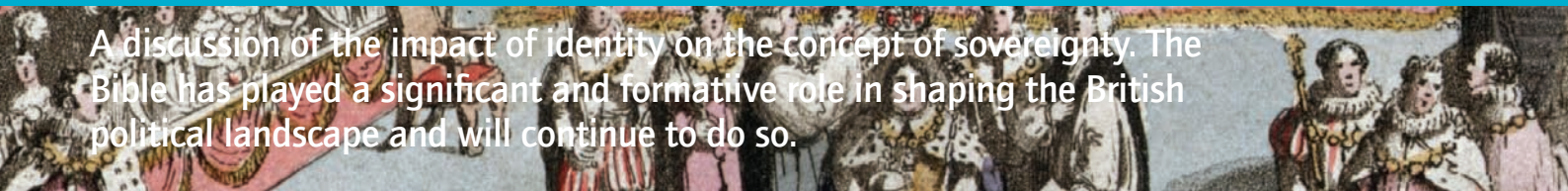




Shaping national sovereignty: The Bible and British politics

A discussion of the impact of identity on the concept of sovereignty. The Bible has played a significant and formative role in shaping the British political landscape and will continue to do so.



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'Faith is part of the fabric of our country. It always has been and it always will be.' So spoke David Cameron as he bade farewell to Pope Benedict XVI on 19 September 2010.

It was the kind of statement that was calculated to send secularists, already infuriated by the papal visit and its cost to the taxpayer, even further into orbit. And yet, it is demonstrably true. For all that church attendance has fallen in the last half-century the UK remains officially a Christian nation. In the words of the House of Lords Select Committee on Religious Offences in England and Wales, 'the constitution of the United Kingdom is rooted in faith – specifically the Christian faith exemplified by the established status of the Church of England ... The United Kingdom is not a secular state.'

It is worth reading through the Coronation Service to get the full force of this 'rooting in faith'. Based on a service designed by Archbishop Dunstan of Canterbury and first used for the crowning of King Edgar in 973 (!), it is positively saturated with Christian logic, language, imagery and ceremony. The service is a salutary reminder that, much as some would it were otherwise, the foundation and contours of our political life, not least the nature of the monarch's sovereignty, are not only Christian but explicitly biblical.

I have spent much of the last two years writing a book on the influence of the Bible on British politics and one of the things that has made itself disconcertingly clear to me is the extent to which we owe our sense of political identity to the Bible. The formation both of England and, roughly a thousand years later, of Great Britain as

political entities, was deeply indebted to the Bible – in a way that, as we shall note below, presents us with some challenges today.

Becoming England

When Pope Gregory sent his missionaries to the English people in 597, the English people did not exist. In its place were numerous separate, militaristic kingdoms that lived in a state of more or less constant conflict. Conceiving of them as a single unit and sending his missionaries to them all was a momentous move on Gregory's part, causing one recent historian to remark provocatively that 'the English owe their existence as a people, or at least the recognition of it, to the papacy.'¹

It was a slow process. When the Venerable Bede wrote his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* 130 years later, the English people were still not cemented into any meaningful political unit. It was only over the next century and a half that a genuine political identity began to emerge, in large measure because of King Alfred and the Viking invasion that threatened the country.

That invasion was widely understood as a sign of divine judgment and Alfred was determined to respond and repent accordingly. He embarked on a reform of the ecclesiastical, educational and moral life of the people, much of which centred on a conscious turning to the Bible. Asser, his biographer, describes how the king 'listen[ed] eagerly and attentively to Holy Scripture being read out by his own countrymen', and never ceased from

'personally giving ... instruction in all virtuous behaviour and tutelage in literacy'.²

Alfred scoured the country for learned men to edify his West Saxon Court. He helped establish a court school that would educate his children, those of other noblemen 'and a good many of lesser birth as well'.³ In his preface to Gregory's *Pastoral Rule* he proclaimed his intention to translate into the vernacular 'certain books' that all men should know, 'so that all free-born young men now in England who have the means to apply themselves to it, may be set to learning ... until the time that they can read English writings properly'.⁴ This scheme for the universal education of free men in the vernacular was abortive but there is no reason to doubt its seriousness. Only by turning to God would the Saxon people be able to resist the pagan invaders.

Historians have observed that Alfred's law code, at least as existing manuscripts preserve it, would have been of little use to a judge in court, disordered and full of contradictions as it was. It was not intended, however, to provide a comprehensive law code for English society. Rather, Alfred's law code was meant to be powerfully symbolic, placing the king's legislative activity on an historical stage that stretched back through the early Church and Christ to Moses and the divine law itself.

Moreover, by explicitly acknowledging and integrating earlier law codes from different English kingdoms, of Kent and Mercia, this king of the West Saxons was consciously integrating the historically warring English kingdoms into a whole. And he was doing so by inviting all the people to see themselves as a, even *the* people of God. Alfred helped forge the identity of a Christian people that was defending itself against a violent, irreligious menace, in much the same way as Old Testament Israel had done. He was, in effect, forming the idea of the English people by means of the biblical law and narrative, and placing them firmly within God's protection and his purposes for the world.

Protestantism was the foundation that made the invention of Great Britain possible

It was in this context that Alfred's seminal law code, issued towards the end of his reign, should be understood. The code itself is long and without any obvious structure. In an introduction that takes up about a fifth of the entire work, Alfred writes how he 'collected [earlier law codes] together and ordered to be written many of them which our forefathers observed'. The code illustrates an explicit and repeated biblical basis.⁵

The introduction begins with the Ten Commandments from Exodus 20 and sixty-six verses of Mosaic law from the following three chapters of Exodus.⁶ It then moves from the Old Testament to the New by means of Christ's words from Matthew's Gospel, 'think not that I am come to destroy the law' (Mt 5.17). It explains that Christ 'had come not to shatter or annul the commandments but to fulfil them; and he taught mercy and meekness', and then quotes the golden rule, as given in Matthew 7.12: 'What you wish that other men may not do to you, do not to other men', of which it remarks, 'A man can think on this one sentence alone, that he judges each one rightly: he has need of no other law-books.'

The introduction then quotes the apostolic letter of Acts 15, the fruit of what was in effect the first Church council, held at Jerusalem around the year 50 AD, which advised gentile believers to 'abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality' (Acts 15.29). The law code itself, which comprises provisions protecting the weaker members of society against oppression, limiting the ancient custom of blood-feud, and emphasising the duty of a man to his lord is less explicitly biblical but is divided in 120 chapters – 120 being the age at which Moses died (Deut 34.7), the number of believers in the earliest Church (Acts 1.15) and standing for law in the number symbolism of early medieval biblical exegeses.⁷

Becoming Britain

The situation was rather different nearly a thousand years later. In the 1670s the country was still living in the shadow of two painful civil wars followed by a decade of political instability, much of which was associated with the political ambitions of Puritan sects that had flourished when the system of censorship and Church courts broke down in the 1640s.

There were, however, more pressing worries concerning the Catholicism of James, Charles II's brother and the heir to the throne. Tensions grew and parties divided (into Tory and Whig). When James succeeded to the throne and then, three years later, secured a male heir, civil war beckoned again.

The fact that the nation did not descend into civil strife and that James was unseated in favour of the Protestant William and Mary of Orange was judged by many at the time as little short of a miracle. The so-called 'Glorious Revolution' would inform national politics for centuries.

The ensuing Bill of Rights, passed by Parliament in 1689, secured a limited kingship, parliamentary privilege and a subject's right to petition the monarch. The Act of Toleration, also from 1689, helped effect a rapprochement between Anglicans and dissenters, exempting from punishment those dissenters who were prepared to take the Oath of Allegiance, and allowed their clergy to practise their ministry if they signed up to 36 of the 39 Articles. Freedom, toleration and the contours of national sovereignty were anchored within the nation's Protestantism, the icon of which was, of course, the Bible.

This was well drawn in William and Mary's coronation, the service of which was remodelled to highlight the indispensability of their faith. For the first time, a copy

Notes

1. John Burrow, *A History of Histories: Epics, Chronicles, and Inquiries from Herodotus and Thucydides to the Twentieth Century* (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p. 215.

2. Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, chapter 76 in Simon Keynes and Michael Lapidge (eds), *Alfred the Great: Asser's Life of King Alfred and Other Contemporary Sources* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), p. 91.

3. Asser's *Life of King Alfred*, p. 75.

4. *Prose Preface to Translation of Gregory's Pastoral Care* in Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*, p. 126.

5. David Pratt, *The political thought of King Alfred the Great* (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought: Fourth Series; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chapter 11

6. Such as 'Do not thou heed the word of a

of the Bible was carried in procession to Westminster Abbey. The king and queen had to swear, as none of their predecessors had, to rule according to the 'true profession of the gospel, and the Protestant reformed religion by law'. Once crowned, Bibles were handed to each 'to put you in mind of this rule and that you may follow it'. The new king's personal faith was, in reality, somewhat tepid but his public image was one of Protestant piety.

That Protestantism became even more important as a means of establishing a common identity following the Act of Union, in 1707, which joined the kingdoms of Scotland and England into Great Britain. In the words of the historian Linda Colley, 'Protestantism was the foundation that made the invention of Great Britain possible.'⁸

Thus, enemies of the new nation, such as Jacobites or the French, were regularly identified as Assyrians. Britain was often compared to Jerusalem. Isaac Watts published a translation of Psalms in 1719 in which he rendered Israel as 'Great Britain'. George Handel regularly inserted comparisons between his patrons and the heroes of the Old Testament into his work.⁹ His oratorios – Esther, Deborah, Athalia, Joshua, Susannah, Jephtha, Israel in Egypt and Judas Maccabaeus (which was composed in honour of Duke of Cumberland's victory at Culloden) – were all based on delivery of God's people from tyrants. Zadok the Priest, the anthem he composed for George II's coronation in 1727, has been played at every subsequent coronation.

A state poem, published in 1716, effortlessly elided two of the most salvific prophecies of the Old Testament, Micah 4.4 and Isaiah 9.6, with praise of the nation's new, safely Protestant, king:

*Under our vines we'll sit and sing,
May God be praised, bless George our King;
Being happy made in every thing
Both religious and civil:
Our fatal discords soon shall cease,
Composed by George, our prince of peace;
We shall in plenty live at ease,
In spite of popish envy.¹⁰*

The fact that King George could be readily identified with Christ without alarm shows the way in which British identity was forged through Protestant Christianity. Just as the political identity of the English was forged through the Bible nearly a millennium earlier, so was that of the British in the eighteenth century.

There are, broadly speaking, two easy errors into which people fall into once they have recognised the immense influence that Christianity and, within it, the Bible has had on our political formation. The first is the idea that because it has always been thus, it should always be thus. We are a Christian nation, with biblical roots that are almost inconceivably deep, and attempts to change that are as malign as they are sinister.

The second is the idea that 'that was then but this is now', that history counts for little in our modern world and that we need to reinvent our ideas of sovereignty to fit in with contemporary culture. When combined with the fallacious belief that states can be thoroughly neutral in their formation, this idea usually sets people of in the direction of advocating American- or French-style secularism as the only legitimate political settlement.

Both views are wrong. We may indeed be thoroughly Christian in our political formation but the nation is clearly not 'thoroughly Christian' today. And, in any case, there are good reasons, long articulated within the Christian tradition itself, to doubt the desirability of seeing national and religious identities as coterminous. As the Puritan Roger Williams remarked as early as 1644, 'Where hath the God of heaven, in the gospel,

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separated whole nations or kingdoms, English, Scotch, Irish, French, Dutch, &c, as a peculiar people and antitype of the people of Israel?'¹¹

Conversely, there is no good reason why the USA or France should provide the only legitimate political model to follow. Secularism – when rightly understood – has much to offer political thought, but simply to adopt another nation's political model as our own is to imagine that nations are interchangeable and their histories immaterial, both of which are self-evidently untrue.

The fact is that when we think about questions of national sovereignty in the UK today we need to honour our past without being held prisoner by it. The Bible has played an immense and formative 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.

false man', (Ex 23.1–2) and 'Judge thou very fairly. Do not judge one judgment for the rich and another for the poor' (Ex 23.6).

7. Patrick Wormald, *The Making of English Law: King Alfred to the Twelfth Century: Volume 1: Legislation and its Limits* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), p. 417.

8. Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837* (New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 1992), p. 54.

9. See Ruth Smith, *Handel's Oratorios and Eighteenth-Century Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

10. Quoted in Colley, *Britons*, p. 76.

11. Roger Williams, 'Bloody tenent, quoted in J Coffey, 'Puritanism and Liberty Revisited: The Case for Toleration in the English Revolution', *The Historical Journal* 41.4 (1998), pp. 961–85 (at p. 972).