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# The Bible and politics

## Christian sources of British political thought

by Nick Spencer

*He that travels the roads now, applauds his own strength and legs that have carried him so far in such a scantling of time; and ascribes all to his own vigour; little considering how much he owes to their pains, who cleared the woods, drained the bogs, built the bridges, and made the ways possible.*

John Locke<sup>1</sup>

*Economy and politics... must have ground beneath themselves.*

F. D. Maurice<sup>2</sup>

### Summary

This paper contends that the Bible has been the single most influential document in British political history. It takes six major political ideas, each with contemporary relevance, and shows how the Bible has shaped our attitude to each, highlighting particular hermeneutical principles critical in explaining this influence. It is suggested that a continued, strong commitment to such political virtues may be difficult to sustain if Christianity is further eroded from British public life.

### Introduction

The Bible, usually in its King James translation, is widely lauded for its impact on our language, literature and culture. Rather less, however, is made of its political significance. This is misleading. The Bible has had a profound influence on national politics, boasting an unparalleled durability and reach. From politicians to ploughboys, for 1,400 years, no other political text – meaning text with political implications – has been read so avidly by so many, for so long. The Bible is arguably the most important document in British political history.<sup>3</sup>

Two caveats are important. Firstly, to claim for the Bible such influence is not to claim it has been the *only* influence on national politics. In reality, it has always worked alongside other political factors, even when it dominated the stage as it did between the 1530s and 1650s. Secondly, to make such a claim for the Bible is not to say that it has always been used on the side of the political angels. It has not. The Christian Scriptures have been used by many over the centuries to justify political disenfranchisement, subservience and inequality. People are well capable of twisting the Bible towards their own ends. Neither of these caveats, however, alters the fact that the Bible has been foundational to British politics. One way of showing this would be to tell the story chronologically. To do so, however, might be to create a false impression that the Bible's political import is purely of historical interest. Instead, this paper will focus on six political ideas, each of which remains live today, to show what impact the Bible has had on their development.

### Nationhood

What is it that defines 'us' as a *political*, rather than simply a *geographic* or *ethnic*, entity? Recent debates over devolution and independence, not to mention questionable attempts to 'nation build' in the Middle East, and the on-going problem that many African countries have in forging a national identity that prevails over local, tribal or ethnic ones, warn that the 'nation' is an artificial and hard-won idea.<sup>4</sup>

When Pope Gregory sent his missionaries to 'the English people' in 597, the English people did not exist. In its place were numerous separate, militaristic kingdoms that lived in a state of constant conflict. Conceiving of them as a single unit was a momentous move on Gregory's part, causing one recent historian to remark

<sup>1</sup> *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, 1695.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to John Ludlow, 24 September 1852.

<sup>3</sup> This is clearly a significant claim and is backed up in much greater detail in Nick Spencer, *Freedom and Order: History, Politics and the English Bible*, Hodder & Stoughton, 2011, on which this paper draws.

<sup>4</sup> Generally on this issue, see Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, Cambridge University Press, 1997.

provocatively that ‘the English owe their existence as a people, or at least the recognition of it, to the papacy.’<sup>5</sup> It was a slow process, aided by the historian and biblical scholar Bede whose *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* was not only hugely important but also subtly biblical.<sup>6</sup> More influential still was King Alfred and, in particular, his response to the Viking invasions that threatened the country from the late eighth century onwards.<sup>7</sup> Those invasions were widely understood as a sign of divine judgement and King Alfred was determined to repent and respond accordingly. He embarked on a reform of the ecclesiastical, educational, and moral life of the people, much of which centred on a conscious turning to the Bible. In this context Alfred issued a seminal law code towards the end of his reign, a code that integrated laws from other early English kingdoms and, more pointedly, illustrates an explicit and repeated biblical basis, drawing on the Torah, the Sermon on the Mount and the book of Acts.<sup>8</sup> Historians have observed that Alfred’s law code was disordered and full of contradictions and would have been of little use in court. It was not intended, however, to be a comprehensive legal code for English society. Rather, it was powerfully symbolic, placing the king’s legislative activity on an historical stage that stretched back through the early church and Christ to Moses and the divine law itself. Alfred helped forge the identity of a Christian people that was defending itself against a violent, irreligious menace, in much the same way as OT Israel had done.

It was a similar story with ‘Britain’, nearly a millennium later. In the 1670s, England was again sliding towards civil war, this time over the recently-revealed Catholicism of James, Charles II’s brother and heir. The fact that civil war was avoided and James was unseated in favour of the Protestant William and Mary of Orange was judged by many at the time as a minor miracle. The so-called ‘Glorious Revolution’ would inform national politics for centuries. The ensuing Bill of Rights secured a limited kingship, parliamentary privilege and a subject’s right to petition the monarch – a combination of political liberties unique in Europe at the time. Significantly, this freedom and toleration was anchored in the nation’s Protestantism, the icon of which was the Bible. This was highlighted in William and Mary’s coronation, the service for which was remodelled to highlight their Protestant faith. For the first time, a Bible was carried in procession to Westminster Abbey. The king and queen had to swear to rule according to the ‘true profession of the gospel’. Once crowned, Bibles were handed to each ‘to put you in mind of this rule and that you may follow it’.<sup>9</sup>

Protestant Christianity became even more important as a means of establishing a common identity following the 1707 Act of Union which joined the kingdoms of Scotland and England into Great Britain. In the words of the historian Linda Colley, ‘Protestantism was the foundation that made the invention of Great Britain possible.’<sup>10</sup> It is important to recognise that grounding national identity in religion in this way is not necessarily healthy. This can be seen in a state poem of 1716, a verse of which reads:

Under our vines we’ll sit and sing,  
 May God be praised, bless George our King;  
 Being happy made in every thing  
 Both religious and civil:

Our fatal discords soon shall cease,  
 Composed by George, our prince of peace;  
 We shall in plenty live at ease,  
 In spite of popish envy.

This references two of the most salvific prophecies of the Old Testament – Micah 4:4 and Isaiah 9:6 – and locates them not in ‘King Jesus’ but in King George. Biblical Christianity could provide a powerful basis for national identity, but it came at a cost of distorting the gospel.

### Due process of law

The threat of terrorist atrocities since 9/11 has brought the question of due process into the limelight. It is a question with deep historical roots.

Towards the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, a law code of King Ethelred began: ‘it is the decree of our Lord and his councillors that...every man is to be permitted the benefit of law.’<sup>11</sup> As with so many other political statements, this could be seen as a triumph of hope over reality. Yet, the first substantive steps towards proper due process in England can be traced to the Bible.

Stephen Langton was master at the University of Paris in the late twelfth century where he became one of the most prolific and respected biblical scholars.<sup>12</sup> Subsequently appointed Archbishop of Canterbury, he had a difficult relationship with King John who opposed his appointment. Langton became a rallying point for baronial opposition to the monarch when he was finally able to take up his see in 1213. In this role he helped draft the documents that turned into Magna Carta. Langton’s contribution drew on his biblical studies in Paris, in particular his discussion of what obedience to law entailed. He based his thought on texts such as 1 Samuel 10:24–25 in which the prophet Samuel ‘explained to the people the rights and duties of kingship...wrote them down on a scroll and deposited it before the Lord.’ From such texts Langton derived the idea of due process. He became willing to defend political authority, even if unjust, as long as it was legally adjudicated. The imperative of judgement by a legitimate court became his ‘personal signature’. This concern found its way into three major articles in Magna Carta, two of which are among the only three articles from the Great Charter that remain on the statute book today.<sup>13</sup>

### Politics as service

The parliamentary expenses scandal of 2009 reminded us that the British are highly sensitive to political corruption, in a way that is incomprehensible in many other countries where it is assumed that political office legitimises financial gain and personal aggrandisement. There are specific historical reasons for this, not least the influence that the evangelical revival left on British politics. However, there are also wider biblical reasons. Fundamental to the gospel is the conviction that imperial/royal power should be limited. Christians argued, on the basis of a number of texts such as Mark 10:42–45, John 19:11, and Romans 13, that earthly powers should be humble and restricted, owing their very existence to God, to whom they would be answerable. This argument is found in the earliest English political writings. ‘Always remember...my king, with fear and love for God your king, that you are in his place to look after and rule over all his members and to give account on judgement day even for yourself,’ wrote Cathwulf to the greatest of all early mediaeval kings, the emperor Charlemagne, in about 775.<sup>14</sup>

There were deeper biblical roots than even this. In particular, the commands of Deuteronomy 17:14–20 in which, when

5 John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century*, Allen Lane, 2007, p.215.

6 See, for example, Alan Thacker, ‘Bede and History’ in *Cambridge Companion to Bede*, Cambridge University Press, 2010.

7 David Pratt, *The Political Thought of King Alfred the Great*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought: Fourth Series, 2007.

8 Dorothy Whitelock, *English Historical Documents, Vol. 1: 500–1042*, Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1955; 2nd edn. 1996, pp.407–416.

9 Wesley Carr, ‘This Intimate Ritual: The Coronation Service’, *Political Theology* 4.1, 2002, pp.11–24.

10 Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, Yale University Press, 1992, p.54.

11 *English Historical Documents, Vol. 1*, No. 44, pp.442–47.

12 John Baldwin, ‘Master Stephen Langton, Future Archbishop of Canterbury: The Paris Schools and Magna Carta’, in *English Historical Review*, Vol. CXXIII, No. 503.

13 Articles 39, 40 and 52; see J. C. Holt, *Magna Carta*, CUP, 1992, Appendix 6.

14 Quoted in Joseph Canning, *A History of Medieval Political Thought*, Routledge, 1996, p.49.

assuming the throne, the king of Israel was to 'write for himself on a scroll a copy of this law... read it all the days of his life... follow carefully all the words... [and] not consider himself better than his fellow Israelites,' were used by figures as diverse as John of Salisbury in the twelfth century and John Milton in the seventeenth to intimate that kings were under the same law as their subjects, and should not consider themselves better than them.<sup>15</sup>

## Democracy

The idea of democratic participation has deep roots in British history. As early as the tenth century, the Anglo-Saxon monk Aelfric could write, 'No man can make himself king but the people has the choice to choose a king whom they please.'<sup>16</sup> The idea took many centuries to develop, however, eventually emerging thanks in part to one of the least democratically-minded Christian thinkers in the English tradition, William Tyndale. Tyndale was one of the most brilliant linguists and wordsmiths of the Reformation and was by nature and theology a political authoritarian.<sup>17</sup> However, that authoritarianism was matched – and rather undermined – by his evangelical commitment. Tyndale's overwhelming concern was to make the Scriptures accessible to *everyone* in their own language, no matter how poor or socially marginal they were. Not only did this put before all manner of classes the founding documents of society and encourage them to read and discuss them, but it simultaneously removed the influence of the safe, guiding hand of the learned and ordained. So important was it to clear a path for the unmediated relationship between God and the individual believer that it was worth risking political disorder in order to enable that religious freedom.

This 'spiritual democracy' inherent in reformation Protestantism prepared the ground from which ideas of political democracy would one day grow. It was Tyndale's work that enabled Colonel Thomas Rainsborough to remark in the Putney debates<sup>18</sup> a century later, 'every man that is to live under a government ought first by his own consent to put himself under that government.'<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, early nineteenth-century Christian radicals repeatedly drew on the idea of a spiritual democracy to advocate a political one. If God considered even the humblest man competent to judge for himself the means of eternal salvation, they argued, and government was simply the means of temporal salvation, it followed that government should involve the people in the formation of its laws.<sup>20</sup>

## Human equality

The question of equality – what it is and how it should be recognised – dogs contemporary politics, so much so that we are liable to miss quite how counterintuitive and countercultural is the commitment to fundamental human equality.<sup>21</sup> The idea that all humans are of ineradicable, equal worth is far from the 'self-evident' truth that the authors of the US Declaration of Independence imagined. The British (indeed, Western) commitment to it is drawn in large measure from biblical Christianity, particularly Genesis 1:26–27 – '...So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them' – perhaps the single most influential biblical text in British political history.

It is not, on the surface of it, a political text at all. Yet, the manner in which it has been used has been repeatedly and contro-

versially political. Here lay the basis of John Ball's aggressively egalitarian preaching during the peasants' revolt in the fourteenth century: 'When Adam delved [dug] and Eve span, / Who was then the gentleman?'<sup>22</sup> Here lay the basis for John Locke's more sophisticated and more influential *First Treatise on Government*, which methodically demolished Robert Filmer's argument that political inequality was built into creation.<sup>23</sup> Here, too, lay the basis for the abolitionist claim that the slave trade was a monstrous abuse of God's own creatures.<sup>24</sup>

The *imago dei* was, in fact, only one of the two main pillars for the Christian insistence on equality. The second was its NT counterpart: just as all are made in the image of God, all are saved – or offered the gift of salvation – by the same God. Between them, these two biblical doctrines helped generate an idea of human equality that, although honoured far more in the breach than the observance, still shapes British political history profoundly.

## Toleration

If there is one political virtue about which we are today more confused than equality, it is toleration. Who or, more precisely, *what* we should tolerate is a matter for much bad-tempered debate.

Christianity is not immediately associated with the virtue of tolerance, for good historical reasons. Yet, if certain biblical texts carried with them the potential for intolerance, others bore the seeds of toleration. One – the concept of *adiaphora* or 'things indifferent' – was particularly important. This derived primarily from 1 Corinthians and referred to the conviction that some matters, such as eating meat sacrificed to idols, were not essential to faith.

The idea bore fruit, albeit painfully slowly, in the sixteenth century, when (some) reformers began to argue that the magistrates' power (which they had recently boosted considerably) should be limited. Not only was there the imperative not to legislate against God's law (an imperative that was universally acknowledged) but there was also an imperative not to 'command certain indifferent things as if they must be done of necessity'.<sup>25</sup>

At first, and not surprisingly, it was advocated most insistently by those who were on the religious periphery and thus had most to gain from it. Some, though not all, early sixteenth-century English Baptists liked to cite the example of Luke 9, or Matthew 13, or 1 Corinthians 13, or 2 Timothy 2:24–25 in order to show how Christ and the early church had commended love and gentleness even for those of a different creed.<sup>26</sup>

Although it was only the more daring 'dissenters' who argued this in the early 1600s, by the end of the century it was the well-connected, well-respected, learned, Anglican philosopher John Locke who was making the most cogent case for toleration.

Locke had initially been opposed to religious tolerance but experiences abroad and a careful reading of the gospels persuaded him that 'toleration [is] the chief characteristic mark of the true Church.' From the (admittedly questionable) observation that 'scripture speaks very little of polities anywhere ... and God doth nowhere by distinct and particular prescriptions set down rules of governments and bounds to the magistrate's authority', Locke was able to draw a crucial distinction between sin and crime, between religious and political transgressions.

The church had its rightful sphere (of spiritual government) and the state its sphere (of temporal government). Short of some gross incursion from one or the other, an incursion that the

15 See, for example, Cary Nederman (ed.), *John of Salisbury: Policraticus*, Cambridge, 1990, IV.4, pp.35–36; *Complete Prose Works of John Milton*, (ed.) Don M. Wolfe, OUP, 1953–82, Vol. IV, 344.

16 *English Historical Documents*, Vol. 1, No. 239, p.925.

17 William Tyndale, *The Obedience of a Christian Man*, (ed.) David Daniell, Penguin, 2000.

18 Where Cromwell's New Model Army discussed the nation's political future.

19 'The Putney Debates', in *Divine Right and Democracy: An anthology of political writings in Stuart England*, (ed.) David Wootton, Penguin, 1986, pp.285–317.

20 Eileen Groth Lyon, *Politicians in the Pulpit: Christian Radicalism in Britain from the Fall of the Bastille to the Disintegration of Chartism*, Ashgate, 1999.

21 Julian Rivers, 'Uniformity or mutuality? The new equality law in Christian perspective', *Cambridge Papers*, Vol. 20, No. 3, September 2011.

22 Jean Froissart, *Chronicles*, trans. Geoffrey Brereton, Penguin, 2004, p.212.

23 John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government and A Letter Concerning Toleration* (ed.) Ian Shapiro, Yale University Press, 2003; and, especially, Jeremy Waldron, *God, Locke and Equality: Christian Foundations of John Locke's Political Thought*, CUP, 2002.

24 John Coffey, 'Evangelicals, Slavery & the Slave Trade: From Whitefield to Wilberforce', *Anvil*, Vol. 24, No. 2, 2007.

25 Robert Barnes, *That Men's Constitutions, which are not grounded in Scripture, bind not the conscience of Man*, in N. S. Tjernagel (ed.) *The Reformation Essays of Dr Robert Barnes*, London: Concordia Publishing House, 1963, p.90.

26 John Coffey, 'Puritanism and Liberty Revisited: The Case for Toleration in the English Revolution', in *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 41, No. 4, 1998, p.964.

civilised Locke found it hard to imagine, the two spheres could coexist happily. Many years later Locke's scheme appears overly neat and simplistic, and came at the cost of enervating the Church. But coming when it did, after 150 years of religious conflict, it was a bold and much-needed justification of toleration.

## Hermeneutics

The variety of different positions adopted by Christians on some of these issues over the centuries begs the question whether this was simply a free-for-all. Put another way, is there a legitimate way of reading the Bible politically, or were people perfectly justified in picking up whatever message from it they wished?<sup>27</sup>

Everyone invariably reads the Bible from somewhere and all foundational texts, whether religious or secular, are vulnerable to proof texting and abuse. The key question is whether there is any central organising principle by which different political interpretations of the Bible might be judged and how do we know. The (very brief) answer to this is that there was, and that we know this based on two striking features of the historical record.

The first feature is the sheer durability of certain key ideas. Some political readings, such as the limitation of political power or the fundamentally equal worth of all humans, recur repeatedly through the centuries, as liable to be articulated in the tenth century as the twentieth. Their staying power through some very different contexts is testimony to the fact that they have a more secure and reliable basis in Scripture than other ideas such as, in this instance, political absolutism or human inequality.

The second feature is the heat of particular debates. There were periods in British history in which certain political debates created a repeated and intense focus on biblical principles, and which were decisively won by one side. The conflicts over toleration in the seventeenth century and slavery in the eighteenth/nineteenth saw Christians pitted on both sides of the argument, but they also saw one side conclusively win through. In effect, biblically-grounded arguments for toleration and ineradicable human dignity were tested in the heat and found durable.

The fact that some biblical positions won through and others did not is not mere accident. On the contrary, their strength and authority derives from the fact that they are justified not by occasional biblical texts, but rather by the pillars of the Christian narrative. Thus, for example, creation and incarnation underpinned ideas of human equality and dignity; the fall and God's final redemption underpinned the limitation and dispersal of political authority; the concept of sin and the call for royal power to be accountable that is found in both testaments underpinned ideas of due process and democracy; the ministry of Christ underpinned attitudes to service, charity and welfare.

In short, although we should not be complacent about our capacity to read into the Bible whatever we want to, we can afford to be more sanguine about the capacity of Scripture itself to challenge and correct our dubious hermeneutics.

27 On this question and more generally on Christian politics, see Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.

## Conclusion

The six examples of the Bible's influence on political ideas in this paper were chosen because each remains in some way contentious. Others – such as the principle of a shared day off, or the role of (some) Christian traditions in justifying and developing the principle of state-based participation in welfare – might equally have been selected.

Whichever ideas are chosen, however, the question remains whether the Bible's influence is simply historical, or whether it has an on-going role in sustaining our commitment and shaping our understanding of these political virtues. Christians should, of course, recognise that faith should shape their politics but that is good only in as far as it goes. Those who do not share the Christian faith need persuasive arguments that this should be so.

One response to this is to assert that our commitment to the political virtues discussed in this paper can be sustained only on the basis of our Christianity and that without the latter, the former will invariably fail. The problem with this approach, however, is not only that it sounds implausibly alarmist but that it is effectively unverifiable, making large claims that cannot be confirmed one way or the other.

What can be said, with rather more confidence, is that politics is not self-sustaining. Those ideas that we think and often call self-evident, such as basic human equality or dignity, or the principled limitation of political power, are nothing of the sort. All political thought rests on underlying convictions and commitments, such as those relating to questions of God's existence, or human purpose and identity, or the value (or otherwise) of the created world.

Thus, commitment to nationhood, due process, political service, democracy, human equality, and toleration does not simply float free of any wider spiritual or philosophical foundations. On the contrary, such commitments need to be firmly grounded in bigger ideas if they are to withstand the vicissitudes of circumstance and, in particular, the tendency for political power to distort the human moral compass. In the words of the early Christian socialist F. D. Maurice, 'economy and politics...must have ground beneath themselves.'

In the UK, our commitment to these virtues has long been grounded in a biblically-informed Christianity that has, of late, come under intense pressure in public life. It may be unduly apocalyptic to state baldly that we cannot sustain a commitment to such political virtues without the Christianity that has underpinned them for so long, but it would be equally complacent to imagine confidently that we will be able to do so without it.

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