

# THE DESIRE OF THE NATIONS

Rediscovering the roots of political theology

But the Lord of Hosts is  
your search  
willed by judgement, and  
is for true  
righteousness the Holy  
political concepts  
and reveals his

OLIVER  
O'DONOVAN



Peter Singer

POLITICS, EVOLUTION

*A Darwinian Left*

AND COOPERATION

# The politics of peace: *Two political theologies*

Andrew Cameron

Though there are many great nations throughout the world, living according to different rites and customs, and distinguished by many different forms of language, arms and dress, there nonetheless exists only two orders, as we may call them, of human society: and, following our Scriptures,<sup>1</sup> we may rightly speak of these two as cities. The one is made up of men who live according to the flesh, and the other of those who live according to the spirit. Each desires its own kind of peace, and, when they have found what they sought, each lives its own kind of peace.<sup>2</sup>

1 Augustine has a number of Scriptures in mind, many of which picture the citizens of these two 'cities' living alongside each other in entanglement. Cf. Psalm 119:19-20 & v54; Matthew 5:13-16 (perhaps); Romans 12:2; 2 Corinthians 6:14-18 (but noting 'entanglement' as a given in the prior 1 Corinthians 5:10); 2 Corinthians 10:2-3; Ephesians 2:19; Philippians 3:20; 1 Peter 1:1,17; 2:9-11; Hebrews 11:13.

2 Augustine, *City of God* XIV.1.

Oliver O'Donovan

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Peter Singer

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It is 410 AD. Rome, 'the eternal city', has tottered. For the first time in a millennium, barbarians have entered her gates. Meanwhile Christianity continues to expand, and Romans blame it for Rome's demise, since the populace has deserted its ancient gods to Christ.

Augustine delights to retort that these same detractors have Christ to thank for the luxury of being able to object to him, since it was his basilicas into which they fled as a sanctuary from the barbarians, and his Kingship which the barbarians feared in refraining to kill them there.

Thus is another chapter written in the epic collision between Christ and Rome, this time occasioning the start of a multi-volume epic called the *City of God*, written over twenty years, where Augustine first deconstructs all that Rome holds dear about itself, turning then to offer an account of the life of the heavenly city—its origin, its life on earth, and its final destiny. The core conception is of two political entities in uneasy coexistence, competing together for cultural space and seeking different ends.




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Urged on by the Scriptures, Augustine can write powerfully and confidently of the final triumph of God's kingdom. And indeed, it was only a matter of time before an Emperor was overwhelmed by the Lordship of Christ; it happened to be Constantine, whose vision on the Milvian Bridge caused him to turn to Christ and bring the Empire with him.

Sadly for the neatness of my retelling, this moment predates *City of God* by several decades. But the main point is clear. In Christ, God's victory is complete and his kingdom has erupted into this age. Such was the force of this gospel that old orders crumbled and kings bowed their knee to the Lord Christ. And although Christians have mixed feelings about the Milvian

Bridge, for Oliver O'Donovan it had to happen one way or other: somewhere along the line, some emperor would discover that his kingship was given to him by God, and that whatever ruling the emperor did could only occur 'under God'. And when that happens, then is 'Christendom' born.

I am not very good at thinking about politics. It is not hard to see why. I was never taught anything about it, so all I knew was that there are people called 'politicians' whom I am to despise; they come in two sorts, rightish and leftish; and there is nothing to distinguish them since both sorts lie and cheat equally. But I must hate one sort less than the other, based solely upon how my parents voted.

Government is somehow mixed up in this, too. Although it is in charge of things that are very important to me, like roads, I still hate it because it takes money from me. It is off somewhere in the distance, doing its thing; my main job is to ignore it and do mine.

The Bible hasn't thrown much light on this, either. I have learnt that Jesus is the king of kings, and his followers are to diligently obey their government (Romans 13:1f, 1 Peter 2:13f). But that said, it is not immediately obvious how the one follows from the other. But perhaps it doesn't matter anyway: if the kingdom of God is about repenting, trusting Jesus, and telling others of him, when Christians talk lots about politics, it would seem suspiciously as if they have lost the plot. 'Political theology' sounds like other kinds of trendy theology to be avoided.

Yet it is also the case that from time to time, various Christians get very agitated when the government seems to act in a manner hostile to Christianity—such as when a law is enacted that seems contrary to the Scriptures, or when the government seems to be moving so as to curtail some Christian task, such as evangelism. However, to challenge this on Christian grounds seems too hard, because surely the government can hardly be expected to make laws that favour Christians against other members of society, such as Muslims or atheists. So my reaction to said agitated Christians is confused; in the end, I leave them to do their thing, and the government to do its thing.

Because after all, Australia and England, and I suppose most Western countries, seem pretty stable overall. On the whole there is the kind of peace and freedom to practice religion that is mentioned in 1 Timothy 2:2; things seem like they've been like this for some time and will stay like this for a while; and it's all a whole lot better than Stalin or Saddam or Louis XVI.

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Put as baldly as this, the pig-ignorance of my personal confession is embarrassing. Yet I suspect many can identify with it. I suspect Oliver O'Donovan recognizes it, too. His book seeks to show how important the Christian gospel has been for political thought—directing it for nearly fourteen hundred years in the West—and that what we have now, 'late-modern liberalism', is a direct descendant of this thought. This is by no means a story of theological triumph—there are many false trails that O'Donovan will make no effort to defend. It is, though, a *tour de force* of theological acumen, deep historical knowledge, and astute observation. At first sight it seems a thin enough book to be an easy read; but as with O'Donovan's 1986 *Resurrection and Moral Order*,<sup>3</sup> it will take me two or three

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<sup>3</sup> Oliver O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics*, Apollos, Leicester, 1986.

readings to begin a proper digestion. But have no doubt that such is the worth of O'Donovan's subtle thought, that these future readings are a certain appointment, just as they have been for me with the brutally difficult earlier book.

O'Donovan knows the risks of what he is undertaking. He is well aware of 'truth in the suspicion that political theology has gained a following among those who have grown tired of talking about God' (p. 3). O'Donovan is not tired of talking about God, nor of doing so with Scripture as his authoritative access to God. Indeed, I chuckled at O'Donovan's clear intention to do business with Scripture despite biblical scholars, whose 'tidiness of mind' can

ically constituted; but it is too easy to dip into their history and base a theology of politics on one moment of their history, such as 'the Exodus, the promise of shalom, the jubilee laws or ... the reign of Josiah'; this 'is to treat the history of God's reign like a commonplace book or a dictionary of quotations' (p. 27). If politics is about a liberation like the exodus, what about the conquest of Canaan? Or if like the Israelite monarchy, what about the republic of Judges? O'Donovan's chapters on the Old Testament, about which I thought I knew a thing or two, left me exhausted.

But rarely has such exhaustion been more rewarding. Among other themes, O'Donovan frames this odyssey as a quest for an account of true authority. This is important, he believes, because the whole rainbow of political thinkers seem to be hostile at worst, or vague at best, about authority. Yet authority lies at the heart of all political life, and to see the authority of God

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be 'such a dangerous liability in historical discussions' (p. 99) and who engage 'in scholarly arguments which by their very nature seem incapable of decisive resolution' (p. 90) and into which O'Donovan has 'no pretension to intervene'!

Thus with an eye upon the more helpful insights of biblical scholarship, O'Donovan is able to stride through four closely-argued chapters of biblical theology as foundation to his argument that all human government is a reflection of the rule of God. The people of God were polit-



at work in his rule brings with it the possibility of seeing how authority might rightly, and wrongly, be held by human rulers (be they emperors or prime ministers).

Divine rule brings salvation, judgment and possession. This framework encompasses the entire book, as O'Donovan explores the ways in which this is expressed across the theology of the Bible. As a snapshot of this: prior to the OT exile, God rescues his people from Egypt, judges the hostile and the unfaithful, and gives his people a land. Israel's kings are to do this under God. But after Christ (and skipping over O'Donovan's amazing treatment of the monarchy, the exile and return, the intertestamental period, and Christ's ministry), there is no more salvation to be given and no land to be conquered, because God has saved once and for all at the cross, and given over the whole earth to the Christ at the Resurrection and Ascension. What remains is a final judgment; and the surprise of those well-known NT passages on government is that governments are simply now to judge wickedness and vice (surprising, because other ancient conceptions had rulers protecting property rights). Political authority is reduced to a rump of its former self; and rulers would do well to take notice that they too stand under the cross of Christ, and so should temper their judgments with mercy. Even this function is temporary, and O'Donovan's treatment of Revelation—a heavily political book—is as good as ever I have seen.

From the Old Testament material, O'Donovan also generates six 'theorems' that lay the continuity between Israel's



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experience and that of the Western tradition. They are worth repeating:

1. Political authority arises where power, the execution of right and the perpetuation of tradition are assured together in one co-ordinated agency (p. 46).
2. That any regime should actually come to hold authority, and should continue to hold it, is a work of divine providence in history, not a mere accomplishment of the human task of political service (p. 46).

3. In acknowledging political authority (however ruefully), society proves its political identity (for God has made us to operate politically!) (p. 47).
4. The authority of a human regime mediates divine authority in a unitary structure, but is subject to the authority of law within the community, which bears independent witness to the divine command (p. 65).
5. The appropriate unifying element in international order is law rather than government (p. 72).
6. The conscience of the individual members of a community is a repository of the moral understanding which shaped it, and may serve to perpetuate it in a crisis of collapsing morale or institution (p. 80).

As you can see, this is a long way from my impatient ignorance about political parties. More to the point, it is possibly the case

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that for more thoughtful readers, many alarm bells are ringing. Surely we're not proposing a return to Christendom, where the Christian church sometimes tried to be the government? Or is this to say that Christians should fight for theocracy? Weren't whole European wars devoted to

fights for authority between kings and popes? Are we proposing somehow to remix the separation of church and state? What about the risk that to mix theology and politics is simply to use theology to legitimate an evil government? Or to create that worst kind of idolatry, called 'civil religion'? And doesn't all this overlook the fact of religious pluralism in Western democracies? There are valid concerns at the heart of all these questions. Suffice to say that O'Donovan knows about them, and has the wit to deal with them at length. These excurses alone make the book worth reading.<sup>4</sup>

But perhaps the most interesting (and easily accessible) chapter is the last, where O'Donovan paints an interesting scene. To put the main thrust very roughly, modern liberal states are historically indebted to the history of Christendom, and the gospel's influence within it, for their key aspirations; and late moderns would do well to look again to Christianity to understand anew what the liberal order yearns for. The freedom of liberal order springs from evangelical freedom, where by the Spirit of God and baptism, slaves were made brothers to their masters, and slavery itself became irrelevant when all were 'slaves' to Christ.

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<sup>4</sup> One question not worth including in this list, given O'Donovan's trenchant rejection of it, is the 'two swords' theory: God does not grant two spheres of power in the world, the spiritual and the temporal, and to suggest this was always a fundamental misrepresentation of the biblical material, with very damaging results. But—didn't Jesus say 'give unto Caesar ...'? Yes; Caesar can keep his little coins. However the citizenship of God's Kingdom dwarfs the puny demands of Caesar.

The merciful judgments of liberal order spring from the reconciling judgments of God. The natural right of liberal order, where all are found to be equal, springs from God's vindication of his good, created order in the Resurrection of his Son. The liberal order's freedom of speech springs from the evangelical possibility that all, regardless of their social status, may pray and prophecy in the new age of the Spirit.

O'Donovan is not foolishly suggesting that the coming of Christ brings these benefits to humanity in some kind of universalist manner. In constituting the church, God constitutes a political entity that has these four characteristics; and wherever it goes, the presence of a church exhibits these features to the communities that surround it. In this way, tyrants and monarchs are forced to follow suit, perhaps even kicking and screaming: the church brings with it the best possibilities of the best kind of liberal order, and where God rules his people in this way, human societies cannot help but follow. Because of this, O'Donovan's fifth chapter is a careful exploration of the nature of the church.

Sadly, of course, there are many antichrists.

When believers find themselves confronted with an order that, implicitly or explicitly, offers itself as the sufficient and necessary condition of human welfare, they will recognize the beast. When a political structure makes this claim, we call it 'totalitarian'. (p. 274)



The liberal order of late modernity is no exception, and it is easy to paint a picture of this modernity as 'a parodic and corrupt development of Christian social order' (p. 275). In this sad re-painting, freedom is construed to be a state of pre-moral and pre-social individualism, and unfettered

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In that light, it is useful to consider what a vehemently non-Christian thinker makes of political theology.

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human endlessly sets about 'defining' reality. Suffering is now understood to be any imposition upon naked human will, thus making all forms of punishment to be suspect, and reducing 'justice' to the securing of one's own interests. There is no good order from God; humanity creates its own 'order' *de novo*, in theories of social contract and in revolution. And so speech becomes totalized; competitive and continual, there can be no discussion of 'common good', only the special pleadings of a multitude of conflicting wills.

In that light, it is useful to consider what a vehemently non-Christian thinker makes of political theology. It has always seemed a bit rough to label someone as an antichrist, but we can only wonder if Peter Singer actively so names himself when he declares one of two appropriate uses of Darwinism



to be ‘The debunking or discrediting of politically influential, non-Darwinian, beliefs and ideas’ (p. 16). It seems unlikely that Singer would resonate with O’Donovan’s work. His political theory has a very different basis.

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*A Darwinian Left* also differs from O’Donovan in being a much shorter book. Almost tract-like in presentation, it might be unfair to ask more of this book than it can offer. We might wonder, for example, about Singer’s basic approach, since his

leftist utilitarian commitments are asserted, not argued. But he would point us to his other works for the relevant arguments.

Singer firmly holds to the fallacy of naturalism—no ‘ought’ can be derived from an ‘is’. Therefore no argument can be made from the ‘fact’ of Darwinism to ethics. For example, it could never follow from a Darwinian ‘survival of the fittest’ that weak persons would necessarily die, or that the economically weak are destined to suffer oppression from the economically strong. It is important for Singer to press this, since his aim is to show how Darwinism is compatible with a leftist position on social relations (which is to be ‘on the side of the weak, not the powerful; of the oppressed, not the oppressor; of the ridden, not the rider’, p. 8). Traditionally, the left has been opposed to Darwinism because of its ideological uses against the weak by the right, such as capitalists like Rockefeller. Singer, though of the left, also believes that Darwinism states the incon-

trovertible facts of our origins. Therefore, to bring about a leftist-oriented society, it makes sense to use the insights of Darwinism to ‘understand the tendencies inherent in human beings, and modify ... abstract ideals in order to suit them’ (p. 40).

This might seem odd, though, since nineteenth-century Darwinism seemed merely to endorse Tennyson’s older ‘nature red in tooth and claw’. Singer knows that humans tend toward self-interest. Indeed, his opening pages quote a ‘debate’ between Marx and the anarchist Bakunin, in Marx’s own text of Bakunin. The anarchist complained that when ex-workers govern the people,

from the heights of the state they begin to look down upon the whole common world of the workers. From that time on they represent not the people but themselves and their own claims to govern the people. Those who doubt this know nothing at all about human nature. (p. 4)

Although Marx objects, Singer knows that Bakunin is right. This failure properly to estimate human nature has been a significant weakness for the left ever since. Marx held that

The human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relationships. (p. 5)

Believing this, it becomes a key tenet of leftist thought that to change this ensemble of social relations (economically, starting with public ownership of the means of

production), then human nature could be changed. For Singer, the demise of communism settles the argument against Marx and for Bakunin. Humans have a nature, and it is self-interested.

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How then can Darwinism help the left? Simply because the Darwinism of the twentieth century believes it can tell a story of the development of human co-operation. ‘Until the 1960s evolutionary theorists themselves neglected the role that co-operation can play in improving an organism’s prospects of survival and reproductive success’ (p. 19). It is this evolved capacity to co-operate that Singer seeks to harness for a leftist world. (He would deny this to be a return to naturalistic ‘fallacy’.)

Perhaps we could ask whether this new move in evolutionary theory had less to do with the evidence of the fossil record, than with the present-day existence of altruism and social co-operation demanding an explanation in Darwinian terms. If so, this would make it less a discovery than a supposition; and a supposition that might admit of other explanation. It is interesting, for example, that Singer’s prime example of the phenomenon of altruism (to show both that it can sustain societal function and that it can exist amongst the very self-interest that conventional Darwinism

predicts), are the high rates of blood and bone marrow donation in the UK. ‘Thus it is a mistake to say that evolutionary theory shows that people cannot be motivated by a desire to help others. It shows no such thing, which is just as well for the theory because, as we have seen, altruism towards strangers does exist, in institutions like the Blood Bank’ (p. 57).

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Instead, ‘we need to understand more about what it is that leads people to donate blood or bone marrow, so that we can base social policies on a more secure foundation of knowledge about human behaviour’ (p. 58). But in this enquiry, apparently it is inadmissible that the self-identity of the UK has until recently remained substantially Christian, and that high rates of charity overall there are deeply rooted in the strong Christian social conscience of at least the Victorians. In Singer’s closed universe, this ‘understanding’ of altruism is, apparently, an evolutionary one, or nothing.

The left was also suspicious of Darwinism because it traditionally believed in human perfectibility. Perhaps, says Singer, it is time to abandon this idea. But it is not many pages later, when arguing for the promotion by the left of altruism and co-operation, that the force of this advice seems a little diminished.

Both national and international surveys show little correlation between an increase in wealth and an increase in happiness, once basic needs have been met. ... [I]t takes only a little reflection to realize that a society in which people are primarily motivated to keep up with, or ahead of, their neighbours is not likely to be a society in which most citizens find happiness and fulfilment. pp. 45–6

We often hear it said that money cannot buy happiness. This may be trite, but it carries the implication that it is more in our interests to be happy than be rich. Properly understood, self-interest is broader than economic self-interest. Most people want their lives to be happy, fulfilling, or meaningful in some way ... Public policy does not have to rely on self-interest in this narrow economic sense. It can, instead, appeal to the widespread need to feel wanted, or useful, or to belong to a community—all things that are more likely to come from cooperating with others than from competing with them (p. 42).

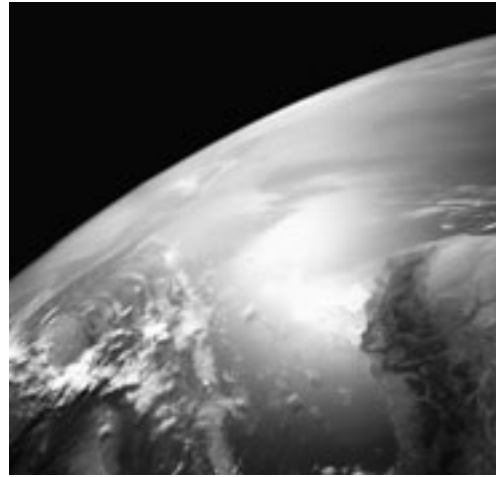
Only a little reflection? And why might trite things be said to be trite? Surely the problem is that people can know about societal good, and still not care. This is what makes things trite. ‘A little reflection’ is not sufficient to enable the trite to bite us into action.

But to convince people that being nice to others is good for them, Singer looks to

something called ‘game theory’. However it is not really explained how the populace might be weaned from self-interest, even though co-operation should be obvious to them by now. When it comes to converting this into a social policy, the best example Singer can give is that there be a tax on excessive spending.

This seems a little thin to me, and even if Christianity is false, it strikes me as odd that Singer is so committed to ‘the debunking or discrediting of politically influential, non-Darwinian, beliefs and ideas’ when (in the case of Christianity) they so demonstrably promote freedom, merciful judgment, equality, and free speech. This would seem to be the kind of society Singer yearns for.

If the main stumbling block is Darwinism,<sup>5</sup> it seems odd that no account is taken of the interesting debate among Christians over the matter. If young earth creationists remind us that God certainly created the world (highlighting cosmology’s avoidance of any first cause) and that Darwinism is hardly free of hiccups, old earth creationists and theistic evolutionists remind us that God is no enemy of his world, and that whatever paleontologists work with is also a part of God’s good



order. The debate between these groups can be robust, of course; but the fact remains that Christians have lived with Darwinism for a long time, understand its implications, and still follow Christ. It always strikes me as odd that atheist Darwinists are so persistently of the view

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<sup>5</sup> Singer’s other stumbling block is the creation account of human dominion over animals. Singer’s ineradicable hostility to Christianity stems in part from his convictions over the ‘rights’ of non-human animals—and, it has to be said, a view that Christianity has no real place for the care and nurture of non-human life, as if Christianity has been uniformly committed to exploitation of the natural order.

that their ‘revelation’ is the only revelation.

But Singer will have it on his overtly anti-Christian terms, or not at all. The breathtaking excess of an astounding final paragraph is worth quoting at length. In it, perhaps we find the real attraction in admitting of no Christian alternative:

No less a champion of Darwinian thought than Richard Dawkins holds out the prospect of ‘deliberately cultivating and nurturing pure, disinterested altruism—something that has no place in nature, something that has never existed before in the whole history of the world’. Although ‘We are built as gene machines,’ he tells us, ‘we have the power to turn against our creators.’ There is an important truth here. We are the first generation to understand not only that we have evolved, but also the mechanisms by which we have evolved and how this evolutionary heritage influences

who understand how they have come to be what they are. ... [This] may turn out to be the prerequisite for a new kind of freedom. (p. 63)

We have really moved very far into a kind of theology here—or what English thinker John Milbank more rightly describes as an ‘atheology’. The naked human will recreating itself *de novo*; the rejection of the bodily order within which we find ourselves; the recreation of ourselves for a new kind of freedom.

But, in fact, this is not something that should scare us. Certainly, O’Donovan knows that within such times of falsity, there are times the church’s Lord calls us to martyrdom. Maybe this will become such a time, maybe not; that is not for us to know.

I think rather that when these two theologies of the two cities are laid side by side, there remains startlingly good news in the Christian gospel. When churches truly constitute themselves along the lines given to them by their Lord, a form of life together is on view that requires no knowledge of game theory, no taxation on spending and no turning against our genetic ‘creators’! Rather, when the Lord leads his people in salvation and judgment and possession, there comes to us a way of living in his world where there is freedom, equality, mercy and justice—and the Lordly example of one who, within the history of the world, lived something far better than ‘pure, disinterested altruism’. It has ever been so, and this heavenly city stands before its earthly counterpart both as a condemnation and as a hope.

Somewhat frustratingly, O’Donovan

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our behaviour. ... Hegel portrayed the culmination of history as a state of Absolute Knowledge, in which Mind knows itself for what it is, and hence achieves its own freedom. ... [S]omething similar really has happened in the last fifty years. For the first time since life emerged from the primeval soup, there are beings



will only tell us in a forthcoming book about 'political ethics', which I take to mean the ways in which we might conduct ourselves politically given the right kind of political theology.

But that's okay, because our main task for politics is something perhaps unexpected, but which, thankfully, many readers know a little about already:

All four aspects of liberal society—freedom, mercy, natural right and openness to free speech—have consistently proved more difficult to realize in effect than to acknowledge in principle. We are especially conscious in the Western democracies of the limited success of parliamen-

tary institutions in bringing public concerns for the common good to bear on governmental deliberations ... The private or sectional good is of more interest to most people most of the time. In Britain the issue that effectively roused public opinion in recent decades was not the dismal state of the prisons, the anarchy over abortion, the frightening growth of technologically induced unemployment, still less such major world issues as the unresolved crisis of Third-World debt or nuclear deterrence; it was the imposition of a new form of local government taxation. When such are the dominant preoccupations of society,

parliament is reduced from its role as a deliberative assembly to its primitive, pre-liberal function as a court of common pleas, defending the interests of particular sectors or persons against governmental impositions. Confronted with such evidence as this we may be inclined to agree with a point made constantly by Gregory the Great, the prime mover of the evangelization of the English: a society gets the form of government from God that it deserves. Liberal order will presumably never thrive within these

islands until the work which Gregory undertook fourteen hundred years ago is resumed! (p. 271)

What happened in Rome will keep happening around the world. While the Lord of the church keeps calling churches together by his word, citizens of the earthly city will look on with that strange mixture of contempt, envy and longing. ❖

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