The Implications of the Gospel for Christian Involvement in Legislative Formation

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Abstract

This paper examines, from the framework of Christian theology, the implications of the gospel for how and why Christians ought to be involved in legislative formation. First, the article draws on Oliver O'Donovan's work to elucidate the grounds for distinctively Christian participation. Then it considers the extent to which arguments in public debate should be explicitly related to Christian theology. Finally, and briefly, it considers some implications of these findings for two controversial examples: UK blasphemy law, and Nigerian homosexuality legislation. The article concludes that Christ's Lordship is the ultimate ground's for Christian involvement in legislative formation. The article argues that involvement in such debates is a facet of the church's mission. However, this does not require that every subset of Christian argument must be explicitly Christian. Such choices are a matter of wisdom and sound communication.

Keywords: legislation, public theology, Oliver O'Donovan, blasphemy, homosexuality.

The Garden of Love

I went to the Garden of Love,
And saw what I never had seen:
A Chapel was built in the midst,
Where I used to play on the green.

And the gates of this Chapel were shut,

And "Thou shalt not." writ over the door;
So I turn'd to the Garden of Love,
That so many sweet flowers bore.

And I saw it was filled with graves,
And tomb-stones where flowers should be:
And Priests in black gowns, were walking their rounds,
And binding with briars, my joys & desires.

William Blake

Introduction

Christian involvement in legislation is viewed somewhat ambivalently. Christians may be concerned that it could distract the church from its 'real mission' of gospel proclamation; others may fear an undue (and oppressive?) influence by the church.[1] This article shall examine, from within the framework of Christian theology, why and how Christians might be involved in legislative formation in ways which are faithful to the central themes of the gospel of Jesus Christ.[2] The approach will be as follows. First, the article give a compressed overview of the work of one leading, gospel-centred contributor to the field of political theology, namely Oliver O'Donovan, and will draw on this work to elucidate the grounds upon which Christians might participate faithfully in legislative formation.[3] Then the article will consider the extent to which arguments in public debate should be explicitly related to Christian theology in general, and the gospel in particular. In the final section, the article shall briefly consider some implications of these findings for two controversial examples: one foreign (UK blasphemy law) and one domestic (Nigerian homosexuality legislation).

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1 Cf. L. Skoan 'On the Relationship of Church, Law and State' unpublished lecture outline.

2 This article will take 'formation of new legislation' to cover creating entirely new legislation, along with revoking or revising existing legislation.

3 For the sake of space, this article will largely confine itself O'Donovan's thought as expressed in *The Desire of the Nations*, his foundational work on political theology, cf. Oliver O'Donovan, The Desire of the Nations (Cambridge, UK: CUP, 1996). The interested reader is also referred to *The Ways of Judgment,* O'Donovan's second major work of political theology: Oliver O'Donovan, The Ways of Judgment (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2005); cf. also David McIlroy, 'The Ways of Judgment', Political Theology 8, no. 3 (July 2007): 373–80; Roger Scruton, 'The Ways of Judgment', Studies in Christian Ethics 20, no. 1 (April 2007): 141–46.

Christ, the Nations' Desire

"Christ is Lord." O'Donovan's work attempts to consistently relate this fundamental gospel truth to political discourse. His argument is radically Christocentric and radically eschatological. Before the Christ-Event, one could think in terms of 'Two Cities' or 'Two Rules',[4] namely, Babylon (opposed to, or at least, ignorant of the true God) and Israel (who ought to be under God's rule). Christ's coming changes all that.[5] We must now think in terms of Two Ages: Christ has inaugurated the age to come, and the old age is passing.[6] Hence (according to O'Donovan) secular[7] government has been superseded by the Kingdom of God, i.e. the rule of Christ. The current overlap of these ages—which exists because, although the new age is inaugurated, the old age has not yet been abolished—provides the only grounds for any ongoing existence of secular government. Now is a time of eschatological tension: the Passing Age is obsolete, but not finally Passed.[8]

According to O'Donovan, the church's mission in this 'overlap of the ages' is to proclaim Christ's Lordship, and the government's responsibility is to submit to that Lordship. The church is to urge the state to recognise its true (humble) position, and to share in the practical deliberation and policy formation which seek to implement this recognition.[9] There is no longer any neutral ground: everything rulers do will either be in submission to Christ's Lordship, or in rejection of it.[10] The most truly Christian state will understand itself most thoroughly as 'secular'—that is, 'secular' in the original sense of belonging to this passing age only and having no eternal future.[11] The humble secular state, in submission to Christ, recognises its own obsolescence. This entails recognising that the only reason,

4 Cf. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. R. W. Dyson (Cambridge, UK: CUP, 1998), passim.

5 Cf. O'Donovan, *Desire*, 83.

6 Cf. O'Donovan, *Desire*, 137.

7 O'Donovan helpfully redefines *secular* in terms of it's older meaning as *pertaining to this age*. Its opposite is thus *eternal* rather than *sacred*.

8 Cf. O'Donovan, *Desire*, 211–12.

9 Cf. O'Donovan, *Desire*, 219.

10 In practice, governments will normally have conflicting tendencies, submitting in some aspects, rebelling in others.

11 Cf. O'Donovan, *Desire*, 219.

within God's purposes, for an ongoing function of government is to facilitate the church's mission.[12]

What might such 'facilitation' look like? The humble state exists to create and maintain a stable, peaceful society where the church may fulfil its mission of proclamation. O'Donovan has, at length, argued that political authority is constituted by power, just judgement, and tradition.[13] Maintaining a stable society requires the government to exercise just judgement; and the exercise of just judgement requires at least some minimal degrees of both power and tradition. Thus, according to O'Donovan's framework, the humble state, which continues to exist solely to further the church's mission, will be minimally coercive and minimally representative. In other words, it utilises power and tradition only to the extent that these are necessary to exercise just judgement.[14]

This is a brief summary of O'Donovan's position. He himself builds a detailed, cumulative case, arising from a careful reading of Scripture. This article is not the place to provide a adequate critique (or defence) of O'Donovan's position;[15] however, it is worth noting that the Bible freely and frequently makes use of political categories to describe God's relationship to creation: e.g. 'Yahweh is King'; 'the Lord Jesus'; 'Messiah'; 'the Kingdom of God'.[16] This, along with a Christocentric understanding of God's action in the world, gives *prima facie* scriptural grounds for expecting O'Donovan's position to be at least approximately correct. Of course, the exact way in which O'Donovan's theology will apply in practice will vary from context to context, depending, not least, on

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12 Cf. O'Donovan, *Desire*, 217. N.B. It is not the government's role to 'defend' the church, or 'reinforce church discipline'. Such mistakes fail to recognise that the church is guaranteed by the ascended Christ; it needs no further underwriting! Cf. O'Donovan, *Desire*, 218.

13 Cf. O'Donovan, *Desire*, 36-46.

14 Cf. O'Donovan, *Desire*, 233.

15 Such critiques are available in, for example, Craig Bartholomew, Jonathan Chaplin, Robert Song, and Al Wolters, eds. *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically: A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan.* Scripture & Hermeneutics Series. (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster, 2002); Mark W. Elliott, 'A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically: A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan', European Journal of Theology 12, no. 2 (1 January 2003): 154–58.

16 Even in works arising directly from biblical studies (i.e. with no immediate or conscious reference to political theology) the Kingdom of God is often cited as the 'organising principle' or 'unifying theme' of the Scriptures. Cf. G. Goldsworthy, 'Is Biblical Theology Viable?' in *Interpreting God's Plan: Biblical Theology and the Pastor* (ed. R.J. Gibson; Carlise: Paternoster, 1998), 44.

the attitude taken towards Christianity by the state. Established churches (i.e. those given official recognition within the country's constitution), will fair differently from churches in pluralistic states,[17] and they will fair differently again from churches in states which are hostile to the gospel.

Nonetheless, given that circumstances are taken appropriately into account, this paper agrees with O'Donovan that the church's mission of proclaiming Christ's Lordship (and its implications) applies to individuals, and also to society, and also to society's rulers. Once this is accepted, it follows immediately that this proclamation should be brought into the field of political discourse in general, and into legislative formation in particular.[18] Making clear the implications of Christian theology for legislative formation is thus a key aspect of the church's mission—and certainly not a distraction from it. A legitimate follow-on question, however, is: ought Christians to argue in an explicitly Christians way on every occasion?

Communication, and the issue of explicitness

Consider a sharpened version of this question: This article has argued that the church, when participating in legislative formation, ought to argue in an explicitly Christian manner; but must the gospel basis of such arguments be explicit *from the very beginning*? And must *every subset* of argumentation be explicitly Christian (i.e. every speech, every letter, every comment)? This subsection shall outline four resources to help answer this question, three doctrinal and one philosophical.

First, a strong doctrine of creation implies that gospel-informed lifestyles, and gospel-informed legislation, will produce the most beneficial outcomes for society. We live in a moral universe: right and wrong are ontologically built into the structure of creation. People may thus recognise the benefits of certain implications of Christian theology without knowing or accepting that theology.[19] Second, a robust understanding of the gospel's power implies that many people

[17] Miroslav Volf makes the case the the Christian gospel is consistent with, and in fact encourages, a politically pluralistic state, cf. Miroslav Volf, A Public Faith (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2011), chap. 7; Miroslav Volf, Allah: A Christian Response (London, UK: HarperCollins, 2011), chap. 12.

[18] This legislative aspect of political discourse is especially relevant since it impacts directly on the only legitimate ongoing role for the state: the exercise of just judgement.

[19] Cf. Peter Jensen, 'Detention is no way to treat asylum seekers in a true state of grace'. Online: http://old.smh.com.au/news/0202/18/opinion/opinion2.html.

will recognise the truth, not only of the gospel's implications, but of the gospel itself. Third, however, a strong doctrine of sin modifies the two previous points. One common expression of sin is people's rejection of the truth of the gospel, and their refusal to recognise that its implications accurately reflect reality. There is an epistemological[20] problem to overcome, a problem compounded by moral (or, rather, immoral) commitments.

Communication theory also has something to offer at this point. If we reject the so-called 'injection theory' of communication (which views the recipient of communication as purely passive),[21] and adopt something akin to Grice's 'co-operative model' (which acknowledges the active role of recipients in communication),[22] this then reinforces that the listener is not merely some *tabula rasa* waiting to be imprinted with our proclamations. Some people, in some contexts, may be able and willing to assimilate a summary of the entire Christian position at the first opportunity. Other people, in other contexts, may be unable or (perhaps due to pre-existing convictions which contradict the Christian position) unwilling to assimilate very much at all. In such cases it may be necessary to dispel preconceptions or prejudices, or to demonstrate the weaknesses of alternative views, before one can even begin to win a fair hearing for the Christian position.

The first part of this article established that O'Donovan's theological framework implies that the church's overall message to government is the proclamation of Christ's Lordship and its implications. But these four considerations clarify that

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20 The distinction between ontology and epistemology is also flagged by O'Donovan; cf. Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 2nd ed. (Leicester, UK: Apollos, 1994), 86–87.

21 'Injection theory' is Mackay's somewhat pejorative term for an understanding of communication that allocates a purely passive role to the recipient of communication. Once the sender has crafted their message, they have done all they can. This theory, in its more extreme forms, can assume an almost magical effect is produced by proclaiming the appropriate message, regardless of whether the hearers will actually understand. Cf. H. Mackay, *Why Don't People Listen: Solving the Communication Problem* (Sydney: Pan Australia, 1994), 15. Cf. also D.R. Brookes, *The Logic of Interpersonal Communication: An Introduction to Epistemology* ([Sydney: self-published], 1997

22 Grice's Co-operative Model of communication acknowledges that communication is complex. It occurs in the context of some form of relationship between people, and includes much more than simply the words spoken (Grice refers to this extra content as 'meta-communication'). For communication to be effective, attention must be given not only to the sender's message, but also to receiver. Cf. Brookes, *Logic*, 37-44. For a partial critique from the perspective of Relevance Theory, cf. D. Sperber and D. Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986), 33-38.

this does not mean that every subset of Christian political communication, no matter how small or preliminary, must reflect the entire emphases of the whole. Even if this were possible, it would not necessarily be good communication. Particularly in dialogue with those from a different religious tradition, who summarily dismiss the Christian message, there may be a place for beginning with (for example) consequence-focused arguments, in order to highlight the benefits of one position, or the problems associated with others. However, this should never be done in order to hide our basic commitment to Christ's Lordship (indeed, such moves begin to veer uncomfortably in the direction of deception). Such communicative strategies do not replace our central message; they are employed precisely in order to win it a hearing.

Case Study One: UK Blasphemy Law

Given this theoretical framework, this article shall now briefly consider two specific examples. The first one is taken from a foreign situation, namely UK blasphemy law.

The issue of UK Blasphemy Law is interesting and controversial since it is overtly linked to Christianity.[23] UK blasphemy law regulates free speech, and its key distinguishing feature is that it concerns the content of speech, not simply its effect on hearers. This explains its controversial nature: vicious verbal abuse of a religion could be prohibited by general 'incitement to religious hatred' legislation (parallel to legislation concerning obscenity and racial hatred). This would apply equally to all religions, and would concern only the manner with which hearers were addressed ('abusive' or 'inciting'), not the content. UK *blasphemy* law, by contrast, is intrinsically Christian.[24]

Many consequence-focused arguments have been used to advocate a blasphemy law:[25] support of society's moral code, protection of the intellectually weak,

[23] Our main conversation partner in this section shall be Julian Rivers. Cf. J. Rivers, 'Blasphemy Law in the Secular State' in *Christianity in a Changing World: Biblical insight on contemporary issues* (ed. M. Schluter; London: Marshall Pickering, 2000), 114-125.

[24] Importantly, this law does not require the state to police heresy. Blasphemy is distinct from heresy in that it must contain an element of violence or mockery (against God). 'Sincere' heresy is not covered by this law. Cf. Rivers, 'Blasphemy', 115.

[25] Cf. Rivers, 'Blasphemy', 118.

protection from outrage and insult, prevention of public disorder, and maintenance of the law. These arguments vary in strength and persuasiveness. Rivers selects the last of these for special attention:

> No religion can be forced on people. But a religion could be prioritized, by being awarded special protection, if it promoted the basic values on which the state itself rested. In order to maximize general freedom of speech, the state can legitimately restrict particular instances of speech that attack religions themselves committed to that freedom. ... The state is justified in prioritizing Christianity to the extent that there is a coincidence between the values underpinning the modern secular state and those promoted by Christianity.[26]

This argument is valid and commendable, but we might question, in the light of O'Donovan's contribution, whether it is radical enough. Rivers' argument is not fundamentally different from other consequence-focused arguments; it stops short of clarifying the explicit connections with Christ's Lordship.[27] The observations above about communication suggest that Rivers' argument could be a very useful preliminary step in the church's mission of proclaiming Christ's Lordship to the state. However, while this argument might make it easier for the church to win a hearing, it falls short of actually proclaiming Christ's Lordship.[28]

This highlights an important distinction in purpose. If the goal of such action is primarily to maintain the blasphemy law,[29] then Rivers' argument may be sufficient. But if the goal is to persuade UK society, its people, and its rulers to *want* to maintain the blasphemy law by pointing them to Christ's Lordship, then it is insufficient. If the former goal is (mistakenly) preferred, then the church may be in danger of relegating to a secondary role its true mission of calling rulers (and everyone) to submit to Christ.

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26 Rivers, 'Blasphemy', 121.

27 Cf. O'Donovan, *Desire*, 219, 'Making the best [of agreement in political doctrine between Christians and non-Christians] means making the evangelical content of the doctrine clear, not veiling it in embarrassment.'

28 It seems likely that Rivers himself considers this the endpoint of his argumentation, since his essay was published in a book which intends to offer distinctively Christian contributions to modern debates, primarily to enable Christians to engage in debate more effectively; cf. Schluter, *Christianity*, x-xvi.

29 Perhaps with the furtherance of the church's mission as a derivative consequence of having this law.

A possible modification (in outline form), witnessing more directly to Christ's Lordship, might run something as follows.

> There are sound reasons for liberal democracies to support a blasphemy law, independent of religious personal convictions. It may help safeguard certain liberties and rights we all value. But there is a more fundamental reason underpinning all of these: Jesus Christ really is Lord. All of us must reckon with this fact, and we must reckon with it as we form our laws. We may acknowledge it and submit to him, or we may reject it and ignore him. We cannot avoid making a decision. Christ *is* Lord, so let us recognise that in our legislation.

These two versions of the argument are not alternatives; each can be used in different contexts, each with appeal differently to different hearers, each will achieve a somewhat different persuasive effect. But the central point is this: to be able to call rulers to recognise Christ's Lordship is vital,[30] since 'to deny political authority obedience to Christ is implicitly to deny that obedience to society too.'[31] Yet it is not the responsibility of Christians to somehow force society or government to enact blasphemy laws—or indeed any law, no matter how worthy—against their will. The Christian's responsibility is to reason, persuade, exhort. The success or failure of these efforts rests on God's providence.

Case Study Two: Nigerian Homosexuality Legislation

The second example to be considered briefly is domestic: Nigerian homosexuality legislation. There has certainly been much Christian input into this debate, and it has been at its clearest in arguing that homosexuality is against the teaching of scripture,[32] and 'against nature' (this precise phrase has been used in some

30 Cf. Karl Barth, *Church and State* (trans. G.R. Howe; Greenville: Smyth & Helwys, 1991), 81-86.

31 O'Donovan, *Desire*, 246.

32 Cf. Matthew Davies, *NIGERIA: Homosexuality and pedophilia must be condemned, says primate*, available online: https://www.episcopalchurch.org/library/article/nigeria-homosexuality-and-pedophilia-must-be-condemned-says-primate, accessed 29/11/2018; James Tillman, *Nigerian Archbishop Upbraids Western Churches for Rejecting Gospel and Accepting Homosexuality*, available online: https://www.lifesitenews.com/news/nigerian-archbishop-upbraids-western-churches-for-rejecting-gospel-and-acce, accessed 29/11/2018.

legislation).[33] While this is an obvious and necessary starting point in the debate, it by no means exhausts the full scope for proclaiming Christ's Lordship over this issue. This subsection shall briefly consider two examples of arguments that could be used more prominently.[34]

First, consider how a fuller engagement with the doctrine of creation deepens and clarifies the argument that homosexuality is against nature. The gospel tells us that God created the whole universe and designed it to work in particular ways. Creation comes with a moral order built into it.[35] That is a fundamental claim, and all people need to decide whether to trust it. If God made us then he knows what is right for us and it follows that we should trust him and follow him. The alternative—that God didn't make us—would imply that we don't have any built-in meaning or purpose, and so we are free to redesign ourselves however we see fit, including redesigning our sexuality. This 'anti-creational' worldview lies behind much of the Western, secular championing of gay rights: once people no long believe that there is a moral order built into creation by God, it follows logically (from that mistaken premise) that any order that seems to be there is our own arbitrary construction; and if it is our arbitrary construction, then we are free to reconstruct it—and perhaps even obliged to reconstruct it, if it is causing oppression to certain minorities.[36] Thus, the issue underlying the homosexuality debate is the question of whether God is God (and so *he* has designed created order), or whether we are 'god' (and so we are free to redesign created order). Western secularism has opted for the latter, which is why Western societies have

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33 Of course, this precise phrase has come into the law code of the northern states through the influence of Islam and Sharia; but on this point there is a certain amount of overlap between Christian an Muslim arguments. Cf. Philip Ostien, *Sharia Implementation in Northern Nigeria 1999-2006: A Sourcebook* (Ibadan, Nigeria: Spectrum Books, 2007), vol IV, chapter 4, part III. Available online: http://www.sharia-in-africa.net/media/publications/sharia-implementation-in- northern-nigeria/vol_4_4_chapter_4_part_III.pdf

34 The two arguments should be taken as indicative, not comprehensive; many more could be added, but that would require a larger work than one journal article.

35 Cf. O'Donovan, *Resurrection*, 31-52.

36 This 'ant-creational' redesigning-of-humanity is taken even further in the 'transhumanism' movement, cf. Brent Waters, *From Human to Posthuman: Christian Theology and Technology in a Postmodern World* (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2006); Steve Donaldson and Ron Cole-Turner, eds., *Christian Perspectives on Transhumanism and the Church: Chips in the Brain, Immortality, and the World of Tomorrow* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018). For the link between gender issues and transhumanism, see Martine Rothblatt, *From Transgender to Transhuman: A Manifesto on the Freedom of Form* (self-published, 2011).

become so confused about sexuality. The church could do better at pointing out this deeper issue, and calling all of society to remember that God is God.

Second, the gospel of Jesus Christ has much to say about how we should treat wrongdoers, offenders, and even enemies: we are to call offenders to repentance; we are to pray that they will come to their senses and escape from the devil's trap; we are to offer them (as repentant offenders) hope, forgiveness, and renewal; we are to show them love, even as God loved us while we were still sinners. This is an aspect of the church's proclamation to society which could still be strengthened. Our proclamation of Christ's Lordship in the area of homosexuality should include speaking out against the persecution and victimisation of homosexuals. Homosexuality is wrong, but murder is wrong too; and two wrongs do not make a right. The church should be at the forefront of speaking out against murder—including the murder of homosexuals (which continues to be a problem in today's society).[37] The church, even as it points to Christ's Lordship to speak in favour of legislation against wrongdoing, should also continue to point to the hope that Christ's Lordship offers even to wrongdoers—precisely because our Lord is also our Saviour.

Conclusion

The gospel of Christ's Lordship is the ultimate grounds for Christian involvement in legislative formation. The church's mission is to proclaim the gospel of Christ's Lordship to individuals, to society, and to rulers. Involvement in debate about legislation is simply a facet of this mission. This entails that Christian involvement, taken as a whole, ought to be explicitly grounded in Christian theology, and in the proclamation of Christ's Lordship. However, this does not require that every subset of Christian argument must be explicitly Christian on every occasion. Such choices are a matter of wisdom and sound communication.

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[37] Cf. Philip Nwosu, *Homosexual Caught in the Act, Receives Beating, Dies Next Day*. http://sunnewsonline.com/ homosexual-caught-in-the-act-receives-beating-dies-next-day, accessed 28/11/2018.

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