

PART 1

Christianity as Civil Society's Adornment

by Stephen Wolfe

Debates between neo-Calvinists and Reformed two-kingdom advocates have revealed a seemingly irreconcilable divide on the Christian's relationship to culture and politics. Many neo-Calvinists see the gospel as inaugurating a social and political project, one that was recovered alongside the truths of soteriology at the Reformation. Nicholas Wolterstorff, a neo-Calvinist philosopher, has argued that "the responsibility of the saints to struggle for the reform of the social order in which they find themselves is one facet of the discipleship to which their Lord Jesus Christ has called them. It is not an addition to their religion; it is there among the very motions of Christian spirituality." Political and social order are not fixed or dictated by nature, he argues; they are the results of human decision. The gospel provides the saints the principles to fundamentally restructure society.

Advocates of a modern variant of two-kingdom theology have suggested a very limited role for the gospel in transforming culture and society, arguing for a more otherworldly and worship-focused Christian religion. Darryl Hart, for example, argues in his book *A Secular Faith* that "efforts to use Christianity for public or political ends fundamentally distort the Christian religion." For Christianity is "essentially a spiritual and eternal faith, one occupied with a world to come rather than the passing and temporal affairs of the world." Hart insists that Christians participate in the public square as humans, sharing the same political concerns, means, and ends as their

unbelieving neighbors. The principal activity of the Christian life *qua* Christian is the corporate worship of God, not political activism. The ends of political action are not changed or transformed above what the natural order already dictates. The essence of the spiritual order—the order of which is determined by *spiritual* worth, not *civil* merit—is widely different from the essential features of the natural order. Hence, though Christians ought to participate in politics, these two-kingdom advocates argue that it is not a Christian's duty to "Christianize" or fundamentally transform the political order with the gospel. Christianity principally concerns the invisible, yet-to-come, and eternal kingdom of God, not the kingdoms of this world. For this reason, Christians are not to collapse the spiritual into the natural through political action but are to remain fixed on the world to come.

This essay argues for a middle position that consistently affirms key elements of both positions: While the natural order, which includes the fundamentals of social and political order, is immutable (*viz.*, the gospel cannot alter it), the gospel can shape those aspects of society that admit legitimate difference and variety. Put differently, there can be a Christianization of those accidental elements of society, such as public and civic symbols, public art, manners, greetings, civic rituals, festivals, certain laws, and religious worship. Hence, this middle position affirms that while Christians are not called to replace the essence of the natural order with the spiritual one, given the right conditions, they still ought to seek the transformation of

those features of human society that work to complete, perfect, and adorn it. In this way, the two kingdoms are kept separate, the eschaton is not immanentized, yet society is truly Christian.

IMMUTABLE NATURAL ORDER

The underlying principles of civil society are fixed, immutable, universal, and accessible to the regenerate and unregenerate alike. These basic structures—authority, order, the nature of power, social relations, law, civil justice, and so on—cannot be objects of transformation or alteration. Contrary to Wolterstorff, who claims that these are not “part of the order of nature [but] the result of human decision,” the principles of civic order are dictated by nature. Reformed theologians have consistently affirmed that Christ did not abrogate or change the standard of righteousness established at Creation. As Calvin said in his commentary on Matthew 5:21, Christ “intended no correction in the precepts of the law. . . . We must not imagine Christ to be a new legislator, who adds anything to the eternal righteousness of his Father.” Further, Calvin, along with most Reformed theologians until recently, affirmed in many places a natural hierarchical ordering of civil society (e.g., see his comments on Numbers 3:5). That is, a hierarchical society, as found in most human societies of history, is dictated by the created order. According to Calvin, Christ had no intention of transforming this order.

Moreover, many Reformed and post-Reformation theologians had a somewhat positive view on unregenerate civil righteousness, indicating the enduring accessibility of the principles of political order. The fall of Adam obliterated man’s heavenly, eschatological orientation, but it only wounded or corrupted man’s earthly life. The political theorist Johannes Althusius, for example, stated in *Politica* (XXI.41) that “in political life even an infidel may be called just, innocent, and upright because of” their external and civil

life of words, deeds, and works, since they have “natural knowledge of and inclination towards the Decalogue.” In his commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, Zacharias Ursinus writes, “The excellent virtues and deeds of renown, which are found among heathen nations, belong, indeed, to the vestiges or remains of the image of God, still preserved in the nature of man.” Francis Turretin argued that fallen man can still “exercise justice and temperance, put forth acts of mercy and charity, abstain from theft and homicide, and exhibit the operations of similar virtues” (*Institutes of Elentic Theology [IET]*, 10.4.3). In his *Reformed Dogmatics*, Herman Bavinck strikingly writes, “The doctrine of the incapacity for good is a religious confession. In light of the standard people usually follow in their daily life or in philosophic ethics, one can wholeheartedly admit that much of what people do is good and beautiful” (*RD* 3.123). Indeed, the unregenerate “can inwardly possess many virtues and outwardly do many good deeds that, viewed through human eyes and measured by human standards, are greatly to be appreciated and of great value for human life” (*RD* 4.257).

All of this is consistent with the thought of Calvin, who affirmed that since “some principle of civil order is impressed on all . . . this is ample proof, that, in regard to the constitution of the present life, no man is devoid of the light of reason” (*Institutes of the Christian Religion [Inst.]* 2.2.13). And Turretin writes that the “universal consent of the nations” on justice and equity shows the enduring relevance of the natural law from “which as a fountain have flowed so many laws concerning equity and virtue enacted by heathen legislators, drawn from nature itself” (*IET* 11.1.13). The Reformed tradition clearly affirms that the principles of civil order are natural and that the unregenerate can both know and implement this order.

If it is the case that fallen, unregenerate man can attain civil righteousness (worthy of praise among men, even from the regenerate), and if regeneration necessarily effects a radical change

in the one regenerated, then the principal effect of regeneration cannot (*pace* Wolterstorff) be civil righteousness, political, social, or anything related to the basic elements of civil or domestic life. The principal effect must be the restoration of one's immediate relationship to God, one's orientation to the spiritual kingdom of God, and the true worship of God. The main effect on the individual is the restoration and reorientation of the principal part of man—the original righteousness that made possible the worship of God, which Calvin, in his comments on Isaiah 44:9, says is “our principal distinction from the brutes.” The gospel will change the individual's civil life, but only as a renewal of the natural law. The gospel does not inaugurate a political project of radical reordering and alteration of the essential properties of natural civil order, power, and social relations.

CHRISTIANITY AS CIVIL SOCIETY'S ADORNMENT

How, then, can any civil society become a Christian civil society? There is an important distinction between the essence of social order and the accidental features of civil society. The accidents are those aspects of society that could legitimately be otherwise and admit of endless possibilities and varieties. Customs and traditions, for example, are what distinguish the French, English, and Germans. And these varying practices—the particularities of regions—speak to the same universal human need for consensus on matters that could be otherwise. Put differently, human belonging is made possible and accomplished by shared attachment to things, people, places, and ways of life that could be different in different places. These particulars are the basis of people's solidarity, mutual trust, fellow-feeling, and self-understanding. Hence, it is possible for all the kingdoms of the world to be just (*viz.*, in accordance with the natural law) and yet look very different on the surface. Just as church

architecture, though having the same basic function, permits a variety of ornamentation and design, human societies can be equally just while having widely diverse customs.

If there is a universal human need to belong to a particular way of life and shared understanding of behavior, rooted in custom and tradition, then we can conclude that there is a formal command by nature, whose content humans can express in innumerable ways, to engender solidarity through distinct ways of life. A formal command does not preclude uniquely religious cultural content. Indeed, most civil societies, at least prior to modernization, have had religion-fused cultures. Christianity, along with other cultural features, can likewise adorn a society, serving as the surface object of a civil community's solidarity and sense of belonging. There is nothing inconsistent with uniquely Christian features in part fulfilling the formal command of nature to constitute social belonging through the transformation of the accidental features of civil society.

With this schema, one can affirm the immutability of the natural law while also affirming that Christians can implement a uniquely Christian society—a *societas Christiana*. Christianity does not fundamentally transform the natural order; it perfects it by adorning it. A just Christian society is therefore one that conforms to natural justice while having uniquely Christian features, such as symbols, public prayers, manners, customs, greetings, festivals, rituals, worship, and certain laws.

The civil community ought also to recognize not simply the divine ground of civil order (which even Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero recognized) but Christ as the king of creation. This civil obligation is also formal, for the content of its fulfillment can come from natural *and* supernatural revelation. The civil recognition of Christ as the governor of creation, the civil protection of true religion, and the adorning of civil society with Christian features do not, however, spiritualize the civil realm. The essence of natural civil order remains unaltered. Only the accidental features have been transformed.

The Christian domestic society (i.e., the family) is similar in this regard to the Christian civil society. An unbelieving family can have a loving husband and wife, disciplined children, means of forgiveness for harms done, and can even be religious. Becoming a Christian family does not change the essential nature of family, nor does it significantly change their conformity to the essential properties of family (though, of course, it could change a corrupted family life when present). But becoming a Christian family necessarily involves a type of transformation, such as the addition or altering of certain practices, rituals, and worship. They now conduct family worship through Christ; thank God through Christ for life, shelter, and sustenance; attend Christian worship together; and forgive one another in Christ. The family is perfected through the adorning of Christian practices, and in this perfection the essential properties of family are not changed but strengthened.

The civil society is no different. When the civil society alters and adds certain distinctively Christian features without changing the essence of civil order, it does not immanentize the eschaton, spiritualize the civil realm, or collapse the two kingdoms any more than a Christian family does. If you allow such transformation of the family, then you must allow it for civil society. In other words, if the type of Christian society described here constitutes a spiritualized civil realm, then so too does the Christian family. The concept of Christian family would have to be rejected.

A pagan kingdom, for example, that converts to Christ does not throw off kingship in the name of some Christian conception of political equality, nor does it only destroy the pagan public features of its preconverted society. Rather, the kingdom *replaces* or *transforms* the various symbols, rituals, and practices. While not changing as to essence, the social order still becomes a Christian one. Christianity perfects this society with Christian ornamentation.

By “perfects” I refer to a relative perfection—a perfection relative to the possibilities of creation.

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The ultimate perfection comes only by the divine action at the consummation. Further, nothing in this argument necessitates an abuse of power forcing an unbelieving society into a Christian society. Rather, most of these distinctively Christian features would arise spontaneously from social interactions in a predominantly Christian community (which, admittedly, we no longer have in the West) and would be enforced socially. They become “social facts,” to use Émile Durkheim’s term—basic social expectations enforced through social means. Still, there are civil laws necessary to constitute a proper Christian commonwealth, such as the civil recognition of the true God and religion, and Sabbath laws. While these are nonessential to civil order, they do strengthen it.

As a variant of the classical two-kingdom conception of Christian society, my view naturally calls into question neo-Calvinism more than the modern versions of the two kingdoms, but it affirms in part the neo-Calvinist concern for a uniquely Christian approach to society. In addition, the middle position is both consistent with the Reformed tradition and reconciles the alleged contradictions in the classical two-kingdom tradition. ■