

Response to Dr. Richard Land – “Christians, Public Policy, and Church and State Separation”
Rick Elgendy
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Thanks to David Newheiser, and thanks to Dr. Land: your work merits trust in your good will and sets an example for all of us in taking a cool-headed approach to heated issues.

As you have said, what is at issue for you and me, and many others here, is negotiating the dual citizenships we have as both American citizens and citizens in the Kingdom of God (or whatever your preferred religious idiom). Given that those citizenships are neither simply competitive – one demanding a categorical withdrawal from or resistance of the other – nor simply mutually amenable – with neither inflecting or challenging the way in which the other is practiced – we find ourselves in a position of negotiating the two, with their respective vocabularies and grammars.

If I can continue with the language metaphor for how we assemble and understand our convictions, your work gives me the impression that you think that Christian faith and life – at least, of your favored Baptist variety – and American democratic participation are like two romance languages: possessing similar origins in important respects, requiring translation but frequently exhibiting an intuitive understanding of each other, and so on. So, for example, the concept of “Church/State Separation”, a concept from the American legal tradition, doesn’t seem in need of much “translating” effort to be brought into your account of Christian political activity, as is clear when you say that “it is possible to affirm and practice belief in God while simultaneously practicing a rigorous separation of church and state” (63) and that “[t]he American model for religious freedom is the triumph of the Baptist concept of a church-state relationship” (122).¹ And, as your treatment of the topic progresses, you discuss how Christians should go about participating in cultural contest for society’s goods: through democratic process and the rule of law, with respect

¹ These quotations are drawn from the chapters of *The Divided States of America* distributed before the lecture.

for individual conscience, preferring to create opt-in rather than opt-out systems of expression of belief in public, etc.

One of the influences on me is Mennonite social ethicist John Howard Yoder, whose free-church convictions lead him to many conclusions similar to yours. I mention Yoder here because I wonder if, drawing inspiration from his work, we could make a case that people like you would find compelling, given your several shared basic attitudes, that a crucially important category for navigating these two citizenships is the category of *civil religion*: the sense in which the nation itself takes on a religious character, with the attendant rituals, beliefs, canon of characters, dispositions, and so on. On such a view there is no difference *in kind* between, say, the Hebrew Bible's detailed prescriptions of the construction and treatment of the Ark of the Covenant, and the United States Code's equally detailed prescriptions (almost 9,000 words, by my count) of the appropriate ways to treat the American flag.² Viewing church-state relations under such a heading is likely to make the conflicts between the two citizenships more apparent, making them seem less like two languages with a high number of cognates and family resemblances and more like two languages between which translation is labored, imperfect, and treacherous. I think that perspective opens up the following questions to us:

1. What is the relationship between the "God" who is related to symbols such as the American flag, American currency ("In God we Trust"), and the pledge of allegiance, and the "God" related to the nation of Israel, Jesus of Nazareth, his cross and resurrection, and the Church? That relationship is very likely not mere equivocation, since the latter tradition has clearly influenced the former. However, it is not immediately apparent to me that the two are in a comfortably univocal relationship, either – as evidenced in America's historical

² See U.S. Code Title 4 – "Flag and Seal, Seat of Government, and the States" (especially chapter 1).

understandings of, for example, providence, and the courses of action we have taken that view of providence to authorize.

2. What is the relationship between political liberties and the theological sense of the term, “freedom”? Christian discipleship has flourished, so the story goes, especially under conditions where persecution was and is the norm. Why, then, do you take the defense of your own “religious freedom”, in terms of official recognition by the civil religion, to be an urgent issue from the religious point of view?
3. Should Christians seek to maximize their fairly-obtained access to society’s goods? That is, what gain is made in specifically Christian discipleship by displaying the Ten Commandments in front of a courthouse or a nativity scene on the grounds of a town hall? In general, are Christians called to ensure that they retain the maximum amount of social power that they can come by fairly? Do you agree with Yoder that “the cross of Christ is the model of Christian social efficacy”?

In sum, if, as you say, “Christianity transforms all relationships,” (75) then surely it profoundly transforms the ways in which we relate to others as citizens. I appreciate your work’s sensitivity to the ways in which gratitude is the appropriate response to American history and political culture, but I would like to hear more about the ways in which our gratitude is transformed and thereby takes, perhaps frequently, the shape of repentance.