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Reformed Systematic Theology Textbooks: Hand Maiden to the Enlightenment Privatization of Faith

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Introduction

Using words from Revelation, the climactic chorus of *Messiah* sings about Jesus Christ. “King of kings, and Lord of lords” is the central theme, while singers comment, “Hallelujah,” and exult, “And He shall reign forever and ever.” At its first production in London, King George II stood at these words, out of respect for the only King of kings, his King. His subjects rose with their king to honor their King. To this day, audiences do the same when they hear the joyous proclamation, “King of kings, and Lord of lords.”

In an apocryphal scene in the movie *Chariots of Fire*, which nevertheless correctly captures Eric Liddell’s faith, “God above country,” the Scottish sprinter resists the Prince of Wales’ demand that he run in the Paris Olympics on Sunday. Liddell says to the Prince, “God made countries. God makes kings, and the rules by which they govern. And those rules say that the Sabbath is His. And I for one intend to keep it that way.”

Christ’s Kingship Over the Nations in Reformed Systematics

Both the oratorio *Messiah* by Handel and the movie *Chariots of Fire* more clearly and truly teach that Jesus is King over nations than do most Reformed systematic theology texts used to train Reformed preachers and through them the Christian Church. The Reformed Presbyterian Seminary uses Robert Reymond’s 1998 text, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*.¹ It teaches little about the kingship of Christ and less about civil government, except for a page in which Reymond takes Theonomists (and Calvin and Luther) to task for confusing church and state. My grandfather, John Coleman, taught systematic theology at the Reformed Presbyterian Theological Seminary in the 1930s and 1940s, using a 1907 text written by the Baptist Augustus Strong. Strong devotes four pages to Christ’s office of Prophet, seventy-two pages to his office as Priest, and one page to his office as King over the Church. Regarding civil government, Strong is

¹ Since the writing of this article, RPTS has begun primarily to use three texts in systematic theology courses: John Calvin, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 ed., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, c1960); Richard C. Gamble, *The Whole Counsel of God* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009); and A. A. Hodge, *The Westminster Confession: A Commentary* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1869). *Ed.*

silent. Westminster Seminary uses the late seventeenth century text by Francis Turretin. He does not address issues of Civil Government and is mainly concerned to establish the spiritual nature of Christ's Kingship over the Church. Westminster also uses Bavinck's systematic theology, which confesses that Christ is King over nations, but does not develop the point. On Civil Government, Bavinck mostly criticizes the Roman Catholic "confusion of Powers." The same, almost complete silence about Christ's rule over the nations and Civil Government prevails in systematic theologies by Shedd (1888) and Berkhof (1932).

The Princeton Presbyterian Charles Hodge (1871), on the other hand, has some material about Christ's Kingship. He notes that Christ's "royal office is rendered so prominent in the Messianic prophecies that the Jews looked for Him only as a king."² After quoting these texts extensively, Hodge teaches that Christ as King providentially rules the nations for the sake of the church. He devotes several interesting pages to civil government in connection with a discussion of the Fifth Commandment. His son, A. A. Hodge (1860), advances this improvement further by devoting a whole chapter to the mediatorial kingship of Christ. He writes, "The state is a divine institution, and the officers thereof are God's ministers. Rom xiii. 1-4, Christ, the mediator, is, as a revealed fact, 'Ruler of the Nations,' King of Kings, and Lord of lords, Rev. 19:16; Matt. 28:18; Phil. 2:9-11; Eph. 1:17-23, and the Sacred Scriptures are an infallible rule of faith and practice to all men under all conditions." He concludes, "That every nation, therefore, should explicitly acknowledge the Christ of God to be the Supreme Governor, and his revealed will the supreme fundamental law of the land."³ But A. A. Hodge does not go on to develop a doctrine of civil government.

Finally, the American Southern Presbyterian writers, Dabney and Thornwell, do address Christ's Kingship over the nations. Thornwell prepared a petition for the southern Presbyterian Church to submit to the new Confederate government, that they should amend their constitution to make it explicitly recognize the reign of Christ. It was never debated, and he withdrew it. Robert L. Dabney in his systematic theology defends at length Christ's mediatorial rule as judge of the nations, both now and at the End. He also discusses at length the origins of civil government, preferring a divine origin to social contract theory, but he does not otherwise deal with modern developments in the realm of government.

The frequent silence of Reformed systematic theology concerning Christ's reign over the nations and civil government, and the limited range of topics dealt with even by A. A. Hodge and R. L. Dabney, is quite surprising to find in the heirs of John Calvin and the Westminster Assembly. The Westminster Assembly, called to meet by the English Parliament according to the Solemn League and Covenant between England, Scotland, and Ireland, devoted an entire chapter in its Confession to the civil magistrate (*WCF* 23). The Confession elsewhere takes frequent notice of civil government, as in the chapters on Oaths (*WCF* 22), Church Synods (*WCF* 31), and Liberty of Conscience (*WCF* 20). John Calvin concludes his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* with a long chapter on civil government, beginning by sharply distinguishing between civil and ecclesiastical government. Calvin's political thought was sufficiently extensive that it has given rise to a vast literature in the academy. Calvin elsewhere devoted more space to Christ's Kingly office than do later Reformed writers. In the *Institutes'* prefatory address to King Francis I of France, Calvin lays down this principle: "Indeed, this consideration makes a true king: to recognize himself a minister of God in governing his kingdom. Now, that king who in ruling over his realm does not serve God's glory exercises not a kingly rule, but brigandage."⁴ Here Calvin

² Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 2:460.

³ A. A. Hodge, *Outlines of Theology* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1860), 434.

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1559 ed., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, c1960), 1:12.

echoes Augustine in his *City of God*, “Justice being taken away, then, what are kingdoms but great robberies?”⁵ Calvin concludes his address to the king, “May the Lord, the King of Kings, establish your throne in righteousness [cf. Prov. 25:5], and your dominion in equity, most illustrious King. At Basel, on the 1st August, in the year 1536.”⁶

Calvin’s echo of Augustine reminds us that his attention to Christ’s Kingship over kings and hence over civil government was no new thing in Christian teaching. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica* addresses both law and judgment extensively in the civil realm. Augustine’s *City of God* contrasts two cities formed by two loves, cities that interpenetrate each other in the present age. He ascribed Rome’s dominion to God’s Providence. “He, therefore, who is the one true God... gave a kingdom to the Romans when He would, and as great as He would....”⁷ Rome’s fall to an enemy was not the result of its becoming Christian, but of its many vices. “But we say that [these Christian emperors] are happy if they rule justly... If they make their power the handmaid of His majesty by using it for the greatest possible extension of His worship; if they fear, love, worship God...”⁸

Finally, the near silence of seminary-taught Reformed Dogmatics about the Kingship of Christ over the nations and civil government should be a surprise to anyone who gives the Bible even a cursory reading. The Old Testament’s messianic prophecies are overwhelmingly about the coming Davidic King. God’s covenant with David promised a son who would sit on the throne forever (2 Sam. 7:16; Ps. 89:27, “Also I will make him My firstborn, the highest of the kings of the earth”; Jer. 33:19-22). Isaiah predicted a son born to a virgin who would be called “Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David and over His kingdom, to order it and establish it with judgment and justice from that time forward, even forever” (Is. 9:6-7). Daniel foresaw

One like the Son of Man, coming with the clouds of heaven! He came to the Ancient of Days, and they brought Him near before Him. Then to Him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away.... (Dan. 7:13-14)

Micah furnished the prophecy that the scribes related to Herod the Great in answer to the question, “Where is the Messiah to be born?” “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are little among the thousands of Judah, yet out of you shall come forth to Me the One to be Ruler in Israel, whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting” (Mic. 5:2).

The New Testament, while it clearly reveals Christ as Prophet and Priest as well as King, makes Christ’s Kingship His central mediatorial office. Matthew begins, “The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the Son of David (Mat. 1:1).” The point is kingship! Jesus’ final and last word to the Church about Himself in Revelation is this: “I am the Root and Offspring of David, the Bright and Morning Star” (Rev. 22:16). The point is kingship! In the first sermon preached after Jesus’ Resurrection, Peter quoted King David in Psalm 16, that God would not allow His Holy One to see corruption (Ps. 16:10). Clearly this was not David—he was long dead. The words were a prophecy about David’s greater Son, now ascended to heaven, of whom David said in Psalm 110,

⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Random House, c1950), 112, IV.4.

⁶ Calvin, 1:31.

⁷ Augustine, 174-175, V.21.

⁸ Augustine, 178, V.24.

“The LORD said to my Lord, sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool” (Ps. 110:1, quoted in Acts 2:25-35). The point is kingship.

The Apostles’ Creed confesses that Jesus “suffered under Pontius Pilate.” At his trial, Pilate asked Jesus directly, “Are you the King of the Jews?” He replied, “It is as you say” (Mat. 27:11) and He directly alluded to Daniel’s prophecy already quoted (Mk. 13:62; Dan. 7:13). Jesus submitted to Pilate’s verdict, but noted to Pilate, “You could have no power at all against Me unless it had been given you from above” (Jn. 19:11). He was put to death on the charge, “THIS IS JESUS THE KING OF THE JEWS” (Mat. 27:37). The point was kingship.

Later, when the Jewish Sanhedrin arrested Peter and John for preaching in Jesus the resurrection of the dead, the Apostles observed that Herod and Pontius Pilate, the Gentiles and Israel, had joined forces against Jesus, fulfilling the Second Psalm: “Why did the nations rage, and the people plot vain things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the LORD and against His Christ” (Acts 4:24-27, quoting Ps. 2:1-2). The Revelation given to John also refers the Second Psalm to Jesus, “the male child who was to rule all nations with a rod of iron” (Rev. 12:5, see Rev. 2:26-27, quoting Ps. 2:10). The Book of Acts traces the continual interplay between a spreading church and Roman officials, in Cyprus, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, Ephesus, Jerusalem, Caesarea, and Rome (Acts 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 22-28). The spread of the Church to Gentile lands meant that God was fulfilling His promise to David, “After this I will return and will rebuild the tabernacle of David, which has fallen down; I will rebuild its ruins and I will set it up; so that the rest of mankind may seek the LORD, even all the Gentiles who are called by My name” (Acts 15:16-17 quoting Amos 9:11-12). The point is kingship. In Thessalonica, a mob accused Paul of saying “there is another king—Jesus (Acts 17:7).” The Jews understood that by calling Jesus the Christ, Paul meant that Jesus is the promised son of David who would be King. Gentiles heard the name “Lord” applied to Jesus and heard Caesar’s claim to be “lord and savior” met with the rival claim of Jesus to be Lord.

The typical seminary’s systematic theology textbooks by and large distort Scripture by their few words about Christ as King, depart from the Christian traditions of centuries in Christendom, fail to instruct new preachers in the full counsel of God, and leave preachers and their congregations with the impression that Jesus is first of all our priest, secondly our prophet, and in only some vague way our spiritual King. There is virtually no instruction on civil government as it has developed since the European Enlightenment, none at all on the nations of the world, and almost nothing on public ethics. So preaching in some conservative churches idolizes the United States of America as the last best hope of mankind, in others it ignores civil affairs completely or addresses them piecemeal without any solid framework of understanding. We end up as Christians flailing futilely to defend the legal remnants of Christendom in our public life in areas such as life and marriage. Reformed preaching, in other words, implicitly accepts the legitimacy of a naked and secular public square, at best opposing it in an *ad hoc* fashion, without a clear theology to give it shape and heft. As now taught from our Reformed textbooks in our Reformed seminaries, Reformed systematic theology distorts Scripture by its silence on Christ’s Kingship and civil government, departs from the Great Tradition of the Christian Church in these matters, fails to follow in the path laid out by John Calvin and the Westminster Assembly, and leaves the Church ill-equipped for the cultural and political battles of our day between the two loves that Augustine describes.

Desperate for help and guidance in dealing with the social and political challenges of our times, Reformed American Christians have sometimes turned to the century-old Dutch tradition associated with the name Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper wanted to see the Netherlands a Christian nation.

One desire has been the ruling passion of my life. One high motive has acted like a spur upon my mind and soul. And sooner than that I should seek escape from the sacred necessity that this is laid upon me, let the breath of life fail me. It is this: That in spite of all worldly opposition, God's holy ordinances shall be established again in the home, in the school and in the State for the good of the people; to carve as it were into the conscience of the nation the ordinances of the Lord, to which the Bible and Creation bear witness, until the nation pays homage again to God.⁹

Nevertheless, great as he was, I consider Kuyper's movement to be a dead end for American Reformed Christians for both theological and political reasons. Politically, Kuyper worked within the bounds of a small continental European nation, with a homogeneous society and a political tradition that have little in common with the American Empire, an offspring of the British Empire. Theologically, Kuyper's movement used a flawed concept of "common grace" as the basis for cooperation between believers and nonbelievers in the public arena, a concept that continues to bear bad fruit both in the Netherlands and in churches of Dutch descent in this country, because it has been used to blur the antithesis between believer and unbeliever, and between Revelation and human efforts to grope for the truth.

The alternative to Kuyper for Reformed American Christians is modern Roman Catholic writing. It is noteworthy that there will soon be no Protestants on the American Supreme Court, only Jews and Catholics. It is to the Catholic Justices that most Reformed Christians look for understanding and defense of the remnants of Christian thinking concerning, for example, life and marriage enshrined in our laws. Many Reformed Christians read the journal of ideas, *First Things*, edited for many years by the late Richard John Neuhaus, a Roman Catholic convert. We read it because it does address, for the most part from within the Christian tradition, issues of American government, education, international relations and the like.

Why did Reformed systematics develop as it did after 1660, falling mostly silent on Christ's Kingship over the nations and on civil government? The answer to that question is beyond the scope of this paper, but in large measure the answer surely has to be found in the outcome of the Thirty Years War on the continent in 1648 and in the defeat of the Puritan project in England with the accession of Charles II to the throne in 1660. The early Reformers aimed to reconstitute both church and civil life on the basis of a Reformed Christianity. John Knox's stay in Geneva "so broadened his outlook on the whole movement, that he now saw the Reformation not just as an effort at religious reform, but as a movement to create a reformed Christian public and private life-style."¹⁰ But after 1660, it was clear that the Reformed party had lost: Europe was not going to be reconstituted on the basis of a Reformed Christianity. Only in Scotland with the Presbyterian Covenanters did the attempt continue for another generation. Their defeat was sealed in 1689 when William became king, and the Covenanter Cameronians were so reduced in number that the Crown could safely ignore them. To put it bluntly, Reformed systematics after 1660 is written for a defeated party in Europe that by and large accepts its reduced ambitions and influence in the new Europe that now began to emerge out of Christendom. The Enlightenment, which in its early years still had strong Christian roots, began, aiming to constitute national unity on the basis of a common morality and an almighty sovereign state, but not on the basis of a common religious commitment. It decisively put denominations as they now evolved into a boxed-off realm of religion and family.

⁹ Abraham Kuyper, *To Be Near Unto God*, trans. John Hendrik de Vries (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, c1925), 7.

¹⁰ W. S. Reid, *Trumpeter of God: A Biography of John Knox* (New York: Scribner, 1974), 154. Quoted by Richard Gamble in "The Christian and the Tyrant: Beza and Knox on Political Resistance Theory," *Westminster Theological Journal* 46, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 126.

The Enlightened West, however, faces two insuperable difficulties. First, it turns out to be impossible to maintain national consensus on public ethics without a religious basis for those ethics. The West today can no longer agree on what constitutes murder. There is no agreed upon sexual ethic. What constitutes a family is up for grabs. The result is a culture that increasingly looks like it cannot maintain itself as it now is for many more decades. Second, Christ really is King over the nations. He is the King of kings and Lord of lords. Nations and their rulers must deal with Him, and the warnings in Psalm 2 and the rest of the Bible are clear and certain: rulers who lead their nations in rebellion against God in Christ put their nations in line for judgment. The Church must at least bear witness to these two realities. But it also needs to think responsibly in its systematic theology about the place of nations before God and about civil government in our day, just as Calvin and Westminster did in their day.

Suppose that those who write and teach Reformed systematic theology to instruct new pastors, and through them the Christian Church, were to reattach themselves to Christian teaching on the Kingship of Christ over the nations and civil government. Three lines of thought, at least, should be explored.

Towards a Reformed Systematic Theology of Christ's Kingship Over the Nations

The first line of thought would be a full development of Christ's office of King. Conventionally, that office is placed third in the triad, Prophet, Priest, and King, but in its presentation in the Scriptures, that office has preeminence. It is the focus of Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah; it is the first meaning of Jesus' title of Christ, or Messiah; it is the obvious import of the title "lord;" it is the first and last word about Jesus in the New Testament; it is the charge on which He was executed; and it is the office that is clearly His by reason of His Resurrection (see Acts 2, Rom. 1:1-4, Phil. 2:5-11). Jesus' preaching was about the Kingdom of God. In many of His Kingdom parables, the master or king is Jesus. It is a universal Kingship, since Jesus claims that all authority in heaven and on earth is given to Him. Therefore, He sends His disciples into all the world to teach all nations to believe in Him and to obey His Law.

Two books by Reformed Presbyterian writers have developed the Bible's teaching about Christ's Kingship over the nations at length, David Scott in his book *Distinctive Principles of the Reformed Presbyterian Church* (1841, Albany), and William Symington in *Messiah the Prince* (1882, Glasgow), but both books show their age. They do not fully deal with modern developments in political thinking, and they think in terms of an established church.

The second area to explore in the Bible's teaching of Christ's Kingship over the nations would be a development of the identity and place of nations in God's plan. In the New Testament, the word "nations" (*ethnoi*) is often used of all non-Jewish people indiscriminately, for example, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Mat. 6:7) instructs us not to pray as the Gentiles (*ethnoi*) do. Non-Jews may be the meaning of *ethnoi* in the Great Commission, "teach all nations," although it could be argued that "nations" in that context means individual nations, not just non-Jews. The simple division of the world into Jew and non-Jew is reflected in Paul's phrase in Romans concerning salvation, "For the Jew first, and also for the Greek" (Rom. 1:16, see Col. 3:11). Later Christian writers sometimes referred to three races, Jew, Gentile, and Christian. Such usage of *ethnoi* reflected the universality of the Roman Empire prophesied in Daniel (see Dan. 2:40).

Nevertheless, there is an older usage of "nation" (*ethnos*) in the New Testament that refers to nations in their particularity. In Athens, Paul preached that "[God] has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth, and has determined their preappointed times and the boundaries of their dwellings (Acts 17:26)." Here Paul echoes Deuteronomy: "When the Most High divided their inheritance to the nations..." (Deut. 32:8). Paul continued that God intended for the nations to seek after Him. But in their ignorance they did not find Him, even though He is not far from us. However, God now commands all men everywhere to

repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world, the king's task, by a Man He chose, proving His choice by raising Him from the dead (Acts 17:27-31).

Although the nations were united in one great Empire in Jesus' day, Daniel's prophecy indicated that that Empire itself would eventually cease. Individual nations would reemerge. And so they have, some strong, some weak. God's division of the world into nations based on common descent, catalogued in the table of nations in Genesis 10 and affirmed at the Tower of Babel with language, was not undone either by the Roman Empire or by the Christian message. On the Day of Pentecost in Jerusalem, the Spirit pointedly empowered the Apostles to speak in all of the languages present (Acts 28:8-11). The Spirit did not empower the hearers to understand Aramaic or Hebrew. Even the picture of a fully redeemed humanity in Revelation portrays a chorus of unity in diversity: "After these things I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no one could number, of all nations, tribes, peoples, and tongues, standing before the throne" (Rev. 7:9).

The Old Testament contains a remarkably developed account of nations. Already noted are the boundary markers of territory, descent, and language. In Deuteronomy is the idea of nations occupying specific parts of the earth with boundaries. Additionally, nations, as Israel observed, usually had their own kings. Finally, the Bible notes that each nation has made its own gods to worship instead of the one Creator. Common descent, common language, common territory, common history, common rule, and a common religion identified the nations. Sometimes only three or four of them delineate a nation. Israel in Egypt did not have its own territory or rulers; the Swiss today speak several languages; Americans do not share a common descent.

God speaks to nations as a whole, repeatedly, in the Bible, since His promise to Abraham was in him to bless all nations of the earth (Gen. 15:16). He gave Amos a message for Syria, Phoenicia, Philistia, Edom, Moab, Ammon, Judah, and finally Israel (Amos 1-2). He sent Jonah to Assyria with a message. Jeremiah spoke to Egypt and Babylon. Through Daniel, and a dream to Nebuchadnezzar, and a sign to Belshazzar, God spoke to Babylon.

Any systematic theology development of the Bible's teaching about nations, established by God to seek after Him, and now called to end that rebellion and obey God's Messiah, must include a treatment of the place of "kings and nobles" in the nations. A good beginning place is Psalm 2. Whereas Psalm 1 describes the two ways of righteousness or wickedness open to every man, Psalm 2 describes the two ways open to every nation. Together, the two Psalms introduce the Psalter, and it is Psalm 2 that the New Testament repeatedly quotes rather than Psalm 1. The rulers of the nations, the elites as we might say today, lead nations in their rebellion against God, who calls on them to lead their nations to end their rebellion.¹¹ It is almost tautological to observe that nations follow their leaders. That is why they are leaders. So God commands the kings and nobles of the nations to kiss the Son, lest in His wrath He destroy them. Leaders who lead their nations to defy God's Anointed put their entire nations at risk of God's judgment.

In the midst of the chapters in Isaiah concerning God's plan for His Servant, He declares, "Kings shall see and arise, Princes also shall worship." "So shall He sprinkle many nations. Kings shall shut their mouths at Him." "Kings shall be your foster fathers, and queens your nursing mothers; they shall bow down to you with their faces to the ground" (Is. 49:7; 52:15; 49:23). When Augustine wrote, as I quoted him earlier, that those emperors who think of sovereignty as a ministry of God, and use it for the spread of true religion, he reflected the words of the prophets, as did Calvin when he addressed the King of France and urged him to see himself as a minister of God.

¹¹ For a further discussion of the meaning of Psalm 2, see William Edgar, "Christ's Kingship in Contemporary Politics," in *Explicitly Christian Politics* (Pittsburgh, PA: Christian Statesman Press, c1997)

In connection with a development of the place of nations in God's plan, we need to come to grips with the history of the interplay of the Christian gospel (Jesus is the promised Messiah, and He is now God's reigning King) and the nations of the world. In centuries past, many of them have thought of themselves collectively as Christian nations. American and Protestant pride should not as easily dismiss their way of thinking as we do.¹² Many Americans, perhaps because they are ill-educated Protestants, proudly dismiss the notion that a nation could or even should be Christian. Other Americans, because they are ill-educated about the radical secularism of our Constitution, continue to insist that the United States already is a Christian nation. For much of our history, indeed, an informal Protestant establishment of the once mainline churches continued our colonial legacy of a generally Christian public life. But in the last half century, that establishment has failed decisively, and it is now often a strong proponent of ever more startling denials of godly ethics in American life. It would be most accurate to describe our nation as not Christian in any official sense, and in recent decades as intensifying its rebellion against the King of kings, even while many Christians live here and have greatly shaped our public life in the past.

The third area that should be discussed in connection with Christ's Kingship over the nations should include an account and evaluation of near universal developments originating in Europe after 1600 A.D. Here I have in mind the emergence of the nation state as the putatively only valid form of social and political organization, with empires, confederations of cities, or tribes considered invalid. In connection with this preeminence of the nation state comes the choice of representative democracy as the only valid form of politics, with an emphasis on rules of the game and procedural justice, more than on rules of life. The huge increase in our productive capacities by the deliberate application of scientific methods to industry, and the significant lengthening of human life, has transformed social life since 1600. In the minds of many this prosperity validates the new political arrangements that have accompanied it. Finally, and with growing insistence, Western national elites have rejected Jesus Christ. The rejection of the reign of Christ is what the term "secularization" truly refers to. The emergence of the nation state, liberal democracy, and productive abundance do not ineluctably lead to a secular life in which religion becomes a purely private matter among consenting adults. No, secularization is the deliberate choice of our leaders, our kings and nobles so to speak.

The systematic theology taught in our seminaries, as it teaches that Christ is King over the nations, needs to be written with an understanding of the contemporary world in which we bear witness. It also needs to interact with Catholic thinking in regard to these things, that is, with Popes Leo XIII, Pope John Paul II, and Pope Benedict XVI, with the American Jesuit John Courtney Murray and with the theology of Vatican II. That is how Augustine, Aquinas, and Calvin all wrote their theology—fully interacting with other thinkers and with the world they lived in.

A recent TV exchange between two leading conservative Catholic intellectuals and a caller who represents traditional Catholic thinking illuminates how strongly the tides of Western secularism overpower even conservative Catholic intellectuals. As you hear it, note how weak the argument is: because something might be done poorly, it should not be done at all. That is not their stance on taxation, making roads, or going to war. They do not begin to explain why silence about Christ is a good thing for the government. Here is the exchange, a partial transcript of a TV question and answer session with Joseph Bottum, new editor of *First Things* magazine, and the conservative Catholic writer George Weigel:

¹² See William Edgar, "The National Confessional Position" in *God and Politics: Four Views on the Reformation of Civil Government*, ed. Gary Scott Smith (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1989), 176-199.

Caller: The Catholics' perennial position and commitment to the Kingship of Christ in America, for example, to a constitutional amendment, perhaps, declaring Christ King....

Joseph Bottum: Richard [Neuhaus, editor of *First Things* until his death] would have thought that this was a fundamentally un-American idea, precisely because America is not a Catholic country, and we're a country born of the rejection of kings. Now Christ is the King, but He is the King over we [sic] the individuals, and thus we are called to something beyond the nation. He...would have seen the changes that happened from Leo XIII on in Catholic social teaching and Catholic understanding, particularly of Vatican II of democracies..., I think Richard would have seen this sort of movement to have a constitutional amendment to declare Christ the King as a retrograde movement.

George Weigel: I think he would also say... that that's simply not the business of the state, and that the state is incompetent to make those sorts of judgments. A state that could say Christ is King is the state that could say that Charles III or George VII or Mohammed or Oprah Winfrey is Queen. The deeper point is that the state is incompetent to make theological judgments. The guys who can't fix the potholes should not be saying theological arguments. This is important to recognize because it puts the state in its proper place. The state is important for certain functions, but it does not have the capacity to make the judgment that Christ is King.

Conclusion

Reformed systematics since Turretin has by and large abetted the secularization of Western nations by its silence about Christ's reign over the nations. It has little to say to the elites that govern us, except to call them to personal (and private) religion. What is needed is a new appropriation of the Christian tradition exemplified by Calvin's chapter on civil government, with an emphasis on Christ as God's chosen anointed King who rules the nations. Then our preachers will have a systematic framework in which to teach their flocks how to call our nation to repentance and obedience to Christ our Lord.

There is no name in America with the power to provoke controversy like the name *Jesus*. I still remember the shocked silence in a 1978 University of Pennsylvania graduate seminar when I quoted Jesus by name. Anyone who has quoted Jesus by name in a public school classroom as I have, or who has referred to salvation through repentance and faith in Him on television as Brit Hume did a few years ago, or who has named Him as His favorite philosopher as George Bush did, has noted the instant hostility that the name Jesus evokes among unbelievers. Systematic teaching about Christ's present Kingship over the nations will bring howls of protest about the imposition of theocracy. And yet, every Christmas we sing the Easter story of Messiah, "King of kings, and Lord of lords." And the occasional "Eric Liddell" puts God above country. It is time for Reformed systematics to catch up with them, because Christ reigns now as King. Our country and its elites need to hear that, because that is the Gospel of God, which "He promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning His Son

Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead” (Rom. 1:2-4).

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