The Protestant Apolitical Tradition and its Legacy

By Alec Ryrie

We tell ourselves two stories about the Protestant Reformation's legacy to political cultures: the two quarrelling twins born from Luther's magnificently impractical doctrine of the two kingdoms. One is a story of defiance and revolution, a story still imbued with a certain Whiggish satisfaction. This tells how some Protestants, chiefly but not only from the Reformed tradition, defied the kingdom of this world in the name of the kingdom of Christ, finding in their consciences the authority to resist princes and even to stand in prophetic judgement over them. The point was famously made by Andrew Melville to King James VI of Scots in 1596: insisting that there were two kingdoms in Scotland, and that while James was king of one, the other, rapidly turning itself into a recklessly expansionist empire, was the kingdom of Christ, "whose subject King James the Sixth is, and of whose kingdom not a king, nor a lord, nor a head, but a member!"[1] A broad tradition can be plausibly traced from the early Protestant resistance theorists and monarchomachs; through seventeenth-century English and Dutch republicans and radicals; through theorists of toleration such as John Locke, who denied that princes had authority over their subjects' souls, since souls are under God's jurisdiction alone; through the anti-slavery Protestants of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; to, ultimately, the radical Protestants of the twentieth century, who stood against a range of oppressive regimes and systems. This reached a kind of apotheosis in the 1982 Belhar Confession and the 1986 Kairos Document, the key theological documents of the anti-apartheid movement.

Opposed to this – so the story goes – is a subservient, craven Protestantism, which is either suborned by the temporal powers or willingly submits to and sacralises them. Here the line of descent stretches from the state churches of the confessional age, through the European missionaries who collaborated with imperialism and the American defenders of slavery, through the churches that stood firmly against liberalism in the generation of 1848, to twentieth-century

1. Robert Pitcairn, ed., *The Autobiography and Diary of Mr James Melvill* (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1842), 370.

apologists for tyranny. Here the apotheosis comes in Nazi Germany. Karl Barth wrote in 1939 that the two-kingdoms doctrine "lies like a cloud over the ecclesiastical thinking and action of more or less every course taken by the German Church."[2] Dietrich Bonhoeffer likewise blamed German Protestants' reluctance to defy Nazism on a fatal humility before the secular power, such that when the regime gave evil orders, Germans obeyed with "an irresponsible unscrupulousness," scarcely bothering to consult their consciences. Yet if they considered defiance, those same consciences awoke into "an agonising scrupulosity which invariably frustrated action."[3] The result was always the same: submission and obedience.

This is an appealing pair of stories, amply populated with heroes and villains. Unfortunately, it tells a very partial story both of the Reformation era and, more especially, of its legacy since. This essay aims to put a third, more morally ambiguous story alongside it, a story which does not appeal so much to modern sensibilities but which is at least as significant for the modern world: the story of Protestant apoliticism.

We may begin with Luther, although he was only channelling Christian traditions dating back to the pre-Constantinian period. This is what Luther's *Temporal Authority: To What Extent it Should Be Obeyed*, has to say about princes: "They can do no more than strip and fleece, heap tax upon tax. […] Since the beginning of the world a wise prince is a mighty rare bird, and an upright prince even rarer. They are generally the biggest fools or the worst scoundrels on earth." But this is not a call to arms. God permits these scoundrels to rule because "the world is too wicked, and does not deserve to have many wise and upright princes." Indeed, it is only because of sin that God needed to institute the kingdom of this world at all, to restrain humanity and to make some limited semblance of peace and order possible. The point, which is so counterintuitive to modern sensibilities that we can miss it, is that the kingdom of this world does not matter very much. It is a temporary necessity, but Christians' hearts should be set instead on the kingdom of Christ, where there is no law, and no coercion, and which is not passing away.[4]

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2. Karl Barth, *The German Church Conflict*, ed. by T.H.L. Parker, trans. by P.T.A. Parker (London: Lutterworth Press, 1965), 75.

3. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison,* ed. by Eberhard Bethge (London: Collins, 1959), 135-137.

4. Martin Luther, *Luther's Works, American edition*, 55 vols. (St. Louis: Concordia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1955-1986), vol. 45 (1962): *The Christian in Society II*, ed. by Walther I.

Encouraging Christians to take no interest in political matters may look very like mere submission. Indeed, this ethic proved thoroughly agreeable for most Protestant princes during the confessional age. To be deliberately apolitical is of course to give tacit support to whoever happens to be in power. Even in the early modern period, however, there were indications that apolitical withdrawal was not merely submission in fancy theological dress. Mennonites, for example, mixed scrupulous obedience with fastidious refusal to be involved in or contaminated by political life in any way: this was not Luther's view, but was a recognisable variant of it. A truer and more subversive descendant was Philip Jakob Spener, the father of Pietism, whose manifesto *Pia desideria* (1675) is notable for its ringing silence on the role of the godly prince. Although Pietism was championed by the Danish and Hohenzollern monarchies, it drew much of its power from its ability simply to bypass political structures, sending its books promiscuously across borders and sparking lay-led revivals which did not wait for political permission. The same can be said of the Pietists' Moravian and Methodist successors. According to the thesis famously advanced by E. P. Thompson, Methodism snuffed out a potential revolution in England by diverting working-class energies down a blind religious alley. It may be so, but just because Methodism did not threaten the British state does not mean that it was subordinate to it. And of course, to *criticise* Methodists for prioritising piety over politics is an ahistorical value-judgement.

It is in the twentieth century, however, that Protestantism's apolitical tradition has flourished most, and has been most criticised. The criticisms have come chiefly from other Protestants, who tend to assume that democratic political activism is normative for Protestants, and who therefore often diagnose apoliticism as at best a naive throwback to outdated theologies, at worst a transparent attempt to collaborate with ugly political forces. Both criticisms have some truth, but neither takes the inherent logic behind apoliticism nearly seriously enough. The remainder of this article will look at some twentieth-century examples of that resurgence and draw out some wider conclusions.

We can see the story in microcosm in South Korean Presbyterianism, where the emergence of so-called *minjung* theology in the 1970s sparked excitement amongst liberal theologians around the world. This aspired to build "a church

Brandt, 89, 109, 111-114.

for and of the *minjung*," the oppressed people, in a kind of Protestant counterpart to liberation theology. As the so-called Korean Christian Declaration of 1973 put it, *minjung* theology aimed to "follow the footsteps of our Lord, living among our oppressed and poor people, standing against political oppression, and participating in the transformation of history, for this is the only way to the Messianic Kingdom."[5] Under the harsh dictatorship of Park Chung-hee, these were not cheap sentiments. Christian dissidents influenced by *minjung* theology were prominent in opposing the regime, and many of them suffered lengthy terms of imprisonment.

During the height of this movement from 1971-1977, the *kijang* church, the small Presbyterian church which embraced *minjung* theology, saw its membership rise by some 11%. During the same years, however, the membership of Korea's main Presbyterian denominations, which actively distanced themselves from politics, rose by 70% or more.[6] The *minjung* theologians, it seems, did not attract much interest from the *minjung* themselves. Nor did converts come flocking to their banner once democracy was established. *Minjung* theology came to seem nationalist and patriarchal, and its willingness to flirt with Marxism was politically toxic to Christians living next door to the world's last Stalinist dictatorship.

This may look as if Protestants were actively supporting the Park regime. It certainly wooed them. Members of the government, and on one occasion even Park himself, attended prayer breakfasts hosted by sympathetic pastors. A new umbrella body for Korean Protestants, the Korean Christian Association for Anticommunism, was openly friendly to the regime. Yet few Korean Protestants seem to have been active supporters of the dictatorships. Rather, their stance was classically apolitical. According to a revealing 1982 survey, only 6% of Korean Protestants believed that churches should "actively and collectively" oppose corruption or human-rights violations. Yet the number who recommended simply ignoring these problems was equally tiny. Thirty-two percent, by contrast, felt that the churches should respond "through criticism and evangelism" – trying to infuse Gospel values throughout Korean society. Forty-three percent recommended responding chiefly with prayer. That stance looks con-

5. Choo Chai-Yong, "A Brief Sketch of a Korean Christian History from the Minjung Perspective," in *Minjung Theology: People as the Subjects of History* (London: Zed Press, 1981), 73-79, here 79.

6. Chung-Shin Park, *Protestantism and Politics in Korea* (Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 2003), 45.

temptibly weak only if we assume that prayer is not an effective means of intervening in worldly affairs.[7]

In the same survey, 89% of Protestants claimed to expect Christ's second coming "very soon." Since their premillennial theology told them to expect the world to grow ever worse, working to improve it was futile. When the *kijang* church's Kim Chaejun claimed that a church should be "an organisation of strength, awakening each citizen to a sense of sovereignty and letting him speak," the Protestant majority countered that that might be admirable, but it did not sound much like a church.[8] Most Korean Protestant churches believed that they were on earth to save souls, which they were doing at an unprecedented rate. The proportion of Protestants in the South Korean population rose from 2.5% in 1960 (some 600,000 people), to 10% in 1970, 19% in 1980 and as high as 27% in 1990 – just under twelve million believers. Almost all of the growth was in rigorously conservative evangelical churches.

This astonishing explosion mirrored South Korea's equally astonishing economic boom in those years. From 1962-89 South Korea's economy grew from US$2.7 billion to $230 billion.[9] It was the *minjung* theologians' misfortune to be preaching justice for the poor in a time and place when the condition of the poor was changing faster than had ever been seen before in human history. The most dynamic growth in Korean Protestantism came, in fact, from churches such as the Yoido Full Gospel Church, now the world's largest congregation, which preached a "prosperity gospel" offering material prosperity as a gift of the Holy Spirit. Amidst an economic boom which even secular economists called a miracle, *minjung* theology offered the poor dignity, but the "prosperity gospel" offered – and delivered! – a chance to stop being poor.

Korean Protestants' apoliticism arises from their own circumstances, but also from deeper traditions inherited through American missionaries. American premillenialism bequeathed a distinct tradition of fastidious separation from a world which is passing away. The Millerite apocalypticism of the 1840s has left its mark in the Jehovah's Witnesses' absolute refusal to engage with this world, and in the Seventh-day Adventists' more measured disdain for politics. The most important modern inheritors of this tradition, however, are Pentecostals.

7. Timothy S. Lee, *Born Again: Evangelicalism in Korea* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 119-120.

8. Park, *Protestantism and Politics* (see note 6), 84.

9. Abeer Khandker, "Why is the South Korean growth experience different?", *Economic Change and Restructuring* 49/1 (2016): 41-69, here 44.

As Laurence Moore puts it: "One can read through the Pentecostal journals that appeared between the early 1930s and the late 1940s […] and get no sense that any events took place in the world other than the wonder-working, soul-saving miracles of the Holy Ghost."[10] Some early Pentecostals refused to vote at all; others did so reluctantly on occasion. As one early leader bluntly put it, most simply believed that "politics is rotten."[11] Its corruption and its compromises offered nothing of any real value to God's people. It is a view similar enough to Luther's own. The kingdom of this world is legitimate. However, in a sinful world there are strict limits to what it can ever achieve. It simply does not matter very much.

Pentecostals' "withdrawal" has often been accused of being politically skewed, above all in Latin America. In Chile, during the presidency of the socialist Salvador Allende, a survey found that 60% of Pentecostals believed that "political participation did not really lead anywhere," and that Pentecostals were less likely than the general population to be interested in politics or to read newspapers.[12] Yet after Augusto Pinochet's 1973 coup, a joint declaration by 32 Chilean Pentecostal and evangelical denominations stated that his accession to power was "God's answer to the prayers of all the believers who recognised that Marxism was the expression of satanic power." Pinochet used the huge Pentecostal Methodist church in Santiago as the site of his annual national thanksgiving service, and even asked its pastor to serve as a minister in his government (he refused).[13] The case for the prosecution, then, is that apoliticism is a sham which systematically favours oppressive and authoritarian regimes. The presumption that politics is rotten is itself inherently right-wing, since many left-wing policies depend on active government intervention. In a 2014 survey, nearly twice as many Latin American Catholics as Protestants thought it was important to lobby for government activity to support the poor, and significantly more Catholics than Protestants (50% as against 37%) emphasised the importance of charitable support for the poor. By contrast, 47% of Protestants but only 24% of Catholics

10. R. Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 142.

11. Robert Mapes Anderson, *Vision of the Disinherited: The Making of American Pentecostalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 208.

12. David Martin, *Tongues of Fire: The Explosion of Protestantism in Latin America* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 238-240.

13. David Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant? The Politics of Evangelical Growth* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 112, 316.

argued that the best way to help the poor was to bring them to Christ.[14] On this reading, apolitical withdrawal is code for collaboration with right-wing Yanqui neo-colonialism.

The tone of accusation is itself an important fact. In post-Enlightenment societies, there is a widespread assumption that most human problems can be tackled through politics, and therefore mass political participation is seen as a virtue. In this context, apoliticism looks deeply irresponsible. In 1986, the Brazilian Anglican and future bishop Robinson Cavalcanti said that "the irrelevance of Protestantism [is] so great that, if the Rapture occurred today, Brazilian society would take a week to notice that the believers were no longer there."[15] That comment, which some Christians might once have taken to be praise, was meant as a criticism.

The truth is subtler than that. It is certainly true that avowedly apolitical Protestants have periodically been stirred into political action by movements which they see as existential threats – whether Marxism in Latin America, political Islam in Nigeria, or imperial Shintoism in Japanese-occupied Korea and China during the Second World War. But equally, they have often been able to negotiate amicable coexistence with such movements. In 1980s most Pentecostal leaders in Nicaragua, one of Latin America's most Protestant countries, loudly condemned the US-backed "contra" rebels, proclaimed their apolitical stance, and avowed their loyalty to the Marxist government. Their chief concern was neither revolution nor counter-revolution, but being able to preach and enact their gospel untroubled by the kingdom of this world. The Sandinistas, as one scholar puts it, "found it hard to understand why, at a time when the poor needed to defend their gains against the United States and counter-revolution, so many were spending their nights clapping and singing to no apparent purpose."[16] But they were willing to permit it.

This demand that the kingdom of Christ be allowed to govern its own realm remains apolitical Protestants' key, non-negotiable political demand. It is both limited and self-centred, paying little attention to the society's welfare as long as their community is allowed to have its safe space. In that sense, it is easy for most governments to buy apolitical Protestants' loyalty. But there is steel here

14. http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america (accessed 24 April 2016).
15. Stoll, *Is Latin America Turning Protestant?* (see note 13), 315.
16. Ibid., 100.

too. Some modern regimes, such as one-party states, cannot by their nature accept this non-aggression pact. In the People's Republic of China, avowedly and painstakingly apolitical Protestants were curtailed and eventually suppressed in the 1950s and 1960s. Since the re-legalisation of public worship in China in 1979, a majority of Chinese Protestants have refused to join the official Three-Self Patriotic Movement. These unregistered churches are typically scrupulous about avoiding political activism of any kind, but their insistence on carving out a space where the Party's writ does not run is in itself highly subversive. As one unregistered church leader explained in the early 1980s: "There is no option but to separate ourselves for holiness. […] I am not a political man. I support the People's Government as everybody does. But as a Christian, I can have no consort with atheistic communism."[17]

The canonical example of non-participation remains the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany. The Confessing Church is remembered as the anti-Nazi wing of Protestantism, but in fact its members offered very little real opposition or resistance to the Nazi state. What they did, or tried to do, was to defend their church's freedom to decide its own doctrine and polity, including its right to treat Christians of Jewish descent as full and equal members of the church. This was not heroic, but neither was it craven. And indeed, it is worth noticing that the religious group which offered the most steadfast resistance to the Nazis, even, in 1937, distributing 300,000 copies of a pamphlet denouncing Hitler as the apocalyptic beast, was also the most doggedly apolitical of them all: the Jehovah's Witnesses.[18]

There is an obvious affinity between Protestant apoliticism and the principles of the modern democratic centre-right: a shared emphasis on self-help, private initiative and individual moral renewal, and a shared suspicion for state enterprise. (There are also corresponding affinities with the centre-left, in a shared emphasis on human equality and a deep-seated unease with nationalism.) Where Pentecostals have become involved in political movements, as in several countries in contemporary Africa, they have often couched their ambitions in terms of national moral renewal rather than of specific policy change. The comparison between Pentecostalism and its most historically important

17. Kim-Kwong Chan, Alan Hunter, ed., *Prayers and Thoughts of Chinese Christians* (London: Mowbray, 1991), 99.

18. Christine Elizabeth King, *The Nazi State and the New Religions: Five Case Studies in Non-Conformity* (New York, Toronto: Edwin Mellen Press, 1982), 159-160.

rival, Marxism, is instructive. Marxism calls the poor to struggle for a future revolution that is defined as a public event. It tends to spread in workplaces and other public spheres, and to be led by men. Pentecostalism, by contrast, offers not a chance to sacrifice oneself for a future revolution, but immediate and practical spiritual help. It spreads in the private sphere, through households and families, and very often through women's agency. It offers solutions across the broad front of the troubles that dominate most human lives: health, the security of families, drug or alcohol dependence, money worries. In practice it does not of course provide all of these things all of the time, but it does enough that the offer works, and certainly does so more reliably than any secular political utopia. And it also mobilises initiative. The same 2014 survey which showed that more Latin American Catholics than Protestants *approve* of charitable work to help the poor also found that many more Protestants than Catholics actually *engage* in work of this kind themselves.[19]

The power and the shortcomings of this tradition are nowhere plainer than in apartheid-era South Africa. While the historically white-led, mainline Protestant churches were divided into openly pro- and anti-apartheid camps, most of the so-called African Independent churches, the largest and fastest-growing segment of South African Protestantism, refused to engage. As elsewhere, apoliticism sometimes amounted to support for the regime. One "independent" leader, Isaac Mokoena, was repeatedly used by the state to denounce international sanctions. The largest of the "independent" churches, the Zion Christian Church, invited State President P. W. Botha to preach at Easter 1985, and invested him with a church honour. Some of its ministers accepted roles in the puppet governments of the "homelands." At the post-apartheid Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), one prominent "independent" church leader came forward to "ask forgiveness for not having fought in the struggle, for not having been beaten up, detained and killed. […] We are cowards and we admit it."[20]

Perhaps, for such churches, simple existence was achievement enough. The Zion Christian Church's testimony to the TRC emphasised that it had defied

19. http://www.pewforum.org/2014/11/13/religion-in-latin-america (accessed 24 April 2016).

20. Joel Cabrita, *Text and Authority in the South African Nazaretha Church* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 323; Robin M. Petersen, "The AICs and the TRC: Resistance Redefined," in James Cochrane, John de Gruchy, Stephen Martin, ed., *Facing the Truth: South African Faith Communities and the Truth & Reconciliation Commission* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1999), 117.

apartheid by teaching its members to respect themselves, one another and the law. They were "not to hurt others, but to refuse to be hurt by others." That was at least speaking the TRC's language. The testimony of another major "independent" church, the Nazaretha Church, struck a different note. When confronted by oppression, they testified, "all they had to do was to ask the congregation to kneel down and have Isiguqa, which is a special prayer to God." This sort of talk led politicised Protestants to despair that the independent churches would only ever offer supernatural placebos rather than providing what one black theologian called "the kind of political direction which the black community needs." When, in 1985, the main English-speaking churches produced the Kairos Document, a stirring theological declaration of the evils of apartheid, the "independent" churches, which constituted such an enormous part of South African Christianity, were neither included nor even mentioned.[21]

The "independent" churches would reply that providing political direction was not their purpose. What the "black community" truly needed, in their view, was not mobilisation but God's help in the midst of this world's troubles. As a more sympathetic black South African theologian, Simon Maimela, pointed out, the establishment churches had much to say to the people about the distant hope of political liberation, but little about "their daily misfortunes, illness, encounter with evil and witchcraft, bad luck, poverty, barrenness – in short, all their concrete social problems."[22] The independent churches, by contrast, positively encouraged believers to bring these troubles to church. Some of the establishment churches were learning to defy evil. The independents offered instead to defeat it.

There is no getting around it: for those who believe in the importance of worldly politics, the apolitical tradition in Protestantism is pernicious. My purpose is not to defend it, but to make two more modest points. First, the apolitical tradition in Protestantism is not (or not only) a cowardly or dishonest response to particular circumstances, but has a longstanding and, in its own terms, honourable theological rationale stretching back to Luther (and, indeed, beyond). Second, the claim that apoliticism is a fig leaf for collaboration with tyranny is at best a very partial truth. Apolitical Protestants tend genuinely to think that worldly politics is not very important, a view which is unfashionable

21. Petersen, "The AICs and the TRC" (see note 20), 115, 118, 121.
22. Allan Anderson, *Bazalwane: African Pentecostals in South Africa* (Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1992), 19.

but not ridiculous, and which, amidst the slow-burning crisis of legitimacy in many modern democracies, may be capable of gaining considerable traction. As such, they have a set of modest but largely non-negotiable demands to make of the kingdom of this world – chiefly, and momentously, to be left alone.

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