

Session to Session

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The Problems with "Christian America"

by Kenneth A. Myers

The recent marches and subsequent arrests in Washington by the advocates of homosexual rights serve as another striking example of the growing moral distance between various communities in the United States.

What is most disturbing about the ethical pluralism in our country is the relatively new role of all three branches of the federal government in providing protection for moral choices that offend a large proportion (if not a majority) of the American public. When homosexuality, for example, is seen as primarily a *political* issue (which is how militant "homosexualists" want it to be understood), it becomes impossible to discuss publicly any *moral* aspects of homosexuality. Moral issues thus become submerged in political competition.

One strategy that some Christians have adopted in the hopes of obtaining a quick victory in this civil war has been to assert loudly that America is a Christian nation, and that, hence, its laws should reflect Christian values. The "Christian America" school goes to great lengths to establish its principal premise, quoting Supreme Court decisions, speeches by George Washington, and verses from II Chronicles. The most extreme defense I've yet encountered was in a footnote, attempting to document the claim that the United States Constitution is "built upon the presupposition of the lordship of Christ." The note read: "Aside from the Christian principles in the Constitution, the dominantly Christian practice of our early government, and the dominantly Biblical content of our early laws, the concluding words of the Constitution are often neglected by Christians: 'DONE . . . in the year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and eighty-seven. . . .'"

One might reasonably conclude that the author of the essay in which this amazing bit of reasoning appeared is a rather desperate man. He is not alone. Many Americans, disturbed by the specter of widespread moral decline, are tempted to such absurd positions because they sincerely believe that a trust has been violated. American moral decay is seen as a form of national apostasy. But since na-

tions are not persons, there are some serious problems with characterizing *national* life by using *personal* attributes.

A *person* is deemed a Christian because we believe he is the recipient of the work of God's saving grace. But what would qualify a nation as Christian? Nations are certainly beneficiaries of God's *providential* grace, but the way most people describe a "Christian nation," fulfilling the terms of the definition sounds like a matter of works more than of grace. Can a nation be a Christian nation simply by *declaring* itself to be a Christian nation? And what of a nation that declares itself Christian which, generations later, has virtually no believers among its population?

Or maybe defining a Christian nation is simply a matter of nose counting. If fifty-one percent of the populace professes to be Christian, is the nation automatically Christian? Since many people claim to be Christians who are not regenerate, what evidence would we require for their profession to count as part of the total? And would the

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Bill Moyers and the Reconstructionists

by O. Palmer Robertson

Cornelius Van Til often joked about never having made it to the cover of *Time*. But there he was (at least a picture of him) in a nationally broadcast, prime time public television special about religion and politics. Reformed theology finally made the big time.

So how did you react to the impressions made by the people in this program who wore the label "reformed" in such a public setting? There they were—Rousas J. Rushdoony, David Chilton, Gary North, Greg Bahnsen, Joseph Moorecraft—all representing the cause of reformed "world-and-life" view.

You'll have to admit that Bill Moyers was restrained in his critique. He let the movement of Christian Reconstructionism speak for itself.

And what did its representatives say? Did they speak for you?

They said that they hoped to have their position prevail

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designation be retracted if two percent of the population apostatized?

When most people use the term "Christian nation," they probably mean a nation whose laws and general standard of behavior do not offend moral principles as Christians understand them. But couldn't a Jewish nation or a Mormon nation or even a Moonie nation evidence a similar morality?

These problems were surveyed in the 1860s by Thomas E. Peck, a Presbyterian theologian at the time of the formation of the Confederate States of America. A number of Presbyterians were eager to press the Confederate Congress in Richmond to officially recognize Christianity in the Constitution. Unlike the "old Constitution," the southern version was explicitly theistic, but many Presbyterians wanted it to be explicitly Christian, to acknowledge Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords.

In 1863, in an article in *The Southern Presbyterian Review*, Peck argued that Christ's lordship over the nations was not specifically a function of his saving mission. "The question is, whether civil rulers derive their authority from Him, as Mediator, or whether they derive their authority from God, as moral governor of mankind." In other words, Jesus is lord of the Church because membership in its body belongs only to those who acknowledge his saving lordship, but he is lord of the nations because as God-Messiah he providentially orders their affairs for the good of his redeemed, whether the membership of the nations and their leaders acknowledge his lordship or not.

That is a crucial distinction which Peck discusses later in the article: "The supremacy of Christ is founded upon His work as a priest, for the salvation of the elect. The State is a branch of the moral government of God, as the righteous judge of all, and is bound to recognise God only in this capacity. The Church, which is the body, or professes to be the body of the saved, is bound to recognise the Saviour, prophet, priest, and king. This is her very vocation, to be a witness-bearer, and the Bible regulates her testimony and her profession. The State must not contradict her testimony; and that is all the State is bound to do."

Peck reminds his readers of Paul's argument that "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord,' except by the Holy Spirit." "Are there more than a very small minority of people in the Confederate States," asked Peck, "who are, in the judgment of charity, persuaded by the Holy Ghost that our blessed Saviour is Lord and King? What then? Will the acknowledgment of Christ in the Constitution make us a 'Christian nation?' Have not the kings of France enjoyed the titles of 'eldest sons of the Church,' and 'most Christian kings?' What shall we say of Henry VIII and Philip II? O Christ! what crimes have been committed in thy name! No; there is no magic in the name of Christ emblazoned in our Constitution and on our banners to transform us into a Christian people. Many a foul heart has beaten under the 'cross' of the Crusader; fouler far than beat un-

der the crescent of the Saracen."

Thomas Peck had no notion of a morally neutral or indifferent state. He believed fervently that every nation is under God, that is, under his judgment, and that "every civil government on earth is bound to recognize its responsibility to God as moral governor of mankind." Every nation's laws had to conform to God's laws for nations, but not to his laws for his own covenant people, now known as Christians.

There would be at least two effects of constitutionally declaring the nation to be Christian, warns Peck: "Either to make us a nation of hypocrites, or to exclude from our public service every sort of ability which was not found associated with a cordial reception of Christ as King, or, at least, with a sincere recognition of His authority." Many citizens do not recognize Christ's lordship; are they to be excluded from public office, or from voting? Only when Christ comes in judgment will every knee bow. Until then, his rule is real but unrecognized. Paul's teaching about civil government in Romans 13 says nothing about the necessity of explicit recognition of Christ as lord for a government to be regarded as legitimate. Peck argues that Jesus recognized the governmental authority of Pilate even though Pilate did not recognize that there was divine source for his authority.

In a sense, an insistence that America is a "Christian nation" contradicts the biblical view of government. Peck observes that "civil government was ordained for all men, and not for the saints only; as there is a moral constitution in all men which responds to the authority of God as moral governor, and they can recognise Him as such without the saving power of the Holy Ghost; and as God, the God of nature and providence, has endowed men with capacity for government who are not Christians; all that is necessary, in the way of an explicit acknowledgment of responsibility, is the acknowledgment of our responsibility to God as the governor of nations."

There are such *informal* recognitions in American polity: the inscription on currency "In God We Trust," the phrase in the Pledge to the Flag, "one nation under God," the practice of swearing in judicial witnesses and public officials by oaths that in effect acknowledge God's omniscience and judgment. But there is not as specific a *formal* theism as existed in the Confederate Constitution.

Many proponents of the idea of a "Christian America" might be sympathetic to Peck's position. When Christians speak of the Judeo-Christian tradition, they are essentially waving a banner of theism, and thus offer an alternative to secularized relativism *and* pious triumphalism, which threaten to distort the integrity of both religion and politics.

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in the government of this country, but only when a clear majority of the people were positively in favor of it. They made it clear that their program would involve a reinstitution of the civic codes of the Old Testament. In addition, they said they were prepared to merge their cause with the activist, enthusiastic pentecostals of the day.

Did they speak for you? They used language precious to the reformed and presbyterian heritage, rich in its commitment to the biblical faith. But they turned it away from the mainstream of biblical presbyterianism into diverted channels that can only bring grief to us all.

Consider what they said, and evaluate it in the light of what they left unsaid.

For the Christian reconstructionists to work their program, the "takeover" of government so that it functions according to Old Testament civic codes means the establishment and enforcement of a theocracy. Not only will recalcitrant children be executed; all adherents to any religion that the state does not perceive to be biblical will be subject to the possibility of the death penalty.

The people being interviewed during the Bill Moyers special were skillful enough to finesse around any questions that might have exposed this mindset of the theonomists, and Bill Moyers didn't know about the requirements of Deuteronomy 13 and 18. But this position came out plainly in a recent presbytery examination in a NAPARC church of a candidate for the office of teaching elder. According to reports, when the reconstructionist being called to a pastorate was asked if he thought that the civil magistrate ought to suppress heresy, he said, "Yes." Then he was asked if he thought Roman Catholicism was a heresy. Again, he said, "Yes."

The staggering implications of these assertions should not be missed. Sugarcoat the pill all you like by stating that the state's suppression of Roman Catholicism should await the development of a "clear majority" of people who desire the state to take this action. But the goal set by the reconstructionists remains the same.

Perhaps the most ironic factor brought out by Moyers's hour-long exploration was the new rapport now being established with the charismatics. The reconstructionists shall provide the brainpower, while the charismatics shall provide the zeal.

Common cause makes strange bedfellows indeed—but this combination must be among the strangest! The reconstructionist, strict Calvinist that he is, insists that God's law written in the Bible is the *only* guide for life. And the charismatic, ardent revelation-seeker that he is, lives moment by moment with the expectation that a "word from the Lord" certainly will come to him so that he can know God's will for the particular problem of the present moment. To be sure, the charismatic is devoted to the Scriptures and to Christ. But the *nihil obstat* nevertheless applies. If the current "word from the Lord" does not directly contradict Scripture, then—go for it! Coming through tongues, prophecy, or by an internal "sense," it

gives him the divine guidance he needs.

So a certain charismatic congressman was sure of his "word from the Lord." No tax by the government should exceed ten percent, since even the Lord demanded only a tithe. Obviously the state shouldn't get more than God—or so he concluded.

Let us give thanks for the freedoms we have as Christians in this great nation. Let us appreciate the balance struck by our forefathers which has been the source of so much blessing to the world. Let us give up once for all the quest for the holy grail, the rescue of the "holy land" from the heathen, and the establishing of a "holy Calvinistic empire." Let us do all we can to advance God's kingdom in a way that accords with the nature of the times as determined by the plan of God. Let us accept the temporally and typologically limited character of the Old Testament theocracy. And let us take more seriously the all-inclusive distinction Christ and his apostles have made between this (interim) age and that (final) age to come, between the present era of our "filling up that which is lacking in the sufferings of Christ," and the future time of his epiphany in glory.

Letting the Church Be the Church

by Michael D'Virgilio

One of the recurring themes at the Congress on the Bible last fall was the call of the Church to action in the public or social arena. What often got lost in this call was the primary role of the Church in the world. Is the nature and mission of the Church primarily political, as some of the triumphalism at the Congress seemed to imply? Does the Church exist principally to effect social change? Lutheran pastor Richard John Neuhaus addressed this issue in his message to the Congress and warned that the Church should never lose sight of its distinctively spiritual role in the world. Neuhaus, who is the author of *The Naked Public Square* and no stranger to political and social involvement, said the Church best serves the world by what it *is*, not what it *does*.

"Of course," acknowledged Neuhaus, "Christians should be engaged in the public square. More and more Christians need to be told that, more and more persuasively, more and more urgently. Christians need to be engaged in the public square, relentlessly, audaciously, defiantly, sometimes even confrontationally. . . . The ministry of the Church, however, is to equip the saints for their vocations in the world. Political action is not a *large* part, indeed it is not even *a* part, *necessarily*, of every Christian's vocation. . . . It is the Church's vocation to

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sustain many different vocations, and it is the Church's vocation to keep those who are politically engaged, engaged with one another, especially when they are politically opposed . . . within the bond of the love of Christ. The truth of the Gospel transcends our disagreements about all lesser truths. It is by that truth, the truth of the Gospel, that we are joined together by mutual dependence and accountability. . . .

"Liberation theologians of a Marxist stripe on the left, of a theonomist stripe on the right, would create a partisan

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Church. Membership in a partisan Church is not defined by the Gospel of God's justifying grace in Christ, but by ideologies, and political alignments, and where you stand on the public policy issues of the day. . . .

"Christians on the left and the right of the political spectrum today are forever investing their hopes in what passes for the new politics of the moment. Forgetting that the only politics worthy of our hope is the genuinely new politics of the heavenly polis, the city that comes down from above, the city of God. The world needs a Church that dares to defy the pervasiveness and imperiousness of the political in our world."

Michael D'Virgilio, a student at Westminster Theological Seminary, is Assistant Editor for Berea Publications.

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