



Universiteit  
Leiden  
The Netherlands

**Levend in Leviathan : een onderzoek naar de theorie over  
'christendom' in de politieke theologie van Oliver O'Donovan**  
Bruijn, A.L.T. de

**Citation**

Bruijn, A. L. T. de. (2006, October 12). *Levend in Leviathan : een onderzoek naar de theorie over 'christendom' in de politieke theologie van Oliver O'Donovan*. Uitgeverij Kok, Kampen. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4913>

Version: Corrected Publisher's Version

License: [Licence agreement concerning inclusion of doctoral thesis in the Institutional Repository of the University of Leiden](#)

Downloaded from: <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/4913>

**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## Summary

This study surveys the theory about 'Christendom' developed by the Anglican theologian Oliver O'Donovan. I define 'Christendom' as a state of affairs in which the Christian faith in one way or another gives public direction to society and/or politics. *Chapter one* presents the context in which the investigation is being undertaken, namely the present debate about the role of religion in Dutch society. Although at first it may seem that this debate has no theological character, a closer study reveals that there is undeniably a theological dimension to it. This improved insight is further stimulated when we consider the Anglo-Saxon debate about 'Christendom'. This Christendom debate is overtly theological, but contains in itself also the issues and positions that we come across in the debate about the public role of religion. The Christendom debate of our time has been for the most part initiated by two American theologians, John Howard Yoder and Stanley Hauerwas. They take a critical view of Christendom. Besides this option (abbreviated as CK) (1), I see four other positions in the Christendom debate: (2) the plea for the Christian faith as a civil religion (further abbreviated as CR), (3) the liberal vision (LB), (4) the theocratic approach (TC), and (5) the choice for a confessional or principled pluralism (PP). By way of an analysis of O'Donovan's theory and its value within the Christendom debate, I hope to strengthen the theological dimension of the present Dutch discussions. I pose the following question for my investigation: "What does the theory about Christendom developed by Oliver O'Donovan as a position within the present theological-ethical Christendom debate and as an aspect of his political theology involve, and what is its contribution to this debate?"

To answer this question, in *chapter two* I offer a reconstruction of O'Donovan's theory about Christendom. Christendom for him denotes in the first place a many-faceted contingent and historically coloured ethical theory. This theory developed within the church as a response to the political concepts that are implied in God's revelation. Out of this theory grew, in the second place, diverse practical political constellations which have lasted many centuries and which up until today remain decisive for the identity of Western politics and Western societies.

This 'Christendom' theory referred to the way in which political authority, while in principle belonging to the saeculum (the passing age of this world), can nevertheless bear the mark of the rule of Christ, and can be related to the church, which is the growing community of Christ's eschatological kingdom. Because of this characteristic, Christendom also remains exemplary in more than one way for the present phase of Western history. It shows *Christians* today how biblical political concepts can be connected to politics and society, and provokes them not to forget the benefits of Christendom, while simultaneously seeking to correct its drawbacks. At the same time, *all Western citizens* can learn from Christendom to understand their present political and social reality. This is true not only in view of the positive characteris-

tics of that reality, which can be considered as the fruit of Christendom, but also in view of impassés within it, which can be seen as the outcome of its saying farewell to Christendom.

In *chapter three* I build an analysis of O'Donovan's Christendom theory on this reconstruction. It shows that this theory is determined by some central theological and political-philosophical insights. O'Donovan's theological ethics is backed up by a thorough knowledge and use of almost the whole of the tradition of Western thought. However, within this whole and the influences it exercises on O'Donovan's theory, some thinkers can be marked out who are in a special way decisive for him. As such, I mention successively Augustine, Grotius, Barth, Paul Ramsey, and George Grant.

From a theological angle, an eschatological Christology, with a 20th century character, determines the profile of O'Donovan's Christendom theory. This Christology considers the Christ event as the eschaton, but at the same time sees this Christ event as allowing room for a continuation of the history of the saeculum. Connected with this is O'Donovan's strong accent on God's historical providence, under which the order of creation is maintained while being en route to its eschatological transformation. Since the Christ event, we see within this wider historical reality of providence the 'Christian era' coming into being. This is the provisional result of the simultaneous existence of saeculum and eschaton. Besides his eschatological Christology and his view of historical providence, an ecclesiological vision is also important for O'Donovan's theory. In his view, the church in principle is the only legitimate and remaining political reality in this world. Yet in the present, this potentially subversive insight should not lead Christians to the formation of a counter-society, because, among other reasons, of the still unfulfilled promises to Israel. O'Donovan's theory also bears a biblical-theological mark. From that angle, his redemptive-historical macro-exegesis of the concept of God's kingdom stands out. The same is true for his treatment of the Revelation to John. Therein he sees prefigured the structure of the whole 'Christian era'.

Regarding politics, O'Donovan emphasizes that politics does not refer to an ontological reality of being but to an historical reality of acts, for which God's providence forms the decisive background. Therefore, all political constellations bear the mark of contingency and can change and vary during history. Politics consists of a tradition of correcting judgements that ought to be true as well as effective. Because of its provisional character, politics should remain modest and provide room for the individual and for the network of smaller natural communities that form the actual context of human life. 'Political acts' have furthermore a second function. They are the focus of representation for a society or a people. Through this representation, these can act as a unity and express their identity. Unlike the above-mentioned smaller communities, in which people share and communicate a positive earthly 'common good', a political society only comes into being by resisting attacks on such a 'common good'. Political societies are never more than provisional interim-bodies en route to the eschatological society that overlaps all smaller ones and exist only in Christ as the true representative of humankind. That eschatological society is the only one that knows an all-encompassing 'common good' in the form of the

### Summary

communication of love to God. Because of this, political representative formations should remain modest and be vigilant in resisting the risk of idolatry. The identities of peoples and political societies are temporarily indispensable, but they should never be considered as natural or historically fixed. For the same reason, the international political order ought to remain pluralistic until the arrival of the eschatological kingdom. This is precisely the case in the model that until this day has dominated the West: a series of nation states that acknowledge each other as neighbours and together acknowledge a higher right. This model was born out of the tradition of Christendom.

O'Donovan's criticism of modernity also has a strong bearing on his Christendom theory. As a modernity-critic, he is more nuanced than many others are. He distinguishes between early modernity and late modernity. Early modernity saw the positive inheritance of Christendom in the form of constitutional constellations and features of the identity of society. Late modernity has the ambition to depart from this heritage, but meanwhile is not able to free itself from it, and as a result gets itself into many problems. These concern not only the character of society but also the crisis around political authority and political representation. With his Christendom theory, O'Donovan's ambition is to tell a counter-narrative about Western modernity. This story shows how and why modernity needs Christian truth and the Christian tradition in order to overcome its deadlocks. Christendom's heritage unmistakably *lives* in Leviathan (modern political society). As soon as we remember that, the underlying biblical conceptuality can also become *alive* again, even in Leviathan.

The reconstruction in chapter two and the analysis in chapter three are followed by a concretisation of O'Donovan's Christendom theory in *chapter four*. How does it work out at the political-*ethical* level? It becomes clear that O'Donovan has no intention of seeking to prolong or restore a situation of Christendom within the Western societies of this moment. Yet, in his view, the *church* has a calling to a public, prophetic way of speaking. She has to point out what are the ultimate and the penultimate purposes for political society, as they follow from God's revelation in Christ. She also has the task to unmask the antichristian dynamics within political society, which become clear in the resistance to Christ's rule.

In addition to this, it is the calling of *individual Christians* to participate in public debate with their own perspective, which has been derived from God's revelation. They can thus contribute to a deeper understanding of the tasks and the problems in political society and to an optimal decision-making process. In our late modern context, the theme that deserves their focus of attention in fulfilling this task concerns the urgent crisis of political reality as such. A Christian society may never be the goal of a human project, because it only can be a blessing of God upon the mission of the church. As such, it could be welcomed with gratitude in the event it should come. Nevertheless, in the light of the above-mentioned urgent task of Christian political responsibility today, it should not be on the agenda to pursue a Christian society. In fulfilling their social and political callings, Christians should not appeal directly to normative Christian claims either, although the explicit use of revelational knowledge is indispensable if they want to be understood. When in the meantime attributing concrete insights regarding specific items they themselves are

backed by the benefits and lessons of the tradition of Christendom. This often enables them to improve the terms of a debate and to offer a fresh and promising perspective. This combination of acknowledging the tradition of Christendom, speaking prophetically and reorganising and clarifying political debates, is demonstrated by O'Donovan himself with respect to some existing bottlenecks in political reflection. This is illustrated with regard to the crisis around political representation, the paradoxes in the doctrine of the separation of powers, the questions around the character and practice of punishment and the usefulness of the doctrine of just war.

*Chapter five* builds on the reconstruction, analysis, and concretisation of O'Donovan's theory by offering an interpretation of it. It is shown that the concept of 'Christendom' is important for the whole of his political theology, not only methodically, but also as far as its content is concerned. This can be maintained even when we grant that in his works this notion is only prominent during a certain phase and in specific contexts, and despite the fact that his own utterances on the importance of the concept for his thought are at the most ambivalent. For, even if the notion is out of view, it is evident that the material content of it can be operative. This significance of Christendom for O'Donovan becomes clear as soon as we understand that his theological-ethical life project from the beginning was coloured by a political-ethical ambition. His way of conceiving ethics does not fit the modern paradigm, with its concept of human acts in which the individual forms the corner stone, and which subsequently can be applied to various areas of life, with politics as one of these. From the outset, ethics is positioned under the authority of Christ. This immediately brings into view the society of God's kingdom and its relation to the society of the saeculum. O'Donovan's overall ethical concept fits the needs of his political-theological approach exactly. It provides the basis for the way in which a fully evangelical ethics can go together with the bearing of earthly responsibility and with the possibility of rational communication and consensus with other members of society.

The directing role of Christendom for O'Donovan's thought becomes even more manifest when we realise that this concept in a way tacitly forms a part of the traditions from which he operates. Especially Augustine and Ramsey bring this element with them. In spite of the reservation he shows to 'Christendom', the 'core' of it parallels an aspect of biblical revelation that is indispensable for him. This regards the specific structure of the Christian era as secular and at the same time determined by Christ's rule. Even deeper is the influence of Christendom on O'Donovan because of the Anglican nature of his theology. This is especially illustrated in his relaxed defence of the possibility and even the reality of a situation of church establishment, which in Britain still endures in the beginning of the 21st century. On some points he offers a correction of the Anglican tradition, but in doing so he explicitly confirms his Anglican identity. Born of an undeniable affinity with the protestant philosopher Jacques Ellul and especially with Søren Kierkegaard, his Christendom theory has absorbed a very Christendom-critical element. In doing so, he creates a new balance of extremes that can be seen as a next version of the characteristic Anglican 'via media'. It cannot be maintained that O'Donovan propagates a

### *Summary*

'Christendom' model. On the other hand it cannot continue to go unnoticed that his thoughts show a deep affinity with 'Christendom' either.

*Chapter six* forms the first step to cross the bridge from the analysis and the interpretation to the evaluation of O'Donovan's theory. In it, I contextualize his approach by showing that it only forms part of a debate within Western culture that has already been going on for many centuries. This holds also for the Anglo-Saxon Christendom debate as such. Since the fourth century A.D., with its differing positions on earthly authority and society, we see comparable discussions in the Reformation era and then in the 19<sup>th</sup> century we witness the clash between the Hegelian stance and critics like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. The 20<sup>th</sup> century brings to the fore the exemplary debate between Barthians and culture protestants or neo-Calvinists. In addition, the Christian social movements originating at the beginning of the century gave rise to many forms of the ideal of a re-Christianisation, while decolonisation on the other hand caused critical analyses of the Christian West, and the sixties even formed the stage of a deliberate farewell to the Christian past. The Christendom debate not only has taken place in more than one round, it can also be found in a series of circles that often form separate contexts of discussion and investigation. Among those are missiology, theology in general, sociology, and history.

In the light of examining this broader frame around O'Donovan's Christendom theory, the beginning of an evaluation becomes possible. On more than one point his theory can be confirmed. For example, it becomes clear that a constellation of 'Christendom' today is not by definition outdated and impossible. A Christendom model today could even be successful, as is shown in the loss of terrain for the secularisation thesis in detailed historical investigations and in missiometric data. Also the function of the Christendom theory in O'Donovan's thought, that of offering a master narrative which clarifies the identity of Western society, fits with recent historical research. In other aspects his theory, however, displays shortcomings. It does not satisfy that the connections between his theory and other broader debates on the same subject remain scarce. Detailed historical research into the reality of Christendom is allowed too little influence in favour of a historical narrative that remains confined to the level of ideas. In particular, he gives less credit to the social sciences than would be desirable, even if we reckon with his methodological criticism of their presuppositions. From the context of the Christendom debate, I also derive a category to characterise O'Donovan's own affinity with 'Christendom', which I established. 'Christendom' is not only an idea or a historical state of affairs, as O'Donovan says, but also a 'mindset'. This mindset of Christendom I recognize in O'Donovan's approach too.

In *chapter seven* I evaluate O'Donovan's Christendom theory as the answer to the second half of my question posed for this investigation. I reach this evaluation by comparing his theory with the five other positions within the contemporary Anglo-Saxon Christendom debate that I distinguished in chapter one: CK, CR, LB, TC, and PP. This comparison has the result of showing a unique quality of his theory within the debate. His theory brings together the central interests and insights of the other positions, while these on many points remain mutually exclusive. The Christendom

debate consists of two battle lines. On the foreground we see the recent clash between CK (Christendom-critical) and CR (civil religion). The background shows the classical opposition between LB (liberal vision) and TC (theocratic approach). Both these battle lines lose their sharply dividing effect when seen in the light of O'Donovan's theory. This theory seems theocratic and liberal at the same time and is familiar with civil religion and its counterpart, the Christendom-critical position as well. As we saw, PP (principled pluralism) developed already earlier as an alternative and bridging option in this debate. With this approach too O'Donovan's theory has resemblances. However, an advantage of O'Donovan's theory above PP is that it is theologically more sophisticated.

It is possible to perceive a third battle line in the Christendom debate. This comes into being when we ask how Christians should hold positions of practicable responsibility in the public domain. With respect to this third line too O'Donovan's theory has the potential to unite what usually only exists in mutual tension.

Therefore, I can conclude that his theory can be worthwhile for a fruitful continuation of the 'Christendom' debate. It can redefine the battle lines and reorder the existing positions. His theory does the same for this field of problems as it did with other themes that we came across. O'Donovan rearranges a faltering debate and so opens up a new perspective for it. His theory has more theoretical fruitfulness than others do. What is it that causes this potential in his theory? My proposal is that this potential forms a consequence of his openness in the public domain to realities that humans cannot control but that at the same time are unavoidably sensed. These realities O'Donovan theologically interprets as God's providence, Christ's rule, and the counterinfluence of evil. As a result of this openness, his theory is delivered from the ambition to develop a fully closed model that covers and controls the political reality in a completely satisfactory way. Apparently, this is basically impossible. As soon as we forget that and nevertheless try to develop such a system, we are rewarded with stalemates and unnecessary theoretical opposites.

This great value of O'Donovan's Christendom theory in the present debate however, does not wipe out the other positions uncovering some important shortcomings in it. It is desirable to improve it for the indicated value to be maintained. The shortcomings I point out are the lack of theoretical elaboration on the question whether every society needs a religious core, the readiness for rejecting a pluralist model, and some aspects of his theological insights concerning creation, history, and eschatology.

With chapter seven, the actual investigation is rounded off. *Chapter eight* brings the book to a close by returning the results to the Dutch context, which was described, in the first chapter. At first sight, the Dutch public discussion about the role of religion seems to display a line of debate that does not correspond with the Anglo-Saxon Christendom debate. After all, in The Netherlands a strictly liberal approach confronts the vision that makes a plea for the societal value of religion. However, the latter corresponds to CR (civil religion) in the Christendom debate. Therefore, this debate can make clear that under the surface of the Dutch debate the battle lines and positions of the Christendom debate implicitly but irrefutably play their parts. Because of that, and with the extra support of the observation that a typical Dutch position as that of G.G. de Kruijfs leads to a similar result as the options of chapter

### *Summary*

seven, when compared with O'Donovan, I suggest the usefulness of O'Donovan's approach for the Dutch discussion.

If, moreover, under the surface of the Dutch discussion the positions of the Christendom debate are present, this leads to the conclusion that the debate about the role of religion also bears a theological character, even when this is not openly acknowledged or recognized. For example, the liberal position and the plea for a societal function of religion involve implicit theological choices, although these often remain unnoticed. This should give rise to a more explicit recognition of the theological aspect of the debate. O'Donovan's Christendom theory offers assistance in this. For his counter-narrative about the identity of Western societies is valid for the Dutch context as well. This narrative presents a train of thought that connects in a natural way reflection on the actual realities and deadlocks of political society to reflection on some of the core contents of Christian faith. The other side of this, however, is formed by the lessons Christians and theology itself should take from his way of operating. They have to improve their strategy in the public domain by incorporating the possibility he offers of a combination of an overtly Christian and explicitly faith-filled way of operating with a 'public voice' that avoids authoritarian claims on public discussions.

Apart from these central points, there are many particular insights in O'Donovan from which the Dutch context could profit. For example, his analysis of the reality of political representation could help in the search for a solution to the often-identified alienation between politics and citizens. In addition, his emphasis on 'authority' is provocative in the light of the usually anti-authoritarian disposition of Dutch public culture. Finally, O'Donovan's concept of 'secularity', which is not antireligious, deserves consideration in a liberal context that often is puzzled by a new public role for religion.



*Levend in Leviatan*