

This is a personal view of how the Church of England might frame its contribution to the life of the nation, as the divisions, incurred initially by the referendum, continue and deepen.

Where are we?

A General Election has been called for 12th December. A string of moderate Conservatives (and some Labour MPs) have stepped down at the peak of their careers citing the fractious and bullying political atmosphere since the referendum. The bishops of the Church of England, and the Archbishop of Canterbury personally, have spoken up for civility in political debate and have been roundly abused for their trouble. Instead, the rhetoric around Brexit becomes increasingly divisive and strident. The Prime Minister appeared to have negotiated a deal that would pass Parliament and then withdrew it. Leavers who preferred a deal to No Deal are routinely being branded as “Remainers”, making the referendum vote seem increasingly irrelevant but the divisions starker. The election campaign is widely expected to be one of the dirtiest ever. A “Parliament versus the People” narrative, with enormous repercussions for the future of representative democracy, appears to be central to the Prime Minister’s strategy.

Ultimately, it now feels as if Brexit is an existential choice between finding our primary national identity alongside the continent of Europe (in or out of the EU) pursuing a version of welfare capitalism, and an Anglophone alliance with the US in an unregulated market model. This is one of the biggest questions faced by our country for centuries.

But it is not obvious that it is a *theological* question. Christian churches flourish under many different polities and, whilst Europe offers us allies who share a monarchical system and some form of established/state church, the Christian heritage of the US is also integral to its identity. Everyone will have a view about whether we should look for our identity across the Channel or across the Atlantic – but it is not clear that the church has any *special* competence on this question.

“Speaking Out”

In a time of national turmoil and febrile politics, calls for the church, or for bishops, to “speak out” are understandable but problematic. If Brexit is not, as I have suggested, a fundamentally theological question, the notion that there is a correct Christian point of view becomes a mirage. Pragmatically, speaking into public issues is rarely acceptable unless the church is amplifying views that people already hold – and in a divided context where positions cannot be easily derived from the gospel, statements that would be interpreted as “God’s view” could exceed our mandate. And, having spoken out, what is supposed to happen?

Temple’s well-known Middle Axiom approach to Christian ethical statements sought a path between excessive blandness, which is embarrassingly irrelevant, and too much specificity going beyond what the church can say *qua* church. But a different approach, avoiding both these traps, is to seek to reframe the questions in the light of the gospel – easier said than done, but perhaps essential when the divisions in the country and Parliament are leading to stasis or disruption.

In the context of Brexit, the church will make no effective difference if it does not recognise and help counter the disenchantment with our politicians and political institutions that long predates the referendum and, whilst it does not explain the Leave vote, does help explain the failure of Remain.

An eviscerated politics

Margaret Thatcher's administrations sought smaller government and shifted responsibilities that had formerly resided with Parliament out of the political sphere. That was part of the rationale of market economics (the hidden hand replacing governmental deliberations) and privatisation (ministers no longer held to account for utilities etc). Whatever economic advantages this gained, the scope of politics and the responsibilities of politicians diminished.

Tony Blair's administrations bought into much of that political thinking. Reasoning that the working classes had nowhere to go but Labour, Blair created a new consensus around economic policies which still subordinated politics to economics, following Bill Clinton's maxim that "it's the economy stupid!"

The global dominance of the market model, and the accompanying denigration of politics as a mechanism for progress, left political institutions ill-equipped to face the 2008 global economic catastrophe. Having declared politics powerless to control the global economy, many levers of economic power had been given away. At the very moment when politics had to take back control of the economy, the only economic policies available within the market paradigm were those of austerity. Politics now looked, not just impotent, but actively harmful to the well-being of the citizen.

So, as the Johnson administration pushes at the boundaries of the constitution, partly to avoid the narrative of impotence surrounding Theresa May, it is no good simply reasserting the primacy of the present version of Parliament or politics. Confidence in Parliament and politics has been undermined over forty years. The commitment to our political institutions that might have delivered a consensual Brexit was more broken than we knew – and broken long before the referendum. If the Brexit vote was a vote against one unresponsive political institution (the EU) it was also a stout kick at what our own Parliament and politics had become, represented by the cross-party Remain consensus.

Unlearning the past

For those who, like me, bought strongly into the Clinton line on the economy, a political re-education is called for. Of course, a flourishing economy is necessary if civilised life is to flourish. But a profoundly unequal economy destroys many things people value (see *The Spirit Level*). Instead of communities and culture serving economic growth – and being eroded as a result – the economy must be put back in its proper place as the servant of culture and community.

This suggests that our focus needs to be resolutely on the long term – on life after the election, after leaving the EU (if and when we do) and that our objective should be a new politics which builds upon people's learning for functional communities instead of trashing our shared lives in the name of economic prosperity.

This suggests that we need a subtle analysis of the forces which drove the Leave vote. Because it remains the case that for some Leavers, especially those in positions of power and wealth, Brexit continues to be seen as an economic project, designed to enable the unfettered flourishing of

globally footloose capital, even at the expense of domestic business interests (*vide*, Boris Johnson's ability to dismiss business leaders Brexit qualms without serious Tory repercussions).

The danger may be that, instead of re-energised communities, we get a doubling-down into identity politics as people seek to replace the lost solidarities once found in diverse neighbourhoods by focussing increasingly on groupings defined by perceived victimhood.

Identity Politics is the bastard child of eroded communities. It is not just a creature of the radical left, focussing on gender, ethnicity and minorities – it is also a phenomenon of the radical right where the disenfranchisement of poorer groups, and dislocations occasioned by large-scale migration, are weaponised in the politics of populism. We need to ask whether any version of identity politics has the potential to capture gospel imperatives – such as the bias to the vulnerable – or if it leads only to the fragmentation and scapegoating of social groups. And we need to think carefully what sort of political allegiances will protect Christian identities in a predominantly secular polity.

Division and Reconciliation

Our focus as a church should be on the things that churches do best. Despite our place in Parliament, the CofE cannot turn around the present febrile politics. Instead, we should reflect on whether the church is, indeed, most itself in its parishes. If so, might the resurgence of parish life (I mean parish, not just congregation) help a new political settlement to emerge which addresses people's continuing allegiance to community and culture?

Some of the theological rationale for a new politics of community was set out in the Bishops' Pastoral Letter for the 2015 General Election. Similar ideas have been deepened in the Red Tory and Blue Labour movements. If the church is to help build a new politics that will reconstruct the attention to community and culture which the dominant narrative of economics has undermined, we will have to mirror the courage of those movements in challenging the shibboleths of left and right. We will face being branded racist, for speaking positively of aspects of English culture (even though we may be stressing the theme of hospitality in that culture) and branded communist for refusing to acquiesce in the asset-stripping cartel capitalism that characterises much contemporary economics.

The trick, however, will be to find words to speak of profound and loving commitment to community whilst embracing difference and diversity. We need to remember that communities can be toxic as well as liberating, even if the current imperative is to rebuild them. We must be liberal and communitarian at once – lauding the significance of community, attending to the importance of culture, but always speaking of a *community of communities* and of capacious, hospitable culture.

The relevance of Anglicanism

Fortunately, this is – if we can only recapture it – a very Anglican gifting. As the church of *England*, we are more wedded to place than to doctrinal specifics. The Elizabethan Settlement following the Reformation upheavals, further developed after the Civil War, sought a form of national church which could embrace all the people (bar irreconcilables) on the basis of parish and nation – the communities people recognised. If we were seeking to build such a reconciliatory church today, our "red lines", and our compromises, would be different. But our breadth of affection and hospitality,

our commitment to place, and most of all our parochial system with its alertness to the messy realities of culture and community, are our strongest suits as the servant church of a divided nation.

Community and culture are crucial to human flourishing, but no *specific* community or *particular* culture must ever become sacralised (that way lies totalitarianism). The CofE has for centuries served communities which differ wildly, and has spoken into cultures that do not speak to each other. The parish is not only our key administrative unit – it is potentially the building block for the kind of politics that could be an antidote to the mess that has brought us Brexit-related conflict.

The parish model can be appropriated by others to build on. It might mean a renaissance in local government – “local”, here, being smaller than some of the present unwieldy authorities. It would be relaxed about seeing different structures and institutions in different places – uniformity is not always a virtue – but would seek just enough commonality to avoid Balkanisation, just as our parishes in all their diversity owe allegiance to the diocese and share in being a national church. Thus (if, indeed, there is no one Christian position on Brexit) the parish allows different “Brexit tribes” to be equally heard and cherished within the Christian community – their differences are no deeper than other Anglican disagreements which remain precariously held together by residual loyalty to the diocese, the bishop and the national church.

The relative weakness of the Church of England is part of our offer to damaged communities. As Grace Davie notes, a “weak establishment” allows the church to hold the local and national together without throwing its weight around – its only power is soft power. This may be precisely the moment – when an established church is weak but has not disappeared – to be more than an honest broker and actively share our history of holding together Christians who hate and distrust each other as a paradigm for a nation which seems to be going the same way.

We need to reframe questions in the light of the gospel. That may mean worrying less about Parliamentary processes and old binary identities, focussing mainly on what we do best – locality, community, hospitality and history – to help articulate, in a country that has few confident narratives to draw upon, answers to the question: who are we, the English, and (echoing Bonhoeffer) who is Jesus Christ for us today?

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