The Bible, the State and Religious Diversity: Theological Foundations for 'Principled Pluralism'

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Introduction

The issue of how the state should respond to the fact of religious diversity in its midst is becoming one of the most contentious challenges facing 21st century liberal democracies. The challenge is not simply the presence of an expanding variety of religious communities in what were formerly largely homogenous societies. It is rather the increasing desire of some of these communities to shape the public order according to their own political visions. No longer content with accepting the privatised role allotted to them by liberal secularism, many of these communities are now demanding not only public recognition but also public influence. They want public policy to accommodate their distinctive religious identities. In much of Europe, Islam is obviously the most visible player in this respect, and the response to Archbishop Rowan Williams' controversial lecture earlier this year on sharia law reveals the depth of anxiety surrounding the influence of Islam on British society. But other religious communities are also joining the fray, including a newly assertive orthodox Christianity – both Catholic and evangelical - which is vocally resisting what it perceives as the progressive secularisation of public life and the marginalisation of Christian faith which results from it.

One influential Christian political response to the fact of religious diversity is known as 'pluralism', or 'principled pluralism'; Os Guinness has called it 'chartered pluralism.' Principled pluralism is 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 in a religiously diverse society is to maintain a public square equally open to contributions from many faiths rather than overtly to prefer or privilege any one of them, even Christianity. Many Christians in the UK seem to support this view intuitively, but often they seem to do so for essentially pragmatic reasons. They recognise that Christians are no longer either in the majority or in the driving seat of public life, and that they

must come to terms with the public influence of other faith communities for the sake of social peace. That's not a bad reason, but thoughtful Christians will want some authentically Christian reasons for endorsing a pluralist political framework. In fact, a variety of theological considerations have been appealed to in support of this view. In a recent paper, Paul Helm grounds it in an Augustinian view of the limits of all earthly political orders. Archbishop Rowan Williams also defends it on broadly Augustinian terms, although he gives it a different name, 'procedural secularism'. Many Roman Catholics find it implied in the teachings of Vatican II, especially in the Declaration on Religious Liberty (*Dignitatis Humanae*), which appeals to a version of natural law. Americans such as Richard Mouw and James Skillen appeal to the neo-Calvinist theory of sphere sovereignty. Os Guinness appeals to the principle of religious liberty, enshrined in the US constitution.

Yet an alternative response to the fact of religious diversity is not only very much alive but winning increasing support. This is the 'Christian nation' position. It has remarkably strong support among evangelicals, and especially among English evangelicals, and not only among Anglicans, who might be expected to have a natural affinity with it given the Established status of the Church of England. On a Christian nation view, the goal of Christian political action is to defend or restore the nation's essentially Christian character. 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. While we can see this impulse at work here and there, I think this can be a rather cheap dismissal. Advocates of the Christian nation view claim to find strong theological support for their stance. It seems important, then, to explore what its theological foundation might be and, if it is found wanting, to ask whether principled pluralism has a better one. The argument for principled pluralism can't just be pragmatic or contextual. It isn't sufficient simply to say that, while once we lived in a Christian nation, now we live in pluralist one and so we have to accommodate our expectations and demands to the sheer fact of religious diversity. For that could

be taken to imply that, if we achieved a majority again, we would be entitled to restore the public preference for Christianity lost as a result of secularisation. That would amount to a 'strategic pluralism' but not a 'principled' one: accepting plurality would be a strategic retreat on the way to the future goal of national re-Christianization. The case for either stance must be theologically principled, and this lecture hopes to contribute to a constructive conversation between advocates of these alternative positions. My own sympathies are with principled pluralism, but my aim here isn't so much to rebut the Christian nation position as to clarify the real differences between the two views.

I 'A Christian Nation' vs. 'Principled Pluralism'

In the first section of the lecture I'll spell out further the implications of these two positions. I've chosen to spend more time explaining the Christian nation view because although it seems increasingly popular in the UK it seems less well understood both by its supporters and its critics. I'll illustrate each position by referring to some weighty recent contributions from very senior evangelical figures.

The Christian Nation View

According to the Christian nation position, Britain (or England on some accounts) was birthed as a Christian nation and, whatever its shortcomings, its public life has been and continues to be shaped predominantly by Christian faith. Advocates may come up with different assessments of exactly how far that remains the case, but there is a common judgment that the core of the nation's identity is essentially Christian. Britain is not simply an aggregation of individual Christians, the majority of whom who happen to be Christian. The very identity of the nation as a corporate 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 practise Christianity. For public institutions to neglect or repudiate

the legacy of Christian faith is to undermine the unique character of the nation and also to put at risk its main political achievements – freedom under law, accountable government, religious liberty, democracy, strong families, education committed to truth, and so forth. The task of the Christian community today, then, is to defend the Christian character of the nation and its institutions as far as possible where it is under threat, and even extend it where circumstances permit – not only through evangelism among individuals but also by public, political action.

The evangelical Anglican Bishop of Rochester, Michael Nazir-Ali, has recently restated the Christian nation position in a series of widely-discussed interventions. Writing in *The Sunday Telegraph* in January 2008 he opened up a hornet's nest, mainly because his article suggested that 'multiculturalism' had led to the emergence of what he called 'no-go' areas in certain urban communities with a large Muslim presence. That claim attracted both enthusiastic praise and sharp criticism, but I won't comment on it here. My interest is in his wider point, which was to lament the fact that public life in Britain is steadily losing its Christian character and is increasingly dominated by a deceptive 'multifaithism'. Far from heralding a tolerant pluralism, this multi-faithism turns out to be merely a cover for a coercive public secularism. In June he elaborated his argument in a more substantial piece in the first issue of a new conservative journal, *Standpoint*. The article, 'Breaking Faith with Britain', carried the following sub-head: 'Christianity is central to British identity, but its marginalisation has created a moral vacuum which radical Islam threatens to fill'. Notwithstanding that slightly alarmist line, the article is a thoughtful statement of a 'Christian nation' stance. Referring to the English nation, he 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'. The ceremonial public expression of this Christian character is seen the Established status of the Church of England, daily prayers in Parliament, the national anthem, and so on. These official forms, he says, 'have the purpose of weaving the awareness of God into the body politic of the nation'. He goes on to stress that this Christian character has also shaped the nation from the

bottom up, through the influence of core political principles arising from biblical faith: the dignity of the person, conscience, consent, natural rights, equality, liberty, the common good, and – notably - hospitality to foreigners (his family comes from Pakistan). Cut off 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 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.' 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"'. This last point may perhaps be an allusion to 'honour-killings' being committed by members of certain ethnic groups within the Muslim community.

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'.

Bishop Nazir-Ali's account is one of several statements of a Christian nation position current today. A similar position seems implied in the public statements of two evangelical lobbying organisations, Christian Concern for Our Nation (CCFON), and The Christian Institute, both of which have done important and influential work. CCFON is an outgrowth of the Lawyer's Christian Fellowship, from which it has recently become independent. At one point it describes its aims as 'enabling Christians to stand up for truth in the public area', and 'empower[ing] Christians to shape the law for Christ'. Now these sentiments could, of course, be endorsed by principled

pluralism. But an echo of a Christian nation position can be heard when it goes on to say that it aims to 'monitor and scrutinise British legislation and case law…and then explain to those in Government where those laws depart from Biblical principles and go against God's Word. CCFON believes that all laws in this nation should glorify God'.

In part the difference between this kind of statement and that which principled pluralists might use is one of language and tone. A principled pluralist, for example, would tend not to say simply that Christians should 'shape the law for Christ' but rather than Christians should 'bring to bear a Christian or biblically-informed voice on issues of legislation'. But the CCFON statement I just quoted seems to imply a distinctive assumption which, however, is not made explicit and which principled pluralists would contest: that the nation is a responsive, corporate entity that can be called to account for departing from biblical standards, so that a direct appeal can be made to the nation's government to uphold such standards. This is the idea of a 'faithful nation', a broadly unified moral community capable of rendering political obedience to God, and it is one of the key points on which the Christian nation view differs from principled pluralism. Principled pluralism questions whether a nation can be a unified moral community in this sense, and thinks of a nation instead as 'a community of faith communities'. Principled pluralists, therefore, do not think that a direct appeal can be made to government simply on the basis of Scripture or some faith confession alone. Christian nation advocates might regard this reluctance as a failure of nerve or even a concession to secularism. Principled pluralism sees it instead as a result of a proper view of the limits of government – a point I'll return to shortly.

Another statement of this view comes in a statement from the Welsh wing of the Christian People's Alliance around the time of the Welsh National Assembly elections of April 2007. This is interesting because the CPA generally seems to incline towards a principled pluralist view. The statement begins: 'CPA Cymru wants our children to understand and respect the Christian values of our forefathers: values of peacefulness and of tolerance and respect for all people regardless of age,

race, gender, culture and belief; values of trust and commitment to serving others, for the common good, even when it is difficult and painful to do so.' Thus far there is nothing here that a principled pluralist would disagree with. But it goes on: 'As a first step, we want the National Assembly in Cardiff to honour Christ at the start of each day. We think that every sitting of the Assembly should begin with Christian prayer, as they do in Westminster. In Wales, we would like these prayers for God's wisdom and direction to be said by our young people of faith, invited, individually, from all over Wales, to come and pray for our Nation's leaders, before they start the business of every Assembly day.' Here we see the assumption that a nation as a corporate entity, via its political representatives, can engage in a communal religious act such as praying.

At this point I need to introduce a further distinction, between a Christian nation view and support for a Christian state (or, as Oliver O'Donovan terms it, a 'confessionally Christian government'). Consider the following statement from The Christian Institute: '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 appropriate….'

This statement goes beyond the sentiments of CCFON and CPA Cymru by explicitly defending the notion of Christian privilege, and affirming that such privilege can and should be defended by the state. And while it also affirms religious liberty for non-Christians, it suggests that official Christian privilege will be "inevitable" where Christians are in the majority, although why that should be so is not made clear in this document. Now the specific idea that the state should officially privilege the Christian faith is not necessary to the Christian nation position. Indeed

Bishop Nazir-Ali himself envisages the possibility of defending the Christian character of the nation without at the same time supporting a privileged status for a church. Confessing his growing sense that Anglican Establishment is less and less theologically meaningful, he cites the USA as an example of such a situation (47). That is an important clarification. What it 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 an entity on the basis of Christian faith. I should add here, too, that while one can hold to a Christian nation stance without necessarily favouring a Christian state, it seems difficult to hold to a Christian state stance without also implying support for a Christian nation view.

We can also make 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 it might do so by including an explicit confession of faith in its constitution, as was done in Canada in 1982. That position has been described by an American proponent as 'National Confessionalism', and something like it is defended in the UK by, for example, David Field, David MacKay and Stephen Perks. It's possible, of course, to advocate both Establishment and a constitutional confession of faith.

To summarise: a Christian nation stance holds that the nation is a corporate entity that can be called to account for departing from biblical standards and so that a direct appeal can be made to government to uphold such standards. A Christian state stance goes beyond this and argues that the government's upholding of biblical standards should include an official recognition of the Christian faith, either by establishing a church or by confessing Christian faith in a constitution or both.

Principled Pluralism

Let me now turn to the principled pluralist position. This has recently been reaffirmed in another significant evangelical statement, this time from the USA. Entitled 'An Evangelical Manifesto', it

was issued in May 2008 over the signatures of prominent figures such as Timothy George, Os Guinness, John Huffman, Richard Mouw, David Neff, and Dallas Willard. I'm not sure whether they themselves would use the term 'principled pluralism' but their position seems very close to it. As I noted, Os Guinness himself introduced the parallel term 'chartered pluralism' some years ago, and the Evangelical Manifesto advocates a similar position. The Manifesto specifically rejects what it calls the idea of a 'sacred public square', i.e., one which '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 square.' But the Manifesto not only rejects a 'sacred public square', it also rejects a 'naked public square', which 'would make all religious expression inviolably private and keep the public square inviolably secular'. It goes on: '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'. The document makes no concessions to those who would secularise the public realm. Over against both a sacred public square and a naked public square, it advocates a 'civil public square', which it defines as: '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. Thus every right we assert for ourselves is at once a right we defend for others.'

Before discussing the theological foundations of the two positions, let me make two further remarks.

First, let me underline that the Christian nation and Christian state positions are just as committed to the principle of individual religious liberty as principled pluralism. The statement from The Christian Institute already makes that clear, as does Nazir-Ali in his *Standpoint* article. Indeed 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. Defenders of this position are quite correct to say that a preferred or even legally privileged status for Christianity in the public realm is entirely compatible with extensive religious liberty for adherents of other faiths or none. None of them defend religious coercion of any kind.

Second, neither the Christian nation nor Christian state positions imply 'theocracy'. This is a widespread misunderstanding, arising mainly because people do not know what the term means and use it promiscuously, and sometimes mischievously. 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. What people really mean by the term is the rule of the church or the clergy, which would be better termed ecclesiocracy or clerocracy. Contemporary Iran would be the clearest example, where a Council of Guardians composed of senior Islamic clerics functions as a kind of supreme court. Christian nation of Christian state supporters do not advocate anything like theocracy in this sense, although some defenders of a Christian state imply that some ecclesial body or other needs to instruct the state on what true religion is, since it can't know it by itself. But this does not imply the conferring of political or legislative power on such an ecclesial body. Defenders of both positions fully acknowledge the duality of political and ecclesial jurisdictions, even if they also support Establishment.

II Theological Convergences and Divergences

To spell out a theological case for principled pluralism, I'll proceed by responding to the distinctive theological arguments invoked by defenders of the Christian nation position. I should say at the outset that I won't be engaging with the most influential representative of that position, namely Oliver O'Donovan; his views are addressed by David McIlroy tomorrow. But let me start by

identifying eight core commitments, in addition to those already noted, which I believe are or could be shared by adherents of both the Christian nation view and principled pluralism.

First, God is sovereign governor and judge over the universe and over all nations. I mention this seemingly obvious point because it's important to note that principled pluralists don't suggest that diverse religious should be treated equally by the state because the state is somehow outside the realm of divine sovereignty. They do so precisely because it stands under that sovereignty. Second, neither side assumes a distinction between the sovereignty of God the Father and that of God the Son. They both affirm that all authority on heaven and earth, including all political authority has been given to the ascended Christ, and that the Kingdom of Christ embraces every dimension of reality, including the political realm. Third, 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'. They will be answerable to Him for the discharge of the office at the final judgment but are also accountable to Him in the present age, even if they don't know it. This is especially important because Christian state supporters sometimes 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. But the difference between them and principled pluralists is not over whether Jesus is Lord of all nations but over how his sovereignty is mediated in the current dispensation, on which more below.

Fourth, 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 careful regard to it. I say more about that below as well. Fifth, 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 will

be greatly improved if public policy were shaped powerfully by a biblically-informed vision of politics. Sixth, Christian citizens, and even 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 in order to gain a legitimate hearing, though they will try to make themselves intelligible and persuasive in the context of a largely secularised public realm. Seventh, 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, and Christians should not apologise for or conceal this, although they will also humbly acknowledge that Christians have often contributed to unjust political actions. A particular constitution, the EU's for example, could legitimately acknowledge the centrality of Christianity to the formation of the nation's political culture. Eighth, the structures and policies of contemporary states may as a matter of fact come to be substantially influenced by authentic Christian faith, and 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, even 'between the times'. Some defenders of a Christian nation position tend towards an over-realised eschatology at this point, but David Field plausibly shows this is not a necessary implication. He writes: '[W]e 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' (101). I can't see why principled pluralists could not share such aspirations. (Later in the same article, however, he 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).)

These are substantial areas of agreement, and so it's likely that adherents to the two positions may often be working for very similar practical political goals, even if they adopt somewhat different languages or tactics. Let me now probe a bit further into the differences. There are several, but here I'll concentrate on the one already anticipated in my accounts of the two positions.

While the Christian nation position holds that the nation's identity is essentially Christian or could become so, pluralists hold that a nation is a 'community of faith communities' in which, as *An Evangelical Manifesto* puts it, 'no one faith should be normative for the entire society'. As a consequence, states should not take an official view of the truth of any one faith but adopt a posture of even-handedness among them. I noted a central assumption underlying this position: that a nation can exist as a unified moral community which could be held corporately accountable to God. The central theological commitment sustaining this assumption derives from a particular reading of the relationship between the two testaments and the redemptive dispensations to which they bear witness. The assumption is that the ancient Israelite polity, the model of the covenanted people of God, remains valid in a very specific way even in the New Testament era. Christian nation advocates do acknowledge several important discontinuities. For example, as noted, they not think that the principle of compulsory religious uniformity any longer applies, but they support religious liberty for all. They acknowledge that the NT 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. Almost all adherents to the Christian nation view also agree that the state may not in any way disadvantage unbelievers civilly. Stephen Perks is exceptional here in arguing that only members of constitutionally recognised Christian churches may hold political office. Finally, with the exception of the Theonomists, nor do Christian nation advocates think that the specific content of the criminal or civil law of the OT remains valid as positive law for states in the NT era. Instead they tend to favour the principle stated in the Westminster Confession that it is not precise

details of Mosaic law which are binding on Christians today but only 'the general equity thereof' (a point elaborated in a recent article by Harold Cunningham in Tyndale Bulletin).

So Christian nation advocates accept all these points of discontinuity between Old and New Testaments. But a crucial point of continuity they seem to assume is that nation-states in the New Testament era can and should display the unified moral and religious character of the OT polity, such that it is meaningful to attribute to them the capacity to respond corporately and consciously to God. The central disagreement, then, is not over whether nations stand under the universal authority of Christ, but rather over the character of nationhood itself in the New Testament era, over whether nations are today the sorts of entities that can corporately embody or profess a particular religious faith.

There is no doubt that ancient Israel was indeed 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 hold the view (which, of course, is not original to them) that this specific, covenantal character was only ever ordained by God for one people, biblical Israel. They do not deny that there may be generic features of nationhood of which Israel is only one instance, such that lessons can be learned from Israel about the proper conduct of other nations. Nor do they necessarily insist on the specific doctrine of supercessionism, i.e., the view that the biblical nation of Israel has been entirely superseded in God's plan of salvation and has no future as a polity in his eschatological future. That is an entirely distinct question on which I offer no view here. But principled pluralists do deny that God has anywhere disclosed that he has entered into a covenantal relationship with any nation other than Israel, or that other nations are obliged to 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. From Scripture we certainly do know generally that God orders all nations providentially according to his will, and specifically that he 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. Apart from that there is no other way we could attain reliable knowledge of such things. It is one thing to confess, as principled pluralists also do, that God continues to rule over the nations and call them to submit to his will. It is quite another to claim that he has called a particular naton into a covenantal relationship with him akin to that with biblical Israel.

Principled pluralists, then, hold that the OT people of God played a dispensationally unique, unrepeatable, and inimitable role as a divinely created political community. This was the way God first chose to reveal himself first to fallen humanity. But there was nothing necessary about that choice, as if God was somehow bound to choose a particular nation as the conduit of his first revelation, as a kind of anticipation of some general plan to go on working through covenanted nations in the future. Indeed, Deuteronomy, for example, attributes God's choice of Israel entirely to his own sovereign will and does not interpret it as a first instance of subsequent acts of election.

This negative conclusion is reinforced by a positive one. Not only are there no chosen nations today, but the New Testament people of God today is constituted as a trans-national community. In Jesus Christ the Gentiles are brought fully into a covenant relationship with God, a theological truth we see enacted visibly in the trans-ethnic, trans-national character of the early church in Acts, since is Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek. What Paul describes as 'the revelation of the mystery' in Colossian 1: 26 is not some Gnostic secret, but rather a flinging open of the doors of salvation to all nations. Of course it was always God's plan that Israel itself was to be a witness to all the nations, but now that plan is publicly announced to the whole world and tangibly realised in the Messiah who inaugurates a Kingdom of global reach. Hence the Great Commission to 'make disciples of all nations'. Given this, the NT church cannot literally be a 'New Israel' in the sense of a territorial

political community in which divine positive law prevails. I should add that, to say that the church is trans-national is not at all to say that it is a-political, only that it is not theologically associated with any specific national community.

Clearly, this cannot mean that the OT polity has nothing to say to NT Christians. On the contrary, precisely because that 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, one from which we can learn an immense amount and to which we must give due reverence. So Christians down the ages have been right to pore over the detailed design of the polity of ancient Israel in search of authoritative insights for political orders today. Yet while everything in OT law is revelatory of God's will, none of it is immediately authoritative as binding positive law either for the people of God today or for the diverse states they happen to reside in. The OT command to rulers to subject themselves to the faith of Yahweh cannot, then, simply be applied without qualification to rulers in the NT era.

This conclusion is confirmed, I think, by the most important NT text on political authority, Romans 13. This passage speaks of rulers as 'God's servants', and this phrase is often invoked in support of the Christian state position. But 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 persuecuting his followers and eventually assuming to itself quasi-divine status. Indeed many readings of Romans 13 today argue that Paul's language here is really a radical critique of the Roman empire, since by calling the Roman state a mere servant it radically deflated its imperial pretensions. And that critique is surely one which the church today is called to echo whenever it meets authoritarian or idolatrous states.

So on the basis of a negative conclusion from the OT, and a positive one from the NT, I submit that there is no clear biblical warrant for holding that political nations today are capable of being addressed 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). If this is so, then by implication the divinely-given competence of state as specifically disclosed in the NT does not extend to declaring an official public view of the truth of any confession. David Field at one point characterioses principled pluralism as holding this: 'that the triune God is the true God, that Jesus is Lord, and that the Bible is authoritative, but…a proper reading of the Bible teaches that these things should not be authoritatively (constitutionally) affirmed in the public square' (113). That is almost right. I would only add the caveat that principled pluralists don't insist that the Bible specifically forbids these things, only that it does not lend sufficient support to such things being necessary, and that its overall theological direction points in another direction.

Let me conclude with two final points.

First, principled pluralism does not imply that laws or constitutions are morally vacant or neutral. Principled pluralists are sometimes regrettably vague on this point, but there is no reason why they should disagree with the Christian nation argument that a 'naked public square' is actually a myth. Any particular constitutional provision or piece of legislation will inevitably reflect some substantive moral principle or other, or a combination of them. Indeed the overall design of the state will also. Oliver O'Donovan has argued powerfully that the task of government, as expounded in Romans 13 for example, can be summarised as that of rendering 'public judgement'. He also shows how this can never be a purely procedural task, as if government merely laid down technical rules of procedure for decision-making. For even the rules themselves, never mind the substantive decisions flowing from them, will carry substantive moral content. Some Christian nation advocates, and most Christian state advocates, argue, however, that principled pluralism necessarily assumes the possibility of a morally neutral state, and so unwittingly offers succour to liberal secularism. I don't think this follows at all. What principled pluralism does imply, crucially, is that the required unity of the state is to be found not in a shared moral or religious vision, but rather in the basic constitutional

framework that structures it. Included in such a framework will be what An Evangelical Manifesto points to as an agreement over core principles of justice and freedom for all faiths. To be sure, as Bishop Nazir-Ali rightly points out in his article, such a constitutional framework cannot be sustained without some substantive moral commitments on the part of citizens, and these need to be nurtured and shored up if the state is to survive 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. And 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, i.e., as if could ever function as covenanted nation. Principled pluralism implies what Oliver O'Donovan describes as a stance of 'confessional silence' on the part of state. He criticises that view, but I think it is implied by the NT reading of nationhood I sketched above. Confessional silence will not produce substantive confessional neutrality, but it will require an official posture of confessional even-handedness.

Second, and to conclude on a note of convergence, I think Christian nation supporters will agree with principled pluralists that what truly pleases God most is not that states officially declare their support for Christian faith but that they actually act justly in their concrete policies, especially towards the poor, vulnerable, and the oppressed. Confessional silence does not in itself amount to a rejection of the Lordship of Christ. Indeed, given a sufficiently large, faithful and politically active Christian citizenry, the state will in fact be submitting to his Lordship *in action*, even if it is not officially doing so in words. That surely is far more important. On that, I think, we can expect, and should work for, a great deal of practical agreement.