

God and Government

a lecture by the Bishop of Durham, Dr N. T. Wright

in the Boothroyd Room, Portcullis House, Westminster

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Introduction

I am grateful to the 'Theos' think-tank for organising this evening; to those responsible here in Portcullis House for making the necessary arrangements; and of course to all of you for being here tonight. We live in fascinating and exciting, if disturbing and often frustrating, times, and the task of reflecting on where we are, and what we might do about it, presses upon us all. Someone suggested a couple of weeks ago, during the debate on the Equality Bill, that the Bishops were like turkeys voting for Christmas; but right now our entire process looks more like a bunch of headless chickens voting for the fox. We face major questions about our whole social and political landscape, and the one thing we can be sure of is that there are no easy answers, especially no easy solutions we can pull down off the shelf of the tired slogans of a previous generation. What I want to do this evening is to look briefly at where we are in terms of government itself, then at the current problem of the place of God in all this, and then to set out some biblical suggestions about a Christian vision of 'God and government', which is a more complex and interesting thing than most people, including most Christians, realise today. That will lead to some concluding reflections and challenges.

1. The Crisis of Government

The 'expenses' scandal which broke last summer, whose full repercussions are only now being worked out, was for many observers only the tip of the iceberg of a disillusionment with our whole political process. The Chilcot enquiry has done nothing to decrease that disillusionment. Our entire constitution has been creaking under the strain of new challenges and old methods for a generation at least. Many people in this country used to believe, until fairly recently, that when they elected Members of Parliament to represent them this resulted in a proper parliamentary debate about the key issues through which wise laws would be enacted and appropriate social change effected. Few people believe that any longer – including MPs themselves.

Ever since the massive majorities of Margaret Thatcher, for most of the last generation we have had governments that could, and did, effectively ignore parliamentary process, with a very small number of people, sometimes only one, taking key decisions which nobody dared to oppose and which were rammed through Parliament with scant regard for proper debate. A generation ago Lord Hailsham spoke of the need 'to challenge and frustrate the tyranny of the elected dictatorship'. That call was echoed last week in a meeting here in Westminster by Professor Sir John Baker from Cambridge, who spoke of the 'absolute monarchy' of the Prime Minister. In calling for an independent Constitutional Convention, Sir John warned of the danger of constitutional reform being driven by the government of the day – any government of any day

– who would inevitably tilt new constitutional proposals to suit their own party agendas. The point of a constitution, after all, is to place *limits* on government, to set a framework within which governments can govern but also can be held to account. Without a constitution, whether written or not, a government which enjoys a large elected majority can simply forge ahead and do whatever it wants. Hence the oxymoronic flavour of instituting, six years ago, a government department called the ‘Department for Constitutional Affairs’, and the even more remarkable setting up, last year, of something called the ‘Democratic Renewal Council’ – at a time when the present government was forcing through more and more legislation, much of it in the form of undebated regulations, and much of it emanating from a Home Office that has seemed to many observers out of control, producing more legislation in ten years than in the previous century.

And in the meantime constitutional reform has proceeded, in bits and pieces and utterly *ad hoc*, without anyone appearing to think through the larger issues involved. In last summer’s Lords debate on the constitution, I was the only speaker to refer to Vernon Bogdanor’s new book [*The New British Constitution*](#). Indeed, the idea that this might be a serious and complex subject requiring careful thought seems to be foreign to many who pronounce on such things as the role of Parliament itself, including the composition of the House of Lords. To cite Professor Baker again, a wholly elected House of Lords would not only rob Parliament of one of its present strengths, namely the presence of genuine experts in a wide range of fields, but would throw all the weight for scrutiny on to the newly established Supreme Court, who would have to review legislation retrospectively rather than, as at present with the Lords, prospectively. This has simply not been thought through. There are a thousand potential unintended consequences lurking in this area. I can’t comment on them further tonight; I simply comment, as I have done in the House, that constitutional reform seems to be being done on a wing and a prayer, and that while we on the Bishops’ benches are happy to supply the prayer, we do want to be assured of the quality of the wing.

In case anyone supposes that this is a covert plea for the place of Bishops within the House of Lords, let me make my position clear. I would much rather have a wholly *appointed* House of Lords from which Bishops were *excluded* (unless they themselves happened to be appointed, as the Chief Rabbi and the Methodist peer Leslie Griffiths have been appointed), than a 95% *elected* House in which bishops were still *included*. Precisely as a bishop concerned for the health of our constitution, I would rather have a second chamber that can do its job without me than one which can’t do its job even with me, if you see what I mean. We have some excellent MPs, but many observers think that to fill another chamber with more of the same, whipped to the will of the government, would be worse than pointless. I am, in other words, much more concerned with the ability of the Lords to scrutinise legislation than I am with the official place of bishops in that house. But that isn’t the point. The point is that our fine-tuned constitution, like a complex ecosystem, cannot simply be tampered with and played about with without considerable risk. If we are to make changes, elected politicians are the very last people who ought to be in charge of that process. The Canadian provinces of British Columbia and Ontario chose members of the public by lot for their Conventions on Electoral Reform. We could do worse.

Our present confusions have contributed strongly to what I can only call the decline of democracy in the west. Yes, we still vote – though in decreasing numbers; I would be prepared to bet that where I live there will be a record low turnout this spring, as traditional Labour voters

stay away in droves. We have all realised that voting every few years doesn't deliver Utopia, as some really did believe in the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Here, with some caution, I stand partly at least beside Prince Charles: the French Enlightenment proposed that *liberté*, *égalité* and *fraternité* would follow universal adult suffrage, and were prepared to kill quite a lot of people to make the point. Almost nobody now believes this, at least in Europe (though in America the illusion is still widely, if precariously, maintained). Our politicians have to go on promising us Utopia, because if they didn't the press would pillory them; but this essentially modernist dream, of socially engineered progress leading to Paradise, sits increasingly uncomfortably with our postmodern electorate, trained now in the high arts of cynicism, of 'Yeah, yeah' and 'Whatever'. And, somewhere near the heart of it, we find the point made sharply and eloquently by Lord Sacks a week ago in the [Times](#): that the French system of imposing 'freedom' and 'rights' on people from above, whether they want them or not, contrasts radically with the British system of allowing them to emerge and be discovered from below.

We thus have a dangerous situation where voting in the late-modern world is a bit like the problem of sex in the late-modern world: we all know how to do it but we've all forgotten why. This breeds a crisis of legitimacy, which can only be increased in May, when the next government, even if it has a clear parliamentary majority, is unlikely to have been voted for by more than 35% of the full electorate. Faced with this situation, anyone who supposes either that we can just rumble on and hope for the best, or that our present elected politicians are just the people to reorganise our constitution, is putting their head in the sand. And anyone who supposes that the question of God and government is irrelevant to these questions is omitting one of the vital ingredients we need for any wise solution.

2. God in the Real World

Among the nice ironies of the last year or two is the fact that the *New Statesman*, of all journals, has twice run cover stories on 'God'. So, for that matter, has the *Economist*. That, I think, would have been unthinkable ten years ago. God is back with a bang: literally, as in September 11, which is part of the cause of the suddenly revived theological interest in unlikely places; metaphorically, as Richard Dawkins screams vitriolically from one side while, on the other, the public flock to exhibitions like *Seeing Salvation* ten years ago, or to the great musical celebrations of faith such as the *Messiah* or the *Matthew Passion*. The secularist myth of a declining religion hasn't actually come true, and like all people who discover their myths to be moribund, the secularists are angry, and determined to kill off by force what they had hoped would die of natural causes. But in the newer generation there is a wistful questioning of the old certainties. Whereas, a generation ago, Kingsley Amis declared that he didn't believe in God, and he hated him, today the mood has shifted. Jonathan Barnes, in his poignant book [Nothing to be Frightened Of](#), begins by saying 'I don't believe in God, but I miss him.'

The interesting thing about the features in the *New Statesman* and the *Economist* is this. Both of them knew there was a question to be addressed; but neither of them understood what the question was, still less how to answer it. (I exempt from this the shrewd pieces by Sholto Byrnes in the *NS*.) The question, though, has been forced on us by a number of factors large and small: the rise of militant fundamentalisms; the attempt in this country to stop airline workers wearing

crosses, and in France to stop Muslim women wearing the *burka*; and, not least, a sense that the dangerous and perhaps criminal adventures in Iraq were led by two men who professed Christian faith, one of whom was sustained by a worldview in which current events in the Middle East were seen as part of a prophetic scenario in which goodies and baddies, like cowboys and Indians, fight the preliminary battles which lead to Armageddon. All of this might seem to support the secularists' view: religion is dangerous nonsense. But at the same time more and more people, as the modernist dream declines, are turning, if not to official religion (though plenty do that too), to 'spirituality' of various sorts. We all know there's more to life than you can put in a test tube or a bank balance, and though we aren't clear how or where to find that missing Something, or even Someone, that sense of an absence haunts us all the more as we find the eager but shallow modernist solutions running out of steam.

If that is so in our wider culture, it is also the case, I suggest, in our public and governmental life. We have done our best to banish God from the public square, and the gods come back in different ways. Let me again be clear. Despite the report in last Saturday's *Times*, I do not blame the Labour party for this secularisation of public life. True, there are some, particularly among the older Old Labour ranks, who represent the hard line of old secularism; and, absurdly, there are some Christians who have gone along for the ride, still believing the old fable that God and government don't mix. (This contrasts with the world of forty years ago, where the Labour leaders used to read the lessons at the local Methodist church on the Sunday of the party conference, and where it was Conservatives who insisted that God and Caesar shouldn't be muddled up.) The roots of today's secularism, of banishing God from the public square, goes back much further than a generation – again, not least to the Enlightenment. The eighteenth century replaced the Divine Right of Kings with the populist slogan '*vox populi, vox dei*', but increasingly the two became fused – the populus *was* divine – until, with Marxism on the one hand and Fascism on the other, they built their towers of Babel and came crashing down under their own weight. We in Britain, avoiding those extremes, did not avoid the Enlightenment's sense of God as an elderly relative, banished to the attic (call it 'heaven' if you like, as long as it's up a winding staircase out of sight), so that one's relation to God and one's relation to Caesar were two totally different things. That isn't, of course, Christianity or Judaism; it's Deism, though once people forget basic theology they forget that the word 'God' has been used to refer to several quite different beings. And with that implicit Deism, the *de facto* theology of most Britons for the last two hundred and fifty years - parties of left, right and centre - have treated God, or religion, like that elderly relative, who we might well visit on the odd Sunday morning when nothing more interesting is on offer, but who, we trust, will not come downstairs uninvited and embarrass us by interrupting our nice dinner parties, our worlds of politics and economics, our private or public worlds of power and money, or even sex.

The idea that this Deist view of God and real life is 'modern', perhaps somehow even validated by contemporary science, so that the presence of Bishops in the Lords strikes people as an 'anachronism', simply shows how deeply the Deist ideology of the Enlightenment, with its implicit narrative of Whig progressivism, has soaked into our bloodstreams. And this ideology was every bit as present in the implicit theology of the Conservative governments of the 1980s as it has been in New Labour. When Alistair Campbell said that 'Downing Street doesn't do God', he was merely putting into words what had been taken for granted for the previous two decades. Margaret Thatcher didn't even believe in *society*, after all – as the battered remnants of 'society' in some parts of our country ruefully attest. If she did believe in a God, that God was firmly

locked up in the attic, while the individuals downstairs made money, made war, and made empires. All that the present government has done is to continue the trend, with a healthy dose of anti-clericalism thrown in from time to time.

And now, frankly, in the aftermath of all that, we are just plain muddled. Recent discussions – of the so-called Equality Bill, of assisted suicide, of chaplaincy in Further Education, and so on – have all showcased the shrill frustration of the secularists at the thought that their march to Utopia is hindered by people who still believe in checks and balances of a different order. But the muddle extends further, in recent discussions of ‘Establishment’. Some people are against Establishment because it gives the church too much power; others, because it leaves it in thrall to others. But to whom? Theo Hobson’s book *Against Establishment* sports a cartoon on the front cover: the Archbishop of Canterbury in the form of a small dog on the end of a lead, with the lead being held by Her Majesty. But Hobson’s polemic against this picture backfires. For a start, there is no actual evidence that the Archbishop is a mere poodle doing Her Majesty’s bidding. More important, in Hobson’s own preferred scenario, the Church of England is actually *supposed* to reflect and articulate the mood and whims of postmodern liberal society. In other words, he holds just as Erastian a view as the one he claims to oppose, but instead of Her Majesty he has substituted, in the cartoon, the liberal commentariat. There is no sense here that the church exists not least to be a prophetic community, cutting across popular moods, speaking out against the surging tides of wayward public opinion whichever way they may go, no memory of Hugh Latimer speaking sternly to Edward VI and then bravely facing the stake under Mary – an equal witness in a different context; and no memory, in a longer story, of Nathan confronting David and teaching him a lesson, Elijah confronting Ahab and then fleeing for his life, John the Baptist confronting Herod and losing his head. All this and much, much more is required if we are to understand the multiple and subtle registers of a mature and wise church/state relationship.

All this is squashed flat in much of today’s discourse about God and government. It is widely assumed that we are faced with two alternatives: either a fundamentalist God, bullying the world into submission from a great height, or a secularist paradise from which the rumour of God has been banished. Both sides, of course, feed on one another’s excesses. Many people in Britain today, if asked about the place of God in public life, have only the shallowest and sketchiest idea of what might be involved in even asking the question, let alone what Jewish or Christian thought might have to say about it. Memories of detached biblical references – the ‘render unto Caesar’ saying, Paul’s affirmation of the legitimacy of rulers in Romans 13, or John’s denunciation of them in Revelation 13, are glimpsed vaguely and distantly, like a range of hills seen through morning mist, while the much larger biblical themes, of God the creator, of the victory of Jesus over the powers, of the launching of the Kingdom of God itself, remain well hidden: huge, craggy mountains, invisible behind a dense bank of post-Enlightenment fog.

The question, then, is not how we put together two well-known entities, namely ‘God’ on the one hand and ‘government’ on the other. The question is, Which God, and which government? That is the question to which the ancient Jewish and Christian sources offer, I believe, fresh answers; and to them I now turn.

3. God and Government: A Biblical Sketch

Like everything else in Jewish and Christian theology, all biblical wisdom about God and government goes back to Genesis. Right from the start, over against the rival worldviews of the ancient Near East, Genesis declares two things: first, that our world is the good creation of a good God; second, that humans are given a place of special responsibility within that world. The doctrine of humans being made ‘in God’s image’ is about the vocation of humans to bring God’s wise, fruitful order into the world, and in turn to sum up the praises of creation before the creator. This vision, which is reaffirmed in the last book of the Bible, is of humans as the angled mirror in which the creation glimpses and experiences its creator, and through which the creator receives the worship of his creation. Humans are called to be a royal priesthood.

And it isn’t only gardens that humans are called to look after. The concept of humans bringing God’s order to the world lies at the heart of all ordering of human society, all leadership, all government. The New Testament reaffirms very strongly the essentially monotheistic vision of human powers and authorities: all of them, rulers, authorities, powers and dominions, declares St Paul, are created in, through and for the Messiah who is the Image of the invisible God. The rebellion, pride, sin and failure of the human race has not obliterated the image-bearing vocation. It has, though, made that vocation far more complicated and ambiguous. That is the complexity and ambiguity which the Enlightenment hoped to wipe away with its new-minted ideology, but which has returned to haunt us with a vengeance. Because the next thing that must be said about Genesis is that human society, following human rebellion, lurches to and fro between the classic polarized alternatives: chaos and tyranny. Humans become violent and chaotic, and God responds with the Flood. There then emerges the great empire of Babel; and God responds by calling one man and promising him that through his descendants all the families of the earth would be blessed. The Old Testament is framed by this notion of Israel as the new model of humanity, in a world always threatened with chaos in one direction and tyranny in the other. What theologians sometimes call ‘salvation history’ is not about rescuing souls from a wicked world, but rescuing and restoring the human race so that it can fulfil the creator’s intention at last. The biblical vision of the wolf lying down with the lamb, of the calf and the bear feeding together, and the child playing by the cobra’s den, is a vision not just of God’s justice and peace filling the earth but of this being accomplished through the true human being, the coming king, arriving to take charge. God’s call to humans to be a royal priesthood comes true in the little child who leads creation into peace.

This explains (to oversimplify what is itself a complex and ambiguous story) the way in which Israel’s story oscillates around the two poles of the monarchy and the priesthood. Indeed, the two great tellings of that story, in the books of Kings and Chronicles, determinedly see the story of God’s people through those two focal lenses. The Psalms constantly draw both together, celebrating YHWH’s sovereign rule through the king and his presence in the Temple, and promising a time when the king’s rule would be not only over Israel but over the whole world. It is remarkable that many generations of Christians have read or sung Psalms like 2 and 72, celebrating the worldwide rule of God’s anointed king, and have continued to imagine that the Bible is an apolitical book.

The royal and priestly narratives are constantly intersected with the third strand, the prophetic. Because, as the writers knew well, the people of Israel were not only the bearers of the solution, they were themselves part of the problem. Just as human rulers are called to bring God’s order to the world, but, being fallible, easily become part of the disorder they were supposed to be sorting

out, so God's people are called to live as a society which models genuine human living, justice and mercy and peace, and even the kings and priests who are supposed to be leading the way – in fact, *particularly* the kings and priests who are supposed to be leading the way – get it badly wrong. The prophets thus play the vital role of reminding kings, priests and people what they are supposed to be about. And the story lurches on, with the vision flickering before the puzzled people, appearing to be extinguished completely through the Babylonian exile, but then being gloriously reaffirmed in prophecy even though, after the exile, neither kings nor priests regained their former glory, despite energetic attempts. Even prophecy seemed to vanish.

All this would have remained a very strange puzzle, a unique worldview within ancient visions of God and government but ultimately a dream that died, were it not for the extraordinary events of the first century. Out of the chaos of the Mediterranean world following the death of Julius Caesar there emerged the greatest empire the world had ever known; and out of the chaos of first-century Judaism, with kings and priests and would-be prophets all clamouring for power and attention, there emerged the man whom his followers hailed as Messiah – the world's true Lord. The two met, in the climactic scene of one of the world's greatest books, the gospel of John: Caesar's subordinate, Pontius Pilate, confronts Jesus of Nazareth and asks him about truth, and power, and the kingdom of God. And then he has him killed. There is no way through from the Old Testament's vision of God and government – of shaky human authorities called back to their task by vulnerable prophets – into a Christian view of government and politics unless we go by this route. The four canonical gospels are not about a Jesus who tells people how to get to heaven away from this wicked world. They are about God becoming the ruler on earth as in heaven. When Jesus says to Pilate, 'My kingdom is not from this world', he doesn't say, as is implied in the older translations, that his kingdom has nothing to do with the present world; rather, that it has a different *origin*. It comes from somewhere else, from the creator God; but it is certainly and emphatically *for* this world. That's why it's dangerous. That's why Pilate has him killed.

Jesus' whole proclamation of, and inauguration of, God's kingdom on earth as in heaven always was about the fulfilment of the vocation of Israel, the vocation of humanity itself: to reflect the wise ordering of the creator into the world, and to reflect the praises of the world back to the creator. The confrontation with Pilate highlights the first of these; that with Caiaphas, the second. And the result of both – Jesus going to the cross – is not, then, an added extra to the message and the fact of God's kingdom, just as God's kingdom is not an irrelevant teaching added on to the front of the cross as simply the event through which sins are forgiven. They go together and interpret one another, and, in so doing, create a new world of possible political theology, in continuity with the hope of Israel but radically transformed. They bring about what Jesus' mother had sung of in her wild celebration of God's restoring power, pulling down the mighty from their thrones and exalting the humble and meek, putting the world to rights at last. As Jesus himself pointed out tartly to James and John, the rulers of this world do things one way, but Jesus and his followers were to do things the opposite way, because the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. The salvific meaning of the cross is part of the larger feature which much modern western Christianity has ignored: the cross as the redefinition of power itself, bringing into sharp focus Jesus' entire kingdom-inaugurating ministry.

The New Testament is predicated, of course, on the belief that Jesus' violent and shameful death was a victory, not a defeat; which is itself only thinkable in the light of his resurrection. Here again we misunderstand. The resurrection was always incredible in terms of the normal run of things; it isn't the case that we've only just discovered, with the aid of modern science, that dead people don't rise. The real reason for opposition to Jesus' resurrection, apart from a natural scepticism about such an unprecedented event, is that it changes the *political* landscape as well as the personal. It brings God face to face with government. Oscar Wilde's brilliant play *Salome* catches the point: Herod, hearing of Jesus doing miracles, is intrigued; but when he hears that he is raising the dead, he is alarmed and tries to forbid it. Death is the last weapon of the tyrant as well as the terrorist, and if death itself is defeated then a new political order has been established. That is why, in the triumphant theological conclusion to his greatest letter, St Paul, quoting Isaiah, speaks of Jesus as the one 'who rises to rule the nations'. That is a direct confrontation, as so often in Paul, between Christ and Caesar: when you say 'Jesus is Lord,' or 'Jesus is Saviour', and when you speak of his 'gospel' and 'kingdom', and the 'peace' and 'justice' which he has brought to the world, you are using Caesar's language, snatching his rhetorical weapons and claiming them for the King of the Jews, the Messiah who is now fulfilling Psalm 2, Isaiah 11, and much else besides.

But how is he fulfilling them? The claim is made, clearly enough (though, like much else, cheerfully ignored by many would-be 'biblical' Christians), in the so-called 'great commission' at the end of Matthew. 'All authority in heaven and earth,' declares the risen Messiah, 'has been given to me; go therefore and make disciples . . .'. Most western Christians have been happy to think of Jesus as possessing all authority in heaven; but *on earth*? What – what, precisely 'on earth' – would or could that mean? Clearly not the immediate abolition or overthrow of earthly powers, even of Caesar or Herod. It means a new *kind* of power, a new way of being human, a new kind of royal priesthood, let loose in the world, in Caesar's world, in the world that still lurches between chaos and tyranny. And the claim at the end of Matthew is not eccentric; it is reinforced throughout the New Testament. 'He must reign', wrote Paul, 'until he has put all his enemies under his feet', the last enemy being death itself. But the point is that Jesus is *already* reigning. That (by the way) is the message of the Ascension. The puzzles many moderns have at that great feast is not simply that they try to understand it within the wrong cosmology, as though heaven is miles away up in the sky, but that they try to understand it within the wrong *political* worldview. The point of heaven, in biblical thought, is that it is the control room for earth. The one who dwells in heaven is not removed from earth; he is in charge. He is the one at whose name every knee shall bow.

What, then, might that rule look like in practice? The book of Acts is written, in part, to answer that question. Jesus' followers ask him whether this is the time when he will 'restore the kingdom to Israel', and his answer is to tell them to go and bear witness to him right across the world. This is how the vision of the Psalms and Isaiah is to be fulfilled. It isn't just the case – this is the key move here – that Jesus' followers are to form a parallel society, a holy family who live in a new way and thus implicitly put the world to shame. They are indeed to do that, but they are to do it not as a quasi-monastic community hidden away from the rest of the world, leaving rulers and governments to their wicked ways and denouncing them from a safe distance, but as a community which bears cheerful public witness to the fact that there is a different way to be genuinely human, and calling people, particularly rulers, to account before the God who has in Jesus the Messiah abolished the power of death itself and has thereby, according to Paul in a

remarkable passage, led the principalities and powers as a defeated rabble in his triumphal procession.

This works out, almost immediately in Acts, in terms of the authorities discovering that a new kind of society is being born in its midst, and is proving highly subversive. ‘We must obey God rather than human authorities’, declare the apostles when the Chief Priests threaten them. Like Daniel and his companions, they now see clearly where the systems of the world, including even the religious system of first-century Israel, has become idolatrous, and they oppose it in the name of Jesus. That produces the first martyr, Stephen; and the story continues with that strange blend of martyrdom on the one hand and vindication on the other, as Herod kills James but then, as a reward for his hubris, is himself destroyed by sudden and horrible sickness. The career of St Paul, in the second half of Acts, moves rapidly from success to stoning, from rousing sermons to riots in the theatre, from a formal trial in Athens on a similar charge to that of Socrates to the dismissal of a charge in Corinth, resulting in Christianity sharing the Jewish status of ‘permitted religion’ in southern Greece. And again and again Paul, no doubt most annoyingly, presumes the right to tell the authorities their business. Beaten and imprisoned without trial in Philippi, when the local rulers tell him to leave town he points out that, as a Roman citizen, he has been wrongly treated; he demands a public apology, and he gets it. Slapped in the face by the High Priest’s henchman, he reminds him of the rule he’s just broken, while taking care, when it’s pointed out, to acknowledge the High Priest’s office even while leaving clear the implication that the present holder of it is unworthy. And, finally, after the shipwreck whose symbolic value should not be overlooked, Paul arrives in Rome, under Caesar’s very nose, and the book closes with him proclaiming God as King and Jesus as Lord ‘openly and unhindered’. This is a deeply political vision as well, of course, as a thoroughly spiritual and theological one.

We should remind ourselves that in the ancient world ‘religion’ was simply a department of state. Politicians were regularly priests, and vice versa. There were different theories about the gods, and some even doubted their existence; but almost everyone believed that civic religion, within the bounds of the political framework and at its behest, was important. If you left the gods unappeased, bad things might happen; and anyway the public at large believed in them, and it was better to go along with the old rituals, safely controlled by the ruling classes, than to allow subversive kinds of ‘religion’ to grow up unchecked. In that world, the one thing nobody thought about the Christian movement was that it was a new ‘religion’. Indeed, if you were to ask whether early Christianity should be studied in a department of religion or a department of politics, you should really choose the latter. The Christians were perceived not only as giving their full allegiance to this strange character called Jesus; that was bad enough, even though they claimed they were living as good, law-abiding citizens in other ways. They were discovering that following Jesus generated and sustained a new way of living together, a new kind of communal life, which, strangely to ancient eyes, didn’t offer sacrifices to the gods, didn’t go off to ask directions from the oracles, and, though it paid Caesar’s taxes, didn’t pray to him or offer incense before his image. They weren’t normal revolutionaries; they were worse than that. And so, as the early church spread, the story of Acts was multiplied: martyrdoms on the one hand, explanations on the other, and, increasingly, a whole new view of *how the world should be governed*. The earliest Christians were in no position to do the governing themselves. But they, like some ancient Jews, had no hesitation in telling rulers how to do their job. The church was not simply called to be a parallel society, leaving the world to go its own wicked way. The church discovered that, out of allegiance to Jesus, it had the annoying and dangerous task of *calling the*

world to account. Paul, on trial in Athens, turns the tables, and declares to his accusers that the God of whom he speaks has fixed a day on which *he* will judge *them*, bringing true justice to the world at last through a man whom he has appointed, giving assurance of this fact by raising him from the dead. As I have said elsewhere, the point about the early Christian view of government was not, as our modern age has imagined, to do with how governments come to power, but with *what they do once they are in power*.

Already, then, two centuries and more before the time of Constantine, the church claimed for itself a strange new *public* role, in articulating and living a vision of society which increasingly showed up Caesar's empire as a shabby parody of God's kingdom. Sometimes the empire struck back; sometimes people got the point. And, as Rodney Stark showed in his brilliant book [*The Rise of Christianity*](#), the movement spread by the way people lived in their whole lives, not simply by the religious feelings that came over them or the subtle theology which enabled them to speak of Jesus and God in the same breath. The latter doctrine – Christology, and with it the Trinity – always was, in any case, as much a *political* doctrine as a 'theological' one, and part of the whole point of early Christianity is to deny that hard-and-fast distinction. Caesar claimed divine power; from Paul onwards, the early Christians demoted him, insisting that God does indeed want governments but that those governments are not divine. The Trinity explains how it is that this man Jesus is the world's true Lord, and how he is exercising that lordship. And at this point we are almost ready to return to our own day.

Almost, but not quite. A word about Constantine is in order. Part of the standard Enlightenment rhetoric has been to blame Constantine for all the ills which have come upon the church ever since. This is naive. When you are part of a struggling sect whom the Emperor is doing his best to persecute out of existence, and then suddenly the Emperor turns round and says that since there are now so many of you you'd better become official, you don't reply, 'Oh no, please go on persecuting us, because that is so much more authentic'. Yes, of course, the new situation creates new tensions and challenges. That was partly what the monastic movement was all about, creating a new kind of parallel world to remind the newly Christian empire of the dangers of an over-realised eschatology. But it was simply not the case that from then on the church capitulated to the state, or indeed vice versa. It would be good to revisit and revise some of the old myths that hang around in that department.

4. Back to the Future

So let us return from the first two centuries to our own. We cannot, of course, just make that jump without any awareness of all that has happened in between, but that must be for another occasion. What I want to do by way of conclusion is to spell out some at least of the implications of a fresh political reading of the New Testament for where we are in our world today and where we might be going tomorrow.

The first thing to stress is that the present push in some quarters towards a newly secularized society is easily recognisable in terms of the story I have told. It is the attempt to turn Christianity into a 'religion', and to insist that religion is a department of the state: in other words, it is the attempt to reinstate the way things were in ancient paganism, as though God were

a god and Jesus just one teacher among many. Granted, if we were starting from scratch, in a newly discovered country, we would pretty certainly not create the kind of establishment we now have. But granted that we are starting where we are, to allow the government – any government, of any party – to dictate terms to the church, to threaten us with legal action for being true to ourselves and our foundation charter, would be to collude with a sort of neo-paganism. The day the church bends to the whim or dictate of secular government or ideology is the day it ceases to be the church. That has happened before and we mustn't let it happen again. We don't need bishops in the Lords to live out this point. But since we've got them, to lose them might be seen as making the point that God has now been pushed off the public square. And it isn't only Anglicans, or only Christians, who would shiver at the chilly secular wind that would then blow.

But the church is precisely not simply a parallel community that must be allowed to order its life according to its own rules, just as a golf club ought not to be compelled by law to allow cows to graze on the course. The claim of Jesus the Messiah, in line with and bringing into focus the entire claim of Israel, is that this is where the entire human race is being remade. Israel's king is to be the king of the world, and in hailing Jesus as Lord the church from the earliest days until now is saying that he is in fact the true Lord of the whole world. The church's claim must therefore always be a *public* claim, with public implications. When Jesus tells his followers in the last chapter of Luke that repentance and forgiveness of sins are to be proclaimed in his name, he doesn't just mean that they are to tell individual people to repent and find forgiveness, though of course that is the personal heart of it all. The church is to announce, in the name of Jesus, that there is a different way to be human, a way in which normal power-games are stood on their head, a way in which conflicts can be resolved not by force of arms but by costly truth and reconciliation. And when Jesus tells his followers in Matthew to teach people all that he had taught them, that includes the comment in the Sermon on the Mount that you cannot serve God and mammon; so that the church must bear witness to a different way of ordering our financial lives, a way in which the law of Jubilee replaces the law of the jungle. They need that in Haiti right now: the world reels in horror at the earthquake, but the damage caused by long-term unpayable debt left over from bygone regimes has been much, much more devastating. We have bailed out the very rich when they came squealing to us; why can't we do the same for the very poor? Likewise, Jesus' teaching on marriage and sexual behaviour was radically counter-cultural in his own day as it is in ours, but you have to be particularly hard-nosed to say that our present society has got it right, with our frantic obsessions and devastated families, and that Jesus got it wrong. Power, money and sex; and the fact that we thus label them shows already how deeply in thrall we are to the Enlightenment's reductionism. What we ought to be talking about is responsibility, resources and relationships, and leave behind the thin, sharp, shrill little worlds of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud. And the followers of Jesus, I suggest, must bear constant witness to the fact that some laws, and some systems of government, create space for that kind of mature human living, and that others do not. This is part of the theme I have spoken of elsewhere, of moving through postmodernity, not back to modernity or pre-modernity, but out into a new world for which there is presently no name, and to which nobody other than Jesus' followers is pointing the way.

What has changed with the victory of Jesus is that we now know that the ancient Israelite dream of a world put to rights was not a mere fantasy. Jesus has launched God's new creation, and one day the whole world will be put to rights. The task of governments in the present time, seen from the Christian point of view, is to perform within the world that waits for that eventual

day such acts of judgment – the making of decisions, the drawing of lines, the setting of parameters – which will properly anticipate, even in the present time and even if the rulers in question are unaware of this God-given role, that final putting-to-rights of all things. *And it is a prime task of the church to remind the rulers, whoever they are, of this vocation.* This is what we see in Acts, where Paul regularly reminds the authorities of what they ought to be doing and where they're getting it wrong. Annoying to the rulers, of course, and dangerous for the apostle; but following in the steps of Jesus. A Christian vision of political theology does not mean that Christians must try to seize power, or force through by non-legal methods the particular policies in which they believe. We must not only advocate the message of the cross but do so with the methods of the cross, which involve risky advocacy (for instance, when the government is bullying defenceless asylum-seekers), bold proposals (for instance, for debt cancellation), and wise counsel when the headless chickens all come home to roost.

I am not suggesting, of course, that when you follow Jesus you have instant access to automatic answers to everybody's problems. That would be ridiculous. Part of the point of Christianity is that it challenges you to think harder through the real complexities of life, instead of settling for the easy answers offered by the current platitudes of left and right. In fact – and here I come to a major point about how 'God and government' in fact works out within a Christian perspective – if we are following Jesus and indwelt by his Spirit, we should *expect* that we will find ourselves puzzled and confused at many points, that the church itself would be in distress on many points, which overlap with and often bring into focus the same problems that are 'out there' in the world. When that happens, declares St Paul, it constitutes a vocation to be in prayer at the places where the world is in pain, so that the God who himself comes to that point can bring not just 'solutions', but healing. Prayer is not a retreat from the business of public life, into a private world of detached spirituality. Christian prayer grows out of the prayer Jesus himself taught, that God's kingdom would come on earth as in heaven, that we might have bread, forgiveness and deliverance from evil. Those are all political questions just as much as spiritual ones.

The call to allow God back into the heart of government does not mean, then, that our politicians should imagine that a hot line to God will give them 'correct' answers on the urgent problems they face. It does mean that, whether the politicians are believers or not, the Christian church has a vocation to create a climate of opinion in which the cry of the poor can be heard more easily, the summons to peace will sound more sweetly than the trumpet of war, and the challenge to faithful marriage will be recognised as the way to personal and social maturity and stability. No doubt all things need nuancing. No doubt there are many hard cases and surprising twists and turns of ethical and political argument. But what we must aim for, and not be distracted from by clever but specious arguments, is the continuing place in our society, all the way up to government itself, for the liberating, re-humanising, healing news that Jesus is the world's true Lord; that he has broken the power and tyranny of evil; and now delegates to his followers the task of living out that victory in the face of chaos and tyranny. Of course, the church needs to get its own act together if it is to live like that, let alone speak like that; but that, in Synod week, is another story.