

ECCLESIAL PLURALITY

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Recently, some of the strongest divisions within the Christian world in the West, and particular in North America, have arisen from disagreements about human sexuality. These disagreements may be described and accounted for in various ways. Those who hold to the traditional view that sexuality is properly expressed only in marriage between one man and one woman may speak of heresies and disobediences that demand the invocation of the strict disciplines and separations of 1 Corinthians 5; conversely, those who accept the validity of same-sex unions may see in the traditionalists the dangers of a renewed Donatism. Although all such charges have occasional validity, they tend to promote diagnostic crudity.

Such crudity has also been promoted by how both sides use the Bible. A great deal of energy has been expended, throughout the history of Christianity, in trying to resolve the apparent contradictions in the biblical witness, by choosing (often in ways that seem arbitrary) some passages to govern the interpretation of other passages. That's how we get the Calvinist/Arminian divide, among many others. But then, seeing how interminable and fruitless these controversies are, some people decide that the Bible is incoherent and self-contradictory and stop relying on its witness to determine their theology.

What I want to suggest is that such despair—and I think that's what it is—has been almost forced on those people by a model of interpretation that, with a commendable desire for clarity and focus of witness, has in a

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1. What follows is a reflection by one who is neither ordained nor a theologian. I am no more than an interested layman, and the essay should be read with that in mind. I am grateful to Rowan Williams for advice on a previous draft of this essay.

sense immanentized the eschaton, that is, assumed that certain kinds of clarity are possible in the here and now that in fact will only be possible at the culmination of history itself. So the real challenge, as I see it, then becomes: How can we learn to live, in a genuinely charitable, constructive, and forward-looking way, with irresolvable disagreement? That is, what might an orthodox theory of plurality look like?

I say *plurality* rather than *pluralism* because, as Lesslie Newbigin argues in *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society*, the *fact of plurality*—the incontestable condition of living in a society that is plural in its commitments, its practices, its standards of belief, in ways that affect various Christian communities as well as the relations between Christians and non-Christians—must be distinguished from the *ideology of pluralism*, the belief that “pluralism is conceived to be a proper characteristic of a secular society.”² We need not succumb to the ideology of pluralism to see, and accept, that a certain degree of plurality is intrinsic to our lifeworld and cannot—for reasons we shall explore in this essay—be overcome between now and the time that the Lord comes again in glory to judge the living and the dead. But living in plurality without pluralism is not something that Christians have historically been good at.

I hope, therefore, that it may be possible to take a fresh look at these divisions by drawing on some resources from outside the Christian tradition. Any full accounting of the matters explored here—fellowship, communion, church discipline, and so on—would of course need to be articulated in biblical and distinctively Christian theological language. But although some of the difficulties Christians have with one another do arise from profound theological error (often on both sides of a particular dispute), many of them are products of the general human condition—of the “thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to,” as Hamlet put it. Christians rarely respond to disagreement in ways that are wholly different than their unbelieving neighbors. It might be possible, then, to find useful wisdom for the *church* in thinkers who shrewdly identify and diagnose the ways that our *secular* political order can run around on the shoals of intractable disagreement.

The sociologist Bruno Latour famously wrote that “we have never been modern,” but there is another sense in which all of us are modern, Christians as much as non-Christians. And within modernity we possess a relatively small repertoire of ways in which to respond to those “thousand natural shocks.” As the parameters of thought and behavior within technocratic modernity narrow, that repertoire of responses grows narrow also. For Christians trying to “manage” disagreement in such a setting, the essential problem, the essential temptation, becomes what I will call *rationalism in ecclesiology*.

2. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 1.

I

In an illuminating essay called “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” the political philosopher Isaiah Berlin describes the great turning point in his education that occurred when he read Machiavelli for the first time. None of the more familiar Machiavellian themes—that it is better to be feared than loved, that a wise prince must know when to break his promises—caught Berlin’s attention. Rather, he was struck, confused, and troubled by Machiavelli’s frank acknowledgment that the excellences praised by his beloved classical authorities and the excellences commended by Christianity are simply not compatible with one another.

The combination of *virtù* and Christian values is for him an impossibility. He simply leaves you to choose—he knows which he himself prefers. The idea that this planted in my mind was the realisation, which came as something of a shock, that not all the supreme values pursued by mankind now and in the past were necessarily compatible with one another.³

This was not what Berlin had been taught. He knew, of course, that among philosophers there was great disagreement about almost everything. But reading Machiavelli brought him to recognize that all of the philosophies he had studied shared three axioms, buried so deeply that they were never formally acknowledged: that “all genuine questions must have one true answer and one only, all the rest being necessarily errors”; that “there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths”; and that “the true answers, when found, must necessarily be compatible with one another and form a single whole, for one truth cannot be incompatible with another.”

In his essay Berlin focuses particularly on the third of these axioms because it is the one that Machiavelli most thoroughly demolishes. After reading him, Berlin could no longer believe that it is possible to build an objectively, universally excellent culture (or *be* an objectively, universally excellent *person*). The culture that produces Alexander the Great cannot produce St. Teresa of Avila, and vice versa. Each of them exemplifies an extreme, a nearly absolute, human excellence; but those excellences are simply incompatible with each other. A culture that wishes to produce the one kind of excellence must forego the other; a person who wishes to live into one of those types must abandon all hope of cultivating the virtues of the other. Says Berlin, “Some among the Great Goods cannot live together. . . . We are doomed to choose, and every choice may entail an irreparable loss.”

3. *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (London: Pimlico, 1997), 1–16.

Political idealists, whether on the Left or the Right, neglect this vital truth, and we all pay the price for that neglect. They believe so absolutely in their own preferred kind of social or personal excellence that they must deny that any other excellence is truly excellent. Thus, genuine human good, even “Great Goods,” get swept away because attention to them distracts from or positively impedes the realization of the goods to which the idealists have pledged their lives.⁴

These idealists also tend to believe strongly in the second of the axioms that Berlin identifies: that “there must be a dependable path towards the discovery of these truths.” Therefore, they tend to become apostles of what Michael Oakeshott, in another justly famous essay, calls “rationalism in politics.” Its character may best be summed up in this paragraph:

The conduct of affairs, for the Rationalist, is a matter of solving problems, and in this no man can hope to be successful whose reason has become inflexible by surrender to habit or is clouded by the fumes of tradition. In this activity the character which the Rationalist claims for himself is the character of the engineer, whose mind (it is supposed) is controlled throughout by appropriate technique and whose first step is to dismiss from his attention everything not directly related to his specific intentions. The assimilation of politics to engineering is, indeed, what may be called the myth of rationalist politics.⁵

What I have called *technocratic modernity* is the ideal breeding ground for rationalism in politics. Its natural orientation toward difficulties and conflicts is what the technology critic Eugene Morozov calls “technological solutionism”: the “recasting [of] all complex social situations either as neatly defined problems with definite, computable solutions or as transparent and self-evident processes that can be easily optimized—if only the right algorithms are in place.” But one can be a social as well as a technological solutionist: indeed, it is commonplace for people faced with conflict and disagreement to perceive such a condition as a “problem” and to “engineer” solutions to it. That those solutions will involve organizational rules and procedures rather than algorithms does not alter the fundamental character of the logic—of what Oakeshott calls the *myth*

4. One might also cite here, by way of additional analysis, Kenneth Burke’s concept of “terministic screens”: the language that we use enables certain goods or truths to come into view but simultaneously “screens” others out, making them invisible. See *Language as Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature and Method* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 44–62. It is probably significant that Berlin, Oakeshott, and Burke were all writing in the middle of the twentieth century, at a period particularly afflicted by ideological conflicts involving liberal democracy, fascism, and communism that repeatedly exploded into warfare.

5. Michael Oakeshott, *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991 [1962]), p. 5.

of rationalist politics, which is that disagreement is intolerable over anything but the very short term and must in some way be *fixed*.⁶

It is interesting that Oakeshott thinks that resistance to these totalizing schemes of political engineering is best characterized as a kind of *conservatism*, whereas Berlin thinks of the same resistance as a kind of *liberalism*. On reflection it is clear that both descriptions fit. For Oakeshott the “disposition” to “inject into the activities of already too passionate men an ingredient of moderation; to restrain, to deflate, to pacify and to reconcile; not to stoke the fires of desire, but to damp them down,” is conservative in that it seeks to preserve existing goods, however imperfect, rather than allow them to be trampled in the quest for an ideal that is probably unattainable. As Berlin puts it, “Sacrifices for short-term goals, coercion, if men’s plight is desperate enough and truly requires such measures, may be justified. But holocausts for the sake of distant goals, that is a cruel mockery of all that men hold dear, now and at all times.” It is thus *illiberal* in that it constrains the liberty of others—including, perhaps most important, their liberty to choose other Great Goods—in the pursuit of its own preferences.

The political-idealist engineers typically believe, with passionate and serious earnestness, in their Great Goods, and typically those Goods are indeed Great. But they forget that, as Berlin puts it, “to force people into the neat uniforms demanded by dogmatically believed-in schemes is almost always the road to inhumanity.” For those truly convinced that some ultimate solution to humanity’s problems is available, discoverable, and achievable, “then surely no cost would be too high to obtain it: to make mankind just and happy and creative and harmonious for ever—what could be too high a price to pay for that? To make such an omelette, there is surely no limit to the number of eggs that should be broken.” And the history of the twentieth century, Berlin suggests, is a vast wasteland of broken eggs—yet “the omelette remains invisible.” Therefore, in the name of conservatism and liberalism alike, such totalizing schemes of engineering must always be resisted, in whatever ways prove feasible.

The relevance of this argument that Berlin and Oakeshott effectively share is, I think, evident everywhere in our political culture. To take but one example, the failure to realize that “some among the Great Goods cannot live together” is what makes arguments about the legality of abortion so fruitless. (I write that as someone who believes that abortion is a great evil but who also believes that many who share my view have simply refused to acknowledge the massive costs that the prohibition of abortion inflicts on women—and who consequently have been unable to persuade many women even of their good faith, much less the rightness of their

6. Evgeny Morozov, *To Save Everything, Click Here: The Folly of Technological Solutionism* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2013), p. 5.

cause.) But I think what has not been sufficiently acknowledged—or acknowledged at all, in recent years—is the relevance of the moral and epistemological modesty that Berlin and Oakeshott counsel for the life of the Christian Church. The purpose of this essay is to recommend such modesty as an indispensable virtue for anyone concerned with ecclesiology.⁷

II

I believe that if Berlin and Oakeshott are correct in their diagnosis of our political condition, then that diagnosis applies to the politics of the Church as well. Their ideas allow us at least to sketch the outlines of what we might call an *ecclesial anthropology*—a realistic account of both the powers and the inevitable limits of those who belong to the Church. We might begin by reflecting on the idea that certain Great Goods are incompatible with one another: if this is true when we compare the life of a saint with the life of an emperor, is it also true when we look at different forms of the Christian life? I believe it is. C. S. Lewis once commented that “Those who are members of one another become as diverse as the hand and the ear. That is why the worldlings are so monotonously alike compared with the almost fantastic variety of the saints.”⁸ This is indeed true, but we should further reflect that there is not a single form of ecclesial life that can reliably sustain every kind of saint.

Further, it is inevitable in a broken world populated by fallen, if sometimes redeemed, people that we will find limited and partial ways to become Christlike. Indeed even the greatest of the saints gathered around the Throne of God can never have the comprehensiveness of personality embodied in the Triune Godhead. And those who see only one, two, or three of the ways that people may become sanctified and pursue wholeheartedly those Great Goods may well find themselves inadvertently foreclosing on other Goods that are equally Great. Some of us are, as Auden said of Kierkegaard, “monodists.” It is a useful term.

When Auden first embraced the Christian faith as an adult, in the early 1940s, he was deeply fascinated by and enamored with Kierkegaard, but late in his life he reconsidered that earlier enthusiasm. He did not deny, indeed he warmly affirmed, Kierkegaard’s profundity; but it

7. I write as an evangelical Anglican, and that of course shapes my understanding of and response to these issues. But the issues I raise here are part and parcel of the life of almost all the serious Christians I know. That said, the magisterial teaching of Catholicism sets certain limits on ecclesiology that make my argument somewhat less relevant to the conflicts that go on within that tradition.

8. “Membership,” in *The Weight of Glory and Other Addresses* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1980 [1949]), p. 167.

now seemed to him that that profundity was purchased at a very high price. Auden believed that although Kierkegaard would of course have affirmed the orthodox view of the goodness of bodily life and the promise of the resurrection of the body, he was “in his sensibility” Manichaeic: “A planetary visitor might read through the whole of his voluminous works without discovering that human beings are not ghosts but have bodies of flesh and blood.” (This is not strictly true, but it illuminates something important about Kierkegaard.) Auden explains the consequences of this one-sidedness: “like all heretics, conscious or unconscious, he is a monodist, who can hear with particular acuteness one theme in the New Testament—in his case, the theme of suffering and self-sacrifice—but is deaf to its rich polyphony. . . . The Passion of Christ was to Kierkegaard’s taste, the Nativity and Epiphany were not.” Max Weber famously wrote of those who are “religiously unmusical,” but Auden is rightly suggesting that faithful Christians can be unmusical with regard to some essential themes of the faith.⁹

I don’t think Auden sees Kierkegaard as *sinning* through this unmusicality; I think, rather, he sees him as merely *finite*, as we all are finite, and therefore in need of supplementation and correction by people who see what he does not. It was in a similarly reflective mood that Auden developed, as he notes in the same essay, the little parlor game he called *Purgatory Mates*, in which you are invited to imagine two people who would be deeply and instinctively antipathetic to one another and then (this is the truly essential, the truly *Christian*, aspect of the game) imagine the means by which they might come to be reconciled. Auden suggested as an exemplary pair Tolstoy and Oscar Wilde, the pure literary moralist and the pure literary aesthete, and thinks that Kierkegaard might well be paired with Sydney Smith, the famously witty and common-sensical broad-church Anglican clergyman of the generation before Kierkegaard’s. A church without either would be impoverished; and yet the same ecclesial community could not produce both.

A failure to recognize this ecclesial economy—the complex political workings of what St. Paul calls “the household of God” (*oikeiōi tou Theou*, Ephesians 2:19)—has multiple consequences. One of them, Auden suggests, is a failure of gratitude: “The Danish Lutheran Church may have been as worldly as Kierkegaard thought it was, but if it had not existed he would never have heard of the Gospels, in which he found the standards by which he condemned it” (p. 367). In his ongoing and largely justified campaign against the worldliness, the indifference to the radical

9. Auden, “A Knight of Doleful Countenance,” *The Complete Works of W. H. Auden: Prose, Volume V: 1963–1968* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), pp. 368–69. Weber wrote in a letter of February 9, 1909, “It is true that I am absolutely unmusical religiously and have no need or ability to erect any psychic edifices of a religious character within me. But a thorough self-examination has told me that I am neither antireligious nor *irreligious*.”

call that Jesus Christ makes upon the lives of Christians, that Kierkegaard discerned in the national church, Kierkegaard failed to realize what that church *had* done well, which was to pass along the whole of the biblical witness, regardless of the fact that it was thereby opening itself to judgment. That Kierkegaard could not discern or acknowledge his debt to the church he despised *is*, I think, more than a limitation. *That* arose from sin. But this is the danger that the monodist courts: to become unaware that his or her view is indeed finite, and therefore to become blind to his or her need for the supplementation and correction that other members of the Household offer, and therefore, ultimately, to fail in charity and gratitude towards those other members.

In “Vespers,” the fifth section of his magisterial meditation on Good Friday, the *Horae Canonicae*, Auden imagines two “antitypes,” temperamental opposites, passing through the City. The Arcadian, in love with a putatively innocent past, is appalled by the ruthlessness of the Utopian, in love with a putatively ideal future. The Utopian is of course equally appalled by the Arcadian’s naïveté and recalcitrance. But perhaps, Auden suggests, in a moment of political hope, the two on some deep level of their psyches understand that their crossing of paths is “a rendezvous between accomplices who, in spite of themselves, cannot resist meeting” so that each may “remind the other (do both, at bottom, desire truth?) of that half of their secret which he would most like to forget.”¹⁰

And that secret is that the flourishing of the city is built on a “cement of blood”—a reference to the practice, in several ancient cultures, of pouring blood, usually that of a sacrificed beast, on the foundation-stone of a building to ensure its permanence. But here the cement of blood is that of “our victim,” the victim whose “immolation” is the subject of the whole sequence. And “without a cement of blood (it must be human, it must be innocent) no secular wall will safely stand.” But neither the Arcadian nor the Utopian can, within the boundaries of his own temperament, fully comprehend the nature and status of the victim: as the Arcadian says, “but for him I could forget the blood, but for me he could forget the innocence.” Each of us can know only half, at most, of the “secret” which holds together our community.

Auden is here blurring the lines, intentionally I believe, and for purposes we need not get into, between the City of God and the City of Man, but my suggestion is that his little narrative holds a powerful and necessary lesson for the Christian church. In this light we might revisit Ephesians 2:19, which not only employs the image of the “household,” the *oikos*, but also says that Christians are “fellow-citizens of the saints”—*sympolitai*, in the *politeuma* together. We belong to the same polity, and

10. Auden, *Collected Poems*, ed. Edward Mendelson (New York: Modern Library, 2007), p. 637.

the form that polity takes is that of the household, in which, as we know from other letters of St. Paul—see especially 1 Corinthians 12—different people have different roles of equal dignity and worth. Even a body as “worldly” as the Danish Lutheran Church may have a part to play in this divine economy—using “economy” in at least two of its many senses, as meaning both *household* and *disposition of roles* (as when we speak of the “economic Trinity”).

It is just this disposition, this diversification and complication of roles, which the “monodist” finds it difficult to understand and accept. For that reason the monodist is tempted, especially in a technocratic age, to become what Oakeshott calls the Rationalist who sees all the church’s shortcomings as problems of engineering.¹¹ Such persons see theological and moral and pastoral disagreement as an intolerable offense to the unity that Christ wants for his Church, rather than, as the philosopher Bernard Williams suggests, not only inevitable but also potentially enriching: “Disagreement does not necessarily have to be overcome. It may remain an important and constitutive feature of our relations to others, and also be seen as something that it merely to be expected in the light of the best explanations we have of how such disagreement arises.”¹² But how the offense of disunity is to be overcome by enforcing it institutionally is not clear, at least to many observers.

Such persons are often committed to breaking any number of eggs to make their perfect ecclesiastical omelet. They believe, to quote the motto of Pope Benedict XVI, that “pruned, it thrives”; but they also believe that they know just when, how, and what to prune. They tend, moreover, to approach these matters always from the position of power: as one who can and must do the pruning, not as one who is affected by the decisions of others. (I speak as an often befuddled layperson here.) The ecclesial Rationalist is a kind of zealot, and often a shrewd and well-organized one. But those within reach of such zeal will often find themselves either elbowed aside and left without a role, or else pruned away altogether.

11. As T. S. Eliot wrote during World War II: “I have suggested that the cultural health of Europe, including the cultural health of its component parts, is incompatible with extreme forms of both nationalism and internationalism. But the cause of that disease, which destroys the very soil in which culture has its roots, is not so much extreme ideas, and the fanaticism which they stimulate, as the relentless pressure of modern industrialism, setting the problems which the extreme ideas attempt to solve. Not least of the effects of industrialism is that we become mechanized in mind, and consequently attempt to provide solutions in terms of *engineering*, for problems which are essentially problems of *life*.” “The Man of Letters and the Future of Europe,” *The Sewanee Review* 53:3 (Summer 1945), pp. 333–42.

12. Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), p. 133. Several Anglican pastors and theologians have recently argued that disagreements can be not just understandable but also substantive enhancements of *koinonia*: for an overview of these arguments, see the review essay by Ellen K. Wondra, “Questioning Authority,” in the *Anglican Theological Review* 97.2, Spring 2015, pp. 307–25.

III

In the early 1950s, Helmut Thielicke preached a series of sermons at St. Michael's Church in Hamburg on the parables of Jesus. One of the most powerful of these reflects on the parable of the wheat and the weeds. Thielicke begins by admitting that the parable poses a great and puzzling question: Why does the Lord say, "Let both grow together until the harvest. You can't change things. Leave the decision, leave the separation of the weeds from the wheat to the judgment day of God. This is not your affair. God will take this thing in hand in his good time"? "What is it that causes our Lord, so strangely, it seems, to stifle the holy zeal of his people and to say to them, 'Hands off! You cannot change the field of the world as it is anyhow'?"¹³

He suggests that there are three reasons why Jesus dissuades his disciples from separating the wheat (the real disciples, those who will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven) from the tares, the weeds (those who will ultimately be cast out). In the first place, Jesus is saying to them: "Please do not think that you can exterminate the evil in the world by your activity and your own personal exertions. After all, that evil is within you yourselves." Even true believers are not free from the sins that they denounce in others, which is why, Thielicke believes, we tend to distrust those who become obsessive about social reform. "The fanatical reformers do precisely what the servants in our parable wanted to do. They want to exterminate the tares with force and will power, failing to remember that their own wills are filled with weeds. Not to see this is their Pharisical error; and to see this is the royal realism of Jesus Christ. (p. 76)

The second reason Jesus forbids the uprooting of the weeds is "the same reason that Jesus forbade his disciples to call down fire from heaven to consume the hostile Samaritans (Luke 9:52ff). On that occasion he cried out in anger to his people, 'You do not know what manner of spirit you are of: for the Son of man came not to destroy men's lives but to save them.'" To "cast out of the temple the hangers-on, the hypocrites, . . . and all the other wobblers in Christendom, in order to keep a small elite of saints" would be an act of "spoiling God's plan of salvation. We would abandon the "comforting promise, 'Everybody can come, just as you are,'" and replace it with "a questionnaire in which everybody would have to list his accomplishments and merits"—and someone would take it on himself to decree who has passed and who has failed (p. 77).

And now the third reason: "the householder in the parable explicitly points out that the servants are completely incapable of carrying out any

13. Thielicke, *The Waiting Father: Sermons on the Parables of Jesus*, trans. John W. Doberstein (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), pp. 75f.

proper separation of grain and weeds because they look so much alike and therefore in their zeal for weeding out the tares they would also root out the wheat" (p. 79). Here Thielicke is quick to insist that he is not counseling either indifference or a reluctance to make moral judgments: "Of course we should 'distinguish between spirits.' Of course we must call what is godly godly and what is satanic satanic. The Lord Christ himself did this" (p. 80). But the casting out of *people* is a different thing, a different order of action.

What makes it different is that "when we examine the weed patch more closely and try, on the basis of what we know about sin, blasphemy, and nihilism, to determine clearly just who is a sinner, a blasphemer, a nihilist, we encounter a strange difficulty. We find that nobody is *merely* a blasphemer or *merely* a nihilist, but always at the same time an unhappy, misguided child of God." Thielicke asks, with profound warning, "Would not our hand wither if we were to root him out as a weed? Must not this hand draw back and perhaps open in a gesture of blessing and prayer that God may yet bestow his mercy upon this seemingly lost and condemned failure?"

It should be remembered that the great unspoken context of Thielicke's sermon is the de-Nazification of Germany in the postwar years. Though the explicit context of the sermon is of course Christian community, Thielicke, like Auden, and writing at almost exactly the same time, blurs the lines between prudent action in civil society and prudent action in the life of the Church. Certain words of caution—do not overrate your own powers of judgment; do not judge people only by the worst they have done (especially if you judge yourself and your allies by the best they do and are); do not foreclose on the possibility of renewal or repentance—apply equally well to all human social arrangements. Indeed, this is the principle by which I have drawn on the political philosophy of Isaiah Berlin and Michael Oakeshott as guides to what I wish to call *ecclesial plurality*. Such plurality combines the reluctance to pass definitive judgment that Thielicke counsels with an openness to learning from those who pursue Great Goods other than the ones we are dedicated to, those who hold "that half of their secret which [we] would most like to forget."

To put my point, and I think Thielicke's point, bluntly: *The determination of who is and is not a Christian is above our pay grade, and expressly forbidden to us by Jesus.* Again, and at the risk of overstressing a point already made eloquently by Thielicke, we must return to the parable of the wheat and the weeds, which, like all the parables, is about the Kingdom of God. When Jesus explains the parable, he says that "the good seed is the sons of the kingdom," while "the weeds are the sons of the evil one." But when "the servants of the master of the house" want to gather up the weeds, the master forbids them, "lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them." Note that the master is not concerned that the

servants will leave too many weeds; he is, rather, concerned that in their over-exuberance, their hypertrophied zeal for justice, they will mistake wheat for weeds: they will see “sons of the evil one” where they ought to be seeing “sons of the kingdom.” And apparently this tendency is so entrenched in the servants that they are not merely warned to be careful, they are *forbidden the task altogether*. They are *not allowed* to identify “sons of the evil one.” Note that the explanation of the parable says that sons of the evil one do indeed exist; but the servants of the master of the house cannot reliably identify them.

When someone in my church, or within the Christian fold more generally, says or does things that I believe terribly wrong, or terribly mistaken, I have many options available to me but among them is not the declaration that “You are not a child of the kingdom, you are a child of the evil one. You are a weed.” That is, if I am going to obey the teaching of this parable, I have to treat this person as a brother or sister, as one of my fellow children of the kingdom.

This plurality in no way denies church discipline. St. Paul told St. Peter “to his face” that he was wrong (Galatians 2:11), and those of us granted the responsibility of church leadership may act similarly, if they do so in the right spirit. But a properly chastened and humble plurality should, to cite an example common within my Anglican context, make us greatly reluctant to have recourse to the “nuclear option” of excommunication as outlined in 1 Corinthians 5, lest we fall into the condition of the eye that says to the hand, “I have no need of you” (1 Corinthians 12:21).

And once we acknowledge those we passionately disagree with as brothers and sisters in Christ, as fellow members of “the household of faith,” we commit ourselves to meeting certain strenuous obligations. The letters of the New Testament are full of instruction for how brothers and sisters are to interact with one another, and almost all of that instruction is sobering in its rigor: We must be patient, humble, gentle, not quarrelsome, encouraging and upbuilding—and must exhibit all those traits even when we believe people are wrong and are striving to correct them. It is very hard work. But it is what we are all called to.

The forces of technocratic rationality structure our thinking in ways that prevent us from hearing this call as clearly as we need to. In such an environment, solutionism is the one constant temptation: all disagreement will inevitably be perceived as something to be *fixed*. This is why Oakeshott’s warnings about the perils of rationalism and Berlin’s portrait of incommensurable goods are so important for us: when we don’t recognize the incommensurability of goods we are all the more likely to apply the “rationalist” instruments that we believe will “solve” our problem. And by so doing we not only risk “immanentizing the eschaton”—resolving matters that, we are promised, will be properly resolved only at the end of this world—we foreclose on the possibility of developing

the inestimably valuable virtue of patience. I speak as someone who has devoted much of his life, it now seems to me, avoiding the opportunity to be patient.

IV

In his essay on “The Pursuit of the Ideal,” Berlin takes some pains to distinguish the view he endorses from relativism:

“I prefer coffee, you prefer champagne. We have different tastes. There is no more to be said.” That is relativism. But . . . pluralism [is] the conception that there are many different ends that men may seek and still be fully rational, fully men, capable of understanding each other and sympathising and deriving light from each other, as we derive it from reading Plato or the novels of medieval Japan—worlds, outlooks, very remote from our own.

“Very remote,” but not inaccessible: we may, if we are willing to work at it, “derive light” from those who are pursuing different ends than ours. But if this is not relativism, it *is* at least one kind of pluralism, and I began this essay by distinguishing my project—to learn to deal constructively with the fact of pluralism—from the acceptance of the ideology of pluralism. So why do I quote Berlin’s support of pluralism here? In part because I think he may be using the word *pluralism* when he really means *plurality*; and I think *that* because of his claim that people whose paths in life seem quite other than one another may nevertheless “understand,” “sympathize with,” and “derive light” from one another—all of which suggest that we may recognize in others who seem quite different from us *some* commonality of purpose. Otherwise how could any of us shed light on another’s path? The ways of being fully rational and fully human are many but are not *infinitely* varied; there are as it were family resemblances among them, even when the family is quite large. We might well discern something both rational and richly human in the lives chosen by Alexander the Great and St. Teresa, even if we see either or both of them going astray in certain ways, while denying those words of approbation to Hermann Göring or the Marquis de Sade.

And if this mutual enlightenment is possible for people in general, then it is all the more possible, and all the more necessary, for people who share life in Christ. Moreover, a Christian theological anthropology gives us further reasons to support Berlin’s acceptance of plurality because we are aware not only of our finiteness, the inevitable limitations of any one person’s perceptual and conceptual grasp on the world, but also of our fallenness, the many ways that sin distorts our vision or causes some key truths to disappear from it altogether. Where we Christians differ from

Berlin—where we have great cause for hope—may be found in our belief that in the end all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well. We await with hope the completion of the work by which God reconciles all things to Himself, and us to him and to one another.

In another poem, “Under Sirius,” Auden speaks to an imagined late-Roman rhetorician and poet named Fortunatus—an ironic name, in that Fortunatus complains ceaselessly about his life and wishes for deliverance from it: “All day, you tell us, you wish” that “the wind of the Comforter’s wing” would “Unlock the prisons and translate / The slipshod gathering.” To this the poet replies,

It is natural to hope and pious, of course, to believe
That all in the end shall be well,
But first of all, remember,
So the Sacred Books foretell,
The rotten fruit shall be shaken.¹⁴

That is: Be careful what you wish for, Fortunatus. You may not be as ready for Judgment Day as you think. It is best that you seek peace with those who now arouse your impatience or contempt before that Day when all that is hidden shall be revealed. We should hesitate before asking for that Day to hasten; and indeed remember that it will come only at the appointed time; and not try to enforce through our own wisdom and power the great winnowing which, we are promised, will happen when that time comes. We can pretend that it is in our power to make the eschaton now immanent; we cannot actually achieve it. And if Auden is right, it is good not just for others but for us that we cannot.

The account I am developing here was once intrinsic to Anglicanism: the familiar tripartite division of high, low, and broad church is the very embodiment of it. That model arises from the awareness that particular communities of faith are going to be able to pursue some Great Goods only at the expense of relatively neglecting others—all the more reason, then, for them to be grateful that there are other communities doing what they cannot do, pursuing the Great Goods that their own inclinations and habits make it impossible for them to do full justice to. How sad, then, that Anglicans are forgetting, or actively repudiating, this vital aspect of their history, which it should be the special charism of Anglicans to present to the rest of the Christian world.

This forgetfulness, or repudiation, seems to me to characterize both the Left and Right of the Anglican, and more generally the North American Christian, world, if I may deploy that crude dichotomy. For many of those who have fully embraced the inclusion of gay and lesbian and

14. Auden, “Under Sirius,” *Collected Poems*, pp. 543–44.

transgender persons as a matter of fundamental justice and charity, the continual need to engage with and respond to conservative stubbornness will seem a distraction at best, at worst an offense. Likewise, conservatives for whom biblical teaching on these matters seems luminously clear will often prefer to “walk apart” rather than have what they believe to be the foundations of the faith so crassly ignored or disparaged. But to take such views is to court that rationalism in ecclesiology, that model of Church in which strong disagreement is a problem to be solved by the application of the appropriate theological and disciplinary instruments. My suggested alternative to this model is the ecclesial plurality that emerges, I think, from the Pauline image of the Church as a polity that is also a household.

It is possible from within such a household to pursue some of the various Great Goods of the common Christian life with great energy and commitment, but also with the awareness that one must necessarily—always because of one’s own limitations but often because of one’s sins as well—forego other equally legitimate Great Goods. If we think of our choices in that way we might become grateful that other members of the household are doing what we cannot; we might achieve such gratitude even when we think that those members are seriously in error about some things, because we will know that their understanding of the Christian life is limited by partiality both blameworthy and blameless—like our own partiality—and that what they do well may not be readily disentangled from what they get wrong, though perhaps through a long, long patience we may help one another with that disentanglement before the Lord comes. As Thielicke might put it, we cannot say that any of them is merely a weed; nor can they say that of us. And none of us, I think, should be *defined* by the point at which we are most wrong.

In the long run—the longest run of all—it is our hope that when “the wind of the Comforter’s wing” finally does “Unlock the prisons and translate / The slipshod gathering,” we shall see that those Great Goods that so often seemed to belong in different compositions, that at best were out of tune and out of rhythm with one another, will fit seamlessly into a great and perfect polyphony—a polyphony in which Sydney Smith and Kierkegaard will each have his part and know the value of the other’s. What a day that will be.