

POLITICS AND THEOLOGY IN THE THOUGHT OF RICHARD BAXTER

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Richard Baxter (1615-1691) lived at a time which was conspicuous for its changes. His life spanned that period in which the principles and theories of social and political, as well as ecclesiastical, relations that were to prevail in the English-speaking world were formulated. Among his more famous contemporaries were William Laud, Oliver Cromwell, Thomas Hobbes, John Milton, John Lilburne and John Locke. Out of this group he emerged as perhaps the most articulate champion of conservative Puritanism at the time when the movement flourished and then began to disintegrate as a cohesive force. His pastoral ideals and achievements (notwithstanding many interruptions), his sense of mission as an advocate for Christian unity, and his moving piety strike the modern Christian with a strange contemporaneity.

Just as Locke and Newton achieved immense popularity because they ably enunciated statements of new insights and discoveries, while holding fast to that part of the old which not many men could then have discarded, so Baxter had earlier and in a more conservative way appealed to Christians who wanted the traditional faith with such adjustments to contemporary thought as every sensible man had then to make.

Baxter lived in an age prior to the modern compartmentalization of religion and politics. So intricately interwoven were these spheres that even Hobbes could not avoid discussing both at great length. Essentially, Baxter believed in the concept of the Christian state, but he opposed the scholastic view of the hierarchical, organic, and teleological structure. He defended the position that political government was necessarily rooted in the divine constitution of the world.

The social "creatureliness" of man, says Baxter, presupposes that the Creator wanted him to live in a society under the control of government. Man's rationality and ultimate responsibility to God strongly argue in favor of the theory that government (and that includes ecclesiastical government) by duly constituted law is not only desirable but is also consistent with man's nature.

Thus Baxter's respect for law and authority was rooted in his theological understanding and exposition of the absolute sovereignty of God, of the nature of man, and of the hierarchical structure of society. He therefore saw the relationship of political theory and practice to divinity as being one of mutual dependence.

The intention of the present essay is to show how Baxter's afore-mentioned concepts regarding church and state affected him as a pastor, as a scholar, as a consistent supporter of monarchy, and yet as a nonconformist. I will also draw attention to his continuing significance for our age, especially at a time when contemporary theologians are addressing themselves to the subject of political theology and its impact on the development of Western religious thought.

1. *The Theological Foundation of Baxter's Political Philosophy: Biblical and Medieval Background*

The foundation of Baxter's political philosophy was his theology. He states this as follows:

He that understandeth not the divine *dominium et imperium*, as found in Creation and re-founded in Redemption and man's subjection to his absolute Lord, and the universal laws can never have any true understanding of the polity of laws of any Kingdom in particular.¹

Central to all of Baxter's teachings, theological and political alike, was the conviction that Christianity was a way of life and

¹ Richard Baxter, *Christian Directory* (1673), 4:104. Hereafter cited as *CD*.

not merely an ideology. He speaks of it as a religion, meaning by this that it is the integrating portion of the whole of life. Upon this premise, Baxter proceeds to build his system of political theory. He views the entire spectrum of theological knowledge from the perspective of both the theoretician and the practitioner, and carries the point further by affirming that the theoretical arises out of the practical.

Precisely for this reason, Baxter places strong emphasis on the biblical and medieval background, although from the latter there are some important differences which must be noted. However, this background is essential for an understanding of Baxter's principles of Christian practice, which includes politics.

The *modus operandi* of Baxter's world-view is the whole of biblical revelation. In several places in his writings he refers to the Bible as his statute-book. From this source he develops his conceptions of the sovereignty of God, of God's creative authority and rule by law, of the human instruments as ministers of God, and of a people whose primary purpose for existence is to glorify God in the purity of their religion and in the justice of their social relationships. These conceptions reflect the extent to which Baxter was influenced by the theocratic ideal of the OT.

Baxter felt that although the metaphorical language which is largely used in the OT to speak of the relationship of God to man (including political relationship) may make it appear that in OT times there was a radical separation of religion and politics, such a separation was inconceivable from the perspective of the OT itself. Rather, the OT's demand is precisely a recognition of the total sovereignty of God which extends to the whole of life.

The problem of the relation of the state to divine government as depicted in the NT, Baxter evidently saw as more complex. The complexity lies in a comparison of the teachings of Jesus with the OT. To Baxter, the words of Jesus seemed to create a more indirect relationship between human government and God's rule. For him, the *locus classicus* of this tension of relationship in the NT is revealed in the command in Rom 13 to be subject

to the civil powers for conscience's sake since in ultimate terms the civil rulers exercise jurisdiction because of God's supreme power; but on the other hand, the Roman state was personified as the beast in Rev 13.

Later I will clarify how Baxter dealt with this problem, but first our attention must be directed to the medieval period. During that period the tension just referred to was largely overcome. For although Augustine continued the tension in his dualism between the *civita Dei* and the *civitas terrena*, he put "beyond question for centuries . . . the conception that under the new dispensation, the state must be a Christian state, serving a community which is one by virtue of a common Christian faith, ministering to a life in which spiritual interests admittedly stand above all other interests and contributing to human salvation by preserving the purity of the faith."²

It is particularly in scholastic political and theological thought that the idea of the Christian state—*respublica christiana*—is most fully developed. The Christian theologians and philosophers of that period articulated with exceeding firmness their acceptance of the fact that God is man's true ruler and sovereign. Following from this they proceeded to develop the further theory that the constitutive principle of the cosmos is the "divinely-willed Harmony of the universe."³ "It is a system of thought which culminated in the ideas of a community which God Himself had constituted and which comprised all mankind."⁴

The background for the formation of the concept of the world as divinely ordered cosmos is traceable to both Greek and Christian ideas. As is well known, medieval political theory was strongly influenced by this synthesis of Greek thought and the Bible.

² George H. Sabine, *A History of Political Theory*, 3rd ed. (New York, 1962), p. 191.

³ Otto Gieke, *Political Theories of the Middle Ages*, trans. with an introd by Frederick W. Maitland (Cambridge, Engl., 1900), p. xvii.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

In the development of this whole system of beliefs there is a noticeable emphasis on the rational and teleological view of the constitution of reality. God is reckoned as the divine *Logos*, or "Reason," whose sovereignty pervades through a hierarchical arrangement of reality in which reason is the means of universal harmony. Not only is God the divine arranger of the universe, but he is also absolute being and timeless perfection and the final good of man. The proper function of all government, political and ecclesiastical alike, is to lead man towards the fulfillment of the good and so to an experience of genuine happiness.

Baxter's political philosophy was in effect an attempt to restate in seventeenth-century Protestant England the basic premise of the medieval ideal, that is, the world as a divinely constituted monarchy. He used models that were characteristic of medieval times: law, conscience, and the divine orders or powers of the *imperium* and the *sacerdotum*. With these he expressed his philosophy of the administration of God's government.

But because Baxter's seventeenth-century Protestant understanding of God and of God's relationship to man differed in some important respects from the medieval conceptions, his explication of law, conscience, and the powers also differed. We can speak of his views as "Reformed Medievalism." It should be further noted that though strong teleological and rationalistic elements can be traced in Baxter's thought, yet his concept of man's relationship to God was notably deontological rather than teleological.

The fundamental point that emerges from all this is that in Baxter's thought the question of sovereignty is a key doctrine—one that is carefully worked out in his effort to combine theology and political theory.

2. *God's Sovereignty a Key Concept in Baxter's Thought*

In his doctrine of Church and State, Baxter takes as his point of departure the concept of the *Corpus Christianum* rather than the concept of the duality of Church and State. His Protestantism,

and in a narrower sense his Puritanism, had taught him that God can be experienced first as "will," and not as "reason" or perfection of being. He believed that experience itself was relatively more immediate than the hierarchically and sacramentally mediated relationship to God which was characteristic of medieval Christianity.

Another point must also be noted regarding Baxter's hermeneutical structure: the effect on it of the Puritans' conception of Covenant as the ordering principle of the Puritans' whole world. One recent writer has noted:

The covenant was not for the Puritans, one idea or concept among others. It was the fundamental motif running throughout the whole of their life to shape their understanding and their feeling for existence. It pervaded and held together their views of religion, politics and ethics; it shaped their whole approach to marriage, church and society.⁵

While it is indisputable that Baxter in some of the essentials of his political philosophy reflected the medieval ideals, the dominant interpretative pattern of his thought was covenantal, rather than the hierarchical, organic and teleological pattern of medieval thought. In his method of interpreting law, conscience, and the sovereignty of God in the light of the covenant, he opposed such thinkers as Hobbes, who championed the mechanical pattern of interpreting nature and political government. According to the covenantal philosophy of history, the history of man's relationship to God reveals God's successive covenants with man by which God makes known on what conditions He would govern man.⁶ The biblical record is central in this revelation.

In harmony with this outlook, Baxter vigorously maintained that God's word determines man's duty, and that man must firmly accept that word although he may not always see the reason or wisdom behind doing so. This particular emphasis

⁵ Gordon Harland, "American Protestantism: Its Genius and Its Problems," *The Drew Gateway* 34 (Winter 1964): 71-72.

⁶ Baxter, *The Divine Appointment of the Lord's Day Proved*; in Orme, *Practical Works*, 23 vols. (1830), 13:484. Hereafter cited as *Works*.

brings to attention Baxter's voluntarism. In fact, Baxter's theological voluntarism was reinforced by contemporary political thought. As J. N. Figgis remarks, in the context of the times the central political questions were put in terms of right. Authority was established on the concept of right, and the primary political question was: Who has supreme right or authority to rule; that is sovereignty?⁷

Baxter, in all his exposition on political matters, never failed to combine politics with theology in order to bring out as clearly and forcefully as possible the fundamental question of God's sovereignty. He consistently maintained that God's rule is universal in its scope and nature.⁸

Thus, according to Baxter, it is always God's right to rule and man's duty to obey. Baxter never weakened his position on this point. And following from this firm conviction are two vital considerations. The first relates to Baxter's attempt to root political government in divine government. The second concerns his doctrine of law. The two are, in fact, closely interrelated.

Although we cannot deal here in any detail with Baxter's exposition of Law, a summary will be helpful. In a larger context, the whole biblical revelation, for Baxter, was included in the law by which God governs the world. "Law," he declares, "is a signification of the Ruler's will constituting the subjects Due."⁹ He also speaks of law as "the governing Will of a Rector signified, constituting or confirming Right (or Dueness) from and to the subjects," and as a "sign or signification of the reason and will of the rector as such to his subjects as such, instituting or antecedently determining what shall be due from them, and to them."¹⁰ Moreover, obligation which rests upon the authority

⁷ J. N. Figgis, *The Divine Right of Kings*, pp. 177ff.

⁸ Cf. James I. Packer, *The Redemption and Restoration of Man in the Thought of Richard Baxter* (D. Phil. dissertation; Oxford University, 1954), p. 332.

⁹ Baxter, *A Holy Commonwealth* (London, 1659), p. 320. Hereafter cited as *HC*.

¹⁰ Baxter, *Catholick Theologie* (London, 1675), p. 52. Hereafter cited as *CT*.

of a right to command is the essence of morality and law. Not the appropriateness of an act to an end, but obedience to an obligation, is the norm of action (although, as we have already mentioned, the teleological framework is often present in Baxter's thought). Such obedience must reflect God's glory and graciousness. Baxter asserts:

All that God commandeth us to do is both a duty and a means; it is called a duty in relation to God the efficient Law-giver, first; and it is a means next in relation to God the End, whose work is done, and whose will is pleased by it. And we must always respect it in both these notions inseparably.¹¹

God is therefore the Great *All* in human affairs, both spiritual and temporal. This fact must evoke from the creature respect and obedience, love and reverence; for all these are involved in the notion of God as both Beginning and End.

Thus, Baxter laid the foundation of his political philosophy by affirming that all right to govern, and therefore all law, is necessarily derived from and serves God's sovereignty. Moreover, Baxter felt that man is required to accept and obey God's law implicitly. At times, such obedience may seem to defy all the canons of logic and rationality, but this is precisely the reason why man must obey.

It is certainly not to be assumed, however, that Baxter is antirational. He has, in fact, given a high place to reason, but it is regenerate reason. When the law addresses man, it first addresses him as fallen man, removes the mask, and exposes his ignorance. However, there is another vital function of the law: It rehabilitates man, and in this process produces true rationality. Man is given back his dignity, and a sense of worth. He now possesses a vision which helps him to see God's glory, and enables him to become a rational being who can rule by moral means. Through this rational process God communicates and

¹¹ *CD*, 5:306. This insistence on combination and inseparability is peculiarly characteristic of Baxter. See G. F. Nuttall, *Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience* (London, 1946), end of chap. 2.

seeks to govern. Man's mind thus becomes the ground through which God's will can be known, and man can find good reasons for his actions.

Only in this light can Baxter's statement about God's authority be fully understood. To Baxter, no human authority is above God's, nor can bind us against him; but all authority is received from him, and is subordinate to him.¹²

3. *God's Sovereignty and the Nature of Man and Society*

Whenever Baxter discussed politics systematically, he provided clear evidence that his *a priori* point of departure is the absolute sovereignty of God.¹³ His system consisted of at least three basic points: (1) God is Creator, and therefore has absolute dominion or ownership; (2) God alone has a moral right to govern man because he alone is qualified by his fullness of wisdom, goodness, and power to fulfill such a task; and (3) God has the highest right to govern man because he is man's greatest benefactor. In particular, God holds this right over man through the redemption of Christ.

Correspondingly, there is also a threefold conception in Baxter's exposition of man's relationship to God: Man stands related to God as (1) God's own possession, (2) God's subject (as to obligation), and (3) God's beneficiary.¹⁴

Having described the ways in which God and man are related, Baxter concludes that God has not only the *jus imperii* but also the *jus domini*; that is, the world under God is not only a monarchy, but an absolute monarchy. This is how Baxter expresses it: "The World then is a Kingdom where God is the King, and the form of Government is *Monarchia absoluta ex pleno Dominio jure creationis*; an absolute Monarchy from or with a plenary

¹² Baxter, *Life of Faith* (undated), p. 388.

¹³ R. B. Schlatter, *Richard Baxter and Puritan Politics* (New Brunswick, N. J., 1957), p. 61. Here the author quotes from a letter written by Baxter to John Swinfen. The original letter is among Baxter's correspondence in Dr. Williams Library.

¹⁴ *HC*, p. 17.

Dominion or propriety (property) of persons and things, by Title of Creation."¹⁵

At this point we must draw attention to what is perhaps one of the most vexing problems Baxter encountered in the development of his political philosophy, and specifically, in terms of God's sovereignty. We may put it in the form of a question: How does God exercise his sovereignty over man?

As Baxter wrestled with this question, one central concern dominated his thought, namely, the vindication of God's moral government. For unless this vindication could be assumed, both God and man would be debased and all morality undermined.

Baxter here again reverts to his argument of an orderly universe as necessarily requiring a good and omnipotent God. But inasmuch as man is not omnipotent, how, then, does he count in this grand plan? Baxter deals with this question by declaring that man is a rational free agent, and goes on to argue that God governs him as such. Again the pattern of interpretation is the Puritan covenant.¹⁶

A second approach which Baxter chose in dealing with this problem is what may be termed his theory of mediate government. He calls attention to the fact that God could rule the world directly so that there is really no necessity for mediate government, but that in fact he elected to rule mediately—that is, to use some parts of the creation to rule other parts. To say this, Baxter argues, is to agree that God had created a natural inequality in the cosmos, a hierarchy of administration, in which some parts mediate his government over other parts. Out of this concept arises, at least in part, Baxter's principle that man himself should be governed. Man is a microcosm, and the relationship of his faculties illustrates the universal principle of mediate ordered government.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

¹⁷ Packer, *Redemption and Restoration*, p. 6, notes that Baxter showed a very modern awareness of the pitfalls attendant upon all attempts to

However, Baxter was moved to issue the following caveat: "Take heed of those mistakes which confound sovereignty with subjection, and which delude the people with a conceit, that they are the original of power, and may intrust it as they please."¹⁸ Baxter was reacting to three contemporary theories that threatened to deny God's moral government: the mechanical theory, absolutism, and antinomianism. Against each Baxter argued that the only form of government appropriate to man as a rational, free, and therefore moral agent, is moral government by law.

Baxter was willing to grant that God exercises his sovereignty over the world and man by a determining necessity, but he shied away from any suggestion that tends to impute the same necessity to man. Man is a free rational creature, he argues; therefore God's government of him does not infallibly determine, and objects necessitate the will:

Because we know there is a true contingency in the world . . . we know there is a Will in man that is a self-determining Principle, and naturally free, and that this is part of the Natural Excellency of man, that is called God's Image, and maketh him capable of moral proper Government, which Brutes are not.¹⁹

Baxter criticized those who maintained an opposite view and cast doubt upon God's right to govern. Moreover, to his mind, they undermined all morality by making God the author of sin and man not responsible because he is not free. He states:

Man must be ruled by his Rector's Will, not merely as operating physically by a secret influx, but as knowing. And we cannot know God's Will immediately. . . . Only by signs can we know God's Will concerning our duty; and those signs are laws.²⁰

Here again can be detected the underlying theological concept implicit in Baxter's argument.

abstract universals from particulars and to communicate the results in words. Therefore it is with some care that he draws his illustrations from the universals and the particulars.

¹⁸ *CD*, 4:23. See also *Works*, vol. 6.

¹⁹ *HC*, p. 22.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

Man, because of his social creatureliness, needs and desires to be governed, according to Baxter, who states:

The intellect in man is made to guide and the will to command, and all the inferior faculties to obey: showing us that in societies the wise should guide, the good should command, and the strong and all the rest should execute and obey. An ungoverned man is a mad man or a bad man.²¹

The same argument holds in an ungoverned society. This type of society is incongruous with God's universal mediate ordered government of the world. "The great disparity that is among all creatures (including the angels that did not sin) in the frame of Nature" Baxter declares, "intimateth the beauty of Orderly Political disparity."²²

In summary, since man is rational, moral, and ultimately responsible to God, government by law is the only government consistent with man's nature.

²¹ Ibid., p. 55.

²² Ibid.

(To be continued)