

Constructing a public theology of common grace

From Constantine to Abraham Kuyper

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It is now rightly taken for granted that the Christian faith is to be professed in a post-Christendom context. The public sphere in Western democracies has become one which is a mix of the secular, the Christian, the post-Christian, multicultural and multifaith. With respect to Western civilisation Jürgen Habermas describes the present as being one which is post-secular and must now acknowledge the power of religion in the public sphere¹: that religious reference for him is no longer necessarily Christian. How can it be with the rise of Islam, in particular, in his own immediate context of Europe? In a similar vein, writing on the Australian Soul Gary Bouma refers to the eclipse of the secularisation hypothesis which imagined all religions would gradually disappear and to its replacement with the resurgence of spirituality.²

Bouma is mindful of a distinction between multiple forms of spirituality and organised religion which is frequently dismissed on the basis of its institutional nature. His Lloyd Geering Lectures were shaped around the theme of being faithful in diversity. The 'old normal' of a Christian establishment or

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pseudo-establishment is gone.³ The poet Les Murray alludes to 'a residual frame of Christian reference' which acts like a default position within Australian society if and when required.⁴ Further afield Michel de Certeau speaks of 'semblances of belief', 'used to be Christians', and 'vestiges of speech' which are 'ebbing away'.⁵ In his Boyer Lectures for 2005 Peter Jensen noted 'the surface absence of Jesus' in this country: there was, it seems, a tendency for Jesus to pop up anonymously in cultural clichés, without even the benefit of a footnote.⁶ The close relationship between the Christian faith and the political and cultural habits of its host culture is no longer what it once was. There are many references now to post-this and that. This is a feature of the context in which consideration of the 1700th anniversary of Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge takes place.

It is also the setting in which the discipline of a public theology has arisen. The term itself was first coined in the United States. Its explicit origins lie in the work of the Chicago-based theologian Martin Marty during the 1970s.⁷ It was first associated with the need for a public church: it was thus a protest against the way in which the Church can become introverted and more concerned for its institutional self and individual salvation. There is correspondingly less interest in public affairs and an active engagement in such. In the first decade of the new millennium the language of a public theology has become what Will Storrar has described as a global flow. It has left behind its American origins; now it circulates around the world and finds its distinctive expressions in a diversity of cultures. Storrar reckoned that on account of this more expansive use of the term the present should be seen as a *kairos* moment.⁸

The ostensible purpose of a public theology is to promote the common good and nurture a civil society. David Ford prefers to think in terms of the flourishing of all. There is need to secure the right to speak on public matters and not rely on some dogmatic or revelatory override. The practice of a public theology is mindful that the Christian faith is one voice among many. The Himes brothers argue that it must be grounded in the symbols, ideas, and doctrines of the Christian tradition.⁹ The risk that Charles Mathewes identified was one of otherwise allowing a political and cultural agenda to determine the shape of a public theology that would always be accommodationist.¹⁰ The very nature of a public theology presupposes a capacity to address occasional issues as they arise. To meet that need Storrar, drawing on the work of Beverly Gaventa, insisted that a public theology must be

bilingual. It must be able to make use of the distinctive languages of the Christian faith and the public domain in ways which were appropriate to the audience being addressed and which maintain an integrity of translation between the two.

The premise on which public theologies are constructed is that there ought to be a close nexus between discipleship and citizenship. Storrar sometimes casts that bond in the mould of the call to be a neighbourhood saint. Malcolm Brown, Stephen Brown and Graeme Smith have more recently argued the case for a 'citizen theology' in preference to a model of public theology based on 'disciple' and 'liberal activist' theologies.¹¹ Seminal writers like Sebastian Kim have described the public domain into which the Christian faith might engage in variations of Habermas' four spheres: broadly speaking, the governmental, the economic, the voluntary associations, including the Church, and the opinion-makers which would incorporate the media.¹² The question now arises whether there is a fifth sphere, the social media, as suggested by Greg Jericho, writing on politics in Australia.¹³

This rather rudimentary mapping of the nature and purpose of a public theology is seemingly rather removed from the debates over the ambiguous legacy of Constantine. There is only occasional reference ever made to him in passing in this emerging discipline. There is little attention paid to his dream before the battle, his employment of the *chi-rho* symbol, his victory over Maxentius, the Edict of Milan, the end of persecution and the actual details of his subsequent patronage of the Church. There is little specific interest in the debate over how authentic his conversion was. Nor is there much attention given to his role in the calling of ecumenical councils of the Church and his handling of the controversies over Donatism and Arianism. In terms of much debate, the interest is less in Constantine as an historical personage than in him as a slogan or symbol that represents a significant shift in the history of the Church and the inception of a new era. The point is well made by John Yoder: 'Our concern is not with Constantine the man ... Nor do we suggest the year 311 represented an immediate reversal without preparation or unfolding ... he stands for a new era in the history of Christianity.'¹⁴

The legacy of Constantine is often viewed in terms of a question mark. Were the measures which he effected and which were of considerable benefit to the clergy and ordinary Christians as well as the institutional church a form of captivity? How helpful to the future integrity of the Christian faith

was it to receive so much imperial patronage? Was it a mistake? Were 'elements of the Christian witness' rendered 'susceptible to the cultural dangers of entrenchment and complacency'? Was the prophetic and the countercultural diluted? Was personal discipleship sacrificed on an altar of obligations to worldly power?¹⁵ The temptation John Dungan discerned was one of exchanging recourse to the prince of peace with the potential alternative of an imperial sword.¹⁶

The immediate advantages were, of course, obvious. Writing in *A Public Faith* Ivor Davidson notes that for

many of the Christians of his own time Constantine's reign brought a welcome end to repression and provided opportunities for social expansion and political influence that previous generations of believers would have found unimaginable.¹⁷

And again:

his political regime had witnessed a substantial revolution in the status of the faith in the Roman world. The churches had gone from at best being tolerated and often a harassed flock, obliged to live a precarious existence in the world and trust in God, to being officially recognized institution.¹⁸

For his part Dungan looks in vain for any record of a bishop or theologian objecting to Constantine's initiatives – even though he was not baptised until the end of his life, never joined a church, knew little theology and was not ordained.¹⁹

The dilemma was the legacy. The pathway to Christendom, the *corpus Christianum*, was initiated. Constantine's victory at the Milvian Bridge marks the beginning of an era in macrohistory. Was the Church now to be consigned to a sort of captivity to the idolatry of the State? Could it more easily become a kind of handmaiden to nationalism? Might it draw more readily upon authority and coercive persuasion which owe less to the life of discipleship and more to political control? The power of these questions in a world which is post-Constantine and post-Christendom is undeniable. The momentum is against the imperial contribution. It can be so easy to lose sight of how his Christian contemporaries – and especially his devoted admirer Eusebius of Caesarea – might have seen the hand of providence

at work, a new Moses, and welcomed the achievements of a canonical and orthodox belief.

In this kind of popular setting it is increasingly unusual to hear a qualified apologia on behalf of Constantine. Oliver O'Donovan is willing to acknowledge there is no need to regret the likes of the Edict of Toleration. The way in which the Christian faith embraces the turn of fortune in its favour during the time of Constantine should be seen in its own cultural and temporal terms. O'Donovan concludes: 'The church of that age had to do contextual theology just as we do.'²⁰ The evangelical writer Esmond Birnie furnished a 'qualified commendation' for Constantine and Christendom on the basis of the State having 'some God-given role and duty to uphold certain standards of righteousness'. Birnie is seeking to call in question what he takes to be an evangelical consensus: Christendom was a 'colossal mistake' and Constantine is responsible for its beginnings. Birnie first assumes that Christendom was preferable to pre-Christian paganism and post-Christian degeneracy. It is then his conviction that the contemporary idea that the State is neutral is a 'dangerous myth'. Here he is touching upon standard ideas which permeate a public theology where the exclusion of the religious voice does not do justice to the full humanity of those whose convictions on the common good arise out of their believing convictions. Birnie is also well aware how the democratic State does not tolerate all forms of pluralism and act as an umpire for competing faiths. Birnie writes 'in praise of Constantine' because he is willing to draw upon biblical texts which allow him to see the State as 'God's minister'. There are separate spheres in which Church and State fulfil their authority and responsibility from God. Birnie is willing to situate Constantine and his policy towards the Christian faith within this kind of context and acknowledge a qualified approval. He is not unaware of the problems.²¹

There has not yet been any sustained attempt to evaluate the importance of Constantine to the emergence of a public theology in the twenty-first century. The tendency of those public theologians who sift the Christian tradition for exemplars from the past is to name the work of Augustine, Luther, Calvin and, now in certain quarters, Abraham Kuyper. The tendency has been to concentrate upon the role of contemporary political leaders like Tony Blair, Kevin Rudd, George Bush and Barack Obama. In the work of historical retrieval Constantine is barely mentioned. It is a notable omission.

This neglect begs the question of what might the shape of a reading of Constantine from the perspective of a public theology look like?

The task is premature in one respect. There is still need to clarify terms and how the various post-it labels so common in our era should be distinguished. Stuart Murray in particular has taken issue with the way in which labels like post-Christendom, post-Constantinian and post-Christian are readily used as if they are synonymous and easily interchangeable. The difficulty Murray discerns is that an uncritical use of these terms obscures how each one is carrying differing basic assumptions. The post-Christian seemingly suggests the end of a faith and its ongoing influence; the post-Christendom weaves together a geographical region, an historical era, and a civilisation shaped primarily by the story, language and rhythms of the Christian faith. It embraced a political arrangement for Church and State as well as an ideology, a mindset, and an habitual pattern of thinking as to how the activity of God in the world might be described. The language of now being post-Christendom conveys a very different way of how Christians might understand their role in society: from the centre to the margins, from majority to minority, from settlers to sojourners/exiles/aliens, from privilege to plurality, from being in control to the need to witness by way of example, from maintenance to mission, and from institution to movement.²²

The most enigmatic of the terms is post-Constantinian. Murray observes that the term points us back to the beginnings of the Christendom era in the fourth century. It looks to the foundations of the subsequent emergence of the *corpus Christianum* which would envelop the whole of Europe. Without the admittedly ambiguous role played by Constantine the future history of the Church and of Europe may have been very different. That link between Christendom and Constantine is deeply problematic, however. Constantine did not impose Christianity on the Empire. There was no coercion to convert. Constantine tolerated paganism and other religions. It was not until Justinian in the sixth century that imperial law was invoked to require all to be Christians. Murray wonders whether Constantinian might better represent a political and cultural system where the ruling authority favours the Christian faith but does not necessarily impose it. The Constantinian strategy is thus in certain respects more nuanced than what might be assumed to be the way of Christendom.

Nor can it be said that Constantine determined the actual interior witness of the Christian faith in its new relationship to the imperial system.

It was true that he summoned the council of Nicaea but their theological outcomes were not his handiwork. Murray privileges Augustine as the primary theological influence of the first few centuries of Christendom; the coming together of Empire and the Christian faith did not constitute the 'city of God' for him in the way in which Eusebius of Caesarea had seemingly implied.

If this distinction is of merit, then it might be helpful to set the politics of Constantine in conversation with the nineteenth, early twentieth century thinker, Kuyper. There is an irony here: Kuyper has a complaint against Constantine: the moment of the Emperor's conversion was the moment the Church became more worldly and its 'salt lost its flavour'.²³ And yet there are some resonances (amid all the differences) between Constantine's patronage and the consequences of Kuyper's invocation of divine ordinances, spheres of sovereignty and his theory of common grace.

Kuyper is a rare figure. He is theologian turned Prime Minister. Richard Mouw has described him in current speak as an 'energetic, multitasker'.²⁴ He helped found a newspaper, a university (The Free University of Amsterdam), a political party (the Anti-Revolutionary Party) and a denomination – and all the while wrote theology in a robust Calvinist style. His practical ministry and theology of culture led him to write on complex theological subjects as well as deliver speeches to farmers' associations and labour unions. Kuyper's public life extended from his ordination in the 1860s through to his death in 1920. There is a significant hermeneutical gap then between this 'important voice' and Constantine with whom his name has sometime been associated. Mouw notes a further irony here: critics of Kuyper have sometimes reckoned him to be too Constantinian for the postmodern intellectual habits of the age.

Kuyper had not set out initially to become a public theologian by way of anachronism. He had undergone a couple of conversions in the wake of his ordination: the second of these had to do with exposure to some malcontents in his congregation in Beesd and his growing realisation that there was merit in their continuing confessional orthodoxy. The issue at stake was how could that be reframed in a way in which it might play a part in the public life of the nation.²⁵ The necessity for such was due to his concerns over the rising tide of secularism which looked back to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. It was being carried along further in Kuyper's present by an Hegelian spirit and progressive humanism which was inclined to 'blur the boundaries' between ways of thinking and practice. Kuyper believed there

to be a fundamental 'clash of principles' at work in the social and political architecture of his time. It was time for a revelation-based perspective into public life.

Kuyper wrote extensively but much of what would be seen as his public theology was mediated through lectures and addresses. It was a fundamental conviction of his that there were divine ordinances built into creation by God and which can be discovered through experience. They were not necessarily discovered through biblical exegesis or spiritual reflection; writing in *De Standaard* he declared that, 'we regard as incontrovertible the assertion that the laws governing life reveal themselves spontaneously in life We learn to know the laws of thought by thinking. By doing business we discover the art of commerce. The same is true for political life'

Kuyper, being a good student of Calvin, was of course well aware that all of life had been tainted by sin. It thus became necessary for him to explain how human beings could then discover these ordinances. It was important for Kuyper to advance a distinction between a general and a special revelation. That special revelation was confined to the salvific works of Christ in and through the particularity of Scripture. The general revelation allowed for the observance of these ordinances which presupposed a principle like justice which can address conscience. Kuyper assumed that an overarching sovereignty lay with God but his sense of a plural State imagined the division of separate spheres for human life – for instance, politics, art, education – where there are laws specific to that particular area.

Calvin himself never used the language of common grace. There are references in *The Institutes* to 'universal grace which is spread over all creatures' and a 'general grace'. This general grace can maintain a measure of moral order in society; it can curb the destructive power of sin and work in the human conscience and provide blessings as well as sustain the care of creation. For Kuyper the advantage of common grace was that it allowed him to switch his ministry, his service of Christ in effect, from the ecclesial realm to the public domain. His reading of the spheres meant that it was possible to discern the work of the Spirit, perhaps anonymously, in and through the agency of otherwise-secular occupations and tasks.

It was evident that Kuyper was seeking to make room for Christian engagement in public affairs and for theological conviction to play a part in public debate. His political theory was grounded in the overarching sovereignty of the Christ who would come again. His most remembered saying

down the years has been his claim that: 'no single piece of our mental world is to be hermetically sealed off from the rest, and there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: "Mine!"' His political practice was governed by a deep and abiding commitment to compassion and a set of principles – justice and freedom especially, which he believed were eternally valid and could be discerned in and through a general revelation. Kuyper was more interested in the principles than he was in constructing a political manual. And his pastoral and theological conviction was such that those principles needed to be put into practice. While he was Prime Minister between 1901 and 1905 Kuyper adopted measures to alleviate the plight of the poor, the elderly, and those most at the mercy of their employers.

There is a world of difference then between Constantine and the theologically erudite Prime Minister. It is clear nevertheless that Kuyper likewise strove to privilege the Christian faith and its institutions. Nowhere was this more obvious than in the Higher Education Law which set up chairs in Christian theology in state universities. Why Kuyper presents himself as an initial conversation partner for Constantine for the sake of a public theology lies in his commitment to a common grace. Constantine was not coercive in favour of the Christian faith. His tolerance of paganism and other religions alongside the Christian faith has sometimes called the authenticity of his conversion into doubt. Kuyper was likewise seeking to create a plural public space. His commitment to a common grace was to be distinguished from a special and salvific grace to those who had been converted to Christ. Kuyper assumed that it was possible for all to discern the divine ordinances within creation and operate within the laws of particular spheres of sovereignty. These things were acts of common grace. It is this aspect of his thinking which has been so appealing to a branch of public theologians. It enables inter-disciplinary insight as well as multiple partners – with the benefit in his case of a Reformed understanding of Christ lying non-coercively in the background.

Now this reading of both Kuyper and Constantine is a little idealised. Constantine might well have tolerated paganism alongside the Christian faith but he was prepared to use his office over those who were deemed to be not orthodox. Some of Kuyper's views were able to be put to use in a way which subverted the quest for the common good and the flourishing of all. There are those now at work seeking to discern his legacy for a contemporary

ecothology.²⁶ One of those theologians is the South African scholar Ernst Conradie, now a devotee of Kuyper relatively speaking, but it was a hard won companionship. Kuyper's views of diversity and pluriformity were frequently used in the case of justifying apartheid. The neo-Kuyperians have had to come to terms with the potential for that misuse and shadow side. Constantine likewise attracts a mixed legacy.

There are some points of affinity between Constantine and Kuyper in their practice of faith in a pluralist public space. Kuyper would probably not be flattered by the comparison but he provides a link in the ongoing task of constructing a public theology. He is one of the most frequently cited theologians and public figures from the past in current writing. He draws attention to the task of historical retrieval for an emerging discipline. The way in which he was sometimes seemed to be too Constantinian turns attention onto the Emperor and his dream at the Milvian Bridge. It is now time to subject Constantine to a much more concerted inquiry into what his legacy might be for a twenty-first century public theology in a post-Constantinian, post-Christendom, post-Christian, postmodern world. It is the eclipse of that earlier era which has made a public theology necessary.

Endnotes

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