

The Case for Principled Pluralism

In 2007 Stephen Green, the national Director of Christian Voice took out a blasphemy prosecution against the BBC for screening Jerry Springer: the Opera. By all accounts the programme was pretty blasphemous. At the very least it was a nasty prurient, mocking piece of television which did not particularly grace the BBC.

But was Stephen Green right to attempt a blasphemy prosecution? I don't think so. Of course he went to court because of his deep Christian convictions, and in particular his biblically based conviction that Jerry Spring: the Opera was blasphemous. I agree with him. I think the Bible would label it as such. Where I part company with Stephen Green is on whether he should have pursued a blasphemy prosecution in the courts.

I am convinced that Stephen Green, and to be honest a significant proportion of Christians in this country, have misunderstood the biblical role of government and the law courts. And more than that I am convinced that a lack of careful thinking in this area is in danger of bringing the reputation of Christ into disrepute.

So for this second sermon in our series on the Bible and politics I have one aim. My aim last week was to persuade you that we should be a concerned about politics. From beginning to end the bible is interested in solid practical earthy matters concerning people and resources, and we should be too. My aim this week is to deal with a second introductory issue, before we get onto specific matters of policy in the weeks following. I want to set out the limits that I believe the bible sets on the role of government.

☞ Case for principled pluralism

I want to explain to you an understanding for the role of government which has come to be called by many "principled pluralism." Put simply it says this:

☞ Government....

Government has a limited role to provide an environment of peace and relative justice in which people from a variety of different faiths and worldviews may live with equal dignity and freedom.

This, of course, contrasts with what the majority of Christians in Britain, and indeed in Europe, have believed for the last 1500 years. The majority of Christians have understood that we live in a "Christian nation." They would believe that the government of a Christian nation has a responsibility to uphold the teachings of the Bible simply because they are the

teachings of the Bible. I believe that in biblical terms Britain never has been, nor ever will be, a Christian nation and the Bible never expected any country to be such. It may, in the past, have had a majority of people who acknowledged Biblical teaching as authoritative – to a greater or lesser extent. For that we can be deeply thankful. But it was always a mistake, and is particularly a mistake today, to think that government by default had the responsibility to favour Christians.

This morning I want to explain that from the Bible. I want very briefly to sketch out the history of this understanding of scripture. Then I want to apply it practically to a few areas of current interest in public life. Before finally thinking a little about how we should live day to day.

1. Biblical foundations

OT – Israel among the nations

Israel was responsible to obey everything the LORD taught.

But the nations were not automatically expected to:

Amos 1:3-2:5 - The limited moral accountability of nations

Judgment on surrounding nations

Setting out basic principles of "just war" – protecting non-combatants etc.

CRUCIALLY judgment for gross and obvious sins

Judgment on Israel – 2:4

CRUCIALLY for "rejecting the law of the Lord"

The nations will be brought to full obedience VOLUNTARILY

E.G. Isaiah 2 –

Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths."

Limited moral accountability of the nations, and voluntary obedience to the whole law of God.

NT – the church in the state

The church inherits the "covenant people" status

1 Peter 1:1, 2:9

1 Peter 2:9 (NIV - Anglicised)

⁹ But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.

The state has a limited moral role –

Act 18 – Gallio proconsul in Corinth

Vv14-15 crucial

Possibly recording this just because it happened

But Luke sophisticated historian – approves of this aspect of Roman Law

Gallio's role –

to maintain the peace

to punish serious crimes

to allow liberty of conscience in other matters – “words, names, your own law”

Romans 13

Last week – we must “honour” government which means being responsible citizens

Now – note the vagueness of the term “to do you good”.

A limited and broad role – not enforcing every aspect of Christian morality

Objection: no possibility of a Christian government in the first century.

Answer: part of a consistent pattern throughout scripture of a distinction between how God's people are to be governed and how the world should be governed.

- Role of government
 - To punish serious crimes
 - To promote the common good
 - To maintain the peace in a pluralistic society
- Role of the church in the nation
 - To proclaim Christ, and a vision of what is good – ONLY PERSUASION
 - To live lives which adorn the teachings of scripture
 - To live peacefully for the common good in a pluralistic society – CLAIMING NO PRIVILEGE

2. Historical support

No time – read my republished prayer notes

Idea of a Christian nation – Conversion of Constantine in 4th Century

The Crusades

Justified executions for heresy

Denial of University education to non-Anglicans

Principled pluralism – Baptists and dissenters

Some imprisoned or died for their beliefs – e.g. Thomas Helwys first Baptist minister in England – c17

19th Century – dissenters at the forefront of toleration in politics

Campaigned to allow Jews to be MPs.

Present day

Substantially forgotten in all sides

Anglicans – not really a part of Anglican theology

The Christian Institute – “a Christian nation”

Free Churches forgotten

Christian Concern for Our Nation – non-denominational but committed to the idea of a “Christian nation”

PRESENT POLITICIANS HAVE FORGOTTEN

Tolerance in a pluralist state has been slowly and painfully worked out over the last 500 years – with much bloodshed – forgotten

Example:

1960s abortion act – conscience clause for doctors

*Government ensured that women had access to abortion
– I think the abortion act was a terrible piece of
legislation, but it was passed in a legal and
accountable manner*

Government allowed conscientious objection

2007 – Sexual Orientation Regulations - forced adoption agencies to admit homosexual couples – no conscience clause

Catholic agencies forced out of the market – or became essentially secular.

Not difficult to ensure homosexual couples have access to adoption rights AND preserve the right to freedom of conscience for Catholics.

The views of the parties

Sent out a letter to main four candidates for East Oxford

So far only Andrew Smith labour, and Steve Goddard Lib Dem replied.

On equality, liberty of conscience, and pluralism

Both affirm it as an ideal

Neither demonstrated any clear understanding of the issues

Both have an essentially totalitarian view on certain key issues at least

Not clear whether the Tories are significantly different

Green Party – at least historically has tended towards totalitarian approaches to government.

3. Present day implications

Free speech

There should be no blasphemy law

Jesus was publicly abused and did not claim his rights

The Racial and Religious Hatred Act 2006

“stir up hatred” – when does disagreement become “stirring up hatred”

Much better – incitement to violence.

The gay issue

Christians should be campaigning for certain gay rights

Eg. Inheritance rights

The liberty of Christians and others to decline to encourage homosexual behaviour

Other religions

Support the provision of appropriate places of worship

Sikhs in Oxford – support them

Accept limitations on the role and influence of religions in the public sphere

Islamic call to prayer

Church bells if the majority of hearers did not want them

4. Our fundamental calling

To proclaim Christ to the world

To forgo privilege and status and to serve others

Profound implications from Christ – Philippians 2:3-8