

FOUNDATIONS OF THE REFORMATION PARTY

The Reformation Party is unique in many ways in today's western political climate, though it would not have been so unique in time past before the advent of secularism in western cultures. Because of its unique, non-secularist stand, it is important to provide a thorough explanation of the philosophical basis upon which its platform lies. This article is an attempt to do that. Of course, the themes we will look at in this article are discussed elsewhere in much greater depth, and we will refer to some resources at the end of the article where the reader can go to get a fuller treatment of them.

The fundamental assumption of the Reformation Party is that Christianity is true. We also hold that the classic Reformed tradition, as summarized in the Westminster Standards, is the purest expression of biblical Christianity. Just about everyone would agree that it is better to live in accord with reality than out of accord with it. Since Christianity is reality, the right and sensible thing to do is live in accordance with it. Individuals should live according to the principles of Christianity. Families should order themselves in line with them. Businesses, educational institutions, churches, and all other human institutions should be ordered according to biblical principles, for the simple reason that those principles are true. And this applies to the civil sphere, the state, as well.

It would be absurd for any human individual or human institution to ignore the true worldview and to base laws on that which is known to be false. This is why the currently prevailing (in the west, anyway) philosophy that the civil government should be neutral makes no sense. Secularism is the position that the civil government ought not to endorse any particular religion. Secularists claim that this view is neutral, but in reality it is the establishment of agnosticism as the official religion of the nation, for it requires the government to take a “know nothing” attitude towards religious claims. It is in effect the embracing of atheism or naturalism, as it implies that the civil government should ignore information derived from religious sources (like the Word of God) and should base its decisions only on information derived from the natural world without taking into account anything else. This is completely irrational, if Christianity is true. What would we think of a father who took a position like this with regard to his family? “Well, I know that Christianity is true, but I choose to structure my family around the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita instead.” Or, closer to the case under discussion, “I choose to structure my family around the principles of atheism.” This would be absurd, and it would also be wicked, for God is the ultimate moral authority of the universe and all human beings, both individually and corporately, are under a moral obligation to regard God as Lord over all things, to obey all his commands, and to structure their entire lives according to his desires and standards. Many Christians get this when it comes to individuals, families, businesses, classrooms, etc., but they don't see that it clearly applies to the state as well.

So we are obligated both by prudence and moral obligation to work for Christian standards to be implemented in all areas of life, including the state. We should therefore look to the Bible to see what God has to say about the nature, role, and authority of civil magistrates, and to see what specific instructions God has given to those functioning in that role. The Bible's teachings on this subject can be found throughout the Old and New Testaments. One of the most important summary passages is Romans 13:1-7:

Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority resists the ordinance of God, and those who resist will bring judgment on themselves. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to evil. Do you want to be unafraid of the authority? Do what is good, and

you will have praise from the same. For he is God's minister to you for good. But if you do evil, be afraid; for he does not bear the sword in vain; for he is God's minister, an avenger to *execute* wrath on him who practices evil. Therefore *you* must be subject, not only because of wrath but also for conscience' sake. For because of this you also pay taxes, for they are God's ministers attending continually to this very thing. Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes *are due*, customs to whom customs, fear to whom fear, honor to whom honor.

There are descriptive as well as prescriptive elements in this passage. Paul is instructing the Roman Christians to submit to the governing authorities who are currently governing. But in giving this instruction, he also sums up the prescriptive role of the civil magistrate. The role of the civil magistrate is to protect those who do good and to punish evildoers. The Westminster Confession sums up the overall role of the civil magistrate in this way, almost paraphrasing Paul:

God, the supreme Lord and King of all the world, has ordained civil magistrates, to be, under Him, over the people, for His own glory, and the public good: and, to this end, has armed them with the power of the sword, for the defense and encouragement of them that are good, and for the punishment of evil doers. (WCF 23:1)

God is the ultimate moral authority, but he has delegated limited authority to human beings in various spheres, such as in the family, in the church, and in the state. Each of these spheres has roles that are complementary to the others. The role of the family is to provide mutual help for husband and wife and to raise up children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, training them to grow into faithful Christian adults (Deuteronomy 6:7; Ephesians 6:1-4). The role of the church is to shepherd the people of God, teaching the gospel, administering the sacraments, and exercising spiritual discipline (Titus 1:9; Matthew 18:15-20). The role of the state is to protect the society from actions which promote evil and which thwart good (Romans 13:1-7; 1 Peter 2:13-17; Acts 25:10-11). The family uses parental instruction and discipline as its tools. The church uses spiritual teaching and discipline. And the state uses the power of the sword (lawmaking and law enforcement). As all of these spheres are mutually complementary, none of them should attempt to encroach into the domain of the others. None of the authorities should attempt to take upon themselves that which is outside their proper sphere (see 2 Chronicles 26:16-21 for an example of the civil power attempting to take on spiritual duties and God's response). Parents should not attempt to administer the sacraments or to excommunicate their children from the church. Church officers should not attempt to arrest or execute people for civil crimes. Civil magistrates should not take it upon themselves to be the primary caretakers of children. And so on. All the spheres should work in complementary harmony under God, the Head of all.

The Scriptures say it is the role of the state to protect the good and punish the evildoers. The civil magistrate is "an avenger to execute wrath on him who practices evil." Whose wrath is he an avenger of? Where is he to look for the standard of good and evil by which he must decide how to carry out his functions? Dictatorship would tell us that the ultimate standard is the will of the dictator. Modern secular democracy tells us that the ultimate standard is the will of the people. But the Scriptures tell us that it is the will of God, expressed in his law. The civil magistrate is not ultimately the minister of himself or the minister of the people, but he is the minister of God. He is to care for the people under his jurisdiction, but his authority is from God and it is his task to rule according to God's standards. God's moral law is to be the foundation of the civil laws and policies of the society.

Some Christians will grant this with regard to what are often called "offenses against the second table (of the Ten Commandments)"--that is, offenses that are immediately horizontal, directed to human beings, such as murder, theft, adultery, etc. But they shrink back from holding that civil magistrates are

to enforce the first table of God's law—that is, laws that more immediately concern our relationship with God, such as laws against the worship of false gods, idolatry, blasphemy, etc. But there is no biblical basis for this distinction. Nowhere in all of Scripture do we ever find it taught that the state is to limit itself to the second table of the law. Romans 13 makes no distinction: The state is for the praise of the “good” and for the punishment of “evildoers,” in general. This idea that the state must not enforce laws dealing with man's relationship to God is simply a myth that has become popular due to the prevalency of modern secular ideas in western culture, a prevalency that has infected even the church to some degree. In the Law of Moses, we find that the society is to civilly punish not only murder, theft, and the like horizontal crimes (Exodus 21:12-14; 22:1-4), but also idolatry and blasphemy (Deuteronomy 17:2-7; Leviticus 24:10-16).

This raises a question: Do the civil laws in the Law of Moses have continuing authority for the state today? The Westminster Confession, following the general Christian tradition (and ultimately the Bible), divides the law of God up into three sorts of laws: moral, ceremonial, and judicial. The moral law is summarized in the Ten Commandments and is forever morally binding (though we are freed from its curse in Christ and rely on God's grace to live it out in our lives). The ceremonial portions of the law have to do with ceremonies and practices that were earthly shadows pointing forward to the work of Christ and to various moral duties and are no longer in force to be literally followed by Christians today. The judicial law refers to the case laws—that is, the applications of the principles outlined in the Ten Commandments to particular circumstances (such as many of those found in Exodus 21-23). In this category are included the laws addressed to the society in its civil capacity. These laws, being addressed directly to the people of Israel in Old Testament times, have much in them that no longer applies to us today given the significant changes in our circumstances from the conditions of God's people in the Old Testament. However, there is also much in these laws that is moral and universal in character, and these aspects do apply to us today. Here is how the Westminster Confession summarizes the Scriptural position on the judicial laws:

To them also [that is, to the people of Israel], as a body politic, He gave sundry judicial laws, which expired together with the State of that people; not obliging under any now, further than the general equity thereof may require. (WCF 19:4)

Aspects of laws that relate to temporary characteristics of the state of the people of God in the Old Testament (such as laws separating Jews and Gentiles, laws regarding what foods can be eaten, laws regarding the earthly Tabernacle, etc.) no longer apply in their literal form today. Aspects of laws that relate to permanent and universal moral principles (such as laws dealing with such permanent evils and dangers as murder, theft, and blasphemy) are still binding on people today. Many of the civil laws fall into this latter category. Particularly, the Reformed tradition has historically acknowledged that laws commanding the punishment of sins against the first table of God's law, such as laws against the public toleration of idolatry, still apply to the state today, as is evident from the entirety of WCF 23. As an example, here is what the historic Reformed Church of Scotland had to say about the public toleration of idolatry in 1649:

As the Lord by his servant Moses, in the 17th of Deuteronomy, requires of him that shall reign over his people, that he have a copy of the law of the Lord by him, and that he read therein all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, and to keep all the words of that law; so in the 13th [chapter] of that book he gives a command to put to death the false prophet, and the brother that speaks to his people to turn them away from the Lord their God; and the reasons taken from the nature of the duty, whereby he persuades unto the obedience thereof, are perpetual and no less binding unto us now, than to them of old. How strongly doth the Lord plead, in the 22d

[chapter] of Deuteronomy, against toleration and false worship, and all the occasions thereof, and provocations and incitements thereto? and how severe is he about the removing and destroying all these, and in tying all his people to one way according to the rule of his word?
(http://www.truecovenanter.com/anti_toleration/testimony_against_toleration.html)

God is no less concerned now for his public honor and for the protection of true religion than he ever has been. Idolatry is just as wicked and harmful now as ever. Just as we recognize the continuing role of the civil magistrate in protecting the life and property of citizens today as well as in ancient Israel, so we should recognize the continuing role of the magistrate in protecting the public honor of God and the spiritual welfare of the people. To quote again from the Church of Scotland in 1649:

As that infinitely glorious divine Essence is one in himself most holy, most righteous, most true, so hath he given unto the children of men, one eternal, unchangeable law, according to the rule whereof they are to square their profession, and order their conversation: Therefore as his justice requires in the covenant of works that we should walk according thereto without declining to the right hand or to the left, so he in his mercy promises in the covenant of grace to give unto his people one heart and one way to fear him for ever: And in both covenants they are obliged to walk after the rule of this law. It is acknowledged by many of those with whom we have now to do, that no liberty is to be allowed unto men in the breaches of the duties of the second table, which we owe unto our neighbours, but that if a man sin against his neighbour, and disturb the peace of the common-wealth, he is to be restrained and punished: Can there any solid reason be given why it should not also be thus in regard of the duties of the first table which we owe unto God? Is not one Lord author of both? hath not conscience influence upon both? Is not the Lord's glory interested in the one as well as in the other? Doth not his image shine as brightly, and may it not be as much defaced in the one as in the other? Are the things of God less precious than the things of men, and that which concerns the soul less to be cared for than that which concerns the body? or are we more to value our own damage than the Lord's dishonour? We know that no man hath dominion over the conscience: But the Lord who made it, exercises his sovereignty therein; and he hath set a law unto the spirits of men, after the rule whereof they are to order both their judgments and affections; and hath given power to those whom he clothes with authority, which they are to exercise in these things so far as they are manifested in expressions and actions unto the dishonour of his name, and hurt and prejudice of others.

As we mentioned earlier, secularism claims to be neutral. It also claims to be tolerant and loving and accuses biblical law of being harsh and bigoted. But secularism is not neutral. Nor is it inherently more or less tolerant than any other philosophy. All societies have something in common: They all make and enforce laws according to their own beliefs and values, tolerating what their worldviews consider tolerable and not tolerating what their worldviews consider intolerable. We have seen that blasphemy (dishonoring God's name) is a civil crime according to God's law. It is not so in a secular society. Is this because the secular society is "nicer"? No, it is because a secular society, being an agnostocracy, does not care at all about the public honor of God because it considers God to be a myth. If God is a myth, then having laws against blasphemy makes no more sense than having laws against publicly insulting the Keebler Elves. But if God is not a myth, if he is instead the Supreme Being and Creator and of infinite value, then blasphemy is a grossly wicked moral action and ought not to be tolerated. All societies become intolerant when values they see themselves bound to protect are threatened. Modern liberal secular societies generally put value on human life and private property to some degree, and so they make laws against theft and murder. The problem with the argument for having a secular society is that it asks us to accept a non-Christian foundation for determining which values the society ought to protect and how it ought to protect them. And we've already seen that since

Christianity is reality, it is foolish to base our policies on false, unrealistic non-Christian beliefs and values.

It also needs to be pointed out that though secularism claims to be a neutral safe haven for people of all views, there is no reason to believe that secularism will be tolerant of distinctively Christian beliefs and practices. So far, in the United States in particular, Christians have indeed been relatively safe in our secular society. But times are changing. Secularism has been to a large degree kept at bay by the fact that the United States has for most of its history been made up mostly of Protestant Christians of varying degrees of doctrinal purity and faithfulness. Over the past century, this has begun to change dramatically. We have seen remarkable growth in the number of people with non-Christian views in our society, including a rapidly growing agnostic/atheist community. These non-Christians are taking full advantage of American secularism to push out of the public sphere Christian beliefs and values and to instill their own. Many of the culture war battles we have seen and are continuing to see in the United States—including battles over abortion, physician-assisted suicide, same-sex marriage, prayer in schools, and many others—are really front line battles in the war of worldviews. And we are consistently seeing Christians beliefs and values losing these battles to the beliefs and values of agnostics and atheists as the United States resolves itself more and more into consistency with its declared secular political ideology. Unless there is a dramatic shift, we can expect to see more of the same in the future, with greater and greater acceleration. As this happens, there is no doubt that toleration of some distinctively Christian practices is going to significantly decrease. Atheists and agnostics often preach toleration for religious viewpoints today, but much of this is owing to the fact that they do not yet have the power to squelch dissent to many of the items on their agenda. We should not expect them to keep this up forever. Already, both in the United States and in Europe (which is further along the road to full secularism in some ways than the United States and which many secularists in the US look to as a model), there are signs of decreasing toleration for many religious practices. The fights over homeschooling (<http://www.hslda.org/courtreport/V26N6/V26N601.asp>), the battles over tolerating male circumcision of children (<http://www.sltrib.com/sltrib/opinion/52092520-82/circumcision-body-julie-newborn.html.csp>; http://worldnews.msnbc.msn.com/_news/2012/06/27/12446284-german-court-bans-male-circumcision-sparks-outrage-among-jews-muslims?lite), and the attempts of anti-discrimination laws to stop people who own apartments and businesses from refusing the demands of homosexuals (http://www.lawlink.nsw.gov.au/lawlink/adb/ll_adb.nsf/pages/adb_homosexual), are just a few examples of what we should expect to see much more of in the coming years. *Unless* things turn around.

Ultimately, only God can turn the tide of secularism. Only God can overcome any of the false ideologies that dominate human societies today. But God often chooses to work through means, and he invites us to be his fellow-workers, in reliance on his grace and strength, in the battle. It is time for Christians to stop accepting the status quo that secularism and other non-Christian ideologies should be dominant in our societies. It is time that we refuse to be put into the secular box of “religious fundamentalists whose beliefs belong in private life” and instead employ all our powers and opportunities to proclaim and work for the crown rights of Christ the King and of his law and gospel in all areas of life, including politics. The Reformation Party is one of the few political parties in the world today that proudly, consistently, and unashamedly stands for a consistent and explicit Christian foundation for social/political ethics. And of the few parties that do stand for this, we are part of an even smaller group of political parties (I am only currently aware of two, including the Reformation Party) that stand for a fully consistent version of Christianity as the foundation for politics—the historic Reformed faith, summarized in the Westminster Standards. Don't get your values from the agnostic world that surrounds us, or whatever false ideology is dominant where you live. Live and advocate in

all areas of life for the beliefs and values that are rooted in reality, in the Word of the true and living God. Join the Reformation Party and help us show the church and the world a better way!

Some resources for further research on the biblical principles of civil government (besides documents already quoted from above):

<http://www.naphtali.com/articles/george-gillespie/wholesome-severity/> - A great article by Scottish Presbyterian George Gillespie discussing the classic Reformed view of liberty of conscience.

http://books.google.com/books/about/A_Free_Disputation_Against_Pretended_Lib.html?id=nh0tAAAAYAAJ – Another excellent work on liberty of conscience by Scottish Presbyterian Samuel Rutherford.

http://books.google.com/books/about/A_Free_Disputation_Against_Pretended_Lib.html?id=nh0tAAAAYAAJ – Great book by American Reformed Presbyterian theologian James R. Willson on the role of God's law in the Scriptures for the exercise of civil magistracy.

<http://www.covenanter.org/JRWillson/tolerance.htm> – A nice little essay on the rhetoric of tolerance, also by James R. Willson

<http://books.google.com/books?id=Vw1MAAAAYAAJ&pg=RA1-PA143&dq=George+Gillespie+propositions&output=text> 0 – Another work by George Gillespie articulating biblical principles of church and civil government in a series of propositions.