TESTING THE FOUNDATIONS OF THEONOMY AND RECONSTRUCTION

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Introduction

If God is sovereign how then should the Christian live, both as an individual and citizen, to apply this fact in the modern world? The Reformation revived belief in the biblical emphasis that God is supreme and sufficient in salvation; should not the way we organise and govern our society also reflect his sovereignty? Certainly, some evangelical Christians have at times stood against whatever was seen as contrary to God's moral law: Wilberforce against slavery, Shaftesbury opposing child labour, and Schaeffer against abortion, for example. In 1897 the notable theologian Abraham Kuyper, later to become prime minister of the Netherlands, pledged himself, '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 Bible and Creation bear witness, until the nation pays homage again to God'.[1] So evangelical Christians have not been shy of arguing that all nations are subject to 'God's law'. What this might mean in practice has not always been clear, just as varying definitions have been given of the law of God. In recent years, however, the theonomy movement has developed apparently straightforward answers to the questions, 'what is God's law?', and 'how should that law be applied in contemporary societies?'.

The theonomists (sometimes termed Christian Reconstructionists) argue that we should obey *all* of the laws presented in the Bible, not simply the Ten Commandments but also including the whole of the Mosaic law in so far as this has not been fulfilled in Christ. We should also expect the state to enforce this observance on all, whether they are believers or not. Theonomists have been gaining in strength in the USA over several decades and there are now signs of interest in the UK. For example, the prominent American theonomist Greg Bahnsen visited England during 1993, and before this the journal *Calvinism Today* (more recently *Christianity and Society*) was already disseminating theonomic ideas. The time is therefore ripe to evaluate theonomy.

This task has been greatly eased by the publication of two books which neatly summarise the two sides of the argument. First there is

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[1] A. Kuyper, *Lectures on Calvinism* (Grand Rapids, 1898), p. iii.

G.L. Bahnsen's *Theonomy in Christian Ethics: Expanded Edition with Replies to Critics* (Presbyterian and Reformed, Phillipsburg, 1984: hereafter referred to as Bahnsen). Although Rushdoony[2] is more the pioneer of theonomy, Bahnsen, until his recent death, provided perhaps the principal 'serious' exposition of theonomic thought, together with an attempt to respond to the critics of this school. In contrast, the second book, edited by W.S. Barker and W.R. Godfrey, *Theonomy. A Reformed Critique* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1990; hereafter, Barker and Godfrey), represents a disguised compliment to the success of theonomy in gaining influence in the USA especially among the 'Reformed' churches. It presents a series of essays in which members of the staff of Westminster Theological Seminary in Philadelphia respond to theonomy from the perspectives of hermeneutics, sociology, church history, and social and economic policy.[3]

Defining Theonomy: The Two Key Propositions

Before proceeding any further it is necessary to define theonomy. Although Bahnsen offers an extensive definition (his ten points, pp. xvi-xvii) this seems reducible to two key propositions: first, the 'continuing validity of the law in exhaustive detail', and, second, the obligation on modern governments to follow the government of Old Testament Israel in enforcing such obedience.[4]

In the first place, **Twentieth-century Christians are still obliged to obey the Mosaic law, because of '[the]...**

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2 R.J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law* (Nutley, NJ, 1973), p.2.

3 Theonomists have not been slow to respond to this Reformed critique. For example, G. North in *Westminster's Confession: The Abandonment of Van Til's Legacy* (Tyler TX, 1991) regards the Westminster response as inadequately Reformed in its foundations (one sad legacy of the abandonment of Van Til's presuppositional apologetic), patchy and even sometimes downright dishonest.

4 An alternative and insightful approach to a definition is provided by A. Sandlin, 'The Creed of Christian Reconstruction', *Chalcedon Report* (August, 1995), p. 2, who defines the movement as Calvinist, theonomist, presuppositionalist, postmillennialist and dominionist. Alternatively, '"Theonomy" which simply means "God's law" indicates the belief that all of the non-ceremonial Old Testament civil code is meant to be obeyed by all nations. "Reconstructionism" betokens the conviction that American society and public policy are in a desperate state, salvageable only by a radical effort to bring the nation in line with norms of scripture'; D.L. Duncan, 'Moses' Law for Modern Government: the Intellectual and Sociological Origins of the Christian Reconstruction Movement', *Premise* II:5 (1995), pp. 4-16.

continuing validity of the law in exhaustive detail' (Bahnsen p. 39). In support of this contention the theonomists would advance what is probably their favourite text, Matthew 5:17-18, where Jesus said, 'I have not come to abolish [the law and the prophets] but to fulfil them... not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished' (NIV; used for all biblical quotations). For the theonomists this provides divine endorsement of the claim that the law of Moses still stands except where set aside by the New Testament.[5]

Secondly, **modern governments are obligated to enforce the law in detail just as that of Old Testament Israel was.** In this case, the theonomists have less direct textual evidence but claim that such a case can be reasonably deduced (Bahnsen, pp. 339-64). (They note how the Old and New Testaments claim God as the foundation of all political authorities and also the injunction to believers to work for the good of even heathen political entities; *cf.* Jer. 29:7). In Deuteronomy 4:6-8 God says, 'Observe them carefully [*i.e.* the laws delivered to Moses], for this will show your wisdom and understanding to the nations, who will hear about all these decrees and say "Surely this great nation is a wise and understanding people". What other nation is so great as to have their gods near them the way the Lord our God is near us whenever we pray to him? And what other nation is so great as to have such righteous decrees and laws as this body of laws I am setting before you today?' In other words, Old Testament Israel, its laws and consequent systems of personal and social righteousness were set up by God to be a model for the other, pagan, nations. The theonomists see no reason why this should cease to be true during the Christian era. One notable consequence of the application of Mosaic law would be that a considerable list of crimes, and indeed certain immoral actions which would not now conventionally be considered as crimes in the legal sense, would become capital offences (Bahnsen, p. 445).

The Strong Points of Theonomy

1. *No platitudes or vague generalities*

Having defined theonomy we should perhaps begin by noting some of its attractive properties. Those who hope for the development of biblically based social ethics have reasons to give one cheer for theonomy. To begin with, whilst Christian comment on social, political or economic matters has sometimes been at best vague and, at worst, platitudinous

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[5] In Mark 7:19 Christ set aside the dietary laws, so Matthew 5: 17-18 cannot be a statement of the continuing validity of the law in exhaustive detail.

(Barker and Godfrey, p. 389),[6] the very detailed prescriptions of theonomy avoid being either. Bahnsen (p. 479) argues, 'The Law of God and its promotion also offers an answer to the current social-political irrelevance of the orthodox churches of Christ.' Indeed, Bahnsen accuses the non-theonomic mainstream churches in America of losing the ability to say anything meaningful as to how people should live in contemporary society. They 'analyse into a mist and mysticism' (Bahnsen, p. 15).[7]

2. *Application of the whole Bible*
Not only do theonomists attempt to lay down definite prescriptions for the social order but they try to base this on the whole Bible. This contrasts to those Evangelicals who give the impression that Leviticus and Deuteronomy are somehow less canonical than the rest of the Bible because, after all, they do not seem to have much to say to the modern Christian! The theonomists do find something in Leviticus and Deuteronomy and they display a due reverence for the law of God. Even though the law in itself cannot provide either justification or the empowerment for obedience, it remains, writes Bahnsen, a 'transcript of God's holiness and the standard for human righteousness' (Bahnsen, p. 146).

3. *Optimism of reconstruction*
Some at least would count it an attraction of theonomy that it is an activist and optimistic Christian movement. Its adherents really believe that they can turn the world upside down. Indeed, they aim to 'reconstruct' society along lines which conform to the universal lordship of Christ. 'If D.L. Moody thought the world was a sinking ship from which souls should be rescued, the Reconstructionists want to commandeer the ship, repair it and sail towards their own destination.'[8]

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[6] A situation sometimes blamed on the absence of a 'Christian mind' able to discern the distinctively Christian 'third way' in each situation (H. Blamires, *The Christian Mind* , London, 1963, p. 3 ; though see P. Miller, *Into the Arena,* Eastbourne, 1992, pp. 139-41, for a different view).

[7] Bahnsen's dismissal of the United Presbyterian Church of the USA Conference of 1967. See also, North, *op. cit.,* pp. 89-91, who gives a long list of interesting questions of applied Christianity which mainstream churches and their seminaries usually duck.

[8] Rodney Clapp, in *Christianity Today* (Feb 20, 1987), p. 19. Since Clapp came not to praise theonomy but to bury it, it is worth noting that from within the movement itself have come expansive claims of its activism and optimism. Indeed, these have been likened to some of the great ideologies. 'The most effective social movements of the twentieth century's masses - Marxism, Darwinian science, and

Historically, the Reformed churches have had a reasonable track record in stressing the creation mandate (*i.e.* the idea, based on Genesis 1: 28, that God has commanded human cultural development as part of the fulfilment of his creation purposes),[9] but perhaps they could now learn from the enthusiasm with which the theonomists seem to be tackling the reconstruction of society. They appear to be more Calvinist than Calvin himself in expressing a willingness to see not just the church but the whole of society reformed in line with the teaching of the Bible.[10]

4. *Crime and more punishment*

From what they see as their firm biblical foundations the theonomists have not been slow to sally forth to attack the influence of other philosophies and ideologies within the church and elsewhere. In some ways this has been beneficial. For example, they rightly stress that the criminal justice system should, amongst other things, provide punishment. This sets them against the humanistic view that punishment is a barbarous relic. This liberal downgrading of punishment may have occurred in part because of self-perceived guilt on behalf of the 'haves' that they have no right to punish criminals from amongst the 'have-nots', or because violence is sometimes seen as justified if committed for political motives, or because of the generally corrosive impact of relativism, social Darwinism and existentialism on belief in moral absolutes.[11] 'Thus there is a crescendo of the crime rates of all major cities of the world... and a continuing expression of group anarchy or terrorism.... In the face of all these situations... neither the

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militant Islam – have held variations of the three doctrines that are crucial for any comprehensive program of social change: providence, law and optimism'; G. North, 'Free Market Capitalism', in R.G. Clouse (ed.),*Wealth and Poverty: Four Christian Views of Economics* (Downers Grove, IL, 1984), pp. 27-65. North implies that theonomy is similarly equipped and therefore is the only school of Christian thought sufficiently well armoured in intellectual and spiritual terms to take on 'enemy' world views and win.

9 Of particular strength has been the Amsterdam school of Dutch Calvinist thought, *e.g.* A. Kuyper's 1898 Stone Lectures, *Lectures on Calvinism, op. cit.*

10 Miller, *op. cit.* , p. 7. In the vast body of Calvin's writings there are certain things which reconstructionists could point to as proto-theonomy. Calvin was at least a dominionist who regarded God as, '*legislateur et roy*' of the universe and he looked for a time when 'God is purely worshipped by all, and all the world is reformed', W. Bouwsma, *John Calvin* (Oxford, 1988), p. 192.

11 See P. Johnson, *Modern Times* (London, 1992); on guilt, p. 41; on 'political violence', pp. 687-9; and on moral relativism, pp. 5-11.

government of the United States nor the Christian church of the said nation have done what is requisite in the way of supplying an antidote' (Bahnsen, p. 8).

The theonomists also argue (*e.g.* on the basis of Exodus 22: 1, which states the rate at which thieves of sheep or oxen must make reparation to their victims) that criminals must attempt to make restitution. The theonomists have not been alone in recognising the failure to provide for restitution as a major gap in most modern judicial systems.[12]

5. *Celebration of wealth-creation*

Business and economics represents another field in which theonomy provides what is at least in part a useful corrective to certain strong and sometimes damaging influences. The theonomists rightly celebrate wealth-creation as something mandated by God and also as the means through which levels of poverty have been most often reduced. In taking this position they run counter to a very strong tradition in the church which has either downgraded wealth-creation completely or at least accorded it much less favour than the redistribution of wealth.

Such a position may have derived from the Platonism of the early church Fathers, or even residual Manicheism in the case of Augustine, with the consequent tendency to view the affairs of this material world as necessarily evil.[13] Any bias against business may have been consolidated during the predominance of the church in medieval Christendom. Since the pre-1600 period was characterised by very slow economic growth and a sort of crude centrally planned economy, there may have been inculcated in church leaderships habits of thought which are now highly inappropriate in an era of dynamic market economies.[14] There is a danger that the current teaching programmes of evangelical churches restrict their message on wealth and economics solely to the New Testament strictures against a materialist philosophy of life. This means that many Christians do not realise how much the Bible (especially the Old Testament) praises creativity, and socially responsible and just technological change and economic activity. In fact, even churches which give a very high position to the Bible are prone to absorb the ideas of the outside culture. This means that they sometimes confuse what was once a generally accepted political consensus (*e.g.* in the UK for the Attlee welfare state of 1945-51, or in the USA for the Great Society of the Kennedy-Johnson 1960s)

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12 Jubilee Policy Group, 'Planning for Survival: A Family Policy for the Twenty First Century', *Insight,* 5 (1994).

13 G. Dawson, 'God's Creation, Wealth Creation and Idle Redistributors', in D. Anderson (ed.), *The Kindness that Kills* (London, 1984), pp. 13-20.

14 J. Atherton, *Christianity and the Market* (London, 1993).

with a distinctively Christian position.[15] A further manifestation of the bias against wealth-creation has been displayed by attitudes to the so-called 'Third World'. Perhaps the most vocally expressed view in recent decades has been the argument that the poverty of the less developed countries can be mainly or even entirely attributed to the wealth of the developed world.[16]

Against all these views, and especially the last, the theonomists have provided a useful corrective. They have noted that poverty has sometimes been a consequence of the behaviour of the poor individual or, indeed, the poor nation, and especially of sinful behaviour. One does not have to accept all of the premises of the theonomists' arguments to agree that they may have generated *some* valid conclusions with respect to issues such as crime and punishment and riches and poverty. However, have they really worked out from the Bible a watertight system of Christian ethics? There follow some of the reasons why they have not yet done so.

Flaws in Theonomy

1.*Deceptive simplicity of theonomic ethics*

Perhaps the major reason for the growth of theonomy has been its appearance of attractive simplicity. The answer to the question how should we live, and to the question of how society should be governed, is in both cases the application of all the Old Testament laws. Unfortunately, this simplicity breaks down on closer inspection. Even Bahnsen admits that not every Mosaic law can be directly applied in the context of modern society.

Take, for example, Deuteronomy 22:8, 'When you build a new house make a parapet around your roof so that you may not bring the guilt of bloodshed on your house if someone falls from the roof'. Since American homes typically do not have flat roofs, and the Middle Eastern custom of going up onto the roof is not usually followed, Bahnsen concedes there may be little point in direct enforcement of this injunction. However, he argues that owners of private swimming pools (perhaps more common amongst US theonomists than UK Evangelicals!) must put a barrier around the edge. The point is not that Bahnsen is wrong to argue this but that he has done what non-theonomists who take the Bible seriously have been trying to do for many years, *i.e.* disentangle which parts of the

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[15] D. Anderson (ed.), *The Kindness that Kills*, B. Griffiths, *The Creation of Wealth* (London, 1984), p. 9, and Atherton , *op. cit.*

[16] See the arguments of two American Evangelicals, R. Sider, *Rich Christians in an Age of Hunger* (London, 1978), and J. Wallis, *The Call to Conversion* (Tring, 1981). Their claims are in some ways similar to those advanced by exponents of liberation theology; *e.g.* U. Duchrow, *Global Economy: A Confessional Issue for the Churches* (Geneva, 1987).

Bible are culturally specific from those which have a timeless significance.[17] Bahnsen further admits that application of the Old Testament to our own circumstances is 'not an easy or simple task' (Barker and Godfrey, p. 122). 'This very willingness to discuss flexible application of the case law actually detracts from the popular appeal of theonomy, which lies in its (apparently) straightforward biblicism.'[18]

2. *Problems with the interpretative framework*

The application of theonomic principles is therefore not as straightforward as it would at first seem. Moreover, difficulties attach to Bahnsen's general approach that all Old Testament laws should be regarded as binding on us unless specifically abrogated in the New Testament. Would the theonomists seriously argue that the prohibitions of Deuteronomy 22:9 (do not mix crops) and 22:11 (do not wear blends of wool and linen) still apply to the Christian (Barker and Godfrey, p. 104)? (It is only fair to add that the symmetrical approach, that only those laws specifically endorsed in the New Testament still stand today, is equally problematic; most evangelical Christians would condemn cross-dressing but the New Testament provides no direct support for the prohibition expressed in Deuteronomy 22:5; Barker and Godfrey, p.110. Leviticus 18:23 presents a similar problem.) Bahnsen does admit that the Old Testament ceremonial laws do not apply to the Christian (Bahnsen, pp. 208-16). In this he is agreeing with the traditional Reformed approach to the identification of those laws which have abiding validity whereby ceremonial laws are seen as being fulfilled by the coming of Christ; obedience to such laws in Old Testament times is in the Reformed view seen as a paradigm, *i.e.* something from which the Christian can read across lessons but which does not necessarily apply directly. Bahnsen would therefore presumably argue that Deuteronomy 22:9 and 22:11 represent ceremonial provisions, *i.e.* the separation of God's people from contaminating influences, but the New Testament does not spell this out (though certain provisions, *e.g.* dietary ones, are clearly abrogated; *cf.* Mark 7:14-19, Acts 10:9-15).

The legitimacy or otherwise of the theonomic social programme is ultimately a hermeneutical question. Partly this is the issue of assumed continued validity which has just been discussed. Bahnsen, and other theonomists, tend to argue that any non-ceremonial law continues to be valid. The traditional Reformed approach, whereby the law was divided into three categories, ceremonial, civil and moral, with only the third

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[17] *Cf.* J. Stott's argument that we can overcome the hermeneutical problem of our cultural imprisonment plus the cultural conditioning of the biblical authors through cultural transposition; *The Contemporary Christian* (Leicester, 1993), pp. 186-206.

[18] Duncan, *op. cit.* , p. 8.

having continued application to Christians, cut no ice with Bahnsen who condemned the critics of theonomy for multiplying distinctions not enumerated in God's Word. However, it is notable that Bahnsen himself employed a twofold classification of the law, into 'moral' and 'ceremonial'. (The civil category, having been collapsed into the moral, therefore continues to hold.) Since the Bible itself does not contain a formal designation of these laws, though particular ceremonial laws are identified, Bahnsen, just as much as his more traditional Reformed critics, had been engaging in speculation as to the purpose for which God gave particular laws.

Whether the theonomists are right to follow a hermeneutic of assumed continued validity, in which civil laws are subsumed under the continued moral laws, depends critically on the nature and extent of the difference between the old and new covenants. In the old covenant the institutional form of God's kingdom on earth was the nation-state of Israel. Under the new covenant the institutional form is the church which is multi-national and multi-ethnic. Given this shift a good and necessary deduction would be the expiration of the Old Testament judicial laws. 'The civil law of Israel (as the application of God's eternal standards to a particular situation in the history of his kingdom) has now (in the progress of his redemptive economy) passed away with the demise of that state (in its unique role as earthly representative of the rule of God) and the advent of a superior institutional expression of God's rule.'[19]

3. *Exact blueprint for criminal justice?*

When the interpretative or hermeneutical foundation is weak one should not be surprised that some of the applications are flawed, and so it is with theonomy. Notwithstanding the earlier praise for some aspects of their teaching on criminality and economics, the reservations against their conclusions may be very strong. For example, is it legitimate to deduce that, because Old Testament Israel appears to have had no prisons (or at least Moses made no provision for them in his instructions prior to the conquest of Canaan), there should be no prisons in the modern USA (Barker and Godfrey, p. 44)? The theonomists infer that God's intention is that state authorities should eliminate the criminal class (either through personal reform in the case of minor offenders or through the execution of the more serious; one consequence of the application of the Mosaic law would be, of course, that the range of capital crimes becomes very large). Many people, including many Christians, would be horrified by these suggestions.

Such a reaction does not deter the theonomists, who dismiss such opposition as the exaltation of liberal secularist arguments over and above God's standards (Bahnsen, pp. xxiv-xxvii). The key criticism of

[19] Duncan, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

theonomic penology is not that it is distasteful but that there may be a misunderstanding of the way justice was applied in Old Testament Israel. There are grounds for holding that the authorities in fact had some discretion in applying the punishment for each crime. This would parallel the interpretation that the *ius talionis* ('an eye for an eye' *etc.*) established maximum permissible levels of retribution rather than prescribed obligatory responses (Barker and Godfrey, p.52). Certainly, we have two recorded cases where the state authorities did not immediately deal with what were apparently capital crimes, blasphemy (Lev. 24:10-16) and sabbath-breaking (Num. 15:32-6). Execution occurred only after a specific divine intervention, a 'word from the Lord'. The theonomists would presumably respond that the law was eventually applied. What they could not deny is that King David, who as a murderer and adulterer was twice over deserving of capital punishment, was reprieved. In other words, even in Old Testament Israel there appears to have been some discretion in the application of punishment. None of this is to deny that modern state governments still have a God-given responsibility to administer justice (Rom. 13: 1-4) and that Christians can call upon such governments to be 'tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime', to use Tony Blair's phrase, perhaps even to the point of the application of capital punishment against murderers. (The instruction that murderers should be executed is provided in Genesis 9:6 and therefore, because it predates the giving of the Mosaic law, could be seen as part of the creation order, which has a timeless and universal significance.) The Christian is not however necessarily obliged to start closing prisons!

4. *The wealth of nations*

The flaw in theonomic economic thinking is that it fails to appreciate the extent to which the poor, either locally or globally, cannot always help themselves. Chilton[20] argues that the Third World is under the judgement of God. It is certainly true that Deuteronomy 28 warns that national poverty can follow national unrighteousness. No doubt sinfulness is a primary cause of Third World problems but Chilton fails to distinguish between the sin of ordinary Africans, Indians and Latin Americans, the sin of their governments, and indeed the sin of western governments and companies. If it is implied that it is exclusively the sin of the Third World poor which is to blame, then theonomy could encourage a rather

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[20] *Productive Christians in an Age of Guilt Manipulators* (Tyler TX, 1981) a clear attempt to rebut Sider, *op. cit.* See also G. North, 'Editor's Introduction', in G. Grant, *In the Shadow of Plenty* (Fort Worth, Nashville, 1986), p. xiii. North in fact argues that longstanding poverty is always a sign of sin and the consequent curse delivered by God: G. North, *Unconditional Surrender: God's Programme for Victory* (Tyler TX, 1981).

callous disengagement by rich Christians from concern for the conditions of the poor in the world.[21]

The rather simplistic monocausal theonomic explanation of global poverty may ultimately be as unhelpful as the similarly monocausal explanation, now apparently favoured in some mainstream evangelical churches and their development charities, which demonises the IMF, the World Bank, and western multinationals, and asserts (but does not prove) that developed world affluence causes underdeveloped world poverty.[22] In truth poverty and riches are sometimes the consequences of exploitation and structural sin but sometimes come about by variations in work effort, enterprise and efficiency in the use of resources. The Bible supports the possibility of both situations and therefore it is wrong to claim either explanation as the only permissible one for Christians to adopt. The question which interpretation of poverty is right in any given historical circumstance is therefore partly an empirical one, so that it would be helpful if Christians, both theonomic and non-theonomic, addressed themselves more carefully to the economic evidence before pronouncing on the causes of poverty.[23]

The theonomists not only argue that the poor of the Third World are largely responsible for their own fate but claim that the same is true for the poor of Chicago and New York, or indeed Glasgow and London. As a result they are reluctant to see either state welfare or private charity applied beyond the 'deserving poor'. In this respect one can see some

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[21] Given their general views about the nature of poverty and the appropriate sphere of government intervention in the economy it is not surprising that theonomists regard state-to-state international development aid as illegitimate. The theonomists would probably argue that they do have an adequate response to the plight of the Third World through a combination of mission activity (which would implant an ethos of the law-order of the Bible), private giving and free trade (W. Greene, 'Theocratic Norms in the Context of International Political Economy', *Paper Presented to the Southern Political Science Association* (Atlanta, Nov. 3-5, 1994).

[22] See Christian Aid, '*Who Runs the World?*', (July 1994). And for an evaluation of this point of view Atherton, *op. cit.*, p. 16, and H. McRae, 'A Bumpy Road from Bretton Woods', in *The Independent*, July 21, 1994.

[23] For examples of Christians who believe that the rich countries cause the poverty of the Third World see Sider, *op. cit.*, Wallis, *op. cit.*, and Duchrow, *op. cit.* B. Griffiths, *Morality and the Market Place* (London 1982), pp. 125-55, provides a vigorous rebuttal of their views. For opposing sides of the debate in secular terms see Oxfam, *Africa Make or Break* (Oxford, 1993), and World Bank, *From Stagnation to Recovery* (Washington DC, 1993).

similarity between theonomic social policy and the new right neo-conservatism which came into vogue in the 1980s.[24] However, it is worth noting that the theonomists have adopted a position on economic policy which would make even Mrs Thatcher and Mr Reagan, or Michael Portillo and Newt Gingrich or even Adam Smith and Milton Friedman, look socialist! For the theonomists the modern state should undertake no actions other than those directly prescribed in the Old Testament and New Testament and this leaves little scope, in their view, for anything beyond the provision of law and order and defence forces.

Once again, the theonomists appear to have no difficulty about being out on a limb. All their opponents, they argue, have fallen prey to humanistic, collectivist fallacies. Presumably they think that these fallacies have even infected American Republicans and British Conservatives, which explains why even right-wing governments have been unable to reduce the state's share in national income. The more fundamental issue than political isolation of the theonomists is whether they are right to use the Bible in the way they do, and more particularly whether modern governments should restrict their activities to only those things which have direct biblical precedents. Application of that principle would have halted Wilberforce's campaign to abolish slavery throughout the British Empire. In fact there may be some biblical support for moving beyond the minimum or *laissez faire* state; for example, in Joseph's anti-famine measures.[25] In addition to empirical criticism of their

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[24] For a Christian (though non-theonomic) representative of the new right see M. Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (London, 1988). One summary of theonomic economics notes the following elements: no state intervention in the market economy, no state provision of educational and health services, and no state monopoly in the issue of money (S.C. Perks, 'The Reconstructionist View of Economics', *Chalcedon Report* (1996), pp. 22-4). Perks also notes the striking similarities to the conservative school of neo-Austrian economics exemplified by Ludwig von Mises and Friedrich von Hayek.

[25] North. *op.cit.* (1991), pp. 274-5, has felt the need to tackle the example posed by Joseph's Egyptian administration. Joseph, he argues, cannot be used as a biblical justification for the activities of any modern central planner or bureaucrat because Joseph, uniquely, had the insight of a direct revelation from God and was righteously tyrannising over pagans. This was one case where the forecasts about the state of the macroeconomy did prove to be right! It is true that Joseph cannot provide an exact blueprint for modern governments but it is still significant that God would hardly have ordered Joseph to intervene in the economic management of society if this was *per se* sinful (Barker and Godfrey, p. 283).

argument that the poor are always responsible for their fate (the proportion of the USA poor who are able-bodied single males is quite low; Barker and Godfrey, p. 267), a more fundamental failing in the theonomists' position is that it may spring from an inadequate appreciation of the quality of God's grace (Barker and Godfrey, p. 274). His grace is, after all, the presentation of a priceless gift to the entirely undeserving. So perhaps individual Christians, and even the state social security system, should sometimes extend charity even to those who appear to have brought hardship upon themselves. (Acceptance of this principle is not to deny the inevitability of budget constraints at either personal or national level which limit the amount of help which can be given.)

5. *Calvin was no theonomist*

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the controversy which therefore attaches to aspects of applied theonomy, some theonomists, though not all,[26] have been anxious to establish an impressive pedigree for their school. Calvin, the Westminster Confession of Faith and the New England Puritans have all been hailed as proto-theonomists. It is true that sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformed thinkers appear to have taken a more robust position than their twentieth-century theological descendants on the possibility of using state power to enforce social righteousness (including the use of capital punishment against a wider range of crimes).[27] However, this similarity to theonomy is more superficial than substantial, given that the Reformers and Puritans arrived at their position using quite a different approach than the direct and exhaustive application of Old Testament law. For example, Calvin certainly started from God's moral law, which for him was summarised in the Ten Commandments, but then allowed natural law and circumstances to influence any detailed application to, say, Geneva in the 1550s (Barker and Godfrey, p. 302). For example, Calvin judged that the prohibition on interest-bearing loans in Deuteronomy 23 and Leviticus

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[26] Rushdoony, for example, was prepared to criticise what he viewed as incorrect biblical interpretation on the part of Calvin. On those occasions when Calvin was judged to have fallen under the influence of 'classical humanism', Rushdoony accused him of producing 'heretical nonsense' (*op. cit.*, p. 9). Some theonomists would warn against the leaven of natural law thinking in Calvin - see particularly North, *op. cit.* (1991) p. 240.

[27] 'Theonomy Again', *Free Church Monthly Record*, (December, 1992), p. 273, where Knox and Calvin are quoted as apparently favouring the stoning of adulterers. As to the execution of rebellious youths, Luther is recorded as writing 'would that we observed this law too'.

25 was primarily an anti-poverty measure designed to prevent the entrenchment of absolute poverty and debt slavery in what was a mainly agricultural society. Since he saw this intention of the law, though not its outward form, as having an abiding significance, he did not feel it should prevent interest on loans made to businesses (Barker and Godfrey, p. 307). Of course, Calvin may have made a misjudgement in his re-application of this law to modern industrial society. The Jubilee Centre[28] has argued that the development of a financial system based on interest-bearing debt has in many ways been socially harmful, but the important point in this context is that neither Calvin, nor for that matter the Jubilee Centre, is really theonomist.

Similarly, it is very doubtful that the Westminster Confession (1647) is a thorough-going theonomic charter. In fact it states that the various laws associated with the social and political order of Old Testament Israel expired with the end of that state (19:4). These laws should be applied in modern societies only to the extent that 'the general equity thereof' makes appropriate. This suggests a method very similar to that adopted by Calvin (or indeed Bahnsen when he considered the applicability of parapets). The Westminster divines were in fact working within a situation of extreme political flux. The Civil War was still in progress and within six years Parliament would execute the king and Britain would become a republic. Issues of church-state relations, antinomianism, liberty of conscience and threats of anarchy dominated debate. Given this background, if the Westminster divines had been theonomists, they would surely have made this crystal clear in their final document (Barker and Godfrey, p. 326). In fact, although they represented a range of views, with some probably willing to countenance specific theonomic applications though not the fundamental theonomic interpretation of the law, they were not theonomists. Even a rigorist like Rutherford did not wish the Mosaic penalties to be applied against sabbath-breakers (Barker and Godfrey, p. 341).

So it seems that Reformed theologians and politicians in 1640s England refused to take the opportunity of very unusual constitutional conditions to impose a theonomic state. It is perhaps even more notable that their Puritan counterparts in New England at about the same time did *not* introduce theonomy into the New World (Barker and Godfrey, pp. 351-84). John Cotton's *An Abstract of the Laws of New England* should not be regarded as representative of New England Puritanism and neither did his views gain official standing (Barker and Godfrey, p. 377). In any case, contrary to the claims of Bahnsen (pp. 549-69), Cotton may not have been an early theonomist (Barker and Godfrey, p. 339, and see also Bahnsen, pp. 556-7). Notwithstanding the fact that they could introduce

[28] M. Schluter and R. Clements, *Reactivating the Extended Family* (Cambridge, 1986).

laws starting from scratch and had deduced the idea that something comparable to God's national covenant with Old Testament Israel was still possible for a nation state in the Christian era, the New England Puritans do not seem to have been theonomists and the full range of Old Testament death penalties was not applied.

6. *The sociology of theonomy*

If theonomy does not come out of the stable of mainstream Reformed thought, where then does this dark horse come from? Barker and Godfrey suggest that in some ways theonomy is peculiarly rooted in the sociology of the late-twentieth-century USA (p. 246). The apparent simplicity of theonomic ethics, with the implication that social order and prosperity can be regained through obedience to those laws, may appear very attractive to middle Americans and US Evangelicals and fundamentalists (there is a lot of overlap between the sociological and religious categories) who have been disoriented by the loss of Protestant political and cultural ascendancy in the USA, the development of racial pluralism and the relative economic decline of America, which over two decades has squeezed middle-class and blue-collar living standards. In other words, theonomy appears an attractive exit for those who find that the American dream may have become a dead end. Of course, we should beware of falling into the trap of sociological reductionism. Ultimately theonomy should stand or fall according to the merits of its biblical interpretation. Nevertheless, some of the sociological insights have validity. After all, why did we have to wait until twentieth-century America for theonomy to appear? Why was it absent in other places and times where Reformed or evangelical Christianity was strong (seventeenth-century Scotland or the Netherlands, nineteenth-century England or even, dare one say it, twentieth-century Northern Ireland)?[29]

[29] The lack of any significant theonomy movement in Northern Ireland at present is in some ways surprising, given the presence of characteristics which might assist the development of such thinking: cultural openness to the South and Middle America of the USA, a strong Calvinist tradition, a preference amongst many Northern Ireland Protestants for very literalistic readings of the Bible, the history of use of state power to encourage particular religious adherences, weak development of socialist political parties, the Troubles after 1969 and hence the perceived need for a tough law and order policy, a receptiveness amongst many Protestants to ideas of a national covenant and 'a chosen people'. My guess is that some Northern Ireland Protestants (maybe part of the rural or fundamentalist section of Democratic Unionist Party support) are partial theonomists without realising it. Given all of this,

7. *Theonomist reluctance to accept that believers may have to suffer*

Underlying much of the theonomic approach may be a pretty thin view of suffering. In the theonomic scheme of things, the righteous will be healthy and wealthy but the wicked the reverse (this is how they read, for example, Psalm 37:25). Could it be that theonomists are making a similar mistake to that of an unbalanced charismaticism in assuming that believers are guaranteed a royal road to prosperity and healing? The theonomist may have adopted something akin to the 'Name it, claim it' philosophy of some charismatics and expanded it to the national level. In other words, theonomy is all about healing the USA and then the world. Obedience at the national level is expected to prompt such divine blessing that political and economic decline will be reversed. Bahnsen is explicit about this; obedience to theonomy brings the national blessings described in Deuteronomy 28 but disobedience will bring the curses described in the same chapter.[30] The weakness in this line of argument is the same as that underlying health-and-wealth theology. God may indeed choose to bless the obedient with physical strength and material riches (there is biblical precedent for this). Equally, and the Bible also provides instances of this (*e.g.* Job and Jeremiah), he may decide that the righteous remain less well off in human terms than their unrighteous counterparts. The same could also be true at the level of nations. The theonomists tend to have post-millennialist expectations of a future golden age coinciding with the implementation of their programme. In fact, the downside of the theonomist activism and optimism noted earlier is that it seems to spring in large part from a sometimes triumphalistic post-millennialism (Barker

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consideration of theonomy may be of particular relevance in Northern Ireland.

[30] Bahnsen, p. ix. Similarly North, *op. cit.* (1991), vigorously defends the thesis that God brings predictable positive and negative sanctions in new covenant history. To give North due credit, he has been able to point out that it was not always the case that amillennialism was as prevalent in mainstream Reformed thinking as has been the case since, say, the 1930s. Moreover, he could be right that amillennialism often degenerates into 'pessi-millennialism' and hence that postmillennialism is more likely to catch and hold the young or keen or activist. However, considerations of expediency or pragmatism do not clinch his case. North may be right that the graph line of Christendom's progress has been upwards since the resurrection and ascension, but, as a trained economic historian, he should be open to the possibility of cylical fluctuations around that trend. It is notable that North asserts that it is long-term poverty or prosperity which is the outcome of God's curse or blessing. Sometimes the deeds done by one generation are punished or rewarded only in the next (or even later).

and Godfrey, pp. 197-224). The danger of this outlook is that they disparage the present church. In contrast the New Testament presents the paradox that although the church in the interim between Christ's first and second comings is in fact suffering (1 Cor. 4:10-13, Phil. 3:10), it is also at the same time triumphant (Barker and Godfrey, p.216).

Conclusions

I have argued that theonomy, like the curate's egg, is good in parts. Even if the good is outweighed by a variety of flaws, there is still the possibility that the theonomy movement could bring net benefits to the rest of the church by forcing the wider evangelical and Reformed community to come to grips with what obedience to God's law means today.

At their most expansive the theonomists claim to have found the solution to all problems of identifying a biblically based personal and social ethic. They go so far as to argue that any alternative to the application of the Old Testament laws in exhaustive detail exalts human autonomy and hence sinfulness. In other words, it is either theonomy or autonomy; there is no other choice.[31] In practice, however, as I have argued, the theonomic claim of the 'continuing validity of the Mosaic law in exhaustive detail' is not very helpful, since theonomists, or at least the wiser amongst them, do not really mean what those words seem to mean. Bahnsen, for example, concedes that on occasions the laws cannot be applied directly to the modern world. Thought is required to provide the necessary cultural contextualisation. Once Bahnsen has admitted this, it must be wondered whether the gap in principle relative to the traditional Reformed approach to the Old Testament laws is all that large. After all, the Westminster Confession of Faith allowed for the application of Old Testament laws to the extent that their 'general equity' demanded. The old Reformed tripartite division of the law between the moral (of eternal validity), the ceremonial (abrogated because fulfilled in Christ) and the civil (applying specifically to Israel, though it may be possible to draw lessons for modern societies), may still be valid.[32]

The virtue of theonomy has been to remind us of the wealth of detailed

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[31] Bahnsen, p. 307. For theonomy to prevail would require an unmanageable crisis of the present world system, which theonomists believe likely, and a Christian revival on a heretofore unseen scale, which theonomists believe is inevitable (Greene, *op. cit.*).

[32] Though as Schluter and Clements, *op. cit.*, argue, it may be a mistake to assume that any given law can be allocated to just one category. Instead a single law could combine moral, ceremonial and civil aspects.

information provided in the Mosaic law. This is case law[33] whereas the Ten Commandments set out the general principles of God's moral law. In the case law we are confronted with God's priorities - the God who hates, amongst other things, blasphemy, sexual perversion and commercial dishonesty - and these serve as a valuable antidote against being conditioned by the standards of secular humanism and indeed the whole spirit of autonomy and antinomianism which the theonomists see as so prevalent in modern thought and practice (Bahnsen, pp. 279-314).

Theonomy also forces us all to think more about the role of the state as an enforcer of civil or social righteousness (distinguished from the personal righteousness which is a consequence of salvation). The theonomists accord a very heavy responsibility to government in enforcing an outward obedience to God's laws. The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Reformers and Puritans also gave a wide role to the state in upholding morality.[34] In contrast twentieth-century Evangelicals have often been reluctant to ascribe such roles to government. This switch of position might be seen as justifiable adaptation to changed circumstances (*e.g.* the development of democracy). It might also be defended in principle, in terms of the victory of the philosophy of a 'free church in a free state' which was strongly represented within nineteenth-century Dutch and American Calvinism, which saw the state as a neutral holding the ring for plurality of Christian confessions and other faiths (for support of this view, see Barker and Godfrey, pp. 225-42).[35]

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[33] See how Paul uses, and yet also extends, the case law of Deut. 22:10 to support the principle provided in 2 Cor. 6:14.

[34] Westminster Confession of Faith 23:2-3, though these sections should be interpreted in the light of 19:4. In other words, the broad thrust of the Confession is not theonomic (Godfrey and Barker, pp. 326-7).

[35] The theonomy movement may have been of value as a challenge to the traditional post-1788 view which seems to have been prevalent in mainstream US Protestant churches, *i.e.* of the state as a neutral umpire holding the ring in a situation of religious pluralism. The theonomists have questioned whether such neutrality is sustainable in practice and even desirable in principle. However, this paper has not considered the church-state question and whether theonomists themselves blur the distinction between church and state. Although some theonomists have been anxious to deny this (*e.g.* Bahnsen, *No Other Standard* (Tyler TX, 1991), pp. 171-88), would theonomy in practice lead to the persecution of non-believers?

However, it must be wondered whether the theonomists might be right in arguing that even many evangelical Christians now lack either the moral courage or the intellectual means to argue for the more widespread application of God's standards to the wider society outside of the church.