



Can A Modern Society Be Christian?

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Modernity is a product of western Christendom. Many historians of thought have traced its roots in the ongoing history of the interaction between the classical and the biblical elements in European culture, and it is a fascinating story. It is clear that the particular form of human culture which calls itself modernity could not have arisen from within the cultures of Asia or Africa. And it seems clear that modern science, that form of human knowledge which we have learned to distinguish from the rest of our knowledge by giving it a special name, would not have developed without the fresh input of biblical thinking at the Reformation which challenged the dominance of Aristotelian rationalism in the later Middle Ages.

Many of the earliest apostles of modernity – from Voltaire onwards – were clear that Christianity was part of the old baggage which would have to be thrown away. Scepticism about the possibility of combining the ‘modern’ world view with Christianity grew through the 19th century and became clamorous in the 20th. Yet churchmen and theologians continued to explore ways of adjusting the conflicting claims of modernity and the gospel in such a way that Christianity would survive.

Its survival depended upon its being confined to an inner world of religious experience, making no claim to control, or even address the public realm of political, scientific and cultural discourse. The public realm was to be the realm of the secular. Any talk of a Christian society was

taken to be the nostalgic dreaming of disoriented Christians seeking a return to the Middle Ages, to those happy days when witches were burned and inquisitors turned their thumb-screws. At the strange climax of this wave of thought, in the decade of the 60s, we heard the secular celebrated as a great achievement of Christianity in such books as Harvey Cox's 'The Secular City', and van Buren's 'The Secular Meaning of the Gospel'. It is rare, but not unique, to witness a defeat being so splendidly celebrated as a victory.

Both Christianity and modernity make global claims. Both are necessarily missionary faiths, because they claim to give the true understanding of the human situation, valid for all peoples at all times. During the past two centuries these two faiths have expanded from their place of origin to penetrate all the cultures of the world. But, of course, to speak in that way is an anachronism. Until well into this century we did not speak of 'cultures' in the plural. We spoke of societies which were more, or less, civilized. Europe was the home-base of civilisation. Europe's mission was to extend the blessings of civilisation to the world. Most Christians went along with this and saw Christian missions as part of this grand design. Looked at from the point of view of the non-European societies, this meant that they received from the missionaries a package in which Christianity and modernity were parcelled up together in a way which it was as difficult for them as it was for Christians in Europe to unpack.

Another way of describing what was happening is to speak, as the early pioneers of the ecumenical movement such as Joe Oldham and Visser t'Hooft did, of the domestication of Christianity within European culture. The cuckoo's egg was, as happens in nature, mistakenly supposed by the original owner of the nest, to be one of her own young with whom there could be a happy family life. She had yet to learn that the cuckoo would claim the whole nest. To use a different sort of language, there was the illusion that the meta-narrative of the Gospel and the meta-narrative of the Enlightenment could be fused into a single story of the march of Christian civilisation.

It seems often to be forgotten now that it was the recognition of this illusion and this danger which was at the heart of the passion with which these men and others with them threw themselves into the ecumenical movement. The slogan of the 1937 Oxford Conference on Church, Community and State – 'Let the Church be the Church' was a call to recognise the unique, distinct and God-ordained reality of the Church as standing over against the state and call it to account in the name of God. In the background, but not far in the background, was the German Church's struggle, and the English title of the conference was a translation of the key German words of that struggle – Volk, Stadt, Kirche.

The slogan of 1937 hardly rings bells for us today, but it is impossible to understand the passion that drove the early ecumenical leaders, including very specially our own Bishop George Bell, without realising that the background of their thought was always the terrible struggle going on in the heart of Europe. It was a passion to rescue the Church from its Babylonish captivity to European culture.

Perhaps it was an inevitable reaction to this that, when the terrible struggle was over the new slogan should be 'Let the Secular be the Secular'. If the Church asserts its freedom over against the State, let the State and all the organs of public life affirm their independence over against the Church. Under the shadow of the coming conflict, T.S. Eliot had ventured to write of 'The Idea of a Christian Society'. Twenty years later the Christian economist Denim Munby wrote 'The Idea of a Secular Society' – a book which laid the line that was to be followed in ecumenical thinking for several decades. It is extraordinary that this idea has had such a long run among Christians. A much more recent work of Michael Novak, 'The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism' celebrates as the glory of our secular society that, in his words, 'the central shrine is empty'. There is no icon to tell us what is most to be desired. There is no table of the law preserved in the sanctuary. The secular society creates its own norms.

Even if we are blind and deaf to the multiplying signs of a descent into moral anarchy, we might at least be awakened by the angry voices of our young Muslim neighbours who attack with increasing fury what they rightly see as a pagan society which openly defies the laws of God.

To speak in most gatherings of liberally minded Christians about the idea of a Christian society is, in my experience, to invite the immediate question: Do you want to go back to the Middle Ages? But this knee-jerk reaction is absurd. Of course we cannot go back, nor should we wish to. But also, we cannot remain as we are. We are carried along by a tide that sweeps us towards increasing moral anarchy and social disintegration.

Certainly we cannot go back; but we can and we should look back on the way we have come. A society which has lost its memory is like a ship which has lost its rudder. It can only drift with the tides. I find it very alarming that history seems to have such a diminishing place in our public education. We know, and we do not like, the symptoms of Alzheimer's disease when we meet it among our friends. It sometimes looks as if the dissemination of a sort of national Alzheimer's disease is part of the present agenda. If we are to get our bearings for the future, we need to pay attention to the past, not to return to it but to learn from it.

Let us begin by posing a question which is central to any fundamental debate about Christianity in the public realm. It is the question: How is power legitimated? By what right do some people, calling themselves 'the State' exercise coercive power over others? It has been alleged of Los Angeles that it is a city governed by four gangs, one of which is called 'Police'. What entitles this one to claim authority over the others? In all ancient societies, as far as we know, the legitimation is held to come from powers higher than human. The ruler in some way represents a more-than-human reality, whether conceived in terms of a personal divine being or otherwise. There is therefore an indissoluble link between acknowledgment of this power and acknowledgement of the authority of the ruler. What Professor Lamin Sanneh calls the territorial principle in religion is in operation. Being a subject of the earthly ruler involves acknowledgment of the power which lies behind the legitimacy of his rule.

Obviously the Roman Empire, within which Christianity came to birth, was an order of this kind. Political and religious obligations were fused. There could be private religious cults offering personal salvation through various rites, teachings and practice, but these could not replace, or be allowed to threaten, the public cult by which the empire was held together.

When the point came at which the Roman world was collapsing from its own inner weakness and was being threatened with destruction from the barbarian enemies from without, and when the Emperor Constantine took the step of baptism, it was necessarily both a political and religious act. It opened the way for the Church, evidently the only body capable of giving some renewal of order to a disintegrating society, to take increasing responsibility for public life. But this assumption of responsibility did not alter the fundamental character of that society. It was still, to use van Leeuwen's term, an ontocratic society, a society based on the acknowledgment of a more-than-human power. Certainly that power was now invoked under another name and had a different character. But it is easy, with hindsight, to see that the figure of Christ as the Byzantine Pantocrator has been more shaped by the image of imperial power than by the image of the crucified Jesus. The important point is that the 'territorial principle' still operates. How could it be otherwise? Society is still held together by acknowledgment of a more-than-human power, represented in the human figure of the earthly ruler. It would surely be hopelessly anachronistic to imagine a modern 'free Church in a free State' emerging full-grown from that critical change in the fourth century.

The territorial principle in religion operated through Europe for the next 13 centuries. In much of the old eastern Christendom the Arab armies ensured that a new territorial regime, at once political and religious, would be established so securely that it is still in place.

The division of western Christendom at the Reformation did not end the territorial principle, in spite of the Anabaptist protest against it. Lutherans, Calvinists, Anglicans and Roman Catholics each made territorial claims on the principle of *Cuius regio, eius religio*. But the terrible religious wars of 17th century Europe opened the way for the conversion of western Europe to the new faith of the Enlightenment, and so for the ending of territorial religion. The decisive event, marking a radically new departure within the story of Christianity, was that experiment in an altogether new kind of political and religious order which was, and is, the United States of

America. Here both the new ideas of the Enlightenment and also the enduring power both at work to create a new kind of society based on a new principle of legitimation. Not that the ontocratic note was entirely silenced. According to the foundation documents of the new republic it is the Creator who has endowed all persons with equal rights to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. The political order thus still rests upon a more-than-human authority. But in the ensuing development of this new kind of society, the face and the voice of the Creator do not remain centrestage. The equal rights of every individual human being, understood as something belonging to human beings as such apart from any divine ordering, move to the centre. It is the duty of the State to safeguard these rights. In doing so it necessarily exercises power. But whence comes its authority to do so? Evidently from the will of the people.

Here we come, I think, to the central problem which now faces the liberal democratic state. Insofar as the older biblical meta-narrative still pervades society, the concept of human rights still has some anchorage in the will of the Creator who is their author and upon whose character as holy and loving God they rest. But insofar as the biblical story fades from public memory, the intrinsic self-contradiction of the liberal vision shows itself. This self-contradiction has been set out with admirable clarity by Ian Markham in his recent book 'Theology & Social Ethics'. If there is no more-than-human source for the rights of the individual person, if, in other words, nothing exists except the sum total of human persons and all things visible, there are no grounds for affirming that one individual human person has rights which can limit the rights of all human beings considered collectively. There is no ground for affirming the rights of an individual as limiting the rights of the collective. The liberal democracies of western Europe are still haunted by memories, even if fading memories, of that formidable being whom Moses encountered on Mount Sinai, and by the figure of Jesus, even if only in a mist of childhood memories. So long as this is so, the logic of the liberal state is checked from exercising its full rigour. But when this fades still further into the background of memory, or when – as in Central Europe during the inter-war years – it is swept away by the re-emergence of pre-Christian pagan myths, there is no check against anarchy except tyranny.

Before we turn to look at the alternatives before us, we should pause to reflect on the ending of the territorial principle. It would be ungrateful and unrealistic to move on without recognising what has been achieved in this ending. The separation of political power from religious belief has made possible the freedom of thought and speech which we rightly prize as something we are ready to defend at all costs. Whatever our present problems and perplexities, we must affirm and defend this freedom. And the ending of the territorial principle has also brought a positive gain for religion. We now recognise that being a Christian is much more than being a citizen of a 'Christian' country, or subjects of a Christian ruler. This is not universally recognised even now. You can still find people in parts of the Third World who assume that a visitor from Europe or North America is a Christian until the contrary is proved. It is one of the positive fruits of the Enlightenment that we recognise that to be a Christian is to be personally committed to Jesus Christ as a matter of deliberate and sustained willing and doing. In that sense, the ending of the territorial principle has been a cleansing experience for Christendom, and we should be thankful for it.

But this proper gratitude cannot absolve us of the responsibility of asking about the adequacy of that which has replaced the old territorial principle. We still have to ask about the legitimation of political power.

I have referred to the internal contradiction which besets the liberal answer to this question. If political power is legitimated by 'the will of the people', and if at the same time one holds that every individual among those who make up 'the people' has inalienable human rights, how can these rights be secured against the will of a majority? As we have noted, in the classic political statement about human rights, these are said to have been given by the Creator. But, as we well know, the Creator has long been retired from the public square. These rights are held to be part of the substance of human nature, even though it is obvious that the definition of these rights (as in the documents of the United Nations and the European Union) are matters of ad hoc

political negotiation. The problem with human rights cut off from their source in the will of the Creator, is that they are things to be desired rather than secure possessions. The concept of rights belongs to the language of law. It is a juridical term. Rights exist only if there is an agreed framework in which there are parties who acknowledge the corresponding responsibility to honour the claim for a right. Since these claims are - in the modern world - usually made against the nation-state, it is natural that the definitions of these rights becomes a matter of political negotiation. Individuals have rights only to the extent to which governments are prepared to acknowledge them. Anyone who regularly writes 'Urgent Action' letters for Amnesty International knows about this.

But if human rights are a gift from the Creator, then they cannot be severed from their context in what we may know of the Creator's purpose for human life. One cannot take the gift on an 'a la carte' basis, ignoring the purpose for which these rights were bestowed. In the biblical tradition which has shaped western Christendom into a coherent and distinct culture, this context is the covenant relation established by God, first with the people of Israel, and then extended to all nations through the new covenant in the blood of Jesus. And here we come to what seems to me to be an extraordinary feature of the whole debate about the relation between political power and Christian belief. At the heart of the political debate is always the question: How shall justice be effective? How shall power be just? One might almost say that this agonized question is the pervasive theme of the Old Testament, above all of the Psalms. How, when, where shall God's holy and just rule take effect in the life of this world of violent wrong-doing? When, where and how, in other words, shall we see the kingdom of God, his kingly rule manifest in the life of the world?

The answer which the Gospel gives to this is an astonishing one. God's kingly rule has been decisively manifest: it is there in the dying of Jesus, and we know it is there because the crucified and humiliated Jesus has been raised from the dead. We know, in other words, that God's kingly rule is the final reality with which we have to deal, and which must therefore shape all our thinking and acting, but that the full manifestation of this rule is an event beyond history, an event by which all human living - personal or political - is to be guided and judged.

The political implications of this must be that, when Christians are in a position to exercise political authority, they must do so on the basis of that which has been revealed in Jesus Christ as God's purpose for human life, but in doing so they are required to give to all under their political authority the same freedom to dissent as God gives to us in the incarnation of his word in Jesus. This freedom to dissent is required not in spite of, but because of, what God has revealed to us as the truth. I have said that the freedom of dissent which the Enlightenment brought is something that we can never surrender. But we have now to recognise that it was based upon an insecure foundation. The liberal doctrine of the free society has no adequate safeguard against the twin dangers of moral anarchy and political tyranny.

We must surely now recognise that it is an illusion to suppose that the State can be totally neutral in respect of fundamental beliefs. All deliberate action pre-supposes some belief about what is the case, about the meaning and direction of human life. The ideologically neutral state is a myth, and a very dangerous one. Insofar as Christians are in positions of political responsibility, they are bound to use the power entrusted to them in accordance with the Christian understanding of God's purpose for human life. This means that there will be resistance from those who take other views. For the reason just stated, namely for the reason that in Christ God has given us a space of freedom for dissent and disobedience, but also for witness to the kingly rule of God, a government shaped by Christian belief will ensure the preservation of this space. It will recognise that there is unending need for the spiritual warfare which is required if the truth of the Gospel is to prevail in the public realm. But it will not pretend to neutrality. It will use the power entrusted to it in accordance with its understanding of God's will as revealed in the Gospel.

I have in mind here, of course, the alternative vision for modern society which is being vigorously offered today by Islam, the only contemporary ideology which seriously challenged the reigning idea of the liberal secular state. Islam seeks legitimation for political power in the

will of Allah as understood to be embodied in the Qyr'an and the Aharia law. Here there is no question of freedom to dissent. Political and religious authority are fused. Growing numbers of our Muslim contemporaries in western Europe correctly perceive the slide towards moral anarchy in our society and claim that only Islam can save us. On university campuses, and in those areas of our cities where Muslims are strongly represented in the population, this claim is proving increasingly credible. To suppose that we can meet it by repeating the slogans of secularity and neutrality would be blind and foolish. If there were no contemporary challenge from Islam, Christians would still have to face up to the manifest failures of the liberal secular state. We should be grateful that the powerful challenge of Islam makes it impossible for us to evade the issue.

I referred earlier to the early slogan of the ecumenical movement, 'Let the Church be the Church'. In the context of that time – the 1930s – this was a summons to the European churches to extricate themselves from the position of domestic chaplains to western society. That was a necessary summons. But we need to add a corollary: 'Let the Church be the Church and therefore let it take proper responsibility for the civic community'. This means addressing the question of power.

The main Christian tradition, following the teaching of the New Testament, has acknowledged the use of power by the civic authorities as something ordained by God for the preservation of justice. But this tradition is explicitly or implicitly questioned in much contemporary Christian discourse. The words 'dominance' and 'violence' are routinely used to denote what has traditionally been regarded as the normal use of power by governing authorities. Those who resist governments are routinely regarded as occupying higher moral ground than those who govern.

Certainly the Church, according to the main tradition, has the duty to admonish the civic authority when it abandons justice and serves injustice. But it is foolish to suppose that anything can be accomplished in the political order without power. Those who exercise power need constantly to be reminded that power tends to corrupt, but it would be an evasion of their calling if Christians refused to take the responsibility of power when its use is needed for the maintenance of justice. Christians will not fulfil their responsibilities to the civic community merely by protesting. They have to take the responsibility of government, knowing well the dangers which this involves. And, if my argument is right, when they have this responsibility, they will have to use the powers entrusted to them in accordance with the understanding of the purpose of human life which we have in Christ. They will therefore seek a kind of government which is not neutral but Christian, knowing that those who hold other beliefs will protest, and ensuring that they have the freedom to protest, to dissent, and to engage in public argument. Their vision would be not that of a neutral, secular society, nor that of a theocratic society of the type sought by Islam, but of a Christian society, a society whose public life is shaped by the Christian beliefs about the human person and human society. And because at the heart of these Christian beliefs is the knowledge that in Christ God has given us the freedom to dissent, and has entrusted to his Church the responsibility of bearing witness to the truth in face of dissent, it would be a society in which there is provided the maximum of opportunity at all levels of society for open discussion of the matters which have to be decided in the public area.

What would be required of a Church which acknowledged the obligation to seek here in Britain for a Christian society?

1. The first requirement is that we recover the belief that the Gospel is true. That is to say that it is the public truth, free for us all, and therefore the touchstone by which all other claims for truth have to be judged. This is by no means an announcement of the obvious. The counterpart of the idea of the neutral, secular society, is the idea that there is a body of neutral secular truth which is true for everyone, and which is the touchstone against which the truth-claims of Christianity, along with other religions, are to be evaluated. This is fundamental to the world of ideas which we share, except in those moments, perhaps in church, perhaps in our private prayers, when we remember that we are in the presence of another reality, requiring different, and

potentially terrifying, truth claims. I know that I am touching here on huge epistemological as well as psychological questions. But it has to be stated as the first and fundamental condition for any thought of a Christian society. The Church must recover the belief that the Gospel is true.

2. The second requisite, following upon the first, is that the Church becomes an evangelising community. This is not just to take the obvious point that if the Gospel is truth it is public truth - which everyone ought to know and believe. It is to make the further and distinct point that the Gospel is only known to be true when it is experienced as the liberating power that it is. Evangelisation is the antidote to domestication. The power of the Gospel as liberating truth, as release from illusion and alienation, as light out of the darkness and confusion, is known when people are receiving it as news. Thank God that this is now happening, and after the heavy pruning of the past decades the old bush is putting forth new shoots, and people - especially young people - are being liberated from the nightmare of a meaningless world, but for a fresh challenge to the powers that enslave society.

3. The third requirement is what I have elsewhere called the de-clericalisation of theology. During the centuries in which the role of the Church has been reduced to that of domestic chaplain to a secular society, theological teaching has been largely confined to the training of clergy. If we are to entertain the vision of a Christian society, it will be required of men and women in all the areas of secular responsibility that they are theologically equipped to discern the bearing of the Gospel upon the matters with which they have to deal in their secular work. Politicians, people in commerce and industry, in the various professions and the civil service, will have to be aware of the bearing of the Christian faith upon the decisions they have to make and the priorities they have to establish. It is not enough that pastors and preachers and priests should have an understanding of theology. They are not normally operating at the frontiers where, if at all, the Christian faith has to shape daily decisions. I think that in this respect we in Britain ought to pay more attention to the Kuyperian tradition of the Netherlands Reformed churches - a tradition which has had much less influence in the thinking of British churches than its importance deserves. 4. Since a Christian society, as I am trying to imagine it, would be a society where those in authority both affirm explicitly their allegiance to the Christian faith as their guiding light in all the decisions they have to make, and affirm the right of others to hold and express different beliefs, such a society would have to be one in which opportunities for discussing the business of the public square would have to be maximised. Otherwise stated, this is the venerable Catholic doctrine of subsidiarity. While democratic government can only operate through representative bodies, the opportunities for face-to-face discussion among those directly concerned must be maximised, and this means that all decisions should be taken as near as possible to the place where those most concerned can be directly involved. This is widely recognised as essential to any healthy democratic society - much applauded in discussions about relations between Westminster and the town hall.

5. Such a vision for society implies a Christian community equipped for vigorous controversy. It implies the development of a spirituality for combat, training for skill and courage in the use of those spiritual weapons which alone are appropriate for Christian warfare. The New Testament speaks of the Gospel as a gospel of peace, but this does not negate what both our Lord and the apostles have to say about conflict, about combat, about the endurance of contradiction. I have spoken of the need for a lay theology, but it is equally important to develop a type of spiritual and intellectual formation for priests and pastors and bishops which will enable them in turn to equip the members of the body of Christ in each place for this spiritual warfare. I do not think that this is now a feature of most ministerial formation.

I am very much aware of the fact that in presenting these ideas I am wide open to many questions for which I do not know the answers. My excuse is that I do not think the questions can be evaded. We cannot remain content with the vision for society which has been - explicitly or tacitly - accepted by most of us for the past decades - the vision of a secular, neutral society in which the Church is one of many voluntary associations for the cultivation of a particular set of beliefs and practices for the personal life of its members. We are witnessing the Gadarene rush of

the secular society into sheer paganism. Nor can we accept the only radical alternative now being offered to us, and especially to the disadvantaged amongst us, the offer of an Islamic society where the will of Allah is the law of the land. We must wrestle with the question – ‘What kind of society do we want Britain to be?’. What I have tried to suggest – tentative and vulnerable as it is – is not a political programme for today or tomorrow. It is a call to the churches of this country to the possibility of a new vision for our nation and to have the courage to affirm it in the public square for all to hear and see.

So, let the Church be the Church! Yes, and therefore let it be the faithful and confident witness to God’s rightful rule over the world!

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