. authority over church *and* State. The coming of Christ as the antitype of all three offices means that he has authority and jurisdiction in all three spheres, including that of the State, not that his jurisdiction is limited in any sphere. Such a limitation of Christ's jurisdiction in any of these spheres would be the reversal of the meaning of the typology of the old covenant, not its fulfilment. To argue in the way that Coffey does is to stand the old covenant typology of kingship on its head.

<sup>48</sup>J. H. Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, Fourth Edition, 1901), p. 518b; G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, Third Edition), p. 366.

<sup>49</sup>The Hebrew word *tsedeq*, which is translated in the LXX by *δικαιοσύνη* ("righteousness") and often by "righteousness" in English translations, means "justice, equity in the administration of justice" (B. Davidson, *Analytical Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon* [London: Samuel Bagster and Sons], p. DCXlb)

<sup>50</sup>H. A. W. Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 120f., emphasis in original.

as its final aim is the Messiah and His work, is represented by *οἱ προφῆται* [the prophets], who make up its principal part; accordingly, *ὁ νόμος* and *οἱ προφῆται* [the law and the prophets] summarily denote the *whole Old Testament revelation* (comp. Luke xvi. 6), partly as a living divine economy, as here; partly as *γραφὴ* [Scripture], as in Luke xxiv. 27. Moreover, in the expression *τοὺς προφῆτας* [the prophets] we are not to think of their *predictions as such* . . . as nobody could imagine that *their* abrogation was to be expected from the Messiah, but, as the connection with *νόμος* shows (and comp. vii. 12, xxii. 40; Luke xvi. 29), and as is in keeping with the manner in which the idea is carried out in the following verses, their contents as *commands*, in which respect the prophets have carried on the development of the law in an ethical manner. In *νόμος*, however, to think merely of the *moral law* is erroneous, as it always signifies the *entire* law, and the distinction between the ritualistic, civil, and moral law is modern;<sup>51</sup> comp. on Rom. iii. 20. If, afterwards, sentences are given from the *moral law*, yet these are only quotations by way of illustration from the *whole*, from which, however, the *moral* precepts very naturally suggested themselves for quotations, because the idea of righteousness is before the mind. He has fulfilled the *entire* law, and in so doing has not destroyed the slightest provision of the ritualistic or civil code, so far as its *general moral idea is concerned*, but precisely *everything* which the law prescribes is raised to an ideal, of which the old legal commands are only *στοιχεῖα* [elementary principles

<sup>51</sup> Of course this is strictly incorrect. Scripture itself makes a distinction between ritual and non-ritual law; e.g. Lev. 10:9-10; 11:46-47; 20:25 cf. Dt. 14:21; Num. 4:15. This is further confirmed in the following passages, which are incomprehensible except on the basis of such a distinction: Lev. 15:16-24; 22:3-7, Num. 5:1-4 cf. Lk. 10:30-37; Dt. 14:21; 1 Sam. 15:22; Ps. 40:6; 51:16; Pr. 21:3; Is. 1:11-17; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Mic. 6:6-8. The same distinction can be demonstrated in the New Testament: Mt. 9:13; 12:7; Heb. 9:1 to 10:25; Eph. 2:14-16 cf. Jn 14:15; 15:10, 12; Rom. 3:31; 13:8-10; 1 Jn 2:3-6; 5:3; Rev. 12:17; 14:12. Nevertheless, Meyer's main point is that when Jesus said that he had come to fulfil the law, not to abrogate it, he was referring to the *whole* law, including the ritual laws, in that the principle taught by these laws—namely, that without the shedding of blood there can be no forgiveness of sin (Lev. 17:11; Heb. 9:22)—is not cancelled by Christ's coming but permanently put into force (once and for all time, Heb. 10:12) by his substitutionary death on the cross. The Christian, therefore, observes the principle taught in the ritual law by trusting in Christ (Heb. 10:19-22), to whom it pointed (Heb. 10:1), not by practising the rituals, which were never meant to continue into the Messianic age and are therefore now obsolete (Heb. 8:13; 10:18). But the New Testament nowhere teaches that the magistrate's duty to administer justice according to the righteousness revealed in God's law has been rendered obsolete by the death of Christ. On the contrary, it tells us specifically that magistrates are sent by God (1 Pet. 2:13-24) as his *servants* (Rom. 13:4).



or component parts]. Theophylact well illustrated the matter by the instance of a silhouette, which the painter οὐ καταλύει [does not destroy], but carries out to completion, ἀναπληροῖ.<sup>52</sup>

Commenting on the words of Jesus, "For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled" (v. 18), Meyer continues: "These words of Jesus do not indicate a terminus, after which the law shall *no longer* exist . . . but He says: *onwards to the destruction of the world the law will not lose its validity in the slightest point*, by which popular expression the duration of the law *after* the final catastrophe of the world is neither taught nor excluded. That the law, however, fulfilled as to its ideal nature, will endure in the new world, is clear from 1 Cor. xiii. 3 (ἀγάπη); 1 Pet. i. 25; 2 Pet. iii. 3 (δικαιοσύνη)."<sup>53</sup>

There has, of course, been controversy and debate over the meaning of Mt. 5:17-19. Suffice it to say here, that however one interprets the word "fulfil" (πληρῶσαι) in Mt. 5:17 it is clear that Christ maintained he had not come to abrogate the law and the prophets because, as he himself explained, it is these that speak of him (Lk. 24:27). The law and the prophets are the law and the word of *Christ*, who came to bring them into their fulness, as the prophets had foretold he would (Jer. 31:31-34). Therefore, there must be continuity as well as discontinuity between the covenants. Yet it is precisely such continuity that Williams' argument denies. However, there is another incident recorded in the New Testament that is at least as important as that recorded in Mt. 5:17-19 in demonstrating the continuity between the old and new covenants, but which has received far less attention.

Mt. 17:1-8, Mk. 9:1-8 and Lk. 9:28-36 record the transfiguration of Christ before his disciples. During this incident Moses and Elijah appeared in a glorified form and began speaking with Jesus (Lk. 9:31). Why? What was the purpose of this incident? The answer to this question is of no small importance for the subject under consideration here. If the old covenant is so utterly

<sup>52</sup> Meyer, *op. cit.*, p. 120.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122, emphasis in original.

unique, as Williams and Coffey argue, why should Christ appear in a vision with Moses and Elijah? This seems to be a question that many have not considered. The idea that the old and new covenants are totally discontinuous has gained much ground in modern evangelicalism. The assumptions underlying this position have led to a failure to understand one of the most significant events in Christ's ministry on earth. The purpose of Moses' and Elijah's appearing with Christ was precisely to demonstrate the continuity between Moses, Elijah and Christ, i.e. to demonstrate the continuity between the covenants. If the old covenant was indeed so utterly unique and discontinuous why should Moses and Elijah have appeared in a glorified form speaking to Christ? Why would Christ have gone up the mount and met with these two representatives of the old covenant, which in terms of the principled pluralist position is totally discontinuous with the new covenant inaugurated by the coming of Christ? Are we to think that the disciples who witnessed this event understood that Jesus did this to demonstrate just how great the gulf between the old and new covenants is and how thoroughly the law was abrogated by his coming? On the contrary, it seems obvious that Christ went out of his way to demonstrate by the most conspicuous and memorable of events that there *is* continuity between the covenants, that the coming of the kingdom of God, which he preached, and his appearing on earth for the salvation of man, is not to be understood as a complete break with the old covenant represented by Moses (the law) and Elijah (the prophets). By appearing in a glorified form with Moses and Elijah Christ demonstrated precisely that there was *not* a "gulf between the old dispensation and the new" as Williams and Coffey maintain.<sup>54</sup>

It seems clear, therefore, that an argument that claims to demonstrate the "utter uniqueness" of the old dispensation as a more biblical argument than that of the Magisterial Reformers and "Constantinians" must provide an alternative and more convincing explanation of these words (Mt. 5:17-19) and actions (Mt. 17:1-8 etc.) of Christ. There is not even an attempt to do

<sup>54</sup> E.Q., p. 48.

this in Coffey's essay. Where is the biblical evidence for this "profoundly biblical" point of view? Perhaps those who support the principled pluralist position should start with Isaiah 2:2-5, Mt. 5:17-19 and the transfiguration in making their "profoundly biblical" position a little more profoundly clear.

When Coffey does eventually reference Scripture we are left wondering how the position he asserts in the name of Roger Williams can be maintained on the basis of such texts. "The New Testament, argued Williams, signalled the end to the temporary fusion of religion and the civil government witnessed in Old Testament Israel."<sup>55</sup> Of course, Coffey has not proved, or even attempted to prove, that religion—i.e. the Temple cultus (Israel's institutional church)—and the civil government were fused in the old covenant. He simply expects us to assume this point, as he does. In fact, as I have argued above, these two aspects of Israel's constitution were not fused (2 Chron. 19:11), and therefore did not need unscrambling in the New Testament. It is this faulty perspective that leads Coffey astray in his interpretation of the few New Testament Scriptures that he does reference. Coffey comes to the New Testament with a predetermined agenda and a set of assumptions or presuppositions that are not based on Scripture and then seeks to elicit from the text the solution to a problem created by these assumptions that the text does not address. Scripture is forced to bear a meaning it was not intended to bear and provide the answer to a question it neither poses nor seeks to answer.

The basis of Coffey's assertion that the New Testament brings the fusion of civil government and religion to an end is 1 Pet. 2:9—"But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." According to this text, writes Coffey, "there was now only one 'holy nation', the Church, the antitype of ancient Israel, 'called out to [God] out of every nation and country'. All political nations were now 'merely civil, without any

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

such typical, holy respect upon them, as was upon Israel, a national church'.<sup>56</sup> But how does this text, stating that the church is a holy nation, establish the principle that the State should be non-confessional, i.e. that the State should be neutral with regard to religion, that the magistrate should not confess Christ to be the one whose law must govern the affairs of State? Coffey's argument, again, is a *non sequitur*. There is no reason to make this leap from an unsubstantiated premiss to an unnecessary conclusion without further evidence or argument. The church is a holy nation, *ergo* the State should not respect religion. This is the "logic" of the argument. But it is biblically and logically unsustainable. If it were a valid conclusion the Bible would be openly contradicting itself since Paul says unequivocally that the magistrate is a "servant of God" and "ordained of God" to "execute wrath upon him that doeth evil" (Rom. 13:2, 4). Paul repeats himself in order to drive the point home: "they [i.e. magistrates] are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing [i.e. the administration of justice]" (v. 6). How can the Bible say both that the magistrate is a servant of God, appointed by God to execute God's wrath (i.e. God's justice) upon the evildoer and at the same time that the magistrate is to have no regard for the very God who has appointed him and whose servant he is, and therefore whose law he must uphold? If Paul says, as he does, that the magistrate is a servant of God, and Peter says that the church is a holy nation, how do these contradict, as they inevitably must if Coffey's interpretation of Peter is correct? If, in accordance with the logic of Coffey's argument, the former is outlawed by the latter, should we not expect some explanation of the reasoning, the logic of this view? How are we to hold two such totally contradictory notions together in the name of Christianity? How can it be reasonably maintained that now Christ has come "All political nations were now merely civil, without any such typical, holy respect upon them, as was upon Israel, a national church" when Paul says precisely the opposite, namely, that the magistrate is a servant of God appointed to execute his

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

wrath (justice) upon those who break his law? There is no explanation in Coffey's essay, just bare assertion. 1 Pet. 2:9 is referenced, but there is no exegesis of the text, nor of Rom. 13:1-6, which has a direct bearing on the issue under consideration. Yet we are expected to follow Coffey's argument as if the logic of it were evident. But his position defies understanding. Are we expected to abandon the use of our minds or throw our Bibles away at the beginning and accept such a highly selective use of Scripture on Coffey's authority alone?

If it is argued that the magistrate has been given authority by God but that he is not obligated on account of this to pursue justice according to the definition of right and wrong given in God's word, we must ask in what sense he is the *servant* of God, since in that case he may use his authority to do evil—i.e. punish people for doing things that the Bible does not define as crimes, or refuse to punish people for doing things that it does define as crimes. If it is then argued that the magistrate does not have authority from God to do evil we must ask by what standard of right and wrong he rules. If it is stated that "natural law" is the standard by which the magistrate is to rule, we must ask where such a concept of "natural law" derives its authority from. In other words, *who* defines right and wrong? Either God does, in which case the magistrate must rule according to God's word, or the magistrate does, in which case whatever he does is just, even if he commits the foulest murders imaginable, or else those who appoint or elect him define right and wrong, in which case whatever he does is just provided it conforms to the will of those who have appointed him. All law is based on a particular understanding of ultimate authority, and this is always a religious question, a question of who God is. Either the magistrate is the servant of God, as Paul claims, and therefore he must administer justice as defined by God's word, or he does not have to administer justice as defined by God's word, in which case he is *not* the servant of God but the servant of some other god, an idol—or is himself the ultimate authority, the idol around which society is to order its life. Coffey, if he is to accept both Rom. 13:1-6 and

his own view that the State must not have regard to religious convictions in the administration of justice, must maintain both that the magistrate's authority comes from God and that he is thereby authorised to disobey God. A more contradictory position is hardly imaginable.

There is neither rhyme nor reason in Coffey's and Williams' arguments. Says Coffey, "There was 'no respect of earth, of places, or countries with the Lord' in the Church age, no difference 'between Asia and Africa, between Europe and America, between England and Turkey, London and Constantinople."<sup>57</sup> Indeed, taking this statement on its own, i.e. out of context, I heartily concur with Coffey; there is no difference. But this is because all nations are commanded to kiss the Son and do homage, and therefore serve the Lord and administer justice according to Christ's law, not because they are freed from their obligation to serve God, as Coffey argues.

We are then told that "The state was now limited to its original and natural function: 'to conserve the civil peace of people so far as concerns their bodies and goods'. Its ends were to be merely civil, and its attitude towards religious diversity to be one of impartiality and *laissez-faire*."<sup>58</sup> Here we are told that this attitude of religious neutrality on behalf of the magistrate was the "original" and "natural" state of affairs. Unfortunately, again, there is no biblical argument to support this theory. No texts, no eras of Old Testament history are produced to show how this "original" and "natural" state of affairs functioned. Just *where* and *when* was it that this "original" and "natural" state of neutrality existed in history? Where are the texts that demonstrate this era of neutrality for the magistrate, this religious Utopia where the State was not required to serve God and administer justice according to his law? There is no period in history when the magistrate was not commanded to honour God and obey his precepts in the administration of justice. God destroyed—i.e. judged and executed—the people of the antediluvian world for their sin. But the Bible tells us that sin is not imputed when there

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48f.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

is no law (Rom. 5:13), and that where there is no law neither is there violation of the law (Rom. 4:15). On what grounds then did God destroy the antediluvian civilisation? The judgement of the antediluvian world can only be predicated on the grounds that those who inhabited it were disobedient to God's law, since if they had not had the law their sin would not have been imputed. But their sin was imputed to them and "the wrath of God [was] revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold [i.e. hold back, suppress, *κατέχω*] the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them. For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful . . ." (Rom. 1:18-21). The work of God's law is written in man's heart (Rom. 2:15), and therefore men are without excuse. Those who died in the antediluvian world were rebels against God. They had no special dispensation, inhabited no Utopia of religious and ethical neutrality; they died for their sin. God imputed their sin to them; they were under obligation to honour God and obey his word in every respect and in every sphere of life. God said to Noah "Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous [*tsadiq*—"just"] before me in this generation" (Gen. 7:1). Where were all Williams' "many stately kingdoms and governments in the world that have long enjoyed civil peace and quiet, notwithstanding their religion is so corrupt as that there is not the very name of Jesus Christ amongst them"<sup>59</sup> Obviously, God held them to account. The antediluvian world, therefore, was not the "original" and "natural" state of mankind in which the magistrate was commanded to take no account of God's law in the administration of justice.<sup>60</sup> It was destroyed for doing the

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>60</sup> It is possible that in the antediluvian world there was no State or civil magistrate at all and that this office was established for the first time in the post-

very thing that Coffey and Williams insist is the duty of the State: ignoring God's law.

Perhaps, then, the immediate post-diluvial world was the era of this Utopia of religious neutrality. But again, this cannot be so, since God entered into covenant with Noah *and with his seed after him* (Gen. 9:9), in other words with the whole of mankind, right down to this day. And God gave mankind a sign of this eternal covenant (Gen. 9:9-17). "And the bow shall be in the cloud; and I will look upon it, that I may remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is upon the earth" (v.16). The use of a phenomenon built into the very fabric of creation, the rainbow, as a sign of God's covenant with mankind, means that this covenant is still in force. It is everlasting. While the world remains, this phenomenon, which God has designated the sign of his covenant with mankind in Noah, testifies that God's word shall never be broken, that God has established his covenant with all flesh and that he will keep that covenant. Men are either covenant keepers or covenant breakers; but they are *never* covenantally *neutral*. This everlasting covenant obligated Noah and his descendants after him to administer justice in the earth according to God's word: "And surely your blood of your lives will I require; at the hand of

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diluvial covenant with Noah. In that case, prior to the Fall God executed justice in the earth directly, i.e. in an unmediated way, the flood being the final act of this direct unmediated administration of justice in the earth by God himself. With the Noachian covenant God promised never to judge the earth in such a way again, but the terms of the covenant stipulate that *man* must now execute justice in the earth according to God's word, since the death penalty is established for murder (Gen. 9:5-6). Hence, instead of God executing justice directly, in the Noachian covenant the execution of justice is devolved upon man himself. Certainly, Gen. 9:5-6 is the first mention of the death sentence for murder. The cases of Cain and Lamech seem to indicate a state of incipient anarchy in the earth that finally achieved its full potential prior to the flood. This is speculation based on uncertain foundations (an argument from silence), but not entirely without credibility. If this was the case, it still does not help or support Coffey's argument, i.e. the notion of a religiously neutral Utopia, since in this scenario judgement is executed directly by God rather than through the agency of man, and there is no State at all. However one interprets this period of history, it is clear that there was no secular State that administered some kind of religiously neutral or "natural" law.



every beast will I require it, and at the hand of man; at the hand of every man's brother will I require the life of man. Whoso sheddeth man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed: for in the image of God made he man" (Gen. 9:5-6). There was no relaxing of ethical standards in this covenant, no neutrality for those who administer justice. Rulers were to obey God. They were not free to determine good and evil for themselves, but were to accept God's word and execute his will. This was not Coffey's "original" and "natural" state of religious neutrality for the magistrate.

Was it then perhaps before the Fall that this Utopia of religious neutrality existed? Did Adam and Eve live in a state of religious neutrality? Of course, before the entrance of sin there was no magistrate or the need for Adam to exercise the function of the magistrate. But there was right and wrong and a social order with Adam as the head. *Who* defined right and wrong? Did Adam determine what was right and what was wrong by means of a process of autonomous human reasoning in which God's word was merely a claim to be assessed at the bar of man's own understanding? On the contrary, God defined right and wrong. God said "Do not do this" and Adam was expected to accept God's word as definitive and live accordingly, i.e. obediently. It was the very act of rejecting God's definitive word and the assertion of human autonomy over the definition of good and evil that constituted the original sin. In refusing to abide by God's word regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil Adam and Eve posited a neutral sphere where God has no jurisdiction, where man would determine for himself what constitutes good and evil. God, they reasoned, should not be involved in this decision about what good and evil are. They would decide for themselves. This should be a religiously neutral affair, i.e. it should be determined by man on his own without reference to God and his word. We all know the consequences. Neutrality is impossible. In rejecting God's word they usurped God's sovereignty and fell from their innocence into sin. Evidently, the Garden of Eden was not Coffey's "original" and

“natural” state of religious neutrality. Then where and when was it that this original, sublime condition existed for mankind? The plain fact is that there has never been such a condition in the history of mankind. It has never been the case that God did not require man to obey his word and honour him in all his thoughts, words and actions. This principled pluralist Utopia, an “original” and “natural” condition of human society in which the magistrate was not obligated to obey God’s word and kiss the Son, has never existed. It is a figment of Coffey’s and Williams’ imagination, a myth, a mere rhetorical flourish without substance.

“Once this was accepted”—i.e. the impartiality of the magistrate in matters of religion—Coffey tells us, “there was every reason to expect that those of ‘other worships or religions, Jews, Turks, or anti-christians’, could be ‘peaceable and quiet subjects, loving and helpful neighbours, fair and just dealers, true and loyal to the civil government’.”<sup>61</sup> What a happy community Coffey’s pluralist society is! Fancy, all along, all we needed to do to end world injustice and human misery was to let people practise their own religions unhindered by the State! What a terrible fall for mankind it must have been when God required obedience to his word! Coffey has evidently forgotten, or never considered, the evils committed by these “peaceable and quiet subjects, loving and helpful neighbours, fair and just dealers, true and loyal to the civil government” who worship other gods. Perhaps he has not read of the religious practices of these other religions, the cannibalism, the human sacrifice, the witchcraft etc.<sup>62</sup> If the church

<sup>61</sup> *E. Q.*, p. 49.

<sup>62</sup> Nor is it the case that practices such as these are curiosities of history that are no longer to be found in the modern world. In India, the world’s largest democracy, human sacrifice and murder committed under the influence of witchcraft are on the increase. For example, it has been reported that “In the northeast Indian state of Bihar, villagers are turning increasingly to magic to solve their disputes and problems. The result has been a spate of grisly killings. In six years, 114 people have been murdered on the advice of magic men known as ‘oojahs’” (Stephen Grey, “Indian villagers killed by a murderous magic,” *The Sunday Times*, 30th November 1997). See also Ellen Myers, “Satan Against Man, the Fierce War, the Victory in Christ” in *Christianity and Society*,

had only left well alone and not interfered with Greek culture instead of saving and caring for many of the children that were exposed; if only the Druids had been allowed to continue with human sacrifice in their religious ceremonies; if only the Mexicans had been allowed to continue sacrificing thousands of human beings in their religious ceremonies; if only we had allowed the Muslims to murder and steal from the infidels in their *jihād* (religious war<sup>63</sup>) etc. the world would have been such a better place. What evil Christianity has brought on the world by bringing such reasonable governments to an end! Christian magistrates had no right to do this, they should not have interfered; God did not require them to end these inviolable religious freedoms. They should have kept out of religion altogether.

Such is the inevitable logic of the argument for principled pluralism. Coffey's essay is a compendium of ill-considered ideas that will not withstand the scrutiny of reason nor the test of Scripture, which teaches precisely that it is the duty and destiny of Christian nations and magistrates to uphold God's law and bring such religious practices to an end (Ps. 149:5-9; Is. 2:1-4; Mt. 28:18-20). The Christian faith is to be preached throughout

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Vol. V, No. 3 (July 1995), pp. 22-27, which documents many modern cases of ritual murder committed in Central and North America.

<sup>63</sup>The notion of *jihād* is an essential part of the Muslim faith: "the *jihād* gradually became one of the most important religious duties of Muhammad's adherents . . . Those who could not personally take part in the campaign must at least assist in the *jihād* by payment of money according to their means. Even after Mecca was taken, and the inhabitants had been converted to Islam, the *jihād* against unbelievers remained a religious duty . . . The doctrine that all heathen must be subjected to Islam 'because of their unbelief' first arose in the time of the Great Conquests, after the death of the Prophet, when the Muslim armies succeeded in conquering an extensive territory outside Arabia, and in making tributaries of many unbelievers. At that time the Prophet is said to have declared: 'I am commanded to fight against men until they bear witness that there is no God but Allāh, and that Muhammad is God's messenger; only by pronouncing these words can they make their property and blood secure from me.' The *jihād* is a duty of every male Muslim who is free, of full age, and not only in the full possession of his intellectual powers, but physically fit for service and able to obtain the necessary weapons." (Th. W. Juynboll, "Law (Muhammadan)" in James Hastings, ed., *op. cit.*, Vol. VII, p. 881a; cf. the Koran, Chapters II and XLVII. See also the references in note 11 on p. 21.)

the whole earth, and all nations are to be brought under the discipline of Christ. As a result of the preaching of the gospel Christ's law is to govern all nations. It is, therefore, according to Scripture, the duty of Christian magistrates to ensure that God's law is proclaimed and obeyed in the political sphere, and that peace and freedom are maintained in terms of *that* law, not in terms of some imaginary autonomous, religiously neutral, and thoroughly humanistic notion of justice, which has been responsible for the worst crimes of the twentieth century. It is only where the Christian faith has been victorious in national life that such atrocities have been extirpated from human society. Coffey, on the other hand, would have us believe that religious toleration leads to "peaceable and quiet subjects, loving and helpful neighbours, fair and just dealers, true and loyal to the civil government." According to Coffey, "such, thought Williams, was the New Testament picture of civil societies, and believers had been given no mandate to alter this situation by establishing Christian states."<sup>64</sup> To drive the point home he quotes Williams: "Where did the Lord Jesus or his messengers charge the civil magistrate . . . to publish, declare, or establish by his arm of flesh and earthly weapons, the religion and worship of Christ Jesus?"<sup>65</sup>

This brings us to the heart of another problem that besets Coffey's whole essay, namely, a failure to distinguish between the church (as an institution) and the State. Throughout his essay Coffey confuses the separation of powers with the separation of religion from the State. The function of the State is to administer public justice (Rom. 13:2-6; 1 Pet. 2:14). The function of the church is to preach the gospel. The power of the State to enforce its decrees is the sword. This sword has been given to the magistrate by Christ. As God's servant the magistrate does not bear the sword in vain. (Rom. 13:4). This sword is *not* to be used to force people to worship Christ; but it is to be used to enforce God's law, God's justice, in the civil sphere. The fact that the State is not called to preach the gospel or attempt to compel people to believe does not mean that the State is not duty-bound to obey

<sup>64</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 49.      <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

God in the administration of justice, i.e. to establish and maintain those laws that God has put within the magistrate's jurisdiction. There is no religious neutrality in this matter. Justice is always a religious issue. But all authority is limited by God's word. The State's authority falls within the sphere of public justice. The church's authority to preach the gospel, and its authority to exercise discipline by the use of spiritual means (e.g. excommunication) relates to the Christian public religious cultus, not public justice. To argue that the State must be Christian, i.e. that it must honour Christ by administering justice according to his revealed law, is *not* to argue that it must force people to worship God. Such would be outside its jurisdiction and therefore an abuse of its authority. But it is quite another matter to say, as Coffey does, that "Christianity was never meant to be a civil religion."<sup>66</sup> The Bible commands all magistrates and rulers to "kiss the Son" (Ps. 2:12) i.e. acknowledge Christ and uphold his law. There is no such thing as a non-religious State. It is a myth. All States are religious institutions. Coffey contends, however, that the "private, voluntary character of the Church . . . was of the essence of Christianity, a vital hallmark of the true Church."<sup>67</sup> But Coffey is confusing the church with the State. The fact that the church is a voluntary association as far as men are concerned, i.e. the fact that the State is not commissioned to force men to join the church or profess faith in Christ, does not mean that the State should not be a Christian institution, that it should not administer justice according to God's law. Coffey speaks about the church and the State in the same breath as if they were the same institution and therefore as if what is applicable to the one is necessarily applicable to the other. Hence, he concludes that because the old covenant sacrificial rituals have come to an end the administration of justice according to God's revealed law has also come to an end, that because the former was never meant to continue into the Messianic age neither was the latter. But again, this has not been proved; it is merely presupposed on the basis of the "utter uniqueness" of the old

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

covenant, which has already been shown to be incorrect. Once this essentially Gnostic idea is abandoned and the whole Bible is allowed to inform the whole of one's belief system the myth of religious neutrality disappears into the thin air from whence it came and it becomes evident that the Bible has a great deal to say about the Christian character of the magistracy.

To the objection that civilisation will disintegrate if Christianity ceases to be a State religion Coffey answers, "Common grace and natural conscience provided an adequate foundation for the formation of flourishing political communities."<sup>68</sup> Of course, no one would be stupid enough to deny that non-Christian nations or States have had "flourishing political communities." The question is, what *kind* of political communities have they been? And what kind of political communities can we expect them to be in the future, given their track record in ancient and modern history? To this Coffey gives no answer because he has not considered the question. But surely, these are precisely the questions he should be asking. The Mexicans had a flourishing political community prior to the conquest of Mexico by Cortés. So successful was their political community that they were able to take captive enough of their enemies to sacrifice 2,000 human beings to their gods each year.<sup>69</sup> The victims were held down on a stone block by the priests and their hearts cut out while they were still alive; their hearts were burned in a brazier and their heads cut off and held up; the bodies were then thrown down the steps of the pyramids upon which these gruesome religious ceremonies were carried out. The limbs of the victims were cut off and eaten with maize and chilli by the

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>69</sup> Hugh Thomas, *The Conquest of Mexico* (London: Hutchinson, 1993), p. 646. This is a conservative estimate. Estimates vary between 2,000 and 20,000. It has been estimated that at the dedication of a new temple to Huitzilopochtli in Tenochtitlan in 1487 between 56,000 and 80,000 human beings were sacrificed in four days (W. H. Prescott put the number sacrificed on this occasion at 70,000 [*History of the Conquest of Mexico* (London: George Routledge and Sons, [1843], Revised Edition edited by John Foster Kirk), Vol. I, p. 70]). Lines of prisoners waiting to be sacrificed stretched as far as the eye could see in four directions from the site of the temple (Hugh Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 25).

noblemen and warriors (the torsos were fed to the animals in the zoos).<sup>70</sup> Not only were the State's enemies murdered; the children of the Mexican poor were also sacrificed in the same way.<sup>71</sup>

Of course, it is well-known that similar atrocities occurred throughout the ancient world, and the Bible itself bears testimony to the barbarities of pagan religious practices in the Middle East. But modern secular States have committed atrocities every bit as gruesome and on a larger scale. The Communist and Nazi States have had probably the worst records of human mistreatment, oppression, torture, genocide, witch-hunts, and religious persecution that the world has ever seen. And these States have been the most consistently and self-consciously secular of States, having systematically expunged the light of the gospel from their ideology. In the increasingly secular States of the West we now have our own holocaust of human sacrifice in the millions of unborn children murdered in the abortion clinics. All these atrocities have been committed in "flourishing political communities," it cannot be denied. Whether the term "civilisation" is justly used of societies that do such things is another matter, depending on whether the term is used in a technical sense or in the sense it has been used in Christian nations to denote a society that has progressed beyond such barbarities to a more enlightened—i.e. *Christian*—form of culture. How easy it is to sanitise such atrocities by terms such as "flourishing political communities"! It must surely be evident to all who have eyes to see and are prepared to look at the evidence that the disintegration of civilisation is precisely what has been the result of the abandonment of Christianity.

"Williams had little time for such pessimism"<sup>72</sup> we are told. Pessimism is an irrelevant word for us today. The modern world has demonstrated the reality of the disintegration of civilisation where Christianity has been abandoned. This is surely clear for all to see except those blinkered by ideology. We live in an age when the grim reality of the crimes committed by States who see

<sup>70</sup> Hugh Thomas, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.      <sup>72</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 49.

no reason to govern themselves according to the restrictive standards of the Christian faith face us daily. Perhaps Williams' optimism about secularism is to some extent excusable. He did not live to see the fruit of his secular paradise. But is Coffey really serious when he says in the name of Williams that "many stately kingdoms and governments in the world have long enjoyed civil peace and quiet, notwithstanding their religion is so corrupt as that there is not the very name of Jesus Christ amongst them"?<sup>73</sup> It is difficult to believe that Coffey is really suggesting that the lot of those who have lived under these regimes was equal to that of those who have lived in Christian States. What a cosy picture of paganism and idolatry Coffey paints for us!

Religious liberty for all is the goal of Williams and Coffey. Religious liberty for those who murder their children in ritual sacrifices? Perhaps this will be considered an extreme example. Then what about the religious freedom of Muslims to enforce the Rushdie fatwa? Would Coffey tolerate this? No. Of course Coffey would not tolerate this (at least I hope he wouldn't). But then on what basis will he deny the religious freedom of those who do such things? That they are hurting others? Who has made this rule? What authority does it have? To whom will principled pluralists appeal to validate this standard of justice? On what basis is this rule of not hurting others established? It was certainly not self-evident to the Druid, the Mexican or the Molech worshipper that he had no right to practise his ritual sacrifices, nor to the Greek father that he had no right to expose his deformed children. Nor is it self-evident to contemporary Muslims that the Rushdie fatwa is unjust. Such interference with men's religious freedom—indeed, with what they perceive as their religious *duty*—would be seen as religious intolerance, because the only reason such practices would not be acceptable to Coffey and Williams is that they offend their *religious* (i.e. Christian) sensibilities. In the end, the enforcing of all human laws comes down to religious conviction. If Coffey and Williams will not tolerate religious freedom here then why must it be tolerated

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.



elsewhere? In other words, why must we accept *their* standard? The whole argument ultimately boils down to a question of authority. *Who* says what should be forbidden and what should be permitted? *Who* determines right and wrong, good and evil? The Christian must ultimately confess that it is the God of the Bible, the Muslim that it is Allāh, the Mexican that it is Huitzilopochtli or some other god, the humanist that it is human reason or the human will. This is always in the end a religious question, even for the humanist who makes *man* the measure of all things, the "I Am Who I Am" who defines all other things. But this is God's prerogative and for man to claim it for himself or attribute it to anyone or anything else is idolatry.

Eventually Coffey gets to what he calls "the single most important passage in the armoury of ear[ly] modern tolerationists, and for this reason, arguably one of the most significant texts in the history of political thought,"<sup>74</sup> namely Mt. 13, i.e. the Parable of the Tares and the Wheat. It is fortunate that Coffey adds the important qualifier "arguably" to this statement. I cannot see how this parable can be so significant for the subject under consideration. But it is, claims Coffey, and it is "arguably" one of the most significant texts in the history of political thought. "It is still employed by contemporary principled pluralists like Gordon Spykman" we are told.<sup>75</sup> Well, it is just as well that Coffey tells us all this, otherwise we might have inadvertently thought that insignificant texts such as Rom. 13:1-7 and Ps. 2:8-12 need to be addressed. Since Coffey does not even mention these texts we must assume they are irrelevant. But Coffey offers no argument to demonstrate why this parable is so important. He simply says that believers and non-believers are to dwell together in the earth until the consummation of the kingdom. Christians are to wait patiently and practise toleration.<sup>76</sup> And . . . ?

At this point one would expect an explanation of why this text confounds those who are "Constantinians," as Coffey calls them. But there is no explanation (again), just more assertion from the pen of Roger Williams: "It is the will and command of

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51 n. 49.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50f.

God that, since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries”<sup>77</sup> What? The “most Paganish . . . anti-christian . . . worships [are to] be granted to all men in all nations”! Of course, Williams uses the words “consciences” and “worships” in the same sentence. But it is certainly *not* the same thing to tolerate someone’s conscience, i.e. his views about his god or gods and how they should be worshipped, and his *worship*, i.e. the practice of his views about how his gods should be worshipped, since if the latter contravenes the laws given to the magistrate as a servant of God to preserve civil righteousness (*tsedeq*—justice) the magistrate is duty-bound by God’s word to punish those who commit such crimes. We cannot deny anyone, pagan or otherwise, the freedom of conscience to believe in his god and hold views about how this god should be worshipped, and the magistrate is not required to do so by God’s word. But we can stop such from practising *acts* of worship in accordance with his conscience that constitute crimes in terms of God’s law, e.g. human sacrifice or attempts by British Muslims to enforce the Rushdie fatwa. The magistrate is commanded by God’s word to punish those who commit such crimes. These two things, the conscience or belief *per se* and the act, which is the practical consequence of belief, must be distinguished, and where the latter is a transgression of the judicial law (i.e. those laws that fall within the jurisdiction of the magistrate) the State must act to suppress and punish those who commit such acts. In so doing the State abridges no one’s freedom of conscience; it merely punishes him for his crimes. But Coffey does not make this distinction. The “Constantinian” position—at least as this was articulated by the Magisterial Reformers—does not attempt to force anyone’s conscience in the way that Coffey and Williams suggest; it attempts to stop people committing crimes that are forbidden by God’s word.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>78</sup> I believe the Magisterial Reformers’ understanding of the function of the magistrate was mistaken in some important respects. This led them at times to

Granted, there may be disagreement among Christians about what laws the magistrate is required to enforce. But the way to solve these problems is to look at the issues involved carefully in the light of Scripture. Instead of this, Coffey would have us

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confuse the function of the magistrate with that of the church and even the family. For example, Calvin defines the function of the magistrate biblically as that of administering public justice but then goes on to give the magistrate responsibilities that the Bible assigns to other institutions (see further Chapter 4 below). Similarly, Cotton gives the magistrate a much wider jurisdiction than can, in my opinion, be justified from Scripture. Nevertheless, I think the problem here is not that the Reformers believed the magistrate has the right or duty of restricting men's freedom of conscience. Freedom of conscience was a basic principle of the Magisterial Reformation that was summed up in Luther's famous words at the Diet of Worms: "Unless I am proved wrong by Scripture or by evident reason,—I do not accept the authority of popes and councils, for they have contradicted each other—then I am a prisoner in conscience to the word of God. I cannot retract and will not retract. To go against the conscience is neither safe nor right. God help me. Amen." The problem is rather one of properly defining the role of the magistrate in preserving public order. The difference at times may seem subtle. For example, Cotton says that "it is not lawful to persecute any for conscience' sake rightly informed . . ." but qualifies this by saying that "if such a man, after such admonition, shall persist in the error of his way, and be therefore punished, he is not persecuted for cause of conscience, but for sinning against his own conscience" (R. Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, p. 20). Cotton's use of Tit. 3:10-11 as a proof text here is every bit as erroneous as Coffey's use of Scripture to support principled pluralism, and for the same reason, namely, because Paul is not in this passage addressing the issue of the magistrate's authority but rather church discipline. Cotton's argument at this point, therefore, seems to put matters of conscience into the hands of the magistrate, at least after due admonition, when there is no biblical justification. However, we must see this and similar statements of the Reformers in the wider context of their thought and teaching on freedom of conscience and the role of the magistrate. When this wider context is taken into account it becomes evident that it is entirely misleading to say that the Reformers did not believe in freedom of conscience. Rather than seeking to restrict freedom of conscience, the Reformers and Puritans were concerned with the disturbance of public order that heretical beliefs might produce, i.e. with *acts* arising from such beliefs, including the public dissemination of heretical beliefs among the population, which they saw as leading to the overthrow of the Christian social order. Thus, Cotton further explains his position by saying that "if a man hold forth, or profess, any error or false way, with a boisterous and arrogant spirit, *to the disturbance of civil peace*, he may justly be punished according to the quality and measure of the disturbance caused by him" (*ibid.*, p. 21; my italics). This is why I think it is incorrect to see abuse of authority in matters of religion by Protestant magistrates as a denial of freedom of conscience. The problem was the result of an inadequate or confused definition of the role of the magistrate. The Reformers' and Puritans' terminology

abandon the whole enterprise and leave the job to those who refuse to kiss the Son and do homage to God, claiming that anything else is a denial of freedom of conscience. But this simply does not follow. Those whom Coffey is critiquing do not propose to force anyone's conscience. They propose to stop people committing acts—whether prompted by their conscience or for any other reason—that are considered crimes by God's word and therefore justly punished by the State. The difficulty of determining which laws fall within the jurisdiction of the State in some areas is a real one. No one denies this. Nor can it be denied that there have been serious failures in this respect in Christian States, resulting sometimes in persecution of religious dissenters for reasons that cannot be justified either by Scripture or reason. But the answer surely cannot be to abandon the enterprise. The secularists and humanists have more problems determining what

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and their thought at times lacked clarity on this issue and this led to error. It is true that in Protestant nations abuses were perpetrated and dissenters and heretics were persecuted beyond the warrant of Scripture. Other injustices, such as chattel slavery, have been tolerated in Protestant nations. I do not deny this. What I deny is that such abuse invalidates the adoption of Christianity as the religion of State or justifies the existence of secular States. Such abuse should always be condemned and not lightly dismissed. Nevertheless, the charge against the Magisterial Reformers and Puritans as formulated by Williams and Coffey is hardly justified. Cotton protested his innocence at Williams accusation, stating that "whilest he pleadeth for Liberty of Conscience, he taketh Liberty to his Conscience to publish, That I do professedly maintaine Persecution for cause of Conscience, When I doe in expresse tearmes professedly Renounce it . . . But it may be, by consequence, I doe maintaine Persecution for cause of Conscience, though in expresse tearmes I professedly Renounce it . . . What if such a thing might be inferr'd by consequence? mens judgments and professions are not to be taken up from every unwary consequence, against their owne positive and expresse Declarations, and Professions" (*The Bloudy Tenent, Washed, And made white in the bloud of the Lambe* . . . [1647], p. 3). I think there is valid criticism of the Reformers' and the Puritans' position, both in terms of express declarations and professions and in terms of the implications and consequences of their position. But this does not justify the charge of persecution for cause of conscience nor Williams' and Coffey's proposed alternative, namely the secular State, which is a cure far worse than the disease. The solution to the problem lies in a much needed clarification and refinement of the position adopted by the Magisterial Reformers and Puritans. Part Two of this essay will attempt to offer such a modification of the "Constantinian" position.

should be classed as crime than Christians have, and they have no standard to guide them other than their own fallen human reason, which has already proved its inadequacy, for example in the Communist and Nazi States. Rather than handing the job over to pagans and humanists, which is in effect what Coffey is advocating, Christians should be seeking to understand more clearly what Scripture requires of the State in terms of upholding justice according to biblical principles and working to get such principles accepted and acted upon by the State. To seek to do this is to attempt to give to every man his due rights and liberties under the civil magistrate. The extent to which this is accomplished is the extent to which men do actually enjoy their God-given rights and liberties, and the extent to which they are denied licence to do as they please against the law that God has given to govern the political sphere—i.e. commit crime. To abandon this task is to take away from men, and usually from the weakest and most vulnerable members of society, from those least able to defend themselves, the protection that God's law affords them against the tyranny of other peoples' religious convictions, whether pagan, Muslim or secular.

According to Coffey, Williams offers us "a remarkable vision of a just multi-cultural society . . . without once compromising the universal truth claims of Christianity, because his political vision is [an] *intensely biblical* one, drawn from the pages of the *New Testament* and the example of the primitive church."<sup>79</sup> This is a bold claim. Williams' multicultural society is just because it is "intensely biblical" and drawn from the pages of the New Testament. Even a cursory glance at this statement should alert the reader to the fact that this argument is self-contradictory. A "biblical" vision is here identified exclusively with the New Testament and the primitive (i.e. early Christian) church. Coffey has already spent several pages of his essay telling us that the old covenant was utterly unique. Now he claims that Williams' intensely biblical argument for a just multicultural society is drawn from the New Testament. Is this valid? I do not believe it is. The

<sup>79</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 53, my emphasis.

teaching of the New Testament is that the Old Testament is an indispensable part of the Christian revelation (2 Tim. 3:14-17<sup>80</sup>). The Lord Jesus himself and his apostles taught the continuing validity and relevance of the Old Testament Scriptures (Mt. 5:17-19; Lk. 24:27; Jn 10:35; 1 Cor. 9:8-10; 1 Tim. 5:18; 2 Tim. 3:14-17). Any teaching, therefore, that fails to take account of those Scriptures when they speak to the subject being taught cannot be considered biblical; and the teaching and example of the Lord Jesus and his apostles in their use of the Old Testament bear ample testimony to this. The Scriptures Christ and the apostles expounded were the Old Testament Scriptures and the gospel they preached was founded on this revelation. It was this gospel, founded on the Old Testament Scriptures—which, says Paul, “are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus” (2 Tim. 3:15)—that became the content of the New Testament, and therefore it is not possible to overturn the Old Testament in the way that Coffey does without at the same time overturning the foundations upon which the gospel, and therefore the New Testament itself, rests. The early church, as well as the Magisterial Reformers, adopted the same attitude to the Old Testament that Christ and his apostles had. Any teaching that does not take account of the Old Testament as an indispensable part of the Christian Scriptures cannot be said to be in conformity with the New Testament’s or the primitive church’s attitude to what constitutes a *biblical* argument. A biblical argument is one that is informed by the whole of Scripture. A biblical argument is also based on a hermeneutic that allows Scripture to interpret Scripture, which is impossible if the greater part of Scripture, the Old Testament, is considered so utterly unique that it has no relevance. For this reason, therefore, Coffey’s statement is self-refuting. “Biblical” is precisely what it is *not*. It does not conform to the New Testament’s own hermeneutic. In what sense is it biblical therefore? Coffey’s claim

<sup>80</sup> See also Mt. 5:17-19; 22:29; Lk. 24:25-27, 32; Jn 5:46-47; 10:35; Acts 17:2, 11; 18:11, 28; Rom. 1:2; 4:3, 23-24; 15:3-4; 16:25-26; 1 Cor. 15:3-4; Eph. 2:20; 2 Pet. 3:16.

about the "intensely biblical" nature of Williams' political vision is rhetorical; it has no basis in the Bible, and in fact employs a hermeneutic that is the antithesis of that employed in the New Testament itself by Christ and his apostles. Coffey's only claim to the Bible rests on the fact that he has referenced six texts that he claims support his position. But he has provided virtually no exegesis to support this claim.

But the problem goes deeper than this. Having read Coffey's article I obtained a copy of Williams' book *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, from which Coffey draws the material for his presentation of Williams' political thought. I found that in Williams' book, as with Coffey's essay, the New Testament is quoted selectively.<sup>81</sup> It is not merely that Williams considers the old covenant so unique that the Scriptures of the Old Testament have no relevant bearing on the Christian doctrine of the State. In his use of the New Testament Williams refers to certain texts as premisses or proof texts, which, if taken together with other texts from the New Testament that address the subject under discussion, could not possibly mean what Williams takes them to mean. That is to say, if Williams had allowed Scripture to interpret Scripture, or even just the New Testament to interpret the New Testament, he could never have arrived at the profoundly muddled position he adopted.<sup>82</sup> Consequently, I found no such

<sup>81</sup> Of course, in a sense all quotation of Scripture is selective. I have quoted Scripture selectively throughout this essay. One selects those Scriptures that have a bearing on the subject under consideration, or at least the most important and relevant of them, and quotes them. But this is not what I mean when I say that Williams and Coffey quote Scripture selectively. Rather than selecting the Scriptures that most directly and obviously have a bearing on the subject in hand Coffey and Williams select Scriptures that have no direct relevance at all for the subject and read their own views into these texts (eisegesis). Their position seems to be based not on texts that address the issue but on avoiding texts that address the issue and the substitution of other texts, which are then made to bear a meaning that is far-fetched and quite beside the point being addressed in those texts. There seems to be a studied avoidance of the most clear and obvious passages addressing the issue. This is what I mean here by selective quotation of Scripture.

<sup>82</sup> Even in Chapters XLVI and XLVII of *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, where Williams claims to deal with Rom. ch. 13, he studiously avoids commenting on vv. 1-6, dwelling instead on vv. 7-10, which enjoin love upon the

“intensely biblical” political vision in Williams’ book, but only utter confusion and misunderstanding aided and abetted by an extremely selective and tendentious use of Scripture. Williams would have made a good apprentice for the second-century heretic Marcion in this respect, since he followed the same basic approach to Scripture—just leave out the bits you don’t like and build your theology around what’s left. This is also the way modern evangelicalism approaches Scripture. Evangelicals seem to spend half their time professing to be “Bible believers” and the other half arguing that most of the Bible is irrelevant and not applicable to them or modern society—i.e. making up excuses as to why they should not have to obey it.

The essence of Williams argument is this: 1. In the Parable of the Tares and the Wheat Christ commands that the tares be left alone in the field and not plucked up until the end of the world (Mt. 13:30, 38 etc.). 2. Christ commands the same when he says that we should let the blind lead the blind and not hinder them so that they fall into a ditch as a result of their own blindness (Mt. 15:14). 3. Christ rebuked his disciples for trying to call down fire from heaven on those who would not receive Christ (Lk. 9:54f.). 4. The servants of the Lord should not strive but be gentle towards all men, instructing them with meekness so that they might repent (2 Tim. 2:24f.). And 5. The Old Testament prophesied of this gospel age of gentleness and pacifism (Is. 2:4; Mic. 4:3; Is. 9:9)—in other words, the weapons of Christian warfare are not carnal (2 Cor. 10:4).<sup>83</sup> Ergo, the State should not be Christian.

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brethren as the fulfilment of the law. Furthermore, he accuses his opponents of insisting that Rom 13 proves the legitimacy of persecution for cause of consciences (p. 121). But Cotton did not insist that Rom. 13 proves the legitimacy of persecution for cause of conscience. On the contrary, he protested against this false accusation (see note 78 above). Williams refers to Rom. ch. 13 to prove that magistrates do not exercise power over the conscience, a position his opponents did not deny. But the relevant verses (vv. 1–6) are not considered or allowed to interpret the Scriptures that Williams uses to support his own position; they are simply left out of the argument.

<sup>83</sup> This is a summary of Williams’ thesis as set out in the first section of his book, entitled “Scriptures and Reasons, written long since by a witness of Jesus



This is the exegetical basis of Williams' case against the Christian magistrate, which he then defends against John Cotton's critique. But this amounts to nothing as far as disproving the validity of a Christian State. The fact that Christians should gently and meekly seek to convince non-believers of the truth rather than trying to convince them with the sword does not mean that the magistrate should not rule as a Christian,<sup>84</sup> since the magistrate's function is not to preach the gospel but to administer justice in society in accordance with God's revealed word, which defines justice. If Williams' and Coffey's argument were valid the magistrate would have no authority to bear the sword. But this is precisely what Paul says the magistrate, as the

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Christ, close prisoner in Newgate, against persecution in cause of conscience; and sent some while since to Mr Cotton, by a friend . . ." According to John Cotton the content of this section was originally a letter sent to him (Cotton) by Williams for his reply, and after receiving the reply from Cotton, Williams then replied to Cotton's private reply and published the whole thing under the title *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution, for cause of Conscience, discussed, in A Conference betweene Truth and Peace*. The bulk of the book, therefore, is a reply to Cotton's private response to Williams' thesis set out in the original private letter. Williams gave a different version of the events leading up to the printing of his book. According to Williams the original letter, which forms the thesis that Williams defended against Cotton's critique, was sent to Cotton not by Williams but by a Mr Hall, a Congregational minister at Roxbury. Cotton replied, but not being satisfied with his reply Hall sent the original letter and the response to Williams "already printed." Williams then responded in the form of "A Conference betweene Truth and Peace," which was printed together with the original letter and Cotton's response to it as *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*. In the 1848 reprint (from which Coffey works), the original letter, after a summary, a dedication and an epistle to the reader, takes up eight pages. Cotton's response takes up the next ten pages, and Williams' reply (the "Conference betweene Truth and Peace") then runs for 334 pages. (See the Biographical Introduction by E. B. Underhill in The Hanserd Knollys Society edition of R. Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* [London: 1848].) Cotton subsequently responded to Williams' book in *The Bloody Tenent, Washed, And made white in the blood of the Lambe: being discussed and discharged of blood-guiltinesse by just Defence* (London: 1647). On his visit to England in 1651 Williams reopened the debate in *The Bloody Tenent Yet More Bloody* (1652) (W. Haller, *op. cit.*, p. 157).

<sup>84</sup> It should be remembered that the belief that non-believers should *not* be compelled to profess faith in Christ but won by sound doctrine and a good conversation was also the position of the Reformers and many of the Puritans who are the object of Williams' and Coffey's critique. See, for example, the quotation from The Instrument of Government in note 36 on p. 49.

*servant of God* in the sphere of public justice, must do (Rom. 13:4). Virtually every Bible quotation in Williams' thesis prompts the question, What about Rom. 13:1-6 and 2 Tim. 1:8-11? If the highly selective use of Scripture is challenged Williams' "biblical" vision falls to pieces and is shown, in fact, to be anything but biblical; rather, it is a truncated view of biblical teaching. The texts that Williams and Coffey reference as proving that the magistrate should not interfere with religion relate to those who preach the gospel, not to the magistrate. If this were not so, the inevitable conclusion would be that the magistrate should not bear the sword, a position that has already been shown to contradict the Scriptures.

Both Williams' and Coffey's arguments are hopelessly confused. This is evident at the very beginning of Williams' treatise, which states in the first subject heading "Whether persecution for cause of conscience be not against the doctrine of Jesus Christ, the King of kings. The Scriptures and Reasons are these."<sup>85</sup> Then there follows the five point argument summarised above. If here the question is, "Should Christians enforce Christian belief upon non-believers by means of physical coercion?" I readily grant Williams' and Coffey's argument, as did the Magisterial Reformers. Nothing could be clearer from the Bible. But Williams and Coffey have not simply undertaken to pose and answer this question. Rather, they have conflated this question with the question of whether the State should be confessionally Christian, a completely different matter. It does not follow that a Christian State means persecution for those who are not Christians or that they will be forced to practise the Christian faith. It means only that they must abide by the law of the land, which is Christian law; and since it is evident from the Bible that no one should be forced to believe or confess Christ against his will by means of physical coercion it follows that for a Christian State to exact such confessions is apostasy from the word of God and contrary to the will of Christ. No Christian State has the right or authority to do this, and if they do they err grievously. But it is

<sup>85</sup> Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, p. 10.

quite a different matter when it comes to the law that the State must enforce if it is to be faithful to Christ's word in the administration of justice. Here the State not only may but must enforce the law of God in the political sphere, i.e. the *judicial* law. But this law does not command the magistrate to enforce belief; it forbids the doing of certain acts (i.e. crimes) and empowers the State to punish those who are guilty of these acts (criminals). This law does not commission the magistrate to punish people for not *believing* but for *acting* unlawfully within certain parameters. If this were not so the State would be powerless and without authority to punish a murderer who claimed that the ritual sacrifice of his children was an inalienable right and that the abridgement of his freedom to practise such rituals would be religious persecution.

Of course, Coffey realises the inescapable logic of this, the shipwreck it makes of his argument, and when he comes to the issue of abortion—i.e. the right to murder one's unborn children, which is a religious dogma of modern humanism, and therefore a very pertinent contemporary example of my argument above—he says “abortion is an extreme case,” and puts it aside, claiming that “on most legislative issues some form of consensus will be easier to come by.”<sup>86</sup> Coffey does not face up to the implications of the abortion issue at all; he simply tries to sail round it. But he has already given his own case away by saying that “If a Christian's faith tells her that the foetus has fully human status, then this moral belief will compel her to campaign for the complete prohibition of abortion by the state.”<sup>87</sup> Leaving aside the “if”—presumably Coffey thinks Christians might just as well come to the conclusion that the foetus does not have fully human status—there are two points that need to be addressed here: first, what Coffey admits is a religious conviction in the first instance, namely the belief that a foetus has fully human status, becomes a mere “moral belief” when it enters the realm of public order (politics). The campaign against abortion for Coffey is a moral issue, but not a religious issue, therefore. This kind of sophistry is necessary if the principled pluralist is to have any valid reason for

<sup>86</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 57.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

campaigning against abortion. Presumably Coffey thinks he can justify political campaigns based on “moral beliefs” but not campaigns based on religious beliefs. But this is nonsense. All moral beliefs are based on religious convictions. If the history of twentieth-century European culture has taught us anything it is surely that once the religious foundations of morality are dismantled the disintegration of morality itself will inevitably follow. Of course when Coffey uses the word “morality” he means *Christian* morality. The denial of God is ultimately the denial of morality as this has been understood in the West, i.e. Christian morality. Morality is simply the practice of one’s religious convictions. In a nation that has been Christian for as long as Britain has it takes time for these moral norms to disappear once the religious foundations upon which they rest have been dismantled. Hence, non-believers often hold moral norms that contradict their atheism. But disappear they surely will the further the nation strays from the religious foundations of the old faith. What Coffey in effect proposes is that Christians, by supporting a secular State, should help to expedite this process of moral decline, though I do not think he is aware of these implications—from his essay it seems he is totally oblivious to such consequences, which seems odd for someone who claims to “think deeply” about these issues.<sup>88</sup>

Secondly, Coffey admits that “In such cases [i.e. moral campaigns over abortion—SCP], disagreement goes so deep that there may be no alternative to a prolonged constitutional power struggle between different groups.”<sup>89</sup> But if the State should not respect religious convictions what right has the Christian to en-

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57. Coffey uses the term “different groups” to classify disagreement over the issue of abortion, but clearly these are different *religious* groups, i.e. groups of people who, because they disagree about the origin, nature, meaning and value of human life, in other words because they have different religious beliefs, have very different views about whether parents (or their doctors) have the right to kill their unborn children. What differentiates these groups is religious belief. The “prolonged constitutional struggle” of which Coffey speaks is a religious conflict, a conflict between two very different concepts of ultimate authority that produce incompatible ideas of what justice is and therefore conflicting ideas about the role of the State in such matters.

gage in such campaigns? Why should Christians seek to have their moral beliefs enforced by the State when these beliefs are based on religious convictions and the State should not take account of religious convictions? Coffey uses the term "moral belief" but it is clear that he is really speaking about a *religious* conviction. Coffey is hopelessly confused here. Morality and religion cannot be separated in the way that Coffey tries to separate them.<sup>90</sup> He wants to have his cake (a secular State) and eat it (allow people to campaign for the State to outlaw abortion, a *religious* issue). Those who support abortion do not have the moral sensibilities that are generated by the Christian belief that man was created in God's image. For the evolutionary humanist, man is just another animal, more clever perhaps, but not essentially different from other animals. The idea that mankind is above the animals and that it is a heinous crime to murder human beings is predicated on the belief that mankind was created in God's image. If man is not made in God's image why should the foetus be considered human? It is only religious belief that makes the Christian view the issue differently.<sup>91</sup> So why should the State be permitted to enforce such Christian beliefs after a successful campaign to outlaw abortion? Or, to put the question in a way that gets to the real issue here: why is the State only permitted to act upon Christian beliefs when *Coffey* thinks the issue is serious enough to justify constitutional struggle? Why should *Coffey* draw the line on where the State may act religiously? Who gave principled pluralists this mandate and authority? Is it not rather God's prerogative to determine who should live and who should die? Should it not be the Bible (i.e. God in his revelation) rather than *Coffey* and the principled pluralists that determines where the line should be drawn? Rather than face this issue *Coffey* dismisses it by saying "abortion is an ex-

<sup>90</sup> See also the discussion at note 7 on p. 18.

<sup>91</sup> Though I would also maintain that the influence of Christian belief in a Christian culture has an ameliorating effect on the moral beliefs of even non-believers, so that the latter begin to think and act like Christians. Such influence is an aspect of common grace. Unfortunately, is it precisely such an influence that *Coffey's* separation of religion from morality would vitiate.

treme case, and on most legislative issues some form of consensus will be easier to come by." But such a consensus will not be easier to come by. If it were that easy these legislative issues would not have exercised the minds of so many people for so long, nor would there be such an antithesis between Christian culture and non-Christian culture on such matters. The mere fact that Coffey has to argue his case against the majority tradition of the church demonstrates that consensus is *not* so easy to come by. For example, divorce, education and taxation beyond what is necessary to provide for the administration of public justice—which some would argue is a form of theft and forbidden by the eighth commandment<sup>92</sup>—are religious issues, not merely moral issues, just in the same way that abortion is a religious issue. There is no consensus on any of these issues either.

Ironically, Coffey goes on to say "Because the image of God in human conscience has not been obliterated, we can expect that in many areas of our common life citizens who disagree strongly about ultimate reality can unite on more limited principles of political ethics."<sup>93</sup> Of course, I do not deny common grace, but if men cannot come to a consensus on a fundamental and basic issue such as the murder of the most defenceless of human beings what reason is there to believe such consensus politics will work anywhere? And what is more important than the murder of defenceless children? Is abortion so unimportant that it can be set aside like this and just dismissed? Are we really to think that people who accept and are prepared to legalise murder are suitable to govern the nation, that this "extreme" issue has no bearing whatsoever on the validity of such a government? Coffey's answer to this problem is simply to say that "The presence of sin in the redeemed and the presence of common grace in the unregenerate reminds us that Christian takeover of the public order is not the only option."<sup>94</sup> But this is no answer. Common grace has not stopped the murder of millions of unborn children any more than it stopped the murder of millions of people by the Nazis and Communists.

<sup>92</sup> Ex. 20:15 cf. Dt. 17:17; see also 1 Sam. 8:10-18.    <sup>93</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 57.    <sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*

What Coffey is really saying here is that because of the image of God in man we should expect men to *behave* as Christians, at least in many areas that have important political consequences, even though they are not Christians and therefore deny God and the validity of his revelation. That is to say, we are to expect non-Christians to obey God in certain matters; God does not permit them to be left to practise their non-Christian religions in every respect. A further two anomalies in Coffey's position appear here: first, if, as Coffey admits, God has the power and authority to restrain men internally through their conscience, why does he not have the power and authority to command the magistrate to restrain men outwardly? Why does Coffey allow and require God to work internally through the conscience but refuse to accept his authority to work externally through the magistrate? Why does he limit God in this way? Who gave Coffey the right to circumscribe God's authority in this way? Secondly, it is often the case that non-believers do conform to Christian norms in their behaviour as a result of internal constraint operating through the conscience. Such is an aspect of common grace. But this only happens where Christianity is able to exert a strong influence upon society, both culturally and institutionally. Common grace is not a constant factor in human society. There are degrees of common grace. In a Christian society there is far greater evidence of common grace than there is in pagan societies because the Christian faith, when it is dominant, has an ameliorating effect on the consciences and lives of the population as a whole, including non-believers, and thus on the life of the nation. Yet it is precisely such an influence on the institutional level that Coffey aims to remove by establishing a secular State. Coffey wants non-believers to behave in a way that is consistent with a Christian conscience. Yet he wishes to remove from the nation those institutional influences that reinforce and safeguard such behaviour. Moreover, the notion that non-believers should never be coerced outwardly, that they are to behave according to Christian social norms—i.e. obey God's law—only if they *wish* to do so, is totally at odds with Scripture,

not merely in the Old Testament but in the New Testament also (1 Tim. 1:8-11). What Coffey and Williams deny, the New Testament gospel categorically affirms. Such outward constraint exercised by the magistrate in obedience to God's word is also an aspect of common grace.

This muddle is the result of confusing the ministry of the word (the church) with the ministry of public justice (the State). Both Williams and Coffey make the same mistake. The fact that the State is not the church does not mean that the State should not be Christian, it simply means that its jurisdiction should be limited to the administration of public justice according to God's word, which is how the Bible defines the function of the State in Rom. 13:1-6. But, as we have seen, this *locus classicus* of the Christian doctrine of the State is not once mentioned by Coffey, who replaces it with Mt. 13:24-30, the Parable of the Tares and Wheat. But Rom. 13:1-6 does not address evangelism and Mt. 13:24-30 does not address the doctrine of the State; yet the latter functions in Coffey's schema as the *locus classicus* of the Christian doctrine of the State. Once this confusion is corrected Coffey's argument falls to pieces. There is no biblical argument for principled pluralism because the argument can only proceed by confusing two institutions that the Bible clearly differentiates and by applying the proof texts for one as arguments for the illegitimacy of the other. There is no "intensely biblical" argument here, only biblical confusion. Coffey's New Testament argument for principled pluralism is a New Testament Babel.

A further contradiction must be mentioned here. After having said all this Coffey goes on to argue that in a secular State based on the principled pluralist position Christians would "have every right to look to the Scriptures for guidance on public policy matters."<sup>95</sup> Then he says, "Roger Williams . . . would not have objected to this. He freely acknowledged that 'what was simply moral, civil, and natural in Israel's state, in their constitutions, laws, punishments, may be imitated and followed by the states, countries, cities and kingdoms of the world.'"<sup>96</sup> Coffey has

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.      <sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*



not quoted the whole of Williams sentence though. What Williams adds is this: "yet who can question the lawfulness of other forms of government, laws, and punishments which differ, since civil constitutions are men's ordinances (or creation, 2 Pet. ii. 13 [*sic*]), unto which God's people are commanded even for the Lord's sake to submit themselves, which if they were unlawful they ought not to do?"<sup>97</sup> At best this makes the laws of the Bible just one set of laws among a range of equally valid law systems that contradict each other. In many of these different law systems both the principles of justice held forth and the remedies against injustice offered are utterly incompatible. According to the logic of Williams' position here it was quite just for Caesar to murder Christians for refusing to say "Caesar is Lord."

But the worse confusion is the theological supposition that there could be anything in God's law that would run counter to natural justice and thus would not be relevant to all men and societies. That is to say, if God's law is naturally just, it is applicable to all men, and any law that contradicts God's law cannot be considered naturally just. Therefore, the validity of any law system that contradicts biblical law, which Williams maintains, can only be predicated on the grounds that God's law, at least in those areas where it contradicts such a law system, is not naturally just. For example, it cannot be naturally just both to execute a murderer and to let him go free (cf. Num. 35:31). Yet what Christians consider to be murder and would have the State punish,—exposure of infants for instance—other cultures consider to be a natural right and therefore they would not require the magistrate to punish those who do such things. Those who do such things would be justified by such a law system. Williams is wrong therefore. It does not follow that because the Bible commands Christians to submit to the authorities, whatever such authorities do is legitimate. Yet this is the inevitable implication of Williams' position. Therefore Caesar was just to execute Christians for refusing to say "Caesar is Lord."

<sup>97</sup>Roger Williams, *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution*, p. 313.

Here again we are back to the basic error that besets Williams' and Coffey's whole case, namely, the notion of neutrality. For Coffey "natural law" is really religiously neutral law. But how can "natural law" in any sense be not fully in accord with God's law, which is a revelation of God's righteousness—i.e. *tsedeq*, "justice"? Yet according to Coffey and Williams, only that part of God's law that is in accord with "natural justice" is binding on all men. Therefore, if the logic of this position is followed out consistently, not all of God's law is naturally just. The concept of "natural law" that Coffey posits here is totally unbiblical; and a biblical definition of the term "natural law" would render Coffey's definition, and his position, invalid.

The truth is, however, that men use the term "natural law" to camouflage their rejection of God's requirement that they pursue justice *as defined by his word*. They use the term to maintain a façade of righteousness (i.e. justice), so that God's law is rejected in favour of the notion of "natural law," the content of which is only partially in conformity with the concepts of justice revealed in God's law. This is another case of selectivity. In any case, if there were such a thing as "natural justice" or "natural law" we should expect the nations to agree on the content of this justice or law. But in fact this is not what we find. When Calvin spoke of "natural law" or "the law of nations" he was speaking in the context of a Christian culture that was common to the whole of Western Europe. He had the luxury of an epistemological naïvety that those who face a more self-conscious atheism cannot afford. Concepts of "natural law" are not the same the world over, and this is because all concepts of justice are religious in nature. There is no such thing as "natural law" in the sense that Coffey uses the term because one's understanding of what is naturally just is based on one's religious convictions. The only concept of "natural law" that is consistently Christian is one that identifies it with God's law. Since God is the Creator, who defines all things by his creative purpose, natural justice or natural law is law that conforms to God's prescriptive will as revealed in the Bible.

Coffey states that "insofar as Israel's law was an application of 'creation ethics' or 'natural law' to a specific society, it can be a guide for Christian thinking about political and social issues today."<sup>98</sup> Does Coffey think the atheist is going to be fooled by this? Coffey has ruled out religious convictions in the process of informing political and social policy and now wants to bring them in by the back door—well, at least he wants to bring some of *his* religious convictions into the process; "Constantinians" are still resolutely excluded from the process in Coffey's enlightened State. In fact, however, the whole idea of "creation ethics" and "natural law" is an intensely religious idea. Coffey contradicts himself again, and this is simply because no matter how hard he tries he cannot get away from the fact that all law is based on religious convictions. Justice is a religious issue. "Creation ethics" is another term used to try and avoid God's revealed law, to posit a *neutral* law rather than a truly natural law, which would by definition from the Christian perspective be identical with God's revealed law. But this does not work either. "Creation ethics" is a religious idea. Who determines what these creation ethics are? On what authority? In the end Coffey must admit, if he is to be consistent with this idea, that it is the Creator, God, who determines what creation ethics are. But sinful me want to deny that God has set down these creation ethics in his law. And this is because this law is too specific, too clear, and men do not like what they read there. They want an excuse to ignore God's law. The whole notion of "creation ethics" is an attempt to posit a law that is above God's revealed law and substantially different from it (i.e. a less comprehensive law). The impulse behind this is that men do not like God's law, so they make up some notion of "natural law" or "creation ethics" to take its place, the contents of which they can determine for themselves. This is just another form of apostasy. Where in the Bible are we taught about this "creation ethics" or "natural law"? These are not biblical notions.

Coffey tries to justify allowing *his* religious convictions into

<sup>98</sup> E.Q., p. 58.

the political process by arguing that such would not constitute an establishment of Christianity and that "The neutrality of the secular state is a neutrality of *justification*, not a neutrality of *effects*."<sup>99</sup> What this means is that the State may establish laws that benefit the Christian community, e.g. laws restricting Sunday trading, but it may not do so because it wishes to conform to the requirements of the Christian religion—in other words, it may not do so out of obedience to God's word—but only because such laws are "supported by publicly accessible arguments."<sup>100</sup> Hence, "Laws against divorce, adultery or homosexual acts," says Coffey "cannot be passed simply on the grounds that many Christians believe that God hates these things; publicly accessible reasons must be provided for every policy recommendation, and laws adopted by the government should rest on some secular objective."<sup>101</sup> Christian principles may be used in legislation but not because they are *Christian* principles. Such are only acceptable when non-believers agree with them.

It is this kind of thinking that leads Coffey to make a distinction between a secular State and a *secularist* State.<sup>102</sup> According to Coffey, a "*secular* state is not to be confused with a *secularist* state, which is hostile to religion and effectively constitutes a new religious establishment."<sup>103</sup> But such a distinction between a secular and a *secularist* State is mere sophistry. Coffey's secular State is a religious establishment every bit as much as a Christian, Muslim or "secularist" State. His ideal of a secular State is hostile to the Christian State. In seeking to replace God's law as the ultimate standard of justice in society with a secular standard based on "a common vision for the common good" the secular State dethrones God and usurps his authority. Religious neutrality is impossible not only for "secularist" States, but for Coffey's secular State also. The idea that Coffey's secular State is not hostile to Christianity, or to "religion" as Coffey puts it, whereas

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59, emphasis in original.      <sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* The quotation is from Kent Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice* (Oxford, 1988), p. 20.

<sup>102</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 57.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

a "secularist" State is hostile to religion, is nonsense. If it is the case that in a secular State Christianity may not be established, then the secular State is hostile to the religious beliefs of those who believe that Christianity should be established. One of the fundamental tenets of such a political ideology is to deny the validity of the religious belief that Christianity should be established. These are two conflicting religious ideals. It is not the case that antisestablishmentarianism is a religious ideal while disestablishmentarianism is a non-religious ideal. Both positions are religious ideals. Opposition to the establishment of Christianity in Coffey's ideal of a secular State is a religious conviction, and therefore any State that is founded upon such an ideal is a religious establishment.

The distinction Coffey makes between a secular State and a *secularist* State is a poor attempt to posit a principle that will allow his own religious convictions into the political process while proscribing the religious convictions of antisestablishmentarians, with whom he disagrees. What Coffey argues here, in effect, is that it is valid for John Coffey and those who think like him to bring their religious convictions to the political process but not those who disagree with him. Coffey seems to think his readers will not see through this particular brand of religious intolerance—and that is precisely what it is, despite his posing as a champion of religious toleration. He is guilty himself of the same kind of intolerance for which he reproaches the "Constantinians." Coffey's secular State is just as intolerant as the Christian State. What it will not tolerate is that God's law should be the ultimate standard of justice in society in terms of which the political authorities must rule. But it must not be forgotten that the Christian State, which Coffey paints as so intolerant and abusive, is precisely the form of political establishment that recognises Coffey's freedom to argue for his secular State. Coffey does not yet live in a completely secular State; he lives in a State that is constitutionally Christian, and whose Christian constitution, built up over 1500 years at the cost of the blood of many martyrs, is responsible for those ideals of freedom that he takes

for granted. In fact, it is the case that where the most consistently secular of State's have existed such freedom has been denied. It is the establishment of Christianity, not secularism, that has given modern Western States the freedom of speech and debate, freedom of conscience and equality before the law that Coffey says he values so much,<sup>104</sup> yet that he insists can now only be preserved by abandoning the establishment of Christianity. Instead Coffey desires a form of religious establishment that has conspicuously failed to provide or even value these freedoms wherever it has been dominant. Tolerance is a Christian virtue. Our freedoms have not been bequeathed to us by 1500 years of secular humanism. We have yet to see secular humanism's martyrs die in their thousands for their faith that others might be free to serve God according to their conscience.

Of course, this is not to say that Christian States have never been intolerant or abusive. Men are sinners. Magistrates and rulers are men also. They sin. This is not denied. But we should not cast off so easily the benefits that establishment of Christianity has brought to the world. When all the rhetoric is over the fact remains that it is in those nations where Christianity has been established that the freedoms Coffey values so highly have been found and preserved, not in secular States. If Coffey values tolerance so highly, one would have thought he would have compared the records of nations where Christianity has been established with those States that have been secular. No such assessment is to be found in Coffey's essay. If tolerance is to be the criterion Coffey has only one real option: the established Christian State.

Coffey's reasoning at times is so confused that he virtually scores an own goal.<sup>105</sup> To buttress his case he refers to a number of liberal political philosophers who would "argue vigorously against those liberals who would exclude religious convictions from public debate."<sup>106</sup> But his argument only allows certain

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.* p. 52. See the discussion at note 109 below.

<sup>105</sup> See for example his quotation from Kent Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice* (Oxford, 1988) on p. 58. <sup>106</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 58.

kinds of religious convictions into the public debate, namely, those that do not require the establishment of Christianity (or any other religion except that of secular humanism). It is difficult to imagine a more confused position than that of Coffey's at this point. Coffey wants his own religious convictions to be accepted as a valid influence on the political process. He says "Christians will have every right to let their theological convictions shape their political beliefs."<sup>107</sup> But the convictions of "Constantinians" are not to be permitted. Hence, "principled pluralists certainly do want to insist that legitimate Christian political influence has clearly demarcated boundaries. Above all Christians should not enter politics with the aim of establishing Christianity as the state religion and using state power to suppress false religion."<sup>108</sup> But in making this point he merely plunges his own argument for a secular State into utter confusion. If Coffey is to be consistent with his espoused ideal of religious equality at this point he must maintain either that religious convictions, including the religious convictions of "Constantinians" regarding the establishment of Christianity, are acceptable in the political process, or that all religious convictions, including his own liberal humanist and quasi-Christian convictions, are excluded. His attitude to those who believe that Christianity should be established reveals, however, that his espousal of religious equality is anything but the principled position he claims it to be. In fact, he seems quite happy to abandon the principle of religious pluralism and equality at this point. He wants to exclude "Constantinian" convictions from the political process, and thereby establishment of Christianity, but not his own religious convictions, acceptance of which by the State would constitute another form of established

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.* Of course, Coffey does not state *which* false religion he is referring to here. Does he mean *any* and *every* false religion? Is there *no* religious practice that the State may suppress? Again, we must ask, what about the Rushdie fatwa and countless other crimes, proscription of which by the State is the suppression of religious freedom? Coffey's argument is strewn with such unanswered questions, which if seriously and honestly considered would make total shipwreck of his case for religious pluralism.

religion. Coffey's view of the State, therefore, is no less intolerant than that of the "Constantinians" with which he disagrees. It is merely intolerant of different things.

Coffey's naïvety is striking. It seems he has not yet worked out that his own argument for a secular State contradicts his argument for permitting *his* religious convictions to influence the political process (this is in addition to his failure to recognise that the establishment of a secular State is another form of religious establishment). Does Coffey really expect Christians who believe in the establishment of Christianity and non-believers who do not to acquiesce in such an illogical and contradictory argument?

Towards the end of his discussion of Roger Williams' political views as propounded in *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* Coffey subjects the Levellers to the same hagiographical treatment that Williams receives. There are a number of misconceptions perpetrated in this brief account of the Levellers. For example, we are told that the Levellers were

. . . the first modern political movement organised around the idea of popular sovereignty. They are the first democrats who think in terms, not of participatory self-government within a city-state, but of representative government within a nation-state. They are the first who want a written constitution in order to protect the rights of the citizen against the state. The first with a modern conception of which rights should be inalienable: the right to silence . . . and to legal representation; the right to freedom of conscience and freedom of debate; the right to equality before the law and freedom of trade; the right to vote and, when faced with tyranny, to revolution. The Levellers are thus not merely the first modern democrats, but the first to seek to construct a liberal state.<sup>109</sup>

It seems that Coffey thinks most of the benefits of modern liberal democracy were bequeathed to us by the Levellers and that the only reason they were able to arrive at these enlightened ideals was because of the pioneering work of Roger Williams. The "conceptual revolution" achieved by the Levellers, says Coffey,

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52. Coffey is here quoting from D. Wootton, "The Levellers" in J. Dunn, ed., *Democracy: the Unfinished Journey, 508 BC to AD 1993* (Oxford, 1992), p. 71.



"was only possible because Roger Williams had demonstrated that Christians could start to look at the state as a 'merely civil' institution."<sup>110</sup>

I do not intend to deal with this issue in any great detail here. Any good history of the period will correct Coffey's misconceptions.<sup>111</sup> There is one claim, however, that I cannot pass over without further comment. According to Coffey, "Once this move was made [i.e. Williams' conceptual revolution of thinking of the State as a merely civil institution—SCP], the Leveller writers were able to draw on traditional natural law theory and on the biblical demand for justice, equality and freedom, to formulate the first liberal democratic programme in Western history."<sup>112</sup> That the Bible requires justice for all men, and therefore equality before the law, is of course indisputable. The Old Testament demands that those who rule should do justice, and it insists that all men should be equal before the law, that there should be one law for all, both Israelite and stranger.<sup>113</sup> But by "equality" few today understand equality before the law in this biblical sense. What is understood by this term in modern Western society is a much more general notion of equality, in particular economic equality, equality of opportunity (e.g. education, employment), and, especially as Coffey uses the term, *religious* equality. This modern notion of equality is nowhere to be found in the Bible.<sup>114</sup> Yet Coffey tells us that the Bible demands not only justice for all men but equality as well. Where does it make

<sup>110</sup> E.Q., p. 52.

<sup>111</sup> See for example, Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution: 1603-1714* (Edinburgh: Thomas Nelson and Sons Ltd, 1961); *idem*, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London: Temple Smith, 1972); Robert S. Paul, *The Lord Protector: Religion and Politics in the Life of Oliver Cromwell* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1955). See also A. S. P. Woodhouse, ed., *Puritanism and Liberty, Being the Army Debates (1647-49) from the Clarke Manuscripts* (London: Dent, [1938] 1986).

<sup>112</sup> E.Q., p. 53.

<sup>113</sup> See for example, Ex. 12:49; Lev. 24:22; Num. 15:15-16, 29; Ps. 82:1-4; Pr. 21:3; Is. 1:17; 56:1; Amos 5:24; Mic. 6:8.

<sup>114</sup> The community of goods described in Acts 4:32-37 was a voluntary sharing (cf. 5:5) not a moral requirement of the faith, nor a doctrine taught by the apostles. It was not practised by the whole church, and that the experiment was ultimately a failure is apparent from the fact that the Jerusalem church in time was unable to provide for itself and had to be subsidised by the growing Gentile

this demand? No references are given (again). Coffey makes this bold claim but provides no argument or exegesis, not even a Scripture reference. This notion of equality, which Coffey assumes is consonant with biblical teaching, is an ideal spawned by secular humanism not Christianity.

What are we to make of this? Coffey's reading of this period of history is anachronistic to say the least. Even the Levellers were not for the modern notion of equality that Coffey imputes to them. The modern idea of universal suffrage, for example, was not part of the Levellers' agenda: "the Levellers wanted the vote to be given only to 'freeborn Englishmen.' Unless they had fought for Parliament, servants and those in receipt of alms—that is, wage labourers and paupers—were excluded from the franchise, because these two groups were not economically independent. Thinking in terms of small household industrial and agricultural units, the Levellers held that servants—apprentices and labourers as well as domestic servants—were represented by the head of the household no less than were his womenfolk and children. 'Free' Englishmen were those who could freely dispose of their labour, of their property in their own persons."<sup>115</sup> It has become fashionable among some left-wing thinkers to claim the Levellers as forerunners of modern socialism. Consequently, much nonsense has been said and written about their agenda. Even their contemporaries had their own reasons for exaggerating and misrepresenting their demands. "The Levellers' conception of 'free Englishmen' was . . . still restricted even if much wider than that embodied in the existing franchise. Their proposals would perhaps have doubled the number of men entitled to vote. But manhood suffrage would have quadrupled it. The Generals, genuinely horrified, pretended at Putney that the Levellers were more democratic than they were."<sup>116</sup> Coffey's assessment of the Levellers, like much of the assessment of Leveller thinking among modern socialist writers and politicians, is anach-

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churches (Rom. 15:15-16), which held to the principle of private property instituted in God's law (Ex. 20:15).

<sup>115</sup> Christopher Hill, *The Century of Revolution: 1603-1714*, p. 131.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

ronistic and distorted. The Diggers, by contrast, were communists, from whom the Levellers distanced themselves.<sup>117</sup> The modern notion of equality claimed by Coffey as a biblical principle espoused by the Levellers is neither biblical nor was it espoused by the Levellers. It was a feature of Digger ideology, however, which required the establishment of communism, an agenda that can hardly be described as biblical.

One final contradiction will be mentioned here. Coffey says, "it is not fair to say that principled pluralism simply privatises Christianity and capitulates to secularist hegemony."<sup>118</sup> Then, two pages later he says, "In a sense, therefore, principled pluralism does privatise religious faith."<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, Coffey recognises the conflict of loyalties that this privatisation of the faith creates when he says "the schizophrenia that we as Christians inevitably feel between our private and public personas is one the New Testament tells us to accept, for we are pilgrims in this world, looking forward to the *eschaton* when the whole of life will be swallowed up in Christ, and the tensions we experience in the here and now will be overcome."<sup>120</sup> This adequately sums up Coffey's position at this point. He wants religion out of politics. But he also wants non-believers to agree to act like Christians in certain areas that he thinks are too important to be left without a Christian influence—hence the notion of "creation ethics." His position is hopelessly self-contradictory and confused, without biblical corroboration, and, as he himself admits, creates a conflict of loyalties that can be characterised as schizophrenic—and for once I entirely agree with him. Good point! I couldn't have put it better myself—in fact I doubt I would have dared to use the word if Coffey himself hadn't. The whole con-

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132, cf. R. S. Paul, *op. cit.*, p. 199 n.5.

<sup>118</sup> *E. Q.*, p. 57.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59f.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60. Coffey here presumes to speak for all Christians, but it is certainly not obvious that all Christians experience this schizophrenic tension between their private and public lives. Such schizoid behaviour is a feature of pietism rather than of biblical Christianity. Furthermore, we must ask where it is that the Bible tells us to accept such a tension. No reference is given (again), and this is simply because the Bible nowhere tells us to accept such a tension as part of the Christian life.

fusion rests, however, on the erroneous idea of religious neutrality in the political sphere, i.e. the notion that political institutions can work properly without reference to the God who instituted them and the law he has given to govern their actions. Given this perspective, the Christian faith must be privatised, and even though Coffey wants to have his cake and eat it at certain points, the inevitable consequence of this is that Christian standards must disappear from public life, as indeed they already are doing under the influence of the very secularism that Coffey advocates. The practical evidence against Coffey's position is already with us, and it will continue unabated until the preposterous notion that the Christian faith does not speak to the political sphere is overturned. Christianity is a public truth for all the nations (Mt. 28:18-20).

### §3

#### *The exegetical basis of Coffey's argument*

The exegetical basis of Coffey's position is admittedly rather scant, but I shall examine what there is of it. Perhaps "exegetical" is a rather misleading word here, since Coffey does not attempt to exegete any texts, with the possible exception of the Parable of the Tares and Wheat. I shall give him the benefit of the doubt and see what these texts hold out for his argument. Coffey references the following six texts: Mt. 13[:24-30, 36-43]; Lk. 9[:54-55]; 1 Cor. 5 [presumably vv. 11-13—as with the preceding two texts and Eph. 6 he does not specify the verses]; 2 Cor. 10:4; Eph. 6[:10-17]; and 1 Pet. 2:9. Although he does not cite the biblical references he also alludes briefly to Heb. 11:13 and 1 Pet. 2:11 when he says, "we are pilgrims in this world, looking forward to the *eschaton* when the whole of life will be swallowed up in Christ, and the tensions we experience in the here and now will be overcome."<sup>121</sup> I shall, therefore, include an examination of these texts also.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*

(i) *Matthew 13:24-30, 36-43*

Mt. 13:24-30, 36-43 is the Parable of the Tares and Wheat. According to Coffey this parable demonstrates that the New Testament invalidates the notion of a Christian State.<sup>122</sup> But the passage does not address the issue of law and order and on what basis the magistrate is to administer justice at all. And even if it did, i.e. even assuming Coffey's hermeneutic for the sake of argument, the parable does not invalidate the notion of a Christian State, and for the following reasons: the fact that the workers are told not to uproot the tares for being tares (i.e. non-believers) in no way implies that non-believers should not be punished for their crimes. The question of what should be done with those who commit crime still remains, and this brings us back to the religious nature of the whole issue, i.e. the question of *who* determines what crime is. If Coffey's argument were valid, however, it would invalidate *any* State, not merely a Christian State. If men may *not* be punished for their crimes because they should be left alone until the Last Judgement, no magistrate would be authorised to restrain them. If it were valid, therefore, the argument would prove too much. It would invalidate Coffey's notion of a secular State also. But Coffey's perspective distorts the parable anyway. I am at a loss to understand how this passage even addresses the issue let alone proves the case for a secular State.

(ii) *Luke 9:54-55*

In Lk. 9:54-55 Christ rebukes his disciples for proposing to invoke divine judgement on those who did not receive Christ as he journeyed to Jerusalem. Williams and Coffey assume that this means the *magistrate* must not have regard to religion. But it is difficult to see how this idea can be extracted from this text. First, those upon whom the disciples proposed to call down fire

<sup>122</sup> To be fair, the content of the original letter that forms the thesis defended by Williams against Cotton's critique in *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* is more moderate in its claims than either Coffey's or Williams' developed position, and this may lend credibility to Williams' version of its provenance as a letter sent by a Congregational minister to Cotton (see note 83 on p. 82f. above). All that

had committed no crime. On what grounds could they have been punished by the magistrate? What crime had they committed? None. Sin perhaps, but not crime. It would have been unjust for the magistrate to punish them for this. But that fact, the fact that the magistrate is not authorised to punish people who have committed no crime, does not mean that the magistrate has no authority to punish those who *have* committed crimes. Therefore Christ's rebuke of the disciples' error does not invalidate the magistrate's duty to serve God and uphold his law.

Second, even if they had committed a crime, the disciples were not magistrates and therefore it was not their place to judge. Even Christ himself refused to take the law into his own hands in this way when there was proper redress available in the duly constituted courts (Lk. 12:13-14). For the disciples or Christ to have acted in such a way would have been to bypass and usurp the authority of the duly instituted courts of Israel, and therefore rebellion against the judicial order established by God (Dt. 1:9-17). Therefore, again, Christ's rebuke does not invalidate the Christian magistracy.

But third, such a judgement—i.e. fire from heaven—would not in any case have been the exercise of the magistrate's authority and power, but a *divine* judgement. Calling fire down from heaven was not the magistrate's job. It had not been given as a biblical penalty for crime; and the magistrate had neither the authority nor the power to do it. What is under discussion here is the appropriateness of calling down divine judgement, not the office and calling of the magistrate nor the means at his disposal to pursue that calling. The magistracy is irrelevant to this incident. In what sense, therefore, does the passage address the authority, power or jurisdiction of the magistrate? The passage has no bearing on the issue under consideration. Hence, the fact that

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is claimed in this letter is that the parable proves that persecution for cause of conscience is against the decree of Christ (Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, p. 10). With this I am in full agreement provided it is not interpreted to mean that one may then practise those beliefs if such practices are crimes under God's law.

Christ rebuked the disciples for their error does not invalidate the Christian magistracy.

Fourth, even if this incident were addressing the issue of the magistrate it would not invalidate the *Christian* magistrate; it would simply show that the magistrate must act within the limits set by God's law.

(iii) 1 *Corinthians* 5

Coffey references 1 Cor. 5. No verse references are given but presumably vv. 11-13 are in view: "But now I have written unto you not to keep company, if any man that is called a brother be a fornicator, or covetous, or an idolator, or a railer, or a drunkard, or an extortioner; with such an one no not to eat. For what have I to do to judge them also that are without? do not ye judge them that are within? But them that are without God judgeth. Therefore put away from among yourselves that wicked person."

Again, Paul does not here address the office of the magistrate. He is speaking to the church at Corinth about *church* discipline, not the magistrate. He has told the believers at Corinth that they are not to associate with those who call themselves Christians but act in such a way as to contradict that profession. Fornicators, covetous people etc. have no part in the life of the church and those members of the church who commit these sins are to be disciplined by the church if they refuse to repent. This the Corinthians misunderstood. They thought Paul meant they should not associate with non-believers who did these things. He writes to correct them on the very same point that Coffey has himself misunderstood. He is addressing the issue of *church* discipline, not the magistrate. What authority has the church to discipline non-members? None. If they have committed crimes that is a matter for the magistrate, not the church. This text has no bearing whatsoever on the issue of the magistrate's proper function and authority. The church's jurisdiction to discipline the disobedient by means of spiritual sanctions is limited to members of the church. The church authorities have no jurisdiction over those who are not members, those "without" as Paul calls them.

This is not the case with the magistrate, since Paul says categorically that “the law is good, if a man use it lawfully; Knowing this, that the law is not made for a righteous man, but for the lawless and disobedient, for the ungodly and for sinners, for unholy and profane, for murderers of fathers and murderers of mothers, for manslayers, For whoremongers, for them that defile themselves with mankind, for menstealers, for liars, for perjured persons, and if there be any other thing that is contrary to sound doctrine; According to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust” (1 Tim. 1:8-11).

The law is not for believers only; it is for all men. But the church does not judge men for their crimes. That is the function of the State. Neither does it discipline those who are not members for unrepented sin. But the State must judge men for their crimes, says Paul, because it is the *servant of God*, and the law in terms of which judgement must be given is the law of God, which is *according to the glorious gospel of God*.

A more thorough refutation of Coffey’s position than that given in these two passages (1 Tim. 1:8-11 and Rom. 13:2-6) is hardly imaginable. Not surprisingly, therefore, Coffey never refers to them. In 1 Tim. 1:8-11 Paul speaks of God’s law generally. In 1 Cor 5:11-13 he addresses the church and speaks of church discipline. In Rom. 13:2-6 he addresses the subject of the magistrate. Both church and State have a limited jurisdiction in which those of God’s laws that are relevant are to be applied. The State does not apply church law. The church does not apply State law. Each deals with what is appropriate to its given jurisdiction in its own proper way. It does not make sense to confound and confuse these spheres, which the Bible differentiates. Paul says in 1 Cor. 5:11-13 that the *church* must discipline apostates. He says that the church does not discipline non-members. But he also teaches that God’s law addresses all men, since it is made for sinners. Therefore, in the sphere of public justice the magistrate judges according to God’s law, God’s revealed standard of righteousness (justice). Neither can this text, therefore, be made to support the principled pluralist position without twisting



Scripture to mean what it evidently does not say, and contradicts elsewhere.

(iv) *2 Corinthians 10:4*

In 2 Cor. 10:4 Paul speaks of the weapons of the Christian warfare: "For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war against the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds;) Casting down imaginations and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ; and having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled" (vv. 3-6).

What is Paul speaking about here? Who is he addressing? Who is it that he is ready to discipline? The answers to these questions are important if we are to understand the Scripture correctly. But Coffey does not consider these things. He just lifts the text out of its context and confidently assumes it will support his case. It will not. Like the other texts he references, this one simply does not address the subject he is dealing with. Let us look at these questions then.

First, what is Paul speaking about here? This statement comes at the beginning of a long passage (several chapters) in which Paul defends his apostleship to the Corinthians. The Corinthians had been listening to those who despised Paul and demeaned his ministry (v. 10). He responds by defending his authority as an apostle of Jesus Christ. Paul is not dealing with the Corinthians' attitude to the magistrate, but with their attitude to an apostle of Christ. Paul was not a magistrate. His ministry was the ministry of the word, not the ministry of the sword. His statement that "the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty through God . . ." makes perfect sense in this context. But it does not invalidate the ministry of the sword nor the notion that the ministry of the sword should be exercised in accordance with God's law in obedience to Christ. The idea that it does is without any foundation in the text itself.

Second, who is Paul addressing? The church at Corinth. Paul is speaking of the church and her relationship with himself, her apostle. He is not addressing the magistrate nor is he teaching the church about the Christian doctrine of the magistrate. If he were, the argument would flatly contradict his own argument in Rom. 13:2-6. Furthermore, if it were valid, Coffey's argument would, again, prove too much. If Paul were addressing the issue of the magistrate this text would prove not that the magistrate must not respect religion (Coffey's position), but that the magistrate must use spiritual means to enforce discipline, not the sword, which is a plain contradiction of Scripture. Applied to the magistrate this text would render the use of coercion illegitimate by *any* magistrate, not merely by the Christian magistrate in matters of religion. It would in effect, therefore, abolish the office of magistrate, since he would not be able to enforce the law against those who did not wish to obey. In fact, if this were the case, this text would overturn Coffey's argument for a secular State because the discipline in view is clearly Christian in nature, i.e. in the service of the gospel. There is absolutely no logic in the reference of this text in Coffey's argument therefore. An apostle's weapons, we are told in this verse, are not carnal. But the magistrate's weapons *are* carnal, i.e. the sword, Paul tells us elsewhere (Rom. 13:4). Therefore Paul cannot be speaking of the same office and function, unless we are to accept that the Bible contradicts itself in the most obvious and open manner.

Third, who is it that Paul is ready to discipline? Clearly it is those in the *church* who are sinning and refuse to repent of their sin (2 Cor. 13:3). Paul addresses the church at Corinth (1:1) and threatens to discipline those who are apostatising morally (13:3). His argument in chapters 10 to 13 is a defence of his *apostleship* and therefore his authority in the *church*. He does not claim to be a magistrate, authorised to use the sword, and therefore he does not threaten anyone with the sword. He is not called or authorised to act as a magistrate. Rather, as an apostle of Christ, he is authorised to use spiritual means of discipline in the church.

If Scripture is allowed to interpret Scripture, it is clear that

this verse also offers no support whatsoever for Coffey's principled pluralist position.

(v) *Ephesians 6*

Ephesians 6 is next to be considered. Again no verse references are given but we must assume the reference is to vv. 10-17, the spiritual armour, since vv. 1-9 deal with domestic relationships and duties and vv. 18-24 deal with prayer requests and mission information. It is difficult to understand how anyone can come to the conclusion that this passage outlaws Christianity as the religion of State or supports the idea of principled pluralism. Paul deals with *spiritual* warfare, not the office of the magistrate. Again, if this passage did support Coffey's theory it would contradict Paul's teaching elsewhere.

Perhaps the mere mention of the word "sword" in v. 17 in the term "sword of the Spirit" leads Coffey to think this is a reference to the power and authority of the magistrate. But it is not. It is merely an analogy. The "sword of the Spirit" is the word of God. Paul does not here apply his teaching to the function of the State but to the spiritual struggle of the Christian life. This could not be clearer, since he says specifically "we wrestle *not* against *flesh and blood*, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places" (v. 12). But flesh and blood is precisely what the magistrate or State *does* wrestle with. The magistrate does not fight against spiritual enemies, i.e. the devil (v. 11). His only means of suppressing evil is the sword, which is useless in the spiritual warfare of which Paul speaks in this passage. What comes under the discipline of the magistrate's sword *is* flesh and blood, which is vulnerable to the sword. But, says Paul, the Christian in his daily life of faith is involved in a struggle in which the enemy is *not* flesh and blood, but spiritual wickedness. The magistrate on the other hand is to punish flesh and blood, i.e. those who transgress the law by committing crimes. This passage does not address the doctrine of the magistrate. It addresses the church's spiritual struggle. There is nothing

in the passage to support the principled pluralist position. If the passage were taken as supporting such an idea it would directly contradict Paul's teaching elsewhere in Scripture. Again, therefore, the use of this passage to support principled pluralism contradicts the hermeneutic used by the authors of the New Testament themselves, namely that Scripture must be allowed to interpret Scripture.

(vi) *1 Peter 2:9*

What about 1 Pet. 2:9 then? "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light." Who is Peter speaking of? The church again; those redeemed by Christ. He is not speaking of the State or the magistrate, but of the church and her calling to follow her Saviour. Nevertheless, in whatever calling the members of the body of Christ should find themselves they are to be a holy people—this is precisely what the verse teaches. What then if a Christian should be called to the office of magistrate? What would Coffey maintain such a person's duty is? To ignore God's word, God's law, as it applies to the administration of justice? Or to execute justice in the way that the Bible directs? If Coffey's argument were correct, the Christian who is also a magistrate must not be a Christian magistrate; rather, he should separate himself from the faith and from Christ in his duty as a magistrate. But this would be absurd, since Peter says in this very verse that Christians are to be holy, i.e. obedient to God. Therefore Christian magistrates must serve God by conforming to the precepts of his law in their administration of justice.<sup>123</sup> The only

<sup>123</sup>The Reformers taught, to use the words of Bullinger, that "whosoever embrace truth are partakers of Christ's kingdom, whether they be princes or of the commonalty: all these obey the voice of their King, and serve their highest Prince." Therefore, it follows inevitably that "kings can no otherwise serve their Lord and King than [as] kings, that is, in doing those things which kings ought to do, namely, to execute judgement and justice. For albeit these be in the world, yet rule they not after the world, because they are now governed by the Spirit of their King Christ, and direct all their doings to the prescript rules of God's word, and in all things yield themselves to be guided by the Spirit of

other conclusion that the principled pluralist could come to, if he is to be consistent, is that it is not possible for a Christian to be a magistrate without sinning, and therefore the office should be filled by non-believers only.<sup>124</sup> In what sense therefore does 1 Pet. 2:9 support the principled pluralist theory? How does it follow that because the body of Christ is a holy nation, a peculiar people, the magistrate must not respect religion? How do we get from this first premiss to the conclusion without a second premiss from which the conclusion can be deduced? Coffey does not say. He seems to think a syllogism consists of one premiss and his opinion.

(vii) 1 Peter 2:11 and Hebrews 11:13

Coffey also alludes to 1 Pet. 2:11: "Dearly beloved, I beseech you as strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul"; and Heb. 11:13: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth." The operative word seems to be "pilgrims."<sup>125</sup> The Greek word used in both texts (*παρεπίδημος*) means "a sojourner, exile."<sup>126</sup> This word is used in the LXX of Abraham when he dwelt in the land of Hebron (Gen. 23:4). But we must ask, In what sense does Peter say we are strangers and pilgrims? This is an important question, since "The idea that the life of man is a sojourn and his

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God: and so far surely their kingdom is not of this world" (*The Decades of Henry Bullinger* [The Parker Society: Cambridge University Press, 1851], Fourth Decade, Seventh Sermon, p. 277f.).

<sup>124</sup>This is, of course, a very Gnostic idea. Elements of such thinking have plagued the church throughout its history, especially among groups and sects such as those that constituted the Radical Reformation and the pacifist, pietist sects that have followed their teaching, which is precisely the tradition from which Coffey draws his historical support and that he is so keen to rehabilitate as part of evangelical tradition. This kind of Gnostic thinking breaks through into Coffey's essay at many points.

<sup>125</sup>E. Q., p. 60

<sup>126</sup>Abbott-Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 345. The companion words, *πάροιχος* in 1 Pet. 2:11, translated "strangers," and *ξένος* in Heb. 11:13, again translated "strangers," must be understood in both passages in the same sense as *παρεπίδημος*.

true home is in heaven is found in Hellenistic philosophy. But here [i.e. in Hellenistic philosophy—SCP] it is shaped by the cosmological dualism according to which the soul belongs to another world and is imprisoned in the body.”<sup>127</sup> This dualistic notion is, of course, not a biblical idea. The Bible holds out the Resurrection as the final state, not a disembodied “spiritual” existence. The destruction of the human body is *death*, not life, which for mankind is always conceived in the Bible as a bodily, i.e. physical, existence.

In what sense, therefore, are believers pilgrims and sojourners or exiles in this world? The answer is that they are pilgrims and exiles in the world in the sense that the term “world” stands for unbelief and sin. This is evident from what Peter goes on to say: “abstain from fleshly lusts” and in the next verse, “Having your conversation honest among the Gentiles,” i.e. “Keep your behaviour good among the nations,” that “whereas they speak against you as evildoers, they may by your good works, which they shall behold, glorify God in the day of visitation” (v. 12). In other words, as ambassadors of Christ among those who do not believe Christians are to avoid the sin that characterises the life of non-believers, and by their good works they are to testify to God’s saving grace. The condition of being exiles or sojourners is *ethical*. It does not mean that Christians are not part of society, nor that their faith is merely a private affair and that they are not to associate with the society of which they are a part—in fact it was precisely such an idea that Paul rejected in his teaching to the Corinthians regarding how they should deal with believers who refused to repent (1 Cor. 5:10–13; see above).

Where is the believer’s true home then? It is a world where God is worshipped and obeyed, a world where all men bow the knee to Christ and do homage. Believers are often in a world that is hostile to these things. Therefore they are pilgrims and sojourners. But what is their duty? Christ told his disciples to

<sup>127</sup> Walter Grundmann, “παρπείδημος” in Gerhard Kittel, ed., *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1964), Vol. II, p. 65.

convert the nations and teach them to obey his commands (Mt. 28:18-20). He told his disciples to pray "Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done, in *earth* as it is in heaven" (Mt. 6:10). Christ taught us to pray and work for the kingdoms of this world to become the kingdom of Christ (cf. Rev. 11:15). Yes, we are strangers and pilgrims often, in a world where Christ is not worshipped or obeyed. But our home is not an existence in some other dimension; it is a world where Christ is worshipped and obeyed, the world of the new covenant in Christ. We must remember that when Abraham was called a pilgrim in Gen. 23:4 he was living in the land that God had promised to him and his descendants. He was a pilgrim in his own promised land.

Coffey assumes that because Christians are pilgrims in this ethical sense they should live as a ghetto, that their faith is a private matter. The Bible does not say this. It says, rather, that though we are pilgrims we live out the faith, do good works, teach the nations and baptise them in the name of the Trinity. The Christian faith is a faith that *overcomes* the world, not a faith that retreats before it: "For whatever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith" (1 Jn 5:4). The Bible tells us to go out into the world and convert the nations (Mt. 28:18-20). Yes, we are strangers to the culture of death that rebellion against God produces; but we are to overcome this, we are to bring the light of God's word to bear upon our culture. We are to be salt and light (Mt. 5:13-16), transforming the nations so that they convert to the faith and obey Christ (Mt. 28:20). Of course, this will never be perfectly completed before the Last Judgement and in a sense therefore there will always be this element of pilgrimage in the life of the believer. But the fact that there will not be perfection in this life does not mean we should retreat into a ghetto and abandon our calling, since this would be a total contradiction of the Great Commission. In short, our pilgrimage is ethical, not metaphysical.

How then can these texts teach that the magistrate should not have respect to the Christian religion? Again, if Scripture is

permitted to interpret Scripture Coffey's position is shown to be hopelessly at odds with the Bible; in fact it is shown to be the antithesis of what the Bible teaches. Furthermore, the idea that this physical world is not our home and therefore that our sojourn or pilgrimage is one in which believers are to withdraw from society, which is an inevitable consequence of the privatisation of the faith that Coffey admits is the corollary of his position,<sup>128</sup> assumes a dualistic view of life that has its origin in Hellenistic philosophy, not in the Bible.<sup>129</sup>

Thus, neither do 1 Pet. 2:11 and Heb. 11:13 support Coffey's argument for a secular State. These texts do not deal with the authority, function or power of the magistrate any more than the other texts referenced in Coffey's essay, and when taken together with the rest of the New Testament they are shown to be entirely consistent with the idea that the magistrate is a servant of God who must honour and obey God in the vocation to which he is called. The exegetical basis of Coffey's position is a mirage caused by presuppositions that are alien to the Bible. It has no substance whatsoever. Those who visit it will be disappointed. There is no water of life here. It is not a water hole, just a hole.

On a general point, we must note that Coffey's use of Scripture to support principled pluralism implies that the Christian virtues are incompatible with the use of the sword by the magistrate. Coffey does not say this explicitly, but it is implicit in the conclusions he draws from Scripture. If it is wrong for a *Christian* magistrate to use coercion—which is the inevitable implication

<sup>128</sup>E. Q., p. 59f.

<sup>129</sup>The appearance of these ideas in Coffey's essay would seem to suggest a belief system heavily influenced by Gnostic and humanistic philosophy. This problem besets evangelicalism generally. I am not implying that evangelicals who hold to these views do so self-consciously, nor that they are not believers, but simply that they have imbibed a form of Christianity that has been corrupted by certain pagan beliefs. These beliefs are usually imbibed subliminally, not self-consciously, along with the gospel of salvation in Christ, and hence they function as presuppositions in terms of which the gospel is understood and which are in turn read into the Bible. They have left an abiding legacy in the church in the form of mysticism and pietism, both of which have vitiated the message of the gospel.



of his use of Scripture—why should it be acceptable for a non-Christian magistrate to use coercion? There are not two standards of justice, one for the believer and another for the non-believer. The inevitable implication of Coffey's position, therefore, is not merely that Christianity should not be a State religion, but that it would be wrong for a Christian to fill the office of magistrate, since Scripture puts the sword into the hand of the magistrate, and this is something that is against the Christian virtues according to the logic of Coffey's argument. This must also mean that the use of coercion by the magistrate *per se* is evil, and since without this use of force the magistrate has no power, i.e. since the authority to use the sword defines the calling of the magistrate, the magistracy itself must be an evil institution. But of course this is contrary to the Scriptures, which teach that the magistrate is ordained of God as his servant (Rom. 13:2-6). The use of the sword by the magistrate is not against the Christian virtues. It is, however, against the Christian virtues to permit murderers and thieves to roam the streets plying their trade. The magistracy is a necessary and virtuous office in a fallen world, provided those who fill this office pursue justice as defined in God's word and observe the limitations of authority imposed upon them by that word. Coffey, of course, does not say the magistracy is an evil institution. But such would be the inevitable implication of his position if it were to be followed through consistently. For some bizarre reason, what Coffey argues is that it is only the secular State that is not inherently evil; Christian States *are* evil, as are other non-secular States. There is no reasoning evident in his essay to support this notion, just the assertion that this position is biblical, indeed *profoundly* biblical, followed by references to the above texts.

## CONCLUSION TO PART ONE

IN concluding his essay Coffey claims that principled pluralism frees the church to pursue her true calling and offers two modern examples of principled pluralist thinking that will, he says, “help to reinforce the point about the promise of principled pluralism”<sup>1</sup>—though he admits himself that these examples are “rather modest and uninspiring.”<sup>2</sup>

Coffey’s argument that principled pluralism frees the church to pursue her calling is a revealing one, since it gets to the very heart of the problem, the confusion from which his perspective suffers. He argues that the church is called not to provide a national religion for society but to live a marginalised existence as a colony of resident aliens in the midst of a hostile culture.<sup>3</sup> This is the very antithesis of the role given to the church in Scripture, as can be seen from Mt. 28:18–20, the Great Commission, and other Scriptures that speak of the influence of the church upon society (e.g. Mt. 5:13–16). According to Coffey the recognition of this calling to live a marginalised existence “can be a tremendously liberating experience for the Church. Relieved of the burden of providing the national religion, we can get back to doing what we were meant to be doing in the first place—being God’s counter-cultural community.”<sup>4</sup> It is difficult to imagine how Coffey ever got this idea from the Bible—in fact he did not, though he may think he did. Where does the Bible tell us that the purpose of the church is to retreat into her own private ghetto? This is a Radical Reformation agenda for irrelevance. Christ told us not that the meek will retreat into a ghetto, but

<sup>1</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 61.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

that they will inherit the *earth* (Mt. 5:5), i.e. the kingdoms of the world (Jesus was not making some obscure point about allotment ownership in the church—cf. Rev. 11:15). Coffey's argument at this point is simply this: the church should not seek to provide a religion for the world that will bring salvation to entire nations; rather, it should exist as a ghetto on the margins of society. Coffey speaks of this ghettoisation of the church as a "liberating experience," a process of getting back "to doing what we were meant to be doing in the first place." What kind of freedom this is I cannot conceive, unless he means freedom from the church's responsibility to be salt and light to the world (Mt. 5:13-16). These words seem to me to have no real meaning; their purpose is rhetorical. It seems that Coffey thinks it is inappropriate that the teachings of the Christian faith should inform the political process. Surely it is precisely the calling of the church to preach the gospel to the *whole* world (Mk 16:15), to teach all *nations* to obey Christ's commandments (Mt. 28:18-20). And lest it should be objected that I have taken the evangelist's words out of context let us remember the words of Paul: "We are destroying speculations and every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking *every* thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (2 Cor. 10:5, NASB). Of course, Paul says the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but spiritual (v. 4); but this is just the point, he is speaking of the *church's* calling to take the whole of life captive to Christ by means of the preaching of the word. This means that the church not only may but *must* provide the guidance and instruction from the word of God in her own way, using spiritual means, that the State needs in order to fulfil its role obediently according to the word of God. The abdication of this responsibility, which Coffey so eagerly desires, is the negation of the Great Commission. But in so advising and providing counsel and instruction to the State and to all other institutions, the church does not "take over" these institutions, as Coffey insists. The church's calling is to preach the word to all men. The calling of the State is to administer justice in accordance with the principles of justice revealed in the

word of God. The church does not bear the sword, it preaches the word. The State does not preach the word, it punishes evildoers with the sword. But what the State considers evildoing must be informed by God's word, otherwise how can the State act as God's servant in this matter? It is the church's calling to teach the word of God to all men and all institutions, including the State. Only as she does this, in fulfilment of her commission from Christ himself (Mt. 28:19-20), will the State be able to serve God according to his revealed will and therefore fulfil its own calling (Rom. 13:1-6). What Coffey in effect argues, though without realising it, is that some religion other than Christianity should govern the activities of the State. Today this religion is secular humanism with its supposed religiously neutral concept of human rights, such as a woman's right to murder her unborn children. It is the very policy that Coffey advocates, i.e. the withdrawal of the Christian faith from the political sphere, that has led to this abortion of justice in the first place, a situation that Coffey somehow thinks will be remedied by a further dose of withdrawal.

Coffey is surely correct to say that "government has an important but strictly limited function," but entirely wrong to think that this function can be found in "a common vision for the common good"<sup>5</sup> rather than in the pages of Scripture. This, it seems to me, is the essence of Coffey's error and the error of principled pluralism as he presents it. Only in God's word can we find clear guidance about the limits of the State's function, and only by observing these limits can tyranny by the State be avoided. It is evident that a "common vision for the common good" does not exist between Christians and humanists and other non-believers. Nothing could demonstrate this fact better than the holocaust of legally murdered children since the passing of the Abortion Act. Coffey's vision of principled pluralism has already proved to be anything but a "common vision for the common good." The participants to this common vision cannot even agree about the most basic and fundamental issue of right

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

and wrong, murder, yet we are expected to believe that a secular State will provide justice for all once Christianity gets out of the way.

As modern examples of this particular political vision Coffey offers us, first, Reinhold Niebuhr. Because Niebuhr "was also willing to draw on secular sources, and because the principles he defended were not exclusively Christian," Coffey tells us, "he was able to reach and influence a very wide audience."<sup>6</sup> But what does this achieve? Is adherence to the Bible now to be sacrificed to a wider audience just for the sake of gaining political influence? Is political influence a goal to which Christian principles can be sacrificed? Is it not the Christian vision itself that is the goal? What good is political influence for Christians if it can only be achieved by sacrificing the Christian vision of society? In that case Christians might as well retire from politics and let non-believers rule the nation. It is no better to have a Christian running the State according to secular (i.e. non-Christian) principles than it is to have a non-believer running the State according to the same principles. The non-believer rules the nation in both cases. All that such an argument achieves is to counsel the abandonment of politics as a *Christian* vocation for the sake of merely having political influence and attaining power regardless of the moral basis upon which such power is exercised. Is this really supposed to be a Christian vision of politics? Hardly! "Christian politics takes its origin in the Christian's acknowledgement of the total sovereignty of the Lord Jesus Christ over the whole of human life. For this reason it should be clear why Christian political and social action can never be simply a question of getting Christian persons into existing political and social and economic positions. Many Christians today feel that they have done their Christian duty at the polls when they have voted for a Christian candidate regardless of whether the candidate's party affiliation and party platform openly acknowledge the sovereignty of Jesus Christ. Christian political life is *not* the accepted political life of the time being accomplished by Christian indi-

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

viduals; it is doing the will of God as revealed in the Holy Scriptures in the political sphere of human society, exercising our office according to the will of the Sovereign God as revealed in his Word."<sup>7</sup>

The second example Coffey gives is that of the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge. This is a strange example, since from the literature produced by the Jubilee Centre it is clear that its basic political philosophy is anything but the principled pluralist position. According to Coffey the Jubilee Centre is "advancing a politics of natural conscience or common grace"<sup>8</sup> and in support of this statement he quotes from *The R Factor* by Michael Schluter, the Director of the Jubilee Centre, the words "an ethic upon which humanist and theist, Hindu and Muslim, Christian and Jew can all agree."<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, judging from the Centre's own statement of purpose it would seem that Coffey has pressed these words into the service of an ideology that the Jubilee Centre does not espouse. The purpose of the Centre is "To carry out research into contemporary economic and social issues in the light of biblical norms of politics and economics . . . the aims [of the Centre] are to propose policy alternatives to central government, the business community and the church on the basis of the research findings."<sup>10</sup> I fail to see how the Jubilee Centre takes a principled pluralist stance. Its position is one of promoting the application of biblical political and social norms as answers for contemporary social and political problems. It seems evident from its published literature that the Jubilee Centre is operating on an entirely different basis from that set out in Coffey's argument for principled pluralism. Coffey seems to have almost totally misunderstood the work of the Jubilee Centre.

A brief look at the various publications of the Jubilee Centre

<sup>7</sup>E. L. Hebden Taylor, *The Christian Philosophy of Law, Politics and the State* (Nutley, New Jersey: The Craig Press, 1969), p. 599; emphasis in original.

<sup>8</sup>*E.Q.*, p. 61

<sup>9</sup>Quoted from M. Schluter and D. Lee, *The R Factor* (London: 1993), p. 269.

<sup>10</sup>Michael Schluter, *Family Roots or Mobility?* (Cambridge: Jubilee Centre, 1986), p. 19. I disagree with the position taken by the Jubilee Centre in a number of areas. Ironically, I find the Jubilee Centre's position too ready to use the State to enforce biblical norms, which is the very antithesis of Coffey's principled pluralist position.

will reveal just how much Coffey has misunderstood the Centre's position. For example, in *Reactivating the Extended Family: From Biblical Norms to Public Policy in Britain* Schluter argues that "The central theme of this paper is the importance and relevance of Old Testament teaching on socio-economic issues to contemporary western societies. A careful examination of the social structure of Old Testament Israel is followed by a discussion of the applicability of these institutions and values to our own society. The conclusions are then considered in relation to several areas of British economic and social policy in the 1980s."<sup>11</sup> According to Schluter, "Christians should at least realise that the O[ld] T[estament] approach to political economy provides guidelines and norms which are relevant for most, if not all, issues of contemporary social policy."<sup>12</sup> Again, the much more revealing title *Israel: A Model for Church and Nation?* shows that the vision of the Jubilee Centre is the complete antithesis of Coffey's and Williams' vision of an entirely unique Old Testament Israel. The advertising blurb for the book tells us that "Christians today spend little time studying Old Testament teaching. This paper seeks to answer the common objection [i.e. Williams' and Coffey's objection—SCP] that Israel's experience is only applicable to the church, and explores principles for applying Old Testament law and historical experience to contemporary nation-states."<sup>13</sup> Yet it is precisely this notion that Coffey has spent his entire essay trying to refute as misguided and ill-considered. The very purpose of the Jubilee Centre is to expound Old Testament social and political norms and promote the application of these biblical norms to contemporary society. One may not agree entirely with all aspects of the Centre's work or with the position it has taken on various issues, but its purpose is a laudable one that is entirely consistent with the "Constantinian" position that Coffey takes issue with; indeed the Centre is

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20

<sup>12</sup> Michael Schluter, *Political Structures in Old Testament Israel and their Relevance to Britain in the 1980s* (Cambridge: Jubilee Centre, 1982), p. 16.

<sup>13</sup> Schluter, *Family Roots or Mobility?* p. 20.

a prime example of evangelical "Constantinianism." If Coffey had taken the time to investigate the Jubilee Centre's work more thoroughly he could only have considered it the very epitome of the position he seeks to discredit in his essay. Given the fact that the Jubilee Centre represents the position Coffey is attacking, and that in his opinion its efforts are "rather modest and uninspiring," one wonders why he bothered to bring it up. If the Jubilee Centre is indeed an example of the principled pluralist position in action we must conclude that the confusion that characterises Coffey's political ideology is rather more widespread and problematic than one would suspect from reading his essay.

Coffey ends his essay with the claim that Christians are not called to the task of consummating the kingdom that Christ has inaugurated. Before Christ's Parousia, we are told, Christians should concentrate on being an "alternative society, which in its corporate life anticipates the Heavenly City which is to come. As the Church we must practice [*sic*] 'eschatological tolerance' and work with our fellow citizens to forge an 'interim public ethic' which will deliver a more just and peaceful society."<sup>14</sup> More just and peaceful than what? A society that abides by the social and political pattern laid down in God's word? This is the thrust of Coffey's position. A secular State is more just and peaceful than a Christian State. But he has not at any point proved or even attempted to prove that such a secular State is a more just and peaceful society, either from Scripture or history. Coffey is happy with an "interim public ethic" that embraces all religions. It is a *Christian* public ethic that is unacceptable to him. Surprisingly, he ends his essay with the following statement: "In so doing [i.e. following this interim public ethic that embraces all religions—SCP] we will bear witness to the Lord whose command and example we follow."<sup>15</sup> Bear witness to the Lord of what? Not the Lord of national politics for sure. But what are we to make of Coffey's claim that we should follow Christ's command? Is this the command given in the Great Commission to convert the

<sup>14</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 62.      <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*



nations? Evidently not. And is not the whole Bible the word of Christ? Was it not his teaching (Jn 10:35) that the Scriptures (i.e. the Old Testament) cannot be broken? What then does Coffey's statement mean? What command is he referring to? He has spent the whole of his essay arguing precisely that Christ is not Lord of man's political life and that his commandments are not binding on society. Again, this is a mere rhetorical flourish—Christian *sounding* language that can have no real content or meaning given the position he sets out in his essay.

For a position that claims to be "the most promising philosophy for evangelicals involved in politics"<sup>16</sup> it is odd that Coffey's case for principled pluralism has neither a biblical basis nor a consistent, reasoned argument with which to commend itself. Coffey's argument is a bewildering quagmire of disjointed and unreasoned assertions. In this respect it would seem there is an affinity between Roger Williams and his latter-day disciple, John Coffey. Perry Miller wrote of Williams: "we may well doubt that he could ever construct a sustained logical argument of his own..."<sup>17</sup> It is just the absence of such an argument that characterises Coffey's essay.

A Christian political philosophy must be based on the Bible and offer a vision of political life that can be defended by consistent and reasoned argument. Its foundations must add up to more than a few random jottings and disjointed ideas thrown together with a few selectively chosen texts. It must be based on a consistent and exegetically sound understanding of the whole word of

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Perry Miller, *Roger Williams: His Contribution to the American Tradition*, p. 102, cited in G. North, *Political Polytheism: The Myth of Pluralism* (Tyler, Texas, 1989), p. 250. As North points out, commenting on these words of Perry Miller's, Williams' failure to provide a sustained and logical argument for his political views was not due merely to a lack of intellectual ability on Williams' part, but rather to the fact that his political views were irreconcilable with biblical Christianity (*ibid.*). This applies equally to Coffey. Coffey's problem is not that he does not have the intellectual ability to make a sustained and reasoned case for his position; it is the position itself that is not susceptible of reasoned argument based on Scripture. Coffey's principled pluralist ideal is simply impossible to reconcile with Scripture. Coffey might as well have wasted his time trying to square the circle.

God as it speaks to the political sphere. Adding proof texts taken out of context to one's favourite ideas and pet theories will not do. We are required to be as thoroughly biblical in our understanding of how the Christian faith applies to the political sphere as we are in our understanding of how the faith applies to personal morality and church life, since Christ is not Lord merely of one's private life, personal morality, and the church; he is Lord of all things and the Christian faith is a public truth that addresses the political sphere as decisively as it addresses the sphere of private morality. To reject this is to reject Christ's Lordship and restrict his jurisdiction to a voluntary life of devotion. That is not the belief system of the Bible, nor has it been the belief system of Christ's church prior to the rise of twentieth-century pietistic evangelicalism.

## PART TWO

### THE CHRISTIAN STATE

*Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers [magistrates]. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour. (Rom. 13:1-7)*

### INTRODUCTION

ALTHOUGH in the first part of this essay I have criticised the principled pluralist position for its confusion and lack of clarity regarding the differing roles of church and State, the blame for this confusion cannot be laid entirely at the feet of principled pluralists. The cause of the confusion must at least in some measure, though not entirely, be laid at the feet of those whom the principled pluralists have reacted against, namely the "Constantinians" and Magisterial Reformers themselves. Far from there being the clarity of vision on this issue that we should like to

have seen among the Magisterial Reformers and their heirs in the seventeenth century, there has been confusion, and more authority has been claimed for the magistrate in terms of his role in preserving and defending the church and the profession of the Christian faith than can be justified from Scripture. The Magisterial Reformers and Puritans were themselves often guilty of confusing the different roles of church and State and sometimes used Scriptures that address issues of church discipline to support the use of coercion by the State against dissenters and heretics.<sup>1</sup>

Roger Williams can perhaps be better understood in this light, though it does not help his case. His response to the perceived injustice involved in this confusion was to promulgate the opposite error rather than correct the imbalance. This has had worse consequences for society than the "Constantinian" position of the Magisterial Reformers with all its defects. The future of modern Western society under Williams' ideal of the secular State is a bleak one—bleakest of all for those who are least able to defend themselves against the tyranny of the secular State. It is much less easy to understand such an error of judgment in the case of Coffey, who lives in an age that has witnessed the mass crimes of secular States, and those principled pluralists he claims stand in the Dutch Calvinist tradition of Abraham Kuyper,<sup>2</sup> since it is the development of Kuyper's doctrine of sphere sovereignty that has, more than anything else, cleared up the confusion that beset both the Magisterial and Radical Reformation in relation to this issue by bringing more sharply into focus the relationship between the distinctive roles of church and State.

Nevertheless, I am in complete sympathy with those who abhor the attitude that seeks to deny or suppress the freedom given to mankind by God's word, including the freedom to

<sup>1</sup> See for example John Cotton's use of Tit. 3:10-11 to defend the magistrate's punishment of those "sinning against [their] own conscience" in Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, p. 20. See also note 78 on p. 76ff. above. Calvin's dubious use of Scripture to support State funding of the church, welfare and education will be discussed below.

<sup>2</sup> *E.Q.*, p. 42.

express one's religious convictions in word and deed where this does not contravene the political boundaries—i.e. State enforceable boundaries—prescribed in God's word for human behaviour. The use of force by the State to restrain the expression of religious belief is only legitimate where the actions of those involved constitute a violation of public order to which judicial penalties are attached in God's word. Where the expression of religious convictions falls outside this limited sphere, which constitutes the legitimate jurisdiction of the magistrate, man's freedom is to be respected. The basic principle of biblical law is this: what is not forbidden is permitted. This applies in the political sphere just as much as in the sphere of personal morality and church life. What is not forbidden politically either by direct command, biblical example, or may by good and necessary consequence be deduced from Scripture, is permitted politically, even when it may be immoral or contrary to God's word in other respects. Thus, whereas all crime in the biblical model of political government is sin, not all sin is crime, and while the magistrate is commanded to extirpate crime, his remit does not and cannot extend to the extirpation of all sin. This means that the magistrate's sphere of operation, his jurisdiction, for which alone he legitimately bears the sword (physical coercion, including the death sentence), is a limited one. The magistrate may not legitimately cross the boundaries of this jurisdiction as set down in God's word.

This is because the State is not the only form of government that God has instituted in society. Besides civil government there is church government, family government and individual self-government, each with its own sphere of authority, its own jurisdiction, which may not be subsumed under any of the other spheres. God's word speaks to each of these spheres of life. The Scriptures reveal many precepts that apply to family, church and the individual that fall entirely outside the jurisdiction of the State. Compared with the whole life of either the individual or society the sphere of the State's authority is a very limited one. But where the magistrate is given jurisdiction his actions must

conform to God's word every bit as much as the actions of the church, the family or the individual. The magistrate is under obligation to obey God and uphold his word as it relates to the sphere of public order. There can be no neutrality in this sphere. The magistrate is obligated by God's word to enforce Christian principles of behaviour in society within this limited sphere of authority. The magistrate is the servant of God (Rom. 13:4), and if his administration of justice is to serve God it must conform to the principles of justice laid down in God's word. The State, therefore, is not a religiously neutral institution. The magistrate is called to kiss the Son and do homage. He must bow the knee to Christ and accept his law as the standard by which he is to administer justice in society.

In the remainder of this essay I shall look briefly at some of the problems with the Magisterial Reformers' understanding of the calling and function of the magistrate and then set out what I believe to be the biblical doctrine of the magistrate, which is a modification of the position adopted by the Magisterial Reformers.

THE MAGISTERIAL REFORMERS'  
DOCTRINE OF THE CIVIL MAGISTRATE

CALVIN's doctrine of the civil magistrate is set forth in Book IV, Chapter xx of his *Institutes*.<sup>1</sup> There Calvin begins by making the traditional and biblical distinction between civil and spiritual powers. He states that the civil government "pertains only to the establishment of civil justice and outward morality."<sup>2</sup> This is an excellent and biblical definition of the function of the magistrate. Unfortunately, Calvin goes on to argue that the civil government "does not merely see to it . . . that men breath, eat, drink, and are kept warm, even though it surely embraces all these activities when it provides for their living together . . . but also prevents idolatry, sacrilege against God's name, blasphemies against his truth, and other public offences against religion from arising and spreading among the people; it prevents the public peace from being disturbed; it provides that each man may keep his property safe and sound . . . that honesty and modesty may be preserved

<sup>1</sup> This is not meant to be an exhaustive consideration of the Magisterial Reformers' views on the State. The Magisterial Reformation did not produce a completely homogeneous body of doctrine in the area of political thought. Calvin's teaching on the subject will be taken as broadly representative. It is also the most accessible. See also *Genevan Confession* (1536), Ch. XXI; *Scots Confession* (1560), Ch. XXIV; *Second Helvetic Confession* (1562), Ch. XXX; *Articles of Religion of the Church of England* (1571), XXXVII; *Irish Articles* (1615), XI; *Belgic Confession* (1619), Ch. XXXVI; *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), Ch. XXIII cf. *Savoy Declaration* (1658), Ch. XXIV; Martin Luther, *Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should be Obeyed* (1523); Philip Melancthon, *Loci Communes* (1520); *The Decades of Henry Bullinger* (1549), Second Decade, Sermons Six to Nine; Martin Bucer, *De Regno Christi* (1557); Johannes Althusius, *Politica* (1603); John Cotton, *An Abstract of the Laws of New England* (1641); Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (1679-85), XVIII.xxiv.

<sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1960, translated by Ford Lewis Battles), IV.xx.1, vol. 2, p. 1485.

among men. In short, it provides that a public manifestation of religion may exist among Christians, and that humanity be maintained among men.”<sup>3</sup> He continues, “Let no man be disturbed that I now commit to civil government the duty of rightly establishing religion . . .”<sup>4</sup> But this *is* disturbing. Calvin has confused church and State here. It is the church’s calling to provide for public worship. I shall argue below for the establishment principle—i.e. that the Christian church should be established in law, and therefore that the Christian faith should be defined confessionally in law. But this is not what Calvin is driving at here. He is giving to the civil government the task of providing for public worship, i.e. of maintaining the Christian public religious cultus.

This is clear from his criticism of those who reject the notion that the magistrate should enforce both tables of the law: “This proves the folly of those who neglect the concern for God and would give attention only to rendering justice among men. As if God appointed rulers in his name to decide earthly controversies but overlooked what was of far greater importance—that he himself should be purely worshipped according to the prescription of his law.”<sup>5</sup> But of course it does not follow that because God has not committed the maintenance of public worship to the civil government he has therefore overlooked such worship. This is sloppy reasoning. God has committed the maintenance of public worship to the *church*, not to the State. Of course, the magistrate must maintain order and peace in society, and his maintenance of such must be pursued according to the precepts

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.xx.3, p. 1488.      <sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.xx.9, p. 1495. Calvin contradicts himself here. As we have seen, at the beginning of section 1, Book IV, Chapter xx of the *Institutes*, the chapter on civil government, Calvin states that the rule of the magistrate “pertains *only* [duntaxat] to the establishment of civil justice and outward morality” (my emphasis). This is entirely in accordance with Paul’s teaching in Rom. 13:2-7. Now Calvin states that those who maintain that the rule of the civil magistrate pertains only to civil justice and outward morality are guilty of folly. Yet according to his own words Calvin is guilty of the very folly he imputes to others. I do not, of course, think Calvin was a fool, despite the accusation of his own words, but his thinking on this issue reveals a lack of consistency and an element of confusion regarding the distinctive functions of church and State.



of God's law. In so doing the magistrate maintains and upholds a social order based on the moral ethic of the Christian religion. Therefore the civil government helps to create and maintain a social environment in which the church is able to flourish. It does this not by providing for public worship but by upholding justice and order in society according to God's word. The civil government does not provide for public worship, it punishes criminals. This has an *indirect* effect on the life of the church and the maintenance of public worship by the church, in that the social order that the magistrate is to uphold is based on and conducive to the practice of Christian morality. But the magistrate has no commission or authority from God to provide for the Christian public religious cultus, nor to use coercion as a means of enforcing the observance of such Christian worship.

Precisely what Calvin envisages the magistrate doing in relation to the maintenance of public worship is not spelled out in any great detail, but it is clear that it extends further than the administration of justice according to the precepts of God's law. Undoubtedly, there are laws in God's word that relate to both public justice *and* religious worship that it is the duty of the magistrate to enforce. For example, human sacrifice and witchcraft are well-established religious practices of paganism the world over. The magistrate must suppress these religious practices. Men do not have the freedom under God's law to practise these religious ceremonies without hindrance from the State because they are crimes, i.e. sins that God has put within the jurisdiction of the magistrate to suppress. But unless there is clear evidence that a religious practice involves the transgression of a law that falls within his jurisdiction it may not be suppressed by the magistrate.

Calvin makes his case worse by arguing that the magistrate has the duty of enforcing both tables of the law.<sup>6</sup> But the ques-

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, IV.xx.9. This is probably the worst aspect of the Magisterial Reformers' understanding of the function of the magistrate. It was erroneous thinking at this point that gave rise to the confusion between church and State and led the Reformers to attribute more power and authority to the magistrate in matters of public worship than can be justified by Scripture. But the problem

tion of where the boundaries of the magistrate's jurisdiction lie is not a question of whether he must enforce one or both tables of the law. The Decalogue is a summary of God's law for mankind, a summary of the righteousness required of man. It sums up the *whole* duty of man. But the function of the magistrate is not to enforce the *whole* duty of man.<sup>7</sup> His duty is to punish those failures of man's duty that are *crimes*. The Decalogue therefore is much wider in its application than the legitimate jurisdiction of the civil government. If it were the function of the State to enforce the whole duty of man, and therefore police the whole Decalogue, it would have to have total control over the whole life of the individual and society. This kind of power is forbidden to the magistrate in the Bible. His jurisdiction is limited by God's law, by the Decalogue itself, which forbids theft and therefore the means necessary for the State to pursue such a totalitarian regime, i.e. control and where necessary expropriation of the nation's wealth (cf. Dt. 17:17). It is not the function of the civil government to enforce the whole Decalogue, nor even the whole of the second table of the law.

For example, the magistrate may not punish covetousness, but only certain acts, i.e. crimes, to which covetousness leads. One may covet one's neighbour's goods and thereby commit sin, but one does not commit crime until one steals, and only this latter act can be punished by the civil government, not the covetousness itself, which is beyond the legitimate jurisdiction of the State. One may also sin by coveting one's neighbour's goods and obtain the coveted goods by means that are questionable on moral grounds but yet do not constitute a crime that the State may punish. Likewise, one may commit idolatry and therefore sin grievously, yet without committing any crime. We commit idolatry whenever we allow anything to occupy a place in our

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was not confined merely to confusion over the roles of church and State (see the discussion at note 9 below).

<sup>7</sup>Bucer's *De Regno Christi* (1557) is a good example of the kind of totalitarian political philosophy to which the idea that the magistrate should enforce the whole duty of man can lead.

lives and our affections that belongs to God alone. But we do not commit crime until that idolatry issues in a transgression of the law to which God has appended a judicial penalty. Only then does idolatry fall within the jurisdiction of the civil government. The magistrate's duty is not to punish every transgression of the Decalogue, either in the first or the second table, but only those transgressions that constitute crimes. There are crimes that transgress each of the Ten Commandments that fall within the jurisdiction of the magistrate; but there are also many sins, transgressions of these Commandments, that have no judicial penalties attached to them and therefore fall outside the jurisdiction of the civil government. In such cases the State may take no action against those who commit these sins.

The civil government's jurisdiction relates to the judicial law, some infringements of which involve idolatrous worship, some of which do not. To argue that it is the duty of the magistrate to enforce the whole of the Decalogue, as Calvin does, is to invite confusion and misunderstanding. Not all of God's laws are statutes for the State to enforce. Only a small number compared with the whole relate to the function of the civil government. When the State does not observe the boundaries of its jurisdiction as set down in Scripture the inevitable result is tyranny. In fact, in Book IV, Chapter xx, section 9 of the *Institutes*, where Calvin argues that the civil government has a duty to enforce both tables of the law, he offers no proof texts or examples from Scripture to support his argument that the magistrate must enforce the first table, but proceeds to give many biblical examples for his argument that the civil government must enforce the second table. These are conspicuous. But even then, his method is faulty because there are transgressions of the second table that are *not* crimes, though they are of course sins, just as there are transgressions of the first table that *are* crimes. The whole argument in terms of the two tables of the law is a faulty one based on an inadequate understanding of the role of the civil government. This argument, which revolves around the division of the law into two tables, is further complicated by the fact that there

were certain transgressions of the law under the old covenant that were punishable as crimes, such as sabbath desecration, that are no longer considered crimes under the new covenant.<sup>8</sup> It seems clear, therefore, that a different and more clearly focused method of defining the role of the magistrate is called for.

Unfortunately, Calvin does not stop with confusing the differing roles of church and State. He also confuses the function of the State with that of the family. The problem with the Magisterial Reformers' doctrine of the State, ironically, is *worse* than Coffey imagines, though the answer is not principled pluralism—a supposed religious neutrality in political affairs. In his commentary on Isaiah 49:23, "And kings shall be thy nursing fathers," Calvin says that kings "shall supply everything that is necessary for nourishing the offspring of the church."<sup>9</sup> Precisely what Calvin means by this becomes all too clear when he goes on to say: "Undoubtedly, while kings bestow careful attention on these things, they at the same time supply the pastors and ministers of the Word with all that is necessary for food and maintenance, provide for the poor and guard the Church against the disgrace of pauperism; erect schools, and appoint salaries for the teachers and board for the students; build poor-houses and hospitals, and make every other arrangement that belongs to the protection and defence of the Church."<sup>10</sup> Here Calvin expands the jurisdiction of the civil government into a full-blown welfare State and more. He not only confuses the role of the church with that of the State but also puts areas such as education and welfare within the jurisdiction of the State. It is doubtful a strong case can be made for church schools and for church welfare agencies as a normal means of provision,<sup>11</sup> though the Levites'

<sup>8</sup> See also note 46 on p. 55 above.

<sup>9</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of the Prophet Isaiah* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, trans. by William Pringle), Vol. IV, p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40f.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this point see Stephen C. Perks, *The Christian Philosophy of Education Explained* (Whitby: Avant Books, 1992), Chapter Seven, "Some Observations on the Role of the Church in the Provision of Education," pp. 117-130.

provision of education in the law and their minimal role in enforcing quarantine laws for certain diseases has been stretched rather improbably by some to include general education and welfare.<sup>12</sup> But where in the whole of Scripture is the civil government commissioned to provide education and welfare services?

Calvin's interpretation of this text is out of context, forced, and speculative to say the least. A better example of eisegesis is hard to imagine. Although it does under certain circumstances give the church a limited role in education and welfare, the Bible never gives such a role to the civil government, and for one very simple reason, namely, that such a role would severely compromise the even-handed administration of justice, i.e. equality before the law, maintenance of which is an essential and fundamental aspect of the role assigned to the civil government by Scripture. Why would such a welfare or educational role for the State compromise this essential principle of equality before the law? Because when the State provides these services they have to be funded by the levying of taxes, which is a function of the State as the bearer of the sword. In other words, those who pay taxes are forced to do so. The payment of taxes is not voluntary but enforced by the State. For the State to enforce a redistribution of the nation's wealth by using taxes levied on the *whole* population to fund education and welfare for *some*, is theft. The Eighth Commandment forbids such a redistribution of wealth by the civil government and Dt. 17:17 forbids the amassing of wealth on a grand scale by the State. There were no State-funded schools or State-funded welfare programmes in the Bible. The kings and magistrates of Israel, Calvin to the contrary, never set up schools and welfare agencies for the people of Israel. And they were never commanded to do so. There is neither precept nor example in Scripture for such an idea. On the contrary, the kings and magistrate's of Israel were constantly charged with doing *justice*,

<sup>12</sup> See for example R. J. Rushdoony and Edward A. Powell, *Tithing and Dominion* (Vallecito, California: Ross House Books, 1979), p. 18, 105ff. I accept, of course, that both general education and welfare may come within the orbit of church missionary activity and charitable work.

not with providing education and welfare services, and they were rebuked and judged for their failure to provide *justice*, never for their failure to provide education and welfare. Education and welfare are the responsibility of the family (1 Tim. 5:4, 8),<sup>13</sup> not the State, nor the church, at least in normal circumstances, though a limited role in these areas is committed to the church where the family cannot provide (1 Tim. 5:16). When the State provides these services it does so by the use of coercion since it raises the necessary funding via taxation. Those who refuse to pay their taxes are punished. But, as we have seen, the Bible restricts the use of taxes to the administration of justice (Rom. 13:6). The use of taxes to fund education and welfare is therefore a form of economic oppression by the State, a transgression of God's law, and the rejection of the social order revealed in Scripture.

The confusion of the roles of these different institutions (family, church and State), which God has given to govern the life of society, leads to serious consequences when there is widespread religious apostasy such as exists in twentieth-century Western societies. But even in an age of faith such a confusion of the roles of the different social institutions cannot be defended biblically. Our political philosophy must be guided by Scripture. Calvin says: "let them [i.e. princes—SCP] consider that their imposts and levies, and other kinds of tributes are nothing but supports of public necessity; but that to impose them upon the common folk without cause is tyrannical extortion."<sup>14</sup> He even calls such taxes "the very blood of the people."<sup>15</sup> Yet he still maintained that princes may use such revenues "for the magnificence of their household, which is joined, so to speak, with the

<sup>13</sup> See also Gen. 18:19; Dt. 4:7-9; 6:20-25; Pr. 1:8; 4:1-4; 6:20-21; Eph. 6:4. For a useful if brief description of how children were educated in ancient Israel see Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961), p. 48f. On the development of Jewish schooling in the later biblical and early post-biblical periods see Nathan Morris, *The Jewish School from the Earliest Times to the Year 500 of the Present Era* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1937). On the Christian philosophy of education see Stephen C. Perks, *The Christian Philosophy of Education Explained*.

<sup>14</sup> *Institutes*, IV.xx.13, p. 1501.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*.

dignity of the authority they exercise.”<sup>16</sup> On the contrary, as we have seen, the Bible forbids the amassing of such wealth by the king (Dt. 17:17), and the fact that various biblical kings of old did amass such wealth does not justify the practice, as Calvin erroneously affirms.<sup>17</sup> The State may not amass wealth or engage in lavish expenditure without biblical justification. Its divine mandate is to administer justice impartially, and for this alone it has authority to levy taxes (Rom. 13:6). Anything beyond this is tyrannical extortion to use Calvin’s own words. Yet Calvin would have the State raise taxes to fund the church’s ministry along with general education and welfare, services and responsibilities that the Bible clearly and specifically places within the sphere of church and family.<sup>18</sup>

It seems clear from this that Calvin—and the Magisterial Reformers on the whole adopted a similar position<sup>19</sup>—went too far in his claims for the civil government, not only with regard to

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Ironically, many, if not most, who today object to the State’s enforcing of Christian laws, even when justified by Scripture, show no similar abhorrence of the State’s abridgement of the family’s legitimate sphere of freedom and authority as a result of the State-enforced tax-funding of State educational and welfare services. From a principled pluralist perspective, I suppose, if there is a majority consensus on these matters such extortion on the part of the State is justified, regardless of the scriptural teaching and example. Politics is a “no-go area” for God where the will of the people is supreme (see further the quotation from Abraham Kuyper at note 12 on p. 152 below); which is to say, in politics original sin—i.e. man’s insistence that he determine what constitutes good and evil for himself without reference to God’s word—is the ruling principle.

<sup>19</sup> For example, Luther states that “it is the duty of government to maintain the offices and estates that have been mentioned, so that there will always be preachers, jurists, pastors, writers, physicians, schoolmasters, and the like, for we cannot do without them” (*A Sermon on Keeping Children in School in Luther’s Works* [Philadelphia: Fortress Press/Concordia Publishing House, (1530) 1967, trans. Charles M. Jacobs], Vol. 46, p. 256). See also Luther’s call *To the Councilmen of All Cities in Germany that They Establish and Maintain Christian Schools* (1524). Cf. Martin Bucer, *De Regno Christi*, Book Two, Chapter XLVIII. Bucer places the burden of funding education of the youth on parents and, where the parents’ means are insufficient, the church. Nonetheless, he argues for compulsory education and the church in question, the Church of England (the treatise was written for Edward VI of England, to whom it is dedicated), was a State church supported by compulsory tithes. Bucer’s view of procreation and the education of children was totalitarian, as is evident from his comment that “everyone brings forth children more for Christ the Lord, the

its arrogation of those powers and responsibilities that properly belong to the church but also with regard to the powers and responsibilities of the family. These claims were not confined to the Magisterial Reformers however. This confusion of the roles of church and State was also evident among the Puritans, including John Cotton, against whom Roger Williams directed his misconceived polemic in *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*. According to Cotton, the fact that the jurisdiction of civil magistrates extends “no further than over the bodies and goods of their subjects, not over their souls,”<sup>20</sup> and that the church may “not use the arm of secular power to compel men to the faith or profession of the truth . . . hindereth not that Christians sinning against light of faith and conscience, may justly be censured by the church with excommunication, and by the civil sword also, in case they shall corrupt others to the perdition of their souls.”<sup>21</sup> It

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Church, and the commonwealth than for himself; which Plato also recognises (*Laws XI*)” (*De Regno Christi*, Book Two, Chapter XLVIII in W. Pauck, ed., *Melanchthon and Bucer* [Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1969], p. 335). The whole argument of this work is totalitarian, however, and Bucer relies almost as much on Plato as on Scripture to guide his political philosophy, a charge of which he seems to have been aware and of which he attempted to clear himself (*ibid.*, p. 385; see also the Editor’s Introduction, p. 164f.). Cf. Martin Greschat, “The relation between church and civil community in Bucer’s reforming work” in D. F. Wright, ed., *Martin Bucer: Reforming church and community* (Cambridge University Press, 1994). Greschat states that “according to Bucer’s persuasion, God has entrusted an essential task to the authorities: they are responsible not only for the earthly welfare of their subjects, but also for their blessedness, their eternal salvation—although admittedly within defined limits. The political power does not replace the spiritual; on the contrary it assumes it. This means that the authorities, who are entitled to undisputed sovereignty in all earthly concerns and must accordingly command full obedience from their subjects, have only a subordinate role when it comes to facilitating and realizing spiritual life” (*ibid.*, p. 17). Nevertheless, Bucer insisted “that the worldly authority restrict itself to its own sphere and arrogate to itself no greater power than is imposed and ordered by God, in other words, that it have no desire to hinder the concerns of the church” (*Martini Buceri Opera Omnia*, series I: *Deutsche Schriften*, 17, p. 164, cited in D. F. Wright, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 31). Here again, we see in Bucer, as with Calvin, an inconsistency between the Reformer’s understanding of the principle itself—i.e. restriction of the role of civil government to its proper sphere as defined by God’s word—and his understanding of the practical outworking of that principle.

<sup>20</sup> Cotton’s letter in Roger Williams, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*, p. 28.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, my emphasis.



is not clear here what Cotton means specifically by "sinning against [the] light of faith and conscience." Nor is it clear how the magistrate's jurisdiction, given Cotton's prior restriction of this to the bodies and goods of his subjects, extends to such sins against the light of faith and conscience. If the magistrate's jurisdiction does not extend over the souls of men but only over their bodies and goods, sins that do not affect men's goods or bodies, no matter how much they may be sins against the light of faith and conscience, are beyond his sphere of authority. It is difficult to determine from what Cotton says, therefore, whether and to what extent such sins would constitute crimes in terms of biblical law. Furthermore, why is such punishment of sins against the light of faith and conscience restricted to Christians? Non-Christians who commit crimes are to be punished no less than Christians. The law is made for sinners, says Paul, not for the righteous (1 Tim. 1:8-10). At the very least the argument lacks clarity and fails to make a necessary distinction between sin and crime. Cotton's reasoning here seems less than convincing and there is the same kind of confusion between the differing roles of church and State that characterised Calvin's thought.<sup>22</sup>

Nor was Cotton alone among the Puritans in holding this position. The Westminster Assembly also gave to the civil magistrate the authority and power to enforce church discipline. The Directory of Excommunication in *The Directory for Church-Government, Church-Censures, and Ordination of Ministers*<sup>23</sup> agreed upon by the members of the Assembly in 1645, stipulates that, "Although it be the duty of pastors and other ruling officers to use all diligence and vigilance, both by doctrine and discipline, respectively, for the preventing and purging out such errors, heresies, schisms, and scandals, as tend to the detriment and disturbance of the church; yet, because it may fall out, through

<sup>22</sup> See also note 78 on p. 76ff. above.

<sup>23</sup> This document, which is no longer printed in modern editions of the Westminster Standards, was presented to the English Parliament by the Assembly in July 1645. It was adopted by Parliament in August 1648 and published as "The Form of Church Government to be used in the Church of England and Ireland."

the pride and stubbornness of offenders, that these means alone will not be effectual to that purpose; it is therefore necessary, after all this, to implore the aid of the civil magistrate, who ought to use his coercive power for the suppression of all such offences, and vindicating the discipline of the church from contempt."<sup>24</sup>

It is clear from this that the Magisterial Reformers, and the Puritans after them, went too far in their claims for the role of the civil magistrate in supporting the practice of the Christian religion. Nevertheless, the problem is not solved by the adoption of principled pluralism, which not only fails to deliver a satisfactory explanation of how the magistrate is to function as a servant of God, but establishes, in the place of Christianity, a religion totally at odds with both the truth claims and the morality of the Christian religion, namely, secular humanism.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Stephen C. Perks, "The Westminster Assembly and Church Discipline," *Christianity and Society*, Vol. V, No. 2 (April 1995), p. 17. The whole of the Directory of Excommunication was repinted in this essay.

5  
THE CHRISTIAN DOCTRINE  
OF THE CIVIL MAGISTRATE

How is this question to be resolved? How are we to arrive at a doctrine of the civil magistrate or State that both protects man's legitimate freedom and at the same time enables the State to administer justice and punish evildoers according to the juridical principles set down in God's law?

§I  
*Sphere sovereignty*

I believe that this problem and the confusion surrounding it can best be cleared up by applying Abraham Kuyper's concept of *sphere sovereignty* to the issue.<sup>1</sup> Before going any further, however, it must be stressed that this concept of sphere sovereignty does not posit the idea that any sphere of life, either private or corporate, can be considered neutral with regard to the claims of the Christian faith. In the Kuyperian model *all* spheres of life are under God and his word. There is no sphere that is autonomous

<sup>1</sup> Abraham Kuyper's concept of sphere sovereignty is set forth in "Calvinism and Politics," the third in the series of lectures given at Princeton University in 1898 and subsequently published as *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, [1931] 1976). The full text of these lectures is available on the Kuyper Foundation's world wide web site at <http://www.kuyper.org>. The concept of sphere sovereignty that I use in this essay does not follow Kuyper's model in every detail but uses the basic Kuyperian paradigm. I assign more weight to the sphere of the individual than Kuyper does and subsume under it many of the human functions that Kuyper subsumes under the social sphere. I also identify the *family* as one of the foundational social spheres where Kuyper has *society*, and I follow a stricter view of the function of the State than does Kuyper. (See also note 6 below and Appendix B.)

with regard to God or his word and the requirements that word makes upon the life of man. The term "sovereignty" has reference to the interrelationship of the various spheres, not to God or his word. No area or sphere of life is sovereign in the sense of being autonomous of God's word. But each sphere of life has its own degree of sovereignty in relation to the other *spheres*. This may be called a type of sphere pluralism under Christ, in that each sphere is independent of the others in terms of government and does not derive its authority from any of the other spheres. But it would be entirely incorrect to imply, as Coffey does,<sup>2</sup> that one of the sources of the principled pluralism he advocates is the Kuyperian concept of sphere sovereignty. It is not.<sup>3</sup> The concept of sphere sovereignty does not posit areas of life that are to function independently of God's will as it has been revealed in his word, and in all spheres men are required, in this model, to submit obediently to God's word. All spheres are under God's word and derive their functions and the manner of their functioning from God's word. They also derive their authority directly from God's word, not mediately from any other sphere. Only God is sovereign; but each sphere derives its authority from the word of God independently of the other spheres. The sovereignty of the spheres, therefore, is not an autonomous sovereignty, an inherent authority independent of God, but the sover-

<sup>2</sup>E.Q., p. 42.

<sup>3</sup>Just how misleading this idea is can be seen from the words of Kuyper himself: "Now let us put the theory itself to the test and look successively at the duty of the magistrate in things spiritual: 1 towards *God*, 2. towards the *Church*, and 3, towards *individuals*. As regards the first point, the magistrates are and remain—'God's servants.' They have to recognize God as Supreme Ruler, from Whom they derive their power. They have to serve God, by ruling the people according to *His* ordinances. They have to restrain blasphemy, where it directly assumes the character of an affront to the Divine Majesty. And God's supremacy is to be recognized by confessing His name in the Constitution as the Source of all political power, by maintaining the Sabbath, by proclaiming days of prayer and thanksgiving, and by invoking His Divine blessing. Therefore in order that they may govern, according to His holy ordinances, every magistrate is in duty bound to investigate the rights of God, both in the natural life and in His Word. Not to subject himself to the decision of any Church, but in order that he himself may catch the light which he needs for the knowledge of the Divine will" (Abraham Kuyper, *op. cit.*, p. 103).

eignty of God himself as this relates to the particular spheres and devolves upon each sphere independently of the other spheres. It is not the sovereignty of the spheres, properly speaking, but the sovereignty of God *in* the spheres, that is posited by the concept of sphere sovereignty.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, in the created order God's sovereignty is vested totally only in Christ (Mt. 28:18). Nowhere else in the created order is such total sovereignty exercised. In all other persons and spheres sovereignty is differentiated and devolved in a limited and restricted form. This means that all reductionist theories of mankind and human society are idolatrous. Totalitarianism, which reduces man to one function of human society, namely the State, for which it claims a total sovereignty, is idolatrous. Patriarchalism, in which the whole of human society is subsumed under the family and all other spheres subordinated to it, is also idolatrous. Ecclesiocentrism, in which the whole life of man and society is subordinated to the church, is equally idolatrous, as is libertarianism, in which the whole of human life is subordinated to the individual. Christianity teaches, rather than any of these, including ecclesiocentrism, that *Christ* is the centre of creation, that only he is sovereign over the whole creation and that all institutions and spheres, legitimate in their own right and independent of each other's devolved authority structures, must subordinate themselves in all things to him and to his word.

This concept of sphere sovereignty provides a model for resolving the problems associated with the social ideals of the Radical Reformers and the principled pluralist position of those who have followed their ideology in the twentieth century, and

<sup>4</sup>Kuyper states the matter thus: "In order that the influence of Calvinism on our political development may be felt, it must be shown for what fundamental political conceptions Calvinism has opened the door, and how these political conceptions sprang from its root principle. This dominating principle was not, soteriologically, justification by faith, but, in the widest sense cosmologically, *the Sovereignty of the Triune God over the whole Cosmos*, in all its spheres and kingdoms, visible and invisible. A *primordial Sovereignty* which radiates [*sic*] in mankind in a threefold deduced supremacy *viz.*, 1. The Sovereignty in the *State*; 2 The Sovereignty in *Society*; and 3. The Sovereignty in the *Church*" (Abraham Kuyper, *op. cit.*, p. 79).

also those associated with the Magisterial Reformers' conception of the role of the civil government in promoting the Christian religion. Under this concept of sphere sovereignty social relationships are defined in terms of three main social institutions or spheres: family, church<sup>5</sup> and State.<sup>6</sup> Each of these spheres has its own forms of government derived from Scripture independently of the other spheres. Each sphere has its own particular functions and areas of jurisdiction in society. The function of the State is the administration of public justice; the function of the institutional church is the ministry of God's word and maintenance of the Christian public religious cultus; the function of the family is the raising of children and the provision of welfare and education

<sup>5</sup>By *church* here is meant the institutional church. The reader should bear in mind the definition of the institutional church given in the Introduction to Part One, i.e. the visible community of believers organised as a legally defined societal structure for the purpose of maintaining the Christian public religious cultus. The sphere of the church as discussed in this essay refers throughout to this *institutional* church. For a more detailed discussion of the institutional church see Stephen C. Perks, *The Nature, Government and Function of the Church* (Taunton: The Kuyper Foundation, 1997).

<sup>6</sup>In Kuyper's own schema the family is subsumed under the sphere of society (see note 4 above. See also note 1 above). However, society does not constitute an authority structure in itself, but is rather the interrelationship of the spheres of family, church, State and the individual. The family, however, does constitute an independent authority structure instituted by God's word, along with the church and the State. There are of course many other associations and organisations in society but these are not institutions in the sense that the State, church and family are institutions, namely, divinely established and therefore *necessary* constituents of a Christian society that derive their authority directly from God's word and are thus not derivative of any of the other spheres. By contrast, organisations such as voluntary associations, educational establishments and business enterprises, which derive their functions from the family and/or the individual sphere; the army and police force, which derive their functions from the State; and denominational missionary societies, denominational theological colleges and church schools, which derive their functions from the church, possess their authority mediately from the particular spheres to which they owe their existence; i.e. they are not independent spheres in their own right and therefore they have no sphere sovereignty of their own, only an authority devolved from the particular spheres under which they are subsumed. This is not the case with the institutions of church, family and State, which have an original independent authority derived not from any of the other spheres but directly from God's word. These are primary institutions, established by God, from which other social organisations and associations derive their being, functions and authority.

for its members. The family is also the basic economic unit of society and provides the funding for the other spheres, to the church via the tithe and to the State via legitimate taxation (i.e. taxation within the limits imposed by Scripture). Each sphere has its own form of government and each of these governments is limited. No sphere controls the other spheres and no sphere may encroach upon the God-ordained authority and function of the other spheres. The State may not swallow up the church or the family and assume the functions or usurp the authority that God has delegated to these spheres (totalitarianism). Likewise, the church may not subjugate the State under her own rule (e.g. the Roman Papacy in the Middle Ages). Neither may the family usurp the functions and authority of the State or the church and seek to maintain a controlling influence over these institutions (e.g. the Mafia). Each sphere must respect the legitimate function and independent authority of the other spheres.

We must now consider another sphere besides those of the family, church and State, namely, that of the *individual*, which is equally as important as these other spheres. This is not an institution in the same sense that the other spheres are institutions, since it is that sphere of life where the institutions of church, family and State do not operate. Each sphere or institution discussed above has a *limited* jurisdiction. Neither church, family nor State, separately or together, dominate and control the whole life of man. The State acts to bring to justice and punish those who commit crime. The church teaches the faith, administers the signs of the covenant, provides for public worship and preaches the gospel. The family raises children and provides for the welfare and education of its members. But none of these functions individually or taken together account for the whole life of man, either personally or societally. In fact, when all the other spheres are taken together there is still a great deal of freedom left to the individual. Those areas where the family, church and State do not have any legitimate jurisdiction constitute a fourth sphere: the sphere of the *individual*. This sphere of *individual liberty* is in the Bible a very large one.

It has been stated that this sphere of individual liberty is every bit as important as the other spheres of church, family and State. Why? Because it is only as man learns to govern *himself* according to God's word that he can establish responsible government in the other spheres. For sure, the other spheres are designed to inculcate in man this self-government. But they cannot exercise it for him; they can only go as far as their scripturally prescribed limits in fulfilling the functions for which they have been instituted. Thus, the family inculcates Christian values in children as they are brought up; the church inculcates Christian values in her teaching and preaching; and the State inculcates Christian values in its administration of justice, all of which conduce to instill in man an understanding of God's moral requirements in the whole of life. But the family cannot live a man's life for him. The child must eventually leave his parents and establish another family. The church cannot live man's life for him; she can only proclaim God's grace in Jesus Christ and teach the requirements of the faith. And the State cannot live man's life for him; it can only apprehend and punish those who commit crimes. Self-government according to the Christian ethic is the goal that the governments of these other spheres are to seek to inculcate and reinforce. And they must act to limit the consequences of the failure of such self-government according to God's word within their limited jurisdictions. But they cannot live a man's life for him. The time comes when a person must stand before God and society as an individual responsible for his own actions. If the lessons have not been learned and such a person transgresses against the laws over which the various spheres are given jurisdiction, he must face the consequences—e.g. crime results in punishment by the State, unrepented apostasy from the faith in doctrine or morals results in excommunication from the church.

The individual's freedom to govern himself according to God's law, therefore, rather than being a *concession* of the State, church or family, is the *foundation* of good government in all the other spheres. Only when man learns to govern himself properly according to God's word will he be able to govern others prop-



erly in the family, church and State. The individual should not be the slave of the State, the church or the family (or society). Neither State, church nor society defines man. Rather, man is defined by his relationship to God, and State, church and family are defined in God's word as specific relationships between men. Without the exercise of reasonable self-government according to the ethical standards of God's law there can be no reasonable government in the other spheres, since in all spheres it is *men* who govern. The State is not an impersonal institution, a natural force or principle of nature; it is the rule of some men over others in a limited sphere. Likewise, the church and the family are not impersonal institutions or forces in life; they are governments instituted by God over society in which some men rule over others. Therefore, unless men learn to govern themselves according to God's revealed will they will not rule others properly. Good self-government is the foundation of all good government.

Of course, it may be asked, "which comes first?" Unless the individual is brought up in the family to respect other people's rights to life and property etc. he most likely will not learn to govern himself properly. But such a failure of government in the family—which is a significant factor in the deterioration of contemporary Western society—is the result of a lack of self-government by the head of the family. The point is that the sphere of individual liberty is not *simply* the sphere where the main institutions of society have no jurisdiction. That is to say, it is not a sphere in which men have *licence* to do as they please. Rather, it is the sphere of *personal responsibility* where men are to govern themselves according to God's law. For this reason the sphere of the individual is every bit as important as the other spheres, and good self-government in this sphere is the foundation of good government in the other spheres. No matter how well a nation may be constituted legally, no matter how well a church may be constituted confessionally, or a family descended from highly principled parents, unless those who govern in these spheres rule themselves well, submitting themselves to God's law, their gov-

ernment in these other spheres will fail. Institutions do not rule themselves; *men* rule them. If men will not rule themselves well, how will they rule others well? How are we to believe that those politicians who cannot be faithful to the most basic and important of public contracts, the marriage contract, can be trusted in their government of the nation? If a man cannot be faithful to his wife, why should he be trusted with public office? How can it reasonably be maintained that a man's adultery is a purely personal matter that does not affect his ability to discharge the duties of public office, as has been claimed time and again when the sordid affairs and scandals of politicians are brought to light? Responsible self-government according to the moral principles of the Christian faith is the foundation of good government in all other spheres. This ideal of self-government must, of course, be inculcated in the population by the governments of each of the other spheres if society is to be well-ordered and well-ruled. The government of each sphere has an effect on the other spheres. Society is not static but evolves from one generation to the next. Family, church and State each have an effect on the children who will govern in these institutions in the next generation, and as adults they in turn will have an effect through their government of these institutions on those who will come after them.

Since individual self-rule according to God's law is the basis of good government in every other sphere of life we should expect Scripture to address this issue decisively. And in fact this is what we find in Scripture. The Bible provides a great deal of guidance and instruction for this sphere of individual self-government. Many of the precepts contained in God's law are precepts for self-government, not rules laid down for the State or church to enforce. Torah means *instruction, guidance, precept*, not *statute* (i.e. State law). Much of what the church is to teach, therefore, is aimed at equipping Christians to exercise self-government properly according to the principles of biblical wisdom and thereby live redemptively in the whole of life. Likewise, in family life the aim of education is *wisdom*, not merely the acquisition of knowledge or good academic results. It is wisdom that brings forth

good self-government and therefore good government in all spheres of life. This wisdom is the primary aim of education from a biblical perspective.<sup>7</sup> If men are to live wisely they must follow the precepts and instructions of the Lord. The psalmist says, "Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path" (Ps. 119:105), "Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law doth he meditate day and night" (Ps. 1:1-2). Only as men imbibe this wisdom from the Lord are they able to govern themselves properly and therefore govern others properly when called to office.

It has very often been a failure to recognise the validity and scope of this sphere of individual freedom and individual responsibility that has produced tyranny in the government of the State and even at times in the government of the church. The fact that government in one sphere may have broken down does not legitimise the usurpation of the functions and authority of that sphere by any of the other spheres.<sup>8</sup> Nor does individual failure in one sphere necessarily mean the involvement of the other spheres, though it may do, depending on the nature of the fail-

<sup>7</sup>For more on this point see Stephen C. Perks, *The Christian Philosophy of Education Explained*, p. 63ff.

<sup>8</sup>The Magisterial Reformers often failed to recognise this principle. Thus, according to Bucer, "because the authorities are a father, they must truly and even zealously ward off every trouble from their community, just as a particularly conscientious father is duty bound to keep all trouble away from his house, because the authorities are subject to a higher command and in a wider sense are fathers of the fatherland. They should therefore take responsibility for what individual fathers neglect or are unable to accomplish by way of Christian discipline and urgings toward piety" (*Martini Buceri Opera Omnia*, series I: *Deutsche Schriften*, 6:2, p. 177, cited in D. F. Wright, ed., *Martin Bucer: Reforming church and community* [Cambridge University Press, 1994], p. 22). But who determines what a father's duty is? History shows that when the State is given this paternalistic role it will define not only the father's duty but every other duty of its citizens as well. Such a political theory is totalitarian in principle (see also note 19 on p. 137f.). On the contrary, not the State, but Scripture defines the functions and authority of both State and family. For the State to assume the legitimate functions and authority of the other spheres is rebellion against God and the usurpation of God's sovereignty as it has been devolved in a limited way upon the individual spheres independently of each other.

ure. For example, a man may, as a result of spiritual apostasy, act in such a way that the church must discipline him by excommunicating him from the fellowship of the church until he repents of his sin. But the State may not step into the church's sphere of jurisdiction, nor may the church invite or require the State to enforce its discipline, unless such apostasy constitutes a crime, i.e. a breach of public order (injustice) that falls within the legitimate jurisdiction of the State. For example, if someone breaks the eighth commandment his theft must be punished by the State, and if the thief is a member of the church and unrepentant of his crime the church must discipline him also. However, if his denial of the faith or apostasy does not constitute a breach of public order that falls within the jurisdiction of the State, i.e. if it is not a crime, the State may not act against him even though the church must. In this way the sovereignty of each sphere is maintained while the legitimate jurisdiction of each sphere is also maintained. The situation that obtained in mediaeval Europe, where clerics were not subject to the common law courts and were tried for their crimes by an ecclesiastical court (benefit of clergy) would not arise under this model of government therefore, since it would be a usurpation of the State's jurisdiction by the church. A clergyman would be tried for his crimes under the same system of justice as the layman, in the State courts, since the Bible maintains that there must be one system of justice for all.

It cannot be emphasised too strongly that the term *sovereignty* here refers to the independent governments of each sphere in relation to the others. It does not refer to the spheres' relation to God or his word. In relation to God and his word no sphere is sovereign; God is the only sovereign in this sense. Each sphere, in other words, is directly subject to the authority of God's word and derives its own authority from that word independently of the other spheres. Only God is sovereign over all spheres. Each sphere has a governmental independence of the other spheres. The State derives its authority from God's word; likewise the church and the family. The State does not derive its authority from the family, the church or the individual (i.e. the

people).<sup>9</sup> The church does not derive its authority from the State or from the family, or from its members. Neither does the family derive its authority from the church or the State. Each sphere derives its authority from the word of God independently of the others. Therefore no one sphere controls the other spheres. But none of the spheres are neutral with regard to God's word. Each sphere is subject to God's word and must order its life by the light of that word. Those who rule in each sphere, therefore, are required to kiss the Son and rule in obedience to God's will as this is revealed in Scripture. According to Kuyper:

... the Calvinistic confession of the Sovereignty of God holds good for all the world, is true for all nations, and is of force in all authority, which man exercises over man; even in the authority which parents possess over their children. It is therefore a political faith which may be summarily expressed in these three theses: 1. God only—and never any creature—is possessed of sovereign rights, in the destiny of the nations, because God alone created them, maintains them by His Almighty power, and rules them by His ordinances. 2. Sin has, in the realm of politics, broken down the direct government of God, and therefore the exercise of authority, for the purpose of government, has subsequently been invested in men, as a mechanical remedy. And 3. In whatever form this authority may reveal itself, man never possesses power over

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<sup>9</sup> Although in a representative government such as the British parliamentary system those who hold public office are elected, the authority of their office does not derive from the electorate but from God's word (Rom. 13:1), and for this reason such authority must always be exercised in conformity with the requirements of Scripture, as is required, for example, by the Coronation Oath taken by British monarchs (see Edward C. Ratcliff, *The Coronation Service of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II with a Short Historical Introduction, Explanatory Notes and an Appendix* [Cambridge University Press/S.C.P.K., 1953], p. 37ff.). Thus, a basic principle of English common law stated that "Any law is or of right ought to be according to the law of God" (cited in A. K. R. Kiralfy, *Potter's Historical Introduction to English Law* [London: Sweet and Maxwell Ltd, Fourth Edition, 1958], p. 44. This statement is taken from a Year Book of Henry VII's reign). The same principle applied in the Court of Chancery, where it was stated that "every law should be in accordance with the law of God" (Theodore F. T. Plucknett, *A Concise History of the Common Law* [London: Butterworth and Co. (Publishers Ltd), 1956], p. 685). The authority of a Member of Parliament to represent his constituents is derived from those who have elected him. The authority of his office, however, is derived from God's word, since civil government is a God-ordained institution.

his fellow-man in any other way than by an authority which descends upon him from the majesty of God.<sup>10</sup>

Kuyper further states that "Directly opposed to this Calvinistic confession there are two other theories. That of the *Popular-sovereignty*, as it has been anti-theistically proclaimed at Paris in 1789; and that of *State-sovereignty*, as it has been developed by the historicopantheistic school of Germany. Both these theories are at heart identical . . ." <sup>11</sup> The concept of sphere sovereignty as developed by Kuyper, therefore, does not support the notion of principled pluralism or religious neutrality in politics to any degree. What Kuyper said about the French Revolution is equally true of principled pluralism:

It refuses to recognize a deeper ground of political life than that which is found in nature, that is, in this instance, in man himself. Here the first article of the confession of the most absolute infidelity is—"ni Dieu ni maître" ["no God no master"]. The sovereign God is dethroned and man with his free will is placed on the vacant seat. It is the will of man which determines all things. All power, all authority proceeds from man. Thus one comes from the individual man to the many men; and in those many men conceived as *the people*, there is thus hidden the deepest fountain of all sovereignty. There is no question . . . of a sovereignty derived from God, which He, under certain conditions, implants in the people. Here an original sovereignty asserts itself, which everywhere and in all states can only proceed from the people itself, having no deeper root than in the human will. It is a sovereignty of the people therefore, which is perfectly identical with atheism. And herein lies its self-abasement. In the sphere of Calvinism . . . the knee is bowed to God, while over against man the head is proudly lifted up. But here, from the standpoint of the sovereignty of the people, the fist is defiantly clenched against God, while man grovels before his fellow-men, tinseling over this self-abasement by the ludicrous fiction that, thousands of years ago, men, of whom no one has any remembrance, concluded a political contract, or, as they call it, "*Contrat Social*."<sup>12</sup>

Nothing could demonstrate this grotesque state of self-abasement, this freedom from God's sovereignty in the political sphere, better than the holocaust of murdered children that has

<sup>10</sup> Abraham Kuyper, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87f.

taken place since the legalisation of abortion. If men refuse to bow the knee to God in their political life they will inevitably live under the tyrannical rule of men. As already mentioned, institutions do not rule anyone. Men rule. And in each sphere of life God has revealed laws by which men are to rule. There is, therefore, a law above the laws of the State to which all State law (statute) must conform if it is to be legitimate. Those who rule are themselves subject to moral law. How is such morality to be defined if not by God's infallible word? By that will of man, "popular sovereignty," i.e. the secular State, which has produced the mass crimes of the twentieth century? It is God who has given mankind moral law. And this law is given to govern the life of man in every sphere. Man is not exempt from the morality of God's law when he engages in political action.

While each of these spheres has an important part to play in the life of the individual and society as a whole, none has a total jurisdiction. The jurisdiction of each institution—church, family, State—is limited not only with respect to the other institutions but also within its own sphere. This means that man has a great deal of freedom individually, as a family member, as a member of the church and as a citizen or subject of the State. The civil magistrate may deplore the callous neglect of the poor in society, and the church must preach against such neglect, holding out selfless charity as a Christian virtue; but the State has not been given authority by God's word to redistribute wealth within society in an attempt to achieve economic equality. The State has been given authority to collect taxes only for the purpose of administering justice (Rom. 13:6). The use of taxes to create economic equality by redistributing the nation's wealth is an attack on private property. The confiscation of private property by the State is a transgression of the Eighth Commandment, which the State is duty-bound to uphold and enforce. Charity is the duty of the family, the individual and the church. For the State to interfere in the functioning of these spheres of life is an abuse of its authority and a violation of the sphere sovereignty of church, family and individual life. Likewise, parents may deplore

the choice of a marriage partner made by a son or daughter, but they may not seek to nullify such a marriage or bring it to an end, since the Bible teaches that a man shall "leave his father and mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh" (Gen. 2:24; Mt. 19:5) and "what therefore God hath joined together, let not man put asunder" (Mt. 19:6). There are limits to the authority that men exercise over each other in all spheres of life. The authority of each institution is real but limited. Only God has total authority over the whole of man's life, and he has set down in his word the functions of the various institutions he has established for the better government of mankind along with the limits of their authority.

Since the sovereignty of each sphere is not an original sovereignty but a devolved sovereignty—the sovereignty of the triune God over the whole cosmos as this is reflected in a "deduced supremacy"<sup>13</sup> in the specific spheres,—for one sphere to violate the authority structure or usurp the functions of any of the other spheres is an attack on the very sovereignty of God himself in those spheres. This is an important principle that helps us to understand the condition of modern Western society and the growth of the totalitarian secular State. When men cease to acknowledge the sovereignty of God they attribute sovereignty to someone or something else. Modern humanism in its various forms, including principled pluralism, has located this sovereignty in man himself, and particularly in the State as the embodiment of the human will. The State, therefore, becomes totalitarian, the total predestinating State. This is because the concept of predestination is inescapable for man. Either men will acknowledge God as sovereign, the one whose predestination is total, or they will acknowledge someone or something else as possessing this attribute of divinity. The concept of predestination in the modern "post-Christian" world of the West has not disappeared with the eclipse of biblical Christianity; it has been secularised. Predestination has become an attribute of the *State*. When the State arrogates to itself total sovereignty over the nation it claims as its own

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79. See note 4 above.



the sovereignty of God and therefore the right to predestine, i.e. regulate and control according to its own fiat, the whole life of man and society. The principled pluralist State, or secular State, is a usurper that sits on the throne of God himself. The State, as the embodiment of autonomous human will, now determines good and evil and orders the life of society by its own law without reference to any higher law. The State is the highest law in this perspective. It is the sovereign, and therefore it claims the right to control the whole life of man and society. It is the sovereign State, the predestinating State, the divine State, the *idolatrous* State.

The Magisterial Reformers located this “primordial sovereignty” in the being of God, where it rightfully belongs. Furthermore, they correctly defined the function of the civil government as the administration of justice. Their error was, first, to attribute a greater “deduced supremacy” or jurisdiction to the civil government than can be justified by Scripture, and secondly, to confuse the functions of the different spheres. They acknowledged the sovereignty of God over politics and all other spheres of life and the necessity of man’s obedience to God’s word in all spheres of life, but failed to observe the limited nature of the State’s authority. This led to an inconsistency between theory and practice in their understanding of the function of the State. The civil government was therefore given a role quite outside its legitimate jurisdiction and authority: that of enforcing the law of God as it relates to the whole duty of man—i.e. both tables of the law.

On the other hand, the error of the principled pluralist position is to deny that the State is under the authority of God’s word and therefore duty-bound to enforce God’s law within the limited boundaries of its jurisdiction. In other words it denies the sovereignty of God over his creation and locates the “primordial sovereignty” in man himself and in the State as the political embodiment of the human will. Therefore, the State is not subject to Christ and his revelation. Its authority is not a devolved authority—the sovereignty of God over man as this is reflected in

a “deduced supremacy” in the political sphere—but an autonomous authority, the political manifestation of the autonomous will of the people. Hence the right of all to practise the religion of their choice. Religion is a private matter, an expression of man’s free will, not a duty of obedience to God’s sovereign will. Religion and politics are thus totally isolated. Religion may not interfere with politics and the State may not interfere in religion. Both spheres are autonomous. Even religion is an autonomous sphere where man chooses according to his own free will whom he will worship. Such religion is not man’s acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty over his soul but the condescension of man to God. But free will is a myth. Man has no free will. He is the slave of sin, and only in Christ is he delivered from that slavery. Man’s political life is either subject to God or subject to sin, either obedient or disobedient. There is no neutrality, no autonomy. In all that man does, in politics and every other sphere, he either lives redemptively in subjection to God’s will or idolises some aspect of the created order, thereby bringing upon himself the judgement of God (Rom. 1:18-32). Religious neutrality in politics or any other sphere of life is impossible.

It is my conviction that the concept of sphere sovereignty as outlined above provides the necessary corrective to both of these errors while at the same time preserving man’s legitimate freedom under God and the Christian faith as a public truth that addresses the whole life of man, including the political sphere. The question that remains to be answered now is this: Is this concept of sphere sovereignty biblical?

## §2

### *The biblical basis of sphere sovereignty*

Of course, the Bible does not use the term “sphere sovereignty,” nor does it set forth this concept systematically in the way that I have tried to do above. But then it does not systematically set forth the doctrine of the Trinity and many other important doc-

trines of the faith in the way that systematic theologians explain them. The Bible is not a systematic philosophical or theological treatise in the modern sense. It does, however, set down the concept of sphere sovereignty implicitly. That is to say, it lays down abiding principles along with examples of how those principles operate from which the concept of sphere sovereignty is derived.

First, the Bible clearly defines the role of the State or magistrate.<sup>14</sup> Many texts and arguments based on these texts could be cited to demonstrate this,<sup>15</sup> but the most succinct and clear of these statements about the function of the State as a ministry of public justice is Rom. 13:1-7. This text is the *locus classicus* of the Christian concept of civil government. Paul says that the magistrate is "ordained of God" (v. 1) and "a minister [i.e. a servant, *διάκονός*] of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister [servant, *διάκονός*] of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil" (v. 4). The magistrate's function is here defined negatively; that is to say, he is required to punish evildoing, not enforce the doing of good. His function is to bring to justice and punish those who commit crimes. And in doing this the magistrate is the *servant of God*, i.e. he is God's vicegerent, one who represents God in the administration of public justice. In order to drive his point home Paul repeats himself, saying this time that magistrates are God's "public servants,"

<sup>14</sup> See Appendix B, "The Function of the State in Abraham Kuyper's Doctrine of Sphere Sovereignty."

<sup>15</sup> See for example the following texts, which demonstrate that civil government (including kingship) in Israel was an institution defined by the administration of justice (judgement) according to God's law: Ex. 18:13-27; Dt. 1:13-17; 16:18-20; 1 Sam. 8:4-5; 2 Sam. 8:15; 1 Kings 3:7-9 cf. 2 Chron. 1:8-10; 2 Chron. 19:5-11; Ezra 7:25-26; Ps. 1:10; 72:1-2; 82:1-4; Is. 1:10 cf. 17; Mic. 3:11. Furthermore, the law regulating kingship in Dt. 17:16-17 severely limits the ability of the king to amass the kind of power and wealth necessary to establish totalitarian government, and 1 Kings 21:1-24 (cf. Lev. 15:23-28; Ezek. 46:18; Num. 36:7) demonstrates that the king had no right of eminent domain,—i.e. sovereignty over all land and property in the State with the right of expropriation—which was the basis of mediaeval feudalism and still remains a basic doctrine of modern humanist and especially socialist political ideology.

attending continually to this very thing, namely, the administration of justice. It is, says Paul, for *this* purpose, i.e. the administration of public justice, that we pay taxes: "For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers [i.e. public servants, *leitourγοι*], attending continually upon this very thing" (v. 6). The phrase "attending continually upon this very thing" refers to the function of the magistrate as defined in v. 4, namely, the execution of God's wrath upon those who do evil.<sup>16</sup> The words Paul uses, *αὐτὸ τοῦτο*, mean "just this (and nothing else)."<sup>17</sup> In other words the magistrate is a public servant of God whose function is the administration of justice as defined by God's word, and nothing else. He is not a minister of education, welfare or anything else. It is for *this* cause, and this cause *alone*, i.e. the administration of justice, that we pay taxes.

This severely limits the jurisdiction of the State to matters of public justice. But who is to determine what justice requires? Where is the magistrate, the public servant of God, to look for wisdom in determining matters of justice? To the will of the people? To secular humanism, which denies the God he is called to serve? Is the magistrate really to ignore the will of the one in whose service he is employed? Of course not. The magistrate is to consult God's word for the principles of justice that are to guide his actions and judgements. As God's servant his administration of justice must conform to the divine wisdom revealed in Scripture (Pr. 8:15-16). The Scriptures teach that God's law is to guide the nations in judgement (Lev. 18:1-5; Dt. 17:18-20; Is. 2:2-4; 43:15 etc.). The Christian must affirm, therefore, that the canon of Scripture defines justice and delineates those issues of justice over which the magistrate has jurisdiction.

There are of course many significant discontinuities between the old covenant and the new covenant as a result of the finished work of Christ, some of which have important political conse-

<sup>16</sup> On Rom. 13:6 see further Appendix A.

<sup>17</sup> F. Blass and A. Debrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (Chicago, 1961) state that "Paul frequently has *αὐτὸ τοῦτο* 'just this (and nothing else)'" (cited in L. Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans/Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988], p. 466).

quences. For example, under the Mosaic economy false prophesy was a capital offence (Dt. 13:1-5<sup>18</sup>). Since the coming of Christ, however, God no longer reveals his will to the nation through prophets (Heb. 1:1-2). This does not mean that the church no longer has a prophetic role in forthtelling and applying the revealed word of God. But the office of prophet as exercised under the old covenant, i.e. the office of one who reveals God's word, has gone, since this was typological of Christ as the one who reveals God to Man (Jn 1:14; 14:9).<sup>19</sup> Under the old covenant the people were commanded to listen to and obey the word of the prophets whom God sent to the nation as his mouthpiece. Now, under the new covenant, we are to look to the canon of Scripture as the *complete* revelation of God's will. Since the old covenant function of the prophet as God's mouthpiece has been superseded by the completed canon of Scripture the crime of false prophesy is no longer relevant or applicable. Therefore, whereas under the old covenant the magistrate was duty bound to enforce Dt. 13:1-5, under the new covenant this law is no longer enforceable by the magistrate. However, the obsolescence of this law is the result of a change brought about in *principle* by the coming of Christ and the inauguration of the new covenant, which brought the canon of Scripture to completion (Heb. 1:1-2). Unless the laws of the Old Testament are affected by such changes, either in principle, as with the sacrificial laws and Dt. 13:1-5, or specifically annulled by subsequent revelation, e.g. the dietary laws of the Mosaic economy (Mk. 7:19; Acts 10:9-15; Col. 2:16-17), the moral principle or equity of Old Testament law remains binding. Where the magistrate is required to exercise his authority under the judicial law of the Old Testament, therefore, and such law has not been rendered obsolete or the magistrate's role in enforcing it altered by subsequent revelation, the modern State is morally obligated to act in accordance with the equity of such law. In using Scripture to define justice and delineate those issues of justice over which the State has jurisdiction,

<sup>18</sup> On Dt. 13:6-18 see the discussion at note 2 on p. 176.

<sup>19</sup> See note 47 on p. 56f.

therefore, the full scope of biblical revelation must be taken into account and both the discontinuities and the continuities between the covenants observed carefully in their historical context. Only when this has been done can it be said that a particular political theory is biblical, i.e. based on the teachings of the *whole* of Scripture, and therefore a *Christian* political theory.

Likewise, the Bible clearly defines the function of the institutional church and its legitimate sphere of authority (Eph. 4:11-12; Mt. 18:15-20; Rom. 14; 1 Cor. 5:1-5). The church is not given authority over the State or the family; it may not usurp the authority of either, just as they in turn may not usurp the authority of the church.<sup>20</sup> The role of the church is the ministry of the word of God (1 Tim. 5:17), administration of the signs of the covenant (1 Cor. 11:20-22), diaconal ministry (Acts 6:1-6), and maintenance of discipline among church members in terms of morals and doctrine (1 Cor. 5:1-5; Tit. 1:10-11).<sup>21</sup> The same holds for the family. The Bible clearly defines the functions and role of the family (Eph. 5:22 to 6:9; 1 Tim. 5:4, 8). The family may not usurp the role and authority of the State or the church. The family does not bear the sword in disciplining its members—though it must use corporal punishment on erring children (Pr. 13:24; 22:15; 23:13-14). Nor can the family excommunicate its members from the visible church. These roles are for the State and the church respectively. The jurisdiction of the family does not extend this far. But neither does the provision of education and welfare fall upon the State, or even upon the church as a normal means of provision.

In all these spheres, therefore, we find that the Bible gives

<sup>20</sup> The Bible does teach that where the family cannot provide welfare for its own members the church has a role in such provision (James 1:27; 2:15-17 cf. 1 Tim. 5:8). In providing welfare for the poor, however, the church may not usurp the role of the family. The aim of such welfare is to support and preserve the family in its proper role, not to encourage the abdication of this role to welfare agencies. The same holds for provision of education in certain circumstances. For a more detailed discussion of this see Stephen C. Perks, *The Christian Philosophy of Education Explained*, p. 117f.

<sup>21</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the role and jurisdiction of the church see S. C. Perks, *The Nature, Government and Function of the Church: A Reassessment*.

guidance and precept regarding the roles of each and the limits of their authority. Of course, these spheres are not isolated from each other. There is a necessary and inevitable interaction between the spheres. But nowhere does the Bible subordinate one institution or sphere to the others. Each sphere has a specific role and authority. This concept of sphere sovereignty is the model of social order that the Bible itself sets forth.

Second, although these spheres or institutions are clearly defined and differentiated in the Bible, and the authority of each limited in regard to the others, very clearly all the spheres are seen as equally under God and under the authority of his word. None of these spheres are seen as religiously neutral. In all spheres men are responsible to God for their actions and must order their life by the light of his word. The State does not administer justice according to some neutral idea of "natural law" that is independent of God's revealed will for mankind. On the contrary, the magistrate is called a servant of God (Rom. 13:4, 6) and expected to kiss the Son, i.e. do homage to Christ and obey his law (Ps. 2:12). His authority comes from the word of God, and he is duty-bound to conform to the requirements of that word in all things. His role is not seen as independent of God's revealed will or religiously neutral. Likewise, the family must live in subjection to God's word. The Bible does not give us a picture of the family as an institution that may follow a religiously neutral pattern of life. Parents are to raise their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord (Eph. 6:4 cf. Dt. 6:1-7). In all spheres and areas of life man is to live in subjection to Christ. And God commands all men everywhere to repent (Acts 17:30). No person or institution is religiously autonomous. In each sphere of life, therefore, man must live *redemptively*, i.e. he must work out the implications of his salvation and live out the Christian faith.

To sum up: the Bible sees the office of the magistrate, or the State, as a God-ordained institution. The magistrate is a servant of God who must administer justice strictly in accordance with God's revealed will. The authority of the civil government is

restricted to a limited sphere and it may levy taxes only for the purpose of fulfilling its proper function in society. It is, therefore, a religious institution, not a secular institution. But its function is clearly distinguished from that of the church and the family.



## THE ESTABLISHMENT PRINCIPLE

THE question we must now consider is whether this concept of sphere sovereignty permits or necessitates the establishment of the Christian church and whether such an establishment of the church is biblical. Furthermore, if it is accepted that the establishment *principle* is necessary and biblical, we must then ask in what *form* it is to be practised, since it by no means follows that because the establishment of the church is necessary and biblical, therefore *any* form in which this principle is enshrined is justified, or that the *historical* forms of establishment that have existed are entirely biblical and without need of modification.

It is my belief that the establishment principle is indeed biblical and both justified and necessitated by the concept of sphere sovereignty, but that the forms in which this principle has been practised historically have not always been entirely biblical and therefore without need of modification. For example, the form in which the church has been established in Protestant Britain since the Restoration of the monarchy in the seventeenth century has been narrowly denominational; i.e. it has been not so much establishment of the *church* as establishment of *episcopacy*. This has meant that episcopalianism has remained an abiding part of the constitution, but due to the apostasy of the bishops and the church authorities generally, the witness of the Church of England to the Christian faith has declined drastically, often resulting in beliefs and practices in the church that can hardly be called Christian in terms of any biblical or historical understanding of the word.<sup>1</sup> This denominational form of the establishment prin-

<sup>1</sup>The promotion of socialism by the church is a good example. Socialism is a social ethic based on envy and the claim to eminent domain by the State, a

principle, therefore, has proved inadequate, in that a mere form of church government has been prioritised over the confession of the church, which has often been relegated to a historical curiosity. Rather than the establishment of a particular denomination, therefore, the church should be established *confessionally*. This would mean that a confessional definition of the Christian faith would be embodied in constitutional law and all individual churches whose own confessions came within the boundaries of this constitutional definition would be part of the established church.

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prerogative that Scripture insists belongs to God alone. The establishment of the socialist State can be achieved only by the perversion of justice, i.e. the legitimisation of theft by the State, the very institution that is charged with enforcing the Eighth Commandment. The Church of England has aided and abetted this abolition of the Eighth Commandment as applied to the State both officially and unofficially. For example, in *Bias to the Poor* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), Bishop David Sheppard argued that justice should be biased to the poor, despite the fact that Scripture specifically forbids those in office to exercise such a bias (Ex. 23:3; Lev. 19:15). Sheppard acknowledged that such a bias involves more than a recognition of the biblical injunction that the wealthy should help and care for the genuinely poor. Such a bias must be built into social structures. Says Sheppard, "The call for justice jars on many ears. To those who broadly believed the status quo to be a just one it seems more wounding than the demand for charity or welfare . . . But I want to press the points about justice and about more equal opportunities for all to make real choices about their destiny. That will mean the shift of power and resources" (p. 15). Of course, any *shift of resources*—i.e. redistribution of wealth from one class to another in society—that is not the result of voluntary decisions on the part of those from whom the resources are distributed, whether through trade or charity, in other words any shift of resources that is achieved by force, is called theft in the Bible, even when such force is exercised by the State (cf. Lev. 25:23; Num. 36:7; and Ezek. 46:18 with 1 Kings 21:1-19). Such theft is not excused by the needs of the thief (Pr. 6:30-31); though neither does this fact relieve the wealthy of their responsibility to help the poor (Pr. 22:9; Lk. 14:13-14 etc.). Along with this kind of thinking it is often claimed that crime is caused by poverty. As a result the guilt for increasing crime in society is imputed not to those who commit the crimes but to a society that fails to maintain *economic* equality (See also the discussion at note 3 on p. 29). Such thinking flatly contradicts not only Scripture but history as well. These ideas have arisen and gained popularity in tandem with socialist ideology. The acceptance by bishops and clergy of homosexual practices as a legitimate expression of human sexuality is another example of the role that the church has played in the ethical revolution that has overturned the Christian social order in twentieth century Britain. Other examples are the ordination of priestesses and the promotion of a "green" political agenda, both of which in principle contra-

Moreover, the form of church establishment practised in modern Britain is Erastian; i.e. it is a denominational church that is subject to the jurisdiction of the civil government. The monarch rules as head of the church as well as head of State, although, as with all theoretical powers of the modern monarchy, actual power is devolved upon the chief ministers of the State, who are usually elected. This particular form of established church, therefore, does contradict the concept of sphere sovereignty outlined above, since it gives the magistrate or civil government the right and power to determine matters of church policy that are strictly within the sphere of the church, i.e. the ministry of God's word, not the sphere of public justice. As a result the separation of powers is compromised. Nor was the denominational form of church establishment confined to the Church of England under episcopal rule. Both Presbyterians in Britain and Congregationalists in New England attempted to secure the power and authority of the civil government to enforce their ecclesial systems, their denominations, as the sole legitimate form of church government, existing by "divine right."<sup>2</sup> Only for a brief period under Oliver Cromwell's protectorate in the mid-seventeenth century did the Church of England practise a more enlightened ideal of ecclesiastical establishment—a kind of Protestant ecumenical State church<sup>3</sup>—but this was brought to an abrupt end with the failure of Richard Cromwell's protectorate and the Restoration of the king, and with this the restoration of the episcopal establishment.

Many have reacted to this form of established church by arguing for the abolition of the establishment principle alto-

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dict the specific teachings of Scripture (1 Tim. 2:11-12; Gen. 1:28).

<sup>2</sup> See for example *Jus Divinum Regiminis Ecclesiastici*, a Presbyterian treatise on ecclesial government published in 1646 (republished by Naphtali Press, Dallas, Texas in 1995 in a revised and edited version).

<sup>3</sup> See The Instrument of Government, 1653, articles XXXV to XXXVII, in S. R. Gardiner, *The Constitutional Documents of the Puritan Revolution 1625-1660* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, [1889] 1979), p. 416. See also Peter Toon, *Puritans and Calvinism* (Swengel, Pennsylvania: Reiner Publications, 1973), Chapter III, pp. 62ff.; *idem*, *God's Statesman: The Life and Work of John Owen* (Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1971), p. 90ff.

gether. But this would be to throw out the baby with the bath water. The fact that the form of establishment practised in the past has been less than perfect and indeed even abusive at times does not mean that establishment of the church in *principle* is an error or abusive. Furthermore, just because the *powers* and *authority* of church and State are clearly distinguished we are not to imagine that there is therefore a separation of church and State. On the contrary. The magistrate must pursue his vocation as a servant of God, under the discipline of his word, and this of necessity means that in a Christian society the office of magistrate may only be filled by a Christian, i.e. someone in communion with Christ's visible, institutional church. How can a nation ensure that its magistrates are indeed servants of God if there is no means of enforcing the discipline that would guard the Christian nature of their office? Without some means of enforcing the criteria necessary to guard the magistracy as a Christian office the way would be open for anyone to assume office no matter how liberal his beliefs and morals were. And once this happens the legislation passed and enforced by those in authority will increasingly reflect the atheistic and immoral world-view of the non-Christian. In fact, this is precisely what has happened in Britain under the inadequate establishment of the church in a denominational institution that increasingly sits loose to morals and doctrine. Perhaps this is a fitting judgement on the British church's infatuation with sectarianism, its idolatry of secondary denominational issues and its near total neglect of the weightier matters of God's word. Nevertheless, this is not the biblical ideal. The Christian nature of the magistracy should be preserved.

The Bible itself bears out this fact. The Torah stipulates that a foreigner may not rule over Israel (Dt. 17:15). Moreover, the king is commanded to read and meditate upon the law of God "all the days of his life: that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them" (Dt. 17:19). The concern that no foreigner should rule over Israel was not a xenophobic ideal. The Bible is insistent that foreigners are to be treated equally with Israelites under the law

(Ex. 12:49). But the nations surrounding Israel were pagan nations and Israel was commanded not to assimilate with them or imitate their ways. The rulers of Israel were to be God-fearing men who respected and obeyed the law of God. Once immigrant families had culturally assimilated into Israel and abandoned their pagan religion the office of magistrate was open to them, as is clear from Dt. 23:3-4, 7-8 and the fact that King David was descended from a Moabitess (Ruth 4:17). The Bible's concern is with ethics not ethnic purity, and the criteria for membership of Israel was covenantal not racial. In banning foreign rulers, therefore, the purpose of the law was to ban *non-believing* rulers. Of course, this in itself did not guarantee obedient rulers, as the history of Israel clearly shows. But it did afford some preservation of cultural and therefore religious continuity, and an appreciation for and understanding of the religious calling of the nation.

This principle holds for Christian nations also. If a nation is to have a Christian magistracy this must be safeguarded by the fact that the magistrate is a member in good standing of the State church. But this in turn requires that the Christian faith should be defined in law. All churches that conformed to this definition would be considered part of the established church, i.e. the church established in law. The Christian nature of the magistracy would thus be preserved by the requirement that officers of State should be members of the established church. This, indeed, would not be the *only* qualification for office, but it would be an indispensable one. If only those who are Christians may hold the magisterial office the constitution must have a competent definition established in law of what Christian belief is, just as Israel had its belief system set down in the covenant law.

Such a legal definition of the Christian religion must clearly set down what it means to profess faith in Christ. But it cannot tie this profession to a particular denomination without unchurching those who hold to different denominational ideals while at the same time maintaining an orthodox Christian profession. This means that the national or State church must be defined, i.e. established, in law *confessionally*, not denomination-

ally. Under this type of establishment, therefore, the State church might possibly include various different Christian denominations. The criteria for establishment would not be a particular form of ecclesial government, nor could it be biblically, since the Bible does not give us the criteria on which to establish such a denominational definition of the church.<sup>4</sup> But it does give us the criteria on which to base a confessional definition of the Christian church. In practice, therefore, this would mean that all Christian denominations that fell within this definition confessionally would constitute the national church.

This form of establishment, however, would not be a mere establishment of the Christian faith, but an establishment of the institutional *church*. Some have argued for establishment of the Christian *faith* without establishment of the church. But this is impossible, since without a clearly defined church of which officers of State were required to be members in good standing there could be no effective means of enforcing Christian discipline in the civil government without compromising the concept of sphere sovereignty. If there were no remedy against apostasy from the faith by the magistrate through church discipline, which would automatically disqualify an apostate from office, establishment of the faith would mean nothing. Establishment of the church, therefore, is necessary to secure discipline in terms of orthodox Christian belief. The disciplining of officers of State for apostasy would not be carried out by the State, since this would compromise the doctrine of sphere sovereignty, but by the established church of which they were members. Such discipline by the church, however, would *ipso facto* disqualify apostates from holding office in the State. In this way both sphere sovereignty and orthodox Christian belief as a qualification for office are

<sup>4</sup>Although Scripture sets down various basic principles that are to guide the church in the way that it should be governed, there is no definitive denominational structure as such set forth. Indeed, the basic and essential principles of church government given in Scripture can be practised, and have been practised at various times, by all the main Protestant churches. For more on this point see Stephen C. Perks, *The Nature, Government and Function of the Church: A Reassessment*.

maintained. The State punishes no one for apostasy from the faith, including officers of the State itself, unless he has committed a crime, in which case the State acts to punish him for his crime, not for his apostasy. But the church does discipline its members for apostasy from the faith, both in terms of morals and belief, and only those members in good standing of the established church would be permitted to hold office. This system, therefore, protects both church and State from the illegitimate and tyrannical invasion of each other's God-ordained spheres of responsibility while at the same time preserving their functions as servants of God acting in obedience to his revealed will and applying his law within their limited jurisdictions.

Moreover, with a representative form of civil government such as the British parliamentary system, those with the franchise have ultimate power to determine *who* should rule. In a sense, therefore, the State is inseparable from those who exercise the franchise. This means that suffrage also would be limited to those who are members of the established church.<sup>5</sup> Again, this would not be the only qualification, but it would be an essential one.

But what of those individuals, religious organisations and churches that fell outside this confessionally defined and constitutionally established church? Would they be forced to conform or be punished or banned? Certainly not. Such would be free to pursue their belief systems in accordance with the dictates of their conscience in private *and* in public, except where such practices are against the law of the land and therefore constitute

<sup>5</sup> The reader should understand that I am here dealing with a system, an ideal type, not the situation we currently have in Britain. I am not under the mistaken impression that this ideal system could be established in contemporary Britain except by the providential will of God through the conversion of the nation to the Christian faith. Nor am I advocating that it should be imposed upon the nation. What I am attempting to set forth is a consistent understanding of principles, i.e. a paradigm for a Christian nation in covenant with God, most assuredly for which Christians must work, in the first instance by preaching the gospel, not by means of political reform, which under present circumstances will have a much more modest, though certainly no less important, set of goals, e.g. abolition of the abortion law, prevention of euthanasia and the dismantling of the socialist State that was created in Britain during the twentieth century.

crimes, in which case the civil government would be duty-bound to take action to extirpate such practices and punish those involved in them. The State exists to maintain order in society by enforcing the law and punishing criminals. It is required to apprehend and prosecute those who break the law, regardless of whether the crimes they have committed are motivated by religious conviction. In a Christian nation under Christian law crime is defined by God's word. The magistrate's mandate to enforce the law does not permit him to discriminate between those whose crimes are motivated by religious convictions and those whose crimes are motivated by other causes. Murder is forbidden whether it is motivated by greed and envy or by religious convictions.

Nevertheless, the magistrate's administration of justice is not neutral with regard to religion. Such a State is not a secular State. The notion of justice is always informed by religious convictions based on one's understanding of the ultimate meaning and purpose of life. The Christian concept of justice, which has been at the foundation of the British legal system for over a millennium, is not the same as the Muslim, Hindu or secular humanist concepts of justice. The State's legitimate sphere of authority is public justice; but in this it must have continual respect to God's law as that which defines justice. There can be no neutrality here. The magistrate must kiss the Son and do homage. Like the kings of Israel he must read and study the law of God so that his actions and judgements might conform at all points to the standards of righteousness (justice) revealed in that law. The wisdom that is to guide and inform the magistrate's judgments is the wisdom of God revealed in Scripture and personified, incarnated, in Jesus Christ, its author.

Although the establishment principle should be enshrined in the constitution of a Christian nation, therefore, this does not mean that any particular form in which this principle has been practised historically will satisfy the biblical requirements. On the contrary, the practice of the establishment principle in Britain, for example, needs to be modified and refined according to



biblical ideals and principles. The State should not control the church or have ultimate power in the church, just as the kings of Israel were not high priests. Therefore headship of church and State should not be united in one office, the monarchy, nor the powers and authority of such headship respecting the church devolved to ministers of State, as is currently the case in Britain with the Church of England, without compromising the sphere sovereignty of the church. The *powers* and *authority* of both spheres are to be separated. But this does not mean that church and State are to be separated, that there is to be no institutional link between these vitally important spheres, no established church. In Israel the king was required to obey God's law and put his faith in God. This did not give him priestly authority. Likewise, priestly authority did not confer magisterial rule. But both priests and kings were subject to God's law and were required to carry out their duties in conformity with God's will as revealed in that law. This separation of powers and authority, however, did not mean that there was no established church in Israel. The religious cultus of the Temple in Israel was an established institution, part of the constitutional law of the nation. Likewise in Christian nations with the Christian church. The *powers* and *authority* of State and church must be separated, but the church nevertheless must be established. Church and State are not separated, but their powers and jurisdictions are separated.

Moreover, in Israel the Levites acted as advisers to the king and the magistrates in matters pertaining to justice, so that in difficult cases where the correct judgment according to God's law was difficult to determine the king or his magistrates could take advice from the Levites, who were experts in the law (Dt. 17:8-11, 18; 1 Chron. 23:4; 26:29-32 cf. 2 Chron. 19:8-11). This does not mean that the distinction between church and State was blurred. The Levites acted as advisers to the judges on matters of the correct interpretation of God's law. Their authority in this capacity was the authority of those who are charged with the ministry of God's word, not the prosecution and punishment of

criminals. Because God's law must be applied by the magistrates, those whose calling was the interpretation and exposition of that law, the Levites, were to be available to give advice about the correct meaning and purpose of the law. This did not compromise sphere sovereignty, therefore. But it did strengthen the inseparability of church and State. The Levites did not usurp the power and authority of the magistrate, but provided a service within their legitimate sphere of authority, namely ministry of the word. This interpretation of the function of the Levites in the courts is borne out by Josephus, who recounts the law of Moses on this matter as follows:

Let there be seven men to judge in each city, and these such as have been before most zealous in the exercise of virtue and righteousness. Let every judge have two officers allotted him out of the tribe of Levi . . . But if these judges be unable to give a just sentence about the causes that come before them, (which case is not unfrequent in human affairs,) let them send the causes undetermined to the holy city, and there let the high priest, the prophet, and the sanhedrin, determine as it shall seem good to them.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, "Josephus confirms the fact that Israel's history was marked by this fact, i.e., that *the court is a religious establishment*. The presence of the priests or Levites did not mean a confusion of church and state: it meant rather the total permeation of church and state, as well as every other institution, by the authority of God's word. The Levites in question were experts in God's law, *lawyers*. The frequent reference to lawyers in the New Testament was precisely to these experts who were members of the court."<sup>7</sup>

Here we find an interesting parallel in the British constitutional establishment of the church. The Lords spiritual, who sit in the House of Lords, are bishops and archbishops. Such a presence of representatives of the church in the House of Lords is in principle justified by this biblical model. The contribution of the

<sup>6</sup>Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* (translated by William Whiston), Bk. IV, Ch. viii, §14.

<sup>7</sup>R. J. Rushdoony, *The Institutes of Biblical Law* (The Craig Press, 1973), p. 617f.

learned men of the church to the development of the English common law system was a significant one. Indeed, many of the first common law judges and chancellors were clerics whose influence on the English legal system was formative.<sup>8</sup> It is wisdom for any nation to follow the biblical model for social and political organisation.

Nonetheless, the State should not be saddled with the expense of supporting the church financially. The Levites were supported by the tithe not by the State. Neither should the officers of the church be appointed by the State or vice versa. In Britain the State has a veto over the appointment of senior ranking clergy in the Church of England. There is no clear biblical precedent for this.<sup>9</sup> The monarch should be crowned by the representatives of the church, however, following biblical precedent (1 Kings 1:45)—and in this the English constitution has always followed biblical precedent. Church and State, therefore, are not to be separated. They are inseparably linked by constitutional law and both are essential to a Christian social order. But there is a separation of powers and authority, and a mutual respecting of each other's sphere sovereignty.

<sup>8</sup> See Stephen C. Perks, *Christianity and Law: An Enquiry into the Influence of Christianity on the Development of English Common Law*, p. 51ff.

<sup>9</sup> According to Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1961), p. 376f., the priests of Israel were civil servants appointed by the king, but his only reference for this, 1 Kings 2:27 and 35, is not convincing (Bullinger took a similar position to that de Vaux on this point [*The Decades of Henry Bullinger*, Second Decade, Sixth Sermon]). The incident referred to is exceptional and prompted by an unsuccessful political *coup d'état*. There is no mandate for such a practice in the law nor any subsequent revelation from the prophets. It is not consistent with the witness of Scripture, therefore, to see this incident as the outworking of God's prescriptive will. It was, however, the providential fulfilment of a prophecy regarding the house of Eli (1 Sam. 2:27-36).

## CONCLUSION TO PART TWO

IN seeking to develop a biblical doctrine of the State that can be applied in the new covenant administration of the gospel we must be careful to observe and assimilate all the relevant biblical material. An appeal to the New Testament alone cannot provide all the necessary material to construct a biblical doctrine of the State, any more than an appeal to the Old Testament alone can do so. The whole of Scripture must be searched and all relevant teaching must be considered and assimilated. The model of the church-State relationship set forth above is, I believe, the only model that will do full justice to the teaching of Scripture in both Old and New Testaments. Sphere sovereignty is preserved in this model but church and State are not separated. The powers and authority of each sphere are distinguished and preserved in their particular jurisdictions. Thus, separation of church and State, which is not a biblical idea, is not confused with the separation of powers and authority, or differentiation of respective jurisdictions, which is a biblical ideal. Under this model the State does not engage directly in preaching the gospel or enforcing Christian belief and worship. But it does support the Christian religion and therefore the church *indirectly* by instituting a Christian political order, which is of inestimable benefit to church and society. It does this by preserving law and order according to biblical principles of justice. The fact that the magistrate is not called to preach the gospel or enforce Christian belief and worship in society does not mean that he must not have respect to the word of God as this applies to the proper sphere of his work. On the contrary, as a servant of God he is called to kiss the Son and do homage, and therefore his actions and judgements must conform

in all respects to the revealed will of Christ, whose jurisdiction over human life and society is total. The political sphere is not a religiously neutral sphere.

A Christian society is founded on four essential ideals: the Christian church, the Christian family, the Christian State and a strong Christian ethic of individual liberty. These are the four pillars upon which a Christian society rests. All four are essential to a healthy society, and they are all *equally* essential. A church-centred society is not the Christian ideal; neither is a libertarian or a patriarchal society, certainly not a totalitarian society. The Christian ideal requires all four principles: a vital church, a just State, a strong ethic of family life, and individual liberty, all operating within the parameters and boundaries and observing the proper limitations of authority set down for these institutions in Scripture. It is this ideal of Christian society that the concept of sphere sovereignty upholds. The demise of one of these institutions means, ultimately, the end of the Christian social order. All of these vital institutions must be restored in society if we are to save the nation from ruin. One must not be stressed to the exclusion of the others, and none may take precedence over the others.

Finally, I think it is necessary to reiterate several important points before drawing this essay to a close: first, in the Christian model of civil government set forth above it is no part of the Christian magistrate's commission to persecute those who stand outside the established church in their religious convictions. The purpose of the establishment principle is not to provide the magistrate or the church with a rationale for persecuting dissenters or extirpating heresy by the use of force. Such does not fall within the magistrate's jurisdiction and is a compromise of the principle sphere sovereignty. The purpose of the establishment principle is to maintain Christian discipline in the civil government itself, and therefore to ensure that the administration of public justice in society is carried out in accordance with the highest ideals of justice revealed in God's law. In other words, the purpose of the establishment principle is to protect society from spiritual and

moral corruption in the civil government, not to protect the Christian church or provide her with a subtle means of persecuting non-believers or dissenters.

Second, it is the calling of the magistrate to maintain public law and order. But the law and the social order that is protected by this law must be defined by Scripture. When it is so defined by Scripture it will be seen that the jurisdiction of the magistrate is a limited one. The suppression of non-Christian religious convictions and practices will only occur when such practices constitute crimes for which the magistrate is obligated to provide a remedy in God's law. Perhaps the issue that has most exercised the spirits of liberal-minded people in this respect is the blasphemy law in Scripture (Lev. 24:10-16). Here also, however, the principle holds good: the State may not punish blasphemy unless such blasphemy constitutes a crime. Abraham Kuyper expressed the meaning of this law well:

And as regards blasphemy, the *right* of the magistrate to restrain it rests in the God-consciousness innate in every man; and the *duty* to exercise this right flows from the fact that God is the Supreme and Sovereign Ruler over every State and over every nation. But for this very reason the fact of blasphemy is only then to be deemed established, when the intention is apparent contumaciously to affront this majesty of God as *Supreme Ruler of the State*. What is then punished is not the religious offence, nor the impious sentiment, but the attack upon the foundation of public law, upon which both the State and its government are resting.<sup>1</sup>

What this means is that in a Christian society based on a Christian political order blasphemy may constitute *treason*, since God is the "Supreme Ruler of the State."<sup>2</sup> Treason, it must not be forgotten, has in all societies been considered one of the most

<sup>1</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, [1931] 1976, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> The laws of Dt. 13:6-18 requiring capital punishment for Israelites who seduce other Israelites to apostatise and serve foreign gods are of the same nature as the blasphemy law of Lev. 24:10-16—i.e. they are laws against *treason*, not merely laws against false worship—and are to be understood in the same way.

serious of crimes, and has usually been a capital offence. It is incorrect to say that the death sentence has been abolished in modern Britain. The death sentence is still available as the maximum penalty for treason. It has been abolished for all crimes except treason. In this the British State is no less harsh, and probably more harsh, than a Christian State that punishes such blasphemy as Kuyper describes. However, the biblical offence of blasphemy, for which capital punishment is available, is more restricted than this. It is *cursing* God that carries the death sentence in the Bible (vv. 24:11, 14-15 cf. Job 2:9).<sup>3</sup> Certainly, what is in view here is not blasphemy in the sense of profane language or taking God's name in vain (i.e. misuse of God's name, Ex. 20:7). What is in view is a very specific kind of blasphemy. Even then, it must be remembered that there is only one offence in the Bible that carries a *mandatory* death sentence—i.e. murder. The death sentence in all other cases is a *maximum* sentence, not a mandatory sentence (Num. 35:30-31). Thus, the death sentence

<sup>3</sup>The Authorised Version reads: "whosoever curseth (*yqallel*) his God shall bear his sin. And he that blasphemeth (*wenoqeb*) the name of the Lord, he shall surely be put to death" (vv. 15-16). The verbs translated "curseth" (*qalal*) and "blasphemeth" (*naqab*) are used throughout vv. 10 to 16 to define the crime under consideration. However, *naqab*, translated as "blaspheme" in most modern versions also, means "to bore, hollow out, then to sting, metaphorically to separate, fix (Gen. xxx.28), hence to designate (Num. i.17, etc.), and to prick *in malam partem*, to taunt, i.e. *blaspheme, curse*" (C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Old Testament*, Volume II; *The Pentateuch* [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, trans. by James Martin], p. 453). The Jews took this to mean "to name," understanding the verse to say "whoever names (i.e. *uses*) the name of his God . . ." Hence their reluctance to vocalise the divine Tetragrammaton (*yhwh*). In order to be arraigned on a charge of blasphemy carrying the death sentence under Jewish law one had to utter the divine name, which is what Jesus did in John 8:58. When vowel points were eventually added to the Hebrew text of Scripture the vowels of *adonai* ("Lord") were placed around the Tetragrammaton because the Jews always read *adonai* instead of *yhwh* in order to avoid pronouncing the divine name. Christians subsequently read the vowels of *adonai* into the Tetragrammaton and the hybrid "Jehovah" was born. However, the mere use of the name of God is not what is at issue in Lev. 24:10-16 and the Jews here, as so often elsewhere, were wide of the mark (the high priests uttered the divine name on the Day of Atonement anyway since they understood this to be commanded in the Torah). The offence clearly refers to *cursing* God not merely pronouncing the divine name or even using it vainly.

for blasphemy would be available only in the most extreme cases involving the cursing of God. Such a law is no harsher or inhumane than the law of any nation that punishes treason with the death sentence. Such blasphemy would constitute a treasonous attack on the very foundations of the legal order itself. Even then it would be at the discretion of the court to commute this sentence to a lesser form of punishment.

Third, since I am likely to be accused by the prejudiced reader of failing to recognise the limitations imposed upon the Christian community by the predominant humanist culture of our times, I must stress that the Christian theory of the State set out above is an ideal. I do not imagine that this ideal is something that can be established in present circumstances through political action. It must not be understood as being a political agenda or manifesto for Christian activists. Furthermore, I should not wish to see the present form of established church targeted as an object of political reform since this would more likely result in the total abandonment of the establishment principle than its further development and refinement in terms of biblical ideals. Such reform must await an age less characterised by apostasy than the present. This model of the State has been set out over against the principled pluralist position espoused by John Coffey, as principle against principle. I accept the involvement of Christians in the political life of the nation as valid and valuable, indeed vital. But a necessary prerequisite of such reform in the political sphere would be a revival of Christian faith in the nation on a significant scale, and this cannot be achieved by political means—though the development of a Christian political perspective would surely be all part and parcel of such a revival of the faith. Far more urgent and pressing matters must consume the time of Christian activists in the present political climate. The most important issues confronting the Christian politically are repeal of the abortion act, prevention of euthanasia, reform of the criminal law and penal systems, the dismantling of the welfare State that was created during the twentieth century, privatisation of the State educational system, and the revival of economic freedom



(i.e. capitalism) as the national form of economic organisation. Such issues doubtless come before the kind of constitutional reform required by the Christian theory of the State discussed above and constitute present evils that can be addressed immediately. Furthermore, though the present constitutional system is not perfect, it is certainly conducive to the preservation of Christian society if used responsibly. Therefore the priority given to constitutional reform is by no means as high as that given to the substantive moral issues just mentioned as the immediate objects of Christian reform.

## APPENDIX A

### ROMANS 13:6

THE argument set forth above for limiting the State's jurisdiction to the administration of public justice as defined by God's law rests on the teaching and example of Scripture. The most important text supporting this argument is Rom. 13:1-7. Here Paul teaches that the function of the State is strictly the prosecution and punishment of evildoers and that it collects taxes for this purpose alone. However, commentators do not speak with a unanimous voice about the precise meaning of Paul's words in v. 6, which states: "For this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing." The antecedent of "they" is not in dispute, since it can only be the magistrates of whom Paul is speaking. But the "cause" for which tribute is paid and the "very thing" upon which magistrates are said to be continually attending have been subject to differing interpretations. I cannot rest my case, therefore, until my interpretation of this verse has been shown to be exegetically sound. The issue here relates to two points: first, whether the State is authorised by this text to collect taxes, and second, whether this text limits the function of the magistrate in the way that I have argued and therefore restricts the use of taxes for the specific purpose of administering public justice.

First, then, the *cause* for which tribute is paid. The question here is whether the antecedent of "cause" is the function of the magistrate as defined in v. 4, i.e. the maintenance of law and order, or the injunction to submit to the authorities for conscience' sake in v. 5. Commentators are divided about this question. Thus, John Murray writes: "In view of all that is involved

in verse 5 regarding the divine sanction by which the magistrate discharges his functions there is no need to seek any remoter basis for the terms with which verse 6 begins."<sup>1</sup> Ultimately, whether we pay taxes for conscience' sake or in order to support the maintenance of law and order, it comes to the same thing since the reason Christians are duty-bound by conscience to pay taxes is that the State is a God-ordained institution charged with the task of administering public justice. This is precisely what Cranfield argues, although he takes the "cause" to refer to "conscience' sake" in v. 5: "The *διὰ τοῦτο* [on account of this] refers backwards (as, e.g. in 1.26), not forwards (as, e.g. in 4.16). It can be taken as parallel to *διό* [wherefore] in the previous verse, and so referring back to what has been said in vv. 1b-4, or—perhaps rather more probably—as referring back to *διὰ τὴν συνείδησιν* [for conscience' sake]. If *συνείδησις* is to be understood as we have suggested, no substantial difference of meaning is involved."<sup>2</sup>

However, it has been claimed on the basis of the interpretation that makes "conscience' sake" the antecedent of the "cause" of v. 6 that Paul here does not validate the collection of taxes by the State; that is to say, that he commands Christians to pay taxes not because the State has a right to collect taxes but merely for "conscience' sake." Thus, although Christians pay taxes without resisting the magistrate for conscience' sake such taxes are not to be seen as legitimate. All taxes in this perspective, not merely taxes collected for purposes other than those applied to the legitimate function of the magistrate, are seen as theft on the part of the State. In other words, the fact that Paul commands Christians to pay taxes "for conscience' sake" rather than because the State has a right to collect taxes to support the maintenance of law and order is taken as indicating that the Bible does not approve the collection of taxes at all.

<sup>1</sup>John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1965), Vol. II, p. 154.

<sup>2</sup>C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, [1979] 1986), Vol. II, p. 668.

This idea is unsustainable in my opinion. It makes a nonsense of Paul's whole argument and contradicts the teaching of v. 7. Christ told his disciples to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's (Mt. 22:21; Mk 12:17), not those things that are not Caesar's. If the State has no right to collect taxes, therefore, why should Christians have a bad conscience about not paying them? They might pay out of fear, or prudence, for sure, but this would not be for conscience' sake, but rather for convenience' sake, i.e. so that they might avoid being thrown into prison. But a bad conscience is the result of sin, disobedience to God. Therefore taxes are legitimately collected by the State.

However, Paul's words do not give the State permission to collect taxes for *any* cause. He specifies that for which taxes may be collected. It is for "*this* cause," namely maintenance of law and order, that taxes are paid. The whole argument in v, 4 is aimed at defining the legitimate role of the State. He specifies the role for which God has ordained the State, i.e. the prosecution and execution of criminals. If we pay taxes for conscience' sake, it can only be because in conscience we are duty-bound to support the ministry of public justice.

This verse offers no room for an argument against the payment of taxes *per se*. But it does place a limitation on the uses to which those taxes can be applied. Taxes may only be used for the support of the State in its legitimate function. If the cause for which we pay taxes is conscience, the reason we must for conscience' sake pay these taxes is that they support the administration of public justice by the State, which is an institution ordained of God for this very purpose, and therefore entitled to collect taxes for this purpose.

Nevertheless, it is by no means accepted by all commentators that the antecedent of the "cause" is the "for conscience' sake" of v. 5. For example, Godet writes: "The: *for this cause*, does not refer specially to the idea of ver. 5, but to the whole preceding development from ver. 1. The *for* makes the practical consequence (the payment of tribute) the proof of the principle, and the *also* refers to the agreement between the general idea and the

particular fact.”<sup>3</sup> Likewise, Robert Haldane states: “For what cause? Is it on account of conscience or on account of civil government being an appointment of God? The latter is the true answer. The reason why the thing is a matter of conscience is, because government is a Divine appointment. Taxes are to be paid to government for its support, because God has appointed government for the good of society; and this is the argument that is immediately added. *For they are God’s ministers.*”<sup>4</sup> Charles Hodge takes the same position: “This verse may be connected by the words (*διὰ τοῦτο*) rendered *for this cause*, with the preceding, thus ‘Wherefore (*i.e.* for conscience’ sake) ye should pay tribute also.’ But it is better to consider this clause as containing an inference from the foregoing exhibition of the nature and design of civil government.”<sup>5</sup>

However one takes this phrase (*i.e.* “for this cause”) it is clear that the Bible here validates the levying of taxes by the State for its proper function, namely maintenance of law and order. Even if the phrase “for this cause” refers to the “for conscience’ sake” of v. 5, conscience here refers back to the definition of the State as the ministry of public justice in v. 4. Leon Morris sums up the argument well: “Taxes are not just an arbitrary impost. They are the means of carrying on responsible government—the state could not exist without them. It is because the authorities are *God’s servants* and because they *give their full time to government* that taxes must be paid.”<sup>6</sup> This verse, regardless of whether conscience or the function of the magistrate is judged to be the antecedent of “for this cause,” cannot be used to support the notion that the State has no right to collect taxes and therefore that all taxes are illegitimate, *i.e.* tyrannical. But Paul does strictly limit the use to which taxes may be applied. The cause for which

<sup>3</sup>Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 1977), p. 445.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Haldane, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Romans* (Florida: Mac Donald Publishing Company), p. 586.

<sup>5</sup>Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on Romans* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, [1835] 1975), p. 408.

<sup>6</sup>Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans/Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), p. 465f.

taxes are levied is the support of civil government in its proper function, and Paul clearly defines this function as, and limits it to, the execution of God's vengeance upon evildoers, not, for example, provision of education or welfare services, which he elsewhere specifically places within the sphere of family responsibility (1 Tim. 5:8).

Second, we must ask what "this very thing" is upon which the magistrates, as God's servants, are continually attending. Here the disagreement between commentators has more significant implications. According to Murray, "The 'very thing' upon which the rulers are said to attend continually must in this context refer to the taxes. It would not be reasonable to regard the antecedent as the more general function specified in the earlier verses."<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, Murray's interpretation is the position of a minority of commentators. Most commentators who address this issue find nothing whatsoever unreasonable in taking the antecedent to be the function of the magistracy as argued in this essay. Of the same opinion as Murray are Charles Hodge and Leon Morris. Cranfield argues that the antecedent could be one of three possibilities: (i) the public servants of God of v. 6; (ii) the administration of public justice of vv. 3-4 (these two, of course, amount to the same thing); or (iii) the collection of taxes. "It is hard to choose between these" says Cranfield "but possibly the third interpretation should be preferred. The meaning will then be probably that it is as God's servants (and therefore as those whose claim must not be rejected or evaded) that they busy themselves earnestly with this very thing, namely the matter of taxes."<sup>8</sup>

What these four commentators assert is that Paul here teaches that the business upon which the magistrate is continually attending, "this very thing (and no other)" (*αὐτὸ τοῦτο*), is the *collection of taxes*. It would be unreasonable, says Murray, to regard Paul as referring back to the function of the magistrate mentioned in v. 4. But why would it be unreasonable to regard the antecedent as

<sup>7</sup>Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

<sup>8</sup>Cranfield, *op. cit.*, p. 669.

the function of the magistrate defined in v. 4? Murray does not say. Most commentaries I consulted that address this issue do in fact take it to refer precisely to this. Insisting that those who take a different position from one's own are unreasonable without providing a reason for one's own position is hardly to be considered a reasonable argument itself and serves the need for sound exegesis very poorly. I am at a loss to see why these commentators follow this line of argument. It is as if they lose sight completely of what Paul is teaching and focus in on the immediate context to the exclusion of the wider context and therefore the meaning of the passage as a whole. In doing this, however, they make Paul contradict himself. This interpretation states: (1) that the magistrate is ordained of God to punish evildoers, and for this purpose he bears the sword. (2) Therefore, for conscience' sake we must obey the magistrate. (3) Because we are in conscience bound to obey the magistrate (or because he has been given the ministry of public justice—it comes to the same thing) we pay taxes. (4) The reason we pay taxes is because it is the duty of the magistrate to be continually collecting taxes, and nothing else. Here points 1 and 4 are in open conflict; they contradict each other completely.<sup>9</sup> According to point 1 the role of the magistrate is to prosecute evildoers. But point 4 states that the sole duty of the magistrate—"just this (and nothing else)" is the force of Paul's words, as we have seen<sup>10</sup>—is to collect taxes. On what grounds can it be asserted that this is a reasonable interpretation? Is it really more reasonable to insist that Paul contradicts himself so blatantly? This is the dilemma Murray's interpretation creates. Paul says clearly that the function of the magistrate is to punish evil doing (v. 4). He then insists that the magistrates are continually attending upon this very thing, and this alone (v. 6). How can the latter statement be taken as signifying anything other than the function of the magistrate as given in v. 4, i.e. the

<sup>9</sup>Point 4 is also in conflict with point 3 since, as discussed above, the reason we are bound in conscience to obey the magistrate is because he is ordained of God to execute wrath on those who do evil.

<sup>10</sup>See note 17 on p. 158 above.

punishment of evildoers? It is difficult to imagine a more contradictory interpretation than that of Murray, Hodge and Morris. The collection of taxes is a *means* to an end, namely the punishment of evildoers, not the end in itself. But Paul's "attending continually upon this very thing" is precisely the *end itself*, not the means. If the magistrates were continually attending to the collection of taxes and nothing else, this would be the sole purpose of their vocation, not the administration of public justice. The term is exclusive: "this very thing (and nothing else)." Murray's interpretation makes nonsense of the passage and puts the means for the end. However, if the antecedent is taken to be the punishment of evildoers the whole passage makes complete sense. The magistrate is a servant of God ordained to punish evildoers. For this reason we obey him. We could not in good conscience disobey since his calling is divinely-ordained; he serves God by executing the wrath of God upon evildoers. Therefore we pay taxes in order that he may continually give himself to this God-ordained business. But it is "for this cause," upon which the magistrate is "attending continually," i.e. the punishment of evildoers, that such taxes are paid. The phrase "this very thing (and nothing else)" limits not only the function of the magistrate but also the cause for which taxes are paid because the reason taxes are paid is to support the magistracy. That for which taxes are paid is the maintenance of law and order, and that alone. What Murray argues, however, is that Paul says we are to pay taxes because the magistrate's sole function is to collect them. This is absurd. It also contradicts Paul's statement in v. 4. We pay taxes to support the magistrate in his proper vocation, which is given in v. 4 as the maintenance of law and order.

This is not a novel interpretation. Of the nineteen commentaries I consulted only Murray, Hodge, Morris and Cranfield reject this interpretation, and Cranfield seems to be in two minds about it. Furthermore, Murray appends the following comment to his interpretation: "By implication this verse also reflects on the purposes for which taxes are collected and on the uses which



they serve.”<sup>11</sup> It seems as though he recognises the problem with his argument and tries to correct it by adding the obvious antecedent as an “implication.” Seven of the commentaries I consulted manage to comment on v. 6 without addressing this issue (and without actually saying anything much at all). One misses out the verse altogether. The remaining seven adopt the interpretation put forward in this essay. Thus, Meyer states: “*for this very object*, by which is meant not the administration of *tax-paying* (Olshausen, Philippi, and older interpreters), but the just mentioned *λειτουργεῖν τῷ Θεῷ* [to render public service to God] in which vocation, so characteristically *sacred*, the magistracy is continually and assiduously active, and the subject gives to it the means of being so, namely taxes.”<sup>12</sup> Likewise Godet: “*for this very thing*, might depend on the participle *προσκαρτεροῦντες*, *applying themselves to*. But it is more natural to make it depend on the expression *λειτουργοί*: ‘ministers for this very thing’—that is to say, to make justice reign by checking evil and upholding good. Olshausen and Philippi apply the words: *for this very thing*, to the payment of tribute, which would signify that the state is God’s minister to levy tribute, or that it may continually watch on this levying. Neither the one nor the other of these two ideas rises to the height of the notion of the state as it has just been expounded. This appendix: *προσκαρτεροῦντες*, *attending thereto continually*, seems at first glance superfluous; but it is intended to account for the payment of tribute because the magistrates, devoting *their whole time* to the maintenance of public order and the well-being of the citizens, cannot themselves provide for their support, and ought consequently to be maintained at the expense of the nation.”<sup>13</sup> Also Robert Haldane: “‘This very thing,’ then, does not refer to the gathering of taxes. The ‘ministers of God’ are the ‘powers’ of whom the Apostle was treating. The ‘very thing’ to which they constantly attend, is not the collection of

<sup>11</sup> Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 155.

<sup>12</sup> H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Handbook to The Epistle to the Romans* (Winona Lake, IN: Alpha Publications, 1979), p. 493.

<sup>13</sup> Godet, *op. cit.*, p. 445.

taxes, but the ministry of God in the things of government. 'The very thing' must be something either mentioned or necessarily implied in the text. But this can be no other than the ministry of the ministers mentioned. The collecting of taxes, then, is not the very thing to which civil rulers attend. They are called ministers of God, and after this they are said to be attending continually on this very thing. The thing to which they attend is their duty as ministers of God in civil things."<sup>14</sup> C. K. Barret translates the verse "For these men are God's public servants, attending upon the purpose I have described" and adds the comment "that is, of promoting good, and of restraining evil."<sup>15</sup> Sanday and Headlam,<sup>16</sup> C. H. Dodd<sup>17</sup> and Calvin<sup>18</sup> adopt this same interpretation. In addition, James Moffatt translates (or rather paraphrases) vv. 5-6 as follows: "You must be obedient, therefore, not only to avoid the divine vengeance but also as a matter of conscience, for the same reason as you pay taxes—since magistrates are God's officers, bent upon the maintenance of order and authority."<sup>19</sup>

It seems clear from this that the overriding force of logic compels us to insist that the antecedent of "this very thing" upon which the magistrates are continually attending is the administration of public justice, and that the force of Paul's words, *αὐτὸ τοῦτο*, "just this (and nothing else)," limits the function of the magistrate and the use to which taxes may legitimately be applied to the administration of public justice.

<sup>14</sup> Haldane, *op. cit.*, p. 586.

<sup>15</sup> C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1957), p. 247.

<sup>16</sup> William Sanday and Arthur C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, [1895] 1980), p. 368.

<sup>17</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle to the Romans* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited 1932), p. 205.

<sup>18</sup> John Calvin, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1961), p. 283f.

<sup>19</sup> James Moffatt, *A New Translation of the Bible* (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited).

## APPENDIX B

### THE FUNCTION OF THE STATE IN ABRAHAM KUYPER'S DOCTRINE OF SPHERE SOVEREIGNTY

ACCORDING to Abraham Kuyper, "The highest duty of the [civil] government remains therefore unchangeably that of *justice*, and in the second place it has to care for the people as a unit, partly *at home*, in order that its unity may grow ever deeper and may not be disturbed, and partly *abroad*, lest the national existence suffer harm."<sup>1</sup> I agree with this secondary role of civil government only in so far as it is pursued in order to maintain justice, the primary role of civil government. It is not clear that Kuyper so restricted this secondary role of the State. He goes on to assert that the State possesses the right and duty "Whenever different spheres clash, to compel mutual regard for the boundary-lines of each."<sup>2</sup>

This goes beyond what can be argued on the basis of Scripture in my opinion. The Bible does not assign such a role to the State but gives it a simple role of maintaining public justice. Of course, in many cases the maintenance of public justice, looked at from the perspective of sphere sovereignty, is precisely just such a matter of enforcing the boundary lines of each sphere; i.e. the enforcement of justice in such cases results in the preservation of the spheres' legitimate boundary lines. But to assign this *effect* to the State as its proper purpose is a different matter. Not all cases in which the boundary lines between the spheres are compromised necessitate State involvement. Only those cases in which crimes are committed fall within the jurisdiction of the

<sup>1</sup> Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans, [1931] 1976), p. 93. See also the quotation in note 4 below.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

State. Even in some cases involving principles of justice the State may be powerless to act since its remit does not extend to *all* cases of injustice. The Bible limits the jurisdiction of the State more strictly than that. The magistrate's jurisdiction relates to *crime*, i.e. acts of injustice for which judicial penalties are prescribed.

Thus, while I use the basic Kuyperian paradigm of sphere sovereignty I think it needs to be subjected to rigorous definition according to biblical criteria and modified where necessary.<sup>3</sup> As we have seen, not all sins are crimes. In other words, not all immoral actions of men against other men fall within the jurisdiction of the State. For this reason I have defined the role of the magistrate not simply as the ministry of justice but as the ministry of *public* justice, i.e. cases of injustice to which civil penalties are attached. Issues of *public* justice, for which the magistrate is obligated to provide a remedy, constitute, therefore, a more limited category within the wider sphere of justice.

The failure to observe this distinction will result, and has resulted, in a social ethic of "rights" that has serious consequences for the legal system. Positive discrimination laws are a good example. Undoubtedly, from a Christian point of view, racial discrimination in the labour market is immoral, and therefore unjust. But it would be difficult to justify positive discrimination laws biblically. In fact, such laws can only operate by *distorting* public justice, i.e. by creating a form of legally enforced racial discrimination, the very injustice that such legislation is intended to remedy. The same is true of gender discrimination laws. To take another example, a father may unjustly disinherit his children, but the magistrate is powerless to rectify this injustice under God's law. Such disinheritance may be reprehensible morally, but this in itself does not justify the magistrate's taking action against the father. Only God's word can empower the magistrate to act.

The definition of the State as an institution that must "compel mutual regard for the boundary-lines of each" sphere opens

<sup>3</sup> See also note 1 on p. 141 above.

the door for the State to act precisely in such a way that may compromise the concept of sphere sovereignty by giving the State a role that exceeds its biblically defined boundaries. It has been pointed out that "Kuyper did not develop clear criteria for determining when intervention into the economy was necessary or permissible. Consequently, some contemporary Kuyperians advocate large-scale state intervention in order to defend those who cannot care for themselves, despite the fact that Kuyper emphasized the first defense and cultivation of such persons must be undertaken by both the institutional church and individual Christians acting within society."<sup>4</sup> This is why I do not think that in every respect Kuyper himself fully worked out the implications of his concept of sphere sovereignty. Nevertheless, the sphere sovereignty paradigm is a sound one that needs to be developed, refined and applied consistently.

<sup>4</sup>Gregory M. A. Gronbacher, *Economic Personalism: A New Paradigm for a Humane Economy* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Acton Institute, 1998), p. 31. Kuyper was, however, critical of such intervention in the economy by the State. Writing on the jurisdiction of the government he stated: "Or do the authorities overstep their bounds when they create labor or reduce competition, raise wages or shorten the work-week, and in general support manual labour by making it available only under such conditions which ensure that the manual laborer is also respected as a *human being*? We believe it beyond doubt that the government does *not* have this right, at least not in the absolute sense, State and society are not identical. The government is not the only sovereign in the country. Sovereignty exists in distinct spheres, and in each of these smaller circles this sovereignty is bound to primordial arrangements or ordinances that have been created not by the government but by the Creator of heaven and earth. Only in one instance can these sovereign entities tolerate, or even demand, government intervention: when two or more of these spheres collide at their common borders and a great imbalance between their respective powers makes it likely that the more powerful entity would suffer from *hypertrophy* and the other would be inequitably suppressed. To take an example. The point of contact between the sphere of capital and the sphere of manual labour is always a contract—either formally drawn or presupposed. Because the authorities are involved in court cases about contracts, this is the formal point that lies within the reach of government" (A. Kuyper, "Manual Labour" in James D. Bratt, ed., *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* [Eerdmans/Paternoster Press, 1998], p. 241). This clearly demonstrates Kuyper's opposition to socialist economic planning, contrary to the misinformed claim, sometimes heard, that he was a socialist. On Kuyper's critique of socialism see Peter S. Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview: Abraham Kuyper's Lectures on Calvinism* (Eerdmans/Paternoster Press, 1998), p. 152ff.

## APPENDIX C

### HOW EVANGELICALS SHOULDN'T THINK ABOUT POLITICS

[The following article is the full text of John Coffey's essay published in *The Evangelical Quarterly*, Vol. LXIX, No. 1 (January 1997). The original page numbers are given in the margins. This essay is reproduced by kind permission of the publisher, Paternoster Publishing, P. O. Box 300, Kingstown Broadway, Carlisle, Cumbria, CA3 0QS, England.—SCP]

[39]      HOW SHOULD EVANGELICALS THINK ABOUT POLITICS?  
            ROGER WILLIAMS AND THE CASE FOR PRINCIPLED PLURALISM

*by John Coffey*

*Dr Coffey is a graduate of Cambridge University who has recently completed research on the political thought of Samuel Rutherford. In this article he continues his investigations in Puritan political thought.*

#### I

#### *The question posed*

THE most publicised feature of worldwide evangelical Christianity in recent years has been its renewed interest in politics. After decades of apolitical pietism, many evangelicals have reentered [*sic*] the public sphere. Most spectacularly, organisations like the Moral Majority and the Christian Coalition in the United States have mobilised vast numbers of evangelicals to campaign against

abortion, pornography, and often it seems the Democratic party.<sup>1</sup> In Latin America too, evangelicals have played key roles in recent elections in a number of countries.<sup>2</sup> In Guatemala, Zambia, South Korea, and the United States, there have been evangelical presidents.<sup>3</sup> Even in countries like Britain, where evangelicals are a small minority, they have spearheaded a number of new social and political initiatives.<sup>4</sup>

The astonishing numerical expansion of global evangelicalism—particularly in its Pentecostal form—makes it inevitable that this trend will continue. Any movement which numbers around four million adherents worldwide, and in a few countries (such as South Korea, Guatemala, Brazil and the United States) accounts for over twenty per cent of the population, inevitably exercises considerable political clout.<sup>5</sup> However, there have to be severe doubts about the ability of evangelicals to exercise this clout wisely. As Mark Noll has pointed out, in a powerful critique of evangelical anti-intellectualism, evangelicals do not usually “think first before leaping into action.” The traditional characteristics of evangelical politics—activism, populism, biblicism and intuition—are not conducive to political reflection. Yet as Noll demonstrates, if evangelicals are make [*sic*] a positive impact in the political arena, serious reflection is imperative.<sup>6</sup> [40]

<sup>1</sup> See S. Bruce, *The Rise and Fall of the New Christian Right: Conservative Protestant Politics in America, 1978-88* (Oxford, 1988). Bruce's talk of the “fall” of the Christian Right proved to be somewhat premature. The demise of the Moral Majority simply made way for the even more formidable Christian Coalition, which now effectively controls the organisation of the Republican party in many states.

<sup>2</sup> See D. Martin, *Tongues of Fire: the Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford, 1990), ch. 12.

<sup>3</sup> I am thinking of Rios Montt and Jorge Serrano (Guatemala), Frederick Chiluba (Zambia), Kim Young Sam (South Korea), and Jimmy Carter (USA). A comparison of their politics would be most intriguing!

<sup>4</sup> This is well documented in T. Chester, *Awakening to a World of Need: The Recovery of Evangelical Social Concern* (Leicester, 1993).

<sup>5</sup> This information is derived from P. Johnstone, *Operation World* (Carlisle, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> See M. Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Leicester, 1994), ch. 6, and 221-8. Noll's focus is on American Evangelicalism, and the problem he identifies is almost certainly less pronounced in Britain, where the influence of

This paper aims to encourage such reflection by tackling perhaps the most fundamental question faced by Christians who think deeply about politics: namely, is it theologically legitimate for Christianity be [*sic*] a state religion?

This is not merely an academic question; it has great practical implications. In the first place, the answer we give may well affect (or reflect) our attitude towards the issue of religious liberty. Western evangelicals live under states which, if not all secular, are lukewarm about the vigorous promotion of Christianity and decidedly hostile to any discrimination against those of other faiths. For those who support the non-confessional state, of course, this is no problem, but for at least some advocates of the Christian nation it might be. We need to ask if evangelicals are in wholehearted agreement with strong policies of religious liberty and equality, or if they merely acquiesce in them and wish for a more robust and zealous Christian government. Is evangelical support for religious liberty principled and in good faith, or is it grudging and pragmatic? Secondly, the answer we give to the question of religion and the state is important because it helps to determine the type of politics we pursue. Those who believe in the ideal of the Christian nation will probably devote considerable energy to the attempt to promote true religion through political and legal means. They will, for instance, feel an obligation to fight for the explicitly Christian character of state schools, whether by defending school prayer in America or Christian religious education in Britain. Those who reject the idea of the Christian nation, on the other hand, will concentrate their efforts on non-religious issues in public policy. The Christian nation approach is considerably more ambitious, and aims for "take-over," whilst the alternative approach tends to favour "work-with" policy and seeks to develop an overlapping consensus among those of other faiths and none [*sic*] concerning moral, social and political issues.<sup>7</sup> Thirdly, and perhaps most impor-

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Anglican Evangelicals, in particular, has enhanced the intellectual breadth and depth of the movement.

<sup>7</sup> I realise, of course, that any description of the Christian nation position will



tantly, the answer one gives to the question of Christianity and the state will dramatically shape one's vision of the Church. For advocates of the Christian nation, the Church should aim to be at the centre of society, providing its official creed. For their critics, however, the Church is meant to stand at the margins, making a political contribution, but as a counter-cultural community rather than as a state religion.

Both of these approaches have a long pedigree within evangelicalism. Indeed, they reflect one of the most important divisions within the evangelical community, one which stems from the dispute between the magisterial and the radical Reformers. The magisterial Reformation, as the name implies, was built on the Constantinian belief that the conversion of the nations to Christianity was God's providential plan and that Christians should work to maintain or create godly nations and states.<sup>8</sup> Most evangelicals in the last three or four hundred years have agreed with them. Even today—when a substantial majority of evangelicals belong to churches with a greater affinity to the radical Reformation the Constantinian mentality is still predominant.<sup>9</sup> American Baptists, for example, despite their sectarian roots, are often zealous supporters of "Christian America," and thoroughly Constantinian in their outlook.

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arouse protests of caricature. This is because there is no such thing as *the* Christian nation position, but rather a vast spectrum of opinion ranging from the wooliest [*sic*] of liberal Anglicans, whose "Christianity" seems to consist of little more than an admirable concern for the poor and oppressed, to fire-breathing American theocrats who wish to see the reimposition of the judicial laws of Moses! It should be obvious that I am using the term "Christian nation" in a full-blooded sense to refer to states which acknowledge Christianity to be the true religion, not in the diluted sense of states which happen to conform to certain "Christian" values (such as caring for the poor) which may as easily be described as Islamic or humanist values.

<sup>8</sup>Although I will use the term "Constantinian" throughout to refer to the belief that Christianity should be a state religion, it should be noted that it was actually the Emperor Theodosius I (and not Constantine) who made it so in 380 AD.

<sup>9</sup>See the defenses [*sic*] of theonomy, national confessionalism and Christian America in G. S. Smith, ed., *God and Politics: Four Views on the Reformation of Civil Government* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey, 1989).

However, there has always been a minority tradition within evangelicalism which has followed the radical Reformers in criticising the whole concept of the Christian nation. In recent years, due in no small part to the growth of religious diversity and the secularisation of the state, the cogency of this position has become increasingly apparent. A growing number of evangelicals have been espousing "principled pluralism," a theory which maintains that Christians should be principled advocates of religious freedom in non-confessional states. At the forefront of this development have been scholars influenced by Abraham Kuyper's Dutch neo-Calvinism. Three of the most prominent are Gordon Spykman (of Calvin College), James Skillen (director of the Center for Public Justice), and Richard Mouw (president of Fuller Theological Seminary).<sup>10</sup> But these scholars have been joined by a wide variety of fellow evangelicals. Os Guinness has recently written extensively in favour of principled pluralism. He chides American evangelicals for their insistence on seeking their own sectional interests in politics and for their failure to seek "a common vision for the common good."<sup>11</sup> The eminent evangelical historians, Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch and George Marsden, have defended the idea of a non-confessional state largely by demonstrating the abuses perpetrated in the name of "Christian America."<sup>12</sup> A number of conservative evangelical theologians have also lined up on the side of the non-confessional state,

<sup>10</sup> See R. Mouw, *Political Evangelism* (Grand Rapids, 1973), 94-8; A Storkey, *A Christian Social Perspective* (Leicester, 1979), 310-11; G. Spykman et al., *Society, State and Schools: a Case for Structural and Confessional Pluralism* (1981); R. McCarthy et al., *Disestablishment a Second Time: Genuine Pluralism for American Schools* (Grand Rapids, 1993); J. Skillen, *The Scattered Voice: Christians at Odds in the Public Square* (Grand Rapids, 1990) and *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community* (1994); R. Mouw and S. Griffen, *Pluralism and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids, 1993); and the essays by Spykman, Smith, Skillen and Schrotenboer supporting this approach in Smith, *God and Politics*.

<sup>11</sup> O. Guinness, *The American Hour: a Time of Reckoning and the Once and Future Role of Faith* (New York, 1993); "Tribespeople, idiots or citizens? Religious liberty and the re forging of the American public philosophy," *Spectrum*, 23 (1991), 29-50; edited with J. D. Hunter, *Articles of Faith, Articles of Peace* (Washington, D. C., 1990).

<sup>12</sup> M. Noll, N. Hatch, G. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America* (1983).

though from quite different theological traditions. The dispensationalist Norman Geisler, and the Reformed theologians Meredith Kline and William Barker have argued that in the Church Age it is not a legitimate function of a civil government to endorse and support religious establishments. Instead, governments should operate according to principles of natural law (Geisler) or common grace (Kline, Barker).<sup>13</sup> Another Reformed writer, Theodore Turnau, has presented one of the most sophisticated statements of the principled pluralist position, and argued that it constitutes the best Christian response to the postmodern fragmentation of public discourse.<sup>14</sup> Finally, in the British context, Nigel Wright has drawn on the Anabaptist and Dissenting traditions to present the case for disestablishment,<sup>15</sup> and Trevor Cooling has written a deeply thoughtful book which shows how evangelicals can support a system of secular schooling in a pluralist society without opening the door to secular humanist indoctrination.<sup>16</sup>

What is intriguing about these writers is that most of them come from churches which would trace their roots back to the magisterial Reformation. For this very reason, they find it difficult to provide much historical support for their position. John Calvin, after all, was hardly famed for tolerating confessional pluralism in Geneva! This paper, therefore, aims to fill in an important gap in the principled pluralist case by showing that the position has deep roots in the evangelical protestant tradition. It does so by describing the political thought of Roger Williams, an English puritan who emigrated to America and became one of

<sup>13</sup> N. Geisler, "A premillennial view of law and government," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, 142 (1985), 250-66; M. G. Kline, *The Structure of Biblical Authority* (Grand Rapids, 1972), part II, ch. 3; W. Barker, "Theonomy, pluralism and the Bible," in Barker and W. R. Godfrey, eds, *Theonomy: A Reformed Critique* (Grand Rapids, 1990), 225-42.

<sup>14</sup> T. A. Turnau III, "Speaking in a broken tongue: postmodernism, principled pluralism, and the rehabilitation of public moral discourse," *Westminster Theological Journal*, 56 (1994), 345-77.

<sup>15</sup> N. Wright, "The Church and God's servant the State," *Anabaptism Today*, 7 (1994), 9-14, and "Disestablishment: a contemporary view from the Free Churches," *Anvil*, 12 (1995), 121-35.

<sup>16</sup> T. Cooling, *A Christian Vision for State Education* (London, 1994).

[44] the most outspoken champions of religious liberty in the seventeenth century. Though feted by several generations of American academics, Williams has generally been a prophet without honour in his own constituency. Yet his argument for religious toleration and the non-confessional state was profoundly biblical, and I shall argue, a far better guide for Christian political action than the Constantinianism of the magisterial Reformers.

## II

*Roger Williams (c. 1604-83) and the case against Constantine*<sup>17</sup>

Roger Williams is arguably one of the most remarkable and attractive figures in the history of evangelical Christianity. Not only was he among the earliest and most thoroughgoing champions of full religious toleration, he was also extraordinarily sensitive in his attitude to the American Indians.<sup>18</sup> In an age when aboriginal peoples were usually despised as barbarous and deprived of their land without receiving anything in return, Williams took the trouble to master their difficult language, appreciate their culture and defend their land rights. Evangelicals who are looking for models of social and political righteousness would do well to study his example. Like many puritan preachers, Roger Williams was educated at Cambridge University. After graduating he was ordained in the Church of England, but his radical puritan views set him at odds with the High Church reforms of Archbishop Laud and in 1630 he emigrated to New England. Before long, however, he fell out with the puritans of Massachusetts Bay, particularly over his contention that the civil

<sup>17</sup> The literature on Williams is very large indeed, An excellent recent biography which discusses the historiography is E. Gaustad, *Liberty of Conscience: Roger Williams in America* (Grand Rapids, 1991).

<sup>18</sup> Williams was a remarkably talented linguist who quickly mastered Indian Languages and defended the land rights of native Americans. A study which contrasts his ideas on this subject favourably with those of John Locke is J. Tully, "Rediscovering America: The Two Treatises and aboriginal rights," in his *An Approach to Political Philosophy: Locke in Context* (Cambridge, 1992), ch. 5.

magistrate should not interfere in matters of religion. Eventually he was forced to leave the colony in the middle of a bitter winter, and trek across dangerous territory to find a new settlement. In the spring of 1636, he established the town of Providence on Rhode Island, and under his guidance it became the first American colony to enshrine freedom of religion in its constitution. His widest fame, however, came from the books which he wrote during visits to England in 1643-44 and 1651-54. In these works, including his magnum opus *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution* (1644), he maintained that toleration should be extended to all religions and that the state should confine itself to purely secular functions. [45]

The ideas expressed in these books did not spring from nowhere. Many sixteenth century Anabaptists had already called into question the Constantinian assumptions of the magisterial Reformers, and maintained that the Church should never have allied itself with the state in the first place.<sup>19</sup> Williams never quoted the Anabaptists, since their work was not readily available in seventeenth century England, but he was influenced by the English General Baptists, who may have adopted some of their political ideas from the Dutch Mennonites.<sup>20</sup> The founder of the first General Baptist church in England, Thomas Helwys, was also the author of perhaps the earliest tract in the English language to call on the magistrate to tolerate all religions. "Let them be heretikes, Turcks, Jewes, or whatsoever," Helwys declared in 1612, "it apperteynes not to the earthly power to punish them in the least measure."<sup>21</sup> He was followed in this conviction by other General Baptist preachers, including John Murton, whose *Humble Supplication to the Kings Majesty* (1620) fell into the hands of

<sup>19</sup> The best survey of Anabaptist political thought remains J. Stayer, *Anabaptists and the Sword* (Lawrence, KS, 1972).

<sup>20</sup> The extent of Anabaptist influence on the early English Baptists has been much debated. The General Baptists agreed with the Mennonites that the civil magistrate could not exercise coercive power in civil matters [*sic*], but rejected the Anabaptist ban on Christians serving as civil magistrates. For a judicious assessment of the relationship between the two groups see J. Coggins, *John Smyth's Congregation* (Scottsdale, PA, 1991).

<sup>21</sup> *A Short Declaration of the Mistery of Iniquity* (1612), 69.

Williams, and probably helped to steer him towards commitment to full religious toleration.<sup>22</sup>

[46] In order to understand Williams and the position he represented, we need to know something about his target: the political tradition of the magisterial Reformers. The founding fathers of that tradition, men like Calvin and Beza in Geneva and John Knox in Scotland, had no doubt that Christian magistrates were to throw all of their considerable weight behind godly reformation and the purging of false religion from their lands. The conversion of whole nations to the true religion, they were convinced, was God's providential purpose, and they fully anticipated that in the last days it would be greatly extended as popish states fell before protestant armies. They were followed in this conviction by the vast majority of puritans in England, Scotland and New England. In Massachusetts, the governor John Winthrop and the divine John Cotton, despite their personal friendships with Williams, repudiated his views and firmly adhered to the belief that the civil magistrate ought to be actively involved in religious affairs. In England and Scotland, too, the rebellions against Charles I were spearheaded by puritans who saw a great opportunity to purge the nations of popish idolatry and build a godly Church and society with the aid of the civil magistrate.<sup>23</sup> Preachers like the Scottish divine, Samuel Rutherford—a polemical adversary of Williams—wrote at length to defend the religious activities of the civil magistrate, and for a while believed that the puritan victories in Britain were the prelude to the triumph of the Reformed faith throughout Europe.<sup>24</sup>

These mainstream Reformers have often been highly praised by modern evangelicals. Alister McGrath has recently argued that

<sup>22</sup> On these General Baptist theories, see T. George, "Between pacifism and coercion: the English Baptist doctrine of religious toleration," *Menmonite Quarterly Review*, 58 (1984); W. K. Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England 1603-39* (Cambridge, 1937), 109-143; and L. McBeth, *English Baptist Literature on Religious Liberty to 1689* (New York, 1980), ch. 1.

<sup>23</sup> On puritan political zeal and the origins of the English civil war see J. Morrill, *The Nature of the English Revolution* (Harlow, 1993), 33-90.

<sup>24</sup> On Rutherford see J. Coffey, "Samuel Rutherford (c. 1600-61) and the British Revolutions," unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Cambridge University (1994).

whilst Williams, Menno Simons and Balthasar Hubmaier were ancestors of the sterile separatist fundamentalism of twentieth century America, John Winthrop and others in the magisterial Reformation tradition inspired the "new evangelicalism" with their desire "to build a Christian civilisation on the basis on the Gospel."<sup>25</sup> Francis Schaeffer, too, was fulsome in his praise of the magisterial Calvinists, dedicating one of his most influential books to Rutherford.<sup>26</sup> However, both McGrath and Schaeffer fail to mention the dark side of the Reformed attempt "to build a Christian civilisation." McGrath is silent on the record of Winthrop's Massachusetts towards religious dissenters and those accused of witchcraft, and Schaeffer omits all reference to Rutherford's treatise *A Free Disputation Against Pretended Liberty of Conscience* (1649), which has been described as "the ablest defence of religious persecution in the seventeenth century."<sup>27</sup> A franker judgement on the magisterial Reformed tradition is provided by Ronald Wells of Calvin College. Wells notes that "the tendency to promote one's own view by 'law' has always been a dangerous part of Calvinism: one sees Calvinists in power as triumphal and dictatorial. Whether in Calvin's Geneva, Knox's Edinburgh, Cromwell's London and Dublin, Winthrop's Boston, or in our own time, Vorster's Pretoria and Paisley's Belfast, Calvinists in power have wielded that power oppressively."<sup>28</sup>

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The dictatorial character of Calvinist rule, however, was anything but Machiavellian. The magisterial Reformers did what they did because they sincerely believed that Christian magistrates were obliged to imitate the rulers of Old Testament Israel in the way in which they dealt with heretics, blasphemers, idolaters and apostates.<sup>29</sup> By the mid-1640s, the majority of Williams' puritan contemporaries in England and Scotland were engaged in

<sup>25</sup> *Evangelicalism and the Future of Christianity* (London, 1994), 17, 27.

<sup>26</sup> *A Christian Manifesto* (Westchester, IL, 1981).

<sup>27</sup> O. Chadwick, *The Reformation* (1964), 403.

<sup>28</sup> In R. W. Ruesegger, ed., *Reflections on Francis Schaeffer* (Grand Rapids, 1986).

<sup>29</sup> See P. Avis, "Moses and the magistrate: a study in the rise of protestant legalism," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History*, 26 (1995), 149-72.

a full-blown Old Testament crusade to destroy "popish idols," execute witches, and imprison heretics.<sup>30</sup>

Williams was convinced that this was a terrible mistake, and he traced the problem back to Constantine and the other Christian emperors of the fourth century, who had modelled themselves on "the best patterns of the kings of Judah, David, Solomon, Asa, Jehosephat, Josiah, Hezekiah."<sup>31</sup> The establishment of Christianity as the imperial religion, he believed, had constituted a catastrophic Fall in the history of the Church. Its result had been terrible: the persecution of heretics who were actually godly Christians, dissimulation and hypocrisy among those not fully convinced of Christian truth, and "flames of civil combustion." Worst of all, Constantinianism had corrupted the Church. When Constantine and theologians like Eusebius concluded that the Christian magistrate should model himself on the kings of Judah, "they lost the true path, and themselves."<sup>32</sup> "The unknowing zeal of Constantine and other emperors" had done "more hurt to Christ Jesus's crown and kingdom, than the raging fury of the most bloody Neros." "Christianity," wrote Williams, "fell asleep in Constantine's bosom."<sup>33</sup>

Williams believed that it was his responsibility to wake Christians up again, to make them aware of the fundamental differences between the old and the new dispensation. The fusion of religion and politics in Israel was unique. During that period of history, it was legitimate for the magistrate to promote true religion and suppress heresy through legal and political means. But "the pattern of the national church [of Israel] was a nonesuch," Williams declared, "unimitatable by any civil state in all or any of the nations of the world beside."<sup>34</sup> The utter

<sup>30</sup> On puritan use of the Old Testament see C. Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth-Century Revolution* (London, 1993), esp. part III.

<sup>31</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 317. On the use of the Old Testament magistrates as models for Christian rulers after Constantine see D. F. Wright, "War in Church-Historical Perspective," *Evangelical Quarterly*, 57 (1985), 133-61. On the crucial importance of the Old Testament to the historic case for persecution, see J. Lecler, *Toleration and the Reformation*, I (London, 1960), 5-10.

<sup>32</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 317.

<sup>33</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 154.

<sup>34</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 65.



uniqueness of Israel's covenant relationship with God was evident throughout the Old Testament: in the miraculous deliverance of Israel from Egypt, in the divine provision of the land of Canaan and the terrible destruction of its inhabitants, in the ceremonial holiness of its people, in the cult of the tabernacle, and in the ordinance of circumcision. These unparalleled signs demonstrated the "vast and mighty difference between that state of Israel and all other states."<sup>35</sup> Many features of the polity and law of ancient Israel were merely "typical"; they foreshadowed the spiritual kingdom of the Church. The Jewish magistrate's punishment of heretics and idolaters, in particular, was simply a typical foreshadowing of the excommunication of heretics in the Church; it had no binding force for any other nation. To make it a model for modern magistrates was to underestimate the typological function of Old Testament Israel, and to minimise the gulf between the old dispensation and the new.<sup>36</sup>

The New Testament, argued Williams, signalled the end to the temporary fusion of religion and the civil government witnessed in Old Testament Israel. According to 1 Peter 2:19 there was now only one "holy nation," the Church, the antitype of ancient Israel, "called out to [God] out of every nation and country."<sup>37</sup> All political nations were now "merely civil, without any such typical, holy respect upon them, as was upon Israel, a national church."<sup>38</sup> There was "no respect of earth, of places, or countries with the Lord" in the church age, no difference "between Asia and Africa, between Europe and America, between England and Turkey, London and Constantinople."<sup>39</sup> The state was limited to its original and natural function: "to conserve the civil peace of people so far as concerns their bodies and goods."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 272.

<sup>36</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 271ff.

<sup>37</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 212.

<sup>38</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 131.

<sup>39</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 273, 275.

<sup>40</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 214. In places (e.g. *Bloudy Tenent*, 79), Williams said that the state was only to enforce the second table of the Decalogue (concerning man's duties to his fellows). Such a view was popular among early modern tolerationists and is accepted by some modern principled pluralists like Geisler, Kline, Barker and Turnau. However, the problematic nature of the proposal becomes apparent as soon as one thinks of how the state should punish disobe-

Its ends were to be merely civil, and its attitude towards religious diversity to be one of impartiality and *laissez-faire*. The sphere of religion was one in which the state should not interfere, either to encourage diversity or to suppress it.<sup>41</sup> Once this was accepted, there was every reason to expect that those of "other worships or religions, Jews, Turks, or anti-christians," could be "peaceable and quiet subjects, loving and helpful neighbours, fair and just dealers, true and loyal to the civil government."<sup>42</sup>

Such, thought Williams, was the New Testament picture of civil societies, and believers had been given no mandate to alter this situation by establishing Christian states. "Where did the Lord Jesus or his messengers charge the civil magistrate, or direct Christians to petition him, to publish, declare, or establish by his arm of flesh and earthly weapons, the religion and worship of Christ Jesus?"<sup>43</sup> Christianity was never meant to be a civil religion; the Church was always depicted in the New Testament as a private, voluntary association in the midst of civil society, "like unto a Body or College of Physitians in a Citie; like unto a Corporation, Society or Company of East Indie or Turkie Merchants, or any other societie or company in London."<sup>44</sup> This private, voluntary character of the Church was not an unfortunate burden which Christians managed to shrug off in the fourth century; it was of the essence of Christianity, a vital hallmark of the true Church.

Some puritans, of course, claimed that once Christianity ceased to be the state religion, civilisation would disintegrate. But Williams had little time for such pessimism. As he pointed out, "Every historian, merchant, traveller in Europe, Asia, Africa, [50] America" could testify that "many stately kingdoms and governments in the world have long enjoyed civil peace and quiet, notwithstanding their religion is so corrupt as that there is not the very name of Jesus Christ amongst them."<sup>45</sup> Common grace

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dience to parents, adultery, and coveting. A better starting point is the more limited definition given quoted [*sic*] above.

<sup>41</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 214, 199-212.

<sup>42</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 131.

<sup>43</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 225-6.

<sup>44</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 46.

<sup>45</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 216.

and natural conscience provided an adequate foundation for the formation of flourishing political communities.

This anti-Constantinian vision of Church and state led Williams inexorably to a Christian defence of religious liberty for all. As he rightly pointed out, Christians had started to persecute others almost as soon as they had allied themselves to the state. Once that connection was cut, however, they would be free to imitate the early Church again. The primitive Church had imposed rigorous discipline on its own members, but its attitude towards the unbelievers, heretics, apostates, and atheists beyond its company had always been one of gentleness and tolerance. Paul had taught that the weapons of the Church's warfare were not carnal but spiritual (2 Cor. 10:4),<sup>46</sup> and the only "Ammunition and Artillerie" he spoke of was the "Christian Magazine" which included the shield of faith and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God (Eph. 6).<sup>47</sup>

Above all, the early Church had been following the commands of its master, Jesus, who had taught that his kingdom was not of this world. He himself was meek and lowly, persecuted but never persecuting, and he had told his disciples to imitate him. They were to love their enemies, and turn the other cheek when they were struck. When they had wanted to call down fire on the Samaritan village that rejected their message, Jesus had rebuked them (Lk. 9), and when he sent them out on mission he gave them no other weapons than the gospel they were to preach.<sup>48</sup> In particular, Williams believed, Jesus had explicitly urged Christians to tolerate those who believed in false religions. According to the parable of the wheat and the tares (Mt. 13), God would separate the wheat (Christians) from the tares (unbelievers) at the Last Judgement. In the interim, however, adherents of both true and false religions were to be allowed to dwell together in the field of the world. Christians were to wait patiently for the consummation of the kingdom, aware that in the

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<sup>46</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 117-8.

<sup>47</sup> See Williams, *Queries of the Highest Consideration*, (London, 1644), 29.

<sup>48</sup> *Queries of the Highest Consideration*, 26-7.

present they were called by Christ to practice [*sic*] toleration.<sup>49</sup>

Such was the argument that lay behind the emphatic opening statement in *The Bloody Tenent*: "It is the will and command God that, since the coming of his Son the Lord Jesus, a permission of the most Paganish, Jewish, Turkish, or anti-christian consciences and worships be granted to all men in all nations and countries: and that they are only to be fought against with that sword which is only, in soul matters, able to conquer: to wit, the sword of God's Spirit, the word of God."<sup>50</sup> In practice as well as in theory, Williams faithfully followed this principle until the day that he died. Indeed, his life and writings constitute an eloquent refutation of the common belief that tolerance rests on scepticism and is incompatible with strong religious convictions. For far from being in conflict with his religious dogma, Williams' theory of toleration arose from his dogmatic understanding of the nature of Christianity.<sup>51</sup>

Moreover, Williams was not a lone voice within the puritan movement. The 1640s, in fact, saw the publication of numerous tolerationist tracts written by godly evangelical protestants which demanded liberty for all religions.<sup>52</sup> Two of the most prominent tolerationist writers were the Calvinistic separatist John Lilburne,

<sup>49</sup> *Bloody Tenent*, 68-90. Matthew 13 was the single most important passage in the armoury of early [*sic*] modern tolerationists, and for this reason, arguably one of the most significant texts in the history of political thought. It is still employed by contemporary principled pluralists like Gordon Spykman. See Smith, ed., *God and Politics*, 85-6. <sup>50</sup> *Bloody Tenent*, 2.

<sup>51</sup> Histories of toleration are generally written by those who feel a greater emotional attachment to sceptical elites than to popular sectarians, but they invariably demonstrate that both of these groups contributed to the development of tolerationist theory. See for example, Lyon, *The Theory of Religious Liberty in England*; Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, 4 vols (London, 1932-40); Lecler, *Toleration and the Reformation*, 2 vols (London, 1960); H. Kamen, *The Rise of Toleration* (London, 1967); and especially W. L. Miller, *The First Liberty: Religion and the American Republic* (New York, 1985), which sets Williams alongside the Enlightenment figures of Jefferson and Madison. Moreover, a number of recent studies show how scepticism may often prove inimical to toleration. See R. Tuck, "Scepticism and toleration in the seventeenth century" in S. Mendus, ed., *Justifying Toleration* (Cambridge, 1988), 21-35; S. Mendus, *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism* (London, 1989), 75-9.

<sup>52</sup> See Jordan, *The Development of Religious Toleration in England*, III, 347-542 and IV, 15-360.

and the Arminian Baptist Richard Overton. Like Williams, Lilburn and Overton abandoned the mainstream puritan belief that the parliamentary war against Charles I was a war against the popish Antichrist, a war that would purge England of popish idolatry, restore the nation's covenant with God and clear the way for a godly Britain. Instead they came to see the war as a battle for popular sovereignty and religious liberty. Charles has ruled autocratically ignoring the people who were the source of his royal authority, and persecuting men who disagreed with his religious policy. thus [*sic*] parliament, as the people's representative, was justified in reclaiming the authority it had delegated to the king, and rebelling against his tyranny. However, parliament was now ignoring the people who were the source of its authority, and it too was intent on suppressing sectarians who disagreed with its religious policy. Lilburn and Overton, therefore, with power bases in Cromwell's New Model Army and London's sectarian congregations, began to campaign against the authoritarian and intolerant rule of parliament. They soon became known as "Levellers," because of their democratic principles, and began to formulate a wide-ranging political programme which they promoted in dozens of pamphlets and documents, most famously in the three versions of *An Agreement of the People*. In practical terms their movement was ultimately a failure; its support base was too narrow to bring it to power, and it faded away after 1649. But the Levellers are still of great intellectual importance, for they accomplished one of the most astonishing conceptual revolutions in the history of Western political thought. In the words of David Wootton:

The Levellers are the first modern political movement organised around the idea of popular sovereignty. They are the first democrats who think in terms, not of participatory self-government within a city-state, but of representative government within a nation-state. They are the first who want a written constitution in order to protect the rights of the citizen against the state. The first with a modern conception of which rights should be inalienable: the right to silence . . . and to legal representation; the right to freedom of conscience and freedom of debate; the right to equality before the law and freedom of trade; the right to vote

and, when faced with tyranny, to revolution. The Levellers are thus not merely the first modern democrats, but the first to seek to construct a liberal state.<sup>53</sup>

[53] As Wootton points out, this conceptual revolution was only possible because Roger Williams had demonstrated that Christianity could start to look at the state as a “merely civil” institution. Once this move was made, the Leveller writers were able to draw on traditional natural law theory and on the biblical demand for justice, equality and freedom, to formulate the first liberal democratic programme in Western history.<sup>54</sup>

### III

#### *Evangelicals and the politics of principled pluralism*

The example of the Levellers, I believe, illustrates how deep are the roots of liberal democratic thought within the evangelical protestant tradition. It also demonstrates the tremendous potential of the principled pluralist politics advocated by Roger Williams. Whereas the magisterial Reformers’ vision of a godly commonwealth is now largely obsolete, shaped as it was by assumptions of medieval Christendom, Williams has something to say to the Church in a pluralistic age. He presents us with a remarkable vision of a just multi-cultural society, in which the Church is a vigorous private association, the state an essentially civil institution, and people of different faiths live together as good neighbours. Moreover he does this without once compromising the universal truth claims of Christianity, because his political vision is intensely biblical one [*sic*], drawn from the pages of the New Testament and the example of the primitive Church.

Sadly, however, there are worrying signs that many evangelicals still hanker after the authoritarian godly states of the magis-

<sup>53</sup> See D. Wootton, “The Levellers,” in J. Dunn, ed., *Democracy: the Unfinished Journey, 508 BC to AD 1993* (Oxford, 1992), 71.

<sup>54</sup> See Wootton, “Leveller democracy and the puritan revolution,” in J. H. Burns, ed., *The Cambridge History of Political Thought, 1450-1700* (Cambridge, 1991), 412-42.

terial Reformers. As O. Guinness has observed, "there is still copious evidence of evangelical ambivalence over the logic of religious liberty for all, in practice for example the pervasive evangelical hostility to pluralism (the new 'P' word)."<sup>55</sup> Nowhere is this more true than in the United States, where evangelicals who speak with pride of the separation of Church and state, are often horrified by the idea of the secular state. Indeed, among some sections of American evangelicalism there appears to be a revival of Calvinist theocratic dreams. One grouping, the theonomists or Christian reconstructionists, are even more rigorous than Calvin himself, arguing for the reimposition of the Mosaic judicial law on modern nations. Others take up the position of the Scottish Covenanters, maintaining that America should be a covenanted nation, whose office holders are all Christian believers. Even if most members of the Christian Right do not entertain such radical long-term goals, they do seem to be aiming to "reChristianise" the American state.<sup>56</sup> [54]

A glance at the contemporary world ought to remind us of how disastrous such a quest for religious monopoly can be. With the rise of an intolerant Islamic fundamentalism that will brook no rivals, the last thing Christians need to do is pursue the medieval politics which Islam is finding so hard to leave behind. Although the politics of Christendom may offer false comfort to the struggling Church in the West, they offer nothing to our fellow-believers living under Islam. Western evangelicals who long for godly nations have failed to think globally. They are misled by geographical parochialism and historical nostalgia for the Golden Age of Reformation Europe. Their selective memory seems to have edited out the witch-craze, the persecution of heretics, the religious wars, and the bitter disillusionment ultimately experienced by theocratic visionaries.

Most evangelicals, of course, have no wish to return to the rigors [*sic*] of the traditional godly commonwealth, but many still

<sup>55</sup> O. Guinness, *The American Hour*, 183.

<sup>56</sup> These three positions (theonomy, covenanted nation, and Christian nation) are each defended in Smith, ed., *God and Politics*.

favour a kinder, gentler version of the Christian nation. They remain firmly convinced that Christianity should have a place of special privilege at the heart of national life, either in the form of an established denomination (as in England and Scotland), or in the form of Christianity as the official religion of the nation (an option which American evangelicals prefer). This, they argue, will ensure that the ultimate authority of God is acknowledged at a national level, but in a manner which is compatible with the gentleness of New Testament Christianity.<sup>57</sup>

[55] This moderated Christian nation position is certainly attractive, and its advocates combine an admirable irenicism with a desire to retain a central place for Christianity in modern Western society. However, it is open to the accusation that although it appeals to the New Testament teaching about the Church's weapons being spiritual and not carnal, it does not take seriously enough the paradigmatic example of the early Church. The New Testament writings presuppose that the Church will be a community radically distinct from the surrounding culture, stringent towards those who voluntarily join its company, and gentle towards those outside.<sup>58</sup> Christians who abandon this model and attempt to embrace entire populations, however, tend to choose either tolerance or discipline as their policy towards an entire nation. They fall into either coercion (as was often the case in the Middle Ages and the Reformation era), or into wooliness [*sic*], softening the intellectual and moral demands of the Gospel in order to make the faith credible to the powers-that-be (as has

<sup>57</sup> This ameliorated version of Christendom has been defended by J. L. O'Donovan, "Political authority and European community: the challenge of the Christian Political tradition," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 47 (1994), 1-17, and by O. O'Donovan in "The desire of the nations: political theology and the Western Tradition" his 1994 Hulsean Lectures at Cambridge University. See also Graham Keith, "Issues in religious toleration from the Reformation to the present day," *Evangelical Quarterly*, 66 (1994), 307-29. This position is similar to that of nineteenth century evangelicals, such as Thomas Chalmers. See S. J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford, 1982).

<sup>58</sup> Paul in 1 Cor. 5, for instance, presupposes that there is a sharp divide between what Williams called "the garden of the Church" and "the wilderness of the world," and recommends discipline within and toleration without.



been the case since the Enlightenment). If Williams was one of the greatest critics of the rigorous version of Christendom, Soren Kierkegaard provided a stinging critique of the kinder, gentler version. For Kierkegaard "the heterogeneity of Christianity and the World" seen in the New Testament was a normative principle. Once the Church "triumphed" and whole nations became "Christian," Christianity was effectively abolished by Christendom.<sup>59</sup>

Many evangelicals recognise the force of such arguments against the Constantinian tradition, but they are still not convinced by the alternative. Deep down they suspect that principled pluralists are pretty naive about politics. Evangelical pluralists expect to forge a cosy consensus with unbelievers, blissfully unaware of the fact that the noetic effects of sin make such a consensus well-nigh impossible, even on basic moral issues. They talk of the separation of religion and the state, but fail to comprehend that religion and politics just cannot be kept apart. A "civil" issue like abortion, for example, cannot be decided without reference to people's deepest commitments, commitments which may properly be described as religious. Ultimately, politics involves more than co-operation and compromise; it also involves the conflict of ideologies. Principled pluralists criticise other evangelicals for aiming at "take-over," but the fact is that everyone who seeks to influence government policy is necessarily aiming to impose their agenda on society at large with the help of the state. In attacking the idea of the Christian nation, therefore, principled pluralists merely privatise their faith and prepare

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<sup>59</sup> See *Training in Christianity*, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton, 1844), 197-226, and *The Attack upon Christianity*, trans. W. Lowrie (Princeton, 1944). To endorse such an attack on Christendom is not to deny the genuine piety of many Constantinian Christians, nor to deny that some of the most positive features of the modern West derive from its Christian heritage. However, it is to claim that Christians failed to be true to the model of the primitive Church, and to note that God often in his providence brings good out of evil. It should be remembered, moreover, that many of the great revival movements of Church history (such as monasticism, puritanism, and evangelicalism) were attempts to recover the "heterogeneity of Christianity and the World" which we find in the New Testament.

the way for more cunning and ruthless forces, who will take advantage of Christian passivity to assert their hegemony.<sup>60</sup>

These are indeed powerful objections to the anti-Constantinian case, and they need to be taken seriously. There can be little doubt that some principled pluralists have been unduly optimistic about natural human reason. Roger Williams, for example, displayed a Thomistic faith in the power of universal natural reason to bring people of different religions to an agreement on fundamental moral truths. Today however, due to a dramatically increased awareness of the sheer diversity of moral traditions, such optimism about moral consensus seems hardly justified.<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, it is clear that the concept of the non-confessional state can be used by secularists to justify their own domination of the public forum. A number of prominent liberal philosophers, for example, maintain that the non-establishment of religion principle necessitates that the political decisions of individuals should always be made on naturalistic, nonreligious, publicly accessible grounds.<sup>62</sup> This of course, would have devastating results for Christians involved in politics, for whenever they came to make decisions about how to vote or campaign on abortion, pornography, animal rights, the environment, economic policy and so on, they would have to disregard their most profound religious commitments.

[57] Principled pluralists, however, are not unaware of these problems. In the first place they appreciate the difficulty of forg-

<sup>60</sup> See for example L. Newbiggin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (London, 1989), 211-21. See also the responses to principled pluralism of Carl Bogue, T. M. Moore, and Harold O. J. Brown in Smith, ed., *God and Politics*, 100-20.

<sup>61</sup> The contemporary writer who has highlighted this problem more clearly than any other is Alasdair MacIntyre. See his *After Virtue* (London, 1980); and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London, 1988).

<sup>62</sup> See for example, D. Lyons, *Ethics and the Rule of Law* (Cambridge, 1984); B. Ackerman, *Social Justice and the Liberal State* (New Haven, 1980); and J. Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971). In *Political Liberalism* (New York, 1993), 249-50, Rawls gets into an awful mess because he recognises that some of the greatest progressives in American history—the abolitionists and Martin Luther King continually employed religious arguments. His suggestion that this was legitimate in a time of crisis, but not now, sounds like special pleading.

ing an ethical consensus in a pluralist society. They point out, however, that the consensus needed in a liberal democracy is a narrow one, over the purpose and limits of the state. It is not necessary to agree on the morality of sexual acts, for example, to reach some sort of agreement over the state's role in regard to them. On some issues, of course—abortion is the notorious example—such agreement will be very difficult to come by, because here it is very difficult to separate religion from morality and morality from politics. If a Christian's faith tells her that the foetus has fully human status, then this moral belief will compel her to campaign for the complete prohibition of abortion by the state. In such instances, disagreement goes so deep that there may be no alternative to a prolonged constitutional power struggle between different groups. However, abortion is an extreme case, and on most legislative issues some form of consensus will be easier to come by. The presence of sin in the redeemed and the presence of common grace in the unregenerate reminds us that Christian takeover of the public order is not the only option. Because the image of God in human conscience has not been obliterated, we can expect that in many areas of our common life citizens who disagree strongly about ultimate reality can unite on more limited principles of political ethics. Consensus is not impossible; takeover or submission are not the only options.

Moreover, it is not fair to say that principled pluralism simply privatises Christianity and capitulates to secular hegemony. Its advocates argue forcefully that a *secular* state is not to be confused with a *secularist* state, which is hostile to religion and effectively constitutes a new religious establishment. Os Guinness, for example, is scathing about the secularists who think that "citizens can deduce their public policies from Karl Marx, Milton Friedmann, Ralph Nader or Gloria Steinem, but not from the Bible," and who say: "It's okay to be Christian, Jewish, Mormon, Muslim (or whatever), but just don't speak or act like one."<sup>63</sup> Other principled pluralists are at pains to point out that the genuinely secular (or non-confessional) state is characterised by impartiality,

<sup>63</sup> Guinness, *The American Hour*, 220.

[58] in that it allows people of different faiths and worldviews equal access to campaign on public policy issues. Religious believers are free to draw their political convictions from their own particularistic faiths, and free to follow Martin Luther King's example by expressing these convictions in their own particular religious language.<sup>64</sup>

A number of liberal political philosophers, who support the principle of a secular state, would strongly agree with this. They argue vigorously against those liberals who would exclude religious convictions from public debate. Kent Greenawalt, for example, insists that "to demand that many devout Catholics, Protestants, and Jews pluck out their religious convictions is to ask them how they would think about a critical moral problem if they started from scratch, disregarding what they presently take as basic premises of moral thought. Asking that people perform this exercise is not only unrealistic in the sense of impossible; the implicit demand that people try to compartmentalise beliefs that constitute some kind of unity in their approach to life is positively objectionable."<sup>65</sup>

Given that this is the case, Christians have every right to look to the Scriptures for guidance on public policy matters. Although it is a great mistake to see the religious constitution of Old Testament Israel as a model for modern states, recent studies have shown that the social and economic arrangements of the Jewish polity may still have much to teach us.<sup>66</sup> Roger Williams, it should be noted, would not have objected to this. He freely acknowledged that "what was simply moral, civil, and natural in

<sup>64</sup>See Wright, "Disestablishment," 131-2; Cooling, *A Christian Vision*, 69-70; Mouw and Griffen, *Pluralisms and Horizons*; and especially Turnau, "Speaking in a broken tongue," pp. [sic].

<sup>65</sup>Kent Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice* (Oxford, 1988), 155. See also W. Galston, *Liberal Purposes: Goods, Virtues and Diversity in the Liberal State* (Cambridge, 1991). ch. 12.

<sup>66</sup>See C. Wright, *Living as the People of God* (Leicester, 1983); P. Mills, "Interest in interest: the implications of the Old Testament ban on interest for today" (Cambridge: Jubilee Centre, 1989); N. Biggar and D. Hay, "The Bible, Christian ethics, and the provision of social security," *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 7 (1994), 43-64.

Israel's state, in their constitutions, laws, punishments, may be imitated and followed by the states, countries, cities, and kingdoms of the world."<sup>67</sup> Thus, insofar as Israel's law was an application of "creation ethics" or "natural law" to a specific society, it can be a guide for Christian thinking about political and social issues today. Evangelicals can let Scripture shape their political convictions and then try to communicate the wisdom of their positions to their fellow citizens, often by translating them into a common language.<sup>68</sup> [59]

Christians will have every right to let their theological convictions shape their political beliefs, and to use particularistic language in public debate. Moreover, the secular state can pass legislation which is consonant with Christianity and has been lobbied for by Christians without compromising its non-confessional status. On issues like abortion or the environment, for example, Christians may well find that their theological beliefs lead them to campaign for legislation that will protect the unborn foetus and the ozone layer. The passing of such legislation would not constitute an establishment of Christianity, since the views being endorsed by the state would not be exclusively Christian but would be supported by publicly accessible arguments. Even laws which benefit one religious community more than another do not necessarily compromise the non-establishment principle. Laws restricting Sunday trading, for example, may favour Christians above Muslims or atheists, but although their effect is not neutral their justification ought to involve no reference to judgements about the truth of those religions. The neutrality of the secular state is a neutrality of *justification* not a neutrality of *effects*. Thus it is quite unfair to claim that principled pluralism will lead to politics being sealed off from religious influences.

However, principled pluralists certainly do want to insist that

<sup>67</sup> *Bloudy Tenent*, 313.

<sup>68</sup> Such is the strategy of the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge. See *Political Christians in a Plural Society: A New Strategy for a Biblical Contribution* (Jubilee Policy Group, 1994).

legitimate Christian political influence has clearly demarcated boundaries. Above all Christians should not enter politics with the aim of establishing Christianity as the state religion and using state power to suppress false religion. Moreover, although it is acceptable for *believers* to let their religion shape their political convictions, they cannot expect the *state* to pass a piece of legislation for purely religious reasons. Laws against divorce, adultery or homosexual acts, for example, cannot be passed simply on the grounds that many Christians believe that God hates these things; publicly accessible reasons must be provided for every policy recommendation, and "laws adopted by the government should rest on some secular objective."<sup>69</sup> The state is a civil institution with strictly limited ends, and it is no part of its mandate to endorse a particular religious faith.

[60] In a sense, therefore, principled pluralism does privatise religious faith. Because the believer cannot rest her case for a public policy solely on religious grounds, her life will inevitably lack the unity experienced by those who live under states which embrace their religious convictions. But this does not mean that the religious convictions of a citizen or an organisation cannot influence their politics. Furthermore, the schizophrenia that we as Christians inevitably feel between our private and public personas is one the New Testament tells us to accept, for we are pilgrims in this world, looking forward to the *eschaton* when the whole of life will be swallowed up in Christ, and the tensions we experience in the here and now will be overcome. The Constantinian attempt to remove those tensions from the present is an attempt to make Christians feel at home in a world in which we should be pilgrims and strangers. To complain that we are marginalised is to ignore the fact that the Church is called to live on the margins, as a "colony" of "resident aliens" in the midst of an often hostile culture.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>69</sup> Greenawalt, *Religious Convictions and Political Choice*, 20.

<sup>70</sup> The terms come from S. Hauerwas and W. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville, 1989), 12. Hauerwas and Willimon mount a powerful critique of Constantinianism and outline a bracing vision of the Church as a counter-cultural community. See also the Anabaptist works of J.

The recognition that this is so can be a tremendously liberating experience for the Church. Relieved of the burden of providing the national civil religion, we can get back to doing what we were meant to be doing in the first place—being God's counter-cultural community.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, once we cease to look to the political process to deliver a godly nation, we will also be liberated to pursue a far more practical and constructive (though more modest) form of politics. Instead of investing transcendent religious hopes in the political process, we will recognise that government has an important but strictly limited function, and will devote our efforts to finding "a common vision for the common good." We have already seen—in the Levellers—the remarkable conceptual achievements of a group of Christians who turned to this way of thinking about politics, but two modern examples will help to reinforce the point about the promise of principled pluralism. [61]

The first is that of the American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the most respected political thinkers in the United States in the 1940s and 1950s. It was public knowledge that Niebuhr was a Christian and that he drew heavily on the Bible in his political thinking. However, because he was also willing to draw on secular sources, and because the principles he defended were not exclusively Christian, he was able to reach and influence a very wide audience. As Dean Curry has argued, the contrast with American evangelical political activists in the 1980s could hardly be more stark. By preaching a narrow sectional agenda in a belligerent manner and in a private religious

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H. Yoder, *The Priestly Kingdom: Social Ethics as Gospel* (Notre Dame, 1984), esp. chapters 5-7; and A. Kreider, *Journey towards Holiness: A Way of Living as God's Nation* (Basingstoke, 1986).

<sup>71</sup> As Hauerwas and Willimon suggest (*Resident Aliens*, p. 18), "The decline of the Constantinian world view, the gradual decline of the notion that the church needs some sort of surrounding 'Christian' culture to prop it up and mold its young, is not a death to lament. It is an opportunity to celebrate. The decline of the old, Constantinian synthesis means that we American Christians are at last free to be faithful in a way that makes being a Christian today an exciting adventure."

language, evangelical activists have alienated their fellow citizens more than they have influenced them.<sup>72</sup>

A second example of Christian politics which fits the principled pluralist model is that of the Jubilee Centre in Cambridge. Its Keep Sunday Special campaign drew together a broad coalition of support around the basic principle that a weekly day of rest strengthens both individuals and families, and symbolises the belief that our society should not be driven incessantly by the desire for material gain. Here was a principle drawn directly from the Old Testament law, but widely accepted by non-Christians because it chimed in with their God-given sense of right and wrong. Building on the lessons learnt from that campaign, the Jubilee Centre has recently been promoting the concept of "relationalism," which suggests that social and political policies should be judged by how they affect the quality of the relationships which are vital to human flourishing. Once more the Jubilee Centre has been inspired by their reading of the Scriptures to find in "relationalism" a principle which is an attractive and compelling idea for people of very different worldviews. They are advancing a politics of natural conscience or common grace, one which would seem to have a decent chance of forging "an ethic upon which humanist and theist, Hindu and Muslim, Christian and Jew can all agree."<sup>73</sup> Some evangelicals will no doubt be dismayed by the lack of overt Christian references in *The R Factor*, and by its failure to advance the case for a return to Christianity as the only possible basis for a viable national life.

[62]

<sup>72</sup>D. Curry, "Where have all the Niebuhrs gone? Evangelicals and the marginalisation of religious influence in American public life," *Journal of Church and State*, 36 (1994), 97-114. Hauerwas and Yoder are very critical of Niebuhr's defence of democracy and his effort to forge a natural law politics, claiming quite unfairly in my view—that it was simply a new variety of Constantinianism. Their position reflects traditional Anabaptist hostility to Christians occupying positions of political power, an hostility which was not shared by the radical English Baptists. See esp. Hauerwas, "The Democratic Policing of Christianity," in *Dispatches from the Front* (London, 1994), ch. 4.

<sup>73</sup>M. Schluter and D. Lee, *The R Factor* (London, 1993), 269. For some of the Christian rationale behind relationalism see *Political Christians in a Plural Society*.



However, if the argument of this paper is correct, the attempt to establish Christian nations is doomed to failure, and the politics of principled pluralism is the only way forward.

If this seems rather modest and uninspiring, then perhaps that is as it should be. For although Christ has inaugurated his kingdom, it is not our task to consummate it. His Lordship over the nations will only be established at his *parousia*. In the meantime, we should concentrate on the supremely important task of being God's alternative society, which in its corporate life anticipates the Heavenly City which is to come. As the Church, we must practice [*sic*] "eschatological tolerance" and work with our fellow citizens to forge an "interim public ethic" which will deliver a more just and peaceful society. In doing so, we will bear witness to the Lord whose command and example we follow.<sup>74</sup>

#### *Abstract*

The resurgence of evangelical political activity in many parts of the world raises the question of whether Christianity can legitimately be a state religion. In recent years a growing number of evangelicals have argued that it cannot. Principled pluralists maintain that Christians ought on principle to advocate non-confessional states in which all religions enjoy civil liberty and equality. This article defends principled pluralism by adding an historical dimension to its case. It shows that far from being the "new kid on the block," principled pluralism has roots which run deep within the evangelical protestant tradition. The seventeenth century puritan Roger Williams, for instance, advanced a thoroughly biblical argument for full religious liberty and the secular state. After describing his argument, the article deals with objections to principled pluralism and suggests that it is the most promising philosophy for evangelicals involved in politics.

<sup>74</sup> See Mouw and Griffen, *Pluralism and Horizons*, 173-77.

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