

# Is God political?

## *Notes on a Theology for the Survival of the Earth*



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### **Klas CORBELIUS**

What does it mean to be a Christian today? In our highly competitive society where we are graded, labelled and often seen only as consumers and workers, what does it mean to be a Christian? Can Christianity provide a different kind of identity? If Christianity should seek to be an alternative to society, what kind of alternative should it be? These questions have arisen from a lifetime of involvement in the Church, with its traditions and rituals. While observing the prayers and practices, one begins to question the kind of space that one inhabits. How do these things reconstruct our identity and what secret makes the church different? These questions led me to write a book, entitled *I Mommons Tid* (In the Time of Mammon).

### ***The Gift and the Problem of the Church***

First, I should begin by telling you the personal story of how I discovered the gift of the church and how I became aware of its problems. When I was seven, because of a girl, I started to go to the youth group in my local parish in the Church of Sweden. I continued attending long after she left because I had made friends there. At the same time the leaders spoke powerfully of the love of God; it was not only in their words but also in their constant kindness. This contrasted with competition that was taught early in school.

Not only was there the pressure of tests but, even worse, the exposure of sport and gymnastics. I can still remember the feeling I had every time I was chosen last for soccer teams, “alright, you can have him”. So from the beginning faith was not only a matter of theory but first of practice. Our treatment of each other is a sign of our faith and God’s love.

Still there were problems and things became more complicated in high school. I wanted to go further; I wanted to pray and act for justice. I wanted to change society and to undo injustice; I did not understand the apathy of those who knew about injustice but did nothing to change it. At church the minister would preach about loving your neighbour but did not criticise politicians and corporations that failed the command and created injustice. A sermon might talk highly of peace and forget the stocks the church owned in the weapons industry.

### ***Politics and Faith***

The common opinion was that faith and politics were two separate things that should not influence each other. That idea seemed strange to me. If faith has meaning and significance for all human life, than it must also apply to politics. This idea seemed to suggest a very different interpretation of Jesus and Christian life than my experience allowed.

In Jesus, God became a human being and walked about on earth with ordinary women and men. He ate and drank, laughed and cried as we do;

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he raged against injustice and gathered the excluded and oppressed to himself. He was born not in a palace but in a stable, and after he was executed by the Roman Empire he was buried secretly and mourned by friends and disciples. Jesus taught by his actions and by stories of God's rule in everyday life and work. So when others tried to silence the blind man, Jesus healed him. Whilst the disciples wanted to send the 5 000 men away, Jesus took care of their needs and fed them. Many did not dare to touch the unclean leper, but Jesus healed him and restored him to society. In Jesus we see that faith is known in practical works of love. For those who witnessed Jesus' teaching and actions, he was troublingly political. Many today are rediscovering this aspect to Jesus' life, death and accession.

Jesus perhaps spoke about justice to the poor more than any other thing. The Bible includes more than 2500 verses about poverty and justice. Indeed Jesus begins his ministry by announcing that his mission is "to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4,18-19). We can easily miss the importance of economic justice in Jesus' teaching, but the whole preaching of the kingdom depends on it and is taken up with a vision of justice and compassion: the rich young man is told that he can have no share in it unless he gives up his riches and shares them with the poor whilst others are promised the Kingdom and Heaven for the gift of a cup of water. In Matthew's parable of the sheep and the goats, knowledge of God and obedience to the coming Christ rests entirely

on responding to those in need, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me" (25,40).

We forget the literal meaning and significance of these sayings when we fail to put them into practice, but the primitive Church took these teachings of Jesus literally. They sold their possessions, giving them to the community and to the poor; they lived in commune, sharing every thing on the basis of equality and need. The greatest sin and deceit against the Holy Spirit recorded in the Acts of the primitive Church was hiding property and refusing to share things in common. James, writing from this early community, makes it clear that those who take pride in their riches and do not help their sister or brother in need have no part in the grace of Christ or the Church.

As time went on Christians did not continue to live in commune, but their meetings and activities still centred on justice to the poor and the neglected. The collection of money during the Eucharist today might be traced to the collection for widows and orphans in the Acts Church and the collection in the Pauline Churches, sent to relieve the Church in Jerusalem that was suffering from famine. Early Christians are known to have rescued orphans and the virginity movement was as much about liberating women from the economic and power relationships of pagan marriage as it was about ideas of sexual purity. Likewise, early Christians took a firm stand and opposed the whole nature of Roman society, from refusing to go to the barbaric games to refusing to take part in the idolatry and injustice of the trade guilds. Like Jesus they also refused violence and military service. For all of this they suffered suspicion, persecution, imprisonment and even death.

## *Towards the Kingdom*

Justice to the poor, peace and nonviolence are vitally important in our contemporary world and it is as disciples of Jesus with a vision of the coming Kingdom that we are able to find new ways of living and acting for a more just and humanitarian future. The gift of the Spirit is the gift of the Kingdom. As Christians this gives us not only an imagination to see how things can be different but also hope that, whatever the short term effectiveness of violence and injustice, justice and compassion will win in the end because Christ rules all.

This gift is known and celebrated in the meeting of the Christian community. While listening to a sermon or gathering around the table of the Lord's Supper, we hear rumours of the New Jerusalem and taste the Kingdom feast. Fed with the Spirit, Christ rules in us and the whole community acts out a different way of being and sharing that becomes a place of transformation not only for the church but also for society. The church becomes the centre of a militant society, where we each receive the freedom and support to fulfil our mission in the world. When Paul talks of the Church as the Body of Christ it is not just a metaphor, an image, but a living reality. It is only when our churches become centres of an alternative reality that we will be able to fulfil our mission to be a transformative and liberating presence in the world.

In our time the Church faces new challenges and new opportunities. If we have lost a sense of the radical call and resources of our tradition, if we have lost a sense of our responsibility to our fellow human beings and our orientation to the coming Christ and our life in the Spirit,

than we must wait on God in prayer. In preparing to resist Hitler and the Nazi regime, the German theologian Dietrich BONHOEFFER (1906-1945) said that only two things were needed: prayer and love of neighbour.

The duty of ministry and of our churches is simple and two-fold: firstly to teach basic spirituality (how to pray) and secondly to teach basic discipleship (how to love). They are the beginning and all that is needful for Christian life. To discover them they first require us to follow Jesus into the desert. The desert is a place to struggle with God and temptation, to commit wholeheartedly to the Gospel and receive our vocation. The whole of Christian worship, calling, forgiveness, word and promise, intercession and praise are all designed to open us to the teaching and guidance of the Spirit, to the joy and responsibility of life and community. Especially during advent and lent, we create a sort of desert, a retreat and a home of the soul.

Jesus taught, "No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon." In this community and in this space we learn to be free of wealth and the greed and injustice that go along with it and to serve only God and live in equality and justice with our brothers and sisters in the world. Here students and activists, theologians and church leaders, along with politicians, stock brokers, bankers, managers and workers join together in the Body of Christ and enrol in the service of the Kingdom of God. Let us not take this Body or this service for granted but let us act together for peace and justice and become the alternative and compassionate community we are called to be.



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