

Church Matters¹

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1. *The Theological Politics of the “And”*

I am a Christian. I am even a Christian theologian. I observe in my memoir, *Hannah’s Child*, that you do not need to be a theologian to be a Christian but I probably did. Being a Christian has not and does not come naturally or easy for me. I take that to be a good thing because I am sure that to be a Christian requires training that lasts a lifetime. I am more than ready to acknowledge that some may find that being a Christian comes more “naturally” but that can present its own difficulties. Just as an athlete with natural gifts may fail to develop the fundamental skills necessary to play their sport after their talent fades, so people naturally disposed to faith may fail to develop the skills necessary to sustain them for a lifetime.

By training I mean something very basic such as acquiring habits of speech necessary for prayer. The acquisition of such habits is crucial for the formation of our bodies if we are to acquire the virtues necessary to live life as a Christian. For I take it to be crucial that Christians must live in a manner that their lives are unintelligible if the God we worship in Jesus Christ does not exist. The training entailed in being a Christian can be called, if you are so disposed, culture. That is particularly the case if, as Raymond Williams reminds us in *Keywords*, culture is a term first used as a process noun to describe the tending or cultivation of a crop or animal.² One of the challenges Christians confront is how the politics we helped create has made it difficult to sustain the material practices constitutive of an ecclesial culture to produce Christians.

The character of much of modern theology exemplifies this development. In the attempt to make Christianity intelligible within the epistemological conceits of modernity theologians have been intent on showing that what we believe as Christians is not that different than what those who are not Christians believe. Thus MacIntyre’s wry observation that the project of modern theology to distinguish the kernel of the Christian faith from the outmoded husk has resulted in offering atheists less and less in which to disbelieve.³

It should not be surprising, as David Yeago argues, that many secular people now assume that descriptions of reality that Christians employ are a sort of varnish that can be scraped away to reveal a more basic account of what has always been the case. From a secular point of view it is assumed that we

¹ My title is a play on Herbert McCabe, O.P. *God Matters* (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1991).

² Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), pp. 77-78.

³ Alasdair MacIntyre, *The Religious Significance of Atheism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1966), p. 24.

agree, or should agree, on fundamental naturalistic and secular descriptions of reality whatever religious elaborations may lay over them. What I find so interesting is that many Christians accept these naturalistic assumptions about the way things are because they believe by doing so it is possible to transcend our diverse particularities that otherwise result in unwelcome conflict. From such a perspective it is only a short step to the key socio-political move crucial to the formation of modern societies, that is, the relegation of religion to the sphere of private inwardness and individual motivation.⁴

Societies that have relegated strong convictions to the private, a development I think appropriately identified as “secularisation,” may assume a tolerant or intolerant attitude toward the church, but the crucial characteristic of such societies is that the church is understood to be no more than a “voluntary association” of like-minded individuals.⁵ Even those who identify as “religious” assume their religious convictions should be submitted to a public order governed by a secular rationality. I hope to challenge that assumption by calling into question the conceptual resources that now seem to be givens for how the church is understood. In particular I hope to convince Christians that the church is a material reality that must resist the domestication of our faith in the interest of societal peace.

There is a great deal going against such a project. For example in his book, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy*, Ronald Beiner argues that in modernity the attempt to domesticate strong religious convictions in the interest of state control has assumed two primary and antithetical alternatives: civil religion or liberalism. Civil religion is the attempt to empower religion not for the good of religion but for the creation of the citizen. Indeed the very creation of “religion” as a concept more fundamental than a determinative tradition is a manifestation that, at least in Western societies, Christianity has become “civil.”⁶ Rousseau, according to Beiner, is the decisive figure that gave expression for this transformation because Rousseau saw clearly that the modern state could not risk having a church capable of challenging its political authority.⁷ In the process, the political concepts used to

⁴ David Yeago, “Messiah’s People: The Culture of the Church in the Midst of the Nations,” *Pro Ecclesia*, VI, 1, pp. 147-148.

⁵ I have no intention to enter into the never-ending debates about secularisation and the corresponding discussions concerning the demise of “religion.” Suffice it to say I am in general sympathetic with David Martin’s contention that secularisation is best understood in terms of social differentiation correlative of the division of labor with the result that discrete sectors of social life are assumed autonomous. See David Martin, *The Future of Christianity: Reflections on Violence and Democracy, Religion and Secularisation* (Surrey: England, 2011), pp. 124.

⁶ Bill Cavanaugh provides an invaluable account of how the creation of “religion” was a correlative of the modern state. See his *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 60-71.

⁷ Ronald Beiner, *Civil Religion: A Dialogue in the History of Political Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 1-7.

legitimise the modern state, at least if Carl Schmitt is right, are secularised theological concepts.⁸

In contrast to civil religion the liberal alternative rejects all attempts to use religion to produce citizens in service to the state. Liberalism, in its many versions, according to Beiner, seeks to domesticate or neutralise the impact of religious commitment on political life.⁹ Liberalism may well result in the production of a banal and flattened account of human existence, but such a form of life seems necessary if we are to be at peace with one another. In other words, liberalism as a way of life depends on the creation of people who think there is nothing for which it is worth dying. Such a way of life was exemplified by President Bush who suggested that the duty of Americans after September 11, 2001 was to go shopping. Such a view of the world evoked Nietzsche's bitter condemnation, ironically making Nietzsche an ally of some forms of Christianity.¹⁰

I have earned the description of being a “fideistic, sectarian tribalist” because of my attempt to imagine an ecclesial alternative capable of resisting the politics Beiner describes. For as Yeago observes, most churches in the West, with the possible exception of the Roman Catholics, have acquiesced in this understanding of their social character and have therefore collaborated in the eclipse of their ecclesial reality.¹¹ As a result the church seems caught in a “ceaseless crisis of legitimation” in which the church must find a justification for its existence in terms of the projects and aspirations of that larger order.¹²

In his extraordinary book, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, David Bentley Hart observes that the relegation of Christian beliefs to the private sphere is legitimated by a story of human freedom in which human kind is liberated from the crushing weight of tradition and doctrine. Hart, whose prose begs for extensive quotation, says the story goes like this:

Once upon a time Western humanity was the cosseted and incurious ward of Mother Church; during this, the age of faith, culture stagnated, science languished, wars of religion were routinely waged, witches were burned by inquisitors, and Western humanity labored in brutish subjugation to dogma, superstition, and the unholy alliance of church

⁸ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 5, 35.

⁹ Beiner, pp. 301-305.

¹⁰ Beiner, pp. 374-394.

¹¹ For an extremely informative comparison of the Catholic and Protestant responses to secularisation see Martin, *The Future of Christianity*, pp. 25-44. Emile Perreau-Saussine's, *Catholicism and Democracy: An Essay in the History of Political Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011) is a fascinating account of the rise of the political importance of the papacy after the French Revolution was at once the manifestation as well as the result of the Catholic agreement with the liberal presumption that there is “something irreducibly secular about the modern state.” p. 2.

¹² Yeago, pp. 148-149.

and state. Withering blasts of fanaticism and fideism had long since scorched away the last remnants of classical learning; inquiry was stifled; the literary remains of classical antiquity had long ago been consigned to the fires of faith, and even the great achievements of “Greek science” were forgotten until Islamic civilisation restored them to the West. All was darkness. Then, in the wake of the “wars of religion” that had torn Christendom apart, came the full flowering of the Enlightenment and with it the reign of reason and progress, the riches of scientific achievement and political liberty, and a new and revolutionary sense of human dignity. The secular nation-state arose, reduced religion to an establishment of the state, and thereby rescued Western humanity from the blood-steeped intolerance of religion. Now, at last, Western humanity has left its nonage and attained its majority, in science, politics, and ethics. The story of the travails of Galileo almost invariably occupies an honored place in this narrative, as exemplary of the natural relation between “faith” and “reason” and as an exquisite epitome of scientific reason’s mighty struggle during the early modern period to free itself from the tyranny of religion.¹³

This “simple and enchanting tale” is, Hart observes, captivating in its explanatory power. According to Hart, however, there is just one problem with this story. The problem is that every detail of the story, as well as the overarching plot, just happens to be false.¹⁴ Hart’s book provides the arguments and evidence to sustain that judgment. What I find so interesting, however, is even if the narrative may be false in every detail it is nonetheless true that believer and unbeliever alike assume, though they may disagree about some of the details, that the main plot of the story is true.

That this story now has canonical status has deep significance for how Christians should understand the relation between faith and politics. Put even more strongly, in the interest of being good citizens, of being civil, Christians have lost the ability to say why what they believe is true. That loss is, I want to suggest, a correlative of the depoliticisation of the church as a community capable of challenging the imperial pretensions of the modern state. That the church matters is why I resist using the language of “belief” to indicate what allegedly makes Christians Christian.¹⁵ Of course Christians “believe in God,” but far more important for determining the character of Christian existence is

¹³ David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), pp. 33-34.

¹⁴ Hart, p. 34.

¹⁵ In his magisterial book, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularised Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012) Brad Gregory observes that the Reformation placed an unprecedented emphasis on doctrine for identifying what made Christians Christians. Such an emphasis led Protestant and Catholic alike to emphasise the importance of an “interior assent to the propositional content of doctrinal truth claims, whatever they were.” Gregory observes this development “risked making Christianity seem more a matter of what one believed than how one lived—of making the faith a crypto-Cartesian matter of one’s soul and mind, *rather than* a matter of what one does with one’s body.” (p. 155)

that it is constituted by a politics that cannot avoid challenging what is normally identified as “the political.” For what is normally identified as “the political” produces dualisms that invite questions such as, “What is the relation between faith and politics?” If I am right, that “and” prematurely ends any serious theological reflection from a Christian perspective.

As I have already indicated, to make this argument necessarily puts me at odds with the attempt to make Christian convictions compatible with the epistemological and moral presumptions of liberal social orders. That project presumed a story very much along the lines suggest by Hart. Theologians trimmed the sails of Christian convictions to show that even if the metaphysical commitments that seem intrinsic to Christian practice cannot be intellectually sustained it remains the case that Christianity can claim some credit for the creation of the culture and politics of modernity.

In particular Christian theologians sought to justify Christian participation in the politics of democratic societies. The field of Christian ethics, the discipline with which I am identified, had as one of its primary agendas to convince Christians that their “beliefs” had political implications. The determinative representative who exemplified this mode of Christian ethical reflection was Reinhold Niebuhr. Thus his claim that “the real problem of a Christian social ethic is to derive from the Gospel a clear view of the realities with which we must deal in our common or social life, and also to preserve a sense of responsibility for achieving the highest measure of order, freedom and justice despite the hazards of man’s collective life.”¹⁶ Niebuhr reminded Christians that we do not live in a world in which sin can be eliminated, but we nonetheless must seek to establish the tentative harmonies and provisional equities possible in any historical situation.

Niebuhr, who prided himself for being a sober realist challenging what he took to be the unfounded optimism of liberal thinkers such as John Dewey, would have in a like manner called into question the optimism of the story Hart associates with the celebration, if not the legitimisation, of modernity. But Niebuhr’s support of liberal democratic political arrangements drew on a narrative very much like the one Hart identifies as the story of modernity.¹⁷ The result is ironic, a category Niebuhr loved, because Niebuhr’s arguments for the political engagement by Christians presupposed a narrative that legitimates political arrangement that requires the privatisation of Christian convictions. One of the consequences being the loss of any attempt to say what it might mean for the gospel of Jesus Christ to be true.

¹⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *Reinhold Niebuhr on Politics*, edited by Harry Davis and Robert Good. (New York: Scribner’s, 1960), p. 153.

¹⁷ For a fuller defense of this account of Niebuhr see my *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997), pp. 32-62 and *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church’s Witness and Natural Theology* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2001), pp. 87-140.

For instance one of the curiosities associated with what has been popularly called, “the new atheists” is their assumption that the most decisive challenges to the truthfulness of Christian convictions come from developments in the sciences or perhaps more accurately put, the “method” of science. Such a view fails to appreciate that the most decisive challenge to the truthfulness of Christian convictions is political.¹⁸ The politics of modernity has so successfully made Christianity but another lifestyle option it is a mystery why the new atheists think it is important to show what Christians believe to be false. Such a project hardly seems necessary given that Christians, in the name of being good democratic citizens, live lives of unacknowledged but desperate unbelief just to the extent they believe what they believe as a Christian cannot be a matter of truth. As a result, Christians no longer believe that the church is an alternative politics to the politics of the world, which means they have lost any way to account for why Christians in the past thought they had a faith worth dying for.

2. *The Witness of Karl Barth*

I need an example of what the connection between the truthfulness of Christian speech and politics might look like. An example is necessary because I am not sure we know what Christianity so understood would look like. I think, however, we have the beginnings in the work of Karl Barth. Barth, more than any theologian in modernity, recognised that the recovery of the language of the faith entailed a politics at odds with the world as we know it. He did so because as he tells us his commitment to liberal theology was first and foremost called into question one day in early August of 1914. On that day he read a proclamation in support of the war policy of Wilhelm II signed by ninety-three German intellectuals. To Barth’s horror almost all his venerated theological teachers were among the names of those who had signed in support of the war. Barth confesses he suddenly realised that he could no longer follow their theology or ethics. At that moment the theology of the nineteenth century, the theology of Protestant liberalism, came to an end for Barth.¹⁹

Barth characterised the theology he thought must be left behind, a theology identified by figures such as Schleiermacher and Troeltsch, as the attempt to respond to the modern age by underwriting the assumption that Christianity is but an expression of the alleged innate human capacity for the infinite. From such a perspective Christianity is understood to be but one particular

¹⁸ David Martin nicely shows the assumption that science makes theological claims unintelligible is simply not sustainable. See his *The Future of Christianity*, pp. 119-131. Brad Gregory observes that “empirical investigation of the natural world has not falsified any theological claims.” Much more troubling for the status of the truthfulness of Christian convictions, according to Gregory, was the unresolved disputes between Protestant and Catholic concerning the meaning of God’s actions. *The Unintended Reformation*, p. 47.

¹⁹ Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God* (Richmond, Virginia: John Knox Press, 1963), p. 14.

expression of religion. Such a view of the Christian faith presumed that the primary task of Christian theology is to assure the general acceptance of the Christian faith for the sustaining of the achievements of Western civilisation. Barth observed theology so conceived was more interested in man's relationship with God than God's dealings with man.²⁰

For Barth, however, a theology understood as the realisation in one form or another of human self-awareness could have no ground or content other than ourselves. "Faith as the Christian commerce with God could first and last be only the Christian commerce with himself."²¹ The figure haunting such an account of Christianity is Feuerbach, whom Barth thought had powerfully reconfigured the Christian faith as a statement of profound human needs and desires.

Drawing on Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky, and Overbeck, as well as his discovery of what he characterised as "the strange new world of the Bible," against the theology of his teachers Barth proclaimed: "God is God."²² Barth did not think such a claim to be redundant, but rather to be the best expression of who God is; it is a response to the particularity of a God who has initiated an encounter with humankind. Barth says, "the stone wall we first ran up against was that the theme of the Bible is the deity of God, more exactly God's deity—God's independence and particular character, not only in relation to the natural but also to the spiritual cosmos; God's absolutely unique existence, might, and initiative, above all, in His relation to man."²³

So Barth challenged what he characterised as the accommodated theology of Protestant liberalism using expressions such as God is "wholly other" who breaks in upon us "perpendicularly from above." There is an "infinite qualitative distinction" between God and us, rendering any presumption that we can know God on our terms to be just that, namely, a presumption based on sinful pride. Thus Barth's sobering claim that God is God and we are not means that it can never be the case that we have the means to know God, unless God first makes himself known to us.

Barth will later acknowledge that his initial reaction against Protestant liberal theology was exaggerated, but any theology committed to clearing the ground for a fresh expression of the Christian faith could not help but sound extreme. Barth acknowledged that his first salvos against Protestant liberalism seemed to be saying that God is everything and man nothing. Such a God, the God

²⁰ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 24. Barth noted, however, that theology so understood could be in continuity with Melancthon's emphasis on the benefits of Christ. So there is no reason that an attempt should not be made to develop a Christian anthropocentrism in which theology is done, so to speak, from the bottom up.

²¹ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 26.

²² Timothy Gorringer suggests that Barth may well have seen *A Midsummer Night's Dream* whose "Well roared Lion!" he liked to use to characterise his reaction against Protestant liberalism. See Gorringer, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 25.

²³ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 41.

that is wholly other, isolated and set over against man threatens to become the God of the philosophers rather than the God who called Abraham. The majesty of the God of the philosophers might have the contradictory results of confirming the hopelessness of all human activity while offering a new justification of the autonomy of man. Barth wanted neither of these results.

In retrospect Barth, however, confesses he was wrong exactly where he was right, but at the time he did not know how to carry through with sufficient care the discovery of God's deity.²⁴ For Barth, the decisive breakthrough came with the recognition that "who God is and what He is in His deity He proves and reveals not in a vacuum as a divine being-for-Himself, but precisely and authentically in the fact that he exists, speaks, and acts as the partner of man, though of course as the absolute superior partner."²⁵ In short, Barth discovered that it is precisely God's deity which includes and constitutes God's humanity.

We are not dealing with an abstract God; that is, a God whose deity exists separated from man, because in Jesus Christ there can be no isolation of man from God nor God from man. In Barth's language: "God's deity in Jesus Christ consists in the fact that God Himself in Him is the subject who speaks and acts with sovereignty...In Jesus Christ man's freedom is wholly enclosed in the freedom of God. Without the condescension of God there would be no exaltation of man...We have no universal deity capable of being reached conceptually, but this concrete deity—real and recognizable in the descent grounded in that sequence and peculiar to the existence of Jesus Christ."²⁶

I am aware that this all too brief account of Barth's decisive theological turn may seem but a report on esoteric methodological issues in Christian theology. But I ask you to remember that Barth's discovery of the otherness of God, an otherness intrinsic to God's humanity, was occasioned by his recognition of the failure of the politics and ethics of modern theology in the face of the First World War. I think it not accidental, moreover, that Barth was among the first to recognise the character of the politics represented by Hitler. Barth was a person of unusual insight, or as Timothy Gorringer describes him, he was a person of extraordinary vitality who was a profoundly political animal.²⁷ But his perception of the threat the Nazis represented cannot be separated from his theological turn occasioned by his reaction against his teachers who supported the war.

Tim Gorringer rightly argues in his book, *Karl Barth: Against Hegemony*, that Barth never assumed his theology might have political implications because his theology was a politics. That way of putting the matter – that is, "his theology was a politics" – is crucial. The very structure of Barth's *Dogmatics*, Gorringer suggests, with its integration of theology and ethics displayed in his refusal to

²⁴ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 44.

²⁵ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 46.

²⁶ Barth, *The Humanity of God*, p. 48.

²⁷ Gorringer, p. 11.

separate law from gospel, was Barth's way of refusing any distinction between theory and practice. Barth's Christocentrism meant that his "theology was never a predicate of his politics, but also true that politics is never simply a predicate of his theology."²⁸

Gorringer's argument that Barth was a political theologian was confirmed in 1934, the same year Barth wrote the Barmen Declaration, by Barth's response to a challenge by some Americans and English critics that his theology was too abstract and unrelated to actual lives. Barth begins his defense by observing that he is after all "a modern man" who stands in the midst of this age. Like his questioners, he too must live a life not merely in theory but in practice in what he characterises as the "stormy present." Accordingly, he tells his antagonists that "exactly because I was called to live in a modern world, did I reach the path of which you have heard me speak."²⁹

In particular, Barth calls attention to his years as a pastor in which he faced the task of preaching the gospel in the face of secularism. During this time he was confronted with the modern world, but he was also confronted with the modern church. It was a church, a church of great sincerity and zeal with fervid devotion to deeds of charity, too closely related to the modern world. It was a church that no longer knew God's choice to love the world by what Christians have been given to do in the light of that love, that is, to be witnesses to the treasure that is the gospel. The problem, according to Barth, is that the church of the pious man, this church of the good man, this church of the moral man, became the church of man.³⁰ The result was the fusion of Christianity and nationalism.³¹

Consequently the modern church is a near relative to the godless modern world. That error, Barth suggests, began two hundred years before the present with Pietism's objections to orthodoxy. In the Reformation, the church heard of God and of Christ, but love was not active.³² The fatal error was the Christian response: they did not say *let God be even more God and Christ be even more the Christ* – instead, they said *let us improve matters ourselves*. Reverence for the pious man became reverence for the moral man and finally, when it was

²⁸ Gorringer, p. 9.

²⁹ Karl Barth, *God In Action* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2005), p. 133. This little gem of a book contains lectures Barth gave in response to the Nazis in 1934.

³⁰ The role of Pietism for the development of Protestant liberal theology as well as the legitimating discourse for the subordination of the church to the state is a story in itself. It is not accidental that Barth was the great enemy of pietism. David Martin suggests that pietism was the ultimate working out of the implications of the Protestant Reformation for the development of the centralised sovereignty necessary to legitimate the formation of the nation state. He observes, "German Pietism inculcated disciplines that helped ensure the smooth running of the state." *The Future of Christianity*, p. 199.

³¹ Barth, *God in Action*, pp. 134-135.

³² In his book, *The Unintended Reformation*, Brad Gregory convincingly argues "that the Western world today is an extraordinarily complex, tangled project of rejections, retentions, and transformations of medieval Western Christianity, in which the Reformation era constitutes the critical watershed." The secularisation that was the result of the Reformation was, according to Gregory, unintended but no less a reality. p. 2.

found that man is of so large an importance, it became less important to speak of God, of Christ, of the Holy Spirit. Instead, men began to speak of human reason.³³

Barth then directly addresses his questioners—whom he identifies as “friends”—to tell them he is well aware of what is happening, and that is exactly why he insists that he must speak of God. He must speak of God because he must begin with the confession, “I am from Germany.” Because he is from Germany he knows that he stands in a place that has reached the end of a road, a road that he acknowledges may be just beginning social orders like America and England. Yet Barth claims he is sure that what has been experienced in Germany, that is, the remarkable apostasy of the church to nationalism, will also be the fate of those who think Barth’s theology to be a retreat from political engagement. Thus Barth’s challenge to his critics: “if you make a start with ‘God and...’ you are opening the doors to every demon.”³⁴

Barth early recognised such a demon had been let loose in the person of Hitler. He was able to do so because Hitler’s attempt to make Christianity a state religion by creating the German Church meant the free preaching of the Gospel was prohibited. Theological speech and politics were inseparable. It is, therefore, no accident that Barth in the Barmen Declaration challenged the “German Christians” on Christological grounds. He does so because Barth assumes that Jesus’ claim “I am the way, and the truth, and life; no one comes to the Father, but by me,” (John 14, 6) is the defining politics of Christianity. Barth writes:

Jesus Christ, as he is attested for us in Holy Scripture, is the one word of God which we have to hear and which we have to trust and obey in life and in death. We reject the false doctrine, as though the Church could and would have to acknowledge as a source of its proclamation, apart from and beside this one word of God, still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation.³⁵

If we value Karl Barth’s witness, we must acknowledge that the political significance of the church depends on her Christological center.

3. *Where Are We Now? Where Do We Need To Go?*

You may be rightly wondering, if not worried, where all this has gotten us. I should like to be able to say more about where we are now and where we need to go, but I am unsure who the “we” or the “us” may be. I have assumed I should, or perhaps more truthfully, I can *only* speak from a first person

³³ Barth, *God in Action*, p. 137.

³⁴ Barth, *God in Action*, p. 138.

³⁵ I am quoting from Arthur Cochrane, *The Church’s Confession Under Hitler* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), pp. 172-178.

perspective, but hopefully it is one shaped by my Christian identity. Yet just as Barth confessed that he was German, so I must acknowledge I am American. Indeed, it may be I am more American than Christian, and thus tempted to confuse the Christian “we” and the American “we.” That confusion tempts Americans to assume we represent what any right-thinking person should say, because our “we” is the universal “we.”

American presumption is always a problem, but the problem is deeper than my American identity. For I think none of us can assume an agreed upon “we” or “us” to be a manifestation of the cultural and political challenges that is the subject of this conference. Given the difficulty of locating the “we”, some may worry that directing attention to Barth in order to show the political character of Christian convictions is morally and politically the exemplification of a profoundly reactionary position. In Nazi Germany, a Barmen Declaration may have seemed “prophetic,” but “after Hitler” a Barmen-like account of the politics of Christian convictions suggests theocracy.³⁶

I confess I often enjoy making liberal friends, particularly American liberal friends, nervous by acknowledging I am of course a theocrat. “Jesus is Lord” is not my personal opinion; I take to be a determinative political claim. So I am ready to rule. The difficulty is that following a crucified Lord entails embodying a politic that cannot resort to coercion and violence; it is a politic of persuasion all the way down. A tiring business that is slow and time consuming but then we—that is, Christians—believe that by redeeming time, Christ has given us all the time we need to be pursue peace. Christ, through the Holy Spirit, bestows upon his disciples the longsuffering patience necessary to resist any politic whose impatience makes coercion and violence the only and inevitable response to conflict.

For fifteen hundred years, Christians thought Jesus’ lordship meant they should rule the world. That rule assumed diverse forms, some beneficial and some quite destructive. “Constantinianism” or Christendom are descriptions of the various ways that Christians sought to determine the cultural and political life of the worlds in which they found themselves. Some Christians look with nostalgia on that past, seeking ways to recapture Christian dominance of the world. That is obviously not my perspective.

For as David Hart observes, Christianity’s greatest historical triumph was also its most calamitous defeat. The conversion of the Roman Empire, in which it was thought the faith overthrew the powers of “this age”, found that the faith itself had become subordinate to those very powers. Like Hart, I have no reason to deny the many achievements of Christendom. I think he is right to suggest that the church was a revolution, a slow and persistent revolution, a

³⁶ During a visit to the Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. my wife and I encountered school children wearing shirts emblazoned with the slogan, “Celebrate Diversity.” There is much good no doubt in training the young to enjoy difference, but I worry for those who think the celebration of diversity an adequate response to a movement like National Socialism.

cosmic sedition, in which the human person was “invested with an intrinsic and inviolable dignity” by being recognised as God’s own.³⁷ But this revolution, exactly because it was so radical, was absorbed and subdued by society in which nominal baptism became the expression of a church that was reduced to an instrument of temporal power and the gospel was made a captive to the mechanism of the state.³⁸

In *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West*, Mark Lilla has written in defense of what he calls “the great separation” of politics and religion represented by Hobbes. He observes that though Christianity is inescapably political, it has proved incapable of integrating this fact into Christian theology.³⁹ The problem, according to Lilla, is that to be a Christian means being in the world, including the political world, but somehow not being of it. Such a way of being, Lilla argues, cannot help but produce a false consciousness. Christendom is the institutionalisation of this consciousness just to the extent the church thought reconciliation could be expressed politically.⁴⁰ Politics so constituted cannot help but suffer from permanent instability.

Lilla, I think, is right that the eschatological character of the Christian faith will challenge the politics of the worlds in which it finds itself. But that is why, even at times when the church fails to be true to its calling to be a political alternative, God raises up a Karl Barth. For as Barth insisted, this really is all about God, the particular God of Jesus Christ. The humanity of that God Christians believe has made it possible for a people to exist who do in fact, as Nietzsche suggested, exemplify a slave morality. It is a morality Hart describes as a “strange, impractical, altogether unworldly tenderness” expressed in the ability to see as our sisters and brothers the autistic or Down Syndrome or disabled child, a child who is a perpetual perplexity for the world, a child who can cause pain and only fleetingly charm or delight; or in the derelict or broken man or woman who has wasted their life; or the homeless, the diseased, the mentally ill, criminals and reprobates.⁴¹

Such a morality is the matter that is the church. It is the matter that made even a church in Christendom uneasy. From the church’s standpoint today, Christendom may be a lamentable world now lost, but it is not clear what will

³⁷ Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, p. 167.

³⁸ Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, p. 194. In is true, nonetheless, as Brad Gregory argues in *The Unintended Reformation*, that the church was never coextensive with or absorbed by any secular political entity. A thousand years after Constantine, from the papacy to the parishes into which Christendom was parceled, the church remained distinct from secular political entities such as medieval kingdoms, principalities, duchies, and cities and city states. Pp. 136-137. One of the great virtues of Gregory’s book is his treatment of the often ignored Anabaptist. He rightly understands the Anabaptist alternative to represent a political alternative to the magisterial Reformers just to the extent the latter led to the increasing control of the church by the state.

³⁹ Mark Lilla, *The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics, and the Modern West* (New York: Knopf, 2007), p. 85.

⁴⁰ Lilla, *The Stillborn God*, p. 169

⁴¹ Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, pp. 213-214.

replace or shape the resulting culture or politics. Hart observes when Christianity passes from a culture, the resulting remainder may be worse than if Christianity had never existed. Christians took the gods away, and no one will ever believe them again. Christians demystified the world, robbing good pagans of their reverence and hard won wisdom derived from the study of human and nonhuman nature. So once again Nietzsche was right that the Christians shaped a world that meant that those who would come after Christianity could not avoid nihilism.⁴²

Why this is the case is perhaps best exemplified by how time is understood. Christians, drawing as they must on God's calling of Israel to be the promised people, cannot help but believe that time has a plot; that is to say, Christians believe in history. A strange phrase to be sure, but one to remind us of how extraordinary it is for Christians to believe we come from a past that will find its fulfillment in the future. Accordingly we believe that time has a narrative logic which means time is not just one damn thing after another. The story of creation is meant to remind us that all that exists lends witness to the glory of God, giving history a significance otherwise unavailable. Creation, redemption, reconciliation are names for Christians that we believe constitute the basic plot line that makes history more than a tale told by an idiot.⁴³

Yet the very assumption that history has a direction is the necessary condition that underwrites the story of modernity earlier characterised by Hart. The story that has underwritten the new atheist's presumption—that if history is finally rid of Christianity we will discover that through unconstrained reason how our politics—can be made more just and humane. Thus Hart speculates that the violence done in the name of humanity, a violence that is now unconstrained, might never have been unleashed if Christianity had not introduced its “peculiar variant of apocalyptic yearning into Western culture.”⁴⁴ Hart rightly observes that such a judgment is purely speculative given the reality that past great empires prior to Christianity claimed divine warrants for murder. Yet Hart thinks that the secularisation of Christian eschatological grammar is the “chief cause of the modern state's curious talent for mass murder.”⁴⁵ An exaggerated claim, perhaps, but it is at least a reminder that it is by no means clear why the killing called war is distinguishable from mass murder.

This last observation, I hope, draws us back to Karl Barth's theological work. I suggested Barth exemplifies the politics of speech that is at the heart of Christian convictions. At the heart of Christian convictions is the belief in “the humanity of God,” a humanity made unavoidable by our faith in Jesus Christ as the second person of the Trinity. Christ's humanity means no account of the church is possible that does not require material expression that is rightly understood as a politic. Church matters matter not only for the church, but we

⁴² Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, pp. 229-230.

⁴³ Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, pp. 201-202.

⁴⁴ Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, pp. 222-223.

⁴⁵ Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, pp. 223-224.

believe what is a necessity for the church is a possibility for all that is not the church.

I suspect humans always live in times of transition; what is time if not transition? But I believe we are living in a time when Christendom is actually coming to an end. That is an extraordinary transition whose significance for Christian and non-Christian has yet to be understood. But in the very least it means the church is finally free to be a politic. If I may summarise what I take to be one appropriate response to this observation, it is quite simply this: let Christians make the most of it.