CHAPTER ONE

The politics of scripture

> I just want you to know, my friends, that I stand here to speak from this Holy Book. It is important for you to recognize that what I am going to say is not based on any ideology, political or otherwise. It is based on this Holy Book.
>
> (Desmond Tutu)[1]

The present study is governed by two overriding convictions, one negative and the other positive. The relationship of church to state has often been cast in terms of the relations that obtain between two dominant institutions existing in a close and exclusive partnership. With the end of Christendom, this is now outmoded. A more differentiated approach is required that positions the church in positive relation to a range of other institutions within civil society, thus more effectively presenting its public significance. To this end, however, a rich tradition of Christian social thought can be appropriated for contemporary political conversation. Hence the attention devoted to historical materials is neither a preamble nor a diversion; it is integral to the argument.

These two ruling convictions are supported by a range of further considerations. As secular liberalism experiences various crises, especially the ordeal of 'value pluralism', attention can be diverted to early modern arguments for religious tolerance. These provide an account of social diversity that is articulated along distinctively theological lines. With the concept of 'civil society' now attracting fresh scholarly interest, the social contribution of churches can be positively assessed without recourse to the options of sectarian isolation or public dominance. This is reinforced by attention to the experience

[1] *The Rainbow People of God* (London: Doubleday, 1994), 166–7.

of non-western churches which have become socially significant but without aspiring to function as national or state institutions. And in the background to these arguments, an ecclesiology emerges that in important respects stresses the increasingly congregational, voluntarist and ethically formative dimensions of the church in western societies. The case is supported by familiar arguments against establishment, although it will be claimed finally that the concept of 'disestablishment' is neither univocal nor unproblematic.

PATTERNS OF DISSOCIATION

Most people over the age of about forty have little difficulty in providing anecdotal evidence for the decline of mainstream Christianity in western European societies. The opening of retail stores for business on Sundays; the availability of leisure alternatives to church attendance; shifting patterns in domestic and family life; the affirmation of pluralism as a positive social good; less media coverage of the ethical pronouncements of church leaders: all these are symptomatic of a growing dissociation that has taken place in our lifetime between the beliefs and practices of the Christian churches and those of civil society. With the help of sociologists and historians one can detect these trends already at work more than a century ago, but the momentum that they have gained in living memory is striking. The statistical decline in baptisms, church attendance, weddings and even now Christian funerals confirms the intuition that ours is a society less interested in traditional expressions of religious faith, less sensitive to ecclesial practices, and less informed about Scripture, prayer and the sacraments. Even the faithful themselves have become uncomfortable with arrangements that quite suddenly seem outmoded, the relics of a bygone era of establishment. The attack by secularists on the regular BBC Radio 'Thought for the Day' slot on the flagship news programme seems persuasive to many who remain committed to the ethical and social relevance of religious resources.[2]

[2] Clifford Longley confesses that 'my own misgiving about doing "Thought for the Day", the difficulty of attracting Catholic contributors, and the distaste of the National Secular Society are not entirely disconnected. For it is surely a legacy of a Protestant and Erastian understanding of Church and society which now seems obsolete'; *Tablet*, 9 August 2003, 2.

Callum Brown, in his recent book *The Death of Christian Britain*, has painted a provocative picture of how rapid and recent has been the dissociation of contemporary society from the ethos of the churches in the past generation:

> It took several centuries to convert Britain to Christianity, but it has taken less than forty years for the country to forsake it . . . In unprecedented numbers, the British people since the 1960s have stopped going to church, have allowed their church membership to lapse, have stopped marrying in church and have neglected to baptise their children . . . [A] formerly religious people have entirely forsaked [*sic*] organised Christianity in a sudden plunge into a truly secular condition.[3]

In some measure, this lament is part of a wider social story. Institutions and organisations which commanded the commitment of mass memberships are generally in decline. Our corporate life is increasingly fractured and fragmented. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds can now boast many more members than all of the United Kingdom's main political parties combined.[4] The pressures towards the atomisation of social life can be detected in shifting patterns of family life with more people living alone than ever before, in working practices which place us increasingly in front of computers, in leisure pursuits which are more various and accommodating of individual preferences, in meal times and moments of relaxation spent not in conversation but in front of a television screen. These trends have given rise to a body of literature which complains in Tocquevillian fashion of a loss of moral identity and social cohesion, the evaporation of community spirit, deracinated elites, and the dangerous dissociation of growing numbers of citizens from the political process.[5] Voter apathy, a familiar ailment, is now difficult to remedy. With the process of fragmentation, there arises a different set of pathologies. These are no longer the repressive conditions produced by societies and homes demanding a narrow conformity. Instead, the psychological ailments

[3] *The Death of Christian Britain* (London: Routledge, 2001), 1. In citing Brown's work at this juncture, I do not intend to endorse his particular take on the secularisation thesis. However, the evidence he cites for the rapid changes that have taken place within the last forty years is striking and ineluctable.

[4] *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 22/29 December 2000, 24.

[5] E.g. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: the Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).

of western culture are generated by the loss of those stable ideologies and moral standards that once defined the self. The resultant effects include cynicism, privatism and self-preoccupation.[6]

In this new social landscape, we seem to be faced with two ecclesiological options. These are withdrawal or assimilation. This disjunction is probably most plausible to those living in the USA and in those western European societies which have suddenly departed from familiar patterns of establishment. The social pre-eminence of churches has disappeared in a more pluralist culture that esteems individual lifestyle choices and tends to perceive religious commitment as now restricted to a private or subcultural domain. The former option of withdrawal has been described pejoratively as 'the sectarian temptation'.[7] The church can maintain its identity by corralling its members into tightly defined subgroups within which they are socialised in the ways of authentic Christian life forms. The maintenance of tribal identity is thus secured albeit for a small minority who are willing to make this commitment. The other alternative is merely to position the church in the slipstream of cultural developments, where it will provide an ongoing religious dimension or variant to whatever moral and social choices are made by individuals.[8] On the assumption that there will always be some spiritual aspect of human life, the churches can thus survive by meeting the shifting needs and aspirations of our contemporaries. The decision of the Church of Scotland minister at Dornoch Cathedral to preside at the wedding of Madonna and Guy Ritchie and to baptise their child was presented, albeit unfairly, as symptomatic of an ecclesiology in which the church will bend in whatever direction the winds of cultural change happen to blow.

Each of these options thus described contains elements of caricature, and neither is sociologically possible nor theologically supportable. The stark alternatives of withdrawal or assimilation present modern culture as monolithic. You are either for it or against it.

[6] This is argued by Charles B. Guignon and David R. Hiley, 'Biting the Bullet: Rorty on Private and Public Morality', in Alan Malachowski (ed.), *Reading Rorty* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 339–64.

[7] E.g. James Gustafson, 'The Sectarian Temptation', *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 40 (1985), 83–94.

[8] My colleague David Wright sees this as increasingly the reality of establishment churches; 'The Kirk: National or Christian?', in Robert Kernohan (ed.), *The Realm of Reform: Presbyterianism and Calvinism in a Changing Scotland* (Edinburgh: Handsel Press, 1999), 31–40.

Yet this is surely to simplify what is a highly complex phenomenon requiring a discernment that will sometimes confirm and sometimes reject developments in the worlds of art, education, science, medicine, social-welfare economics and politics.[9] It would be surprising if one were in favour of either everything or nothing. Nonetheless, a range of critical questions is raised for contemporary theology by recent cultural dissociation from the church, by modern ideologies of pluralism and by the politics of state neutrality. These are not new problems. In one form or another, they have generally beset Jewish and Christian communities, who in turn provide us with a rich heritage of resources for critical reflection. Attention to these is required for an adequate and informed response to these changing cultural conditions.

THE KINGSHIP OF YAHWEH

Much early Christian thought in this area (as in others) is rooted in centuries of Jewish reflection. For the Hebrew Bible all thinking about political authority and power is profoundly related to the claim that 'Yahweh is king.' It has been pointed out that the Hebrew word for 'king' – *melek* – is found over 2,500 times and is the fourth most frequently encountered term in the Hebrew Bible.[10] The affirmation of Yahweh's kingship is thoroughly political to the extent that it embraces the social, economic and cultural life of the community. This is celebrated in the enthronement Psalms and reveals the extent to which not only is the life of Israel sustained by the kingship of Yahweh but also the natural world and the other nations of the earth. The world is firmly established by Yahweh (Psalm 96:10). Yahweh will judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with equity (Psalm 98:9). Yahweh loves those who hate evil and guards the lives of the faithful (Psalm 97:10). Yahweh the most high is awesome, a great king over all the earth (Psalm 47:2). Despite the Christian temptation to spiritualise these passages or to project them on to a distant eschatological state, it is clear that they are of intense political significance.

[9] A similar point is argued to great effect in John Howard Yoder's critique of H. R. Niebuhr's typology in *Christ and Culture*; 'How H. Richard Niebuhr Reasoned: a Critique of *Christ and Culture*', in Glen H. Stassen, D. M. Yeager and John Howard Yoder (eds.), *Authentic Transformation: a New Vision of Christ and Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 52.

[10] Horst Dietrich Preuss, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. II (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 21.

Brueggemann suggests that the rhetoric of divine kingship has two functions in the thought of Israel.[11] Negatively, it destabilises any government or regime which claims an absolute authority. This is true of Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar at either end of Old Testament history. Yahweh alone determines who rules proximately on the earth, and brings low those who walk in pride (Daniel 4:37). Yet positively, Yahweh's kingship offers compassion, healing and the deliverance of justice. 'The Lord upholds all who are falling, and raises up all who are bowed down' (Psalm 145:1).

Given the significance attached to the kingship of Yahweh one might expect to find monarchical models of government legitimated in terms of their mediation of this higher kingship. In part, this is true. Israel has a monarch as do the other nations. His task is to maintain the security of the nation against external threat and to execute the will of Yahweh amongst the people. Nevertheless, there are strands within the Hebrew Scriptures which are highly critical of the monarchy as an institution. Gideon renounces the kingship in Judges 8:23 for it is Yahweh's right alone to rule the people. In Judges 9 Jotham tells a parable in which the olive, the fig and the vine all renounce any claim to be king over the trees only for the worthless bramble to take up a position of supremacy. This is a deeply anti-monarchical story, which led Martin Buber to insist upon prophecy rather than kingship as the authentic political voice of Judaism.[12]

Monarchy is conceded, as it were, in 1 Samuel but not without reservations which are subsequently articulated by the prophets and the histories, which record at best mixed outcomes. There are repeated efforts to position the monarch under the claims of divine law. Thus the king, like any other citizen, is subject to Yahweh's law. It is this which legitimates his rule and brings prosperity to the nation. Nathan is able to confront David for despising the word of Yahweh (2 Samuel 12:9). Solomon is rewarded for placing wisdom above all other gifts: 'If you will walk in my ways, keeping my statutes and commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your life' (1 Kings 3:14). Yet he also will become the object of divine anger for turning to foreign deities (1 Kings 11).

[11] Walter Brueggeman, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997), 38–240.
[12] 'At no other time or place has the spirit been served in the human world with such militancy, generation after generation, as it was by the prophets of Israel'; Martin Buber, *On Judaism* (New York, Schocken Books, 1967), 194.

The tension between the ideal of kingship and the empirical reality is maintained through much of the Hebrew Scriptures. Psalm 72 is a prayer for the reign of a king which petitions Yahweh for justice, military success and economic prosperity. In Jeremiah, despite his suspicion and bitter experience of kingship, the reign of Josiah is held up as an example of just kingship according to the law of Yahweh: 'He judged the cause of the poor and needy: then it was well. Is not this to know me? says the Lord' (Jeremiah 22:16). The king remains an ideal. He can mediate Yahweh's sovereignty in the responsible use of power towards the goal of communal well-being.[13]

Following the exile in 587 BCE, Israel's life is no longer shaped by king, temple and city. In some places, this is interpreted as a judgement upon the failure and corruption of the monarchy, for example in Ezekiel's prophecy against the false shepherds of Israel (Ezekiel 34). The inability to use power responsibly is indeed perceived as a cause of its withdrawal by God. Yet hope for a time of renewal is expressed in terms of the restoration of the Davidic monarchy. The root of Jesse becomes a signal to the peoples of a new era (Isaiah 11:10).[14] This remains a political hope. The king who comes to Jerusalem in Zechariah 9 commands peace to the nations. His dominion is from sea to sea.

Despite this hope, from the time of the exile the political situation of the Jewish people remains radically altered. In Babylon there is a strong maintenance of Jewish identity but also an accommodation with the state and civil society. This is expressed most famously by Jeremiah's injunction to 'seek the welfare of the city' (Jeremiah 29:7). His discourse appears to have been written to counter unrealistic hopes of an imminent return to Jerusalem and to criticise false prophets: 'But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.' A positive commitment to the peace of the city is advocated and acknowledgement made that the welfare of Jews there is bound up with that of the civil community. Yet the language of exile is still restrained and an eventual return to the homeland anticipated. This creates dissonance and makes a full assimilation into Babylonian society impossible.

[13] I am indebted in all this to the discussion in Brueggeman, *Theology of the Old Testament*, 611ff.

[14] This passage is sometimes read as a post-exilic addition to the text.

By the first century there is not so much exile as dispersion. It is estimated that there may have been 5–6 million Jews throughout the empire. Philo reports that there are about a million Jews in Alexandria alone during the first century.[15] Throughout the empire, Judaism had the status of *religio licita*, thus enjoying the position of a recognised religion. The synagogue (or prayer house) served as a meeting place for daily and sabbath prayer, for religious instruction and communal gathering. So the faith could be maintained and upheld within societies displaying a measure of tolerance and hospitality, albeit with a tension never permitting total assimilation.

JESUS AND THE DOMINION OF GOD

In Israel at the time of Jesus we find a range of attitudes including withdrawal, resistance and forms of accommodation. The Essenes adopted a strategy of detachment either within urban communities or in remote sites such as Qumran. Their separate identity was maintained by an elaborate system of purity, ethics and initiation. They did not recognise the Jerusalem priesthood. Violent resistance was sporadic, and recent scholarship suggests that resistance movements took a variety of forms deriving from the example of Maccabean revolts in the second century BCE. The issue of taxes raised one problem. In paying taxes, they owed allegiance to a foreign power. According to its sacred traditions, however, Israel was to be ruled by a king of divine appointment. Submission to Rome could be seen, therefore, as effectively violating the first commandment. Faithfulness was to be exhibited in outright resistance to foreign overlords, and God would vindicate the faithful either in this world or at the end of time. There was such armed resistance to the rule of Herod's son after the death of his father in 4 BCE and in the example of the Sicarii.

The assumption that resistance to Roman rule was restricted to the Zealot party has been challenged by recent scholarship.[16] Examples of wider resistance amongst Pharisees and other groups are available, while it is now doubted whether a discrete Zealot grouping existed

[15] However, John Barclay notes that this estimate is probably much exaggerated; *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1996), 41.

[16] In what follows I am indebted to Marcus Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teaching of Jesus*, 2nd edition (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1998), 43–65.

before or about the time of Jesus. Herod's desecration of the Temple with the eagle of imperial Rome in 4 BCE was attacked by two Pharisees and forty students. For destroying the eagle they were executed, a political event that precipitated widespread public protest. Tensions with Rome were ongoing; resistance was sporadic, involving a range of groups from a broad cross-section of the Jewish population. Torah and Temple dominated Palestinian Judaism, so that varying threats to these institutions brought about forms of protest, sometimes violent, from a range of individuals and groups. The neat packaging of priests as collaborators, Pharisees as quietists, Zealots as guerilla fighters, and Essenes as sectarian escapists obscures the complexity of the historical situation. It may also have the effect of marginalising the importance and necessity of political criticism within Judaism.

It is within this complex political, social and religious context that Jesus is to be understood. In some respects, the group to whom he may be closest is the Pharisees. The intensity of their conflict indeed may be explained by the sheer proximity of ideology.[17] By positioning himself between outright resistance and total withdrawal, Jesus follows a path mapped out by other movements. His eschewal of violence in the Sermon on the Mount sets him apart from more violent trends in first-century Judaism, while his eschatological vision of the coming reign of God prevents any political or military orchestration of the ideal society. In response to the divine rule of compassion and forgiveness already being inaugurated in his teaching, people are called to live obediently and gratefully. This was a social movement directed not merely at individuals but at Israel as the people of God. Its radical inclusiveness made for indistinct and fluid boundaries. Yet it was a corporate movement, a new community adumbrated by the calling of twelve disciples. Although this vision of divine grace and inclusion, together with its eschatologically urgent demand, brought Jesus into conflict with the regnant interpretations of Torah and Temple, the proximity of his position to that of Pharisees and priests should not be overlooked.

In attempting to reshape the *polis* of Israel, the outcome of Jesus' ministry was confrontation with some of these religious forces and

[17] Borg points out that the closer the relationship between the antagonists the more intense is the conflict; ibid., 153.

execution by the civil authorities. Jesus may not have actively sought confrontation with the Roman authorities, but his willingness to suffer crucifixion for the rule of God indicates where his highest allegiance lay. His fate and that of many of his followers reveals the inability of Christianity to function as a form of civil religion, a religion whose primary purpose is to reinforce the life of a civil community. There is never a perfect coincidence of civil and theological loyalties. The possibility of conflict is always present, and in such a situation one's highest allegiance is to God. This is dramatically represented in the trial before Pilate as narrated in the Fourth Gospel. Here the clash of allegiances is personified in the encounter of Christ with the Roman procurator. Pilate is ostensibly the judge yet the story attests Jesus as the judge of Pilate whose kingship is derived from God and conceded only in a provisional manner.[18]

The credal confession *crucifixus est pro nobis sub Pontio Pilato*, often quoted in this context by Donald MacKinnon,[19] is a reminder that Jesus was a victim of the *Pax Romana*. The procurator charged with maintaining the peace of Palestine perceived Jesus as a threat. Here the *Pax Romana* and the reign of God collide. To this extent it is hard to disagree with Klaus Wengst when he argues that 'anyone who prays for the coming of the kingdom of God, expects it very soon, and sees the sign of its dawning in his own action, has no faith in the imperial good tidings of a pacified world and human happiness in it'.[20] The peace of Rome, enforced by military means under the imperial authority, was of course not devoid of legal, economic and cultural benefits. Yet the fate of Jesus under Pilate meant that any subsequent endorsement of Roman authority by the early church could only be provisional and temporary. It might generate the conditions under

[18] This is emphasised by Bultmann in a commentary written in the midst of the German church struggle. The neutrality of the state is no longer possible when the state becomes pressed by 'the world' to execute the Revealer. Hence Pilate is placed under judgement by Jesus. Bultmann concludes that an atheistic state, i.e. a neutral one, is impossible although an unchristian one is possible in principle; *The Gospel of John*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray (Oxford: Blackwell, 1971), 661. The first German edition appeared in 1941.

[19] E.g. *Borderlands in Theology* (London: Lutterworth, 1968), 87.

[20] Klaus Wengst, *Pax Romana and the Peace of Jesus Christ* (London: SCM, 1987), 55. The extent to which the community inaugurated in Jesus' ministry is effectively a religious, social and economic challenge to Roman imperial rule is stressed by Richard A. Horsley, *Jesus and Empire: the Kingdom of God and the New World Disorder* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).