

THEOCRACY AND THE MODERN NATION–STATE:
A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

A KEYNOTE ADDRESS DELIVERED

BY

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GREETINGS

INTRODUCTION

Theocracy is a distinct form of government marked by the integration of political and religious authorities. According to Encyclopaedia Britannica, theocracy is “government by divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as divinely guided. In many theocracies, government leaders are members of the clergy, and the state’s legal system is based on religious law.” Similarly, Webster’s New Lexicon Dictionary defines theocracy as “government by priests or men claiming to know the will of God; a state thus governed.” The [*Oxford English Dictionary*](#) has this definition:

1. a system of government in which priests rule in the name of God or a god.

1.1. the commonwealth of Israel from the time of Moses until the election of Saul as King.

Dictionary.com also describes theocracy as:

- a form of government in which God or a deity is recognized as the supreme civil ruler, the God's or deity's laws being interpreted by the ecclesiastical authorities.
- a system of government by priests claiming a divine commission.
- a commonwealth or state under such a form or system of government.

Duhaime’s Law Dictionary describes theocracy as a form of government which defers not to civil development of law, but to an interpretation of the will of a God as set out in religious scripture and authorities.

Holman Bible Dictionary defines theocracy as a form of government in which God directly rules. As the Sovereign King, God may rule directly through unmediated means, or He may choose to use various mediators to manifest His rule. In either case, God Himself is the Sovereign Ruler.

Development of the Theocratic State

In the purest form of theocracy, the political authority and the religious authority are one and the same, unified in the persona of someone with a direct connection to god. The theocracy of God is revealed progressively in the Scriptures and the earliest forms of God’s governing were His direct encounters with Adam in the garden of Adam.

In Genesis 2:15-17

“15. And the Lord God took the man, and put him into the Garden of Eden to dress it and to keep it.

16. And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, Of every tree of the garden thou mayest freely eat:

17. But of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, thou shalt not eat of it: for in the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.”

Moreover, the plan of God to establish a national theocracy upon the earth was revealed when God called Abram out of Ur of the Chaldees to go to a land He will show him and where His rule will be revealed. Gen 12:1-3

“1. Now the Lord had said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee:

2. And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great; and thou shalt be a blessing:

3. And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all the families of the earth be blessed.”

As God gave the Mosaic Law to the Israelites, it gave them a unique theocratic structure. The civil and moral laws provided the guidance for governance of the state and personal relationships within the theocracy. These laws would establish the basic social structures of the theocratic state: judicial decision making, processes of adjudication, marital guidelines, parental responsibilities, regard for human life, property rights, and so forth while the ceremonial law addressed the issues of religious observances and practices.

The first law from God was the Ten Commandments which spelt out the responsibilities of man to God and his relationship with men. Exodus 20: 1-17 states:

1. And God spake all these words, saying,

2. I am the Lord thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage.

3. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

4. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth:

5. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;

6. And shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

7. Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD will not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

8. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy.

9. Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work:

10. But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates:

11. For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

12. Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.
13. Thou shalt not kill.
14. Thou shalt not commit adultery.
15. Thou shalt not steal.
16. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.
17. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant, nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

Other Laws

Laws about Servants - Exodus 21:1-11

A servant must not be kept for more than six years. In the seventh year, he must be released to go out free for nothing.

Laws about murder and strife - Exodus 21:12-36

Any man that smites a man, so that he dies, shall be surely put to death. Likewise, if a man shall dig a pit and not cover it, and an ox or an ass shall fall therein; the owner of the pit shall make it good, and give money unto the owner of them; and the dead beast shall be his.

If men strive, and hurt a woman with child, so that her fruit depart from her, and yet no mischief follow: he shall be surely punished, according as the woman's husband will lay upon him; and he shall pay as the judges determine. And if any mischief follow, then thou shalt give life for life, Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, Burning for burning, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.

Laws about property – Exodus 22:1-15

If a man shall steal an ox, or a sheep, and kill it, or sell it; he shall restore five oxen for an ox, and four sheep for a sheep.

If a man shall cause a field or vineyard to be eaten, and shall put in his beast, and shall feed in another man's field; of the best of his own field, and of the best of his own vineyard, shall he make restitution.

Laws about personal actions – Exodus 22:16-23:9

And if a man entice a maid that is not betrothed, and lie with her, he shall surely endow her to be his wife.

Thou shalt not suffer a witch to live.

Whosoever lieth with a beast shall surely be put to death.

He that sacrificeth unto any god, save unto the Lord only, he shall be utterly destroyed.

Ye shall not afflict any widow, or fatherless child. If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; And my wrath shall wax hot, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless.

Development of The Modern Nation-State

Theocracy was the first form of government worldwide but overtime, many nations and states have abandoned any reference to religious texts as having ultimate authority in law. It is believed that strict adherence to religious texts was necessary for the early forms of human government to impose law and order.

The reality, though, was likely the other way around: strict moral religious texts were developed or promoted by rulers to sustain law, order and their political authority.

However, with education, states have gradually been able to relax the grip of theocracy and replace it with democratic principles. A theocratic state cannot be a democratic state - the one the antithesis of the other.

The reign of God in Israel declined as the children of Israel decided to reject God as the Sovereign and requested for a king like the other nations surrounding Israel. I Samuel 8:4-7 states,

*“4. Then all the elders of Israel gathered themselves together, and came to Samuel unto Ramah.
5. And said unto him, Behold, thou art old, and thy sons walk not in thy ways: now make us a king to judge us like all the nations.
6. But the thing displeased Samuel, when they said, Give us a king to judge us. And Samuel prayed unto the LORD.
7. And the LORD said unto Samuel, Hearken unto the voice of the people in all that they say unto thee: for they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.”*

The request of the elders of Israel to Prophet Samuel saddened him. Despite his warnings to the children of Israel on what they would experience with the king, there was insistence that Samuel should carry out their request. I Samuel 8:10-18

10. And Samuel told all the words of the LORD unto the people that asked of him a king.

11. And he said, This will be the manner of the king that shall reign over you: He will take your sons, and appoint them for himself, for his chariots, and to be his horsemen; and some shall run before his chariots.

12. And he will appoint him captains over thousands, and captains over fifties; and will set them to ear his ground, and to reap his harvest, and to make his instruments of war, and instruments of his chariots.

13. And he will take your daughters to be confectionaries, and to be cooks, and to the bakers.

14. And he will take your fields, and your vineyards, and your oliveyards, even the best of them, and give them to his servants.

15. And he will take the tenth of your seed, and of your vineyards, and give to his officers, and to his servants.

16. And he will take your menservants, and your maidservants, and your goodliest young men, and your asses, and put them to his work.

17. He will take the tenth of your sheep: and ye shall be his servants.

18. And ye shall cry out in that day because of your king which ye shall have chosen you; and the LORD will not hear you in that date.

Samuel obeyed the children of Israel and anointed a king, named Saul. I Samuel 10:1.

1. Then Samuel took a vial of oil, and poured it upon his head, and kissed him, and said, Is it not because the LORD hath anointed thee to be captain over his inheritance?

This development culminated in the shift to monarchical reign from theocracy.

The monarchical experience also declined among the Israelites following the division of the monarchy and the exilic/post-exilic periods. The exilic and post-exilic periods were turning points in the governmental affairs of the Jews.

In the exilic period and while in captivity, the children of Israel were appointed as governors over provinces of Babylon and this experience went with them to the post-exilic period. Daniel, one of the Jewish captives along with his friends was appointed as governors. Likewise, were Nehemiah and Zerubbabel. Daniel 2:48-49:

48. Then the king made Daniel a great man, and gave him many great gifts, and made him ruler over the whole province of Babylon, and chief of the governors over all the wise men of Babylon.

49. Then Daniel requested of the king, and he set Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, over the affairs of the province of Babylon: but Daniel sat in the gate of the king.

The post-exilic period witnessed the appointment of governors and leaders to superintend over the affairs of the Jews till the first coming of Christ at the outset of the New Testament era.

At the time Jesus was born, the governmental affairs of the Jews were under the Romans, with Herod serving as the king, Pontius Pilate as governor and Caesar as the emperor.

Mark 12:13-17:

13. *And they send unto him certain of the Pharisees and of the Herodians, to catch him in his words.*

14. *And when they were come, they say unto him, Master, we know that thou art true, and carest for no man: for thou regardest not the person of men, but teachest the way of God in truth: Is it lawful to give tribute to Caesar, or not?*

15. *Shall we give, or shall we not give? But he, knowing their hypocrisy, said unto them, Why tempt ye me? bring me a penny, that I may see it.*

16. *And they brought it. And he saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription? And they said unto him, Caesar's.*

17. *And Jesus answering said unto them, Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. And they marvelled at him.*

Further, God commands Christians to obey the state, for the state as an institution is ordained and established by God. Romans 13:1-7:

1. *Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.*
2. *Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.*
3. *For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same:*
4. *For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil.*
5. *Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake.*
6. *For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing.*
7. *Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour.*

God has instituted government because in this fallen world we need certain restraints to protect us from the chaos and lawlessness that is a natural attitude of man. This was further alluded to in 1 Peter 2:13-15:

13. *Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme;*

14. *Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.*

15. *For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men:*

Conclusion

American Baptist minister, Isaac Backus wrote in 1773: “The church is armed with light and truth, to pull down the strongholds of iniquity and to gain souls to Christ and into His Church, to be governed by His rules therein; and again to exclude such from their communion, who

will not be so governed; while the state is armed with the sword to guard the peace, and the civil rights of all persons and societies, and to punish those who violate the same.

And where these two kinds of government, and the weapons which belong to them, are well distinguished and improved according to the true nature and end of their institution, the effects are happy and they do not at all interfere with each other. But where they have been confounded together, no tongue nor pen can fully describe the mischiefs that have ensued.”

Many states continue to refer to the existence or "grace" of God in their constitutional texts but no longer give theocracy, or its underlying theological dogma, any role in the law of the land, although almost all such states, because of the freedom of expression they espouse, have religious groups that call for a return to strict theocratic ideals in law and government.

However, the impending second coming of Christ promises a refreshing time and government as He takes over and reigns over all affairs of men. All old and present things shall pass away and a new government with Him as the Head will hold sway. This new dispensation is emphasised in Revelation 21:1-5.

1. *And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea.*
2. *And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.*
3. *And I heard a great voice out of heaven saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God.*
4. *And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.*
5. *And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said unto me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.*

Thank you for listening.

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