

Contra Imperium:

Biblical Foundations of an Anti-Imperial
Theology

by Kiran Lotay

MA Biblical Interpretation



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Y Drindod Dewi Sant
UNIVERSITY OF WALES
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Abstract

The current financial crisis, and the controversy surrounding equality legislation and conservative Christians, merits serious theological consideration. The anti-imperial interpretation of the New Testament is a relatively new discipline with roots in the slightly older tradition of liberation theology. It has frequently highlighted the disturbing parallels between the Western economy and the injustice of Babylon in its reading of Revelation. A response to this injustice has also been articulated in the last decade through the anti-imperial interpretation of Paul's letters by Richard A. Horsley and others. This dissertation partly seeks to assess the contribution of the anti-imperial interpretation of Revelation 13, 17 & 18, and 1 Corinthians, to understanding and responding to the financial crisis. Is its critique of the Western economy through Revelation accurate and justified, and is Horsley's anti-imperial vision an appropriate response? However, since anti-imperial scholars have not yet discussed the controversy surrounding the relationship between Christians and equality legislation, this dissertation also asks the question of whether their model can aid in understanding and responding to it as well. The model is partly vindicated by the grim fact that it reveals in both situations the characteristics of Babylon and the Beasts which lead to their destruction. Unfortunately, Richard Horsley's anti-imperial vision provides only a partial response to this recognition. The opposition of the Church to the unjust practices of surrounding society is clear in Paul's teaching. However, by not mentioning that Christ's love conditions this opposition, he allows for dangerous misappropriation. This is made particularly likely by the strong emotions the issues examined often evoke. To fill the gap in Horsley's vision, it is then compared with the relevant elements of Oliver O'Donovan's political theology. O'Donovan takes into account the conditioning influence of Christ's love, and so provides the foundation for a more biblically faithful response.

Introduction

The subject matter of this dissertation was inspired by concern for two related areas of British public life. However, this comparatively small arena has provided a window through which to view and engage with concerns relevant to the much broader arena of Western civilization. The first concern is as follows: since the election of the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010, a radical policy of welfare reform has been aggressively pursued, and at the time of writing, largely implemented¹. The far reaching consequences of this remain to be seen, but the immediate (and indeed, intended) effect of the reforms to the Job-seeker and Disability Allowance has been that a large number of people have been removed from the system of support². If the job climate were such that these people were easily able to find employment, this would perhaps not be seen as quite so problematic. Unfortunately, this is not the case.

The larger problem that these difficulties highlight is the source of the austerity policies being implemented: the financial crisis gripping the Western economic system. It is this that has caused jobs to disappear, and those already on the bottom of society to be denied support as they seek work that is increasingly competed for and hard to find. The financial crisis is creating a growing section of society with limited employment prospects and dwindling state support, living on the edge of destitution. As such, they are a group that the Church feels compelled to support, encourage and fight for. One half of this discussion is an attempt to understand the financial crisis using the interpretive framework contained within the Book of Revelation, and articulate a biblically founded response to the economic practices that have caused the poor to become so much poorer while some of the ultra rich continue to prosper.

Such an aim has much affinity with a stream of biblical interpretation that grew significantly in strength and conviction during the Bush administration³, when the rhetoric of empire started being explicitly used by the American government. It is typically referred to as anti-imperial or empire-critical interpretation⁴. This being the case, the anti-imperial interpretation of Revelation 13, 17-18 and 1 Corinthians will be used as the starting point for reflecting on the financial crisis and an appropriate response. The passages from Revelation have been the focus of Christian critiques of empire since their recording in the first century, and so will form the lens through which

1 <http://www.dwp.gov.uk/policy/welfare-reform/legislation-and-key-documents/welfare-reform-act-2012/>, accessed 03.09.2012

2 http://www.shu.ac.uk/_assets/pdf/cresr-final-incapacity-benefit-reform.pdf, p. 14, accessed 03.09.2012

3 Jim Wallace, *God's Politics: Why the Right Gets it Wrong and the Left Doesn't Get It* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 2005), pp. 138-142

4 Denny Burk, "Is Paul's Gospel Counter Imperial? Evaluating the Prospects of the Fresh Perspective for Evangelical Theology.", *JETS* 51/2 (June 2008), p. 310

the financial crisis and the Western economic system are viewed. The writings of Richard A. Horsley and others on 1 Corinthians outline a vision of the Church as an alternative society, set over against the oppressive structures and practices of the Roman Empire. The description and evaluation of this vision will provide the stimulus for our discussion of how the Church should respond.

The second concern relates less directly to the aims of anti-imperial interpretation, but is certainly contained implicitly in the texts mentioned above and in some of their treatments. In the last decade there have been a number of highly publicised cases evidencing a conflict between the manifestation of certain conservative Christian convictions, and liberal progressive values of absolute equality and religious neutrality in the public square. While the conflicts publicised are complex interactions and not a moral monochrome, certain cases do raise questions about the place of conservative Christian morality in public life⁵. The Ladele vs. London Borough of Islington case, which started in 2008 and is currently in the European Court of Human Rights, shows one of the more extreme cases of conflict between the morality underpinning a local authority's equality policy and the conservative Christian conviction regarding homosexual practice. Ladele refused to carry out civil partnership ceremonies, and also refused a compromise which allowed her to not take part in the ceremonies, but still required her to carry out a signing procedure⁶. She was disciplined for “gross misconduct”⁷ by her employer and threatened with dismissal for these actions, which constituted for her an expression of her conservative Christian convictions about sexual ethics.

While the actions of London Borough of Islington do not seem to be a common practice amongst civil registration services, they do form part of a growing pattern in British society whereby the right to manifest religious belief in public space is being gradually eroded⁸. Although this is not a concern for Christians of all persuasions, for those who are being denied the accommodation of the manifestation of their belief by their employers and the courts, it is something that can and has led to loss of livelihood. The second half of my task is to attempt to understand and respond to this pattern using the same interpretative lens as with the financial crisis outlined above. The anti-imperial interpretation of Revelation 13, 17-18 and 1 Corinthians highlights the stark difference between the values of the Christian community and the surrounding society, outlining

5 <http://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/publications/upload/Clearing-the-ground.pdf> , pp. 14-24, accessed 03.09.2012

6 http://www.christian.org.uk/eat_ladele_19dec08.pdf , p. 3, accessed 20/07/2012

7 http://www.christian.org.uk/eat_ladele_19dec08.pdf , p. 3, accessed 20/07/2012

8 <http://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/publications/upload/Clearing-the-ground.pdf> , p. 14-25, accessed 20/07/2012

the ways in which Christians should and should not interact with it. Once again, its description and evaluation as a lens through which to view and respond to this concern will provide the focal point of our discussions. These two concerns may seem unrelated, for they exist in two very different (although not entirely separate) spheres. However, viewed through the lens of Revelation 13, 17 & 18, it will be seen that they are linked by the disturbing feature of imitating the character of Babylon and the beasts.

Before I begin, a brief note concerning the hermeneutical pitfalls of this enterprise is necessary, as well as an outline of the criteria by which the anti-imperial interpretation will be evaluated. The description and subsequent application of “the interpretative lens” of Revelation 13, 17-18 and 1 Corinthians is in danger firstly, as with any exegesis, of not being completely faithful to the texts it seeks to interpret. Indeed, this will form a basic criterion for evaluating the anti-imperial interpretations of these passages: to what extent do they emphasise one element of the text at the expense of others? Secondly, in order to responsibly discern how to apply the lens to current events, one must take into account the significant historical differences between the first and twenty-first century, whatever the similarities. For example, wholesale identification of the Western economic system with the figure of “Babylon” from Rev. 17-18 is potentially difficult to justify given the absence of widespread Christian persecution and martyrdom in Western nations. There may indeed be ways to understand the presence of behaviour associated with Babylon and the beast in twenty-first century Western society, but the difference between historical contexts does not allow for simplistic or surface level application. With these important provisos in mind, I will proceed to describe and assess the anti-imperial interpretation of our passages with regards to its usefulness in understanding and responding to the issues outlined above.

Part 1: Babylon, the Beast, Economics and the Law

Chapter 1

The Beasts of Revelation 13

Since they were seen, recorded and circulated, the visions of Revelation 13, 17 and 18 have been understood as a proclamation of God's judgement against the Roman Empire. There is a strong scholarly consensus, ancient and modern, that Rome and its Empire are at least the partial referents of the vision of the whore, Babylon, and the beast⁹. A distinguishing feature of the contemporary anti-imperial interpretation of these visions is that this reference is both actual and partial. They present neither a timeless archetype nor a historically limited judgement, but an instance of the established pattern of God's judgement on arrogant empires¹⁰. Therefore there are features of the visions noted which seem to point very specifically to the contemporaneous Roman Empire, but also elements which set this specificity within the overarching story of God's destruction of any who attempt to usurp his place. The characteristics of empire are contemporary political, religious, social and economic realities which are predicted to be judged and destroyed by the God who continuously opposes human arrogance and injustice throughout history¹¹.

Revelation 13 is a vision rich with both potential historical reference and clear suggestions of a continuous pattern of God's action in history. The description of the beast in Rev. 13:2 is an amalgamation of the beasts of the vision in Daniel 7¹², interpreted in Dan 7:17 as referring to kings, and by association the empires they controlled. There is also overlap between the two visions in the behaviour of the beast(s): they are both allowed to make war on the saints and conquer them (Dan 7:21; Rev. 13:7), and are both described with the same phrase as having “a mouth speaking arrogantly” (Dan 7:8 cf. Rev. 13:5; the Greek in Rev. corresponds to the Septuagint version of Daniel: “στόμα λαλοῦν μεγάλα”). The beast of Revelation 13, then, is painted in the colours of an arrogant and powerful empire given authority over the

9 Craig Koester, *Revelation and The End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), Ch. 1; Ian Boxall, “The Many Faces of Babylon the Great: *Wirkungsgeschichte* and the Interpretation of Revelation 17” in Steve Moyise (ed.), *Studies in the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2001), p. 58

10 Simon Woodman, *The Book of Revelation* (London: SCM, 2008), p. 215-6; Ian Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John* (London: Continuum International, 2006), p. 244

11 Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation: Justice and Judgement*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), p. 25

12 Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 9

people of God, to persecute and conquer them for a time. The combination of the images in Daniel and the similarities in character of the beasts sets this vision in a broader context than the book of Revelation. The historical backdrop of this vision is all of the kings and empires that have attempted to usurp God's position as Lord of the world, and as a result have persecuted his people¹³.

There are also two characteristics of the beast revealed which are not found in Daniel: one which makes an assertion about the nature of these empires in general, the other emphasising the way in which they attempt to replace God himself. It is asserted that its authority comes from the dragon (Rev. 13:4), which represents Satan, characterised in Revelation as the deceiver of the nations (Rev. 20:2; 7-8). According to this vision, the power that underpins the blasphemy and violence of empire is none other than the enemy of God and the accuser of his people¹⁴. Moreover, Rev. 13:3 shows us that this beast, in its blasphemy, imitates the power and glory of God: the “mortal wound which had been healed” (13:3) is a twisted reflection of “the Lamb that was slaughtered” (13:8)¹⁵. This direct imitation of God both reveals the depth of idolatry sunk to by empire, and hints at one of the contemporaneous 1st Century Roman social structures which may be partially in view: the Imperial cult¹⁶.

The resonances that the behaviour and characteristics of the second beast have with this structure have been noted by a number of anti-imperial interpreters (Kraybill, N.T. Wright, Friesen)¹⁷. The dominance of the imperial cult in Asia Minor is a defining feature of the historical context of Revelation, whether the earliest or latest date of composition is held. By the late first century it defined the calendar and national holidays¹⁸, formed the focus of cities' attempts to define themselves, underpinned the legal decisions of the *koinon* and was prominently supported in the public religious activities of the wealthy, amongst others¹⁹. Both the glory of Rome, personified as Roma, and the Emperor as the Empire's icon, had Temples built to house their statues in Asian cities as a bid to gain honour and favour from the Emperor²⁰. Given that this is the context which the churches John wrote to found themselves in, it is difficult to deny at least some resonance with the Imperial cult to the actions of the second beast. In forcing

13 Oliver O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology* (Cambridge: University Press, 1996), p. 156

14 Ben Witherington III, *Revelation* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003), p. 220

15 O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 154

16 Witherington III, *Revelation*, p. 25

17 Stephen J. Friesen, *Imperial Cults and the Apocalypse of John: Reading Revelation in the Ruins* (US: Oxford University Press, 2001); N.T. Wright “Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire” in Richard A. Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics: Ekklesia, Israel, Imperium, Interpretation* (Pennsylvania: Trinity Press, 2000); J. Nelson Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce in John's Apocalypse* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1996)

18 Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, pp. 34-36

19 Witherington III, *Revelation*, p. 224

20 Friesen, *Imperial Cults*, pp. 36-38

all the inhabitants of the earth to worship the first (Rev. 13:2), it echoes the pressure put on all inhabitants of the Roman Empire to publicly honour the gods and the Emperor²¹.

However, this resonance is only comprehensible if we understand the first, composite beast to refer to the Roman Empire or the Emperor, or both. The strongest indication that these were understood by John as the first century referents of his vision comes in the form of a narrative comment concerning the number of the beast (Rev. 13:18). John uses gematria, a system whereby each letter of the alphabet was given a numerical value, to communicate in code his interpretation of the beast's identity²². Scholars have long noted that the sum of the words Nero Caesar written in Hebrew script equals six hundred and sixty-six²³. Moreover, the Latin form rather than the Greek (*Neron Caesar*), when transliterated into Hebrew, gives 616, a common variant in the textual tradition²⁴. Bauckham also notes that the sum of the Greek θυριον ("beast"), when transliterated into Hebrew, is six hundred and sixty-six. This may indicate that John is actively demonstrating how Emperor Nero is the beast with the assistance of gematria. Indeed, this might lead us to understand the identification of "the number of the beast" with "the number of a person" (Rev. 13:18) quite literally²⁵.

If we take the two beasts as partially referring to the arrogance and blasphemous idolatry of the Roman Empire and the Imperial cult, we arrive at another question. What is the meaning of their being presented as part of the recurring pattern of God's judgement? The significance of the amalgamation of the four beasts of Daniel 7 is debatable. Bauckham argues that it indicates that John viewed the Roman Empire as the final culmination of all great arrogant Empires to persecute and murder the saints before the return of Christ and the renewal of creation²⁶. Koester and Boxall, on the other hand, interpret the composite beast as suggesting that the spirit underlying every proud empire also lies at the heart of Rome's²⁷. The viability of applying the anti-imperial lens of this vision to our own times rests on the difference between these two interpretations. Bauckham's has the effect of limiting the reference of the vision to the 1st Century context. This makes the task of discerning the spirit of empire in contemporary structures and political orders more difficult to ground within the scope of the vision itself. If, on the other hand, the Roman Empire is presented only as a contemporary

21 Christopher Bryan, *Render to Caesar: Jesus, the Early Church, and the Roman Superpower* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2005), p. 117

22 Richard Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy: Studies on the Book of Revelation* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. 389

23 Witherington III, *Revelation*, p. 177

24 Witherington, *Revelation*, p. 177

25 Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 389

26 Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 345

27 Craig Koester, *Revelation and The End of All Things* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 159; Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 244

historical expression (rather than the final incarnation) of the spirit which drives humans to hubris and self-deification, the same spirit may be discerned again in other historical situations.

The latter interpretation seems particularly likely considering the structure of Revelation's final sequence of visions and prophetic pronouncements (18-22). The "story" threaded through the various visions of Revelation is that of God's total destruction of and victory over evil, both on earth and in heaven, leading to the renewal of both. It is significant that the sequence of visions which proclaim God's final victory over evil have as a key component of them the destruction of the beast. In chapter 19, the beast is forever defeated (Rev. 19: 20), then, in 20:10 & 14 Satan and death are finally judged and destroyed before the new heavens and the new earth are created (Rev. 21). This suggests that the judgement of the beast is a prerequisite of the final judgement (Rev. 19-20) and renewal of creation (Rev. 21-22)²⁸. Following this interpretation of Revelation's structure, if the historical Roman Empire was the only referent of the composite beast, it would imply that after its fall creation would be renewed and Satan defeated. Since this did not happen, Koester and Boxall seem to be justified in understanding the composite beast of Revelation 13 as revealing and judging the spirit beneath the Roman Empire *and also every proud empire that may follow it*.

The Whore of Revelation 17-18

If the vision of Revelation 13 shows some of the character and behaviour of the spirit at the heart of empire, those recorded in chapters 17-18 proclaim its destruction at the hands of God and the Lamb. Once again there are features of these chapters which strongly suggest that Rome and its empire will be subject to the judgements pronounced, but also that it stands in a long line of kingdoms which have set themselves in opposition to God and been destroyed as a result. The description of Babylon in Revelation 17 displays a number of features which suggest its identification with Rome: she is seated on seven hills, she is identified with "the great city that rules over the kings of the earth" (Rev. 17:18), she is seated on many "peoples and multitudes and nations and languages" (Rev. 17:15), she is adorned in rich finery (Rev. 17:4) and she is drunk on the blood of the saints (Rev. 17:6). Babylon seems to be a parody of the glory of Rome personified, Roma, who was frequently depicted as seated on Rome's famous seven hills²⁹. In the same way that the image of the composite beast is flexible and may

²⁸ Fiorenza, *The Book of Revelation*, p. 68

²⁹ Koester, *Revelation and the End of all Things*, p. 158

symbolise both the Emperor³⁰ and the Roman Empire itself, the seven heads of the beast on which Babylon is seated are said to signify both seven hills and seven kings (Rev. 17:9). If Babylon may be at least partly identified with Rome, these would signify Rome's seven hills and seven of its Emperors. There are those (Ford, Barker) who argue that Babylon should be identified with Jerusalem, on account of the depiction of unfaithful Jerusalem in the prophets (Ezek. 23:1-4, Jer. 13:27, Isa. 1:21) as a prostitute³¹. Moreover, on the basis of 1 Enoch 24 it may be argued that Jerusalem is accurately described as a city built on seven hills³².

However, this does not account for Babylon's description as ruling over the kings of the earth,³³ or the riches and violence associated with her as they are elaborated in chapter 18. The prosperity of the Roman Empire is hardly debatable, and the characteristic of Babylon being drunk on the blood of the saints resonates with the brutal persecution of Christians towards the end of Nero's rule. The question of whether this vision pre-dated, followed, or was contemporaneous with it does not affect the identification of Babylon with Rome. The resonance remains whether it was predicted, remembered or observed. As with the historical context of the Imperial cult, it is hard to deny that a city described as ruling over the kings of the earth could not at least partially refer to Rome. It was the only city in the latter half of the first century which could have been described in this way³⁴. Moreover, the description of Babylon's judgement prevents any identification with Jerusalem. The long list of commodities in 18:11-13 accurately represents the imports of Rome in the first century³⁵; and the elaboration of the indictment in 17:6 attributes a magnitude of slaughter to her that could only find a first century referent in the imperial conquests of Rome (Rev. 18:24).

However, some of the very same features which lead to the identification of Babylon with the city of Rome also allude to the unfinished story of which this vision is part. There are many echoes of ancient prophetic judgements against prosperous and arrogant empires recorded in the books of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. The judgement against Babylon in Revelation 18 bears striking similarities to Ezekiel 27-8 and Jeremiah 51³⁶. The list of cargo in Rev. 18:11-13 imitates Ezek. 27:12-24³⁷; the lamentation of the merchants and seafarers over Babylon's destruction (Rev. 18:15-19) parallels the mourning of the merchants over Tyre in Ezek. 27:29b-32; the arrogant pronouncement of Babylon that

30 Witherington, *Revelation*, p. 38

31 Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 240

32 Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 243

33 Boxall, *The Revelation of St. John*, p. 243

34 Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 345

35 Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 351

36 O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 155

37 Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 351

she rules as queen and will “never see grief” (Rev. 18:7) echoes the arrogant claim to divinity of the King of Tyre in Ezek. 28:2. Moreover, the command to “Come out” of Babylon so as not to share in her guilt and punishment (Rev. 18:4) was issued also to the exiled Israelites at the time of Babylon's fall to the Persians (Jer. 51:6); Babylon's sins are heaped “as high as heaven” both in Jer. 51:9 and Rev.18:5; and Babylon which was a “golden cup in the LORD's hand making all the earth drunken” (Jer. 51:7) now holds a golden cup filled with “abominations and the impurities of her fornication” (Rev. 17:4) from which the nations have all drunk (Rev. 18:3).

These allusions to former prophecies reinforce the suggestion initially made by the composite beast: Rome stands in continuity with the powers of Israel's past which have been destroyed for their arrogance and idolatry. Moreover, the argument of structure advanced concerning the significance of the composite beast beyond the Roman Empire also applies here, since the final sequence of judgements leading to the renewal of creation begins with the judgement against Babylon³⁸. It can be concluded that, according to the narrative structure of Revelation, the beast upon which Babylon rides has not yet been finally defeated. The foundations upon which anti-imperial interpreters build their critique of contemporary society are exegetically firm. Therefore I will now evaluate the ways that they discern in contemporary structures the characteristics of Empire judged in Revelation.

38 Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgement*, p. 68

Chapter 2

Babylon, the Beasts, and Economics

The beasts of Rev. 13 and Babylon share a number of behaviours: self-glorification leading to idolatry (Rev. 13:8; 18:7); military might and violence against the saints and all the inhabitants of the earth (Rev. 13:4-7; 17:6; 18:24); and influencing or dominating the economy with their idolatry (Rev. 13:16-17; 17:3-4; 18:7)³⁹. It is essential to note that all of these behaviours are linked to each other, and it is evident in the scholarship of Fiorenza that these three elements are drawn together to form a theology of justice which is applicable to our own times. She understands Revelation 18 to be a court room scene wherein a “class-action suite”⁴⁰ takes place. The plaintiffs are the Christians, representing the slain of the earth, and they bring charges against Babylon of “exploitation and murder in the interest of power and idolatry”⁴¹. The economic exploitation and violence of Babylon and the beast is wrapped up in the arrogant attempt to exalt themselves to the place of God, their idolatry.

In the passages cited for the third characteristic, the idolatrous arrogance of Babylon and the beast is explicitly linked with its control and abundance of wealth. It is through limiting the ability to buy and sell that the second beast attempts to force the inhabitants of the earth to worship the first (and by implication, the dragon cf. Rev. 13:4), and Babylon is punished because she has “glorified herself and lived luxuriously” (Rev. 18:7a). Indeed, it is because she lives in luxury that she is able to glorify herself and say “I rule as a queen, I am no widow, I will never see grief.” (Rev. 18:7b). Moreover, it is also implied in the list of cargoes (Rev. 18:11-13) that Rome's luxury is built on oppression and bloodshed. The position of slaves as the last “commodity” on the list, as Bauckham notes, “is a comment on the whole list of cargoes. It suggests the inhuman brutality, the contempt for human life, on which the whole of Rome's prosperity and luxury rests.”⁴² This is also reinforced by his interpretation of the phrasing of “slaves, the souls of men” as indicating that the slaves are not property but human lives, people, and much more than property⁴³. This threefold judgement of the Roman Empire is the lens through which anti-imperial interpretation seeks to view and critique contemporary institutions and structures, to the extent that they mimic the behaviour of Babylon and the beast.

39 Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgement*, p. 7

40 Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgement*, p. 7

41 Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgement*, p. 7

42 Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 370-1

43 Bauckham, *The Climax of Prophecy*, p. 370-1

What is seen through this lens, however, is subject to the perception of the viewer. Anti-imperial interpreters tend to understand the idolatry of Babylon and the beast in terms of its economic luxury/exploitation and bloodshed, rather than understanding the exploitation and bloodshed in terms of its idolatry. While this is a subtle difference, it reflects the central critique anti-imperial interpretation brings to contemporary structures and practices. It is founded less on a critique of idolatry and claims of unique loyalty to Christ, and more on a critique of the economic and social inequality caused by the imperial machine to the end of liberating those oppressed by it. This is also sometimes reflected at the fundamental level of how salvation itself is understood. Fiorenza argues that in the theology of Revelation, salvation is presented more as a concrete socio-economic and political reality rather than as incorporeal and spiritual experience: “He [John] no longer speaks of redemption from personal sins, but of the ransom of slaves from the whole world.”⁴⁴

Salvation is construed not in terms of the unique saving work of Christ, but in terms of the political and socio-economic liberation of those oppressed by the empire. The construction of this distinction between more traditional Christian formulations of salvation and that found in Revelation allows Fiorenza to assert socio-economic and political justice as the response to the idolatry, violence, economic injustice perpetrated by Babylon and the beast. Justice for the oppressed eliminates idolatry, because the idolatry *is* the economic exploitation and violence, rather than a root cause of it. Therefore when she concludes that final salvation is only possible when the “state of dominion on earth is radically changed...when Satan and the concrete representation of demonic power, the Roman Empire, no longer rule on earth...Only when God and the Lamb reign on earth is salvation accomplished.”⁴⁵, socio-economic and political liberation is in view as the accomplishment.

A similar interest in economics can be found in commentaries on Revelation influenced by anti-imperial interpretation. Woodman notes the Roman practice of *latifundia* in relation to the luxury of Babylon portrayed in Rev. 17:

Land was taken from smallholders and placed in control of city-based landowners, making those who farmed the land become tenant farmers. To cater for the spiralling demands of profitable luxury goods at the heart of the Empire, the landowners directed ever increasing sections of the land to be turned over to oil and wine production at the expense of grain, leading to a shortage of staple foods and a surplus of luxury items...The picture...is...that of the unsustainable nature of the Empire that directs money towards luxuries while exploiting those living in poverty at the fringes.⁴⁶

44 Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgement*, p. 68

45 Fiorenza, *Justice and Judgement*, p. 68

46 Woodman, *Revelation*, p. 152, 214

Moreover, Witherington also argues that the subject of Babylon's judgement is “in large part materialism and greed, the wrongful orientation towards the good things of this world.”⁴⁷ It is primarily by riches and luxury that the merchants and kings of the earth were convinced to commit fornication with Babylon, and Witherington sees significance in the fact that the call to “Come out” of Babylon (18:4) immediately follows the association of her fornication and wealth⁴⁸. Since the riches and wealth of Babylon are so tightly tied to her fornication and idolatry, it is primarily for this reason that God's people are called to “come out of her”.

The practice of exploiting conquered peoples to feed the luxury of the Empire bears many disturbing similarities to the operation of the current global economy. This is not lost on anti-imperial interpreters. Woodman continues to elaborate on the work of Howard Brook and Gwyther, who use the imagery of Revelation as a vehicle to communicate their critique of the economic ideology of global capitalism⁴⁹. They see in the trade relationships between the first world and third world an expression of the economic behaviour which is part of the reason for Babylon/Rome's judgement:

The compelling picture that they draw is one in which the merchants of the contemporary world grow rich from participation in the system of global capital, with those at the centre of the first world benefiting from the generally high standards of living while those on the margins in the third world are held in economic slavery and poverty to service the demand for luxury, convenience and entertainment at the heart of the Empire.⁵⁰

Christopher Rowland also notes the parallels between modern Western capitalism and the exploitative and idolatrous economics for which Babylon is judged. The idolatry at the heart of Western economics is the idolisation of wealth itself:

The work of our hands achieves a mystical quality with superhuman characteristics which displaces God. Nowhere in our contemporary language is this more evident than the way in which we ascribe almost supernatural quality to “the market”. A place of exchange between human agents is given superhuman status with a life of its own, beyond our control.⁵¹

It follows from this similarity in behaviour that the West will be similarly judged. The idolisation of wealth, fuelled by excessive consumption and greed, has led to stark inequalities between first and third world countries, as well as within Western nations. This is highlighted by anti-imperial interpreters as something which, when viewed

47 Witherington, *Revelation*, p. 226

48 Witherington, *Revelation*, p. 226

49 Woodman, *Revelation*, p. 215-6

50 Woodman, *Revelation*, p. 215

51 Christopher Rowland, *Revelation* (London: Epworth, 1993), p. 118

through the lens of Revelation, can be perceived as deserving the same judgement as was given to Babylon. For Howard Brook and Gwyther, the critique of Rome's economics present in Rev. 17-18 is applicable “whenever a system arises that perpetrates the corrupt economic ideals of ancient Rome”⁵². Rowland is more tentative, but the correlation is the same. Commenting on Rev. 17, he observes that it “invites us to consider carefully the history of our wealth, and to assess the extent to which the trading which forms a part of the business of our international order (18:3) is neutral in its inspiration and effects.”⁵³. The economic exploitation integral to the Roman Empire, upon which God pronounces judgement, is also our own. If we were to view the financial crisis through this lens, we might conclude that it is the beginning of that judgement. Having “sown the seeds of its own destruction through its oppressive, exploitative and unsustainable levels of consumption”⁵⁴, the economic system of global capital is now experiencing its “fall”.

The focus on the economic exploitation for which Babylon and the beasts are judged is partly due to the fact that it provides the easiest window through which to critique Western society. However, as we noted above, the judgement on Babylon and the beasts is threefold. Indeed, the elements of the visions mentioned above may actually suggest that Babylon and the beasts' engagement in exploitative and violent economics should be viewed as a product of their self-idolisation, rather than effectively identified with it⁵⁵. The second beast is motivated to violence through enforcing the idolatry of the first, and the fact that Babylon is seated on the first beast (Rev. 17:3) suggests that the economic injustice she perpetrates is somehow dependent on it, and by association its idolatry. The contemporary anti-imperial focus on the economic imitation of Babylon by the West is an important part of the lens through which we are to view the financial crisis. However, in order to ascertain whether Western civilisation stands under the same judgement as Rome did in its day or not, we must ask whether the West is guilty of the same violence and exploitation *committed to protect and enforce idolatry*.

Abundant prosperity, and even violent economic exploitation, are not the heart of the charges brought against Babylon and the beast: they are judged primarily because they dare to attempt to take God's place. The call to “come out” from Babylon exhorted Christians “to sever or avoid economic and political ties with Rome because the institutions and structures of the Roman Empire were saturated with unholy allegiance to an Emperor who claimed to be divine (or was treated as such).”⁵⁶ Therefore in order

52 Woodman, *Revelation*, p. 215-6

53 Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 118

54 Woodman, *Revelation*, p. 215-6

55 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 107

56 Kraybill, *Imperial Cult and Commerce*, p. 17

to trace the applicability of the judgement to the current Western economic system, we must ask whether this link (or something analogous to it) is present in the West. How, if at all, does the global capitalist economy attempt to force its participants to worship something that is not Christ, *and somehow attempts to impersonate him?*

Idolatry and Corporate Capitalism

At this juncture the work of Paul Mills and Michael Schluter will prove useful to us. Although not anti-imperial interpreters, their biblically founded moral critique of the current Western economic system - which they classify as “Corporate Capitalism”⁵⁷ - highlights some of the philosophical foundations and practical procedures which encourage participants to worship both Mammon and themselves rather than God. The exclusively materialistic vision of capitalism “lends itself to the idolatry of wealth at a personal level, and the idolatry of economic growth at a corporate and national level.”⁵⁸ The worship of Mammon leads to those controlling the flow of capital (shareholders, senior executives) pursuing wealth without a thought for how it is generated or the inequality this creates.

Companies encourage consumers to worship themselves in the form of their material desires, that is, in encouraging them to control and direct their lives, through expanding “current consumption beyond satisfied appetite...they seek to generate additional consumption through advertising, built in obsolescence and expansion of debt.”⁵⁹ It is very difficult to start a business, study at University, or buy a house without incurring considerable and constantly expanding debt. This means that a large proportion of any given Western democracy is likely to accumulate debt which they will be unable to pay during their lifetimes. According to Mills and Schluter's understanding of debt, founded on Prov. 22:7, it is essentially equivalent to bonded servitude or slavery “because of the solemn promise to repay”⁶⁰.

The situation the West finds itself in is one whereby the majority of its countries' populations are in a form of slavery, and companies exploit and encourage consumers' idolisation of their material desires in order to feed their own worship of Mammon. However, debt and advertising encourages, *but does not force* consumers to commit idolatry. This means that any parallel with the practice of the second beast of Revelation

57 Michael Schluter, “Is Capitalism Morally Bankrupt? Five Moral Flaws and their Social Consequences” in Paul Mills and Michael Schluter, *After Capitalism: Rethinking Economic Relationships* (Cambridge: Moreton Hall Press, 2012), p. 39

58 Michael Schluter, “Is Capitalism Morally Bankrupt?” in Mills and Schluter, *After Capitalism*, p. 43

59 Schluter, “Is Capitalism Morally Bankrupt?” in Mills and Schluter, *After Capitalism*, p. 43

60 Paul Mills, “The Great Financial Crisis: A Biblical Diagnosis” in Mills and Schluter, *After Capitalism*, p. 30

13 will be inexact. The economy is not attempting to force anyone to worship a figure held up as an imitation Lord in Christ's place. Nor is it even attempting to violently force participants to worship the inexactly parallel idols of themselves and Mammon. The nature of Mammon as an idol is very different to an Emperor who claims divinity. The system of global capital does exert considerable pressure on all participants to become slaves to their material wants, and draws many into a position of effective servitude to those wants through the accumulation of debt. However, there is not yet the coercion to the kind of idolatry seen in Revelation 13, whereby a figure explicitly claims (or has attributed to them) the power and status attributed by Christians to God and Christ alone. Anti-imperial interpreters are right to condemn the worship of Mammon present in and encouraged by our economic system, but this cannot be equated wholly with the edifice judged in Revelation 13, 17 and 18. This said, it is deeply concerning that some of the practices which led to judgement and destruction are present.

Indeed, the concentration of wealth, power and influence in increasingly fewer hands that the financial system has encouraged perhaps sows the seeds for the arrogant assumption of the qualities of divinity. One particular practice inherent in the current system (which is an interest/debt-based economy) seems a frightening miniature of Babylon's boast in Rev. 18:7. A fundamental assumption of interest-based finance is that economic conditions will be conducive to prosperity: "Borrowers hope they will have the wherewithal to repay while lenders believe that their security and the pooling of risk mean that the interest charged will cover any defaults...debt finance is based on making working assumptions about the future and making promises based on those projections."⁶¹

A particularly painful instance of the potential for disaster in this way of thinking is provided by the situation some Low Income Countries (LIC's) now find themselves in: attempting to pay spiralling debts at the cost of the welfare of their citizens. Banks lent and LIC's borrowed at very high rates during the 1970's when interest was low and commodity prices were quickly rising. However, when the prices of commodities fell sharply in the early 1980's at the same time as interest rates rose, LIC's were forced to greatly increase their exports and submit to austerity programs devised by the IMF (International Monetary Fund). As a result, much of the potential natural wealth of LIC's is used growing cash crops which are sent to the richest countries in the world, and the living standards in the poorest countries have dropped significantly⁶². Mills grimly

61 Mills, "The Great Financial Crisis" in Mills and Schluter, *After Capitalism*, p. 33

62 Mills, "The Ban on Interest: Dead Letter or Radical Solution?" in Mills and Schluter, *After Capitalism*, p. 115

observes: “The lives of millions have been lost as a direct result.”⁶³.

Neither party is blameless, but it is striking to note the similarity of the systemic assumption of prosperity to the confidence of Babylon in her own security and luxury. We do not know the future, but the current financial crisis was in large part caused by the assumption that the future would consistently lead to prosperity, when in fact the opposite turned out to be the case⁶⁴. However, since this has not (so far as can be seen) led yet to any public claims to divine status or demands for worship on the part of those benefiting the most from the financial system, we may conclude that whatever seeds are present in the West of Babylon and the beast's behaviour have not grown and flowered yet.

While it is very difficult to shop or bank in the first world without becoming partly involved and responsible for the injustices perpetrated for the sake of Mammon, contributing to injustice (though a vexing problem in itself) is qualitatively different to forming economic and political ties with a figure attempting to replace God as Lord of the world. This being the case, perhaps it would be possible to understand the current financial crisis (and even the cycle of boom and bust?) as more of a warning than the beginning of destruction. In his mercy, God is not allowing our prosperity to grow to the point of deceiving us to openly and forcibly challenge his place in the lives of his people as the beasts did. If the opportunity to change provided by the crisis is not taken, however, then those seeds of arrogance may be given opportunity to grow. If the consequence of this as defined by Revelation is taken seriously, it demands a response.

Assessing the Anti-Imperial Lens

At this point we may consider the ways in which our discussion has answered the questions highlighted in the introduction. Firstly, has the anti-imperial interpretation of Revelation 13 and 17-18 been wholly faithful to the text in drawing out the lens through which to view our society? The answer must be no, because of the way in which the accusation of economic injustice is emphasised as the main reason for judgement. It becomes the lens through which all the other charges against Babylon are viewed, and therefore leans towards too easily finding parallel judgement as well as parallel behaviour. Particularly in the writings of Howard Brook, Gwyther and Rowland, it is the economic injustice of Babylon which is the prime cause of her destruction⁶⁵.

63 Mills, “The Ban on Interest: Dead Letter or Radical Solution?” in Mills and Schluter, *After Capitalism*, p. 115

64 Mills, “The Great Financial Crisis” in Mills and Schluter, *After Capitalism*, p. 28

65 Woodman, *Revelation*, p. 215-6

Therefore the parallel behaviour in the Western economy must lead to similar destruction. However, the destruction of Babylon cannot be separated from the idolatry of the beast: she is dependent on it⁶⁶, the economic injustice perpetrated by her would not be but for the beast's blasphemous imitation of Christ. There is no direct parallel for this kind of idolatry in modern Western society, and as such it cannot be said that it currently stands under the same judgement.

This gives us the answer to our second question: how are we to evaluate the anti-imperial interpretation of Rev. 13, 17 and 18 as a lens through which to view the financial crisis? In light of the way in which it highlights God's opposition to the injustice partly systemic in the form of Capitalism that governs contemporary global economics, we must conclude that it performs an extremely important function. Indeed, it allows us to recognise that, left unchanged, these seeds might grow into the very behaviour that leads to the inescapable destruction of arrogant Empires. However, the weakness of the interpretation is also the weakness of its application. By separating Babylon's destruction from the specific kind of idolatry her crimes were rooted in, anti-imperial interpreters have allowed for parallels to be drawn with our society which are not yet justified.

The reason for the economic focus of anti-imperial interpretation may be that it is deeply rooted in liberation theology. A central hermeneutical assumption of it is that those on the economic margins of society provide an important counter-narrative to “that told by the wielders of economic power whose story becomes the 'normal' account.”⁶⁷. Moreover, this alternative story formulated through the point of view of the poor presents the “vantage point of the crucified God and can act as a criterion for theological reflection”⁶⁸. Both Fiorenza and Rowland advocate this hermeneutic⁶⁹, so it is unsurprising to find Liberation theology's concern with economic critique in their writings on Revelation.

The Beasts and the Law

The economy is not the only societal structure through which the behaviour of the beast expressed itself. The imperial cult was built into the legal and social structures of Roman Imperial Asia, and had the effect of coercing, sometimes tacitly and sometimes

66 Rowland, *Revelation*, pp. 132-4

67 Christopher Rowland, “Introduction” in Christopher Rowland (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 1999) p. 6

68 Rowland, “Introduction” in Rowland (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, p. 7

69 Rowland, *Revelation*, p. 141; Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Revelation: Vision of a Just World* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993), p. 3

overtly, those associated with it to bow to the Emperor before Christ. In this chapter I will examine the ways in which Roman Imperial society reflected the behaviour of the beasts. Moreover, I will ask the question of whether this behaviour is also present in a more recent trend. Does limiting the manifestation of conservative Christian conviction in the public sector via anti-discrimination legislation reflect the behaviour of the beast?

The potential first and second century historical referents of the persecution of the saints which Revelation 13 describes have been outlined and utilised by anti-imperial interpreters. However, no parallels have been drawn in our own times to this situation as they have with the economic injustice associated with Babylon and the beasts. First of all then, I will outline the debate surrounding the Imperial cult and the persecution of Christians seen through the lens of Revelation 13. Scholars have often dated Revelation to the reign of Domitian. They have interpreted the corroboration of the writings of Suetonius and Eusebius as confirmation of widespread persecution under his rule, as well as pretensions to divinity. Suetonius writes that he allowed himself to be referred to as “My Lord and my God”⁷⁰.

However, the historical referent of John's description of the behaviour of the second beast may not have existed during his lifetime. More recent scholarship has doubted the reliability of Suetonius' testimony⁷¹, as his writings were commissioned by the Emperor who succeeded Domitian, Trajan. Writing for the first of the new dynasty, Suetonius had a vested interest in presenting the preceding ruler in as dim a light as possible so as to set in sharp focus the numerous benefits of the new government⁷². It is argued that the contemporary situation implied by the letters written to the seven churches (Revelation 2-3) is that of sporadic, localised persecution, rather than the worldwide violent coercion envisaged in Rev. 13:15⁷³. The only martyrdom mentioned is that of Antipas, Christ's “faithful witness” (Rev. 2:13). The only other external problems addressed come from Jewish groups and travelling “false” apostles (Rev. 2:2 & 9; 3:9)⁷⁴. Therefore the kind of persecution envisaged in Revelation 13 does not seem to be present in any of the congregations being written to. However, what can be said with relative assurance is that the Imperial cult was pervasive at a local level in Asia minor during the first and second centuries⁷⁵.

70 Ian Boxall, *Revelation: Vision and Insight* (London: SPCK, 2002), p. 88

71 Boxall, *Revelation*, p. 90-91

72 Michael Naylor, “The Roman Imperial Cult and Revelation”, *Currents in Biblical Research*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2010, p. 226

73 Bernard Green, *Christianity in Ancient Rome: The First Three Centuries*, (London and New York: T & T Clark (a Continuum reprint), 2010), p. 138

74 Stephen Friesen, “Satan's Throne, Imperial Cults and the Social Settings of Revelation”, *Journal For the Study of the New Testament*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2005, p. 366

75 Naylor, “The Roman Imperial Cult”, *Biblical Research*, p. 215

While there is little direct evidence of specific instances of legal pressure being brought to bear on Christians to conform to the culture created by the imperial cult, it is clear that anti-Christian sentiment existed in Roman society. Tacitus, writing about the persecution of Christians under Nero, refers to the possibility of Christians being found guilty not of arson, but of a “hatred of humanity”⁷⁶. In the eyes of many Romans, Christianity was a *superstitio coniuratio*: the links formed between members of the community competed with those of traditional society; a solemn ceremony was performed to initiate members into the community; it gained many adherents; and was sometimes perceived to be hostile towards the state. As such, it was seen as a subversive threat to the fabric traditional Roman society⁷⁷. This, combined with the permeation of the imperial cult into many different layers of Roman Asian society, provided the situation within which localised persecutions of Christians could arise at any time in the first two centuries BCE.

The practice of burning incense to a bust of the Emperor was used at various times as something of a litmus test of loyalty, and as such could acquit anyone accused of being a Christian⁷⁸. Moreover, shortly after the latest estimate of Revelation's dating (81-96 BCE), swearing an oath of loyalty to the Emperor was used as a device to convict Christians to death by Pliny the Younger⁷⁹. While the use of oaths in this particular instance was not approved of by the Emperor⁸⁰, punishment for refusing to pay respects to the gods and his image was⁸¹. Whether this practice was common during the time of Revelation's writing or shortly afterwards, the potential for historical parallels between the behaviour of local governors and the beast from the land in Rev. 13 can be said to exist.

Indeed, these possibilities began to be realised when the decree of Decius required an empire wide public act of worship verifiable by certificate. Those who refused, including the bishop of Rome, were killed⁸². We may remind ourselves that the characteristic of the beast revealed and then judged is that of pressing all into the service of its idolatrous self-glorification by any means necessary. Both the direct, violent coercion to renounce Christ and the subtle but firm pressure of a prevailing culture of

76 Thomas B. Slater, “On the Social Setting of the Revelation to John”, *New Testament Studies*, vol. 44, no. 2, 1998, p. 248-9

77 Agnes A. Nagy, “Superstitio e Coniuratio”, *Numen*, vol. 49, no. 2, 2002, p. 178

78 David S. Potter, “Odor and Power in the Roman Empire” in James I. Porter (ed.) *Constructions of the Classical Body* (University of Michigan Press, 2002), p. 179

79 <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1233&context=honors>, p. 23-4 accessed 06.08.2012

80 <http://digitalcommons.liberty.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1233&context=honors>, p. 23-4 accessed 06.08.2012

81 Slater, “On the Social Setting”, *New Testament Studies*, p. 249

82 Green, *Christianity in Rome*, p. 152

Emperor worship present in first and second century Roman-Asian society⁸³ are reflected in the passage. All the inhabitants of the earth whose names are not written in the Lamb's book of life follow the beast (Rev. 13:8), and the second beast is able to cause all those who do not worship the image of the beast to be killed (Rev. 13:15).

The question of whether this characteristic of the beast may be discerned in our times has not been broached in practice, though the theory of the anti-imperial interpretation of Revelation 13 does allow for it. It does not recognise any parallel between the legal pressure put on Christians to conform to the culture created by the Imperial cult and the difficulties faced by some Christians in Western democracies. This is because there is not yet widespread action against Christians in an attempts to force them to conform to the prevailing culture at the expense of their loyalty to Christ. If recent scholarship on the social setting of Revelation is to be trusted, however, this was not the case when those visions were seen either. What was present was a climate within which legal and occasionally lethal pressure could be exerted on Christians, in order to make them conform to the dominant culture of Emperor worship. In the same way, a number of exceptional cases in recent years have set the ethical values of modern liberal democracy in direct legal conflict with the public manifestation of Christian convictions. If there is a spiritual as well as situational parallel, then there is considerable cause for concern.

A Reflection of the Beast

The case of Lillian Ladele demonstrates the possibility that, in the present day, Christians may be excluded from holding positions as civil servants due to the manifestation of their convictions concerning sexual morality. It is important to note that Islington council did not have to take the course of action that it did, but felt morally obligated to do so due to their equality policy, which all employees were expected to adhere to⁸⁴. When the prevailing values of liberal democracy clashed with those of conservative Christianity, the law supported those of liberal democracy. The use of the anti-discrimination legislation to effectively outlaw (in Islington council) the manifestation of conservative Christian conviction concerning sexuality by any of its employees could be seen as an inexact parallel to the kind of pressure exerted on first and second century Asian Christians. They were living in a culture saturated with the values of the Imperial cult, which also directly clashed with their convictions

83 Wright, "Paul's Gospel and Caesar's Empire" in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 161

84 http://www.christian.org.uk/eat_ladele_19dec08.pdf, p. 7, accessed 03.09.2012

concerning the Lordship of Christ. In the eyes of the conservative Christians concerned, the challenge to the Lordship of Christ in their lives is the same now as it was then, as in both cases Christians were being legally required to act in such a way as to disregard it.

A similar choice has been presented to Catholic adoption agencies who receive government funding: many were told that unless they began to recommend children for adoption by homosexual couples, their funding would be withdrawn⁸⁵. This effectively meant that their choice was to change their practice to conflict with their convictions regarding sexuality and the best situation within which to raise a child, or close and cease to provide their services⁸⁶. The pressure to conform to the prevailing understanding of what it means to treat all persons with equal dignity was exerted through the legal mechanisms of local government. The way in which this was done is at least partially analogous to the practice of the local Roman governors in making Christians choose between Christ and the Emperor.

We may also note the possibility of anti-Christian sentiment existing in certain sections of society surrounding issues of sexuality. A potentially interesting case in point involves a comment (later retracted) in evidence submitted by the Equality and Human Rights Commission during the proceedings of *Johns vs Derby City Council* (2011). Purportedly, it likened conservative Christian views on homosexuality to an “infection” which could be passed on from foster parents to children⁸⁷. This was said to be a “drafting error”, and the EHRC subsequently published an apology⁸⁸. Unfortunately the form of the submission which caused such controversy is now unavailable. If indeed the comparison was made, the sentiment expressed is of the same kind as Tacitus when referring to Christians “hatred of humanity”, albeit on a much smaller scale.

The trend of restricting the ability of Christians to manifest certain convictions in the public sector could combine with a disdain for certain aspects of orthodox Christian belief to make the exceptional cases discussed above more frequent. Although the parallel is not exact (the threat of death is absent), there are striking similarities in character between this pattern and the behaviour of the beast. Forcing Christians to choose who to obey when there is a public conflict of values mimics the practice of the Roman Empire condemned in Revelation. The judgement issued on *Johns vs Derby* contained an excerpt from the EHRC submission which suggested that ““there is often

85 <http://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/publications/upload/Clearing-the-ground.pdf>, p. 22, accessed 03.09.2012

86 <http://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/publications/upload/Clearing-the-ground.pdf>, p. 22, accessed 03.09.2012

87 <http://www.christian.org.uk/news/equality-commission-sorry-for-christian-infection-jibe/>, accessed 08.08.2012

88 <http://www.equalityhumanrights.com/legal-and-policy/legal-updates/johns-v-derby-city-council/>, accessed 08.08.2012

scope for change where a person is willing to perform his or her professional duties in a way required by applicable standards notwithstanding personal belief” and that “attitudes too might be changed, moderated or modified through training, counselling and support”⁸⁹. While there is no figure to publicly worship instead of Christ, the legal pressure exerted on Ladele and Catholic adoption agencies to act as though the values of their employers or funders were worth more to them than those of their Lord embodies a similar sentiment. Indeed, this conflict highlights a form of idolatry pervasive within the modern world: the idolatry of the self. The definition of morality without reference to God necessarily puts people in his place, and to a certain extent the morality that exists in the institutions of liberal democracy is defined by people in explicit opposition to the morality revealed in the Christian tradition as God's. Viewed through the lens of Revelation, these instances have at their heart the same spirit which attempted to coerce Christians to worship the Emperor in first and second century Imperial Asia.

Conclusion

It has been seen that viewing the financial crisis and the curtailing of religious liberty through the lens of Revelation 13, 17 and 18 provides an inexact parallel. Positively it must be said that there are some very clear, if partial, reflections of the beasts' and Babylon's behaviour in these contemporary situations. Anti-imperial interpreters are right to point out the parallels between the unjust economic system underpinning the Roman Empire and our own. Indeed, the recognition that the system of global capital, left unchanged, could lead to Western society coming under the same judgement as Babylon and the beasts could not require a more urgent response. However, some (Howard Brook and Gwyther in particular) overstretch this parallel when they claim that the critique of Babylon in Rev. 17-18 can be applied whenever only the *economic* behaviour of Rome is replicated in contemporary structures. Even though the worship of Mammon and the encouragement to worship material desires at the heart of the Western economy is deplorable, at the moment it does not force participants to worship anything set up in God's place. Temptation may be present, but not coercion.

With regards to religious liberty, the pattern of Roman Imperial Asia finds a closer parallel. The dominant understanding of what it means to treat persons with equal dignity is occasionally being forced by law on some Christians whose understanding differs. This legally requires participation in a certain form of idolatry, which echoes the

⁸⁹ <http://www.bailii.org/cgi-bin/markup.cgi?doc=/ew/cases/EWHC/Admin/2011/375.html&query=johns+and+derby&method=boolean>, para 61, accessed 08.08.2012

beast's blasphemous attempt to take God's place by defining right from wrong in opposition to what is revealed in the Jewish-Christian tradition. The choice between livelihood and the expression of deeply held conviction closely parallels the decisions early Christians had to make between denying Christ and imprisonment. However, this very concerning pattern is not yet fully developed: the economic sanctions imposed by the second beast to enforce idolatry have no parallel in our society. This being the case, we may say that something like the behaviour of Babylon and the beasts is present in the West, and it is cause for serious concern, but its full measure is not present yet.

Therefore we may conclude that the anti-imperial interpretation of Rev. 13, 17 and 18 has illuminated some disturbing features of our contemporary situation, and given us important insight as to how to understand the spiritual dynamics beneath them. However, whatever critique may be levelled at the global economic system and the curtailing of religious liberty in the UK, it cannot yet be along the lines of absolute condemnation and destruction that are present in Rev. 17-19. The injustice and coercion to idolatry are present in part, but not closely intertwined. The financial crisis is best understood in terms of God's judgement on all unjust economies (as in the prophetic tradition which Revelation is indebted to), rather than specifically along the lines described in Rev. 17-19. The economic difficulties faced by Western nations provide the chance to change, rather than heralding the utter destruction of Western society. The legal coercion to conform may be understood as directly reflecting the behaviour of the beast, but the partial nature of this reflection means that the judgement pronounced against the beast will not yet be pronounced against the West. However, these insights into the spiritual heart of Western society demand a response. Moreover, whatever response is formulated must be proportionate to the partial presence of this behaviour in our society, and be aimed at preventing the development of these seeds into more exact parallels.

Revelation furnished its hearers/readers with two interlocking responses to the situations displayed in Ch. 13, 17 and 18. The call to “come out” of Babylon (Rev. 18:4) applies to contemporary Christians only to the extent that they must be wary of the tendency of the economic system towards causing participants to worship their material desires and Mammon⁹⁰. Since the economic system has a tendency towards, but not a compulsion to, a certain kind of idolatry, it is possible to participate in it without connecting oneself to the kind of blasphemy condemned in Rev. 13. Similarly, the call for “the endurance and faith of the saints” sounded in Rev. 13:10 applies to those Christians whose acting upon their convictions has cost them their livelihoods just as it

90 Witherington III, *Revelation*, pp. 226-7

did those in the first Century. The call to “Come out” is also reflected in the anti-imperial vision of Richard A. Horsley. Drawn in particular from his interpretation of 1 Corinthians, it argues that the early church responded to the injustice perpetrated by the Roman Empire by forming a distinctly separate, alternative society with radically different economic and social practices. In our democratic situation, however, another possible constructive response is that of engaging government and financial institutions with recommendations for reform. Oliver O'Donovan's political theology as set out in *The Desire of the Nations* and Mills and Schluter's *After Capitalism* are excellent examples of this response. The next two parts of this dissertation will compare and evaluate these two positions.

Part 2: The Anti-Imperial Church

Chapter 3

Richard Horsley and 1 Corinthians

The scholarship of Richard A. Horsley on 1 Corinthians will be my starting point for discussing how the Church should respond to the reflection of the beasts and Babylon in the West. His interpretation of the structure and vision of the Church from this text forms the centre of his understanding of the church as decidedly anti-imperial. We will assess this understanding in two related parts: the eschatological vision of the early church; and its separation from the surrounding society both in values and practice. The key passages for Horsley which signal the anti-imperial orientation of the early church's eschatology are 1 Cor. 2:6-8 and 15:17-26. The first passage serves to emphasise Paul's argument in 1 Cor. 1-2 concerning the radical difference between human wisdom and the wisdom of God. Horsley notes an assertion actually tangential to this argument in v. 6 as evidence for the expectation of the eschatological destruction of every political power which opposes Christ⁹¹. The rulers of this age, whose wisdom Paul is contrasting with God's, are said to be "doomed to perish" (1 Cor. 2:6). Horsley is careful to emphasise that the "rulers of this age", referred to are political and *not* spiritual, in an effort to guard against what he views as the post-Pauline spiritualisation of this expectation⁹².

Moreover, he makes a link not explicitly emphasized in this particular passage, that the rulers are doomed to destruction precisely *because* they crucified "the Lord of glory" (1 Cor. 2: 8). However, this link is implied within the eschatological framework further evidenced in 1 Cor. 15: 3-5;17-26. The crucifixion of the "Lord of glory" is followed by his resurrection and appearance to many disciples, including Paul (1 Corinthians 3-5). After his resurrection Christ is described as reigning "until all his enemies are put under his feet" (1 Cor. 15:25), and "every ruler and every authority and every power" (1 Cor. 15:24) are amongst those to be destroyed before he hands over the kingdom to God the Father. The ignorance of the rulers of the age who crucified Christ means that before the end they will be destroyed, because they do not submit to his rule. Since Christ's death led to his resurrection and exaltation, Horsley is right to make the inference.

91 Richard Horsley, "Rhetoric and Empire – and 1 Corinthians" in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 92

92 Horsley, "Rhetoric and Empire" in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 92, footnote

Reading this expectation in the light of Paul's comments concerning the nearness of the end of the age, Horsley argues that Paul is explicitly asserting the *immanent* destruction of these political powers. We may note here how Horsley emphasises the politically subversive slant of the early Church's eschatology: "To speak a gospel of the crucified was also "foolish" in the sense of politically suicidal, because it would bring the Romans down on one's head...In 1 Corinthians in particular...Paul explicitly articulated the anti-imperial political implications of Christ's enthronement as the true Lord or "emperor" of the world."⁹³.

It is this interpretation of Paul's eschatology that allows Horsley to envisage the early Church as an alternative political community set *over against* the surrounding society⁹⁴. The sharp difference between the values of the *ekklesia* (Christ, the wisdom from God) and those of the surrounding Imperial society is tied up in the eschatological expectation of the destruction of rulers, powers and authorities. Of particular note here is Horsley's understanding of Paul's use of rhetoric in 1 Corinthians. Paul uses Greco-Roman rhetorical forms to subvert what they are usually attached to⁹⁵. He rejects outright the high value placed on rhetorical persuasion (1 Cor. 1:17-20), but offers himself as a paradigm for the Corinthians to follow (1 Corinthians 1-4, 8-10, 12-14). This was a common orators tool, but the "*ethos*...he presented...was virtually the antithesis of the epitome of aristocratic virtue and values standard in Greco-Roman rhetoric...weak, foolish, poor (and working with one's hands for a living), lowly and despised, rather than powerful, wise, wealthy (living from others' labour), noble and honoured (1 Cor. 4:8-13), and compelled by necessity rather than living by one's own free will (1 Cor. 9:15-19)."⁹⁶. Moreover, by exhorting the Corinthian *ekklesia* to unity and solidarity with each other based on values embedded in the gospel, Paul was subverting the unity commonly called for in Greco-Roman public oratory, which was based on an antithetical set of values.

As this unity "formed the very basis of the Pax Romana"⁹⁷, according to Horsley, Paul would seem to be attempting to upset the social and political fabric of Corinthian society. He taught that the *ekklesia* must stay sharply separate from Imperial society, opposing it in terms of values and practice⁹⁸. Two examples of the way in which the values of the early church were intended by Paul to lead to non-participation in the life of Imperial Corinth are noted by Horsley, in 1 Corinthians 6 and 10. In the former

93 Horsley, "Rhetoric and Empire" in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 92

94 Horsley, "Rhetoric and Empire" in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 74

95 Horsley, "Rhetoric and Empire" in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 74

96 Horsley, "Rhetoric and Empire" in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 90

97 Horsley, "Rhetoric and Empire" in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 91

98 Horsley, "Rhetoric and Empire" in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 90-91

passage, Paul admonishes members in the *ekklesia* for bringing lawsuits against each other in a local court. Though Paul rebukes the Corinthians for resorting to legal action at all (1 Cor. 6:7-8), matters are apparently made worse because they did so through an “unrighteous” court (1 Cor. 6:1). Paul's argument in 1 Cor. 6:2-6 evidences the link between his eschatology and the separation in practice of the *ekklesia* from mainstream society. The saints are to “judge the world”, therefore it is ridiculous that no one can be found to arbitrate between conflicting parties within the assembly (1 Cor. 6:2)⁹⁹.

Paul refers to a tradition that is partially in evidence also in 1 Cor. 15, but wholly in the Gospels and Revelation. Christ reveals to his disciples that they will be given authority to judge the twelve tribes (Matt. 19: 28; Luke 22:30), and the martyred saints are given a millennium to reign with Christ at the end of the age in Rev. 20:4. Paul seems to extend this honour to all believers, referring to Christ's resurrection as the “first-fruits” in 1 Cor. 15:20 and implying here and elsewhere (Rom. 8:17) that those who share in Christ's resurrection will in some sense share in a measure of the authority given to him. If, therefore, the Corinthians find themselves unable to appoint as judge one of their own, they are essentially denying the authority that has been promised them in Christ¹⁰⁰. Horsley interprets this authority as intentionally challenging the social order of Corinthian society, since the Christian *ekklesia* is intended to constitute an entirely separate socio-political entity. It is a self contained microcosm of God's coming kingdom, and as such should function in oppositional relation to, but independent of, surrounding society¹⁰¹.

The second example of this separation comes in 1 Corinthians 10, where Paul forbids the *ekklesia* from partaking in the “sacrificial meals that constitute the overlapping networks of communal relations in Corinthian society”¹⁰². This practice is indirectly related to the eschatological expectation which Horsley interprets as anti-imperial: the unique loyalty of Christians to the Lordship of Christ should, according to Paul, bar them from eating meat at a meal where a sacrifice to the Roman gods is also taking place. Paul makes a distinction between simply eating meat sold at market which has previously been sacrificed to idols (1 Cor. 10:25) and partaking in “the table of demons” (1 Cor. 10:21). The former is allowed, the latter is not, seemingly because of the spiritual implications of “sharing” in Christ or demons through a ceremonial meal (1 Cor. 10:16-20).

However the social and political, rather than the spiritual, implications of not partaking in these meals is what concerns Horsley. By refusing to attend them, the

99 Horsley, “Rhetoric and Empire” in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 90-91

100 O'Donovan, *The Desire of The Nations*, p. 150

101 Horsley, “Rhetoric and Empire” in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 91

102 Horsley, “Rhetoric and Empire” in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 91

members of the *ekklesia* cut themselves off from much of the commercial and social life of Corinth: trade guild dinners, public holidays and civic ceremonies all involved the sacrificial meal Paul commands the Corinthians to avoid¹⁰³. This is further evidence for Horsley that the early church viewed itself as a rival political society, with very different values and allegiances to those surrounding it. As such, it was instructed to behave in such a way as to protest against, by virtue of its practice, the values and allegiances of Imperial Corinth.

It cannot be denied that the practices Paul exhorts the Corinthians to would separate them from the surrounding society. The Christian refusal to ceremonially honour the gods and the Emperor was often seen by Romans as imperilling the welfare of their society¹⁰⁴, and as such it does constitute an opposition to the very fabric of the “*Pax Romana*”. This peace was dependent on the “*Pax Deorum*”: honouring the gods, among whom the Emperor was counted¹⁰⁵. For Paul, and for the early church, their loyalty to Christ did not allow them to bow the knee to any other God or Lord in the way that Roman *pietas* required. It is therefore unsurprising that the anti-Christian sentiment and sporadic persecution noted in previous chapters developed. Before I explore the ways in which these practices of the early church might be applied to our own situation, however, a number of criticisms that Horsley's exegesis has attracted must be noted.

Interpretive Flaws and Dangerous (mis)Appropriation

There are a number of related elements in Horsley's interpretation of 1 Corinthians which give cause for concern. The first is the attribution of an aggressive attitude of subversion towards the unjust practices and structures of Imperial society to Paul and the early church; the second is the potentially dangerous application of this attitude to our own times. The tendency of Horsley to emphasise as explicit opposition what seems in fact only implicit has been noted by a number of scholars (White, Bryan¹⁰⁶). It is argued by Horsley that using such titles as “Lord” for Jesus and “*euangelion*” to announce the news of his coming constituted a deliberate attack on the pretensions of Roman Emperors to divinity and imperial rule as “good news”. These phrases were the language and titles of the Imperial cult: Caesar was proclaimed as “Lord”¹⁰⁷, and “in

103 Horsley, “Rhetoric and Empire” in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 91; John Domonic Crossan and Jonathan L. Creed, *In Search of Paul: How Jesus' Apostle Opposed Rome's Empire with God's Kingdom* (London: SPCK, 2005), p. 143

104 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 177

105 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 117

106 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 83; Joel White, “Anti-Imperial Subtexts in Paul: An Attempt at Building a Firmer Foundation”, *Biblica*, Vol. 90 (2009), p. 313

107 N.T. Wright, “Paul and Caesar: A New Reading of Romans” in C. Bartholomew (ed.), *A Royal*

Greek cities such as Corinth, *euangelion* was the “gospel” of the “salvation” and “peace and security” established by the imperial savior Augustus”¹⁰⁸.

According to Horsley, Paul's use of these terms to refer to Christ was motivated primarily by a desire to oppose these claims. Indeed, as well as forming an alternative and separate society in Corinth, Horsley argues that “In his use of key terms and symbols from political public oratory and imperial ideology, Paul was thus proclaiming an alternative gospel of an alternative emperor”¹⁰⁹. This has been criticised as stretching instances of parallel terms too far, because the terms suggested as being used primarily to supplant titles applied to the Emperor also appear frequently in the Septuagint. White and Bryan question the assertion that Paul specifically formulated his terms to set himself in opposition to the proclamation of the Roman Empire and Emperor about itself. It is more plausible, they argue, that Paul uses the titles he does for Jesus primarily because of his Jewish background¹¹⁰.

White notes that *kurios* would likely be the first term to be appropriated from the Septuagintal tradition for someone who “wanted to bring Jesus into the closest associations with Israel's God”¹¹¹. Moreover, since this title was used for Jesus in Jerusalem before Paul began his mission to the Gentiles¹¹², it is difficult to sustain the argument that Paul chose this vocabulary *solely* based on an opposition to the Imperial cult. Bryan also points out that the usage of similar vocabulary does not automatically mean that Paul is intending to confront and resist the Imperial counterparts¹¹³. The fact that the Greek language was used in Christian, Jewish and pagan discourse means that the parallel use of religious terms is in fact inevitable. Their occurrence alone does not allow us to assume that they were formulated primarily to challenge parallel narratives¹¹⁴. While it is highly likely that the implication of proclaiming Jesus as the highest Lord would not have been lost on those immersed in first century Roman Imperial society, we are simply not able to prove that Paul specifically tailored the titles he uses for Jesus to present him as an alternative Emperor¹¹⁵.

This does not mean that significant parallels are totally absent from 1 Corinthians (the term *parousia* in 15:23 has no equivalent in the Septuagint, but was used in relation to the Emperor visiting a town or city¹¹⁶), but it does cast doubt on the attitude of

Priesthood: The Use of the Bible Ethically and Politically (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2002), p. 173

108 Horsley, “Rhetoric and Empire” in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 92

109 Horsley, “Rhetoric and Empire” in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 92

110 White, “Anti-Imperial Subtexts in Paul”, *Biblica*, p. 313

111 White, “Anti-Imperial Subtexts in Paul”, *Biblica*, p. 309

112 White, “Anti-Imperial Subtexts in Paul”, *Biblica*, p. 310

113 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 84

114 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 90-91

115 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 91

116 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 82-3

deliberate and aggressive opposition Horsley attributes to Paul. The opposition of the proclamation of the early church to Imperial pretensions to supremacy was implicit in the assertion that the coming Christ is Lord of *all*. In this sense Horsley is right to highlight the eschatological framework in 1 Cor. 2 & 15 as subversive (which White and Bryan confirm¹¹⁷), but wrong to assume that it is *specifically* the Roman Empire which is the intended object of subversion. The good news is not simply that the Roman Empire will be replaced by the Kingdom of God, but that *every* system of government which does not reflect and pursue God's justice, recognising its humble position under him, will be replaced¹¹⁸.

Horsley's estimation of Paul's intentions, while contested, is not necessarily a problem in itself. However, when combined with the absence of any mention of love conditioning Paul and the early church's opposition to the Empire, it could lead to a dangerously lopsided interpretation of the contemporary political significance of 1 Corinthians. Horsley recognises that Paul was no political agitator or revolutionary¹¹⁹. He views the methods of Paul's opposition as covert, subverting the Roman Imperial order by "catalyzing" communities in which Imperial values, discourse and social norms were challenged through the formation of alternative practices¹²⁰. However, the attitude that is attributed to him is so aggressively subversive that we may be forgiven for thinking that given the political opportunity, his methods would have been open and violent (this indeed is how Bryan seems to interpret Horsley's arguments¹²¹).

This is certainly the way in which Neil Elliot, another anti-imperial interpreter, seems to understand Paul's attitude to resisting the Empire¹²². He frames his examination of potentially anti-imperial subtexts in Romans with an explanation of the way that the majority of resistance to oppressive practices in government is covert, since the time for open, violent action is rarely opportune¹²³. The implication is that when Paul was writing Romans (and presumably all through his ministry), he took care not to openly encourage violent resistance to the Empire, not because he thought this an inappropriate line of response, but simply because the situation did not allow for it. However, more concerning even than this allowance is the fact that Horsley's interpretation does not guard against the danger of violent resistance being motivated by vengeance¹²⁴. It is his

117 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 92; White, "Anti-Imperial Subtexts in Paul", *Biblica*, pp. 315-33

118 Burk, "Is Paul's Gospel Counter Imperial?", *JETS*, p. 322

119 Richard Horsley, "Introduction" in Richard A. Horsley (ed.), *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order* (Continuum International, 2004), p. 3

120 Horsley, "Introduction" in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, p. 3

121 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 9 & 111

122 Neil Elliot, "Blasphemed Among the Nations: Pursuing an Anti-imperial "Intertextuality" in Romans" (<http://www.ntgateway.com/paul-the-apostle/romans/>, accessed 01.02.2012), p. 5

123 Elliot, "Blasphemed Among the Nations", p. 5

124 Richard Horsley, "Ethics and Exegesis: "Love Your Enemies" and the Doctrine of Non-Violence" in William M. Swartley (ed.), *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation in the New Testament*

failure to mention Christ like love conditioning any opposition to Empire which allows for this. He outlines how Paul explicitly proclaims the immanent destruction of the Roman Empire in 1 Corinthians 15 without any mention of how the Corinthians were instructed by him in the “more excellent way” (1 Cor. 12:31). This leaves the way open for the application of his interpretation in a spirit of bitterness and vengeance against contemporary imperial powers. Moreover, in his work on the Gospels he attempts to systematically demolish the interpretation of Jesus’ “Love your enemy” sayings (Matt. 5:38-48; Lk. 6:27-36) that applies them to political enemies¹²⁵. This supports the attitudes of other scholars such as Crossan who directly mention the use of violence as a possibility for pursuing justice in the world¹²⁶, albeit as a last resort. Horsley elsewhere draws parallels between the Roman Empire and America/the West, in the same way as the anti-imperial interpreters of Revelation discussed above¹²⁷. Allowing space for the response to injustice to be both violent and vengeful is, at the very least, a dangerous oversight.

The roots of this kind of exegesis once again lie in liberation theology, which has theologially justified a lifestyle of resistance and revolution for the sake of justice since its inception in South America¹²⁸. However, before critiquing the anti-imperial vision which Horsley draws from 1 Corinthians, I must issue myself a word of caution. Horsley notes that any kind of vision springing from a liberation theological concern for justice in the modern world, will often resonate more with those made poor through the system of global capital than with those made rich by it¹²⁹. Therefore, writing from a comfortable, Western perspective, I must be constantly aware that violent revolution is not appealing to me partly because I am not desperate enough to consider it.

However, the social composition of the Corinthian *ekklesia*, though largely unknown to us, was certainly not solely wealthy and privileged (1 Cor. 1:26). Horsley’s recognition that Paul gives his own life as an example for the Corinthians to follow puts strict limits on the kind of attitude which can be appropriated from him. The implication that political violence might be an acceptable application of Paul’s anti-imperial gospel must be significantly curtailed by the fact that he never committed any such acts, and therefore never gave them to the *ekklesiai* as an example to follow. In fact, after his conversion, the only blood he shed was his own. Furthermore, Paul’s discourse on love in 1 Corinthians 13 forbids anyone wishing to imitate him from acting in vengeance in

(Westminster: John Knox, 1992), p. 72

125 Horsley, “Ethics and Exegesis” in Swartley (ed.), *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation*, p. 72

126 Crossan and Reed, *In Search of Paul*, pp. 411-12

127 Burk, “Is Paul’s Gospel Counter Imperial?”, *JETS*, pp. 312-313

128 G. Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (London: SCM Press, 1974), p. 299

129 Horsley, “Ethics and Exegesis” in Swartley (ed.), *The Love of Enemy and Nonretaliation*, pp. 95-6

response to anything. Unfortunately, Horsley does not draw out these implications. His interpretation of 1 Corinthians is flawed, because it does not allow the exhortation to love in the context of exercising spiritual gifts at the *ekklesia* (1 Cor. 13) to at all affect the presumed nature of Paul's resistance to the norms of Imperial society. Even if arguments for the Christian use of violence as a method of resistance to oppression could be vindicated, Horsley's anti-imperial vision for the church does nothing to guard against the attitude with which this may be carried out. This is something which Paul is clearly concerned with, even whilst exhorting the Corinthians to be separate from Imperial society (1 Cor. 10:31-33).

Therefore it must be concluded that Horsley's interpretation does significantly over-emphasise certain elements of 1 Corinthians at the expense of others. Moreover, this affects the validity not only of the exegesis itself, but of its application to contemporary political issues. Those railing against the injustices perpetrated by the system of global capital might be encouraged in vengeance against it by this interpretation, an attitude specifically forbidden in Romans 12 (a passage which, incidentally, receives very little attention from any anti-imperial interpreter to this author's knowledge). Those Christians feeling marginalised by mainstream society might be encouraged to respond in bitterness and aggressive separation. Although this is unlikely to be an intended outcome of Horsley's interpretation, without the separation from society and opposition to oppressive structures being conditioned by Christ like love, these are very real possibilities.

A Firmer Biblical Foundation

These considerations should by no means lead us to discount Horsley's interpretation entirely. The gaps in his anti-imperial vision could lead to unintended and potentially dangerous applications. However, just as real is the implicit opposition of the gospel to blasphemous Imperial pretensions and the exhortation of Paul to the Corinthians to separate themselves from mainstream society. Therefore, at this point we may examine the work Christopher Bryan, whose examination of Christian interaction with the Roman Empire provides a helpful balance to Horsley's. In particular his exposition of Romans 12-13 enables us to understand the way in which Paul was able to exhort the Romans to submit to civil authorities (Romans 13), while also proclaiming a gospel which implied that the Emperor's claims to divinity were not only void, but to be judged by the returning Christ (1 Corinthians 2 & 15).

He first notes that the exhortations in Romans 12-13 are an application of his explanation of the gospel in Romans 1-11. On the basis of “God's justice and mercy toward all...Paul now goes on to speak of the justice and mercy that must “therefore” characterize both the believers' relationships with one another within the fellowship of Christ (12.3–12.13) and their relationships with those who are outside that fellowship (12.14–13.7).”¹³⁰ Paul's exhortations concerning the authorities must therefore be seen in the context of applying the “graceful attitude”¹³¹ required of those in Christ to relations with them. The submission recommended is partly on the basis of God having “instituted” (Rom. 13:1) the authorities that do exist, and it is Bryan's interpretation of this which is of particular interest to us, as it allows both for the opposition of, and submission to, governing authorities:

Paul's view of Roman rule therefore points in two directions, just as the biblical and prophetic tradition has always done. On the one hand, it accepts and holds as legitimate Roman authority; on the other, it leaves Roman authority in principle open to prophetic challenge wherever and whenever it has claimed too much for itself or betrayed the purposes for which it was instituted.¹³²

While on the basis of Romans alone this position requires further argumentation to support (there is no explicit prophetic critique of Empire in that particular letter), given the clear implicit presence of one in 1 Corinthians 2 & 15, we may suggest that this is an accurate interpretation of Paul's attitude to the Roman Empire. The eschatological framework and exhortation to separation in 1 Corinthians does not allow us to say that Paul's gospel did not challenge the Roman Imperial order at all, but Romans 12-13 does not allow us to posit that the manner of this opposition was motivated by anything other than a deep appropriation of the love of Christ. Therefore we must conclude that Paul intended the implicit opposition of the gospel to the norms of Imperial society to be worked out in such a way as to express this love, even in separation and subversion.

Bryan also notes, very importantly, that the root of the conflict between Paul's gospel and Imperial social values and practices was the repudiation of idolatry. “Later strife between Christianity and Rome was not because Christians were or were perceived as political rebels. It was about religion. Romans accused Christians of *superstitio* and meant it.”¹³³ As was mentioned above, Romans believed that the ceremonial honouring of the gods held the Empire together. “Christians, however, on their own admission, did not honor the gods. They were guilty of *impietas*. Therefore, and in that sense, they

130 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 78

131 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 78

132 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 79

133 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 113

were a security threat.”¹³⁴ It is extremely striking that the empire wide persecution which occurred later on in the church's history under Decius was caused not by the general Christian subversion of Roman Imperial norms, but a specific instance of Christian refusal to partake in a ceremony which appeared to many to be idolatrous¹³⁵. Horsley is entirely correct in arguing (as Bryan also seems to imply) that this was as much a political as religious subversion, but this seems to be the only point of conflict on which the church attracted the kind of persecution Horsley posits as a reaction to many of the other subversive elements of Paul's proclamation¹³⁶.

This is not to say that Horsley is incorrect in recognising that there were multiple points of conflict in value and practice between Paul's teaching and Roman Imperial society, but that the only point of conflict which was explicit enough to attract attention was that of ceremonial sacrifice. Whether Christians used (or didn't use) Roman courts, attached the same value/shame to managerial/manual labour, or proclaimed the coming of a Lord who would destroy all earthly rulers¹³⁷ does not seem to have concerned the Romans nearly as much as their refusal to sacrifice to the gods and the Emperor. This being the case, it may be that the manner in which Paul instructed his *ekklesiai* to be separate in value and praxis actually prevented the kind of social and political disruption that Horsley implies was intended¹³⁸. In fact, Paul seems to take great pains to ensure that the *ekklesiai* do not, as far as is possible in obedience to Christ, disrupt the peace (1 Cor. 10:33; Rom. 12:18) of the society surrounding them *while at the same time living according to antithetical values* (1 Cor. 2-3).

This leads to the obvious question of why Paul taught and behaved in this way, and there are a number of textual clues as to his reasons. I have previously asserted that the kind of love the Corinthian *ekklesia* is exhorted to in 1 Cor. 13-14:1 should be seen as applying not only to its immediate context (the pursuit of spiritual gifts) but also to any interaction with those outside the community. In a general sense, Bryan's interpretation of Rom. 12-13 supports this, but there are a number of features in 1 Corinthians itself that indicate Paul's concern for them to act graciously towards outsiders. While these are only implied in his instruction concerning relations within the community, his presentation of himself as an example to be imitated makes them significant indicators nonetheless. In 1 Cor. 10:14-33, Paul addresses a hypothetical situation in which some of the Corinthian *ekklesia* are invited to a meal with an “unbeliever” (v. 27). In conclusion of his exhortation to seek “not your own advantage, but that of the other” (v.

134 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 117

135 Bryan, *Render to Caesar*, p. 118

136 Horsley, “Introduction” in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, pp. 4-5

137 Horsley, “Rhetoric and Empire” in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 92

138 Horsley, “Introduction” in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and the Roman Imperial Order*, p. 3

24), he states his reason for seeking the advantage of “many” rather than his own: “so that they may be saved.” (v. 33). The underlying reason for the existence of these instructions is ensuring that the gospel receives as favourable a hearing as possible without compromising the worship demanded of every Christian.

Similarly, in 1 Cor. 14, Paul's instructions concerning order in the speaking of tongues and the bringing of prophecy in the *ekklesia* have as their end the creation of a situation within which anyone “in the position of an outsider” (v. 16) is able to experience the gospel¹³⁹. Indeed, his encouragement of prophesying has as its ultimate motivation the possibility of bringing an unbeliever to repentance through the secrets of his/her heart being disclosed (v. 25). It seems evident from Romans 12-13 that this concern for ensuring that every possible opportunity is afforded those outside the community to hear the gospel stretches from individual relationships to community relations with surrounding society. Indeed, whatever creates a favourable attitude for the spreading of the Gospel without compromising worship of the true God and his Christ is what Paul pursues in both 1 Corinthians and Romans.

This is an understanding of Paul's attitude within which both the implicit opposition of the gospel to Imperial society and the council of keeping the peace make sense. He cares less about opposing the Roman Empire than about spreading the gospel. The gospel implicitly proclaims the destruction of every power not submitted to Christ, including the Roman Empire and its idolatrous Emperor/Emperor worshippers. However this gospel is primarily concerned with the salvation now available to both Jew and Gentile. Therefore Paul is concerned that no barrier get in the way of it being heard and accepted, save the offense that it gives by virtue of its content and implications. Indeed, one might venture that Paul was more interested in bringing the Empire to repentance and conversion than proclaiming its immanent destruction.

Conclusion

The combination of Horsley's over - and under - emphasis of certain aspects of Paul's attitude in 1 Corinthians shows us that although there are parts of his interpretation which are beneficial and pertinent to the issues being discussed, others do not do justice to the text(s). It is clear that the gospel implicitly stands against the kind of idolatry institutionalised by the Imperial cult. The values of mutual service and “seeking the

¹³⁹ The gospel in this sense meaning the coming of God's Kingdom proclaimed and partially present through the ministry of Jesus and in the Church. The outpouring of the Spirit promised in Joel 2:28-29 and fulfilled through Christ at Pentecost (cf. Luke 24:49; Acts 2) was seen by the early church as a sign of the dawning of God's Kingdom. The exercise of prophecy in the *ekklesia* was therefore a sign of the presence of God's Kingdom, and to experience it was to experience the gospel.

advantage of the other” also work against the replication of the selfish economic practice Rome is condemned for in Revelation. However, although the values and actions of the *ekklesia* set it quite deliberately apart from surrounding society, this separation is never intended to be something which is done in an attitude devoid of the love and mercy of Christ. The potential dangers posed by the contemporary appropriation of Horsley's anti-imperial vision lie not in what is present, but what is absent. Positively, there are a number of important applications Horsley's vision could lead to in relation to the contemporary issues that we have discussed. The sharp separation of the economic values and practice of the church from surrounding society, littered as it is with the worship of Mammon, cannot be criticised and indeed should be encouraged. This is something which is highlighted by Horsley through examining the practice of the early church in taking collections for the poor in other congregations¹⁴⁰. He also attempts to draw out the contemporary implications of this in *Covenant Economics*, which outlines the just economic practices intended in the Kingdom of God in contrast to the greed that has led to the current financial crisis¹⁴¹.

Negatively, by not recognising that the love shown by Christ conditioned the separation of the church and the opposition of its values/practice to surrounding society, Horsley leaves space for the appropriation of radical separation and opposition in an attitude of vengeance or bitterness. Particularly when dealing with the economic injustices of 21st Century Western civilisation, this is an easy attitude to take. The anger present in some involved with popular movements such as Occupy: Wall Street should not be given space to flower into hatred and vengeance. Moreover, these attitudes should find no justification within the church. While anger at injustice is important and necessary, any opposition or separation on the part of the Church must be conditioned by the gracious behaviour Paul exhorts the Corinthian and Roman *ekklesiai* to. Anything less would be at best an incomplete witness, and at worst extremely damaging both to church communities and their witness.

The question of religious liberty in the West is not a subject broached by many anti-imperial interpreters, and Horsley is no exception. However, it may be that the example of Lillian Ladele presents something of a parallel situation to that which Paul addresses in 1 Cor. 10. Her desire was not to cease working for the civil registration service because some of her colleagues and the policy of the council itself held convictions different to her own¹⁴². However, she did not feel able to carry out or participate in a symbolically significant ceremony which implied her endorsement of a lifestyle contrary

140 Richard A. Horsley, *Covenant Economics: A Biblical Vision of Justice for All* (Westminster: John Knox, 2009), p. xvii

141 Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, pp. xi-xx

142 http://www.christian.org.uk/eat_ladele_19dec08.pdf, pp. 3-4, accessed 05.09.2012

to those convictions. In this sense, she made the same distinction that Paul does between “partaking” and “eating” (1 Cor. 10: 21&25) in terms of “participating in civil partnership ceremonies” and “working for Islington Council”. The separation that this has caused between herself, her employers and her homosexual colleagues also closely parallels the experience of the early church when refusing to publicly honour the gods and the Emperor. Although Horsley does not mention this contemporary similarity in his scholarship, it seems a fairly direct application of the separation in values and practice he recognises Paul encouraged. Mercifully, the danger noted in the application of Horsley's vision does not seem to have manifested itself in Ladele's interaction with her employers in exchanges leading up to the lawsuit. She repeatedly stated her position courteously by letter, not giving any indication of bitterness towards her employers¹⁴³. However, in the climate which this situation and others like it have created, an exhortation to separation and opposition unconditioned by Christ's love could allow the pain of perceived injustice to turn into bitterness and vengeance.

The inclusion of Paul's exhortations to Christ like love in all relationships, as suggested by Bryan's reading of Romans 12-13, fills the gap in Horsley's vision. For Christians to be truthful in a society whose values differ from their own, sometimes radically, they must be separate and opposed in some sense. By the same token, for Christians to be truthfully Christian (“little Christs”) they must do this in a way that imitates Jesus' grace towards those who hated and murdered him. The model for this is provided by Paul's interaction with the Roman Empire, which prioritised the spread of the gospel for the sake of many being saved, but not at the expense of the integrity of worship in the *ekklesia*. A contemporary application (or perhaps more accurately, retrieval) of this model is presented by O'Donovan in *The Desire of the Nations*. We will now examine and compare this with Horsley's anti-imperial vision with a view to articulating an appropriate, biblically faithful response to the reflections of Babylon and the beast in the West.

143 http://www.christian.org.uk/eat_ladele_19dec08.pdf , p. 3, accessed 05.09.2012

Part 3: Engaging the Powers

Chapter 4

The Anti-Imperial Church and Early Christendom

The political theology of Oliver O'Donovan contains a model of church-state interaction which is similar in foundation to Horsley's, but recognises the loving attitude Paul encouraged the church to take towards the state. I must make it clear from the outset that a full analysis and comparison of O'Donovan's political theology is not possible here. What is being examined is the way in which he conceives ideal interactions between the church and the state, in comparison to the anti-imperial vision represented by Horsley.

Firstly we may note that, as with Horsley, O' Donovan's conception of the relationship between the church and the Roman Empire is founded on eschatology: "Christ has led captivity captive; he has disarmed the principalities and powers; the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand."¹⁴⁴ The victory Christ has won significantly limits the authority of secular government. O'Donovan's interpretation of Romans 13:1-7 highlights the fact that the only responsibility of government Paul mentions is that of executing judgement. This is in marked contrast to the primary purpose of government both in ancient Israel and the classical world: possession¹⁴⁵. O'Donovan argues that the critique of idolatry levelled at contemporary government in Revelation comes from this narrow definition of the limits of political authority¹⁴⁶. In his conception of biblical eschatology, the powers and principalities are given two choices: "subjection" or "outright confrontation and defeat"¹⁴⁷.

Anti-imperial interpreters also note in their interpretations of Rom. 13:1-7 that Paul's description of the authorities sets them in a place far below the lofty reaches of the rhetoric of the Imperial cult¹⁴⁸. However, the difference in emphasis between these two explanations of eschatology is quite noticeable. Anti-imperial interpreters are more keen to emphasise the subversive nature and intent of Paul's comments on authorities in Rom. 13:1-7. They very rarely comment on the possibility that as well as implying that Imperial Rome far exceeded the limits set it by Christ's victory, Paul, in his zeal to

¹⁴⁴ O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 7

¹⁴⁵ O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 147-8

¹⁴⁶ O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 152

¹⁴⁷ O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 152-3

¹⁴⁸ Robert Jewett, "Response: Exegetical Support from Romans and Other Letters" in Horsley (ed.), *Paul and Politics*, p. 66

preach the gospel, may have desired the subjection of the powers to Christ rather than simply proclaiming to them their destruction at his coming.

O'Donovan, on the other hand, is very aware that the missionary impulse of Paul and of the early church led them to interact co-operatively with the Empire, to ease the spread of the gospel wherever possible¹⁴⁹. Indeed, it is the extension of this impulse long after Paul into the early days of Christendom that O'Donovan desires to retrieve for current church-state relations:

It was the missionary imperative that compelled the church to take the conversion of the empire seriously and to seize the opportunities it offered. These were not merely opportunities for 'power'. They were opportunities for preaching the Gospel, baptising believers, curbing the violence and cruelty of empire and, perhaps most importantly of all, forgiving their former persecutors.¹⁵⁰

It is his mention of this last opportunity that shows O'Donovan's recognition of the attitude Paul encouraged the Corinthian and Roman *ekklesiai* to. The attitude in which opposition and separation was encouraged *did not* preclude the forgiveness of former political enemies. This is a key part of O'Donovan's interpretation of Paul's theology, and as a consequence his model of church-state interaction leaves room for both opposition and co-operation. This particular element of O'Donovan's theology of politics takes into account more of the biblical witness than Horsley's, and in this way is to be preferred.

We should note at this point that Horsley does not seem to desire the kind of interaction between church and state we are suggesting is allowed as a possibility by his biblical interpretation. Indeed, his works which attempt to outline an application of his anti-imperial vision (*Covenant Economics, Jesus and Empire*) do not suggest that Horsley intends to encourage anything of the sort. He advocates the passionate pursuit of the transformation of unjust Western economic and social norms, on the basis of a biblically founded vision of justice for the most vulnerable¹⁵¹. The kind of transformation Horsley wishes to encourage in fact has strong affinities with the examples of the early church O'Donovan uses to elucidate his model. In his discussion of Paul's comments relating to the institution of slavery in the ancient world, he argues that the reason that the early church did not attempt to abolish it was not because they lacked the wherewithal or political opportunity. Rather, it was because they believed that it had *already* been effectively abolished through Christ's victory. The early church wanted to claim that household economic organisation could be transformed “in such a

149 O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 146; 212

150 O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 212

151 Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, pp. 165-180

way that its participants stood on a new footing of equality. They were both employees of Christ; they owed him the conscientious performance of their respective duties.”¹⁵².

The kind of just economic and social transformation Horsley desires to be the outcome of his anti-imperial vision for the church in America is not at odds with this, even if he might not agree with O'Donovan's precise argumentation on the subject of slavery. Moreover, O'Donovan also perceives the function of the practices of the early in much the same way as Horsley: “The church does not philosophise about a future world; it demonstrates the working of the coming Kingdom within this one. Through the authorisation of the Holy Spirit it squares up to civil authority and confronts it. This may lead to martyrdom, or to mutual service.”¹⁵³. However, along with their similarities we see again that O'Donovan allows for a co-operative relationship between church and state that is absent from Horsley's interpretation of Paul.

Having briefly outlined the important similarities and differences between these two models, we may explore the question of why they differ. It has already been mentioned that Horsley's vision is influenced by the relatively new tradition of liberation theology. The bias towards opposition and resistance inherent in this tradition has created the imbalance in Horsley's anti-imperial vision. In the pursuit of justice, the church is conceived as an alternative, just society set up in opposition to the unjust society surrounding it. Resistance to injustice can take many forms, some violent, some non-violent, but the weakness of liberation theology is the combative stance it takes towards the unjust society in attempts to reform/replace it.

This attitude of setting one's face against the perpetrators of oppression pervades Horsley's scholarship, and prevents him from being able to fully justify, from the biblical traditions, his commendable desire to reform/transform unjust economic practices in America. O'Donovan's retrieval of the early Christendom model, on the other hand, recognises the church's duty to ensure the powers know the limits of their authority, but not to the point of creating an alternative, independent, replacement society. This is significant because it mitigates against some of the the dangers of Horsley's vision by connecting the church and the surrounding society in a way Horsley does not:

“Just as there is only one true throne, so there is but one structured human community...Its name and aspect changes as the God who claims it wrests its government away from the pretender. The church is not apart from it; it is the sanctuary within its midst, and by its acts of witness it enables its transformation to begin...”¹⁵⁴.

152 O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 185

153 O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 217

154 O'Donovan, *The Desire of The Nations*, p. 156

This foundational difference is the result of an alternative way of thinking about opposition. While O'Donovan does not deny the challenge the gospel poses to any and all rulers, powers and authorities, this challenge does not always have to result in the complete subversion/replacement/destruction of the unjust power. The visions of Revelation portray the fate of those powers continually opposed to God's rule. However, this is not the only possible end even for arrogant Empires: the submission of secular powers to Christ's rule is also a genuine possibility (cf. 1 Peter 2:13-17)¹⁵⁵. The spreading of the gospel, not the opposition of Empire, is the burden of Paul's mission, and thus that of the early church. The fact that O'Donovan recognises this, both at the level of interpretation and application, means that his model is a more biblically faithful response to the reflections of Babylon and the beasts in Western society.

Engaging the Powers

Having settled on a biblically faithful model of response to the problems of economic injustice and the curtailing of religious liberty, we may briefly turn to a discussion of some contemporary examples of it. In terms of responding proportionately to the systemic arrogance and practical injustice of Corporate Capitalism, the work of Mills and Schluter in producing *After Capitalism: Towards a Relational Economy* is an important example of both opposing unjust structures and working to change them from within. Their moral critique of capitalism recognises the deep seated flaws of our current economic system, but rather than encouraging the church to create a separate society to challenge current economic practices, they set out a way in which the current system could have biblical values embedded in it. They do encourage Christians to model their practices on biblical economics, but these are not envisaged within the framework of an opposition society. Therefore the response they suggest to economic injustice is very much along the lines of O'Donovan's model of the church serving society at the same time as opposing its injustices.

With regards to the occasional instances where Christians have been legally pressured to act against their convictions, the advocacy work of various Christian organisations such as Christians in Parliament and CARE also closely corresponds to O'Donovan's suggestions. In response to the Equality Act 2010, which was subsequently used in a number of cases to prosecute Christians for attempting to manifest their convictions concerning sexuality in the work place, CARE produced a lengthy legal

¹⁵⁵ O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, p. 156; 217-18

analysis (2011) which highlighted the elements of it which were a cause of concern¹⁵⁶. The paper called the government to reform the legislation so that provision was made for the status' protected to interact without creating a "hierarchy of rights"¹⁵⁷. Furthermore, in February 2012, Christians in Parliament published the findings of the "Clearing the Ground" inquiry, which aimed to ascertain the nature and extent of the problems some Christians face with manifesting their faith in the public square¹⁵⁸. It was recognised that there are serious problems with the way equality law is currently interpreted, but the response to this was recommend legal reform to ensure genuine equality for all parties concerned¹⁵⁹. The balance of critique and the clear desire to cooperate with currently existing legal structures to remedy the problem once again demonstrates affinity with O'Donovan's model.

It must again be emphasised that the primary reason O'Donovan's suggested response should be preferred is that the biblical foundations for it are firmer. Horsley suggests a number of practical responses faith communities can enact to work out the anti-imperial gospel, and none of these differ radically in intent from the kind of reform called for by the organisations and individuals mentioned above. Horsley is concerned to encourage provision for the poor in local communities, speaking prophetically against unjust practices, and economic action against injustice¹⁶⁰. Indeed, the "Clearing the Ground" report could easily be seen as speaking out prophetically against injustice, albeit in a very different manner to what Horsley might envisage. While the lack of specificity in the last suggestion leaves it open to the misappropriation discussed earlier, none of the practices Horsley suggests explicitly encourages an attitude of vengeance or bitterness. However, the theological foundations of O'Donovan's model directly mitigate against this possibility, and so we must conclude that it is the better of the two.

156 http://www.care.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/CARE_AgainstDiscrimination_Layout-1.pdf, accessed 05.09.2012

157 http://www.care.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/CARE_AgainstDiscrimination_Layout-1.pdf, p. 12, accessed 05.09.2012

158 <http://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/publications/upload/Clearing-the-ground.pdf>, accessed 05.09.2012

159 <http://www.eauk.org/current-affairs/publications/upload/Clearing-the-ground.pdf>, pp. 33-42, accessed 07.09.2012

160 Horsley, *Covenant Economics*, pp. 165-180

Conclusion

The task of responding to contemporary political, social and economic problems in a way that is faithful to the witness found in the New Testament is not an easy task. I noted at the beginning of this endeavour the hermeneutical dangers of not paying adequate attention to all of the texts dealt with, or applying the lenses drawn from them too simplistically to contemporary situations. The adequacy of anti-imperial interpretation, as a way of understanding and responding to the problems of injustice and limited religious liberty, hinges on how well it has avoided these dangers. At the end of our discussions, it has been found that the anti-imperial interpretation of 1 Corinthians and Revelation 17-18 are guilty certainly of the former, and subsequently of a form of the latter.

The anti-imperial interpretation of Revelation 17-18 emphasises the economic sin of Babylon to the point of forgetting that the judgement levelled against it is for a specific form of idolatry. Highlighting economic sin in our society using Revelation 17-18 is not in any way objectionable, but the further step of implying that our society stands under exactly the same judgement as Babylon stretches the parallels too far. It is not possible to locate in the economic system of global capitalism a direct attempt to usurp God's throne as the worship of the Emperor did (as seen through the lens of Revelation). So the anti-imperial interpretation of Revelation 17-18 does not show us that our society stands condemned.

However, the parallels that do exist cannot be ignored, and must be cause for significant concern. There are enough of these to conclude that although Western society does not mirror the monstrous caricature of Rome seen in Revelation, the elements which led to the sin that did condemn Rome are present. The systemic assumption of constant prosperity echoes the arrogance which led Rome to set its Emperor up as Lord; the sporadic use of legal compulsion to ensure Christians behave in accordance with widely held societal values echoes the coercion to idolatry of the beasts and the Imperial cult; and the accumulation of wealth built on oppression and bloodshed imitates most closely the practice of Rome. The financial crisis may serve as a warning that God will not allow unjust economic practices to continue indefinitely, and that an attempt to continue in the same greed and idolatry would lead to further judgement. Moreover, reflections of the beast's behaviour in conflicts surrounding religious liberty urgently demands that Christians who care about the future of the UK (and the West) engage with government and society to stop this trend. Whilst the ugly flower of blasphemous empire is not in full bloom yet, the seeds are present and will

grow unless prevented.

The anti-imperial interpretation of 1 Corinthians, and the wider anti-imperial vision of Richard A. Horsley, was also found to both over-emphasise the opposition of Paul's gospel (and thus the early church) to the Roman Empire and under-emphasise the love which conditioned what opposition did exist. As a contemporary model of response, we must conclude that although it rightly recognises the conflict between the gospel and an unjust society, it is incomplete. It does not allow Paul's admonitions to imitate Christ's love in all things to affect its understanding of his attitude of opposition to Imperial society. This, perhaps unintentionally, encourages a narrow view of the gospel whereby it is understood simply to oppose unjust, unequal and oppressive norms and institutions¹⁶¹, without defining (as we have seen that Paul does) the gracious Christ-like attitude in which this must be done. Although Horsley may assume this attitude, his anti-imperial vision does not seem to, and therefore is open to contemporary appropriation by those responding in vengeance or bitterness to the injustice that exists in the Western world.

It was further concluded that elements of the work of Bryan and O'Donovan could supply what is missing in Horsley's vision, with their understanding of what motivated both the conflict and co-operation with the Roman Empire which existed in Paul's ministry and the life of the early church. Paul's passion was to ensure that every possible avenue for spreading the gospel was kept open and available for use. This requires those who would follow his example to both critique and positively engage with the powers God has instituted while this is still possible. Therefore, it is those individuals and organisations which work to graciously challenge unjust societal norms and institutions (Mills and Schluter, Evangelical Alliance, CARE) to reform which best demonstrate a biblically faithful response to the seeds of Babylon and the beasts in Western society.

The discussion of the two issues I have examined is itself part of a much wider contemporary discussion about the future of the Western world. The financial crisis has called into question the economic foundations of modern Western civilisation, and the controversy surrounding conservative Christians and equality law has highlighted the cracks showing in current attempts to deal fairly with all in a deeply pluralistic society. If the analysis presented above is correct, these problems have arisen because the spiritual foundations of Western economics and application of equality legislation are rotten and need replacing. The idolatry and greed which drives Babylon and the beasts towards irreversible destruction will indeed drive the UK and other Western nations towards the same fate if their seeds are not removed. The great insight of anti-imperial

161 Burk, "Is Paul's Gospel Counter Imperial?", *JETS*, p. 322

interpretation, despite all its flaws, is that the gospel proclaims God as King over every conceivable area of life in the world. Political, social, economic, spiritual and every intersection between these spheres of existence should be subjected to Christ's influence and Kingship.

The burning question that this discussion has begun to answer is this: how can Christians contribute to the Western world moving forwards? What kind of economics will work, if Corporate Capitalism has failed? How is it possible to respect differences in a pluralistic and multicultural society without scorning, degrading or marginalising groups whose behaviour conflicts with the dominant morality (whatever form that takes)? The specifics of the answers to these questions will require much more research, and perhaps a considerable amount of trial and error. However, the attitude and priorities of Christians wishing to imitate Paul in their response should be clear. The foundation of their every interaction with unjust/idolatrous society and government is the love of Christ, their final end easing the spread of the gospel. The opportunity for contemporary Christians, as with the Church of early Christendom, is to work out how to apply the gospel to these areas of contemporary public life and become part of the answer to the crisis of confidence the Western world faces.

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