

God in National Constitutions: A Liberating Reference?

Robert Mager

Practices referring to God may be religious, cultural, or political. Theologians are most accustomed to religious practices. However, the drafters of political constitutions, who engage in a rare but highly significant political practice, often invoke references to God, even in modern secularized countries. Currently, 114 constitutions refer to God (and seven others refer specifically to Allah). At first glance, those references could be overlooked as remnants of a past era; as a columnist wrote, “a constitution says more about where a country is coming from ... than about how the nation is now, or where it wants to go” (B. C. 2013). But as we shall see, those references testify to very salient political issues, and they are normally analyzed as such, either from a historical, political or legal perspective (Dietze 1956; Domingo 2016; Ibán 2016). Adopting a theological point of view, I will explore the different ways in which God is referred to in national constitutions and the significance of such mentions.

Introduction

This telling example, worthy of being quoted at length, is the very beginning of a modern constitution:

IN HUMBLE SUBMISSION to Almighty God,
Who controls the destinies of nations and the history
of peoples;
Who gathered our forebears together from many
lands and gave them this their own;
Who has guided them from generation to generation;
Who has wondrously delivered them from the dangers
that beset them;
WE, who are here in Parliament assembled, declare that
whereas we
ARE CONSCIOUS OF OUR RESPONSIBILITY towards
God and man;
ARE CONVINCED OF THE NECESSITY TO STAND
UNITED
To safeguard the integrity and freedom of our country;
To secure the maintenance of law and order;
To further the contentment and spiritual and material
welfare of all in our midst;

Robert Mager is a French Canadian theologian from Quebec. He has taught Christology and Fundamental Theology at Université du Québec (Trois-Rivières, 1994–2004), and Practical Theology at Université Laval (Quebec City, 2004–2015). He has served as Officer, Secretary and Vice-president of the International Academy of Practical Theology (2011–2017). He has authored many articles on the fundamentals of practical theology, religion in modern Quebec, and theology of action.

ARE PREPARED TO ACCEPT our duty to seek world
peace in association with all peace-loving nations; and
ARE CHARGED WITH THE TASK of founding the Republic
of ... and giving it a constitution best suited to the
traditions and history of our land:
BE IT THEREFORE ENACTED ...

A theologian can hardly remain insensitive to this political document's faithful tone. It exudes breadth and vision. The god it refers to is the God of history, who sets God's people free, and leads them to a promised land. Modern exegesis has insisted on the centrality of this redemption narrative in the Bible. Various liberation theologies have built on it exten-

sively, albeit in a renewed perspective centered on issues of poverty and injustice (Cone 1974; Rowland and Corner 1990).

But it is sobering and unsettling to realize that the above-quoted sentences introduce the 1961 Constitution Act instituting apartheid in the Republic of South Africa.¹

This example raises a few questions, which will underlie the following reflections. What is happening when God is explicitly invoked in a national constitution? What are the theological underpinnings of such invocations? Can those references to God be considered “liberating” in any way?

There are clear limitations to my brief inquiry. My perspective is predominantly theological. I only consider explicit references to God in national constitutions. I do not get into the various clauses concerning religion (e.g. religious freedom, secularism, fiscal measures, etc.). I do not analyze the specific dynamics of Islamic constitutions, which exceed my expertise (for those constitutions, see Issa 2011 and Georges 2012). My overview is synchronic rather than diachronic, paying little attention to the historical evolution of individual constitutions.

Invocations and nominationes

In many constitutions, God is mentioned very briefly and generically, in expressions such as “the name of God” (e.g. Costa Rica, 1949; Dominican Republic, 2015, Ecuador, 2008), “faith in God” (Albania, 1998), “trust in God” (El Salvador, 1983) or “pledging to God” (Paraguay, 1992). Some accentuate a specific attribute, such as “the One and Only God” (Indonesia, 1945) or “the guiding hand of God” (Papua New Guinea, 1975; Solomon Islands, 1978). Some display characteristic features pointing to a specific religion: “In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful” (Kuwait, 1962); “In the name of the Holy and Consubstantial and Indivisible Trinity” (Greece, 1975; also see Samoa, 1962).

The literature about references to God in constitutions occasionally differentiates *invocationes Dei* (invocations of God) and *nominationes Dei* (mentions of God) (Schröder 2004, 345). *Invocationes*

place the constitution under the patronage of God or call for God’s help. Here are a few examples:

The Democratic Constituent Congress invoking Almighty God ... has resolved to enact the following Constitution ... (Peru, 1993)

By the grace of God Almighty ... (Indonesia, 1945)

In the Name of God the Merciful and the Compassionate ... (Algeria, 1976)

Nominationes mention God as a source, principle, guardian or in any other respect. For example:

We, the people of Albania, proud and aware of our history, with responsibility for the future, and with faith in God and/or other universal values ... (Albania, 1998)

We, the representatives of the Brazilian People ... promulgate, under the protection of God, this constitution ... (Brazil, 1988)

Whereas Canada is founded upon principles that recognize the supremacy of God and the rule of law ... (Canada, 1982²)

An approximate tool, this distinction between *invocationes* and *nominationes* fails to account for the many ways God is referred to in constitutions. Thus, Johannes van der Ven (Ven 2003, 201) stresses the importance of recognizing the “various linguistic nuances”; many *invocationes*, for example, are actually “rhetorical petition prayers”, such as the invocation “God bless South Africa” found at the end of the Preamble of today’s South African Constitution (1996). Likewise, *nominationes* aim at several different purposes, which call for further analyses.

To go beyond the distinction between *invocationes* and *nominationes*, I suggest the following mode of analysis. When constitutions refer to God, God is represented in a certain way; furthermore, the god-head is understood to play a certain role; finally, implicit or explicit expectations are present. I will focus on this interplay of images, functions and benefits. From this perspective, I suggest that four categories can be discerned in constitutions: God as liberator, as ruler, as giver and as judge. I will briefly address and assess each of these categories.

¹ Wikisource 2018. From here on, I will refer to the Constitutions in the following way: “Peru, 1993” is the Constitution of Peru initially adopted in 1993. The various constitutional texts can be found on the Constitution Project website (<https://www.constituteproject.org/>).

² As is the case for United Kingdom, Canada’s Constitution is a compendium of various documents deemed to have constitutional value, such as the one quoted here, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, which was voted as part of the 1982 Constitution Act.



God as Liberator

In the Judeo-Christian tradition, God is experienced and portrayed first and foremost as a liberator, the *gō'ēl* (redeemer) who frees God's people from slavery. This understanding of God is most explicit in the Pentateuch, but it is foundational to all biblical literature, from the dissipation of chaos in Genesis up to the fulfilment of all things in Revelation. It links God to history and underlies the idea of a covenant between God and specific peoples.

The above-cited 1961 South African Constitution is a most telling example of this view. But there are other traces of it. Nicaragua's Constitution (1987) mentions "those Christians who inspired by their belief in God have joined and committed themselves to the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed." The Dominican Republic's national motto associates "God, Country, and Liberty" (2015). Other constitutions express their gratitude for the country's existence (Liberia, 1986; Seychelles, 1993), evoke the protection of God (especially South American Constitutions: e.g. Argentina, 1853; Colombia, 1991; Venezuela, 1999), ask for God's guidance (Tuvalu, 1986; Liberia, 1986, Paulu; 1981) or God's blessing (e.g. Australia, 1901; Kenya, 2010; Hungary, 2011). God is understood as instrumental in those countries' history and destiny.

In those constitutions, the references to God are dynamic, in the sense that they suggest concrete benefits for the country. But they clearly open the door to the "God with us" syndrome, as the former South African Constitution exemplifies.

God as Ruler

The Kenyan Constitution (2010) acknowledges "the supremacy of the Almighty God of all creation" (Kenya, 2010). Many constitutions presume God's rule over the world. The United States of America's Constitution (USA, 1789) does not mention God, but two USA State constitutions (Colorado, Washington) refer to God as "the Supreme Ruler of the Universe."

This vision of God as a ruler is the most common in the constitutions. Its roots run deep in political history: The Magna Carta, a foundational element of the United Kingdom's Constitution (1297), is written "unto the honour of Almighty God." God's rule is expressed in various ways. Many constitutions mention the sovereignty of God (Samoa, 1962),

God's supremacy (e.g. Canada, 1982; Zambia, 1991; Zimbabwe, 2013), God's Fatherhood (Kiribati, 1979; Grenada, 1973), or God's Highness (Lebanon, 1926). Their provisions are established "under God" (Ireland, 1937; Nigeria, 1999) or "under the guiding hand of God" (Papua New Guinea, 1975; Tuvalu, 1986; Solomon Islands, 1978). In monarchic systems, the king or queen rules "by the Grace of God" (Liechtenstein, 1921; Sweden, 1974) or takes the oath "in the presence of Almighty God" (Lesotho, 1993).

The most frequent attribute we find in the constitutions is "Almighty God," and its variants ("God All-Powerful," "Almighty Allah," "the omnipotence of Allah"). They appear in at least 37 constitutions. *Power* is the central notion here: God is seen as the overarching authority from which the power of the State proceeds or to which it is somehow related. Sometimes, this relationship is clearly defined, thus in Samoa (1962): "sovereignty over the Universe belongs to the Omnipresent God alone, and the authority to be exercised by the people of Samoa within the limits prescribed by God's commandments is a sacred heritage." Many times, constitutions try to articulate the sovereignty of God and the sovereignty of the people: "All powers of government, legislative, executive and judicial, derive, under God, from the people" (Ireland, 1937). But most of the time, the reference to God's power is simply stated, such as in the Constitution of Switzerland (1999), which opens with a brief but blunt "In the name of Almighty God!"

Commentators remark that bracing a ruler's power against the authority of a divinity is an age-old stratagem (Winiger 2010, 17). Others interpret this enduring reference to God's rule as a "claim that human rights and human authority are not without limitations and conditions but find their source, their limitation, and their goal in the authority of God. The human being cannot be the measure of all things" (Schmid 2004, 29). Thus, the reference to God's rule appears to sway between the justification of power and its ultimate limitation.

God as Giver

Konrad Schmid sees a close connection in the constitutions between references to God Almighty and the foundation of a moral order. He traces this connection back to the deistic views of the early modern period: "For the Enlightenment, God cannot be proven, but he must be postulated as an infallible

agency of supervision in order to guarantee a functioning moral community. In this context, it is particularly advisable to refer back to God as the 'Almighty': God is the almighty guarantor of a moral order for state and society" (Schmid 2004, 21). Bénédict Winiger concurs with this idea, discerning a Kantian perspective under the references to "God as moral Lord of the world" (Winiger 2010, 21; my translation). Indeed, some constitutions ascribe moral considerations to the "Almighty God" figure: "the people of Nauru acknowledge God as the almighty and everlasting Lord and the giver of all good things" (Nauru, 1968).

However, as the Nauruan example indicates, another specific pattern appears in the context of these moral considerations. It entails a *donation* and is often expressed with the image of a "source." God is seen as "the Giver of our life, liberty, identity and our inherent rights" (Marshall Islands, 1979). God is the "source of all reason and justice" (Argentina, 1853). "Human dignity is given by God to every human being, and this is the basis for all human rights" (Somalia, 2012). This gift is related to God's creational activity: "Since it appears to be the will of God that man should be free as He has made all men of one blood therefore shall the people of Tonga and all who sojourn or may sojourn in this Kingdom be free forever" (Tonga, 1875). Much like Nauru, the Polynesian State of Tuvalu (1986) sees God both as a ruler and as a provider: "the people of Tuvalu, acknowledging God as the Almighty and Everlasting Lord and giver of all good things, humbly place themselves under His good providence and seek His blessing upon themselves and their lives." And again: "The right of the people of Tuvalu, both present and future, to a full, free and happy life, and to moral, spiritual, personal and material welfare, is affirmed as one given to them by God." In many constitutions, reference to God goes hand in hand with the idea of gratitude for what God has given, through terms such as "gift," "gratefulness," or "benediction" (Liberia, 1986; Seychelles, 1993; South Sudan, 2011).

The Polish Constitution (1997) offers a recent and well-crafted version of this reference to God as giver:

We, the Polish Nation—all citizens of the Republic,

Both those who believe in God as the source of truth, justice, good and beauty,

As well as those not sharing such faith but respecting those universal values as arising from other sources ...

Beholden to our ancestors for their labours, their struggle for independence achieved at great sacrifice, for our culture rooted in the Christian heritage of the Nation and in universal human values ...

Recognizing our responsibility before God or our own consciences,

Hereby establish this Constitution of the Republic of Poland ...

In this case, the imagery of the "source" is used to anchor the moral order. The Polish people are also "beholden" to their ancestors for what the latter have achieved and transmitted. This Preamble retains a strong reference to God while refraining from invoking the powerfulness of God as ruler. Through its openness to a variety of "sources," it seeks to invoke different roots for the moral order. However, even this thoughtful expedient cannot silence two enduring questions: What can this reference mean for people who are estranged from the very idea of a god? And for the believers themselves: To what extent can God be rightly viewed as a Moral Absolute?

God as Judge

A last representation of God is quite discernible in constitutions, that of God as judge. It emerges behind the multiple calls to *responsibility*. Many countries declare themselves responsible "for the future" (Albania, 1998), before "God and history" (Equatorial Guinea, 1991), "God and the nation" (Georgia, 1995), "God and man" (Germany, 1949), "God and our own consciences" (Poland, 1997), "God, our own conscience, past, present and future generations" (Ukraine, 1996), "God, the Nation, Africa and the World" (DR Congo, 2005). We could understand this responsibility as being answerable to God as ruler, but there is a juridical twist to it, which can be perceived in a minor article of the Argentinian Constitution (1853): "The private actions of men that in no way offend public order or morality, nor injure a third party, are reserved only to God, and are exempt from the authority of the magistrates."

Another testimony given to the understanding of God as judge is the massive appeal to God in *oath-taking* (40 constitutions), even in constitutions that do not entail any other reference to God (e.g. Fiji, 2013; Jamaica, 1962; Lithuania, 1992). The oath supposes consequences if it is ever broken. "The essence of a divine oath is an invocation of divine



agency to be a guarantor of the oath taker's own honesty and integrity in the matter under question. By implication, this invokes divine displeasure if the oath taker fails in their sworn duties." There is a juridical overtone in such practices: a divine oath "implies greater care than usual in the act of the performance of one's duty, such as in testimony to the facts of the matter *in a court of law*" (Wikipedia 2019; emphasis mine).

The essential provisions for oath-taking in constitutions, their link with appealing to God, and the larger call for responsibility provoke thought. Exploring these issues would take us far beyond the scope of the present article. May I just point out two potential avenues for further inquiry. The first one is the fundamental importance of *promises* in political life, as hinted to by the political thinker Hannah Arendt (Arendt 2013, 243–247). The second is the age-old relationship between religion, oath-taking and the practice of libation. The very concept of responsibility points towards this three-fold relationship: the famed linguist Émile Benveniste has shown how the etymology of the concept of responsibility points towards the Greek and Latin root *spend-*, which in turn bears the memory of the religious rite of libation (Benveniste 1969, 209–221).

In any case, the call for responsibility before God (and nation, history, conscience) indicates that constitutions are looking for ways to ensure that the promises they make are binding and will ultimately be accounted for. They express a wish that there be a transcendent depth beyond the legal nature of constitutional provisions. We may wonder, however, if the appeal to a divine judge can have a real effect in the concrete application of constitutions and if, in sum, they do not represent a sophisticated version of the famous "pie in the sky."

The Theologico-Political Problem

The above-delineated four categories are distinguished in order to see the many ways God is referred to in national constitutions. They mingle in some preambles, such as that of the Irish Constitution (1937):

In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity, from Whom is all authority [*God as ruler*] and to Whom, as our final end, all actions both of men and States must be referred [*God as judge*],

We, the people of Éire,

Humbly acknowledging all our obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ [*God as giver*]³,
Who sustained our fathers through centuries of trial
[*God as liberator*] ...

Do hereby adopt, enact, and give to ourselves this
Constitution.

The four categories represent, in a way, four cardinal ways of locating God, either on a temporal axis (the past liberator, the future judge) or on a spatial axis (the ruler above, the giver below). In any case, they attempt to strengthen constitutional foundations by bracing them with a divine reference. In doing so, they testify to an age-old problem: how can the political sphere, which is contingent by nature, be firmly established? Can an absolute divine foundation be invoked? Can the contingent and the absolute connect in any way? Should they? In political philosophy, those questions point towards what has come to be known as "the theologico-political problem" (Strauss 1997; Meier 2006).

Early Modernity had broken with religious foundations and undertaken to re-establish them on the sole principles of reason and the will of the people. But tragedies of the 20th century, especially world wars and genocides, shook the confidence in such foundations and laid bare the powerlessness of laws when faced with widespread violence and injustice. Different solutions were explored. After World War II, there was a renewal of interest for the idea of a "natural law" beyond rationality.

[Their proponents] believed in a natural law which was derived from the order created by God, in which man's nature was the source of, and his reason nothing but a means to, revelation. Natural law was not just some product of human reason, but a system of norms which through reason could be found in the order erected by God, in which God was both *principium* and *finis*. They believed in a law ... which Plato had referred to as the law in itself ... Cicero had said of it that it was the same in Rome and Athens, unchangeable and eternal at all times and for all peoples, the voice of God himself, which could not be abolished; nor could its validity be contested by the resolution of a senate or a plebiscite (Dietze 1956, 75–76).

Natural law underlies many recent discourses on human rights. As Dietze writes: "Under the Western

3 Obligation relates to the idea of gift through the themes of gratitude and indebtedness (Online Etymology Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/word/obligation>).

constitutions, basic rights appear as an objective value. The *pouvoir constituant* does not grant them, but merely guarantees them. Having their roots in a natural law that is not so much the creation of human reason but of God, these rights are immune from a subjectivist interpretation and can neither be amended nor abolished” (Dietze 1956, 81).

More secular schools of thought attempted to ground human rights on other principles, such as human dignity or reason. Most constitutions refer to human rights and do so in a very solemn way, even if they do not relate them to a divine foundation. However, as Schmid (2004, 28) remarks:

It seems that the commitment to universal human rights has attained quasi religious status in these preambles, that at first sight appear to be secular. No longer is accountability to the almighty God final criteria, but accountability to the dignity of the human being. This demonstrates, as with the particular western examples, that constitutions—as the supreme texts of law—cannot do without religious reminiscences, at least as structural elements: whereas they do not invoke God, they do celebrate a firm “faith” in universal human rights, in which they find their foundation *extra se*.

The theologico-political problem cannot be easily solved. “Religious reminiscences” remain, even when constitutions try to do without a religious foundation.⁴

Critical Reflections

Our assessment of the references to God in national constitutions leads us to a mixed appraisal. On the one hand, many analysts find those references useful to warrant the solemnity of constitutional measures.

To invoke God is, beyond the act of faith ... to give an additional guarantee to the liberty and the rights of the citizens, in the sense that a divine presence means that human law is not the supreme and final norm of human society, because everyone knows that positive law does not exhaust the sphere of law. Likewise, this invocation emphasizes that politics is not the unsurpassable horizon of social life (D’Onorio 2008, 9; my translation).

On the other hand, other analysts deem such invocations to be either inappropriate, ineffective, or

harmful. From a modern perspective, constitutional references to God seem out of place. Their location in preambles and their very general phrasing tends to make them useless in legal disputes.⁵ They testify to ancient alliances between religious authorities and political powers, which, too often, served to warrant those powers and to justify unfathomable crimes (Winiger 2010).

Other critical remarks are necessary from a theological point of view. The massive legacy of Christendom prompts many Christians to consider the inclusion of God in national constitutions as a fit homage to God or the Christian heritage and to see its promotion as a faithful duty. We could witness this sort of argumentation in the debate around the European Constitution project (Berten 2004; Kiljunen 2004, 51–52; Wynne 2007). But to what extent isn’t the God of national constitutions a mere projection of our collective desires and needs? Do constitutional references to God truly honour God? Their insistence on “Almighty God” and on God as “Supreme Ruler” of the universe leaves aside important aspects of the biblical tradition about God. God calls Abram to leave his country and to move towards “the land I will show you” (Gen 12:1). The prophets constantly question the rulers’ appeal to God to justify their deeds and policies. Jesus’ kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36), and, therefore, in Paul’s words, “our citizenship is in heaven” (Phi 3:20). In a word: from a Christian point of view, constitutional references to God tend to suffer from an eschatological deficit. But this leads us to a well-known theological dilemma: Is the Christian view of politics essentially a critical one, or can Christianity (still) make positive contributions to the foundation and development of countries?

A proposal

Konrad Schmid made a thought-provoking remark in his study of constitutional preambles: “It could very well be the case that a preamble that avoids

4 Even an openly atheistic constitution such as that of North Korea (1972), as it exalts the leadership of Comrades Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il, underlines that their maxim is “The people are my God.”

5 In Canada, “the British Columbia Court of Appeal has gone so far as to describe the words of the preamble as ‘a dead letter’ into which that court has ‘no authority to breathe life’—an act of resurrection, it says, which only the Supreme Court of Canada could hope to bring about” (Farrow 2004, 162). For a counterargument regarding the normative value of preambles in constitutions, see Pieprzyc 2017.



mentioning God is shaped by theological thought to a greater degree than a preamble in which such mentioning is explicit” (Schmid 2004, 29). The issue might not be so much to name God but rather to discourse in such a way that a space opens for transcendence, be it a “nameless Transcendence.”⁶

The conditions under which such discourse can be achieved would have to be explored for themselves. Let me just suggest that they could be traced in the South African case, as the country abandoned the racist constitution of 1961 to move towards the post-apartheid constitution of 1996. This contemporary constitution abandons the epic godly narrative to propose instead a brief preamble remembering past sufferings, injustice and hardships, and expressing its fundamental belief in inclusivity:

We, the people of South Africa,
Recognise the injustices of our past;
Honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land;
Respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and
Believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity.

We may notice that the three central categories of Johann Baptist Metz’s new political theology are imbedded in this first sentence, namely: memory, narrative, and solidarity. The memory is, as in Metz’s view, the memory of suffering (Metz 1980). The preamble goes on with the goals and principles held dear by the country:

We therefore, through our freely elected representatives, adopt this Constitution as the supreme law of the Republic so as to
— Heal the divisions of the past and establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights;
— Lay the foundations for a democratic and open society in which government is based on the will of the people and every citizen is equally protected by law;
— Improve the quality of life of all citizens and free the potential of each person; and

— Build a united and democratic South Africa able to take its rightful place as a sovereign state in the family of nations.

The preamble concludes with a dual *invocatio Dei*: “May God protect our people,” and “God bless South Africa.” Such invocations recognize that, ultimately, the people are vulnerable and in need of “blessing.” Our beliefs, intentions and projects are full of hopes and desires that we cannot entirely fulfill. God is invoked not as a warrant that closes the deal, but as the trustworthy witness of a liberating journey which remains our own.

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6 The French-Canadian sociologist Fernand Dumont wrote extensively about the key role of such transcendence in human life, both on individual and societal levels (Baum 2015; Dumont 1995, 215–234).

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