

Church and politics – a Reformed approach

ABSTRACT

Today Christians are often involved in politics. Early Christian authors held a different opinion. They considered the church as a nation of a different kind and themselves as foreigners in the world. They refused (even when they were not excluded) participation in any branch of the government. It was not until Constantine that this changed.

Theologians and church leaders in many countries plead for the involvement of the church in politics. Often politicians also call for a contribution by churches or other religions in the public square. The nature of this participation can differ very much. In Romania, Reformed church leaders openly use their position for political votes. A close connection is also clear in the USA. In the Netherlands, and recently in China, politicians refer to the importance of religion for societal virtues, morals, and coherence of society. In South Africa there is a call for public theology to contribute to the Rainbow Nation. The examples can be extended as one wills. No matter how much the situations may differ, they all stress that the church or individual Christian should participate in the political area.

GOD'S OWN PEOPLE

In this perspective, it is interesting to see how early Christianity dealt with politics. Their attitude towards state affairs was totally different. That was not only the case when they were not allowed to participate. Even when they were invited to participate, they refused—as appears from a challenging quote from the book, *Against Celsus*, by Origenes, written in the first half of the third century.

Celsus also urges us to “take office in the government of the country, if that is required for the maintenance of the laws and the support of religion.” But we recognise in each state the existence of another national organization founded by the Word of God, and we exhort those who are mighty in word and of blameless life to rule over Churches. Those who are ambitious of ruling we reject; but we constrain those who, through excess of modesty, are not easily induced to take a public charge in the Church of God. And those who rule over us well are under the constraining influence of the great King, whom we believe to be the Son of God, God the Word. And if those who govern in the Church, and are called rulers of the divine nation—that is, the Church—rule well, they rule in accordance with the divine commands, and never suffer themselves to be led astray by worldly policy. And it is not for the purpose of escaping public duties that Christians decline public offices, but that they may reserve themselves for a diviner and more necessary service in the Church of God—for the salvation of men. And this service is at once necessary and right. They take

¹ The author is Professor of Christian Creeds at VU University Amsterdam and Extraordinary Professor in Systematic Theology at the University of Stellenbosch.

charge of all—of those that are within, that they may day by day lead better lives, and of those that are without, that they may come to abound in holy words and in deeds of piety; and that, while thus worshipping God truly, and training up as many as they can in the same way, they may be filled with the word of God and the law of God, and thus be united with the Supreme God through His Son the Word, Wisdom, Truth, and Righteousness, who unites to God all who are resolved to conform their lives in all things to the law of God.²

Origenes' position is not an exception in the early church. On the contrary, his ideas are broadly intertwined in early Christian thought. The base of Origenes' considerations is his idea about the church as a nation. In each state there is another organization—founded by the Word of God. It exists across the borders of human states in all countries where God gathers people as his own nation. They are of a different kind. Human institutions are not really relevant to them because they belong to the people of God. As the writing, *To Diognetus*, says:

Inhabiting Greek as well as barbarian cities, according as the lot of each of them has determined, and following the customs of the natives in respect to clothing, food, and the rest of their ordinary conduct, they display to us their wonderful and confessedly striking method of life. They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers.³

Christians in the first centuries conceived of themselves as a particular community: they are the people of God, they belong to the kingdom of heaven, and their king is Christ. That is not a kingdom somewhere on earth with geographical borders. It is a kingdom across all countries, with its own laws, its own life style, and its own purpose. They hold to the law of Christ.

This view about their place among the nations of Christians had several consequences:

1. First of all, they refused to enter the army. Those who were already in the army refused to use their weapons—as is told about the army of the Roman Emperor Marcus Aurelius in the time when he was still a general in the army. Christians in the army prayed when other soldiers prepared their swords.⁴ They did not pray for the victory of the army; they prayed for another kingdom, the kingdom of Christ as the kingdom of the Father in heaven.

Tertullian tells about a soldier who refused to accept the chaplet after a victory by his company:

The tribune at once puts the question to him, Why are you so different in your attire? He declared that he had no liberty to wear the crown with the rest. Being urgently asked for his reasons, he answered, I am a Christian. O soldier! boasting thyself in God. ...At once he put away the heavy cloak, his disburdening commenced; he loosed from his foot the military shoe, beginning to stand upon holy ground; a he gave up the sword, which was not necessary either for the protection of our Lord; from his

2 Origenes, *Contra Celsum* 8, 75.

3 *Ad Diognetum* 5.

4 Letter by Marcus Aurelius to the Senate, translation in Ante-Nicean Fathers I. Cf. also Tertullianus, *Apologeticus* 5.

hand likewise dropped the laurel crown; and now, purple-clad with the hope of his own blood, shod with the preparation of the gospel, girt with the sharper word of God, completely equipped in the apostles' armour, and crowned more worthily with the white crown of martyrdom, he awaits in prison the largess of Christ.⁵

The *Apostolic Tradition*, written at the beginning of the third century, gives rules about admission to baptism. Some professions are excluded. One of those is being a soldier.⁶ Soldiers are excluded from the community of Christ, just as soldiers of Christ are expelled from the army of the emperor. They belong to another nation, and they refuse to fight against other people. Also, among the barbarians there are Christians.⁷ When fighting in the army you might kill a brother in the Lord. But it goes further: violence as such is not allowed for Christians.

To begin with the real ground of the military crown, I think we must first inquire whether warfare is proper at all for Christians. What sense is there in discussing the merely accidental, when that on which it rests is to be condemned? ... Shall it be held lawful to make an occupation of the sword, when the Lord proclaims that he who uses the sword shall perish by the sword? And shall the son of peace take part in the battle when it does not become him even to sue at law?

A chaplet for a military victory actually is, according to Tertullian, a horrible thing because "is the laurel of the triumph made of leaves, or of corpses? Is it adorned with ribbons, or with tombs? Is it bedewed with ointments, or with the tears of wives and mothers?"⁸

2. They did not participate in the administration, as we heard from the quote from Origenes.

3. They followed the customs and culture of the country they lived in. As *Ad Diognetum* says, they are dressed like the other citizens of the country they live in. They use the same food; they do not have specific traditions. They are only different because they are loving and caring.⁹

4. They are not revolutionaries. They do not form a counter organization that opposes existing political structures. It would not help to found a new nation with Christians as leaders. Because, first of all, Christians cannot execute violence as nations may, but it would also imply that the kingdom of Christ would be of this world and not the eternal kingdom of God. A Christian state would be just one of the nations in the world, and thus, by definition, not Christian because Christians belong to a kingdom of a different kind.

5. By consequence, Christians are foreigners.¹⁰ It does not matter in which country they live. They are foreigners by their very being as Gods people. As foreigners', they seek the peace of the city they live in. They will be obedient citizens unless they are urged to deny the name of their Lord.

5 Tertullianus, *De Corona* 1.

6 *Traditio Apostolica* 16. See E.P. Meijering, *Geschiedenis van het vroege christendom: van de jood Jezus van Nazareth tot de Romeinse keizer Constantijn*, Balans, Amsterdam, 2004: 350.

7 *De Corona* 12

8 *De Corona* 12.

9 *Ad Diognetum* 10,5f.

10 See A. van de Beek, "Every Foreign Land is Their Native Country and Every Land of Birth is a Land of Strangers," in *Journal of Reformed Theology* 1(2007): 178-194.

This does not mean that Christians were not interested in society. They were because they were interested in peace, and they were very well aware that they contributed to the well-being of society. They did so in two ways:

A. First, they did so by their very life:¹¹

And thus do we also, since our persuasion by the Word, stand aloof from them (i.e., the demons), and follow the only unbegotten God through His Son – we who formerly delighted in fornication, but now embrace chastity alone; we who formerly used magical arts, dedicate ourselves to the good and unbegotten God; we who valued above all things the acquisition of wealth and possessions, now bring what we have into a common stock, and communicate to every one in need; we who hated and destroyed one another, and on account of their different manners would not live with men of a different tribe, now, since the coming of Christ, live familiarly with them, and pray for our enemies, and endeavour to persuade those who hate us unjustly to live conformably to the good precepts of Christ, to the end that they may become par-takers with us of the same joyful hope of a reward from God the ruler of all.¹²

Other early Christian writers express themselves in similar ways. By their very life, Christians sustain society, and they are to it as the soul is to the body.¹³ Christians do not try to change society by force, but they change it by their love. If all people would be Christians, the world would be a better place to dwell in. But that is different from urging the world to be changed.

B. Just as important as Christians' lifestyle is for society, so is their prayer. I already mentioned the soldiers in the army who prayed. But actually, the whole life of a Christian is a life of prayer that fully depends on the grace of God. They do not only pray for themselves, but for all human beings and for peace and justice.

As we by our prayers vanquish all demons who stir up war, and lead to the violation of oaths, and disturb the peace, we in this way are much more helpful to the kings than those who go into the field to fight for them. And we do take our part in public affairs, when along with righteous prayers we join self-denying exercises and meditations, which teach us to despise pleasures, and not to be led away by them. And none fight better for the king than we do. We do not indeed fight under him, although he require it; but we fight on his behalf, forming a special army—an army of piety—by offering our prayers to God. And if Celsus would have us to lead armies in defence of our country, let him know that we do this too, and that not for the purpose of being seen by men, or of vainglory. For “in secret,” and in our own hearts, there are prayers which ascend as from priests in behalf of our fellow-citizens. And Christians are benefactors of their country more than others.¹⁴

I give these extensive citations from authors in the second and third century in order to give an impression about how Christians thought and lived in the beginnings of Christianity. I do so in

11 Meijering 2004: 282-292.

12 Justinus, *Apologia* I, 14.

13 *Ad Diognetum* 6.

14 Origenes, *Contra Celsum* 73f.

the conviction that their attitude is basic for Christianity, according to the Reformed principle of *Ad Fontes*: back to the sources. As it was not about *changing* the church in the sixteenth century Reformation, but a real *restoration* according to the very foundation of the church, so we should also keep in mind what is basic and return to the beginnings—even if this has immense consequences that often do not fit into our mind’s and time’s framework. It did not fit into the framework of sixteenth century minds either. But it fit into the mind of Christ.

EARLY CHRISTIANITY AND SCRIPTURE

Now all of us know that the Reformation was not just a return to the early church. It was first of all a return to Scripture. Though the Reformers were convinced that the church in the first centuries was not captured by aberrations as it was in later ages, and, for instance, Calvin makes extensive use of the church fathers and even copies or paraphrases vast sections of their texts, their final ground is always scripture. Therefore, we must check the early Christians’ thought with scripture.

As said, it was basic in the relation of early Christianity to society that they considered themselves as a particular nation that was spread among all nations, both inside and outside the Roman Empire. This idea is strongly rooted in the New Testament. Actually, we should not even search for specific texts, as it is the basic structure of New Testament thought about Christ as the eschatological coming of God and the church as an eschatological community. Of course, this is expressed in specific verses that are not *loca probantia* but just focus texts for supporting our memory and giving us orientation on the understanding of the Bible.

Paul tells the Christians in Philippi (3:20) that our *politeuma* is in heaven. *Politeuma* is citizenship. It refers to our national identity. Where is our civil registration? It is in heaven. Our basic national identity is in Christ, who is with God. By consequence, we are foreigners in the world, says Peter (1 Pet 1:17; 2:11)—arguing in the same way as the fathers of the following centuries. We belong to the kingdom of Christ whose kingdom is not of this world. By consequence, he does not make use of worldly power, as he says to Pilate. “My Kingdom is not of this world. If it were, my servants would fight to prevent my arrest by the Jews. But now my Kingdom is from another place” (Jn 18:36). Even if his followers have a sword, they do not use it because those who take the sword will perish by the sword (Mt. 22:52). They had two swords when Jesus was captured. And Jesus says, “That is enough” (Lk 22:38) Of course, it was not enough to resist a company of soldiers. It was also not needed because Jesus could call for a dozen of legions of angels if he wanted (Mt. 26:53). The two swords are just enough to show that you do not use them – as the soldier, who Tertullian tells about, who dropped the sword from his hand – for I am a Christian.¹⁵

Because Christians belong to a heavenly kingdom, neither are they revolutionaries. When the Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome because he feared unrest, Paul, in Romans 13, exhorts the Christians in that city to submit themselves to the government. That chapter has not so much to do with theocracy – at least not with theocracy as it is used in the political debate—but with reality. It is God who places us in a specific situation and in a specific country with a specific government. Christians should obey that government because it is God who gave it to them. That can be said even about the perverted regime of Claudius. If Christians would revolt, they would experience that this government does not have a sword for nothing. This expression ‘for nothing’ does not imply that the sword is legitimated. It can have the same meaning as in the case when a burglar threatens you with a knife. It is better to give him your

money because, certainly, he does not have that knife for nothing!

In between, Christians should be happy with the relatively peaceful life they can have in Rome. There is some kind of justice under Roman law. Certainly, it is not the kingdom of God, but it is better than the anarchy of a civil war and revolution. And Christians know that the kingdom of God belongs to another dispensation, thus they can endure. For, as Paul continues, it is only for short term that they are still living in Rome: “The night is nearly over; the day is almost here” (Rom. 13:12).

The thought of the apostles about Christians in society is not essentially different from the ideas of the church fathers. Christians are a community of foreigners who receive a heavenly heritage. Their home is where Christ is, and they maintain distance from involvement in the political affairs of the countries they live in as foreigners. On the positive side, they also share the same view. They are looking for the peace of the city they live in, and they contribute to it by their own lifestyle—not by clothes, rituals, or specific days (Gal 4:10)—but by love and patience. The apostle even admonishes people to keep to that so that the word will not be maligned (Tit 2:5; cf. I Tim 5:14).

They also agree with the fathers in prayer on behalf of society and government. Paul writes, “I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone, for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness” (I Tim 2:1f). These were neither Christian kings nor godly people in authority. They were the leaders of the Roman Empire in the days of Claudius and Nero. It must be noted that the prayers of Christians for the government are on behalf of a government that is not their own. It is merely for a government of the country that they live in as foreigners, and that is often hostile to them. But also with regard to this government, what Jesus says is valid—“Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s” (Mk 12:17). Do not confuse these two! Do not merge them either—for they belong to different worlds.

ENDANGERED FOREIGNERS

The conviction of Christians that they were foreigners made them vulnerable. Most societies do not like foreigners. They especially do not like them if they are so different that they do not understand their fundamental beliefs that are expressed throughout their whole lifestyle. In that case, the foreigner easily receives the image of evil.¹⁶ And evil should be contested. So the Hellenistic society acted against Christians as the Jewish community did – and so did ultimately the Roman government. They persecuted the Christians.

The reaction of Christians to this persecution is typical for their fundamental convictions. They did not retaliate. Their leaders called on them not to do so and to follow their Lord. “When they hurled their inflictions on Him, he did not retaliate; when He suffered, he made no threats. Instead, He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly” (I Pet 2:23). They defended themselves with words, as the Apologists did, in the imitation of the Apostle Paul. Paul uses all his rhetorical skills in his defence against the Jews, both in the Sanhedrin and in the Roman courts, as the book of Acts records. He never calls, however, on his friends and other Christians to undertake some kind of action to get him free. Similarly, Tertullian and Justin make use of their philosophical and rhetorical training – both in their own way – and Ignace calls on the congregation of Rome not

16 Regarding accusations about Christians by pagans, see: Athenagoras, *Legatio pro Christianis* 3; Tertullianus, *Apologeticus pro Christianis* 2.

to intercede with the government in order to obtain his freedom.¹⁷ He is prepared to die as a martyr.

The attitude of Christians in an often hostile environment is one of defence by words, if it is fitting to do so without compromising Christ—that means without giving the impression they fear torture and death. It is also an attitude of perseverance and peace. Their hearts have peace even when they suffer:¹⁸

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions (Heb 10:32-34).

They live in the peace of God, which transcends all understanding (Phil 4:7).

Maybe somebody would object that all these references are from the New Testament. They are, indeed. That is not because the Old Testament would be less relevant; it is because the hermeneutics of the Old Testament are more complicated.

In any case, we cannot play off the Old Testament against the New—or the other way around. They are the one word of God. We can also not make a distinction between the Old and the New as if the Old Testament would be violent and the New Testament about pure love. That has already been done by Marcion, and the church rightly condemned him. The difference is of another kind—the difference between promise and fulfilment. That means we cannot apply words about Israel directly to the church, and even less to present day nations. It is not we who are the fulfilment of the Old Testament. It is Jesus. “Everything that is written by the prophets will be fulfilled to the Son of Man,” says Jesus (Luke 18:31).¹⁹ Thus the kingdom of David and the nation of Israel are revealed in him—in his life and in his death. His kingdom is the kingdom on the cross—“This is the King of the Jews.” Therefore, this is the way we must understand everything that is written in the Old Testament. The Lord of Israel “reigns from the cross.”²⁰

THE DRASTIC TURN

The perspective wherein Christians lived during the first centuries is totally different from the one that guides most Christians today. Presently, Christians usually do not see themselves as foreigners in society. They do not distance themselves from politics. They participate in the army, and they do not distinguish themselves by a godly life with excellent moral standards.

What occurred that this change could happen?

This change is due to a U-turn in Christian thought in the fourth century. After

17 Ignace, *To the Romans* II,2; IV,2; V,2.

18 See also Eusebius, *Historiae Ecclesiasticae* VI,5,1-7.

19 This is the version of Nestle 26. Variants say everything that is written about the Son of Man will be fulfilled. These are obviously derived from the idea of *loca probantia* and not from a general hermeneutics of the Old Testament as the majority of early Christianity operated with.

20 Justin, *Trypho* 73; *Apologia* I,41 and Tertullian, *Adv. Iudaeos* 10 and 13; *Adv. Marcionem* III,19 and 21, based on a variant of Psalm 96:10. See Daniélou, J. *Histoire des doctrines chrétiennes avant Nicée I: Théologie du Judéo-Christianisme*, Bibliothèque de Théologie, Desclee, Paris/Tournai/New York/Rome 1958:111.

Constantine made Christianity the leading religion of the Roman Empire, and Theodosius even made it the state religion, Christian faith has received a totally different face. Though it endured centuries of persecution, it was easily overcome by receiving political power.

When we read the church fathers from the third century and, subsequently, those of the fourth, it is as if we enter another world. It is not synchronic everywhere. The Egyptians in Alexandria resisted longer than the theologians on the other side of the Mediterranean. Therefore, when the Coptic Church was condemned for so-called heresy in Chalcedon, they were punished by suppression (e.g. the patriarch of Alexandria, Athanasius, was sent in exile to Germany), and finally, exclusion from the Christian community that actually had become identical with the Christian empire. In the new capital, Constantinople, the shift began immediately. The leading theologian, Eusebius, developed a theology that perfectly fit into the aims of the Emperor Constantine. He praises Constantine as almost a messianic character.²¹ Philosophically, later in the fourth century, well-trained theologians such as the Cappadocians no longer use their skills to defend Christians as a community of foreigners on earth, but for developing a new doctrine of God that fit into the new situation of power. The God that Christians confessed no longer had the face of the man crowned with thorns and ruling from the cross, but the face of the Pantocrator in the dome of the court chapel of the Emperor and sitting on his throne.

The shift can be demonstrated by a change in the admission regulations to baptism. We mentioned that the *Apostolic Tradition* in the early third century excluded soldiers. In the *Apostolic Constitutions* (VIII, 32) around 400 AD a similar list of professions and activities is given. It is clearly based on the *Apostolic Tradition*. However, some issues have been changed. The most conspicuous one is about soldiers. Now no longer a soldier as such is excluded, but only soldiers who abuse their power—with a reference to the saying of John the Baptist (Luke 3:14). Actually, the church turns to the time before Christ (cf. Mt 11:11; Lk 7:28).

In the fourth to the sixth century, a shift occurred from being a church of a nation in the image of Christ with citizenship in heaven to the Byzantine church – which is heaven on earth in the trinity of patriarch, emperor, and army. Byzantinism opinion about the relation of church and politics is opposite to the convictions of early Christianity. It merges church and empire. Christian faith and political power are fully intertwined. The apex of this thought is the Emperor Justinian in the sixth century. He is both a powerful emperor and the leading theologian of that era. His rule is a rule in the name of God, who gave him this imperial power. There is no distinction between the rule of God and the rule of the government. It is notable that precisely this emperor initiated the condemnation of Origenes as a heretic (553). The theologian, who had been one of the most influential Christians thinkers of antiquity, did not fit in the framework of the emperor—in the framework of Byzantine theology.

The theology of Eusebius has become dominant not only in the Byzantine world, but also in the West. Augustine's *City of God* may have given some ambiguity to it in the West, but ultimately church and power—either power that the church has or power that Christians try to get in order to change political and societal structures—continue to be intertwined. Not even the Reformation could change that. The Lutherans are clear in that: whose land, his religion: *cuius regio eius religio*. Calvin comes much closer to early Christian thought with his distinction of Christian freedom as the expression of Christian life, on the one hand,²² and equilibrium in

21 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini; Oratio de laudibus Constantini in eius tricennialibus habita*.

22 *Institutes* III, 19.

society, on the other hand;²³ for politics it is enough if some balance can be found in society.²⁴ But soon Calvinists became just as nationalistic as the Lutherans—and even more!

It is a challenge to the church to become really Reformed: reformed according to the beginnings and sources of Christian life and thought. That means developing a lifestyle of love and care that is sustained by prayer and intercession, living as foreigners—foreigners not due to political decisions of the past, but due to a much more fundamental decision of the Lord to make Christians heirs of a heavenly kingdom and with a citizenship in heaven. I am very well aware that it will be hard to accomplish this new U-turn. Even the early Christians, to whom the letter to the Hebrews was sent, had to be admonished to keep to their roots (Heb 10:32-39). However, the Lord never promised that Christian faith would be easy. “In the world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world,” says our Lord (Jn 16:31).

KEY WORDS

Church and nation

Public theology

Early Christianity

Political Theology

23 *Institutes* IV, 20.

24 See A. van de Beek, “Beyond the Unfounded Optimism of Equity,” in E.A.J.G. Van der Borcht (ed.), *Affirming and Living with Differences*, SRT 12, Meinema, Zoetermeer, 155-157.