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Essential Difficulty: Faith, Secularity and Transformation

Carole Irwin

Abstract

The recent phenomenon of Christian interest litigations instantiates a wider difficulty. This difficulty involves the theological political problems of secularity and religious identity, as these find expression in the everyday *aporiae* of practiced Christian religious conviction. The core argument of the thesis is that these problems need to be understood and dealt with as difficult. It asks what resources can help articulate these problems, and their difficulty, as a feature of late-modern Western democracies, but without sliding into forms of culture war. Oliver O'Donovan and John Milbank are two key figures for political theology, but their work tends to set Christianity in an oppositional relationship to secular late modernity. The thesis argues that some contrasting but key decisions in their theology mean that they do not deal with the *aporiae* of that relationship. Rowan Williams is the key conversation partner in the thesis. He uses the notion of 'difficulty' frequently but enigmatically in his theology, including his political theology. The thesis undertakes a sustained engagement with Williams over two chapters, to propose that his understanding and use of the notion of difficulty produces an account of political action as an invitational and dispossessive negotiation of difference. The thesis suggests that Williams's concept of difficulty offers a means for critical, dialogical engagement with secular perspectives and commitments from a position of Christian faith. It provides resources for faithfully negotiating Western political settings, particularly in the context of everyday *aporiae*, in ways which are potentially transformative but ultimately without guarantees.

Essential Difficulty: Faith, Secularity and Transformation

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A thesis presented for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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List of Abbreviations

CLC	The Christian Legal Centre
ECtHR	European Court of Human Rights
ECHR	European Convention on Human Rights
EWCA	England and Wales Court of Appeal
EWHC	High Court of England and Wales
BA	British Airways

Statement of Copyright

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SECTION I

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction - the difficulty of living faithfully

For some years, I have been interested, pastorally and academically, in issues of Christian life and identity in everyday, non-ecclesial settings, and in what it means to live faithfully there. The context for my thinking has been contemporary Britain, a society which, like many Western democracies is increasingly socially and culturally diverse. It is also increasingly religiously disconnected - 'secular', one might say, although the language of 'the secular' can be somewhat slippery, and so I will indicate below some of the ways terms like 'secularism', 'secularisation' and so on are used and understood, and give an indication of how I will approach these terms. I will also attend to how my interlocutors use and understand these throughout the thesis.

I encountered a series of legal cases in Britain which sought to address clashes between Christian identity and other needs or perspectives in public space using the legal provisions for protecting religious freedom and identity. These seemed to offer a way to focus and clarify some of those broader tensions in living faithfully in late-modern democracies in the West. A closer look at the cases and in particular at the campaigning surrounding them, and the wider aims of the campaign groups involved, suggested that there was real difficulty involved in negotiating Christian identity in a persistently 'secular' public space. The sense that the idea and language of 'difficulty' was significant for this study has been present from very early in the research.

The questions raised for me, by the work of Christian campaigning groups and Church leaders supporting and publicising the cases, were broader, political-theological ones than the legal protection of freedom of religion. The campaigners were addressing the litigations by also asking about the moral framework of British society, and the formulation of its law and public policy. They questioned a 'rights' framework undergirding recent changes in the law, and the concept of 'multiculturalism' as a way of dealing with ethical and cultural diversity. As I shall

show, their wider campaigning work, as well as that focussed on these legal disputes, asks whether these 'secular' approaches to contemporary social and political life have the kind of moral undergirding which can build social and political cohesion. The individual cases being brought to the courts often involve a clash between the practice of religious faith and another protected category under rights legislation, and the difficulty of arbitrating between these. But they frequently also begin with real difficulty in simply talking about and dealing with faith as a lived reality in the public square, in very everyday settings, such as the world of work.

Political theology offered a meaningful way to think about the nature of these collisions and of living faithfully within them. Here too, the language and notion of difficulty have seemed significant for trying to think about and work within the resultant tensions. I shall clarify further the role these Christian interest litigations are playing in a piece of doctoral research in political theology: what they are, and are not, doing here. But first, I shall try to locate myself within the work of this thesis and outline the impetus which gave rise to it.

My questions about negotiating Christian identity in everyday public space arose in a sharp form when I worked in food retail. This came during a spell without pastoral responsibilities as a Methodist presbyter, while I studied for a master's degree. I had moved pretty directly to ordination training after undergraduate study, so had no significant experience of asking what it meant in practice to live faithfully as a Christian outside the sphere of ordained, pastoral ministry, where - at least ostensibly - the answers to these questions seemed more obvious.

At work, I encountered a mixture of interest, puzzlement, suspicion/reserve in my colleagues and customers about my Christian faith and my status as an ordained minister. I was aware of tensions between my faith and my working life and relationships - not least in relation to my colleagues (who were often puzzled or wary). This led me to adopt a public persona which sat rather lightly to my Christian identity, or downplayed, even subverted it. There were other, more concrete dilemmas: over Sunday working; about being asked to do more 'upselling' and wrestling with how and whether I could question the underlying economic and ethical models as an issue of faith.

I became aware of long-formed habits of such downplaying of my Christian faith and identity, of 'sitting lightly', and of avoiding tricky conversations when in public or in the company of those who did not themselves believe. As someone who might be described as a 'liberal' kind

of Methodist, this had not previously caused me much concern; in fact, I suspect I saw it rather as a virtue. The experience of working in a non-ecclesial role and setting made me more consciously aware of these kinds of tensions between what I am calling Christian identity and its expression in a relatively secularised public sphere. It also made me realise how little, when I was in church ministry, I had thought about or sought to address these tensions as daily realities with which people in church congregations might be grappling.

The phenomenon of Christian interest litigations, and the campaigning around them, thus seemed to have some resonance with my own experience and the questions it provoked and sharpened. I shall set out now how and why I am taking these cases as a departure point for identifying and focusing the tensions, issues and questions this thesis will explore.

Christian interest litigations: a particular phenomenon revealing a broader reality

These litigations involve claims by Christians for exemption either from legal or employment requirements on the basis of the legal protections of religious freedom. Examples include a Christian registrar dismissed for seeking to avoid officiating at same-sex couples' civil partnerships, and Christian employees requesting exemptions from uniform regulations prohibiting jewellery which included their crosses and crucifixes. From time to time, individual cases have made news headlines and gained a certain notoriety, the 'gay cake' litigation in Northern Ireland being one recent example.¹

The phenomenon of Christian interest litigations seemed to me to instantiate something of the broader difficulty of negotiating Christian identity in a 'secular' - religiously disconnected - society. They involved Christian people, albeit from a more conservative tradition than my own, seeking to live faithfully in everyday settings and encountering difficulty in doing so. This looked like similar territory to some of my own experience while working for the first time as an adult in a non-ecclesial setting. There are differences in the presenting conflicts, but something of a shared experience of struggling to live faithfully in public. Tensions between faith-based conviction and employment requirements are one instance. I was worried about colluding with neo-liberal economic practices and assumptions, which seemed

¹ Henry McDonald, 'Gay Marriage Cake: Customer Takes Case to European Court', Guardian, 15 August 2019. Online at <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2019/aug/15/gay-marriage-cake-customer-takes-case-to-european-court>. Accessed 20/11/2019.

to me at odds with Christian social teaching, when encouraged to ‘upsell’ to customers in my own workplace. Some of the Evangelical Christians involved in the Christian interest litigations were navigating between a conservative approach to sexual ethics, and either the equality and diversity policies of their employers, or human rights legislation, and so struggling with the requirements of their employment which seem to require support for same-sex relationships.

There are signs too of a common difficulty in expressing and communicating the stuff of faith - profound belief, obligation, commitment, and a whole way of thinking about and being in the world - with others: managers, colleagues, and ultimately judges in the case of the litigations. These are often people who appear perplexed, wary, or simply unable fully to comprehend the world of religious faith, conviction, identity and belonging which forms persons in distinctive and corporate ways of thinking, believing and behaving.

The language and the notion of *difficulty*, as I have indicated, became important early on in the research journey. It simply looked *difficult* faithfully to inhabit and negotiate Christian faith and identity as a lived reality in persistently ‘secular’ and increasingly plural public space. I wanted to look for ways to understand and work theologically with this idea of difficulty as a contemporary reality for Christian life and speech in the public square.

The case of Gary McFarlane - frames of reference

The case of Gary McFarlane reflects something of what I am describing as ‘difficulty’. McFarlane’s legal claim for religious discrimination was based on having sought, and been refused, exemption from working with same-sex couples as part of his job as a Relate counsellor. As an Evangelical Christian, his conviction was that ‘it follows from Biblical teaching that same-sex sexual activity is sinful and that he should do nothing which endorses such activity’.² His employer had in place a policy of non-discrimination, which included both religion and sexual orientation as protected characteristics. McFarlane felt unable to offer counselling to all couples regardless of sexual orientation and was dismissed.

² *McFarlane v Relate Avon Ltd* [2009] UKEAT 0106/09, 4.

Bishop George Carey, a prominent supporter of several of the litigants, sought to convey in a witness statement to one of the hearings of Mr McFarlane's case something of the weight of what it meant for McFarlane to comply with Relate's policy of non-discrimination based on sexuality. Carey's submission to the court endeavoured, unsuccessfully, to show that working to support same-sex couples as an Evangelical Christian carried a sense for McFarlane that what he was being asked to do involved 'eternal consequences': something beyond a merely personal choice, and with significance within a whole moral universe.³ This record of Lord Carey's intervention in Gary McFarlane's case suggests the difficulty in communicating this sense of a transcendent and final point of reference and judgement for a believer as an objective reality which must be reckoned with.

We also have the record of Lord Justice Laws response to Lord Carey's statement in support of McFarlane's case.

The precepts of any one religion, any belief system, cannot, by force of their religious origins, sound any louder in the general law than the precepts of any other. If they did, those out in the cold would be less than citizens and our constitution would be on the way to a theocracy, which is of necessity autocratic'.⁴

There is a sense here of the collision between two very divergent frames of reference. I am not sure Lord Carey made the best possible attempt at describing the moral universe which would lead to a conservative Christian stance on same-sex relationships and eliciting understanding for it. But my point is that it is *difficult*, with limited shared points of reference for meaningful and sympathetic communication.

Shirley Chaplin's cross - and the problem of saying 'what it meant'

The case of an NHS nurse, Shirley Chaplin, suggests similar difficulties of understanding and communication, as she and her managers seemed unable to find common ground on the meaning of a crucifix she wore as part of seeking to live, and work, faithfully as a Christian.

³ *McFarlane v Relate Avon Ltd* [2010] EWCA Civ 880, 16.

⁴ *McFarlane vs Relate Avon* [2010] EWCA Civ 880, 22. At <http://www.bailii.org/ew/cases/EWCA/Civ/2010/880.html> (accessed 15/03/14).

Shirley Chaplin worked as a nursing sister in the Devon and Exeter NHS Trust. She was asked to remove the crucifix she had worn since her confirmation while dealing with patients at work. The request came after a change to the staff uniform in the hospital where she worked. This change meant that her crucifix would hang outside her scrubs and was therefore classed as a health and safety risk in clinical settings, posing a danger of cross-infection to patients and presenting a potential risk to her should a distressed patient grab it. There was a series of meetings between Chaplin and hospital managers, and various alternatives were proposed by both parties, which are detailed in court transcripts.⁵ No option was found which satisfied the requirements of the hospital, and at the same time retained the significance to Chaplin of her crucifix as part of what it meant to her to live faithfully as a Christian in her daily life.

I was struck by parts of Shirley Chaplin's own account of the communicative difficulties involved, given in newspaper interviews. She says, of the significance to her of wearing her cross, that she could 'never find the right words to describe it'⁶, and speaks of the impossibility of being able to express to hospital managers 'what it meant to her' to wear her crucifix and the extent to which it was bound up with her faith as a lived reality in her role as a nurse.⁷ There also seemed to be what might be termed an imaginative difficulty in the negotiations with her managerial colleagues: Chaplin described feeling 'humiliated' by the suggestion that she might wear cross-shaped earrings as an alternative to her crucifix⁸ - a suggestion which her colleagues presumably intended to be helpful.

The cases of McFarlane and Chaplin raise the question of how these gulfs in understanding and possibilities for communication and comprehension might be navigated in religiously - and irreligious - diverse societies, and of what territory might be found for such negotiation.

Both of these cases arose in the everyday settings in which these two people work. The collisions involved were negotiated between employees and employers or managers. In the

⁵ Eweida & Others v UK [2013] ECHR 37 (15 January 2013), 20. Online at [http://www.bailii.org/cgi-bin/format.cgi?doc=/eu/cases/ECHR/2013/37.html&query=\(shirley\)+AND+\(chaplin\)+AND+\(exeter\)](http://www.bailii.org/cgi-bin/format.cgi?doc=/eu/cases/ECHR/2013/37.html&query=(shirley)+AND+(chaplin)+AND+(exeter)). Accessed 14/02/2019

⁶ Jonathan Petre, 'Why It's so Difficult to Stand up and Be a Christian, by Nurse Caught up in Hospital Crucifix Row', Mail Online, 4 April 2010, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1263441/Nurse-crucifix-row-reveals-uplifting-story-faith-symbolises-difficult-stand-Christian.html>.

⁷ Laura Roberts, 'Christian Nurse Says NHS "persecuted" Her Faith and Favours Muslims Employees', <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/7538768/Christian-nurse-says-NHS-persecuted-her-faith-and-favours-Muslims-employees.html>. Accessed 7 January 2020

⁸ Roberts.

case of Shirley Chaplin particularly, there is a clear sense of quite a long, negotiative process of reciprocal offers and suggestions to try to find some working resolution. This negotiation looks like a *political* process. But it would not be seen as such where politics is understood in more formal and institutional terms as government, law, rule. There are, however, strands of political theology working with a more social and diffuse understanding of the political⁹, and I will go on to engage with scholars who ask about the significance of these kinds of spaces for the work of political theology in complex and diverse political communities.

The campaigners

In the course of my research around the litigations, and particularly the campaign groups supporting them, I became increasingly interested in the campaigning and publicity around the litigations. This began to look like an instance of public, practical politics. In chapter two I examine in more detail this practical politics, its aims, and some of the problems it seems, albeit inadvertently, to produce. I also describe in chapter two what began to emerge as an identifiable political theology underlying the campaigning, as I assessed it in the light of Jonathan Chaplin's work on a particular strand of political reflection and engagement in the Evangelical tradition.

The most significant campaigning groups are the Christian Institute and The Christian Legal Centre. Both organisations campaign largely on issues such as sexual and reproductive ethics, and issues relating to marriage, the family and end-of-life issues.¹⁰ These organisations and Church leaders come from a conservative Evangelical tradition, as do most of the complainants. Both campaign groups are currently supporting a number of Christian interest litigations.¹¹

Among the Church leaders who have intervened in the debate around the litigations, Bishop Michael Nazir Ali and Lord Carey are notable examples. Lord Carey submitted the witness

⁹ Carl Schmitt is a key figure in this tradition

¹⁰ Both organisations publish details of the issues on which they campaign on their websites. Details for Christian Concern are online at <https://christianconcern.com/issues/> (accessed 10/07/2019). For The Christian Institute, details of their campaigns are available at <https://www.christian.org.uk/campaigns/> (accessed 10/07/2019)

¹¹ Current cases which The Christian Legal Centre is supporting are online at <https://christianconcern.com/cases/> (accessed 19/09/2019). Those of The Christian Institute are online at <https://www.christian.org.uk/case/> (accessed 19/09/2019).

statement already cited to the Employment Appeal Tribunal in the case of Gary McFarlane.¹² Both have cited the litigations as examples of Christian marginalisation in publications: Carey in his book *We Don't Do God: The Marginalisation of Public Faith*¹³, and Nazir Ali in his critique of secularism, Islamism and multiculturalism in Western democracies, in *Triple Jeopardy for the West*.¹⁴

The Christian Institute and Christian Concern have broader organisational aims, many of which are similar in nature. These aims will be detailed in chapter two, in which I discuss the litigations and the work of the campaign groups more fully. The aims of the campaign groups might be summarised as maintaining and extending Christian influence in British society and combatting a perceived shift towards greater 'secularism', with a particular focus on law and public policy. The Church leaders supporting these cases are sympathetic to many of these aims.

When I first encountered these litigations, and the campaigning organisations with which they became associated, I found them troubling. The public language and action encouraging Christians to 'stand up for their rights'¹⁵ concerned me, and I wanted to think through why that was. The litigations seemed to put Christians in a competitive relationship with others in the public square; one in which commitments or needs collided in a win-lose scenario. I wanted to examine in more detail whether, and why, this might be the case. The campaigning surrounding the litigations appeared at times to advocate a highly oppositional relationship between Christian faith and the 'secular' values of liberal democracies. This opposition is emphasised by a narrative of a 'call to arms', together with the frequent and somewhat indiscriminate use of the term 'aggressive' secularism¹⁶. The research for this thesis involved some changes in my understanding, with a more detailed insight into the actual concerns and aims of the campaigners, and into the litigations as part of a broader strategy in relation to British public and political life. Chapter two recounts this journey of understanding, as well as my continuing concerns about a conflictual conception of Christian faith and lives in

¹² (*McFarlane v Relate Avon Ltd UKEAT/0106/09/DA*).

¹³ Carey, George, and Andrew Carey. *We Don't Do God: The Marginalisation of Public Faith*. Oxford; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Monarch Books, 2012.

¹⁴ Michael Nazir-Ali, *Triple Jeopardy for the West* (London; New York: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2012).

¹⁵ Carey and Carey, *We Don't Do God: The Marginalisation of Public Faith*, 37 and 120.

¹⁶ Martin Beckford, 'Bishop of Rochester: Church of England Must Do More to Counter Twin Threats of Secularism and Radical Islam', 29 August 2009, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/6104407/Bishop-of-Rochester-Church-of-England-must-do-more-to-counter-twin-threats-of-secularism-and-radical-Islam.html>.

relation to what the campaigners regard as an increasingly 'secularised' political and public life in Britain.

The problem, and the solution, is presented by the campaigners in terms of formal politics: law, rule, government. This should perhaps not be surprising, since the groups were founded and run by Christian legal professionals. But as I have indicated, I will suggest in this thesis that an exclusively 'formal' view of the political may have weaknesses in helping think through the kinds of everyday *aporiae* which the legal cases - and some of my own experience - point to.

Defining some terms

As indicated, some clarification is needed at this point about my use of the language of 'the secular' in the thesis.

I will take *secularisation* to indicate the kinds of cultural and societal changes being described in Charles Taylor's description of a 'secular' age: for example, as a decline in both observance and influence, a 'falling off of religious belief and practice', which combines with a situation where 'the norms and principles we follow' in public space 'generally don't refer us to God or to any religious beliefs'.¹⁷ In this sense, secularisation denotes a falling-away from a more monolithically Christian past, and largely describes a phenomenon of developed societies in the North Atlantic world. I will return to the concept of secularisation, and whether this is any longer a wholly adequate or comprehensive conceptual tool for understanding and describing contemporary realities, in a discussion of the concept of the post-secular later in this chapter.

I will use *secularism* to denote the political decision for a separation of religion and state – which can be further refined to distinguish between two quite divergent forms of political secularism. Ahdar and Leigh offer a summary of the way two different forms of state secularism can be distinguished as either 'benevolent' or 'hostile'. 'Secularism of the benevolent (or 'soft', 'moderate', 'negative', 'procedural' or 'passive') sort' obliges the state 'to refrain from adopting and imposing *any* established beliefs...upon its citizens' and 'accords

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 3.

religious impulses, individual and communal, due standing and equal participation in the public square'. They characterise state secularism as '[h]ostile (or 'hard', 'assertive' or 'programmatic')' when the state 'actively' pursues 'a policy of established unbelief' as an 'ideological defence of the secular cause' as a 'fully-fledged worldview' or 'Rawlsian comprehensive doctrine'.¹⁸

'Secular', however, is also a theological term. It denotes the period between the Incarnation and the Eschaton: of or belonging to this age (or *saeculum*). This sense of the secular denotes the impermanence and penultimacy of this age, and with it, the ordering of social and political life in a world not yet finally and fully subject to the redemption and renewal of all things in Christ. This theological understanding of the secular is used in the work of all three of the political theologians whose work this thesis considers, to challenge - in different ways and with different degrees of urgency - the 'sacralising' of political orders.

A brief clarification is also needed about my use of the term 'plural' to describe liberal Western democracies. I am not presuming or advocating what Nigel Biggar (for example) calls 'the settled pluralism of polytheistic liberalism'¹⁹. By this I take him to mean a political and ideological choice for fostering a mutual indifference, between diverse grouping within a wider political community, as to how each other live, act and believe. Neither am I suggesting an ethic of mutual non-interference which plays out as non-interaction: a politics of 'anything goes' or, more seriously, nothing really matters as long as it is 'not hurting anyone' - to deploy the customary language. Instead, I am using the language of plurality to describe the genuine diversity - religious, ideological, cultural - which largely characterises Western democracies today. I have found Charles Taylor's concept of 'deep diversity' a useful way of framing this reality, and I will say more about his notion as a tool for describing and understanding plural societies later in this chapter. I share the reservations which will be seen in the campaigners and my theological interlocutors about models of human sociality which seem predicated on, or productive of, social fragmentation into mutually isolated groups independently pursuing divergent aims, goals or moral visions.

¹⁸ Rex Ahdar and Ian Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State* (Oxford University Press, 2013), 95–96.

¹⁹ Nigel Biggar, 'On Defining Political Authority as an Act of Judgment: A Discussion of Oliver O'Donovan's *The Ways of Judgment* (Part I)', *Political Theology* 9, no. 3 (3 October 2008): 284, <https://doi.org/10.1558/poth.v9i3.273>.

The risk of culture war

The research described in chapter two into the campaigning around the series of Christian interest litigations indicated some wider and more systematic aims for the campaign groups. The doctoral research of Méadhbh Mclvor is an important source for the work of the chapter. The campaign groups' websites and publications are clear that their aims involve retaining or increasing the influence of biblical norms and ethics on British law and public policy. Mclvor's work suggests that the Christian interest litigations are often understood by the campaigners as an opportunity to demonstrate the inadequacy of 'secular' norms such as the concept, and legal protection of human rights, as a basis for shared social living - and even as an effective way to deal with colliding and incommensurate interests. She shows this allows the campaign groups to propose that a Christian moral framework offers an alternative, and better, basis for life together. These insights from Mclvor combine with Jonathan Chaplin's suggestion that the campaigners properly belong within a 'Christian nation' tradition of Evangelical political theology.

I discuss in detail in the next chapter whether Christian faith can be a shared source of moral values for a society marked by real difference: divergent moralities, cultural plurality and varieties of belief and unbelief. However, the campaigners are pressing questions of whether highly plural political communities need a more robust moral vision in order to foster a healthy common life: whether some shared set of commitments or aims around a society's sense of its own 'good', which might enable a social coherence against which - it is argued - the more atomising 'secular' ethos of individual rights works.

These are important questions for me, and for all my major conversation partners in this thesis. They involve reflection not simply on what political theology might say about how *Christians* can faithfully navigate the tensions and differences of modern liberal democracies, but further, how political theology can contribute to a wider thinking-through of the kind of political arrangements needed for religiously and irreligious diverse societies to think and act together. What - if any - shared vision of a society's 'good', however minimal, is required to facilitate this, and how is this negotiated, re-negotiated and fostered? Crucially, what might make such negotiation possible in ethically plural political communities in which a variety of comprehensive moral or religious visions of the good may exist alongside sincerely held anxieties about any public or political role for comprehensive visions as such?

The thesis does not focus on the specific concerns relating to religious freedom, which underlie many of these cases - such as the public wearing of religious symbols, attitudes to same-sex relationships and so on. I am likewise not primarily concerned with a discussion of the merits or limitations of using the legal protection of religious freedom as a way to deal with the collisions of Christian faith and more secular commitments. Nor was I seeking in the research to explore these specific issues or to suggest possible ways forward as legislation is interpreted and developed. Likewise, I am not treating litigation as key to thinking through the task of political theology here. Rather, I am beginning with these legal cases as one, concrete and contemporary instance of colliding Christian and 'secular' commitments. I am treating the reality of difference, and the collision of divergent commitments, as a political reality in liberal democracies, raising both political and theological questions. I am using the legal cases then as a springboard into a discussion of the wider tensions of negotiating Christian identity as a lived reality in secularised, plural societies. The *difficulty* of that negotiation is the primary focus of the thesis, together with the question of how political theology understands and works with that difficult process of negotiation within its own ongoing reflection on the nature and relationship of the theological and the political in late modernity.

The question of difficulty as a question for political theology

This thesis could have been a piece of practical theology, given what I have already said about my interest in Christian faith as a lived reality in everyday life, with the colliding and potentially incommensurable commitments involved in encounter and negotiation in that increasingly diverse and complex space. However, I have been concerned in my research and thinking to ask how that is understood and navigated theologically, as a *political* space. Thus, in the end, I was drawn to explore the broader political-theological issues the collisions and incommensurabilities seemed to point to, and questions of how Christians might negotiate, in shared public space, between the kinds of colliding commitments and frames of reference underlying the individual litigations, including communicative differences and the associated problems for how such conversations might be conducted. But I will continue to ask how the lived reality of negotiating Christian identity in conditions of secularity and plurality might shape that exploration.

As I will show in more detail in chapter three, the issue of Christianity's relationship to the 'Enlightenment project' and its crises in Western democracies has been a focus and source of dissent within ecclesial political theology since the post-war period in Europe. Much of the debate has turned on whether any Christian collaboration is possible with the 'universal' ideals of Enlightenment modernity: freedom, equality, emancipation. Such 'collaboration' was a feature of the immediate post-war period in European political theology, but the work of Metz, Sölle Moltmann, Rahner and others has been criticised more recently, as a subordination of Christianity to 'secular' political aims, by 'second generation' political theologians on both sides of the Atlantic, among them William Cavanaugh and Stanley Hauerwas in the United States, and John Milbank and Oliver O'Donovan in the United Kingdom.²⁰

These tensions and questions are visible in the collisions giving rise to the litigations and are more explicit in the campaigning and debate surrounding them. However, it is not clear, as I shall argue in chapter two, that the difficulty of how this tense relationship between Christianity and secular modernity plays out in everyday settings and encounters, and in believers' lives, can be dealt with in more institutional political spaces, particularly via the formal processes of law.

A 'Schmittian'²¹ strand within political theology holds that 'the political' cannot be confined to the institutions of politics as classically understood, such as parliaments or political parties. The political is instead conceived as a multiplicity of spaces within modern societies: in media, in economic interactions, in technology and so on. This broader conception of the nature and location of the political persists and continues to be debated in political theology. The interactions and negotiations which underlie and give rise to the Christian interest litigations happen within these more social spaces of the political, *before* being shifted into the more formal processes of law. I will ask whether an understanding of the political which can take account of these informal, interpersonal and everyday spaces, offers a more fruitful means for theological political reflection on how Christians negotiate the difficulty of practiced faith in daily living.

²⁰ Elizabeth Phillips, *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark International, 2012), 51.

²¹ Marc De Wilde, 'Violence in the State of Exception: Reflections on Theologico-Political Motifs in Benjamin and Schmitt', in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent De Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 190.

Contextualising the problem – post-secularity and deep diversity

I shall endeavour to give some context for my argument that it is difficult for Christians to live faithfully in the everyday, complex public spaces of late-modern democracies. There are two concepts which I will draw on here to build a more detailed picture of what might constitute the difficulty of faithful daily living. The first is the concept of post-secularity, as used in social and political thought as well as by theologians, as a conceptual framework for understanding new and changing religious and social realities in Western political contexts. The developing concept of post-secularity offers resources for grounding my own sense of the ‘difficulty’ of living faithfully in public in significant shifts in, and beyond, the two paradigms of Christendom and secularisation in the West. The second concept is that of deep diversity, first developed by the philosopher Charles Taylor as a way of describing complex social, cultural and moral difference as a defining feature of contemporary Western democracies.

The context – post-secularity

The concept of post-secularity is widely used by social and political theorists to describe a new and complex reality in Western democracies. It is a recognised concept for grappling with the unexpected persistence and public profile of religious faith, against all the expectations of a paradigm of secularisation, which was a commonly accepted framework for understanding religious change in the latter part of the twentieth century. This new situation is conceived as arising from the co-existence in public space of more vocal and visible forms of religious faith and continuing secularisation. The concept of post-secularity suggests that this is a situation for which the secularisation paradigm and the conventions of public secularism are no longer adequate. Jürgen Habermas is a notable thinker who has challenged assumptions, including his own, regarding the necessity of separating religion and public life, and asked some searching questions about the role of religion in this new ‘post-secular’ situation.²²

The concept of post-secularity suggests that the religious past offered one kind of social and political cohesion – of a dominant religious tradition – while the secularisation thesis offered

²² Habermas, Jürgen. ‘Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society’. *New perspectives quarterly*. vol. 25 (2008) p. 17-29.

another – of attaining a final, shared secularity as a shared social and cultural reality. Post-secularity is a way of describing a new and more complex situation and the new questions it raises of social and political coherence and commonality, and whether or how they might be fostered.

The language of the post-secular is also used by theologians and scholars of religion. Elaine Graham, in her book *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age*²³, sets out an account of post-secularity and analyses how new conditions in Western democracies produce novel and sharp collisions between more public forms of religion and continuing general secularisation. She also examines the phenomenon of ‘Christian interest’ litigations as one particular instance of such collisions.

Graham argues that that the language of the post-secular describes the paradoxical coexistence of two parallel and apparently incompatible realities. The first is a new religious voice and visibility in public space, which runs alongside an increasing general detachment from religious faith and unease about public religion in populations as a whole. She further argues that this unexpected coincidence of persistent religious visibility and ongoing religious decline produces genuine difficulties in political and public space. This is a wholly new situation, she argues, for which there are no signposts, no frameworks of understanding. It poses sharp political questions about how liberal democracies ‘square (the) circle of concurrent religious visibility and religious scepticism in public life, and how ‘this new dispensation of the sacred and the secular’ may require ‘new conventions of identity, citizenship, governance and public discourse about the common good’.²⁴

I will outline Graham’s description of the new situation as the paradox of more visible faith in combination with persistent secularity. I will then trace the features of the specific difficulty she identifies in their public co-existence and interactions, as a way of suggesting some features of the difficulty I have identified for living faithfully in the public square. I will conclude with two particular implications for political theology in conditions of post-secularity which are proposed by Hent De Vries.

²³ Elaine Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age* (London: SCM Press, 2013).

²⁴ Graham, xviii.

Persistent faith

One aspect of the religious change that post-secularity describes, in Graham's account, involves the variety and complexity of the presence and role of religion in contemporary Western societies, including Britain. Increased global migration has led to a greater variety of religious traditions, together with increased awareness of the links between the expression of piety and issues of identity: personal, cultural and ethnic. Migration has also, however, brought differing attitudes to, and understandings of, the place and role of religion in public space. Migrant communities are by no means signed up to the classic demarcations of the 'liberal settlement' which confine religious practice and conviction to the realm of the private, personal and individual, rather than the public, corporate and political worlds.²⁵ The 'faith sector' is also increasingly seen in national and local government as a politically significant contributor to social capital²⁶ and as 'partners in the delivery of welfare and other services'²⁷ when public resources are stretched. There are also signs of interest in 'alternative' forms of religiosity rather than traditional, institutional ones: a phenomenon encapsulated by the increasingly commonplace term 'spiritual but not religious'.²⁸

Another area of change concerns the public understanding, representation and treatment of religion. This includes the perception that 'religious literacy' is now a requirement among the political classes, alongside similar training for the staff of governmental institutions and public services.²⁹ Graham also highlights the role of popular media in articulating and forming people's perceptions of religion via the notion of the 'mediatization' of religion. This denotes a double dynamic between the mediation of religion through the media to a public increasingly detached from direct contact with believing communities and religious institutions, and a concurrent dependence, on the part of religious bodies, on precisely this mediating role of the media, if faith communities are to connect with a religiously detached public.³⁰ Graham also includes, in these patterns of change in how religion is seen and dealt

²⁵ Graham, *Rock*, xiv.

²⁶ Graham, *Rock*, 20–21.

²⁷ Graham, *Rock*, xiv.

²⁸ Graham, *Rock*, 7ff.

²⁹ Graham, *Rock*, 10ff.

³⁰ Graham, *Rock*, 12ff.

with in public, the extension of equality and diversity legislation in Europe to include ‘religion and belief’.³¹

The new visibility and public presence of religious faith leads to a new situation, where the conventions of public ‘secularism’ are breaking down.

The conventional demarcations of ‘public’ and ‘private’, ‘secular’ and ‘religious’ are breaking down, along with the protocols governing the nature of public discourse and civil activism in liberal democracies. It is not clear, for example, that non-theological reasoning is any the less subjective or partial than any other form of public discourse. Similarly, the expectation that only people of faith might ‘bracket out’ their deepest moral convictions is no longer viewed as the ideal condition for participation in political life.³²

Rex Ahdar and Ian Leigh suggest that there has been a notable rise in the presence and discursive significance of more conservative and fundamentalist forms of religion in recent years.³³ Nigel Biggar and Linda Hogan’s survey of contemporary forms of public religion analyses the parallel role of what they term ‘violent religion’ in the re-emergence of public religion, and its role in fuelling both the ‘secular fury’ of anti-religionists and also a more diffuse anxiety about religion’s place in society.³⁴ Ahdar and Leigh also note that a combination of low religious literacy and public anxiety about ‘political’ and violent religion has combined to make the term ‘fundamentalist’ a catch-all term for any serious follower of religious faith.³⁵

Persistent secularity

Graham argues that reality of ongoing religious decline is reflected in a persistent downward trend in the numbers of people who describe their religious identity as Christian. Figures from the national census in the UK show that the number of those identifying as Christian has steadily fallen over recent decades and stood at less than two thirds of the total population

³¹ Graham, *Rock*, 205.

³² Graham, *Rock*, 113.

³³ Rex Ahdar and Ian Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State*, 2nd edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2.

³⁴ Nigel Biggar and Linda Hogan, eds., *Religious Voices in Public Places* (Oxford: OUP, 2009), 2.

³⁵ Ahdar and Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State*, 2015, 3.

in the census of 2011, compared with 72 per cent in 2001. Those affirming no religious affiliation rose from 15 per cent in 2001 to 25 per cent in 2011. While the numbers of people belonging to other religious traditions are growing in Britain, most notably Islam, a YouGov poll in 2011 found just 5 per cent of the population identified as belonging to faiths other than Christianity.³⁶

Graham suggests that increasing detachment from religious faith results in a widespread lack of religious understanding and literacy in the general population, efforts in politics and public services to address which were noted above. Alongside a generalised disaffection Graham points to the rise in anti-religious attitudes, exemplified in sharply sceptical and antagonistic public commentators and thinkers such as Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Polly Toynbee, collectively referred to as 'New Atheists'. Here, religion is characterised as a malign force in public life; and Graham notes a tendency to assume that there is an underlying totalising impetus, explicit in highly fundamentalist strands, but argued to be latent even amongst moderates, in Sam Harris's warnings about the dangers of theocracy.³⁷

The persistent, more visible and more complex nature of religious faith in post-secular societies, then, sits in tension with continuing and often deepening debate about what its place and role in public life and conversation should be.

To summarise, what Graham is describing via the concept of post-secularity is the paradoxical public presence in modern political communities of two apparently incompatible visions of the good, and deeply different ways of thinking and speaking and arguing about them. One might characterise the religious vision as being framed in the language of the divine, of transcendence, of an objective reality beyond the immediate to which immediate concerns are answerable, some coherence with which is what makes it possible to 'live well together'. The classically secular vision is of a negotiation of life together which happens within an immanent sphere and by appeal to universally accessible criteria of rationality, on the basis of demonstrability or evidence, ordered to equally 'universal' values of freedom and equality.

³⁶ YouGov, 'British Religion in Numbers', 2011.
<http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2011/yougovcambridge-on-religion>.

³⁷ Harris, Sam. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. New Ed edition. London: Simon & Schuster UK, 2006. Cited in Graham, 18.

The difficulty of talking about it

Graham also identifies a 'widespread deficit in religious literacy'³⁸ as a feature of continuing and growing secularisation, meaning that the conversation in shared space, about shared life, may have no common language or frame of reference.³⁹ This indicates the simple possibility of incomprehension in everyday exchanges about the deepest motivations of believers. The religious voice, she says, is '[n]o longer...speaking into a common frame of reference'.⁴⁰ It follows, in Graham's analysis, that even if appeals to religious faith are not proscribed by an exclusive 'public reason', there will still be a question of their 'counting', if there is no shared language or common frame of reference for communicating or assessing such appeals.

Graham proposes the idea of a 'gulf'⁴¹ between persistent secularisation and persistent and more public religious faith – between different accounts of the good, and differing modes of thought and frames of reference which determine how they get talked about. She suggests this involves differing understandings of what is admissible as grounds or motivation for a particular action, or for advancing a particular position - which make for a communicative gulf, in addition to that between the divergent visions. This may take the form of a continued 'questioning' by 'reasoned sceptics' of 'the very legitimacy of religious voices and the benevolence of faith-based interventions'.⁴²

Graham also raises the spectre of what I have termed a 'culture war'. She points to the possibility of an 'impending collision' between the 'immovable object' of more visible and vocal religious faith and the 'irresistible force of secularism'.⁴³ This is strong language; but it seems to be intended as a warning about the need to avert such a collision and its potential consequences.

A new reality with new questions

There is, then, what Graham terms a 'political tension at the heart of the post-secular'. This is the question of how to deal with a 'new kind of public square' in which religious faith,

³⁸ Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 17.

³⁹ Graham, *Rock*, 21.

⁴⁰ Graham, *Rock*, 20.

⁴¹ Graham, *Rock*, 42, 182.

⁴² Graham, *Rock*, xviii.

⁴³ Graham, *Rock*, 33, 207.

including Christian faith, is 'newly resurgent', yet its 'legitimacy as a form of public reason continues to be hotly contested' via 'the objections of reasoned sceptics'.⁴⁴ For Graham, the question is how 'a liberal, pluralist democracy' can 'square that particular circle' in this 'new dispensation of the sacred and the secular'.⁴⁵ She suggests that the political conventions separating private faith and public reason, sacred and secular, may no longer be adequate to this new situation

(T)he unprecedented co-existence of multiple forms of belief and non-belief (and all points in between) may require a reorientation of the conventions by which Western democracies have demarcated religion and politics, as well as many of the legislative conventions governing the mediation of religion into the public square.⁴⁶

Hent De Vries – post-secularity and working 'in the dark'

We also find this sense of a new reality, requiring new political and theological models, in Hent De Vries' lengthy essay in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*.⁴⁷ His essay introduces a collection of academic papers presented at the 2004 conference 'Political Theologies: Globalization and Post-Secular Reason', and offers an orientation to the context for their shared aim to 'open or, rather, re-open, an enquiry concerning religion's engagement with the political'.⁴⁸ Like Graham, De Vries describes a variety of religious and socio-political changes which challenge established paradigms and the conventions governing the interactions of religion and politics, and raise new questions for political theology. Like Graham, De Vries argues that it is a *difficult* question because at its heart is the coincidence in contemporary societies of secularisation and resurgent forms of public religious faith, with all their apparent incommensurabilities.

De Vries shares Graham's sense of being in uncharted territory, beyond traditional paradigms of either the 'religious past' or a secular alternative. This leads him, specifically in his reflections on political theology in conditions of post-secularity, to the conclusion that political theology must do its work in the dark, to some extent. The traditional hegemonic

⁴⁴ Graham, *Rock*, xviii.

⁴⁵ Graham, *Rock*, 18.

⁴⁶ Graham, *Rock*, 33.

⁴⁷ Hent De Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds., *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 1–88.

⁴⁸ De Vries and Sullivan, 1.

'alternatives' of religiosity and secularism are shown to be inadequate paradigms for understanding and dealing with present realities. Likewise, De Vries argues that no new framework for understanding and navigating these realities is yet available. This leads him to suggest that the paradoxes and problems of post-secularity raise questions for political theology which have no ready-made responses.

Neither the hope of further secularization or secularism – whether as a bulwark against or an enabler of religious diversity – nor, to be sure, a simple return to forgotten religious values, can fill this void. If any post-secular thought and political theology of Europe and the West there may be, we do not yet know what it is.⁴⁹

Attending to 'daily politics'

The suggestion that political theology must work in somewhat uncharted territory leads De Vries to speculate that what he terms 'daily politics' may be a political site which warrants theological attention. De Vries is in dialogue, at this point, with Job Cohen, and with Cohen's essay in the collection, which De Vries's essay introduces.⁵⁰ He discusses Cohen's suggestion that 'the most important problems' in post-secularity are 'social and societal', and that they 'concern not matters of politics or policy but a confrontation of "styles" or "ways of life" in neighborhoods (*sic*) and on streets.' He also cites Cohen's conclusion about the contemporary relevance of 'daily practices' by which these encounters across difference are navigated.⁵¹

De Vries therefore questions a traditional way of understanding the discipline of political theology as having to do with the relationship 'between 'political community and religious order...between power...and salvation'. Rather, he argues, as well as 'theorizing "the political"', political theology also 'enters into relationship with urgent questions of daily "politics"'.⁵² This leads him to conclude that it is the holding together of the tension between these two – 'theorizing the political' and dealing with the questions of 'daily politics'

⁴⁹ De Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*, 82.

⁵⁰ Job Cohen, 'Can a Minority Retain Its Identity in Law?', in *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, ed. Hent De Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006), 539–56.

⁵¹ De Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*, 73.

⁵² De Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*, 26.

– which is the basis for political theology’s ‘continued recalcitrance – as if, so far, nothing could substitute for it’.⁵³

De Vries’s notion of a ‘daily politics’, and Cohen’s ‘daily practices’ for navigating difference in the encounters of the streets, belong within the Schmittian tradition in political theology, which emphasises the variety and breadth of social and cultural spaces in which ‘the political’ happens. Both political theologians are pointing to the social and societal problems of encounter, even ‘confrontation’, across genuinely different ‘styles’ and ‘ways of life’. They are suggesting that these problems describe some of the most significant issues for post-secular societies and arguing for a shift of focus for the work of political theology to understand these social and cultural spaces of encounter - the ‘streets’ and ‘neighbourhoods’ - as sites for ‘the political’.

The context - deep diversity

‘Deep diversity’ is a term which was first used by the Catholic philosopher Charles Taylor in discussing specifically Canadian circumstances. He first used it in 1997, in a chapter called ‘Deep Diversity and the Future of Canada’ in an edited volume.⁵⁴ The term has been used since, by him and by others, to describe a more generalised reality of moral and spiritual difference, not just between belief and unbelief, but between differing religious commitments as well as varying moral outlooks or conceptions of the good in Western liberal democracies.

I turn to Taylor’s concept of deep diversity here for several reasons. First, it amplifies and modifies the notion of ‘post-secularity’ and is a useful corrective to any sense of a simple religious-secular binary as the distinctive feature of modern Western democracies. Secondly, it may serve as a reminder that the fact of religious diversity is a contributory factor to the new religious visibility. Thirdly, it is a term which will be used in critical engagement with aspects of Oliver O’Donovan’s work in chapter four and so needs some introduction.

⁵³ De Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*, 25.

⁵⁴ Charles Taylor, ‘Deep Diversity and the Future of Canada’, in *Can Canada Survive? Under What Terms and Conditions?*, ed. David Hayne (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

The concept of 'deep diversity' suggests that some aspects of the specific religious-secular gulf and its difficulty are reproduced across multiple 'incommensurabilities' and non-convergent frameworks of meaning and communication, as contemporary societies are increasingly 'deeply diverse'. This suggests that *difference* is a key feature of modern societies. This leads some political theologians to ask whether a less consensual and more *agonistic* form of politics is required in these diverse political communities.⁵⁵ It is significant for my own concerns that the word *agon* denotes 'struggle': something *difficult*, not easily resolved.

Describing difficulty

For a working understanding of the 'difficulty' of the collisions of secularity and Christian identity in post-secular, deeply diverse societies, I will borrow Graham's notion of a 'gulf' in public life and conversation. This gulf, while not final or absolute, denotes divergent but co-existing visions of human conviviality which lack a shared language, frame of reference or agreed 'terms of debate' for negotiating life together, with the risk of a slide towards some form of 'culture war'. Her account of 'post-secularity' also points to the breakdown of liberal consensus about private faith and public reason, with the new coexistence in the public square of the parallel and apparently incompatible realities of persistent, faith and persistent secularism.

Returning to the cases of Shirley Chaplin and Gary McFarlane, there is a sense in both of a lack of a common language or frame of reference in which public Christian commitments can be spoken about and negotiated. These collisions and communicative 'gaps' produce a genuine difficulty for each of them of the kind I have been setting out here, within 'the cut and thrust of negotiating faithfully the Western political context'.⁵⁶ My argument throughout this thesis will be that the collisions of faith and secularity, and the negotiations of these across an imaginative and communicative gulf, are part of the reality of lives Christian identity and faith, and that they are *difficult*.

⁵⁵ Luke Bretherton and Jonathan Chaplin both consistently question a consensual political model and ask if agonistic modes may be more appropriate in religiously and morally plural societies.

⁵⁶ Luke Bretherton, 'Introduction: Oliver O'Donovan's Political Theology and the Liberal Imperative', *Political Theology* 9, no. 3 (3 October 2008): 271, <https://doi.org/10.1558/poth.v9i3>, 265.

Difficulty in context - a summary

Post-secularity describes a new reality, with questions about how politics ‘squares the circle’ of the ‘new dispensation of the sacred and the secular’,⁵⁷ a situation in which De Vries sees political theology working to some extent in the dark, but as a particular and unique discipline.

Let me summarise my argument so far. The legal cases seem to reveal a wider cultural reality of difficulty around the place of religious faith in the public square. This involves difficulty for Christians seeking to live faithfully in public settings, and for the interactions and negotiations of individuals across secular and faith commitments. Processes of legal arbitration may be useful in specific cases but are not adequate as a way of understanding and dealing with all the complexities of a changing political environment in which the conventions of traditional political liberalism and the religiously neutral public square are breaking down.

Symptomatic of this changing environment is the sense of being in uncharted territory, and that ‘our everyday experience may no longer fit comfortably into existing conceptual frameworks’.⁵⁸ The concept of post-secularity argues for the inadequacy of the secularisation paradigm to describe this new situation: the coexistence of continuing secularisation (religious fall-off), persistent and increasingly public religious faith, and ongoing commitment to secularism and anxiety about religious voices in public and political conversation.

This new reality also produces a communicative and imaginative gulf: there no longer exists ‘a common frame of reference, in which the theological and moral allusions fall comfortably on waiting ears’ but instead, the ‘public square...is both more sensitive to and suspicious of religious discourse’.⁵⁹

The gulf between secular and faith commitments is a key site of difference for Western democracies, shaped as they are by the legacy of the Enlightenment and a separation of theology and politics. However, the plural nature of Western democracies means that difference, and its negotiation, is increasingly a feature of social and political life more generally, and of everyday exchanges and interactions of citizens. This suggests the

⁵⁷ Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 18.

⁵⁸ Graham, *Rock*, 12.

⁵⁹ Graham, *Rock*, 21.

importance of these interactions and negotiations, and how they are attended to as an 'everyday' for of politics in theological-political reflection.

This is a situation where the conventions of the liberal settlement – of private faith and public reason – appear to be breaking down: one in which questions arise about 'new conventions of identity, citizenship, governance and public discourse about the common good'. How deeply diverse societies might negotiate and establish such new conventions is not clear. If De Vries is correct these are questions which political theology, with its capacity to hold ultimate questions in tension with lived, everyday realities, may be uniquely placed to address.

Theological resources - Oliver O'Donovan, John Milbank and Rowan Williams

The main theological conversation partners in this thesis are Oliver O'Donovan, John Milbank and Rowan Williams. My engagement with them asks what resources they might offer Christians for living faithfully in plural, 'secular' political contexts and its difficulty. I also ask how they address the questions of 'life together', and how political communities might shape this across the differences not just of religious and secular commitments, but of the multiple differences of morally plural societies.

These three theologians are concerned for a coherently theological account of the political from a Christian perspective and engage explicitly and critically with 'secular' political thought and practice, and with modernity's secular paradigm as such. The way each works with and understands 'secularity' varies considerably.

O'Donovan understands the secular primarily theologically, as the subordination of all forms of political order and authority in this *saeculo* to the rule of God and the victory of Christ. He largely avoids the language of secularism used to describe the religiously neutral state. However, his critical stance towards an Enlightenment 'suspicion' of an association of the theological and the political is clearly an engagement with the preoccupations of secularism in this form. His critique of secularism in this form is that without a moral basis, political authority is bereft of any right, or scope, to govern and direct a society.

Milbank, by contrast, conceives the secular theologically. This is not so much in the sense of temporal politics' subordination to divine rule. Rather, he challenges an account of the

secular as a value-free, ideologically neutral and rationally grounded stance, intellectually and politically. Instead, he locates the development and emergence of the 'secular' *within* Christian theology, as a false step in its history which has ultimately developed heretically. He 'unmasks' the supposed rationality of secular discourse as fundamentally itself a theology - based on a foundational myth or story of violence.

Williams also uses the language of the secular as a theological category, locating and limiting the role of any political order in penultimacy against the horizon of the final reign of God. As a description of the religious alignment of political orders, however, he advocates a form of secularism. However, he is concerned to distinguish 'secularism' into procedural and programmatic forms, within which he sets out a theological case for a procedural form of secularism in plural societies, and a limited role for the state.

Each theologian in dialogue with Augustine, and O'Donovan and Milbank offer explicit readings of his device of the two cities to articulate the relationship of Christian faith, and the Christian community, to secular political orders. Williams' reading, as I will argue in chapter six, is present but more implicit.

O'Donovan and Milbank are concerned to articulate coherently theological visions for human conviviality as what makes it possible for us to live well together which are detailed and often dazzling. Milbank in particular is acutely aware of the communicative and imaginative gulf between faith and the secular, and both he and O'Donovan seek to free Christian theology to articulate its political vision in its own terms, from an explicit position of faith. These gains, however, seem to come with some losses, and the losses occur because of the ways both theologians deal with the difficulty of the territory. Their focus on renewing and re-articulating Christian political theology seems to produce aspects of what I have called a 'culture war' between the Christian social vision and contemporary Western democracies, characterised by largely 'secular' commitments in the political and public realm, and continuing religious disaffiliation in much of their populations.

Oliver O'Donovan's work proposes a much more significant, and *directing*, role for politics in the 'formal' mode, as a way to address what he describes as the political crisis of late modernity: a crisis of authority. He argues that social flourishing, and any possibility of a common good, require this kind of directing role for politics in a formal mode, necessarily undergirded by some moral vision of the good. In discussing the role of authority in his

political theology, I will also explore the implications of this prioritising of authority and of politics as the *direction* of societies.

John Milbank is a theologian who, like O'Donovan, has set out to re-configure how political theology understands its task, and to make it much more robustly and explicitly theological in its self-understanding. But where O'Donovan's work seeks to address a contemporary problem for political authorities, from an explicitly theological stance, Milbank is much more reticent about the scope for secular political orders and forms of political thought to be (borrowing O'Donovan's language) 'evangelically' ordered.⁶⁰ The 'secular' in Milbank's work is viewed and defined as a political and discursive other – and as a problem. His understanding of what constitutes 'true' politics situates politics, and political thought, with the Church as a contrastive and alternative political community of harmonised difference.

I shall draw largely on his work in *Theology and Social Theory*⁶¹ in my discussion of Milbank's work. I focus on this work in particular because it is here that Milbank makes the case for a homologous relationship between political action and the ideas or stories on which they are founded. My engagement with Milbank is based on that claim, and I evaluate what follows, for political life and action, from his claim that it is determined by the fundamental way reality is conceived, ontologically, by orthodox Christian theology and by secular reason respectively. Additionally, it is in this book particularly that he sets out his academic and theological vision, in order to set the new agenda for theology which he proposes. For Milbank, the task is to rescue theology from the 'pathos' of its positioning at the margins of the ideas and discourses which shape human existence - a marginalisation inflicted by 'secular reason' or even at times self-imposed, in Milbank's view - and to recover the possibility of its role as a 'metadiscourse'⁶².

Williams sees the gospel as inevitably political, but I will argue that he understands the 'political' in very broad, social and relational terms as the whole world of 'human bondedness and exchange'⁶³ within which people structure their own lives and life together. It is to this

⁶⁰ Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 246.

⁶¹ John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford; Malden MA: Blackwell, 1990).

⁶² Milbank, 1–2.

⁶³ Rowan Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose', *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (January 1995): 6.

relational world that his theology constantly returns in seeking to relate politics to the ways of God with the world. Within this broad conception of politics, Williams often turns to the language of difficulty for an account of political action that relates coherently to the divine. While rarely explicated in any detail, this idea of 'difficulty' appears to be an important notion in his political theology, and one which he uses in relation to his discussions of this kind of daily politics of the social and relational world. There is also the sense of a world of meaning behind the language of difficulty in his work, and in the ways that he uses the notion of difficulty in his political theology, which it is not straightforward to access. In chapter six I attempt to set out in some detail what Williams seems to mean when using the language and concept of difficulty. This produces an account of political action as negotiation and exchange across real *difference*: difference also being an important feature of his political and theological thought. I also argue that his advocacy of what I term a political 'style' – of intelligible negotiation over assertion as a means to 'success' – owes much to a reading of Augustine's cities. I suggest, however, that he retains enough of their ambiguity in relation to actual political communities, for the sense of a stark choice to be made to be retained, without thereby putting Christian faith, or the Church, into a conflictual relationship with secular political orders. I consider the paradoxical problem that his dense notion of difficulty, while being an important carrier of some key themes in his political theology, is, unfortunately, *difficult*, and suggest that this raises a question as to how useful a theological resource the notion of difficulty can be to a negotiative 'daily politics' for neighbourhoods and streets.

Williams' understanding of difficulty in this broadly social and negotiative sense translates into his more explicitly political proposals for a form of 'interactive pluralism'. I show how the understanding of his notion of difficulty, which I map out in chapter six, translates into his concrete proposals for the ordering of contemporary political communities. In these proposals, he engages specifically with the tensions and discursive difficulties for religious faith in diverse and secular societies. I show that what he proposes is something akin to a conception of common good as a process rather than an end, involving dispossessive, difficult negotiation. His stance on procedural secularism and on a 'neutral' state is critically examined. I further ask whether he gives sufficient attention to the possibility that secular and faith commitments might have visions of the 'good' of human sociality which are

ultimately so divergent that the kind of commonality he envisages may not be realistically achievable. Given his argument for a limited role for the state, I ask whether, and in what circumstances, his understanding of political authority is adequate. I also discuss the problem that his 'difficult' politics can be refused, that his commitment to 'difficult' politics as such has no means of preventing this fundamental refusal of real encounter, and that he may ultimately be somewhat idealistic in assuming the possibility of a shared commitment to dispossessive negotiation.

The argument of the thesis

I will argue in what follows that 'difficulty' for Christians involves negotiating the commitments of faith and its vision for human sociality and its good, and the increasingly 'secular' commitments and vision for human life which shape the social and political context in liberal Western democracies.

I will also assume that there exists a more general difficulty in such societies. I have described this as a communicative and imaginative gulf between religious and secular lives and commitments, drawing on the analysis of Elaine Graham in her discussion of post-secularity. I will argue that navigating its tension is unavoidable in the concrete historical setting of late modernity, and that the 'difficulty' is about how to deal with that tension without producing forms of culture war.

In tracing the shifts in political theology from the middle of the twentieth century, I will suggest that similar tensions between Christian and secular-enlightenment commitments are also present in political theology's engagement with late modernity and its crises.

I am not convinced that the conventions of the so-called liberal settlement, including underplaying the claims of Christian faith as public truth and relegating Christian faith and life to the private sphere, are an adequate response to this fundamental tension in modernity. I do not intend to propose a solution to the question of the public and political place and role of Christianity's political claims about how human communities might be shaped towards their good and flourishing. But I resist any easy resolution of the inherent tensions for Christian public speech in shared political conversation in the religiously and irreligious

diverse public square. My question is how those tensions can be navigated faithfully by Christians.

At the same time, therefore, I am arguing that there is a negotiative and communicative task for political theology in societies where the claims of the Christian gospel are no longer heard and received as authoritative and meaningful for a significant proportion of their citizens. I am persuaded by Graham's concept of a post-secular gulf in societies in which faith is re-emerging as a public fact, but where most people remain dissociated from religious faith and many are suspicious of any public role for religious voices.

The work of the campaigners associated with the Christian interest litigations highlights some of the difficulty, for a broadly religiously disaffected and plural society such as modern Britain, around the place of religious faith as a lived reality in the public square. It also presses the question of what values or vision can sustain anything approaching a common life or sense of common goods, in the context of real social and moral difference. However, I will argue that their claims for Christian faith and values, as a means of uniting and directing public and political life in contemporary British society, fail to address the tension between the divergent religious and irreligious commitments which characterise it, and do not demonstrate how the moral and political convergence they advocate can be achieved by democratic means.

John Milbank and Oliver O'Donovan are two important theologians who represent Christian faith speaking authentically, politically and in - crucially - its own terms in the context of late modernity and its crises. Within the thesis, their work illustrates recent moves in academic theology to challenge the conventions whereby secular modernity's tensions are resolved by separating the theological and the political. They resist what O'Donovan terms the '*cordon sanitaire*'⁶⁴ excluding theology from politics; and what Milbank calls the 'pathos' of theology in allowing itself to be 'positioned' by secular reason.⁶⁵ As such, they are pressing questions about the public and political role of Christian theology and Christian faith and share significant areas of concern with the work of this thesis. As I shall show, they do not actively address the issue of what I have called a communicative and imaginative gulf for Christian public faith and speech in Western democracies which are still significantly shaped by commitment to political secularism where widespread religious disaffiliation continues and

⁶⁴ O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 9.

⁶⁵ Milbank, John. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Oxford; Malden MA: Blackwell, 1990, 1

grows. This may not be an omission in their work, but instead a choice to demonstrate the reality and depth of difference between Christian and secular conceptions of human life and sociality. However, I argue that such a decision leaves significant uncertainty about how Christian faith, and Christian people and communities, engage in public conversation, political negotiation and common life in societies marked by post-secularity and plurality.

I will argue that the political theology of Rowan Williams represents a more dialogical engagement with late modernity, and that he is more critically attentive and sympathetically alert to its aspirations and anxieties. My suggestion is that this more dialogical stance towards the real differences between Christian faith and secular modernity stems from a key feature of his theology. This is the notion of difficulty in his work. I show that the notion of difficulty functions in his work as a multi-faceted approach to the negotiation of difference, and that this translates in his political theology into some very nuanced navigation of the tensions I have described between divergent, even apparently conflicting claims.

While I am ultimately more sympathetic to Williams' approach, I will also ask whether he addresses the question raised by Milbank in particular: of whether there is so fundamental a divergence between Christian faith and forms of life, and secular thought and conceptions of political life that it cannot easily be overcome discursively or imaginatively.

The shape of the thesis

Chapter two offers an analysis of the campaigning surrounding the litigations, and what can be discerned of the assumptions and strategic aims behind these examples of Christian political action. For this work, I draw on resources from Méadhbh McIvor's research into the campaign groups supporting the Christian interest litigations, their aims, and an evaluation of how successfully these are realised. In this chapter, I also ask what can be discerned of the campaigners' underlying political theology. I use Jonathan Chaplin's analysis of what he calls a 'Christian nation' strand of political theology, whose features are seen in statements and literature from the campaigning organisations, and from some of the most prominent supporters of the litigations. I show that there is an issue of 'style' or tone for the strategy of the campaigners as this is perceived and received even by potential supporters. The litigations and campaigning are seen publicly as confrontational and indeed self-interested,

specifically and surprisingly by other Evangelical Christians as they observe them. I also show that there is an implicit political theology underpinning the strategy of the campaigning organisations: a political theology in what Jonathan Chaplin calls a 'Christian nation' tradition. The chapter uses Chaplin's work to analyse some of the problems in the 'Christian nation' tradition, including an oppositional stance towards the confessionally unaligned 'secular' state.

Section II – chapters three, four and five

The remainder of the thesis asks what theological resources can help to articulate the problem of Christian identity and secularity within contemporary political orders, and how they deal with the difficulties of divergent commitments and of communication. I also keep in view the argument for 'daily' politics as a focus for attention, and the extent to which the theological resources under consideration help faithful Christian living in actual political communities.

Chapter three sets out the particular exploration this thesis undertakes within the field of modern political theology. The chapter interrogates some accounts of what political theology is, involving some recent genealogy, and of its 'task'. The chapter also returns to the question of 'daily' politics, and whether political theology's field of vision needs to have in view more 'informal' forms of politics

O'Donovan, Milbank and Williams all work consciously with the thought of Augustine. Chapter three concludes with the contested readings of Augustine's cities and asks whether each theologian's understanding and deployment of Augustine's device shapes their view of Christianity's relationship to secular modernity.

In Chapters four and five I will critically examine key works by O'Donovan and Milbank, proposing a much more robustly theological voice for political theology and seeking much more freedom for theology to speak 'Christianly' about human politics and human sociality. As such, their work stands in just that 'difficult' territory which I outlined above, of the interactions and 'gulf' between, and the communicative issues for, Christian faith and the 'secular'. I will bring to both engagements the question of how they might resource thinking

through the theological political problem of secularity and Christian identity and dealing with its difficulty.

Chapter four is a critical engagement with central themes in Oliver O'Donovan's *The Desire of the Nations* and his later work in *The Ways of Judgement*, particularly the theme of political authority. He addressed the need for a substantive moral vision to enable political authorities to govern in ways which can be seen as 'authorised' in contemporary societies. He argues that this 'authorisation' enables those who govern to make political judgements and arbitrate differences, and to offer some direction to societies in relation to a common good. When pressed, however, O'Donovan's theologico-political stance seems to require greater moral convergence in the 'governed' than seems feasible in Western political contexts, with some risk of a conflictual understanding of how deep differences are ultimately dealt with.

In chapter five I turn to John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*, a singularly significant and controversial work for political theology. In it, Milbank argues for a fundamental re-orientation of the discipline to a radically orthodox and robustly Christian theopolitical vision, rooted in a peaceful Christian ontology, and embodied in the Church as a contrastive political community. This leads to a (re)location of both 'true' politics and Christian political thought with the Church as ecclesiology. I recognise the new freedom Milbank's proposals offer for theology, as public Christian speech, from the constraints of 'secular' discursive norms. I suggest that, as a postmodern theologian concerned with difference, he ultimately steps back from the most significant contemporary site of difference for Christian faith, which is that of the 'gulf' between its own political vision and articulation, and that of a persistent secularity.

Section III – chapters six and seven

This more constructive section of the thesis engages with Rowan Williams as a theologian who holds together a deep pastoral and ecclesial concern for the whole business of Christianity as a lived *social* reality. This is an ecclesial vision, but also as a vision for human existence as such – and one in which the encounter with real difference is essential. Williams views difference as a feature of human sociality as life with the other. He also regards difference, as I will show, as a site of the possibility of transforming learning and growth into fuller and more authentic humanity. This potential for transformation is understood as a

continuum of growth into life 'after Christ', which is fully revealed ultimately through faith, but is not strictly demarcated as accessible only confessionally. This leads him to a more broadly social conception of politics as self-critical negotiation of and across difference.

The possibility I will explore in this section of the thesis is that a theologico-political approach to difference is implicit in Williams' frequently used but often enigmatic notion of difficulty. This is a term Williams often turns to in his work. It does not directly map onto my own description of the difficulty of living faithfully in contemporary political settings, but I was drawn to Williams' work because of perceived points of convergence. Williams does not set out systematically anywhere in his work what he means by difficulty, despite its apparent importance for his thought, particularly his political theology. I am not aware, either, of any of his readers or critics who have done so. I offer a detailed reading of Williams' notion of difficulty in this chapter and set out what I understand him to mean by it in the ways he uses it, particularly in relation to encounter and negotiation with, and of, real difference. The language of difficulty seems to represent his attempt to articulate an overarching 'style' of, or approach to, political life as the broad business of human social interaction, communication and exchange across difference, with negotiation, dispossession and self-questioning as its key features. I therefore explore how the notion of difficulty functions in a 'daily' politics of interaction and exchange across difference and ask how it relates to my own questions. I argue that Williams' understanding and use of the notion of difficulty assumes that it opens possibilities for *metanoia*: for genuine human change and transformation – but without any clear-cut assumptions or guarantees.

Chapter seven suggests that the reading I offer of Williams' use of 'difficulty' in chapter six is the basis for his model of 'interactive pluralism' and offers a way of ordering societies marked by genuine religious and moral diversity, and of living with the tensions between public religion and public secularity. This chapter also considers the criticism that his 'interactive pluralism' allows the state no substantive account of the good, leaving a significant lacuna in his political theology. I further discuss the problem that the dispossessive model of negotiation, which he derives from his notion of difficulty, leaves the option open that it can simply be refused, in favour of mere conflict and assertion. I consider this issue in relation to a concrete instance of such a refusal in the conflicts in the Anglican Communion during Williams' tenure as Archbishop, and as a potential weakness of a politics of difficulty.

In the conclusion I review the findings of the thesis in relation to my concern articulating theologically the problem of secularity and Christian identity as a lived reality, and for dealing with its difficulty.

CHAPTER TWO

Christian campaigning - purposes, problems and political theology

Introduction

This chapter explores the recent phenomenon of Christian interest litigations, with particular focus on the campaigning and activism surrounding them. I discuss the campaigning and its wider aims as a piece of public Christian political action in response to a complex characterisation of Britain as increasingly 'secular' by those involved in supporting and publicising the litigations: a characterisation which will be explored in some detail in this chapter in order to explain some of the underlying theological and political assumptions at play.

As I indicated in the previous chapter, there are several reasons for looking in some detail at the phenomenon of these cases, and in particular the public campaigning in relation to them, together with the broader strategy and aims of the campaigners. They raise questions about what kind of political options enable social cohesion and common action in diverse and morally plural societies, questions which are highlighted in the campaigning surrounding the litigations. The campaigners make specific critique of 'secular' forms of conceiving and shaping social and political life as inherently divisive, citing in particular a rights-based framework for dealing with difference and colliding interests. They see, and present, the outcomes of many of the litigations involving Christians as evidence of this. But - as I will show - this critique itself produces some divisive consequences: the dangers of a slide towards an apparent culture war with 'creeping secularism'; and the appearance, even to sympathetic observers, that the campaigns and litigations involve Christians 'demanding their rights' in the kind of conflictual and competitive politics the campaigners critique. I will also press the assumptions of the campaigners' apparent underlying political theology, in a 'Christian nation' tradition, that Christian norms provide the most cohesive framework for law and public policy in morally and religiously plural, 'post-secular' societies.

My initial impressions when I first encountered the phenomenon of increasing numbers of 'Christian interest' litigations were of a rather unthinking adoption by the campaigners of an adversarial process of arbitration between competing rights as a way of thinking about and

dealing with the conflicts involving Christian practice/conviction in a religiously and culturally mixed public square. This combined with a degree of surprise at the paradox of an apparently unquestioning use of 'secular' rights language, and the laws protecting rights, as a means to challenge 'creeping secularism'.

The process of my research has shown me that the lobby groups and campaigners share many of the concerns which impelled me in undertaking this work: seeing 'competing rights' as an unsatisfactory practical politics because of the difficulties in distinguishing *between* rights, as a theologically unsatisfactory model for shared living in plural societies and negotiating differences, and as a dubious way of navigating *Christian* life where secularity and diversity produces conflicts. These turned out to be questions the campaigners were not unaware of. In fact, they share much of the same concern at the problems, and potential consequences, of negotiating the difficulties of life together via a fundamentally competitive understanding of difference.

An important resource here has been McIvor's doctoral research examining the campaigning work of Christian Concern and the Christian Legal Centre (CLC) in the Christian interest litigations, and of how the campaigning was regarded by their potential support base. Méadhbh McIvor's ethnographic study of the Christian interest litigations found that the litigations could be viewed as a strategic attempt by the lobbyists to 'de-secularise' Britain. Their campaigns work with the language and legislation protecting human rights in order to critique and combat a 'rights culture'. But her research also shows that the success of this strategy is questionable, and that potentially sympathetic 'observers' unfamiliar with the underlying strategy viewed the litigations largely negatively.

However, at the end of this process of learning that my concerns are not so far from many of those of the campaigners, some questions remained.

One question is whether there is a looseness in some of the language and framing of both the problem and the campaigners' proposed solutions. I will suggest that this undermines their ultimate objectives and risks presenting Christianity's relationship to societies characterised by continuing secularisation simply as a rivalry between competing worldviews. There is also the question which McIvor's thesis raises, of whether the campaigners defeat their fundamental object in using a strategy of rights-based litigations to critique a rights-based framework for public and political life. The danger seems to be that in the publicity generated

around the litigations, and its reporting, the fundamental critique of a competitive basis for common life can be lost in an easier-to-communicate narrative of Christians ‘standing up for their rights’.¹ McIvor’s research identifies this perception as a source of ambiguity even amongst supporters of the campaigning groups.

The chapter also draws on Jonathan Chaplin’s work in distinguishing and describing the tradition in Evangelical political theology which he calls a ‘Christian nation’ stance. Chaplin locates the campaigners as a whole within this tradition of Evangelical thought and activism. But he raises significant questions about the robustness of its theological underpinning and demonstrates some incoherence in its analysis. A further set of issues emerge, as Chaplin’s critical consideration of a ‘Christian nation’ theology helps to show the theological problems and category confusion underlying some of the key aims and assumptions of the campaigners. Using some of Chaplin’s analysis of a conflation of categories in ‘Christian nation’ thinking, I argue that a conceptual conflation of secularisation and secularism may lie behind the campaigners’ reading of and response to ‘secular’ Britain, and lead to some of the problems with both.

My abiding concern is twofold. Firstly that, however unwittingly, the campaigners do not successfully produce an effective critique and alternative to rivalry and competition as a mode of political life in situations of plurality and difference. Instead, the litigations-strategy, as a piece of public political action by Christians, unintentionally seems to reinforce and strengthen the secular paradigm of ‘competing rights’ it seeks to unmask. Secondly, the ultimate aim of effectively critiquing a secular paradigm to structure social and political life relies on an ‘easy’ opposition of Christianity and ‘secularism’ as rivals: an opposition which involves sidestepping the essential difficulty of faithfully negotiating Christian life within and across the genuine differences of a post-secular, value-plural, (ir)religiously mixed modern Britain.

¹ Carey, George, and Andrew Carey. *We Don’t Do God: The Marginalisation of Public Faith*. Oxford; Grand Rapids, Michigan: Monarch Books, 2012, 120.

Sources

The source material for these and other instances of Christian interest litigations is various. Details of the passage of each case through the later stages of the legal process are available through the online repositories of court transcripts, including, for some cases, the European Court of Human Rights. The only transcripts not available online are those of the Employment Tribunal – the first stage of any employment related litigation – which were heard before February 2017. I have also used newspaper interviews given by a number of claimants in these cases, and I have drawn on press releases and other material published by the campaigning organisations, together with some of the writings and publications of those Church leaders who have expressed support for the litigants and for the campaigns to support them.

The doctoral research of Méadhbh Mclvor² has also been an important and more objective scholarly resource for details of the aims and motivations of the campaigning groups in particular. Her ethnographic study puts the work of these Christian activists into a critical conversation with a wider conservative Evangelical constituency. Additionally, her lengthy study of the litigations as a ‘strategy’ enables a much richer account of the litigations than simply Christians claiming their ‘rights’. Her assessment of the success of this strategy, however, particularly as it is observed in wider Evangelical circles, reveals some of its problems and inherent contradictions.

Christian interest litigations - what are they?

The litigations involve Christians claiming religious discrimination, often based on unsuccessful religiously based requests for exemption from an aspect of their conditions of employment.

Four cases which had significant public profile and were widely reported were those amalgamated and taken to the European Court of Human Rights. The cases were a Christian registrar who tried to avoid registering same-sex civil partnerships and was penalised by her employer; a counsellor dismissed by the organisation Relate for being unwilling to work with

² Maedhbh Mclvor, *‘To Fulfil the Law’ Evangelism, Legal Activism, and Public Christianity in Contemporary England* (PhD Thesis, London School of Economics, 2016), <http://etheses.lse.ac.uk/3343/>.

same-sex couples; and two women whose cross/crucifix was deemed to contravene their employers' uniform policy.

The background to many of these cases is clashes between the claims of religious freedom and an expansion in equality, human rights and anti-discrimination legislation. The legal changes are the Equality Act 2010 (an amalgamation and tidying of several pieces of anti-discrimination legislation) and the introduction of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into British law in 1998.

Article 8 of the ECHR includes respect for a person's sexuality under the right to privacy and family life. Article 9 includes the right to hold, and to publicly express, religious beliefs. The Equality Act 1998 designates sexual orientation and religion or belief as two 'protected characteristics' and is designed to prevent discrimination on the grounds of any protected characteristic. A significant number of the Christian interest litigations involve these two rights or protected characteristics coming into direct conflict.

There are several cases of Christians contesting public order convictions for street preaching or handing out tracts; and while it is not immediately clear in the outlines of these cases on the lobby groups' websites, the public order convictions invariably involve a presentation of a conservative Christian position on homosexual practice as sinful. The infamous 'gay cake' case involving a Christian-owned bakery, was another high-profile case instantiating precisely this clash of 'rights'.

They have left courts struggling to define and delimit 'religion', in determining, for example, whether the wearing of a cross is a religious 'duty' or a personal choice, and how this might determine its legal status as a religious symbol with legal protection for wearers.

The debate around these cases involves much broader questions of how to think and speak about contemporary British society, and the uneasy tension around the role of religion in national life in a country with an established Church but wary of any who, in the now infamous words of Tony Blair's press secretary Alastair Campbell, 'do God' in public.³

³ Matthew Engelke, *God's Agents: Biblical Publicity in Contemporary England* (University of California Press, 2013), xvii–xix.

The campaigners - lobbying groups

The litigations brought by Christians have been funded by campaigning and lobbying organisations: most significantly, the Christian Legal Centre and the Christian Institute. Christian Concern was formerly Christian Concern for our Nation. Until 2008 Christian Concern for our Nation was a network run out of the Lawyers' Christian Fellowship (LCF) Public Policy Unit, but now operates as a separate organisation.⁴ Through Christian Concern's sister organisation, the Christian Legal Centre (CLC)⁵, people claiming discrimination on the grounds of their Christian faith are supported through legal cases and have access to the services of Christian lawyers. Andrea Minichiello, the current CEO of Christian Concern and the CLC, established both these organisations as separate campaigning and lobbying entities, after her colleagues in the LCF expressed concern that the work she was doing on Christian interest litigations was 'politically polarising, thereby undermining the LCF's primary function as a Fellowship (not to mention risking its charitable status)'.⁶ While the CLC handles the Christian interest litigations, Christian Concern also campaigns more broadly for a biblically-based morality informing British law and public policy: to 'infuse a biblical worldview into every aspect of society (and) to be a strong Christian voice in the public sphere, arguing passionately for the truth of the gospel (so that) society as a whole will benefit (and to) change public opinion on issues of key importance and affect policy at the highest levels'.⁷

The CLC/Christian Concern have supported and publicised much the largest number of Christian interest litigations. Christian Concern's website lists forty-two cases on which it has worked, compared with nine such cases on the website of the Christian Institute.⁸

The Christian Institute, as the other organisation which has been directly involved in these cases, funded the legal costs of Lillian Ladele, a registrar employed by Islington Borough Council who was dismissed for refusing to conduct civil partnerships for same-sex couples, and one of the four high-profile cases taken to the ECHR. The Christian Institute produces

⁴ <http://www.christianconcern.com> and <https://web.archive.org/web/20061207005144/http://www.christianconcernforournation.co.uk/index.php>

⁵ <http://www.christianconcern.com/christian-legal-centre>

⁶ McIvor, *'To Fulfil the Law'*, 16.

⁷ <https://www.christianconcern.com/about>. Accessed Jan 2019

⁸ <https://www.christianconcern.com/cases> and <https://www.christian.org.uk/case/> These numbers were correct on 9 February 2019.

advice leaflets on various aspects of Christians' 'legal rights' – from street preaching and distribution of tracts to running Christian Unions at institutions of higher education.

The litigations are presented by those bringing them – in court and in the surrounding publicity – as instances of discrimination against Christians. This is often claimed to be indicative of a general marginalisation of Christianity in British society. The cases are fought on the basis of equality and human rights legislation and its protection of religion and belief, and their public expression.

The work of both organisations relies on donations from supportive individuals and groups. Christian Concern says on its website that it sends its newsletter to over 43,000 individuals and Churches⁹. Méadhbh Mclvor's findings show that the supporters of these lobby groups are 'conservative Anglicans, Baptists, charismatics, independent Evangelicals, and Pentecostals; from Asian-, black-, and white-majority churches'. Her research found them to be united by 'a deep commitment to (a conservative reading of) the Bible, a general feeling that they are living in an environment increasingly hostile to its expression, and a corresponding desire to challenge this hostility'.¹⁰

Both organisations have a broad, evangelistic aim to 'see the United Kingdom return to the Christian faith',¹¹ and belong within a conservative tradition of Protestant Christianity; but the main work of the two groups involves campaigning and lobbying on matters of public policy and law. Christian Concern lists its campaign areas as 'abortion, adoption and fostering, bioethics, marriage, education, employment, end of life, equality, family, free speech, Islamism, religious freedom, the sex trade, social issues and issues relating to sexual orientation'.¹² The public policy areas highlighted by the Christian Institute on its website include drug abuse, underage sex, sanctity of marriage, gambling and abortion¹³; but the motivation for this policy work is based on a conviction that as Britain becomes increasingly 'secular', the institutions and legal framework of British public life are being de-coupled from their foundations in Christianity.

⁹ <https://www.christianconcern.com/about>

¹⁰ Mclvor, *To Fulfil the Law*, 18.

¹¹ <https://www.christianconcern.com/about>

¹² <https://www.christianconcern.com/about>

¹³ <https://www.christian.org.uk/who-we-are/what-we-believe/> Accessed Jan 2019

The motivating force of their activism is a conviction which we will look at in more detail via Chaplin's notion of a 'Christian nation' stance in Evangelical political theology, and using McIvor's research conclusions; but it might be summarised as resting on a negative construal of the developments leading to a more 'secular' Britain, and arguing that *only* a biblically-founded morality based on Christian faith, and infusing the whole of national life, can deliver a genuine good which is *genuinely* common in contemporary, diverse Britain. The claim is that 'Christianity is the only faith that works in practice' and '(God's) laws are for *everybody's* good at all times.'¹⁴

The Christian interest litigations, then, belong within a broader set of concerns for both organisations and lead to political activism and public action by Christians to advocate for and defend/restore a conservative Christian, biblically based morality in public life and policy. The lobby groups combine a typically evangelistic aim of personal conversion with a more policy-based strategy of seeking to preserve or restore the role and influence of Christianity in public and political life.

A final observation is that the Christian think-tank on religion in public life Theos published a report in 2013 which examined claims that these lobby groups represented the emergence of a US-style 'religious right' in Britain. While some points of similarity were noted, particularly the 'vocal' nature of the campaigning and the 'willingness to resort to legal action', the report concluded that the British organisations and their supporters diverged so significantly from the Religious Rights in the States – in their party politics, degree of financial backing and theological diversity – that they could not be regarded as indicating that a Religious Right had developed that was comparable to that in the US.¹⁵

The campaigners: senior Church leaders

Several senior members of the Anglican clergy have given public support to the claimants in Christian interest cases. Former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Carey and the former Bishop of Rochester Michael Nazir-Ali have been directly involved and have given witness statements

¹⁴ The Christian Institute, *Speaking out Loud and Clear*, 3 (emphasis mine). <https://www.christian.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/solac2015.pdf>. Accessed February 2019.

¹⁵ Andy Walton, *Is There a 'Religious Right' Emerging in Britain?* (London: Theos, 2013), 8, <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/research/2013/01/30/is-there-a-religious-right-emerging-in-britain>.

in support of Christian claimants. Both made submissions to the ECHR when four cases were combined as *Eweida and Others vs the United Kingdom*.¹⁶ Lord Carey also gave a witness statement supporting Gary McFarlane, a Relate counsellor and one of the four EHRC cases, who sought to be exempted from working with same-sex couples.¹⁷ Both Carey and Nazir-Ali have highlighted and spoken in support of the Christian claimants in interviews and in their own writings. John Sentamu, the Archbishop of York, has not been directly involved in any of the legal proceedings, but has given press statements and interviews in support of the claimants.¹⁸ All three bishops belong within the Evangelical tradition of the Church of England, and their public statements, as well as their publications in the case of Carey and Nazir-Ali, characterise the litigations as arising out of an increasing ‘marginalisation’ of and ‘hostility’ to Christianity in public and national life.

They also demonstrate the same kinds of broader concerns as those of the lobbying organisations about Britain’s de-coupling from its Christian past in its recent turn towards ‘secularism’, and the consequences of this move for national life, law and morality, which are regarded as very largely negative. Michael Nazir-Ali argues that ‘Christian faith has been central to the emergence of our nation and its development’; that we ‘cannot really understand the nature and achievements of British society without reference to it’; and that it is ‘necessary to understand where we have come from, to guide us to where we are going, and to bring us back when we wander too far from the path of national destiny’.¹⁹

George Carey has published his argument that ‘(British) values are those of the Christian faith’²⁰ in his 2012 book *We Don’t Do God*, which he addresses to ‘Churches and Christians’ as a ‘call to arms’, as ‘our nation, along with most of western Europe, is drifting towards an unthinking secularism’.²¹

¹⁶ *Eweida & Others v UK* [2013] ECHR 37 (15 January 2013). <http://hudoc.echr.coe.int/eng?i=001-115881>. Accessed Jan 2019.

¹⁷ *McFarlane v Relate Avon Ltd* [2010] EWCA Civ B1. <http://www.bailii.org/cj-bin/markup.cgi?doc=/ew/cases/EWCA/Civ/2010/880.html&query=mcfarlane+relate+avon&method=all>. Accessed Jan 2019.

¹⁸ The Daily Telegraph, ‘Archbishop of York Dr John Sentamu Attacks Government over Right to Wear Cross’, 11 March 2012. <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9136641/Archbishop-of-York-Dr-John-Sentamu-attacks-Government-over-right-to-wear-cross.html>

¹⁹ Michael Nazir-Ali, ‘Breaking Faith with Britain’, *Standpoint*, no. 1 (June 2008): 47.

²⁰ Carey and Carey, *We Don’t Do God: The Marginalisation of Public Faith*, 24.

²¹ Carey and Carey, *God*, 37.

These senior Church leaders, then, share the lobbyists' negative construal of a 'secularising' Britain, not just as it 'marginalises' Christian presence and witness in public life, but as it threatens to dismantle a 'tried-and-tested' basis for national life, through Christianity's historical role in shaping British law and institutions.

What I earlier described as a 'complex' understanding of 'the secular', sometimes involving category confusion, is apparent in the loose usage of language by some of these senior churchmen. Lord Carey is particularly prone to using the concepts of secularisation and secularism almost interchangeably. In his book he described secularisation, for example, as having 'the aim of privileging no religion, in order to safeguard all of them'.²² While Nazir-Ali and Sentamu can be clearer in distinguishing the variety of political arrangements of 'secularism' from describing processes of religious change, and as I will suggest later in this chapter, the strong opposition to *secularism* by those campaigning around the litigations is closely linked to a desire to see a halt of reversal in *secularisation* in Britain, by an evangelistic re-calling of the nation to Christian faith and identity.

In this sense, these senior clergy share the conviction of the campaign groups. This is, firstly, that British identity and the fabric of British public life are deeply historically bound up with Christianity. Secondly, and as a corollary to this, Christianity alone, and specifically a conservative biblically based morality, largely focussed on sexual ethics, is held to offer a continuing basis for social flourishing and cohesion today, and should be seen as such by law and policy-makers.

In what follows, I shall refer to the lobby groups and Church leaders together as 'campaigners' when discussing aims and perspectives which they clearly share but will also note those times when I am speaking about one group in distinction from the other.

A more 'secular' Britain

The Christian interest litigations are presented by the campaigners as arising from a particular context. They are characterised in legal terms as instances of a growing discrimination against Christians in the public domain – often in the world of work. This discrimination is seen as

²² Carey and Carey, *God*, 144.

part of a more general ‘marginalisation’ of Christians and Christianity, which is regarded as closely related to, and consequent on, British society having become increasingly ‘secular’.

One of the conclusions of Mclvor’s research is that the Christian interest litigations are an active response to an increasingly ‘secular’ Britain on the part of some Evangelical Christians, and that part of this strategy involves seeing them as evangelistic opportunities to present a Christian alternative.

This part of the chapter examines how the litigations involve both a negative reading of ‘secularising’ Britain from within a conservative and Evangelical Christian tradition, and a meaningful, strategic response, particularly on the part of the lobbyists, to ‘secular Britain’.

This involves some quite complex convictions and perceptions regarding the nature of contemporary British public and political life, and of Christian life within it, on the part of the campaigners. The presenting issue is a perception of significant discrimination and hostility towards Christians in public life and in the law, seen as consequent upon moves towards a more ‘secular’ public and political life in Britain. In this sense, the litigations undertaken by the CLC and Christian Institute are not regarded as a means of dealing with isolated incidents. Instead, they are understood and presented as part of a widespread and increasing marginalisation of Christianity in a ‘secularising’ Britain which needs to be highlighted and resisted.

Courts have struggled to determine the scope for granting Christians exemptions from contractual obligations as employees in order to practice or manifest their religion – for example, in clarifying whether and how a practice such as wearing a cross might be a legally protected expression of religious belief, based on whether it is understood as a religious obligation or as a personal choice.²³ Where Christian faith as a protected characteristic has come into conflict with other such legally-protected characteristics – sexual orientation being a particularly prominent example – judges have at times found it challenging to arbitrate between rights and are in some cases perceived by campaigners to operate a hierarchy of

²³ This was a significant area of debate in the case of Nadia Eweida, *Eweida v British Airways Plc [2010] EWCA Civ 80*.

rights²⁴ which often finds against Christian claims, further reinforcing a perception of discrimination and marginalisation.

The perception of marginalisation has some broader societal traction and is not confined to the lobbyists and Church leaders. The question of whether Christians are being increasingly marginalised and/or suffering discrimination was investigated in a survey among self-identified Christians by Premier Media Trust in 2011. The findings were published in a report into discrimination against Christians by the Christians in Parliament All Parties Parliamentary Group, jointly with the Evangelical Alliance, and showed that, while just 12% of respondents said they had experienced discrimination on the grounds of their faith, 63% had “observed marginalisation in British public life”.²⁵

These changes to British law related to the Equality Act 2010 and the incorporation of the European Convention on Human Rights into British law in the Human Rights Act 1998, together with the perceived discrimination against Christians in their application, are characterised by the Church leaders in particular as an aspect of a ‘creeping secularism’ in British life.²⁶ This takes a specific form in relation to the law, beyond the more inchoate sense in Alastair Campbell’s dictum of an increased anxiety about ‘doing God’ in public. There is a shared understanding among the campaigners that British laws have historically been undergirded by Christian principles, and that it is this Christian undergirding which has been the bedrock of public good and social and political stability; this is part of a set of convictions belonging within what Jonathan Chaplin analyses as a ‘Christian nation’ tradition of conservative theological thought regarding British public life: a set of understandings which will be examined later in this chapter. This ‘Christian nation’ perspective is contrasted with the language of a ‘human rights culture’ used to describe the legal changes. This human rights culture is seen as part of an increasing ‘secularisation’ of the institutions which shape public and political life, as a legal system regarded as broadly consonant with biblical principles is shaped instead by norms regarded as essentially ‘secular’, such as ‘rights’ and ‘freedom’.

²⁴ Carey and Carey, *We Don’t Do God: The Marginalisation of Public Faith*, 93.

²⁵ Christians in Parliament, *Clearing the Ground: Preliminary Report into the Freedom of Christians in the UK* (London, 2012), 44, <https://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/publications/upload/Clearing-the-ground.pdf>.

²⁶ Examples are Peter Stanford, ‘George Carey: time to say that Christians have rights too’, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 February 2012, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9075653/George-Carey-time-to-say-that-Christians-have-rights-too.html>, accessed February 2019; and ‘Recruit Muslims to defeat secularists, says Dr Sentamu’, *The Church Times*, 2 November 2006, <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2006/15-september/news/uk/recruit-muslims-to-defeat-secularists-says-dr-sentamu>, accessed February 2019.

Roger Trigg, a philosopher and commentator broadly sympathetic to the case being made by the campaigners, states the problem thus:

The language of equality, non-discrimination, and human rights in general, fills the vacuum left, at least in Europe, by the decay of institutional Christianity. It can be proclaimed with the same kind of dogmatism associated with the worst elements of religion, with little appeal to reason or justification.²⁷

The campaigners frequently turn to the language of ‘secularisation’ and/or ‘secularism’ to describe and account for a change from a relatively monolithically Christian past to the present situation of a perceived marginalisation of Christianity in British society, in its institutions and in public life. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the campaigning and somewhat *ad hoc* nature of much of the public communication of the lobby groups and Church leaders, there is no sustained discussion or clear statement of what is understood and intended when this kind of language is used.

Take for example John Sentamu’s statement in a newspaper interview in 2012:

I’ve never been against secularisation because it allows the possibility for good debate and disagreement. But there is a strand within it which has become so intolerant, they think it is tolerant but it isn’t. It is the assumption that religion should have no space anywhere.²⁸

The statement seems to mean that Dr Sentamu is using the term secularisation to mean ‘secularism’ – in the form of a political arrangement entailed in a ‘procedural’ mode of political or constitutional secularism, in which no single worldview – religious or otherwise – is favoured by the state, but where all perspectives and all religious communities have a place and a voice in public life. What seems to be *unwelcome* is a more aggressive or programmatic form of political secularism in which the state is aligned with and actively promotes an ideological commitment to *irreligion* or *unbelief*.

²⁷ Roger Trigg, *Equality, Freedom, and Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 122.

²⁸ John Bingham, ‘John Sentamu Attacks ‘Aggressive Atheism’’, 23 March 2012, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/9161846/John-Sentamu-attacks-aggressive-atheism.html>, (accessed 27/01/19)

It is clear that the campaigners, as a grouping within conservative Evangelical Christianity in Britain, are also thinking and working within that set of cultural, religious and societal realities (and changes) designated by the concept of secularisation, and the questions that arise about the place and role of faith in societies which are not religiously monolithic and which are characterised by genuine difference: of (ir)religion as well as varying moral and ethical convictions and how those are lived out. The campaigners are also clearly grappling with the questions about the set of political options – for the relationship of the state with particular religious traditions and communities – which are contained in the notion of secularism.

I will try to unravel the variety of ways in which some of the language of ‘secularity’ is used and understood by the campaigners in their presentation of contemporary British social and political life by suggesting working definitions of the language of the ‘secular’, and correlate these to the different kinds of realities (social, political, religious) which the campaigners are describing using the language of the ‘secular’. I’ll then use this clarification to explore how the litigations are functioning as part of a ‘reading’ of contemporary public and political life, and as a Christian response to and within it.

Secularisation as a fall-off in observance and influence

The broad concerns of the campaigners are clearly about the kinds of religious change for which the language of secularisation provides a discursive framework – as decline in both the observance and public impact/influence of Christianity specifically, rather than religion more generally, since their concern lies with the role of Christianity.

Much of the analysis of the changes by the lobby groups hinges on changes in law and public policy – perhaps not surprisingly, given that the most prominent of these groups began life in the public policy unit of the Lawyers Christian Fellowship. Both Christian Concern and the Christian Institute focus specifically on assessing and challenging changes to aspects of British law which decouple legal norms from those of a conservative understanding of biblical norms and injunctions. Christian Concern states that its lawyers ‘monitor and scrutinise British

legislation and case law’ in order to ‘explain to those in Government where those laws depart from Biblical principles and go against God’s Word’.²⁹

Significant focus is given by both Christian Concern and the Christian Institute to legal rulings and changes to the laws dealing with the status of the unborn child from conception onwards, and in end-of-life issues (these are gathered under the heading ‘Life and Bioethics’ on Christian Concern’s website). The other area of legislation which features heavily in both the broad campaigning and in the Christian interest litigations specifically is that regarding sexual identity and same-sex relationships (‘Family and Sexual Ethics’).³⁰

Michael Nazir-Ali speaks of the erosion of a ‘descending theme in terms of Christian influence’ in British society whereby ‘the systems of governance (and) the rule of law (...) all find their inspiration in Scripture’.³¹

The campaigners (both lobbyists and Church leaders) are regarding changes in the legal system as an important aspect of secularisation in Britain. They also share a conviction that British institutions, including our laws, function best for the nation as a whole when they are grounded in the norms of a conservatively Christian, biblically based morality. The lobby groups focus their work on highlighting and resisting changes to the law which tend to be within key areas of concern for conservative Christians (sexual ethics and the sanctity of life). All of this comes within an overall aim to ‘see the United Kingdom return to the Christian faith’.³²

It appears then that the law is being seen, by the lobbyists in particular, but coinciding with the views of senior churchmen, as a kind of bellwether for the processes of secularisation in Britain – and, crucially for the lobbyists – as a means to challenge it.

Secularism as separation of religion and state

Some of the writing of the Church leaders occasionally makes a distinction between ‘benevolent’ and ‘hostile’ forms of political secularism; but it is equally if not more common

²⁹ ‘An Introduction to CCFON Limited: Changing society to put the hope of Christ at its centre’.

<http://www.christianconcern.com/sites/default/files/docs/Introduction.pdf>

³⁰ <https://www.christianconcern.com/our-issues>

³¹ Nazir-Ali, *Triple Jeopardy for the West*, 15.

³² <https://www.christianconcern.com/about>

to encounter the term ‘aggressive secularism’, which seems to be doing the work of characterising a more programmatic form of public secularism. The term ‘aggressive secularism’ is sometimes linked to the notion of a ‘project’ or ‘agenda’, such as Michael Nazir-Ali deploys in citing ‘an aggressive secularism that seeks to undermine the traditional principles because it has its own project to foster’.³³ However, and in addition to the problem of indiscriminate use of categories and language, it has been pointed out that whether or not ‘aggressive secularism’ is intended to describe a more actively and programmatically secularist aspect to British politics, it is ‘seldom substantiated’ in any detailed way.³⁴

Underlying the language of ‘aggressive secularism’ that runs through the statements of some campaigners appears to be a conviction that secularism in its procedural form, denoting a neutral state, is inevitably a myth which needs challenging, if not unmasking. They argue that there is in fact no such thing as procedural secularism, and that the term inevitably either disguises or becomes a more programmatic form of secularism. This conviction forms part of the Christian Institute’s ‘What We Believe’ statement on the relationship of Christianity and the state.

To fail to privilege one religion would be for the State positively to endorse either a secular humanistic philosophy (which results in atheism), or a “multifaith philosophy” (which is opposed by faithful people in all religions).³⁵

The assumption here then is that a state *inevitably* privileges some worldview or another, and that political secularism’s claim to neutrality, in a procedural mode, is simply a cover for an actively programmatic promotion of secularism as a fully-fledged ideology. The claim is explicit in the statement by the Christian Institute; and it is latent in George Carey’s rhetorical question, ‘(c)an anyone still pretend that a secular state delivers neutrality?’³⁶

³³ Beckford, M., 2009, Bishop of Rochester: Church of England must do more to counter twin threats of secularism and radical Islam’, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/religion/6104407/Bishop-of-Rochester-Church-of-England-must-do-more-to-counter-twin-threats-of-secularism-and-radical-Islam.html>. Accessed 30/01/2018

³⁴ Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 208.

³⁵ The Christian Institute, ‘What We Believe: Christianity and the State’, <https://www.christian.org.uk/who-we-are/what-we-believe/christianity-and-the-state/>, accessed February 2019.

³⁶ Carey and Carey, *We Don’t Do God: The Marginalisation of Public Faith*, 19.

One of Mclvor's findings was that the litigations were part of a legally based challenge to what the campaigners regarded as an increasingly 'secularising' Britain. Her research shows that, in the work of the CLC and Christian Concern, rights-based legislation in particular comes in for this kind of general criticism of 'secularism', and that a key aim of the litigation work is to 'unmask' and challenge 'rights culture' on several fronts. Mclvor's research found that 'rights culture' is regarded among the staff of these two organisations as intrinsically 'secular' in its foundations.³⁷ As such, it is not regarded as a tool for promoting Christians' rights when conflict arises, despite appearances to the contrary. Rather, rights legislation is instrumentalised as a way of both unmasking and undermining it, and as an evangelistic opportunity to present a Christian alternative.³⁸

The 'myth' of rights, and the Christian alternative

One area where Mclvor points to a significant critique by the lobbyists is that a secular, rights-based framework, far from securing the universal dignity and equality for all which it seeks and promises, in fact institutionalises and fosters individualistic self-interest and a fundamentally competitive basis for negotiating life together. She found that 'the staff of the CLC understand rights-based claims to rely on 'an atomistic logic that prioritises the perceived needs and wants of the individual over the pursuit of society's common good'³⁹, and that 'they hope to convince their fellow Britons that a society built upon the logic of competing rights cannot hope to deliver human flourishing'.⁴⁰ To order and legislate for the negotiation of difference in public life via 'competing rights' is seen as fundamentally destructive of anything like social cohesion or a common life.

The key claim Mclvor sees the campaigners making, however, is that inalienable rights and fundamental equality are a myth, and that this myth of unfounded, universal rights is 'unmasked' by the fact that Christians are routinely discriminated against by the legislation which claims to protect their 'right' to practice their religion.

³⁷ Mclvor, *To Fulfil the Law*, 146.

³⁸ Mclvor, *Law*, 12.

³⁹ Mclvor, *Law*, 153.

⁴⁰ Mclvor, *Law*, 30.

Mclvor's research concluded that it was possible to read the Christian interest litigations as a strategy on the part of the lobby groups to demonstrate this routine discrimination, and to show that it was produced by legislation purporting to protect and secure universal equality and rights.

Mclvor reached this conclusion as she sought to understand why the CLC, the lobby group she focussed on in her research, continued to pursue Christian interest litigations despite routinely losing them. She summarised her conclusions in the form of a threefold set of aims. These conclusions are Mclvor's own, based on her work, interviews and conversations with the staff of both the CLC and Christian Concern over a six-month internship; but they suggest that even if unsuccessful, the litigations represent an 'unmasking' of human rights legislation founded in secular universals, as they allow CLC, in this instance, 'to argue that the current approach to rights does not work *on its own terms*'.⁴¹

First, it reveals the intellectual dishonesty of the rights-based system, which ought to spark conversations about its lack of foundation or guiding principle. Second, it gives non-Christians a chance to hear a Christian alternative to, for example, universalising understandings of sexuality and gender. Third, it cultivates 'indignation' (...) and encourages other conservative Christians to 'awake' and 'arise' (...), rallying to the call of Christ and joining Christian Concern as it seeks to put Christ at the heart of the nation. From this perspective, the potential discomfort a client might feel when they "cry discrimination" can be justified as part of a broader strategy of opening up the possibilities for the articulation of an evangelical alternative. As such, legal activism is part of a two-pronged reform strategy: first, reveal the problems with the current system; second, offer a Christian solution.⁴²

As I will argue, in looking in more detail at the underlying political theology, there is a strong shared thread among the campaigners of advocating a return to, or reclaiming of, Christianity as the moral basis for public life and policy, and arguing explicitly or implicitly therefore for a privileged role for Christian faith in Britain. In this sense, by seeking or advocating privilege for Christianity in public life, the 'Christian nation' campaigners also seem to take a position that opposes secularism as a political option for the state. Again, we shall see in the more detailed exploration of this position that it also raises some questions about the kind of

⁴¹ Mclvor, *Law*, 166, italics in original.

⁴² Mclvor, *Law*, 166.

political theology which is at work, and the questions raised about the assumptions underlying it.

To summarise, the perceived discrimination against Christians is read in the context of, and as pointing to, the consequences of a move from a 'Christian' to a 'secular' national life. The litigations are both about highlighting this, proving the inherently discriminatory hierarchy whereby Christians concisely lose, and give an opportunity to advocate an alternative basis for social and political life, based in Christianity. Méadhbh Mclvor describes the aims of the CLC and Christian Concern, whose work she researched, as 'part of the re-evangelisation of the public sphere' within which 'the instrumentalisation of the right to freedom of religion, is critical to achieving this goal'.⁴³

In the second part of this chapter, Jonathan Chaplin's work on a 'Christian nation' approach to political and public action by Christians is used to consider some of the assumptions and foundations of the lobby groups and the senior Church leaders who have been publicly supportive of the litigations and who share the broader concerns of the lobbyists. I use Chaplin's work in uncovering some of the assumptions underlying this 'Christian nation'⁴⁴ theology, and some of the foundational and theological questions he puts to this tradition.

I also pursue Mclvor's suggestion that the rights-based litigations pursued by the lobbying organisations are used as a strategy to critique a 'secular' rights-based approach to negotiating difference, since it fails to protect Christians. I consider the tensions between the strategy used by the lobby groups and how this is perceived by their support base. I ask if making use of rights-based litigations to critique 'secular' politics based on competing rights – and to commend a Christian alternative – is ultimately self-defeating, by reinforcing the very mode of politics it seeks to unmask.

⁴³ Mclvor, *Law*, 28.

⁴⁴ The term is used by Jonathan Chaplin to designate a particular strand in public and political theologising in a British Evangelical idiom over time, within which he locates the lobbying groups involved in the Christian interest litigations, and the Church leaders aligned with their campaigns.

‘Christian nation’ – a political-theological lens

Jonathan Chaplin has critically but sympathetically analysed what he terms a ‘Christian nation’ conception of national life and of Christian political action in the public sphere.⁴⁵ His analysis offers a framework for locating the campaigners within a tradition of conservative Evangelical Christian thought, and a history of Christian public and political action within British national life. His work also shows where thinking is less than clear in this tradition.

Chaplin identifies problems with the core assumptions that the ‘Christian nation’ stance rests upon which are philosophical, political and theological. These might be summarised as follows. There is a conflation of the nation and the state, with the assumption that nations have agency and can be ‘Christian’. There is a questionable reading of the biblical understanding of the nature and role of Israel, as a nation in covenant relationship with God, and as an ongoing dispensation and model for political life. There is no real thinking-through of the fundamental political-theological decision to be made about the option of political secularism (as the non-privilege of any religion by the ‘neutral’ state) as a principle to be addressed, whether or not conditions of secularisation obtain.

Chaplin describes a ‘Christian nation stance’ as one significant contemporary understanding of the public and political role of Christianity in Britain. He traces its genealogy as a strand of public and political thinking and action largely as a strand within his own tradition of Protestant Evangelicalism, which has had varying degrees of traction and influence in the last half century or so. He locates its origins in ‘a sharpened awareness of the pace of secularization in British public life’ inspired by a concern that ‘if the nation were to continue to abandon its historical biblical moorings’ the ‘common good of the nation itself would be imperilled’. The movement is described as advocating ‘concerted Christian action behind agreed political initiatives to stem the process of de-Christianization and shore up what was left of the legacy of a biblically formed culture’.⁴⁶

Chaplin suggests a renewal in the tradition from around the year 2000, after it had declined in importance in the 1980s due to ‘hostility from secularist opponents, indifference from

⁴⁵ Jonathan Chaplin, ‘Evangelicalism and the Language(s) of the Common Good’, in Nicholas Sagovsky and Peter McGrail, eds., *Together for the Common Good: Towards a National Conversation* (London: SCM Press, 2015), 96–98.

⁴⁶ Chaplain, *Evangelicalism*, 96.

many other Christians’, and with no ‘clear or compelling strategy for realising (its) aims’ in that period.⁴⁷ His analysis links this renewal of the ‘Christian nation’ vision directly to the Christian interest litigations. He suggests that from about the year 2000 onwards, a perception of unjust limits on the public ‘manifestation’ of Christian faith, as a consequence of the ‘growing clashes between the claims of religious liberty and expanding reach of equality, human rights and anti-discrimination legislation’ had ‘galvanized Evangelical opinion’ behind a range of new organisations in the ‘Christian nation’ tradition.⁴⁸

Chaplin regards Christian Concern, the Christian Legal Centre and the Christian Institute as the main examples of such organisations. And he also sees George Carey, Michael Nazir-Ali and others as advocates in the revival of this perspective.

Christian nation, or Christian state: tracing the political theology

The central conviction of a ‘Christian nation’ theology, in Chaplin’s characterisation of the position, is that British national identity is intrinsically bound up with the Christian faith. Britain is essentially a Christian nation. This understanding derives not from a numerical preponderance of Christians who happen to live (or have lived) on the same soil. It is rather the belief that Christianity is the most fundamentally formative influence on British society and culture, and has been the most significant force for good in national life and for ‘its main political achievements – freedom under law, accountable government, religious liberty, democracy, strong families, education committed to truth, and so forth’.⁴⁹; so much so that, even if a majority of people no longer believe in or practice Christianity, the nation’s public institutions and legal and political life can only continue to thrive if they ‘adhere, in some meaningful and discernible sense, to the Christian faith’.⁵⁰

A ‘Christian nation’ position such as Chaplin describes can be traced in public statements made by the Church leaders who have publicly supported the Christian interest litigations. Michael Nazir-Ali, in commentary on recent public scrambles to define ‘British values’,

⁴⁷ Chaplin, *Evangelicalism*, 97

⁴⁸ Chaplin, *Evangelicalism*, 98

⁴⁹ Jonathan Chaplin, ‘Can Nations Be “Christian”?’ *Theology* 112, no. 870 (1 November 2009): 412, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X0911200603>.

⁵⁰ Chaplin, 412.

suggests that any attempts are inadequate without recognising ‘the deep and varied ways in which the beliefs, values and virtues of Great Britain have been formed by the Christian faith’ and that despite the “‘thin values’” served up by those ‘scratching around for something to say’, it ‘cannot be gainsaid that the very idea of a unified people under God living in a “golden chain” of social harmony has everything to do with the arrival and flourishing of Christianity in these parts’⁵¹. George Carey devotes a chapter of his book *We Don’t Do God* to answering the question ‘What has Christianity done for us?’ – and gives an overwhelmingly positive account, citing the emancipation of women and slaves, social cohesion, parliamentary democracy ‘clearly founded on Christian ideals of equality, and freedom’⁵², the ‘Welfare State (*sic*) and National Health Service’.⁵³

Christian Concern’s website describes the organisation’s ‘passion to see the United Kingdom return to the Christian faith’⁵⁴ while the Christian Institute describes its aim as ‘the furtherance and promotion of the Christian religion in the United Kingdom’.⁵⁵ So far, so traditionally Evangelical. Both organisations, however, show characteristics of a specifically ‘Christian nation’ position. Andrea Minichiello, CEO of Christian Concern and the CLC, in comments recorded by Mclvor, states her belief that “‘(w)hat made Great Britain great” was the fact that “our laws, our society” were “founded on Christ””⁵⁶ and that Christian Britain ‘had commanded “the respect of the world”, creating “systems that have been stable and democratic and free, not coercive, truly free”’.⁵⁷ A flyer introducing Christian Concern states its conviction that ‘all laws in this nation should glorify God’ and describes the work of its lawyers, as they ‘monitor and scrutinise British case law’ to ‘explain to those in Government where...laws depart from Biblical principles and go against God’s Word’.⁵⁸

Minichiello’s comments chime with those of Nazir-Ali in associating the best achievements of British legal and political institutions with their grounding in Christian faith. I want to pause, though, at the statement in the introductory flyer from Christian Concern. It reflects the

⁵¹ Nazir-Ali, *Triple Jeopardy for the West*, 14.

⁵² Carey and Carey, *We Don’t Do God: The Marginalisation of Public Faith*, 28.

⁵³ Carey and Carey, *God*, 3–38.

⁵⁴ <https://www.christianconcern.com/about>

⁵⁵ <https://www.christian.org.uk/who-we-are>

⁵⁶ Mclvor, ‘*To Fulfil the Law*’, 38.

⁵⁷ Mclvor, *Law*, 54.

⁵⁸ ‘An Introduction to Christian Concern’, 2.

<http://www.christianconcern.com/sites/default/files/docs/Introduction.pdf>. Accessed May 2018

conviction outlined above that the continued flourishing of British public life depends on some continuing relationship to Christian faith. It introduces a further element, however, in the 'Christian nation' vision which Chaplin describes – by discussing precisely this statement by Christian Concern's flyer.

This statement implies a distinctive assumption which, however, is not made explicit: that the nation is a religious agent, a corporate entity that can be called to account for departing from biblical standards, so that a direct appeal can be made to the nation's government to uphold such standards. This is the idea of a 'faithful nation', a unified religious community capable of rendering corporate political obedience to God.⁵⁹

On a 'Christian nation' view, 'a central goal of Christian public action is to defend or restore the nation's essentially Christian character'⁶⁰; but a 'Christian nation' stance also works on an underlying assumption that a nation has agency, and 'can exist as a unified religious community which can relate as a collective person towards God and so be held corporately accountable to God'.⁶¹

This is the first assumption which Chaplin challenges. He argues that it is problematic to work with an underlying or unspoken assumption that a nation can have corporate agency and choice, which is the confusion of a 'nation' with a 'state'.

The state is an institution that does have a corporate identity. It has corporate agency. It can do things. It's an actor. It's a very complex actor, but it can make decisions. A nation is not like that. A nation is a much more amorphous assemblage, an amalgam of many, many difficult-to-define cultural, historical, social, moral, religious influences and forces and dynamics.⁶²

There is an issue in eliding an essentially descriptive proposal with a prescriptive one. It is descriptive to say that historically, Britain's national life, institutions, law have been significantly shaped by Christianity, during a long period when the nation was fairly monolithically religious, and Christian. Chaplin points out the problem 'when that descriptive

⁵⁹ Chaplin, 'Can Nations Be "Christian"?', 414.

⁶⁰ Chaplin, Nations, 411.

⁶¹ Chaplin, Nations, 417.

⁶² Jonathan Chaplin and Brian Dijkema, 'Can States Be Christian?', *Comment: Public Theology for the Common Good*, Rethinking Civil Religion, 35, no. 2 (Summer 2017), <https://www.cardus.ca/comment/article/can-states-be-christian/>.

historical claim is made to do work it can't really do, which is to justify a continuing constitutional privileging of Christianity in the nation's political institutions'.⁶³

The problem, then, is that while the campaigners seek to defend or restore the historically Christian character of the *nation*, the only way to do so in modern, plural Britain is via the kinds of political options which belong to a Christian *state*.

There is in Chaplin's analysis a second area of unspoken theology implicit in a 'Christian nation' vision. This is an assumption of scriptural warrant for regarding a 'nation' as a 'unified religious community which can relate as a collective person towards God and so be held corporately accountable to God'.⁶⁴ The warrant for this conception of nationhood is drawn from a particular reading of the relationship between the 'redemptive dispensations' of the Old Testament and the New, and, put simply, assumes a continuity between them for which there is very little evidence.⁶⁵ While there is no argument for, say, a continuation of the specificity of civil and criminal Mosaic law, the covenantal relationship between God and Israel is assumed as a model for social and political life for nations in the New Testament era. McIvor's conversations with staff and supporters of the lobby groups reveal a way of thinking that 'connects their nation to the rebellious people of Israel' and believes that '[I]ike Israel, Britain had been chosen and blessed by God': in the conviction both that Britain's status in the world and achievements in 'stability, democracy and freedom' only emerged because of its obedience to God, and likewise that, just as did Israel, Britain has 'chosen to reject and deny this privileged relationship'. She concludes with Andrea Minchiello's own words: 'And over and over again in the Bible we see that where nations trust in God, the God of the Bible, they flourish, and when they turn their back on Him they become unstable'.⁶⁶

There are echoes of this biblical paradigm in Michael Nazir-Ali's argument about Britain's drift away from its Christian heritage and the need to 'bring us back when we wander too far from the path of national destiny'.⁶⁷ The parallel with Israel is being drawn even more clearly in Aidan Nichols' appeal to Britain's Catholic heritage:

⁶³ Chaplin and Dijkema, *States*.

⁶⁴ Chaplin, 'Can Nations Be "Christian"?', 417.

⁶⁵ Chaplin, *Nations*, 419.

⁶⁶ McIvor, *To Fulfil the Law*, 54.

⁶⁷ Nazir-Ali, *Triple Jeopardy for the West*, 22.

The thousand years of Catholic Christianity that preceded the Reformation settlement are responsible for the origins of the English literary imagination, for the principles of the common law, for the concept of a covenanted people under God that permeates the induction of the sovereign, and for the range of virtues that have been commended, and sometimes practiced, in English society and culture.⁶⁸

If the *nation* cannot be Christian because it does not have agency or corporate identity, then the *state* has to be Christian. A Christian *state*, particularly as it might be envisaged in today's Britain, is a very different sort of proposition, politically, from a Christian nation in the purely historical, empirical sense. It entails a move from a *de facto* historical reality to a *de jure* contemporary one. Campaigners in the 'Christian nation' tradition are not altogether clear as to whether this is their position, and if it is, how the Christian state will be brought about. Chaplin's point is that there is a basic theological and political decision to be made, which is whether secularism (as the understanding of a religiously neutral state) is, or is not, espoused as the political model. He argues that '[t]he case for either stance must be theologically principled'⁶⁹ and that a case for state privilege for Christianity has to rest on something more than the contingencies of religious majority or otherwise. It becomes possible, then, to see where secularisation as processes of religious change is somewhat entangled with secularism as a political option for the (non-)privileging of religious traditions by the state.

The 'Christian nation' stance, in affirming that the historical significance of Christianity in the development of national life and institutions warrants Christian faith retaining a privileged position as the basis for law and public policy, actually slides into an argument *for* a Christian state, though this is mostly by implication. There is no discussion, in any of the campaigners' statements about a continuing centrality for Christianity, of how this is to be achieved or legislated for. If the mechanism is further Establishment – what new form should this take? If Christian privilege should be constitutionally enshrined, how would the warrant for this be derived in a democracy? And how would it be institutionalised? Chaplin's argument is that Christianity's *historical* centrality and significance in British national life emerged through the

⁶⁸ Aidan Nichols OP, 'Christianity, secularisation and Islam', Standpoint Issue 2 (July 2008). <http://standpointmag.co.uk/node/144/full>. Accessed 01/2019. Aidan Nichols is seen by Chaplin as working within the 'Christian nation' tradition, theologically. Unlike the senior Church of England Bishops, however, he has not associated himself publicly with Christian interest litigations.

⁶⁹ Chaplin, Jonathan. 'Can Nations Be "Christian"?', 418

complex interactions of culture, institutions etc. that constitute a 'nation' – but in a constantly-evolving way. There is no clarity in a 'Christian nation' stance of how that kind of significance can be maintained, now that evolution has taken a different turn, without the risk that Christian life, and Christian public and political action, come to be seen as a permanent rear-guard action defending the legacy of a lived history in a nation that now lives differently: an unending fight to 'shore fragments against our ruins'.⁷⁰

'Christian nation': conclusions

The political vision in a 'Christian nation' tradition, as articulated by the campaigners, does not include any serious theological consideration of a procedural form of secularism as a political option, but instead advocates a privileged status for Christianity because of the 'inevitability' that states will favour one perspective or another. One problem with this position is that it represents a 'rush' to characterise any form of political secularism as necessarily and often covertly programmatic. There are undoubtedly pressures towards a programmatic form of secularism in parts of British society and in cultural and political life; but a strategy which makes the more extreme example of this political option stand for the whole, in order then to dismiss *all* the options contained within a decision for secularism, in favour of a 'Christian-nation'/Christian-state alternative, is a refusal of the difficulty of thinking.

The other problem is the apparent elision of terms, which the 'Christian nation' position requires, and which has already been referred to. The argument for privileging Christianity, against any form of political secularism, is based on a set of religious, cultural, historical, juridical and social realities in Britain's predominantly Christian past. The changes from a more monolithically Christian past to a more diverse and plural present are what the language and concept of secularisation describes: it was once thus, but no longer is. A contingent empirical claim, then, about the formative influence of Christianity on British political (and cultural and national) life is made the basis for a non-contingent, normative claim: that of a state privileging of Christianity in Britain's legal and political institutions and norms. The question I am left with is whether resistance to political *secularism*, even of an open,

⁷⁰ The reference is to the final lines of T. S. Elliot's 'The Wasteland'.

procedural kind, and reversing changes deemed to erode a biblical basis of the law, are seen by the campaigners, working from a 'Christian nation' perspective, as the means to resist the decline from a formerly widespread Christian observance in Britain: a potential new means to reverse *secularisation*.

Observing the strategy - Evangelicals' ambivalence

Méadhbh Mclvor's research aimed at testing the perceptions of two groups of Evangelical Christians about the practice of rights-based Christian interest litigations: on one hand, the staff of the Christian Legal Centre whose work is to advise and represent claimants in such cases; on the other, members of Christ Church, a conservative Evangelical Church community located in Greater London. Her findings in relation to the CLC were that they regarded the litigations as a strategic means of challenging and unmasking a 'competing rights culture' and an opportunity to present a Christian alternative for British society. She found, in conversations and interviews with members of Christ Church, that they generally had a considerably more ambivalent attitude towards the litigations, and to some of the practices they were defending, than those directly involved in fighting them.

Mclvor found that the people of Christ Church were aware of living in a situation characterised by real difference. She describes their attempts to live faithfully, within a traditionally Evangelical understanding of Christian faith and life⁷¹, as a 'creative navigation of the competing moral commitments around which their lives are structured' in the 'value pluralism dominant in twenty-first century London'.⁷²

She found that the people who worshipped at Christ Church often felt admiration for the claimants in the litigations, and for 'their courage in standing up for individual conscience'.⁷³ Set against this, however, was a set of concerns about both the underlying impetus and the likely impact of the strategy itself, as a piece of very public political action. The members of Christ Church questioned the apparent impetus behind the litigations, asking whether seeking to enforce one's 'rights' was something a Christian should ever do. Mclvor cites members of

⁷¹ Mclvor characterises this as a biblically orientated 'submission to God's Word' which involves both shaping personal life according to a particular understanding of scriptural injunctions, and the duty to evangelise others by 'witnessing to Christ' in actions and words (p 26).

⁷² Mclvor, *'To Fulfil the Law'*, 3.

⁷³ Mclvor, *Law*, 131.

Christ Church who question whether ‘standing on one’s rights meant one was buying into the individualistic logic of what (was) labelled “our ever more litigious society,” in which “everyone is insisting on their rights” to the detriment of others’.⁷⁴

Her interlocutors had what Mclvor characterised as a strongly ‘relational’⁷⁵ approach to personal evangelism (though members of the church more frequently used the idea of ‘friendship evangelism’). This approach to evangelism was based on Christians building what they regarded as genuine relationships of friendship with non-Christians, for example at work.⁷⁶ Those at Christ Church were also concerned to behave in public – again, for example, at work - in ways that might invite questions, conversation and evangelistic opportunity to speak about the faith inspiring their actions. Mclvor characterises this as a commitment to a ‘grace-fuelled life’⁷⁷ that allows opportunities to present the Gospel more directly; the Christian’s ‘loving, hardworking, gracious approach to life ought to be a “flag up” to their beliefs’.⁷⁸ This concern for ‘friendship evangelism’ and for opportunities to present Christian faith through ‘grace-fuelled living’ led to some conversations about the potential impact of this very public, and publicised, piece of political action by Christians. Mclvor records the real concerns her interlocutors at Christ Church expressed – both about the practices being defended as ‘rights’ and about the use of the language and legal protection of rights as a strategy.

Some people at Christ Church additionally questioned the kinds of practices being defended in the litigations, and the insistence on the freedom to wear a cross at work as an expression of one’s faith. One of Mclvor’s respondents suggested that “‘I’m free to wear a cross at work, but I might choose not to for the offence that it causes. That could be an example of [forgoing our] Gospel freedom for the sake of the Gospel.”⁷⁹ In another conversation, the question of Sunday working was discussed. This has been another area where litigations have been pursued and publicised on behalf of Christians by the lobby groups.⁸⁰ Mclvor’s respondents also reflected that to ‘assert your right to not work on a Sunday’ was also likely to be ‘an

⁷⁴ Mclvor, *Law*, 144.

⁷⁵ Mclvor, *Law*, 138.

⁷⁶ Mclvor, *Law*, 138.

⁷⁷ Mclvor, *Law*, 124.

⁷⁸ Mclvor, *Law*, 136.

⁷⁹ Mclvor, *Law*, 142.

⁸⁰ For example, the case pursued by CLC for Celestine Mba, when Merton Borough Council sought to enforce her contractual obligation to work on a Sunday. *Mba v London Borough of Merton* [2013] EWCA Civ 1562.

offence', both for the impact on colleagues 'having to work the roster so that you have Sunday off' and because such a stance is 'not going to do the Gospel any favours' and is 'just going to make you look like a really difficult person'.⁸¹

What Mclvor's research revealed is that even among a group of similarly minded and sympathetic Evangelicals, it was not clear that the strategy of pursuing Christian interest litigations was anything more than a buy-in, or a sell-out, to the very rights culture that the strategy was designed to expose and undermine. What the strategy communicated to sympathetic observers was *not* critique of a culture of 'competing rights', but more often its apparent adoption as a way of dealing with difficulty by Christians in everyday situations of conflict and difference. Among Christians seeking to create evangelistic opportunities by living grace-fuelled lives, the litigations represented a form of Christian life which they saw as detrimental to the communication and commendation of the Christian faith.

Those involved in Mclvor's research at Christ Church echo some of the concerns voiced in an opinion piece in the Independent newspaper in 2010 by the Steve Clifford, Director of the Evangelical Alliance, about the potential consequences for the perception of Christians, and for the already contested place of Christianity in contemporary British society.

Christians do not need to pick a fight with the society they inhabit. Every court case builds the wall a little higher and the disconnect between Church and society grows greater.⁸²

That potentially sympathetic Evangelicals are reading the litigations as actually or potentially detrimental to public perception of and attitudes to Christians and to the faith they seek to proclaim suggests that as, a strategy for challenging a secularising society and commending a Christian alternative, the litigations are not proving particularly successful, even among Christians.

⁸¹ Mclvor, *To Fulfil the Law*, 143.

⁸² Steve Clifford, 'If Christians Are Marginalised, It Is Not Just the Fault of Secular Society', *The Independent*, 30 April 2010, <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/faith/steve-clifford-if-christians-are-marginalised-it-is-not-just-the-fault-of-secular-society-1958693.html>.

Conclusion: persistent difficulty

As I outlined at the beginning of this chapter, on first becoming aware of the Christian interest litigations I regarded them as a troubling response by Christian activists to the kinds of incommensurabilities produced in a post-secular, diversely religious and non-religious, value-plural context. The lobbyists in particular appeared to propose that the genuine difficulties for religious lives produced when divergent commitments and values come into conflict in the public domain could be understood and dealt with using the language and legal protection of 'rights'. I was worried that this was a theologically thin approach to dealing with the difficulty of incommensurability, both as a model for Christian life in diverse societies, and as a basis for a shared life across real difference. The model for Christian life appeared to be little more than an assertion of a Christian identity or of particular convictions and practices over other 'competing' convictions or identities using rights-based legislation. This seemed to extend to a competitive understanding of the navigation of difference in the public square. Neither of these seemed based in any robust theological underpinning, and instead seemed to build a kind of competitive non-negotiability into the life of faith. By non-negotiability, I mean not so much the content of belief, as a particular 'style' and approach in the face of conflicting commitments or wishes, which seems prone to see and deal with difficulty in win-lose rather than negotiative processes; and by competitive, I mean the apparent identification in 'secularism', of an overtly 'aggressive' or covertly 'creeping' 'rival' to Christianity.

This 'competitive non-negotiability', then, appeared to be what was on offer, as it were, to Christians dealing with the inevitable non-compossibilities of daily life in plural societies, as a piece of very public practical politics in response to this kind of difficulty.

Mclvor's research shows that the lobby groups which she worked with are not approaching the conflicts involving Christians as something which can or should be dealt with via human rights legislation. In fact, Mclvor shows that the lobbyists view the introduction of human rights legislation into British law very negatively, and that their anxiety is based on just those dangers – of an individuated understanding of the rights-bearing citizen, leading to competition as a basic form for social and political life – which the litigations suggested to me at first sight.

The lobbyists are shown by Mclvor to view these changes in the law as part of a wider and growing 'secularisation' of public and political life, a perspective shared by those senior clerics

who support the litigants. Together, this group of ‘campaigners’ sees these shifts towards greater secularity producing a marginalisation of Christianity, often in the person of individual Christians such as the litigants. This is seen to be evidenced by the frequency with which their claims are lost in the courts. Mclvor’s findings show that the litigations are intended by the lobby groups to result not so much in individual ‘wins’ as in a broader ‘unmasking’ of rights legislation as such. The lobbyists’ aim is that the repeated losses demonstrate that a ‘rights culture’ fails on its own terms, since it fails to protect Christians from discrimination, and see this as an evangelistic opportunity to present a biblically founded alternative as the only genuine basis for public and national flourishing.

Mclvor’s research shows, then, that the lobby groups’ strategy represents a more complex and nuanced set of understandings and aims than a simple funnelling of the genuine tensions of the legal cases into human rights discourse. There is, however, a question of how successful the strategy is. The ultimate aim of unmasking and overturning the secular ‘creep’ represented by human rights and equalities legislation still suggests a fundamentally competitive understanding of a Christian navigation of a diverse and value plural public life.

The second aspect of Mclvor’s findings questions the success of the lobbyists’ ultimate strategy of ‘unmasking’ the inadequacies of a secular rights-based approach to dealing with difference. Her conversations with Evangelical Christians in Christ Church in London showed that even a generally sympathetic community read the litigations not as a challenge to a culture of ‘competing rights’, but as a troubling instance of it: one which seemed to show Christians asserting their rights over those of others as a way of dealing with the difficulty of an increasingly diverse society.

This would suggest a flaw in the strategy of unmasking ‘rights culture’ to show it as a fundamentally competitive and therefore problematic basis for public life. Mclvor’s findings at Christ Church suggest that the strategic aim of the litigations is not apparent to those observing this Christian activism. While they express a degree of admiration for the litigants’ stand, they are also troubled by what they regard as assertive, competitive behaviour by Christians in the public realm. Further, the ultimate strategic aim – of undermining and

replacing a rights culture with conservative Christian values – depends on a rivalry between Christianity and forms of the secular in public and political life, at the level of a ‘culture war’.⁸³

Jonathan Chaplin’s identification of what he terms a ‘Christian nation’ stance helps to locate the lobbyists’ work within a broader strand of Evangelical political thought and action. Originally a response to growing secularisation, the ‘Christian nation’ vision envisaged concerted political action as a means to shore up the legacy of Christian influence in British public life and institutions. His work identifies the theological and political assumptions underlying the litigations as part of a broader campaign to resist secularisation/secularism, and some of the problems with these.

He highlights the problem of using an empirical claim about the past as the grounds for a normative claim about political arrangements in the present, of shoehorning the options and models available for the modern state into the biblically specific form of Israel’s relationship with God as a religious and political entity, and of confusing the modern state with the separate and much more complex and contingent category of nationhood. Working out of this tradition and using a combination of these conceptions of nationhood with the legacy of a religiously more monolithic, the campaigners implicitly or explicitly claim some form of privilege for Christianity in public and political life as preferable to ‘a secular humanistic philosophy . . . or a “multifaith philosophy”’.⁸⁴ Chaplin’s work, however, shows that the claim for privilege is not securely grounded either theologically or conceptually. Also, the argument against procedural forms of secularism as covertly or inevitably programmatic sidesteps any serious consideration of a procedural secularism as a theological option as well as a political one.

The campaigning surrounding the Christian interest litigations - and to some extent also the Christian individuals they support - are an instance of increasingly public religious faith. The campaign groups particularly exemplify a contested claim for a place, in the public square, the life and commitments of faith. They also represent a rather more contested claim for the role of Christian faith, specifically, in shaping political policy - but without clarity about how this might be achieved or approved in a society where there is no longer widespread Christian

⁸³ Ahdar and Leigh, *Religious Freedom in the Liberal State*, 2nd edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2015), 7.

⁸⁴ ‘What We Believe: Christianity and State’, The Christian Institute. <https://www.christian.org.uk/who-we-are/what-we-believe/christianity-and-the-state/> Accessed 12/01/2019.

adherence or belief. Finally, the specific negotiative processes in which the individual Christians were engaged, with colleagues and managers in everyday settings remain a point of interest for me. Details of these negotiations appear in the newspaper interviews which formed part of the publicity surrounding the eventual litigations and in the court submissions. However, they are largely invisible in the overall strategy of the campaigners, which is focussed much more on the formal political questions of law and policy, and the role of Christian faith in shaping these.

The question remains, then, of how to relate the 'theological' and the 'political' in morally plural and post-secular societies, in ways which avoid the risks of culture war - as a conflictual understanding of the key 'difference' of post-secularity: that between secular and faith commitments.

The next chapter will explore the question of how political theology defines its task via three key and contested issues in relation to the self-understanding of political theology within in the complexities of contemporary democracies. I will look again at the question De Vries raises about a 'daily politics', in asking whether a stronger focus for political theology on some of these more informal configurations of the political may offer ways of living with, and within, the difficulty of living faithfully in Western political contexts.

SECTION II

CHAPTER THREE

Political theology – three contested questions

Introduction

My argument so far has been that the legal cases, which served as my departure point, reveal a wider cultural tension around the place of religious faith in the public square. I have suggested that difficulty is involved for Christians seeking to live faithfully in public settings and navigating the gulf between secular and faith commitments in conditions of post-secularity. But I have also suggested that, while the ‘difference’ between faith and secularity is a key one in modernity, difficulty is also a feature of wider interactions and negotiations across difference in contemporary, morally plural societies in the Western world. I have noted that, while processes of legal arbitration may be useful in specific cases to deal with conflicting needs or commitments, they are not an exhaustive way of thinking about, and dealing with these tensions within the complexities of a changing political environment in which the conventions of traditional political liberalism and the religiously neutral public square are breaking down.

The previous chapter surveyed the wider aims of campaign groups supporting Christian interest litigations. It suggested that a ‘Christian nation’ approach to the task of political theology, and a strong focus on a formal understanding of the political as law and governance, had limitations in the difficult task of relating the ‘theological’ and the ‘political’ in morally plural and post-secular societies in ways which avoid the risks of culture war.

In chapter one, I identified within the developing concept of post-secularity the suggestion that we may be in uncharted territory, and that ‘our everyday experience may no longer fit comfortably into existing conceptual frameworks’.¹ The concept of post-secularity was seen

¹ Graham, Elaine. *Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Public Theology in a Post-Secular Age*. London: SCM Press, 2013, 12.

to suggest that the secularisation paradigm is no longer adequate to describe this new situation: the coexistence of continuing secularisation, persistent and increasingly public religious faith, and ongoing commitment to secularism and anxiety about religious voices in public and political conversation.

I suggested that the concept of post-secularity offers language and context for what I described in chapter one as a phenomenological experience of a communicative and imaginative gulf, in some of the negotiations which gave rise to the litigations, with the acknowledgement that there no longer exists 'a common frame of reference, in which the theological and moral allusions fall comfortably on waiting ears' but that instead, the 'public square...is both more sensitive to and suspicious of religious discourse'.²

I have argued that the gulf between secular and faith commitments is a key site of difference for Western democracies, shaped as they are by the legacy of the Enlightenment's separation of theology and politics. However, the plural nature of Western democracies means that difference, and its negotiation, is increasingly a feature of social and political life more generally, and of everyday exchanges and interactions of citizens. I have suggested the importance of these interactions and negotiations, and how they are attended to as an 'everyday' form of politics, for theological-political reflection.

The question of how to relate the 'theological' and the 'political' in morally plural and post-secular societies, particularly within the everyday 'cut and thrust of negotiating faithfully the Western political context',³ seems to touch on three significant and contested areas in political theology. I will set out these three areas of theological political debate, and some of the key reasons for their being contested, and say how they relate to my own questions about faithful Christian living.

The issues for political theology which relate most closely to my own study are the debate around how to define the political, and the changing and contested understandings of Christianity's relationship to the concerns and crises of secular modernity. A further area of commonality and intersection is the vexed question of Augustine's cities and how they are understood: a key issue in political theology. This issue has had a particular bearing on

² Graham, *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, 21.

³ Bretherton, 'Introduction', Oliver O'Donovan's *Political Theology and the Liberal Imperative*, *Political Theology* 9, no. 3 (3 October 2008): 271, <https://doi.org/10.1558/poth.v9i3>, 271.

articulating Christianity's understanding of, and relationship to, secular modernity in recent scholarship.⁴ All three of the political theologians with whom this thesis is primarily in dialogue are themselves in dialogue with Augustine. I will ask to what extent a binary articulation of Christianity's relationship to secular modernity correlates to a mapping of the device of the two Augustinian cities onto historical political entities.

I shall set out these three issues in political theology – defining politics, relating to 'secular' modernity, and working with Augustine's cities – and discuss them as they relate to my own concerns. The final section of this chapter will bridge into the further work of the thesis, a consideration of the political theology O'Donovan, Milbank and Williams. In various ways, the work of all three involves defining the 'political', addressing secular modernity's crises and reading Augustine's cities. I will argue that the way they address these theological-political issues is key to how they articulate and deal with the difficulty of faithful Christian living, and of navigating the religious-secular gulf, within the plurality and post-secularity of Western political contexts.

Defining the political

Political theology in the twentieth century developed in multiple strands. One significant strand of political theology is ecclesially-focussed, but other strands would identify more closely with political and social sciences, and the boundaries of the discipline are fluid and contested. Aspects of the fluidity and contestation arise as political theology's self-understanding, and the definition and extent of its field of enquiry, continue to be debated and tested. Defining 'the political' is one significant issue within the debate about what exactly political theology is and does.

The divergence might be expressed as the difference between 'politics' and 'the political': between a focus on 'politics' as institutional political spaces and processes (political parties, law, parliaments and the like) and a broader conception of 'the political' as operating in other

⁴ See for example Robert Markus' book *Saeculum*, first published in 1970, in which he argued that Augustine's thought, re-worked in light of contemporary realities, allowed the possibility of an autonomous, secular political realm. Markus, R. A. *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine*. Cambridge University Press, 1988. His claim was controversial, was criticised by Oliver O'Donovan among others, and one which Markus himself later modified as a more nuanced reading of the 'saeculum' in Augustinian thought.

more social and cultural spaces. This issue of how politics should be understood relates to my own questions about what kind of political problem the litigations represent. I am arguing that the collisions between Christian and secular commitments which engender the litigations pose a theological-political question. However, I suggest that these collisions arise initially in the shared, social spaces of 'the political', and that part of the problem with how they are being dealt with by the campaign groups, discussed in chapter two, involved funnelling these colliding commitments into the more formal and institutional spaces of the processes of law. There is a strand within political theology which argues for 'the political' rather than 'politics' as the key category for defining this aspect of its field of enquiry. In the early part of the twentieth century, Carl Schmitt was engaged in a somewhat surprising intellectual correspondence with Walter Benjamin, a Jewish political thinker in the early Frankfurt School, who was in many ways Schmitt's political opposite. While Benjamin was involved in seeking to recover the impetus of the Enlightenment after the crisis of German idealism, and drawing on a version of Marxism for his work, Schmitt was critical of Weimar democracy and regarded dictatorship as potentially legitimate.⁵ Schmitt was a controversial thinker working within what has been termed the 'Conservative Revolution' movement.⁶ This was an intellectual movement working to a strongly nationalist agenda towards the end of the Weimar Republic, and Schmitt eventually went on to a career as a state lawyer in the Third Reich. Despite their obvious differences, Schmitt and Benjamin shared an understanding of the political (*das Politische*) which was much broader than what is generally understood as 'politics'. They both argued that 'the political' was no longer confined to political institutions as classically conceived, such as parliaments or parties, but that it had moved into a multiplicity of spaces within modern societies. Thus, they saw 'the political' at work in mass media, economic interactions, technology and so on and argued that political theology also needed to reflect on these more social spaces.⁷ The legacy of this broad conception of the nature and location of the political persists, and continues to be debated, in political theology.

⁵ Michael Hollerich, 'Carl Schmitt', in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Malden, MA; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 107.

⁶ De Wilde, 'Violence in the State of Exception: Reflections on Theologico-Political Motifs in Benjamin and Schmitt'.

⁷ De Wilde, *Violence*, 190.

I also ask how the political is understood and located in political theology. I have already suggested that the Christian interest litigations arise in the context of a more broadly social understanding of the political. I noted in the introductory chapter Hent De Vries's arguments for a broader conception of the political, or what he terms 'daily politics', particularly as a site for reflection in post-secular contexts on the 'daily politics' of the 'confrontation of "styles" or "ways of life" in neighbourhoods and on streets'. De Vries is reflecting on the specific tensions between religious and secular commitments, in a discussion of post-secularity and its implications for political theology. His reflections lead him to ask what the 'daily practices' might look like by which these 'confrontations' are navigated in post-secular societies.⁸ De Vries makes the further observation that political theology as a discipline specifically holds together these two perspectives on the dual tasks of 'theorizing the political' and 'enter(ing) into relationship with the urgent questions of "daily politics"'⁹, but based on a conviction of the significance of these daily encounters and exchanges for the work of political theology.

A similar set of questions from Luke Bretherton about how politics should be defined and differentiated belongs within this ongoing conversation in political theology about the definition and boundaries of the political. In suggesting a need to differentiate between what he terms 'formal' and 'informal' politics, Bretherton is engaging with the same issues about the nature of the political.

(T)he *formal* mode of politics (is) exemplified in the law and forms of what I call statecraft—parliaments, electoral systems, bureaucracy etc.—and *informal* modes of politics (are) exemplified in social movements, community organizing, and the relational practices of everyday politics that take place in schools, firms, churches and the like.¹⁰

The question for Bretherton is not merely whether political theology should work with both 'formal' and 'informal' forms of politics. While he is clear that formal and informal politics are related, his own position is that formal politics, or 'statecraft' – as law, parliaments, institutions and so on – are 'never an end in themselves but serve the ordering of a common

⁸ De Vries, Hent, and Lawrence E. Sullivan, eds. *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006.

⁹ De Vries and Sullivan, *Political Theologies*, 25.

¹⁰ Luke Bretherton, 'Politics in the Service of Society: A Response to My Interlocutors', *Studies in Christian Ethics*, 25 December 2019, 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0953946819897593>.

life towards its flourishing’ and that ‘human law (and the state) serves the antecedent and superordinate good of association’.¹¹ He argues here for a subordination of politics in its more institutional forms to the more diffuse modes of the political in human sociality, the latter having priority in his own political theology. Bretherton goes beyond merely differentiating between formal and informal modes of politics. He argues that the tendency in political theology is to focus on the formal aspects of politics – what he terms ‘statecraft’: the formal ordering of political life in law, parliaments, elections, bureaucracy and so on. The consequence is that ‘the informal dimensions of politics (...) are eclipsed both in academic work and in popular talk of politics where statecraft, law and unilateral power dominate the field of vision’.¹² His own work aims at righting this imbalance, and relative neglect in political theology¹³, and emphasises informal political modes – as the ‘shared world of meaning and action’ in shaping ‘a common life’¹⁴ – over formal modes.

A more social or ‘informal’ understanding of the political chimes with my own concern for how Christians might live faithfully within the conditions and tensions of post-secularity in everyday lived encounters, and how political theology might help formulate and address this question. It focuses theological attention on these more social spaces of encounter and interaction across difference and colliding commitments, as sites for a kind of daily politics of negotiating across the communicative gulf these engender, and as a means of avoiding the language and appearance of *kulturkampf* which I argued in earlier chapters are the consequence of taking a more formal, legal route through the difficulty.

Christianity and the crises of modernity

The second issue for ecclesial political theology also relates to my own concerns in this thesis. This is the issue of Christianity’s relationship to the Enlightenment ‘project’, which has been a focus of thought, and a source of dissent, within the ecclesial strand of political theology since the post-war period in Europe. Some of the tensions I have identified in the negotiation of Christian faith and identity have to do with the difficulty of negotiating across the gulf

¹¹ Bretherton, *Politics*, 3.

¹² Bretherton, *Politics*, 3.

¹³ Bretherton, *Politics*, 3–4.

¹⁴ Bretherton, *Politics*, 2.

between the divergent thought-worlds behind the commitments of 'secular' post-Enlightenment modernity and those of faith, together with the lack of a shared language in which to conduct such negotiation. The conventions of 'secular' public reason may be breaking down with post-secularity, but the difficulty of speaking and negotiating commitments publicly from a position of faith persists.

Within a more ecclesial strand of political theology, the aspirations of the Enlightenment in modernity have been viewed either with some sympathy, or with deep suspicion, at different moments and from within differing schools of thought. There continues to be deep disagreement among Christian political theologians about how and whether to engage with the key concerns of 'secular' modernity and its political traditions, and questions of how and whether this is possible across potentially divergent or conflicting commitments. This debate within ecclesial political theology touches the same sorts of issues that were seen to be in play across the imaginative and communicative 'gulf' between religious and secular commitments in the first chapter of this thesis.

Political theology emerged as a distinct discipline within *Christian* theology in the academy from the mid-twentieth century onward.¹⁵ A significant early feature of its work was grappling with Christianity's relationship to the ideals of the Enlightenment, particularly as the century saw political authority degenerate into varieties of authoritarianism and fascism. The emerging ecclesial strand of the discipline includes political theologians such as Johann Baptist Metz, Jürgen Moltmann and Dorothee Sölle. Unsurprisingly, these are German theologians, working with an understanding of the task of political theology which involves recovering something of the emancipatory dimensions of the European Enlightenment, and understanding how these could have failed so spectacularly in the descent of political authority into sanctioning and enacting the atrocities of that century, particularly the Holocaust. Part of this task was to ask how Christian Churches and theologians largely failed to question or resist the descent of political orders into authoritarianism and violence, and to argue that the retreat of Christian theology from engagement with the political into more inward and personal forms was a major contributory factor in this failure.¹⁶

¹⁵ Elizabeth Phillips, *Political Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T & T Clark International, 2012), 5.

¹⁶ Michael Kirwan, *Political Theology: A New Introduction* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 2008), 6.

These post-war theologians suggested that Christian faith was either impotent or complicit in the face of fascism because it had become a 'privatised bourgeois' affair, relegating salvation to the realm of personal experience and piety, or to a world beyond the present.¹⁷ They understood the task of political theology as a recovery of the *political* implications of the Gospel as both a critical framework for diagnosing patterns of injustice, and also implying and requiring a transformation that was not merely personal but economic, societal and political. These concerns meant that there was considerable interaction between these political theologians and theologians of liberation working in the global South, in a shared concern for a liberative theology and *praxis* in the face of political and economic injustice. Ecclesial political theology, in this stage of its recent development, tended to look to the (secular) state and civil society as the key sites and agents of political action towards freedom and emancipation, and moved from specifically Christian convictions towards what was more universal and shared.¹⁸

The mid-twentieth century theologians were not simply apologists for secular modernity, but their understanding of the task of political theology has been questioned by a new generation of political theologians. Thinkers such as Stanley Hauerwas and William Cavanaugh in the United States, and John Milbank and Oliver and Joan Lockwood O'Donovan, in Britain have suggested that political theology in this mould might be doing no more than providing either a rationale for or a critique of political programmes. They question the apparent subordination of Christianity to 'secular' political aims and point out the risks involved if Christianity is functioning critically or amelioratively to advance projects driven by very different assumptions and aims. Stanley Hauerwas's well-known juxtapositioning of a 'secular' conception of the human person as a 'holder of rights' alongside a theological understanding of the person as 'beggar'¹⁹ exemplifies this approach, and the concern to identify points of sharp underlying divergence, rather than commonality of aspirations and practical goals.

O'Donovan and Milbank are particularly critical of what they perceive as liberation theology's over-reliance on Marxism, and on social-scientific tools of analysis more generally, as an

¹⁷ Kirwan, *Political Theology*, 101.

¹⁸ Phillips, *Political Theology*, 2012, 50.

¹⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Performing the Faith: Bonhoeffer and the Practice of Nonviolence* (Grand Rapids, MI: Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2004), 241.

erosion of a more distinctively and authentically Christian conception and vision of human sociality. With others, they have proposed that political theology take a more robustly and self-consciously *theological* form; in a ‘theopolitical’ mode.²⁰ Ecclesial political theology in this mode places the Church, as a distinct political body, rather than the state at the centre of its theopolitical reflection, seeing the Church as the site of ‘true’ politics, so that Christian political engagement ‘takes shape in a distinctly theological politics’.²¹

For political theology in this more ‘theopolitical’ mode, there is more concern to emphasise the Christian vision of human sociality as a coherent and comprehensive whole with its own integrity, rather than seeking to articulate Christian convictions in more universal terms. Oliver O’Donovan and John Milbank, particularly, see their work as setting a new agenda for political theology, though in quite different ways, which for Milbank involves moving away from political theology to locating Christian political thought within the Church as ecclesiology.

Where the political theologians in twentieth century Germany saw the task as the recovery of the *political* dimensions and implications of a pietistic, privatised Christianity – as liberative and transformative for actual social realities – the *theopolitical* turn has emphasised the recovery of a robustly theological and comprehensive Christian vision for human sociality.

These sharp differences within ecclesial political theology over how (and whether) to deal with Enlightenment modernity represent differing ways of navigating the ‘gulf’ between secular and Christian commitments. The ecclesial theologians of the 1960s worked to a large degree within the consensus and conventions of a sacred-secular divide which I have suggested is breaking down in post-secular conditions, and tempered their language and frames of reference to Enlightenment universals. The ‘second generation’ political theologians resolve the tensions between secular and Christian commitments by challenging the conventions of secular public reason, and by prioritising a confessional stance and the political character of the Church. My view is that the difficulty of incommensurable claims,

²⁰ For instance, William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination: Christian Practices of Space and Time* (London ; New York: T & T Clark International, 2003).

²¹ Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, eds., *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 1st ed. (Malden, MA; Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2004), 435.

and the lack of shared language or common frame of reference to negotiate between them, persists in both these strands of ecclesial theology.

Reading Augustine's cities

The political thought of Augustine is a foundational source for political theology, to the extent that Eric Gregory can describe some of the major debates within political theology in the modern era as 'footnotes to Augustine'.²² Augustine's is a major Christian voice in critical dialogue with his own context and with the traditions of antique political philosophy. Oliver O'Donovan, John Milbank and Rowan Williams, the theologians whose work I will consider in relation to my own questions, are also variously in dialogue with Augustine. A key issue for reading Augustine within political theology is the debate around his device of the two cities as they have been used to explore the possibility, legitimacy and problems of 'secular' public and political space in modern states, particularly (but not exclusively) in ecclesial political theology. The device of the cities offers a lens through which to articulate my own question about how Christians can faithfully navigate the tensions of the religious-secular 'gulf' in public spaces, without a drift into binary oppositions and culture wars. Part of this work of articulation will be to ask how my three main interlocutors use Augustine in articulating and dealing with these tensions. Two of these theologians give an explicit reading of the Augustinian cities in setting out their positions on the relationship of Christian faith and the Christian community to 'secular' political orders.

Saint Augustine is a significant figure for political theology. He is likewise an important source for the three theologians whose work I shall look at in detail as resources for understanding and dealing with the difficulty of faithful Christian living in plural Western societies. John Milbank and Oliver O'Donovan give explicit and decisive readings of the two cities to set out their understandings of the relationship of the Church and contemporary political orders in their work. The way they deal with secular modernity seems to be related to how they understand and work with Augustine's device of the two cities. I will lay out the issues as I see them in reading Augustine's account of the cities and in working with this device in political theology. Rowan Williams is also in dialogue with Augustine, and I will go on to

²² Eric Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*. (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 1.

suggest in the later part of this thesis that, while more ‘latent’ in his political theology, an understanding of Augustine’s cities also underlies some of its core commitments.

Augustine’s understanding of human nature is highly social, and holds that right ordering of human sociality, and the possibilities for human happiness and fulfilment, will take social forms. For Augustine, pressing the classical philosophical questions about human happiness and how it can best be achieved, real happiness is to be found in communion with God; but it is also a happiness that is social, in its true fullness²³, and as such, is ‘what God eternally intends for his creatures’.²⁴ The language of a ‘city’, then, is language which describes how human persons orientate themselves in their sociality, and how their fundamentally social nature is ordered.

It is the burning necessity of turning to God, however, within the vicissitudes of earthly existence, which drives all Augustine’s thinking about life in the world. There is a differentiation in Augustine not just in how reality is to be understood, but also as this then drives a decisive orientation of life and actions to love of God in spite of self, or love of self in spite of God. Two loves, and two cities.

There is a real sense, in Augustine’s theology, of a stark choice in human living. He points to the fundamental difference between an orientation towards love of self in despite (‘contempt’) of God, and a way of life orientated in love to God in despite of self²⁵; but the real dilemma is about how to translate that into political terms. Given that it is a commonplace for his interpreters not to see Augustine as working within anything like a contemporary conception of politics²⁶, there is a genuine question about how to read his cities. How is the sense of a very stark ‘choice’ in Augustine to be understood and worked with by his subsequent readers, and specifically, what does that mean in relation to social and political realities and options?

²³ Augustine. *The City of God against the Pagans* (Edited and Translated by R.W. Dyson). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, XIX, 5.

²⁴ Robert W. Jenson, ‘Eschatology’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 412

²⁵ Augustine, *The City of God*, 632.

²⁶ For example, Jean Bethke Elshtain, ‘Augustine’, in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, ed. Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 35; Robert A Markus, *Christianity and the Secular* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 41.

It is undeniably the case that Augustine presents a very sharp distinction between a fundamental orientation – toward or away from God – which then determines how all other orientations (‘loves’, desires) are orientated. In *The City of God* this orientation is explored in political terms, by means of the device of two cities ordered by two utterly contrasting kinds of love. However, questions has persisted about how Augustine is using his device, and regarding what is and is not warranted as a ‘reading’ of the cities within the tensions and questions of a ‘post-secular’ age, and its actual political communities and choices.

This is a contended area in reading Augustine politically, perhaps precisely because it looks so relevant. Historically, we stand in a context in some ways analogous to his own. As Graham Ward observes: ‘[p]oised as [Augustine] was on the threshold between radical pluralism (which he called paganism) and the rise of Christendom, we stand on the other side of that history: at the end of Christendom and the re-emergence of radical (as distinct from liberal) pluralism’.²⁷ One reading of Augustine sees a permanent and decisive divide between the two ways humanity may be orientated, given expression in the metaphor of the two ‘cities’ as love of God and love of self, and holds that this has profound and *concrete* outworkings. Oliver and Joan O’Donovan typify this position on the two cities:

[F]or Augustine, the earthly city, with its earthly peace, did have an ultimate commitment, which all its members shared, the ‘love of self to the exclusion of love of God’ (DCD, 14.28). Whatever the difficulties that surround the idea of a *finis malorum* in Augustine, we misunderstand him if we fail to see that he assigns it a seriously ontological status. ‘Love of self’ is no mere circumlocution for diversity of ends. It is the name for a terrible moral unity; and its final state, an eternal cohesion of eternal dissolution, is war, ‘an opposition of will and passion in which hostilities cannot be terminated by the victory of either’²⁸

This is not a mistaken reading of Augustine. It is, however, a reading which is in critical dialogue that of Robert Markus in his *Saeculum*²⁹ of 1970. The O’Donovans find too much of modern liberal, secularist society in the ways Markus interprets Augustine’s phrase the ‘*interim saeculum*’ – the ‘time between times’ – in which the two cities are commingled.

²⁷ In Luke Bretherton, *Christianity and Contemporary Politics: The Conditions and Possibilities of Faithful Witness* (Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.; Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 3.

²⁸ Oliver O’Donovan and Joan Lockwood O’Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection: Christian Politics, Past and Present* (Grand Rapids, Mich.; Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans Pub, 2004), 58.

²⁹ R. A. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St Augustine* (Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Markus's more recent *Christianity and the Secular*³⁰ saw him modify somewhat the position he took in the 1970s, though there is continuing debate about the precise status of this 'interim saeculum' and thus of human civic and political endeavour within it.

At issue seems to be a varied understanding of what is designated in *City of God* by the term *civitas terrena*. Markus argues in *Saeculum* and again (more succinctly but urgently) in *Christianity and the Secular* that the phrase is used in two distinct senses by Augustine and – in the latter work – that much misunderstanding of his view of society and the Church's relationship with it hinges upon a failure properly to distinguish the two. In the terser rendering of the argument in his later work,

[t]he 'earthly City', 'Babylon', stands both for the impious City or empire, the symbol of the eschatologically separated, unredeemed community of the reprobate, and any actual, empirical society, in which good Christians may discharge public functions, rubbing shoulders with wicked Christian and pagan fellow-citizens.³¹

This view of these two distinct guises which the *civitas terrena* wears is at odds with the way other scholars read the term. In Markus's explanation of its meaning in *Christianity and the Secular*, he is specifically contending with John Milbank's insistence that for Augustine 'the realm of the merely practical, cut off from the ecclesial, is quite simply a realm of sin'.³² Assuming the 'realm of the merely practical' to equate to society or civic order, an opposition is then set up between Church and society whereby there seems no room for any 'good at which civic life tends'³³ at all. There is not only *nulla salus* but *nullum bonum* outside the Church. Markus himself is taken to task by the O'Donovans in *Bonds of Imperfection* precisely because, for them, the *civitas terrena* also stands for both 'Babylon' and actual, empirical society, but with the crucial difference that they are equated. Each stands equally condemned as ordered by "'love of self to the exclusion of love of God'".³⁴

³⁰ R. A. Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, Blessed Pope John XXII Lecture Series in Theology and Culture (Notre Dame, Ind: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

³¹ Markus, *Christianity*, 44.

³² John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford 1990), p 406; cited in Markus, *Christianity*, 42

³³ Jean Bethke Elshtain, 'Augustine', in Peter Scott and William T. Cavanaugh, *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, 1st ed. (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2008), 40.

³⁴ O'Donovan and O'Donovan, *Bonds of Imperfection*, 58.

My own view is that an attempt to translate Augustine's 'earthly city' into the 'secular' political space of modernity is also to dissolve the essential ambiguity of his device, if the 'earthly city' is taken to designate a wholly desacralised realm operating without reference to the sacred. This is something like the position Robert Markus somewhat controversially laid out in *Saeculum*. In the 1980s, Markus revisited and explicitly modified the position he took in *Saeculum*, in *Christianity and the Secular*, recognising that in the intellectual climate of the 1950s and 1960s it had been somewhat tempting to 'see Augustine as one of the founding fathers of a Christian tradition of "secularity"'.³⁵ Augustine's own arguments about what makes a political community truly public (a *res publica*), and his claim that the Church itself is a kind of public, complexify any claim about the nature of political space as entirely secular in the understanding that Markus seems to advance in his earlier work.

There is a tension between the role of the individual and the social as the shaping forces, as it were, behind the two cities. Augustine is clear that the *motif* is a way of speaking about something else, but there is no definitive statement in *The City of God* as to exactly what that is. Is the 'city' – earthly or heavenly – a means of indicating the inner intentions, orientation or motivations of the individual human person? Or does Augustine's emphasis on the social impetus in human nature mean that the 'city' (of whichever sort) must always be some corporate expression of one or other of these two alternatives: love of God or love of self in despite of God? This tension makes for complexity when seeking to determine the moral status (virtuous, impious, or mixed) of a complex concept such as 'society'.

The problem in relating Augustine's cities to actual political realities inheres in the nature of his device, in that it does not tell us precisely what the two cities are. If the 'city' refers primarily to people in their sociality, in some sort of organised group and its workings (bearing in mind the language of 'association' and 'agreement' used by Cicero and repeated by Augustine for describing a commonwealth)³⁶, then it becomes possible to think of the Church in terms of the heavenly city and of 'society' as its opposite and opponent. If, however, it is a question of individual inner orientation and aspiration, then extra-familial sociality becomes much more 'mixed', with members of the two cities being found in both Church *and* society. This is what leaves open the possibility of a slightly more open or 'neutral' (to employ a

³⁵ Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 3.

³⁶ Augustine, *The City of God*, 24.

typically and contentiously Markusian term) way of thinking about life in the ‘time-between-times’, and therefore about ‘society’.

The problem with Augustine is that he is inconsistent. At times he uses the terminology of the city of God interchangeably with that of the ‘pilgrim’, historical Church, and similarly conflates the *civitas terrena* and the empire. Elsewhere he is insistent that citizens of the heavenly city will be found outside the historical Church, and vice versa. This conviction that citizens of both heavenly *and* earthly cities would be found in the historical Church drove his dispute with the ‘purifying’ zeal of the Donatists.

It is true that there is in Augustine’s theology a view of ‘true’ justice, and the truly just or righteous society, belonging only with a people whose loves are rightly ordered towards God and neighbour; and that this is only found in the city of God in its pilgrim form *in hoc saeculo*, and *fully* only when finally revealed at Christ’s second coming. Is there, however, an obverse theological position to this for Augustine, which holds justice to be utterly absent and unattainable anywhere else, and that human enterprises, institutions and societies which are not consciously seeking such total orientation towards God, as in the *civitas Dei*, are therefore alien to any form or degree of justice or right? If this is the case, then the mission of the Church with regard to society must consist in (urgent) proclamation of the Gospel, and/or in preserving its own degree of justice by maintaining its purity in separation from society.

We see Augustine making judgements about the empire, for example, which suggest that it will always be a stranger to ‘justice’ because it fails in the primary requirement of *iustitiae*, which is to render to God his *ius*, understood as ‘right’, or ‘due’. This suggests a very close alignment at this point between Rome the specific political entity, and the earthly city ordered by ‘love of self in despite of God’.

Elsewhere, however, Augustine can be seen working with a much less binary sense of this kind of ‘absolute’ justice in historical political communities. He recognises the value of ‘that imperfect kind of virtue’, serving temporal peace, in his less polemical accounts of the Romans. He also counters any suggestion that ‘the goods which this city desires are not goods’, since ‘in its own human fashion, even that city is better when it possesses them than when it does not’.³⁷ This suggests a much less all-or-nothing interpretation, in which Rome’s

³⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, 435.

justice is assessed not in absolute terms, but by degrees as more or less just. This is Robert Markus's argument about Augustine's intention in recounting the story of a pirate's response to Alexander the Great: 'Because I do it with a little ship, I am called a robber, and because you do it with a great fleet, you are an emperor'.³⁸

The point Augustine is making is not that all societies are morally equally bad, or neutral, or all equally deficient, but that none can claim the only true justice, which is to be found only in the heavenly City.³⁹

While there are areas of Augustine's thought that are confused or self-contradictory, there seems to be general agreement on his belief that the only perfect society is the one brought about by the action of God at the end of history (or the one whose sole denizens before then are the angels).⁴⁰ Augustine's formulation of this perfect society was the allegorical concept of the 'city of God' or *civitas Dei*: a way of conceiving humanity restored in and through Christ to God and to itself in perfect mutuality, enjoying God forever.

The eschatological moment will be one of judgement, where human lives, hearts and actions will be shown to have belonged either to the heavenly city (in its pilgrim form in history), or shown not to: a final sifting which will reveal, finally, the two cities and their citizens, and their ordering to God in despite of self, or to self in despite of God.; but this understanding of the sharply divergent eschatological cities is made much less straightforwardly binary in historical terms precisely because they are only finally known in eschatological perspective.

What we often find otherwise in Augustine is an insistence on the mixed (*permixtas*) nature of the citizens of the two cities in time and history *in hoc interim saeculo*.⁴¹ This produces reticence on any absolute (human, temporal, historical) judgements on the final status of actions (and institutions) before God. I am hesitant, therefore, about an identification of the concrete Church and human political entities with *civitas Dei* and *civitas terrena* respectively. On my own reading of Augustine, his thought is at least ambiguous. It must therefore

³⁸ Augustine, *The City of God*, 175.

³⁹ Markus, *Christianity and the Secular*, 63.

⁴⁰ Robert W. Jenson, *The Last Things: Biblical and Theological Perspectives on Eschatology*, ed. Mr Carl E. Braaten (Grand Rapids, Mich: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2002), 159.

⁴¹ Augustine, *The City of God*, 36.

arguably be misinterpreting him to make too strong an identification of the two cities with Church and 'empire'.

Augustine's two allegorical 'cities' coexist not merely side by side and separately, but somehow intermingled (so as to be difficult to distinguish easily) until the final consummation. Between the action of God incarnate in Christ to open the way for the redemption of the fallen, and the final consummation of history by God in Christ returned, lies *hoc interim saeculum* – the time between Incarnation and Eschaton. For Augustine, this time-between-times is the sixth age of seven, in his preferred scheme for sacred history and its decisive moments, culminating in a seventh age of eternal rest for the just.⁴² It is an area in which, as so often in his theology, God is radically free and disconcertingly 'other'.

On the map of sacred history, the time between Incarnation and Parousia is a blank; a blank of unknown duration, capable of being filled with an infinite variety of happenings, of happenings all equally at home in the pattern of sacred history. None are (*sic*) privileged above others; God's hand and God's purpose are equally present and equally hidden in them all. On them all the old prophecies are silent, for their reference is to the Incarnation and to the final fulfilment. The interim is dark in its ambivalence.⁴³

His eschatology, then, and its 'darkening' of this present age, is about the radical subjectivity of God: a God who was and is and will be present and *active* in history; one who has promised to achieve his purposes and will do so, but beyond the scope of any human 'reading', speculation or assistance. God and God's grace are central to Augustine's vision. It is God alone who creates, who acts to redeem, whose grace enables human appropriation of that redemption, and who will bring history to its final completion in Christ. In the interim, the two allegorical cities are commingled and will be so until the end.

The tension in how to read the cities and their loves against actual political realities seems to be left open and unresolved in Augustine's work. I do not see that *The City of God* offers any transparent or final description of the device of the two cities as it relates to concrete political entities. Rather, I see Augustine's relentlessly eschatological understanding of his cities as a theology of *history*. This is combined with his insistence on their profound entanglement in

⁴² Markus, *Saeculum*, 17ff.

⁴³ Markus, *Saeculum*, 23.

the *interim saeculo*, and I regard this entanglement as requiring a serious reticence on how the cities relate to human political communities.

The ambiguity of his cities may be what makes Augustine such a compelling, multi-faceted and *useful* thinker and theologian. There *is* an absolutely fundamental divide in his theology between an orientation towards God and one away from God – an either/or with no room for any ‘in-between’: two ‘cities’ and two loves. There is at the same time an acknowledgement that the stark divide between them is beyond human judgment and will not be fully revealed until God brings history to a close. The two ‘cities’ will find their proper ‘ends’ – fulfilment in beatific communion or destruction in dissolution – with Christ’s second coming, and until then, they are ‘interwoven, as it were (...) and mingled with one another’.⁴⁴ Before the End, then, there is an eschatologically necessary difficulty in *distinguishing* them, but the *divide* is no less real.

The lacuna in the Augustinian device of the cities, of course, is that there is no clear terminology for *actual* political orders, no way of talking about ‘cities’ as the historical configurations of the mixed-up citizens of the eschatological earthly and heavenly cities. Robert Markus’s dual account of the *civitas terrena* as he sees Augustine use it – as *both* impious Babylon *and* actual historical polities – is an attempt to find such language within Augustinian parameters.

Gillian Rose, in her twentieth-century reading of Augustine in the light of modernity’s ‘diremptions’, proposes a ‘third city’, which seems to be her way of resolving this problem in Augustine.

Gillian Rose’s ‘third’ city

One of my central concerns in exploring the difficulty of the Christian interest litigations as a political problem has been to try to understand and deal with this problem in the context of the everyday settings, the ‘neighbourhoods and streets’, in which they arise. These collisions between practiced Christian faith and secular commitments arise in concrete human encounters, and in attempts to negotiate between them. This ‘daily politics’ of negotiation

⁴⁴ Augustine, *City of God*, 476.

represents the world that is actually inhabited by citizens in the plural, morally and religiously mixed, political communities of the late modern West: the city where we actually live.

The philosopher and political thinker Gillian Rose offers a different route through the problem of reading Augustine's cities as a necessary binary between faith and secularity in modernity, with her notion of a *third city*. She outlines what she means by this in her 1996 essay 'Athens and Jerusalem: a tale of three cities'.⁴⁵ The essay diagnoses a contemporary political problem, which she locates fundamentally in an abdication of the responsibility to think about power and its configurations as a particular response to the critiques of postmodernity. 'Power', in this particular outworking of postmodernism, has become a dirty word. This makes it difficult to talk and think about power as a political reality accurately and critically. The problem is compounded because 'power' is also potentially everywhere in this perspective: from social institutions to Nietzschean impulses, to human selves and their relations. 'Power' is also identified with 'knowledge', as patterns of systematic thought and systematic critique of those patterns.

Rose argues that this diffuse description of power and its associated anxiety results in a refusal to think through and deal with power as a political reality for the ordering of human sociality. This is then problematically and destructively latent, but unacknowledged, in the ways we order and share our lives, as 'blindness to the reconfiguration of power which we may be assisting by our unarticulated characterisation of it'.⁴⁶

This abdication of responsibility, for Rose, leaves us caught between two 'cities', Athens and Jerusalem. 'Athens' allegorises the Enlightenment vision of equality and freedom as the ends of political life, and reason as the means to deliver them. 'Jerusalem' is a consequence of a refusal to analyse the twentieth-century failures of the Enlightenment vision and the reasons for these; it represents a retreat from analysis and wrestling with these questions, into an alternative 'fantasy' politics, in which the problems of political life are subsumed into an idealised vision of 'community', where 'love' 'ethics' and the unproblematic harmonisation of

⁴⁵ Gillian Rose, 'Athens and Jerusalem: A Tale of Three Cities', in *Mourning Becomes the Law* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁴⁶ Rose, Athens, 21.

difference⁴⁷ become the means of resolving the political problem and its tensions: a life of ‘unbounded mutuality, a life without separation and its inevitable anxieties’.⁴⁸

The refusal to think through the *aporiae* of power produces one version of a ‘third city’, in Rose’s analysis. This is a city without a politics as a meaningful engagement with the actual problems of life together. It is the city that ‘separates each individual into a private, autonomous, competitive person, a bounded ego’⁴⁹: the ‘city’ of late-modern capitalist economics and a hyper-liberal abstract account of the person and the citizen.

In her essay, however, Rose proposes another understanding of a ‘third’ city. This ‘third’ city is Rose’s language for the concrete political communities we construct and inhabit, ‘in which we all live and with which we are too familiar’.⁵⁰ There is still a binary in this city which describes fundamental human orientations – a ‘struggle between politics and anti-politics’⁵¹, in Rose’s terms – but it is a struggle which does not resolve *either* into abdication of the responsibility to work within and understand those tensions, *or* into flight into a fantasy of community where difference does not matter, and which is itself another kind of abdication of the struggle. The third city requires us to work, and to think, within the ‘ambitions and the tensions, the utopianism and the violence, the reason and the muddle’ of life as it is lived ‘within the constraints and imperfections’⁵² of time and history.

Rose’s point is the *aporiae*: the sheer difficulty of the third city and (*as?*) our actuality, the lived political experience of the ‘diversity of peoples’ who ‘come together’ to form and construct a city⁵³, and the impossibility of wholly resolving the tensions involved.

I find Rose’s notion of the ‘third city’, a helpful one for describing what I am feeling after, in this thesis. In many ways, it fills a gap in Augustine’s own allegorical device. As I have suggested, neither the city of God, nor the earthly city, as devices in Augustine’s work, seems to function as a way of thinking and speaking about actual political communities - though I have noted the slippage in Augustine which means that the earthly city sometimes used to designate historical political orders as well as a more allegorical device designating love of self

⁴⁷ Rose, Athens, 21.

⁴⁸ Rose, Athens, 22.

⁴⁹ Rose, Athens, 22.

⁵⁰ Rose, Athens, 34.

⁵¹ Rose, Athens, 34.

⁵² Rose, Athens, 34.

⁵³ Gillian Rose, ‘Diremption of Spirit’, in *Shadow of Spirit* (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 54.

in spite of God. Rose's 'third city' seems to function in this way: not to characterise or evaluate specific societies or political orders; and not interchangeably with the *saeculum* - as an epoch within sacred history. Rather, as language for the variety, and moral ambiguity, of actual human and political communities, and the business of living in them. In part, then, the third city offers an account of a difficult territory, the complexly ir/religious and aporetic places where we all live, which we know so well, with their constraints and imperfections. But Rose's 'third city' also looks, to me, like a political 'style' which might orientate lives and living, and human interactions. The 'third city' also seems to designate, in Rose, the work and task of choosing politics over 'anti-politics' in the choices, the interactions and the difficulty of daily living, and within some of the moral ambiguity: a politics of *both* 'the soul' *and* 'the city'.⁵⁴

The remainder of the thesis considers how the theologies of O'Donovan, Milbank and Williams approach these issues in political theology: defining the political, dealing with modernity, and reading Augustine's cities, and assesses how their differing approaches might offer resources for living faithfully in Western democracies in the *aporiae* of genuine difference and divergent commitments.

⁵⁴ Rose, 'Athens and Jerusalem: A Tale of Three Cities', 38.

CHAPTER FOUR

The problem of authority - Oliver O'Donovan's political theology in *The Desire of the Nations* and *The Ways of Judgement*

Introduction

Oliver O'Donovan seeks to describe and deal with a problem in Western political thought and practice in the West which he sees as essentially a crisis of political authority. His argument is that the tradition of Christian political theology in Western settings offers genuine resources by which this crisis of authority might be addressed. He points to an absence, in late-modern democracies, of clear grounds on which the exercise of political authority is *authorised*, and argues that what is needed is the (lost) art of *government* - understood as the direction of societies. The alternative is 'a society conceived in abstraction', 'unformed by moral self-awareness' and driven by internal dynamics rather than led by moral purposes'.¹ This retrieval, he claims, requires some core sense of what a society as a whole is ordered to, what its shared commitments are, and how these are expressed in the way it is governed. The lack in modernity, particularly in late modernity, of a fundamental moral core around which a political community might cohere produces the question, for O'Donovan, of what gives any government the right to rule, and as a consequence, how societies and their citizens can be enabled to act together, and across their internal differences. He argues that government according to some coherent vision of a society's good allows for the negotiation of differences and divergent commitments and gives a basis for arbitration between them.²

This is where O'Donovan's concerns sit alongside my own in this thesis. My questions centre around how difference is negotiated in late-modern and highly plural democracies - including those differences arising from apparently very divergent and even ostensibly incommensurate commitments such as that between public faith and public secularity described by the concept of post-secularity. I have suggested that such colliding commitments can be discerned in the everyday conflicts out of which the legal cases

¹ O'Donovan, Oliver. *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*. Cambridge University Press, 1999.

² O'Donovan, *Desire*, 14.

described in earlier chapters arise, and from the divergent frames of reference underlying the conflict and making their negotiation difficult. I have also recognised further questions which arise in deeply diverse societies, about what kind of minimal social and political cohesion and collaboration is needed - and can be achieved - to avoid either social fragmentation into different and mutually estranged subcultures, or forms of culture war.

I have highlighted in particular the specific difficulties of a communicative and imaginative gulf between secular and Christian commitments in the public square, in a context where the continuing validity of dismissing faith as a form of public reason or relegating its vision for human life to the private sphere is questioned. Additionally, I have asked what account of the theological and the political, and their relationship, can assist theologians - and potentially whole societies - in thinking about and asking how difference is understood and dealt with in contemporary Western politics.

This chapter will ask how O'Donovan's theology deals with these tensions, and how his work understands and relates the theological and the political.

The crisis in politics in Western democracies as a crisis of authority

Key to the political problems identified in O'Donovan's work is the definitive separation of the theological and political in late-modern political liberalism. The opening pages of *The Desire of the Nations*, published in 1999, describe the separation of theology and politics as a history of 'suspicion': a basic anxiety about the potential for mutual corruption by too close an association between them. It is important to note that O'Donovan uses the term 'theology' to include *any* broad moral commitment³, and 'suspicion' in relation to 'theology' includes this general sense of any given moral horizon. At the same time, he remains committed, as a Christian theologian, to framing this moral horizon in scriptural and doctrinal terms. His focus on authority, as the basis for the 'art of government' locates his theology within a formal understanding of the political. I shall return to a fuller discussion of his understanding, and relating, of 'theology' and 'politics' in the course of the chapter.

³ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 7.

'Suspicion' is O'Donovan's shorthand description of a Kantian, Enlightenment anxiety about too close a relationship between political rulers and theology – or indeed any account of the good which appears to have a revelatory or 'divine' mandate.⁴ The 'suspicion', as O'Donovan describes it, is that each will inevitably contaminate the other. Either theology/morality will be recruited by those who rule, as a 'legitimation' for their personal political ends, or else political rulers will be 'corrupted' and political freedom 'overwhelmed' through a 'theological infiltration of political orders, or manipulation of political rulers'.⁵ The result of this kind of anxiety is the 'late-modern liberal consensus on the separation of theology and politics'.⁶

O'Donovan traces a shift of 'suspicion' in the late-modern world. He argues that, from being focussed largely on those who rule as uniquely suspect, suspicion now has an almost hegemonic status in which it has become 'total'.⁷ This *cordon sanitaire* makes political rule impossible, by effectively cutting out the legs from under it. His point is that wholesale suspicion makes the work of politics impossible, as any political action based on a claim about what is 'right' or 'good' can simply be 'unmasked' as serving the agenda or interests of the agent concerned. In a culture of total suspicion, any positive political proposals based on a moral or theological account of the good will inevitably be 'deconstructed' by an endless critical cycle of *cui bono*?⁸

Understood in these terms, O'Donovan's starting point is that politics as the 'art of government' has been so comprehensively subjected to critique and counter-critique that it has effectively been deconstructed out of existence.⁹ What is lacking is any place for 'the "political act", the act which is authorised and carries authority, which can give moral form to a community by defining its commitment to the good in representative performance'.¹⁰ Politics is paralysed, on this account, by its own internal dynamic of suspicion. Endless 'unmaskings' make the political act impossible. Politics ceases to be a governing and directing art and becomes mere sociology: no more than reflection on the unconscious internal processes of human communities.¹¹ A self-enclosed politics with no critical purchase beyond

⁴ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 7.

⁵ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 6–11.

⁶ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 9.

⁷ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 8.

⁸ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 11.

⁹ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 10.

¹⁰ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 249.

¹¹ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 10.

contingent societal processes lacks any firm point of reference and so cannot produce the kind of political judgements which can direct and govern human society, since 'one cannot gain a truer vision of the world by criticism alone, any more than one can make a dish of mince with a grinder and nothing to put through it'.¹²

This account of 'total' suspicion - as the decisive separation of the theological and the political - is how O'Donovan characterises a particular form taken by 'secularity' and its problems in late modernity in *The Desire of the Nations*. He largely eschews using the language of the secular or secularism explicitly, though this is indisputably the territory he is in. However, O'Donovan's description encompasses more than merely constitutional arrangements for a religiously non-aligned state. Instead, it becomes something of an existential characterisation of an entire political and discursive landscape in which 'the division has become internalised'. 'Each of us has a mind', he suggests, 'partitioned by a frontier, and accepts responsibility for policing it'.¹³

O'Donovan's primary use of the language of the secular within his political theology is instead theological, in the sense of life lived between Incarnation and Eschaton *in hoc interim saeculo*. Political authority in this view is 'secular' by virtue of belonging to, and being limited by, this transient and theologically penultimate era. He defines as 'secular' all temporal, political authority which is properly ordered to the rule of Christ. 'Secularity', in these terms, involves 'the humble state',¹⁴ and the recognition by political rulers and governments of the properly limited nature of their political task and authority, 'marked for displacement when the rule of God in Christ is finally disclosed': an authority which is 'confined to this passing age'.¹⁵

This theological conception of political institutions and rule as 'secular' places limits on what any ruler or government can lay claim to - whether a claim to the loyalty of citizens or subjects, or to the kinds of outcomes and goods which a given political order aspires to deliver. Neither can be final or ultimate when the exercise of political authority is seen as secular in the sense used by O'Donovan. His political theology therefore restricts the scope of secular political authority to the work of *judgement*. For all that the political is thus limited in this theological description of the nature of the art of government, what is left is what, for O'Donovan, is key

¹² O'Donovan, *Desire*, 11.

¹³ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 9.

¹⁴ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 219.

¹⁵ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 211–12.

to proper ordering of human society and its flourishing - and what is missing from politics in today's western democracies. The role of political authority *is* about making judgements about what is right.¹⁶

The decisive de-coupling of the political and the theological produces another form of disfunction, in O'Donovan's diagnosis. Where politics functions independently of any moral horizon, a society comes to regard political authority as its own construct - a 'product' of its own will and decisions.¹⁷ A late-modern democracy, nurtured on notions of equality and 'reciprocity', has no reason to consent to the 'obligation' to be governed. O'Donovan sharpens the sense of how alien any such sense of obligation has become by asking how willing citizens still are to be 'subject'. Political authority cannot function if citizens regard such authority as essentially of their own making, and so entailing no obligation to be 'subject' to it.¹⁸

His argument is that a proper account and *authorisation* of political authority is needed in Western democracies in order to make political life possible: a shared, public account of the good as a basis for political action, as the direction of societies which can enable their flourishing. His claim is that political theology is uniquely placed to do this.

The task of political theology

The argument which *The Desire of the Nations* makes is that a contemporary crisis for political authority is where political theology's task begins. O'Donovan suggests that a culture which has lost its grasp of the authoritative, and authorised, political act as the representation and enactment of a community's shared moral commitments opens up a space for theology to speak authoritatively; and that 'theology, by developing its account of the reign of God, may recover the ground traditionally held by the notion of authority'.¹⁹ He argues, however, that this will require political theology to recover and speak from its own biblical, theological and historical roots. He suggests that much contemporary political theology has itself been drawn into the dynamic of suspicion and left unable to speak to the crisis in political authority,

¹⁶ O'Donovan, Oliver. *The Ways of Judgment*. Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2005.

¹⁷ Oliver O'Donovan, *Judgment*, 128.

¹⁸ O'Donovan, *Judgment*, 127.

¹⁹ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 19.

through ‘not knowing how to address the topic without abandoning the posture of totalised criticism and returning to “legitimation”’.²⁰

O’Donovan is not alone in his suspicion of ‘suspicion’, or in asking whether the void left by theology (in the form of the shared Christian culture and moral compass of the Christendom era) has not been filled by other modes of ‘theology’. In the early twentieth century Carl Schmitt was already suggesting, in a more ‘diagnostic’ mode of political theology, the ‘reappearance of theological figures of thought in a secularized political sphere’ in the form of ‘fundamental political beliefs, ideologies and myths’.²¹ The task O’Donovan outlines for political theology is to recover its own account of authority as a central theological theme, as it ‘postulates an analogy...between the acts of God and human acts’,²² and so to be a critical and directing voice in relation to modern politics, filling the contemporary void created by the dynamic of suspicion in Western politics and culture.

The work of *The Desire of the Nations* involves retrieving the history and tradition of Christian political theology, partly by demonstrating its role in political thought via the history of Christian reflection on the interactions of the theological and political in the era of Christendom. In so doing, O’Donovan makes a case that Christian theology can legitimately speak politically of ‘how the Gospel is good news for how humans are to live together and undertake their political and social relations’ and seeks to ‘rehabilitate Christian political thought as central to political thought in general’.²³

He therefore excavates the scriptures for a biblical account of politics which can relate divine and human action, and thus authority: ‘to rediscover politics not as a self-enclosed field of human endeavour but as the theatre of the divine self-disclosure: to rediscover God as the one who exercises rule’.²⁴ For this he constructs a theoretical ‘architectonic’ of scripturally founded, ‘true political concepts’.²⁵

²⁰ O’Donovan, *Desire*, 17.

²¹ Wilde, Marc de. ‘Violence in the State of Exception: Reflections on Theologico-Political Motifs in Benjamin and Schmitt’. In *Political Theologies: Public Religions in a Post-Secular World*, edited by Hent De Vries and Lawrence E. Sullivan, 188–200. New York: Fordham University Press, 2006.

²² O’Donovan, *Desire*, 2.

²³ Bretherton, Luke ‘Introduction, Oliver O’Donovan’s Political Theology and the Liberal Imperative’, in *Political Theology* 9, 3 (October 3 2008), 265-71, 268.

²⁴ O’Donovan, *Desire*, 82.

²⁵ O’Donovan, *Desire*, 15.

O'Donovan lays the foundations for his political theology on the biblical claim and testimony that 'YHWH reigns'.²⁶ In the extensive exegetical and theoretical section of *The Desire of the Nations*, he traces the notion of divine kingship as central to Israel's political identity and Jesus' proclamation.²⁷

He traces the revelation of God's kingly reign initially via three 'affirmations',²⁸ using the Hebrew words for salvation, judgement and possession, as the biblical means by which 'Yhwh's authority as king is established'.²⁹ To these three O'Donovan himself adds a fourth, the human response of praise. He links these four affirmations or themes to the modern concepts of power, law and tradition, together with political recognition, with the aim of relating them to recognisable categories in Western political thought. This then offers 'a framework for exploring the major questions about authority posed by the Western tradition'.³⁰

O'Donovan's four exegetical themes are further elaborated in this section of the book by six theorems, which make a series of normative claims about the nature and function of political authority³¹, and four 'moments' – the latter deriving directly from the story the Early Church told of Christ: Advent, Passion, Restoration and Exaltation.³² The four 'evangelical' 'moments' combine to reveal God's reign in the incarnate, crucified and victorious Son. These 'moments' are in their turn later mapped onto Enda McDonagh's fourfold organising 'Kingdom values' for political theology: justice (which O'Donovan modifies to 'merciful judgment'), freedom, peace ('natural order') and truth.³³

The biblical discussion ends with the conclusion that 'Christ's victory ... is the same victory that was promised to Israel over the nations, the victory of a God-filled and humanised social order over bestial and God-denying empires, a victory won for Israel on behalf of all mankind'.³⁴

²⁶ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 30.

²⁷ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 30.

²⁸ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 45.

²⁹ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 36.

³⁰ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 45.

³¹ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 46–80.

³² O'Donovan, *Desire*, 133.

³³ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 250.

³⁴ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 147.

The purpose of O'Donovan's enormously complex exegetical work is to demonstrate that a story can be told of the nature of divine authority which makes it possible to evaluate political authority as rightly (or wrongly) ordered in relation to the ultimate authority, which is the kingly reign of God and the victory of Christ. The theological architectonic which he builds, founded upon the key themes of salvation, judgement, possession which establish God's reign in the scriptures, is the basis against which all political authority may be assessed as rightly or wrongly ordered in relation to the authority of God, and in obedience or enmity to Christ.

As I have already described, within O'Donovan's description of political authority ordered to the divine, 'secularism' is simply the recognition by believing political rulers and governments of the properly limited nature of their political task and power, 'marked for displacement when the rule of God in Christ is finally disclosed': an authority which is 'confined to this passing age'.³⁵ He therefore characterises 'Christendom' as 'secular'. Christendom, in this understanding of secularity, designates both a historical idea and 'the history of that idea in practice'. The 'idea' is of a 'professedly Christian secular political order'. The 'history' is an era: namely, that period in which 'the truth of Christianity was taken to be a truth of secular politics'.³⁶ While he recognises the various 'elaborations and corrections' that the Christendom 'idea' underwent, he sees its consistent core as the conception of 'a confessionally Christian government, at once 'secular...and obedient to Christ'.³⁷ Crucially, it is *obedience to Christ* which determines what is meant by 'secularity' here. In submitting to Christ's authority, the government of Christendom recognises and determines the limits of its own authority: its penultimacy, in theological terms.

O'Donovan's work offers a coherently theological approach, set within a reading of scripture which traces a coherent and comprehensive political and social vision within the purposes and ways of God. However, this approach is not without its difficulties. Duncan Forrester, for instance, suggests that O'Donovan's handling of his material depends on a particular view of the Bible: showing 'a confidence in the unity and distinctiveness of Scripture, that the Bible

³⁵ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 211–12.

³⁶ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 195.

³⁷ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 195.

has a coherent teaching on everything, and that this teaching is *sui generis*, and asks whether 'such a way of handling Scripture can survive convincingly in secular debate'.³⁸

As I will discuss at greater length below, while breathtakingly detailed in its scope and in many ways incontestable in its theological conclusions, questions remain for me about how O'Donovan's comprehensive scriptural account of political authority serves to equip political theology to address actual political issues in religiously plural societies, where scriptural warrant, and even the language of ultimate right and truth, are barely meaningful.

Political authority as a judgement

The Desire of the Nations establishes the 'secularity' of all temporal political rule, and limits this to the work of public judgement. In a later volume, *The Ways of Judgement*, published in 2005, O'Donovan gives a detailed description of his conception of the nature of political authority as judgement, and of its exercise within political communities. His argument here is that it is permissible, and necessary, for politics to deal in evaluating what is right and just, and that authorised political judgement is only possible when ordered to some conception of what is *right* and *just*, rather than what is expedient, or what plays well in an electoral cycle. He also argues that it is possible and necessary to think and speak about an objective moral order beyond the mere exercise of personal or corporate will. The theological cannot be divorced from the political, in this sense, in his thought.

For a Christian theologian, judgement about what is fundamentally true, or right, is grounded in the nature and will of God. In *Desire of the Nations* this is understood in relation to the biblical witness to how first Israel and then the Church of Christ are ordered in their shared sociality to the will of God for their flourishing final good within God's saving purposes. O'Donovan traces the nature and role of authority as an unfolding scriptural story and disclosure beginning with the lordship of God, and the meaning of God's rule for human social - and political - life. But his own claim that political theology offers resources for addressing a contemporary crisis in political authority requires that the problem be addressed of how a

³⁸ Duncan B Forrester, 'The Desire of the Nations. Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology by Oliver O'Donovan', *The Journal of Theological Studies* 48, no. 2 (October 1997): 758.

model of authority rooted in notions of final 'truth' and 'right' can enable the free response - as freedom - in ethically plural societies.

The notion of how *recognition* functions between those who govern and the governed suggests how O'Donovan might answer these questions in his work. A description of the role of recognition forms an important dimension of the account of authorised political action in *The Ways of Judgement*. We have already seen that O'Donovan recognises that his strong emphasis on the art of government as rule, and on the directing role of political authority, might prove problematic for moderns. In political communities imbued with notions of individual liberty and self-determination the question arises of how and why they should consent to be governed, subject, *obedient*. The notion of recognition avoids any danger of a heavy-handed, coercive model of political authority. O'Donovan argues that when properly functioning, authority confers *freedom* for those governed - as citizens *recognise* political authority being exercised towards a final or ultimate good which they recognise is bound up with their own. Political authority rightly exercised invokes 'recognition' inasmuch as it secures and 'defends' a community's 'common good'.³⁹

There is a sense that O'Donovan's account of authority *The Ways of Judgement* has a slightly different focus compared to the approach taken in earlier work, and his construction of a comprehensive, scriptural and theological 'architectonic' in *The Desire of the Nations*. In the later volume, there is more of a sense of his claims being based in something like a natural theology, and the apprehension of authority as 'right' or 'just' within the natural or created order as a shared frame of reference. He suggests, for example, that '(o)ur situation in the face of political authority, far from being out of the ordinary like an encounter with an angel or a divine revelation, is simply a special case of a situation deeply woven into our experience as human agents'.⁴⁰ In similar vein, he sets his account of political authority within common experiences of being dependent on or directed by another, such as 'doctors, teachers, parents, employers'.⁴¹

In this account of political authority, O'Donovan appears to be feeling after some more common frame of reference for discussion of the problematic necessity, for moderns, of

³⁹ O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 138.

⁴⁰ O'Donovan, *Judgment*, 129.

⁴¹ O'Donovan, *Judgment*, 130.

political authority than an explicitly biblical or theological one. There is an attempt here to show that structures of authority and obedience belong within the nature of reality, and that *recognition* of their 'authorisation' is not necessarily accessible solely from a confessional stance.

A similar approach is apparent in O'Donovan's use of the example of revolution. He uses the indubitably political phenomenon of revolutions to illustrate that political authority involves something more than merely human will and determinations, and involves appeal to an objective moral reality to which is, and must be, related. He argues that a revolution is '(b) definition an extra-constitutional act' which nevertheless represents a form of political authority, 'otherwise it is not a revolution but merely a seizure of power'.⁴² Revolutions arise apart from - and often in opposition to - political institutions: they are not and cannot be legislated for. Yet they occur, as political events, often leading to new political determinations, and new forms of political authority. O'Donovan asks what kind of authority a revolution commands, and points to the impossibility of mere appeals to the 'will of the people' to explain the mystery of why '*this person's* speeches (spurred) the people to act as one'.⁴³

This 'mystery', for the theologian, will be regarded as the work of divine providence. In the case of the revolutionary leader, and the question of why this one rather than that inspires change, then ultimately, to use O'Donovan's language, faith will claim that 'God raised him up'.⁴⁴ But here again, the case being made about authorisation does not stand or fall on a confessional viewpoint. Instead, O'Donovan's reasoning suggests a moral structure inherent in the created order itself, which is recognised in the 'speeches' which mobilise revolutionary change in a population. This is a case for what authorises political action which is potentially more widely accessible in a political community with differing or no religious commitments.

O'Donovan is suggesting a possible common framework for the notion of recognition in the exercise of authority. Those who govern act to direct societies towards what will enable their shared flourishing - or indeed to arbitrate in situations of competing moral/ethical commitments. If their political action in such situations is grounded in what is fundamentally

⁴² O'Donovan, *Judgment*, 128.

⁴³ O'Donovan, *Judgment*, 128.

⁴⁴ O'Donovan, *Judgment*, 128.

right or true in any given circumstance, O'Donovan argues that those governed will be able to see the truth or rightness underlying the decisions, action and arbitrations of their rulers, and therefore 'obey'.

Historical roots – recovering the 'high' tradition of political theology

The most striking feature of O'Donovan work is his challenge to political theology to understand its own history. His argument is that, of the available *non*-scriptural resources, Christianity's long history of interaction with political authority in the era of Christendom has to be a triangulation point: to 'have the first word' in considering which political models Christians can 'approve'⁴⁵, and to be a starting point for that question. He recognises that contemporary realities present a new set of questions and challenges, but there is nothing to be gained, he maintains, 'by a posture of studied distance from the legacy of Christian political reasoning'.⁴⁶

He claims that there is much to be learned from this legacy, and that 'to think through the demands of the Gospel in unfamiliar circumstances, we must have understood its demands in familiar ones'.⁴⁷ His thesis is that '[o]ur present situation' as 'post-Christendom' poses real questions, but that, since it 'has as its backdrop that centuries-long engagement with government which we call "Christendom"', there is 'everything to be said for our learning to address *this* frontier out of the experience the Church has gained from addressing *that* one'.⁴⁸ While late-modernity now has little continuity with the assumptions of Christendom, it has developed *from it* and is its *dénouement*: the 'insights and errors' of the past shaping those of the present.⁴⁹ Here, he is also resisting any merely antithetical characterisation which sets Christianity and the 'secularity' of the late-modern era in a merely binary relationship.

O'Donovan's retrieval of Christianity's association with political authority in the era of Christendom is not simply an exercise in better self-understanding for political theology, through a 'long view' of its own history. The broader and potentially more challenging point

⁴⁵ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 228.

⁴⁶ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 229.

⁴⁷ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 229.

⁴⁸ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 193.

⁴⁹ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 194.

he is making is that contemporary Western political realities, commitments and problems, have emerged from the long interaction, in European Christendom, of the theological and the political. His argument is that the West's present political problems, including a 'secular' commitment to separating the theological and the political, are arguably a product of Europe's political *and Christian* past, and that 'we think and speak from within that cultural legacy'⁵⁰. Hence his argument that fully understanding and addressing the realities and the problems of *this* situation must involve taking serious account of *that* reality out of which it has emerged.

O'Donovan's work of historical retrieval begins with his claim, in *The Desire of the Nations*, that confessionally-Christian political entities, from the empire of late antiquity to the nation-states of late-modern Europe, are the consequence of the success of the Church's mission. The Church proclaims Christ as lord of all, and calls people to turn to Christ and acknowledge him as such. People respond in faith and obedience. This response extends to includes those who exercise authority and rule within political communities. The particular response of rulers involves their authority and rule being exercised under the authority of Christ and so in obedience to his commands. Confessionally Christian societies – and specifically their governments and the 'obedience of rulers'⁵¹ – are simply the result of the success of the Church's mission. Christian mission produced 'Christian princes', who confessed Christ and genuinely sought to order their rule to his. O'Donovan urges that credence be given to the fact that these Christian rulers 'believed the Gospel was true' and 'intended their institutions to reflect Christ's coming reign'.⁵² This meant that the Church's thinking in Christian Europe necessarily involved questions of what it meant to exercise political authority in proper relationship to divine authority.

Against Christendom's theological detractors, and accusations of 'Constantinianism', O'Donovan's argues that a Christian state is a legitimate consequence of a confessionally Christian society. He is impatient with any wholesale theological denigration of Christendom and a dismissal of 'Christian princes' as the capitulation of Christianity to political power in

⁵⁰ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 228.

⁵¹ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 193.

⁵² O'Donovan, *Desire*, 194.

‘taking up Rome’s project’.⁵³ He argues that confessionally Christian rulers are a legitimate outcome of the success of the Church’s mission, understood as proclaiming Christ and calling people, including rulers, to obedience.⁵⁴

O’Donovan’s reconstruction of this political tradition sees its apotheosis in the early-modern period, with a particular form of Christian liberalism. He regards the early-modern period as representing the ‘triumph of Christ in liberal institutions’⁵⁵ – the victory of Christ taking actual, historical and institutional effect as European political authorities ‘bowed’ before the throne of the risen, ascended Christ. Late-modern liberalism, however, in the form of ‘liberal society’, is viewed by contrast as something more like a nadir, in which the political tradition has become detached from its Christian origins and has lost all depth and substance.

This shift – and the ‘end’ of Christendom in O’Donovan’s understanding of that era – is traced in *The Desire of the Nations* to the various forms of the religious non-alignment of states. At this point, we see O’Donovan address ‘secularism’ in the sense of constitutional religious neutrality. He highlights the passing of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1791, prohibiting religious establishment, as symbolic of Christendom’s passing.⁵⁶ This is because he understands the formally constituted non-alignment of a nation state as ‘excluding government from evangelical obedience’.⁵⁷ O’Donovan regards secularism in this form negatively, as fundamentally shaping of a society’s ordering and self-understanding. To deny the possibility of obedience to rulers is implicitly to deny it to society. Religious non-alignment prevents a society’s ‘conscious self-ordering under God’s government’⁵⁸ and has consequences for the way societies are conceived. For O’Donovan, this means an abstract conception of societies which are therefore driven by their own internal dynamics, rather than being formed ‘by moral self-awareness...and led by moral purpose’.⁵⁹

The concept and language of secularisation is likewise not used to describe any aspect of the shift from what he instead terms ‘Christendom’ to ‘post-Christendom’. One might say that

⁵³ O’Donovan (*Desire of the Nations*, 215) is citing Stanley Hauerwas from his collection of essays *After Christendom? How the Church is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation are Bad Ideas* (Abingdon, Nashville, 1991), 59

⁵⁴ O’Donovan, *Desire*, 194ff.

⁵⁵ O’Donovan, *Desire*, 228.

⁵⁶ O’Donovan, *Desire*, 244.

⁵⁷ O’Donovan, *Desire*, 246.

⁵⁸ O’Donovan, *Desire*, 246.

⁵⁹ O’Donovan, *Desire*, 246.

he is simply being consistent in his reticence about the usefulness of the 'humanistic' social and political intellectual traditions of modernity⁶⁰, but this reticence might raise the question of how his work can effectively 'speak' not solely to those who also think and speak from a confessional stance, but into the kinds of religiously, and irreligious mixed societies whose problems his political theology seeks to address.

Elsewhere, O'Donovan's descriptions of the consequences of disallowing the possibility of governments' 'evangelical obedience' are much more sharply negative. The deliberate detachment of liberal democracies, their governments and, by implication, the governed from the possibility of confessional commitment produces a moral and spiritual void. In countering the supposed 'neutrality' of the non-aligned state, O'Donovan claims that the void is inevitably filled by some alternative, directing principle. He identifies this alternative principle as that of sheer voluntarism, which is necessarily idolatrous.⁶¹ The ideas of human freedom, decision and choice as the free exercise of the will, which he regards as the central feature of late-modern political thought and practice, become the driving principle of political authority and, because wholly unrelated to the authority of God, are inevitably opposed to God and idolatrous.

This is 'the notion of the absolute will, exercising choice prior to all reason and order, from whose *fiat lux* spring society, morality and rationality itself' – positing a 'paradigm for human presence in the world' in a way which 'does not (...) honour God's creative deed, but competes with it'.⁶² It is this conviction which underlies his statement of modernity that it

is child of Christianity, and at the same time it has left its father's house and followed the way of the prodigal. Or, to paint the picture in more sombre colours... modernity can be conceived as Antichrist, a parodic and corrupt development of Christian social order'.⁶³

In many ways, O'Donovan's is an important critique of secular modernity's decisive separation of theology and politics. He shows how divorcing the political from any substantive moral vision reduces the shaping of social and political life to the contingencies,

⁶⁰ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 31.

⁶¹ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 227.

⁶² O'Donovan, *Desire*, 274.

⁶³ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 275.

and potentially conflicts, of human choices and determinations, rather than any substantive vision of their good. As O'Donovan himself makes clear, a voluntaristic politics also offers no clear basis for deciding *between* differing desires or commitments when these come into conflict,⁶⁴ which is one of the wider problems the Christian interest litigations reveal.

O'Donovan makes an astute and necessary critique of the risks of a late-modern, secular politics cut adrift from any account of the good of human life and community, and reduced to a self-enclosed, self-determined form of political reasoning and action. In many ways, he is in the same territory here as Rowan Williams, whose political theology is the focus of subsequent chapters. Both are concerned to point out the dangers and losses inherent in a politics with no referent beyond its immediate processes and the determinations of political agents. For O'Donovan, as for Williams, this *must* involve the relating of human political action to the divine, and to Christ, in reclaiming the notion and function of political *authority* - explicitly set in a biblical and theological account of divine authority in *The Desire of the Nations*, but described in the a potentially more widely-accessible notion of *recognition* in *The Ways of Judgement*.

Where I find Williams' theology a potentially more useful contribution in relation to the negotiation of difference in late modernity is in its ability to speak from an unreservedly theological position, while addressing much more explicitly the gulf I have suggested exists between religious and secular ways of thinking and speaking in the public squares, and public conversations, in which Christians negotiate faithful living. Further, Williams is much more consciously grappling theologically with the reality of difference in highly plural societies.

O'Donovan's language in naming what I have called a 'gulf' between can be very stark. His description of modernity as Christianity's 'prodigal child' suggests 'a stark dichotomy between things "Christian" and things "modern"',⁶⁵ for instance; and his description of the role of the 'absolute will' precludes any more benign possibilities for what might motivate contemporary political agents and communities. O'Donovan's claim has been that contemporary political issues can only properly be addressed by political theology in relation to the past, Christian and political. However, I wonder whether a more sustained and sympathetic engagement

⁶⁴ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 14.

⁶⁵ Murphey, Andrew, 'Christendom in an Age of Enlightenment'. *The Cresset* LXIX, no. 5 (Trinity 2006): 55–59, 57. http://thecresset.org/2006/Murphey_T2006.html.

with the key features and commitments of contemporary Western cultures, and of their political problems and possibilities, might better enable O'Donovan to bring a reconstructed political theology to bear fruitfully on these contemporary questions.

The difficulty of plurality and difference

O'Donovan's account of political authority also appears to rely on significant moral and ethical cohesion, even if not also religious, in those who are governed. His notions of 'right' and 'judgement' seem to require much more universal 'recognition' of what constitutes rightness, and more ethical consensus, than may be possible in highly plural societies. But it is this kind of moral convergence which seems to be required, to enable the exercise of judgement as the 'political act' by which such a society can consent in being directed to its own, common, good and accept the obligation and inhabit the freedom which authority as 'right' judgement brings. This returns me to my own question of whether there is a *particular* difficulty in establishing possibilities of commonality in highly plural societies, where there is limited ethical consensus, divergent accounts of the good and a lack of a common language or moral frame of reference in which this can be articulated.

Jonathan Chaplin seems to identify a similar problem in his paper 'Representing People: Oliver O'Donovan on Democracy and Tradition'.⁶⁶ Chaplin interrogates the description of political authority which O'Donovan proposes in *The Ways of Judgment* as the 'representation of a traditioned people'⁶⁷. He analyses how the terms 'representation', 'tradition', and 'people' are used and understood in this formulation. This leads him to the conclusion that political authority in O'Donovan's terms requires a significant degree of ethical cohesion, and a well-defined moral identity on the part of the 'governed', in order to function. His challenge to O'Donovan is that his model of authority might not sufficiently reckon with the concrete pluralism of human political communities, and that the 'representation of a traditioned people' as a description of the nature of rule requires a much greater degree of moral convergence than actually exists in most contemporary political communities in the Western context.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Chaplin, 'Representing a People: Oliver O'Donovan on Democracy and Tradition', *Political Theology* 9, no. 3 (July 2008): 295–307.

⁶⁷ O'Donovan, *Judgment*, 149ff.

Chaplin's critique leads him to suggest a more 'agonistic' conception and practice of politics in morally diverse societies. I will summarise Chaplin's argument, and then look at O'Donovan's response to it, which seems to offer quite a stark evaluation of genuinely diverse polities as 'ungovernable', and an apparent suggestion that the required degree of convergence for politically functional societies ultimately relies on social crisis and conflict to resolve deep moral differences.

The 'representation of a traditioned people'

In *The Ways of Judgment*, published from his Bampton Lectures in 2003, O'Donovan argues for an understanding of political authority as providential: given by God, not derived from human decision. It 'arises as judgement is done' and is something we almost 'stumble upon'.⁶⁸ Encountering it 'resembles our confrontation with the divine. Like God himself, political authority is peremptory'.⁶⁹ Chaplin sees O'Donovan engaged here in a theological deconstruction of any understanding of political authority as essentially and solely 'conjured by a collective agreement of human wills'.⁷⁰ This 'excludes the idea that political representation amounts to any kind of popular authorization of the office of government itself'.⁷¹

Instead, O'Donovan describes political representation as deriving not from the people's will nor their aggregated preferences in a contractarian sense; instead, political authority 'represents' a people via their identity. Chaplin argues that identity is understood in O'Donovan's thought (and drawing on his earlier work *Resurrection and Moral Order*, as well as *The Desire of the Nations* and his 2001 Stob Lectures, published as *Common Objects of Love*⁷²) not in cultural or national but in *moral* terms, such that '(a) "people" is first of all a moral community'.⁷³ This concept of a people understood primarily in moral rather than cultural or geographical terms can also be traced through *The Desire of the Nations*. So

⁶⁸ O'Donovan, *Judgement*, 128.

⁶⁹ O'Donovan, *Judgement*, 134.

⁷⁰ Chaplin, 'Representing a People', 295.

⁷¹ Chaplin, *People*, 297.

⁷² Oliver O'Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community; The 2001 Stob Lectures* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2002).

⁷³ Chaplin, *People*, 297.

'people' does not have a political equivalence to 'nation' or 'state' in O'Donovan's conception, but is 'constituted by participation in the common good'.⁷⁴

To see ourselves as a people is to grasp imaginatively a common good that unifies our overlapping and interlocking practical communications, and so to see ourselves as a single agency, the largest collective agency that we can practically conceive. A people is a complex of social constituents: of local societies determined by the common inhabitation of a place; of institutions, such as universities, banks, and industries; of communities of specialist function, such as laborers, artists, teachers, financiers; of families; and of communities of enthusiasm such as sports clubs and musical organizations. To have identity as a people is to be able to conceive the whole that embraces these various constituents practically, as a coordinated agency.⁷⁵

'Representation' describes the role of political authorities in representing to and for a people its own tradition – the latter being the historical and cultural form *taken* by a people's own common good.⁷⁶

O'Donovan's description of the 'tradition' which political authorities are to 'represent' is that of a people's ongoing and developing sense of what it means to live well: a shared account of its 'common good' which has developed over time. He is careful to make such an account not an abstract ideology, but something that is subject to internal critique and processes of change and development: a 'negotiated' reality that is both 'inherited' and 'developed'.⁷⁷ Tradition is not something he understands conservatively, as fixed and unchanging. He recognises the ways it shifts and changes, while at the same time making the case that, at any given moment, his model for functioning political authority requires some common moral framework that a 'governable' people can recognise as its own common good. He argues for the possibility that a people's 'tradition' can be a coherent moral whole, while recognising that it is in an ongoing and developing process.⁷⁸ In O'Donovan's model, political authority discerns and stands for this tradition as 'what the people at its best, i.e., at its most reflective and considerate, is concerned about': a government does and says 'what the community does and says'.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Chaplin, *People*, 297.

⁷⁵ O'Donovan, *Judgment*, 150.

⁷⁶ Chaplin, *People*, 299.

⁷⁷ O'Donovan, *Judgment*, 147.

⁷⁸ O'Donovan, *Judgment*, 147.

⁷⁹ O'Donovan, *Judgment*, 179.

Authority, tradition, representation – and difference

Chaplin uses Charles Taylor's view of the 'deep diversity'⁸⁰ of contemporary societies to question O'Donovan's definition of political authority as the 'representation of a traditioned people'. His paper questions the underlying assumption about a 'traditioned people' as a political community, and their capacity to cohere around a common conception of their own good. Essentially, his critique rests on whether O'Donovan's conception of political authority as 'representative' of a 'traditioned people' depends too strongly on his definition of a 'people' as having 'sufficient internal cohesion and a sufficiently well-defined moral identity such that it can collectively envisage a coherent and determinate common good'.⁸¹

(T)he assumption regarding the moral cohesion of a people is, so far as I can tell, nowhere subjected to explicit theoretical or empirical investigation in the book.⁸²

Chaplin's view is that, while posing real questions about a society's capacity for 'collectively envisaging and collaborating towards a widely shared common good', such profound differences do not mean that such a society is or has become 'ungovernable'. What it does mean is that some model of 'representation' is needed which can take more account of fundamentally divergent perspectives than he sees in O'Donovan's. Chaplin illustrates his point by asking about the representation of a traditioned people where this included 'British Muslims, Christians, radical feminists, deep ecologists, libertarian capitalists, and others too'⁸³ as a way to convey a sense of that divergence.

Chaplin suggests that these widely differing political, ethical, religious and cultural voices in contemporary Britain will require a much more 'agonistic' model for political conversation. If the role of political authority is 'judgment', in O'Donovan's model (a role that Chaplin is not

⁸⁰ A reminder that Taylor first developed the concept of 'deep diversity' in response to specifically Canadian features of social fragmentation, in his essay 'Deep Diversity and the Future of Canada' (in *Can Canada Survive? Under What Terms and Conditions?* Edited by David Hayne (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1997). Taylor and others have subsequently used 'deep diversity' as a shorthand for describing varying forms of fragmentation in the nation-state, whereby 'its members increasingly identify with the concerns of specific groups rather than with the state as a whole' (Redhead, Mark. 'Charles Taylor's Deeply Diverse Response to Canadian Fragmentation: A Project Often Commented on but Seldom Explored'. *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 36, no. 1 (2003): 61–83. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3233346>.

⁸¹ Chaplin, 'Representing a People', 305.

⁸² Chaplin, *People*, 305.

⁸³ Chaplin, *People*, 306.

unsympathetic to), he asks O'Donovan how, 'in conditions of persisting moral and spiritual diversity' governments can 'discern and implement anything that could be generally recognized as a "common enactment of right"'.⁸⁴ He argues that O'Donovan works with a very unitary sense of what 'a people' is, or needs to be, in order to be constituted by its 'tradition', as its common defence of its common good. The question Chaplin raises for O'Donovan's account of authority in these terms is whether a contemporary, morally and religiously plural society can have 'sufficient internal cohesion and a sufficiently well-defined moral identity such that it can collectively envisage a coherent and determinate common good', and whether situations of deep diversity do not require a more 'agonistic' approach to 'the representative process' as well as to 'deliberative activity'.⁸⁵

A conflictual understanding of tradition?

The 2008 issue of *Political Theology* in which Chaplin's article appears is largely devoted to scholars reflecting on O'Donovan's work. The issue includes a response to his interlocutors from O'Donovan. In his response to Chaplin's paper, he argues that a functioning political community requires a coherent moral framework by which it can be governed, and which is sufficiently 'common' to enable arbitration on specific moral differences and controversies by those entrusted with political authority. His contention is that 'agonistic practice makes sense only on the hypothesis that there is a hegemonic tradition to be contended for'.⁸⁶

O'Donovan illustrates what he means with a snapshot of a conversation with an RAC officer fixing his car, in which he seems to suggest conflict as a means to establish and secure a 'tradition'.

The man who came from the RAC to re-start my car assured me that the Archbishop of Canterbury should quit over his remarks on *sharia* law; the tradition of British law, he claimed, was inflexibly secular and applied to everybody without religious differentiation. Did he think, I asked, that this tradition required, too, that Christian churches should be made to cease conducting marriages? He cast a doubtful glance at the volume of Chomsky lying on his dashboard, and said he supposed that must come. He may turn out to be right. But if he is right, he will have won a struggle for "the" tradition, and I and those who think like me will have lost one. Neither he nor I

⁸⁴ Chaplin, *People*, 307.

⁸⁵ Chaplin, *People*, 305.

⁸⁶ Oliver O'Donovan, 'Judgment, Tradition and Reason: A Response', *Political Theology* 9, no. 3 (3 October 2008): 405, <https://doi.org/10.1558/poth.v9i3.395>.

would be content to be told that Britain's traditions are many—not because that is false, but because it does not address the question we were asking each other. What is important to the notion of tradition, in other words, is not the *differences* but the *contest*.⁸⁷

O'Donovan's view of governability contrasts with Chaplin's. Chaplin suggests that Britain is now so diverse that it 'can no longer be construed as a traditioned people'. This leads him to ask what models of political life are now needed. O'Donovan's response is that, on such an account, 'it cannot be a governed people, either'. He therefore envisages 'some crisis in the near to middle-future' which will 'split it apart into ideological war or perhaps enable a regrouping on more "cohesive" terms': a possibility which he does not think should be 'dismissed out of hand'.⁸⁸

O'Donovan may here simply be inviting a more realistic and sanguine appraisal of difference as a social reality, and of the possibility that conflict - in an ideological sense, as contestation between divergent visions of conviviality- is the inevitable way that real difference is dealt with, and social cohesion and coherent political action are made possible. Alternatively, O'Donovan's authority-orientated political theology, as it plays out logically in the negotiation of genuine difference between individuals and groupings within political communities, may struggle to deal with the significant social and moral diversity, including between belief and non-belief, which seems increasingly to characterise Western democracies. The reality of difference seems to present a problem for the level of moral cohesion required by his account of authority as representation of a political community. He argues that a representative authority of this kind is required to act politically, to judge between the incompatible needs or competing claims which arise from real difference. But real difference – Charles Taylor's 'deep diversity' which Chaplin uses to characterise contemporary societies – as a social and political fact which *produces* competing needs and claims, makes it very difficult for authority to be representative, and so to make the judgements required for government to be possible. The only apparent solution and resolution to this difficulty is social and political conflict *across* difference, in which some commitments and claims will win out over others and make government possible again.

⁸⁷ Oliver O'Donovan, *Judgment, Tradition and Reason*, 395.

⁸⁸ O'Donovan, *Judgment, Tradition and Reason*, 406.

O'Donovan's reading of Augustine

In surveying O'Donovan's political theology, I have suggested that there is quite a strong 'binary' strand which runs through it. This strand in O'Donovan's thinking, as a scholar and reader of Augustine, can be seen as a particular reading and use of aspects of Augustine's thought.

I argued in chapter three that Augustine's theology is clearly marked by the sense of a stark choice to be made, one which fundamentally directs human lives and communities, and their desires and actions, either *to* God as their true and final 'end', or away. At the same time, I have argued for a reticence in Augustine's theology about any final assessments of the status of human lives and communities in relation to God within the time and space of *hoc interim saeculo*: the period between Christ's coming and his return. Augustine's 'relentlessly eschatological'⁸⁹ perspective reserves final judgements to God's ultimate sifting and revealing of human hearts and purposes: hence his reticence about making such judgements preemptively, or indeed about any too-confident claims that God's purposes can clearly be seen unfolding or advancing in the movements of human history. Hence, too, the necessary ambiguity about the 'allegory' of the two cities, which I have argued cannot straightforwardly be mapped onto human political communities because of Augustine's insistence that within history, they remain 'mixed together, entangled, interwoven', their citizens only finally to be distinguished 'at the Last Judgement'.⁹⁰

O'Donovan seems to derive from Augustine a much more confident sense that the eschatological status of human lives and communities, specifically political communities, can be clearly discerned *within* time and history, in terms of their orientation to the authority and lordship of Christ: that is, confessionally. This makes him confident in insisting that Augustine's two 'cities' can and should be mapped onto actual human communities – Rome and the Church – as their 'political expression'.⁹¹

This concrete expression of the Augustinian binary in political entities is what seems to underlie some of the stronger language O'Donovan uses in chapter six of *The Desire of the*

⁸⁹ Robert W. Jenson, 'Eschatology' in *The Blackwell Companion to Political Theology*, Scott, Peter and Cavanaugh, William T (eds) (Malden, MA; Oxford: Blackwell 1994), 408

⁹⁰ Augustine, *The City of God*, 259, 314.

⁹¹ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 202.

Nations regarding the obedience of rulers, noted above. While a sympathetic hearing is enjoined for the sincerity of obedient rulers, O'Donovan's language when describing them deploys rather oppositional terms. Unbelieving political rulers are described as 'alien powers'⁹², but those who have 'bowed before him' are called 'Christ's conquered enemies' who have 'his sovereignty imposed upon them'.⁹³ This at least suggests that, theologically, Christ is ranged against any form of political power and authority which is not self-ordered in explicit, confessional obedience to his rule, and in absolute triumph over those which are. Political authority and the art of government seem to be understood in one of two ways: as either aligned to Christ or ranged against him. In his description of the Church's task of discernment, this is also described in starkly binary terms, as the need to distinguish between 'the working of the Spirit and of the Antichrist' as representing the reign of Christ on earth, and false pretensions to it respectively.⁹⁴

However, elsewhere in O'Donovan's work, as I have already noted, there is more of a sense of the possibility of 'degrees' of obedience in political authorities. In *The Ways of Judgement*, the possibility of an 'evangelical' response to the gospel by political authorities posits more of a sense of a continuum. Political actions in this perspective can be seen in a more nuanced way, as more or less coherent with a faithful response to divine action.

Conclusion - relating *this* frontier to *that*

To think through the demands of the Gospel in unfamiliar circumstances, we must have understood its demands in familiar ones; and nothing whatever is gained by a posture of studied distance from the legacy of Christian political reasoning. If the church has to formulate, not an abstract statement of what might in principle be conceded to political authority, but a challenge to an existing political situation, then let it begin from the challenge the state has already heard and already responded to. We cannot simply go behind it; it has the status of a church tradition, and demands to be treated with respect.⁹⁵

⁹² O'Donovan, *Desire*, 195.

⁹³ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 212.

⁹⁴ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 214.

⁹⁵ O'Donovan, *Desire*, 229.

O'Donovan offers a systematic, comprehensive and theologically coherent political theology grounded in a detailed reading of the scriptures. His work gives a means of relating the theological and the political which is not open to the criticisms of the 'first generation' of ecclesial political theology, noted in earlier chapters, that their theology ceded too much ground to the concerns and thought-forms of the secular modernity.

He also addressed systematically and in details the pressing question for contemporary political communities of whether and how they might live and act together coherently across difference, in the light of some understanding of what is ultimately true and right, around which a political community can cohere, and which it 'owns', as it were. Such a moral framework allows individual questions and decisions within a political community to be dealt with, and the collisions of particular and contesting commitments to be arbitrated, by governments whose right to thus decide and arbitrate can be seen as authorised.

However, I am left with the question of how any objective moral reality, against which the exercise of political authority is a recognisable act of judgement, *can* be 'owned' and talked about in ethically, culturally, and religiously plural societies. The problem is not the robustly theological work in which his project is grounded. It is the issue identified in chapter one: the communicative gulf between divergent thought-worlds in post-secular societies, and the question of what kind of language and frame of reference might enable even minimal consensus and communication across that gulf. O'Donovan is seeking to reinvigorate theology to enable it to speak on its own terms into a shared political problem. But it often seems that is doing so without seriously addressing the questions in late-modern societies of how theology can speak and be heard in a society where religious speech or thought as such, and indeed any comprehensive moral vision which appeals to notions of ultimate right or truth, are no longer seen as authoritative.

An issue which seems to be unresolved in O'Donovan's work is how he understands the relationship between the Christian past and the present, the 'familiar' and the 'unfamiliar' which he has argued must be dealt with in relation to each other, and in what degrees of continuity and discontinuity he believes them to stand. This means that little space is given in his work to assessing the degree and reality of difference between the worlds of Christendom and post-Christendom and engaging sympathetically - albeit critically - with the commitments and concerns of the latter.

I am left wondering what room there might be in O'Donovan's theology for recognising and addressing late/post-modern inhibitions in relation to *any* objective claims - about truth, or right, or reality itself - and the problem of how, and within what framework, his theology might address the problem of the metaphysical (or the meta *anything*) for late-modern thought.

The notion of recognition in his work might be how O'Donovan would respond to my criticism. I have suggested that his reliance on theological and scriptural language and categories begs the question of how he fulfils the stated aim of *The Desire of the Nations*. O'Donovan's aim is to recover a robust political theology and to show how it might resource and inform the transition from the more monolithically Christian societies and cultures of its past into the very different setting of late-modern Western democracies, and help understand and address the problems of the latter. But here again, I find myself wishing for something more explicit from O'Donovan on how notions of 'truth' and 'right' are understood and spoken about and acceded to, and against which acts of direction and governance can be *recognised* by those governed are, in societies which are both morally plural, and in some measure intellectually reticent about final moral absolutes. In what kind of language and categories can citizens in late-modern political communities determine the truth or rightness of political rule, policy decisions, arbitration on matters of moral controversy, such that it enables their obedience and frees them to act?

An associated question is whether he attends sufficiently sympathetically to the anxieties and aspirations of late modernity and give sufficient room for the possibility that they might be ethically grounded - if not explicitly evangelically, at least in a fundamental commitment to human flourishing which might have some congruence with his own concern for flourishing as the 'end' of political authority ordered to Christ. What kind of shifts, for instance, do the attitudes and commitments he collectively terms 'suspicion' represent, in the way Western cultures think, 'feel', speak and act in relation to their politics – and specifically, to political authority – given the key role authority plays in O'Donovan's definition of politics, and of political theology? Giving these concerns a searching, critical 'hearing' might make O'Donovan's theological-political vision for human flourishing more accessible within the political conversations of the complex Western democracies whose difficulties he seeks to address.

CHAPTER FIVE

Theologising the Secular – John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory*

Introduction

John Milbank is a British theologian whose work proposes a radical re-framing of Christianity’s relationship with secular modernity. He is acutely aware of the existence of what I have described as the ‘gulf’ between Christianity and the secular in contemporary political communities, and his work is impelled by the question of how Christian faith can speak in a public, discursive space dominated by secular norms seen as axiomatic.

In his 1990 book *Theology and Social Theory*, Milbank sets out to challenge and overturn the hegemony of ‘the secular’ as somehow normative for public and political thought and speech. He questions its supposed neutrality and therefore any claimed status for secular discourse and politics as *the* way that human existence is described, and life together negotiated. In so doing, he also seeks to counter secular reason’s ‘positioning’ of theology outside the realm of rationality and admissibility, and to reaffirm its status as a comprehensive ‘metadiscourse’, capable of criticising and positioning other accounts of human sociality. This involves a very particular and detailed account of ‘the secular’, the main features of which I shall indicate below.

Milbank thinks and writes consciously in a post-Enlightenment and postmodern context, aware of the limitations this context has placed on confessionally based claims. In an audacious move, however, he uses aspects of post-modern critique to turn the tables. He challenges the dominance of ‘secular’ reason in public discourse since the Enlightenment, by exposing the ‘theological’ foundational assumptions of secular modes of discourse and reasoning as no more rational or defensible than those of faith. This allows him to ‘position’ secular forms of thought and rationality within an account of the history of Christian thought, and to assign them a theological genealogy as heretical offshoots of developments in mediaeval Christian theology. His genealogy claims that a fundamentally violent and conflictual metaphysics underlies these ‘anti-theologies’, such that human difference is only ever understood and negotiated via conflict.

There is a close engagement with difference as a social and political *datum* in Milbank's work. The primary way in which he understands and describes politics, in its broadest sense, is as the navigation of human difference. He proposes a way of dealing with differences as analogically related, rather than necessarily at variance. This is the stark alternative he perceives between the divergent ways social difference is construed and handled by orthodox Christian theology on the one hand, and secular reason on the other, and between the peaceable or violent commitments which underlie each. He argues that Christianity offers a real alternative: a theologically grounded 'imagination in action of a peaceful, reconciled social order', as 'an extension of ecclesial practice' which 'both projects and "represents" the Triune God, who is transcendental peace through differential relation'.¹

Milbank is not primarily concerned with working across what I have called the communicative and imaginative the gulf between religious and secular commitments, or with the difficulties I have identified in negotiating between them in everyday interactions and exchanges where a common language or frame of reference cannot be assumed. The theologico-political issue for Milbank is not how the religious-secular gulf might be understood and navigated. Instead, he is concerned to show, and account for, the very different and fundamentally opposed ideas which lie on either side of it. In *Theology and Social Theory*, he sets out to demonstrate that both can be understood as theologies. On one side of the gulf is orthodox Christian theology, arising from a metaphysics of peace; on the other is a heretical offshoot which ontologically prioritises violence, an anti-theology which leads to the anti-politics of secular modernity.

In this sense, Milbank's understanding of 'difficulty' focuses more strongly on the reality and depth of the 'gulf' I between Christian and secular commitments in late modernity. For him, political *agon* does not mean the struggle to find convergence, or common ground, across this key and diremptive difference. Instead, it involves a historical struggle between competing ways of conceiving reality. He is impelled by the conviction that secular reason is constructed on an originating 'anti-theology' of violence, and that this has devastating consequences for human life, in that it issues in a politics which sees conflict and competition as fundamental to the way lives - and life together - are shaped, and as the only way difference can ultimately be resolved. In this sense, Milbank's critique of 'the secular' as an

¹ Milbank, John. *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*. Oxford; Malden MA: Blackwell, 1990, 6.

anti-theology makes possible an important and sharp critical perspective on some of the rapacity and tribalism which shape much economic and political life, and the ways social and political relations are negotiated, on both a global and interpersonal level. His work demonstrates that these are neither inevitable or necessary and shows that Christian faith offers a coherent account of an alternative.

The questions I am left with, however, are whether his account risks regarding everything which might be comprehended within the language of 'the secular' as irretrievably violent, such that the only form of Christian faithfulness in the 'third city' is struggle with secularity in all its forms.

Milbank's claim in *Theology and Social Theory* is that the destructively competitive and conflictual approach to human difference he identifies is difficult simply to ameliorate by dialogue, interaction, negotiation. He argues that this is because it is rooted in a basic ontology which is essentially and irrevocably conflictual, and so will always produce a conflictual politics. In the book, he sets out an alternative politics of harmonious reconciliation of difference, derived from his account of an orthodox Christian theology's apprehension of ontological peace which comes as the gift of God. Milbank's case is that human action, including human *political* action, can only properly be understood as 'homologously' related to what is 'prior': that is, to the fundamental ontological commitments which underlie it. It is this claim which has led me to focus the discussion in this chapter on his work in *Theology and Social Theory*. This is the book which first set out his theological critique of the dominance of secular reason and discourses in modernity, and offered a programmatic account of a new paradigm, as a highly original, as well as provocative and polemical, thesis.² I have noted that his concerns in *Theology and Social Theory* are ostensibly different from my own. This is a work of social theory rather than political practice. My own reflections in this thesis began with questions of political practice, particularly the everyday negotiation between Christian and secular commitments in plural, 'post-secular' societies. However, a central claim that Milbank makes here is that *ontology* decisively shapes human *action*, including political action. It is this claim which undergirds his characterisation of orthodox Christian theology and secular modernity as arising from

² Kieran Flanagan, 'Preface to Special Issue: Theology and Social Theory', *New Blackfriars* 73, no. 861 (1992): 302, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43249148>.

opposing ontologies. He identifies a narrative of violence as the foundational ‘myth’ of secular reason, and argues that this leads irrevocably to a political outcome in persistently conflictual patterns of human interaction. This pattern of conflict is seen by Milbank as deeply embedded in the forms of social and political life in modernity: and irretrievably so, because of the central, ‘false theology’ on which the secular domain has been constructed.

Milbank begins with the ideas - or ‘myths’, to use his own language - which give rise to action, particularly political action. This decision allows him to shake theology loose from its capitulation to the claims of ‘secular reason’, and thus its discursive marginalisation: a problem which he sets out in the first pages of *Theology and Social Theory*, and sets out to overcome.³ His argument that all forms of social and political life, and thought, begin with foundational ‘theologies’, each as unprovable as the other, allows him to speak as a Christian theologian, from a confessional stance, and sets Christian theology free to present its story, and the forms of life shaped by it, in its own terms.

My argument in this chapter is that while Milbank’s decision to begin with the fundamental ideas from which political action homologously derives produces real gains for theology, these come with some losses. I suggest that these losses are particularly significant for the world of everyday political realities and negotiation in which Christian people and communities actually live in Western democracies. I shall set these out in more detail below but offer a brief overview here.

First, there is a danger that by focusing on underlying ideas, Milbank risks a degree of abstraction in his theology. His key ontological concept of violence is one instance of this, and his rather loose elision of ‘violence’ and ‘power’, which are then rejected at the level of ontology, as has been noted by some of his critics.⁴ Homologously, this will then tend to play out as a negative view of actual political power and its exercise and make it more difficult to grapple theologically with the fact of power as a feature of political life. Beginning with ideas can mean that his opposing ontologies can seem to ‘float above history’⁵ in ways which may leave little room for negotiation or compromise between actual political agents or groups, if

³ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

⁴ Nicholas Lash, ‘Not Exactly Politics or Power?’, *Modern Theology* 8, no. 4 (1992): 358, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.1992.tb00287.x>.

⁵ Gregory, Eric. *Politics and the Order of Love: An Augustinian Ethic of Democratic Citizenship*, Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 2008, 134.

their homologously derived commitments are seen theologically as fundamentally irreconcilable. Ultimately, my concern is that Milbank's claim for the homology between opposing ontologies and the forms of life they produce risks producing conflict as an unavoidable consequence of mapping ideas onto complex, concrete historical communities in the mixed social and political realities of post-secular societies. By arguing that two identifiable and fundamentally opposed views of reality fundamentally shape two equally divergent forms of social and political life, Milbank potentially leaves little room for theological or political manoeuvre in dealing with real difference. The notion and fact of difference is a key one in his own theology. I am suggesting in this thesis that one of the most crucial differences in modernity in the West has been between Christian faith and the ideas and commitments of the secular Enlightenment, and that this continues to play out in more complex ways in conditions of post-secularity. Milbank's differentiation of this difference into theology and anti-theology seems to me to leave limited scope for dealing with this key difference in modernity, and particularly for its faithful navigation in the daily life of Christians in Western democracies.

The claim in *Theology and Social Theory* that political action is homologously related to a prior ontology, then, and the outworking of this interrelatedness of ideas and practice, is why I have chosen to focus primarily on this work. I also refer to *Beyond Secular Order: the Representation of Reality and the Representation of the People*, his later work, in which his notion of homology is further explored. But I have confined my discussion of Milbank's theology in this thesis to the book in which the claims about opposing ontologies and opposing politics were first made and are most fully elaborated.

I shall initially set out the main features of Milbank's description of the secular, and his re-framing of the relationship between Christian theology and secular discourse. I shall then go on to consider in detail some of the main criticisms of Milbank's theology from his readers and relate these to my own questions: about what theological resources can be drawn on for faithfully negotiating this gulf and its difficulty, and how these might relate more specifically to a 'daily politics', and to the societal conversation that shapes shared political life.

‘Once, there was no secular’ - re-framing the relationship

The problem, for Milbank, is that ‘the secular’, in modernity, is a discursive and political space which is essentially autonomous from God, and from any reality beyond that which it asserts itself. This self-referential, autonomous and asserted space of contesting wills is what is meant in his work by the ‘secular as a domain’.⁶ His argument is that the problem begins at the level of ideas. He contends that human sociality, and political community, begin with a particular way of construing reality. Ideas have a fundamental role in shaping how people and communities live and interact in the world, in what he describes as the ‘homology between human thought and human action’.⁷ His reasoning is that all human life and action derive from underlying ideas and commitments which may be no more than a particular, unfounded decision to view reality in a particular way. He thus intends to expose the ‘secular’ myth that ‘progress’ consists in stripping away ‘primitive’ commitments, such as religious ones, to uncover the purely ‘natural’ forms of human life.⁸ Milbank therefore begins with ideas, and excavates those which underlie ‘the secular’, in order to show them to be a construal of reality which is opposed to orthodox Christian theology, but which can be unmasked as a kind of theology.

The first sentence of *Theology and Social Theory* – ‘(o)nce, there was no secular’⁹ – sets the tone for his project as a whole. His theology, and Radical Orthodoxy, the theological movement it inspired, deal with the crisis of modernity via a rejection of the secular, whose ultimate and imploding logic is described in images of the theme parks and cyberspace.¹⁰ The dominance of the secular in modernity is seen to produce political communities founded upon liberal indifference, agnosticism about the common good, and contentment with ‘mere mutual toleration and non-interference with the liberties of others’.¹¹

Milbank regards the crisis of modernity as something much deeper and more fundamental than many of the political theologians of the second half of the twentieth century. Where

⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9.

⁷ John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People* (Hoboken, NY: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 2.

⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9.

⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

¹⁰ John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward, eds., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology* (London; New York: Routledge, 1998), 3,14.

¹¹ John Milbank, *The Word Made Strange: Theology, Language and Culture* (Oxford; Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 1997), 154.

Metz, Sölle and Moltmann were wrestling as ecclesial political theologians with modernity's crises in order to revive and renew its best aspirations, Milbank is much more pessimistic about the modernity project, regarding it as he does as based on flawed foundations, and that theology's attempt to work with and within this heritage is ultimately self-defeating.

His solution is a new, theologically defined and grounded account of human life and meaning.

Radical Orthodoxy defines its endeavour – in opposition to the tradition born of Rahner, Metz, and liberation theology – as an attempt to “reclaim the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework”.¹²

Milbank uses terms such as ‘the secular’ and ‘liberalism’ to characterise the dominant forms of thought and of political life in the late modern era as a whole. He uses them at times in a very broad and undifferentiated way: one which he would defend, but which his critics, to whom we shall come, have suggested are too generalised and imprecise to sustain some of his most trenchant criticisms. Theologians such as Christopher Insole and Eric Gregory, who defend a properly defined account of political liberalism and the secular state from an Augustinian stance, point out that Milbank tends to elide ‘liberalism’ and ‘secularism’ in a similarly problematic way. Insole reads his account of the tradition of political liberalism as presuming that liberalism means or requires a programmatic form of secularism in political and public life: that ‘comprehensive doctrines be “watered down” to fit a secularised common ground’.¹³ Eric Gregory argues that Milbank’s description of secularism equates of necessity to the negation of the divine, inasmuch as he ‘identifies the “secular” with immanence and the denial of transcendence’.¹⁴ Not infrequently, then, Milbank is criticised for loose and sometimes unhistorical language when describing the tradition of political liberalism, and that he often uses the terms ‘secularism’, ‘liberalism’, and indeed ‘modernity’ interchangeably.

In his defence, Milbank’s argument is that the whole philosophical and political tradition of ‘modernity’ relies on the same fundamental understanding of reality. This is his ‘ontology of violence’, to which we will come. He sets out to show that the thought-world and the public

¹² Milbank *et al*, *Radical Orthodoxy*, 1.

¹³ Christopher J. Insole, ‘Against Radical Orthodoxy: The Dangers of Overcoming Political Liberalism’, *Modern Theology* 20, no. 2 (2004): 217, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.2004.00251.x>.

¹⁴ Gregory, *Politics*, 140.

conversation of Western societies are shaped by ‘the secular’, as a dominant set of assumptions, with consequences for human living and for political life, and that ‘the necessity of an ultimate, organizing logic cannot be wished away’.¹⁵ Secular order and secular reason support and reinforce each other: that is the point.

This reasoning also leads Milbank to view the standard secularisation thesis as a construct whereby ‘a particular western history is universalized, and the boundaries between the sub-systems are declared to be inviolable’¹⁶, with a ‘legitimizing narrative (presenting) the modern west as the culmination of “universal” history’¹⁷. His aim is to show that secular modernity is simply one way among many of ordering or ‘coding’ human social life. It is not the result of a kind of progress, as if secularisation simply involved ‘the removal of the superfluous and additional to leave a residue of the human’.¹⁸ Milbank contests these claims and argues that human life is inevitably a hybrid of the natural and the cultural, shaped by beliefs, modes of thought, codes of conduct, rituals, symbols, and suggests that these cannot be ‘peeled back’, as it were, to reach a ‘pure’ form of human nature and activity. The ‘secular’, as Milbank seeks to demonstrate, is simply one construct among others.

He turns to another definition of the ‘secular’: as a Christian concept, understood in a temporal sense, in patristics and in medieval thought. It is the *saeculum*, the period between the Fall and the final Advent of Christ. All human life in this period is ‘secular’, whether the Church or the state. Milbank is seeking to show that modern thinkers have spatialised the secular, regarding it as a space marked off from the sphere of the sacred. This combines with his entirely programmatic view of the trade-offs of a secular polity, in the more conventional sense whereby *all* religious discourse and commitments are banished from the public sphere. He argues, on this basis, that the result is a politics cut off from questions of ultimate purpose and good, and so dominated by what turns out to be an alternative set of equally ‘religious’ commitments, to raw power and profit.¹⁹

¹⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

¹⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 127.

¹⁷ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 128.

¹⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9.

¹⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 426.

Freeing faith to speak

On the other side of Milbank's gulf is Christianity: with a substantive, theological account of the good and a comprehensive vision for human sociality, which is capable of offering an alternative to the failure of secular modernity, since 'theology alone remains the discourse of non-mastery'. Milbank, however, regards Christian theology as having become unable to articulate this alternative vision, and as hopelessly fettered by the demands of secular reason.

To make possible his theological diagnosis and solution for a broken modernity, Milbank aims to overcome what he describes as the 'pathos of modern theology'.²⁰ This is theology's 'false humility', in submitting to the dominance of secular reason in public space. Milbank describes this as theology's retreat either to the territory of 'intimations of a sublimity beyond representation', or into confining what can be said of God to 'immanent fields of knowledge'²¹, as 'secular' modes and criteria of thought and speech. His aim is to reclaim theology's right to speak publicly without the restraints imposed by rational criteria of admissibility: 'about God, and materially about everything else, insofar as it relates to God'²². This is a key concern: to 'restore, in postmodern terms, the possibility of theology as a metadiscourse'.²³

The critique and the alternative

Milbank accepts, and then fundamentally re-works, the social-scientific description of theology as a 'contingent historical construct' dependent on 'particular social practices conjoined with particular semiotic and figural codings'.²⁴ He shows how Nietzschean forms of postmodern analysis uncover 'the inevitably religious or mythic-ritual shape'²⁵ of all forms of human association and thought-worlds, including secular orders and forms of reasoning, as the 'unfounded *mythos* which a particular society projects and enacts for itself'.²⁶ Milbank thus levels the intellectual and discursive playing field, as it were, by overturning the

²⁰ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

²¹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

²² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 239.

²³ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

²⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2.

²⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 2.

²⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 64.

conventional distinctions of religious-secular, irrational-rational, and thus frees theology to 'speak' with as much (or as little) authority as secular discourses, in two ways.

The first is his theological 'positioning'²⁷ and evaluation of secular modes of thinking as 'false theologies', based on fundamental commitments rooted in founding 'myths' of violence and primal conflict. Theology is not understood to provide a critical perspective on culture/social orders, or even the philosophical commitments they represent, based on an assumption that these are independent ideological positions with which theology is in dialogue. Milbank reframes the debate, in seeking to show that the intellectual, cultural and political edifice of modernity derives in large part from a set of flawed ideas which have become 'anti-theologies in disguise'²⁸, by opening up a wider and wider socially and politically 'secular' space, which is collapsing because of its own inherent contradictions and impossibilities.

The second use of theology's freedom to speak on its own terms, in the language of belief, is in order to present its own claims as a 'counter' to secular modernity, and as the possibility and grounds for an alternative form of human life set on alternative metaphysical foundations. Theology offers a 'counter ontology' as a basis for social and political life as a 'counter-history' – of Christ and his Church – and a 'counter-ethics' which embodies peaceful harmonisation of difference.²⁹

'Positioning' the secular theologically

Milbank's thesis is that there is an incommensurability at the most fundamental level between Christianity and the secular. He sets out to show that the intellectual heritage of the secular in modernity essentialises conflict, and that this fundamental and tacit metaphysical commitment to an 'ontology of violence' produces forms of social and political life which are themselves essentially conflictual. Having demonstrated the 'constructed' nature of the secular, as one option among other historically contingent worldviews, he undertakes a 'Foucaultian historical archaeology' of the 'self-deceiving perversity that is

²⁷ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

²⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 3.

²⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 382–434.

secular reason³⁰, in order to show the prioritisation of violence underlying it, to uncover its persistent and recurrent ‘myth’ that conflict is the key to human progress.

He traces two sources for this violent ontology: a persistent pagan mythology of originary conflict and chaos, and a mistaken, heretical turn in medieval Christian theology which issues in a similar prioritisation of conflict: fundamentally at a metaphysical level but issuing ‘homologously’ in competitive and destructive social and political relations. He claims, and sets out to show in detail, that the ‘genealogy’ of modernity can be traced, narrated and explained by theology *as* theology – but as anti-theology, or as theology gone astray.

I am not intending to discuss in detail the intellectual ‘genealogies’ of secular modernity that Milbank proposes in *Theology and Social Theory* and revisits in *Beyond Secular Order*. My interest is in his decision to deal with the relationship between Christianity and the secular at the level of ideas, and the problems this solves, together with the new problems it produces.

Paganism and heresy – uncovering the roots of the secular

Milbank’s intention in his excavation is to expose two strands in secular modernity’s intellectual heritage. One of these strands he regards as essentially pagan, with roots in antiquity and given contemporary expression in the thought of Nietzsche. The other he traces as a development in Christian thought originating in medieval scholasticism, which he regards as essentially heretical.

The strand of ‘paganism’ which Milbank uncovers resides in the antique conception of virtue, which he views as contaminated by a celebration of violence, through an identification of virtue with ‘strength, achievement or conquest’.³¹ He characterises Nietzsche as an exponent of this pagan strand of thinking, as a neopaganism likewise rooted in an idea of a primordial and essential chaos and violence. Milbank’s objective is to demonstrate that this pagan preference for conflict relies on an understanding that it reflects the ‘way things are’ at some fundamental level, on an ontology. Milbank’s thesis is that this ontology is a ‘presupposition of transcendental violence’; an ‘imagined cosmic terror’.³² The point is that it is *imagined*; it

³⁰ Richard H. Roberts, ‘Transcendental Sociology? A Critique of John Milbank’s *Theology and Social Theory Beyond Secular Reason*’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 46, no. 4 (1993): 528, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0036930600045282>.

³¹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 286.

³² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 298.

is no more necessarily a description of the way things are than any other and is shown to be dependent on mythological forms of thinking, anti-theologies.

The second strand in the intellectual genealogy of the 'secular' originates in a theological 'turn', which Milbank regards as a departure from orthodox norms, which opens up the autonomous, self-assertive and self-referential space, and which is the seedbed of secularism and the origin of modernity. He identifies the key characteristics of this turn as *univocity of being*, *voluntarism* and *nominalism*, and its chief architects as medieval Franciscan Scholastics.

Univocity of being

This area in doctrinal reflection relates to how the nature of 'being' is conceived, and whether the same sort of conceptual framework for what it is to exist can be used to speak at once of the creator and the created order: of what is God and what is not-God. This then determines decisively how the relationship between God and the created order can be thought and spoken about.

In the first instance, Milbank characterises a false move in the theology of the Franciscan Scholastic, Duns Scotus. This involves a turn to a 'univocal'³³ conception of being, as the belief that there is only one sort of being, from God on down, even though the infinite might be vastly different from the finite. 'Being' is therefore flattened out into a continuum and, ultimately, God is able to be thought and spoken of in the same way as other beings, without mystery or the necessary caveats, and is ultimately both remote and dispensable. The alternative is that God is spoken of 'analogically', in ways related, but not identical, to those used to speak of creatures. For Milbank, the analogical 'participation' of created being in God preserves both God's transcendent otherness and God's immanent relationship to the created. Essentially, Milbank's argument is that Scotus's abandonment of an analogical conception of being allows for the created, material order to be understood as existing independently of God, and that this theological error opens an autonomous space of 'secularity' both philosophically and politically.³⁴

³³ 'Univocity of being' is the term Milbank uses for describing this theological false step.

³⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 302ff.

Voluntarism and nominalism

The second area of reflection involves patterns of acting, as *voluntarism* and ways of knowing, via a *nominalist* epistemology.

The voluntarism which Milbank describes again belongs with the Scholastic tradition, in which he seeks to show that God began to be talked about via an understanding of the essence of divine nature as *dominium*, the exercise of will. Milbank traces various strands in this trend³⁵, but also regards Duns Scotus (and to some extent the other medieval Franciscan Scholastic, William of Ockham) as giving the fullest expression to this false theological turn. Via the flattened-out univocity of being, the essential nature of humanity as *imago Dei*, and the patterns of human sociality in a now-autonomous, 'secular' sphere, come to be similarly understood in terms of power, self-possession and will.³⁶

This, argues Milbank, leads to a conception of the basic shape of human political and social life as 'violent', since human nature, and interaction, are essentially seen in terms of the assertion of, and contention between, human wills and incommensurable individual freedoms.³⁷

The Scholastic tradition is also presented as the originator of a particular theory of knowledge, based on nominalism. Nominalism, for Milbank, emerges as an idea in the Middle Ages, inherited from antiquity. It replaces an understanding of 'knowing' via identification with the thing known and leads to a detached knower with the known 'projected' onto and developed in the brain, but without any real 'life' or existence independent of the knower.

Milbank's diagnosis of the genesis of modernity argues that, combined with univocity of being, nominalism produces a drift from ontology as the most fundamental category for reflection on existence to epistemology: how we know what we know.

...if all we know are the snapshots that we take, and if you can know something adequately without referring it to God, then you're on the road to Kant – to saying

³⁵ In conversation with Rupert Shortt, Milbank suggests that these include Avicenna, Gilbert Porreta, Roger Bacon, Henry of Ghent and Bonaventure. 'Radical Orthodoxy', in Shortt, Rupert, *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 2005), 108.

³⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 429.

³⁷ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 238.

that what we know is merely how we know things, not a knowledge of how things are in themselves'.³⁸

This medieval shift in the theory of knowing drives a wedge between the act of knowing as the representation of the thing known, and the thing in and of itself, between reality and the act of naming/knowing, between ontology and epistemology.³⁹ This ends in a subject-object dualism, whereby I as the 'knower' produce some kind of an image, inside my head, of the 'thing out there'.

The combination of a 'remote' deity and the contestation of 'the demiurgic wills of human individuals'⁴⁰ is identified by Milbank as the ground of the liberal-secular understanding of human social/political life as an 'autonomous', 'secular' space which is characterised by conflict.

In *Beyond Secular Order*, published in 2014, Milbank sets out to show the 'homology between metaphysical philosophy on the one hand, and political philosophy on the other',⁴¹ and how a false theory of knowledge based in nominalist representation produces an unrepresentative politics, separating the political ruling class from the people, and the people from each other.

Milbank suggests that there is a problematic parallel between modernity's 'representing concept' in epistemology and metaphysics, and its social-political affirmation of representative democracy.⁴² In the former case, human knowledge is cut off from any direct connection to reality because it is limited merely to phenomena. Likewise, modern representative democracy is not a real expression of the will of the many but, rather, merely the assertion of the will of the plutocratic class purporting to represent the will of the people. In essence, modern secularity leaves human beings cut off from reality and from each other. Society becomes merely an aggregate of isolated individuals rather than an organic and interrelated body politic.⁴³

³⁸ John Milbank and Simon Oliver, 'Radical Orthodoxy', in *God's Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation*, ed. Rupert Shortt (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2005), 110.

³⁹ Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 33.

⁴⁰ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 27.

⁴¹ Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 3.

⁴² Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 140.

⁴³ William J. Meyer, 'Review of John Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order: The Representation of Being and the Representation of the People*', *Sophia* 54 (25 November 2015): 601.

In addition to opening an autonomous, secular space, unrelated to God and characterised by a voluntaristic, self-assertive anthropology, the nominalist errors of the Scholastic tradition detach the representation of reality from reality itself, producing an unrepresentative politics. Modern liberal democracies claim to, but do not, represent the 'will' of the people. Instead, political actors are detached from one another within the body politic, and they produce a ruling class so detached from the people that it 'represents' (asserts) only its own will.⁴⁴

An ontology of violence – difference and conflict

Milbank's genealogy of the 'secular' is designed to show its essentially irrational and unfounded dependence on these two strands of 'anti-theology'⁴⁵ – pagan and heretical. He identifies the pagan strand with a basic celebration of violence⁴⁶, and he traces the outworking of the nominalist-voluntarist turn in theology, via his account of univocity of being, into an autonomous, self-assertive and competitive sociality. This enables him to argue that the common feature of these two constitutive strands in the emergence of modernity is an underlying commitment to violence as the basic 'shape' of reality. This is the 'ontology of violence' which Milbank claims is at the heart of the secular. 'In the beginning was violence', and it is reproduced in the forms of life engendered by these traditions.

One of the key consequences of Milbank's rejection of any essentialising or prioritising of violence as a 'false theology' is his turn away from dialectics as a way of dealing with difference. His argument is that the dialectical tradition extends the 'myth' of necessary violence by its assumption that 'antagonism is inevitably brought to an end by a necessary dialectical passage through conflict'.⁴⁷ Any hint at the 'attribution to negativity of a certain positive influence' is the thin end of an ontological wedge, and the first step in giving negativity, or 'the conflictual', something like 'real ontological purchase'.⁴⁸ This implies that any reconciliation or peace is the product and outcome of prior and therefore necessary conflict. He identifies Hegel – and, through Hegel, Marx – as key carriers of the dialectical tradition in modernity. This leads him to reject a tradition in political theology which relies

⁴⁴ Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 140.

⁴⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 3.

⁴⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 288.

⁴⁷ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 389.

⁴⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 313.

on Hegelian or Marxist dialectics: hence Milbank's early signalling of a parting of the ways with the tradition of Rahner, Metz and the liberationists, who draw on this tradition for their own work. Instead, Milbank holds up an alternative ontology, a 'state of total peace', which is utterly prior and totally, divinely given, and makes it possible to 'unthink the necessity of violence'.⁴⁹ Milbank urges that it is nonsensical, in Christian terms, to 'put peaceful reconciliation into dialectical relationship with conflict', and argues a perspective which 'isolates the codes which support the universal sway of antagonism, and contrasts this with the code of a peaceful mode of existence, which has historically arisen as "something else", an *altera civitas*, having no logical or causal connection with the city of violence'.⁵⁰ True peace, and the possibility of reconciliation, emerge not from violence, but as the gift of God. Milbank's argument is that by treating conflict or *agon* as in any way involved in social or political reconciliation or progress, human agents are still caught within the self-referential autonomy of the secular. To rely on dialectics is simply to construct our own 'peace', without reference to God, and political action is thereby detached from any relationship to divine action. However, this rejection of dialectical or agonistic approaches to the social and political reality of difference and incommensurability provokes the question of whether difference is, for Milbank, difficult. His ecclesiology, as we shall see, evokes a peaceful harmonisation of difference with the social 'other', but in a way which might provoke a question about where we see the Church in which this vision is realised, particularly given Milbank's insistence on concrete historical communities.

His resistance to the possibility of dialogue with secular modes of reasoning offers a new freedom for theology as public Christian speech in its own terms; but it means that the *actual* difficulty remains: of how Christians faithfully negotiate the realities of Western politics the tensions of a daily politics in which believers and non-believers will continue to encounter and impinge upon one another and struggle with the difficulty of finding language and terms in which to navigate potentially competing commitments.

⁴⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 411.

⁵⁰ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 389.

Articulating the alternative: ontological and political peace

Milbank's critique, and his theological positioning of secular reason and the forms of thinking and sociality it gives rise to, take up eleven of the twelve chapters of *Theology and Social Theory*. The (lengthy) critique is all 'prelude'. The substantive aim is an assertion: 'of theology itself as a social science, and the queen of sciences for the inhabitants of the *altera civitas*, on pilgrimage through this temporary world'.⁵¹ This is not a search for new universals that can be applied to human history and forms of life in general. The task Milbank sets for theology is to give an account of 'the final causes at work in human history' on the basis of its own 'historically specific faith'.⁵² Neither, however, is it to be a distillation from Christian doctrine of a body of Christian 'social teaching'. The aim is to present a Christian social theory which is wholly coherent with Christian social action, as a social practice: an ecclesiology.

The solution to modernity's bankrupt vision is

to put forward an alternative mythos, equally unfounded, but nonetheless embodying an "ontology of peace", which conceives differences as analogically related, rather than equivocally at variance.⁵³

Milbank opposes a univocal conception of being with an analogical and participative one, drawing on and extending Platonic and Thomist conceptions of the relationship of being to the divine, as both like and unlike.⁵⁴ He counters the nominalist epistemology of the Franciscan Scholastics with an ontologically based theory of knowing which is essentially responsive, a 'knowledge by identity', which links the knowing subject to the thing known. He adds a 'counter-teleological' addendum to this essentially Aristotelian/Platonic model, derived from Augustine and Aquinas. This roots a responsive 'knowing by identity' in our fundamental desires for what is ultimately true, good and beautiful.⁵⁵ This leads him to link knowledge – as relationality and desire – with human creative and artistic expression – as itself a mode of more truly 'knowing' reality.⁵⁶

⁵¹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 380.

⁵² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 380.

⁵³ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 279.

⁵⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 304.

⁵⁵ Milbank, *Beyond Secular Order*, 59.

⁵⁶ Johannes Hoff, 'Beyond Secular Order', *Modern Theology* 32, no. 4 (2016): 680, <https://doi.org/10.1111/moth.12290>.

Milbank argues that Augustine and Aquinas together show us that it is possible to tell the story of reality in a way which does not assume the priority of violence, *agon*, conflict. He presents instead an 'ontology of peace' as the fundamental nature of created reality, not emerging from primordial chaos and conflict, but as plenitude and as divine gratuity. The Trinitarian 'movement from unity to difference'⁵⁷ is the source of Milbank's peaceful political vision of difference not as a spur to conflict, but as possibility of peaceful mutual relation *across* difference. The theological task is to tell this story as a 'counter-ontology', as the origin and basis for social and political life, as a 'counter-history' – of Christ and his Church – and as a 'counter-ethics' which embodies the peaceful harmonisation of difference.⁵⁸ What is 'countered' is the 'secular' ontology of violence and originatory and necessary conflict, with the politics it homologously produces.

Milbank is not concerned to present Christian faith as 'true', in a propositional sense. This would be to fall prey to the dominance of secular claims to rationality. Christianity is presented as ultimately 'rhetorical, persuasive (and postmodern) rather than argumentative, dialectical (and modern)'.⁵⁹ Theology simply needs to tell the Christian story, with its peaceful ontology, in order to demonstrate its superiority to the secular myth of original violence and its political embodiment. Via the homology of this peaceful ontology and human action and social/political relation, the peaceful harmonisation of difference is enacted in the Church's practice and life.

The church

The 'countering' role of Christianity in Milbank's theological vision does not remain at the level of academic theory. He sees the counter-ontology of Christianity's founding *mythos* given form and reality in a distinctive community, the Church.

It is the Church which secures the 'truth' of the Christian myth in concrete, visible form, as a mode of life and as a politics. Milbank relies on a postmodern demonstration that Enlightenment universals rely on myths and are as dependent on non-empirical foundations

⁵⁷ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 423.

⁵⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 381.

⁵⁹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

as Christian theology; but he also points to the Church as an alternative political community which embodies and demonstrates the truth and superiority of the Christian story and its foundational ‘myth’ of the ‘peaceful harmonisation of difference.’ The ecclesial community is a ‘lived narrative’ which ‘represents the Triune God, who is transcendental peace through differential relation’.⁶⁰

He directly relates his opposing ontologies to Augustine’s cities, and regards each city as having a historical and concrete political expression. Thus, the Church becomes the embodied enactment of the priority of peace, and an *altera civitas*: an alternative political community set over against the violence and sin of the secular city.⁶¹

In Milbank’s schema, the ‘ecclesia’ is itself a ‘political reality’⁶², and, further, the only true political society, since it is ordered in relation to the divine and founded in the peaceful ontology of orthodox Christian thought. This means that ‘[a]ll political theory in the antique sense is relocated by Christianity, as thought about the Church’ – a process he regards as having begun with Augustine.⁶³ This, however, dissolves any possibility that a political society might have any purpose, integrity or meaningful account of the good *apart* from the Church; the ‘realm of the merely practical’ – when “cut off from the ecclesial, is quite simply a realm of sin’.⁶⁴ The Church *is* the *altera civitas*. The hope Milbank presents for more harmonious forms of human life lies in the greatest possible extension of the Church’s ‘properly ill-defined’ boundaries. At the same time, he suggests that, of states which remain committed to politics as the containment of essential violence by more violence – as *dominium* – ‘little is to be hoped’.⁶⁵

Positioning the secular - gains and losses

John Milbank’s theology has provoked strong responses: many warmly receptive of the new avenues and freedoms his work opens, and many which are more critical and corrective. In the final part of the chapter, I shall explore further Milbank’s understanding of the ontological

⁶⁰ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 6.

⁶¹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 382.

⁶² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 403.

⁶³ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 403.

⁶⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 406.

⁶⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 422.

and political gulf between Christianity and the secular, to highlight the losses which come with the gains, especially in relation to how Christians navigate the business of daily living in persistently secular Western political contexts.

I share with Milbank an interest in challenging a dominant secular paradigm for the ordering of political life and public speech, and a conflictual model for negotiating difference. His radical reclaiming of discursive territory for theology opens a space for public Christian thought and speech in modern societies, and he acknowledges the (post-) modern issues around communicating from a standpoint of faith where faith is not shared.

His argument that a 'secular domain' is necessarily constructed, rather than what lies beneath supposed religious accretions, allows a searching critique of the pervasive idea that a secular space is founded in a 'desacralized' and universal version of the human.⁶⁶ His demonstration that secular discourse rests on its own pre-rational foundational narratives, allows the supposed neutrality of secular discourse to be questioned, and any claims that only 'secular' criteria can be trusted to frame public conversation and debate. Milbank subverts the very notion of the 'problem' of objective truth, in showing that secular modes of reasoning are just as 'theological' as theology.

This makes it possible to challenge more programmatic modes of secularism. His detailed tracing of the foundation of secular reason in what is essentially a 'story' or mythology gives grounds - and confidence - for Christian faith to speak from within its own founding narrative and vision for human conviviality. Milbank's demolition of the usual reasons for side-lining the voice of faith in public discourse overturns its 'false humility' and opens possibilities beyond the arguments for the definitive separation of the theological and the political. He also offers scope for inviting proper humility in secular forms of thought, and for questioning the claims of objectivity, universality, rationality, empiricism by which religious perspectives are frequently discounted or dismissed. In this sense, Milbank is asking - very persuasively - whether there is really such a gulf between 'secular' modes of reasoning and the stance of faith. This potentially offers a more chastened context for engaging across the difficulties of negotiation between secular and faith commitments in political life.

⁶⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 9.

However, at the same time, Milbank is arguing that a profound gulf exists between the fundamental *ideas* undergirding these commitments at the level of foundational narratives, ways of conceiving reality. My own questions relate to what this theological position means for everyday political negotiation across the gulf in the mixed and quite complex reality of post-secular and deeply diverse societies.

Beginning with ideas

Milbank defines the Christian-secular gulf not as a political problem of difference and incommensurability, but rather, *theologically*, as a difference so final and absolute that only the language of truth and error, orthodoxy and heresy, Christianity and paganism, are adequate to describe and deal with it. His ontological hermeneutic sets up a fundamental opposition between 'true' theology and the false and destructive 'anti-theologies'⁶⁷ as the only way to understand and overcome the crises and failure of secular modernity.

One problem this produces is at a conceptual level, given the degree of abstraction involved in Milbank's ontological hermeneutic. Several commentators note the slippery nature of the term 'violence' as Milbank uses it, and the kind of work the language of 'violence' is being asked to do, homologously, as he moves in his critique of the secular from ontology to actual political action in the world. Rowan Williams, who taught Milbank and who is sympathetic to a good deal of his project, nevertheless observes that

the word 'violence' is both loaded and vague...and sometimes it is being made to do duty for any voluntary limiting of another's unrestricted will, while still retaining extreme pejorative connotations not necessarily appropriate to such a more general account.⁶⁸

Williams' point here is that an imprecise and consistently negative use of the notion of 'violence' leaves no way of grappling with conflict as a fact of historical and social existence: that in 'a contingent world...contestation is inevitable, given that not all goods are compossible'.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 3.

⁶⁸ Rowan Williams, 'Saving Time: Thoughts on Practice, Patience and Vision', *New Blackfriars* 73, no. 861 (1992): 322.

⁶⁹ Williams, *Time*, 322.

In a similar vein, Nicholas Lash questions Milbank's almost undifferentiated equation of violence and power.

Milbank himself too easily adopts Nietzsche's habit of confining the sense of 'power' (*Macht*) to domination and the violence which it entails. But surely an (Augustinian) Christian rejection of the myth of primal violence entails, in turn, rejection of the view that power, as such, is tainted and to be eschewed.⁷⁰

This equation of power with violence, and its consequent rejection at the level of ontology, it could be argued, leaves Christian theology ill-equipped to think through actual forms of human social and political relations, in which issues relating to the use and dynamics of power are necessarily in play. Milbank does not, however, see the contemporary political task to involve engaging with the deep differences between religious and secular visions of human sociality and the inevitable collisions between these in mixed political communities, or with the intellectual and communicative difficulties in negotiating these which I have identified as a feature of post-secular societies. The task he sets for theology is exposing a fundamental opposition between Christianity and the secular and urging a choice between true and false theologies and the kinds of communities they produce: a choice between peace and violence, life and death.

As I have indicated already, the accounts of the heritage of political liberalism and of the secular can be somewhat generalised. For Milbank, 'liberal' *means* 'secular'. Further, he largely engages with just one reading of the 'secular', as the evacuation of all perspectives beyond the immediate and demonstrable from public and political space, and therefore the dismissal of the language and thought forms of faith. Eric Gregory makes this point about the broad-brush definitions Milbank employs in his characterisation of the secular as necessarily hostile to the 'sacred':

Milbank identifies the "secular" with immanence and the denial of transcendence. On these terms, it is impossible to offer an ambivalent assessment of liberal democracy. It is pushed into a corner, just as Milbank feels cramped by its supposed immanence...No doubt many citizens committed to liberal democracy are committed to secularism. But why should Milbank take one version of the liberal story to be the whole story?⁷¹

⁷⁰ Lash, 'Not Exactly Politics or Power?', 358.

⁷¹ Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 140.

While this is a lurking danger for procedural secularism in liberal democracies, it can be argued that a secular politics is not inevitably and *de facto* also programmatic. Ethna Regan, in her theological evaluation of human rights discourse, questions Milbank's negative judgement of the secular, pointing out that positive secular witness, for example that of *Médecins sans Frontières* or *Wanghari Maathai* or the Green Belt Movement, finds no mention in his work⁷², and that he takes no account of the emphasis on the communitarian – rather than atomised and individualistic – dimension of rights in the 'secular' language of the United Nations.⁷³

Ideas and political communities

I wonder whether the decision to frame the relationship between Christianity and the secular as one grounded in deeply divergent ontologies makes it more difficult to bring Milbank's insights to bear on the struggles to negotiate specific differences in actual political communities, including those between faith and 'secularity'. Eric Gregory observes that Milbank 'writes as if two ontologies (peace and violence) float above history, waiting to be instantiated in practice'.⁷⁴ Likewise, the forms of political life that derive homologously from his opposing ontologies run the same risk of abstraction; and the sometimes sharp division of ecclesial and non-ecclesial communities in his theology might be difficult to sustain when overlaid onto actual historical communities.

The reliance in Milbank's theology on opposing ontologies may leave limited room for understanding and integrating concrete political processes, or for imperfect, interim and compromised solutions in the business of negotiation across difference or contestation. This may it difficult for Milbank's theology to account for the uncomfortable and mixed nature of concrete political communities: the combinations of good and bad, creative and destructive, actual and possible, which make them up.

⁷² Ethna Regan, *Theology and the Boundary Discourse of Human Rights* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 180.

⁷³ Regan, *Theology*, 187.

⁷⁴ Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 134.

[Milbank's theology] fails to acknowledge, respect and enable the intention and actuality of human commitments made within the limits of the partial and imperfect knowledge implied by all real involvement in the world.⁷⁵

Eric Gregory suggests that Milbank's 'identification of liberal society with sin offers little possibility for political ethics itself (except as ecclesiology)'.⁷⁶ There is no place in his sharply differentiated, ontologically based model for any continuum in actual political bodies of justice or peacefulness: of degrees of imperfectly just or peaceful politics.

Ethna Regan asks Milbank '[i]s everything that is outside perfection "sin"?' Her warning is that his theology's 'disdain for the secular, including human rights, its preference for a theological politics, and its impatience with the provisional, marks a quest for perfection' and risks 'a placing of theology in the realm of the pure, the permanent, and the certain, a realm that seems more akin to the rigorist elitism of Donatism than to the latitudinal "mixed body" of Augustine's *City of God*'.⁷⁷

Gregory makes the point that Milbank's opposing ontologies deliver a rather final assessment of modernity, without allowing for the open-ended possibility that it may be both 'liable to further decay or, by the grace of God, possible reformation'⁷⁸ within a 'genuinely contingent' history.⁷⁹ He goes on to suggest that this opens real questions about the freedom of God to act providentially within history *apart* from the Church. Rowan Williams raises similar questions about the place that is afforded in Milbank's vision of peace for the working of divine grace *within* historical processes. He points out that his account of peace presents it as 'something 'achieved' but 'with little account of how it is learned, negotiated, betrayed, inched forward, discerned and risked'.⁸⁰

Milbank's critics also suggest that his theology is too ecclesiological, and his ecclesiology too eschatologically anticipative. Nicholas Lash, for example, suggests that the claims in *Theology and Social Theory* for the Church as the new *locus* for political theory might be more appropriately 'located as thought about the Kingdom', in a historical situation where

⁷⁵ Roberts, 'Transcendental Sociology?', 534.

⁷⁶ Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 148.

⁷⁷ Regan, *Theology and the Boundary Discourse of Human Rights*, 204.

⁷⁸ Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 140.

⁷⁹ Gregory, *Politics*, 140. Emphasis in original.

⁸⁰ Rowan Williams, 'Saving Time', 321.

‘salvation is occurring now and is still awaited, eagerly, in hope’.⁸¹ His retrieval of Augustine risks being *insufficiently* Augustinian by over-anticipating the eschaton, and therefore pre-emptes the final eschatological revealing of the citizens of the two cities by mapping the heavenly city too directly onto the empirical Church in time and history. He is therefore open to criticism that his account of the Church tends to be idealised. Rowan Williams observes that the Church’s peace is not an absolute but a historically contingent one; ‘grace does not give innocence...the Church’s peace is a healed history, not a ‘total harmony’ whose constructed (and thus scarred) character doesn’t show’.⁸²

There is no real narration of the Church’s own flawed and imperfect history. The Church’s own turns to violence and conflict (with other groups and internally) requires an ecclesiology which can accommodate the two cities present and *permixtas* within the historical reality and practice of the Church. This is a further dimension of Williams’ critical response to *Theology and Social Theory*; that Milbank’s thought does not sufficiently relate his peaceful ecclesiology to the Church’s *historical* enactment of such peace. This would require taking account of ‘the risks taken by the Church in constructing its peace’ and ‘theologising about its misconstruals, its repeated slithering into premature totalisations, and, ultimately, theologising about the victims of the historical Church’.⁸³

Given Augustine’s ‘deconstruction of antique political society’, by which he shows that ‘by its own standards, its virtue is not virtue, its community is not community, its justice not justice’⁸⁴, it is surprising that Milbank does not put his ecclesiology, and the weight it asks the Church to bear as a historical entity and in its concrete practice, under more critical pressure.

Augustine’s cities

Milbank makes a close correlation between his opposing ‘ontologies’ and Augustine’s two ‘cities’ in his claim that ‘Augustine’s contrast between ontological antagonism and ontological peace is grounded in the contrasting historical narratives of the two cities’.⁸⁵ In claiming,

⁸¹ Lash, *Not Exactly Politics or Power*, 362.

⁸² Williams, *Saving Time*, 322.

⁸³ Williams, *Saving Time*, 323.

⁸⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 389.

⁸⁵ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 390.

however, that ‘the realm of the merely practical, cut off from the ecclesial, is quite simply a realm of sin’, he must be in some danger of mapping the metaphor of the two cities – the heavenly and the earthly – more or less directly onto the Church and what is not the Church respectively. This risks discounting the variety of ways in which Augustine’s cities have been interpreted by scholars, as well as the implications of his metaphor for Christian life in relation to political orders. There is a variety in this interpretative history which the ambiguity of Augustine’s device makes possible.⁸⁶ The problem with identifying political communities directly with the two cities (and Augustine himself is occasionally guilty of at least suggesting the possibility, though not at all consistently or conclusively) is that it denies the fundamental theology of history that underlies Augustine’s use of the metaphor. Gregory suggests that Milbank’s decision to locate politics essentially in the realm of ontology is counter-Augustinian. The *City of God* is above all else a theology of *history*, ‘locating politics within the realm of history rather than being or nature’.⁸⁷ What we learn from looking theologically at history, through Augustine, is not just that it reveals two contending ‘cities’ in its various twists and turns; we learn that in this *interim saeculo* (the time before the eschaton), they are inevitably and permanently *mixed*.

It is the ‘mixed’ nature of historical existence – the presence of the two ‘cities’ in both the ecclesial community and the ‘secular’ order – which is theologically necessary to Augustine’s thought. They will be known, shown for what they truly are, and find their proper place, only with the eschatological ushering-in of God’s final rule over all things – and thus, ultimately, only by God. God’s final judgement then chastens and relativises ours. Milbank seems to lose the eschatological tension between historical communities and the final differentiation of the citizens of the two cities. There is an absence of a sense of the ‘third city’ in addition to his two opposing entities: the peaceful Church and the violent secular ‘city’. Each of these are presented as the only alternative to the other within time and history, excluding the eschatological uncovering of what is otherwise known only to God before the end.

⁸⁶ Eugene TeSelle, ‘The Civic Vision in Augustine’s City of God’, *Thought: Fordham University Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (1987): 268–80.

⁸⁷ Gregory, *Politics and the Order of Love*, 140.

The risk of re-producing the problem

Milbank is vulnerable to the criticism that his own ontological and ecclesial commitment to peacefulness is not carried through in his theological style. Christopher Insole exemplifies this critique when he suggests that ‘Milbank’s positive solution is entirely imitative of the problem (as he sees it) and shares all its drawbacks’.⁸⁸ Insole suggests that Milbank’s theological method reproduces the ‘modern’ problem he himself criticises, of a self-constructed and ultimately arbitrary account of reality. Stanley Hauerwas, who would be broadly sympathetic to much of Milbank’s project to challenge secular, liberal modernity, also asks questions about his methodological decisions. He observes that, while Milbank may be correct to assume that ‘you can only counter a totalizing narrative with another narrative that is equally totalizing’, he risks reproducing ‘the violence of liberalism’ and reducing the Gospel to ‘just another “system” or “theory” in the process’.⁸⁹

Milbank counters these criticisms of theological totalising with an argument that what is needed for Christianity to be convincing is ‘an entire coherent intellectual vision’ which is ‘not a totalised vision in which all the details are set rigidly, but a vision in which all religious belief and practice connects with, say, nature, or the way you read history or the way you act in society.’⁹⁰ What is not addressed here, though, is the strong argument he makes not only for a broad and coherent vision for theology, but for explicitly ‘countering’, ‘positioning’ and ‘demolishing’⁹¹ those other, secular visions via the construction of an opposing theological vision.

Communicating and negotiating - some conclusions in relation to my own concerns

Milbank’s work rightly exposes and challenges the easy assumptions of the secularity he describes - as some kind of apotheosis, a final, pure state of rationality in a story of human progress out of unreason and superstition. To see the secularisation of public and political

⁸⁸ Insole, ‘Against Radical Orthodoxy’, 215.

⁸⁹ Stanley Hauerwas, *Wilderness Wanderings: Probing Twentieth-Century Theology and Philosophy* (New York, Abingdon: Routledge, 1997), 197.

⁹⁰ Shortt, Rupert. *God’s Advocates: Christian Thinkers in Conversation*, London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 2005, 104.

⁹¹ This is Milbank’s own language from the second sentence of *Theology and Social Theory*: ‘To social theorists I shall attempt to disclose the possibility of a sceptical demolition of modern, secular social theory from a perspective with which it is at variance.’ *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

space as anything more than a contingent development in the complex relationship of theology and politics would be historically short sighted and intellectually presumptuous.

A persistent question for me in relation to Milbank's project is how Christianity and the secular *go on from here*. What might it mean, rather than starting from true and false ontologies, to begin with the existence of two contrasting, but co-existing and not-wholly-unrelated, sets of commitments, which are part of the mixed fabric of the polities and relationships in which Christian lives are lived?

The decision to deal with the relationship of Christianity and the secular at the level of ideas, and to evaluate those ideas theologically, and *as* theology, requires a parting of ways. Milbank's argument against a negotiative or dialogical approach to the thought-forms and political philosophies of secular liberalism rests on the ontological claim that he makes about its fundamental orientation and commitment to violence: that 'we have here only to do with heresy on the one hand and the half-return of paganism on the other'.⁹² This conception of opposed and incompatible metaphysical commitments underlies Milbank's retreat from a more negotiative relationship with the intellectual and political traditions of modernity as such, collectively treated in his work as 'the secular'. If these forms of the secular are fundamentally dependent on a violent ontology, which he defines and rejects as paganism and heresy, then the possibility of commonality is precluded, whether in seeking points of contact in language or a discursive framework or looking for common ground in the pursuit of political goods. The stakes are too high and the risk of collusion too great.

If Christianity seeks to 'find a place for' secular reason, it may be perversely compromising with what, on its own terms, is either deviancy or falsehood.⁹³

While he expresses an openness elsewhere to the possibility that 'one can entertain culturally alien meanings, understand them at least up to a point, yet without embracing them'⁹⁴, Milbank holds back from a more mutually-questioning form of dialogue.

⁹² Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 23.

⁹³ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 23.

⁹⁴ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 341.

'Milbank (...) is reluctant to take the final step of envisaging a mutually modifying concourse between different worlds of meaning, restricting the scope of dialectic, as he does, to the exposure of intra-traditional inconsistencies.⁹⁵

'Between nihilistic univocity and Catholic analogy there is no longer any third liberal path'⁹⁶, and the work of Christian theology therefore consists not in engagement, even critical engagement, with the secular, but in countering it. The consequence which his readers have observed is that 'his conception of "counter" has no room for "encounter"'.⁹⁷

One might consider, in this regard, the lack of engagement with Milbank's work by scholars beyond the world of theology. While not inviting dialogue as such, Milbank explicitly addresses his thesis 'both to social theorists and to theologians'.⁹⁸ Despite this intent, however, the academic and philosophical gauntlet he throws down has not been taken up by anyone other than theologians within the academy. The theologian Richard Roberts notes the 'complete unwillingness of sociologists to review *Theology and Social Theory* in the relevant professional journals' or to engage with its 'archeological (*sic*) investigation of the historical roots of their disciplinary procedures'.⁹⁹ This leads him to question the 'adulation' with which *Theology and Social Theory* has been received in some theological circles - as possibly indicating the 'profound intellectual ghettoisation and malaise of much Christian theology'. While I would not concur with Roberts gloomy suggestions about the parlous state of contemporary theology, including the reception of Milbank's work, I do wonder about the risks, in a non-dialogical stance, of placing theology in something of an echo chamber.

He regards late-modern, occidental societies as hegemonically and programmatically secular, both intellectually and discursively. His work seeks to free theology to articulate an 'alternative', ecclesial, vision for human sociality, without being tied to secular criteria of rationality. The result is a potentially thrilling theological challenge and alternative to the supposed 'givens' of secularity. However, I see his claims about the homology of underlying ideas risk as absolutising their difference ontologically as true theology and anti-theology. In my view, this claim for theology as a metadiscourse reinforces the fractures of the post-

⁹⁵ John Daniels, 'Not the Whole Story: Another Response to John Milbank's *Theology and Social Theory*: Part II', *New Blackfriars* 82, no. 963 (2001): 226, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.2001.tb06477.x>.

⁹⁶ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 318.

⁹⁷ Bernd Wannewetsch, 'The Political Worship of the Church: A Critical and Empowering Practice1', *Modern Theology* 12, no. 3 (1996): 296, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0025.1996.tb00091.x>.

⁹⁸ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, 1.

⁹⁹ Roberts, 'Transcendental Sociology?', 535.

secular. Milbank, as I have shown, would argue that the fractures are deep and real, and that negotiation across an ultimately insuperable gulf is self-defeating for Christian faith and succumbs to the lure of dialectics. However, by defining difference as the boundary between true and false theologies, and agonism as an anti-politics which has succumbed to the error of violence, Milbank's theology risks foreclosing dialogue or exchange as a response to this most fundamental 'post-secular' difference between a faith and a secular stance. This raises a question for me about how his theological vision translates into faithful Christian political action within the non-ecclesial, mixed reality of actual political communities, and the concrete navigation of arguably the most significant instance of difference which Christians encounter beyond the ecclesial community, as a daily reality in late modernity in the West.

SECTION III

CHAPTER SIX

Difficulty and life after Christ - Rowan Williams's theology of politics

Introduction

This section of the thesis explores the political theology of Rowan Williams as offering resources towards engaging at some depth with both questions.

It draws on Williams' work for a number of reasons. Firstly, he is a theologian who is contributing constructively to thinking about the broadly political nature of human sociality as part of the theological task, and as having to do with the nature and character of life 'after Christ'. Secondly, Williams is thinking critically, constructively and theologically about questions of the more formal ordering of social and political life and the reality of social and political pluralism and multiculturalism. Thirdly, and crucially, his work is a resource for this thesis because he is a Christian theologian who grapples with real difference. He regards difference, and its consequent difficulty, as essential to historical existence as such. But he also deals explicitly with the particularly sharp forms of difference in today's plural societies. Williams does not simply engage with this kind of difficulty; he also expands and deepens the notion of difficulty as such into a detailed framework for thinking and acting politically: one which opens possibilities for learning and growth, but without any certainties or guarantees within time and history. Finally, his political thinking emerges from a theological catholicity. This 'catholicity', as we shall see, envisages God's redemptive action in the world as a removal of boundaries, and a restoration of human life and human relations which is potentially as wide as humanity itself. This catholicity of vision means that Williams steers away from oppositional understandings of how Christian theology and the Christian Church relate to other forms of human thought, life and meaning in post-secular, plural societies.

I will offer some reflections on key features of that theological hinterland before turning to a specific consideration of how Williams understands and works with the notion of difficulty. Difficulty is a term Williams turns to frequently and suggestively in his work, often in the

context of an encounter with another, in their alterity, to indicate the kind of processes and commitments this involves, if it is to cohere with faith in Christ. However, I have not found anywhere in his work a systematic account of how he understands and uses the term 'difficulty' to think through these kinds of encounters. The core of this chapter will be an attempt at doing that work. I will offer a threefold analysis of how I think Williams understands and uses the notion of difficulty as a description of acting politically 'after Christ' across genuine difference. I will describe how this offers a theologically rich account of Christian political action as the navigation of genuine difference. In the following chapter, I will show how Williams puts this conception of 'difficult' political action to work in actual political communities, engaging specifically with the tensions of Christian faith in plural and secular political communities.

I will comment about my choice of sources at this point. While drawing on a variety of sources, and some commentary on Williams's theology, I will make particular reference in this chapter to his essay 'Between Theology and Metaphysics: Reflections in the wake of Gillian Rose'.¹ Williams is indebted to Rose, a philosopher and social thinker, for some of the ways he thinks about and uses the notion of difficulty, since it is a term to which Rose herself frequently turns in her work. This essay, which is an extensive engagement with her thought, is one of the few places in his writing where we see him work with and expand on the notion of difficulty at any length. It is therefore an important resource for the work this chapter attempts.

An initial note, also, about a distinction between kinds of 'difficulty'. Williams's theology has the reputation for being 'difficult', in the sense of being complex, abstract, stretching and demanding – a reputation which Mike Higton highlights in the opening pages of his book *Difficult Gospel*, which sets out to offer a 'way in' to Williams's thought.² This kind of difficulty is not what this chapter is concerned with. However, I will return to this form of difficulty towards the end of the chapter, as something of a 'problem' for an account of Christian political action as a 'daily politics'.

¹ Williams, Rowan. 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose'. *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (January 1995): 3–22.

² Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 2.

I begin with some parameters: in a description of the kinds of overarching themes in Williams's theology which demarcate and locate his use of 'difficulty'.

Describing politics

There is a strong note of caution running right through much of Williams' recent work against what, in his introduction to *Theology and the Political*, he terms a 'successful' approach to politics – a politics of 'assertion' - and a concern that 'some contemporary voices appear to be content with something very like this'.³ Williams makes a distinction between an 'assertive' and an 'intelligible' basis for political action. By 'assertive', he means the kind of activity which is purely designed to advance my own ends, as I have determined them, in relation to others, and to, as it were, impose my will such that it 'has imprinted its agenda on the "external" world'. An 'intelligible' basis for acting politically, by contrast, involves something much more exposed. 'Intelligible' action 'invites response', is interactive and open to collaboration and to a shared construction of meaning or possible outcome which 'is not exhausted by my action and determination alone'.⁴

There is something of an Augustinian feel to this sharp distinction between intelligibility and assertion. Williams does not himself suggest that his distinction derives from Augustine, but as someone deeply influenced by Augustine, Williams may owe something to Augustine's 'two cities' in suggesting this fundamental distinction between two very different kinds of political action. Here as elsewhere, Williams holds back from identifying either 'city' with any specific historical entity or polity; but there is a sense of a basic and divergent political choice to be made.

Elsewhere, when Williams is explicitly working Augustine's political vision in the *City of God*, and the device of the two cities, Williams suggests a different kind of choice: as 'the opposition' ...not between public and private, church and world, but between political virtue and political vice'.⁵ Augustine characterises the city of God as ordered by love of God and the earthly city by love of self. Williams's notion of intelligibility as the source of meaningful

³ Rowan Williams, 'Introduction', in *Theology and the Political*, ed. Slavoj Žižek, John Milbank, and Creston Davis (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁴ Williams, 'Introduction' in Davis *et al*, *Theology and the Political*, 1–3.

⁵ Rowan Williams, 'Politics and the Soul: A Reading of the City of God', *Milltown Studies* 19/20 (1987), 58.

political action depends on a basic orientation to God, and a congruence between human action and divine action. Hence, and in contrast to the 'successful' action of self-assertion, '[t]heology claims that what intelligible action is "after" is divine action', in the light of the 'core conviction' for Christians that 'the most densely "intelligible" action in the world's history...is the self-exposure of Jesus Christ to death at the hands of political and religious meaning makers'.⁶ I am hesitant to press too far a connection which Williams does not make explicit in his two forms of political action. But it suggests the possibility that Augustine's cities can be read as representing urgent political choices without necessarily setting Christian theology, or the Christian community, in opposition to secular political orders.

The contrast between 'success' and 'intelligibility' as a basis for meaningful political action also demonstrates a preference in his political thought for the social, interpersonal and interactive as the primary focus for reflection – rather than more formal questions of the nature and structuring of political orders, or the nature and use of political authority/rule. If 'intelligibility' is understood as involving systems of exchange and communication, then intelligibility is inevitably and actively social, and politics conceived as this kind of activity will not easily be located within structures of rule and governance, but rather belongs with the looser patterns and processes of life together.

The social as political

In Williams's early work on Christian spirituality, there is preoccupation with the totality of human experience, including the social and political worlds, as the locus of God's redeeming activity, and a refusal to compartmentalise:

'Spirituality' becomes far more than a science of interpreting exceptional private experiences; it must now touch every area of human experience, the public and the social, the painful, negative, even pathological byways of the mind, the moral and relational world. And the goal of a Christian life becomes not enlightenment but wholeness - an acceptance of this complicated and muddled bundle of experiences as a possible theatre for God's creative work.⁷

⁶ Williams, *Politics and the Soul*, 3

⁷ Rowan Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990), 2.

Williams is a theologian whose political interests and thinking tend towards the broadly social rather than the structurally political – for example, as authority and governance – and which focus on the navigation of relations with others across difference. This navigation involves a consideration of the nature and quality of those relations in the light of what faith can say of the nature and being of God in the light of the story of Jesus. Even where he is working explicitly with politics – as, for example, in the essay ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics’⁸ – he tends to develop his thinking on politics in this broadly social direction. Here too, the political framework is seen in comprehensive interpersonal terms as ‘the exchanges and negotiations that constitute our actuality’, and ‘intelligibility’ in so far as it involves ‘human bondedness and exchange’⁹ in the concrete activity of negotiating life together. At the core of his political interests there seems to be a consistent concern with navigating the reality of difference or plurality as what must be attended to and nurtured – as part of the work of constructing a genuine commonality, a ‘city’, in and through concrete encounter and interaction with the social ‘other’ - and the thinking-through of that otherness/difference.

His political theology is theological in that he is constantly seeking to relate the political, located within human life as ‘bondedness and exchange’, to the divine life. This insistence on the *social* nature of both the Gospel and of the political leads him into consistently *concrete* reflection on how redeemed human sociality actually takes shape. There is a constant movement in his theology towards spelling out the forms or shape of human lives as they are lived ‘after’¹⁰ the divine life, in concrete terms, as an essential dimension of more speculative and abstract work. He extrapolates further to ask similarly concrete questions about what life shaped more nearly ‘after Christ’ or ‘in tune with divine life’ might be, in the patterns of ‘bondedness and exchange’ by which our relations are ordered – informally and broadly as a socially-orientated conception of politics. This means that in seeking to relate political action to the divine, he tends towards looking for a style, grammar, a basic orientation – a way of behaving rather than a set of behaviours; a process rather than ends or goals. Williams, however, consistently seeks to root his reaching after a ‘grammar’ or ‘style’ in the concrete rather than the abstract, and the actual rather than sets of ideals. As we shall see he spends

⁸ Rowan Williams, ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics’, 5-6.

⁹ Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 6.

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, ‘Introduction’ in Davis *et al*, *Theology and the Political*, 3.

significant time spelling out what a 'style' of political action related to divine action looks like in practice.

His concern for spelling out what life after Christ might actually look like in day-to-day terms, as we shall see in the next chapter, also has implications for Williams in the questions around the more formal ordering of our political lives. He also consistently seeks to communicate that style or grammar in the most broadly-accessible terms possible – not simply narrowly confessional, in the language of holiness or godliness, but searching for shared vocabulary such as 'most-fully human' and so on, while remaining thoroughly theological. His desire to communicate as broadly as possible itself instantiates his commitment to intelligibility, as openness to questioning, response and amplification from others.

The way these concerns takes shape in his theology is in a commitment to difficulty, and I find him understanding difficulty in two ways: first as something essential to reality as it is, our 'actuality'¹¹, and secondly, as something essential to forms of life and action *within* that actuality which are ordered 'after' divine life and action.

A catholic vision

Williams does his political theology within a particular theological vision for restored or redeemed human life, as what is envisaged and made possible in Christ's death and resurrection. This is a highly universal and (potentially) all-encompassing vision of a restored *humanity*. Benjamin Myers uses the idea of 'catholicity', in its sense of breadth and universality, to express the sense in Williams's thinking that the redeeming work of God includes in its scope humanity in its entirety. Myers traces this catholicity in Williams's conception of salvation to his interactions with Orthodox theology, and specifically the 'imaginative world of modern Russian Orthodoxy, where redemption is envisaged as the removal of boundaries and the creation of a new, organic catholicity (*sobornost*)'.¹² Myers suggests that Williams takes this idea of 'catholicity' in a particular direction, conceiving it in the sense not of some abstract human 'essence', but of human sociality: the 'whole world of

¹¹ Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics', 4.

¹² Benjamin Myers, *Christ the Stranger: The Theology of Rowan Williams*, 1st ed. (London; New York: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2012), 38.

language, mediation and social exchange' which is the substance of our social and political relations.¹³

In his 1982 book *Resurrection*, Williams articulates something of this catholic vision, as he affirms the scope of salvation as a healing of humanity, where '(T)he crucified and his resurrection speak comprehensively of what it is to be saved, *to be a whole human being before God*'. In the same discussion he also draws on the notion of the 'catholic' nature of the Easter Gospel in affirming the possibility that if Christ as whole human being in this sense can be discerned in 'the work of human salvage and restoration wherever it occurs' and in 'another truthful, visionary and compassionate human project', then 'the Easter gospel can indeed be seen to be catholic'.¹⁴

This vision, of the possibility of a 'healed human world'¹⁵, is not coterminous with ecclesial life, identity and belonging for Williams.

(T)he Christian community has a focus for its identity in Jesus, yet the 'limits' set by Jesus are as wide as the human race itself. The Christian 'community' is potentially the whole world: Jesus offers new possibilities for the forms of human life as such, not merely for a particular group to find an identity.¹⁶

The Church in Williams's theology points to the possibility of a 'healed humanity'. This leads him to understand the Church, and Christian living, as being at the service of this possibility, rather than something to be protected or defended. Christian commitment is to 'a common hope and vocation for human beings, such that the welfare or salvation of one section of humanity cannot be imagined as wholly different from or irrelevant to that of the rest of the race'.¹⁷

He also hints at a 'humanity-wide' scope for the theological task, in the essay 'Logic and Spirit in Hegel'. Williams's reading of Hegel leads him to suggest that the preoccupations of the latter

¹³ Myers, *Stranger*, 38.

¹⁴ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1982), 65. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵ Williams, Rowan, *Faith in the Public Square*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2012, 61.

¹⁶ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 137–38.

¹⁷ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 17.

invite the theologian to abandon a theology-in-itself, a theology that refuses to be a way of thinking the nature of human sociality. They invite theology to enact what it talks about and so (*only* so) to become authentic thinking.¹⁸

For Williams, however, this catholic Christian vision also makes possible a catholic *conversation*: a broad human conversation about what our life looks like when more or most truly itself, and about what might sustain the learning and maturation which that involves.

The humanity-wide scope of the new possibilities for human life 'after' Christ makes questions of how human relations are conducted and pursued, including political relations, proper objects of theological attention, and it allows for active attention to, and 'restorative' participation in, the 'whole world of language, mediation and exchange' as having to do with life 'after Christ'.

My own understanding of the notion of intelligibility itself, as a basis for meaningful political action, is that with it, Williams is seeking to spell out in human terms, what 'life after Christ' and a restored humanity looks like as a lived reality: and to do so in a way which invites a response, which is open to revision, critique, supplementation. Moreover, if difficulty is key to such learning and growth, he is also asking about what patterns and habits in human sociality enable life together to live with(in) difficulty, and about those which avoid difficulty and therefore evade learning and growth.

A threefold reading of Williams' notion of difficulty

Williams is not a theologian who works in particularly systematic ways. Monographs are rare in his work, which tends to consist in conversational engagements with other thinkers, or with particular themes. His readers will not find in his writing anything resembling even a working definition of difficulty, despite the significant role it plays in his thinking. Some consistent themes, however, can be traced, which are often implicit in his work and, when made more explicit, help to lay out how the concept of difficulty functions in his thinking. This chapter sets out three different ways in which Williams seems to work with the language and idea of

¹⁸ Williams, Rowan, *Wrestling with Angels: Conversations in Modern Theology*, ed. Mike Higon (London: SCM Press, 2007), 49.

difficulty, and which he, as it were, layers onto one another in his theological account of political action 'after Christ'.

The first 'layer' of difficulty resides in the central role played by human *difference*, and its navigation, in his conception of politics. The second 'layer' is his commitment to *intelligibility* as the basis of that navigation. The third is an insistence on *answerability*: the conviction that the intelligible navigation of difference relates to, and must reckon with, that which is beyond its immediate processes. Together, they represent a consistent feature of Williams's thought, in seeking always to deepen difficulty, rather than to resolve or avoid it.

These three 'layers' or construals of difficulty are related to Williams's core theological convictions, often emerging from his trinitarian theology, his Christology, or both. They are consistent with a conviction that the proper 'end' of all human life, including political life, is a growing orientation to or conformity with the divine life. They also represent the ways he simultaneously recognises and deepens difficulty. Williams is both describing a political reality (that the work of shaping and negotiating life together is difficult) and at the same time advocating a political 'style' which reckons, and actively engages, with difficulty. It is this engagement with the reality and complexity of difficulty which Williams sees as potentially transforming.

This 'style' is offered as both constitutive of the life of faith 'after Christ', and also as constitutive of a catholic vision of redeemed human sociality 'after Christ'. This reading of Williams therefore suggests a non-competitive model for Christian life in religiously plural contexts. It offers a theologically rich but broadly accessible vision for a genuinely common life which reckons with the difficulty of genuine difference which is neither overcome nor made final.

I am suggesting that, by his language of difficulty, Williams does not mean *simply* a struggle with the tensions and contradictions of difference, and political life as life with the other. This is not merely an agonistic approach, as Matheson Russell describes Williams's political theology¹⁹, although these realities *are* where his reflection begins. What he seems to be seeking to do, via the notion of difficulty, is to show the impossibility of conceiving ourselves

¹⁹ Matheson Russell, 'Dispossession and Negotiation: Rowan Williams on Hegel and Political Theology', in Russell Matheson, ed., *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009) 85-114.

as human persons, and ordering life together, purely on the basis of an isolated and individual will as it seeks to advance its ends. He frequently expresses concern that this kind of picture increasingly seems to be how we think about who we are, and how we shape our lives and life together: as though to live and interact in the world is simply a matter of abstractly free-floating, choosing selves or groups of selves whose mutual impingement, when it occurs, is no more than a contest of interests.

Instead, he is looking for an understanding and description of our lives and life together rooted more in a reading of the nature of reality, of *how things fundamentally are*, how life and people and relationships seem most essentially to *be*. This involves recognising that the way we shape our lives is never done in a historical vacuum, but as a continuation of processes of negotiation and exchange that inevitably shape our own. So much of what Williams means by *difficulty* is simply a refusal to allow political interactions to be reduced to isolated, contextless, self-contained acts of self-assertion or self-will. To say political life is *difficult* is simply a way of suggesting that it is not simple – however seductive that conception might be as a way of getting things done or getting one’s way. But he can often be seen looking for ways of doing this which do not simply rely on confessionally-based accounts. Williams often grounds his explorations of how we live together in the world in terms or notions which are accessible not just to Christian, or even religious, believers: like the way language works or the way reality ‘seems to be’. My sense is that this is Williams looking for a way of talking about who we are and how we are to live together in the world which can engender and resource a conversation which is as wide as possible. He is seeking to work ‘communicatively’, in the sense he uses in his introduction to *On Christian Theology*: suggesting that theology ‘witness(es) to the gospel’s capacity for being at home in more than one cultural environment’ and its being able to ‘be rediscovered at the end of a long and exotic detour through strange idioms and structures of thought’.²⁰

He seeks to shift the focus of political thinking and action away not only from *individual* self-assertion, but also from an understanding of politics as concerned solely and in a ‘final’ way with the decisions and choices of persons or groups, as though these were all that needed to be determined and negotiated. He insists on an answerability which goes beyond the social

²⁰ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, xiv.

other, and on the necessity of an 'engagement with structures that have nothing to do with will', with 'a prior and shaping reality' – the way things fundamentally are and the nature of the reality within which we do our political living.²¹ As we will see, he suggests instead that a politics rooted in the way things actually are will involve a fundamental openness to self-exposure, to what he terms 'judgement' and 'answerability'. This answerability is in relation not only to the political and social other (though this is *also* what is meant), but also to what is *prior* to the self. By this, I mean Williams's insistence on some kind of metaphysics. He does his thinking in the context of an account of the nature of reality, and a sense of how our interactions are already caught up in a web and history of historical interaction and exchange by which they, and we, are inescapably shaped. All of this requires what he terms 'self-dispossession': a willing renunciation of ownership or control as the most important feature of political agency and political action. All of the foregoing is why *essential* difficulty seems to characterise the politics he seeks both to describe and to commend.

This leads to a political vision which is deeply and conversationally theological and is rooted in a relational and mutually-questioning and negotiative construal of human difference as a source of learning and growth in and through the reality of difficulty. These dimensions to his thinking offer a non-competitive model for faithful Christian life in situations of religious plurality, but also offer a model for shared political life itself in all its contemporary plurality as a negotiation of difference. And in both he sees the difficult process of negotiation as maturing into the fullest possible humanity, ultimately understood by faith as human living *after Christ*, and which is, in its scope, potentially open to all.

A first layer of difficulty - the construal of difference

In an essay on Hans Urs von Balthasar, Williams recognises the need to 'politicise' Balthasar's theology, but suggests that this involves

...the widest possible theatre of politics, as the muddled, struggling debate, often stifled or abandoned, as to the character of human difference – the debate in which

²¹ Williams is careful elsewhere to clarify that in his concern with the 'prior', he is not trying to import some kind of pre-modern and unproblematic metaphysical order or set of 'givens', but is rather seeking, within the processes of 'consciousness and social/communicative action', a way of articulating a conviction that human life and action is insufficiently understood, as it is actually lived and experienced, if conceived as wholly contingent and so largely 'subject to will'. See Rowan Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose', *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (January 1995): 3–22, 14.

the Christian theologian obstinately battles to understand why it might be that the concrete plurality of human life, from conception to death, demands an unqualified, attentive and hopeful contemplation and a response of nurture and love.²²

This 'widest possible' description of the 'theatre of politics' indicates the focus of Williams's political thinking as a theologian. As a Christian thinker and leader, he is deeply concerned with the political; but his attention is directed towards the 'character of human difference' and then exploring what it means to navigate difference in the 'concrete plurality of human life'. Here, as elsewhere, Williams is a theologian determinedly concerned with how a human life 'after Christ' is actually, concretely lived in the everyday – in this case in the navigation of our shared political life.

This seems to locate Williams' thinking, at this point, within the Schmittian strand in political theology, with its broad conception of 'the political', and of the range of social and cultural spaces in which politics happens.

Part of how Williams then explores a more social conception of politics as difference involves the real possibility of conflict where divergent and often incommensurable desires, interests, perspectives come up against each other in concrete human interactions. It is this territory of mutual impingement which has long been an area of reflection in Williams's work, and over time, has emerged as a place where he traces the possibility of growth into human maturity, and of human transformation, precisely in remaining and working with its *difficulty*.

Some of the importance of difference for Williams, as a category in a social conception of the political, involves how he thinks about the human person. Early in his theological journey, his doctoral work on the Russian Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky exposed him to Lossky's highly complex Trinitarian theology, and the ways this relates to and 'explicates' human existence as something 'between' mutual relatedness and the genuine distinctness of human persons. One element of Lossky's thought that is significant here is his attempt, in a short essay of 1955, to derive a doctrinal account of the human person based on the language of persons used by early theologians for speaking of God as Trinity and of Christ's two natures. The essay is his 'The Theological Notion of the Human Person'.²³ In it, Lossky traces the

²² Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 77-85, 85.

²³ 'The Theological Notion of the Human Person' in Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*. (Crestwood, New York: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1974), 111–23.

development of Trinitarian language among the early Greek Fathers, who began to differentiate between two terms (*hypostasis* and *ousia*) which had previously, in philosophical usage, been regarded as synonyms. The consequence that he discerns for the theological categories of 'person' and 'essence' is that a differentiation of former synonyms which (he suggests) also refused finally to make an absolute distinction between them, allowed theologians to navigate and articulate distinction and unity in speech about both the Triune godhead and the incarnate Christ. Lossky's very technical discussion concludes that there is an essential mysteriousness to personhood which is analogous to that of the divine nature and life. He further points to the language of personhood when used of human beings, understood via its history in Trinitarian and Christological discourse, suggesting an irreducibility of human persons to the sum of things that happen to be true about them, because there is something indefinable in and about us that 'exceeds' even the most exhaustive account of those things.²⁴

Williams traces several consequences that he sees arising from this theological and doctrinal insight of Lossky, which are relevant for the way he approaches difference as a political reality. They are all present in his 2012 annual lecture for the Christian thinktank Theos, 'The Person and the Individual: Human Dignity, Human Relationships and Human Limits'.

In this lecture, Williams suggests that Lossky's work points to a fundamental and ultimately indefinable mystery at the heart of human persons, which is very close to the kinds of things theologians want to say about God and constitutes the ground of human dignity, and the reason why for every human person, irrespective of merit or ability, 'the same kind of attention and respect is due to all of them' that faith regards as due to God.²⁵ This account of personhood deriving from Lossky's insight is one element of Williams's theological commitment to difficulty in human interaction as an attentive reverence before the reality of genuine human difference.

It is in the light of this kind of reverence in the face of the irreducible mystery of the 'other' that Williams explores the political as the negotiation of difference in human social and

²⁴ Lossky, *Person*, 120.

²⁵ Williams, Rowan, "The Person and the Individual: Human Dignity, Human Relationships and Human Limits", Annual Theos Lecture 2012, p 12. Available at <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/cmsfiles/archive/files/FINAL%20ANNUAL%20LECTURE%20PDF%202012.pdf>. Accessed 23 July 2017

political relations. However, this reverence is not another term for a distancing kind of holy awe before the sheer alterity of the social other, an inducement for stepping back in sheer contemplation. On the contrary, it is something more like a 'problematizing' of any sense I might have that I have 'got to know' someone, and functions dispossessively, but enticingly, into further engagements and learning, and reticence about 'final words'.

The concern to relate human action to divine action, and human life to divine life, leads Williams in particular directions in his political thinking about difference, based on the conviction that the relationship between divine and human, creator and creation, must be understood *non-competitively*. Mike Higton traces this in his survey of Williams's theology, in suggesting that Williams

...wants to avoid any hint that God can be at work only in the *gaps* in our world, where other actors, other agencies, are pushed aside to make room for him. This picture will not do. If God's act is seen most clearly in the free human action of Jesus of Nazareth, then it is not seen where creaturely actions are being shouldered aside to make way for divine actions – not, that is, where God is one actor among many – but rather where divine action is the deep, generative ground, the wellspring, the guiding source, of creaturely actions; the context in which they take place, the territory they explore. God is not one more character on the script, one with whom we must negotiate: he is the author of the script, the paper on which it is written.²⁶

Higton discerns this commitment to a non-competitive understanding of God in relation to the creation via the kind of language Williams uses in articulating the relationship between creation and creator, and a reticence about using traditional indicators of *agency* in speaking of the divine in relation to the finite.

If there are moments when the act of God is recognised more plainly than it is in others, or when the subject senses a closeness to the underlying act of God that has the effect of prompting, warning, reassuring or guiding, we are not to think of the fabric of finite order being interrupted, but rather of the world being such that, given certain configurations of finite agencies, the texture of the environment is more clearly transparent to the simple act of divine self-communication.²⁷

²⁶ Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 47.

²⁷ Williams, Rowan, 'Reply: Redeeming Sorrows', in D. Z. Phillips (ed.), *Religion and Morality* (New York, St Martin's Press, 1996), 132-48, 144, cited in Mike Higton, *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams* (London: SCM Press, 2004), 46.

Williams himself explores this non-competitive picture of God in detail in an essay on 'God' for the 2004 volume *Fields of Faith*, both as it shapes a doctrinal conception of God and in how human life and sociality relate to the divine life.

God is not an object competing for attention: to know God is to be involved in the entire range of actions specified by law; or, indeed, more particularly, a writer like Hosea can put 'the knowledge of God' more than once as a parallelism for 'fidelity' and *hesed*, compassionate commitment... God's relation to the chosen community is thus not an element in the community's life, it is the constitutive fact for there being a community at all... God's priority in the life of the covenant community is not a matter of ascribing to God a greater significance than is possessed by anything else; God is that to which every action in some sense refers, that which every action manifests or fails to manifest; and, as such, an agent who cannot be compared with other agents.²⁸

It is this conviction about the nature and 'action' of God which underlies his consistent alertness to the problems with a competitive framing of human social interactions as 'simply a world of jostling essences-in-competition'.²⁹

A third feature of the way Williams deals with 'difference' is his dialogue with postmodern patterns of thought. He is acutely aware of the postmodern critique of the failings of 'modernity': of a totalising subject, reducing or overcoming all difference to a single and exclusive vision: 'all negotiation moves inexorably towards identity, all exchange presupposes an attainable sameness or equivalence'.³⁰ Williams, however, identifies the risk in postmodernity's 'corrective' insistence that the other should be almost untouchable in its alterity, which can simply amount to a refusal to reckon with the reality of difference, but in another guise. 'The fascination in postmodernity with difference' he argues, 'in fact sidesteps the practical constructions of difference with some elegance' because by 'absolutising the other, otherness becomes un-thinkable'.³¹ It is possible to trace through many parts of Williams's work an insistence on the inseparability of relatedness and difference in human political existence as life-with-others; a tension and inseparability which mean that

²⁸ Williams, Rowan, 'God' in David F. Ford, Ben Quash, and Janet Martin Soskice, eds., *Fields of Faith: Theology and Religious Studies for the Twenty-First Century*, Reissue edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 75-89, 77-78.

²⁹ Rowan Williams, *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), 270.

³⁰ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 28.

³¹ Williams, *Wrestling*, 5.

relationship can never 'take over' the reality of human difference, such that the otherness of the other is subsumed, cancelled or erased; but likewise such that difference can never be made final, or absolute, so as to do away with the reality and the imperative of relatedness and mutual entanglement.

I suggested that, in his assessment on politics as the 'muddled, struggling debate...as to the character of human difference', Williams makes the case that it is in precisely through its centuries-long wrestling and reflection on God's 'difference', in the divine life as Trinity and in the human and divine natures of Christ, and in an increasingly plural world, that Christianity offers a distinctive contribution. He argues that theology has been involved in centuries-long work to discern a path between absolutising either sameness or difference in its trinitarian and Christological reflection, 'between the models of identity/presence and identity shadowed by unrepresentable otherness'. In a culture apparently caught between similar polarities of identity and difference, he argues that theology 'stakes a claim to be heard within the cultural debate'.³² Williams offers the possibility that Christian thought (not incidentally, but essentially, because of the nature of its core subject-matter) can be read afresh as an attempt to 'think through otherness so as to avoid totalization' in relation to a broader political and intellectual grappling with the nature and reality of difference and its negotiation.

This concrete political reality of what we might term this 'boundary territory' of related difference is an area of focus in Williams's theology, involving as it does the difficult business of mutual impingement. This mutual impingement, as we will see, emerges as the seedbed of human learning and growth, if the dual temptations of mutual hostility and mutual estrangement can be resisted and difficulty engaged and inhabited.

At the core of Williams's political sensibility, then, is a theologically-founded commitment to recognise and work with real difference between persons and groups of persons as a fundamental reality of human social existence; but equally strongly, the call or imperative to construct a genuine commonality, a 'city'³³, through the navigation and *thinking-through* of that difference in, and as, interaction with the concrete, social other in all their difference,

³² Williams, *Wrestling*, 79.

³³ Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 6.

but without making their difference an absolute, a reason to eschew engagement and the 'labour' of thinking.

This first level of 'difficulty' involves engaging real difference, and steers between dual pulls towards its avoidance, by reducing or cancelling or subsuming the real alterity of the other as 'rival', or by absolutising the 'sacred' other so as to avoid any real engagement with difference. Both are 'easier' paths, because they avoid facing the difficulty of conflict and incommensurability which can characterise encounter with the other; but Williams would, I think, insist that such avoidance, while easier, precludes any possibility of genuinely common life or action.³⁴ I think he would also say – although this is less straightforwardly visible in his scholarly writing – that the 'easier' paths of rivalry or estrangement also preclude the growth *and joy* into which, in Christ, we are invited: 'that I and you should so grow together in our wonder and delight at each other, and our willingness to serve each other, that eventually we will grow into a fullness of conscious joy and love in relation to God, which nothing can ever take away'.³⁵

I now move on to suggest that Williams regards the actual business of negotiating difficulty as procuring, and requiring, further levels of difficulty, if its political 'grammar' is in any way consonant with the divine, via the notion of 'intelligibility'.

A second layer of difficulty - intelligibility

I have argued that the difficult negotiation of real but non-defining difference forms what we might term the 'substance' of the political task for Rowan Williams, and that this way of thinking theologically about concrete political life together offers a potentially fruitful framework for negotiating life together in the daily realities of diverse and plural societies.

³⁴ Williams, *Between*, 17.

³⁵ McCall, Duncan, 'The Stranger Who Could Save You', *The Church Times*, 30 September 2015. <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2016/30-september/comment/opinion/the-stranger-who-could-save-you>. Accessed March 2019. McCall summarises in his article a lecture by Williams at the Church of St Martin in the Fields in central London which I attended, entitled 'The Ethics of Global Relationships'. In the subsequent Q&A, Williams tackled an audience member's rather daunting question asking for a 'potted' account of Christianity. While it is not recorded here, Williams's answer began with a characteristic recognition of the social nature of human historical existence, and of the 'real possibilities for conflict' which life 'with the other' can give rise to. The words which McCall records above are Williams's account of the possibilities which emerge when persons accept the invitation to stay with each other through this 'difficulty'.

This section is an attempt to bring together the kind of political ‘style’ or ‘grammar’ which Williams advocates. This is important because a key feature of how he thinks about human social and political life as a theologian is to keep returning to how life ‘after Christ’ takes shape in concrete terms in the everyday actuality in which it is lived. The question of a political ‘style’ or ‘grammar’ addresses the question of *how* this difficult, non-competitive navigation of real difference happens: what it looks like in the realities of human interactions and exchanges in the process of negotiating differences. In doing so, I will keep in mind some of the framing ideas he brings to the task. The term ‘grammar’ serves as a reminder that he’s looking very broadly at the whole world of human language, interaction and exchange when he’s thinking about politics; and he is doing so with what Myers terms his ‘catholic’ vision: the possibility of restored human life ‘after Christ’, which involves the difficult negotiation of difference and is potentially as wide as the whole human race.

Together, then, these two perspectives form the basis for an approach to politics which is concerned with actual forms of shared human life. Williams consistently works to articulate his broad, social view of politics in the light of the conviction that ‘as preached by Jesus’, the gospel ‘is a gift from one person to another, and, as such, both sustains and constitutes certain sorts of relationships’ and ‘occurs in the interaction of historical persons’.³⁶ He insistently presses the theological questions and possibilities concerning how actual forms of human life are and become ‘Son-like’³⁷, via his non-competitive conception of the nature and action of the *divine* life.

In this section, I will explore Williams’s frequent turning to the language of *intelligibility* to do the work of teasing out in concrete terms the ‘grammar’ of the political task, as the non-competitive negotiation of difference ‘after Christ’.

It is important first to clarify what Williams does *not* mean by the term ‘intelligibility’. On the surface, one might assume that intelligibility assumes getting across to another person a clear statement of an already-determined idea – about oneself and one’s interests, about the other person, about how one sees things going in the process of negotiation, and so on. In fact, when Williams advocates a politics based on intelligibility, he means precisely not this, but

³⁶ Williams, Rowan, ‘Liberation Theology and the Anglican Tradition’ in David Nicholls and Rowan Williams (eds), *Politics and Theological Identity: Two Anglican Essays*, 7-26. London: The Jubilee Group, 1984, 7.

³⁷ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 120.

something much more provisional, evolving and potentially exposing for and between political actors.

I have drawn on his introduction to a collection of essays on theology³⁸ for Williams's use of the concept of intelligibility to describe and insist on the 'difficulty' of politics as these concrete relations and exchanges between persons, and their navigation. Williams proposes this idea of intelligibility as the defining feature of a politics worth the name. He defines 'intelligible' political action as action which '*invite(s) response*' and opposes this to a politics based on 'the successful assertion of will'. He elaborates briefly what follows from an action which 'invites response'; but the sketchy notes here reflect much more detailed and complex thinking elsewhere, particularly in the 1995 essay 'Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose'. 'Intelligibility' is a term he uses here, too, for the kind of political lives and exchanges which he suggests are most fully and truly human, in that sense of life and action which is 'after' Christ. Here too, he is describing as 'intelligible' action which is conversational, collaborative and *invites response*.

It is this openness to the conversational 'other', the respondent, which carries something of the reason why, for Williams, a genuinely conversational style in human social interaction is one which reckons with the reality of difficulty.

What is being affirmed here...is that what human beings do is characterized by the kind of difficulty that arises when the effects of action or decision are open to the judgement and interpretation...of other finite agents or clusters of agents...³⁹

The discussion ranges widely in the longer piece, but the two pieces together suggest that Williams envisages specific consequences, for the actual processes involved in negotiating difference, when working within an 'intelligible' political style. These consequences, for political actors whose style 'invites response', involve *interpretation*, *judgement* and, ultimately, *dispossession*.

Williams's point is that, as communicative beings, we relinquish any final control of a conversation, or our contribution to it, by the simple fact of being involved in a communicative process that 'invites response'. For Williams, most 'genuine' conversations

³⁸ Williams, Introduction, in Davis *et al*, *Theology and the Political*, 1–3. My emphasis.

³⁹ Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 7.

of whatever kind fall into the category of inviting response, including the negotiations and exchanges of human political life, unless these are merely verbal sparring matches. To put it simply, in a politics grounded in intelligibility, agents do not have final and unquestioned 'ownership' or control of their own interests/perspectives, nor their *accounts* of those interests/perspectives, nor, indeed, of the *outcome* of any negotiation of their interests/perspectives against those of others engaged in the conversation. None of these can be pre-determined, or remain unchanged, in intelligible engagement with another. In this kind of 'intelligible' negotiation, 'I lose my conception of private rights so as to negotiate with the otherness of other persons a good neither theirs nor mine'.⁴⁰

If my account of my perspective or interest invites response, is 'capable of being talked about'⁴¹, and so is offered into a communicative process, this means that what I bring to that process is already open to question as I enter into it. Of necessity, then,

...I must determine and maintain a position from which to communicate. Hence what I say is questionable to myself (as well as to others); whence does it come, how does it connect in the processes of exchange, at what points does it fatally ignore another perspective, so rendering itself without effect or actual presence, at what point does it so absorb another perspective as to disempower itself in another way, by failing to own its peculiar locus in the map of exchange?⁴²

By inviting a response, I am also opening myself (my position, my actions, the communication of my needs and interests) to judgement, critique and change. My position, and I myself, may be tested, questioned, challenged; I may need to explain myself, question myself, not only in terms of my own stated aims or claims, but also in the assessments and judgements I have brought to my exchanges with the other party or parties to the political conversation.

By 'intelligible action' here, I mean action that can be recognised by other agents as analogous to their own; and thus action capable of being talked about, action that is not the assertion of blind will, but is bound up with the exchanges and negotiations that constitute a pattern of language. 'Intelligible action' is action that can be criticised and defended, understood or misunderstood.⁴³

⁴⁰ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 44.

⁴¹ Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 8.

⁴² Williams, *Between*, 4.

⁴³ Williams, *Between*, 6.

All of this may lead to unanticipated revisions of my assessment of my own position, or that of others, and to mutual adjustments and to real change not only in what is being negotiated, but in the negotiating parties themselves. A process of negotiation will unfold in particular ways, then, if it is characterised by intelligibility.

Imagine a group of people in a contested situation of conflicting aims or visions. They are seeking some kind of a shared way ahead, a common future, out of apparently incompatible needs or interests. If I am participating in a negotiation of conflicting needs intelligibly, I will do so not simply by pushing or promoting my own agenda as hard as I can so as to silence or bulldoze other voices and perspectives, and I will also resist the rhetorical lure of using the communicative process as a way to draw or recruit others into my particular vision; both of these scenarios resolve difference in a 'return to the same'. Equally, I will not simply bring my already formed aims and desires to a negotiation in the hope of securing their maximum realisation or my own maximal freedom to pursue them.

Instead, Williams envisages an intelligible process as one in which I communicate a much more provisional picture of a possible future for us; one which, because it invites response, is open to critique, to being questioned, weighed, and its underlying assumptions pressed, in a way which will not leave my idea of a possible future unchanged. He imagines a step by step edging forward, by revising and mutually adjusting, which may bring us to shared futures, or at least agreement about how to continue the conversation, not anticipated in any of our imagined pictures of our future. He also suggests that this kind of intelligible process will not leave our imagined futures unchanged. He also anticipates that the risky and exposing – and therefore *difficult* - process of opening my perspective to question and critique will challenge, and likely change, my own understandings and assumptions about myself and of what I have assumed are my interests and needs, and about you and yours.

Intelligibility, then, involves bringing into conversation, and exposing to view and to judgement, all the ways in which I and you think, and bringing them into a conversational process of being seen, exposed and changed, rather than one in which one of us simply gets (or does not get) what we think we want.

Williams and Wittgenstein

At this point, I will make a brief excursus to look at Williams's use of Wittgenstein, and how this feeds into the idea of 'intelligibility'.

Williams's choice of the notion of intelligibility as the basis for meaningful political action places him in the broad realm of the communicative and the linguistic, rather than with judgements about the source of authority and the exercise of power, in his discussion of the nature of the political. Williams gives a central place to linguistic and communicative processes in his work, and to the ways in which human action and activity, including the political, cannot be separated from human language and forms of symbolic communication.

Williams is here indebted to the thought of Ludwig Wittgenstein. He is regarded as a recognisably Wittgensteinian thinker by many of his commentators, most notably Benjamin Myers.⁴⁴ The influence of Wittgenstein is also recognised by his reviewers (not always positively!)⁴⁵; and by Williams himself; in an interview with Nick Spencer of the Christian public think-tank Theos on the publication of his book *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language*, Williams reflects that 'Yes, Wittgenstein, I suppose, is one of the biggest influences on my thinking over the years'.⁴⁶ And both Myers's assessment and the interview with Spencer note Wittgenstein's conviction about the inseparability of language and 'contexts of social interaction'⁴⁷ and therefore 'the priority of life over ideas'.⁴⁸ This is crucial to the way Williams works with his philosophy as a theologian. All of this reaffirms a communicative, social and relational basis for Williams's key *political* convictions as a theologian. His political theology is based on social interactions as the setting for the real work of politics, and on a Wittgensteinian choice of meaningful action as *intelligible* action as a central plank for reflecting on and assessing the nature and conduct of politics.

If intelligible political action is action which 'invites a response', then it may not be inappropriate to think of Williams's conception of politics as a 'conversation', and so again,

⁴⁴ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*.

⁴⁵ For example, Theo Hobson, 'Rowan Williams Has Been Reading Too Much Wittgenstein', *The Spectator*, 27 September 2014, <https://www.spectator.co.uk/2014/09/the-edge-of-words-by-rowan-williams-book-review/>.

⁴⁶ Spencer, Nick, 'It's Intelligence All the Way Down', , interview with Rowan Williams (London, Theos, 20 October 2014). Online at <https://www.theosthinktank.co.uk/comment/2014/10/20/its-intelligence-all-the-way-down>. Accessed October 2019.

⁴⁷ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 14.

⁴⁸ Myers, *Stranger*, 15.

crucially linguistic, but also as locating the most significant kinds of human activity for Williams in the 'border-territory' where individual agents and groups intersect, interact and impinge upon each other, and where negotiation across difference happens, conducted within the possibilities, limitations and meaning-making of language. Indeed 'conversation' is a word Williams turns to for a description of what he means by and is centrally concerned with when speaking about public and political life.⁴⁹ If political life is essentially life negotiated with the 'other', then it is inextricably bound up with those processes of communication and exchange in which negotiation is conducted.

A third layer of difficulty – answerability

Williams's conception of a negotiative politics based in intelligibility moves the conception of political action away from one in which the political actor sets out to achieve or advance a determined set of aims to the fullest possible extent. An intelligible encounter with other political agents cannot avoid nor seek to overcome real difference; but it also moves beyond a mere trade-off of interests, as the communicative process opens the parties to question, judgement and adjustment of their positions and interests, and their perceptions of self and other. Intelligible negotiation requires a provisional, conversational and collaborative political action in which my sense of myself and my interests, and you and yours, and our assumptions about ourselves and each other are all at play and at stake in the contested territory of mutual impingement. This kind of negotiative process moves us towards realising goods which are neither mine nor yours.

Its difficulty goes beyond the 'first-order' difficulty of difference and incommensurability. When my and our positions, perceptions and interests are provisional and revisable, we are 'dispossessed' of final control of our perceptions and positions, and of the negotiative process and its outcomes.

There is a further deepening of this kind of difficulty in what I am calling the notion of 'answerability' in Williams's understanding of an intelligible negotiation of difference. This

⁴⁹ There are several instances of this in Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2012). Williams uses the word 'conversation' when speaking about politics in his discussion of the current status of secularism (p 20); the relationship between secularism, faith and freedom (p 32), and multiculturalism (p 102).

further difficulty resides in his resistance to the process of negotiation *itself* between political actors being seen as self-enclosed and ultimately self-determined, even by a process of provisionality and adjustment. There is a context and a hinterland to any negotiative process which means that the parties have a degree of answerability to something other than simply themselves, simply each other: to something more even than the complex, intelligible, responsive and invitational process in which they are both engaged. There is something 'more', which breaks open any understanding of a negotiative process being only the 'business' or the 'possession' of the actors involved. Williams resists *any* account of politics which depends exclusively on the determinations of the political actors/agents themselves, seen in isolation. It is something like saying: it's not good enough to think and construct a politics based on pure self-assertion or self-determination. *However*, a political model based solely on what *we together* determine is also inadequate. If 'what *I* want' becomes 'what *we* want', even when arrived at through the mutual testing and adjustment of negotiation, political action remains at the level of assertion: a case of 'because *we* say so' rather than 'because *I* say so'. He resists a politics that is no more than 'a *contest* of private and momentary desire', a process based on rivalry⁵⁰, but argues against a politics which is *no more* than private and momentary desire, a political model which still assumes the actors have final ownership, final control - of the negotiative process itself.

In the essay 'Between Politics and Metaphysics', what I am calling 'answerability' involves the dimension of metaphysics which Williams is seeking to explore as a – for him – necessary corollary to any political thinking and practice, but he does so tentatively in this discussion, since his starting point is the recognition of cultural anxiety at any mention of 'unreal objects or causes', of 'speaking with generality about the real or actual'.⁵¹ Part of his aim in the essay is to show what is lost, and the kinds of risks involved, in a discursive style which disallows these kinds of questions. Much of the work of the essay is to suggest ways of thinking, speaking *and acting* which allow the possibility of seeing and situating social and political life within and relating to a conception of the shape, 'structure' and nature of 'actuality'. In other words, Williams argues for a fundamental relationship between how (and whether) we think

⁵⁰ Williams, Introduction in Davis *et al*, *Theology and the Political*, 1. My emphasis

⁵¹ Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 3.

about the nature of existence itself – how reality ‘is’ – how we see ourselves and each other, and how we act ‘in the world’.

His fundamental case is that ‘actuality’ is itself ‘difficult’, because there is something in the structure of reality which is dispossessive. However, his concern is not to overlay human thinking and activity with some kind of prior metaphysical framework or blueprint, or to ‘specif(y) a metaphysical structure or give information about invisible states of affairs’.⁵² He suggests a rather more involved relationship: a difficult actuality which we are ‘engaged in’ well as ‘answerable to’⁵³, something *between* politics and metaphysics. This is what he is doing, for example, in tracing the way language works, as both something we ‘do’, and something ‘prior’, into which we step, and which shapes and constrains the kind of process we are in.

In *The Edge of Words*, Williams reframes this sense of answerability, in arguing that the whole of reality can be thought of as processes of intelligibility, of exchange: that reality gives itself to be known. He suggests that ‘our universe looks like a network of communication... in which something like conscious relation is the focus towards which material process moves’ and ‘whose currency is intelligence and intelligibility’.⁵⁴

For me to bring anything to speech and offer it into conversation is to invite response, evaluation, judgement. Communicative processes and linguistic exchange ‘enact’ intelligibility. My communicative act means that I am no longer in control of what is ‘made’ of what I have said, or tried to say; as I speak, I ‘dispossess’ myself and ‘renounce the finality of my judgement on myself, which is, of course, what I do when I initiate any kind of communication, any speech’.⁵⁵

He uses a series of categories which express this non-ownership by political actors of the process in which they are engaged. He suggests that actors are ‘answerable’⁵⁶ in the process of negotiation; he refers to that which is ‘not negotiable’ in the environment in which we negotiate, ‘not subject to will’⁵⁷; and he uses the language of a ‘constant’ to describe the

⁵² Williams, *Between*, 20.

⁵³ Williams, *Between*, 14.

⁵⁴ Rowan Williams, *The Edge of Words: God and the Habits of Language* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2014), 9–10.

⁵⁵ Williams, ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics’, 12.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Between*, 14.

⁵⁷ Williams, *Between*, 14.

conviction that in time and history ‘truth requires loss’.⁵⁸ He resists, however, setting any metaphysical conception ‘over-against’ the world of human history and action.

Elsewhere, Williams speaks much more overtly about our relatedness to God as the way in which we are ‘dispossessed’ of final ‘say’ or control, in being, and seeing others as, ‘objects of another sensibility than my own’.⁵⁹ There is something of this in the notion of being held in a divine ‘gaze’, which Mike Higton characterises as God’s ‘disarming acceptance’. This too functions dispossessively, inasmuch as it dismantles those carefully constructed self-descriptions and self-justifications by which we endeavour to secure our place with God and with others.⁶⁰

Here too, he is committed to a way of thinking about the relationship to the world of the God who is ‘prior’ and who ‘already sees’ in a way which does not locate the creator decisively over-against the creation, and suggests that the divine life and divine action should be understood as a kind of established ‘gold standard’ against which human life and action can be measured and to which it can conform. Williams envisages something much more like a ‘convergence’ and an ‘enactment’ by which ‘what is enacted in history is the divine life, but living in its other, realizing its “interest” in its other’⁶¹. ‘If’ as he continues, ‘in simple terms, this is how God is, this is how God’s creation also is’; or, as Higton expresses it from the perspective of lived experience, ‘(i)t is rather like a journey into a life in which I am more and more mastered by the reality I am exploring’.⁶²

Difficulty and theological anthropology

By looking to the nature of language and communication in seeking a basis for discussing and assessing politics based on intelligibility, Williams is making a strong case for the negotiative and communicative as the closer to what humans most normally *do* in their interactions and exchanges, over against the assertive and competitive, and seeing the way language ‘works’ as an indicator of the way existence essentially ‘works’.

⁵⁸ Williams, *Between*, 17.

⁵⁹ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 13ff.

⁶⁰ Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 14–37.

⁶¹ Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 19.

⁶² Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 54.

Williams also comes at this from another direction entirely: his reflection on Jesus as the 'most intelligible' action; and thence to a complex trinitarian theology which is the basis for everything he wants to say about human social and political life. But a 'working assumption' of the priority of the negotiative over the competitive in the structures and patterns of language, and as the most fundamentally and fully 'human' ways to act, is a further reason why Williams does not fit into a traditionally 'negative' view of politics as the necessary restraint of fundamental human tendencies to violent competition, despite his brooding, Augustinian sense of the 'immense shadow' of 'sin as an ugly wound running right through the middle of things, and most acutely through human reason and experience itself'.⁶³ This idea that the nature of language has certain features, 'givens', which in turn 'speak' of other realities – social/political, metaphysical, transcendent – which are themselves to a degree 'given' and undetermined by human choice or will, is another key feature of Williams's theology. It is at play in 'Between Politics and Metaphysics' but also runs right through his work.

In some ways, Williams seems to be searching for ways of speaking about the nature and necessities of public and political life that is both rigorously theological but also – in a contemporary cultural setting of multiple perspectives and convictions – maximally accessible, *intelligible*: 'restoring a language for the "absolute" in less alarming terms',⁶⁴ as he expresses it. In such a culturally diverse setting, Williams's choice of a discussion of a pattern for social and political exchange and interaction derived from the shared human experience of language allows this kind of maximal accessibility. It invites and allows a response; it is a theological voice in cultural conversation which is not dependent on the simple assertion of terms and concepts which are essentially 'ecclesial' in nature and so potentially opaque; it is conversational, inviting a response from the greatest possible number of voices. The nature and structure of language offers one means to explore these possibilities with maximal accessibility.

Williams is, however, always working recognisably as a theologian, whether explicitly with the story of Jesus as the starting point or looking for clues to the most fundamental truths and patterns of existence in the 'stuff' of human existence, such as language. In some ways, in

⁶³ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 33.

⁶⁴ Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 18.

looking for traces and clues in the 'givens' of historical existence for who and what we most truly are, he is pursuing a different strand of Augustinianism: the one which affirms the presence of traces of the divine in the material world which is God's creation: 'a limited and fluid whole which is not God, yet is saturated with God'.⁶⁵ This is not a naïve 'optimism', or a natural theology as traditionally understood. Williams is always working with a sense of the limits of finite existence, and of the tragic theme running through human lives and history; but there is at the same time the assumption of a complex continuity between the nature and being of God and what can be seen and traced and understood - what 'speaks of God' - in an 'intelligible' world which is God's creation. 'If', he suggests, 'in simple terms, this is how God is, this is how God's creation also is': what is 'enacted in history is the divine life, but living in its other, realizing its 'interest' in its other'.⁶⁶

This sense of a particular shape to reality is balanced by the sense, in his thinking, that there are decisions to be made about and between different kinds of political action, or 'style'. If the overall shape of a politics can be based on two conceptions of meaningful action – either assertion or intelligibility – then not everything can be understood in terms of what persons 'most naturally' do. This sense of a decision to be made, or perhaps a better perspective to be chosen, is contained in a recurring phrase in 'Between Politics and Metaphysics'. He suggests early on in the essay that a non-intelligible, assertive political style is one which 'will only do if we fail to see actuality as *difficult*.'⁶⁷ and then towards the conclusion, that whether we entertain certain foundational sources over others 'as authoritative or revelatory' in the search for meaning or vision 'has something to do with how or whether we do in fact construe actuality as difficult'.⁶⁸

His broader Christian vision is of a redeemed humanity whose healing or redemption lies in its being most fully human because most fully 'in tune' with the ways and the being of God. Human action is related to divine action, and so the 'tracing' of the divine in an 'intelligible' world as God's creation, and the seeking to live in ways that are more and more deeply 'in tune' with the divine is something of how Williams understands and expresses the religious life and theological task.

⁶⁵ Rowan Williams, *On Augustine* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2016), 75.

⁶⁶ Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 19.

⁶⁷ Williams, *Between*, 3. Emphasis in the original.

⁶⁸ Williams, *Between*, 20.

Difficulty and transformation

Essentially, what Williams's notion of difficulty does is to bring the subject into genuine and conversational encounter with the 'other' in a way which invites revisions of perceptions and assumptions which are shown to be premature, too narrow, or too 'final' (to use a word typical of Williams). Even in a discussion of what he terms the 'salutary' difficulty of the writing of George Orwell and Thomas Merton, the same idea of difficulty as invitation to encounter, response and re-thinking appears.

[T]he difficulty of good writing is a difficulty meant to make the reader pause and rethink. It insists that the world is larger than the reader thought, and invites the reader to find new ways of speaking. In that sense, properly 'difficult' writing is *essentially* about response.⁶⁹

It is here that Williams is indebted to Gillian Rose for her reading of Hegelian dialectics, which moved Williams from a set of assumptions about Hegel as a totalising thinker of 'sameness' in his notion of synthesis. Rose's rendition of Hegelian 'speculative' thinking offers Williams a conception of a transformative process in which I am again and again brought up against the ways I am pulled into set and fixed assumptions and positions in my relations with what is other to myself. Williams translates this pull into fixity as a model of 'consciousness as a kind of property owner' – the opposite of dispossession. For Hegel it equates to 'natural' thinking, and far from resolving this as a solvable 'problem', it is the repeated process of becoming aware of this mode of thinking which Hegel regards as the goal of 'thinking about thinking'. In Williams's own language, the recognition of 'possessive' habits of thinking and relating is 'not a process that can necessarily deliver a social ideal' or a 'programme for concrete improvement'.⁷⁰ Rather, any 'outcome' of an intelligible negotiation of incommensurables may well be highly provisional, perhaps leading to nothing more than agreement on how the conversation might proceed.

Where Williams sees the transforming possibilities of human persons being put in question in this kind of negotiative exposure, however, is in its 'insistently showing us' our habits of

⁶⁹ Williams, Rowan, 'War, Words and Reason: Orwell and Thomas Merton on the Crises of Language', The Orwell Memorial Lecture 2015. Available at <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/programmes/the-orwell-lecture-2/2015-dr-rowan-williams/>. Accessed May 2016.

⁷⁰ Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 9.

‘possessive’ thinking and acting, and their inadequacy.⁷¹ He sees this as a self-questioning that is closely related to the ‘comprehensive self-questioning’ provoked by the gospel, and as the ground of *metanoia*.⁷² Elsewhere, and also in a discussion of Hegel, he characterises this as a ‘social practice of critical self-vigilance (what used to be called repentance...)’.⁷³

The difficulty of ‘difficulty’

I return here to a distinction I made earlier. This is the distinction between the reputation for ‘difficulty’ which Williams’s *theology* has, on the one hand, and on the other, his own use as a theologian of the *term* ‘difficulty’ with which this chapter has been concerned.

I return to the difficulty (the denseness, complexity) of the way Williams does his theology because it raises a question for me about how his theology – specifically his theology of ‘difficulty’ – might serve to ground an account of political action as a daily politics. I can testify, as his reader, to the time and effort it has required to, as it were, ‘get hold of’ what he might mean by the notion of difficulty. It is a dense idea. Williams uses it in complex ways which he hardly ever elaborates. It requires some grappling with some equally complex thinkers. Yet it says much of what he wants to say about how human beings, all of us, might live with one another, and the reality of what that entails and needs, in ways that are, and make us, more true to the truth of ourselves and of the whole created order, which is God. I have questioned the usefulness of O’Donovan’s political theology, particularly, on the grounds of its (non) accessibility in a post-Christendom context, despite seeking to address precisely this reality. I pointed out his apparently uncritical reliance on unmediated biblical and theological themes which have less and less meaning in secularised societies. A similar question might be asked about the accessibility of Williams’s thought: in this case, because of its ‘difficulty’.

One might venture the thought, explored above, that Williams seeks to describe something of what we already do. Might the kind of dispossessive negotiation he describes with the idea of ‘difficulty’ (in its more ‘technical’ sense that I have explored in this chapter) be something ‘prior’ to its being put (however complexly) into words, and so communicated equally ‘in

⁷¹ Williams, *Between*, 9.

⁷² Williams, Introduction, in Davis *et al*, *Theology and the Political*, 3.

⁷³ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 33.

action' as in ideas? I am hesitant to let Williams 'off the hook' entirely, but I suspect he might wish to make a rejoinder, if not necessarily the one I have ventured on his behalf.

I make one further observation. I have suggested that there is in Williams's thought an Augustinian sense of a fundamental and stark choice to be made between two fundamentally differing orientations in living and acting in the world (God-wards, as 'difficulty'; and away from God, as 'successful assertion'). It seems equally the case that there is nothing to prevent a fundamental 'refusal' of difficulty as he describes it, in our daily politics. All the inducements are there, because it is *difficult*. The language is used advisedly; it is *difficult* to take the kind of risks he suggests are involved, to be exposed to the other, to take the steps of trust required, to turn searching critique on oneself and one's own motivations. I will hold this important question over for further consideration in the next chapter which, after considering Williams's more formal account of politics, looks at some instances of the practical politics in which Williams has been involved, where deeply opposed parties have been unwilling to engage in these dispossessive processes of negotiation.

Conclusion

Williams insists on the reality and significance of difficulty as a feature of human social and political life, as the tensions and *aporiae* of genuine but non-absolute difference. His deepening of this difficulty via intelligible, dispossessive negotiation produces an understanding of a 'kenotic' form of life 'after' Christ, which is rooted in thick doctrinal reflection on Christology and on God's Trinitarian life. He describes this form of life in terms of the shape and grammar of conversational, collaborative exchanges by which human political action is related to divine action in actual interactions across difference: as what life 'after' Christ *looks like* in the concrete interactions of life together.

This model of dispossessive negotiation suggests both a form for Christian life in situations of genuine difference, and a theologically thick description of the possibilities for negotiating life together, within Williams's broadly social conception of the political. This negotiative shape for life amidst difference emerges from a persistence in relating social and political life to metaphysical commitments. While Williams insists that metaphysical questions must be engaged with for any worthwhile account of politics, he articulates these non-'assertively',

seeking intelligible and accessible conceptions of the 'non-negotiable' dimensions of social and political life for conversation with and in an intellectual and cultural context which is easily alarmed by claims about the intangible and transcendent.

This chapter has focussed on a broadly social conception of politics in Williams's theology, and on 'intelligible negotiation' as a model for political action 'after Christ' in social and political interactions. The next chapter will suggest that this intelligible process of negotiating difference informs and underlies his more formal proposal for ordering political life in diverse society as 'interactive pluralism'.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Difficulty and Rowan Williams' politics of interactive pluralism

Introduction

This chapter builds on the previous chapter, and its description of Rowan Williams's use of the notion of difficulty, theologically and politically, to describe a political 'style' of negotiating difference in human social relations 'after Christ'.

The key elements of difficulty I identified were, first, his conception of politics as the navigation of human *difference*; second, his commitment to *intelligibility* as the basis of that navigation; and third, a conviction that intelligible navigation of difference is always *answerable* beyond the immediate processes of human negotiation, in ways which must be reckoned with.

This chapter outlines how these features of difficulty function in a more formal, political model of 'interactive pluralism' which he proposes as a way of ordering complex and diverse contemporary societies. I also consider specifically how he uses the features of difficulty to deal with the tensions between Christian faith and public secularity. The discussion here draws largely on those speeches and papers of Williams's which are collected in the 2012 book *Faith in the Public Square*¹, and which, as the title suggests, sees him exploring more formal questions of Christianity's place in public and political life.

Interactive pluralism

'Interactive pluralism' is Williams's proposal for a way that a genuinely diverse society might live together across the differences between groups and communities.

I will show in this chapter that interactive pluralism can be seen as a translation into more formal political proposals of his broader social political theology, and his threefold diagnosis of, and commitment to, its difficulty described in Chapter Six: as genuine encounter with

¹ Williams, Rowan. *Faith in the Public Square*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2012.

difference, as intelligibility as the basis for a dispossessive, negotiative political practice, and as insistence on the reality of the metaphysical/divine ‘other’ as the context of all political life and action, to which it is somehow *answerable*.

Interactive pluralism has some key features by which it relates to these underlying concerns. Before exploring these in detail, I shall outline what Williams means by ‘interactive pluralism’.

For the basic political model of pluralism, Williams draws on the work of English political thinkers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, such as J. N. Figgis, G. D. H. Cole and Harold Laski, who made a case for a pluralist theory of the state. He then gives pluralism a more explicitly ‘negotiative’ character by re-describing it as *interactive* pluralism.

The earlier pluralists argued for the political role of ‘intermediate’ or ‘first order’ communities in civil society, which is seen primarily as a cluster of smaller political entities. They advocated a ‘distributive’ conception of power as a counter to centralisation of authority in the single, sovereign state, but also in opposition to radical forms of individualism. Pluralism gave these thinkers a political doctrine which cut across the traditional oppositions of a centralising, sovereign state or an extreme, free-market individualism.² The political doctrine of pluralism was founded on belief in ‘the vitality and the legitimacy of self-governing associations as means of organizing social life’.³ For Laski the socialist, trade unions played a key role; for Figgis the Anglican, religious communities were seen as this kind of ‘first order’ grouping. For the political pluralist, true political life lay with the possibilities for collective and collaborative action by and through such associations of citizens.⁴

The twentieth-century pluralists’ emphasis on the role of ‘intermediate’ communities is taken up and re-worked by Williams. The earlier pluralist thinkers included among these intermediate communities groups such as ‘trade unions, Churches and voluntary bodies’.⁵ Williams adds to this, and includes ‘ethnic and cultural groups’ and ‘churches *and* faith groups’.⁶ This expanded understanding of who is included among intermediate communities offers him a political framework for thinking through a politics for multicultural, multi-faith,

² Paul Q. Hirst, ed., *The Pluralist Theory of the State: Selected Writings of G.D.H. Cole, J.N. Figgis, and H.J. Laski*. (London; New York: Routledge, 1993), 16.

³ Hirst, *Pluralist*, 2.

⁴ Hirst, *Pluralist*, 16.

⁵ Hirst, *Pluralist*, 2.

⁶ Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury Continuum, 2012), 50. Emphasis mine.

value-plural Britain, and the new realities of religious, social and cultural diversity in the twenty-first century. Williams's particular interest in ethnic and religious groups among these intermediate communities, apparent throughout *Faith in the Public Square*, shows this reframing of the earlier tradition for the new and more complex setting in modern Britain. His focus on these 'moral communities' is in part a recognition of the particular forms of belonging they represent, and the fundamental formational role of such belonging in human lives and action. Williams is concerned with the difficulty involved where these 'diverse sorts of belonging provoke conflict'⁷, and with the kind of politics within which this might be thought through and handled.

The pluralist model anticipates that these smaller groups will conduct political life as a process of mutual negotiation, within an overall 'system of arbitration recognized by all'.⁸ This is where the state, and the law of the state, have a role, recognised by all communities. The state functions as a mediator or 'broker' (a term Williams deploys which we will come back to, to look at some of its potentially difficult nuances). The intermediate, 'first order' communities do not derive their right to exist from the state and are not legitimised (or de-legitimised) by it. The earlier pluralists were in part arguing for a much more limited role for the state, through a 'vision of diffused governance and interdependence'. They were challenging and countering a growing conception of the state which increasingly envisaged no mediation between the sovereign state and the 'sovereign' individual: a concern which Williams shares. In the 'sovereignty' model, what comes first, conceptually speaking, is 'a single sovereign power (which is) in some sense a source of legitimacy for other groups (and) before which every individual stands on a perfectly equal, neutral footing'.⁹ What is missing, which is key to Williams's theology, is the dimension of interpersonal relationality, and the constitution of the person *in relationship* and in interaction with others. This is what a pluralist model offers.

Mark Chapman has suggested that 'in his application of pluralist thought to modern society, Williams has been one of the first Christian leaders to move to a level of sophisticated

⁷ Williams, *Square*, 50.

⁸ Williams, *Square*, 50.

⁹ Williams, *Square*, 51.

theological thought about multiculturalism'.¹⁰ A proposal for interactive pluralism as a political model for complexly plural contemporary societies, derived from a theological reinterpretation of the pluralist tradition of Figgis *et al*, offers an instance of Williams doing precisely that.

It is important to note, on the question of 'multiculturalism', that Williams clearly concurs with the critique of mutually isolated models of 'multiculturalism' made by the campaigners around the Christian interest litigations, and argues that

the peace of a society or of an international system should be more than the juxtaposition of wary and rather distant units, generally sealed off from each other, occasionally petitioning the state's tribunal for its (*sic*) rights.¹¹

Williams consistently works to move political thinking and political life away from thinking in terms of mutually isolated individuals and self-enclosed groups, independently pursuing their own projects and goals, and interacting only when their interests come into competition. As Mark Chapman observes:

(f)or Williams, multiculturalism is thus not about fragmentary and competing private goods and the resulting separatism between communities, but instead is about negotiation between different and sometimes competing public truths.¹²

Williams characterises this kind of mutual isolation as a 'static pluralism' produced by 'Balkanizing' versions of multiculturalism which offer only the 'juxtaposition of mutually non-communicating groups'.¹³

He goes further, in proposing a positive construal of multiculturalism as involving essential interaction, mutual adjustment and critique among differing groups. He argues that a 'static pluralism' fails to understand the concept of multiculturalism, since 'culture' is itself part of 'making sense' of the world by 'material and intellectual labour' and is thus 'inherently

¹⁰ Chapman, Mark D., 'Rowan Williams's Political Theology: Multiculturalism and Interactive Pluralism', *Journal of Anglican Studies*, 13 August 2010, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-anglican-studies/article/rowan-williamss-political-theology-multiculturalism-and-interactive-pluralism/DF80F6A54014C1B020CA2407A5BCA324>.

¹¹ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 58.

¹² Chapman, 'Rowan Williams's Political Theology',

¹³ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 58.

changeable' (and interactive)¹⁴. Williams also suggests that it shies away from the real exchanges and challenges which intelligibility (in his own terms) requires, because of 'well-intentioned eagerness...in recent decades to compensate for insensitive cultural hegemony by treating all clusters of cultural and religious expression as equally worthy of abstract respect and equally distant from the public square.'¹⁵

While he shares the Christian campaigners' concerns over a 'statically-plural' multiculturalism, Williams' proposals differ from the goals of the campaigners. The main proposal by the campaigners to offset this mutually estranged and socially fragmented multiculturalism is the retrieval of the values of a Christian past. Their claim is that this Christian heritage offers the only reliable source of social cohesion: a possible common set of values underpinning the quest for a common good. In Chapter 2, I showed the problems with making the empirical fact of a society's Christian past the basis for a normative claim for privileging Christian faith or values in its post-Christian present.

Williams proposes a different conception of moral commonality, located in interactive negotiation of the common life and of the good between diverse communities. He proposes this interactive pluralism as a *form* of public life which is theologically grounded, in seeking to relate political life and action to the divine in the negotiation of difference. It does not, however, require a privileged place for Christianity or a confessionally Christian account of the good.

There is continuity here with Williams's conception of political action as 'intelligible negotiation' across real difference, as a theologically founded form of life 'after Christ'. One might almost suggest that he is translating the key concepts of intelligible negotiation of difference into more formal political terms. The word 'pluralism' retains the reality of difference against the pull towards identity; while 'interactive' holds Williams's insistence on difficult, complex encounter and exchange in the boundary territory of real difference: what I have termed 'mutual impingement'.

This conception of political life, and the possibility of authentic political action, as located with mutually impinging intermediate communities, with a mediating role for the neutral state, is

¹⁴ Williams, *Square*, 105.

¹⁵ Williams, *Square*, 105.

further defined by Williams. He is theologically committed to secularism but argues for a form of secularism which allows the kinds of conversations which, for him, alone enable genuinely intelligible negotiation of difference.

Interactive pluralism and secularism

Williams's model of interactive pluralism requires the state to have a mediating role between intermediate communities, and as such, a neutrality towards their varying conceptions and pursuits of the good, since its primary role is the oversight and regulation of public space as a site of negotiation between the groupings that constitute any given society. It carries an authority agreed and granted by those constituent communities to act impartially, to prevent their varied accounts and pursuits of the good from undermining those of other groups. In this role of mediator, the state cannot 'in any simple sense' have 'goals of its own' which are 'potentially in competition with those of its constituent communities'.¹⁶ However, Williams takes what looks like a fairly bald account of secularism as the non-aligned, non-privileging state, and significantly re-works it.

This re-description involves, first, arguing that a neutral, non-aligned state is as much about preserving the autonomy and integrity of intermediate communities and 'desacralising' the state. In this regard, he takes a similar line to that of O'Donovan in defining 'secular' theologically as the limitation and non-finality of temporal and historical political orders. Secondly, however, Williams aligns himself with a theological case for secularism which involves securing the penultimacy of political orders by resisting any alignment of Christianity with any historical polity, and preserving the autonomy of the Christian Church to operate as a critical voice in political life, rather than risking the kind of 'ultimacy' that such a close alignment of Church might suggest for any given state and its actions.

He traces the *Christian* origins of the secular state in this sense to the 'unlicensed presence' of the Church in the Roman empire. Here was a religious group which resisted absorption into the imperial project, and imperial legitimation, which he argues gave rise to 'a question mark

¹⁶ Williams, *Square*, 57.

against the sacredness, the ultimate claim, of the Roman state; its lawfulness could not be seen as absolute and universal'.¹⁷ The secular state as 'de-sacralised', in Christian history.

The state has a proper power (early Christians are careful to say that they are quite content to pay taxes), but it is not a holy power. It can be challenged, and its finality can be contested. It has become secular, as we say.¹⁸

Christianity, in this understanding of secularism, does not derive its legitimacy from the state. It is therefore free, with other social groupings and communities, to challenge and criticise the state, to be in critical dialogue with it. The 'independence' of a secular political order is about placing a limit on its claims and capacities regarding ultimate ends and goods. It cannot, by definition, be an end in itself.

Williams therefore characterises secularism as a limitation on the role and ultimacy of the state, rather than simply a non-privileging limitation on any religious or moral perspective. Williams's account of secularism is not an account of the autonomy of the social and political sphere from the norms and claims of any one community or grouping within the body politic. Rather, it secures autonomy and maintains a critical distance *for* those communities, including Christianity, from any sense of their legitimacy deriving from an all-powerful state. Secularism in this understanding involves preserving the integrity of religious and moral communities and 'desacralizing' political orders. However, and in contrast to O'Donovan's definition – effectively a 'desacralizing' one – in Williams's account, secularism is *also* a necessary means of protecting the state *from* undue influence, religious or otherwise. Where 'religious identities and political power are intertwined', Williams argues that 'conversation is always affected and usually distorted by the awareness of these issues of power and advantage' and a 'civic or civil space for encounter and proper mutuality is not created'.¹⁹

The moral good of the secular state

William's interactive pluralism requires that the state not align itself with any one comprehensive vision of the good. As a pluralist he locates political life not primarily with the

¹⁷ Williams, *Square*, 2.

¹⁸ Williams, *Square*, 52.

¹⁹ Williams, *Square*, 133.

state but with negotiating intermediate communities. The non-aligned state can therefore act as a mediator for and on behalf of intermediate communities equally, in their interactions with each other. This means that he sees a limited role for the state, in meditating between these diverse communities in their interacting and potentially conflicting description and pursuit of social good. The neutrality of the state in this sense is conceived as a negative, preventative role. The neutral, meditating state ensures that no community or group, in pursuing or advocating its own good, 'steamrollers' any others as they pursue or present theirs, erasing or absorbing their difference.

However, the state's role does not require a sort of bare neutrality, in which its role is merely keeping communities apart, preventing the erasure of difference by 'encroachment'. In Williams's interactive pluralism, the point is the interaction and not simply the pluralism. The state's role is to bring diverse communities together in a mutual *impingement* where difference is encountered, and a common life negotiated between differing accounts of social good. The state has a role, then, in facilitating and encouraging such interactions, based on Williams's theological commitment to negotiation of difference as a more authentically human form of social and political life, because more closely related to divine life. The role of the state is not simply to protect communities from each other, but to facilitate genuine encounter and exchange. In this sense, one might say that Williams's 'secular' state is one which espouses moral values to a certain extent; but its limited morality is directed towards fostering interaction, mutual impingement and 'difficult' negotiation between communities.

The state is thus more than a tribunal; it exercises its lawful character by promoting and resourcing collaboration.'²⁰

I will discuss some further aspects of this more actively 'fostering' role for the state later in this chapter, examining the challenge to Williams that his political model lacks any robust account, or carrier, of a society's moral good.

²⁰ Williams, *Square*, 59.

Procedural vs programmatic secularism

For these interactions and impingements to be a genuine encounter across difference, Williams grounds them in 'intelligibility' as a fundamental understanding of meaningful political action.

To do this requires him to define carefully the nature of the procedural secularism he is advocating (and the pure or programmatic style he is rejecting) in terms of what is admissible as meaningful contributions to the interactions and conversations of differing, interacting communities.

It is not too far-fetched to see his description of a procedural form of secularism as another rendering of his account of difficulty, and its key features – difference, intelligibility and answerability – formulated for ordering the politics of contemporary and diverse societies. At the same time, he is wrestling, as were the political theologians who were considered in the earlier chapters, with the specific difficulties of incommensurable commitments and communication between religious and non-religious citizens in contemporary political communities.

Difference

Williams argues for a procedural form of secularism over a programmatic one on the basis that programmatically secular politics amounts to a smoothing-over of real *difference* in societies.

He criticises a programmatic form of secularism as one which banishes commitments to religious and other substantive accounts of the good from the public realm and conversation, 'as if they were simply issues about individual preference, almost of private 'style'. In so doing, however, this kind of 'pure' secularism flattens out public and political life and creates 'an almost value-free atmosphere of public neutrality' which 'effectively denies the seriousness of difference itself'.²¹ His argument is that, by ruling religious and other 'moral and spiritual commitments' out of public discourse and debate, a programmatic secularism reduces and debases the negotiations and exchanges of political life to a functionalist

²¹ Williams, *Square*, 26.

consideration and pursuit of aims. This means that other political agents are seen purely as they 'advance or obstruct' those aims, and not as other human beings with their own agency and integrity.²² Fundamentally, for Williams the theologian of difference and its difficulty, making what matters most deeply to large numbers of 'agents and groups' inadmissible in public discourse is a fundamental denial and bypassing of difference. A programmatic secularism forces large numbers of people and their deepest convictions to 'dress in borrowed clothes' – that is, to become, for the purposes of public life, something other than who they are: less themselves and thus less different.²³ The difficulty of contending commitments should not in itself be a reason for avoiding discussion of them.

Because there is no tribunal to adjudicate arguments between basic commitments about God, humanity and the universe, it is assumed that there is therefore no exchange possible between them, no work of understanding and discernment, no mapping of where common commitments start and stop. On this account, there is public reason and private prejudice – and thus no way of negotiating or reasonably exploring real difference.²⁴

In a procedural form of secularism, no one comprehensive account of the good is favoured as *the* comprehensive account by which public life is ordered. Religious and other motivations can therefore be debated in public conversation and interaction, 'the good' does get talked about, 'gets argued about'²⁵ in public conversations, and 'prior commitments' are not ruled to be inadmissible as a basis for political actors' motivations. A 'procedural' secularism in Williams's sense, then, goes beyond the neutrality of the state towards religious and other substantive commitments to look at the actual interactions of intermediate communities. This kind of procedurally secular political community will recognise the reality that members of some of these intermediate communities will be motivated in their public actions by prior commitments, religious and other, and enables both appeal to and the questioning or challenging of these in public and political conversation and debate. Williams warns that the potential consequences are a messier and more difficult public square: 'potentially a noisier and untidier situation than one where everyone agrees what will and will not 'count' as an

²² Williams, *Square*, 12.

²³ Williams, *Square*, 12.

²⁴ Williams, *Square*, 27.

²⁵ Williams, *Square*, 58.

intervention in public debate, but his point is that it is more truthful in that ‘at least it does not seek to conceal or deny difference’.²⁶

There is a recognition here of a real problem of incommensurability, in diverse political communities, between differing convictions and commitments. In the kind of procedural model of a secular ordering of political life and conversation, these convictions will include some of the ‘purer’, more programmatically secular kind. The point is that those ‘purer’ secular commitments get talked about, alongside religiously motivated ones - but as part of the *content* of debate, not as the architecture which determines the terms or the goals of the debate itself. Williams’s version of a procedural secularism does not seek to resolve the intractabilities of incommensurable commitments and frames of reference, or the communicative difficulties these produce. He insists instead that they be lived with, and faced, as part of the social and political reality in diverse communities.

Intelligibility

Williams’s most urgent arguments against a programmatic form of secularism are based on the overarching concern identified in the previous chapter for the *catholic* vision of human lives (re)ordered ‘after Christ’. Hence a procedural form of secularism involves all that he means by *intelligibility*, – including mutual criticism. His argument for the admission of religious motivation and commitment a part of public conversation is not simply a claim that religious voices be ‘heard’, as though some uncontested public space might be secured for the commitments of faith. It is so that, with other perspectives and commitments, they might be subject to scrutiny and critique, for the good of religious faith and religious communities, and of the political community as a whole. There is a risk to the whole of social and political life if religious communities, and others whose prior commitments are not part of the currency of public debate, ‘go underground’. This means that the ‘substantive motivations’ of these persons and groups are not exposed to the testing of public debate, and the evaluative processes of intelligible negotiation, where judgement and criticism, including self-criticism, are key to such exchanges, and (in the case of religious commitments, for example)

²⁶ Williams, *Square*, 27.

prevent the relegation of ‘the moral and the spiritual to a private sphere where they may be distorted into fanaticism and exclusion’.²⁷

A programmatic secularism, as Williams here defines it, involves stepping *back* from the difficult work of intelligible negotiation of real difference, into a ‘possessive’ politics of success, assertion, control, against the possibility of a dispossessive style of interaction and exchange of mutual critique, adjustment, (mis)recognition, and growth. If, by contrast, the prior commitments of political actors are brought into a negotiative political process marked by intelligibility, they will be exposed themselves to testing and critique, as a necessary and important process for confessionally-based intermediate communities. Exposure to the ‘court of reason’ can avoid a dangerous drift of religious communities into isolated, unreasoning sects centred on unexamined dogma. To resist a programmatic or ‘pure’ form of secularism, for Williams, means that prior motivations be open to scrutiny and question within a process of negotiation which ‘invites a response’.

The third dimension of a procedural form of secularism in Williams’s account suggests that dimension to difficulty which I described in the previous chapter as ‘answerability’. He resists a form of secularism which admits only the present and tangible as the substance of political exchange because it amounts to ‘*final and decisive accounts of what things are good for in terms of profit and functionality*’.²⁸

In its purest form (secularism)...implies that the definitive ‘currency’ of the public realm is to do with calculation about functions: I or we begin with aims that we are out to realize; the other participants in the social or public process are understood in terms of how they further or obstruct those aims. As this becomes clearer, negotiation advances. The social equilibrium is a state in which all significant participants are adequately satisfied that others are serving or at least not obstructing their goals. Successful social performance is measured by this criterion. I’m suggesting that secularism in its neat distillation is inseparable from functionalism; and if so it will generate a social practice that is dominated by instrumental or managerial considerations, since the perspectives that would allow you to evaluate outcomes in other terms are all confined to the private and particular sphere’.²⁹

²⁷ Williams, *Square*, 84.

²⁸ Williams, *Square*, 5 (emphasis mine).

²⁹ Williams, *Square*, 12.

The warning is that certain kinds of public secularism can so narrow the exchanges of public and social life that – even implicitly – self-possession, mutual isolation and hostility come to structure these.

It finally suggests that there is nothing beyond the processes of successful negotiation – or, in plainer terms, no substantive truth but a series of contests about sustainable control and the balances of power...(and) in having no criteria other than functional ones, it takes for granted contests of power as the basic form of social relation.³⁰

Answerability

I have suggested that intelligibility, for Williams, means letting go of ‘possession’ as the primary way of dealing with others and their difference – ‘possession’ of myself and my interests, possession as my need to control the negotiative process and its outcomes. I have also argued that this amounts to a deepening of what it means to encounter genuine difference – its difficulty. Our ‘answerability’ is the further layer of difficulty which Williams describes in the navigation of difference.

This further aspect of the ‘difficulty’ of intelligible negotiation involves that which is ‘other’ to the negotiative process itself: that which is ‘not negotiable’ in the environment in *which* we negotiate, ‘not subject to will’³¹, but to which we, and all our actions and interactions, are somehow ‘answerable’. This language comes from the essay we considered in the previous chapter, and Williams’s reflection on the thought of Gillian Rose. In other contexts, he might use the language of the divine. He does so in his essay ‘Has Secularism Failed’ in *Faith in the Public Square*. Here Williams discusses the limits of a programmatic form of secularism as a way of conceiving and being in the world. A key feature of this limitation is to foreclose the possibility of ‘the unrestricted time and total self-investment of a divine knowing and loving’, which is both ‘very strictly incommensurable with any specific human perspective’ but is also ‘not the same as a perspective in the world’.³² In both cases he is indicating that there is a further sense in which our encounters and exchanges are not and cannot be subject to our ‘possession’. In his essay on Rose, this appears as a more metaphysical reflection on a ‘shape’

³⁰ Williams, *Square*, 15.

³¹ Williams, Rowan. ‘Between Politics and Metaphysics: Reflections in the Wake of Gillian Rose’. *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (January 1995): 3–22, 14.

³² Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 16.

to reality, or something in the nature of things, that we are engaged in or answerable to, and which means that the processes of human action and interaction are neither the first nor the last word.

Williams also argues for a noisier public square, in which prior commitments and claims about what is good and right can be debated and opened to processes of judgement and evaluation, because it introduces a context for political answerability beyond the negotiating communities themselves and their interactions. The simple presence of religious commitments and traditions, alongside others, in the procedurally secular public square, brings with it the commitment to a perspective and a reality which is 'prior' to the immediate concerns and exchanges being negotiated, to which they might be in some measure 'answerable'.

The Church

Williams is not a theologian who takes the Church other than seriously. He belongs within the theological recovery of the significance of the Church as a community with its own distinctive way of life. Even his most trenchant critics recognise that he doesn't 'collapse the Church into the world' but insists on its visibility and 'distinctive presence in the world'.³³

At the same time, and in contrast to some of the ways this recovery of the distinctive life of the Church has led a much more central place in theology for the concrete Church and for ecclesiology as reflection on the Church, the orientation of Williams's thinking puts the Church, and theology, 'at the service' of a more universal Christian vision of the 'possibility of a healed humanity'³⁴ – a possibility which the act of God in Christ opens in the world and which is made visible in the Church.

³³ Rhys Bezzant, 'The Ecclesiology of Rowan Williams' in Russell Matheson, ed., *On Rowan Williams: Critical Essays* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009), 1-24, 17.

³⁴ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 27.

What he resists, therefore, is any sense of the Church as an end in itself; the Church is seen as the herald and servant of the renewal of the whole of human life in Christ, a 'pilot project for the human race'.³⁵

One consequence of a secular politics in Williams's 'desacralised' sense is that the only ultimate authority is carried by the Church, but it is not a *political* authority. The Church is not, crucially, a political entity in competition with other political entities.

He eschews any characterisation of the Church which sets it over-against 'the world', where the 'world' represents some concrete aspect of human existence and endeavour, such as modernity, secularism, liberalism. He resists any sense that the Church is ranged against other human communities, or against forms of political life, as rival or alternative. He refuses to put the Church in the role of competitor. The Church on earth is and remains 'dispossessed' of any final ownership of, or identity with, the possible healed humanity it points to.

This leads to a dispossessive ecclesiology, in which the Church is essentially non-competitive: its mission and identity not bound up with any political realisation as an alternative to or contender among others, nor indeed with its own apparent success or survival. And Williams's Church is the carrier but not the owner of the gospel. (It is precisely its non-possession of the Gospel that allows its proclamation *by* the Church also to confront the Church in judgement.)

Williams argues that any seeking to safeguard/protect the Church's public place, or even survival, in any final or forceful way is based on poor theology. If I believe in God *as* God, then 'apparent defeat in the world for my belief cannot be the end of the story', since 'God's mind and character cannot be changed by what happens here in the world', and 'God does not fail because *I* fail to persuade others or because my community fails to win some kind of power'. If the object of my belief becomes 'vulnerable to the contingencies of history', the object of my belief is something other than God.³⁶

Williams also insists on the eschatological horizon against which the new humanity, the new forms of human life and relations which the Church announces and serves, has to be seen.

³⁵ Williams, Rowan, 'The Church: God's Pilot Project', an address to the clergy Synod of the Chelmsford Diocese, April 2006, online at <http://aoc2013.brix.fatbeehive.com/articles.php/1779/the-church-gods-pilot-project>. Accessed March 2019.

³⁶ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 293.

[T]he fundamental vision of Christian theology both claims that the future has arrived in the assembly of believers around Word and Sacrament, and warns against supposing that this future can be rendered now as a public system, a regime, within a political world. When this happens, the Kingdom of God becomes a contender alongside others for the control of debated territory; it becomes less than itself.³⁷

The promised future is not identified with or possessed by the historical Church, so as to become a competitor among other alternatives within the vicissitudes of history. The new humanity, as a new form of human social life after Christ, remains a proclamation and a promise, not a *polis*.

The case for a 'non-competitive' Church, in this sense, is also based on the necessary continuity between God's non-competitive, dispossessive life and 'action', and a Church which is constituted and motivated by that life and action. Williams describes this as 'the paradoxical reality of a community believing itself to stand for the "interest" of a God without interest or favouritism' or representing the interest of a disinterested God as 'the universal saving generosity of divine action'. Thus the Church which, with Israel and Jesus, is 'the contingent reality in which this enactment takes place' is 'dispossessed of its own self-definition, as an "interested" or sectional presence in the world'.³⁸

The Church itself is also in an ongoing process of transformation, and as such, is subject to judgement and the call to repentance by the gospel as itself a difficult, potentially transforming 'question'. The Church is constituted by what Williams describes as the 'experience of profound contradictoriness' which profoundly 'questioned the religious categories of its time': a questioning which each generation takes up afresh, and which every believer has the task of 'making his or her own'. The focus is not, however, on questioning but in *being* questioned, or 'put in question': the 'intractable strangeness of the ground of belief' in its 'interrogation of us' and our possessive attempts to circumscribe and give a final account of divine meaning.³⁹ Here is a form of words for Williams's characterisation of 'the most densely "intelligible" action in the world's history': the 'self-exposure of Jesus Christ to

³⁷ Williams, *Square*, 58.

³⁸ Williams, 'Between Politics and Metaphysics', 19.

³⁹ Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge, Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross*, 2nd rev. ed. (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990), 1.

death at the hands of political and religious meaning makers'.⁴⁰ The Church, then, is less custodian of answers than the bearer of a potentially transforming question, which means that 'Christianity...is not a moral code, but the gift to humanity of a wholly transformed life'.⁴¹

So even in its mission to proclaim the gospel of grace, Williams insists on the Church's solidarity with its audience. In the essay 'The Judgement of the World', Williams argues that the Church's proclamation to the world places it in a solidarity *with* the world, as it comes under judgement itself in the act of proclaiming a gospel it only imperfectly reflects in its own life.⁴² As bearer of the question and the gift, the Church is subject to its interrogation and capacity to transform. This questioning of the Christian community by the story and the question it carries is the import of Williams's essay. In it, he is asking some questions of George Lindbeck's project, in *The Nature of Doctrine*, of 'inserting the human story into the world of scripture' where (citing Lindbeck directly) "[i]ntratextual theology redescribes reality within the scriptural framework rather than translating scripture into extrascriptural categories".⁴³ Among Williams's reflections on the apparent unidirectionality of this communicative process is a suggestion that while the story the Church tells, proclaims and embodies will inevitably interrogate and indeed 'judge' other stories and other construals of meaning in 'the world', this interrogation and judgement will also fall upon the Church. The conviction here is that of non-possession. The gospel as profoundly contradictory story, transforming gift, points to a reality beyond both Church and world; and even understanding the kinds of categories that allow it to be conceived and spoken of is 'still growing and changing'.⁴⁴ He cites frustrations beyond the Church in 'some of those most serious about the renewal of a moral discourse' about the ways the Church's own language 'neglects or trivialises or evades aspects of the human' (Williams cites sexuality, death and meaningless suffering). The suggestion he makes is that such frustrations are one way in which the Church 'hears God's judgement on itself in the judgement passed upon it by the world'.

Williams' use of 'first order' associations (from Figgis and others) allows for the possibility of a properly central and robust ecclesiology, but without ecclesiology becoming the dominant

⁴⁰ Williams, Introduction, in Davis *et al*, *Theology and the Political*, 3.

⁴¹ Williams, *The Wound of Knowledge*, 158.

⁴² Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology*, Challenges in Contemporary Theology (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 29-43.

⁴³ Williams, *Theology*, 29.

⁴⁴ Williams, *Theology*, 39.

characteristic of modern Christian theology and public identity/engagement. The Church as a first-order form of association allows a space within civil society for the Church's distinctive practice/way of life, and for the faith that it expresses. It also allows for Christian voices and contribution in the public conversation and the common life, without that being premised exclusively on extending the life and proclamation of the *ecclesia* into public space.

The theology of Rowan Williams contains two central features. One is a conviction about the inevitably political nature of the human response to the gospel as 'life-with-others'. The other is a broad and universal view of the scope of the gospel as the 'healing' or renewing of the whole of humanity. This means that neither the Church as lived response to the gospel, nor theology as reflection on that response, can ever faithfully reflect the gospel if they become ends in themselves. He offers a perspective which detaches the 'success' of religious faith from the territory it occupies in the public sphere.

(Theological) assessment of political orders

The broadly social, rather than the structural and governmental, is the site of Williams's interest and focus in the 'political'. 'Interactive pluralism' is his political model for complex and diverse societies such as modern Britain. This model restricts the role and scope of the ideologically and religiously 'neutral' state to one of holding open and fostering conversational public space for the 'first order' or intermediate communities. It is in the lives and interactions of intermediate (concrete, historical) communities that he situates political life, rather than with the state or in the relationship between state and citizen. The form of procedural secularism he advocates for these exchanges in public space assumes that the loyalties and prior commitments of members of these communities are in play, as meaningful public speech and motivation for political action. It is assumed, however, that the kinds of exchanges envisaged in an interactive pluralism will expose such prior convictions to evaluation, questioning and critique, of the kind which characterises his notion of intelligibility as the basis for meaningful political action: action which 'invites a response'.⁴⁵ This is how Williams relates political action to God's action. A politics based on intelligible exchange,

⁴⁵ Williams, Introduction, in Davis *et al*, *Theology and the Political*, 1.

rather than assertion, brings political life – and lives – into an analogical relationship with divine, dispossessive life and action.

The way O'Donovan develops this analogy is within the language and conceptuality of authority and rule – divine and human – and the legitimacy of forms of human rule by the few on behalf of the many: expressed as a conviction that 'the political act is the divinely authorised act' and that 'a political theology will seek to understand how and why God's rule confers authority upon such acts'.⁴⁶ For Williams, the primary question seems to not to be that of relating human political life to the divine through an understanding of the nature of authority, nor the location and legitimacy of human political power in relation to divine authority. It is rather a concern to ask how the communicative processes of human interaction and exchange across genuine difference relate to God's 'act' and self-communication in Christ, and God's own self-differentiation and self-relation as Trinity, self-dispossessive *love*.

Theology claims that what intelligible action is "after" is divine action whose gratuitousness (or love) motivates and activates an unlimited process of representation without simple repetition (and thus posits irreducible human and other diversities).⁴⁷

He also differs from a theologian such as Christopher Insole, again in his insistent focus on the site of difficulty as the site of intelligible, potentially 'godly' political action across real difference. This is enabled, in Williams's interactive pluralism, by a careful balancing of mutual *encroachment*, which is to be restrained, and from mutual *impingement*, which is the whole point. In Insole's thought, a largely negative anthropology, benignly characterised as our frailty, leads him to emphasise the political necessity to prevent encroachment. In *The Politics of Human Frailty*⁴⁸, Insole makes a clear case for a contemporary post-lapsarian political Augustinianism, within a wider defence of political liberalism against some of its fashionable theological detractors. Insole is arguing here for the necessity of restraint as the defining feature of political orders, and for political 'rule' as a protection for individuals and

⁴⁶ O'Donovan, Oliver. *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*. Cambridge University Press, 1999, 20.

⁴⁷ Williams, Introduction, in Davis *et al*, *Theology and the Political*, 3.

⁴⁸ Chris Insole, *The Politics of Human Frailty: A Theological Defense of Political Liberalism* (London: SCM Press, 2012).

groups against the *libido dominandi* of others within a fallen creation, which Insole rather more benignly terms their 'enthusiasms'.⁴⁹ In any situation of plurality, there will be divergent sets of moral convictions that motivate individuals and groups – 'comprehensive conceptions of the good'⁵⁰ – and Insole is alive to the danger that one group's pursuit of its vision ends up encroaching or being imposed on those who do not share it. The underlying assumption at work here is that rivalry rather than negotiation is the most significant or fundamental response to dealing with difference and the social and political 'other'.

In working with a more negative anthropology, the primary political goals for Insole appear to be 'absence of conflict' and 'peaceful coexistence'.⁵¹ The state's role is policing the boundaries between the diversity of persons and convictions in a given body politic to deliver these goals.

As I read Williams's Augustinianism, there is an important if small and somewhat nuanced divergence from this traditional view of the purely negative restraining role for political orders, which has to do with the role of political authority: governments, the state – those who 'rule'. A purely negative understanding of the role of politics as restraint, as elaborated by Insole, suggests that 'policing the boundaries' is the primary task for political rule. In the interactions of individuals and groups, their tendency to impinge and the risk that they *impose* on each other, the key political aims are 'peaceful coexistence' and 'absence of conflict'.

For Williams, it is precisely this border territory of interaction and exchange, even mutual limitation and impingement, which appears to be the most significant and the most pregnant with possibilities in and for shared human life – possibilities for learning, change, growth – and possibilities for echoes of divine self-dispossession, as well as the enormous risks of descent into rivalry, competition or retreat into mutual isolation. This borderland where individuals meet and mutually impinge – the territory of difference, of incommensurability and potential conflict – produces the greatest pressure towards communication and exchange, judgement, critique, self- and mutual questioning. As we shall see in more detail in due course, the demands of sustaining intelligibility across real difference, amidst its

⁴⁹ Insole, *Frailty*, 172.

⁵⁰ Insole, *Frailty*, 41.

⁵¹ Insole, *Frailty*, 5.

pressures and the risks, are what is encapsulated in Williams's dense notion of *difficulty*, and something of what he means by the kind of human action which is "'after" divine action'.

I have used the two terms 'encroachment' and 'impingement' to try to make this differentiation in Williams's thinking about this border territory of encounter and risk across difference.

In Insole's thought, the 'negative' risk of mutual encroachment, of the domination or undermining of one social grouping by another because of unrestrained 'enthusiasms', is so significant that the focus for political life is on keeping the peace so as to protect more vulnerable groups and individuals from this kind of encroachment. I wonder, however, if this leaves little room for the kind of mutual *impingement* – the interactions and encounters with real difference – which I've argued is the location of political life as such and the site of political action in Williams's theology.

Williams is alive to these same tendencies, often acutely so. He is unflinching in his diagnosis of the lure of the 'illusion of rivalry'⁵² and the fantasy of control⁵³ – the impulses to seek to dominate and order what is other to the self – and political action as 'success'. There is, however, a clue in Williams's language to another perspective on these tendencies. These are fantasies, allurements and, as such, not to be seen as the most fundamental things to be said about the human person, even in its fallen nature.

I have traced some of the ways Williams sees a different kind of pattern within historical existence – something more collaborative and trusting but which involves engagement with real difficulty. It is here that he traces the possibilities for human action, human living, in the structures of language, and conditions of intelligibility, as 'what human beings do'⁵⁴, together with the possibility of being weaned away from 'self-serving idols'⁵⁵: the lure of the 'easy' paths of successful political action as assertion.

To reiterate a point from the previous chapter, his position here does seem to depend on the 'kinds of things we're willing to entertain' as fundamental truth and reality. Here is Williams

⁵² Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 5, 17.

⁵³ Williams, Rowan, *Open to Judgement: Sermons and Addresses* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1994), 89.

⁵⁴ Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 7.

⁵⁵ Higton, Mike. *Difficult Gospel: The Theology of Rowan Williams*. London: SCM Press, 2004, 52.

expressing just that conviction in discussing how ‘authoritative’ or ‘revelatory’ stories can shape our perceptions and actions:

[W]hat stories we entertain as authoritative or revelatory has something to do with how or whether we do in fact construe actuality as difficult. And this in turn has to do with a certain leaning towards intellect rather than will as telling us basic things about ourselves-in-the-world.⁵⁶

This might seem to show Williams uncharacteristically giving human determinations a central political role. In fact, the key to Williams’s argument at this point is that it those aspects of reality we earlier referred to as the *context* for our political life and actions – the nature of language, the ‘shape’ of actuality – to which we ‘answer’ in our political action, and the kinds of metaphysical proposals these might lead us towards.

So in his focus on the political as the broadly and socially interactive sphere of shared human existence, Williams proposes an ‘attentive and hopeful contemplation’ of the ‘concrete plurality of human life’ cited earlier, which he suggests is the call that the theologian accepts even as s/he ‘battle(s) to understand’ it⁵⁷; for while he seems to hold a limited view of the possibilities of any given political order or structuring of life together in its capacity to deliver ‘the good’, he does hold open the possibility that human political life – as interaction and exchange across difference – might be increasingly shaped ‘after’ the divine life as a kenotic self-dispossession in relation to the other. This is always, however, in full awareness of the pulls towards competition or mutual estrangement in the face of the social other with which political life is littered.

Politics: moral good and common good

Jonathan Chaplin, himself committed to ‘principled pluralism’⁵⁸ and state neutrality as a political model, has written a constructively critical engagement with Williams’s political theology as he sees this elaborated in *Faith in the Public Square*, and raises a particular question for where the ‘moral good’ is seen to reside in his model of ‘interactive pluralism’.

⁵⁶ Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 20.

⁵⁷ Williams, *Wrestling with Angels*, 85.

⁵⁸ Jonathan Chaplin, ‘Liberté, Laïcité, Pluralité: Towards a Theology of Principled Pluralism’, *International Journal of Public Theology* 10, no. 3 (2016), https://brill.com/view/journals/ijpt/10/3/article-p354_6.xml.

It is key to Chaplin's own political theology that a neutral state does not— indeed *should not* — of necessity 'imply that laws or constitutions are morally vacant or neutral' and that legal and constitutional provisions 'will inevitably reflect some substantive moral principle or other, or a combination of them'.⁵⁹

Chaplin also argues for more defined models of 'first-level associations' (social institutions) than Williams gives, and asking if 'certain forms of social relationship and institution' to be preferred 'over others'.⁶⁰

In this case, Chaplin seems to be arguing for Williams's own Christian understanding of the nature and meaning and purpose of human life, to produce a broader model for the kinds of associations that promote human flourishing. Chaplin is asking Williams whether some more explicit commitments to a moral grounding are needed, both for the definition of intermediate communities, and for the kinds of moral commitments that might undergird the workings of the state in a pluralist political model. Williams's model allows for any moral/ethical community, including the Christian one, to argue for what normative — or the 'best' — forms of human association look like, on the basis of the kinds of lives, and living, they produce/promote. What Chaplin seems to be pressing is the question of how anything like a common good, or fundamental human dignity, is secured if a state is neutral *morally* as well as politically.

Chaplin indicates what he sees as the lacuna in Williams' thinking by pointing out that Williams does tend to assume that there are some non-negotiables: that 'basic human rights and freedoms are not routinely up for pluralist negotiation'.⁶¹ Williams does indeed acknowledge the protection of 'certain rights and liberties' by the 'apparatus' of the state⁶²; but he does this as part of a broader conception of how these are established. In a broader discussion of the changing relationship of religious communities to political entities in *Faith*

⁵⁹ Chaplin, 'Can Nations Be "Christian"?', *Theology* 112, no. 870 (1 November 2009): 412.

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0040571X0911200603422>.

⁶⁰ Chaplin, Jonathan, 'Person, Society and State in the Thought of Rowan Williams', unpublished paper, 2012, 8.

https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&rct=j&q=&esrc=s&source=web&cd=1&ved=2ahUKEwjDt_nA8PLgAhXMQxUIHU_hBZwQFjAAegQICRAC&url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.vhi.st-edmunds.cam.ac.uk%2Fresources-folder%2Fpapers-files%2Fpaper%2520chaplin%2Fat_download%2Ffile&usg=AOvVaw3dU9SUjEanDYZsVB9ctiew. Accessed 11/2018.

⁶¹ Chaplin, 'Person, Society and State', 12.

⁶² Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 45-6

in the Public Square, for instance, Williams recognises a convergence, on a conception such as the dignity of the human person, between a fundamental and permanent religious stance and a more contingent historical position in modern polities, which contrasts with ancient slaves-based societies.⁶³ The ‘state apparatus’ in Williams’s account equates to the law by which things like rights and liberties are secured; but in historical perspective he recognises that these legal protections are the consequence of complex social and cultural changes which have produced convergence between religious non-negotiables based on foundational theological assumptions about persons as they relates to God, and more contingent and therefore ‘thinner’ political consensus enshrined in modern law.⁶⁴ His interactive pluralist model assumes that religious communities will seek to “thicken the texture” of law in the ‘continuing process of public argument over political and social virtue’.⁶⁵ The language suggests that Williams’s conception of a neutral state does not mean that it lacks moral values. Instead, it has necessarily ‘thin’ moral values, because these are negotiated between associations which might seek to ‘thicken’ them differently. This is exemplified in the ‘thin’ values of Williams’s picture of the state. It seeks to foster mutual impingement and the difficult encounter, mutual adjustment and negotiation, across the difference which this entails. At the same time, it polices and minimises mutual encroachment, in the sense of individuals or groups dominating or overriding others in the pursuit of their aims or enthusiasms.

Chaplin looks for an ‘objective normative standard of rightness’ by which the state can adjudicate between competing claims, arguing from his own ‘principled pluralism’ standpoint that the unity of the state requires a ‘constitutional framework’ which includes ‘an agreement over core principles of justice and freedom for all faiths’.⁶⁶ It is not clear, however, in a situation of plurality which includes significant non-religious perspectives and commitments, how such agreement is to be reached or on what basis, if core principles are to carry the weight of normative and objective standards.

⁶³ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 45.

⁶⁴ Williams, *Square*, 47.

⁶⁵ Williams, *Square*, 47.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Chaplin, ‘The Bible, the State and Religious Diversity: Theological Foundations for “Principled Pluralism”’ (Kirby Laing Institute for Christian Ethics). <http://klice.co.uk/uploads/EST08JC.pdf>. Accessed 18/04/2018.

Williams seems to recognise that we live within a rather more fragile framework, reached by rather more complex processes. Elsewhere he describes the law as the 'reactive' embodiment of the changing ways people think about themselves, citing the 'advance of legislation around the protection of ethnic minorities' as it reflects the 'developing moral and imaginative awareness of a society'.⁶⁷ Moral norms that are genuinely common in modern societies are reached through historical, social and political processes of learning, 'public argument' and change. This is not an argument *for* a particular state of affairs but a recognition *of* it. While Williams will make a robust case that religious communities can and should press their 'thicker' perspectives for the grounding of core political commitments – and does so himself – he resists imposition of moral norms in a way which bypasses the negotiative process which he regards as constitutive of their establishment, however fragile that is in a pluralist politics.

The moral good of political orders - common good as process

For Williams, a state which carries its own account of the good is problematic because it becomes an 'interested party' with 'goals of its own'.⁶⁸ As such, it can no longer occupy a neutral role in facilitating and guaranteeing a maximally conversational and intelligible political space for the variety of social groupings and communities with their own accounts and pursuits of the good: it has become a competitor, with the power to enforce its own goals against those of first order communities. The risk then becomes just that of an uncriticised, sacralised power existing in the political realm, assuming the finality which belongs to the as-yet-unrevealed Kingdom of God: or of 'the good' as an ahistorical and static *idea* with no relationship to human political life, since '[i]n the actual historical world of existing societies, the good is something that gets argued about'.⁶⁹

Here too, however, we might recall his more fundamental perspective that the kind of conversational exchanges envisaged between complex moral communities can be seen as a moral good in themselves: 'a convergent morality...with a theological underpinning'⁷⁰: a

⁶⁷ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 164.

⁶⁸ Williams, *Square*, 57.

⁶⁹ Williams, *Square*, 57.

⁷⁰ Williams, *Square*, 58.

moral good which the state fosters in its 'brokerage' of these conversational exchanges, even arguments, which 'impinge' but are prevented by the state's brokerage from becoming and 'encroachment' in which members of one community in pursuing their vision of the good impede or undermine that of others.

While Williams veers away from defining formally the forms of rule and government which might shape a historical social order 'after Christ', what he is proposing is something more like a 'style' or 'grammar', as I have termed it, of the political conversation as it is conducted and continued, as the most significant locus of political good in diverse and genuinely plural societies. Politics is not the outcome of such negotiations – the good chosen or the direction taken. It is the thing itself.

A quick word about Williams's use of the language of 'brokerage' for the role of the state: Chaplin's critique of Williams may derive in part from this use of 'broker', and what Chaplin assumes it to mean. A totally neutral state has no kind of moral purpose. In part it is perhaps just an unfortunate decision that Williams makes in his choice of language. My sense is that what he's feeling after is that sense of a shared trust within intermediate communities of the state's role in overseeing their interactions – something of the sense contained in the expression 'honest broker'. The state's role as '(honest) broker' is that of dealing even-handedly with the kinds of destructive interaction which I've called 'encroachment': the steam-rolling of one community in its pursuit of its vision of the good by another in its own. But its positive role – which has already been touched upon in this chapter – is an equally even-handed but positive encouragement of those kinds of interactions whereby communities and groups genuinely encounter each other, even in 'noisy argument'⁷¹, in their real differences, in a negotiative conversation about their common life and future. Williams, as has been noted, sees the secular state as 'more than a tribunal', but instead as having the role of 'promoting and resourcing collaboration' between 'diverse communities of conviction and loyalty'.⁷² This requires that the state actively to encourage and facilitate what, as already observed, Williams suggests is in itself a moral good and a kind of 'convergent morality...with

⁷¹ Williams, *Square*, 27.

⁷² Williams, *Square*, 59.

a theological underpinning'.⁷³ It is on such a basis that a state can be evaluated: by the kinds of human relationships it fosters.

(T)he Church does not either affirm or deny 'the state' in the abstract: it asks what kind of humanity this or that state fosters...

This convergent morality relies on the kind of intelligible negotiation, the processes of mutual critique and questioning, revision and learning, which are involved. It is 'good', he argues, that communities 'see their accounts of the social good set in the context of other such accounts', that any such account will 'have to argue its case', that national and international life be 'more than the juxtaposition of wary and rather distant units, that it gives 'security against uncriticised, sacralised power in the political realm', and ultimately to avoid an ahistorical and escapist quest for an 'account of the social good which is final and obvious', since '[i]n the actual historical world of existing societies, the good is something that gets argued about.'⁷⁴ What Williams is resisting is an account of public or common good which is 'imported' as the basis for political life, and bypasses the difficult process of that ongoing negotiation between diversely-committed communities about what 'the good' is.

It is this conversational and negotiative style of human interaction across difference which is the central focus of interest in Williams's political theology - as the kind of activity which is *in itself* both an enactment and a fostering of the moral good of a given group or society, rather than simply a means to deciding or securing its moral or political good, or a process whose outcomes must be weighed against some previously determined conception of the public or common good.

The political conversation then – in this broad sense of social interaction and exchange – is not primarily seen as a process of determining and then enacting the moral good of a given society. Rather, it is (or is not) *itself* what social and political good is, and its means. In his notion of intelligibility, and the kind of human behaviour, action or way of being with others in the world which Williams is feeling after with this notion, he is proposing a conception of the common good as process rather than outcomes, understood in this sense of a shape, style or pattern of human lives and life together as they relate to the divine life, rather than as they relate to particular moral values or criteria.

⁷³ Williams, *Square*, 58.

⁷⁴ Williams, *Square*, 58.

What Williams means with this notion of 'intelligible' action as a basis for politics, and the kinds of patterns of behaviour and interaction it assumes, suggests that a politics based on intelligibility (over against success-as-assertion) has implicit in it a whole pattern of shared human life: not as a kind of 'template', a series of does and don'ts, nor even a collection of virtues, but rather a style, a 'grammar' (to borrow language that's typical of Williams) for human relations across difference which enacts the social goods it seeks to foster and realise.

Benjamin Myers also traces this kind of thinking back to the Wittgensteinian priority of 'life over ideas' in the affirmation that, for the later Wittgenstein, 'philosophers exhaust themselves in arguments over the nature of the good, whereas there is no such thing as 'the good': only various human acts which are called 'good' through a sort of family resemblance'.⁷⁵ If the family resemblance Williams is after in meaningful political action is the conversational, then intelligibility will have to do with what is or needs to be in play to make a conversation happen, and allow it to continue. This will involve more than simply the substance of the conversation between different agents or groups: colliding desires or interests, contested access to space or goods, or incommensurable accounts of 'the good'. What is at issue is what will allow for the boundaries between conflicting needs or perspectives to be navigated *conversationally*, rather than as a contest, a scramble for control or possession. In addition, there will need to be some shared sense of what will allow the conversation to continue, to progress, in such terms as can be agreed for continuance, and recognised as progress, so that what passes for conversation is not simply the verbal equivalent of the 'contest' option. What makes a conversation a process of exchanges in which something like movement or growth can emerge, and be seen and recognised as such by all those involved? It is this question that Williams's notion of intelligibility is seeking to answer.

As I have endeavoured to show in these chapters, Williams' social and political thought is deeply rooted in Christian theology but not always expressed in specifically theological or confessional terms. This gives him an account of political action which is potentially broadly accessible in societies where Christian language and claims are not common currency and offers ways for theology to 'speak' in late modernity. In some of his writing, particularly his

⁷⁵ Myers, *Christ the Stranger*, 14.

more 'public-facing' work in *Faith in the Public Square*, for instance, written while he was Archbishop, Williams can often go quite a long way before he raises metaphysical questions. He often turns to common human experiences, such as the ways language works, or to a vision of being fully human, as an expression and outworking of the purposes of God in and for the world.

He does, however, recognise a need to address the broader questions of how political action is *authorised*, to avoid the concerns he shares with O'Donovan and Milbank about a politics situated in an autonomous 'secular' realm ordered solely by the will and decision of human agents. He does this by locating his account of dispossessive political action in relation to - and congruent with - some metaphysical and theological claims. He is easing towards this kind of territory to some extent in his discussion of the social and political implications of the ways language appears to function, as an essentially collaborative and dispossessive process of making meaning. In what I have called the third 'layer' in Williams' account of difficulty, this is made much more explicit. At the same time, Williams is also clearly aware of the issues, for late- and postmodern forms of thought, in any move to make objective statements about the nature of reality. A case in point is his essay *Between Politics and Metaphysics* where, as we have seen, he deals explicitly with the contemporary intellectual and cultural reluctance to engage with any non-tangible referent for human political action. In the same discussion, however, he suggests the inherent problems of refusing *any* engagement with non-contingent reality, and questions of whether and how it can be spoken about.⁷⁶

Unlike Oliver O'Donovan, Williams does not use the language of authority explicitly. But he is clearly raising questions of how political action is *authorised* beyond the merely contingent will and decision of human agents, when he asks how it is related to the structure of reality, or to how political action is related to divine action.

I have shown that Williams works with an 'informal' conception of politics, locating the political with and between 'first order' communities rather than in a centralised or unitary state. He offers a negotiative, dispossessive account of political action. This begins as an account of the processes of human relations, interactions and exchanges as such. It also translates into a set of proposals for a negotiative form of politics within a pluralist model of

⁷⁶ Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 3.

the state in the tradition of twentieth-century theorists of political pluralism such as Figgis, Cole and Laski. An explicit discussion of political *authority*, then - as the directing role of governments and those in authority - does not feature significantly in Williams' theology. He understands the role of the state to be one of holding open and fostering the negotiative space and ethos he advocates: 'promoting and resourcing collaboration' between 'diverse communities of conviction and loyalty'.⁷⁷ The state also has the role of 'honest broker'⁷⁸ whose job is to 'manage and balance real difference'⁷⁹ between individuals and groups.

I have suggested that in Williams' political theology, it is the work of self-dispossessive and negotiative exchange which functions as his vision of the common good of political communities: a good which the state, in Williams' conception of its role, has the task of 'promoting and resourcing'.⁸⁰ I have also ultimately argued that for Williams, it is in the experience of and exposure to dispossessive negotiative encounter that real human transformation towards 'Son-shaped lives'⁸¹ can - by grace and the work of the Spirit - take place. However, Williams' political theology, centred as it is on a vision of politics as dispossessive negotiation between agents and groups of agents in an 'interactively pluralist' conception of the political and model of the state, may leave a lacuna in how the role of authority in ordering political action, life and communities is understood.

The question of authority

Without using the language specifically, Williams appears to give consideration to the question of how political action is authorised. Political action 'worth the name'⁸² is 'authorised' to the degree it stands in relation to divine action - characterised in his trinitarian theology and Christology as supremely and utterly self-dispossessive.

Williams arrives at dispossession as core to both divine life and action, and to political action which accords with the divine, via his careful and complex reading of trinitarian theology. But he also derives this perspective from his reading of a collaborative, cooperative, trusting

⁷⁷ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 59.

⁷⁸ Williams, *Square*, 59, 80.

⁷⁹ Williams, *Square*, 27.

⁸⁰ Williams, *Square*, 59.

⁸¹ Williams, *On Christian Theology*, 120.

⁸² Williams, Introduction, in Davis *et al*, *Theology and the Political*, 1.

mode of human interaction and relationality written into the fabric of human life and relationship. This sense of a reading of the way reality works is also apparent in his engagement with Wittgenstein and reflection on the processes of language and seeing language as a model for all human interactions and engagement.

What we do not find in Williams' political theology is any explicit understanding of what authorises governments to *rule*. He accords the institutions of the state the role of 'trusted broker'. But it is not immediately clear whether that brokerage deals with the problem O'Donovan identifies in modern Western polities: the need for some final arbitration in situations of genuine moral controversy and lack of consensus among citizens, and the question of how that happens and on what basis it is authorised and so can be accepted by contending parties. The state in O'Donovan's political theology has a role of arbitration, of judgement, and thus needs to be orientated to some objective moral framework which can authorise it to do so. In Williams' work, the language more commonly used for the role of the state in situations of contention is that of mediation. This might raise the question of how and whether any urgent choices can be made, in Williams' conception of the state, on pressing human and ethical question, including those where lives or wellbeing might be at stake. Are there situations where a politics of negotiation might not only be protracted, but negligent? Is Williams' emphasis on the negotiation of real difference in danger of militating against the possibility of political *consensus*? Can anything actually be *done* in his political model?

Williams the political pluralist does propose a limited role for the state in terms of securing or advancing a particular morality. However, as Jonathan Chaplin points out and as I have noted above, there is in his work an assumption of moral and ethical norms which are sufficiently established and authorised that they enable things like human rights to be protected in particular instances, without any sense that they are constantly subject to negotiation. My own reading of Williams' work is that it does assume some core ethical and moral commitments which command sufficient consensus within societies, however diverse, for decisions to be taken by governments and other authorities based on them. This seems to be an underlying assumption for him. One does, though, not see him offering a more formal or systematic account of what those core principles are, or should, be for any given society - based, I suspect, on his reticence about an established or formalised moral position

beyond the limited one he accords to the state in the procedural form of secularism he espouses.

However, his discussion of multiculturalism⁸³ in *Faith in the Public Square*, which I examined earlier in this chapter, may show how Williams sees moral consensus emerging in particular political communities, and by which concerted political action is authorised and not subject to immediate negotiation. He seems here to be exploring the specific possibilities for how ethical convergence happens in highly diverse societies. As I have suggested, in this essay, Williams seems to suggest the way moral consensus has been reached over things like human rights, which have not, as it were, just come out of nowhere. Rather, he regards them as having the status of a tradition, with their own authority, as they emerge from the conversational and negotiative processes. He describes this process in terms of the ways cultures themselves develop over time. The resulting consensus have the status of 'where we have come to' in the ongoing conversation about the vision and values undergirding social and political life of societies. But nevertheless, at any given point in that history, they provide sufficient authorisation for political societies and their governments to act and decide on particular matters based on cogent, fundamental ethical commitments.

This more 'organic' conception of how some core moral commitments in societies arise through negotiated consensus over time - and are thus *authorised* - may underlie the apparent but unspoken assumptions about things like human rights which Chaplin points to in Williams' work. What is missing, however, is the sense of what I have called the 'answerability', or the third 'layer', in my survey of Williams' account of difficulty. By answerability, I am indicating Williams' own concern that worthwhile political action must involve some reference to what is non-negotiable, in a final sense, and stands outside purely human and contingent processes of negotiation and determination. There is therefore a question of whether the authority of a political commitment arrived at by the slow, negotiative developments of particular political communities is consistent with Williams' own account of how and why good, non-assertive politics is *difficult*: because it is ultimately somehow 'answerable' to what is other than and beyond its own negotiative processes. Given that Williams himself does not make this link in his discussion of a 'multicultural'

⁸³ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 99–112.

process of negotiated and authorised moral norms, a more explicit account of how a society's central moral commitments are arrived at, how they can be seen as warranted, and to what they are answerable, would allow for discussion and testing of how their authority is derived and what weight it can ultimately carry.

The possibility of commonality

I have noted the positive theological anthropology which seems to undergird Williams' reading of collaborative patterns of interaction written into human existence. This leads him to suggest that there are patterns of trust and cooperation in the nature of reality which are fundamentally 'truer' than the competitive and conflictual patterns of human behaviours and thinking of which he is nevertheless acutely aware. As I have shown, conflictual behaviours are often seen by Williams as 'fantasies', when compared to a more fundamental, self-dispossessing shape to reality which he traces in the created order and its relatedness to the deepest reality of divine self-dispossession.

There is a question, however, about whether there is space in his political theology - committed as it is to this vision of mutuality, collaboration and intelligibility - for the possibility that political agents may not share any of the starting assumptions or vision of the good which animate his theology. There is sometimes a sense, in his work, that if only a common language and framework might be found, it would itself offer a social and political solution to the problems of deep and incommensurate difference. I regard his commitment to find intelligible, accessible ways of speaking of his central doctrinal commitments as a Christian theologian as a positive contribution in political theology in religiously and irreligious plural societies such as Britain. But the question could perhaps be asked of Williams of whether he countenances the possibility that other persons or groupings are actually committed to, or significantly shaped by, an utterly divergent originatory 'story' about reality ('the stories we entertain as authoritative or revelatory'⁸⁴, to use Williams' own phrase), compared to his own model of self-dispossession. Does his work grapple with the possibility of a politics where political action and agents are shaped by a story which is much less collaborative, and more

⁸⁴ Williams, *Between Politics and Metaphysics*, 20.

competitive, even brutal: something more like what Milbank seems to be feeling after, in his account of the 'ontology of violence'?

Williams criticises an assertive model of political action underlying some approaches to public life: what he describes as 'successful' action (without meaning this to be a positive assessment).⁸⁵ However, he does not seem to consider the possibility that this cannot adequately be understood or dealt with simply a false turn or a fantasy, and that the objects of his political critique (and one's political 'neighbours') might be entirely committed to and convinced by these ways of navigating the business of shared human existence. Is the language of 'fantasy' and 'self-deception' enough, here? There is a radical, Augustinian sense of human propensity to sinful patterns of destructive self-assertion present elsewhere in Williams' work. But that alertness to the drive to *non*-collaboration might need to be more front-and-centre in his political theology. This would enable him to address the possibility that a consensus might not be possible: that a dispossessive negotiations about goods and choices cannot *itself* be seen as a common good, as he proposes. A mediatory role for the state might therefore be less practically effective, in ways which Williams' theology does not address in a detailed way as a possibility.

If a 'successful' mode of political action springs ultimately from the fantasies and self-deception which are often the way Williams speaks about the reality of sin, it provokes a further question about whether, in a political community, the kind of assertive political action he resists can be dealt with via his model of negotiation. The possibility may need to be addressed that a negotiative form of politics cannot be sustained without the role of grace, as the divine 'cure' for the destructive forces and fantasies which inspire and drive such self-assertion, and the mission of the graced community, as the carrier of the story and the possibility of a dispossessive political action conformed to the self-dispossession of God made known in Christ.

One final set of problems involves the possibility of stasis in a negotiative political model which was explored in chapter seven. In 2006, during Williams' tenure as Archbishop and while Anglican Primates were gathered in Canterbury wrestling with divided opinion over women in episcopal ministry, Giles Fraser wrote (in apparent frustration) in the Guardian

⁸⁵ Williams, Introduction, in Davis *et al*, *Theology and the Political*, 1.

newspaper that 'the Church of England is currently being tortured by a dead German philosopher'.⁸⁶ Fraser's article describes what he regards as Williams' pattern, as Archbishop of dealing, with real differences in an endless Hegelian dialectic of negotiation between parties, without any final decision or authoritative direction on what is ultimately right or just. Giles' frustrations return us to the question of whether anything ever gets *done*, in Williams political model, and whether - where no settled consensus has developed in the negotiative way Williams envisages - some authorised leadership is at times required. My own reading of Williams suggest he might reply that the most fundamentally important things happen not through the decisions of leaders and governments, but in the risky and difficult process of mutual impingement and negotiation: that this is where genuine and transformative change can happen. He might suggest further that it is people and communities committed to a dispossessive form of life in tune with divine self-dispossession - specifically, but not exclusively, the church - who make that visible and available as a transforming possibility for all human lives, communities and politics. In this sense, he may be in similar territory to Oliver O'Donovan, in an understanding of the Church's mission as invitation to an 'evangelical' conformity. Williams seems to operate, however, with a much greater sense of the risk and fragility of the task.

There is only, for us, the ambiguity of the commitment to diplomacy, to negotiation, to give and take, conversation, debate, and argument. And there is no guarantee attached to any of that: no guarantee of success, no guarantee that it will not be swept away by the violence of one or two of the players, no guarantee that it is safe and secure.⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Giles Fraser, 'Giles Fraser: Face to Faith', *The Guardian*, 17 June 2006, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/jun/17/comment.religion>. Accessed 07/02/2021

⁸⁷ Higton, *Difficult Gospel*, 134.

Conclusion

Essential Difficulty

The work of this thesis began with my response to the phenomenon of Christian interest litigations. I had a sense that these litigations revealed deeper theological political problems, but asked whether the strategy of campaigners in relation to the complex issues involved needed a fuller account of their difficulty.

This led me to ask not simply what political theology might say about how Christians can faithfully navigate the tensions and differences of modern liberal democracies; but further, how political theology can contribute to a wider thinking-through of the kind of political arrangements needed for religiously and irreligious diverse societies to think and act together. What - if any - shared vision of a society's 'good', however minimal, is required to facilitate this, and how is this negotiated, re-negotiated and fostered? I have also asked what might make such negotiation possible in ethically plural political communities, where a variety of comprehensive moral or religious visions of the good may exist alongside sincerely held anxieties about any public or political role for comprehensive visions as such.

My conclusions are arranged in relation to the three issues in political theology which have ordered my engagements with O'Donovan, Milbank and Williams: Christianity's relationship with modernity and its crises; how the political is defined and understood; and reading and interpreting Augustine's cities.

Christianity's relationship with modernity and its crises

O'Donovan and Milbank contribute to the conversation and debate within political theology about how Christian faith and theology relate to the aspirations and crises of the Enlightenment in late modernity. Both theologians clearly view late modernity as being in crisis. For O'Donovan this is a problem of authority. Enlightenment 'suspicion' and its comprehensive separation of theology and politics has radically undermined the possibility of authorised political action in governing and directing societies. The problem for Milbank begins in fundamentally divergent ways of conceiving the nature of reality, which issue in

contrasting modes of political action, primarily in dealing with difference: conflictual or harmonious.

In dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan and John Milbank, who are very different thinkers in many ways, I argued that the tense relationship between Christianity and secularity seems ultimately to play out in largely oppositional ways in the work of both, as Christianity *contra* the secularity of late modernity. However, this critical stance allows Milbank and O'Donovan to ask some searching questions about whether theology does need to think realistically about fundamentally divergent commitments in social and political practice, as well as the intellectual traditions within which they stand. I have asked whether Williams' theological and political vision of the common good as a process not an end, in the dispossessive negotiation of real difference, is sufficiently cognisant of that possibility.

In places in O'Donovan's theology, particularly in *The Ways of Judgement*, there is the sense of a continuum of 'evangelically' ordered political action which does not depend on an explicit Christian obedience or confessional stance. But at the same time, and with Milbank, he retains the sense of a sharply divergent orientation in political action, ordered to 'Christ' or 'Anti-Christ'. For Milbank, the fundamental orientation is to either peace or violence, and issues homologously in politics or anti-politics.

In relation to the question of how faith 'speaks' in late-/post-modernity, all three theologians stake a claim for Christianity's public and political voice. They challenge lines of demarcation that comprehensively separate the theological and the political and are critical of forms of secularism which decisively locate and limit social and political thought and activity within the determinations of the human will, without reference to anything beyond itself. Milbank and O'Donovan share an assessment that some kind of work of recovery is needed, either *in* or *of* theology, to allow it to speak. Both likewise point to a subordination of theology in modernity to 'secular' discourses and disciplines, in the task of articulating a vision of human conviviality.

Williams and Milbank are both aware of the discursive gulf between Christian and late-/post-modern thought-worlds, and the problem of confessional claims and transcendent absolutes. Milbank deal with this by showing the ultimate irrationality of *all* foundational positions and claims, giving a basis for claiming Christian theology's freedom to speak from its own. At the same time, however, he makes a case for just how deep the gap is between Christian and

secular claims, by arguing that they are not simply different, but opposed: peaceful *versus* violent, true *versus* false.

O'Donovan seems less concerned with communicative issues between Christian and non-Christian frames of reference. He bases his political theology on the foundations of scripture and the experience of Christendom, but without showing in detail how a political theology on these foundations makes the transition from an early-modern context to what he recognises to be a very different one.

In relation to the work of Milbank and O'Donovan, their engagement with the problem of how Christian theology speaks in late modernity both relates and does not relate to what I have termed the 'gulf' between the commitments of faith and secularity and how these are negotiated. It relates to the gulf in the sense of identifying a problem and a gap: Christian faith has struggled to speak in a late-modern intellectual, cultural and political landscape whose conventions and discursive norms have allowed little public space for the 'sacred', and the claims and commitments of faith. It does not relate to it inasmuch as Milbank and O'Donovan are not primarily concerned to grapple with any of the communicative or imaginative issues involved, and which have been of concern to me. I have suggested that there may be something of an unacknowledged and perhaps unconscious lacuna in O'Donovan's work in this respect, in that the aspirations and concerns of late modernity might be more explicitly and extensively engaged with in his work. In Milbank's theology there is a much more conscious reticence about the possibilities for dialogue with secular reason and of the risks involved for theology of such engagement, and so therefore no real impetus to address what I have highlighted as the 'difficulty of talking about it'.

I have argued that Williams is the theologian who is most dialogically engaged with late modernity, and more critically attentive to its aspirations and anxieties. I have emphasised his conversational, invitational stance, and suggested that he takes a dialogical, intelligible and accessible approach to secular modernity. I have shown him searching for language in which to express profound theological convictions which is not so confessionally framed as to render it inaccessible to those without faith. This may related in some measure to the public context of his recent political theology, on which I have drawn substantially in my engagement with his thought. His role as the then Archbishop of Canterbury and leader of the Anglican Communion worldwide may have made for greater impetus to find common language and

ground. While Williams is also a notable academic, Milbank and O'Donovan write primarily as academic theologians in the works I have considered in this thesis.

However, as I have also shown, there are similar concerns in the rest of Williams' work in relation to the struggle to speak both theologically and intelligibly for and within a late-modern/post-modern thought-world, mindful of the communicative tensions in doing so, and prepared to engage critically with key contemporary commitments. His careful but critical discussion in *Between Politics and Metaphysics* about addressing metaphysical questions in relation to political action - as a contemporary problem and a pressing need - is a case in point, and dates back to 1995.

However, and Milbank and O'Donovan, Williams *also* makes a methodological decision of an absolute kind. His decision is for a differentiated account of political action ordered either to *intelligibility* or to *success*. I have suggested that he is positing something like a political 'style' as a way of making judgements about whether human political action is, or is not, coherent with divine action.

Milbank is much more pessimistic about whether there is any commonality, in the most fundamental sense, which might make dialogue possible. His acute sense of the enormously destructive outcomes of a politics based on the essentialising and 'worshipping', as it were, of conflict, poses the question of what dialogue or negotiation would be desirable or responsible.

Defining and understanding the political

I have identified two strands within political theology. One deals in a more formal understanding of politics as the structures and processes of government, and involving law, political parties, political rule and so on. The other, which is less familiar territory for ecclesial forms of political theology, locates the political in more informal, interpersonal and everyday spaces. Williams and O'Donovan make some identifiable decisions in relation to these two strands in political theology's self-description.

O'Donovan makes a broad decision for a formal definition of the political, as an institutional conception of 'politics'. He then makes a further refinement to emphasise authority as key to his understanding of politics. He is impelled in this by a belief in the capacity of good,

‘representative’ government - beyond a contemporary practice which he sees as largely managerial - to direct societies towards their ‘best selves’, as it were. He makes a compelling case that the task of authority, within a limited and humble understanding of its penultimacy, to promote the flourishing of human communities in an ‘evangelical’ ordering of authority to the ways of God with the world. A detailed account of political action as recognised and authorised judgement also allows him to address the question of how difference is dealt with, in political communities, particularly where there is real controversy and difficulty, by processes of arbitration which a society can see as warranted.

It has been important to show that this understanding of politics as authority in O’Donovan’s work is not despotic, but rather, ‘representational’. However, the representational character of political authority in O’Donovan’s theology requires significant moral coherence within political communities as the ‘represented’. I have suggested that this aspect of his understanding of politics as authority and rule therefore becomes problematic as a model for highly diverse political communities in a Western context. There are signs, in *The Ways of Judgement*, that the possibility of evangelical obedience in response to the church’s proclamation of the Gospel might be on something of a continuum, not wholly dependent on obedience in the form of explicit faith in Christ. However, the question of how governments might exercise their authority, and direct morally plural societies, many of whose citizens have no Christian or indeed any religious affiliation is not addressed in a systematic way in his theology.

O’Donovan’s response to the problem of deep diversity suggests that a high degree of moral plurality may ultimately result in societies that are ungovernable. This leads to a somewhat conflictual strand in his thinking about how real difference is dealt with in highly plural political communities, and the suggestion that the problem will produce, and be resolved by, some form of social contestation or unrest.

Milbank is committed to a broad description of politics located in human sociality and the navigation of difference. However, in relation to a key site of difference in modernity, between Christianity and secularity, he locates his most fundamental thinking in the ontological and metaphysical ideas undergirding each. This gives a basis for his searching critique of some of modernity’s deepest and most destructive crises, and to show that conflictual and competitive forms of human social and political relations are neither

inevitable, nor the only way of dealing with the reality of difference. However, this commits him to a more oppositional understanding of Christianity and the secular, as they emerge *politically* as forms of life from the ideas and theological or 'anti-theological' ontologies that ultimately impel them.

Williams, as I have shown, also gives a high priority to difference, both as a social reality and in his conception of the ways of God with the world as 'non-competitive' difference. Therefore, a priority for difference is a significant feature of the way he relates human political action to divine action. He sees informal forms of politics as the place of encounter with the real difference, and suggests that it possible to engage intelligibly with the difference of others in increasingly diverse societies. Specifically for my own preoccupations with the dangers of culture wars, I have argued that his notion of difficulty enables a critical engagement with specific secular commitments, but one which is intelligible, communicative and inviting of response.

Augustine's 'cities'

All three of my interlocutors work with a sense of sharp distinctions to be made or identified in their assessment of political action as it is ordered, or not, to divine action.

I have been more critical of Milbank and O'Donovan than of Williams, in this regard, in suggesting that they are less attuned than they might be to the ambiguity in Augustine's device of the cities. I have argued that the reading by both theologians of Augustine's cities, as unambiguously taking shape in historical political entities, leaves less theological room for evaluating secularity, and political orders marked by secularity, in a more 'mixed' way. I have suggested that there is little recognition, in the work of either theologian, of the possibility of a 'third city', which was Gillian Rose's proposal, as a reader of Augustine, by which she avoided a particular binary she discerned in her own intellectual and cultural context at the end of the twentieth century, and may make it possible for her to speak about actual political communities, historically conditioned and temporally situated, and about the *aporiae* of negotiating our lives and life together in that political space, in which the city of God and the earthly city, and the loves by which they are orientated, are and remain mixed.

In the case of Williams, I suggested that the differentiation of political 'styles' into 'successful' and 'intelligible' is where one detects the influence of Augustine and his cities in Williams' political theology. His decision to distinguish between political 'styles' seems to give Williams a way of engaging critically with aspects of a secular culture without this critique being tied to explicitly Christian commitments over against 'secular' ones. It offers a language which does not presuppose a Christian frame of reference or lexicon, offering the possibility of – and indicating a commitment to – a continued dialogue about and across the Christian-secular 'gulf' of real, but not absolute, difference. At the same time, the sharp distinction between intelligibility and assertion as a basis of political action, and exposition of how these do and do not relate to divine action, expresses something of the Augustinian conception and conviction of a fundamental orientation towards or away from the divine expressed within human social and political life. By not couching this sense of a choice to be made in strictly confessional terms, his theology embodies the kind of conversational intelligibility which it advocates, as a way for Christian faith to speak in and to Western political contexts.

However, I have also suggested that Williams' search for accessibility and common discursive and imaginative ground may not account for the possibility of wholly divergent and irreconcilable commitments to an assertive political style. What would a dispossessive, negotiative style of politics make, for instance, of a person or group of people who were unproblematically committed to the advancement of their own interests as a fundamental and incontestable 'good'? In the search for something like a common language, or frame of reference, in what I have termed post-secular societies, Williams may be somewhat idealistic in his pursuit of commonality.

Pressing this observation further, it might be argued that the Williams' theological vision, which is the grounds for his search for commonality, however invitationally, is one to which he is non-negotiably committed. He may be just as unwilling to negotiate with an assertive politics as Milbank is to seek dialogue with the secular, as the conflictual philosophical and political outworking of his ontology of violence. In this sense, Williams is arguably just as uncompromising as Milbank – and at times O'Donovan - in the theological-political vision of dispossessive negotiation he espouses as the basis for a common good. He is, though, perhaps more irenic in the ways he communicates this vision, and in the language and tone he uses to characterise the alternative. Here again, his status as Archbishop at the time of

writing much of the material I have drawn on to assess his political theology may have influenced his tone to a greater extent than for Milbank and O'Donovan who are working in the academy.

To return, briefly, to the legal cases: I have talked about the lack of a common language or ultimate frame of reference as the primary locus of difficulty, and have addressed this primarily as a communicative and imaginative gulf. However, I also observed in the early part of the thesis that there was some perception among the campaigners that Christian faith is actively being marginalised, and that this perception was sometimes shared by the litigants themselves and to a degree within a wider constituency of largely Evangelical Christians.

I have generally questioned the use of the language of aggressive, or 'creeping' secularism, and avoided engaging at any length with claims of widespread and active discrimination against Christians in the thesis, or with the suggestions of an influential 'secularising' *animus* in Britain. I am not persuaded that this is a widespread problem, and the findings of the surveys referenced in chapter two seems to bear that out. However, the language of discrimination does point to another area of potential weakness in Williams' dispossessive politics of negotiation.

This is the question of whether Williams' dispossessive model is adequate for a political agent operating from a disadvantaged position, and how the interests of the most socially and politically disadvantaged - those already significantly dispossessed within actual political communities - are protected. It may be that Williams' theology requires some greater acknowledgement of this possibility, and of the question of how a person or group can negotiate dispossessively when beginning from an already dispossessed position in relation to the social or political 'other'.

Given that involuntary dispossession is a lived reality for countless individuals and groups, something other than self-dispossession might be required. It is here that the value becomes apparent of a substantial account of politics and anti-politics, or an attentiveness to and discernment of the social and political forms taken by Christ and Anti-Christ, which Milbank and O'Donovan respectively offer.

I suspect Williams might respond by saying that this is where, in his model of a procedurally secular state, a government and the law have the role of securing and enacting some basic

norms of right and justice. As I have already suggested, his interactively pluralist, negotiative politics located with first-order communities seems to be the basis for an ongoing conversation about those basic norms, with consensus on them emerging from that negotiative political process over time and between ethical communities. Additionally, his account of the difficult negotiation of difference requires the negotiation of *all* interests, not merely the surrender of some. Williams strongly resists any moves towards the subject simply relinquishing all claims and interests in the face of the imperative of the Other, whether to resolve the difficulty of incommensurability, or as a kind of Levinassian self-immolation. This is apparent in his critical appraisal of Edith Wyschogrod's work on a postmodern hagiography. He suggests that her proposal of what he terms a 'bare receptivity to the need of the Other' leaves no room for any process of negotiation between agents: 'no intelligible way of describing how action remains "saintly" in the business of discerning, allocating priority, and so on'.¹

This does not resolve the problem of political agents who may have very little agency in processes of negotiation, and the question of how, in unequal or unjust settings which disadvantage particular individuals or groups, those who are thereby disempowered ensure that their own interests remain in view. It may however be the point at which political action, in Williams' model for securing and protecting the human rights of vulnerable or oppressed persons, becomes the task of governments and representative institutions, as a shared and convergent common 'good'.

I have given a high priority in this thesis to difference as a general feature of, and political reality in, plural societies in the contemporary western world, and in the space of 'daily' politics. I have focussed particularly, as one very significant 'form' of difference, on the 'gulf' between Christian and secular commitments and frames of reference, and the difficulties and possibilities for meaningful communication across those.

I recognise that this was a methodological decision, driven to a large extent by another methodological decision to emphasise a 'daily politics' as a stronger focus for the thesis than the more formal modes of politics as 'statecraft', though they are related, and I have tried to keep more formal political matters in view. I also recognise that this has influenced how I

¹ Rowan Williams, 'Saints and Postmodernism: Revisioning Moral Philosophy', *Modern Theology* 8, no. 3 (1992): 306.

have read and received the work of the three political theologians whose work I have engaged with as a resource for my own thinking. Another of my concerns, in a culture increasingly remote from Christian faith, has been to avoid assuming that the absence of Christian faith, and even explicit rejection of Christian faith and its claims, necessarily precludes the possibility of political action and social exchange 'after Christ' - even though Christ may not be invoked, and may indeed be rejected in a confessional sense. I suspect both of these starting points may have influenced why I have been drawn to Williams' theological perspective, whose work more explicitly engages with this possibility than I detect in Milbank and O'Donovan.

It may be that there has ultimately been a choice: about what matters, and about how to think; about where to pay attention and where to be asking questions. I have made extensive use of the idea of 'difference' as a focus for attention and questions. I recognise some of my conversational partners might want to press questions about whether that is an adequate rendering of what is at stake, and to ask whether one might use different categories, or start somewhere else.

I asked earlier, in relation to Milbank's return to a mediaeval theological divergence, about the decision of where to begin. My question took the form 'Where do Christianity and the secular go *from here*?' This, I suggest, is what is so essentially difficult: to begin from here, from Gillian Rose's 'broken middle' of the temporal and historical sites in which we actually live and by which we are shaped and determined. Her 'broken middle' involves and acknowledges all the histories of false moves and wrong turns within which we seek to live, and to shape our lives and negotiate and talk about life together, across the gulfs in understanding and communication.

The term 'essential' in the title of this thesis serves to indicate something of the difficulty of beginning *from here*, of difficulty as unavoidably and inevitably a feature of this mixed reality: the shared social and political space of the 'third city'. Difficulty, as it were, goes with the territory.

Difficulty is also essential, however, within Williams's political thought, inasmuch as it is seen to offer the possibility of transformation. The difficult work of self-critical, self-dispossessive and ultimately 'answerable' negotiation holds out, in complex ways and not straightforwardly, a way into learning, growth and a fuller humanity. This 'complicated and

muddled bundle of experiences' is understood to be 'a possible theatre for God's creative work'.²

However, this construal of difficulty also asks whether a political secularism which is ultimately 'unanswerable', in the face of the questions raised about itself and its other by the gaze and the attention of the divine, can ever 'dispossess itself'.³ In his critical engagement with forms of secular thought and politics, Williams leaves an open the question of whether the fullest transforming possibilities emerge only in self-dispossessive encounter with the Christ of faith: a question which invites a response.

² Williams, Rowan. *The Wound of Knowledge: Christian Spirituality from the New Testament to St John of the Cross*. 2nd rev. ed. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1990, 2.

³ Williams, *Faith in the Public Square*, 20.

APPENDIX

List of court cases referred to

Eweida & Others v UK [2013] ECHR 37

McFarlane v Relate Avon Ltd [2009] UKEAT 0106/09

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