

TOWARD A BIBLICAL POLITICAL SCIENCE American and Asian Lessons for Africa

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Nations throughout the continent are struggling to establish forms of government which will keep their peoples united and provide the freedoms and structure for personal and economic development. Does the Bible provide any instruction for the development of a political science for Africa and the world? John Carpenter considers some biblical principles and reflects on them in the light of his Asian and African experiences. He concludes that democracy is needed because of depraved human nature. But some of these "rights" may need to be curtailed temporarily in order to promote economic development.

INTRODUCTION

As Jesus made clear in his parable of the weeds (Mt. 13:24-30), the "sons of the kingdom" will co-exist with the "sons of the evil one" until the day of judgement. The point of the parable is that they should do so peacefully, without taking the judgement prematurely into their own hands. How they fulfill the implied imperative of this parable is the question which Christian political science seeks to answer.

To form the outline of such a science we must first survey the direct biblical statements about the state, then derive political conclusions from some of the theological revelations of Scripture and on that dual basis look seriously at the real world. For special comparison I would like to comment on the systems in my native United States, in Singapore and a general look at the developing world, drawing on my experiences in Ethiopia.

THE NATURE OF THE KINGDOM

I have already touched on what I believe to be one of the most important passages of Scripture to the church's approach to society: the parable of the weeds. In just a few verses Jesus demolishes any ideas of a "Christian state"

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before the judgement ("The Lord's Salvation Army" notwithstanding). I believe that Jesus, using this parable, does not allow "the sons of the kingdom" to imagine that by their efforts, whether by social action, political action, mass evangelism, or even revolution, the utopian kingdom of God can be realised in this era. To further emphasise this crucial point, Jesus told the parable of the growing seed (Mk. 4:26-29) in which he emphasised that the kingdom of God will expand we "know not how". The church can only proclaim the gospel of the kingdom; it cannot establish it.

These parables were told in the context of the expected soon coming of the kingdom of God on earth. That expectation was not frustrated but it was not fulfilled in the way that the Jews were assuming it would be. The Jews of Christ's time were expecting that God would send his Messiah, "the Son of Man" (Lk. 17:20f). They had assumed that the new David would come to liberate them from the humiliating oppression of the Romans. Instead, the kingdom came among them with a demand for their true submission to the God of love.

Christians today also misunderstand the kingdom; either they believe it can come in this era by their efforts (as do some Liberation theologians, reconstructionists, and even some charismatic "spiritual warfare" advocates) or else they believe the kingdom is entirely future and cannot be introduced in this present evil age in any way (as do many dispensationalists). Evangelicalism in Africa (and America) has been accused of using the future hope of the kingdom as an excuse to avoid working to improve the world now.

Theological convictions, as always, shape how the principles of these parables are applied to the real world. I follow George Ladd's thesis that the kingdom of God has been introduced with the ministry of Jesus, is even now expanding by the sovereign work of God on earth, and will be consummated with the return of Christ.

If God's Kingdom is the gift of life bestowed upon his people when he manifests his rule in eschatological glory, and if God's Kingdom is also God's rule invading history before the eschatological consummation, it follows that we expect God's rule in the present to bring a preliminary blessing to his people (Ladd: 1974, 72).

The Kingdom of God is both "now" and "not yet". The "now" tells us that we can develop a Christian political theory and we can be involved in the political institutions of our world, bringing some of the benefits of the kingdom to bear. The "not yet" warns us that there will be no utopia, no Marxist-like "new man" in this present evil age. The former is the prod to involvement while the latter is the jolt of reality.

There are, of course, other Scriptures that deal with the issues directly or indirectly relevant to church-state relations. One is the fact that the kingdom of God is in fact a *kingdom*. Much of the Old Testament is a story of God raising up and dealing with a monarchy. In fact, the legitimacy of the monarchical form of government is never directly challenged in the Bible (though the Israelites' motivation for desiring a kingship is condemned by the Lord through Samuel). Only when the king forgot that his authority came from God (as with Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel 4) or used his position of power to abuse his subjects (commonly railed against by the prophets) does the king come under God's condemnation. Some would interpret this as a support for authoritarian government; at least, it shows that government is necessary; anarchy is not a Christian ideal.

“RENDERING TO CAESAR WHAT IS CAESAR’S”

To this the New Testament adds: "Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established" (Rom. 13:1). Christians, then, recognise a divinely sanctioned role for civil governments even when they are headed by otherwise wicked people. This text (Rom. 13:1-7) is often used by Christians as the *locus classicus* on church and state and it is usually done so in a way that emphasises the call for submission to the state. That emphasis is just; it is the emphasis of this particular text but it is mistaken for Christians to think that that is all the text implies or that it is all the Bible has to say on church and state. Even in the midst of Paul's call for submission to the state, the apostle seems to have a certain kind of state in mind. He writes, 'For rulers hold no terror for those who do right...' We know, though, that there have been many rulers (including a certain Nero who would in a few years of the writing of those words terrorise the Christian community who threaten those who do right. Of course, Paul knew that. He had already suffered persecution from local governments. The fact is that Paul is not laying down an absolute; he is not saying that Christians must always submit to everything that every government commands. I believe he is teaching a general principle that in the day to day affairs of life Christians ought to submit to government. Caesar does not have absolute authority. That belongs only to God.

Of course, we must not overlook Jesus' famous words, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Mt. 22:21). In their specific context this saying applies to paying taxes but I think it is evident (from the very nature in which Jesus phrased his response) that Jesus intended to lay down a much broader principle. What that principle is, that is, what exactly belongs to Caesar takes the whole of Scripture to find. However, it is evident here that

belongs to the state. There are parts of life that are to be rendered to God alone. Therefore, authoritarianism is excluded.

It is easy to see how for centuries nations dominated by Christianity have used the teachings of Scripture to justify "the divine right of kings" or, if I may coin the phrase, "the kingly right of divines" (i.e. Caesaro-Papism or Papal-Caesaroism). Only the conviction, at times stronger than others and stronger in the Western church than in the Eastern, that there was a realm that belonged only to God, distinct from Caesar's, tempered this authoritarianism. They showed that their understanding of biblical teaching was incomplete.

THE RULE OF LAW

What needed to be added to this recipe for authoritarianism were the doctrines of the Reformation: particularly the authority of Scripture, the priesthood of all believers and the differentiation between the institutional church and the kingdom of God. The authority of Scripture was decisive in theology because the centre of authority shifted from the church, with the people (the *pontifex maximus*) to the written Word of God. (Actually, in theory the Bible had always been the centre of authority but the church, represented by the popes and councils were accountable to no one and taught that their interpretation was authoritative.) With Scripture given to the laity, the concept of *lex rex* (whether they knew it or not) became prominent. God ruled over his people through his law, the Bible, and not through a priestly aristocracy. The priesthood of all believers and the conviction that the kingdom of God is, in fact, *of God* (and not of this world) went even further to reinforce this notion.

If the law of God could be the centre of authority over God's people, "the sons of the kingdom", it is not difficult to believe that the law could be king over even the kings. It is only a small step from the theological idea of the authority of Scripture to a political doctrine that all, whether peasant or monarch, must equally be ruled by objective law. The "rule of law" is an idea that finds affirmation and a parallel in Christian theology. *Lex rex* is part of the Christian political theory for this age. Constitutions and the idea that no one is above the law grow out of these concepts.

INALIENABLE RIGHTS

The Right to Life

One of the central affirmations about the nature of humanity in Christian theology is that we are made in the image of God (*imago Dei*). We are much more than the species that happened to get lucky at the evolutionary casino.

We are a little lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honour (Ps. 8:5). We have been so invested with worth by our maker that the second greatest command (like the first) is that we love one another; we are prohibited from killing each other (except in extreme circumstances) because of that image we bear (Gn. 9:6). Our right to live is inalienable; only those who purposely take it from others can have theirs taken from them.

Here I introduce the important concept of inalienable rights. I define these kinds of rights as qualities with which we are endowed by our Creator and only he can justly take from us (unless we are guilty of unjustly taking them from others). When I say "no one" I mean *no person!* This includes kings, army generals, prime ministers, or majorities. They cannot be cancelled by a Caesar's edict, a parliament's bill, or by a referendum. Of course, we should not think of rights as a claim upon God; we have none but we do have claims upon each other. Even the most insignificant person can make a claim upon the whole world that he has a right to live.

The Right of Faith

There are inalienable rights. Life is one of them. I believe faith is another. When God set our first parents in the garden of Eden, he gave them the freedom to choose whether they wanted to obey him or Satan. God could have, but did not, impose the correct choice on them. Even in mainstream Calvinism the original freedom of choice of our first parents is preserved in the covenant of works. Also God is omniscient, all-wise and all-loving. If anyone could justly force a decision of faith on another, it is the Lord. But he restrained himself. He restrained himself, not out of a lack of ability, because he is omnipotent. He could get any human being to do anything he wants and make it seem like a free choice in so doing. Yet he does not and even if he did, that is only his right. Jesus bids us but he does not impose himself upon us. True faith simply can not be imposed. Therefore it is a gross abuse of authority for any government, even if it were evangelical, to legislate faith.

Christians have a much harder time at allowing people the same freedom when they get into power. Augustine approved of state persecution against the Donatists. When Christianity became the state religion of the Roman empire, it wasn't long before Christians started persecuting pagans and Jews just as they had been persecuted. But if even God would not impose a decision of faith on Adam and Eve, how dare anyone take it into their hands to do so. No one, absolutely no one, has the right to tell another what faith they can and cannot believe. Not even having the true faith, which I believe evangelicals have, and which Muslims believe they have, gives people a right to impose it on others.

Faith should not, and cannot, be forced on or prohibited from another. This is why Christians should be guardians of everyone's freedom of religion -- not just their own. We don't support this right because we think all religions are the same. That is an insult to the other religions and a denial of the unique revelation of the gospel. But, as Jesus showed in the parable of the growing seed (Mk. 4:26ff), the kingdom of God grows as God mysteriously extends it. We cannot spread the kingdom by trying to harness political power. We can, though, respect the rights of others while all the time we pray that they use that right to choose, like Joshua, to serve the Lord (Josh. 24:15).

Therefore, I believe that the separation of church and state is right and best for both. However, that does not mean that Christians should withdraw from political participation; in fact, the Church should seek to influence government policy in a way that they believe is in the best interest of the whole nation. Christian communalism that pits the desires of the Church against the welfare of the nation or of broader humanity (e.g. the crusades) is fundamentally unchristian. It is a violation of our command to love and serve our neighbour. If a Christian enters politics, he does so to serve the whole nation and not a partisan for his fellow believers. The separation of church and state, a term coined by Thomas Jefferson, is a barrier that restricts the state from interfering with the freedom of religious organisations to practice peacefully and without hindrance. It does not merely keep religion from dominating the state but it prevents governments from favouring one religion or discriminating against any faith. This kind of separation of church and state can be defended by fervent Christians and can give them a framework in which they can work to bring Biblical principles to bear on national problems for the good of the whole nation.

As an application of this principle to the Singapore context, Christians should insist on the right to worship of such banned groups as the Jehovah's Witnesses, however much we may disagree with their theology. Christians, including missionaries, should not seek to use civil power as a tool to hinder the growth of groups with which they are competing.

The Right to Justice

Not only has our Creator endowed us with certain inalienable rights, chiefly life and faith, but he has commanded us to "do justice" (Micah 6:8). Justice, by definition, is the same for everyone regardless of whether they are rich or poor, powerful or weak, Chinese or Indian or Caucasian or African, Christian or not. Justice means getting what one deserves whether it be rewards or punishment; it should not be used as a code word for "socialism" or retribution as some are prone to do.

Unfortunately, there is a carnal tendency of Christians to exchange justice for "just us". This command is active, not just a passive suggestion that we not practice injustice ourselves. The prophets still cry out that we be bastions of justice; we must stand up for justice for everyone whether they share our faith or race or tribe or not. There is no room for tribalism among Christians.

During the crusades Christians killed Jews and Muslims because they believed that that was God's will. Most of us now would know better than practising those atrocities in the name of the God of justice but we may passively sit back and allow injustice to carry on without our raising an interested eye brow. In the South of the USA Christians for decades tolerated the heinous sin of racism because they were too blinded by their culture and numbed by their "narrow piety" to see inalienable rights and feel the cruel injustice inflicted on their neighbour. After all, that neighbour was a "nigger"; he's not one of us, so why should we care? We care because he is made in the image of God and because God, the judge of the whole earth, demands that we do right.

Inalienable rights, notably life and faith, and the active practice of justice must be what the Christian citizen demands of his government. If he settles for anything else, he is failing to be the salt in his nation.

Therefore, the government for this present evil age, truly built upon the whole Word of God would necessarily be a restricted government; one that knew that there are certain areas beyond its jurisdiction. I believe that that kind of government is only found, in the long term, in a democracy. Though Confucians hold out faith in a sagely gentleman ruler, the Christian doctrine of original sin tells us, even if interpreted liberally, that such gentlemen rulers will be few and far between. On the other hand, one can argue just as well that the masses who make up the electorate are just as depraved as the strong man at the top of many Asian governments. However, the genius of democracy is that even if the electorate is depraved, they do not have absolute authority as do dictators.

The Right to Economic Development

However, there is a complicating factor: poverty. A government may be just in theory, respecting the inalienable rights of its citizens, but if the economic development of the nation is such that people, though they are safe from unjust executions, die from famine or preventable diseases then their inalienable rights are being taken away just the same. Perhaps they are not losing their lives due to the conscious decisions of despots and their secret police, but they can scarcely enjoy the blessings of liberty if they are starving to death. Economic development plays an important role in the type of government that a country

should have.

TEMPORARY RESTRICTION OF DEMOCRACY

It is the theory of some, like Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew, that too much democracy at an early stage of economic development can hinder growth due to the undermining of the pro-business government's ability to organise the nation; too much power going to labour unions and the ability of socialists to appeal to the masses. Lee Kuan Yew maintains that governments should restrict some freedoms in the developing stage in order to allow businesses to grow; the government is to ensure that the increasing prosperity is fairly distributed (fairness being based on performance). Due to the phenomenal economic growth of Singapore and some of the other East Asian "economic tigers", Lee's ideas should be taken seriously. I see no reason why Christians cannot tolerate, for the time being, the curtailing of certain secondary rights, such as completely free elections, free expression, etc., in the interests of bringing the benefits of development to a poor nation. However, Christians can never support the violation of inalienable rights for any reason. To place development over justice is crass, but to stress democratisation and ignore what must be done for development is other-worldly and doomed to failure. In other words, inalienable rights must always be preserved but the degree of democracy which a nation should adopt may depend on the level of development it has attained and upon other cultural characteristics. Democracy, though, remains the goal in this age.

Therefore, the restriction of the rights of communists, the guidance of the media, the propagandising of capitalist economics and the strict punishment of anti-social behaviour, all done in part to make the island friendly to investors, was understandable when Singapore had an average per capita GDP of \$600, an enormous housing problem and was crime infested. As those problems dissipated and Singapore approached developed status, it should have moved to more democratisation as far as the cultural factors would allow.

While all change, as with evangelistic ministry, must be on a person to person level, to turn around a whole nation - yes, and a whole continent - will probably require a leader. Leadership committed to clean government and meritocracy, that understands economics, the dynamics of development and which can calm the troubled waters of tribal conflict - injecting some mellowness - is desperately needed in Africa. One African like Lee Kuan Yew, a man who knows the way the world works and how his own people think and is willing to take any means necessary (hopefully short of atrocities) to snatch the nation up by its bootstraps, could revolutionise all of Africa. Just as Singapore has become an economic dynamo in Southeast Asia, spurring development in the region, so too could an African nation become an African dynamo if the right

leadership arose and certain cultural changes were made. This government would probably be authoritarian. Our prayer for Africa should include a prayer for a "sage-king", a "gentleman-ruler."

"Lee Kuan Yew has repeatedly argued that Singapore's rapid, sustained, and stable economic development has been dependent upon his autocratic control, whereby individual rights and interests must be subordinated for the greater long term good of the national community" (Brown 1996: 209). Before the American or the Christian reacts against this as the crass triumphing over the spiritual, remember the children who will unnecessarily die today. One factor in Asian economic growth some point to is "good government" by which they mean a powerful, pro-business -- indeed business-like -- administration. Lee Kuan Yew said, "whether in periods of golden prosperity or in the depths of disorder, Asia has never valued the individual over society" (Choong 1994: 268). For Lee this is the Asian rationale for detaining communists without trial, putting suspected gangsters in "preventative detention," sometimes draconian punishments and bending the labour unions to the imperatives of economic competitiveness.

Cultural factors, too, complicate the ability of a nation to sustain democracy. Democracy depends on such practical demographic features as high literacy and relative prosperity as well as on such abstract civic virtues as moderation (except in the zeal to preserve justice), a feeling of national identity that over-rides tribalism (ethnocentrism) and regionalism, a willingness to serve the common good, and a willingness to compromise: all, in part, manifestations of Jesus' command to love our neighbour as ourselves. The church should more conscientiously seek to be an institution that nurtures those virtues since we are eager to move every society as close as possible to the ideal of the kingdom of God.

THE IDEAL OF DEMOCRACY

Can a non-democratic nation preserve inalienable rights and justice in the long term? The Confucianist would say "yes;" the "gentleman ruler" will take care of his people. But the Biblicist must say "no," not in the long term. Granted that for a few, brief shining moments there may be a real gentleman ruler here and there, but the Bible tells us that men are not generally so trustworthy. Here the Christian doctrine of sin makes its contribution to our formation of a Biblical political theory.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "I am a democrat because I believe in the Fall of Man. I think most people are democrats for the opposite reason" (Lewis 1943:192). In fact, when Lewis approvingly quoted Aristotle as saying that some men are born slaves he added, "But I reject slavery because I see no men fit to be masters.

Mankind is so fallen that no man can be trusted with unchecked power over his fellows." Lewis, here, turns the traditional enlightenment defence of democracy on its head. Democracy is not mandated by the dignity of humanity; it is necessary because of the depravity of humanity. Lewis finds another reason for the concept of human rights: to prevent sinful people from abusing one another, especially to prevent the strong from abusing the weak. "Legal and economic equality are absolutely necessary remedies for the Fall, and protection against cruelty" (Lewis 1943). It's not even that power corrupts, it's that people are already corrupt and putting them into a place of unaccountable power will give them the opportunity to show that corruption.

Thus, democracy is not plainly spelled out in Scripture but the principles are there just waiting to be assembled. We must be concerned with justice, the preservation of inalienable rights, and due to human depravity, we know that justice will only stand a long-term chance if there is a real accountability of those in power. Accountability over those in power may take many forms depending on who is in the position of offering the accountability. A developing nation may only be able to handle a limited circle of those offering accountability due to poor education or insufficient understanding of the dynamics of economic development. A democracy offers the widest participation of the interested population efficiently possible and, therefore, it offers the most accountability if the other civic institutions are operating properly to maintain republican virtues.

Democracy, then, is Christian. Preserving it, or seeking to develop a nation to the point of being able to achieve it, should be our concern. Therefore, we must also be seeking to nurture, as far as the present condition of a nation can tolerate, the secondary rights that are necessary for cultivating a true democracy: like the right of free speech, free press, right to assemble, the right to a fair trial, fair elections, etc. I do not believe these are inalienable rights because there may be rare circumstances when they may be curtailed. You can't yell "fire" in a crowded cinema; the press shouldn't be allowed to publicise military secrets just to sell more copies; no one should be able to threaten the development of a poor nation because they preach tribalism or communism. But on the whole, these rights are essential if a democracy is to be genuine. How can you make a legitimate decision at the polls if you do not have access to unbiased information or dissenting opinions are not allowed to express themselves? So where these rights are constantly suppressed or where people are afraid to exercise them for fear of being fired or humiliated - or worse - there the land is not fertile for true democracy. Where there is a famine of democracy, the harvest of justice will be dismal.

When I explained inalienable rights, I insisted that not even the majority has the right to do certain things. In the light of human depravity we could also

add that the mob can be just as cruel as the despot. Socrates was unjustly condemned by a democracy. Just as no monarch should be absolute, neither should any majority be absolute. The "mob" needs accountability too. The type of democracy that I believe most fully reflects all the Biblical data is a republic in which there is a vision of powers, checks and balances and institutions set up to ensure minority rights.

Charles Colson puts it this way:

The republican form of government best reflects the Judeo-Christian world view. It recognises human sinfulness and the need for checks and balances to power. It is based on the belief that law is objectively rooted and thus bending on the present, that tradition is to be respected, that citizenship demands civic responsibility and often, delayed gratification. And most important, a republic is consistent with the belief that government is God's ordained instrument, not simply a mouth piece for the masses. (Colson 1992:)

CONCLUSION

Africans should know what Americans will not tell them: a good, efficient government is more important, especially for the destitute, than free election. Yet, we strive for the best; we would have both, if we can.

Bread and butter politics is not enough for the Christians. Though longing for the life saving benefits of development to be extended to all, in the midst of that development we cry out like the prophets for justice to roll down like a never failing stream.

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