

In defence of Christendom: the claim of Christ and the confidence of the Church

I will be surprised if some readers progress beyond the title of this paper. To attempt to defend Christendom is foolishness surely; as viable and as potentially popular as the attempt to defend pornography or paedophilia? Overwhelmingly in contemporary reflections on the nature of the Church and its relatedness to society, both popular and academic, the term 'Christendom' serves effectively as a swear word, a shorthand means of summarising all that ought to be repudiated in Christian history; a naming of the Church's apostasy in its appropriation of violent coercion and its abandonment of paths of peace; a fatal and incomprehensible confusion of the Kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world. Nor is this distancing and dismissal merely a recent phenomenon: since the Reformation the term 'Christendom' has served to define that against which radical reforming groups sought to define themselves. During the Nineteenth Century, for instance, the Brethren movement (both in its connexional and its independent forms), defining itself as the true and restored Church (rather than as the sect which it seemed to be to other eyes) named as Christendom not just the 'established' Church but also all historic denominations which it likewise deemed to be 'fallen', compromised, and beyond renewal; Christendom represented all that should now be rejected and from which true disciples of Christ should separate themselves.¹ Previously the various and diverse streams of Anabaptism had named as Christendom all that had preceded them, the Church of Rome but also the Magisterial forms of Protestantism deemed to be only partially reformed. The Church was perceived to have fallen, to be apostate beyond hope, and God was now making a new beginning, restoring his true Church in the pristine image of the New Testament disciples.² Of course, some Anabaptist streams and individuals, as later some Brethren streams and individuals, were more moderate in their dismissal, but the movements were united in their wholly negative employment of the word 'Christendom'.

And in our contemporary context this repudiation of Christendom surely is doubly justified and appropriate. In the first place, a history vitiated with crusades, pogroms, persecutions, inquisitions, and imperialism is repugnant to a society that promotes toleration and plurality. Do we not have an obligation, at least to our Jewish and Islamic neighbours, to expose and to repudiate this embarrassing history of cruelty and coercion? But in the second place and practically, the era of Christendom has passed: the Christian Church simply is no longer the dominant and determining voice within our society; this nation is no longer a 'Christian country' (as if such an entity were possible); increasingly legislation is rooted in other supposed foundations than that of the Christian Scriptures; increasingly the Christian Church is relegated to the margins of national life. And in so many respects this marginalisation of the Church is to be welcomed: relegated from spheres of influence and political power, the Church can focus simply on being the Church; on being an alternative community and culture within a society that is increasingly diverse in its cultures and commitments; on reminding the world precisely that it is the world.³ Is it not the case, after all, that an increasingly secular society, divesting itself gradually of even the

¹ Roger Shuff, *Searching for the True church: Brethren and Evangelicals in Mid-Twentieth-Century England* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2005), pp. 1-8.

² See, for instance, Bernhard Rothmann, 'Restitution' (1534), quoted in *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources*, ed. Walter Klaassen (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1981), 330-333, p. 330.

³ See, for instance, Stanley Hauerwas, *The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics* (London: SCM, 1984), p. 99.

trappings of formal religion, ends confusion and promotes spiritual clarity? In such a context nominal Christian commitment loses its attraction. In such a context that which is authentically the Church is more likely to emerge, albeit on the margins of society.

All of this may appear attractive, commendable, and beyond serious dispute but it ought not to be received without qualification: can so much of Western Christian history be so thoroughly dismissed as faithless; in abandoning all that is signified by Christendom might we be in danger both of mitigating the claim of Christ and of misconstruing our own true identity as the Church in relation to the world?

The confession that “Jesus is Lord” is often cited as the earliest and most basic Christian confession – this may or may not be an appropriate understanding of the significance of the claim but, whatever the status and liturgical manner of the claim, it represents the irreducible confidence of the New Testament: “God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2.36). Neither can the claim be reduced as merely of religious significance in an immediate Jewish context: “[a]ll authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me... go and make disciples of all nations” (Matthew 28.18f.). The confession of Jesus’ Lordship was never merely an expression of personal commitment but was always politically significant: this Jesus is “Lord of lords and King of kings” (Revelation 17.14); his resurrection and ascension imply universal authority. And whatever significance we may accord to these claims of the New Testament, this was certainly the manner in which the claims were interpreted by those with political authority: “[w]e have no king but Caesar” is the response of the chief priests to Pilate, rejecting the perceived claims of Christ (John 19.15); and in recognition of the rival claims of Christ, as represented by the early Church, the Roman Empire (quite understandably) began to persecute Christians as undermining the claims of the Emperor and Senate. From the very beginning, then, the claim of Christ’s Lordship was perceived, at least by the Church’s opponents, as public rather than private, as political rather than merely religious. And this perception by its opponents is, of course, reflected in the New Testament: to this Jesus every knee will bow;⁴ and perhaps even more pertinently, the Pilates of this world have no authority except that which has been given from above.⁵ As Oliver O’Donovan observes in the course of his sustained and compelling response to criticisms of Christendom: secular authorities have been in serious trouble since Jesus rose from the dead; his rising marks their end both in the sense of their termination and in the sense of the revealing of their authentic goal and mediated authority; the most pressing danger for the Church is not that of illegitimately appropriating to itself such secular power but rather of according to such secular power a legitimacy and significance that it no longer possesses.⁶ Secular powers in the main may be ignorant of this ‘end’ of their authority in the resurrection of Jesus Christ, but it is and remains the task of the Church to remind them of such, to proclaim publicly and therefore politically that Jesus is Lord.

Not too long ago Tony Blair, the British Prime Minister, provoked some reaction to his reflective claim that he would be answerable to God for the war in Iraq; commentators in the secular media were quick with the retort that British Prime Ministers were directly accountable to Parliament and to the British electorate; that such expressed piety could, in practice, serve to obscure and to undermine this political accountability. But whatever the motivation for Tony Blair’s claim, and however it might be construed or misconstrued, the claim is both primarily and

⁴ Philippians 2.11.

⁵ John 19.11; cf. Romans 13.1.

⁶ Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 241.

ultimately correct: a British Prime Minister, just as a first-century Roman provincial governor, has no authority other than that mediated by God, albeit in the former case a mediated authority itself mediated through the British electorate. Just as Pilate was answerable ultimately, not to Caesar and the Roman Senate, but to God for his capitulation to mob pressure and for his craven concern for his own position, so Tony Blair is answerable ultimately, not to Parliament and the British electorate, but to God for the initiation and prosecution of a conflict which, contrary to Tony Blair's assertions at the time, seems to fall far short in every respect of the traditional criteria of 'just war'. At the time of the Allied 'blanket' bombing of Germany, George Bell, then Bishop of Chichester, protested publicly and persistently. Those Christians who joined marches protesting against war in Iraq acted appropriately, reminding a British Prime Minister and a British Parliament, not just of the claims of justice, but of an ultimate answerability to God. And would that the voices of prelates and other church leaders had been heard more clearly and persistently at the time in protest against aggression so lacking in international support, initiated on the basis of questionable intelligence, so costly in civilian casualties, and so lacking in any clear, achievable, and sustainable goal.

The fundamental error of historic Christendom, then, was not its affirmation of the Lordship of Christ in relation to secular powers and authorities but its fatal failure to recognise and to represent the distinctive character and manner of Christ's Lordship, its failure to take note of the manner in which Lordship, sovereignty, majesty, power, and authority are systematically deconstructed in the pages of the New Testament. On the numerous occasions his disciples were uncovered squabbling over who should have priority, Jesus confronted them with the example of a child, told them that in God's kingdom the greatest would be the least, and demonstrated his own Lordship by washing their feet. Though on a single occasion he takes a whip and clears the Temple, Jesus counsels us more generally not to resist evil, to love our enemies, to pray for our persecutors.⁷ And when, in Revelation, John is informed that "the Lion of the tribe of Judah... has triumphed" he sees "a Lamb, looking as if it had been slain".⁸ Similarly, later in the vision, the "dragon and his angels" are overcome, not by military might but "by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony".⁹ Paul owns the "weapons we fight with", as "not the weapons of the world",¹⁰ but too easily, in the age termed 'Christendom' and still, worldly weapons prove beguiling. The error of Christendom was not its confession of Christ's universal Lordship but its fatal and blasphemous misapprehension of the manner of that Lordship.

But, as Oliver O'Donovan rightly indicates, the contrasting error that we now court in our ill-defined repudiation of Christendom is that of conceding an independent and discrete secular authority, thereby disowning the universal authority of Christ and the significance of his resurrection. One key characteristic of the age we term the Enlightenment – and, in this respect, post-modernity is more properly recognised as late-modernity – is a radical individualism expressing itself in the assumption of a radical and sustainable disjunction of the private from the public, the religious from the political, the sacred from the secular. And the Western Church, to a significant degree, has acceded to this disjunction and thereby has apostatised, effectively disowning the universal and public claims of its Lord. This supposed disjunction, of course, is the reason underlying Western society's incomprehension of the phenomenon of radical Islam, a faith for which, in the main, this Western

⁷ Matthew 5.38-48.

⁸ Revelation 5.5-6.

⁹ Revelation 12.7-12.

¹⁰ 2 Corinthians 10.4-6.

disjunction of the private and public is similarly incomprehensible. It is the nature of religious confession, as faith in God, to be universalistic in its claims: the Enlightenment marginalisation of religion to the sphere of the merely private rests upon an elementary misconstruing of the nature of religion, or, at least, of the nature of Islam and Christianity. This is what renders multiculturalism problematic: culture is neither spiritually nor ethically neutral; distinct cultures derive from distinct religious and ethical commitments, and such religious and ethical commitments tend to be universalistic in their assumptions and claims. Contrary to Enlightenment optimism – rightly dismissed by Stanley Hauerwas as “hope without truth”¹¹ – there is no religiously neutral, rational foundation for political and ethical reasoning; rationality is culturally rooted in the practices and self-understanding of distinct communities.

The issue, therefore, is not whether religion is inherently public and political rather than merely private, nor whether politics is inherently, albeit often inadvertently, religious; the issue is rather the manner in which religion is political, or, more basically, the manner of religion – and this is where Christendom, in the main, failed so fundamentally and fatally. Professor O’Donovan argues that Christendom occurred because the Church was effective and successful in its mission¹² – and although this interpretation of history can (and perhaps should) be qualified, it cannot be entirely dismissed. But when, for whatever series of reasons, the Church found itself in the place of political influence and power, it generally succumbed to the temptation to act coercively and violently.

Politics, of course, even in its most benign form, is inherently coercive in some respects: it is appropriate that Government restricts my freedom to speed or to pollute the atmosphere, just as it is appropriate for Government to protect the vulnerable and to legislate against abuse, violence, theft, and extortion; it is appropriate for Government forcibly to restrain some for their own protection and for the protection of society – and in a society that honours personal freedom, such constraints and restraints will be judiciously minimalised and circumscribed. But as soon as we speak of a society that ‘honours personal freedom’ we have made a religiously distinctive assessment: not all societies honour personal freedom – or, at least, not all societies honour personal freedom to the same degree and in the same manner; that specific societies honour personal freedom in a specific manner derives from religious commitments, albeit sometimes unconscious or residual religious commitments. And if such honouring finds widespread (though not universal) acceptance, this is not an outcome of a common, religiously neutral, rational foundation, it is rather the outcome of what is usually (and, in some respects, unhelpfully) termed ‘common grace’ – this world remains God’s creation whether we acknowledge it as such or not, and God’s Spirit breathes through all creation and all men and women whether we acknowledge it or not. And if such honouring fails to find universal acceptance this is not merely an outcome of an inadequately liberal education but rather an outcome of this world’s fallenness; an outcome of the fact that this world, and we within it, are not yet as God ultimately intends.

In some respects, therefore, Christendom was appropriately coercive: the Church with political influence and power – or political power shaped by Christian commitment – appropriately bans child sacrifice, appropriately (and eventually) legislates against slavery, against child labour, against sexual, physical, and mental abuse, against the abuse of animals and the abuse of the environment. But political power shaped by authentic Christian commitment will also be characterised by

¹¹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Christian Existence Today: Essays on Church, World and Living In Between* (Durham: Labyrinth, 1988), p. 211.

¹² Oliver O’Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 212.

hospitality, the welcoming and defending of the other; will be characterised, not merely by a rejection of aggressive violence, but by an active commitment to peace-making; will be committed to truthfulness and faithfulness in all its dealings; and though appropriately coercively restraining with respect to certain practices, will repudiate all coercion with respect to the convincing of others concerning its own faithful commitments. Such repudiation, of course, courts the risk of reinforcing an Enlightenment disjunction of faith and practice – the mutilation which is female circumcision is an expression of religious and cultural commitments – to legislate against a practice is to coerce conviction; absolutism here, as elsewhere, is unattainable. Perhaps the best to which we can aspire is to coerce against that which seeks to coerce others – and to apply the same stricture to the implementation of our own convictions (though that which does and does not constitute coercion can similarly be disputed). This commitment of itself is insufficient to resolve all dilemmas – to coerce against abortion in all circumstances is, at least in some circumstances, to coerce against the well-being of a mother – but a repudiation of coercion other than with a view to prevent coercion may be an appropriate first step in an exercising of political influence that is coherent with Christian commitment.

In an increasingly secularised society overt Christian political influence inevitably is restricted if not opposed; the Church increasingly is marginalised. Though a majority of those questioned in Britain still own some form of belief in God, and though Christianity in its various guises still embraces more adherents than other faith communities, the creeping marginalisation of the Church is a matter of fact, the age of Christendom has passed. The question for the Church is whether this marginalisation is to be welcomed or passively resisted; whether Christian commitment is accepted as private or persists in its public and political claims; whether the promise and invitation of the gospel is local and sectarian or universal; whether Jesus is merely my Lord or truly Lord. The argument of this paper is that to conspire with this marginalisation is to deny Christ, is to apostatise just as fatally as the Church apostatised in the era of Christendom, albeit conversely.

As has already been acknowledged, perhaps the most beguiling siren voices conspiring with this marginalisation welcome such in the cause of clarity: the demise of Christendom militates against nominalism; the Church, liberated from political influence and pretence, can focus on being the Church in its distinction from the world, reminding the world precisely that it is the world and not the Church. Precedent and succour for such separateness is usually gleaned from the witness of sixteenth and early seventeenth century Anabaptists who, though vilified and brutally persecuted, embraced and promoted a radical separateness from secular authority in the quest for purity of faith and faithful discipleship. The term ‘Anabaptist’ was coined by the opponents of these groups and applied indiscriminately to quite diverse streams of radicals, sometimes with little more in common than the practice of ‘re-baptising’. If commonality amongst the mainstream of Anabaptist groupings can be identified at all it is generally recognised as expressed in the Schleithem Confession of 1527,¹³ an expression of the commitments of the ‘Swiss Brethren’ that was to gain wide assent and was taken by Calvin and others as indicative of Anabaptist distinctives. The Confession is unambiguous in its dualism and sectarianism: the Church is perceived as over against the world as light is opposed to darkness; Christian commitment is attested by radical separation from the world and its structures – hence a repudiation of oath-taking, of the bearing of the sword, of participation in the Magistracy; hence a commendation of strict church discipline, to be enforced by the ‘ban’.

¹³ Michael Sattler, ‘The Schleithem Brotherly Union’ in Yoder, J. H., *The Legacy of Michael Sattler* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1973), 28-54.

It is often too readily assumed that this early Anabaptist witness, together with its radical separatism, is determinative for an English (or British) Baptist history and heritage yet the influence of continental Anabaptists even on English General Baptists can be (and has been) disputed.¹⁴ The roots of English General Baptists – and certainly the roots of Particular Baptists – are to be traced primarily in British Puritanism, in a tradition of dissent rather than in a tradition of radical separation. In a context of post-denominationalism, when so many who worship in Baptist churches remain unaware of Baptist history and tradition (apart from the obvious commitment to Believers' Baptism) a distinctive tradition of dissent, once shared with Congregationalism, is barely understood and too easily confused with a tradition of separation. Nor is this confusion merely a recent phenomenon: if gnosticism is the most persistent Christian heresy we should not be surprised to discover its characteristic dualism resurfacing over and again in our history, reinforced variously by expressions of Hyper-Calvinism, by notions of Idealism and Romanticism, by the influence of the Brethren movement and the Pentecostal movement, and more recently by some expressions of the charismatic movement. Through each of these influences a notion of the world's otherness and a corresponding notion of the Church's separateness have been emphasised; the Church is conceived as over against the world rather than on behalf of the world; rescued from out of the world rather than sent as a transforming presence within the world; Christian involvement in secular government is discouraged (or, at least, not actively encouraged). Such separatism cannot comprehend how William Kiffin can hold a commission in the Parliamentary Army, how he can serve as a Member of Parliament and later as an Alderman of London, how he can even advance a vast sum of money to a King.¹⁵

A tradition of dissent, therefore, is not characterised by a radical separation of the Church from secular society (nor, incidentally, by any necessary rejection of all formal liturgy) but is rather characterised by a refusal to accept the claim of the State – be it the pretentious claim of a Monarch or of the English or Scottish Parliament – to legislate for the life and worship of the Church, to appoint prelates, or to prescribe liturgy. In some respects, therefore, it is not at all surprising that Dissenters have often found themselves grouped together with Catholics in periods of toleration and periods of disfavour, restriction, and oppression. But welcomed and affirmed or otherwise, Dissenters (like Catholics) traditionally have shown little reluctance in seeking involvement and influence in government: the well-being of society is too important to be abandoned to the forces of secularism (or Anglicanism); the claims of Christ demand rather than deny involvement. The tradition of Dissent, then, far from advocating a religion-less State (as if such an entity were possible or conceivable), actively sought to influence the State religiously and resisted (for the most part passively) the marginalisation of its witness. That which distinguishes Dissent (for the most part) from the form of Christendom it opposed (and that which distinguished Dissent from Catholicism, similarly for the most part) was a commitment to religious liberty. Notwithstanding its common and unreflective usage, absolute freedom is incoherent both conceptually and practically – a commitment to religious liberty must be (and has been) qualified by all the limitations noted already in relation to coercion and non-coercion (and more besides), but it is this commitment to religious liberty, rather than a commitment to radical separation, that is distinctive of Dissent.

One source of confusion in these respects has been the habit of speaking of the separation of Church and State when that which is intended is this principle of

¹⁴ B. R. White, *The English Baptists of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Baptist Historical Society, 1983), pp. 21-29.

¹⁵ Michael A. G. Haykin, *Kiffin, Knollys and Keach: rediscovering the English Baptist Heritage* (Darlington: Carey, 1996), p. 48.

religious liberty rather than a commitment to radical separation. Nowhere is this confusion more evident than in understandings of the first amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, a constitutional establishment of religious liberty that derives both from the Puritan roots of a tradition of Dissent and from an Enlightenment assumption of the disjunction of belief and practice, of the private and the public (a confusion currently demonstrated by constitutional arguments concerning the insertion of the phrase “one nation under God” in the pledge of allegiance).¹⁶

As is the case with all truly theological questions, an understanding of the relationship between the Church and the State derives from an understanding of the nature and will of God. Is God divided or is God simple and therefore undivided? Does God have two words, one word for the Church and one word for the State, a word of grace and a word of law; or does God have but one word, the word of the gospel, for both Church and State? Or, to misquote the Apostle: is God the God of the Church only; is God not the God of the nations also?¹⁷ Is God the Saviour of believers only, or is God “the Saviour of all people, and especially of those who believe”?¹⁸ And since God and God’s purposes are undivided ought we not to think of the Church as on behalf of the world rather than over against the world; as a means to an end rather than as an end in and of itself? And how can the Church fulfil its calling as a means to an end if it conspires together with its marginalisation and glories in its diminishment?

This, of course, is not the first time in the history of Western Europe that the Church has found itself marginalised, deprived of political influence, supplanted by paganism.¹⁹ That early medieval period we term ‘the Dark Ages’, with the Roman Empire in retreat, with Germanic tribes sweeping through Western Europe, found the Church, which had gained significant political influence since Constantine, robbed of that influence and power and facing again the threat of violent persecution. But the Church thus confronted did not acquiesce in passive retreat: this was the age of the rise of Western monasticism and of the Celtic missionary movement. From bases of confident intentional communities the Church confronted pagan powers with the gracious claims of the gospel. And the society that was shaped by their witness was a society that would not have comprehended contemporary divisions of private and public, of religious and political, of sacred and secular; the gospel story was recognised as embracing all of life and shaping all of life. And even if some of their methods and some of their outcomes can be and should be faulted, their underlying confidence in the claims of a universal Saviour shame our resigned and resigning generation.

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¹⁶ “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

¹⁷ cf. Romans 3.29.

¹⁸ 1 Timothy 4.10.

¹⁹ For this parallel see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a study in moral theory* (Duckworth, London, 1985²), p. 263.