

What is Oliver O'Donovan's "word of advice to Christendom's would-be critics" in *The Desire of the Nations* and how far should it be followed?

O'Donovan gives a word of advice to Christendom¹'s would-be critics in two ways: firstly, he shows how they might rightly criticise Christendom and, secondly, he shows how they should not wrongly criticise it.

Though we may have some quibbles with *The Desire of the Nations*², its word of advice can be followed with great joy. We will suggest drawing back from O'Donovan's negativity at one point and hope, with him, to go beyond it.

Following O'Donovan's word of advice towards criticisms of Christendom

O'Donovan has repeatedly said and with varying degrees of frustration that *DN* is not intended as a defence of Christendom³. Indeed, he argues that in *DN* "I tried to make clear not only how I thought Christendom might be defended, but also how it might be criticised. I think I might even claim to have written... a primer for its critics."⁴

¹ O'Donovan defines Christendom thus: "I use the term 'Christendom' (in keeping with a good deal of current discussion) to refer to a historical idea: that is to say, the idea of a professedly Christian secular political order, and the history of that idea in practice. Christendom is an era, an era in which the truth of Christianity was taken to be a truth of secular politics.... Let us say that the era lies between AD 313, the date of the Edict of Milan, and 1791, the date of the First Amendment to the US Constitution, though these moments are symbolic only, and others could no doubt be found that would do as well.... 'Christendom'... is the idea of a confessedly Christian government, at once 'secular' (in the proper sense of the word, confined to the present age) and obedient to Christ, a promise of the age of his unhindered rule.", *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the roots of political theology* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), p195.

² Hereafter, *DN*. We may be concerned, for example, that whilst strongly stating the authority of Holy Scripture (p15) and often arguing in a conservative direction, Professor O'Donovan seems often to accept the assumptions and conclusions of liberal Biblical scholarship. For example, Peter Leithart ('Review of *The Desire of the Nations*' in *Westminster Theological Journal*, 63 no 1, Spring 2001, p211) is disappointed by the reference to Q (a putative collection of sayings material which Matthew and Luke are sometimes thought to have used) in *DN*, op. cit., p95. In responding to challenges from the guild of Biblical studies, O'Donovan describes his debt to scholarship in adopting, for example, the view that there are priestly (P) and Yahwist (J) strands in the Pentateuch and layers of traditions in the Isaiah corpus ('Response to Respondents: Behold the Lamb!' in *Studies in Christian Ethics* 11.2 (1998), p96). Evangelicals may also be surprised to find Ps 15:13f spoken of as "intrusive" (p77), Job called a folk myth (p74), Esther and Mordicia referred to as fictional (p86) and a late dating for Daniel (p88). Yet taken as a whole, *DN* is a stirring endorsement of the unity of Scripture in the face of the academy's fragmentation of it and a noble insistence that it is possible to speak of what the text says as normative (p151f), rather than merely of competing interpretations. On this last point see the striking exchange in *Studies in Christian Ethics*, op. cit., between Hauerwas & Foder on p42 and O'Donovan on p98.

³ E.g., O'Donovan, *DN*, op. cit., p103; 'Response', op. cit., p103. For references to O'Donovan's supposed "defence of Christendom" see Hauerwas and Foder, 'Remaining in Babylon: Oliver O'Donovan's Defense of Christendom', *Studies in Christian Ethics* 11.2 (1998) pp30-55; Meilaender, Gilbert, 'Recovering Christendom' in *First Things* 77 (November 1997), pp36-42; Pater, Josh, 'Interview with O'Donovan' from *Chimes Online*, Calvin College Student magazine, <http://www-stu.calvin.edu/chimes/2001.11.09/ess1.html>.

⁴ O'Donovan, 'Response', op. cit., p105. Likewise, O'Donovan in Pater, 'Interview', op. cit.: "I think I have to challenge a reading of the book that sees it as a defense of Christendom in a strong sense. It's a lesson to the critics of Christendom as to how they should set about their job. It's a defense of

O'Donovan suggests that the “chief mistake” of Christendom “was the thought of secular authority as an office *for the defence of the church*.”⁵ He explains: “It was a mistake... to go beyond speaking of conscious facilitation of the church’s mission [by the civil ruler] and to speak, as the apologists of Christendom often did, of the ruler’s duty to ‘defend’ the church, or ‘reinforce church discipline’. These conceptions were among the false steps of Christendom, which helped to create ambiguity about the church’s identity.”⁶ Christ has already decisively intervened for the church and she depends on him, not the civil ruler for ultimate security. She looks to Christ’s judgement and in the interim judges not.

O'Donovan summarises: “... in the end, perhaps the ‘defence of Christendom’ amounts to no more than this, that any well-taken criticisms of Christendom that we may think of turns out not to be ours but theirs.”⁷ It is appropriate, then, that we should turn to what Christendom’s would-be critics should understand about and learn from it.

Following O’Donovan’s word of advice towards learning from the witness of Christendom: criticism of the critics of Christendom

Though Christendom is dead and decomposing⁸ and we may conveniently be said to live in post-Christendom⁹, O'Donovan calls, then, for “a sympathetic understanding of it [Christendom] that we profit from its achievements and avoid repeating its mistakes”¹⁰. Christendom particularly deserves our attention for: “Those who ruled in Christendom and those who thought and argued about government believed that the Gospel was true. They intended their institutions to reflect Christ’s coming reign. We can criticise their understanding of the Gospel; we can criticise their applications of it; but we can no more be uninterested in their witness than an astronomer can be uninterested in what people see through telescopes. And while no testimony to Christ can safely be ignored, this one lays claim with a special seriousness; for although it is no longer our tradition, we are its *denouement*, or perhaps its *debacle*. It was the womb in which our late-modernity came to birth.”¹¹

Christendom against what seemed to me be dogmatic and doctrinal criticisms, and it's an attempt to explore more fully the very ambiguous legacy that it left us and at what points it did make mistakes.” It is worth noting that some of the undoubted failures of Christendom look fairly insignificant when considered against the crimes post-Christendom regimes such as Nazi Germany or Stalin’s Russia.

⁵ O'Donovan, ‘Response’, op. cit., p105, referring to *DN*, op. cit., p218f.

⁶ O'Donovan, *DN*, op. cit., p218.

⁷ O'Donovan, ‘Response’, op. cit., p105. Similarly, as O'Donovan says in Pater, ‘Interview’, op. cit.: “You have all kinds of practices going on out of Christendom, many of them intensely criticized within Christendom. If they [would-be critics of Christendom]’ve got a good criticism of Christendom, they will probably find they’ve got it from the thinkers of Christendom, that they are actually not breaking with it but continuing the critical dialectic that helps constitute the era that most of the objections we raise are modifications, and frequently rather unobvious modifications, of things that were seen, discussed, purposed on as problems within the era of Christian civilization.”

⁸ O'Donovan, ‘Response’, op. cit., p103.

⁹ O'Donovan accepts the term ‘post-Christendom’ as a description of our present situation, *DN*, op. cit. p193, see also p212.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. ix. Likewise, O'Donovan, ‘Response’, op. cit., p103.

¹¹ O'Donovan, *DN*, op. cit., p194.

Properly understood the witness of Christendom delivers from the opposite errors of (1) the state as an oppressive instrument of the dominant church for religious coercion and (2) the church as a domesticated legitimisation of the dominant state¹². The key to this is the blessing of God on the mission of the church and the submission of the ruler to Christ.

Not a coercive state-church

O'Donovan corrects the frequently made criticism that Christendom is inherently coercive¹³. "The story-tellers of Christendom do not celebrate coercion; they celebrate the power of God to humble the haughty ones of the earth and to harness them to the purposes of peace."¹⁴ Understanding the Christendom idea as an aspect of mission delivers it from the fear of compulsion¹⁵ since the goal of the church's proclamation is willing submission to Christ. Indeed, only the logic of the Christendom state provides a minimally coercive authority since it is freed from arbitrariness by coming under the law of Christ¹⁶. Leithart accepts O'Donovan's analysis that ironically some critics of Christendom's fear of coercion is really born from reservations about consensus and society that would ultimately rule out the church: "There is an incoherence in the work of Hauerwas, Yoder, and others who defend the Church as polis but attack the idea of a Christian civilization and a Christian political order. Ultimately, hostility to Christendom is hostility to social consensus, but this hostility is also an attack on the Church."¹⁷

Not a domesticated civil religion

O'Donovan suggests that: "... perhaps the church falls less into the temptation of assuming the state's authority, [and] rather more into that of acquiescing with the state's assumption of its own.... 'Civil religion' poses a more serious objection to the co-operative church-state arrangements of Christendom than religious coercion does."¹⁸ However, this is a betrayal of the origin and essence of Christendom since the whole project is born not of domesticated civil religion where the church compromises with the state but from the effective mission of the church, which under the blessing of God leads to the ruler bowing to the authority of Christ. At its best Christendom retains its

¹² C.f. "the twin perils identified by the fifth chapter of the Barmen Declaration", *ibid.*, p224.

¹³ Thus, for example, Stuart Murray argues that: "The end of Christendom marks the collapse of a determined but ultimately futile attempt to impose Christianity rather than inviting people to follow Jesus. The fourth century decision to transfer from the margins to the centre in one enormous leap for power resulted in coercive but nominal Christianity.", *Church After Christendom* (Milton Keynes, Paternoster Press, 2004), p147. Perhaps as we man the barricades we might allow ourselves a smile at Murray's comment that: "The Christendom mindset pervades many theological colleges and their influences will scupper progress unless they embrace this paradigm shift."! p141. O'Donovan particularly interacts with John Howard Yoder's stress on the *voluntariness* of the church in *The Priestly Kingdom* at this point. See *DN*, *op. cit.*, p223.

¹⁴ O'Donovan, *DN*, *op. cit.*, p223.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p212.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p233.

¹⁷ Leithart, *Against Christianity*, (Moscow, Canon Press, 2003), p137 citing O'Donovan, *DN*, *op. cit.*, p222ff.

¹⁸ O' Donovan, *DN*, *op. cit.*, p224.

prophetic voice that all authority in heaven and on earth belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ and that the public square and the civil ruler are under his sway.

It is a gross error, then, to see Christendom as essentially a retreat from mission as Murray does¹⁹. On the contrary: “The rulers of the world have bowed before Christ’s throne. The core idea of Christendom is therefore intimately bound up with the church’s mission... It is not, as is often suggested, that Christian political order is a *project* of the church’s mission, either as an end in itself or as a means to a further missionary end. The church’s one project is to witness to the Kingdom of God. Christendom is *response* to mission, and as such as a sign that God has blessed it. It is constituted not by the church’s seizing alien power, but by alien power’s becoming attentive to the church.”²⁰. Again: “Far from seeing Christendom... as an age in which the missionary challenge of the church became derailed, we have to understand that it was perpetually preoccupied with that challenge.”²¹.

Murray makes the ridiculous assumption that effectively the Christian mission only succeeds if it fails²². We must dissent from glorying in the church as a perpetual minority dissent movement. Hauerwas’ rejection of Christendom/Constantinianism as the improper acquisition of worldly power by the church is historically wrong since Hauerwas refuses to see the triumph of Christ amongst the nations and “his Christianity is marked by a kind of return to the catacombs”²³ but not the hope of those who inhabited the catacombs²⁴. This pessimism is to assume that the witness of the “martyr church” unto death with not be heard and that there is no resurrection vindication this side of the eschaton. Leithart makes these points from O’Donovan eloquently and argues that “invoking the martyrs without also invoking this hope is an insult to the memory of the martyrs.”²⁵

Christendom points beyond itself to the unrivalled and fully realised rule of Christ. We may also hope to look beyond O’Donovan’s word of advice to Christendom’s would-be critics.

¹⁹ E.g., “Rediscovering the pre-Christendom mission orientation [lost in Christendom] is crucial in post-Christendom... [Christendom] also deflected a missional movement that had, from the margins, made extraordinary progress during the past three centuries and might have permeated and transformed the Empire from the grass roots.”, Murray, *op. cit.*, p146f.

²⁰ O’Donovan, *DN*, *op. cit.*, p195.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p196f.

²² Murray, *op. cit.*, p147, argues that the church is to welcome her proper place on the margins. To move to the centre is inevitably to sell out. Contrast the view of O’Donovan (and, incidentally, later Chaplin, p302, who sees the civil ruler as not centre stage and never meant to be) who might be characterised as thinking of the civil ruler as properly pretty marginal compared to the church, which is at the centre of the redeeming purposes of God.

²³ O’Donovan, *DN*, *op. cit.*, p216.

²⁴ As O’Donovan puts it: “Even if the church is a minority, it can’t be a self-conscious minority which says to itself, “We’re perfectly safe because we’re a minority.” That I have to say I find troubling in the kind of catacomb consciousness I find in Stan and John Howard Yoder. I don’t think it was at all typical of the Christians that actually inhabited the catacombs. They didn’t huddle down there and say, “How nice. We at least know who we are while we’re down here.””, Pater, ‘Interview’, *op. cit.*

²⁵ Leithart, *Against Christianity*, *op. cit.*, p129.

(Following O'Donovan) beyond O'Donovan's word of advice

We raise here some questions relevant to O'Donovan's Christendom understanding of the civil magistrate and the church.

O'Donovan's great methodological resource in *Resurrection and Moral Order* might suggest a way of enriching his own word of advice. As *RMO* articulated, it is the resurrection that vindicates the creation order by showing how it is taken up into eschatological order. In *DN* the resurrection is similarly central as O'Donovan rightly gives great attention to the evangelical Christ-event and considers how it is pre-figured in the salvation-history of Israel and recapitulated in the life of the Church. Whilst the centrality of the revelation in the Christ-event is welcome and we recognise that we are straining here at the limits of what Scripture reveals in some of what follows, greater attention to the creation and eschaton moments might have clarified what is authentic in Christendom.

Creation

In particular, Nicholas Wolterstorff's²⁶ and Jonathan Chaplin's²⁷ suggestions of an increased focus on creation might lead to a more positive world-affirming account of the role of the civil magistrate. Though we follow O'Donovan in seeing the ruler stripped of all pretensions by the victory of Christ, all "civil government" may not be destined to pass away and its role may not be limited simply to "judgement" in O'Donovan's sense. As Chaplain says: "O'Donovan's... position seems to be that salvation *restores and vindicates* the created order of *society*, but *restrains and disciplines* the providential order of *government*."²⁸

Clearly in a pre- / un- fallen society there would have been government, or at least some governing²⁹: making wise decisions (a species of judgement), which are implemented in the public square, is an entailment of the creation mandate to rule (Genesis 1:28) and the ordering of society. However, it must be admitted that this does not prove an institutional civil authority without reference to sin since in an unfallen world these functions may have been exercised in a more familial context by patriarchs. If more than one 'family' is allowed, which seems likely given the formation of new social units of households (Genesis 1:24), some non-coercive form of decision-making and division of labour would seem to be required between families even without sin-abuses which the civil ruler would be needed to restrain and punish. Chaplain thus argues that the

²⁶ Wolterstorff, Nicholas, 'Article Review: A Discussion of Oliver O'Donovan's The Desire of the Nations' in *The Scottish Journal of Theology* 54 no 1 2001, pp87-109.

²⁷ Chaplin, Jonathan, 'Political Eschatology and Responsible Government: Oliver O'Donovan's Christian Liberalism', p265ff in Bartholomew, Chaplin, Song & Wolters (ed. s), *A Royal Priesthood? The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically A Dialogue with Oliver O'Donovan* (Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 2002)

²⁸ *ibid.*, p296. Strikingly, O'Donovan recognises that Chaplin has pointed out a contradiction in O'Donovan's thinking between *RMO* and *DN* which O'Donovan had not realised he had made: "In *Resurrection* I assumed that the subordination of power and tradition to justice was typical of all political authority; by the time of *Desire* I had reached the conclusion that it was a fruit of Christ's triumph.", in Bartholomew et. al., *op. cit.*, p309.

²⁹ O'Donovan would probably not object to this statement, especially as in another context he mentions the notion of government as a verbal noun. See O'Donovan, 'Response', *op. cit.*, p101.

Thomist and Calvinistic³⁰ view of politics as part of the created order may have more going for it than O'Donovan allows³¹. Chaplain suggests that his view need not be seen as truncating the influence of the Christ-event when compared to O'Donovan's: rather, the transformation is not specially to the civil ruler but is truly creation-wide and affects every dimension of human social life, the economic, technological, familial, cultural, educational and so on³².

Wolterstorff thus sees civil government as a creation good of common grace with a limited just role (more extensive than O'Donovan allows) to promote the *shalom* flourishing of society. He sees a permanent dual role for church and the civil ruler in which "the state is a manifestation of God's providential care for humanity... with the same task now as that government authority has always had."³³

A greater deployment of Kuyperian³⁴ three spheres³⁵ (of family, church and state) theology would have fitted with these suggestions.

Eschatology

Eschatology may also make its contribution to understanding the ideal social order since one way of understanding the ethical project of Christendom is making earth more like heaven. Chaplain points out that O'Donovan "does not dwell on what such transformed structures [of society] might look like in the age to come, although he seems to envisage a renewed humanity fully unified under the immediate reign of Christ."³⁶ O'Donovan sees it as debatable "whether families, tribes and nations have an eternal destiny"³⁷ but a case could be made for saying that all that is good in these differentiations and affinities will be taken up into the new creation. There is also a biblical basis for suggesting that government in the new creation is not entirely immediately by Christ (e.g., Lk19:17, 1 Cor 6:3, Mt 19:28) which might provide greater insight into the continuing role of government this side of the Christ-event.

Peter Leithart identifies a "more serious flaw" (than the other minor criticisms he makes) in *DN* in that "... fearing the spectre of supercessionism, O'Donovan gives Judaism a place in Christian history that is not warranted by the New Testament."³⁸, where again we might see the benefit of eschatology. An optimistic post-millennialism³⁹

³⁰ It is disappointing not to see more interaction with the Calvinistic and Thomist texts Chaplain has in mind in article.

³¹ Chaplain, op. cit., p301. See O'Donovan's discussion Wyclif in preference to the Thomism of Vitoria and the Salamancan school on p26, *DN*, op. cit..

³² Chaplain, op. cit., p304.

³³ Wolterstorff, op. cit., p108 citing Pss 85 & 72 in support of the *shalom* flourishing point.

³⁴ See Bratt, James D. (ed), *Abraham Kuyper: A Centennial Reader* (Carlisle, Paternoster Press, 1998) esp. e.g., Common Grace (p165ff) and Sphere Sovereignty (p461ff).

³⁵ O'Donovan speaks of spheres on pp117 & 168 but thinks his model of Two Eras (p93) provides a more satisfactory account of the Doctrine of the Two. (p193ff), *DN*, op. cit.

³⁶ Chaplain, op. cit., p297.

³⁷ *DN*, op. cit., p219.

³⁸ Leithart, 'Review', op. cit., p211.

³⁹ See e.g., Gentry, Kenneth L., Jr., *He Shall Have Dominion: A Postmillennial Eschatology* Second Edition, Revised, 1997 (Tyler, Institute for Christian Economics, 1992). Note how this would cohere with O'Donovan's hope about the success of the church's mission described above.

makes O'Donovan's account of a continuing purpose for Israel in God's plans⁴⁰ (Romans 11) more comprehensible since all the nations are expected to be saved, thus arousing ethnic Israel to jealousy that they might be saved through trusting in the gospel and not in some special way by virtue of being ethnic Israel.

O'Donovan himself hopes to go beyond his word of advice to the would-be critics of Christendom and we eagerly await his proposed companion volume on political ethics and infinitely more the great final day when all the promise in the Christendom ideal will be fulfilled.

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⁴⁰ See e.g., O'Donovan, *DN*, op. cit., p132.

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