

Doing Justice to Religious Diversity: Theological Foundations for “Principled Pluralism”

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Abstract

This article argues a theological case for “principled pluralism,” a particular stance regarding the proper attitude of the state towards the plural religious affiliations of its citizens. Its central claim is that the role of the state is both to defend the religious freedom of adherents to all faiths and to maintain a public square equally open to contributions from all faiths without publicly privileging any faith, even Christianity. It develops the argument in critical dialogue with a “Christian nation” position, according to which nations can exercise corporate religious agency, should be formed where possible according to Christian principles, and in which Christian citizens should call their governments to support the nation’s Christian character.

Keywords

Principled pluralism, religious diversity, state, Christian nation, public square

Introduction

The issue of how contemporary states should respond to the reality of religious diversity in their territories is becoming one of the most contentious challenges of twenty-first-century politics. It is evidently bound up with a series of debates taking place under the heading of “multiculturalism.”¹ But the phenomenon of religious diversity merits distinct treatment because of the need to distinguish between demands on states arising from cultural identities and those arising from religious identities, however closely the two are interwoven in concrete life.² The challenge of religious diversity is faced not only by Western liberal democracies but also by states which came later to democratization (such as India, Indonesia, Lebanon, Nigeria, and South Africa) and by authoritarian states (such as China, Myanmar, and, increasingly, Russia). Many countries in the latter two categories have had long experience of coping with religious diversity, with varying degrees of success. While my principal expertise is in liberal democracies, my central argument would apply, suitably contextualized, to any state.³

In European liberal democracies, the challenge of religious diversity is intensifying for at least three reasons. First, the substantial increase in global migration in recent decades has brought to such states significant numbers of residents adhering to unfamiliar religions. The public demands of such “new” religions seem strange and unsettling—as was the case when a devout Hindu sought permission to be cremated on an open-air funeral pyre in Newcastle, England, in 2009 (the request was conditionally granted but only after a legal struggle). Second, the steady advance of secularization has made religion of *any kind* appear increasingly eccentric in public settings, and in need of special justification. Third, some religious communities have been undergoing internal processes of “deprivatization.” No longer content with accepting the privatized role traditionally allotted to them by liberal secularism, they are increasingly demanding not only public protection of their religious freedom but also public status and political influence. In much of Europe, Islam is the most visible player in this respect, as seen, for

¹ See Jonathan Chaplin, *Multiculturalism: A Christian Retrieval* (London: Theos, 2011), <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Reports/Multiculturalism.pdf>.

² This interweaving gives rise to, for example, what sociologists call “ethno-religious” communities, such as the British Pakistani community, which is overwhelmingly Muslim.

³ For a creative application of “principled pluralism” to Indonesia, see Benyamin F. Intan, “Religious Freedom and the Pancasila-Based State of Indonesia: A Neo-Calvinist Idea of Principled Pluralism,” 11th Annual Gaffin Lecture, March 14, 2018, Westminster Theological Seminary, Philadelphia, USA.

example, in demands by Muslim women to wear distinctive clothing in public settings.⁴ But a newly assertive conservative Christianity—Catholic, Evangelical, and Orthodox—is also vocally resisting the progressive secularization of public life and the marginalization of Christian faith which, it is claimed, results from it.⁵ This was reflected, for example, in the (unsuccessful) campaign in the early 2000s for the inclusion of a reference to God in the proposed new constitution of the European Union.⁶

One distinctive Christian political response to the fact of religious diversity—prominent especially in North America—is known as “principled pluralism.”⁷ Principled pluralism is not a doctrine of “religious pluralism,” according to which all religions are complementary routes toward the divine. Many principled pluralists (including me) reject this doctrine. Rather, it is a particular stance regarding the *proper attitude of the state* towards the plural religious affiliations of its citizens.⁸ Deriving from longstanding commitments to religious toleration, its central claim is that the role of the state in a religiously diverse society is both to defend the religious freedom of adherents to all faiths (including secular ones) and to maintain a public square equally open to contributions from all faiths.⁹ The state may not deliberately or officially prefer or privilege any such faith, even Christianity.

Many Christians in liberal democracies seem intuitively to support something like this view, even if only for pragmatic reasons (noted below). Many non-Western Christians also endorse it because they have never lived in majority-Christian states, have never experienced Christian privilege, and have long been accustomed to settling for, at best, equal status for

⁴ W. Cole Durham et al., eds., *Islam, Europe and Emerging Legal Issues* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2012).

⁵ See Timothy A. Byrnes and Peter J. Katzenstein, eds., *Religion in an Expanding Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). “Evangelical Christianity” here includes both churches that are long established in European nations and newer immigrant churches, often made up of African Pentecostals.

⁶ Guy Milton, “God and the Constitution,” in *God and the EU: Faith in the European Project*, ed. Jonathan Chaplin and Gary Wilton (Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2016), 91–207.

⁷ James W. Skillen, *Recharging the American Experiment: Principled Pluralism for Genuine Civic Community* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994).

⁸ US-based evangelical commentator Os Guinness calls it “chartered pluralism.” See Os Guinness, “Tribespeople, Idiots, Citizens?,” in *The New Religious Humanists: A Reader*, ed. Gregory Wolfe (New York: Free Press, 1997), 190. See also Os Guinness, *The Global Public Square: Religious Freedom and the Making of a World Safe for Diversity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2013).

⁹ On the theological foundations of religious freedom, see Thomas Schirrmacher and Jonathan Chaplin, “European Religious Freedom and the EU,” in *God and the EU*, ed. Chaplin and Wilton, ch. 8; Rex Adhar and Ian Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), ch. 2.

Christianity, or, more typically, to striving and longing for freedom from marginalization or oppression. While for defenders of what I will call the “Christian nation” stance, principled pluralism would be experienced as a significant loss, for many non-Western Christians it would amount to an enormous gain. Whatever their contexts, however, Christians endorsing principled pluralism should seek robust theological reasons for it.

Principled pluralism is, of course, far from “the only game in town.” The “Christian nation” response to religious diversity is not only still alive but winning increasing support. According to this view, a primary goal of Christian public action is to defend or restore the nation’s essentially Christian character. This involves reminding a nation of its Christian heritage and, through a variety of means, leveraging the influence of that heritage to shore up the fabric of the nation today. This position is not committed to treating all faiths equally in the public realm.

The Christian nation stance is prominent in the United States of America, where it is associated with a highly problematic form of Christian “exceptionalism,” long championed vocally by the “religious right” but also endorsed in more measured terms by, for example, conservative Catholics associated with *First Things* magazine.¹⁰ The Christian nation stance has recently been profoundly sullied by the overt or tacit support lent to President Donald Trump by many “Christian nation” defenders, especially those claiming the title “Evangelical.”¹¹ Meanwhile, a more moderate and less triumphalist version has been attracting growing support in certain European circles. In most European cases, defenders of a Christian nation position endorse the fundamental institutions and practices of liberal democracy (even though they hold that these cannot be sustained on an entirely secular foundation). By contrast, in the United States of America, large numbers of Evangelical Christians have tacitly endorsed President Trump’s profoundly illiberal style of governance, while in Hungary, Prime Minister Victor Orbán has openly defended a model of “illiberal democracy” as consistent with his idiosyncratic rendition of “Christian Democracy.”¹²

¹⁰ <https://www.firstthings.com/>.

¹¹ Katherine Stewart, *The PowerWorshippers: Inside the Dangerous Rise of Religious Nationalism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019). For critiques of the Christian nationalism behind this support, see Ronald J. Sider, ed., *The Spiritual Danger of Donald Trump: 30 Evangelical Christians on Justice, Truth, and Moral Integrity* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2020); Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power Is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).

¹² Shaun Walker, “Orbán Deploys Christianity with a Twist to Tighten Grip in Hungary,” *The Guardian*, July 14, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/14/viktor-orban-budapest-hungary-christianity-with-a-twist>. The great majority of post-war European Christian Democrats espoused something like principled pluralism.

Critics of the Christian nation view suggest that it is merely a defensive, reactionary position, advanced by those who cannot come to terms with their own loss of power and status. This is undoubtedly sometimes the case, especially in the United States. But advocates claim to find strong theological foundations for their stance, and it is important to test these against those adduced in favor of principled pluralism. A pragmatic defense of pluralism will not be enough. It will not do simply to say that once we lived in a Christian nation, but now we live in a religiously plural one and so we must accommodate our expectations and demands to the sheer fact of religious diversity (crudely, “We lost—let’s get used to it”). For that could be taken to imply that if we achieved an electoral majority again (as some will claim has occurred in Hungary under Orbán’s *Fidesz* party), we would be entitled to restore a public preference for Christianity. That would amount to a “strategic pluralism” but not a “principled” one: accepting plurality would be a temporary retreat on the way to the future goal of national re-Christianization.

I now compare the two positions, beginning with the Christian nation position and focusing on English articulations. Like all national variants, this has its idiosyncrasies, but the central planks of the position will emerge clearly enough.¹³

I. *The Christian Nation View*¹⁴

According to the Christian nation position, England—or “Britain,” on some accounts¹⁵—was birthed as a Christian nation and continues to be framed predominantly by Christian influences. Advocates offer different assessments of how far that remains the case, but there is a common judgment that the core of the nation’s identity—or, at least, some of its major public values, institutions and practices—remain in substance Christian. England is not simply an aggregation of individuals, the majority of whom who happen(ed) to be Christian. The very identity of the nation as an enduring corporate

¹³ Space does not allow me to engage with the most sophisticated representative of this position, the British political theologian Oliver O’Donovan. See his *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). For a response, see my “Political Eschatology and Responsible Government: Oliver O’Donovan’s ‘Christian Liberalism,’” in *A Royal Priesthood? A Dialogue with Oliver O’Donovan*, ed. Craig Bartholomew et al (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 2002), 265–308.

¹⁴ This section draws on my “Can Nations Be Christian?,” *Theology* 112 (November/December 2009): 410–24.

¹⁵ I will not address the complex debate over whether, in this context, we should speak of “Britain” (or the “United Kingdom”) or “England.”

entity depends on its continuing adherence to the Christian faith, even if many or even a majority of individual citizens no longer believe in or practice Christianity. For public institutions to neglect or repudiate the legacy of Christian faith is to undermine the unique character of the nation's identity and to put at risk its main political achievements—freedom under law, accountable government, religious liberty, democracy, strong families, education committed to truth and virtue, and so forth. The task of the Christian community today, then, is to defend the Christian character of the nation as far as possible where it is under threat and, perhaps, to extend it where circumstances permit.

Anglican former Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali has been an articulate defender of such a position. He laments that public life in Britain is steadily losing its Christian character and is increasingly dominated by a damaging “multi-faithism.” Far from heralding a tolerant pluralism, multifaitism turns out to be a cover for a coercive public secularism that is vulnerable to opponents of liberal democracy. One of his important articles, entitled “Breaking Faith with Britain,” carries this subheading: “Christianity is central to British identity, but its marginalization has created a moral vacuum which radical Islam threatens to fill.”¹⁶

Referring to England, Nazir-Ali writes, “The very idea of a unified people under God living in a ‘golden chain’ of social harmony has everything to do with the arrival and flourishing of Christianity.”¹⁷ The ceremonial public expression of this Christian character is seen, for example, in the established status of the Church of England, daily prayers in Parliament, and the national anthem. Such official forms, he says, “have the purpose of weaving the awareness of God into the body politic of the nation.”¹⁸ This Christian character has also shaped the nation from the bottom up, through the cumulative influence of biblical principles such as human dignity, conscience, consent, natural rights, equality, liberty, the common good, and—notably—hospitality to foreigners (his family comes from Pakistan). Severed from those biblical roots, these achievements become precarious: “The assumptions and values by which we live have been formed in the crucible of the Christian faith and its aftermath, the Enlightenment. This is

¹⁶ Michael Nazir-Ali, “Breaking Faith with Britain,” *Standpoint* 1 (2008): 45–47. See also Michael Nazir-Ali, *Triple Jeopardy for the West: Aggressive Secularism, Radical Islamism and Multiculturalism* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), which contains “Breaking Faith.” For a parallel Roman Catholic statement, see Aidan Nichols, “Christianity, Secularisation and Islam,” *Standpoint* 2 (2008): 44–47.

¹⁷ Nazir-Ali, “Breaking Faith,” 45.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

the result of a quite specific history, and it is not at all necessary that such beliefs and values should arise in or survive in quite different contexts.”¹⁹ For example, he warns that, if the influence of non-Christian faiths, notably Islam, continues to grow, then, “instead of the Christian virtues of humility, service and sacrifice, there may be honour, [public] piety and the importance of ‘saving face.’”²⁰ This last point may allude to practices such as “forced marriage” occurring among certain ethnic groups within the British Muslim community.²¹

Nazir-Ali concludes with a summons to Christians to regain their confidence in the gospel in public life:

Christian faith has been central to the emergence of our nation and its development. We cannot really understand the nature and achievements of British society without reference to it. In a plural, multi-faith and multicultural society, it can still provide the resources for both supporting and providing a critique of public life in this country [Christian faith] is necessary to understand where we have come from, to guide us to where we are going, and to bring us back when we wander too from the path of national destiny.²²

Nazir-Ali’s account operates on the basis of an important assumption shared by many defenders of the Christian nation position but rarely made explicit or critically examined—the possibility of *national corporate religious agency*. The assumption is that “the nation” is a responsive, corporate entity that can be called to account for its spiritual direction so that a direct appeal can be made to the nation’s government to uphold biblical or traditional Christian standards. This is the idea of a “faithful nation”: a unified moral community capable of rendering political obedience to God, which may properly be called to account if it becomes unfaithful. This in turn is rooted in the Old Testament idea of the “covenanted nation,” to which I return shortly.

The Christian nation position can be clarified by way of three further points. First, the idea of a *Christian nation* must be distinguished from that of a *Christian state*. Consider the following statement from The Christian Institute, a British Christian organization:

¹⁹ Ibid., 47.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The UK-based Muslim Arbitration Tribunal, however, asserts that such a practice is incompatible with Islam. See “Liberation from Forced Marriage,” *Muslim Arbitration Tribunal*, 2008, http://www.matribunal.com/MAT_Forced_%20Marriage_%20Report. This underlines the importance of distinguishing religious diversity from cultural diversity.

²² Nazir-Ali, “Breaking Faith,” 47.

When a state has a majority who claim allegiance to one religion, it may not enforce that one religious belief. There will, however, inevitably be a privileging of that religion at certain public ceremonies ... [and in] education, while ensuring opt-outs for those of other faiths and none To fail to privilege one religion would be for the State positively to endorse either a secular humanistic philosophy ... or a “multifaith philosophy” Currently Christianity is privileged in the United Kingdom where the majority claim a Christian allegiance The Christian Institute sees this as entirely appropriate²³

This goes beyond the Christian nation view insofar as it explicitly defends the notion that the state may, or even must, offer to Christianity *public legal privilege*.²⁴ This idea is not strictly necessary to the Christian nation position, even though the two positions are often defended together (or, just as often, conflated). Nazir-Ali, however, envisages the possibility of defending the Christian character of the nation without at the same time depending on a privileged status for a church. Confessing his growing sense that Anglican establishment in England is less and less theologically meaningful, he cites the United States of America as an example of such a situation.²⁵ What this means is that, even in the absence of a constitutional preference for Christian faith, it is still possible to issue a public appeal to the nation as a corporate entity on the basis of Christian faith. While one can hold to a Christian nation stance without necessarily favoring a Christian state, it seems difficult to hold to a Christian state stance without also implying support for a Christian nation view.

We can draw a further distinction within the Christian state position between two possible ways in which the state might express its preference for the Christian faith. It might do so by sustaining an established church, as in England or Greece.²⁶ Or it might do so by including an explicit confession of faith in its constitution, as was the case in the Irish constitution of 1937, and, surprisingly, was done during the repatriation of the constitution in Canada in 1982 (to negligible effect). Such a position has been described by an American proponent as “National Confessionalism.”²⁷ Versions of it

²³ “Christianity and the State,” *The Christian Institute*, 2008, <https://www.christian.org.uk/who-we-are/what-we-believe/christianity-and-the-state/>.

²⁴ The statement also suggests that such privilege will be “inevitable” where Christians are in the majority. It does not make clear why that will be the case, and such a claim is not essential to the Christian state position.

²⁵ Nazi-Ali, “Breaking Faith,” 47.

²⁶ For a sophisticated defense of English establishment, see Nigel Biggar, *Between Kin and Cosmopolis: An Ethic of the Nation* (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2014), ch. 2.

²⁷ William Edgar, “The National Confessional Position,” in *God and Politics: Four Views on the Reformation of Civil Government*, ed. Gary Scott Smith (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1989), 176–99. This book also contains statements of principled pluralism, “Christian America,” and “Theonomy.”

have been defended in the United Kingdom by Reformed theologians David Field and David McKay.²⁸ It is possible, of course, to advocate both establishment and a constitutional confession of faith.

The second clarification is that advocates of both Christian nation and Christian state positions are just as opposed to religious coercion and committed to religious liberty as are principled pluralists (as the statement from The Christian Institute makes clear). Nazir-Ali argues that religious liberty is itself a gift of the Christian faith and depends for its sustenance on the ongoing public influence of that faith. Whether or not that specific historical claim is valid, it is the case that a preferred or privileged public status for Christianity is compatible with extensive religious liberty for adherents of other faiths.²⁹

The third clarification is that neither the Christian nation nor Christian state positions imply “theocracy.” Theocracy literally means “the rule of God.” But not even the ancient Israelite polity was a literal theocracy, since God’s rule over politics was always mediated by some human officeholder, whether a Moses, a Samuel, or a David, whose task was to apply and interpret the law or implement other divine commands. The term is frequently used ignorantly, and sometimes mischievously, in public debates. What people really mean by it is the rule of the church or the clergy, which would be better termed “ecclesiocracy” or “clerocracy.”³⁰ Christian nation or Christian state supporters do not advocate such arrangements.

To sum up: a Christian nation stance holds that the nation is an entity possessing corporate religious agency and that its government can thus be called to account by Christian citizens and churches for departing from Christian standards. A Christian state stance also argues that the government’s upholding of such standards should include official recognition of the Christian faith, either by establishing a church or by confessing Christian faith in a constitution, or both.

²⁸ David Field, “Samuel Rutherford and the Confessional Christian State,” in *A Higher Throne: Evangelicals and Public Theology*, ed. Chris Green (Nottingham: Apollos, 2009), 85–12; David McKay, “The Crown Rights of King Jesus Today,” in *Tales of Two Cities: Christianity and Politics*, ed. Stephen Clark (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2005), 210–59.

²⁹ The claim is confirmed in Rex Adhar and Ian Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

³⁰ Contemporary Iran would be a partial example, where a council of senior Islamic clerics functions as a kind of supreme court ensuring that legislation from the (democratically elected) parliament conforms to Islamic principles.

II. *The Principled Pluralist View*

A variety of theological considerations have been appealed to in support of principled pluralism (or variants of it). One approach proceeds from an Augustinian recognition of the limits of all earthly political orders—their incapacity in a fallen world to nurture faith (or virtue) in its citizens. This is the basis for the claim that states should, accordingly, refrain from endorsing religious confessions (or imposing particular moral codes).³¹ Rowan Williams defends an approach somewhat like this, calling it “procedural secularism.”³² Roman Catholics find something like it implied in the *Declaration on Religious Liberty*, which appeals to a version of natural law.³³ The recent *American Charter of Freedom of Conscience* (2018), supported by Christians and many other people of faith, grounds it in the universal human propensity to search for truth and in the principle of religious liberty enshrined in the United States Constitution.³⁴ Other American writers such as Richard Mouw and James Skillen justify it in terms of the neo-Calvinist theory of “sphere sovereignty,” which mandates a clear separation between the jurisdictions of church and state.³⁵ Scottish Reformed theologians also appeal to elements in the Calvinist tradition to articulate a similar stance.³⁶

The political substance of the pluralist position is well expressed in *An Evangelical Manifesto*, an American statement issued in 2008. The *Manifesto* rejects what it calls the idea of a “sacred public square.” Such a model “would continue to give a preferred place in public life to one religion which in almost all most current cases would be the Christian faith, but could equally be another faith.” It goes on, “In a society as religiously diverse as America today, no one faith should be normative for the entire society, yet there should be room for the free expression of faith in the public

³¹ See, e.g., Paul Helm, “An Augustinian Approach,” in *Tales of Two Cities*, ed. Clark, 184–209.

³² Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), ch. 2. He distinguishes this from a “programmatic secularism” that seeks to impose a secularist worldview on society through the state. See also Charles Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³³ Pope Paul VI, *Dignitatis Humanae*, October 7, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651207_dignitatis-humanae_en.html.

³⁴ <http://www.americancharter.org/the-charter/>.

³⁵ Skillen, *Recharging*; Richard Mouw and Sander Griffioen, *Pluralisms and Horizons: An Essay in Christian Public Philosophy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993); Stephen V. Monsma, *Pluralism and Freedom: Faith-Based Organizations in a Democratic Society* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2012); John Inazu, *Confident Pluralism: Surviving and Thriving through Deep Difference* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

³⁶ David Fergusson, *Church, State and Civil Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Doug Gay, *Honey from the Lion: Christianity and the Ethics of Nationalism* (London: SCM, 2013).

square.” But the document also rejects a “naked public square,” which “would make all religious expression inviolably private and keep the public square inviolably secular.” It continues, “Nothing is more illiberal than to invite people into the public square but insist that they be stripped of the faith that makes them who they are and shapes the way they see the world.” Over against both a sacred public square and a naked public square, the *Manifesto* advocates a “civil public square”—“a vision of public life in which citizens of all faiths are free to enter and engage the public square on the basis on their faith, but within a framework of what is agreed to be just and free for other faiths too.” It adds, “Thus every right we assert for ourselves is at once a right we defend for others.” I spell out the theology behind the principled pluralist position through a comparison with the Christian nation stance.³⁷

III. *Theological Convergences*

In this section I identify seven core commitments which are, or could be, shared by adherents of both Christian nation and principled pluralist positions.

First, God is the sovereign governor and judge over the universe and over all nations. I mention this obvious point because it is important to note that principled pluralists do not suggest that it is because the state is outside the realm of divine sovereignty that diverse religious should be treated equally by the state; rather, they suggest equal treatment precisely because the state stands under that sovereignty. Equally, neither position needs to operate with a distinction, familiar in some strands of Protestant thought, between the sovereignty of God the Father and that of God the Son. They can affirm both that all authority on heaven and earth has been given to the ascended Christ (Matt 28:18–20) and that the kingdom of Christ embraces every dimension of reality, including the political realm.³⁸

Second, as a result, governments and political leaders stand directly under the authority of Christ and are obliged to conduct their offices as his servants, ruling justly in all areas of governance. As a phrase drawn from Psalm 2 invoked by some Christian nation advocates has it, governments must “kiss the Son” (v. 12). They will be answerable to him for the discharge of their

³⁷ Evangelical Manifesto Steering Committee, “An Evangelical Manifesto: A Declaration of Evangelical Identity and Public Commitment,” Washington, DC, May 7, 2008, 16–17, cf. <http://osguinness.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Evangelical-Manifesto-2.pdf>.

³⁸ See James W. Skillen, *The Good of Politics: A Biblical, Historical, and Contemporary Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2014).

office at the final judgment but are also accountable in the present age, even if they do not know it. I mention this point because some Christian state supporters appeal to the distinctive Reformed notion of “the crown rights of King Jesus” as a basis for concluding that states should officially confess faith in Christ. However, the difference between them and principled pluralists is not over whether Jesus is sovereign over all nations but over how this sovereignty is mediated in the current dispensation—in “this age” (the *saeculum*) as distinct to “the age to come” (the *eschaton*).

Third, a biblical vision for political reform should be informed by both Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament contains a uniquely authoritative instantiation of God’s political will for humanity in the polity of ancient Israel, and Christians should pay great regard to it. I say more on this below.

Fourth, Christians should work within available political structures to bend government and public policy into closer conformity to God’s will for the state, opposing violations of that will and working for the public good of the nation. The health of the nation would be greatly improved if public policy were shaped powerfully by a biblically informed vision of politics.

Fifth, Christian citizens, and even some Christian officeholders, may, and sometimes should, express their demands on government in the language of biblical faith. They do not need to adopt a supposedly universal secular language to gain a legitimate hearing, though they will try to make themselves intelligible and persuasive in the context of a largely secularized and increasingly pluralized public realm.³⁹

Sixth, the core principles on which a particular nation or state has historically been constructed may, as a matter of fact, have been deeply indebted to Christian influence. Christians need not apologize for or conceal this, although they will also humbly acknowledge that Christians have often contributed to profoundly unjust political deeds. A national constitution (or, indeed, that of the European Union) could legitimately acknowledge, as a matter of history and identity, the centrality of Christianity to the formation of the nation’s political culture.

Seventh, where contemporary states have been substantially influenced by authentic Christian faith, Christians should work democratically to defend such influence where it exists and extend it where it does not. While the kingdom of Christ can never be fully present until the final judgment, its real impact can be visible in “signs of the Kingdom,” already “between the times.”⁴⁰

³⁹ See Jonathan Chaplin, *Talking God: The Legitimacy of Religious Public Reasoning* (London: Theos, 2008), <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/Reports/TalkingGod1.pdf>.

⁴⁰ Some defenders of a Christian nation position seem to tend towards an “over-realized eschatology” at this point. David Field, however, argues this is not a necessary implication. “We

IV. *Theological Divergences*

The foregoing seven points amount to substantial areas of agreement. But the divergences remain theologically deep. While the Christian nation position holds that the nation's identity is essentially Christian or could become so—that it could indeed be a “faithful nation”—pluralists regard nations essentially as “communities of faith communities.” As I will now explain, this is for fundamental “dispensational” reasons: the coming of Christ radically changes the place of nations in the divine economy of salvation.

Pluralists often begin their account by pointing out that the emergence of the church introduced into pagan Roman society an unprecedented institution proclaiming an authority higher than any human political order. Christians brought with them a compelling new loyalty that undermined the existing fusion of political and religious identities. As a result, as Nicholas Wolterstorff puts it, the church in any nation “cannot express the shared religious identity of [a whole] people, since there is no such identity Whenever the church enters a society, it destroys whatever religio-ethical unity that society may have possessed. Now there is only religious pluralism.”⁴¹

Principled pluralists thus regard the state in the New Testament era as almost inevitably made up of many faith communities. At least wherever the church exists, there will never be a fully unifying public confession. Religious pluralism will be the default setting. The Old Testament command to rulers to subject themselves and their nation to the faith of Yahweh cannot be applied to rulers in the New Testament era. Pluralists argue that this conclusion is confirmed by the most important New Testament text on political authority, Romans 13. This speaks of rulers as “God’s servant for your good” (v. 4 NRSV). While this has been invoked to justify an authoritarian conception of the state, it should be read as referring to the divinely appointed “office” of government with its limited duty to punish wrong and promote the good (i.e., to “administer justice”). It should not be seen as conferring

want kings to bow down before Christ and nations to serve him; we want the nations streaming to Zion to learn the law of the Lord ... we look forward to the growing empire of the Lord welcoming the bird-nations into its branches; to seeing the nations subdued and disciplined by the Gospel. None of us knows how far these things will be actualized before the return of Christ. All of us know that they will not be fully actualized before then” (Field, “Samuel Rutherford,” 101). Later, however, Field adds: “A confessionally Christian state will not be established in England for hundreds of years, although we praise God for the possibility that we will see kings bowing down before the Lord Jesus in other countries before then” (106). That will strike principled pluralists (among others) as highly over-optimistic.

⁴¹ Nicholas Wolterstorff, *The Mighty and the Almighty: An Essay in Political Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 123.

moral or spiritual legitimacy on any particular holders of that office, many of whom will abuse its terms of office scandalously.⁴² The Roman government which Paul speaks of as God's servant not only did not confess Christ as Lord but openly rejected his rule, often persecuting his followers and at times ascribed to themselves quasi-divine status. Readings of Romans 13 today argue that Paul's language here is really a critique of Roman imperial rule, since by calling the Roman state a mere "servant" it radically deflates its hubristic pretensions.

The implication is that, from a Christian point of view, no nation can ever be "Christian" in the sense intended by Christian nation advocates. This in turn implies (although Paul himself did not have occasion to trace out the logic) that states should not take an official view of the truth of any one faith, but rather adopt a posture of even-handedness among the different faiths represented in their territory, securing public space for all. As *An Evangelical Manifesto* puts it, "no one faith should be normative for the entire society."⁴³ If this is so, then no appeal to government to protect the "Christian" identity of a nation can legitimately be made today. Christian nation advocates sometimes speak of this call for restraint as evidence of "failure of nerve" or as a "concession to secularism." Principled pluralists see it as a result of a proper theology of the religious limits of government.

Such a call for religious neutrality in no way implies that the state is *morally* neutral. Principled pluralists can agree that a "naked public square" is a myth. Any particular law or policy will inevitably reflect some substantive moral principle or other, or a combination of them; indeed, the overall design of the state may do so. Principled pluralists hold, however, that the required *unity of the state* is to be found not in a shared moral or religious vision, but rather in the more limited constitutional framework that structures it. Such a framework will embody a wide variety of institutions and practices, and Christians should strive to see that these are informed where possible by biblical notions of justice. Among them will be what *An Evangelical Manifesto* calls principles of justice and freedom for all faiths.⁴⁴

It is true, as Nazir-Ali notes, that such a framework of constitutional justice cannot be sustained indefinitely without some substantive moral

⁴² See Wolterstorff's exegesis of Romans 13 in *ibid.*, ch. 8.

⁴³ Evangelical Manifesto Steering Committee, "An Evangelical Manifesto," 16.

⁴⁴ I refer here to the unity of *the state*, a determinate institution. Because *the nation* is not such a determinate structure but a complex amalgam of multiple practices, mores, ethnic, linguistic and religious factors, its unity is much harder to identify, still less to protect. States may protect clearly identifiable aspects of national character such as language, landscape, or historic endowments but should not attempt to protect one ethnic, linguistic or religious community at the expense of others.

commitments on the part of citizens. These do need to be nurtured and shored up if the state is to remain capable of delivering justice over the long term. But against defenders of the Christian state, principled pluralists argue that such a project will not be advanced, and may even be hindered, by conferring official privilege on a particular faith. Against defenders of the Christian nation idea, they argue that it will not be advanced by issuing public appeals to the nation as if it were capable of responding in a unified way to biblical revelation—as if it could ever function as a “faithful nation.” The longer-term task of nurturing the moral virtues needed to sustain the state falls instead to better-placed agents of formation in civil society, not least the churches.

To clarify the difference between principled pluralism and the Christian nation view further, let me dig deeper into the central assumption underlying the latter—the idea that a nation can exist as a unified moral community that can be held corporately accountable to God. This assumption derives from a particular reading of the relationship between the two testaments and the redemptive dispensations to which they bear witness, which pluralists question.

Let me first note that Christian nation advocates, like principled pluralists, do acknowledge important *discontinuities* between the testaments. For example, as noted, they do not think that the principle of compulsory national religious uniformity any longer applies, and they support religious liberty for all. Almost all adherents to the Christian nation view also agree that the state may not in any way disadvantage unbelievers civilly. They also acknowledge that the New Testament seems indirectly to assume the desirability of such civil liberty insofar as it attributes to government the role of establishing conditions in which the gospel may freely be preached (1 Pet 2:11–17). Finally, nor do (most) Christian nation advocates think that the specific injunctions of the criminal or civil law of the Old Testament remain valid as positive law for states in the New Testament era.⁴⁵ Instead, they tend to favor the principle stated in the Westminster Confession that it is not the specific commands of Mosaic law that are binding on Christians today but only “the general equity thereof”—that is, the enduring principles of justice underlying them.⁴⁶

However, a key point of intertestamental *continuity* that Christian nation advocates assume is that nation-states in the New Testament era can and should display the unified moral and religious identity of the Old Testament

⁴⁵ This, however, is the case with the school known as “Theonomy.” See Smith, *God and Politics*, Part One.

⁴⁶ See Harold Cunningham, “God’s Law, ‘General Equity’ and the Westminster Confession of Faith,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 58.2 (2007): 289–312.

polity. They therefore hold that it is meaningful to attribute to them the capacity to respond corporately and consciously to God (even if without coercing unbelievers). Ancient Israel certainly was such an entity. It was constituted and defined by a specific call of God to enter into a covenantal relationship, to obey and express his will in its social and political lives, and to be ordered by his revealed law.

But principled pluralists argue that *the place of nationhood in the divine economy changes radically under the new covenant*. Nations today are not the sorts of entities that are entitled corporately to embody or profess a particular religious faith. Pluralists hold that the specific, covenantal identity of biblical Israel was only ever ordained by God for one people at one time.⁴⁷ They do not deny that there may be generic features of nationhood exemplified in Israel from which important lessons must be learned by nations today—that nations should be humble, order their economic lives justly, affirm the family, care the environment, and so forth.⁴⁸ Precisely because the Israelite polity is a uniquely authoritative instantiation of God’s political will for humanity, it must remain for Christians of “paradigmatic” significance, to invoke Christopher Wright’s useful term.⁴⁹ Yet pluralists insist that, while everything in Old Testament law is *revelatory* of God’s will, none of it is *binding* as positive law either for the people of God today or for the diverse states they happen to reside in.

Crucially, pluralists deny that God has anywhere *disclosed* that he has entered into a covenantal relationship with any nation other than biblical Israel, or that other nations are obliged, or even able, to reproduce or seek the unique covenantal relationship between God and Israel. They hold that, upon the inauguration of the new covenant, God no longer mediates his redemptive activity in the world via any special relationship with a particular nation or political order. Or, if he does, this activity belongs to the realm of providence, which remains inscrutable to us unless God specifically reveals it to us.⁵⁰ From Scripture we certainly do know generally that

⁴⁷ They do not necessarily insist on the doctrine of supersessionism—the view that the biblical people of Israel has been superseded in God’s plan of salvation and has no future in his eschatological future. That is a distinct question which has no implications for my argument. As it happens, I reject such a view.

⁴⁸ For wide-ranging assessments of how biblical law can speak authoritatively to Christians, and society, today, see Jonathan Burnside, *God, Justice, and Society: Aspects of Law and Legality in the Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Christopher J. H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2004).

⁴⁹ Wright, *Old Testament Ethics*, 62–75.

⁵⁰ The problems generated when the operations of “providence” are claimed to be visible in a particular nation are evident in Stephen H. Webb, *American Providence: A Nation with a Mission* (New York: Continuum, 2004).

God orders all nations providentially according to his will, and specifically that in the time of biblical Israel he also chose to work through certain nations (Babylon) or rulers (Cyrus) as his appointed agents. But we know this only because it is revealed in Scripture, the canon of which is now closed. Apart from that there is no other way we could attain reliable knowledge of such things. Claims by contemporary “prophets” that God has revealed special callings for particular nations are to be treated with deep skepticism by the church.

Principled pluralists, then, hold that the Old Testament people of God played a dispensationally unique, unrepeatable, and inimitable role as a divinely established political community. This was the way God first chose to reveal himself to fallen humanity. But we should not suppose (and there is no biblical basis for supposing) that there was anything necessary about that choice, as if God were somehow bound to choose an entity called the “nation” as the conduit of his first revelation. Nor is there any biblical indication that this redemptive strategy was an anticipation of some general plan to go on working through covenanted nations in the future.⁵¹

This negative conclusion is reinforced by an equally important positive one. Not only are there no chosen nations today, but the New Testament people of God today was from the beginning essentially constituted as a transnational community. In Jesus Christ the Gentiles are, for the first time, brought fully into a covenant relationship with God; in Christ “there is no longer Jew nor Greek” (Gal 3:28 NRSV). This theological truth was enacted visibly in the multicultural character of the early church described in Acts and displayed dramatically at Pentecost. What Paul describes as the “mystery that ... has now been revealed to his saints” (Col 1:26) is not some gnostic secret but rather a public declaration that the doors of salvation have been flung open to all nations. It had, of course, been God’s original intention that Israel itself was to be a witness to all the nations, but for the most part it failed in that mission. Now, God’s redemptive plan is publicly announced to the whole world and tangibly realized in the Messiah, who inaugurates a kingdom of global reach; hence the Great Commission to “make disciples of all nations” (Matt 28:19). The New Testament church, then, cannot literally be a “New Israel” in the sense of a territorial political community in which divine law prevails. Nor can biblical Israel be a model to be realized by Christians within the many diverse nations they now find themselves situated.

⁵¹ Deuteronomy 7:7–8, for example, attributes God’s choice of Israel entirely to his own sovereign elective will. It does not interpret it as a first instance of subsequent acts of election.

Conclusion

I have argued that, on the basis of a negative conclusion from the Old Testament and a positive one from the New Testament, there is no biblical warrant for holding that political nations today are capable of being addressed corporately by God as covenant partners (as the Christian nation view holds), or for attributing to them the explicit duty to confess faith in God that was imposed on Israel (as the Christian state position claims). The cumulative witness of Scripture and the historical experience of the church argue decisively for something like principled pluralism (whatever name we decide to give it). Under God today, states must establish public legal space for all faiths equally (within the limits of their mandate to secure public justice) and, as far as possible, facilitate the equal participation of such faiths in the public realm.

But let me close on a note of convergence. Christian nation supporters will, I hope, agree with principled pluralists that what truly pleases God most is not that states *officially declare* their support for Christian faith, but that they *act justly* in their concrete policies, especially towards the poor, the vulnerable, and the oppressed. The state's refraining from endorsing Christian faith does not amount to a rejection of the Lordship of Christ. Indeed, given a sufficiently large, faithful, informed and politically active Christian citizenry, the state will be submitting to Christ *in deeds of justice* even if not officially doing so *in words of faith*. That, surely, is far more important. And on that basis we can expect, and should work for, much practical agreement between adherents to the two positions, as all seek to bear witness in courageous and creative ways to God's coming kingdom within their political communities.