

Home > Opinion > Political Theology and Public Service

## Political Theology and Public Service

As the Scottish National Party moves to elect a First Minister to replace Nicola Sturgeon, both Muslim and Christian candidates are in the field. I do not want to suggest an equivalence in their positions. Neither do I intend to examine their specific positions. Instead, I want here to enquire into religious determinism in secular democratic politics. By determinism, I mean the degree to which a person of a particular faith, or other strong principled foundation in life, must allow their beliefs to determine, or decide, the policies that they implement.

In so saying, remember that in a democracy no one politician normally determines policy. But ministers, not least the First Minister in Scotland's case, can reasonably be expected to execute policy. In many contexts a minister may be faced with the bitter pill of having to honour the body of the kirk, and execute its decisions. But if it is reasonable (if not always justified) to assume that a person of faith will be a person of high integrity, how can that cognitive dissonance – the disconnect between what a person may feel and what they are expected to do in public office – be reconciled?

I should say that I come at this from a Church of Scotland family background, where I was raised in a predominantly Free Church of Scotland community in the Isle of Lewis, and became a Quaker with a liberal theology in the 1980s. That said, I am sympathetic if not always in agreement with those two churches of my childhood and their Calvinist theology. Both have shifted hugely from the sometime hellfire sermons of my childhood, and I have benefitted hugely from their deep understanding of community, and even, forgiveness. I have also worked closely with other faith groups, wherever love breaks through; and in this respect, I was advisor on combatting Islamophobia to the late Dr Bashir Mann, who was President of Glasgow Central Mosque and the first member of an ethnic minority to hold elected office in the UK.

I should also say that religion is not alien to Scottish legal and constitutional thinking. The seminal work of Scots law is the *Institutions of the Law of Scotland*, published by Lord Stair in 1681. Stair begins by declaring "the absolute sovereign" to be "divine law" (1.1.1). He describes the law of Moses as "the prime positive law of God" (1.1.9). But, that has always been mitigated by a reading through the gospels of Jesus Christ. For example, the law of Moses says in Deuteronomy 21 that the parents of a rebellious and drunkard son who refuses to reform his ways should drag him out, "Then all the men of his town are to stone him to death." That could put a Monday morning spoiler on the Saturday night ceilidh! As such, even before we get as far as the ethics of implementing democratic laws, let it be clear that any religious influence (such as Lord Stair considered to be foundational) is subject to discernment. It then becomes unsound to say that because a person belongs to such-and-such a faith group, it means "they must believe" this-and-that, or that they would refuse to honour the requirements of high office to which they have been elected.

Faith and public office may choose to place themselves in conflict in Scotland, but they do not have to; and I am about to outline why not.

But before going there, let me make one further point. When I was a student at Aberdeen back in the 1970s, the insights of the Scots "democratic intellect" and "generalism" were applied in the choice of first year subjects. I was a science student, and we all had to take *natural philosophy* as physics was then wisely called (and taught to us by no less than Professor R.V. Jones, "the father of electronic warfare"). In counterpoint, most arts students took *moral philosophy*. Between the two, the realms



By Alastair McIntosh

More By This Author

Published on 21st February 2023



of matter and of soul were covered. Somehow, I got to take both, and one of our set option texts was D.D. Raphael's *Problems of Political Philosophy*, published in 1970.

Raphael left me with a point that every legislator might hold in mind. The state, he emphasised in chapter four, is not like other clubs. It is not an association where a person can agree the rules, and then opt in or out. Rather, it's more like Hotel California. "The universality of the State's jurisdiction" determines "its compulsory character", he said: and therefore, "I have had no choice." Although Raphael, writing just around the end of the 1960s, did not explicitly go so far, this recognition of state power underscores the imperative for the just state – a state that can sustain legitimacy and remain at peace within itself – to uphold a *permissive society*. And this to honour *pluralism*, which is helpfully defined by the Britannica Dictionary as "a situation in which people of different social classes, religions, races, etc., are together in a society but continue to have their different traditions and interests."

Let me now square up to the conundrum of politicians who might hold deep and perhaps unpopular personal positions, but who nevertheless are fully willing to serve the democratic decisions of a pluralist society. I will briefly outline four principles that can be helpful tools for thinking: 1) Burke's axiom; 2) Calvinist "accommodation"; 3) Quaker "standing aside"; and 4) wait for it ... the Caledonian Antisyzygy! My bias here is Christian because of where I'm coming from, but I have little doubt that variations on these themes are also found in other faith traditions.

### Burke's Axiom

An axiom is a fundamental principle or starting point. Here, I've applied it to a dictum of the Anglo-Irish member of parliament, Edmund Burke (above). In a famous speech to the electors (or voters) of Bristol in 1774, he set out a principle often treated as making a distinction between a representative, who offers their own qualities, and a delegate, who delivers a mandated position. In the gendered language and limited democracy of his time, he said:

"It ought to be the happiness and glory of a Representative, to live in the strictest union, the closest correspondence, and the most unreserved communication with his constituents. It is his duty ... to prefer their interest to his own.... But his unbiassed opinion, his mature judgement, his enlightened conscience, he ought not to sacrifice

to you, to any man, or any set of men living.... They are a trust from Providence, for the abuse of which he is deeply answerable. Your Representative owes you, not his industry only, but judgement; and he betrays, instead of serving you, if he sacrifices it to your opinion."

And after a few further paragraphs, Burke signs off, "Your faithful friend, your devoted servant, I shall be to the end of my life: a flatterer you do not wish for." In other words, he recognised the tensions within his position, but he invites his electors not to choose a player to the gallery, whose opportunism might neglect their deeper interests. He asserts autonomy, even individualism: but if such it is, a form of individualism that subordinates itself in service to its sense of the greater whole. In the end, to elect is to choose; and that choice stayed in the hands of his constituents.

### Calvin's "Accommodation"

The Church of Scotland is "by law established". At the risk of over-simplification, it is based on the Bible as interpreted through the Calvinist lens of the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646. The Free Church of Scotland broke away from the mother body in the 1843 "Disruption". The main reason for so doing was that the deeply unpopular Patronage Act of 1712 had given landowners the power to appoint parish clergy. For the mostpart, by virtue of the piper's payer, these were disinclined to preach a social gospel, let alone a liberation theology that could grapple with such oppression as the Highland Clearances. The laird's theology of private salvation sat over-comfortably with private enrichment.

Here is not the place to discuss uses and abuses of Scots Calvinism. I want to draw upon just one use: namely the notion of "accommodation". John Calvin suggested that the language of the Bible is "accommodated" by God to human capacity. In his words, "Thus forms of speaking do not so much express clearly what God is like as *accommodate* the knowledge of him to our slight capacity" (*Institutes*, 1:13:1).

Bouncing off this, it might follow that a political representative, especially should they be of a Scots Calvinist persuasion, could justify the application of a similar principle to their constituents. Without needing to sound holier-than-thou, an elected figurehead might reasonably say: "I hold such-and-such a view, but I will *accommodate* my views to my constituents". This contrasts with Burke's axiom, for while Calvin might be elaborated upon as authorising accommodation, Burke makes his opinions sovereign.

### Quaker "Standing Aside"

The Quaker way holds that all members have an equal voice. Decision-making proceeds from there, often very slowly, by seeking consensus. In *Beyond Majority Rule*, Michael Sheeran researched such "voteless decision making". As a Jesuit priest who was doing his PhD, he tells how, following the Catholic Church's "Vatican II" reforms of the 1960s, his order looked to the Quakers to help rediscover their own near-lost practice of discernment in collective decision making. Notably, the current pope is also a Jesuit.

However, what happens when a Friend (as Quakers call themselves) disagrees? What, when their being ill at ease discords with "the sense of the meeting"? There are two options. Either, the Friend might be inwardly led to "stand in the way". They can and sometimes do, block the decision. Or, they might "stand aside". They can register their protest in the minute (that is written and agreed as the meeting proceeds), but not stand in the way of how the meeting overall is minded.

A case in point in British Quakerism has been same-sex marriage. In 1963, the Friends' Home Service Committee controversially published *A Quaker View of Sex*. Ever since, Friends have taken leading positions around faith and sexual diversity, especially homosexuality. It has been an uncomfortable ride for some, liberatory for many others, but as the 1963 pamphlet put it: "It is the nature and quality of a relationship that matters... the same criteria seem to us to apply whether a relationship is heterosexual or homosexual."

Half a century later, the issue came to head over same-sex marriage at Britain Yearly Meeting in 2009. Some 600 people gathered to discern their shared "leadings" and

what they might determine. The outcome, was that The Religious Society of Friends became the first church in Britain to affirm same-sex marriage.

But what happened to voices that were more conservative? What of those who sincerely held a very traditionalist view of biblical Christianity – even though Jesus never once mentions gays in the gospels? These elected to “stand aside”. As a Quaker glossary describes it:

“If a person feels conscientiously that a proposed decision is not the best formulation of truth, s/he is obliged to express such a belief. When objection is rooted deeply in conscience, the person may choose to “stand in the way of (block) consensus.” If the matter is less consequential for the person, s/he may decide to “stand aside” and allow the decision to be made.”

To stand aside is not the same as rolling over and submitting. Rather, it is a way of doing politics that acknowledges ego. It acknowledges that each of us has our own interface between the inner and outer world. Equally, it accepts that such is held in a wider community as “members one of another”, all branches on the vine of life. The relevance to democratic politics may seem other-worldly. But for politicians of faith, of any faith or profound principle, consciously and openly standing aside may be an avenue to honour their deepest callings towards public service.

### **Caledonian Antisyzygy**

I move, lastly, to Scotland’s gift to Scrabble. It might help to pull together the above three principles. In 1919 G. Gregory Smith, an Edinburgh MA graduate who later became the professor of literature at Queen’s College, Belfast, published a celebrated book called Scottish Literature. This tackled what Smith thought of as “the two moods” in Scottish writing. The Concise Scots Dictionary defines an *antisyzygy* as “the presence of duelling polarities within one entity, considered to be characteristic of the Scottish temperament.” Put more bluntly, as by the Scots Language Centre: “In other words we Scots are thrawn.”

Smith contrasts the prosaic, practical, dour persona of, say, the Scots engineer, teacher or accountant, with its polar counterpoint. As he thrillingly puts it (pp. 19, 40):

“The Scottish Muse has, however, another mood. Though she has loved reality, sometimes to maudlin affection for the commonplace, she has loved not less the airier pleasure to be found in the confusion of the senses, in the fun of things thrown topsyturvy, in the horns of elfland and the voices of the mountains.”

These two, he says, are “contraries indeed, but as warp and woof”. This capacity to hold opposites in tension, far from being an eccentricity, weaves the fabric of the nation. Let me venture to expand. When R.V. Jones taught natural philosophy at Aberdeen, the posh word for *voltage* was “potential difference”. Potential difference is that charge that comes when opposites are not rejected, but are held in “tension”. High voltage can only be carried safely through “high-tension” conductors.

If a politician harbours antiszygy secretly, they may appear two-faced. But if held openly, and if such honesty can be recognised and accepted, here we have from Scottish literary thought a means to energise an honest politics in a democratic pluralist society. Here we have a means, as the poet [Alice Walker puts it](#), to “Take the contradictions / Of your life / And wrap around / You like a shawl, / To parry stones / To keep you warm.”.

Let me push this one stage further before retreating into Quaker purgatory, or stillness. To hold opposites in tension can leave us open both to Truth perceived, and truths. In his novel, *The Chymical Wedding*, Lindsay Clark describes a dream about the Pope. The narrator then unfolds a remarkable reflection about the holding of the keys of peace (1990, p. 415):

“Then I was what was not so obvious: that the holding together could only be done by *quakers*. And that meant not only the Society of Friends, however aptly named, but men and women everywhere who were prepared to quake. For quaking was what happened when you endured inside yourself the tension of divisive forces. It was what happened when you refused to shrug them off, neither disowning your own violence nor deploying it; not admitting only the good and throwing evil in the teeth of the opposition, but holding the conflict together inside yourself as yours – the dark and the light of it, the love and the lovelessness, the terror and the hope. And as you did this you changed. The situation changed – though whether it was changed enough was another question. Perhaps a meeting of quality and quantity was also needed. Perhaps, in the end, what mattered was how many people were prepared to quake this way, for such quaking spirits were the keepers of the keys.”

I have tried, here, to address the problem of how political representatives of conscience – whether we agree with their conscience or not – might reconcile their views with the body politic. I have set out, on the one hand, Burkean individualism; and on the other, both Calvinist “accommodation” and Quaker “standing aside”. Rarely can the two be found so comfortably, as bedfellows! Finally, I have drawn attention to Professor Smith’s “strange union of opposites”.

One thing is sure. The election of Nicola Sturgeon’s replacement as First Minister has thrown the Scottish National Party “topsyturvy, in the horns of elfland”. Where now, the flow of voltage from such quaking?

We are supported only by our readers. We don't have corporate backers and we don't take advertising, so we rely entirely on your support.

Help to support independent Scottish journalism

SUBSCRIBE

DONATE

Tags: [antiszygy](#) [Political Theology](#) [Scottish National Party](#)

## Comments (16)

### Join the Discussion

Your email address will not be published. Required fields are marked \*

Comment \*

Name \*

Email \*

☐ Save my name and email in this browser for the next time I comment.

☐

I'm not a robot

reCAPTCHA

Privacy - Terms

☐ Notify me of follow-up comments by email.

☐ Notify me of new posts by email.

Post Comment

#### SleepingDog

21st February 2023 at 4:39 pm

Worship of a God who institutes eternal torture for His opponents is unlikely to breed confidence in a politician's sense of justice amongst non-worshippers. Even worse, the 1960s meant, for many, following the dictates of whatever leaders led the state which led your Bloc. Oh, of course we are still in NATO, which was once led by a professed believer in the Rapture. The orthodox Christian view that the world we live is disposable, the apparent shrug towards all those (human and non-human) who will burn in its imminent destruction (and Armageddonists span across the Abrahamic religions), and care for immortal souls justifies Earthly torments and ecocide, is hardly reassuring.

Edmund Burke's gendered language of his time was criticised by Mary Wollstonecraft at that time, as well as much of his teary-eyed long-winded kissing-ups by contemporary critics. We still have the limited democracy of representation rather than delegation. There was Great Corruption then, and there is Great Corruption now. The Patriarchy ensures, it seems.

I'm not sure what we can learn from attempts by Scots Calvinism to make itself less unpalatable so as to retain influence amongst a pretty unpalatable and narrow field of options. 'Accommodated', a good soldierly phrase no doubt.

Quakers have had a good press, though their banks served the racialised chattel slave trade and Richard Nixon was one. If they appealed to Jesuits, that seems much of a kind.

Every time I read the definition of 'antiszygy', I forget it. Surely my fault. What was the point of that section again? A justification of hypocrisy?

In all seriousness, this article addresses important questions of secular government, and my mocks are but the feathered ends of arrows. But if you wanted a solution towards achieving secular government, I wouldn't have started there.

Reply

#### Brian McGrail

21st February 2023 at 5:50 pm

Karl Marx was a capitalist. In his latter years the Marxes had inherited the von Westphalen estate and lived with financial independence in Highgate. That did not prevent him from producing the most profound criticism of his own material condition. A Victorian miner would never have found the time to research and write 'Capital'. I think that's a case of antiszygy. Marx was open about his anti-capitalism. It can be argued we all live in tension between labour and capital (Can I afford not to join the strike? Can I afford to strike?).

Hypocrisy is different, in saying one thing but really believing another (and acting on the belief). The politician espousing thrift (what they say) whilst spending lavishly (what they believe about themselves, their own value, and what they can do). Indeed, it would have been hypocritical for Kate Forbes to claim she was a liberal on sexual politics. (A counter condition to an unmarried politician telling everyone that sex is only for marriage whilst employing prostitutes).

The problem is her admission about how she would have voted within our 'representative' framework, and this is an issue. She would have been 'deciding' how others can live, even though she wasn't a hypocrite for doing so.

Reply

#### SleepingDog

21st February 2023 at 7:31 pm

@Brian McGrail, I think I see you point, but the question of which (if any) position a person is wedded to, and which (if any) they will ditch like a soldier's accommodation, often remains unresolved (at least in drawing on publicly-available sources). I don't think your hypothetical Kate Forbes example is exactly hypocrisy, if from her perspective her imaginary public lie hid private virtue (in her mind). Political hypocrisy might be better thought of as expressions of public virtue masking private vice (in such a way as the latter conflicts with the former), so your counter examples is more apt, I guess.

I don't know of any 'gold standard' of secular governance, but as well as tolerating the tolerable, I suppose there would be evidence-based policies as standard. In the case of a professed believer in an ideology, if their belief waned in later life, but they pretended their belief was still as strong, that would seem to erode the integrity of politician, priest, philosopher or anyone else alike. Or to put it another way, there is a virtue in changing one's mind in the face of evidence, and admitting it. Psychologically, there is typically a drive towards resolving internal conflicts, even towards a mental conversion. However, political conversions are often unconvincing (I think the Editor has a whole file on a bunch of such people).

[Reply](#)
**Cynicus**

26th February 2023 at 9:59 am

I gave up reading your comment after its tedious, formulaic opening. I don't know what to say. But I'm not quaking. Yet.

[Reply](#)
**SleepingDog**

26th February 2023 at 1:30 pm

@Cynicus, perhaps you'll find this less tedious:  
<https://thebrickbible.com>

[Reply](#)
**Cynicus**

28th February 2023 at 11:39 am

It is certainly less off putting, if not more intellectually stimulating, than the opening of your earlier comment.

[Reply](#)
**SleepingDog**

28th February 2023 at 3:39 pm

@Cynicus, if you think you can reword my opening statement to more pleasing effect whilst keeping the original sense, please, have a go. Call it a teachable moment.

**Alasdair Macdonald**

21st February 2023 at 4:57 pm

Thank you for this, as ever, thoughtful and witty contribution to the debate.

The media tend to think in bipolarities – it is A or B with no in-between – and they always try to frame the debate as such a binary choice along a single dimension.

A key job of politicians in a democratic polity is to explore alternatives or to encourage others to do so. This is a charitable description, but I think that a majority of politicians do that and, in the end, achieve some kind of consensus. Of course a large minority are rogues and, in people like Johnson and Truss we have paradigm examples.

All religions have changed over the centuries as a consequence of adapting to changing circumstances and continue to change and, although I am an atheist, I acknowledge the role played by religions in creating humane societies and they have been successful, because they have changed. Of course, there are zealots who declare that there is only one true way which was established at the time the religion was established. These are the people that the meejavolk always seek for 'debate' knowing that they will never deviate from their position. And so, the media fail because such 'debates' amount to two people talking past each other.

Whoever becomes the leader of the SNP is only one person – a person with a fair degree of power and influence, admittedly – and no matter what her/his personal views are has to come to an accommodation with others to bring about change. In the US, this is sometimes cynically called 'pork barrel politics' or 'nickels and dimes'. It can lead to bad decisions at times, but, as often, it leads to pretty good ones, and much of the time, we get the best we can achieve at this time.

It involves each of the four stances Mr MacIntosh has set out, and, as a natural philosopher, since he has spoken well of natural philosophy, I am inclined to agree with him!

[Reply](#)
**Wullie**

21st February 2023 at 5:35 pm

Alastair, thinking here of Gordon Jackson Maw in Whisky Galore.

[Reply](#)
**Sandy Watson**

21st February 2023 at 5:20 pm

Good stuff.

And, as is often applied in situations requiring 'conflict resolution' the notion of sufficient consensus might be applied whenever there is inability to arrive at consensus. (antisyzygy in action).

[Reply](#)
**David McRobie**

21st February 2023 at 11:34 pm

Robert,  
I get this.. as a Quaker –and admirer of John Woolman – I am often 'standing aside' from my own limitations to let a normal flow of conventional life proceed. I am sure Kate Forbes has made this accommodation already to allow her political activity to progress under the will of the majority. How many will see this essential honesty in her as a vote winner?

[Reply](#)
**David McRobie**

22nd February 2023 at 8:59 am

Alastair\* .....Sorry !

[Reply](#)
**Cynicus**

26th February 2023 at 10:04 am

"I am sure Kate Forbes has made this accommodation already to allow her political activity to progress under the will of the majority."  
=====

Has she not said as much?

[Reply](#)
**Graeme Purves**

22nd February 2023 at 7:44 am

Thanks for this, Alastair!

[Reply](#)
**James Robertson**

23rd February 2023 at 1:00 pm

That's a wonderful, erudite, humane exposition of your topic, Alastair. Thank you. And the responses (so far, sitting at 9) are engaging and challenging, and also informative.

Kate Forbes has now released a statement reflecting on some of the things she has said in the last couple of days, and reaffirming her commitment to democracy and not only respect for the rights of others but her commitment to defend those rights:

"I will protect the rights of everybody in Scotland, particularly minorities, to live and to love without fear or harassment in a pluralistic and tolerant society. I will uphold the laws that have been hard won, as a servant of democracy.

"I will also seek to enhance the rights of everybody to live in a way which enables them to flourish. I firmly believe in the inherent dignity of each human being; that underpins all ethical and political decisions I make."

I don't see what more she can say without being either a hypocrite or a liar. I don't believe she is either of these.

[Reply](#)
**Cynicus**

26th February 2023 at 10:13 am

"I don't see what more she can say without being either a hypocrite or a liar. I don't believe she is either of these.."   
=====

Agreed. I see her as an absolutely priceless electoral asset to her –or any– party. A senior politician who gives clear, honest answers to blunt questions is surely unique in modern times.

[Reply](#)



SUBSCRIBE TO REGULAR  
BELLA IN YOUR INBOX

Don't miss a single article. Enter your email address on our subscribe page by clicking the button below. It is completely free and you can easily unsubscribe at any time.

SUBSCRIBE

HELP KEEP OUR  
JOURNALISM  
INDEPENDENT

We don't take any advertising, we don't hide behind a pay wall and we don't keep harassing you for crowd-funding. We're entirely dependent on our readers to support us.

DONATE



[Contact Us](#) [Contributors](#) [History](#) [Comments Policy](#) [Privacy Policy](#) [Write For Us](#)