

Does Christianity Aggregate or Distribute Power? A Historical and Analytical Assessment of Christianity as a Power Distribution Mechanism

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Summary

The paper attempts to assess the state of Christianity as a power mechanism. There are certain speculations which seem to argue that historically Christianity has served as a mechanism to aggregate power for the political and religious establishment of the time through the means of emerging with the Roman Empire, Crusades, and Colonialism. Although at particular times, Christianity has been used to aggregate power from the people, this paper argues that Christianity supports a different view of power. We argue theologically and historically that a distribution philosophy of power is intrinsic to Christianity, and Christianity itself (pre and post Reformation) has served as a mechanism to empower the people.

Introduction

Power, classically defined as the ability to influence others' behavior, has surpassed truth as the central standard of critical judgment in the 21st century. Few texts are evaluated for their similitude to external reality; rather, they are interrogated for their disguised pursuit of power and its concomitants. All meta-narra-

tives and their proselytizing acolytes are suspect hegemonists. In the disciplines of international education and political science that we inhabit, neo-colonial and dependency theories trade on this currency of power which aggregates in centers at the expense of the margins.

The currency, however, is costly: wariness in personal, political, and institutional relationships in a zero-sum universe; cultural relativism; and diminished attention to texts as conveyors of meaning. The Judeo-Christian tradition as a major culture-shaping worldview is immensely suspect, thanks to WASPishness and the past two centuries of European colonialism.

Contrary to this normative discourse on power, Christianity is a reliable, though compromised, distributor of social, political, and spiritual power, and thus a major force behind movements of political, social, and economic empowerment. Biblical and theological texts, as well as social science, suggest that the postmodern case against Christianity as a power aggregator is thus weaker than customarily thought.

Textually, Acts 1:8 illumines this thesis. Jesus meets with his 11 apostles just prior to his ascension. Notwithstanding the times that he shared his power with them so that they could manifest the Kingdom of God as they went out two by two, they wanted the Messiah Jesus to boldly master history by answering affirmatively to their question, "Are you ready to restore Israel's kingdom?" More than a plea to liberate the Jews, the 11 apostles' question thinly veiled their thirst for political power as future ministers of state. His response, paraphrased: "The timing belongs to my Father alone. Your job is clear: Rather than aggregating power for yourselves, discover real power as God pours power into you through His Spirit. Then, go and distribute my power as my witnesses!"

Surely the disciples had, up to this moment, imagined that the Messiah Jesus would overthrow the Romans whose radiating spokes extended to all corners of the Empire in order to transmit power from the margins to the center in Rome. Now, finally, Jewish power would likewise aggregate in Jerusalem. Luke, and for that matter the other New Testament writers, offers a counter-narrative: Power moves into the hearts, hands, and heads of people who, in turn, evangelize others and, by so doing, disperse the power they formerly wanted to control.

Can we validate this argument that a Christian social philosophy radiates power to the margins? We'll offer theological and social scientific validation later in this essay, but the validation of the ideal first requires an explanation for its partial failure in reality.

Oliver and Joan O'Donovan (1999) offer an explanation for power centralization in the Eastern, or Orthodox, churches. There, the aggregation of power was a natural response to external threats, the pervasiveness of Greek thought, and the rise of ceasaropapism – the rule of the church by the head of the state – that

flourished due to the theological error of conflating the Kingdom of God with Byzantine rule. In the West, power centralized in the Roman Catholic papacy in order to control the spread of false doctrine and to ensure the church's unity.

As for the role of Greek thought, Alexander the Great shattered the 140 year-old Athenian democratic project. He initiated the *god emperor* ideology that stamped its indelible mark on the Orthodox churches and even infiltrated Rome which until then had been governed by Roman Law. Thus began the deification of the Roman emperor, who was never able to gain control over the Western church. In the East, the emperor's ties with the Eastern church led to ceasarpapism (which Pelikan labels "Nicaea-Constantinopolitan") as a mechanism for consolidating the emperor's power. The Eastern church compounded this political reality by conflating their politics with the Kingdom of God, as noted by Metropolitan Callistos Ware (1980).

In the West, Roman law and Germanic freedom enhanced political empowerment, but it was not until Augustine that citizenship, however watered down the concept was, became universally available to inhabitants of the empire. Universal citizenship, a concept impossible under the prior pagan ethos, gave significance to the individual by emphasizing the *free will* ideology which was adopted from Platonism and incorporated within Christian theology. Furthermore, Augustine rejected the *god emperor* ideology, arguing instead that it is the church where God operates. In *The City of God*, he concluded that the fall of the Empire had little to do with the church. With this and other arguments, he successfully pried apart the state and the church. On the one hand, Augustine successfully established the ideology of the universal church, which also gave significance and power to the individual, while, on the other, he failed to distinguish between the universal church as a body of individuals and the church as an institution. Failing to make this distinction, the Church *as an institution* used its influence to aggregate power. It was not until the Reformation that the distinction was made, and institutional power was distributed.

Multiple developments within the Western church in the middle of the 2nd millennium shifted the focus from the tradition of power aggregation to power distribution: Islamic conquests, the travels of humanists who resurrected classical Greek literature in the Renaissance, the translation of the Scriptures into English which fostered English national unity, the popularity of Aristotle's *Politics*, the study of Roman law, and resistance to taxation laws which transferred wealth out of developing nations such as Germany and England to Rome. By themselves, these would have not resulted in any significant reform, but the rise of reformer theologians such as Martin Luther reframed the church as the body of believers and promoted the individuality of the person. His theology, and that of the Reformers more broadly, directly challenged the church, with the result that the

flow of power began to reverse, so that Europeans outside of Rome came to feel empowered.

The doctrine of the *priesthood of all believers* radically empowered church members and citizens, but at the expense of the priesthood. Luther's Two Kingdoms theory further diminished ecclesial power by making princes independently and directly accountable to God instead of to the papacy. These limits on the aggregation of ecclesial power reinforced the economic independence of the German people who then demanded to spend their wealth on German soil, not in Rome. The vernacular translation of the Bible, as well as encouragement for lay people to read the Bible, synergistically reinforced the other reforms that limited power aggregation while enhancing its distribution.

By this time, different nations were using Christian rhetoric and imagery to build their national myth. Hastings (1997) notes that until the time of the Reformation, nationalism owed little to religion, but with the Reformation, the situation changed. It appears that the translation of the Bible into the vernacular provided a myth, modeled after Israel, and thus the "generic unity" vital for the emergence of a nation.

The Reformation's historical narrative, while auguring for the distribution of power, is not unqualified. As Gregory (2012) demonstrates, the Protestant Reformation had the unintended effect of fostering secularization. This was because, with the loss of centralized interpretive authority, the newly empowered laypeople ushered in a cacophony of interpretive voices, many willing to coerce others in favor of their interpretations. This had the effect, over time, of fostering secular authorities who not only rejected the ecclesial cacophony, but who insisted on new allegiance to state authorities which would provide a stable identity and social center. Having rejected the power aggregation in Rome, the Reformers unwittingly aided and abetted what has become an aggregation of power among secular states.

Liberation theologies emerged as the 20th century incarnation of this distributive dynamic inherent in Christian faith. Notwithstanding their often deeply-flawed dependence on Marxist theory, liberationists such as Paulo Freire (1970) and Gustavo Gutierrez (1973) have championed the redistribution of power from Catholic hierarchies to the masses.

Where, precisely, in Christian theology lies the dynamic that reverses the flow of power from its aggregation to its distribution? The answer is found in the doctrines of the Incarnation, the *imago dei*, redemption, and pneumatology.

Nietzsche believed that Christianity was a malign, flesh-denying project for empowering the weak, and it was this slave morality, as he called it, that undermined the necessity and morality of the powerful who must shape history. Contrary to Nietzsche, the Christian affirmation is that God takes on flesh while also si-

multaneously self-containing and controlling the power associated with divinity (Philippians 2). The Incarnation was thus no loss for God, and so the distributive dynamic in Christianity is predicated against zero-sum thinking: God's infinite resources distributed amongst finite humanity remain limitless.

The *imago dei* teaches that all human beings are created in God's image, but many commentators fail to attend to what follows in the text of Genesis 1:26: "and let them rule..." Rather than directly managing creation himself, God distributed that responsibility, along with the concomitant power and authority, to humans who would act on his behalf. The desire to exercise power by virtue of responsible leadership is at the core of our humanity as God's image bearers. We are now, however, deeply flawed by sin that enslaves humans who were otherwise created for glory as vice regents of God.

Redemption literally conveys the idea of purchase out of slavery. This understanding of Christ's redemptive work is central to a theological account of the power distributive dynamics of Christianity. As the Second Adam, Jesus Christ liberates his followers from slavery to sin and, by virtue of regeneration, enables them to begin to recover their original vice regency. Rather than living under the power-diminishing rule of sin and death (Romans 6), the Christian believer becomes a conqueror whose mandate, as Jesus articulated it in the Acts 1:8 passage, is to constantly distribute to others what has become the believer's possession: salvation.

As the Third Person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit activates the distribution of God's power. The book of Acts is replete with accounts of this very dynamic, and it is almost always associated with conversions and miraculous gifts. The Holy Spirit is not the believer's special genie, however; rather, he assures that others benefit from Christ's redemptive work so that they too can empower others.

How does Christianity's theology of power compare with that of some its competitors? As evidenced by its 1400-year history, Islam consolidates and aggregates power because *Allah's* will is supreme. Confucianism concentrates power in a social hierarchy that begins with the traditional emperor, the Son of Heaven (cf. Choong, 2011). Scientific naturalism is predicated upon the victory of the strong over the weak in an evolutionary race for survival and gene transfer. Eastern monism offers no contempt for power, which is an illusion, and thus, absent moral imperatives open the door for ruthless power-grabbing. Nietzsche, channeling the logic of scientific naturalism, awaits the strong man who will be victorious over Christianity's despised weak morality. Other than Christianity, there are no meta-narratives predicated on power distribution. Postmodernists' defense of power distribution is less a positive project than a suspicious protest against its aggregation in the name of cultural relativism.

Having offered an interpretation of the historical relationship of Christian

faith to power, as well as the theological foundations upon which Christianity's power distributive dynamic rests, we are left to validate the argument that Christianity has an inherent internal logic that works for the distribution, not the aggregation of power. Sociologist Robert Woodberry, now at the National University of Singapore and before that at the University of Texas-Austin, offers powerful validation in a 2012 *American Political Science Review* journal article entitled "The Missionary Roots of Liberal Democracy." Using statistical and historical methods of analysis, he shows that what he calls "conversionary Protestants" likely caused, to one degree or another, the rise of democracy in nations across the continents of the world. He further shows that Protestant missionaries were catalysts in shaping societal functions which operationalize democratic life: religious liberty, mass education, mass printing, newspapers, voluntary organizations, legal protections for nonwhites, and colonial reforms. Taken together, these phenomena instantiate a power distribution system. Woodberry summarizes:

As CPs [conversionary Protestants] tried to spread their faith, they catalyzed mass education, mass printing, and civil society – hampering elite attempts to monopolize these resources. Protestants themselves did not always provide the most educational, printing, and civil society resources, but Protestant initiatives spurred others to invest heavily in these areas and to pressure governments to create schools that restricted Protestant content. These resource transfers to nonelites helped alter the class structure, fostered the rise of political parties and nonviolent political movements, and facilitated broader political participation.

Besides the secondary effects of conversion efforts on power distribution, a second pathway opened up as Protestant non-conformists colluded with Enlightenment thinkers to fight state churches, thus weakening the power of those churches. According to Woodberry, these conversionary Protestants undermined, opposed, and counterbalanced colonial authorities and landowners, thus leaning toward a greater respect for the rule of law, lessened violence toward anti-colonial political organizations, and relatively peaceful decolonization (p. 246),

Besides these pathways of conversion and counterbalancing colonists, what are the mechanisms by which missionary activity resulted in the growth of liberal democracy? According to Woodberry, missionaries tended to locate in remote locations, not only in major urban centers where power is already concentrated. If there is a power distribution dynamic inherent in Christianity, then we can expect their location in rural locations correlates with power distribution.

But, Christianity's power distribution dynamic may be more than geographical. It also concerns cultural identity. Imperialists stamp their culture on the margins in order to extend their cultural power, but Yale historian Lamin Sanneh argues that the missionaries generally did the opposite. They took a cultural tran-

slatable message to the margins, and thus empowered cultures at the margins. Wherever missionaries landed, in Africa for example, cultural nationalism often led to overthrows of colonial governments. Cultural nationalism arose because missionaries communicated that their neighbors were made in God's image, and that they shared that image with the most powerful persons in the village, tribe, and globe (Sanneh, 1993, 2009). This revolutionary view of human identity dramatically empowered former slaves and servants who were no longer *Slavs* but children of God and citizens in states. Sanneh offers this summary: "Christianity is a form of social empowerment by virtue of vernacular translation" (Sanneh, 2012, p. 217). Later, he writes, referring to Christianity, that "the breeding grounds of religion are the spawning fields of the struggle for justice and dignity" (p. 230-231). Thus, Sanneh offers a delicious irony in the subtitle of his memoir: *Called from the Margins*.

Passion for the vernacular led to the development, first of all, of translation of the Bible into the vernacular, followed by literacy campaigns so that people could read the Bible, and that led to establishing presses to print the Bible. Literacy and presses were, in turn, essential to the distribution (or dispersal, as Woodberry calls it) of political power by virtue of newspapers and political tracts that came to be printed on those presses.

Woodberry also identifies several dynamics of Christian conversion that foster liberal democracy. Besides discovering their identity as God's image bearers, converts are fundamentally empowered by the Christian message of redemption through Christ: Liberation from sin, according to Galatians 5:13, arouses love for neighbors, and thus a desire for the common good. Politically, autocracy (maximizing order at the expense of freedom) and anarchy (maximizing freedom at the expense of order) gives way to self-government (the simultaneous maximization of order and freedom). This redemptively-generated political fruit of the gospel crucifies rabid lusts and cultivates right loves. The dream of self-government becomes real when we stop stealing and start sharing with others.

Another conversion dynamic that promotes liberal democracy has to do with the Holy Spirit. New Christians are told that through conversion they become filled with the Holy Spirit which offers them unheard of power.

Yet a third conversion dynamic has to do with leadership development fostered through involvement in local churches. Admittedly, in this regard, many older missionaries (before 1960) were often patronizing and controlling, not giving over leadership to new converts. Nevertheless, their example fostered a kind of empowerment by way of example, which was greatly enhanced when they eventually became church leaders themselves.

Max Stackhouse (2007, p. 206) notes:

Personal conversion is a decisive opportunity by which humans may discover

the possibility of transcendence over and thus the reorganization of the psycho-spiritual forces that have become embedded in the material, social, and cultural patterns that define most of life for most people most of the time... In conversion we and they can come to know a reality other than the given conditions of life in a way that allows us with them to transform the given conditions of existence.

Besides the dynamics of geography, social identity, and conversion that are consistent with power dispersal, there are ecclesial dynamics that do likewise. The church as an alternative social institution cultivates habits of leadership, especially amongst those church bodies which emphasize the “priesthood of believers”. This leadership capacity transfers easily to secular leadership roles. There is also the reality of the church as a place where preaching, however focused on narrow doctrinal concerns, generates moral, cultural, and social concerns that have a politically empowering effect. As an institution designed to be autonomous from government, by virtue of Catholic notions of subsidiarity and Kuyperian ideas of sphere sovereignty, churches in and of themselves can become alternate centers of political power for the otherwise politically disenfranchised. This ecclesial dynamic of power distribution was arguably a key link between the First Great Awakening in the 13 Colonies and the American Revolution that occurred some 30 years later (Kidd, 2010).

Is power redistribution, while necessarily intrinsic in a Christian vision for society, sufficient for what ails all societies? Hardly. For one thing, power distributed must be accompanied by truth, or, otherwise, power without truth ends up recapitulating the very problem it seeks to overcome. In other words, hegemonies will reproduce unless they are castrated by the Gospel truth that power, by its very nature, is to be distributed rather than aggregated. Furthermore, if the distributive power dynamics are compromised by relying on the power of the state (as has happened in history when missionaries have sometimes aligned themselves with outside political or colonial authorities), then the power distribution mechanism mutates. Another mitigating consideration is human sinfulness itself. Arguably, while power distribution is a Christian ideal, it is always a function of evangelism and not, first of all, political life. Generally, human sinfulness works to aggregate power, that is, toward tyranny. But absent self-governing authority inherent in Gospel-fostered transformation, distributed power invites the real risk of anarchy. Thus, our doctrine of power distribution does not obviate the need for authority by which human impulses to harm the community are held in check.

What are the implications for a Christian social philosophy? If power distribution is inherent in the Gospel of the Kingdom, then we must look within our Christian institutions and ask: Are we aggregators or distributors? Pastors

on power trips, insecure leaders who command loyalty tests, top-down organizations, and centralized command structures look suspiciously like power aggregation mechanisms operating in Christ's name. When we evangelize, we are engaged, Jesus assures us, in genuine power distribution. With his model, he and church leaders empower members to discover service ministries to which they feel drawn. In his time, Roland Allen issued a similar challenge with *Missionary Methods: St Paul's or Ours?* (1912). When Fletcher Brockman, an American, voluntarily turned over the leadership of the Chinese YMCA to a Chinese national in 1914, he was distributing power (Corwin, 1991).

We can also test our cultural and political engagement by the same criteria. While "Power to the People" is anachronistic, at least 60s campus radicals got it right even as they misunderstood the true nature of freedom. America's federalist vision was another example. Policy initiatives should neither reinforce the natural tendency of the state to aggregate power, nor the contrary tendency in the individual to do likewise, a philosophy otherwise called libertarianism. A Christian social vision consistently finds ways to distribute power, especially to the powerless, without opening the door to catastrophic social disorder. Our challenge is to connect democratic aspirations, whether on the Arab street or in African cities and villages, to Christ, who alone provides the capacity to use power as a means to love one's neighbor.

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Skuplja li kršćanstvo moć ili je distribuira: Povijesna i analitička procjena kršćanstva kao mehanizma distribuiranja moći

Sažetak

Ovaj rad pokušava procijeniti stanje kršćanstva kao mehanizma moći. Postoje određena promišljanja koja, čini se, tvrde kako je kršćanstvo u povijesnom smislu služilo kao mehanizam skupljanja moći za političke i vjerske ustanove tog vremena sredstvima povezanima s Rimskim carstvom, križarskim ratovima i kolonijalizmom. Iako je u određenim vremenima kršćanstvo bilo korišteno za skupljanje moći od ljudi, ovaj rad tvrdi da kršćanstvo podupire drugačije gledište moći. Teološki i povijesno dokazujemo kako je filozofija distribuiranja moći svojstvena kršćanstvu, a samo kršćanstvo (prije i poslije reformacije) služilo je kao mehanizam osnaživanja ljudi.