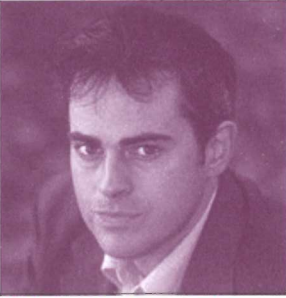


UNLEARNING CHRISTENDOM AND ATTITUDES TO POWER

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POST-CHRISTENDOM IS, BY DEFINITION, A TRANSITIONAL PHASE. IT'S WHERE WE ARE NOW, AND NO ONE CAN BE QUITE SURE WHERE IT IS LEADING. For the best part of 1700 years, since the Edict of Milan in 313, Christians in Western Europe have had a close, if sometimes uneasy, relationship with governments, empires, kings and rulers. In practice, there were times when the Church seemed to rule over monarchs and rulers, at other times different kinds of government had the mastery. It was not always easy to distinguish between church and state. But there were always churches and groups for whom this was not comfortable, and 'dissenters', 'subversives' and 'radicals' (or so they were often labelled by their opponents) who found such a relationship contrary to their understanding of the gospel.

The relationship of Christianity with power has profoundly shaped theology, and our readings of the Bible. And on the post-Christendom journey, Christians must decide what to hold on to, and what to discard from the Christendom era. What must we unlearn and what we must learn afresh, particularly with regard to how we relate to power?

A good place to start is to learn the lessons from our travels so far.

POWER WITHIN CHRISTENDOM

In the fourth century, Christians were faced with a dilemma. In fact, their situation was somewhat embarrassing. For several centuries the empire had been seen as an enemy. Christians were a mixed bunch with divergent opinions, but there was a general agreement that oppression, coercion, torture and killing was not the kind of thing that Jesus advocated when he urged his followers to love enemies, forgive and turn the other cheek. But now they were aligned with the very same empire that had put their founder to death.

The leap of Christianity to the heart of government was both swift and unexpected. It required a rapid and wide-ranging response from the Church as it sought to adjust to its strange new position. As Stuart Murray points out, Augustine and others had to do some pretty nifty theological footwork to explain Christianity's new place of power.¹

But throughout the Christendom era, Jesus presented a problem. Somehow his teachings and example had to be reconciled with the Church's position which seemed quite at odds with the gospel. How was imprisonment, the waging of war and capital punishment to be explained? Theologians have, of course, offered different

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NOTES

1. S Murray, *Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2004).

2. *Ibid.*

3. E.g. The criminal justice system may increasingly be seen as punitive, and conflicting with Christian ideas of justice. Wars will also be less and less justifiable as Christians rediscover Jesus' commitment to peacemaking.

4. Privileges that may soon be restricted or lost include exemptions for the promotion of religion and around evangelistic activities in particular; funding for social action projects which involve vigorous proselytism; discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation or religious faith; bishops in the House of Lords; discrimination in admissions and employment in faith schools; and exclusively Christians acts of worship being broadcast on TV and radio.

► answers down the ages, but broadly speaking Jesus was dealt with in the following ways:

Spiritualisation – it was suggested that Jesus' teachings were unrealistic as far as contemporary politics were concerned and applied only to the 'inner life' or heaven.

Reinterpretation – key passages were given new meanings. The parable of the banquet, in which people were 'compelled' to come in, and that of the wheat and the tares in which the weeds were removed and burned, were used to justify coercion.

Privatisation – Jesus was granted moral authority over people's personal behaviour but not over political or public affairs. Christian soldiers, for example, were urged to 'love' and pray for the enemies they killed.

Clericalisation – a distinction was made between the clergy and laity. For Eusebius, pacifism was for clergy, monks and nuns. Other Christians were obliged to defend the empire with force.

Separation – an idea particularly prevalent at the time of the Reformation was that faith could be distinguished from works. It was the motivation behind people's acts that was important not the acts themselves.

Marginalisation – sometimes the teachings of Jesus were just ignored completely.

POWER AND POST-CHRISTENDOM

The decline of the Church's influence in Western Europe and the changing position of Christianity means that, less than at any other time since the fourth century, Christians have to pursue such justifications to explain their alignment with power. Whilst some will lament the decline in the Christian power base, others will see it as a golden opportunity to explore new ways of engagement that seem to correspond with the gospel.

Stuart Murray has offered six characteristics of post-Christendom, and each can give us a sense of direction as to where things might be heading.²

From the centre to the margins: From a position of power, the Church has often read Scripture with a particular agenda, usually political, in mind. As the Church reads Scripture from the margins, and not the centre, of society, it is likely to discover new perspectives in which it identifies far more with the oppressed than the oppressor, the servant than the King.

The Church will look in unfamiliar places for models for its political activity. Christians tended to look for exemplars in the Bible, whose position resembled its

own at the centre of society. But throughout biblical history, and indeed ecclesiastical history, there have been many other people who were politically active, often on the margins, and the Church should increasingly look to their example. It may also seek inspiration from cultures less affected by Christendom.

The Church may also find that, now it is on the margins, new methods of political engagement with government are possible and acceptable. In the first few centuries after Jesus' death, public sacrifice was an important part of civic life and the refusal of Christians to take part in it registered as a political action. When the Church moved to the centre of society, political tactics of withdrawal, non-participation and civil disobedience were less practicable, as they seemed to present a challenge to the Church as much as government. In post-Christendom, such tactics will become more possible, more acceptable and more important for Christians.

From majority to minority: In Christendom, Christians comprised the often overwhelming majority, but in post-Christendom they will find themselves in an unfamiliar situation, as a dwindling minority amongst other minorities. This gives them a more common experience with other groups who find themselves on the fringes of political life.

Rather than a paternalistic perspective, which was often a feature of Christendom, Christians will increasingly see the world from their new position among the marginalised and disenfranchised. As a result they may become more critical of systems that allow majorities to impose their will on minorities.

The move to the margins also presents a formidable challenge to the Church given the arguments that it has often put forward to give itself an authority. The Church will find it increasingly hard to get a hearing on the grounds that it represents a large number of people – or even the majority – as the line that over 70 per cent of the population 'identify with Christianity' covers less and less weight.

Alliances with other groups are likely to be a growing feature of post-Christendom politics. When it was in a more powerful position, the Church had less need for coalitions, but as a minority it needs to look beyond itself for political support.

From settlers to sojourners: In Christendom Christians felt at home in a culture shaped by their story. In post-Christendom they are exiles and aliens, pilgrims in

'a golden opportunity to explore new ways of engagement that seem to sit more comfortably with the gospel'

a culture where they no longer feel at home. So where previously the Church's political identity was bound up with governments, states and nations, within post-Christendom the Church must discover a new identity. A thriving Church need no longer depend on a thriving country. The national interest and the 'common good' need no longer be so closely aligned.

A new political identity may see Christians place their allegiance far more on values such as justice rather than political party, institution or nationality. Whereas national flags in churches within Christendom denoted the church's allegiance to the nation state, the Church may develop its own political symbols. It may also begin to see existing Christian symbols such as the cross as having new political meaning.

The Church may also move further away from 'chaplancy' or 'priestly' functions where heads of state are blessed by the Church, or where services of thanksgiving take place for military actions. Institutions which were previously considered 'Christian' will seem less so as the Church moves further from government, but also rediscovers the justice of Jesus Christ.³

From privilege to plurality: In Christendom Christians enjoyed many privileges. In post-Christendom they are one community amongst many. As religious pluralism develops, the Church's remaining privileges will be increasingly unjustifiable. Their absurdities will become more evident. The calls for governments to address them will become louder.⁴

The Church may also find it hard to exercise certain privileges such as its relative monopoly on providing hospitals, universities and the armed forces with chaplains. These will increasingly be shared between denominations and different faiths. It will also be hard for the Church to seek out new privileges. Any it gains will be short-lived. But calls may also come from within the Church to renounce existing privileges as charges of the Church's double-standards become more salient.

As churches lose these privileges Christians may appear to have far more integrity in their political actions. Within Christendom the Church's political witness was bound up with a specific idea of privilege and power that some saw as clashing with Jesus' model of powerlessness and the gospel's identification with the poor and the vulnerable. Christians may find that they are more at ease with themselves in their political witness as a result.

From control to witness: Changing laws and holding political power in any meaningful way is less and less a

reality for Christians within post-Christendom. The Church may be maturing politically, but it is shrinking and becoming more fragmented. The Church certainly does not speak with one political voice, and nor does it look like doing so. The goal of control is increasingly unrealistic.

Christians will therefore need to think far more in terms of their witness. Rather than direct lobbying to seek legislative change, as post-Christendom continues, the church will need to consider other political strategies such as shifting the terms of political debate; making suggestions to government; demonstrating models of best practice; taking part in political debates; and direct actions and stands for justice.

Two aspects of the Church's example will have a direct bearing on the power of its witness. The first is its *quality*. Within Christendom there was little need for the Church to lead by example. The quality of its witness was less important as it was able to get what it wanted through other means. But in post-Christendom, the quality of its witness becomes far more important.

The second is the *distinctiveness* of its witness. The Church will increasingly look at what it might be that makes its example different from other pressure and cause groups. But those who are able to show that Christian ethics, beliefs and ideas in the realm of public policy have something innovative to offer will be the ones that stand out the most.

From maintenance to mission: In Christendom the emphasis was on maintaining a supposedly Christian status quo, but in post-Christendom it is on mission within a contested environment. The lessening association of social institutions and structures with Christianity, alongside the moves toward witness rather than control, could open up a whole new political agenda for the Church.

Christendom was characterised by approaches which tended to propose mediating principles which limited the negative effects of institutions and political practices, rather than their radical reform. Post-Christendom, however, brings with it the opportunity to propose radical reforms, which challenge the social structures themselves.

The Church is already beginning to think more imaginatively and radically about its solutions. As such the Church is likely to see itself increasingly as a political counter-culture to society and its institutions rather than their guardian. Although some are still

► defending social institutions that they see as under attack, such defences are frequently failing. Their actions may delay changes in the short term, but political realities suggest that they will inevitably fail. They will be increasingly powerless to do anything about it. And as the institutions themselves change, they will seem less aligned with Christianity and so less worthy of defence.

The political system too will be seen increasingly as something to be subverted and engaged with, rather than endorsed and supported. The system may seem increasingly illegitimate – as something that allows the oppression of minorities, and perpetuates injustice. In light of diminishing allegiance to the state and the recognition that Christians are sojourners in an alien country, there may be less emphasis on civic participation as a virtue in itself.

From institution to movement: In Christendom the Church operated mainly in institutional mode, but in post-Christendom the Church is once again becoming a political movement.

At a glance it may seem as if the Church's political perspective is so diverse that it can hardly be considered a movement at all. At present the voices are certainly many and varied. However, this perhaps represents wider and more general changes in the Church. There is increasing lay participation as churches struggle to find clergy, and the means to support them. Denominational allegiances are declining. There is diversity in doctrine.

But political movements and campaigns have been things that have bucked the wider trends in the Church, by providing a focus of unity. There is a growing recognition that where Christians are divided over theology they can be united around a political viewpoint. It is not that Christians will unite themselves around one identifiable political movement. It is more likely that Christians will continue to disagree politically. But at the same time there may be increasing agreement around the values and ethics that underlie political decisions.

Old habits die hard, and it is difficult for Christians to give up the deeply ingrained habits of control and privilege, and feelings of importance and centrality that characterised Christianity's power during the Christendom era. But it will be those who identify, recognise, respond and embrace the seismic changes that are taking place, who will best be able to negotiate the path on which post-Christendom is taking us all. ■