A Future that's Bigger than the Past

Catalysing Kingdom Communities

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Notes

1 Of course, it's not really new. Origen was musing over the possibility of universal salvation as early as the third century.

2 I first heard this prayer spoken by Michael Nazir-Ali, to whom I remain indebted. After 25 years of searching for its source, Georgie Illingworth, to whom I am most grateful, directed my attention to the work of the mystic Rabi'a. Jane Hirshfield's translation of Rabi'a's original prayer goes as follows: 'O my Lord, if I worship you from fear of hell, burn me in hell. If I worship you from hope of Paradise, bar me from its gates. But if I worship you for yourself alone, grant me then the beauty of your Face.' See www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/55267/o-my-lord-56d236a947ec8, and Jane Hirshfield, ed., *Women in Praise of the Sacred: 43 Centuries of Spiritual Poetry by Women* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994). I can't recall whether my translation is the work of Michael Nazir-Ali or my own flawed memory, but I'm now so attached to the version with which I'm familiar that I'm recording it thus rather than in Jane Hirshfield's translation.

3 This is the argument of Samuel Wells with David Barclay and Russell Rook, *For Good: The Church and the Future of Welfare* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 2017).

4 Roger L. Martin and Sally R. Osberg, *Getting Beyond Better: How Social Entrepreneurship Works* (Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press, 2015), pp. 7–11.

5 L. Gregory Jones, *Christian Social Innovation: Renewing Wesleyan Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2016), p. 5.

6 The original sermon is in Samuel Wells, *Speaking the Truth: Preaching in a Pluralistic Culture* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008), pp. 167–72.

7 Wendell Berry, 'Two Economies', *Review and Expositor* 81 (2) (1984) pp. 209–23.

8 For more on the difference, see my *Incarnational Mission: Being with the World* (Grand Rapids and Norwich: Eerdmans and Canterbury Press, 2018), *Incarnational Ministry: Being with the Church* (Grand Rapids and Norwich: Eerdmans and Canterbury Press, 2017), and *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015).

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For Such a Time as This: The Church's Opportunity

I don't regard Christianity as a religion, if by 'religion' we mean a genus that sits among other religions, which share a concern with spirituality and often life beyond death, are preoccupied with holy figures and sacred rituals, and tend to be associated by others with conservative attitudes and a sense of superiority and judgement over the mass of earthly humanity. Instead, I regard Christianity as alternative society. Alternative in terms of time, because it believes God's future, which we may call the kingdom, is already overlapping with our present; and alternative in terms of space, because while tending to itself in ministry, the church is always sharing space with the world in mission. But alternative most of all in terms of story; Christian identity is not a possession to be owned or an achievement to be cherished or even a quality to be realized – it is a gift to be received. That gift comes in two main forms: it's the gift of a new past, in which the mistakes we have perpetrated are healed and the damage we have undergone is redeemed, collectively known as forgiveness; and the gift of a new future, in which the dread of punishment is lifted and the fear of oblivion is disarmed. Thus Christianity is a new present, a true gift, a way of life made possible by Easter and Pentecost, an anticipation of eternal life with God.

Likewise, I don't regard Christianity in the United Kingdom as being uniquely in peril. It is true that the time when Christianity and citizenship were virtually synonymous has long gone, that regular church attendance is much less

common, that marks of affiliation, notably baptism, are less the norm, and that recourse to clergy in times of life transition, especially funerals and weddings, is less prevalent. But the church has faced challenges in every generation. Dr Arnold, Headmaster of Rugby, in a letter to a member of SPCK, wrote, 'The Church as it now stands no human power can save.'[1] That was in 1832. There was no time when the church in the United Kingdom 'got it right'. There is no challenge today that is different in kind from what has gone before. At the same time there is no complacency in the kingdom of God.

My task in this book is to recognize, in the words of Chesterton, that 'The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and left untried.'[2] Thus undaunted and even emboldened by the cries of peril, my task is to articulate and envision Christianity as an alternative society in terms appropriate for contemporary conditions and circumstances. I'm not suggesting no one has been a real Christian before now: more that there are dimensions of church life, notably its understanding of the kingdom, that have been long neglected or regarded as a minority pursuit, yet are the key to renewal. In this opening chapter I seek to locate the UK church in a global and gospel story, and thereby identify the particular opportunity Christianity has at such a time as this. In the subsequent chapters I direct attention to how it may take advantage of such an opportunity.

I want to relate three overlapping but distinct stories of where the world is at present, before seeing what might be the church's opportunity at such a time as this.

Lament for the casualties of liberalism

I'm going to call the first story 'casualties of liberalism'. This is what we could call the failure of the success of the liberal project. I want to explore a book that constitutes a lament for what our society has lost that it has no prospect of replacing.

In their book *The Politics of Virtue: Post-liberalism and the Human Future*,[3] theologian John Milbank and political scientist

Adrian Pabst offer a prophetic elucidation of a crisis that Brexit and Trump have so vividly epitomized. Democracy has yielded oligarchies and the tyranny of majorities; capitalism has been criminalized and become venal; there's a pervasive sense of a society that's losing the adhesive qualities that held it together. Milbank and Pabst, never short of a grand phrase, call this the 'metacrisis of liberalism'. They position liberalism as an ethos that philosophically 'refuses to accept anything not rationally proven or demonstrable' and 'disallows any public influence for the non-proven – the emotively or faithfully affirmed'.[4] Liberalism believes we are 'isolated, autonomous individuals whose activities can only be coordinated by an absolutely sovereign centre, holding a monopoly of violence, power and ultimate decision making'.[5] It has economic and political manifestations, contrasting the free market with the bureaucratic state, after the fashion of Reagan and Thatcher, yet also social and cultural dimensions, insisting on individual rights and equality of opportunity for self-expression[6] – but, crucially, liberalism regards the economic and political as prior to social bonds and cultural ties, making the latter subject to law and contract.[7]

Sociologically, liberalism became normative from the 1950s: 'after that decade, the whole of social reality, including the family, became gradually capitalized and commodified, through the construction of "the consumer" rather than "the worker" as the crucial economic and cultural actor.'[8] Theologically, liberalism arose in the seventeenth century, when agreement concerning the transcendent good began to be associated with conflict and warfare: Christianity believes in an original peace, disrupted by sin, whereas liberalism assumes an original agonistic condition, which only contract and the state can restrain. Biologically, liberalism perceives a meaningless 'nature', and a non-existent 'spirit', and thus reduces reality to the establishment of power through beneficial exchange conducted by a technologically assisted abstract human will in a world without intrinsic meaning.[9]

Liberalism isn't simply a boo-word: the authors acknowledge that there is a generous sense of the term, denoting the

upholding of constitutional liberties to ensure the exercise of justice, the humanitarian treatment of the weak and the creative flourishing of all. But lurking amid the benign aspirations of equality, freedom and happiness, they sniff the assumption that we are basically 'self-interested, fearful, greedy and egotistic creatures, unable to see beyond our own selfish needs and, therefore, prone to violent conflict'.[10] The authors match each chapter of their diagnosis of the crisis of liberalism with a corresponding account of a cure. That cure is, in a word, virtue.

Virtue is the recovery of the notion of telos, a final purpose towards which all activity is oriented. Milbank and Pabst explain virtue in this way:

> A more universal flourishing for all can be obtained when we continuously seek to define the goals of human society as a whole and then to discern the variously different . . . roles that are required for the mutual advancement of those shared aims.[11]

What this is describing, I suspect, is the same thing people recall as the goodness that was at large when Britain was at war in 1916 or 1940: a common project – a team game. The aim of social relating is not 'mainly the satisfaction of private predilections, but relationship as such, and the good of the other, besides oneself, in the widest possible range'.[12] Meaning belongs primarily in the social, the relational – the specifically located.

In a phrase after my own heart, Milbank and Pabst say, 'Community is always a "being with" . . . a series of exchanged and binding gifts, which originally constitute society prior to any economic or political contract.'[13] To pursue such foundational relationality is to become vulnerable to wounds inflicted by the other. The market and the state promise to insulate us from such hurt through impersonal transactions; but in bureaucratizing security we lose the capacity for genuine joy. Freedom is not a given but a gift that can be discovered by all through healthy formation.[14] In practice, virtue translates into fostering intermediate associations such as manufacturing and

trading guilds, cooperatives, ethical and profit-sharing businesses, trade unions, voluntary organizations, universities and free cities. Following the Italian thinkers Bruni and Zamagni, and in the tradition of writers such as Maurice Glasman, Milbank and Pabst outline a whole vision of a civil economy to amplify the economics of virtue.

In a judgement that puts its finger on concerns central to my argument in this book, Milbank and Pabst identify the connection between their argument and contemporary preoccupations:

> Increasingly liberal-democratic politics revolves around a supposed guarding against alien elements: the terrorist, the refugee, the foreigner, the criminal, the dissident, the welfare-scrounger, the shirker, the spendthrift, the non-'hard-working family,' and those deemed deficient in 'entrepreneurship.' Populism seems more and more to be an inevitable, if ironic, consequence of liberal emptiness of purpose and its founding assumption of a reactive warding off of violence and evil.[15]

The book is a cry to recognize the procedural follies and criminal economics that have undermined the social and cultural relatedness and embeddedness that constitute the true goods of human existence. We have, as a liberal-democratic society, lost the plot. The plot is and should always have been about healthy, gifted forms of relationship and the cultivation of creative expression in the service of the common good. Who could be against that? It turns out, our whole political and economic superstructure.

Hope in ordinary virtue

If John Milbank and Adrian Pabst leave us with a sombre mood of lament, a second, overlapping, recent study offers a humble but plausible source of hope.

In *The Ordinary Virtues: Moral Order in a Divided World*,[16] Canadian professor, broadcaster and politician Michael Ignatieff asks the question, 'Is globalization drawing us together morally?' He seeks to answer that question as he embarks on a seven-stop world tour. The answer, it turns out, is no. Everywhere, the secular narratives that make sense of public life – the inevitability of technical progress, the spread of democracy, the triumph of liberalism – are in crisis.[17] Democratic sovereignty and universalist rights are on a collision course across the globe, and the biggest flashpoint is the tension between migrants and local culture. Grand empires have been replaced not by universal principles but by an assertion of individual entitlements unmatched by corresponding duties. People judge behaviour not by a universal code but instead want 'to think well of ourselves and at the very least to ensure that others don't think too badly'.[18] But beyond that, what shapes people's lives? Ignatieff argues it's a desire for moral order – 'a framework of expectations that allow them to think of their life, no matter how brutal or difficult, as meaningful'.[19] Moral values are not converging. We live in competing local and global worlds. Yet we face the same challenges: how much to trust those who rule us, tolerate those who are different, forgive those who have wronged us, and rebuild life when its fruits have been swept away.

Ignatieff points out two rival perspectives on the imperial era, running from 1490 to 1970. In the first, Christianity, commerce and civilization, epitomized in imperial administration, united humankind in a story of technological and moral progress. In the other, the unifying global cash nexus crushed the local, the traditional, the vernacular in favour of wage labour and colonial domination. But now we face something new, and different: a post-imperial era. For the first time since 1490, no power dominates the global economy. Russia and China have joined the party. But, as Ignatieff points out, 'The antiglobal counter-revolution comes from political forces on the left who mobilize in opposition to the ecological destruction and distributive inequality of global capitalism, and it comes

from the right from those who believe capitalism destroys traditions, national identities, and sovereignty.'[20]

The most striking expression of this counter-revolution was the 2016 American election, in which millions of ordinary voters 'made plain that they feel they are the victims of globalization, not its beneficiaries'.[21] People everywhere are 'struggling to make sense of convulsive, destabilizing change'.[22] Narratives such as the inevitability of technological progress, the spread of democracy and the triumph of scientific rationality founder on the rocks of unexpected events. Everywhere people are seeking with one hand to benefit from globalization, yet with the other hand struggling to retain their jobs, communities and settled values.

Ignatieff is an acute observer of the competition to fill the space left behind by the globalization of empire. One key driver is new technology, which brings rich and poor face to face, generating envy, resentment, ambition, while triggering migration from poor countries and discontent within rich countries about inequalities that used to be invisible. The result is a rhetoric that everyone has an equal right to speak and be heard, alongside a reality that some voices are heard more than others. But a consistent feature is the diminishment of priestly or political authority in telling people what to think. Morality is not about obedience, but about 'affirming the self and the moral community to which one belongs'. Individuals across the globe almost universally regard moral choice as their own responsibility.[23] Another driver is the emergence of two entrepreneurs of moral globalization: on one side, executives of multinational corporations, who set the rates of exchange that bind developing world producers with first-world consumers; on the other side, the activists and NGOs that have replaced the colonial administrator as the bearer of universal values, advocating for ethical sourcing of commodities and making anticorruption a new norm. While some castigate the powerful, others fear that no one is really in charge, and war, migration, inequality, poverty and ecological fragmentation will increasingly stalk the earth.

Ignatieff's proposal in the face of these challenges is ordinary virtue. Trust, honesty, politeness, forbearance and respect are, he says, the 'operating system of any community'.[24] He finds tolerance, forgiveness, reconciliation and resilience (a blend of buoyancy, elasticity and improvisation) to be life skills acquired through experience rather than through moral judgement or deliberative thought. In a paragraph that is surely a gesture to St Paul's hymn to love, he explains, lyrically:

> Ordinary virtue does not generalize. It does not forget or ignore difference; does not pay much attention to the human beneath our diversity; is not much interested in ethical consistency; works to live and let live as an organizing assumption in dealings with others, but retreats to loyalty towards one's own when threatened; is anti-ideological and anti-political; favours family and friends over strangers and other citizens; is hopeful about life without much of a metaphysics of the future and is often surprised by its own resilience in the face of adversity; believes, finally, that ethics is not an abstraction but just what you do and how you live, and that displaying the virtues, as best you can, is the point and purpose of a human life.[25]

More simply, ordinary virtue is a struggle with the ordinary vices of greed, lust, envy and hatred. In the face of extraordinary vice, such as terrorism, it can crumble; but when the crisis passes, ordinary virtues rebuild through networks of trust and resilience. This is a vision in some tension with a Christian ethic, and for the most part a pale shadow of what 1 Corinthians 13 is calling us to: but it's a significant appeal for a ground-up, pragmatic, applicable baseline for human coexistence.

Becoming more human

Located somewhere between the first, economic and philosophical, analysis and the second, social and ethical, one is

a narrative that comes from a combination of thinkers close to the G20 process in a series of contributions to the *Global Solutions Journal*. Their contention is that social and economic progress, which had marched in step for 30 years after 1945, became decoupled after 1980, triggering the signs of global distress seen today. Colm Kelly and Blair Sheppard, senior consultants for PwC (PricewaterhouseCoopers, a multinational professional services network), identify three positive forces that benefitted the world for a generation or two, but are now mistrusted.[26] First, *globalization* started with worldwide economic institutions, and came to involve the migration of people, goods, capital and information, thereby boosting trade. Second, *technology* embraced transport, the internet, biotech, healthcare, and now artificial intelligence. And third, *financialization* narrowed metrics of progress down to GDP and shareholder value, reversing the trend since the 1930s by which companies understood their role as to work for the common good. Together these three phenomena lifted billions out of poverty and raised the global quality of life immeasurably.

The major changes were the universal adoption of market economics after 1989, the emergence of the internet, and the cascade of financial deregulation, all leading to the shift of first products and subsequently services towards countries with large populations and low wage rates. Economic indicators continued to rise, but social indicators started to fall seriously behind. While the richest and poorest benefitted greatly, a whole swathe of the population in the developed world made little or no gains in the 20 years prior to the 2008 crash. Many people sense a diminishing control over their destiny and an attenuation of their social ties. The result has been the erosion of trust in mainstream institutions – government, business, media, education and NGOs. In addition, economic growth has failed to respect its wider ecology, hastening 'climate change, ocean acidification, depletion of vital natural resources, desertification, falling water tables, overfishing, deforestation, and biodiversity loss'.[27]

A realignment of globalization, technology and financialization is critical. Kelly and Sheppard point out that an economy is 'a dynamic and evolving framework of rules, habits, agreements, behaviours, and practices that facilitates meeting the needs of people and their communities, and engages human skill and effort, and well as technology and capital, to do so'.[28] Thus the current economy needs to be refreshed with a broader vision. Healthy communities, smart cities and transferable skills are among those metrics that go broader than the narrow measures of success that have been exposed over the last decade.

The economist Denis Snower builds on this work to point out that 'the world's produced goods and services are growing at the expense of its social and environmental capital' – what he calls a 'dangerous decoupling'.[29] He summarizes the situation like this:

> Economically, the problem manifests itself through rising inequalities. Socially, it comes as a crisis of identities, arising from two by-products of globalization: growing interactions with strangers (due to personal mobility and international competition for jobs) and the weakening of local social ties (due to the rise of global production, distribution and marketing networks and the fall in location-specific job security). Psychologically, the problem often takes the form of a perceived loss of life meaning.
>
> The resulting dissatisfaction of the relatively vulnerable social groups has generated rising nationalism, populism and cross-cultural intolerance in many countries, along with a falling appreciation of the benefits of democracy. This problem threatens to stoke social conflicts and undermine the legitimacy of the political and economic systems responsible for the rising worldwide material wealth, while simultaneously depleting more of our natural and social capital.[30]

Put another way, the emphasis on economics has delivered greater average wealth, but has failed to deliver three important outcomes: equality, empowerment and solidarity. People in

general do not feel greater motivation, capacity or opportunity; they do not sense a growth in care, belonging, meaning, identity or trust.[31] They feel an increasing sense of powerlessness and isolation.

Snower identifies five turning points across 250 years. The first industrial revolution created steam and machine power. The second industrial revolution created electricity, cars and planes. Wealth moved to the developed world, artisans gave way to factory workers, work left the home. Huge dislocation was partly addressed by the emergence of the welfare state. From 1980 there followed three digital revolutions. The first shifted production to the six emerging countries, China, India, Indonesia, Korea, Poland and Thailand; national boundaries became less significant, and skilled labour became paramount. The second involved artificial intelligence, robotics and cloud computing. This was the one that severely hit the middle-income groups. The strategy of skilling one's way to job security and prosperity through knowledge and technical competence no longer works. A worker or machine elsewhere in the world can snatch that job away in a second. The third, almost upon us, will see robots taking over not only manual labour but even sophisticated cognitive work, potentially transforming medical diagnosis and legal judgements. While the industrial revolutions transported goods and the digital revolutions transported ideas, this new phase is set to overcome the challenge of transporting people by transporting machines instead.

This starts to beg the question of what it means to be human. Since the Enlightenment the answer has been associated with such cognitive abilities as other animals lack; but now machines may share many such abilities. Snower maintains that human identity lies with cooperation and innovation. He maintains our social connections rest on our capacity for 'mentalizing (reading the thoughts of others), empathy (feeling the feelings of others), compassion (the desire to relieve the suffering of others), [and] loving-kindness (the desire to promote the happiness of others)'.[32] These capacities are about relationship and purpose. And here emerges the irony.

> Since the Industrial Revolution, people have been required to become machine-like, in order to interact effectively with the machines that they had invented. When the machines did simple, repetitive tasks, the workers operating them needed to do simple, repetitive tasks as well. When the machines became more versatile and programmable, the workers were required to become more versatile, but only within the bounds of the existing programs. But in the Third Digital Revolution, people will be required to exercise their abilities for sociality and discovery that they have developed over tens of thousands of years. Humans, in short, will have the opportunity to become more human again.[33]

It's time to review these three stories of our global plight and opportunity. Milbank and Pabst, sensing the philosophical emptiness of liberalism, take confidence in the social, the relational, the specifically located – in a 'series of exchanged and binding gifts' that transcend any economic contract. Ignatieff, despite the fact that he upholds the philosophy of liberalism in contrast to Milbank and Pabst, still offers texture and global thick description of the virtue that Milbank and Pabst commend. He observes tolerance, forgiveness, reconciliation and resilience as building blocks of global coexistence, and maintains as widespread the conviction that 'displaying the virtues, as best you can, is the point and purpose of a human life'. Snower gives narrative and urgency to these convictions. He shows the class interest and global dynamic of social and economic change. But he offers a tantalizing prospect of an imminent future that, while challenging, offers to bring humanity closer to its true identity.

In the second half of this chapter I want to reflect on these proposals in the light of rival visions of the future of the church.

Three stories of church

Charles Taylor's book *A Secular Age*, perhaps more than any other, has come to be regarded as a significant theoretical

analysis of the social and religious changes most North Atlantic congregations are experiencing on a practical level. Taylor offers three understandings of secularity. The first is that religion has withdrawn (or been excluded) from public life; one can engage in politics or society and seldom if ever encounter significant declarations or rituals of belief; faith and aspiration of conformity to ultimate reality is now assumed to be a private matter. There is no civil ban on usury or insistence on orthodox conviction. The second is 'the falling off of religious belief and practice, in people turning away from God, and no longer going to Church'. The third is 'a move from a society where a belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest one to embrace'.[34]

Taylor conceives of Christianity not so much as a structure of belief but as lived experience. Thus he describes the real challenge to Christianity in the West today as a 'middle position' between a sense of God's grace and the misery of absence, despair or loss. This middle position is a routine order

> in which we are doing things which have some meaning for us; for instance, which contribute to our ordinary happiness, or which are fulfilling in various ways, or which contribute to what we conceive of as the good. Or often, in the best scenario, all three: for instance, we strive to live happily with spouse and children, while practising a vocation which we find fulfilling, and also which constitutes an obvious contribution to human welfare.[35]

If we accept Taylor's three kinds of secularity, and recognize that in the United Kingdom, in spite of some significant aspects of the visibility of Christianity in the public realm, the falling off of religious belief and practice is real, and the move to a general perception of Christianity as one option among others is undeniable; and if we are acquainted with what Taylor calls the middle condition, of domestic contentment, professional fulfilment, and an aspiration to benefit human welfare as the

almost universal purpose of our age; what then is the strategy for the church? I suggest that the two strategies that are currently most prominent and vocal correspond to Taylor's two proposals. I believe what is required, in the light of the global stories described earlier, is a different approach.

The most strident strategy, in the present context, is to accept Taylor's portrayal of the middle position almost uncritically and to seek to instrumentalize or to adapt Christianity to make the church the ideal route to such a position, with the complement of an agreeable helping of grace and limit experiences. Christianity is attractive because the church is full of people who appear successfully to have attained the middle position, with happy families, healthy careers and commendable contributions to general welfare, either through or (perhaps more often) alongside their careers. In addition, Christianity offers a guide for self-discipline and a sympathetic body of wisdom on loving marriage, resilient child-rearing, suitable conduct in the workplace and worthy goals for public benefit. Moreover, a strong emphasis on personal religious experience yields expectation and fulfilment of the desire for intimate, passionate and memorable moments of encounter with transcendent relationship. And whether in a search for more potential converts, or as a result of surplus energy to enhance public welfare, social action projects often result, and these too can make the strategy more attractive, more wholesome and more visible.

When the production standards are high, and the routes towards achieving the middle position are smooth and effective, it might appear there's a lot to be said for this strategy. One of its most appealing features is that it's not seeking to restore some historic place of the church in society; it's not going against the grain of Taylor's secular analysis. It knows Christianity is one option among many: it simply seeks to make it the most compelling option for achieving life-goals that are seldom questioned. Of course, the main problem with it is its largely uncritical acceptance of the middle position as a worthy model of discipleship, and the bourgeois assumptions that tend to accompany such an acceptance. For those for whom a conventional nuclear

household or a fulfilling career are unrealizable or undesirable, the appeal is less strong. It's a model that could prove deeply vulnerable to the kinds of social changes envisaged by the third digital revolution identified earlier; partly because it accepts that faith is a private matter and has no apparent political or social vision that challenges or affects the status quo. Deep down it's instrumentalizing Christianity for something that's a false idea which is in the end a contradiction of the gospel.

The alternative strategy in relation to Taylor's analysis is to focus less on the lived experience of faith and to be more exercised with Taylor's notions of secularity. This view invests a great deal in the constitutional privilege of the Church of England, the role of the monarch as head of the church and defender of the faith, the place of bishops as the 26 Lords Spiritual in the Upper House, the nearly 7,000 church schools, and the place of Christianity in national institutions such as the charter of the BBC; and thus appeals to some kind of guaranteed place of the church at the heart of the nation. It tends to focus on Christianity as a cultural phenomenon, and to invest much in somewhat sixteenth-century expectations of England, Britain or the United Kingdom as a Christian nation. This tends to be less a requirement that so-called Christian values should be instilled in citizens and expected to be upheld by residents than a highly sensitized concern for any encroachment on Christian liberties – for example the right of a nurse to wear a cross around her neck in a working environment. In less confrontational form it appears as a mood of lament that blends the three forms of secularity Taylor delineates, and blames them all on a real or imagined secularist agenda.

Part of the problem with this approach, which is upheld, to some degree, by many across the theological range, is that it is counterproductive. The more such things as constitutional privileges are claimed as a right and entitlement, the more they are jeopardized and appear problematic. To maintain, on the basis of historical memory and cultural inheritance, that the United Kingdom is a Christian nation is to imagine a rose-tinted fantasy of the past and transport it to a very different present. It is

also to forget that, whether or not these privileges were good for the country, they were not always good for the church, because they taught the church to rely for its flourishing on entitlements rather than on God's grace and its own endeavour. The real issue, though, is the mood of beleaguered lament. This is a view that things are slipping away and we should hang on to them for as long as we can. It is not a vision of a future bigger than the past. And it is a view too easily hijacked and made part of a political agenda isolationist in ethos and hostile to diversity. It has nothing to offer the third digital revolution; it's arguable whether it ever adapted to the first industrial revolution. What it doesn't understand is the danger of turning Christianity and the church into another social/political interest group, obsessed by threats to its identity and territory, and constantly feeling imposed upon or marginalized. It forgets that the church needs to be a blessing to the culture and people of the country – or it has no right to be heard at all.

I believe a different approach from these two strategies is required. In relation to Taylor's analysis, it needs to accept the falling-off of religious belief and practice as a fact, but do so without particular lament, for it needs to be mindful that what often passed as belief and practice was not always a full expression of the extent and dimensions of the kingdom of God. It needs to recognize a culture in which Christianity is one option among others as a reality, and seek to incorporate Taylor's notion of faith as lived experience, rather than simply belief, as the ground on which dialogue now takes place. People disregard or dismiss Christianity less often because they conclude that Darwin disproved the Bible than because they have little or no exposure to how the church is a life-changing or existential blessing to people in crisis, trouble or distress. But a fresh approach needs to rise to the challenge of Taylor's first version of secularity: it must contest the easy concession that faith is a private matter, and insist (to itself more than to others) that faith must make a visible and practical difference not only in the habits of individuals but in the collective activity of associations and communities.

In short, Christianity must take this opportunity to be what it was always called to be: an alternative society, overlapping and sharing space with regular society, but living in a different time – that's to say, modelling God's future in our present. It's not enough to cherish the scriptures, embody the sacraments, set time aside for prayer, and shape disciples' character in the ways of truth, if such practices simply withdraw disciples for select periods, uncritically then to return them after a brief pause to a world struggling with inequality, identity and purpose. The church must also model what the kingdom of God (its term for the alternative society, its language of God's future now) means and entails in visible and tangible form. An act of God should not be an unfortunate and uninsurable random occurrence that derails a journey or destroys a house; it should be the daily miracle of a community that lives by faith and in whose life are seen the things God makes possible.

In keeping with Michael Ignatieff's prescription, what's needed are communities of ordinary virtues, but ones infused with grace: thus trust, honesty, politeness, forbearance and respect are the bedrock of such communities, while tolerance, forgiveness, reconciliation and resilience are among its abiding graces. But following Milbank and Pabst, these communities reject the 'guarding against alien elements' and the 'reactive warding off violence and evil'. These communities go beyond what Ignatieff found by seeing the stranger as God's gift. Meanwhile, unlike Ignatieff's ordinary virtue, these communities see the future as bigger than the past – because now is our salvation nearer than when we first believed; in other words, the kingdom is something God brings rather than something we achieve – a purpose rather than a goal. In accordance with Milbank and Pabst's vision, these communities believe a more universal flourishing for all can be obtained when we continuously seek to define the goals of human society as a whole and then discern the variously different roles that are required for the mutual advancement of those shared aims.

But crucially these communities have much to offer in relation to Snower's five-chapter story, when it comes to the

challenges of the digital age, and the second and third digital revolutions. This is because they are precisely concerned with what makes us human. They are specifically devoted to demonstrate how, in Milbank and Pabst's language, the aim of social relating is not mainly the satisfaction of private predilections, but relationship as such, and the good of the other, besides oneself, in the widest possible range. For these communities, as for Milbank and Pabst, meaning belongs primarily in the social, the relational, the specifically located. Community is always a 'being with', a series of exchanged and binding gifts, which originally constitute society prior to any economic or political contract. In this sense these communities are less vulnerable to social and economic changes than a strategy that uncritically focuses on achieving Taylor's 'middle position', which rests on precisely the kind of fulfilling work the third digital revolution looks set to strip away.

Here is a sevenfold proposal for what such a reimagining of church and society might involve.

1 *In contrast to fear, recognizable communities of hope, embodying a liberating story of reconciliation and grace.*
However bland and appealing Taylor's middle position might seem, it masks at least three kinds of fear. Fear of death is the apprehension of something that is set to take away everything that a hard-working life has secured. Fear of the other or the stranger is a fear of spending unlimited time in the company of (or in conflict with) those whose goals are incompatible or in competition with one's own. Fear of loss of meaning is the sense that some of the things death will involve have already come about – for example, that one cannot positively influence the world for good. The Christian gospel of reconciliation is that God in Christ has redeemed past failures and losses, both damage inflicted and hurts received, making God saviour not judge and turning enemy into friend. The gospel of grace is that God in Christ has, through resurrection, turned the future from terrifying oblivion into everlasting gift. Communities of hope embody this liberation.

2 *In contrast to exclusion, distinctive congregations whose life is shaped and renewed through the energy and gifts of those culturally, economically and socially 'on the edge', and whose diversity reflects the diverse glory of God.*
If the church experiences its life as scarcity, and yet at the same time fails to recognize the gifts God is giving it for renewal through those whom church and society have historically excluded, then the church's scarcity is self-inflicted. The mindset of inclusion is inadequate, because inclusion suggests an established and righteous middle that benevolently and magnanimously draws in a vulnerable or unfortunate fringe. Better is a recognition that the church is impoverished unless and until it cherishes at its heart those with whom Christ spent most of his ministry, and in whom the Spirit is most alive today. The bland mantra of diversity hides the theological truth that God is more diverse than creation: the kaleidoscope of the Trinity is more many-splendoured than the human imagination can comprehend or any community can resemble.

3 *In contrast to despair, faithful disciples who have discovered how God is made known in times of adversity and who thus walk with the dispossessed in order to be close to God.*
The Bible came into being in exile, when the people of God came to discover a deeper understanding of their Maker and Redeemer than they had ever found in the Promised Land. That understanding enabled the first disciples to realize God had been made known in Christ's crucifixion like never before. Henceforth, suffering and bewilderment are not simply to be regarded as causes of distress – still less as signs of punishment – but as potential moments of transfiguration when God's being and companionship is made known in a new way. God is not an instrument to use to solve problems or gain security, but a mystery to be entered and in so doing to find true life.

4 *In contrast to decline, humble institutions whose need for financial sustainability opens their lives to the skill, vision and wisdom of those who scarcely or only partly share their faith.*

Churches have not always been a blessing to their neighbourhoods, but when they have been, they have often found it difficult to sustain their life financially. Just as congregational stewardship binds a local church by naming needs that bring forth gifts, so the practice of commercial enterprise is an incarnate form in which a congregation may both offer and receive from its surrounding community. And if it can do so according to exemplary business practices, it can broaden its witness of what the kingdom looks like. Thus it breaks the myth of the 'middle position', secure in its self-sufficiency, and draws out energies and talents others are eager to give and the church is blessed to receive.

5 *In contrast to defensiveness, fertile centres of creative and artistic flourishing through which people apprehend beauty in the world and talent in themselves and one another.*
Being alive is a mystery it takes more than a lifetime to comprehend; being fully alive is the aspiration of all who follow the one who came that all who live may live life to the full. As God the Father is creator, and that creation involves passion in the Son and empowerment in the Spirit, so creativity, passion and empowerment must be part of what it means to reflect the image of God. The imitation of Christ means not awed obedience, but living as Christ lived, igniting energies and talents and gifts and joys, in performance and visual arts, wherever people find inspiration and discover hope. No one knows better than the creative artist the risk of trusting that God will provide.

6 *In contrast to denial, penitent communities that recognize the individual and corporate legacy of the misuse of power and the dominance of some social groups over others, nationally and internationally, and are seeking new forms of practice and relationship.*
The church is a learning community, always open to discovery, new recognition, greater truth, transformed perspectives and wider vision. This means a continual practice of repentance,

over what was once thought good, permissible, of no account, deniable, and now comes explicitly to be rendered shameful, demeaning, exclusionary, wrong. If the church, by more legitimate means than often hitherto, is once again to become respected, authoritative and honoured, it must not make the mistakes that went before – or must, at least, strive with all integrity not to. The church has no monopoly on right action – indeed it might have more temptation to self-deception than many. The gospel is founded on forgiveness, not sinlessness, and the path to forgiveness is sometimes slow and painful.

7 *In contrast to turning inwards, thriving churches that individually and corporately are seen as an unqualified blessing by their neighbourhoods and nation.*
God's original call to Abraham was to be a blessing to the nations. It is perhaps the saddest fact about the church of our times that an institution that was once regarded as harmless and out of touch is now widely perceived, especially by the young, to be positively against what they take to be the universally acknowledged good of live and let live. It used to be a cliché to recall that William Temple named the church the one institution that exists for those outside it; but it's an out-of-fashion cliché that could do with being well known again. Being a blessing seldom means having all the answers and channelling all the resources: it means being one around whom others come alive, find their voice, feel accepted, gain confidence, can find trust and love and hope. It doesn't sound like much. But it's almost a forgotten art.

Conclusion

I have set out the philosophical, social and economic challenge of our times, and briefly examined two contrasting but inadequate responses. I have then made a proposal of an approach that seems more fitting for such a time as this. The rest of this book will outline and explore that proposal in more detail.