

Is the legacy of the Protestant Reformation a host of churches that seek to defy social evils—or defeat them?

# Beyond the Reformation of Politics

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Alec Ryrie

When we celebrate historical anniversaries, we are usually telling stories about ourselves more than about the past. This year is the quincentenary of Martin Luther's Ninety-Five Theses, which sparked the Protestant Reformation: an epoch-making historical event that has always been much too important to be left to the historians. The centenary celebrations in 1617 were about bolstering Germany's Protestant identity in the face of imminent war. The quatercentenary celebrations in 1917 were a grim affair in which imperial Germany held up Luther as an icon of its struggle.

But 2017 is stranger than that. We can't avoid the Reformation's importance in shaping the modern world, but over the past hundred years the historically Protestant countries of North America and Europe have secularized pell-mell. How does a secular society celebrate a religious revolution? Chiefly by transposing "religion" into

a secular key and asking what our secular world owes to it. And given what obsesses our secular world right now, that means politics.

In the mostly liberal world of academic history and theology, this means telling one or both of two conventional stories about the politics of the Protestant Reformation. Both

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of these stories are true, but they aren't the whole truth.

The first story is one of defiance and revolution. This is the story told in slightly different forms by traditional Whig celebrations of Protestantism, by a certain self-congratulatory vein of Protestant nationalism in the United States, and by Protestants strung out anywhere along the line of modern politics between the center-right and the radical left. It tells how some Protestants have defied tyrannical governments 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.

This story begins with Martin Luther standing on his conscience and the Word of God at the Diet of Worms in 1521, defying all the powers of Church and Empire rather than abandoning what he knew to be right. The following year Luther wrote a treatise titled *Temporal Authority: To What Extent It Should Be Obeyed*, insisting rulers could not compel their subjects' consciences, nor could the kingdom of this world stray onto the territory of the kingdom of Christ. It was with these principles in mind that Lutheran cities and princes banded together to defy the Holy Roman Emperor, earning themselves the name "Protestants" in the process. In 1547 they went to war against their sovereign lord. In 1555 they compelled him to recognize their right to religious freedom. Soon Protestants in France were fighting a series of wars against tyrannical kings and arguing that they would be justified in killing an unjust ruler. Protestants in Holland overthrew their foreign king and set up a republic committed to at least a measure of religious tolerance. When Protestants in England won a bitter war against the misrule of King Charles I, they sealed their victory by putting him on trial and cutting off his head.

King Charles's father, King James VI of Scotland, had worried that some of his

radical Protestant subjects were plotting a "Democratic form of government." That was an exaggeration, but the leader of Scotland's Reformation, John Knox, had defied a series of rulers with his insistence that "all man is equal" in the God-given duty to stand up to a tyrant. Knox's successor, Andrew Melville, told King James to his face that while he might be king of Scotland, what truly mattered 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!"

It is an easy matter to trace this radical tradition down to our own times. In the later seventeenth century John Locke denied that princes had authority over their subjects' souls, since souls are under God's jurisdiction alone. In the later eighteenth century, evangelical campaigners in Britain and America began to argue that slavery was incompatible with Christianity, and pursued dogged and ultimately successful campaigns to abolish it. Nineteenth-century Protestants embraced liberalism and democracy even as the Catholic Church continued to set its face firmly against such modernist evils. And in the twentieth century, Protestantism animated a series of radical, antifascist, antiracist, and anti-imperial movements: from the May First movement in post-World War I Korea, through the 1934 Barmen Declaration of the Confessing Church during the Third Reich, to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s Southern Christian Leadership Conference. This tradition reached its modern apotheosis in the Protestant campaign against apartheid in South Africa, in which the leadership of Protestant ministers like Beyers Naudé, Desmond Tutu, and Allan Boesak was decisive, and produced, in the 1982 Belhar Confession and the 1985 Kairos Document, developed theological statements of what this politically and socially radical Protestantism could mean.

If the Protestant resistance story is not



*The Peasants' War was an early political response to the Reformation*

to your taste, the alternative is a tale of an authoritarian Protestantism, which is either suborned by state power or willingly sacralizes it. This is a story told mainly by Protestantism's external detractors, chiefly but not exclusively on the left, along with a smattering of self-flagellating Protestants. It again begins with Luther, who having defied the power of the emperor was all too ready to claim that his own political allies were given almost unlimited authority by God. Indeed, critics charge that Luther was willing to tear up conventional Christian morality to accommodate his patrons, as when he decided that a key princely supporter, Philip of Hesse, could be allowed a bigamous marriage. And if Luther's political and marital theology were at least ambiguous, the same could not be said for King Henry VIII of England, who gave his own twist to the Reformation. Henry was no Protestant, but most English Protestants were willing to swallow their principles for the sake of an alliance with him, and so to validate their king's one true conviction: that God had appointed him head of both church and state in England, and he was accountable to no one else.

The authoritarian streak in Protestantism runs from those beginnings through John Calvin's notorious execution of the Spanish freethinker Michael Servetus in 1553, through the moral authoritarianism of the English republicans and of the New England puritans, through the effortless apologies for imperialism and for slavery advanced throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the twentieth century, this story invokes the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa, whose theology of national distinctiveness was a crucial underpinning for apartheid. But its pinnacle is, as Godwin's Law insists, the deep involvement of German Protestants in legitimizing and enabling the Nazi regime. Luther's doctrine of the "two kingdoms," which insisted that church and state must remain separate spheres, came to be seen as meaning that Christianity could not intrude in any way into politics.

Karl Barth, Nazism's most distinguished theological opponent, 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." Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Protestant

anti-Nazism's greatest martyr, 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." The result was always the same: submission and obedience.

These dueling interpretations create an appealing double story, amply populated with heroes and villains. It has a great deal of truth in it. Unfortunately, it also tells a partial and a partisan story both of the Reformation era and, more especially, of its legacy since. By dividing the world into "good" rebellious Protestants and "bad" tyrannical ones, it bolsters modern myths while failing to understand a crucial feature of Protestantism's political impact. It not only misses a large part of what the Reformation was about but also misunderstands a large part of how it is shaping the world in our own times.

### *Politics not the highest priority*

At worst, the leading interpretations can seem constructed in order to distract us from a point that ought to be inescapable: Protestantism is not, in any of its forms, a political movement. It is about God, and it is about human salvation. The centrality of those spiritual concerns has often been exasperating to secular politicians who want to make Protestants their allies and are frustrated by all the wearisome Jesus-talk, but it is unavoidable. Naturally, Protestants' spiritual preoccupations have political consequences, sometimes dramatic ones. When an overwhelming encounter with God has turned your whole world upside down, nothing, politics included, will be quite the same.

Yet if we misread these secondary effects as primary, we will not be able to understand their impact.

Even at the most politically fraught moments, we can find Protestants setting off at right angles to secular political debates. For example, in the antebellum United States, one theme that repeatedly surfaced among Protestants who were unwavering in their opposition to slavery was that slavery was not the most important question. Abolitionist campaigners pressured missionaries to the Native Americans to denounce the slavery practiced by the Cherokee and the Choctaw; the missionaries retorted that while they loathed slavery, such a denunciation would bring their mission to an abrupt end. They were willing to tolerate a worldly evil in order to save souls.

Or consider the free African American revivalist preacher Zilpha Elaw, who certainly condemned slavery and occasionally attended abolitionist meetings. She would not, however, make it her priority. In 1828 she recorded meeting another preacher, himself a slave: she wrote disdainfully that this man "seemed to manifest an undue anxiety for his freedom." Although the Bible told slaves to be content with their condition, this man "anxiously sighed for liberty." Happily, she recorded, his prayers were soon heard. "In the same week he was taken ill, and finally fell asleep in Jesus, departing to be 'where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest.'" This attitude infuriated abolitionist critics of conventional Christianity, like Frederick Douglass, who despaired at how promises of heaven were used to keep slaves quiescent. Yet if you believe, as Elaw did, that this life is a passing shadow and that humanity's only true happiness lies in God, how could temporal slavery or freedom compare with the momentous and eternal question of salvation or damnation?

Elaw is a clue to a hidden strand of Protestant apoliticism. Once again, this goes

back to Luther, although Luther himself was only reviving a strand of Christian political theology that goes back to St. Paul. Luther's view on princes, in *Temporal Authority*, was hardly idealistic:

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 was not a call to arms. In Luther's view, God permits these scoundrels to rule because "the world is too wicked, and does not deserve to have many wise and upright princes." Anticipating Madison, Luther argued that it was only because of human sin that God had instituted government at all, in order to impose some minimal restraint on human evil and make some limited semblance of peace and order possible. His point, deeply counterintuitive to most modern sensibilities, is that government is not very important. It is necessary in a humdrum way for as long as this passing world endures, but Christians should not pay much attention to it. Their hearts should be set instead on the kingdom of Christ, where there is no law, and no coercion, and which is not passing away.

The distinction between this apoliticism and the ethic of mere submission to rulers can seem a fine one. The two approaches can have very similar results in practice. The apolitical ethic is certainly one the first generation of Protestant princes, and a series of more or less unpleasant governments ever since, were happy to encourage. To be deliberately apolitical is to give tacit support to whomever happens to be in power.

Even in the first generation, however, there were indications that apolitical withdrawal was not merely submission in fancy theological dress. Mennonites and others in the Anabaptist tradition, for example, mixed

scrupulous obedience with fastidious refusal to be involved in or contaminated by political life in any way: that included embracing a radical pacifism. Although the reasoning behind this position was similar to Luther's, it led to a quite different set of practical results.

A truer and more subversive descendant of Luther's apoliticism was Philipp Jakob Spener, a decisive figure in Protestantism's history who is now largely forgotten: he was the founding father of Pietism, which gave rise to modern Evangelicalism. His manifesto *Pious Desires* (1675) nowadays reads as a bland collection of truisms, until you notice the ringing silence on one central issue: in his vision of a godly society, there is no mention of government or princes at all. The revolutionary power of Pietism, Methodism, and Evangelicalism came from their willingness and ability simply to bypass political structures, sending books and preachers promiscuously across borders and sparking lay-led revivals that did not wait for political permission. The English Marxist historian E.P. Thompson argued persuasively that Methodism snuffed out a potential revolution in late-eighteenth-century Britain by diverting working-class energies into religious renewal. He meant it as a criticism, of course, but if that was where the English working class sought and found their salvation, it seems presumptuous to say they were wrong. And while it is true that Methodism did not threaten the British state, equally it was not subordinate to it.

But it was in the United States, where the First Amendment enshrined something much like Luther's "two-kingdoms" doctrine, that Protestant apoliticism came into its own. By 1850 a third of the republic's entire population were Methodists. A series of new American sects and churches disavowed any political involvement, either rigidly like the Jehovah's Witnesses or more flexibly like the Seventh-day Adventists.

Others simply had more pressing things on their minds. The “holiness” Methodists of the late nineteenth century were pursuing moral perfection and empowerment by the Holy Spirit. What did they care about the politics of bimetallism? The Pentecostalism that burst out of the “holiness” scene in the first decade of the twentieth century was not opposed to politics so much as profoundly uninterested in it: a rotten business generally not worth Christians’ attention.

As the historian Laurence Moore puts it, even during the traumatic global upheavals of the 1930s and 1940s, Pentecostal periodicals convey “no sense that any events took place in the world other than the wonder-working, soul-saving miracles of the Holy Ghost.” Early Pentecostals did not believe it was wrong to vote, and when a moral issue such as Prohibition was at stake, they might do so. But they generally believed that the corruption and compromises of worldly politics 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.

The gulf that was opening up between politicized, progressive Protestantism and its apolitical cousin was laid bare by the “missionary moment” of the early twentieth century, when almost the entire world was, for the first time, open to Christian missionaries. Progressives assembled in Edinburgh in 1910 for the World Missionary Conference, setting in train the ecumenical movement that eventually gave rise to the World Council of Churches. They did not bother to invite the fringe group of “holiness” Protestants who, a few years earlier in Los Angeles, had begun speaking in tongues and had fanned out across the planet, convinced they were being empowered and called to share their new spiritual gifts with all humanity. But a century on, the worldwide ecumenical vision

has run into the sand, while Pentecostalism is a force to be reckoned with around the globe.

### *Can churches ever truly be apolitical?*

In modern times, the apolitical tradition in Protestantism has come in for harsh criticism from Protestants who assume that democratic political activism is normative, 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 apoliticism nearly seriously enough.

We can see the story in microcosm in South Korean Presbyterianism. In the 1970s the emergence of a so-called theology of the *minjung*—the poor and oppressed—sparked excitement among liberal theologians around the world. This aspired to build “a church for and of the *minjung*,” a Protestant counterpart to the Marxist-inflected liberation theology of Latin American Catholicism. As the 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.” 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 to 1977, the *kijang* church, the small Presbyterian church that embraced *minjung* theology, saw its membership rise by some 11 percent. During the same years, however, the membership of Korea’s main Presbyterian denominations, which actively

distanced themselves from politics, rose by 70 percent or more. The *minjung* theologians, it seems, did not attract much interest from the *minjung* themselves. Indeed, by the time democracy was eventually established in South Korea, *minjung* theology had come to seem nationalist and patriarchal, and its willingness to flirt with Marxism was politically toxic to Christians living next door to a heavily armed Stalinist dictatorship.

Korea's other, supposedly apolitical Protestants were accused of giving comfort to the Park regime. The regime 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 government. Yet few Korean Protestants seem to have been active supporters of the dictatorships. According to a revealing 1982 survey, only 6 percent 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 contemptibly weak only if you assume that prayer is not an effective means of intervening in worldly affairs.

In the same survey, 89 percent 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. One of the *kijang* church's key leaders claimed that a church should be "an organisation of strength, awakening each citizen to a sense of sovereignty and letting him speak." For the majority of Korean Protes-

tants, the sentiment might be admirable, but it did not sound much like a church. Most Korean Protestant churches believed that they were on earth to save souls, and that, at least, they were doing at an unprecedented rate. The proportion of Protestants in the South Korean population rose from 2.5 percent in 1960 (some six hundred thousand people), to 10 percent in 1970, 19 percent in 1980, and as high as 27 percent in 1990—just under twelve million believers. Almost all the growth was in rigorously conservative evangelical churches.

This astonishing explosion mirrored South Korea's equally astonishing economic boom in those years. From 1962 to 1989, South Korea's economy grew from \$2.7 billion to \$230 billion. 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 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. Amid an economic boom that even secular economists called a miracle, all the *minjung* theologians could offer the poor was dignity. The "prosperity gospel" not only offered but, apparently, delivered a chance to stop being poor.

This pattern of "withdrawal" that looks politically skewed has been paralleled around the world. In Chile, during the presidency of the socialist Salvador Allende, a survey found that 60 percent 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. Yet after Augusto Pinochet's 1973 coup, a joint declaration by thirty-two 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). The case for the prosecution, then, is that apoliticism is a sham that systematically favors oppressive and authoritarian regimes.

The presumption that politics is rotten is itself inherently right-leaning, 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 percent as against 37 percent) emphasized the importance of charitable support for the poor. By contrast, 47 percent of Protestants but only 24 percent of Catholics argued that the best way to help the poor was to bring them to Christ. On this reading, “apolitical withdrawal” is code for “collaboration with right-wing Yanqui neo-colonialism.”

The tone of accusation in which this claim is made is itself an important fact. Since the French Revolution, most European and European-derived societies have shared a belief that is very peculiar in long historical perspective: that most human problems are susceptible of political solutions. This belief has been vindicated by some spectacular successes and has survived despite some catastrophic failures. One consequence of this belief, however, is that mass political participation is seen as a virtue, while withdrawal from political life is a moral failure. Hence, for example, the common presumption—which on the face of it is a little odd—that voting as such is morally superior to not voting, regardless of whom or what you vote for. 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.” It seemed self-evident to him that this was a criticism, but for many centuries, Christians who aspired to withdraw from the world the better to seek God would have taken it as praise.

### *Finding a safe gospel space*

Yet apolitical Protestants’ relationship with authoritarian governments is not a simple matter of submission. In modern times, avowedly apolitical Protestants have periodically been stirred into political action by movements they see as existential threats—whether Marxism in Latin America, political Islam in Nigeria, or imperial Shintoism in Japanese-occupied Korea and China during World War II. But equally they have sometimes been able to negotiate amicable coexistence with such movements. In the 1980s most Pentecostal leaders in Nicaragua, one of Latin America’s most Protestant countries, loudly condemned the U.S.-backed Contra rebels, proclaimed their apolitical stance, and avowed their loyalty to the Marxist government—much to the surprise and frustration of many American evangelicals. 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. For their part, the Sandinista regime (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.” But it was harmless, and the regime was willing to permit it.

This demand, that the kingdom of Christ



be allowed to govern its own realm, remains apolitical Protestants' key, nonnegotiable political demand, as it has done since the sixteenth century. It is both limited and self-centered, paying little attention to the society's welfare as long as their communities are allowed to have their safe spaces. In that sense, it is easy for most governments to buy apolitical Protestants' loyalty. But as has also been the case since the sixteenth century, some regimes are unwilling or unable to accept this nonaggression pact. In the People's Republic of China, avowedly and painstakingly apolitical Protestants were curtailed and eventually suppressed in the 1950s and 1960s (as were their openly pro-communist brethren). Since the relegalization of public worship in China in 1979, a large 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.

The crackdown on both registered and unregistered churches in China that has been under way since 2013 has, predictably, led these punctiliously apolitical Protestants to stiffen their response. In August 2015 the unregistered-church pastor Wang Yi even published a set of "ninety-five theses" for the unregistered sector, explicitly citing the example of "Martin Luther, a servant of God." This manifesto bluntly rejects any political interference in Christian life, urg-

ing Christians facing "illegal infringements from the government...to use any and all legal means to express their protest...and exercise proper self-defense."

The canonical modern example of Protestant apoliticism, however, is the Confessing Church in Nazi Germany. The Confessing Church is now remembered as the anti-Nazi wing of Protestantism, but the explicit and heroic anti-Nazi activism of leaders such as Barth and Bonhoeffer set them apart. In general, the Confessing Church offered very little real opposition or resistance to the Nazi state, even within the scope available for it to do so. Its most important leader, Martin Niemöller, was a self-confessed anti-Semite: he is now best known for his confession, made after the war, that he was silent when Jews, communists, and trade unionists were arrested, so when he himself was taken, no one was left to speak for him.

Niemöller's statement is a not unfair representation of the Confessing Church's stance as a whole. What it did, or tried to do, was defend its own freedom to decide its own doctrine, worship, and polity, including its right to treat Christians of Jewish descent as full and equal members of the church. This was not heroic. But nor was it craven: Niemöller did not spend eight years in a concentration camp because he lacked principles. And indeed, it is worth noticing that the Christian group that offered the most steadfast resistance to the Nazis—which in 1937 managed in one night to distribute across Germany three hundred thousand copies of a secretly printed pamphlet denouncing Hitler as the apocalyptic Beast—was also the most doggedly apolitical of them all: the Jehovah's Witnesses.

Apolitical Protestantism, then, cannot tolerate—because it cannot be tolerated by—totalitarianisms of any kind, whether communist, fascist, or theocratic. It can tolerate authoritarian governments that are willing to leave it alone. The fact that right-wing

authoritarians have in recent decades been more willing to do this than left-wing authoritarians does not make apolitical Protestants friends of right-wing authoritarianism.

There is a genuine affinity between Protestant apoliticism and the principles of the modern democratic center-right: a shared emphasis on self-help, private initiative, and individual moral renewal, and a shared suspicion of state enterprise. There is also a corresponding affinity with the modern democratic center-left: a shared emphasis on human equality and a shared suspicion of nationalism.

The struggle in Latin America between Pentecostalism and 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 yourself for a future revolution but immediate and practical spiritual help, from moral renewal in the face of gangs, drugs, and violence, through promised miracles of healing and deliverance, to the material benefits offered by the “prosperity gospel.” 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: ill health, the insecurity of families, alcohol dependence, money worries. In practice it does not, of course, provide all those things all the time, but it does enough that the offer works, and certainly does so more reliably than any secular political utopia. And it also mobilizes initiative. The same 2014 survey that 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.

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 in the dispute. As elsewhere, apoliticism sometimes amounted to support for the regime. One “independent” leader, Isaac Mokoena, was repeatedly used by the apartheid regime 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, at the height of the United Democratic Front’s civil-disobedience campaigns, and invested him with a church honour. Some of that church’s ministers even 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.”

Others were less apologetic. The Zion Christian Church’s testimony to the TRC emphasized that it had defied 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 politicized Protestants to despair that the independent churches would only ever offer supernatural placebos rather than providing what one black South African theologian called “the kind of political direction which

the black community needs.” When, in 1985, the country’s main English-speaking churches produced the Kairos Document, a stirring theological declaration of the evils of apartheid, the independent churches that constituted such an enormous part of South African Christianity were neither included nor even mentioned.

The independent churches would reply that providing political direction was not their purpose. What the “black community” truly needed, in their view, was not mobilization 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.” The independent churches, by contrast, positively encouraged believers to bring these troubles to church. The establishment churches were learning to defy evil. The independents offered instead to defeat it.

### *Seeking a constructive way forward*

For myself, I am not an apolitical Protestant. It does not seem to me that, in the face of what some governments inflict on their populations, merely standing by and defending the sovereignty of your own sphere is sufficient—although those are cheap words. I draw attention to this persistent and, by its nature, hidden tradition for two reasons. First, to point out that the apolitical tradition in Protestantism is not (or not only) a cowardly or dishonest response to particular circumstances, but has a long-standing and, in its own terms, honorable theological rationale stretching back to Luther and, indeed, beyond. The claim that it 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 that is unfashionable but by no means ridiculous. 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.

Second, I want to suggest that, paradoxically, this way of thinking may be of some real political importance to our own times. For a couple of decades, the Western democracies have been undergoing a slow-burning crisis of legitimacy. For many of their citizens, the claim that politics is an inherently corrupt and rotten business with little power to effect positive change in ordinary people’s lives sounds less like a theological claim than a self-evident truth—as indeed has long been the case across much of the world. Changing our politicians seems trivial, and changing our political culture impossible. This malign set of conditions threatens to produce a politics of scapegoating that may only be reinforced by its own ineffectiveness. Protestantism’s apolitical tradition could make this situation worse by encouraging withdrawal from political engagement into the private sphere and the life of the community.

Yet apolitical Protestantism may also offer a more constructive way forward. This would lie not only through its recognition that a large part of human misery and flourishing does in fact lie beyond the power of any government, and therefore that there are better responses to the ills of our age than impotent rage at a ruling class. It would also offer an alternative means by which political cultures themselves might be changed. The emergent Pentecostal politics of Africa and Latin America prioritizes a moral renewal of the political culture: pulling countries neither to the left nor to the right but towards heaven, in particular by striving to elect politicians of irreproachable personal ethics and by campaigns against corruption.

The problems with such moralized politics are all too obvious: hypocrisy is easily mistaken for piety; piety is a poor substitute for competence; and power tends to corrupt. It does, however, seem likely that the Western

democracies' moribund and transactional political culture will find a new moral or ideological compass at some point. There are many much, much worse options available. †

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## Dialogue: A Poem

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Helen Pinkerton

*For Juliette Light*

A monologue assumes a listener.  
When Juliette looks up and smiles as if  
To speak to me, a dialogue begins,  
Although she is too young to say much yet.

Likewise, when young, we sometimes talk to God,  
Not naming Him at all, and yet as someone,  
There, listening to our monologue.  
The listener may be silent as a stone.

If no one else, it always can be God,  
Who, being outside time, and in it, too,  
Cannot avoid attending to our words.  
If patient, we can wait for some reply.

There was, I think, a reply to my first words,  
For, ever since, my days, suffused with words,  
Became a back and forth of questions, answers—  
Of talk, purporting to examine all

That passed, that made up my experience—  
The constant presence of reality.  
The dialogue confirms duality,  
For it assumes our presence, here and now,

And also that of the other, taking us  
Out of a crippling solipsism—not quite  
Into Platonic wisdom, but at least  
Able to read his dialogues with care.