

Sovereignty and monarchy

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September saw the passing of Queen Elizabeth II after, by any standards, a remarkable 70-year reign. There was much comment on her Christian commitment, even by those usually opposed to public expressions of faith, and the funeral, televised globally, was a deeply religious occasion. It was full of symbolism, not least when the imperial state crown (a controversial name in itself), the sceptre and the orb (right) passed from her coffin to the altar in St George's Chapel, Windsor. Indeed, the themes of empire, sovereignty and God's kingdom rule were never far from the surface and the congregation sang of God's "throne" in the words of John Ellerton's hymn:



*Thy throne shall never, like earth's proud empires, pass away;
Thy kingdom stands, and grows for ever, till all thy creatures own thy sway.*

It surely would have reminded all those present and watching – even, or maybe especially, monarchs, presidents and prime ministers – that human rule is temporary and subordinate. Whatever one's opinion of earthly royalty, this is an opportunity for all, including Muslims and Christians, to reflect on the nature of governance in relation to beliefs.

Both the Bible and the Qur'an speak of God's eternal throne. The well-known "throne verse" in the Qur'an (2:255) says:

His throne extends over the heavens and the earth; it does not weary Him to preserve them both. He is the Most High, the Tremendous. (Haleem translation)

In the Hebrew scriptures, Psalm 45:6 says:

Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever; a sceptre of justice will be the sceptre of your kingdom. (NIV)

In the New Testament, the book of Hebrews (1:8) boldly applies these exact same words to the rule of Jesus, the Messiah, "the Son". Whatever the respective understanding of divinity, it is clear that, for both scriptures, unlike human rule, God's rule is eternal and ultimate.

Yet both the Bible and the Qur'an have a role for humans as God's representatives on earth. In the Genesis account of creation, God makes humankind in his own image and appoints them to "rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground" (1:26). In the Qur'an, the angels are told that God is "putting a *khalifa* on earth", a word that can mean "successor" (Haleem), "vicegerent" (Ali) or "viceroys" (Pickthall).

What is not so clear in either tradition is the way in which earthly rulers should be appointed and what power they should have. A full discussion of this difficult question goes beyond the scope of a short thought-piece, but it is interesting to note the tensions. Historically, both Islam and Christianity have had empires, formed states, appointed temporal rulers and made laws informed by religious principles. At the same time, both claim that God is the ultimate ruler. What should be the relationship between the two? Should religious leaders appoint or anoint the monarch or ruler? Should political leaders oversee a theocracy? Should they enact religious laws?

Even today there are different models. Some countries with significant historical Christian influence have a monarch with a formal link between the throne and the state, such as Great Britain. Others have an elected president or prime minister with no formal connection to the church yet who may themselves be religious, such as in the USA. In Muslim majority countries there are monarchies, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan or Morocco, that trace their legitimacy back to the family of Muhammad. Others, such as Indonesia or Malaysia, have elected presidents or even have religious rulers as in Iran. In all cases there are different views amongst practising Christians and Muslims as to how implicated religious rulers should be in the government of the state.

Whatever the model, it is clear that the character and integrity of the rulers themselves are of paramount importance. Both traditions have examples of bad leadership, past and present; of those that rule for their own self-aggrandisement, for the subjugation of others and for the benefit of the rich and powerful. There have also been good examples of those who were humble, honest and wise, seeking to serve their citizens. Whatever your opinion of Elizabeth II, her passing gives an opportunity for us to reflect, not just on her life, but on how our temporal rulers – royal and political – should reflect God's own character, rule and sovereignty – however that is understood in our different traditions.