

# Citizens of Another City

BY BARRY HARVEY

Scripture contradicts the modern view that religion is a private affair, something we do in the solitude of our “inner selves.” God creates a new pilgrim people who promote their own laws and patterns of behavior, and resemble nothing so much as a distinct nation. How then do we live as citizens of another city, but sojourners and pilgrims in earthly cities?

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**W**e always “live in the description of a place and not in the place itself,” writes the poet Wallace Stevens.<sup>1</sup> In other words, we live, move, and have our being in terms of some particular account of why things in life are the way they are. Depending on when and where we are born and raised, we learn to see the world in a certain way and not others. Though this process of moral and intellectual formation is both natural and necessary (no one is raised in a social vacuum), we too often remain oblivious to other descriptions that may more truthfully account for the world in all its complexity. As those who have been instructed by the Apostle Paul not to be conformed to this world, but to be transformed by the renewing of our minds (Romans 12:2), such ignorance can have serious repercussions for our faithfulness to Christ.

For example, many of us simply take it for granted that politics and religion occupy very different places in human affairs, but in fact this assumption only makes sense within the context of the larger story of modernity. In this regard we are faithful disciples of John Locke (among others), who states that it is “above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the Business of Civil Government from that of Religion, to settle the just Bounds between one and the other...[between] on the one side, a Concernment for the Interest of Mens [*sic*] Souls, and on the other side, a Care of the Com-

monwealth."<sup>2</sup> Politics, according to this modern view, has to do with public matters under the purview of the nation-state. Since the state is the only recognized form of political association in modern society, it has virtually unlimited sovereignty over the activities and relationships of its citizens. It bears the final responsibility for adjudicating conflicts of interests between individuals. Yet, because this modern view also excludes any substantive conception of the common good, it reduces politics to procedures for protecting and promoting the pursuit of individual self-interest in the marketplace of desire and consumption.

Religion, by contrast, is something that men and women attend to in the solitude of their "inner selves." It has to do with private beliefs about what individuals see as ultimately true and important in their lives, since, as Thomas Jefferson so famously puts it, "it does me no injury for my neighbour to say that there are twenty gods, or no god."<sup>3</sup> As Jefferson implies, the object of religious beliefs typically transcends both the material world and the limits of human reason—the world of eating and drinking, passing laws and prosecuting offenders, acquiring and disposing of property, making war and making peace, and producing and exchanging consumer goods. Such matters have been handed over to the purview of the state (in conjunction with the market). Though some religious beliefs may have an indirect bearing on one's public life, an individual must not take them so seriously as to be unwilling to sacrifice them on the altar of public expediency.<sup>4</sup>

### **"A PRIESTLY KINGDOM"**

When we turn to the story narrated in the Bible about the nature of things, we notice something at odds with this way of dividing the social landscape. The formative images in the biblical story depicting God's activity in the world are overwhelmingly political in character, with relatively little resembling what we call "religion."<sup>5</sup> At the heart of the Old Testament we read that the creator of heaven and earth chooses a "people" over whom he plans to rule as "king." Though the idea of divine kingship does not by itself denote a specific political realm, the reality of God's sovereign rule can only gain traction among the tribes, monarchies, and empires of the world through the actual gathering together of a people who profess allegiance to the king as loyal subjects.

This divine king "liberates" his chosen people from their bondage in a foreign land, gives to them a "law" that spells out the directions of and dangers to the practice of everyday life within their "covenant," secures for them a "land" of their own, and once in this land raises up leaders, or "judges," to administer life under the covenant. The Lord's claim to sovereign rule over this particular people finds historical expression as a distinct regime—"a priestly kingdom and a holy nation"—established in the covenant at Sinai. The God of their ancestors would forever be their king ruling over a kingdom unlike that of any earthly king (Exodus 19:6).<sup>6</sup>

Once in the land, the tribes of the Lord succumb to the temptation that to survive they must become like the other nations. God grants their request to give them a human “king,” but one that is essentially a vassal, still subject to the divine rule. Thus begins Israel’s turbulent and tragic experiment with the ways and means of ancient monarchies. The covenant relationship is handed over to a regime (the sort that formerly had been regarded as antithetical to Israel’s constitution on Mt. Sinai) perhaps under the belief that the institutions, offices, and practices of human kingship could be accommodated while remaining true to Israel’s identity as God’s priestly people. And though this attempt ultimately fails, it establishes in the memory of the Jewish people a hope that will burst forth in messianic fervor with Jesus’ pronouncement that the Kingdom of God was drawing near.

Though the circumstances change radically, after the exile the political cast of biblical imagery unfolds even further, with Israel’s king now proclaimed as the ruler of all peoples and nations. In their synagogues and the rebuilt Temple in Jerusalem, the Jews thus profess

For the LORD, the Most High, is awesome,  
a great king over all the earth....  
Sing praises to God, sing praises;  
sing praises to our King, sing praises.  
For God is the king of all the earth;  
sing praises with a psalm.

*Psalm 47:2, 6–7*

There is no king but God, they declare, whose dominion admits no rivals and no partners. As one might expect, such convictions generate a good deal of animosity with the Gentiles, who claim privileges and prerogatives that the chosen people reserve for God and God’s rule alone. According to the Roman poet Virgil, for example, the gods had “set no limits, world or time” to Rome, “but make the gift of empire without end.”<sup>7</sup> These rulers and authorities idolatrously challenge divine sovereignty at almost every point, proclaiming that the constellation of political institutions and peoples over which they preside is the true, real, and rational order of things and that there is no choice but to act in accordance with it.

It is out of this context that Jesus of Nazareth emerges, proclaiming to his fellow Israelites, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1:15). Through his life, death, and resurrection, God’s messianic rule promised to Abraham and Sarah’s offspring becomes a present reality, not in some kind of private “religious” experience or utopian ideal, but in connection with the day-to-day concerns and celebrations of life. Over against the forces and powers that formerly had governed the course and content of life in the ancient world virtually uncontested, Jesus introduces an alternative pattern of

communal life, a distinctive set of personal habits and relations, and a different story in terms of which to make sense of all things on earth and under heaven—in short, participation in another city, one that God would set on a hill for all to see and share. The meaning of all other political figures, events, and institutions no longer resides in themselves. They are now derivative signs, the significance of which can only be discerned in their relationship to this one Jewish man and the body politic of the church over which he rules as head.

### THE EKKLESIA AS ANOTHER CITY

Jesus' followers came to refer to their fellowship as an *ekklesia*, a Hellenistic term for the assembly of those holding rights and privileges of citizenship in the *polis* or city. Many may find this description of the church as a city puzzling, since it draws on a conception of politics that is outside the normal frame of reference. In classical antiquity politics is the art of human community, the *telos* or end of which is living well, that is, in accordance with our highest good as rational beings. Political institutions are a principal means to this end, tasked with cultivating activities and habits that will direct women and men toward that which gives life its meaning, its purpose.<sup>8</sup> As the dominant form of ordered social life, the word "city" functions at the start of the Christian era as the standard trope denoting the shared practices, dispositions, and relationships that enable a people to flourish in accordance with their highest good.<sup>9</sup>

The twofold mission of God in Jesus and the Holy Spirit thus results in the creation of a people who are "looking for the city that is to come" (Hebrews 13:14). Toward that end they promote their own laws and their own patterns of behavior, resembling nothing so much as a distinct nation, albeit one without its own land or ancient traditions to back up its peculiar customs.<sup>10</sup>

The institutions, activities, and habits of this body politic, however, are not those of the Greek *polis* or

the Roman *imperium* (nor that of the modern nation-state). The assembly of God's messianic regime orders the life and activity of its members in ways that explicitly call into question prevailing political assumptions. In the Gospel of Luke, for example, Jesus tells his inner circle, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather the greatest among you must be-come

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like the youngest, and the leader like one who serves" (22:25–26). This comparison locates the nature of the church community squarely within a political frame of reference while at the same time distinguishing the shape of its common life from that of the nations.

The church thus retains for its self-definition the classical *telos* of politics (enabling a people to flourish in accordance with their highest good), and

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the practices and institutions of social life are likewise understood as means to this end. But it gives these structures new content, namely, "the art of achieving the common good through participation in the divine life of God."<sup>11</sup> Christians therefore regard the builders of earthly kingdoms and empires with a wary eye, because they invariably lay claim to an authority that belongs to God alone.

Ancient Rome understood itself to be "*the City*, a permanent and 'eternal' City, *Urbs aeterna*, and an ultimate City also. In a sense, it claimed for itself an 'eschatological dimension.' It posed as an ultimate solution of the human problem." The empire proclaimed itself a universal commonwealth, embodying the decisive expression of "Humanity" and offering to all over whom it exercised authority the only lasting and genuine peace, the *pax romana*. As such it claimed to be omniscient over human affairs and it demanded the complete and unconditional allegiance of its subjects. "The Church was a challenge to the Empire," writes Georges Florovsky, "and the Empire was a stumbling block for the Christians."<sup>12</sup>

### **COMPETING POLITICAL ALLEGIANCES**

Though some might worry that describing the church as a political association implies that Christians must create their own separate social enclaves, this is not the case. Any such separation is impossible, for there is literally no place for the church to go to remove itself from all transactions with the world. The intrusion of God's messianic reign into the world in Jesus and his followers cannot help but interact with virtually every aspect of a fallen world. As it does so, the reorganization of human existence around this new and distinctive set of loyalties and loves will invariably disrupt established regimes of life and language that are subject to the rule of death and sin.

Indeed, like the Jews who have been dispersed throughout the world, Christians who take to heart their membership in the heavenly commonwealth (Philippians 3:20) will find themselves hard-pressed between competing claims for their allegiance. They will need to cultivate the difficult and precarious art of living in-between these competing demands on their loyalty, so that they might forge forms of life befitting their identity and vocation as the people chosen by God to serve the peoples of the earth as members of “a priestly kingdom and a holy nation,” while at the same time formulating a workable *modus vivendi* with the established ways of their hosts.

Christians therefore will need to cooperate with their fellow creatures in obtaining those things that belong to their mortal nature – what they shall eat, what they shall drink, what they shall wear. But as Augustine observes, they will seek these things according to a faith, love, and hope that is different from those affirmed by the citizens of the earthly city, which is governed by the *libido dominandi*, the lust to mastery. The claim of the powers of this world to the moral authority to determine the kinds and order of goods men and women should pursue is thus predicated on the possession, threat, and use of coercive force, and thus on death and the fear of death. By contrast, Christians are called upon to acquire those virtues that will allow them to use prudently those earthly goods that are necessary to life in this age, directing this use towards that alone which can truly be called peace, “a perfectly ordered and perfectly harmonious fellowship in the enjoyment of God, and of one another in God.”<sup>13</sup>

When we describe the world this way as Christians, we can distinguish between the fact that a government happens to dominate public life and all of the after-the-fact justifications it employs to persuade its subjects that it is acting in their best interests (e.g., in our case, “We hold these truths to be self-evident...”). We can judge how to make the best use of both the goods over which these authorities have charge and their vocabularies of legitimation. These powers of discernment enable us to make relative distinctions among nations and rulers; we can recognize that certain regimes (e.g., liberal democracies such as the United States and the European Union) are somewhat less oppressive in their pursuit of the goods necessary for life in this age, without succumbing to the false claim that they constitute a fundamentally new or different kind of political order.

### **SOJOURNERS AND PILGRIMS**

The anonymous author of a letter to someone named Diognetus, writing around the middle of the second century, vividly describes the nature of this “pilgrim city.” Christians live in both Greek and barbarian cities, following local customs in clothing, food, and the other concerns of daily life. They nonetheless cultivate habits and relationships among themselves that reveal the peculiar character of their *politeia*, or commonwealth.<sup>14</sup> Christians

thus dwell in the various lands of their birth, but do so as though they are sojourners and pilgrims in them. They share all goods with their fellows, yet they endure life's sufferings as strangers. Like everyone else, they marry and bear children, but they do not expose their children.<sup>15</sup> They show hospitality to those in need, but they protect the sanctity of marriage. In short, "Their lot is cast 'in the flesh,' but they do not live 'after to the flesh.'"<sup>16</sup>

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themselves from the rest of the world, nor is it for them to fill all the slots of leadership so that the world will run smoothly. Instead, the author writes, Christians are to relate to the world as the soul relates to the body. As the soul permeates all the members of the body, so Christians are scattered throughout all the nations

of the world. And as the soul indwells the body but is not of it, Christians are in, but not of, the world. As we have seen, this relationship creates tensions between the church and the world, and thus Christians must bear the enmity of that for the sake of which they have been gathered together.

The flesh hates the soul, and wages war upon it, though it has suffered no evil, because it is prevented from gratifying its pleasures, and the world hates the Christians though it has suffered no evil, because they are opposed to its pleasures. The soul loves the flesh which hates it and the limbs, and Christians love those that hate them. The soul has been shut up in the body, but itself sustains the body; and Christians are confined in the world as in a prison, but themselves sustain the world.<sup>17</sup>

Christians exist in and suffer for the world as citizens of another city, so that all women and men might learn "what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge" (Ephesians 3:18-19).

## NOTES

1 Wallace Stevens, *Letters*, edited by Holly Stevens (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1966), 494.

2 John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, edited by James H. Tully (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1983), 26.

3 Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Query XVII, "Religion," in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, edited by William Peden (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1954), 159.

4 Richard Rorty, "The Priority of Democracy to Philosophy," in *The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom: Its Evolution and Consequences in American History*, edited by Merrill D. Peterson and Robert C. Vaughn (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 258.

5 To be sure, the language of interiority has a long pedigree in the Christian tradition, but its sense has changed substantially over the centuries. With Augustine, for example, the boundary between inner and outer does not fall between the mind and the body, but between that part of the mind which is dependent on the body for the exercise of its powers, including imagination, and that part which is not so dependent, viz., reason. See Denys Turner, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 90–92.

6 N. T. Wright, *The New Testament and the People of God*, Christian Origins and the Question of God, volume 1 (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1992), 307.

7 Virgil, *The Aeneid*, I.278–279, translated by Robert Fitzgerald (New York, NY: Vintage, 1990), 13.

8 See Aristotle, *The Politics*, III.9, and Cicero, *On the Republic*, I.25.39.

9 More precisely, "city" functions as a synecdoche, where a species (the city) stands in for the genus (political association).

10 Robert L. Wilken, *The Christians as the Romans Saw Them* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1984), 119.

11 Michael Baxter, "'Overall, the First Amendment Has Been Very Good for Christianity' – NOT!: A Response to Dyson's Rebuke," *DePaul Law Review* 43 (Winter 1994), 441.

12 The Very Rev. Georges Florovsky, "Empire and Desert: Antinomies of Christian History," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 3 (Winter 1957), 135, 137.

13 Augustine, *The City of God Against the Pagans*, I.Preface, XVIII.54, and XIX.17, edited R. W. Dyson (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3, 908, 947.

14 The author uses the Greek term *politeia* that typically refers to a particular type of political regime, e.g., a republic, monarchy, or aristocracy, etc.

15 In the Roman Empire, parents would kill unwanted newborns (usually females) by exposing them to the elements and wild animals.

16 *The Epistle to Diognetus* V.4–8, *The Apostolic Fathers*, volume 2, translated by Kirsopp Lake (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976), 359, 361.

17 *Ibid.*, VI.1–7, 361, 363.



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