GOVERNANCE IN REFORMED THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The relationship between Church and State has known many historical variations, ranging from a State dominated by the Church to a Church controlled by totalitarian power, as well as a spectrum in which both respect their own sphere of authority.

One of the outcomes of the European Reformation was the development of freedom of conscience, in which the importance of free expression was recognized.[1] Parallel to this development, the State was seen positively as a guarantor of freedom, often against Church abuses of power. Rights, beliefs, and privacy in society were increasingly protected, and human flourishing was promoted. These two forms of sovereignty, the individual conscience and the political entity, have sought balanced compromises ever since.

Jean Bodin (1529-1596), a contemporary of Calvin, formulated the principle of the indivisible sovereignty of the State which became an incentive for modern systems of power.[2] Centralization is a driving force of modern societies, with the development of individual freedom in a legal framework, and the choice of government through suffrage. The increasing concentration of power in the State has also given rise to monolithic structures, sprawling bureaucracies, debt, and taxation, to say nothing of corruption. Colonialism, war, and invasive control were further downsides. The role of institutions mediating between the State and the individual, including the family and the Church, became an important issue. These forms of cultural and social life have gradually lost their influence, vitality, and independence.

This story invites us to revisit the biblical theology of Church and State and to see how the Reformation contributed to the arrival of the modern world and also how its teaching on covenant and social consensus might still be an ideal for today.

1 RULERS AND RULING

Reformed Protestantism in theory declined the separation of sacred and the profane areas of life in the *polis*, the city.[3] The sovereignty of God holds good for all the world and is the authority binding authorities. Life, in its various aspects, social, cultural, or political, is a human response to the

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[1] Paul Wells, « Freedom of Conscience, Reformation and the Advent of Secularism », in Pierre Berthoud, Pieter Lalleman, eds., *The Reformation: Its Roots and Legacy*, Eugene, Wipf & Stock, 2017, 191-219.

[2] Jean Bodin, *Six Books on the Republic* (1576). Bodin's Republic refers to Plato not to modern republicanism.

[3] *Polis*, the Greek city state, from where the word *politics* comes.

Creator. How is this holistic faith to be put into practice? How does the State relate to the kingship of Christ? Two biblical considerations are relevant.

1. The role of the ruler in Scripture

There is no formal theory of civil rule in Scripture, but there are some biblical indicators both within and outside of Israel, before and after Christ. Some constant features are overlooked, because they are not expected in the context of a story of salvation.[4]

Social entities such as nations and their rulers are called upon in Scripture to acknowledge God. The revelation given to Israel calls for the recognition of creational principles of justice, and those who fail to do so are held accountable by God.[5] Sodom is destroyed because of its wickedness, Jonah calls on Nineveh to repent of its injustices, Isaiah and Jeremiah have lengthy oracles on the fate of the nations that will be judged by God for their barbarity.[6]

Rulers are exhorted to exercise justice and righteousness, and what is considered a transgression in Israel is not permitted elsewhere on the pretext that the nations have no written Mosaic code of law. The prophets constantly issue condemnations against the sins of nations other than Israel and Judah and their leaders (ironically called « gods » in some of the Psalms). Nations that turn away from divine justice will perish. Judgment is not limited to wrongs committed in or against Israel.[7] Habakkuk 2.12 foretells the same calamity for the Chaldeans as Micah 3.9-12 does for Israel, in a context where the same sin is denounced. In Ezra 7.11-28 Artaxerxes, a pagan king, is advised to apply God's law. While practices and the results vary, all nations share the same obligations. God blesses those who practice justice and brings down those that ignore it. The best illustration of this is the book of Proverbs, which sets forth truths free from nationalistic concerns and gives sayings about universal government.[8]

Proverbs 14.34-35 sums it up: « righteousness exalts a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people » and « a servant who deals wisely has the king's favor, but his wrath falls on one who acts

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[4] The biblical perspective as expressed by Kuyper is much broader than that indicated by Bertrand de Jouvenel regarding the concept of sovereignty and divine law, *On Power: Its Nature and the History of Its Growth*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1945, chap. XI. Cf. Greg Bahnsen, *Theonomy in Christian Ethics*, Phillipsburg, P & R, 1984, chaps. 18, 19.

[5] Lev 18.24-30, Prov 14.34, 16.12, Ps 110.5ff.

[6] Gen 13.13, 18.20, 2 Pet 2.6-8; Jonah 3.8-9, Isa 13-24, 45-47, Jer 46-50.

[7] Ps 9.16-17, 79, Amos 1.3-5, 2.13.

[8] Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs*, Downers Grove, IVP, 1964, 16ff, Richard Bauckham, « Wisdom for the Powerful: Proverbs 31.19 », *The Bible in Politics*, London, SPCK, 1989, 41ff.

shamefully. » The notion of universal submission to the law of creation, present in many Psalms, appears in a particular light in Psalms 2 and 110.

Universal ethical obligation is expressed in Romans 1.18-2.11 and chapter 13. Paul states that everything is subject to divine law because every person or institution in creation falls within its sphere. God's law is known naturally apart from the special revelation of Scripture being written in the human conscience and it enables the discernment of good from evil. Romans 13, commenting the role of the pagan governance, lines up with the Old Testament perspective regarding the function of the law outside of Israel. A Jewish rabbi would have made the same comments as Paul regarding the nations.

2. Governance and authority in Scripture

1. According to divine law, political authority must be exercised so as to promote the good prescribed by God, for its representatives are his « ministers ».[9] Paul exhorts believers to pray for them, so as to live in peace with « godliness and dignity »; this is the goal that good government must aspire to, according to 1 Timothy 2.1-3. Another function of the authorities is to limit evil. Like God, civil rulers have a duty to reward good and punish evil. The Sermon on the Mount specifies, in Matthew 5.39 and 7.1, that disciples of Jesus do not take revenge, and Romans 12.19-21 adds that they leave it to God's wrath, expressed through the magistrate. Likewise, Jesus did not abolish the law; he fulfilled it by exhorting a practice of justice superior to that of the Jewish leaders. Far from abolishing political authority and challenging its calling to exercise justice, these texts maintain it. Governments are called to rule under God and to reward good and punish evil. Rulers exist to uphold God's justice. This authority does not exist apart from Christ's rule.[10]

2. Rulers exist by God's will; if they are overthrown, it is also by divine decree. As a contemporary of Nero, Paul knew full well what autocrats do, contrary to their calling to do good. Caesar is subject to God; Pilate has power only to the extent that it is granted to him from above.[11] Romans 13 explains that the exercise of authority by a ruler, as by any authority, is a form of service to God and to one's neighbor. This text is both normative and practical; those who govern are expected to do so according to divine justice, and the Christian accepts their authority. This justice-obedience dynamic is broken when rulers fail to fulfill their legitimate function. It is impossible to refer to

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[9] Servants, *διάκονός,* Romans 13.4, see 7, 12, 13, 16, 19.

[10] Paul A. Marshall, *Thine is the Kingdom: A Biblical Perspective on the Nature of Government and Politics Today,* Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 1984, 46-47.

[11] 1 Cor 2.8, John 18.36.

Romans 13 as an excuse for political injustice.

3. The calling of rulers is to exercise the authority divinely entrusted to them (whether they know it of not) so that justice reigns according to God's law. Justice exists in the promotion of equitable situations or fair practices. This is a calling for order in line with God's will, to actively care for what is good, to show compassion, and to give to each their own. Human life flourishes when God's order of creation is respected.

4. The State is not the only institution called upon to uphold justice in society; authority is also exercised in businesses, schools, families, churches, and so on. Governance becomes unjust if and when it oversteps its authority in these spheres in dictatorial attitudes. It is legitimate and acts justly if it ensures that positive relationships are established in and among these various institutions.

5. A State that strays from this calling runs the risk of being an anti-State and becoming a servant of Satan. This is the case when it establishes unjust laws in place of norms prescribed by God's law. Jesus calls Herod a fox (*alopeki*, feminine, perhaps a subtle reference to Herodias) and Paul describes the civil authorities of Corinth as being blinded by the « god of this age ».[12] A lawless State is therefore subject to criticism and sanctions. It ultimately falls under divine condemnation: Rome will be judged because of its immoral practices.[13]

3. Jesus Christ, King of kings

The State is not free to conduct its affairs autonomously, neglecting God's law, although that is the quasi-universal attitude. God establishes rulers so that they respect his requirements; eventually his judgment falls upon any power that turns away from them. This is why the preaching of the New Testament is not apolitical. There is a unity between the message of the Old and the New Testaments, but also a progression. In the Old Testament the nations are called to practice God's law, which expresses the universal kingship of the Creator. By fulfilling the law, Jesus inaugurates the new creation. All are called to become his servants, and governance is renewed in obedience by serving Jesus Christ, the King of kings, to whom all authority has been given.

This is the biblical norm: government in the service of Christ, by the people, for the people. But how to practice it remains beyond the grasp even of those who see it, because this world is evil, and it will only be attained in the perfect equity of the new creation. It does not mean that now the State must become a Church (in Christianizing the civil authority) or that Christians are called to

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[12] Luke 13.32, 2 Cor 4.4.

[13] Rom 13.4, Rev 13.2 and 14.9-12. Cf. 1 Thess 2.17, Acts 17.7-10, Rev 14.8, 15-20, 17.12, 18.23. Oscar Cullmann, *The State in the New Testament*, New York, Charles Scribner, 1956, on Paul and the Revelation of John on the State.

form Christian political parties under democracies; indeed, the distinction between the eschatological Kingdom of God and the Church has to be respected and this has rarely been the case.

2. THE KINGDOM OF GOD AND THE CHURCH

The Kingdom is God's eschatological, final, and absolute reign, when sin and its consequences will be erased, and where peace will be established by God for his creation. This future reality is anticipated in the first coming of Jesus Christ. In Luke 10.9-11 Jesus announced that the Kingdom is so near that it is already present among those who follow him.

Christ's message is not revolutionary in the accepted sense of the word, but it is totally different from anything else. He identifies with the poor and criticizes the rich, but he does not seek power or to overturn the economic causes of poverty. He draws no social or political conclusions from his message. His preaching offers hope of change by bringing people into the new creation here and now. The good news that God delivers people takes precedence over social renewal. Human virtue never leads to newness of life, which only comes by divine intervention. The meek will inherit the earth, not through being meek, but by God's salvation in Christ.

The Kingdom as God's universal reign is much more than any vision of utopia. Jesus and Paul never called for political or social change now. Paul did not order Philemon to free his slave Onesimus. However, their words and acts were an implicit critique of the existing order. Luke 6.20-25 sympathizes with those who weep now in suffering and who hunger, but it is not about social change. It has implications that are social and religious, because this situation cannot last.[14] The same applies to the political order. Jesus never openly came out like the zealots against the Roman occupation, and he refused to be crowned as a counter king on popular demand. The good news of the Kingdom depends on *God* himself making a world without oppression, anticipated in Luke 1.52: « He brings down the mighty from their thrones and exalts the humble. » This puts everything in a different light. Nothing will escape God's eschatological transformation. The religious message of the Kingdom of God has profound implications because it is already at work.

The Church is not identified with the Kingdom because, as a human institution, it exists in a fallen world and its members are sinners like others, even though they are saved by grace. It points

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[14] Herman Ridderbos, *The Coming of the Kingdom*, Phillipsburg, P & R, 1969, 185-192. Cf. Gerhardus Vos, *The Teaching of Jesus Concerning the Kingdom and the Church*, New York, American Tract Society, 1903, Raymond O. Zorn, *Church and Kingdom,* Nutley, Presbyterian and Reformed, 1962.

to the future beyond the present evil age. The Kingdom is present in hope in the Church.

The Church is a sign of the future Kingdom

« The Church (*ekklesia*) is the place where the gifts and powers of the Kingdom (*basileia*) are granted and received. It is, further, the gathering of those who, as the instruments of the *basileia*, are called upon to make profession of Jesus as the Christ, to obey his commandments, to perform the missionary task of the preaching of the gospel throughout the world. In every respect the Church is surrounded and impelled by the revelation, the progress, the future of the kingdom of God without, however, itself being the *basileia*, and without ever being identified with it. »[15]

From this perspective, the Church's mission in the world is to:

• Confess the eschatological kingship of Christ as the one supreme authority;

• Serve the Kingdom by proclaiming that Jesus is Lord and by calling for all to recognize his lordship;

• Witness to the struggle between Christ and the powers of this world through prophetic acts and words. This implies an opposition to everything in the *polis* (hence politically) that is contrary to God's law and justice fulfilled in Christ: oppression of the poor by high-ups, legal injustices, anti-life policies, materialism, hedonism, discrimination, racism, ideologies, the plundering of property, selfish ambitions, etc.

• Constantly realign with God's word in continuous re-formation.

3 THE KINGDOM OF GOD IN STATE AND CHURCH

The State and the Church function alongside each other, and both are accountable to God. The Kingdom of God has not disappeared into heaven with Jesus, but is present throughout the world. Human history and culture is the history of the progress (or regress) of the Kingdom.

Under Christ's reign, State and Church have complementary functions. But how can this be understood? The question is relevant because of the arrival of Muslim immigration and Sharia law

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[15] *Ibid.*, 355-356.

with those who do not know the freedom of conscience that is standard in the West.[16] This is an important issue for public theology.

Relations between Church and State are represented by historical models of the way in which the two work together in society:

i) The Church is considered to be the Kingdom of God on earth, the realm of grace; it rules over natural realities and therefore takes precedence over the State (Roman Catholicism);

ii) The Church is a part of the State for the social good (the Christian national State: Anglicanism, Lutheranism and its two kingdom doctrine, the Orthodox Church, etc.);

iii) The Church as an alternative kingdom of justice is separate from civil society and its laws (most Anabaptists and representatives of the Radical Reformation);

iv) The Church and the State are juxtaposed entities, founded on different principles (the secular view and the position of certain evangelicals who hold to a Church-world dichotomy);

v) Finally, the Church and the State are distinct and independent social realities, but they share a common foundation (the Reformed Protestant position and many evangelicals).

These different positions are not mutually exclusive, and often overlap in practice. A common denominator between them is that Christ's authority is considered to be exercised directly in the Church and indirectly in the State, because of their different functions and objectives. The State maintains civil order according to the principles of law and order. It protects its citizens and national frontiers and respects freedom of conscience and speech. The Church, on the other hand, is concerned with justice according to God. It holds the power of the keys and oversees the consciences of the faithful within the limits set by Scripture.

The State has no role in promoting religious faith, which is a matter of divine grace. Its temporal authority has no bearing in the spiritual realm. It has no business legislating the organization of Church life or worship beyond the laws of society as a whole. While the State exists to promote the temporal good, the Church calls people to eternal life and acts in a manner that is not directly political.

Christians have not always been malleable subjects. The existence of a community to which one belongs by conscience is a challenge for the State, and a factor contributing to the rise of

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[16] Cf. Christine Schirrmacher, '*Let There Be No Compulsion in Religion' (Sura 2.256): Apostasy from Islam as Judged by Contemporary Islamic Theologians*, Bonn, VKW, 2016.

constitutional government in the West.[17] The Huguenots, for example, were a thorn in the flesh of the French Bourbon monarchy, which took religious diversity to be a threat to national unity.

Nor has the State always fulfilled its role properly with regard to the Church, most often by overstepping its rights and colonizing the religious sphere. As a superior authority it has encroached on the freedom of faith and conscience, which is often increasingly the case today with digital surveillance. This is a challenge for religious and social freedoms. This is not new. The Roman imperium was regarded by Christians as the beast of Revelation 13.18.

Many Christians, particularly in former Roman Catholic countries, view secularism positively. By establishing a power that is independent of the religious sphere, the State freed people from Church oppression. It rejected the tyranny of traditions that stifle religious diversity, enabled the reconciliation of opposing groups, and moderated extremism by promoting tolerance. It enacted laws that may align with biblical law, whereas an authoritarian Church sometimes has done the opposite. Beyond these advantages, the secular State promotes values such as equal rights, freedom, a certain quality of life, peace, social justice, and democracy. There is much that is positive and to be thankful for.

To reject the project of secularism outright would be as unwise as turning a blind eye to the complex problems it has raised. The time has come to take stock. Secularism has relied on residual Christian values. When these disappear humanistic morality is poor gruel. Neither communism nor national socialism succeeded in providing moral foundations for an autonomous State, while in many African States the cult of personality or tribalism has promoted corruption.

The problem is that the secular age lacks a morality grounded in transcendent spiritual principles. Guiding ethical principles seem to have taken leave of political life.[18] The policies of those in power are not expressed by principles but by spin. Hence the superficiality, the excessive 24 hour coverage of all that is political, and doublespeak. Disillusionment is widespread and votes are cast against rather than for.

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[17] Marshall, *Thine is the Kingdom*, 50.

[18] Zygmunt Bauman, Leonidas Donskis, *Moral Blindness. The Loss of Sensitivity in Liquid Modernity*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2013, 17-49.

The Church has become marginalized in public life, which may be an advantage because it offers a chance to do something other than following the rat pack. This is an encouragement to explore what good governance meant in the Protestant heritage.

4 THE MAGISTERIAL REFORMATION AND GOOD GOVERNANCE

Wherever the Reformation spread, new freedoms resulted, and it made an important contribution to the development of the social good in renewed legal structures.[19] So claimed Dutch philosopher Groen Van Prinsterer, who considered that Calvinism is the origin and guarantee of constitutional freedoms.[20] The subject is no doubt complex, but three questions are important: Where does the source of authority lie in society? What is good government in the exercise of power? Can anything be learned from the Reformation for today? How have these questions been answered in the Reformed tradition?

1. Martin Luther

The answer to the first question above was framed during the Reformation in a criticism of the relationship between the Roman Church and civil authority. As early as the late Middle Ages, the power of the Church, and in particular the power of the pope was challenged by conciliarism. Marsilius of Padua was bold enough to suggest, a century before Martin Luther, that the pope should be challenged and deposed, since the origin of divine right lies with the people. Luther was one of the heirs to such radical questioning. In his thought, a distinction between the two kingdoms is fundamental. Luther opposed any confusion between these realms — a situation inherited from Constantine — in which the Church seeks to dominate the world and the world tries to govern the Church. Although they both exist under Christ's rule, the devil, said Luther, is always trying to mix the two distinct kingdoms.[21] The spiritual realm of the Church is wholly different from the principles that govern the world, and a separation is necessary. Even though both are under Christ's authority, the rules governing them are different.

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[19] Harold J. Berman, *Law and Revolution,* II. *The Impact of the Protestant Reformations on the Western Legal Traditions,* Harvard, Belknap Press, 2003, 16-17, 73-80. Berman describes the process: the western legal tradition was founded on Christian belief in a God-given law. Until 1914 « it continued to be widely believed in the West that the ultimate source of authentic positive law are divine laws, especially the Ten Commandments, natural law discovered by reason and conscience, and historical tradition expressed in sources such as Magna Carta. » A century later, two world wars and the Soviet revolution intervening, this consensus vanished.

[20] Groen Van Prinsterer, quoted by Abraham Kuyper, « Calvinism and Politics », in *Essays on Calvinism*, 78-79. Cf. Robert D. Knudsen, « Calvinism as a Cultural Force », in W. Stanford Reid, ed., *John Calvin: His Influence in the Modern World*, Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1982, 13, Harro Höpfl, *The Christian Polity of John Calvin*, Cambridge University Press, 1982, Peter A. Lillback, « The Relationship of Church and State », in Matthew Barrett, ed., *Reformation Theology*, Wheaton, Crossway, 2017, 675-720.

[21] Martin Luther on Psalm 101, *Luther's Works*, St. Louis, Concordia Publishing House, 1956, XIII, 194.

Luther was able to appeal to the German princes to limit the pope's power. Secular authorities bear significant responsibilities, for they are God's representatives in their domain. To resist the prince is to resist God. Luther, however, had no illusions on the subject: A wise prince is as rare as a white blackbird, and a just prince is even rarer, quipped Brother Martin. He added, that princes are, as a rule, the greatest fools or the worst scoundrels on earth, and one should not expect much good from them, especially when it comes to spiritual matters.[22]

Luther's thinking is paradoxical: one may wage war for the prince but not against him, because insurrection is like a vast fire that devastates a country.[23] The only remedy for tyranny is to pray for justice. Luther was suspicious of rebellion, which seems unusual in light of the Reformer's renowned courage. It can perhaps be understood because he spent his entire life in small electorates, absolute regimes with underdeveloped legal systems.

2. John Calvin

Calvin's position, influenced by the humanism of his time, differs from Luther's.[24] « Shakespeare loves a king, but Calvin rarely mentions one with admiration. »[25] He deplored Machiavelli's philosophy of power. Recognizing that religion cannot avoid political issues, he took up Luther's distinction between the two kingdoms, but with broader applications. Two factors are significant in his position.[26] First, his understanding of sin contrasts divine and human justice. The gulf between God from man implies that human institutions and divine authority are never on the same level. The living word of God stands over against human power, whether cultural, social, historical, or ecclesiastical. Every human issue is to be measured by the justice of God as Lord. Calvin's conception of the relationship between the word of God and human situations is tinted by the Chalcedonian definition of the two natures of Christ. The divine is other than the human and can never be confused with it. Yet it is not separate from it; it addresses life in all its aspects. Calvin's thought is non-dualistic because, the word reigns over all that is natural or historical.

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[22] Luther, *On Secular Authority* (1523), in *Oeuvres*, II, Paris, Gallimard, 2017, 34.

[23] Luther, *Against the Plundering and Criminal Hordes of Peasants* (1525), in *ibid.*, 218.

[24] Calvin's first work, which demonstrates the influence of humanism, was a commentary on Seneca's *De clementia* (*On Mercy*). Seneca together with Cicero was much admired during the Renaissance. He wrote around 55AD to his former pupil, the young Emperor Nero. It was a guide as to how a sovereign should use absolute power. The ruler's legitimacy depends on mercy and reason, not fear and tyranny.

[25] John T. McNeill, « Calvin and Civil Government », in Donald McKim, ed., *Readings in Calvin's Theology*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1984, 261.

[26] Éric Fuchs, *La morale selon Calvin*, Paris, Cerf, 1986, 61ff., and François Dermange, *L'éthique de Calvin*, Geneva, Labor & Fides, 2017, chap. 5 on Calvin and politics

God reigns supreme over both the State and the Church, but not in the same way. Man is active as a ruler in the both spheres which are to be kept separate, but both are under divine authority. This may well be a fantasy for modern autonomy, but it is a bulwark against human authoritarianism. Man thinks he *can* do whatever he *wants* to do, and he wants to do whatever he is *capable* of doing. Calvin opposes this with the idea that authority is not in any human being or institution.

Echoing Luther, Calvin stated that two worlds coexist in human beings: an inner, eternal, and personal world, and an outer world where life is subject to temporal and historical constraints.[27] The first world resides in the soul, or in the inner man, and concerns eternal life, while the second world is concerned with establishing civil justice and external morals.[28] Different principles apply in both worlds. This means that the State is called to leave the Church to itself and, conversely, that the Church's authority in society is not of a political nature.[29] In Calvin's view the Church must never be an institution of political power. It does not rule over people but draws them into communities of faith.[30]

Creation with its various relationships is connected to God and exists in covenant with him.[31] If both ruler and citizen are under God's lordship, human beings serve each other in mutual relationships which echo the primary vertical relationship.[32] In the social and cultural spheres humanity is called to fulfill the great commandment. « Equity because it is natural, cannot but be the same for all, and therefore, this same purpose ought to apply to all laws, whatever their object. Constitutions have certain circumstances upon which they in part depend… (but) all equally press toward the same goal of equity. »[33] Equity is an expression of the perpetual law of love.

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[27] Matthew J. Tuininga, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought. Christ's Two Kingdoms*, Cambridge, University Press, 2017, David VanDrunen, « The Context of Natural Law: John Calvin's Doctrine of the Two Kingdoms », *Journal of Church and State*, 46 (2004.3): 503-525.

[28] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.xx.1.

[29] William J. Bouwsma, *John Calvin: A Sixteenth Century Portrait*, Oxford University Press, 1988, chap. 13. Cf. Arnold Huijgen, Karin Maag, eds., *Calvinus frater in Domino*, Göttingen, Vandenhoek & Ruprecht, 2020.

[30] Paul Wells, « Freedom of Conscience, Reformation, and the Advent of Secularism », in Pierre Berthoud, Pieter J. Lalleman, *The Reformation. Its Roots and Legacy*, Pickwick, Eugene, 2017, 206-208.

[31] Cf. Paul Wells, « Reformational Thought and the Social Covenant », *Themelios*, 31 (2006.3): 32-47.

[32] Calvin considered that the Christian nations of his time recognized this covenant through baptism. This is highly debatable, above all when Calvin uses it as an argument to criticize the Roman Church, which, in his view, did not respect the covenant. Peter A. Lillback, *The Binding of God: Calvin's Role in the Development of Covenant Theology*, Grand Rapids, Baker, 2001, 37.

[33] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.xx.16.

Because of this, Calvin had a more positive view of government than his counterpart in Wittenberg, which lead him to be critical of abuse. The ruler is a « minister of God » in his kingdom. As such, he has a calling that is not only legitimate before God, but also the most honorable of all.[34] By upholding law and justice, a ruler defends the kingdom of God indirectly by establishing and maintaining public justice and against anarchy and heresy. In his discussion of social relations, Calvin proposed three principles: the civil authority makes and enforces laws; the law itself enables governance; and the people are called to obey the law. The influence of the covenant is evident in the fact that natural law and justice, reiterated by the Decalogue, are a link between the ruler and the ruled, with the consent of both set in a legal framework.

These propositions may well seem abstract or outdated to us. Calvin himself had no illusions about the compliance of citizens or the virtues of those in power. He was wary of the lack of realism that overlooks the flaws of human nature. Because of the difficulties of governance and the potential for abuse, political authority is best shared by many rather than wielded by one. If equity is the goal of the law, it is best achieved through power sharing. Multiple rulers are desirable, because power is dangerous. That rulers ideally are elected officials, highlights a republican tendency in Calvin's thought. Speaking of the people of Israel, Calvin says: « The best condition for the people is when they can choose their own shepherds by common consent. When someone usurps supreme power by force, it is tyranny; and when men become kings by hereditary succession, this does not seem compatible with liberty. »[35]

At the time of the Reformation when absolutism, hereditary rule, and social rigidity were standard fare, this approach must have been a breath of fresh air. The Protestant movement was oriented toward republicanism, the separation of powers and spheres of authority, of State and Church, and favored the consensual nature of social contracts. There was, however, a tension in Calvin's thought between the idea that rulers are instituted by God as his servants, and the excesses of tyranny: « When tyranny loses concern for justice, there are no limits to its wickedness; and complaints do not soften, but only serve to aggravate its cruelty. Tyrants do not desist from their excesses and abuses until the common people are completely despairing. »[36] From the perspective

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[34] *Ibid*., IV.xx.4.

[35] Calvin, *Commentary* on Micah 5.5, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.xx.8. McNeill, « Calvin and Civil Government », 272.

[36] Calvin, *Commentary* on Exodus, 5.9.

of the governed, tyranny and injustice are violations of human dignity, because humanity demands justice. Freedom disappears with the excesses of tyranny.

For the Reformers, who learned from Augustine that great kingdoms are great thefts, the papacy was the quintessential example of tyranny. The same is true of any accumulation of power in great empires.[37] What is to be done to resist injustice? Calvin asserts the need for a discriminating obedience toward civil authority: « It is true that we must obey princes and other established authorities, but on the condition that they do not deprive God, who is the sovereign King, Father, and Lord, of the rights that belong to him. »[38] Passive disobedience is legitimate in the face of tyranny. Calvin cites as an example the refusal of the Jewish midwives to comply with Pharaoh's order to kill the male children, but he goes further. When a ruler exceeds the limits of his office, he may be held accountable. This should not be done by citizens in an anarchic manner or through open revolt. It is the responsibility of the secondary magistrates to oppose a tyrant. Calvin balances power and counter-power, the idea of a system of checks. So he introduces an element missing from Luther's thought. God raises up among the citizens those who restore order: « Sometimes he raises up open avengers from among his servants, and arms them with his command to punish the wicked government and deliver his people, oppressed in unjust ways, from miserable calamity. »[39] While being wary of revolt by private individuals, he justifies the role of the people's representatives in facing down tyranny. Toward the end of the *Institutes*, Calvin wrote a paragraph whose consequences he likely did not anticipate. This means that unjust rulers are not above the law but subject to it. If necessary, they can be brought to justice by designated representatives of the people. This idea is one of the foundations upon which constitutional democracy was subsequently built. Calvin further asserts, in his commentary on Matthew 22.21, that if rulers usurp any part of God's authority, one must not obey them, except to the extent it can be done without offending God, referring to Acts 5.29 « We must obey God rather than men ».[40]

While Calvin's thought has no claim to originality, it differs from Luther's in that it proposes the ideal of a State promoting the common good, with checks and balances designed to limit power. This would exist where those in authority use their ability to promote the welfare of the people.

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[37] Calvin, *Commentary* on Isaiah, 47.10. Cf. Pierre Viret, *Dialogues du désordre: qui est à présent au monde*, Genève, Labor et Fides, 2012 (1545).

[38] Calvin, *Commentary* on the Acts, 4.19.

[39] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.xx.30.

[40] *Ibid*., IV.xx.32.

This model suggests that, in practice, a ruler presides over a set of associations, properly called a *commonwealth*. The administration of justice involves the protection of the weak, with all receiving their due.[41] Good government can be summed up as follows: « no kind of government is more happy than one where freedom is regulated with becoming moderation and is properly established on a durable basis, so I reckon most happy those permitted to enjoy this state (and who) constantly labor to preserve and retain it. »[42] The responsibility of the ruler is to safeguard the freedom of the people. It is within this framework that resistance to injustice and reforms can be considered. The Magisterial Reformation was a seedbed for the renewal of the established social order.

3. Protestant resistance

The Reformed Churches in Europe were in a delicate position, as they had to fend off accusations of sedition while often finding themselves in the minority vis-à-vis the established powers.[43] It was therefore natural that the limits of resistance to injustice, particularly in the realm of freedom of conscience, became an issue. Calvin's theory, with its ideal of elected representatives and authority by consensus rather than through a hierarchical structure, gave rise to a critique of the divine right of kings, prevalent in Catholic monarchies that held to the idea that the king is primarily ordained to serve his own interests before those of the people.[44] Such views were rejected by Calvin's successors. Théodore de Bèze went further in his treatise *On the Right of Magistrates* (1575). A jurist like Calvin, he upheld the right of lower magistrates to resist the government, even by force of arms, in order to defend freedom of conscience.[45] This line of thought was taken further by his Scottish contemporaries, John Knox and George Buchanan, and later by Samuel Rutherford in his *Lex, Rex* (1644). A king is not above the people, for power is entrusted to him by the people themselves and conferred upon him to the extent and in the manner that they deem appropriate. The authority of those who govern is not absolute; it is relative and tied to the security and well-being of

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[41] Bouwsma, *John Calvin*, 210. Cf. André Biéler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought*, Geneva, WCC, 2005, 302ff, and Edward Dommen, James D. Bratt, eds, *John Calvin Rediscovered: The Impact of His Social and Economic Thought,* Louisville, Westminster John Knox Press, 2007.

[42] Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV.xx.8.

[43] Cf. John Witte, *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

[44] Norbert Rouland, *L'État français et le pluralisme*, Paris, Odile Jacob, 1995, 198: « Royal authority has four characteristics: it is sacred, paternal, absolute, and subject to reason. Ultimately, the main teaching is submission to power, out of respect for tradition, State forms, and trust in God's plan. »

[45] Théodore de Bèze, *On the Right of Magistrates Over Their Subjects*, English translation in the Constitution.org Archive. Cf. Paul Wells, « The Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre, The Huguenots, and Taking up Arms », in *My Kingdom Is Not of This World*, Westminster Ministers Conference, Dewsbury, 2021.

their people. Power does not belong to the ruler; it is delegated and originates in the people.[46] This is not far removed from the social contract theory developed by John Locke, followed by the American Declaration of Independence, which states that « Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. »[47] In England at the time of the Glorious Revolution of 1690, the destitution of James II and the accession to the throne of William of Orange were done in accordance with principles set forth by Rutherford.

Protestantism made an important contribution to the development of social freedoms, even though the theory proposed by the Reformers and their successors is quite different from the sovereignty described by Bodin, as well as from the secularized social contract proposed by Jean-Jacques Rousseau and his followers for whom the idea of obedience to God of rulers and the ruled disappears from political life.

4. Johannes Althusius

Why Johannes Althusius, who is little known, if not totally unknown? His significance has been neglected, and lies in proposing a paradigm entirely different from current democracy which is a median between right and left. Althusius proposed a theoretical federal vision of governance that is a consensual approach to social life on a level other than political partisanship.

Althusius was a German who spent most of his life in the Netherlands. He developed a political theory that embodies reformational principles, and has been called the father of modern federalism.[48] Federalism was a means of reconciling the identity of the individual and the common good of the community. Institutions exist for the individual, not the opposite. He took seeds cultivated by Calvin and planted them in the field of political theory. The *Politica Methodice Digesta*, written in 1603, appeared in its final form in 1614.[49] Althusius was primarily a jurist who sought to apply the biblical notion of covenant to social life. What arouses our interest is his definition of a tyrant as one who violates word and oath. Half a century before the execution of

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[46] Samuel Rutherford, *Lex, Rex*, Harrisonburg, Sprinkle Publications, 1982, 82. This treatise, written in prison to refute a book on the divine right of kings by John Maxwell, became a manual of Protestant opposition.

[47] Declaration of Independence, July 4, 1776, para. 2.

[48] Federalism, from the Latin *foedus*, covenant. Federalism is the idea of balances between levels of power through agreements allowing for both unity and independence in government. Cf. Michael Burgess, *In Search of the Federal Spirit,* Oxford, OUP, 2012.

[49] Johannes Althusius, *Politica*, Indianapolis, Liberty Fund, 1995. See Daniel J. Elazar's introduction and his « The multi-faceted covenant. The Biblical approach to the problem of organizations, constitutions, and liberty as reflected in the thought of Johannes Althusius ». Available at the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, https://dje.jcpa.org/articles2/cov-althus.htm

Charles I of England and before the reign of Louis XIV, he asserted that absolute power is tyrannical and that a dictator may justly be deposed and executed if tyranny is incurable.[50]

More interesting than this is his comprehensive vision of law, political life and its structures, their functioning, and their foundations, which offers the most complete expression of Reformed political thought ever undertaken. Even though his propositions have been overshadowed by the rise of the modern State, with its hierarchical structure and the ideology of national sovereignty, Althusius pointed to a path that history did not follow, an alternative for civic life. *Politics* was the first book to present a theory of federal republicanism rooted in a theological and covenantal view of human society. It proposed the idea of political associations established by the consent of citizens rather than being imposed from above.[51] Politics is the life of the city and a matter of *symbiosis*, or lives organized harmoniously.

This definition of politics is itself surprising, since the word primarily evokes the notion of opposition and disagreement, because of ideological conflicts. What is interesting about Althusius is his decentralization of the political sphere, an idea disagreeable in itself for the ambitious. Politics is not so much the exercise of power as it is the art of living together. As a means of communal life it involves making mutual agreements or alliances. This gives rise to an oath or a vow through which a bond is established for living in agreement. Trust is indispensable to any collective action by which human beings commit to one another in social covenants. Communication is a communion of life, not a verbal act, but the exchange and sharing of everything for the good of individuals in society. A covenant binding people who consent to live together bears fruits of justice, peace, and happiness. Underlying this definition, are echoes of the second table of the Decalogue and the summary of the law taught by Jesus with the love of the neighbor as oneself.[52]

At the heart of a republic, the *res publica,* justice has a central place, reflected in fairness in relationships and harmony in social and cultural interactions. Freedom is safeguarded by forces that create harmony in both the public and private spheres. In private associations, Althusius highlights the family and the professional league, which he calls the *collegium*. Since human beings are created in the image of God, their relationships with others are determined by their genetic and

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[50] Althusius, *Ibid.*, 191, 199.

[51] Commentary by Elazar, in Althusius, *Politica*, xxxv.

[52] Althusius's argument is rooted in a notion of natural law. Cf. Johannes Althusius, *On Law and Power*, Grand Rapids, Acton Institute, 2013.

family heritage, their gifts, and their personal abilities. These domains reflect creation and the associations they give rise to are more permanent expressions of human life than public organizations, which change over time. People at grass roots level relate by sharing with loved ones in the context of their family and culture. They have a social heritage shaped by family, language, cultural background and work. The primary context of the human being is the family.

Individuals find fulfillment in work that makes the most of their natural skills in a community with shared abilities and goals. These associative structures include workers' guilds (in the language of the time), academic or scientific institutions, religious associations, labor unions, and private associations. They have their own rites of passage and rules for their members who commit to activity with others. So people help and support their peers and loved ones, in a social life based on covenantal agreements.[53]

The Church is a voluntary association and an extension of family life. As such it is a community whose members covenant together in the same faith. Its goal implies the separation of Church and State. It is an error to think that the Church can be the Church *of* the nation, even if it is indeed *at home in* its nation because of shared language and culture.

As early as the beginning of the 17th century, Althusius proposed a separation of powers to promote freedom of worship and tolerance for different expressions of faith in society. The Church does not seek to engage in politics to influence public life. Its purpose lies in the private realm where individuals express their commitment to God and where God looks into hearts. It is neither above nor under the State but distinct from it, promoting freedom and independence of belief. A pastor should not be a political representative at the national or local level, as his calling lies elsewhere.

For Althusius, the public sphere comprises three distinct, non-hierarchical spheres: the city, the province, and the republic. The principle of representation operates in these spheres. Public life allows families and private associations to be represented through suffrage. Cities and provinces are federations within a given territory and express the sovereignty of the people. A senate or a central government represents the people from whom it has its mandate in the public sphere. There is thus a separation of the public and private spheres, with different powers of decision.

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[53] Althusius, *Politica*, 28ff, provides many biblical examples to support his point of view.

This model proposes layered forms of governance at complementary levels, and distinguishes between the legislative and executive branches, separating the legislative process from its application.[54] A constitution is adopted with the consent of the people by a senate, which has the right to legislate for public associations. An executive branch oversees the distribution of goods and services, and ensures the respect of law and order. The prescriptions of the Decalogue must be present in the laws (*lex propria*) formulated by the magistrate.[55]

Althusius modeled a federated republic, a society built on covenants between human beings, in which participation, personal commitment, and communication are essential. The individual takes precedence over the collective, but exists within the collective realm through covenants and natural laws that are the foundation of life in society. Participation in collective life is expressed from the grass roots up. This adds up to a rejection of statism, where power is imposed on the individual by hierarchical authority, with a concentration in a governing body. Sovereignty belongs to the people, because they are God's creatures. Rights are therefore rooted in creational and personal structures, not in abstract constructs.

In broad terms, Althusius's theory shows how Protestantism contributed to the development of freedoms and the cultural flourishing of individuals and groups in society. Modern politics has taken a different path — that of sovereign State that seeks to order everything. The sirens of utopia led to the dystopias of the last century, causing the deaths of millions of victims. Progress and world salvation are still on the agenda of those in control. The challenge is to avoid more barbarity, especially with the rise of social Marxism, digital control, and ecological ideology.

CONCLUSION

Western Christians have been gaslighted into thinking that their ruling superiors are benevolent pragmatists. Maybe it was so in the past, in the age when nations were nominally Christian, but they are not anymore. Governments, political parties, public services, legal systems, multinational corporations, and the media consistently promote what is in their interest but is often contrary not only to the people's interest, but also to God's law. Democracy is in name only and an elected government that follows its election manifesto once in power is rather a rarity.

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[54] In contrast with Spinoza who thought that the Old Testament applied only to ancient Israel within its own land, Althusius considered that it provides a model of a republic based on the association of tribes bound by a common covenant, within the framework of a unified legal constitution. This is the fundamental model of federalism.

[55] Althusius, *Politica*, 134, 139.

Freedoms gained by the Protestant Reformation are vanishing as Western culture descends into an amoral wasteland. The last fifty years bear witness to a drift away from the laws of creation and their Mosaic republication, particularly regarding the sanctity of life, family, marriage, and human relations. Progressive legislation introduces laws that are often contrary to creational structures under the mask of humanitarianism.

The believing Church is now a minority comparable to the early Church or the French Huguenots. A blueprint is needed to be an effective minority in an alien society. This could be ordered like Beza's strategy: the honor of God, the confession and promotion of biblical truth, resistance to the darkness that opposes it, and willingness to sacrifice for Christ's Kingdom. Tactics will obviously be different than in his day and will no doubt give rise to debates among believers.