



***Freedom and Order: History, Politics and the English Bible*, Nick Spencer, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2011, pp. 384, ISBN 978-0340996232. £16.99**

As the author of *Freedom and Order* rightly says, the Bible is politically saturated. This means that to understand it, we must take a serious interest both in the political thought and action found within the Bible, and also in the long history of how people have understood its political teachings. The book's focus is on the latter point, as Nick Spencer sheds light upon major movements of English political life throughout England's history.

The argument upon which the book turns is that English political reading of the Bible has always involved a tussle between privileging order and extolling freedom. Rather than simply giving a triumphalist narrative of political progress, the author asks readers to imagine what life was like for early modern readers and hearers, in order to understand why so many of them privileged order over freedom. Indeed, a secure political order was viewed as a gift from God, and a reward for Christian obedience. Yet the book illustrates this preference with a nice twist, by telling the story of how pre-revolutionary Dorchester was transformed by Puritans in ecclesiastical and municipal power from a den of vice into an ordered, godly society which was safe for children, the elderly, the sick, and the poor.

As this is a book written for a popular audience, Spencer's immensely erudite account of the history of church-state and papal/Episcopal-monarchical relations in Part I is unique in the contemporary book market. Spencer begins with the millennium before Tyndale, starting with the biblically-based law-code of Wihtried, Anglo-Saxon king of Kent in 695 CE, before moving on to the time of Alfred the Great. While Bede at this time conceived of the English (Anglo-Saxons) as 'Israel', he also characterised the British (Celts) as 'Canaanites'. Theologically, this was pure nonsense, given that many of the Britons were already Christians: Augustine's complaint that the British bishops did not preach Christianity to the English should be framed as part of a British/Celtic resistance to Papal monarchy as well as a canny resistance to Anglo-Saxon imperialism. All of this would have profound consequences for later English kings' attitude towards

Wales, Ireland and Scotland, and indeed for the growth of English/British imperialism.

Spencer then moves on to later medieval history, explaining with clarity the central importance of Pope Gelasius' formula of two swords of government. He highlights the potential of this formula for restricting temporal power, and points to the bishops' growing boldness in telling kings that they were under judgement: divine law, as set out in the Old Testament, was held up as supreme. The ideas of John of Salisbury on the legitimacy of tyrannicide, Stephen Langton's influence on the Magna Carta, and John Wyclif's sophisticated doctrine of biblical inerrancy and concomitant attack on papal authority, are all explained in a manner that clearly brings out their later relevance.

In Part II, Spencer considers the early modern period. William Tyndale is contrasted favourably in relation to Henry VIII, as advocating obedience to God before the king, though in muted fashion. With the Catholic Queen Mary's accession, exiled Reformers were obliged to rethink the problem of resisting tyrannical monarchs, given that they could not now appeal to the institutional church. Spencer is clearly favourable to the Geneva Bible, with its marginal notes supporting political resistance, and also manages to show readers a glimpse of the biblical battles at stake in the English Revolution. Of particular interest is the figure of Oliver Cromwell who, as head of state, wearied of different parties wanting religious liberty for themselves but not for others: unusually, Cromwell is depicted as opening the door to toleration and later pluralism. Then, to conclude this section, Spencer examines the philosopher John Locke's demolition of Robert Filmer's version of the divine right of kings.

Part III of *Freedom and Order* is devoted to charting the chastened yet vigorous use of the Bible from the rise of evangelicalism until today. Here, the book needs to distinguish more clearly the decline after the Restoration of elite 'biblical politics', and the later rise of popular 'biblical politics'. Moreover, whilst Spencer's portrait of the Chartists' appeal to Jesus in favour of universal male suffrage is moving, he gives no such acknowledgement of the biblical roots of the campaign for female suffrage. Likewise, he gives no account of how these campaigns were integral to Protestant support for feminism: women such as Josephine Butler and Christabel Pankhurst, who

spearheaded first-wave feminism, are not even named, but remain silenced. This omission is odd in a book which has extolled Locke's doctrine of natural equality. This oddness is further compounded by Spencer's negative treatment of the successful Victorian Nonconformist campaign against the Contagious Diseases Act, which raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen, and tackled gambling and alcoholism: the author dismisses these developments as a 'rather narrow understanding of sin'.

There are further problematic omissions for a book on politics and the English Bible. Although due treatment is given to Anglo-Catholicism and Christian socialism, it is only their influence on twentieth-century elite Anglican politics that is discussed. Also unexplored is the fact that both Anglican and Nonconformist colleges all accepted biblical criticism in the period 1880–95, thus driving a wedge between academic biblical exegesis and that of ordinary Christians. This is surely important for understanding the steeper decline of English Christianity, and the loss of 'biblical politics', at least until the rise of charismatic evangelicalism with the Nationwide Festival of Light in 1972.

Another significant lacuna is any account of how black and Asian Christians in England have read the Bible politically in the twentieth century, especially given that English churchgoing is now sustained by many so-called immigrant churches. The book is also silent on the use of the Bible to justify Jewish emancipation. Moreover, whilst the Christian groups within the main political parties are discussed, only cursory treatment is given to the renewed Roman Catholic voice since Vatican II. Despite the voluminous literature available, too little is said about the legal reforms of the 1960s, which were debated so hotly by the churches in relation to 'dechristianisation'. Nothing at all is said about the collusion of the Church of England's liberal establishment with eugenics in the early twentieth century, which paved the way for the Abortion Act and its many bioethical consequences, and has undoubtedly also helped make calls for euthanasia respectable. Finally, human rights arguments, beloved of Catholic activists, have made virtually no dents in public opinion in the last forty years. As the Human Rights Act is not framed in theistic terms, this is unsurprising, but it does mean that debates concerning human dignity urgently

require explicit biblical and theological resourcing in contemporary England, not to mention the rest of the United Kingdom.

This book is strongest when making its argument about freedom and order, especially for the period before the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century. What it does not do is show enough about the role of the Bible in modern civil society. Nevertheless, it is splendidly readable, and is to be commended for avoiding the antiquarian and nostalgic approach that has been lavished upon the King James Bible in this, its anniversary year.

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***Advocacy and Exodus: From Moses to the Mental Health Act, George Gammack, London: Spiderwise, 2011, pp. xi + 420, ISBN 978-1908128195. £10.99***

In the popular mind the term ‘advocacy’ is primarily associated with what is practised in the courts by advocates or barristers. For Christians, of course, the term ‘advocate’ has its Trinitarian reference. In recent years, however, advocacy in the sense of giving a voice to the voiceless, of speaking up for those who cannot speak for themselves, has come to be recognised as a legitimate and necessary activity in society in general. Thus the art and exercise of independent advocacy has gained recognition and increased in scope. Indeed, its recent incorporation in mental health legislation in Scotland and England has further attracted attention. Its nature, range and opportunities as well as its risks and handicaps are here exposed and exploited in a most interesting and well-informed manner by George Gammack, social worker, minister of the Church of Scotland, and professional advocate.

What is interesting and unique in his approach is that he has, as he says, ‘taken the character of Moses and the biblical story of advocacy for the people in their liberation from Egypt, along with the New Testament promise of the Holy Spirit, the advocate as helper and