Towards a Christian Ontology of Political Authority: The Relationship between Created Order and Providence in Oliver O’Donovan’s Theology of Political Authority

Jonathan Cole
Charles Sturt University, Australia

Abstract
This article argues that the formally similar conceptions of political authority provided in Oliver O’Donovan’s *Resurrection and Moral Order* and *The Desire of the Nations* appear to assume different ontologies of political authority. The former account conceives political authority as a special use of natural authorities found in the created order, where ‘authority’ is defined as what it is that evokes free and intelligible human action. The latter account, however, appears to attribute the existence of political authority exclusively to divine providence. I contend that these two accounts of political authority are ostensibly in tension. I also argue that O’Donovan’s subsequent ‘providentialist’ account of political authority is unable to explain how political authority can evoke free and intelligible action in political communities. I maintain that O’Donovan can remove this apparent tension by returning the essence of political authority to creation, as he did in *Resurrection and Moral Order*, and then regard the Christ-event as redeeming political authority rather than merely restricting its historical function to judgment, as he argues in *The Desire of the Nations*. The emergence of O’Donovan’s ‘Christian liberalism’ could then be regarded as the ‘work of divine providence in history’ facilitated by the redemption of the natural authorities in the created order.

Keywords
Oliver O’Donovan, political authority, ontology, created order, providence, redemption.

Corresponding author:
Jonathan Cole, Research Fellow, The Centre for Public and Contextual Theology, Charles Sturt University, George Browning House, 15 Blackall St, Barton Act 2600, Australia.
Email: jonathancole331@gmail.com
Introduction

Oliver O’Donovan has a well-established reputation as one of the English-speaking world’s most important and influential political theologians. His book *The Desire of the Nations* (henceforth *DN*) has been hailed as the twentieth century’s ‘most important contribution to political theology’. It has also been credited with ‘inaugurating a new era in theological thinking on politics’. *DN* and its companion, *The Ways of Judgment* (henceforth *WJ*), have generated a substantial body of secondary literature. Indeed, in a testament to O’Donovan’s impact, this journal dedicated an entire edition in 1998 to engaging *DN*.

The present article seeks to contribute to the existing critical literature on O’Donovan’s thought by examining an apparent tension in the ontology of political authority evident in his work that has been identified in the critical literature, but thus far not pursued systematically. The tension relates to the question of whether political authority belongs to the natural authorities of the created order or to the providential order of history. I will first endeavour to substantiate the existence of this tension and highlight its significance for the cogency of O’Donovan’s account of political theology. I will then propose a way to resolve the apparent tension by better integrating insights from his moral theology with those of his political theology. My proposal is to locate the *esse* of political authority in the created order and then attribute its *bene esse* to Christ’s redemption of that order in history. I venture an immanent critique of O’Donovan’s theology of political authority in

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the spirit of his wise aphorism that ‘the lover of truth has no truer friend than an intelligent critic’.7

**The Essence of Political Authority**

In *DN*, O’Donovan offers two theorems that are foundational for his theology of political authority. They emerge from his analysis of ‘leading political terms’ in the Old Testament ‘habitually grouped’ with the concept of divine kingship.8 The terms in question are ‘salvation’, ‘judgment’ and ‘possession’.9 The first theorem states that ‘political authority arises where power, the execution of right and the perpetuation of tradition are assured together in one coordinated agency’.10 ‘Power’ is construed in terms of the ‘capacity to accomplish something, by whatever means’.11 ‘Execution of right’ relates to the act of making public judgments: ‘to judge is to make a distinction between the just and the unjust, or, more precisely, to bring the distinction which already exists between them into the daylight of public observation’.12 Tradition denotes ‘what is established’, and what is established is what has ‘proved its worth by survival’.13 ‘The authority of tradition’, O’Donovan argues in *WJ*, ‘is that of its continuity with immediate history’.14 Tradition must also be representative, particularly if it is to contribute to the establishment of political authority: ‘An unrepresentative power might do all kinds of good, but it would do it from the outside; it would not be a good done by that community.’15

The second theorem says, ‘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’.16 Together, these theorems make

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11. O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, p. 130. Note that theorem 1 is restated verbatim in *WJ* (p. 142), and it is in that book that the constitutive terms of political authority are given their clearest definition.
16. O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 46. There are a further four theorems presented in *DN* which are not discussed in this article. They are (3) ‘In acknowledging political authority, society proves its political identity’; (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’; (5) ‘The appropriate unifying element in international order is law rather than government’; and (6) ‘The conscience of the individual member 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’, pp. 47, 65, 72, 80.
the following claim: political authority arises where power, the execution of right and the perpetuation of tradition are assured together in one coordinated agency (theorem 1) by the work of divine providence (theorem 2).

O’Donovan’s description of these propositions as ‘theorems’, coupled with the somewhat abstruse methodology by which they are developed, has confused some readers. In reality, theorem 1 appears to be an extrapolation based on the aforementioned exegetical analysis of Old Testament political terms associated with divine kingship. I say extrapolation because two of the constitutive terms in theorem 1—‘power’ and ‘tradition’—differ from the Hebrew political terms actually exegeted from the Old Testament, i.e. ‘salvation’ (yeshuah) and ‘possession’ (nahalah).

It is possible that this subtle conceptual change occurring in the movement from the exegetical analysis to the theorem, which is unacknowledged and unexplained by O’Donovan, is a primary cause of the confusion surrounding the status of theorem 1. In light of O’Donovan’s methodological axiom, articulated early in DN, that political theology fundamentally consists of the pursuit of ‘true political concepts’, which in turn ‘must be authorised … from Holy Scripture’, it is difficult to discern exactly what epistemic weight O’Donovan means to accord theorem 1. Does it constitute, as I suggest above, a theory of political authority extrapolated from Scripture, or is it supposed to be a proposition ‘authorised’ from Scripture, the criterion O’Donovan seems to set for true theopolitical propositions? This is a moot question, but not one that need detain us for the present purposes.

Irrespective of questions surrounding the method used to develop theorem 1, we can be confident as to its meaning. When O’Donovan comes to introduce the idea that the Christ-event ‘re-authorises’ political authority, such that judgment becomes the sole function of secular government in the post-Easter phase of salvation-history, he clarifies that theorem 1 describes the essence of political authority:

The responsible state is the bene esse which corresponds to the esse of political authority. The latter we described in chapter two as the union of power, the execution of right and the perpetuation of tradition in one centre of action … The subjection of all authorities to Christ’s authority does not mean the dissolution of authority. The conjunction of power, judgment and tradition defines what political authority is … Power and community tradition are still essential

to establish authority; the new development is that they are subordinated to just judgment as means to an end.\textsuperscript{20}

Theorem 1 is thus an ontological proposition. It purports to describe the essence of political authority, as it exists generically and empirically, and as it is instantiated by particular regimes. The Christ-event, according to O’Donovan, leaves the essence of political authority untouched, but reorients its \textit{bene esse} towards the exclusive end of judgment, thus giving it a new christologically normed function in history. I will return to the question of political authority’s christological \textit{bene esse} below.

In \textit{WJ}, O’Donovan demonstrates the explanatory potential of this insight about the essence of political authority for the analysis of actual regimes. He shows that his conception of political authority can provide a cogent and empirically verifiable account of what constitutes political authority and what is required for it to endure: a regime must hold \textit{enough} power, execute \textit{enough} right, within a \textit{sufficiently} representative tradition to obtain and retain political authority.\textsuperscript{21} With respect to the issue of executing right, for example, O’Donovan, citing the instance of legalised abortion in Western countries, notes that ‘as one swallow does not make a summer, so one bad law—even a handful—do not make a refusal of right’.\textsuperscript{22}

Theorem 1 also provides an explanation for why certain regimes lose political authority—by failing to fulfil at least one of the constitutive elements that enable political authority to function. For example, a regime that holds power and executes right, but fails to do so within a representative tradition, is ultimately doomed to failure. O’Donovan thinks this is what happened in the case of the collapse of the Soviet Union:

This observation sheds light upon another case familiar from recent history, that of the regime deserted by its tradition overnight, deprived of its authority by a massive and sudden relocation of the community’s identity. The Soviet government was no usurper in 1991 when it was brushed aside by its constituent republics, and until very shortly before it had not even been weak.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{20} O’Donovan, \textit{The Desire of the Nations}, p. 233; emphasis original.

\textsuperscript{21} O’Donovan, \textit{The Ways of Judgment}, p. 8. O’Donovan explains that judgment ‘achieves its goal only if a public moral context is, in some respect, more just as a result’. This insight actually dates back to Oliver O’Donovan, \textit{Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics} (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986): ‘Political authority, then, cannot take form without these three elements: sufficient might to govern, sufficient identification with the tradition of the community to govern legitimately, and sufficient commitment to righting wrong to govern, within the relative possibilities open to human powers, justly’, p. 129.

\textsuperscript{22} O’Donovan, \textit{The Ways of Judgment}, p. 145. Interestingly, O’Donovan considers the question of whether a ‘slave-state’ or ‘apartheid state’ could command authority. He concludes that such a state could not command authority over the group it persecutes, but that it could nevertheless command authority over the remaining citizenry, although that citizenry would owe the state no obligation of compliance in respect of the unjust policy in question.

\textsuperscript{23} O’Donovan, \textit{The Ways of Judgment}, p. 147.
One of the great virtues of theorem 1 is that, as a definition of the *essence* of political authority, it is not dependent on any particular polity, culture or historical period. Political authority can exist within monarchical, oligarchical or democratic polities, and in a variety of institutional forms within each of those polities.\textsuperscript{24} It can also function within different conceptions of justice and within different traditions of communal identity. In that regard, it is noteworthy that, although O’Donovan’s definition of the essence of political authority is ostensibly developed in close dialogue with the Old Testament’s account of God’s divine kingship over Israel, the theorem itself is not formally theological, nor does it depend on the specific institutional and legal arrangements employed in Israel. An atheist, for example, could conceivably embrace the idea that political authority consists of the conjunction in one coordinated agency of power, execution of right and perpetuation of tradition without any theological commitment.

The Role of Providence in O’Donovan’s Account of Political Authority

On its own, theorem 1 provides a relatively clear and straightforward empirical description of political authority. Theorem 2, however, adds theological content to theorem 1 that is not obvious from its formulation alone: ‘that any regime should actually come to hold authority [conjunction of power, right and tradition in one coordinated agency], and should continue to hold it, is a work of divine providence’.\textsuperscript{25} Political authority, then, ultimately owes its existence to God’s providence.\textsuperscript{26}

The rationale for the introduction of theorem 2 is more obscure than that provided for theorem 1. Theorem 2 is introduced on the same page as theorem 1, but ‘providence’ does not form part of the preceding exegetical analysis of divine kingship—it is not presented as a ‘leading political term’ of the Old Testament.\textsuperscript{27} Theorem 2 appears, on the one hand, to be the product of O’Donovan’s orthodox Christian belief in God’s ongoing providential care

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\textsuperscript{24} O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 20. ‘It is not its [political theology’s] goal to describe an ideal set of political institutions; for political institutions are anyway too fluid to assume an ideal form’. Note, however, that O’Donovan’s later work (post-dating DN) gives greater emphasis to representation as constitutive of political authority, suggesting that democracy might have a claim to being a more effective and/or legitimate model for expressing political authority than other polities. See O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, pp. 149–63; and Oliver O’Donovan, ‘Representation’, *Studies in Christian Ethics* 29.2 (2015), pp. 135–45.

\textsuperscript{25} O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 46. The object of highlighting this subtle formal distinction between theorems 1 and 2 is to clarify the theological content of theorem 1 with a view to facilitating its critical engagement in the pages that follow.

\textsuperscript{26} O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 47. ‘No one can pretend to have invented authority or to have devised it as an instrument to serve some pre-political purposes of his or her own’.

\textsuperscript{27} This might have something to do with the fact that there is no Hebrew root for ‘providence’, although, as Carson notes, ‘the concept itself is woven into all divisions of the Hebrew canon’; see Don A. Carson, *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), pp. 3–4.
for his creation: ‘Divine rule is … the potentia ordinata which works within the covenant that is established through creation’. On the other hand, it appears to be an inference drawn from an axiomatic belief that stable political order, upheld by political authority, transcends human will and capacity. O’Donovan notes in relation to theorem 2 that ‘it does not lie within the power of political orders to secure the social conditions for their own indefinite prolongation’. The idea seems to be that it is not within the capacity of human rulers or regimes to create, shape and sustain the complex social conditions necessary for stable political order. A Christian can therefore posit that divine providence is necessary to explain the existence of political authority and the longevity of the stable regimes that hold it.

O’Donovan reaffirms the proposition contained in theorem 2 in WJ: ‘that the ruler we elect and the forms we devise should be able to assert and retain authority, that is something we cannot undertake. We can only entrust them and ourselves to God’s providential authorisation’. O’Donovan is careful, however, to clarify that, while political authority is not a human achievement, it is nevertheless a human task that involves human agency. He maintains that Paul’s description of government in Rom. 13:4 as a ‘minister of God’ ‘does not imply a special intervention of the divine to appoint a particular ruler, but a general provision of non-reciprocal relations under which we may flourish’.

In spite of the clarification that theorem 2 does not imply that God necessarily selects and appoints specific rulers, the precise role of divine providence in the existence and exercise of political authority, per theorem 2, remains opaque. It is not clear if O’Donovan intends to claim only that providence facilitates the generic conditions that allow political authority to emerge and endure, with no further involvement in the emergence of specific regimes and the character of their rule, or, whether he intends something stronger, i.e., that providence facilitates the rise of specific regimes in specific places at specific times for specific purposes, and then keeps them in power, albeit without appointing specific rulers and dictating every action and decision by the ruler or regime in question. This is not the place to resolve this question. Instead, I will focus on the ontological implications of theorem 2 when read in conjunction with the description of the essence of political authority contained in theorem 1. I do so, however, noting that there is some ambiguity surrounding the meaning of providence in theorem 2.

Creation and Providence: The Apparent Tension in O’Donovan’s Account of the Ontology of Political Authority

Jonathan Chaplin has noted the striking similarity between DN’s theorem 1 and an earlier description of political authority O’Donovan provided in the context of his seminal work

29. O’Donovan, The Desire of the Nations, p. 46. ‘But although any actor either may make it a matter of conscious intention to keep power, the execution of right and the perpetuation of tradition together in his own hands and so to exercise political authority, or may intend to keep them together in the hands of someone else and so to be a loyal subject to political authority, in neither endeavour does success come merely by intending it’.
in moral theology, *Resurrection and Moral Order* (henceforth *RMO*).\(^{33}\) In *RMO*, O’Donovan argued that

> the distinctive form of authority which we call ‘political’ is, then, at its simplest, a concurrence of the natural authorities of might and tradition with that other ‘relatively natural’ authority, the authority of injured right. When these three authorities are exercised together by one subject, then they are endorsed by a moral authority which requires that we defer to them.\(^{34}\)

For the sake of comparison, theorem 1 from *DN* says

> Political authority arises where power, the execution of right and the perpetuation of tradition are assured together in one coordinated agency.\(^{35}\)

The description of political authority articulated in *RMO*, however, emerges in a very different context from that of theorem 1. The *RMO* description is also the product of a different methodology from that used in *DN* to produce theorem 1, something also noted by Chaplin.\(^{36}\) The short discussion of political authority in *RMO* emerges within a chapter called ‘Authority’ that explores the authorities in the created order. By created order O’Donovan means a structured order of ends and kinds, which is to say a ‘teleological’ and ‘generic’ order.\(^{37}\) An ‘authority’ is ‘something which, by virtue of its kind, constitutes an immediate and sufficient ground for acting’.\(^{38}\) He provides, by way of illustration, three archetypical instances of natural authorities capable of evoking ‘meaningful’ and ‘intelligible’ human action: ‘beauty’, ‘community’ and ‘truth’.\(^{39}\) Listening to music, joining a club and reading philosophy are self-explanatory grounds for action.\(^{40}\) Humans too are capable of evoking free and intelligible action in other humans through the natural authority they possess by virtue of belonging to and participating in the created order: ‘the young accept the recommendations of their elders’, ‘those who have physical beauty

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35. O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 46. O’Donovan clarified in *WJ* that he had come to prefer ‘power’ in the stead of ‘might’ as the former ‘is a wider notion’; see *The Ways of Judgment*, p. 143.
and charm of speech influence other people’, ‘forceful personalities gather a following’, ‘widely-held opinions are more likely to win new adherents’ and ‘customary practices are maintained because they are customary’.

The constitutive terms in political authority, ‘might’ and ‘tradition’, are both described by O’Donovan as ‘natural’, thus substantially grounding political authority in the ontology of the created order. ‘Might’ and ‘tradition’ draw their force from the natural authorities of ‘strength’ and ‘age’ respectively.

‘Injured right’ is described in RMO as ‘relatively’ natural, in the sense that ‘it belongs to the natural order as it is encountered under the conditions brought about by Adam’s sin’.

In spite of the formal similarity between the conceptions of political authority presented in RMO and DN, there is a consequential difference that has not received the attention it deserves in the secondary literature. The difference is that the adjective ‘natural’ disappears in theorem 1. In fact, political authority and its constitutive elements are not described as ‘natural’ in DN/WJ and the created order plays no ostensible role in the development of O’Donovan’s conception of political authority in those books.

O’Donovan frames the discussion of political authority in DN within the context of the history of God’s reign: ‘theology, by developing its account of the reign of God, may recover the ground traditionally held by the notion of authority’, and ‘to start from the reign of God is to follow the modern tradition … of organising talk of politics within the category of history’. Conversely, while there is a single reference in O’Donovan’s discussion of political authority in RMO to ‘Christian thought … attributing the origin of [political] authority to divine providence’, providence does not assume the central role there that it later does in O’Donovan’s account of political authority in DN/WJ. Theorem 2 finds no counterpart in the discussion of political authority in RMO. As a consequence of these differences, the two formally similar definitions of political authority appear to assume different ontologies. The RMO account treats political authority as substantively grounded in, or emerging from, the natural created order. The DN account treats political authority as substantively grounded in God’s providential activity in history.

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44. Skillen has explicitly drawn attention to the tension in ‘Acting Politically in Biblical Obedience?’ He notes, for example, that ‘the picture O’Donovan presents here [in DN] stands in considerable contrast … to the picture he paints elsewhere of a single creation fulfilled in Christ’s kingly triumph’, p. 406. He concludes that ‘O’Donovan’s insights into creation regained are almost entirely overwhelmed [in DN] … by a secular/eternal framework that is more Greek and Roman than it is biblical’, p. 416. Errington has observed that there is a shift of emphasis in O’Donovan’s treatment of ‘authority’ (in the generic sense) in later works from creation to providence. Errington, ‘Authority and Reality in the Work of Oliver O’Donovan’, p. 378.
45. This is not to suggest that the notion itself is entirely absent or repudiated in those works.
47. O’Donovan, Resurrection and Moral Order, p. 130. Divine providence is not absent from RMO. It just plays no significant role in O’Donovan’s discussion of political authority in that work.
In their present formulation, then, the two accounts appear to be in tension. Theorem 2 ostensibly precludes the notion that political authority could belong to the created order. Conversely, if political authority belongs to the created order it is not clear in what sense it could be understood to exist by the work of divine providence. The impression of tension is reinforced by clarifying remarks O’Donovan has made in relation to DN, in which he has maintained that politics, and hence by implication political authority, belongs exclusively to the realm of providential history.48 This distinction reflects O’Donovan’s postlapsarian understanding of politics.49 This postlapsarianism, however, does not appear to be assumed in, or indeed demanded by, the account of political authority given in RMO. In fact, there are moments in RMO when O’Donovan seems to imply that politics might in fact have prelapsarian origins:

Christian ethics … respects the natural structures of life in the world, while looking forward to their transformation. This can be seen … in the First Epistle of Peter, which starts with a general characterisation of the Christian life in terms of ‘hope’, which is set ‘fully upon the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ’, and then elaborates a special ethics in terms of respectful submission ‘for the Lord’s sake’ to every institution of human life, especially the institutions of government, labour and marriage (1 Pet. 1:13; 2:13ff.) … A hope which envisages the transformation of existing natural structures cannot consistently attack or repudiate those structures.50

Moreover, in RMO O’Donovan contrasts the regularity of the created order with the sui generis nature of God’s providential intervention in history, which further adds to the impression of tension:

Moral authority is the authority of order, the created order of kinds and ends in which all created beings participate. It is ‘universal’ … that is, it supposes a universe of meaning which created beings inhabit in common. The authority of divine transcendence, on the other hand, is beyond world-order, and can only appear to us as an unaccountable and mysterious breach in the

48. Oliver O’Donovan, ‘Deliberation, History and Reading: A Response to Schweiker and Wolterstorff’, Scottish Journal of Theology 51.1 (2001), pp. 127–44 (137). ‘For Politics belongs within the category of history, not of nature’ and ‘political order is a providential ordering’; emphasis original. Chaplin interprets these remarks by O’Donovan in the following way: ‘Government, then, is needed in our present age, but it is not grounded in created order in the same way that natural social structures are’; see Chaplin, ‘Political Eschatology and Responsible Government’, p. 297. In WJ O’Donovan defines ‘politics’ and ‘political’ as ‘those activities with a direct relation to government, but not only those activities with a direct relation to elected office’; see The Ways of Judgment, p. 56.

49. This is assumed in DN, but is not discussed substantively or explicitly. In response to Chaplin, O’Donovan wrote that ‘judgment … does presuppose the fall, for it is the response to actual wrong’; see Oliver O’Donovan, ‘Response to Jonathan Chaplin’, in A Royal Priesthood?, p. 310.

50. O’Donovan, Resurrection and Moral Order, p. 58; emphasis added. Although this passage does not explicitly deal with the question of political authority per se, it does appear to place ‘the institutions of governments’ in the same category as ‘labour’ and ‘marriage’, i.e. among the ‘natural structures of life in the world’. 
world-order. *Encounter with divine authority must be a unique event, irreducibly particular; incapable of comparison with any other.*

‘History’, O’Donovan contends, ‘must be shaped by the unique, by that which cannot be guessed from the scrutiny of natural repetitions’. The unique, *sui generis* nature of God’s providential activity in history possibly illuminates O’Donovan’s contention in *DN* that ‘the unique covenant of Yhwh and Israel can be seen as a point of disclosure from which the nature of all political authority comes into view’. Andrew Errington has drawn attention to the ‘miraculous’ quality that political authority appears to assume in O’Donovan’s account of political authority in *WJ*:

> In *The Ways of Judgment*, O’Donovan gives a persuasive analysis of how political authority can evaporate … The idea of authority as an event aims to secure this truth, by recognising the miraculous, providential nature of authority as the gift of God which happens, and then is taken away … authority is mysterious.

It is conceivable that the different ontologies of political authority assumed in *RMO* and *DN/WJ*, which we might call ‘creationist’ and ‘providentialist’ respectively, simply reflect development in O’Donovan’s thinking. In this regard, one must be mindful that *RMO* offers brief initial thoughts on political authority while *DN* offers a book-length treatise on the subject ten years later. Moreover, theorems 1 and 2 are reaffirmed in *WJ* nine years after *DN*, suggesting that this is O’Donovan’s settled position. Nonetheless, it is my contention that, irrespective of whether the creationist and providentialist accounts of political authority simply reflect progression in O’Donovan’s thought rather than a genuine tension, the providentialist account suffers from losing sight of the relationship between political authority and the natural created order explored in *RMO*. I will endeavour to show that reintegrating this insight into theorems 1 and 2 can provide O’Donovan with a more compelling account of the ontology of political authority, without altering his incisive definition of political authority’s essence, and still retaining a vital role for providence in the successful exercise of political authority.

53. O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 45; emphasis added. There is no hint in *RMO* that Israel has a unique role in revealing the essence of political authority.
The Case for Grounding the Ontology of Political Authority in the Natural Authorities of the Created Order

By losing sight of the close connection between political authority and the created order, O’Donovan’s ‘providentialist’ account of political authority appears to lack an explanation for how political authority can evoke meaningful, intelligible and free human action. According to RMO, a primary function of natural authorities embedded in the created order is to evoke free human action that is intelligible within a structured world of ends and kinds. Indeed, O’Donovan has stressed throughout his corpus that ‘authority is the objective correlate of freedom’. O’Donovan cogently argues in RMO that, without the ‘generic intelligibility of natural authorities, there would be ‘nothing in the world which invited our action’, thus making the very notion of freedom ‘problematic’, something more akin to ‘an irruption into a system that was closed against it’. O’Donovan reiterates the notion that authority ‘evokes free action, and makes free action intelligible’ in DN. He even states that political authority ‘needs a background in the ontology of human freedom, action and the good’. However, by appearing to attribute the existence of political authority exclusively to the work of divine providence in theorem 2, epitomised in the unique and paradigmatic way that God ruled Israel historically, O’Donovan loses the explanatory force of his insight about the way that natural authorities in the created order evoke free and intelligible human action. For if the existence of political authority is ultimately in some sense due to divine providence rather than the created order, it is not clear how political authority can evoke the free and intelligible collective human response that it so clearly does, thus establishing stable political order. It is the ability of political authority to evoke free action that distinguishes it, on O’Donovan’s account, from ‘force’.

Contrary to the anarchist maxim that political authority can never have legitimate ‘binding moral force’, the weight of history suggests that most people find nothing morally objectionable at all about obeying political authority. Indeed, political psychology has developed a host of theories for explaining the human capacity to submit to even

57. O’Donovan, Resurrection and Moral Order, p. 107. ‘For freedom is the character of one who participates in the order of creation by knowledge and action’.


62. O’Donovan, The Ways of Judgment, p. 132. O’Donovan notes that, in relation to political authority, ‘an end of action must be intelligible, not only from the actor’s point of view but from the observer’s point of view’.

63. O’Donovan, The Desire of the Nations, p. 30. ‘Force overrides the agency of those against whom it is brought to bear...’

manifestly unjust and oppressive forms of political authority. The latter phenomenon serves as evidence that political authority is, as O’Donovan suggests, deeply ingrained in the structures of creation (or nature if one objects to the former concept). O’Donovan’s RMO account of political authority potentially provides an explanation for that which has long perplexed and frustrated anarchist political philosophers: responding to political authority is natural and instinctive, because political authority consists of a combination of natural authorities capable of evoking free and intelligible human action. On this view, there is nothing mysterious at all about the consistent diachronic and synchronic human tendency to recognise and obey political authority. As O’Donovan observed in WJ, ‘our situation in the face of political authority, far from being out of the ordinary like an encounter with an angel or a divine revelation, is simply a special case of a situation deeply woven into our experience as human agents: finding ourselves under obligation to do something’.

I have maintained that one of the virtues of O’Donovan’s definition of political authority is its empirical explanatory power. It identifies the elements that make political authority a consistent and regular phenomenon observable in human affairs. This is exactly what a good definition of the essence of political authority ought to be able to do. But this consistency and regularity, indeed the very idea that political authority has an essence, seems to militate against the notion that Israel uniquely reveals, in some sense, the essence of political authority, or that this regularity is the product of unique divine providential acts in history.

It is important to stress at this point that my critique here is immanent. It is O’Donovan’s own compelling account of the way that natural authorities in the created order make human action intelligible and meaningful, along with the integral role they play in human freedom, that has led me to question his ‘providentialist’ account of political authority in DN/WJ. In doing so, it is also important to clarify that it is not my contention that there is a general tension between creation and providence in O’Donovan’s theology. One of the genuine strengths of O’Donovan’s theology is that it is so conscious of the complex and dynamic relationship between creation and history as the stage upon which the divine–human drama occurs, and the foundation upon which Christian theology must be built.

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66. O’Donovan, The Ways of Judgment, p. 129. This is a fine example of the potential contribution that O’Donovan’s insights about the nature of political authority could make to secular discourse in political theory.


68. O’Donovan, Resurrection and Moral Order, p. 45. ‘There is, then, an irreducible duality between the freedom of God to act particularly in history and the generic ordering of the world which is reflected in morality’.
What is under review here is the ontology of the essence of political authority as defined by O’Donovan. What I have characterised as an ‘apparent’ tension in the ontology of political authority in *RMO* and *DN/WJ* could be indicative of a gap in O’Donovan’s argument rather than a tension per se, and hence one that could be bridged by simply connecting the various strands of O’Donovan’s moral and political theology. To some extent the tension, or indeed gap, goes back to the lack of clarity around the meaning of ‘providence’ in theorem 2.

**Differentiating between the Need for Judgment and the Task of Executing Judgment**

O’Donovan’s postlapsarian understanding of politics is founded on the coherent notion that there could not have been any injured right to redress in the good creation. Given O’Donovan’s conclusion in *DN* that the normative function of secular government following the Christ-event is judgment, defined as ‘an act of moral discrimination that pronounces upon a preceding act or existing state of affairs to establish a new public context’, it is not difficult to discern a motive for locating the ontology of political authority in the realm of providential history. The question, however, is whether the conviction that government serves the function of ‘restraining and remedying sin’, as O’Donovan’s mentor Paul Ramsey put it, demands a providentialist ontology of political authority. I think O’Donovan’s account of political authority in *DN* fails to adequately differentiate between the need for public moral discriminations, on the one hand, and what is practically involved in the human task of executing judgment on the other.

Whether viewed from the perspective of legislative, executive or judicial judgments, the act of making public moral discriminations between right and wrong consists entirely of the utilisation of faculties and resources properly understood as belonging to the natural ends and kinds of the created order. These include reason, communication, speech, writing, consultation, coordination, organisation, collaboration, deliberation, labour and the human imagination and creativity required to put all these together into laws and institutions capable of exercising consistent judgment. Even if one assumes that it is divine providence that directs all these natural authorities towards the end of justice, there is nothing *prima facie* ontologically supernatural about the human activity of executing right. As O’Donovan observed in *WJ*, ‘no human act can be *radically* creative in the sense of giving existence to things that had no existence before’.

There is thus a sense in which the execution of right is not even ‘relatively’ natural, but rather wholly natural, at least when considered ontologically. Moreover, one could argue that it is the utilisation of natural authorities in the act of executing judgment that makes that act meaningful, intelligible and ultimately capable of gaining acceptance by the community concerned. What is unnatural is the need to execute right in the first place. That need emerges historically as a consequence of the fall. The failure to clearly

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differentiate between the unnatural end of executing right and the natural ‘authorities’ (in O’Donovan’s sense) involved in executing right, might provide a possible explanation for why O’Donovan felt compelled to look to providence rather than creation to explain the ontology of political authority when he came to write DN.

The argument I seek to make here is more subtle than a mere Thomist critique of O’Donovan’s postlapsarian definition of politics. While I do think Aquinas’s intuition was sound that human sociality necessitates some degree of authority for the purposes of realising the common good, I still think the fall alters the function of this natural authority, introducing a new political function that is alien to the good creation: the enactment of justice (righting wrong).72 I think there is actually a great deal of synergy between Aquinas’s conception of the function of authority in the prelapsarian ‘state of innocence’ and the role O’Donovan sees for natural authorities in the created order. But this synergy is obscured by O’Donovan’s very narrow definition of ‘politics’, restricted to governments exercising the single task of making moral discriminations between right and wrong.73 Such a definition necessarily makes politics utterly alien to the good creation. But definitions of ‘politics’ are by their nature stipulative and O’Donovan’s is no exception.74 There is, as far as I can see, no in principle obstacle to broadening the definition of politics to include both judgment, in the O’Donovan sense, and the pursuit of the common good. Indeed, it is my contention that O’Donovan, by expanding his conception of ‘politics’ to include dominium in the Thomist sense, could better explain how it is that political authority can efficaciously deal with what is alien to creation, ‘injured right’, i.e., by drawing on the natural (political) authorities found in the created order that make collective human action possible.

The Christological Redemption of Political Authority?

In RMO, O’Donovan argues that ‘morality is man’s participation in the created order’.75 The ability of humans to participate morally in the created order, however, is hampered by sin, which has resulted in humankind’s ‘persistent rejection of the created order’ and ‘an inescapable confusion in [its] perceptions of it’.76 The Christ-event ‘redeems’ or ‘vindicates’ the created order, thus restoring humankind’s ability to participate morally in it, 

72. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae Prima Pars*, 50–119, trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas, 2012), 1a.96.a4ad. ‘Man is naturally a social being, and so in the state of innocence he would have led a social life. Now a social life cannot exist among a number of people unless under the presidency of one to look after the common good’.

73. O’Donovan has indicated that he does not regard the dichotomy between the Thomist and Augustinian views of the place of politics in the divine economy as irreconcilable. O’Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, p. 60.

74. A definition is not offered in Scripture, so definitions of ‘politics’ unavoidably must be brought to the text.


in accordance with the proper ends and kinds for which humans were created.77 As O’Donovan wrote in *RMO*, knowledge of the created order

must be a knowledge that is vindicated by God’s revelatory word that the created good and man’s knowledge of it is not to be overthrown in history. Such knowledge, according to the Christian gospel, is given to us as we participate in the life of Jesus Christ … And he is the one whose faithfulness to the created moral order was answered by God’s deed of acceptance and vindication, so that the life of man within this order is not lost but assured for all time. True knowledge of the moral order is knowledge ‘in Christ’.78

In practical terms, it is the Holy Spirit who ‘makes the reality of redemption present to us’ and who ‘evokes our free response as moral agents to the reality of redemption’.79 The spirit restores humans ‘as moral agents’ and its ‘redemptive work … restor[es] … our access to reality’.80

I believe O’Donovan’s insight about the way that Christ redeems humankind’s ability to participate morally in the created order offers a way to resolve the tension, or remove the appearance of tension, in his account of the ontology of political authority. The resolution is to locate the esse of political authority in the created order, as O’Donovan did in *RMO*, and to locate its bene esse in Christ’s redemption of the whole created order, which is to say in the providential realm of history. The latter is precisely what O’Donovan does in *DN*, albeit by also attributing the esse of political authority to providence.81

Under such a refinement the role of providence becomes more specific and definite than the generic and opaque role it assumes in theorem 2. The catalytic act of providential intervention in history is the Christ-event, which redeems the possibility of a morally right exercise of political authority, consisting of a conjunction of specific natural authorities in creation. There are passages in *RMO* that seem to support such a notion. For instance, O’Donovan maintains that Christ’s vindication of creation redeems ‘mankind in his context as the ruler of the ordered creation that God has made’, and ‘in Christ man was able for the first time to assume his proper place within it, the place of dominion which God assigned to Adam’.82 Providence could further be construed in terms of the work of the Holy Spirit, moving individuals and communities towards a redeemed exercise of political authority, or, with respect to political judgments, helping rulers and communities to make just moral discriminations.

Interestingly, Chaplin interprets O’Donovan’s ‘position’ in *DN* ‘to be that salvation restores and vindicates the created orders of society, but restrains and disciplines the providential order of government’.83 This interpretation appears to reconcile and explain

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77. O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, p. 76. ‘Christian morality is his glad response to the deed of God which has restored, proved and fulfilled that order, making man free to conform to it’.
the differing accounts of political authority provided in RMO and DN/WJ by making a subtle distinction between ‘society’ and ‘government’. But militating against this reconciliation is the absence of the created order in O’Donovan’s account of the essence of political authority. We are told at the beginning of DN that ‘the history of divine rule safeguards and redeems the goods of creation’, but political authority does not appear to be one of these goods. Instead, we have to turn to Scripture’s account of Israel in order to learn what the essence of political authority is. Indeed, in DN it is Israel that appears to form the locus for the redemption of political authority: ‘Yet Israel’s history must be read as a history of redemption, which is to say, as the story of how certain principles of social and political life were vindicated by the action of God in the judgment and restoration of the people.’ The Christ-event, for its part, redefines and restricts the historical function of political authority, but does not appear to redeem it—‘the recovery of something given and lost’. Even then, it is not clear how a distinction between the redemption of society and the taming of political authority can resolve the question of how O’Donovan’s providentialist account of the ontology of political authority can explain its ability to evoke a free and intelligible human response if it is not grounded in the regularity of the created order like other authorities.

‘Christian Liberalism’ as the bene esse of Political Authority

In DN, O’Donovan avers that ‘Christian theologian[s] can venture to characterise a normative political culture broadly in continuity with the Western liberal tradition’. This ‘Christian liberalism’ is based on the notion that the ‘high tradition’ of Christian political thought (1100–1650) developed certain political principles that are foundational for liberalism. These principles include ‘freedom’, ‘merciful judgment’, ‘natural right’ and ‘openness of speech’. By freedom O’Donovan does not mean ‘an assertion of individuality’, but rather ‘a new disposition of society around its supreme Lord which sets it loose from its traditional lords’. Merciful judgment entails the recognition that human judges themselves are subject to law and moral judgment. It is merciful because it is premised on Christian notions of reconciliation, penitence and forgiveness. Natural right (not to be confused with natural rights) consists of the Christian concepts of ‘natural equality’, ‘affinity’, ‘reciprocity’ and ‘creaturely cohabitation of human and non-human species in a common world’. Openness of speech relates to ‘access to public deliberations’ and responsible government. O’Donovan attributes these foundational liberal principles to

84. I confess that I do not find this view clearly articulated in DN.
85. O’Donovan, The Desire of the Nations, p. 29; emphasis original.
86. O’Donovan, Resurrection and Moral Order, p. 54.
87. O’Donovan, The Desire of the Nations, p. 230; emphasis original.
Christ’s triumph over the nations, maintaining that Western liberalism ‘has the narrative of the Christ-event stamped upon it’.94

As a historical achievement, the Christian could regard the emergence of Western (Christian) liberalism as ‘a work of divine providence in history, not a mere accomplishment of the human task of political service’ (theorem 2), which is in fact what O’Donovan does in DN:

To display the liberal achievement correctly, we have to show it as the victory won by Christ over the nations’ rulers. It presupposes original political authority, on the one hand, and proclaims the transformation of it wrought by Christ’s Spirit on the other. Apart from this salvation-historical background, liberal expectations lose their meaning, which is to point to a bene esse of political society which presumes an esse. They represent a (provisional) perfection and fulfilment of political order which derives its political character from the rule of divine providence.95

Thus, rather than divine providence being responsible for the existence of the essence of political authority, it could be reconceived as redeeming the created good of political authority in the Christ-event, thereby facilitating the historical realisation of its redeemed bene esse in the form of Christian liberalism.96

It is important to note that, while the conjunction of power, right and tradition in one coordinated agency is a prerequisite for realising the political goods of ‘freedom’, ‘merciful judgment’, ‘natural right’ and ‘openness of speech’, these goods are not, of themselves, constitutive of political authority, nor a necessary product thereof. Political authority does not only have an esse and bene esse, but also a male esse, i.e., a perverted form. By making the ontological distinction between an esse of political authority grounded in the created order and a bene esse of political authority founded in the work of divine providence in history, O’Donovan actually possesses a powerful theological explanation for the existence of oppressive and unjust regimes that does not make God complicit in their existence, as theorem 2 might imply. As a special conjunction of natural authorities in the created order, political authority is there to be discovered and used, or, as the case may be, manipulated and abused, by all humans.97 God is no more morally responsible for the misuse of political authority than he is for the misuse of any other natural authority in creation. Sin is responsible. Moreover, this distinction provides O’Donovan with a constructive normative Christian liberal political manifesto that is distinct from contemporary secular Western liberal offerings. O’Donovan’s Christian liberalism can argue that the only viable way for non-liberal regimes to realise the liberal achievement is to recognise Christ’s redemption of the created order and his triumph

95. O’Donovan, The Desire of the Nations, p. 229; emphasis original.
96. Wolterstorff has asked why the ‘re-authorisation of governmental regimes … would not instead imply the healing of their malformation’. Wolterstorff, ‘A Discussion of Oliver O’Donovan’s The Desire of the Nations’, p.102.
over the nations, the very thing that produced the foundational principles of (Christian) liberalism in the first place.

O’Donovan is keenly aware that contemporary Western liberal political order has ‘turned its back on its theological horizons’.\(^9\) Western regimes no longer recognise Christ’s redemption or lordship and have thus gone the way of the ‘prodigal’.\(^9\) O’Donovan even provocatively suggests that ‘modernity can be conceived as Antichrist, a parodic and corrupt development of Christian social order’.\(^1\) So O’Donovan’s Christian liberalism is not just a constructive pathway for non-liberal regimes to realise the liberal achievement, but also crucially a vital reform agenda for tired Western liberal regimes struggling to retain a firm grip on the fruits of the Christian liberal achievement.

**Conclusion**

Leveraging the foundation of critical engagement with O’Donovan’s theology of political authority developed by Wolterstorff, Chaplin and Skillen, I have sought to argue in this article that O’Donovan’s ‘providentialist’ account of the ontology of political authority in \(DN/WJ\) appears to be in tension with his ‘creationist’ account in \(RMO\). I maintain that O’Donovan’s instinct in \(RMO\) to ground the essence of political authority in the created order was sound, and that his subsequent grounding of it in providential history offers a less compelling account of the ontology of political authority. I propose a modest refinement that draws principally on O’Donovan’s own insights. I propose that theorem 1 be recast in its \(RMO\) form to say that ‘political authority arises where the natural authorities of power, the execution of right and the perpetuation of tradition are assured together in one coordinated agency’. In this formulation the ‘execution of right’ relates to the process of executing right and its utilisation of natural authorities to that end. This formulation could also provide an explanation for how political authority can be efficacious: by evoking a free and intelligible collective human response. I further propose that theorem 2 be recast to say: ‘that any regime should actually come to exercise the bene esse of political authority is a work of divine providence in history facilitated by Christ’s redemption of the created order’. It is hoped that this refinement might strengthen the cogency of what is a genuinely incisive and helpful conception of political authority, along with the insightful distinction between its esse and Christian bene esse.

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