



# Editorial: Planting flags in the twenty-first century?



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The date is 2 August 2010. Two-and-a-half miles below the surface of the Arctic's frozen waters a strange ritual is taking place. A Russian flag is planted on the seabed. This event was, unsurprisingly, given extensive coverage on Russian television and hailed as hugely significant. The flag ceremony was seen in Moscow as a way of furthering their claim to an enormous swathe of territory in the Arctic. It was symbolic rather than substantial. However, it was mocked with equal enthusiasm by Canada's Foreign Minister: 'This isn't the fifteenth century. You can't go around the world and just plant flags and say "We're claiming this territory".'<sup>1</sup>

This 'flag planting' involved a nuclear powered ice-breaker, a research vessel and two mini-submarines. Why should a great nation, seeking to regain some of its status as a superpower, go to such immense trouble and expense, and take significant risks with human lives and costly equipment? Why should this flag (made of titanium as it is) provoke such an outrage? The answer, simply put, is 'sovereignty'!

But that is to put it too simply. The reference to the 'fifteenth century' reminds us that the concept of 'sovereignty' involves a whole history of exploration, conflict and territorial claims, not to mention, nationalism, cruelty, disregard for indigenous peoples, deviousness and avarice. As always, there is a better side which reflects human ingenuity, scientific research, courage and international cooperation. For us, as Christian communities, there are profound theological as well as political and sociological issues, too.

This issue of *The Bible in Transmission* offers us some fascinating snapshots into some of the multitude of topics pertinent to a biblically warranted and theologically attuned engagement with the subject of sovereignty, particularly national sovereignty. Sovereignty is becoming ever more contested from without through a globalised world and from within by our ethnically and religiously diverse country. So as citizens we do well to pay attention to it. As Christians we do doubly well because the Bible, our faith and our Christian heritage has much to offer in terms of resources and insights for the contested understandings of sovereignty.

Fundamental to Russia's attention-grabbing act is the issue of claims on resources. Russia hopes to strengthen its claim on one million square kilometres of territory in order to benefit from the vast oil and mineral deposits, which are expected to become available with the retreating ice-cap. It is estimated that a quarter of the world's resources of oil and gas lie beneath the Arctic Ocean. Four other nations have also claimed jurisdiction over territory in the polar region – Norway, Canada, Denmark and the United States – and the protracted international negotiations continue. Ultimately the issue is who 'owns' the world!

Ellen Davis' article, 'A living creature: A biblical perspective on land care and use', challenges this concept of ownership as inadequate for our survival. It begins with the Gulf Coast oil disaster, another strong emblem of our human passion for resources. She raises the question of whether we need a new paradigm for our understanding of the earth, which moves us far beyond the issue of 'national resources' to that of the planet

as 'a living creature, with its own integrity in the sight of the creator'. Focusing her attention on our current unsustainable approach to food production, she explores biblical insights from Genesis 1 to Revelation and offers some practical alternatives. From her experience of addressing those involved in food production, she affirms 'they care when they realise (often with surprise) how much Bible has to say'. Here is insight and challenge for us: 'the land and its fertility can be forfeited through moral failure'. Behind these words is the challenge to national or even anthropocentric sovereignty that the earth is the Lord's.

The subject of 'resources' is at the heart of George Gelber's article, 'Sovereignty over natural resources: An African perspective'. He focuses our attention on the issue of national resources in Africa. He argues that these resources – such as oil and diamonds and, increasingly in a 'food anxious' global context, the land itself as an agricultural resource – have not enabled the economic and social progress of this continent as they did in Europe and are doing in China. Rather external pressures on the sovereignty of these countries, together with the necessary lack of appropriate internal mediating structures for effective sovereignty, mean that, although there is economic growth, poverty remains stubbornly and lethally high. Indeed, wealth fuels war rather than well-being.

David McIlroy's essay, 'Am I my brother's keeper?', picks up on the issue of moral failure. When does a sovereign state's moral failure legitimise intervention from external forces? Having reflected on the 'constructed' nature of national sovereignty, this article explores the Christian concept that political power should be exercised for the common good, not in the private interests of the ruler. He touches on the contested issue of 'human rights', reflects on one of the key biblical texts regarding government, Romans 13, and concludes that even 'sovereign nations have no authority to act in ways which are contrary to the interests of those they serve', and so failure in this may justify the intervention (even militarily) in that nation by others. Whether we agree or not may well affect our evaluation of the Iraq War.

Moving from the issue of permissive external intervention, the paper by Philip Booth, 'Subsidiarity and education policy', looks at one aspect of internal sovereignty – intensiveness. How far does and should sovereignty reach into the lives of communities and individuals? Does the sovereign state have the legitimacy (even if it has the means) to control our public behaviour, our private lives, our thought worlds and religious consciousness? Philip Booth's paper looks at the issue of education through the lens of Catholic social teaching. He argues that of the two principles of solidarity and subsidiarity, it is the latter which should have the stronger influence in education. So, while the state has the responsibility of providing at least some level of education to all children for the common good, or at least ensures that capital is supplemented where

individual and charitable resources are insufficient, it is going beyond the state's sovereignty to determine the content and ethos of that education: parent's wishes should never be supplanted and private – including church-provided – education should not be discriminated against. From this perspective he then prompts us to reflect on current trends in education policy in the UK.

Another 'internal' issue for sovereignty is how effective governance can be delivered in a democracy. In 'Community organising: Contributing to the renewal of politics', Angus Ritchie explores the way in which sovereignty can, and should, be diffused rather than being concentrated in the power of the state. He offers a practical model for this with 'broad-based community organisations'. His own experience with London Citizens shows that people (often, but not exclusively, from faith-based communities) can agree on critical issues, challenge the authorities, whether government or business, and bring about change. Such change can benefit the powerful as well as the people, as has been shown by the Living Wage Campaign in Canary Wharf. It can also benefit inter-faith relationships without compromising Christian commitments.

Finally, Nick Spencer's article, 'Shaping national sovereignty: The Bible and British politics', explores the impact of identity on the concept of sovereignty. More specifically, how at critical points in the development of, first English and then British identity, the Bible has played a significant and formative role in constructing our identity from the sixth to the eighteenth centuries. Then he faces the challenge that such a history is the past and can be, and perhaps should be, disregarded in the present. While rejecting the validity of more secular models from the USA or France he does not offer any slick solution. Rather, he invites us to think through the issues. He writes, 'The Bible has played an immense ... role in shaping our political landscape. It should and will continue to do so, but the manner in which it does so will need to reflect carefully and responsibly on the circumstances in which we live.'

How can we ensure that the Bible is *planted* once again in the consciousness of our nation and beyond, thus making a creative, legitimate and beneficial claim for God's sovereignty in our world?

## Notes

1. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/europe/6927395.stm>; here you can also find links to the international conventions and commissions which seek to resolve these claims to sovereignty and resources.