Editorial

The Theological Politics of Populism

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In 2017, George Orwell's novel *1984* became a resurgent bestseller in both the UK and the USA, following the Brexit vote and the election of Donald Trump. One of the major bookstores in my own city of Birmingham was doing a brisk trade in dystopian novels, bringing Orwell's classic to a new generation with a window display that also included Margaret Attwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*, Aldous Huxley's *A Brave New World*, and P. D. James's *Children of Men*. The novelist J. G. Ballard, an eloquent exponent of the dystopia genre in his own right, refers to the worlds created in such stories as '*the Near-After*', suggestive of the imminent futures that they evoke. These imminent futures are built on credible, present realities extrapolated into apocalyptic visions that are religious in portent. Futures that include the suburban, atomised ennui of Ballard's characters, or the fundamentalist misogyny of the regimes in Attwood, tell us something of our own contemporary societies. Indeed, it would seem that the reverberations of recent years, catching journalists and political commentators alike by surprise, have drawn readers to the eerie resonances within the worlds of Newspeak or Gilead.

In an effort to bring some theological reflection to some of the dystopian anxieties amidst contemporary political turbulence, we focus in this issue on the phenomenon of political populism. The unforeseen populism in recent western politics demands specific attention, as it seems to be a gatekeeper to so much that is counter-productive of personal freedoms.

At the outset, it is worth distinguishing populism from democracy. As David Marquand asserted in the *New Statesman* in July 2017, 'Populism is not a doctrine or a governing philosophy, still less an ideology. It is a disposition, perhaps a mood, a set of attitudes and above all a style.'[1] The #metoo movement, for example, exposing sexual harassment following the allegations against the Hollywood

producer Harvey Weinstein, is a popular movement; not populist. Populist movements, as Marquand observes, mythologise the past, and mythologise the people. They gather support around a hazy nostalgia such as 'Make America Great Again', while proffering a future that assumes a consensus shorn of all ambiguity, diffidence and resistance. In this worldview, individual contradiction to the perceived will of the people is a sign of decadence, elitism, and the death-throws of an irrelevant establishment. It is just such a moment that signals the overlaps between Orwell's 'doublespeak' and Kellyanne Conway's 'alternative facts', and renders the expert redundant. Populisms exist on both right and left of the political spectrum, promising new vistas of opportunity by harking back to a fallacious past. It is this double-move of mythologizing that the essays in this volume seek to address.

The first essay, by Eric Stoddart, engages with the issue of surveillance. Stoddart has been at the forefront of theological research in the UK into the implications of a growing surveillance culture. Whether the surveillance is for security or as part of the unobtrusive marketing profiling that accompanies the monitoring of website activity, the truly private self is becoming progressively a fiction. In Orwell's *1984*, Winston's first act of rebellion is the writing of a personal diary. Big Brother sees all, and thus erodes the rough edges and particularities of what it means to be wonderfully, and strangely, human. Stoddart retells the gospel encounter between Jesus and Zacchaeus as a parable of visibility and invisibility, and reframes a Christian perspective on surveillance in the light of (in)visibility at the crucifixion.

In common with the other contributions to this volume, Christian ethics would seem to undermine binary responses to the challenges posed by surveillance, a phenomenon dependent upon populist conceptions of free choice and the fear of the other. Complex questions like 'who, amongst the poor and marginalized are most affected?' are suggested by Stoddart as a costly antidote to the mythologies of security and profit that warrant increased surveillance.

Next, Al Barrett reflects on populist politics following the Occupy movement of 2011, Brexit and the tragedy of the Grenfell Tower fire. Each of these events brought to attention voices that had hitherto been ignored, and underscored the invisibility of, respectively, victims of financial markets, the white working class, and residents of public housing in a rapacious housing market. Again, Barrett eschews the simple binary, particularly for a Church of England that is implicated

as part of the 'establishment'. The twofold temptation to assert the privilege of establishment, either mediating on behalf of the perceived 'voice of the people', or holding the ring in the name of stability, fails to attend to the complexity and nuance of lived reality. Barrett commends what Rachel Muers has described as the practice of 'hearing to speech' that amplifies the voices from the margins. A context 'benumbed by populist politics' may demand 'ecclesial listening' rather more than speaking.

The Brexit referendum has mythologised the 'white working class vote' as the populist motor for change, but in our third article Carla Vicencio Prior highlights an alternative perspective: the EU citizen living in the UK. As a Church of England parish priest and Portuguese woman married to a British man, she reflects on the parallel crises of national and personal identity prompted by and revealed in the Brexit decision. This particular voice reiterates the complexities that populist politics would seek to elide. Prior wonders at the potential for local churches to embody 'hearing to speech' within congregations of diversity.

Finally, Helen Stanton offers an insight into the phenomenon of 'fake news', using the dystopian genre of a fictional memoir from Artemis Tyndall in 2048. Much as the Hebrew prophets conjured their critiques of public life through alternative imagining, and Jesus told parables that weave the everyday into the extravagant generosity of the Kingdom of God, creative stories can help us see truth. Fictional worlds, aslant to present realities, are specially potent when lies are made credible and truth seems scarce. Where populist politics seeks to control – voices, visibility, and outcomes – Christian ethics would remind us of the irreducible mystery of each other. And as we recognise the mystery of the other so we encounter the mystery of the Eternal Other.

God in Christ, the stranger at the tomb, reconciles us to each other and to God heralding the new creation. As Vladimir Lossky asserts, Christ is the first fully human.[2] Thus, the building blocks of a Christian politics depend first of all on a recovered anthropology of graced nature: of human brokenness, divine giftedness, and destiny. The ciphers that stand for 'people' in populist politics are a caricature of participatory public life, and they are corrosive to a truly communitarian, traditioned Christian politics.

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References

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Marquand, D. 'The people is sublime: the long history of populism from Robespierre to Trump', *New Statesman*, July 24th 2017: https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/07/people-sublime-long-history-populism-robespierre-trump accessed 9th January 2018.

Notes

1. David Marquand, 'The people is sublime: the long history of populism from Robespierre to Trump', *New Statesman*, July 24th 2017, downloaded from: https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2017/07/people-sublime-long-history-populism-robespierre-trump on 9th January 2018.
2. Lossky, Vladimir., 1957, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, London: James Clarke