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## Reformed social theology: contexts and constants<sup>1</sup>

David Fergusson

### Abstract

The social theology of the Reformed church was informed by a succession of impulses and themes. Seven of these are outlined – politics as vocation, civil resistance, coordination of church and state, democratic tendencies, nationalist ideals, and economic concerns. While many of the Reformed churches initially followed a Christendom model of church-state partnership, this has been problematised in the modern era. An assessment of the place of these national churches is offered, followed by a consideration of ways in which the above mentioned classical themes might be retrieved at a time of rising populism.

**Keywords:** Calvin, church and state, political theology, Reformed tradition, covenant.

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In what follows, I shall sketch in broad outline the social theology of the Reformed churches. My argument is that, while this was shaped in part by the contingent political circumstances that obtained in Europe in the sixteenth century, there are some recognizable theological constants that should be articulated and transposed to other times and places. This adaptation of theological insights to different settings is both a sign of the necessary enculturation of the Christian faith across space and time, and also a reminder that our traditions require retrieval and re-articulation.

The goal of social transformation through the establishment of a godly society runs deep in Reformed theology and is shared in multiple ways with other traditions from which we have much to learn. This goal generated several interconnected emphases which remain relevant today. I shall outline seven of these in an effort to demonstrate their interlocking force. Without a renewed commitment to each in our time, the social witness of the Reformed churches will be impaired.<sup>2</sup>

*a) Politics as a vocation.* In both Lutheran and Reformed theology, political office is ordained by God and necessary for the well-being of the church. For that reason, it was entirely proper for Christians to regard the holding of such office as a calling of God. Much of this thinking can already be discerned in medieval accounts of the Christian prince, but it is emphasised in different ways at the time of the Reformation and often against the more

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<sup>1</sup> A revised version of a paper presented at the International Reformed Theological Institute on 6 July 2019.

<sup>2</sup> In this first section, I have drawn upon a more extended historical treatment in my essay 'Politics, Society and Law' in Michael Allen and Scott Swain (eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Reformed Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

exclusionist trends of the radicals. In Lutheranism, the concept of vocation becomes secularized. The service of God is fulfilled in the home, in commerce, and in political life. Vocation is no longer confined to the cloister. Christ is to be served in the world, freely and gladly without the burden of having to perform extraordinary meritorious works. This lent a dignity and seriousness to the responsibilities of the everyday. Exercised within the secular domain, the calling of the Christian was not out of the world but within it, informed by faith and animated by love.

b) *Civil resistance*. A succession of Reformed writers, including John Knox, Peter Martyr Vermigli, and Theodore Beza, developed arguments for civil resistance. These converged upon several convictions. The power of the monarch is neither absolute nor unfettered. Kings and queens are ordained by God to serve the people and they do so in accordance with natural laws that are not of their own making. A second line of argument developed the notion of a local magistracy which had its own responsibility to act lawfully and to promote the common good. Where local rulers find themselves in opposition to national or imperial forces, they have a right, even a duty, of resistance. In doing so, they act not as private citizens but as holders of an office which carries its own responsibilities and rights. Third, Protestant theories of resistance could appeal to classical and medieval traditions of popular consent. These philosophical and theological considerations were conjoined in the seventeenth century by theologians such as Samuel Rutherford.

c) *The coordination of church and state*. In the *Institutes* IV.11.8, Calvin underscores the difference between the offices of pastor and prince. These are to be neither confused nor disjoined. Both offices serve a common end under the divine rule. Together church and state are committed to a sanctified society according to the Word of God, even though pastors and politicians should not conflate their different functions. Ideally, the Church and the state should act together to fulfil the divine will in the ordering of a peaceful, just and harmonious society. This model reflects earlier Christendom notions and assumes that each citizen is to be regarded as baptized into the visible church. In sixteenth-century Geneva, membership of the church and the *polis* are notionally co-extensive. One consequence of this is that excommunication from the former would have entailed exile from the latter. While this has obvious problems for modern pluralist societies, we can at least note that the recommended partnership of church and state was intended to promote social justice and order as well as undergirding ecclesiastical reform.

d) *Democracy* – The Reformation is sometimes interpreted as a democratic movement. This is true only in a restricted and qualified sense. Luther accepted the right of hereditary monarchs to rule. But, as a humanist scholar and lawyer, a French refugee and citizen of Geneva, Calvin was more alert to constitutional issues. He examines these rather tentatively in the closing chapter of the *Institutes* where he expresses a mild preference for an admixture of aristocracy and democracy.

In other settings, however, Reformed theology was keenly alert to the distribution of authority and popular consent. This is apparent, for example, in church government and the public calling of ministers. Each minister is called by God, yet the ecclesiastical rite of ordination must take place always with the consent of the people. Ministerial appointment

requires popular legitimation, and should not be imposed top-down by church authority. The government of the church, moreover, involves the rule of elders who function with ministers as a senate-like ruling body. These elders are described by Calvin as senior figures elected by the people. We are of course a long way from later democratic ideals of universal adult suffrage, but these features of Reformed polity indicate some popular impulses with respect to church government and the empowering of the laity. Inevitably this would have a wider political effect, as already noted in approaches to civil resistance.

e) *Law* – The third use of the law is another distinctive feature of Reformed theology. This is also apparent in Melancthon's *Loci Communes* where he speaks about a tertiary use of the law in the lives of those who are reborn. This is given for the Christian life so that we can be constantly reminded of our continued sinfulness and the need to do God's works. The *tertius usus legis* reminds us that, even as Christians, our inner self needs to be constrained by the law of God. Since we continue to display the marks of sin, we do not cease to require the law in its primary and secondary functions. Reformed theologians, however, went beyond this by stressing the law as exercising a further positive function in relation to individual and social sanctification. For Calvin, the law is a divine gift to enable people to live together in unity with one another and in true worship and obedience of God. This is neither burdensome nor oppressive – the law properly acts for our wellbeing. Hence there is no dialectical opposition of law and gospel in Reformed theology, but an integration of the two under the rubric of the third use.

With respect to its application, however, the third use was to give rise to some tensions. How rigorously are Old Testament injunctions to be applied to the Christian life, the church and civil society? Are there ways in which these can be modified, mediated and interpreted in light of changing social and political circumstances? An overly rigorous application of Scriptural precedents could result in some counter-productive measures, while also proving inadequate to growing ideals of toleration, democracy, and equality as these emerged in early modern and Enlightenment Europe. And yet the fundamental impulse of Reformed theology seems right. The laws that govern civil society cannot be construed only in a negative modality as ordinances of restraint. They exist to promote social justice, to advance the common good, and to achieve in some measure the *shalom* proclaimed by Scripture.

In several ways, the Reformation contributed to the development of civil law. For example, one outcome of the Protestant understanding of marriage as a created ordinance, as opposed to a Christian sacrament, was the development of civil marriage law with respect to consent, witness, and grounds of divorce. Education meanwhile came increasingly to fall within the civic realm, while the office of the magistrate, outside the immediate control of the church, was of growing significance.<sup>3</sup>

f) *Nationalism* – Within the Reformed tradition, the different confessions played a role in forming national churches, as in the Belgic and Scots Confessions. Reformed churches were committed to the shaping of societies often modelled on the example of Biblical Israel as a

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<sup>3</sup> See John Witte, Jr. 'Introduction' to John Witte, Jr. and Frank S. Alexander (eds.) *Christianity and Law: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 17.

covenanted nation. By the seventeenth century, we see the emergence in Europe of powerful and autonomous states that are now related to each other by international law rather than imperial power, even though these states were inclined to engage in empire-building in other parts of the world. Religious forces played a part in this process.

Yet the relationship between theology and nationalism has often been an uneasy one. Some scholars have argued that the romantic nationalism which emerged through the Enlightenment, with its stress on land, language and ethnicity, was a replacement for more traditional forms of religion. Others, echoing criticisms from the political left, see it as lurching towards an idolatry of kinship and place that divides peoples and threatens a more virtuous commitment to cosmopolitanism. For the church, the loyalty commanded by the nation can threaten the allegiance of the baptized to the body of Christ, a polity that transcends language and tribe. And at other times a theory of national exceptionalism, again modelled on the Israel of the Old Testament, has generated attitudes of hostility and superiority to those who belong elsewhere.

Nevertheless, nationalism could also provide a way of promoting the common good of a people, as well as articulating legitimate protest against tyranny, colonialism and globalising tendencies. There are positive examples of its functioning as a force for liberation and of attracting a commitment to goals wider than those of individual and family. In relation to language, society and territorial boundaries, it is difficult to see how a political philosophy can avoid some acknowledgement of nationhood in comprehending how a *polis* is to be delineated.

A sense of national identity is closely aligned with the Reformed concept of covenant when applied to human associations. This was a feature of political thought in the work of Johannes Althusius and others.<sup>4</sup> Drawing upon Scriptural and confessional account of covenant, the social order could be conceived according to a succession of covenants to which each of us is bound. In some respects, this parallels Catholic notions of the common good and subsidiarity. A society is structured by covenantal commitments which are a function of our creaturely status. This had at least two important advantages for Reformed political thought. First, it offered an account of society that did not depend upon a sacral concept of kingship that legitimised a top-down authority. Instead, political office is justified by its capacity to facilitate a covenant that binds each member of the state together. Its jurisdiction extends over a territorial region that will tend to be marked by a shared history, customs, languages, laws and faith. Within this territory, the civil authorities, as part of their covenantal function, will enforce the rule of law and seek to protect the citizens of the realm, though this can include a respect for liberty of conscience on matters over which the state should not legislate. The law does not derive from the will of the ruler but has its ground in natural law and divine law which are not of our own making. Moreover, our natural condition is to enter into social bonds each of which has its own sphere of operation and rules of conduct. This generates a second advantage of the covenant concept, namely

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Thomas O. Hueglin, 'Covenant and Federalism in the Politics of Athusius', in Daniel J. Elazar and John Kincaid (eds.), *The Covenant Connection: From Federal Theolog to Modern Federalism* (Lanham: Lexington, 2000), 31–54.

its capacity to perceive a society as comprising not one collective but a variety of interconnected covenantal communities each of which has its own traditions, practices and norms. The capacity of covenantal politics to articulate different consocial spheres was a feature of later Dutch Calvinism, particularly in the work of Abraham Kuyper.

*g) Economics.* Much of the discussion in this field has been dominated by the Weber thesis regarding the causal link between Protestantism and the rise of capitalism. The thesis has been largely discredited on account of the ways in which capitalism similarly flourished in societies less committed to forms of Protestant Christianity.<sup>5</sup> But recent scholarship has also pointed to features of Calvin's writings which display a strong ethical concern for the poor and a commitment to economic justice. First published in 1959, André Biéler's landmark study of

Calvin's economic thought drew attention to his extensive deliberations on economic issues, especially in his commentaries and sermons.<sup>6</sup> Though neglected by later Reformed thinkers, this material focusses on Biblical concerns for the underprivileged and destitute. Starvation and homelessness are an affront to God, as is the exploitation engendered by lending money at punitive rates of interest.

#### **Excursus: The Vestiges of Christendom?**

What emerges from this historical sketch is a rich social theology that commits the church to promoting political and civic well-being. Much is attractive in this vision, and anticipates modern developments though under more secular conditions. But the problems of the founding Reformed vision need to be recognised. In particular, the emergence of ideals of tolerance and pluralism generated formidable challenges. The Reformed vision of a godly commonwealth in which the proper worship of God was upheld by the civil magistrate invoked Old Testament ideals of a society united by a common faith – the church or the nation could even be described as a new Israel. This extended to the suppression of other forms of worship and religious association that were adjudged blasphemous or idolatrous. In the face of early modern arguments for religious diversity and later claims for freedom of expression, such invocation of a single confessional identity proved impossible to maintain. A range of arguments was advanced that made appeal to the New Testament example of the free and non-coercive expression of faith, the value of peaceful negotiation over violent struggle, the possibility of moral consensus amidst doctrinal difference, the possibility of different faith groups learning from one another in ways that were mutually beneficial, and the need to protect freedom of conscience in matters of religious adherence. Through the eighteenth century, Reformed churches gradually came to deplore compulsory measures in religion and to assign a more limited role to the civil authorities in the regulation of faith communities.

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<sup>5</sup> See Johan J. Grafland, 'Weber Revisited: Critical Perspectives from Calvinism on Capitalism in Economic Crisis', Gijsbeert van den Brink & Harro M. Höpfl (eds.), *Calvinism and the Making of the European Mind* (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 177–198.

<sup>6</sup> André Biéler, *Calvin's Economic and Social Thought* (Geneva, World Council of Churches, 2005)

But just as the old model brought dangers of suppression, intolerance and violation of human dignity, newer secular approaches also generate their own difficulties. These have been the focus of recent criticism of political liberalism. Where does the political order find its moral and spiritual basis if not by reference to the religious life of its people? Alternatives have been found to be either too thin, incoherent, or incapable of commanding allegiance. The go-to option has been the language of human rights. But can this be sustained without earlier theological references to human beings as created in the image of God and the frequent injunctions in Scripture to attend to the needs of the marginalised, the alien and the dispossessed? And if we are to adopt a substantive secularism in which religious discourse and commitment are confined to a semi-private or voluntary domain does this not prevent citizens and groups from expressing their deepest social commitments in the terms that make sense to them? This can readily develop into a secular intolerance of all public expressions of religion. In response, approaches that favour a procedural (as against programmatic) secularism have been advocated – this invites all exponents of deeply held religious views to express themselves in ways that are accessible to their fellow citizens.<sup>7</sup>

Under these pressures what has happened in Europe is that those churches that have historically had an established or national status have evolved in ways that reflect an accommodation of tolerance and diversity. At the same time, however, elements of their status have been retained and adapted to new circumstances. In an oft-quoted distinction, Wesley Carr, an Anglican writer, has distinguished high and earthed elements of establishment.<sup>8</sup> At ground level, parish churches have continued to view their immediate geographic community as the locus for service and mission. This takes place through the provision of ordinances for birth, marriage and death, and also in running a variety of support groups including youth organisations, counselling services, recreational activities, and in generating support for charitable bodies. The involvement of the church in education has also been important in this context, and might be seen as part of a wider process in which a society can continue to be Christianized, though again the limits of this need to be recognized. Meanwhile, the national identity of churches continues to be recognised in national and local ceremonial events, corresponding to Carr's higher level. These involve a fusion of religious and civic functions but suggest a spiritual dimension or setting for the wider community.<sup>9</sup> Here I am thinking of the presence of a religious input to important state occasions such as the opening of a parliament, the coronation of a new monarch, the remembrance of the war dead, the marking of some public tragedy, or the celebration of an important national landmark. Admittedly, there are perennial dangers here of church captivity with the resultant loss of the prophetic function to speak truth to power. Striking a balance between the offer of support and the challenge of criticism is familiar to every pastor. But it is difficult to see how this can be avoided except through a sectarian

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<sup>7</sup> See, for example, Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 23–36.

<sup>8</sup> Wesley Carr, 'A Developing Establishment', *Theology*, 102 (1999), 2–10.

<sup>9</sup> This is explored by Linda Woodhead with reference to the Church of England and the Lutheran Church in Denmark. See 'Can We Trust the Church?' in David Fergusson and Bruce McCormack (eds.), *Schools of Faith: Essays in Honour of Iain R. Torrance* (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 193–202.

withdrawal from society which has never been consistent with the foundational vision of the Reformed churches.

A more acute problem surrounds the disconnect between these two dimensions of Christian social engagement that has come about through the rapid process of secularism from the 1960s. The national dimension of religious engagement only makes sense where this is an expression of something that is already embedded at the local level in parish communities. Without this traction, the high-profile ceremonial and civic actions of the church can quickly become quaint, bizarre, or absurdly pompous. Unless it is the expression of the genuinely held faith of a substantial body of people across different sections of society, then these functions of the church become increasingly questionable. Consider some statistics from my own context in Scotland where the national church recognised by an act of parliament in 1921 is reformed and Presbyterian. This state recognition belongs to an era in which Scotland could reasonably be considered a Protestant society in which the majority of its citizens adhered to the Church of Scotland. But since reaching a peak in 1955, the adult membership of the church has declined by about 80% to just over 300K which today represents only about 6% of the population. This decline is continuing at a rate of 4% per annum. While the statistics reveal some implicit commitment to religion, more than one half of the population (59%) identifies as belonging to no religion. Although this group is not hostile to the church, it undoubtedly displays a large measure of indifference. And given that the church is disproportionately represented by an older generation, these trends are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

As already suggested, the notion of a 'national church' is fraught with problems which are accompanied by numerous historical illustrations. We might note four difficulties in particular. i) A national church risks becoming the organ of the state through an exchange of privilege for compliance. In providing a spiritual underpinning of state authority, it can too easily deliver a political quietism. This can masquerade as a strategy of 'keeping religion out of politics' while in effect offering tacit support to the regnant powers. ii) A related difficulty arises when the church purports to express the religious identity of a collective such as the Volk or the nation. This can result in a sense of exclusion amongst those who belong to other churches or faiths, or, more dangerously, for migrants whose identity cannot be articulated in similar religious terms. iii) A third problem concerns the extent to which a claim to be exclusively a national church can impede ecumenical cooperation. In this context, it is too tempting for national churches to pretend that they alone have a concern for the society beyond its walls. Other churches have a distinguished, and sometimes better, record of service, charitable giving and social engagement. It is not the sole prerogative of a national church to function in this way. iv) A final problem concerns the incomprehension of churches in the majority world when faced with these older European models. Their different histories do not easily incline towards an adapting of these models. Social engagement and witness can function without any singular recognition on the part of the state. The Christendom model is not a marketable export.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 249.



In face of these challenges, so-called national churches might recognise the problems they have faced in the past and thus welcome, in at least one respect, the greater dissociation of church and society that secularization has brought. The loosening of ties with the state that arises through the sociological phenomenon of 'a differentiation of functions' is to be welcomed. Belonging to a national church no longer confers privileges in terms of holding office, receiving a university education, entering the professions, casting votes, or entering parliament. Equality legislation firmly excludes this. The resultant distancing of the church from the political state enables a degree of autonomy that facilitates social criticism and independence of action. Instead of presenting itself as a spiritual expression of a single national identity, the church can enhance its breadth by offering an open door to all comers. A focus on its surrounding parish, when suitably inflected, might offer scope for ethnic, spiritual and theological diversity. At this (more important, to my mind) 'earthed' level with an openness to local communities in their particularity and diversity, a national church can adapt to different circumstances.<sup>11</sup> If this arises as an accident of history, so be it. At the same time, these churches, with their particular historical associations with the nation, may find themselves in a position where it can broker relations with other churches and faiths – the Protestant churches of Europe indeed have a decent record in terms of ecumenical commitment and involvement. Admittedly, the risk of patronising other groups remains ever-present, and in any case maybe this function is for a time only. Nevertheless, the capacity of long-established churches to function in a constructive ecumenical and multi-faith manner is evident in some quarters today. We should recognise that these are the genuine possibilities of what Adrian Hastings calls a 'weak establishment'.<sup>12</sup> If they prove transient, so be it. We should not cling to the vestiges of establishment if it becomes apparent that it is long past its sell-by date. But the position in which we currently find ourselves is ineluctable.

Where then does this leave the notion of a national church that continues to have a presence, albeit reduced, in every parish across the land? Here I suspect some honesty and humility will be required in accepting a diminished social influence, a lower profile, and the need for a greater concentration of energies on tasks such as church planting and evangelism. Those of us who continue to support national churches should beware of inflated arguments that fail to register the applicability of these arrangements to historically particular contexts that are continually evolving. And yet the socio-political responsibility of a church does not repose upon its size or status. The Scriptural commitment to God's justice generates an imperative that is not contingent upon particular historical circumstances, a point recognized by Bonhoeffer in his prison cell reflections on a *this-worldly Christianity*. 'Unlike believers in the redemption myths, Christians do not have an ultimate escape route out of [page 448] their earthly tasks and difficulties into eternity. Like Christ ("My God ... why have you forsaken me?"), they have to drink the cup of earthly life to the last drop, and

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<sup>11</sup> See Elaine Graham, 'The Establishment, Multiculturalism and Social Cohesion', in Mark Chapman, Judith Maltby and William Whyte (eds.) *The Established Church: Past, Present, and Future* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), 124–140. None of this, I should stress, precludes other churches from doing much the same and at least as well.

<sup>12</sup> Adrian Hastings, *Church and State: The English Experience* (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1991).

only when they do this is the Crucified and Risen One with them, and they are crucified and resurrected with Christ. This-worldliness must not be abolished ahead of its time; on this, NT and OT are united.<sup>13</sup> No church can avoid facing outwards with a view to enriching the life of its host society. In fields of health and education, this has long been apparent in different contexts. And in relation to the state, the church cannot avoid taking a view on political representation, on war, on the care of children, on rule by law, on the fair distribution of resources and so forth. How and when it acts in an advocacy role is not always clear, but there is no prospect for sealing off the socio-political domain from Christian witness and action.

### **Reformed Social Theology Today**

The aforementioned elements of Reformed social thought need to find expression in different circumstances. Amidst the rise of populist political forces, I offer the following proposals.

a) *Politics as a vocation*. The tendency to treat elected officials with contempt represents a threat to democratic societies. If we construe our politicians as self-serving, cynical, venial or power-hungry this will likely have two effects. The first is that decent and talented people will be disinclined to commit to public service. The second is a self-fulfilling prophecy in which people will tend to live down to our expectations, if there are not held accountable to higher standards or provided with better possibilities. We need to offer support and encouragement to political representatives, as to every holder of public office in our midst. They deserve our prayers, our understanding, and our interest in what they do. This critical support that is owed our political representatives can too easily degenerate into cynicism when a negative register becomes so relentless that it suppresses any degree of sympathy or solidarity with those set apart for political office.

In this regard, the churches can exercise political responsibility by the formation of their people for political service whether at local, regional or national level. This can work through providing motivation and vision. Much has been written about the importance of social capital generated by faith communities; the capacity of citizens to network, interact and apply their skills in other domains has been documented by Robert Putnam.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, models of living together can be imaginatively transposed from the ecclesial to the civic level, while the rich traditions of Christian political thought can be harnessed for new situations.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Works, Vol. 8, Letters and Papers from Prison*, edited by John W. de Gruchy, (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010), 447–448.

<sup>14</sup> For example, Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community, revised edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020).

<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel Katongole argues that African churches need to offer an alternative social vision to avoid either political quietism or a more activist co-option by the civil state. *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology of Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 50.

b) *Civil resistance* – this strand of our tradition should remind us that support is never uncritical or unqualified. The task of speaking truth to power is a perennial one as the Old Testament prophets remind us. For this to take place, there needs to be fair scrutiny, accurate reporting, and informed judgement according to our interpretation of the Word of God. This requires education, access to information, and a free press that can function apart from political control or excessive pressure. Politicians did not get a free pass from the Reformers, nor should they today. The two most significant Protestant declarations of the twentieth century were the Barmen Declaration (1934) and the Belhar Confession (1982). While these acknowledged the God-given authority of political rulers, each offered a stark criticism of the circumstances in which they were set. Neither the ideology of the Deutsche Christen nor the policies of apartheid were to be tolerated by a community whose first loyalty was to the God of Jesus. Here theological arguments based on Scripture were deployed in the cause of resistance. These landmark protests are now part of our international Reformed identity and should be studied afresh by each generation.

c) *Coordination of church and state*. The goal of social transformation through the coordination of church and state is an aspiration that is again commanded by the gospel. In the past, this was expressed by the ideal of a religiously monolithic society in which church and state were fully integrated. This has now been abandoned by recognition of modern principles of freedom of conscience, the protection of different religious groups under the law, and the accommodation of a diversity of traditions within the public square. Yet this relative distancing of the state from any single expression of faith, does not invalidate the possibility of a constructive partnership or engagement in societal issues. In the late nineteenth century, the partnership was sometimes re-negotiated through a distinction between the church and the kingdom. The church was concerned rightly with the preaching of the Word, the administration of the sacraments and the pastoral care of its members. But its wider social commitments included a working alongside secular agencies to advance the work of the kingdom of God. This could typically involve a concern with better housing, improved working conditions, fairer remuneration, and universal adult suffrage. In its corporate life, the church was called to be a sign of the coming reign already inaugurated by Christ. Yet other social actors that also contribute towards the divine commonwealth were recognised; these make a vital contribution to civil society the domains such as art, science, education, law, industry and business. This more recent facet of our tradition can also prevent social theology from adopting only a negative posture. If we say ‘no’ to many things, we should be prepared to give an account of what we are willing to say ‘yes’ to.<sup>16</sup>

d) *Democracy*. Current political trends suggest that democracy is not the default position of every society through improved education and greater material affluence. This whiggish narrative is now in some doubt with the rise of strong populist leaders commanding significant levels of support amongst younger voters. If we remain persuaded of the value of democracy over against other systems of government, then this will need the tacit support

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<sup>16</sup> Isaac Phiri proposed a constructive social role for African churches in increasingly pluralist states. Again, this resembles a model of critical support adapted to a different context. See *Proclaiming Political Pluralism: Churches and Political Transitions in Africa* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001).

of churches and other groups within civil society to maintain the necessary degree of social cohesion and commitment to institutions that buttress it – an independent judiciary, respect for the rule of law, the forms of safeguarding affording minorities by protection of their human rights, a welcome recognition of the pluralist and patchwork nature of our societies, the defence of an unfettered press, and the cultivation of habits of civility that enable us to disagree honestly and to find ways of compromising. In this respect, a social theology may sometimes have a conservative caste in preserving and maintaining forms of life that produce cohesion amidst diversity and difference. The institutions of civic life are there to shape us and to contribute to the overall function of a healthy society. But if they become merely occasions for performance or entertainment, they are denigrated.

Recent studies suggest that democracy is more contextual and fragile than we have assumed in previous generations. It cannot be taken for granted as the default setting of our societies. As we face stagnating income levels, identity politics, the power of social media, and suspicion of educated elites, there is an evident risk to democratic institutions.<sup>17</sup> At such a time, a theological re-visiting of the case for democracy is needed. The commitment to popular consent, covenant partnership, the rule of law, and balanced reporting needs to be reinvigorated.<sup>18</sup>

e) *Law*. While there has undoubtedly been a growing separation of church from state with respect to the development of positive law, some important connections persist and deserve closer theological attention. Three areas are worthy of consideration. The first concerns the metaphysical links between law and religion. A legal system should reveal both an ‘inner morality’ and an ‘inner sanctity’.<sup>19</sup> In the former, it reposes upon a deep sense in any society of what is fundamentally just and fair. Without this shared sentiment, it will tend to lack tacit support. Closely related to this is the capacity of the law to command respect and obedience on the part of citizens. Without something approaching reverence for the rule of law, its authority is weakened, even when enforced by sheer power. The ways in which legal systems appropriate the symbolism and rituals of religion – dress, processions, court room architecture, and appeal to authoritative texts and interpreters – also provides a powerful visual illustration of this connection. A second domain concerns the development of positive laws. Areas of recent tension are evident here – marriage, divorce, sexuality, abortion, assisted dying, and capital punishment. But these should not prevent us from appreciating the ways in which strong alliances can be constructed. For example in applying principles of equity, ensuring that the criminal justice system can accommodate notions of forgiveness and rehabilitation, and in seeking to establish the truth in possible miscarriages of justice. Finally, in protecting the free expression of religion, theological and secular arguments for liberty of conscience can coalesce, at least in some ways – these need

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<sup>17</sup> See, for example, David Runciman, *How Democracy Ends* (London: Profile Books, 2018), and Yascha Mounk, *People vs Democracy: Why our Freedom is in Danger and How to Save It* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

<sup>18</sup> The theological case for democracy is examined by Richard Harries, *Faith in Politics? Rediscovering the Christian Roots of our Political Values* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), 51–70.

<sup>19</sup> See Witte, ‘Introduction’ op. cit., 28.

not be in opposition. This area commands widespread attention today, particularly where some forms of free expression generate tensions with other protected characteristics.

f) *Nationalism*. Karl Barth insisted that the divine command meets us as people who are bound to one another by links of history, culture, and language.<sup>20</sup> We can take a justifiable pride in our local identities – our homeland is where we start from and we should remain loyal to it. Yet we are also called to move outwards to meet those more distant and to recognize our solidarity with them. This is a Christian vocation, dramatically manifested on the day of Pentecost and in the eschatological vision of a community transcending tribal and linguistic divisions. While community, land and culture are created goods to be preserved and celebrated, these should be subordinated to wider goals that include hospitality, international cooperation and a recognition of the dangers that have accompanied forms of ethnic nationalism.

Nationalism has often functioned best as a protest movement in the face of imperialist or totalitarian rule. Religion can be a powerful mobilising force in relation to articulating a shared identity or providing a micro-culture in which dissent can be fostered. The case of Poland under Soviet rule offers one striking example.<sup>21</sup> At other times, however, the linkage of faith to national identity can become exclusive and threatening to those who belong to a different church or religion. Vituperative verbal attacks on Irish Catholic immigrants by Scottish Presbyterians in the 1920s and 1930s became one of the most shameful episodes in the recent history of my own church.<sup>22</sup> In this context, there is a particular obligation upon 'national' churches to promote ecumenical and inter-faith relations precisely to avoid any false equation of religious identity with citizenship. To this extent, at least, secularization may have rendered the western churches a favour. With growing numbers now self-identifying as belonging to no religion, the case for a religiously inflected nationalism is greatly weakened.

g) *Economics*. The commitment to more egalitarian forms of economic distribution has at least two motives. One is the priority given to poor relief in the tradition. This extends not merely to monetary income but to affordable access to education, housing, and health care. There is a good deal in the Reformed social vision to support this. In addition, there is a growing realisation that societies exhibiting the greatest disparities in wealth are also functioning less well. They lose their necessary cohesion, their sense of a common good and collective purpose with a resultant reaction against comfortable elites and those institutions that appear to support them. Here a properly regulated nationalism may have something to offer in generating a sense of a wider corporate identity without lurching into exclusionary sentiments. The social covenant is damaged by excessive levels of economic inequality together with acquiescence in growing poverty and disadvantage. These may have no

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<sup>20</sup> Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1961), 286–323. See also Nigel Biggar, *Between Kin and Cosmopolis: An Ethic of the Nation* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> For a survey of the diverse links between religion and nationalism see Christophe Jaffrelot, 'Religion and Nationalism' in Peter B. Clarke (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 406–418.

<sup>22</sup> See Stewart J. Brown, 'Reform, Reconstruction, Reaction: The Social Vision of Scottish Presbyterianism', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 44 (1991), 489–518.

simple remedy, but to ignore the problem or to attempt some form of ideological justification is to fly in the face of the Reformed tradition.

In a series of essays, Nicholas Wolterstorff has noted the resistance to poverty found in the writings of Calvin. This, he argues, proceeds not from a sense of sympathy so much as a recognition of the right of the poor to a fairer distribution of resources. It is grounded in the doctrine of the *imago Dei* and in the command to honour God. Failure to take advantage of readily available measures to alleviate poverty is an offense against God.<sup>23</sup> Bruce Gordon notes the extent of Calvin's preaching from Deuteronomy and the responsibility of Geneva towards refugees. 'Landlords should not charge them higher rates, citizens should employ them, and magistrates should judge them as they did others.'<sup>24</sup>

## Conclusion

Our churches will find very different ways of interpreting and enacting these theological imperatives. A strategy of retrieval, criticism and adaptation is necessary, whereas withdrawal, renunciation or simple condemnation are all impossible options for social theology today. A positive engagement with our societies needs to be negotiated – this will be shaped in part by the history of our churches, our current social condition, and the possibilities that we can identify in each time and place. Yet, even at a time of increased secularism, these persist in new and promising ways.

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<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'The Wounds of God: Calvin's Theology of Social Injustice', *Hearing the Call: Liturgy, Justice, Church, and World* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 114-132.

<sup>24</sup> Bruce Gordon, *Calvin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 298.