



# The influence of Calvinism on politics

*Donald Macleod*

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In his essay on “Calvin and Civil Government” John McNeill remarks that, ‘Calvin’s awe-stricken consciousness of God carries with it no indifference to mundane matters. Rather it demands the most intense participation in the common affairs of men.’<sup>1</sup> In this, Calvinists followed the master, and thus differed radically from the Anabaptists, who simply pronounced the world evil, preached world-renunciation and held as a fixed dogma that Christians could not serve in political life. Lutheranism, too, tended to keep its distance from the secular. Politics should be left to the Prince, while believers simply enjoyed the fruits of justification by faith, uncontaminated by the distractions of public theology.

Calvin, by contrast, took a keen personal interest in the day-to-day affairs of Geneva; and while he wished to keep the clergy out of politics he made sure that the politicians were not short of clerical advice. At the same time, he himself developed a comprehensive political theology, while also fostering international connections, with the result that his political theology had repercussions far beyond Geneva.



## Civil disobedience

One of the key issues to occupy Calvinist political theologians was civil disobedience. Calvin himself took at face value Paul’s statement that the powers that be are ordained by God and that, therefore, to resist them was to resist the ordinance of God (Rom 13:1–7). This was true regardless of the particular form of government. His own personal preference was for aristocracy, or some combination of aristocracy and democracy, but while he was no lover of monarchy he regarded it as a legitimate form of government. On the other hand, he had clear

reservations about undiluted democracy: it was too easy to fall from popular rule into sedition.<sup>2</sup> Besides, government derived its power not from the people, but from God, and while, ideally, it should have the consent of the people, this was a matter of providence. If we lived under such a government, we should be grateful, but the mere absence of popular consent or approval could not warrant disobedience or resistance. Government could be legitimate even when it was bad government, as in the instances of Nebuchadnezzar and Nero.

Yet Calvin added two important qualifications.

First, submission to government can never be an excuse for disobedience to God. Here Calvin was building on Acts 5:29, ‘We must obey God rather than men.’ No obedience can be given to government when it commands what God forbids, or forbids what God commands. This was a matter of fundamental logic. Since we obey magistrates only because God commands it, it would be absurd to disobey God just because the magistrate commands it. ‘If they command anything against him, let it go unesteemed.’<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, while private citizens may not resist, the lower or lesser magistrates can. Here he is thinking not so much of local government as of those representative assemblies which are the constitutional guardians of the liberties of the people. He cites classical parallels such as the ephors of Sparta and the tribunes of Rome, and probably has in mind the Estates of France (though they had not met for over thirty years). The same principle would apply to the parliaments of Scotland and England, and to the Estates of the Netherlands. It was incumbent on such bodies to restrain the fierce licentiousness of kings and to guard those freedoms of which God had appointed them protectors. If they wink at kings who violently fall upon the lowly common folk, ‘their dissimulation involves nefarious perfidy.’<sup>4</sup>

This was not a reluctant concession to popular representatives. It was a statement of moral obligation, and as Calvin’s editor, Dr. John T. McNeill, points out it was to prove ‘powerfully influential’.<sup>5</sup> Nowhere would it be more powerful than in Scotland, where Reformation would mesh with Revolution and the Lords of the Congregation would collaborate with the Estates of Parliament in defiance of the monarchy. Later, when Charles I attempted to impose Laud’s Liturgy by royal decree, Alexander Henderson proceeded by the

same principle, first of all winning the support of the Privy Council, and then channelling the energies of the aristocracy and the outrage of the people into a constitutional movement, under the instrument of the National Covenant. In England, Parliament would risk civil war to restrain royal absolutism, while in America it would be the Congress of the United Colonies which would issue their Declaration of Independence. In all these instances, the lower magistrates took responsibility as guardians of their people's freedoms.

Scottish Calvinism built its political theology on Calvin's foundation, but developed it in a much more radical direction. Knox joined battle with authority almost immediately, though the *Scots Confession* is curiously restrained: 'we confess and avow that those who resist the supreme powers, so long as they are acting in their own spheres, are resisting God's ordinance and cannot be held guiltless'.<sup>6</sup> Even so, the qualification, 'so long as they are acting in their own spheres', is ominous; and in his later interviews with the Queen and in his debate with Maitland of Lethington Knox stated categorically that when the governing powers trespassed beyond their spheres the people had every right to resist them.<sup>7</sup>

For the following century-and-a-half Scottish history was dominated by the determination of the crown to dominate the church. Matters came to a head with the Restoration of 1660, when Charles II arrogated to himself absolute power in all matters spiritual as well as temporal. The struggle for spiritual independence then became a struggle against political tyranny; the end-product would be the defeat of absolutism and the introduction of constitutional monarchy.

Undergirding the struggle was a well-developed theory of civil disobedience, expounded in a voluminous literature.<sup>8</sup> Fundamental to this was the belief that all human beings are equal. 'All men are born alike as to Civil power', wrote Alexander Shields, 'no man being born with a Crown on his head'.<sup>9</sup> No-one, therefore, had a divine right to lord it over his fellow human beings. Even less could civic eminence give anyone the right to lord it over the church. As Andrew Melville daringly reminded James VI, there were two kings and two kingdoms in Scotland, and in the kingdom of God he was neither 'a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member.'<sup>10</sup>

Linked to this was the idea that government requires the consent of the people. To Calvin, such consent was a luxury: a gift of providence, for which we should be grateful, but not essential to the legitimacy of an administration. Scotland's political theologians went much further. '[T]here is no Title on earth now to Crowns', wrote Alexander Shields, '[...] but the people's suffrage'.<sup>11</sup> They could give power on the basis of heredity. They could even give it on the basis of conquest (if the conqueror guaranteed their liberties). But their consent and concurrence were essential.

Yet this consent was given only on certain conditions, and conferred only limited power. It was this that precipitated the conflict between Scottish Calvinism and the Stewarts, who claimed absolute power as their divine prerogative and interpreted such power as the right to enact whatever laws they pleased, repeal whatever laws they pleased, direct their courts to pass whatever sentences they pleased and deploy the soldiery against the people as they pleased. Over against such absolutism, Scottish Calvinism protested that the power of monarchy was limited by the constitution. This was 'the law of Nature and Nations': 'There must be a *Conditionall* reciprocally obliging *Covenant* between the Sovereign and the Subjects, without which there is no such relation to be owned', and 'when this compact is broken in all or its chiefest conditions by the Sovereign, the people's obligation ceases.'<sup>12</sup> This was the precise point laboured by Rutherford in *Lex Rex*, where the title suggests not only the theme of his treatise (the Law and the Prince) but also its core idea, 'the law is king' (in direct contrast to Louis XIV's famous dictum, 'La loi, c'est moi!'). 'The law', wrote Rutherford, 'hath a supremacy of constitution above the king'.<sup>13</sup>

Scottish divines were particularly irritated by the suggestion that Paul's argument in Romans 13 stipulated unconditional obedience. Even Calvin had warned that magistrates

[...] are not to rule on their own account, but for the public good. Nor do they have unbridled power, but power that is restricted to the welfare of their subjects. In short, they are responsible to God and to men in the exercise of their rule.<sup>14</sup>

Rutherford was more forthright:

It is evident from Rom. xiii. that all subjection and obedience to higher powers commanded there, is subjection to the power of the magistrate *in abstracto*, or, which is all one, to the person using the power lawfully, and that no subjection is due by that text, or any word of God, to the abused and tyrannical power of the king<sup>15</sup>

The fundamental question then becomes what attitude is to be taken when government itself is perverted, exalts evil instead of punishing it, and puts the righteous to the sword. Here the Scottish Calvinist answer was unhesitating: ‘a man commanding unjustly, and ruling tyrannically, hath, in that, no power from God.’<sup>16</sup> When that point is reached, the people have every right to disown the ruling power, which is exactly what the Cameronians did in the Sanquhar Declaration:

[...] we for ourselves and all that will adhere to us [...] do by thir presents disown Charles Stuart, that has been reigning (or rather tyrannizing as we may say) on the throne of Britain these years bygone, as having any right, title to, or interest in the said crown of Scotland for government.<sup>17</sup>

But they weren’t content with merely withdrawing recognition. They declared unambiguously that it was right to resist tyranny by force of arms; and they acted accordingly. The *Informatory Vindication* (1687) is in effect a theological defence of the deployment of the Covenanter armies at Bothwell Bridge and Ayrsmoss (and even of the assassination of Archbishop Sharpe). John Brown’s *Apologetical Relation* devotes a long chapter to ‘the lawfulness of Scotland’s defensive war’, while Alexander Shields devotes 118 pages to ‘the refusal to own tyrants’ authority’, 58 pages to the right to bear defensive arms, and 63 pages to ‘the extraordinary execution of judgement by private men’ (in other words, judicial assassination).<sup>18</sup>

These extended treatments reflect the extreme circumstances in which Scottish Calvinists found themselves between 1660

and 1688, but these same positions had already been laid down in relatively quieter times by John Knox, George Buchanan and Samuel Rutherford. Even Alexander Henderson, whose diplomatic instincts stood in marked contrast to the passionate activism of Knox, argued cogently that it is lawful to take up arms against government when it resorts to extreme violence and oppression, to the ruin and desolation of both kirk and kingdom.<sup>19</sup>

Yet resistance was never the policy of first resort. Even the later Covenanters carefully qualified their advocacy of armed struggle. No mere difference of religion could justify such resistance: Knox told Mary that he was as ready to obey her as the Apostle Paul was to obey Nero.<sup>20</sup> Nor could random acts of incompetence or cruelty justify the resort to arms. Shields even went so far as to say that where there was the least doubt as to the tyrannical nature of the government there could be no justifiable armed rebellion.<sup>21</sup> But where there *was* tyranny, the Covenanter theologians had no hesitation. Citizens had an absolute right to take up defensive arms whenever kings threatened the safety of the people, trampled on their rights and liberties, extorted taxes to finance their own vices and luxuries, or used the military to engage in a reign of terror.

It would be wrong to claim originality for such views. Indeed, part of their argument was precisely that such views were *not* original, but went back to the constitutional history of Scotland and even the constitutional history of most of the countries of Europe. In line with this, their publications are laced with quotations from the classical jurists of Greece and Rome, the church fathers, the scholastics, and such contemporaries as Hugo Grotius.

This complicates the question of their influence. The Glorious Revolution of 1688 set up more or less exactly the kind of limited monarchy advocated by Buchanan and Rutherford,<sup>22</sup> driving one contemporary to remark, ‘We have been hanging and shooting honest men for wildness, and now we are all turned wild together.’<sup>23</sup> But many influences contributed to these developments. William of Orange was reared in the Calvinist political theology of the Netherlands, and ever since the days of William the Silent his family had led Dutch resistance to Spanish tyranny, but he was never more than lukewarm towards Presbyterianism; and though his closest confidantes were

Thomas Hog and William Carstares, both of whom had played conspicuous parts in the Covenanter resistance, the decisive invitation to the Crown of the United Kingdom came from London's Whig grandees, who drew their inspiration not from *Lex Rex*, but from the circle of John Locke. Even though Locke's *Two Treatises of Civil Government*<sup>24</sup> was not published till 1690 (specifically to justify the Revolution) the ideas he propounded were clearly in circulation before then. As it happens, Locke's views on the power of the people and their right to resist tyranny were very similar to those of Calvin and the Scottish theologians, but the main theological source on which Locke draws is Richard Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. What is clear, however, is that in England, Scotland and Holland the idea of constitutional monarchy had developed along Calvinist lines. The same would have happened in France had it not been for the savage suppression of Protestantism following the revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685). When France eventually did have its Revolution, it was divorced from all religious principle and quickly degenerated into an anarchic frenzy.

These same ideas of Locke and Rutherford were also brewing in the New World, particularly among Presbyterians and Congregationalists. This is hardly surprising considering that many of the early immigrants were religious refugees who had faced the hazards of the ocean rather than endure tyranny and intolerance. As the ineptitude of government pushed the colonists ever closer to resistance, one of their grievances was precisely the fact that the 'lesser magistrate' (the British Parliament), far from representing their interests as British citizens, was itself an instrument of repression. Yet, when they were finally goaded into launching their struggle for independence they were careful to do so not as private citizens but through coherent action sanctioned by the Conventions of individual states; and when the Declaration of Independence was issued on 4 July 1776 it came, as Calvin would have advised, from 'The Representatives of the United States of America in General Congress assembled'.

Among those who signed was John Witherspoon, once minister in Beith (Ayrshire) and later in Paisley, but since 1768 President of the College of New Jersey. Witherspoon played a full part in steeling the resolve of the colonists. In "Thoughts on American Liberty" he called

on ‘the approaching Congress’ to declare, ‘not only that we esteem the claim of the British Parliament to be illegal and unconstitutional, but that we are firmly determined never to submit to it, and do deliberately prefer war with all its horrors, and even extermination itself, to slavery riveted on us and our posterity.’<sup>25</sup> Later, looking back on the conflict, he wrote with pride, ‘Not only every colony, by its representative body, but every county, and almost every corporation or other subordinate division, publicly declared that they would defend their liberty at the risk of their estates and lives.’<sup>26</sup>

Almost two centuries later, in May 1934, the Confessional Synod of the German Evangelical Church issued the Barmen Declaration. Drafted by Karl Barth, it clearly reflected his Reformed perspective, even though it was adopted equally cordially by the Lutherans and the United Churches. It was not a protest against Nazism as such, nor specifically against the anti-Semitism of the Third Reich. Even less was it a threat of civil disobedience and armed resistance. It was a protest against the ideology of the ‘German Christians’, who had allowed Hitler to turn the church into an arm of the state and thus endorsed Nazism in the name of Christianity. From Barth’s point of view, this was idolatry. By giving the state lordship over the church the German Christians were in breach of the First Commandment. The Declaration would later have wider political ramifications, but in the first instance the Confessing Churches were taking their stand on the Spiritual Independence of the church: exactly where the Scottish Covenanters had stood in the seventeenth century.

The Declaration is an unambiguous exposé of the underlying philosophy of the German Christians. It totally rejects the idea that the church should have to acknowledge the authority of other figures and powers besides Christ and his Word. Equally emphatically, it warns that the state has no right to go beyond its ordinary, appointed task of providing for justice and peace, and to aspire instead to becoming the single, totalitarian arbiter of human life, even to the extent of excluding the church from her own legitimate, spiritual sphere. But the Declaration also insisted on the converse: the church cannot, over and above her special commission to deliver the message of the free grace of God, clothe herself with the dignity of the state, assume its



characteristics or perform its tasks. Even less can she place the Word of the Lord at the service of arbitrarily chosen human programmes, investing them with the aura of the divine.<sup>27</sup>

This was a courageous voice, and its ultimate implementation would cost many of its adherents dear. But it was also a dramatically un-German one. There, for centuries, the Lutheran principle, *cuius regio eius religio*, had prevailed, effectively silencing political protest on the part of the church. Here at Barmen, she is un-gagged, but when she speaks she speaks with a Swiss, not a German accent; and Barth is quickly reminded that he is an alien.



## Theocracy

In its own perverse way, the German Christian movement was a step towards theocracy, or at least an unholy alliance between the church and a dictatorship. Calvin had argued passionately for the separation of church and state: ‘Christ’s spiritual kingdom and the civil jurisdiction are things completely distinct.’<sup>28</sup> The two kingdoms had different objects and different jurisdictions; and these two jurisdictions must not meddle with each other.

But while it was easy to lay down the principle, it was far from easy to work it out in practice, and this quickly becomes apparent in Calvin himself. For all his insistence on the separation of the two kingdoms he firmly believed that there is an obligation on the state to promote true religion. It must cherish the outward worship of God, defend sound doctrine and protect the position of the church.<sup>29</sup> This was not remotely innovative, however. Indeed, it fell considerably short of the position laid down by Pope Boniface VIII, whose Bull, *Unam sanctam* (1302), had declared that the temporal power is subject to the spiritual; that the temporal sword, no less than the spiritual, is in the power of St Peter; and that while that sword is not to be wielded *by* the Church it is to be wielded *for* her.

The later Reformed confessions followed Calvin in this respect. The Westminster Confession (Chapter XXIII), for example, lays down that it is the duty of government

[...] to take order that unity and peace be preserved in the Church, that the truth of God be kept pure and entire, that all blasphemies and heresies be suppressed, all corruptions and abuses in worship and discipline prevented or reformed, and all the ordinances of God duly settled, administrated, and observed.

The Belgic Confession (Article 36) strikes the same note:

[...] the government's task is not limited to caring for and watching over the public domain but extends also to upholding the sacred ministry, with a view to removing and destroying all idolatry and false worship of the Antichrist; to promoting the kingdom of Jesus Christ; and to furthering the preaching of the gospel everywhere; to the end that God may be honoured and served by everyone, as he requires in his Word.

This suggestion of a statutory enforcement of 'pure doctrine' brings us perilously close to the idea of a theocratic union of church and state, and has proved a serious embarrassment to the Reformed churches. What are we to make of it today?

The first point to bear in mind is that Calvinism has always stressed that the whole of human life is subject to the authority of God and the lordship of Christ. Objectively, this follows directly from the premise that God exists; subjectively it follows from the awareness of God (*sensus deitatis*) engraven on every human heart; Christologically it follows from Jesus' own claim, 'All authority is mine in heaven and on earth' (Matt 28:18). This is what underlay Abraham Kuyper's oft-quoted dictum, 'There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign of *all*, does not cry, "Mine!"'<sup>30</sup> This applies as much to the public square as to personal religion; to the meetings of Cabinet as to the gatherings of the church. The alternative notion that God's sovereignty is limited to personal and private matters is itself blatantly atheistic, positing at best only a limited deity. For the politician as well as for the theologian, Christ has risen; for the scientist as well as for the priest, he is Lord. He excludes himself from no sphere, and one day, every government

will stand before his Judgement Throne. It was in accordance with this vision that Calvinism developed its ‘capacity to penetrate the political and economic movements of Western nations with its religious ideals, a capacity which Lutheranism lacked from the very beginning.’<sup>31</sup>

Secondly, the church must bear witness to the state. If the powers that be are to function as servants of God (Rom 13:1), they must know his will. But how? There is, of course, the light of nature (Westminster Confession, 1:1): the witness of conscience, and the general sense of equity engraved on every heart. But Christ also exercises his lordship through his Word, and of that Word the church is the custodian and expositor. Her primary responsibility in the political domain is to bring the light of scripture to bear on the conduct of government. This is exactly what Barth and the Confessing Christians sought to do in the Barmen Declaration, but it inevitably carries its own dangers. It is easy to confuse prejudice with revelation, and easier still to confuse justice with law and order. The Christian Right will focus on abortion, euthanasia and reproductive issues; the Christian left on capitalism and disarmament. In both cases the focus is too narrow, and the link with the divine word often fragile. The besetting sin of government, from Nebuchadnezzar to Hitler, is self-deification, and the perennial obligation of the church is to bear witness against corporate idolatry.

But we have also to search out the implications for politics of the rigorous personal ethics of the New Testament. Whatever the difficulties of adjustment, the whole political process must be illuminated by the Sermon on the Mount, which means that over against *realpolitik* we have to call for national meekness and mercifulness, and even for a willingness to turn the other cheek. Similarly, we have to flag up the political implications of *kenosis*. This means not only that politicians must be servants, indifferent to personal interests, but that nations, too, must be willing to be nothing. Only thus can we escape from the demonic rule that in diplomacy there are no principles, only interests.

Above all, the church must bear constant witness to the principle, ‘Remember the poor’ (Gal 2:10). The most memorable expression of this came from the Lutheran, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, writing from his prison cell: ‘We have for once learned to see the great events of world history from below, from the perspective of the outcast, the suspects, the maltreated, the powerless, the oppressed, the reviled’.<sup>32</sup> But the

same concern had been expressed by Thomas Chalmers a hundred years earlier: 'Let kings retain their sceptres, and nobles their coronets – what we want is a more elevated ground-floor for our general population'.<sup>33</sup>

Every political programme, and every government policy, must be judged from this perspective. The question is not how things affect the pound in our pocket. Even less (and this is a subtle trap) is it a matter of how they affect the church. The question is how they affect those without a pound in their pocket or even a roof over their head. The church has to address government on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves.

Thirdly, Calvinism has asserted the right of the church to participate in the political process. In fact, the very nature of politics makes this unavoidable, since politics affects everything.<sup>34</sup> Left unchecked, the political machine can plunge the poor into even deeper poverty and deprive the powerless of every freedom. The crucial thing, however, is that the church cannot engage in politics from a position of privilege. She cannot claim a position of dominance, as if the very fact of her special relationship with Christ gave her the right to sit at the top table. She must pursue her political goals not by coercion, but by persuasion.

But must we add another caveat: that while individual Christians may engage in politics the church as such may not? This was the position of Abraham Kuyper, who drew a clear distinction between the church as *organism* and the church as *institution*.<sup>35</sup> The latter was the church formally organised and acting through its office-bearers and official structures. This institution, according to Kuyper, should have no political voice. The church as organism, on the other hand, is the totality of believers dispersed through society, lacking any formal organisation, yet linked organically through their common membership of the body of Christ. These believers, according to Kuyper, have every right to raise a political voice. But he went further. Precisely because they are linked organically they have a right to form associations: for example, to set up parent-controlled Christian schools or even (as in Kuyper's own case) Christian political parties.

This was a corner-stone of Kuyper's public theology, and few will deny the right of individual Christians to be politically engaged or even their right to form Christian associations for specific public

objects. Martin Luther King's Civil Rights movement was such an association; and so, too, are TEAR Fund and Christian Aid. But it is hard to see why the church (or indeed any other institution) should be proscribed from raising its political voice. Certainly, the clergy should not be politicians nor churches aligned to political parties. Nor should the pulpit be politicised. But to argue that churches should confine themselves to their 'spiritual' commission is to draw too sharp a distinction between the sacred and the secular. Politics cannot be placed beyond the range of the Word, nor can there be any effective championing of the poor where there has to be a studied avoidance of politically loaded (and sometimes even explosive) speech. The church cannot confine herself to being a social life-boat authorised only to rescue the victims of recurring disasters. Poverty and injustice are structural, and the church must raise its voice against such structures. Even today, she has enviable resources and it would be a dereliction of duty not to use them on behalf of the underprivileged. Protest against an intellectually bankrupt penal system or against the inhumane treatment of immigrants cannot be left to either individual Christians or to voluntary associations.

But while she speaks with a clear Christian voice the church must at the same time be the champion of religious freedom, and indeed of all other freedoms. There is a paradox here. Christianity is implicitly theocratic: it wants God's will done on earth as it is in heaven, and on the face of things this is totally incompatible with pluralism. On the other hand, all other freedoms are implicit in religious freedom. The moment we grant freedom of religious belief and religious expression all other freedoms follow. Yet this has been remarkably difficult to establish. Mediaeval Catholicism sought to establish a twofold uniformity, credal and institutional: everyone must belong to the one holy Catholic Church and everyone must believe the same Creed. Lutheranism adopted the principle *cuius regio eius religio*: the whole nation followed the religion of the head of state. The Westminster Confession of Faith went uncomfortably far down the same road, conceding the power of the state to take order to suppress blasphemy and heresy; and men like Samuel Rutherford came close to regarding toleration itself as heresy. Post-Restoration episcopacy did all in its power to suppress dissent in England and even Liberal voices

such as John Locke's argued for only a limited toleration. It was not to be extended to Roman Catholics, because they owed allegiance to a foreign power; nor to atheism, because it undermined the very foundations of the state.<sup>36</sup> Even today, strident voices clamour for the curtailment of freedom of expression. Parliament may refuse to pass anti-blasphemy laws, but it has no compunction about adopting an Act banning incitement to religious hatred (potentially a catch-all anti-blasphemy Act under another name).

The alternative is the unlimited pluralism advocated by the neo-Calvinism of Abraham Kuyper. This involved a radical move away from the previous vision of a national, institutionally privileged Reformed church, to one in which the Reformed were but one party in a confessionally pluralistic society.<sup>37</sup> This vision included the insistence that all religions, and all Christian denominations, must be tolerated. But it also included the belief that that the multiplicity of denominations (and the consequent 'multiformity' of the church), far from being an evil, was an inevitable result of liberty of conscience and hence contributed to the rich tapestry of Christian expression. On such a projection, the ecumenical ideal becomes one of peaceful and loving co-existence between Christian denominations rather than their incorporation into one mega-church.

But Kuyper wanted to extend his idea of freedom beyond the religious sphere, and in particular to ensure that other spheres of life were kept free from religious tyranny. Politics, education, science and art had their own integrity and legitimacy, and while accountable to God, they were ultimately accountable to God alone, and must be free from all ecclesiastical interference. No religious institution, therefore, should have an authoritative or privileged position in these domains. Within its own sphere each was sovereign.

The essence of this vision is that we concede to others the same freedom of belief and freedom of expression that we claim for ourselves. As Lord Acton famously remarked, 'The test of liberty is the position and security of minorities.' Kuyper lived and worked in a world in which Christianity was statistically and socially dominant, and history has a right to judge us according to the way we ourselves treated minorities. Today, we are the minority, forced for the first

time in almost two thousand years to see things from below, and as William Bennett points out, the only respectable form of bigotry is bigotry against religious people.<sup>38</sup> That may be a judgement on the church's own failure to practise tolerance in the past. But if we lose our religious freedom, how long will other freedoms survive?

Finally, Calvinism has insisted that the church cannot shrink from the culture war. This was already implicit in the Great Commission with its directive that we are to make disciples not only of individuals, but of nations (Matt 28:19). This was the clear vision behind Thomas Chalmers' promotion of the godly commonwealth<sup>39</sup> and Abraham Kuyper's dream of 'a free church in a holy nation'. They aimed not only at the conversion of individuals, but at the transformation of society: not only to evangelise, but to civilise. There was nothing unique about such a vision. Religion inevitably has cultural and social consequences. Mediaeval Catholicism had already secured civic and institutional expression for its own values, and modern Islam seeks the same. In modern North America, Evangelicals strive to secure a place for prayer in public schools. In post-Reformation Scotland, the great symbols of Christian culture were the church schools in every parish, the sanctity of the weekly 'Sabbath' and the social influence of the pulpit, moulding the social consensus on such issues as marriage and divorce, forming attitudes towards the arts, leisure and entertainment, and (eventually) creating a climate of 'moderation' in which submission to government became a cardinal virtue, and the Cameronians were air-brushed out of our history.

Which itself calls in question the extent to which the Protestant vision was ever realised in Scotland. What cannot be questioned is that the last hundred years have seen the end of 'Christian Britain'. Secular humanism has not only installed its own values where those of Christianity once reigned: it has convinced society that religion has no place in the public square. Even more calamitously, it has convinced the church herself, with the result that we have retreated into rapidly shrinking ghettos, where we can practise our arcane rituals in private. This is not only a meek capitulation to humanism. It is the betrayal of the Calvinist vision for an Anabaptist monasticism which regards human society and culture as beyond redemption.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Donald J. McKim, ed., *Readings in Calvin's Theology* (Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 1998), 261.
- <sup>2</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 (2 vols.; ed. John T. McNeill; trans. F. L. Battles; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), IV.20.8.
- <sup>3</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.20.32.
- <sup>4</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.20.31.
- <sup>5</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, p. 1518, n. 54.
- <sup>6</sup> *The Scots Confession, 1560* (ed. with an introduction by G. D. Henderson, together with a rendering into modern English by James Bulloch; Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 1960), chapter XXIV. Cf. Hazlett.
- <sup>7</sup> See Knox's own account in William Croft Dickinson, ed., *John Knox's History of the Reformation in Scotland* (2 vols.; Edinburgh: Nelson, 1949), II:127–34.
- <sup>8</sup> See, for example, George Buchanan, *De iure regni apud Scotos* (Edinburgh, 1579; reprinted Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1982); Samuel Rutherford, *Lex Rex* (Edinburgh, 1644; reprinted, Harrisonburg, Va.: Sprinkle Publications, 1982), Questions XXVIII–XXXIV; John Brown, *An Apologetical Relation of the Particular Sufferings of the Faithful Ministers and Professors of the Church of Scotland Since August 1660* (Rotterdam, 1665; reprinted in *The Presbyterian's Armoury*; Edinburgh: Ogle and Oliver and Boyd, 1846, vol. 3); James Renwick, *An Informatory Vindication* (Utrecht: 1687); Alexander Shields, *A Hind Let Loose: An Historical Representation of the Testimonies of the Church of Scotland* (Utrecht: 1687).
- <sup>9</sup> Shields, *A Hind Let Loose*, 355.
- <sup>10</sup> Thomas M' Crie, *Life of Andrew Melville* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1856), 181.
- <sup>11</sup> Shields, *A Hind Let Loose*, 354.
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 357.
- <sup>13</sup> Rutherford, *Lex Rex*, 126.
- <sup>14</sup> John Calvin, *The Epistles of Paul the Apostle to the Romans and to the Thessalonians* (ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F.



- Torrance; trans. R. Mackenzie; Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 282.
- <sup>15</sup> Rutherford, *Lex Rex*, 172.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.
- <sup>17</sup> William Croft Dickinson, Gordon Donaldson and Isabel A. Milne, eds., *A Source Book of Scottish History* (3 vols.; Edinburgh: Nelson, 1961), III:183.
- <sup>18</sup> Brown, *An Apologetical Relation*, 80–93; Shields, *A Hind Let Loose*, 283–482, 588–646, 646–709.
- <sup>19</sup> *Instructions in Defensive Arms*, 1639. (Originally intended for only private circulation, the text is available in Andrew Stevenson, *History of the Church and State of Scotland from the Accession of King Charles I to the Year 1649*; Edinburgh: Nelson, 1840), 356–360, footnote.
- <sup>20</sup> Knox, *History of the Reformation*, II:15.
- <sup>21</sup> Shields, *A Hind Let Loose*, 303.
- <sup>22</sup> It did not, however, satisfy the scruples of the Cameronians, who were still protesting in 1693.
- <sup>23</sup> James King Hewison, *The Covenanters: A History of the Church in Scotland from the Reformation to the Revolution* (2 vols.; Glasgow: John Smith & Son, 1908), II:523.
- <sup>24</sup> See John Locke, *Two Treatises of Civil Government* (with Introduction by W. S. Carpenter; London: J. M. Dent, 1924).
- <sup>25</sup> John Witherspoon, *Essays on Important Subjects (The Works of John Witherspoon* vol. 9; Edinburgh: Ogle and Aikman, 1805), 75.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.
- <sup>27</sup> <http://www.sacred-texts.com/chr/barmen.htm>. Accessed 06/07/09.
- <sup>28</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.20.1.
- <sup>29</sup> Calvin, *Institutes*, IV.20.2.
- <sup>30</sup> Cited in, for example, John Bolt, *A Free Church, a Holy Nation: Abraham Kuyper's American Public Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2001), 21.
- <sup>31</sup> Ernst Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches* (trans. O. Wyon; 2 vols.; London: George Allan and Unwin, 1931), II:577.
- <sup>32</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (ed. Eberhard Bethge; London: SCM Press, enlarged edition, 1971), 17.
- <sup>33</sup> William Hanna, *Memoirs of Thomas Chalmers, D.D. LL.D.* (2

vols.; Edinburgh: Constable, 1854), II:705. General Booth, founder of the Salvation Army, similarly focused on the ‘the submerged tenth’: the three million people in England who had neither food, a home or a job (*In Darkest England and the Way Out*; London: The Salvation Army, 1890).

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Barth, ‘The proclamation of the church is by nature political in so far as it has to ask the pagan *polis* to remedy its state of disorder and make justice a reality.’ (Cited in Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*; trans. J. Bowden; Eugene, Or.: Wipf and Stock, 2005, p. 216.)

<sup>35</sup> Bolt, *A Free Church, a Holy Nation*, 427–29.

<sup>36</sup> See the article on Locke in the *Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, (2<sup>nd</sup> edition; ed. Ted Honderich; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 526.

<sup>37</sup> Bolt, *A Free Church, a Holy Nation*, 328.

<sup>38</sup> Cited in *ibid.*, 352.

<sup>39</sup> See Stewart J. Brown, *Thomas Chalmers and the Godly Commonwealth in Scotland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982).