

## THEOS God and Government Conference 13 November 2010

### A Christian View of the Role of Government

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It's very exciting to see this church full of people wanting to explore a Christian view of government. This confirms what may be a sea-change in the relationship between faith and politics in the UK, with thousands of Christians no longer willing to meekly accept the privatised role that some secularists would impose on them, and keen to engage at many levels of politics as one expression of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ. Of course, not every manifestation of this new Christian confidence is necessarily welcome. Some Christian voices sound shrill and self-righteous, and some seem to twist the Bible to suit their own purposes; others speak as if – to borrow a phrase from David Landrum – their theology is 'on mute'; and all of us need to learn better how to move beyond a mere politics of Christian self-defense toward a faith-inspired politics of the common good. Nonetheless, a real shift does seem to be occurring, and we need to thank God for it and to seek to equip ourselves as fully as we can to engage in public life with integrity, humility, wisdom, perseverance and courage.

In his lecture earlier, Nick Spencer showed why it is that Christian faith *should* have something to say about government: if all politics is moral, and if all morality is in some way anthropological, and if all anthropology is in some sense theological, then any political goal will reflect an underlying theology or worldview. This is true whether the worldview is 'religious' in the traditional sense or not: so the worldview (or worldviews) of secular humanism will, or should, shape the political stances of secular humanist politicians and movements as much as the worldview of Christians or Muslims or Hindus will, or should, shape theirs.

As Polly Toynbee has rightly put it (I don't find myself saying that too often!), 'Every day in parliament, fundamentally different worldviews do battle. Politics is all about the clash of moral universes.'<sup>1</sup> Worldviews shape politics, and our task is to explore how our Christian worldview should shape our political vision, particularly our vision of the role of government in the public sphere, which is my theme in this talk.

Our generation isn't the first to take up this task: Christians in every age have found themselves compelled to assess the government they lived under, and to take action accordingly to either preserve, reform, criticize or challenge it, and even in extreme cases to remove it. We may feel uncomfortable with the idea of radically challenging existing government. So it's as well to remind ourselves of some words from Luke 1, the passage which has come to be called 'the Magnificat' or 'the Song of Mary.'

The Magnificat is Mary's prophetic confession that the son she will bear is sent by a liberating God who has 'brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; [who has] filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty' (Luke 1: 52). This passage announces that the Kingdom inaugurated by Jesus will be one which turns existing social arrangements on their head. The Kingdom of God is not about offering comfortable rationalisations for our existing

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<sup>1</sup> *The Guardian*, 25 March 2008.

political loyalties but about the arrival of a new order of justice and peace that could call anything into question. One concrete example of this is that followers of Christ in political parties will always have a higher loyalty than the party line, a higher authority than party ideology, a deeper solidarity than party unity, and even if they reach high office they will always stand ready to break ranks when obedience to Christ compels them to do so. All Christian political thought and action should proceed from that radical starting commitment.

To delve deeper into this, I will explore three core themes in Christian political thought:

- government is ordained by God to establish justice;
- government is limited by law and other social authorities;
- government must be representative of its people.

These themes are deeply rooted in Scripture and Christian tradition, but I will assert that they are as important today as they always have been.<sup>2</sup>

### *Government is ordained by God to establish justice*

The claim that government is ordained and authorized by God has a longstanding Jewish and Christian pedigree. This is clear throughout the Bible, and not just in the famous passage in Romans 13. It is important to note that I refer to 'government', not 'governments': it is the office or vocation of government which is ordained, not necessarily any particular office-holders (who might be saints or scoundrels).

The office of government comes with a specific mandate which is the ultimate basis of its legitimacy. Paul plainly asserts in Romans 13 that 'there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God' (Romans 13:1). A few verses on Paul tells us what the purpose of such an institution is: it is 'the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer' (Romans 13:4). Now that may sound a bit too punitive to our modern ears - a bit too 'Daily Mail' - but over the centuries this passage has been combined with many other biblical passages and taken to imply not just retributive justice but something much wider: the establishment of justice in the public realm of society, an idea which includes also distributive justice, or social justice.

Before explaining more what *just* government exactly means, it is important to point out that responsibility for justice is not exclusively the task of government. All of us are called to pursue justice in whatever spheres of life we find ourselves. In this way we can speak of employment justice, family justice, environmental justice, etc. However, only government exist to secure justice *across a whole society*, i.e., in the public realm.

Of course, it is easy to say that governments 'should pursue justice', but not so easy to say what the actual content of justice is. We can certainly offer some general implications: shielding the weak from the abuse of power by the strong; protecting those institutions necessary to human flourishing, such as marriage, family, and local community; creating a public infrastructure for social life; securing many kinds of freedom; supporting those who cannot meet their own basic human

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<sup>2</sup> These and other cores themes are spelled out at length in the various chapters of *God and Government*.

needs; and so on. While most would agree with those general statements, the debate really starts when we try to put policy flesh on them. All I can do here is take a few steps towards approaching these questions, the first two drawing primarily on the Bible, and the third taking its cue from contemporary political thought.

Throughout the Bible, justice is a rich and complex idea that can not be summarised in a few bullet points.<sup>3</sup> However, here are three bullet points anyway:

- justice requires government to be pro-active, not simply reactive;
- justice is not only procedural but substantive;
- justice is complex, not simple.

Let me unpack these a little.

First, *justice requires government to be pro-active not just reactive*. Government should of course *react* when injustice is done but it must also take the initiative in establishing conditions which prevent injustice occurring in the first place. For example, consider Psalm 72, the finest Old Testament portrait of a just king. Here the king is portrayed as actively *reaching down* to help the vulnerable. In that psalm we see many active verbs applied to the king, such as judge, defend, crush (the oppressor), deliver, and rescue. In taking the initiative to do justice the king mirrors the saving activity of God himself who doesn't leave his people under oppression but reaches down to liberate them. And in the New Testament we how that saving activity reaches its fulfilment in the coming of Jesus Christ, the truly just king.

Second, *justice is not only procedural but substantive*. The idea of a purely procedural justice is a typically modern view. This view concerns the justice of decision-making systems - the *how* of determining what justice is rather than the *what* of justice (its actual content). Procedural justice is driven by the view that in a deeply plural society we'll never agree on what it means to live a good human life, and so law and government cannot favour one such view over another. On this view, all government can do is establish a morally neutral set of basic individual rights that everyone will agree on *whatever* their view of the good life, and then facilitate neutral procedures to enforce such rights. Now the Bible certainly *is* concerned with just procedures; in fact the Old Testament is full of injunctions to judges to judge impartially and speedily, to witnesses to tell the truth; and so on. However, its wider account of justice clearly promotes a distinctive, substantive, and normative picture of the good human life, and a wide range of familial, social, economic and environmental relationships which will advance that good life, as designed by God for human blessing. The Bible is also fully aware of the deep power imbalances in society which can skew law or legal procedure towards the interests of the powerful. For this reason the prophet Isaiah attacks those who 'make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right' (Isaiah 10:1-2).

This concern with substantive and not only procedural justice has marked the Christian tradition throughout its history, and it should likewise be our concern

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<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Jonathan Burnside, *God, Justice and Society* (Oxford University Press, 2010), for an extensive recent study.

today as we think about contemporary public policy, whether on the family, banking or on the environment. In none of these areas will it be enough just to offer neutral protection of individual rights. Christians shouldn't fall for the proceduralist argument and so allow their vision of the public good to be silenced by those who think pluralism means a neutral state. In reality, all procedures imply substantive normative commitments about the good human life: the question is *which* substantive commitments they actually reflect.

Yet even when we have begun to clarify what *biblical* justice means, it is not an easy or straightforward task to apply in 21<sup>st</sup> century British government. This brings me to my next point.

Third, *justice is complex, not simple* (which, admittedly, is not a great election slogan). To form a Christian view of justice today we need to engage with the many competing conceptions of justice that jostle for attention in contemporary debate. Each of them picks out at least one or other legitimate aspect of justice, but often does so at the risk of ignoring others. Christians often find themselves lining up with one or another of these mainstream accounts – and that's hardly surprising given that we've spent so little time thinking through our own.

But consider the debate taking place right now over welfare reform between two prominent and admirably thought-through Christians, Ian Duncan-Smith, Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, and Archbishop Rowan Williams. Both claim that welfare benefits should be distributed 'fairly' – or justly – but they disagree over what fairness specifically implies or requires. Now their disagreement stems partly from different predictions of the empirical outcomes of policy changes: Just how many families in will have to move out of London when housing benefit is capped? Just what will compulsory community work do to the self-esteem of the unemployed? But it also partly arises from the fact that they seem to be operating with different basic criteria of justice or fairness. Ian Duncan-Smith leans more towards a 'desert-based' theory, and Rowan Williams more towards a 'needs-based' theory. And these are only two of the many rival accounts of justice competing for attention today. There are also 'contract-based' theories; 'entitlement' theories; 'capacity-based' theories; and more.<sup>4</sup>

I propose that a rounded Christian account of justice will try to integrate as many of these different conceptions into a wider view rooted in a coherent biblical and theological vision, correcting them where necessary but perhaps also rejecting some outright. All I can do here is suggest that we urgently need Christians to take up the task of articulating visions of justice and so be in a better position to contribute to contemporary debates. Of course, we should accept that not all Christians will agree on a single account of justice, and note that even if they did, this wouldn't resolve all the policy disputes between them. Yet I would invite us all to commit ourselves to working toward greater convergence on what justice is. If justice is indeed the core task of government, those who want to be faithful Christians in government had better strive for greater clarity on that very basic issue. Otherwise the public witness of the church could be hopelessly dissipated. Might CCF, CSM and LDCF convene a roundtable on what 'fairness' means today?

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<sup>4</sup> Such differences may lie behind some of the disagreements emerging among some contributors to *God and Government*. For example, compare Andrew Bradstock's egalitarian account with Philip Booth's more market-based account.

## *Government is limited by law and other social authorities*

In exploring the first theme of government as ordained by God to establish justice, I have concluded that justice is the core mandate of government. This mandate authorises government to do many things, but it also sets bounds to the scope of government authority, and this brings me to the second core theme I want to address, that government is *limited*.

Government may not do things which are outside its specific task of 'securing justice in the public realm of society'. Let me provocatively suggest a few candidates: maximising national wealth; creating virtue in its citizens; maximising individual freedom; keeping 'a seat at the table' of the UN Security Council by hanging on to Trident; defining a British 'national narrative'. These may or may not be worthwhile goals for governments (or other bodies) to promote, but I would argue that none of them can be derived from the justice-seeking role of *government*.

Consider some biblical and traditional sources on the question of the limits of government. In the Bible and Christian tradition, divinely ordained government has never meant absolute government – such a misunderstanding led to the heresy of what was called 'the divine right of kings' in the 17<sup>th</sup> century: the view that the authority of the king mirrors on earth the absolute authority of God. The Christian tradition has instead always advocated limited government.

In the Old Testament it is quite clear that the powers of Israelite rulers were strictly circumscribed compared with the absolutism of many of their pagan counterparts. This explains why in the story of Naboth's vineyard in 1 Kings 21 it was such a scandal for the Israelite King Ahab to mimic his despotic neighbours in demanding that Naboth give up his ancestral family property, thereby violating the basic law of land distribution underpinning the whole Old Testament system of economic justice. A similar point arises out of Deuteronomy 17, which contains what might be called a 'charter of kingship' spelling out the task and limits of the monarch, placing him firmly *under* law, and prohibiting him from (for example) imposing heavy taxation or raising permanent armies.

In the New Testament we find the same basic idea powerfully reaffirmed in very different conditions. The early church's confession that 'Jesus is Lord' meant not only that 'Jesus is my personal Lord' but also that the Roman emperor was not Lord but rather – as Paul puts it in Romans 13 – a mere 'servant' of God. And as Peter puts it in his first epistle, one should 'fear God', but only 'honour the emperor', just as we should 'honour everyone' (2:17). In the same vein, Jesus teaches his disciples that they should not 'lord it over' each other as the Gentile rulers do (Mark 10:42), but instead embody a very different vision of authority - authority as self-giving service directed to the needs of others. God never gives blank cheques to any authority, whether they are governments, parents, or church leaders. He always ties authority to the fulfilling of a specific purpose of blessing for the human community. Government is no exception.

Let's explore further how the idea of just and limited government developed over time. Two basic kinds of constraints came to be recognised: governments is to be limited by just laws, and government must acknowledge other social authorities. First, *government must operate under the law*. This is the central meaning of what

has come to be known as '*the rule of law*', perhaps the most basic constitutional principle of liberal democracy. The idea has clear Old Testament roots. The content of law was given in the Torah, covering many aspects of society, and government was required to conform to those laws and administer them consistently. Implicit in this arrangement was the idea that government didn't actually make the law itself at all. Instead, the law was given by God, and only its detailed applications required human action by judges and other rulers.

Over time, particularly in the middle ages, the concept emerged of '*natural law*,' which referred to universal principles of justice knowable in principle by all and implanted in human nature by God. This idea has a somewhat patchy history but at its core is the claim that all human law must conform to the imperatives of the natural law – a claim applying to all governments, not only Christian ones. The modern era saw – albeit with many fits and starts, and with the crucial contribution of Enlightenment thinkers – the emergence of the idea of '*constitutional accountability*': government not only stood beneath a higher moral law but should also stand under enforceable positive law. There should be consequences when government breaches the terms of its office. The idea of constitutional accountability also later came to imply that the executive branch of government must be effectively accountable both to parliament and to the courts. And, of course, being under law meant not just being under any old positive law – that was the error of the school of thought known as '*legal positivism*' – the content of law *itself* must conform to the requirements of justice.

We can see then that the Christian tradition has played a crucial role in realising a principle that we too easily tend to take for granted today – that all law must embody universal principles of justice and that governments must stand under such law and be effectively held accountable for breaches of it. This has many significant implications, but let me mention one that has had great importance in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely human rights.

By '*human rights*' I am thinking not of an abstract notion of '*inherent moral rights*' but rather of legal human rights: a special class of legal rights detailed in codes such as the European Convention on Human Rights (now effectively part of UK law). Human rights are certainly not the whole of justice, as some tend to imply today, and there is certainly a debate to be had about the nature and scope of legal human rights. For instance, human rights can be wrongly identified, and judges can inflate their meaning or stretch their application beyond what is legitimate.

However, the idea of human rights points to a core idea which has been central to Christian thought all along – that there are certain things governments simply may not do to their citizens under any circumstances, and certain things which governments must do for their citizens at all times; and that the law must entrench those protections. The vision of human dignity and equality underlying human rights is not just an invention of the Enlightenment but is in reality part of the legacy of Christianity. Let me add here that among the most basic human rights are the rights to religious freedom, including not only the right to hold certain beliefs in your own head or to practice them behind closed church doors, but also, as the European Convention puts it, the '*right to manifest*' one's beliefs in practice and in public.

Now we must recognise that the historical Christian record on the rights to religious freedom is badly compromised, to say the least. But virtually all Christians today have come to acknowledge the crystal clear New Testament principle that true faith must be free faith, and that authentic faith – saving faith, we might say – simply cannot be coerced. Christians have also embraced the logical implication that governments may not force citizens to adopt any religious faith or penalise them for accepting or rejecting any faith. This is the deepest basis for the principle of religious toleration, first unambiguously asserted by the 16<sup>th</sup> century Anabaptists and then taken up by Reformed Protestants, Independents, and later also by the Catholic church. The right to religious freedom is still systematically denied in many states across the world, especially communist and Islamic states, and supporting persecuted religious believers of any faith anywhere in the world should be a key priority of Christian political action today. If ever there was a firm cross-party convergence on government policy, this surely should be it.

Many Christians today are also expressing concern today about a new and intolerant form of public secularism which is curtailing the religious rights of Christians and others in the UK. In honour of our brothers and sisters in other countries who are facing real danger to life and freedom, we shouldn't call this 'persecution', but it is serious nonetheless. I don't have time to address this phenomenon here, but it has been addressed at length in a recent Theos report and in an excellent piece on the Equality Bill produced by CARE, and I commend these to you.<sup>5</sup>

Subjection to the rule of law, then, is the first kind of limit to the authority of government: government is to be limited by a just legal order which assigns and limits government powers and which prevents governments from violating the rights of its citizens.

Second, *government is limited by the existence of other social authorities*. A crucial boundary on the authority of government is set by the authority of other social institutions. In the Christian tradition many social institutions and not only government are seen as standing under God with their own vocations and mandates.

The first social institution which the early Christians were forced to defend against government was, of course, the church itself. Many historians have noted how the mere existence of a new social institution in the Roman Empire – the church as a new centre of transcendent loyalty and identity – created an entirely new social space: a space of freedom from government, a sphere in which the writ of political authority should not run. After the church, early Christians also found themselves asserting the freedom from state control of marriage and the family, and over subsequent centuries the freedom of a wide range of other social authorities, including religious houses, universities, charitable associations, even businesses and trades unions. For example, Pope Leo XIII in his landmark social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891) made a radical innovation in Christian social thought by claiming that workers' associations (trades unions) had a 'natural right' to exist and couldn't be shut down by the government. Today we often speak of these non-

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<sup>5</sup> Roger Trigg, *Free to Believe? Religious Freedom in a Liberal Society* (Theos 2010); Dan Boucher, *A Little Bit Against Discrimination?* (CARE 2010).

government institutions as civil society institutions, and defending them is a key priority of contemporary Christian political action.

A case can be made that it was the very existence of Christianity which laid the conditions for the later emergence of a genuinely free society - a civil society of free persons, and also of plural institutions standing alongside and limiting government by distributing social authority widely across society. Today, many commentators outside the church recognise the importance of a rich network of civil society institutions, each possessing a wide area of autonomy and capacity for self-governance, and thereby keeping government to its own limits. This is not to suggest, however, that such institutions have absolute autonomy: just as they limit government, so government may limit them in its pursuit of public justice.

It is helpful here to make a distinction between government as *extensive* and government as *intensive*. Government's remit *may* need to be 'extensive' in that public injustice can arise anywhere in society and so touch any institution. However, government authority may not be 'intensive' in the sense of 'going all the way down' into other institutions; it must not intrude into their core responsibilities (assuming, of course, that we can identify these responsibilities).

Let me add a remark here on David Cameron's 'Big Society' idea. *If* this idea is to be helpful, it must not primarily be about whether non-government bodies can perform services more efficiently or cheaply than government. Instead, it should mean first of all that government is simply *not entitled* to generally dominate social institutions, because these institutions possess their own inherent right to exist and govern themselves - for the sake of human flourishing. Unfortunately, a century of political ideology in Britain - left, right and centre - has suppressed this idea, dulling ordinary citizens to the idea that they have the responsibility (and can claim the right) to share actively in governing their own lives. We need to revive this idea, and there are rich strands within all three party traditions to enable us to do so. Might there be scope for a cross-party Christian dialogue on the *Big Society* idea to tease out these various strands and put them to work to assist the current debate?

It's also worthy of note that the same point lies behind the Catholic idea of 'subsidiarity'. Here, the idea isn't simply to make government smaller or more efficient by off-loading tasks to other bodies, nor simply to assign tasks to the lowest possible level of action. Instead, the 'principle of subsidiarity' calls on us to assign the right functions to the right institutions - the ones to which they inherently belong. So it is parents who have primary authority to raise children and decide on the moral and spiritual ethos in which they are educated; schools and teachers that have primary authority to set an educational curriculum; businesses that have primary authority to set their prices and make investment decisions; many other examples could be mentioned. In each case, it is never *total autonomy* which is the goal, but rather greater clarity about where *original responsibility* lies.

I recently heard Lord Wei (who advises the government on the Big Society idea) define the Big Society as 'a society in which no-one feels small'. That is a very attractive suggestion, breathing a truly Christian spirit. My point here is that one way to make small people feel big again is to entrust them with real responsibilities, not only in their personal lives, but also in the institutions in which they participate

## *Government must be representative of its people*

The third theme I turn to is that government must be representative of its people. I discuss this very broad theme only briefly - it certainly deserves more attention. Now it is of course true that in the Old Testament kings are described as being 'chosen by God'. Yet even there it is clear that this choosing involved a limited but essential role for the people in recognising a legitimate ruler. While there was no popular election in the Old Testament, kings were to represent the people, and in turn tribal elders were to represent their communities to the king. One reason for this is that the demands of the covenant were not just for rulers but also for the whole people. In this way, everyone shared in responsibility for implementing justice and righteousness.

This biblical idea of representation was developed extensively in subsequent Christian thought. In the middle ages, the idea of representation became a central theme in the theology of government. Debates about representational structures within the church spilled over into wider political thought and led to calls for rulers to consult with representatives of their subjects. Out of the Reformation subsequently arose the radical idea of 'the priesthood (and prophethood) of all believers.' This idea too gradually spilled out beyond the church and into wider society, injecting a crucial 'democratising' thrust into western politics. What eventually emerged from this Christian line of thought was not the secular modernist idea of 'popular sovereignty,' but rather the idea of *popular responsibility* to make a contribution to just government.

I suggest that the literal idea of 'popular sovereignty' is not a Christian idea at all but a secular humanist one. The dominant secular liberal view is that in an election, the tiny piece of political authority we each think we possess is transmitted through electoral procedures to those in government. On this model it is our wills that collectively authorise government (even if our favoured candidates don't get into office). But in a Christian model, political authority doesn't ultimately derive from popular will, but rather - like all social authority - from God.

Can such a difference be reconciled with modern democracy? Here is one line of Christian thought that suggests 'yes:.' In a democracy, God not only authorises the office of government but also authorises us as citizens to play a role in deciding who will fill the office of government at a particular time, and to contribute to the ongoing task of deciding what justice requires of government. Imagine how this Christian idea of popular responsibility would change our view of the purpose of elections. Instead of seeing them as assertions of popular will (or aggregations of individual 'interests'), we would see them as channels of citizens' participation in the common search for public justice.

In this way, democratic procedures can be seen as serving such a normative role. If this is so, Christians will want to see that the system is reformed to allow it to serve such a purpose better than it currently does. Here are five quick suggestions towards this end. First, we should substantially improve political education at all levels of society - especially in schools (which do it very poorly) and in the media (which routinely obscures deeper debates about justice because of its obsession with the surface conflicts of politics). Second, we should make special efforts to ensure that those groups which are often marginalised in political debates begin to get their voices heard (think for a moment who you would include in that category),

even at risk of destabilising those debates. Third, we should aim to increase substantially the level of participation both in civil society and in politics. Fourth, we should work to make our political parties bodies of true political conviction and not simply marriages of convenience or common economic interest. That is, parties should take an explicit view on the meaning of justice and allow it to shape their policies, in and out of office. Fifth, and lastly, we should work for an electoral system which facilitates a better expression of the people's convictions about justice than the current one does.

These, then, are just some of the central themes regarding the role of government that have emerged (albeit via a tortuous route) over many centuries from Scripture and the Christian tradition. They continue to be hugely important today, and Christians need to reappropriate them, revise them critically as required, develop them in new directions, and put them to work in the daily round of contemporary politics as an anticipation of the promised final reign of justice of peace under Jesus Christ.

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