On Leaving Government

This is the first chapter of: Faith and Politics after Christendom: the church as a movement for anarchy by Jonathan Bartley

'I'm leaving the House of Commons to concentrate on politics.'[1]

So said the MP and former cabinet minister Tony Benn on his retirement from the British Parliament. Although many disagreed with his political positions, few disputed the wisdom and knowledge he had acquired from five decades of playing a part in democratic systems and observing how they worked. He was considered one of the twentieth century's foremost parliamentarians – and yet it was his conviction that a narrow understanding of politics, which takes as its starting-point government or the activities of Parliament, is inadequate.

His sentiments have since been echoed by a number of figures who hold high political office – perhaps most significantly Gordon Brown, who has declared that elected representatives cannot deliver what development agencies, churches and many others want for the continent of Africa unless there is a strong groundswell of support from wider civil society.

The words of Benn and Brown challenge the mantra of many (often less experienced) people in politics that 'you've got to be in it to win it' – that if you aren't playing an active role in party politics, standing for election or otherwise involved in efforts to gain power, you aren't going to make a difference. The political realities that these seasoned politicians testify to suggest that such a view is simplistic and naive. Politicians today operate within the limits set by the spirit of the age. Whatever decisions they have to make, their options have often been predetermined by others. They must choose a course of action within boundaries set by civil servants, constituents, think tanks, pressure groups, activists, academics, business interests, trades unions, the media and public opinion.

The realisation that the business of politics goes far beyond the ballot box and the division lobbies should be welcome to Christians. Like Benn, they too have been on a journey away from the seat of power. For many centuries, the primary political expression of Christians has been in and around the activities of government. This is not to say that church and state have been one and the same – sometimes the church has struggled and competed for political power, at other times it has been invited to take it, and often it has felt controlled by it. But exercise political power it certainly has, in various ways, throughout the Christendom era.

Christendom was a 'power structure'.[2] Its foundations were laid when the emperor Constantine 'Christianised' the Roman Empire following the Edict of Milan in ad313 and Theodosius I made Christianity the only legal form of religious worship in 381. Ever since then, a central, if not defining, feature of Christendom has been the church's relationship to government.

One of the most striking aspects of post-Christendom is the ending of the direct involvement of the church in the business of governing. This development can be seen to have begun some centuries ago. Christendom has been in decline perhaps ever since the time of the Reformation and the English Civil War, after which philosophers set about constructing theories of government that attempted to find alternative sources of authority for political power.

The process of removing religion completely from politics has been a slow one. Christendom was not only a power structure, it was also a culture. Theories of government may no longer have depended upon the authority of the Almighty but Christianity was still integral to politics through

its cultural influence. Post-Christendom is the culture that emerges in a society that has been definitively shaped by the Christian story as that story loses its power and the institutions that in many cases were developed to express Christian convictions decline in influence.[3] Of course, in Britain some remnants of Christendom remain: bishops still vote in the House of Lords, prayers are said each day before Parliament begins work and the Christian faith is protected from blasphemy by law. However, the church can no longer claim to play any direct role in governing the country. Instead, it must take its place alongside all the other commentators and campaigners.

Stuart Murray has identified seven transitions that characterise post-Christendom.[4] All of these involve a move away from a role in government.

From the centre to margins. In Christendom, the Christian story and the churches were often central to the business of government, but in post-Christendom they are marginal.

From majority to minority. In Christendom, those who called themselves Christians comprised the (often overwhelming) majority, and so it was often easy for them to exert political power and influence, but in post-Christendom they are a minority.

From settlers to sojourners. In Christendom, Christians felt at home in a culture shaped by their story. They aligned themselves with and took part in the activity of governing. In post-Christendom, they are aliens, exiles and pilgrims.

From privilege to plurality. In Christendom, Christians enjoyed many privileges, often enshrined in law and often including the privileges of government itself. In post-Christendom, they are one community among many in a plural society.

From control to witness. In Christendom, churches could exert control over society, perhaps most notably by legal means backed by sanctions for law-breakers. In post-Christendom, they have to exercise influence by witnessing to their story and its implications.

From maintenance to mission. In Christendom, the emphasis was on maintaining a supposedly Christian status quo, often through the machinery of government and the law. In post-Christendom, it is on mission within a contested environment.
From institution to movement. In Christendom, churches operated mainly as institutions, which made it far easier to be part of institutional government. In post-Christendom, they must become again a Christian movement.

But while we can see clearly what has passed, the vision of a new relationship between faith and politics that is emerging in its place is cloudy and often confusing.

What Comes Next?

As yet, we cannot really tell what will replace Christendom. The prefix ‘post’ means ‘after’ and indicates that something familiar is passing. It doesn’t describe the relationship between Christianity (or indeed other religions) and government that will succeed it. Centuries of political theology and history lie behind us, and they may be helpful in making sense of the present situation. Approaches such as ‘radical orthodoxy’,[5] associated with the current Archbishop of Canterbury among others, have explored new ways of using old traditions. Certainly, a very different context is going to require such innovations.

‘Post-Christendom’ does not mean ‘post-Christian’, and it does not mean ‘secular’. Although many nations are still regarded as ‘Christian’, the extent to which Britain has ever been so – and, indeed, whether there ever could be such a thing as a Christian country, nation or state – is disputed.

Nonetheless, those who predicted that religious belief would die out in this country have proved to be wrong. Spirituality and religious conviction have flourished, and now a counter-process of desecularisation seems to be challenging old assumptions.

Post-Christendom is mainly the experience of western Europe, where it has found expression in particular political arrangements and ideas. From country to country, historical, socio-political and cultural differences have produced different forms in different locations and at different times. The movement of the church away from government, for example, has been faster in some countries than in others.

Post-Christendom is not the experience of the continents of Africa and Asia and of Latin America. Nor is it altogether the experience of the United States. Some parts of that country, and some aspects of its society, bear the hallmarks of post-Christendom, and then the language and the issues are recognisable and to some extent relevant to British Christians. But the form, the status and the experience of Christendom in the US have been significantly different from other Western societies.

How this will affect the transition to post-Christendom is unclear. In some parts of the US, despite the constitutional separation of church and state, a form of Christendom continues to thrive. This may persist far longer in the US than elsewhere in the West, and may even evolve into something still stronger. Some observers predict that the US will buck the general trend, even though church attendance in the north-west is already down to western European levels. However, the shift to post-Christendom is already evident in many urban areas across the States, and the US may only be lagging a generation or two behind western Europe.

Political concepts such as 'Faithworks', 'faith-based welfare' and 'values voters' have crossed the Atlantic to Britain, but uncritical adoption of US models of faith and politics will be of little help to the church in post-Christendom here, where it has to deal with a very different context.

Defining Politics

But nor does 'post-Christendom' mean 'post-political' as far as the church is concerned. Although one of the transitions of post-Christendom is the movement of the church away from government, Christians have not ceased to be politically engaged. Indeed, as this book seeks to show, the church after Christendom is being radicalised. However, this is happening in different ways and for different reasons than in the past.

The term 'politics' has often been used to signify that sphere of activity that aims to employ the organised power of government[6] to achieve certain ends.[7] Others have attempted to draw a hard-and-fast line between politics on the one hand and social action, social concern, care for neighbours, stewardship, simple living and alternative community on the other. Politics, it is suggested, is 'what governments do and what we do in relation to them'.[8] For various reasons, however, such a definition may be too narrow in post-Christendom.

First, it is possible to influence, or engage with, government without actually meaning to. Modern democracies in the West involve many actors besides those who govern who have a consistent bearing on what government does. But while their actions have political consequences, not all of these aim to influence government: sometimes that influence is a by-product of what they do. For example, many Christians are procuring significant amounts of government funding for social-action projects, and in so doing they may be making statements about (among other things) the desirability of accepting such funding and working with government and about the targets and conditions that accompany such funding. These 'statements' exert a degree of political pressure, but wouldn't necessarily be seen as political in any traditional understanding of the term.

Second, for many people it may be unrealistic to aim to employ the power of government. For example, although at present there appears to be significant Christian political activity, the long-term trend suggests that the church's political influence is declining. Certainly, political activity does not automatically equate with political influence. In post-Christendom the church no longer has a role in government and indeed is increasingly distant from the centres of power. It may well end up with very little influence at all.

Third, politics can be understood in very different ways. As post-Christendom is a transitional phase, we don't know where the church will end up in terms of its political thought and action. Christian political thought is still developing, and is now doing so in a new and unfamiliar context. We don't know what the future holds. Systems of government, too, continue to change. It is conceivable that Christian political approaches that have yet to be developed will not fit with the aim of employing organised power.

Finally, some Christians may seek to oppose rather than work with government. Many have already done so, not only since the Christendom era but before and during it. For example, many in the early church rejected the violence employed by government especially in its functions of enforcing law and defending territory, and their lead was later followed by groups associated with the 'Radical Reformation' and others on the radical edge of the English Civil War.

To define politics as 'that which the state does' may shackle us to Christendom ideas that are no longer helpful. Such a definition may have suited a church that had a role in government (though not those people, including many Christians, who didn't), and it may still suit politicians who wish to emphasise their own importance or to control what politics is. It may not be helpful, however, for understanding faith and politics after Christendom.

Towards Anarchy

The inadequacy of a definition of politics as the employment of the organised power of government can be illustrated by consideration of one particular strain of political thought, mentioned in the subtitle to this book. Academics like to group political ideas under neat headings, tracing the development down the centuries of various ideologies – (new) right and left, conservative and liberal, Marxist and liberationist. However, one particular 'ism' often refuses to fit into such schemes, and that is anarchism.

Anarchism is accepted by political historians as a legitimate area of study, with identifiable thinkers – some of them Christian[9] – and an identifiable perspective or a set of perspectives that share certain political features. Nonetheless it sits awkwardly with other theories about the state and government. All the others accept the legitimacy of government to a greater or lesser extent[10] and seek to work through it, but anarchists reject the idea of government and often refuse even to use the power of government to achieve their ends. Few would dispute that anarchists are 'political', and yet many working within the anarchist paradigm would be excluded by a definition of politics such as the one cited above. The existence of anarchism thus draws attention to the important distinction between government and politics.

If we want an inclusive definition of politics, therefore, which takes account of the variety of political activities and perspectives that historically have been found both inside and outside the institutions of the church, it is better and more accurate to regard it as the sphere of engagement with [itals] the organised power of government, rather than simply its employment, to achieve certain ends.

The Church as a Movement for Anarchy

While Christians in post-Christendom could conceivably withdraw completely from the political

realm, such a move seems highly unlikely, if not impossible – and of course even withdrawal would itself be an action or statement with political consequences. The crucial issue is rather what form our engagement with government will take. This book does not set out simply to report where the church has been politically, or where it is now. It is an attempt to imagine what faith and politics after Christendom could be like.

My subtitle, 'The Church as a Movement for Anarchy', does not imply that we should imagine a post-Christendom church that goes around destroying things. The anarchist tradition, like all the more radical traditions of Christianity, is much misunderstood. Anarchy does not mean violence. Indeed, there are thinkers and actors within the tradition of anarchist thought who reject violence as an article of faith and hold a pacifist position. Christian pacifist and anarchist perspectives have often been explored as one and the same thing.[11]

What is meant by 'the church as a movement for anarchy' is that the church's political perspective may be reimagined after Christendom as something very different from what has gone before, most notably with regard to its relationship to government. As Stanley Hauerwas has observed, an assumption shared by left and right alike is that if you are in power you can do a very great deal of good.[12] The church is no longer 'in power' and so it has to think again about how it can do good in other ways.

Another pertinent characteristic of the anarchist political tradition is that it has always been marginal and contrary. In the same way, there have always been around the edges of Christendom heretical and subversive communities that dissented from Christendom and dared to imagine Christianity without it.[13] The insights they provided continue to be inspiring as we imagine faith and politics after Christendom.

A number of books have been written about Christian anarchy, perhaps most notably by Jacques Ellul[14] – though some of them use the term differently from the way I have used it in this book. Here the word invokes a number of key ideas, including the diminishing identification of the church with government and a commitment to the freedom of the church from the government and the government from the church. It also involves a view of government that sees it more as an enemy than as a friend,[15] and indeed perceives it as one of the 'principalities and powers' with which Christians are called to struggle.

Perhaps it also embraces the belief that one day we will see the reign of God without a government as we know it.[16] 'An-arkhos' in Greek means literally 'without a ruler'. Oliver O'Donovan has suggested that the opposite of 'secular' should be not 'religious' but 'eternal'. Secular government is 'secular' not in the sense that it is irreligious but in the sense that its role is confined to this age (in Latin, saeculum) that is passing away. It does not and cannot in any way represent the promise of the new age that comes in Christ. Applied to political authorities, the term 'secular' indicates that they are not agents of Christ and will inevitably be displaced when the rule of God in Christ is finally disclosed. For Karl Barth, too, the only real state was the future state to which Christians belong here and now.[17] Accordingly, faith can be something that challenges the social order and the government rather than supporting them.

Anarchism also involves a suspicion of top-down notions of political engagement and a confidence in the subversive and creative potential of prophetic truth-telling and grass-roots action.

One of the features of post-Christendom is a church that does not align itself so closely with political institutions, parties, philosophies and ideologies. 'Anarchism' is a label given to a set of principles rather than a political ideology. Ellul has pointed out that his own anarchism puts him in opposition to the 'Christian Left' (as well as the Christian Right) who are intent on creating 'a new,

Christian, social order'. This idea of moving beyond the right-left paradigm may have been new 20 years ago but it is old hat today – but it is worth adding that the word 'anarchism' also suggests leaving behind any 'third way'.

Faith and Politics After Christendom is not a book of theology, but it may provide some pointers towards theological approaches and it certainly deals with much of the political theology the church had embraced in the past. I hope it will prove to be a constructive contribution to the discussion of how Christians can be political in their new and still-changing context – and even beyond it.

Nigel Wright has pointed out that the real political challenge that faces the church is to witness to God's rule without itself ruling.[18] This book considers how the church can be political from a different position, on the margins rather than at the centre. It starts where the church is. Some may be disappointed that it is not more prescriptive, but Christians are only now beginning to explore what post-Christendom means politically. Behind us lie 1,700 years of political theology done from a particular position of power. We are only just beginning to discover what politics looks like from a very different position. Humility is called for.

This book gives an indication of where we may be heading – but our journey starts with an exploration of where we have been.

Notes

[1] This was a line Tony Benn used in a number of interviews in the broadcast media and the press after he announced his retirement from parliamentary politics in June 1999.
[2] See Stuart Murray, Post-Christendom: Church and Mission in a Strange New World, p. 19.
[3] Murray, Post-Christendom, p. 19.
[4] Murray, Post-Christendom, p. 20.
[5] See James K.A. Smith, Introducing Radical Orthodoxy: Mapping a Post-Secular Theology.
[6] Government is defined for the purposes of this book as the organisation that has the power to make laws and enforce them in a particular territory. It is distinct from the state, which here is understood as not only the government but also the people and institutions that help it to govern, such as the civil service, the police and the armed forces.
[7] See, for example, Linda C. Raeder, 'Augustine and the Case for Limited Government', Humanitas vol. XVI no. 2, 2003, pp. 94–106.
[8] Paul Marshall, Thine is the Kingdom: A Biblical Perspective on the Nature of Government and Politics Today, p. 11.
[9] For example, Leo Tolstoy and Jacques Ellul.
[10] Some 'new right' thinkers, for example, would tend to see the state as less legitimate than others, even regarding taxation as theft.
[11] See 'Christian Anarchist and Pacifist Perspectives' in J. Philip Wogaman, Christian Perspectives on Politics.
[12] Stanley Hauerwas, After Christendom? How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas.
[13] An observation made by Murray, Post-Christendom, p. 22.
[14] See, for example, Jacques Ellul, Anarchy and Christianity, The Ethics of Freedom, The Meaning of the City and The Politics of God and the Politics of Man and Vernard Eller, Christian Anarchy: Jesus' Primacy over the Powers.
[15] Vernard Eller has pointed out that 'anarchy' means being not so much against government as not government (see Christian Anarchy, 1) – but it does nonetheless include a sense of 'anti'.
[16] Oliver O'Donovan, The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology.
[17] Karl Barth, Church and State, p. 38.
[18] Nigel Wright, Disavowing Constantine: Mission, Church and the Social Order in the Theologies of John Howard Yoder and Jürgen Moltmann.