

Anarchy in the UK? GM Crops, Political Authority and the Rioting of God

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Abstract

In 2004, the UK government approved the commercial growing of GM maize. This article considers the legitimacy of that decision by exploring for Britain the roots of political experience in liberal society and Christian community. Through an analysis of the different popular responses to genetically based medical therapies and GM foods, the unclear status of nature in liberal thought is highlighted. From there, an account is given of roots of Christian political experience by reference to the resurrection of Christ and the rioting of the Spirit. Drawing on Arendt (1958/1998), the roots of Christian political experience are sourced to actions that are both social and ecological. The legitimacy of the decision to permit the growing of GM maize is then tested against the political authority in Christianity, and is found wanting.

1. Introduction

The context for theological discussion of GM crops/foods in Britain changed in 2004. In this article I try to come to grips with this new circumstance. The new situation emerged as follows: on 19 February 2004, the London-based newspaper *The Guardian* reported the leak that the Labour government had approved the growing of GM Bayer maize. At the cabinet committee at which the decision was made, the discussion apparently conceded that the public was unlikely to be receptive but argued nonetheless that to make any other decision in the light of the results from Farm Scale Evaluations would be 'an irrational way for the government to proceed'. The leaked report indicated the first substantial government decision following on from *GM Nation? The Public Debate*, hosted by the British government in summer 2003. This debate was

promoted as a national consultation exercise in which interested parties and the public were invited to engage with the many aspects of the genetic manipulation of foods and submit their views. Within a few days of the leaking of the government's decision by *The Guardian*, Friends of the Earth published a briefing note setting out why this GM maize, called ChardonLL, which is tolerant to the herbicide 'Liberty', should not be grown.¹ Sure enough, on 9 March 2004, Secretary of State for the Environment, Margaret Beckett, announced the government's decision to allow this variety of GM maize to be grown commercially.

The necessity in the UK for field trials of GM rape, maize and beet and for a public consultation exercise can be traced to the British public's profound antipathy to GM foods. This antipathy – shared with populations of many other EU countries – was in full flood in 1998–99.² Such antipathy led many food retailers to withdraw GM food products from sale and to commit themselves to providing GM-free food. Moreover, the EU felt obliged to act by imposing what amounted to a moratorium on the commercial growing of GM crops in 1999 (Szerszynski 2005). The Blair government, demonstrating its usual trait of boldness tempered by caution, decided that the growing of GM crops should be tested in two ways: farm trials and a national consultation exercise. It is not clear what the government hoped to achieve by taking this two-fold approach nor indeed if it had a clear idea of its preferred outcome. Nonetheless, the Blair government's decision to ask only a narrow range of scientific questions of GM crops and thereafter to approve the growing of a specific GM crop did not come as a surprise to the GM industry or opponents of GM and has not been construed as out of step with the government's general sympathies.

Is the Labour government's decision to approve the growing of ChardonLL GM maize a legitimate one? I ask this question because it is clear that the Government's own consultation exercise, *GM Nation?*, discovered a substantial weight of public opinion (54%) against the growing of GM crops and larger percentage (86%) not wishing to eat GM foods.³ Indeed, the leaked report in *The Guardian* concedes the point: the

1. 'Briefing Note: GM fodder maize', March 2004, available at <www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefing_notes/gm_fodder_maize.pdf>, accessed 7 July 2004.

2. According to the Public Perceptions of Agricultural Biotechnologies in Europe (PABE) final report, available at <www.lancs.ac.uk/depts/ieppp/pabe/docs/pabe-finalreport.pdf>, the intensity of the GM foods controversy continued – and even increased – in some EU countries after 1999: see PABE (Wynne [ed.] 2002: 26–40).

3. See *GM Nation? The Findings of the Public Debate*, p. 32, available at <www.gmnation.org.uk/docs/gmnation_finalreport.pdf>, accessed 7 January 2005. Of course, this finding cannot be described as representative of the population as a whole.

British public, it notes, is unlikely to be receptive. Additionally, the Friends of the Earth briefing paper was cynical about the Labour government's attitude: FoE claimed that the government established the *GM Nation?* consultation exercise without committing itself to being bound by its popular conclusions.⁴ Such a judgement reinforces the question: Is the Labour government's decision to approve the growing of ChardonLL GM maize a legitimate one?⁵

It is not easy to discern how this question is best answered.⁶ Clearly, the issue raised here is of political authority: by what authority does a government act? In putting the matter this way, I am not denying that the government's decision is *lawful*. If, say, Friends of the Earth were to make a legal challenge to the decision, that challenge – I am convinced – would be defeated. In other words, the government is not acting *ultra vires*; it is acting within its powers; its decision is legally valid. However, my question is different: Is the government acting within its *authority*? Has the government exceeded its authority? Are we in an an-archic situation in which the government is acting against 'rule'? Of course, the government has the power, and access to the means of violence, to make and carry through its decision, by this means to establish and protect a new order. However, is the decision authorized? Is the new order in Britain that now permits the growing of ChardonLL legitimate?

Moreover, the complexity of the Government's decision must be noted.⁷ Although the Government granted permission for the growing of ChardonLL, there were also conditions attached. Not least, Bayer was made legally liable for any damage to, for example, the neighbouring crops of organic farmers. As a result, in an announcement made in March 2004, Bayer declined to commence commercial growing of its GM maize in Britain. Thus the Government's decision is both permissive and restrictive: nothing to be said against the technology but commercial farming of a GM crop raises different, practical issues that the GM

4. 'Briefing Note: GM Fodder Maize', p. 3.

5. See also the response by the churches to the UK GM debate, in which they understood themselves as marginalized: 'Christian groups say that they have been cut out of the Government's process of public consultation on genetically modified (GM) crops', Rachel Boulding, 'GM debate is sidelining us, say church bodies', *Church Times* 13 June 2003 <www.churchtimes.co.uk>, accessed 7 July 2003.

6. Of course, this point has been answered in practice by some groups: the act of 'crop trashing', in which anti-GM activists invade a field of a GM crop in order to spoil the scientific trial, began in Britain in July 1998. In later 'crop trashings', activists made clear that they regarded the planting of GM crops as illegal. See Szerszynski 2005.

7. I owe this point to Bronislaw Szerszynski; see also Szerszynski 2005.

industry is required to address (and be prepared to pay for). Again, it remains unclear whether the withdrawal by Bayer of its GM maize is welcomed by the government and indeed whether the present state of affairs is the government's preferred outcome. Whatever, by this route the Blair government can – somewhat cynically? – demonstrate its own scientific reasonableness and yet not be out of step with the 'anti-GM crops' sympathies of the British *populus*.

Through this article, I propose to examine the complexity of this decision from a theological perspective. Deferring discussion of the restrictive aspect to the last section, my analysis at first concentrates on the permissive aspect of the government's decision, and its authorization. I start by examining the sources of political authority in a liberal society. Drawing on the work of Robert Song and Oliver O'Donovan, I offer an account of some characteristic and characterizing commitments of a liberal society. A liberal construal of the roots of political experience, I conclude, is not well-suited to exploring the legitimacy or otherwise of the government's decision to approve the growing of a GM crop. To establish this conclusion, I approach a basic confusion in liberal political experience by noting the very different receptions in some EU liberal societies, including Britain, of medical therapies based on genetic engineering and the growing of GM crops. I try to explain why a 'society of competitive consumers' might in general approve of GM-based medical therapies but in general disapprove of the growing of GM crops.

In my critical diagnosis, I show that a liberal society's sentiments encompass the manipulation of the human but are less secure in according a place to the non-human, whether manipulated or not. Medicine, as we shall see, functions as theodicy for agnostics whereas the manipulation of the organic non-human fulfils no such rectifying function. This leaves the way open for the domination of the non-human, including technological adjustment or 'improvement', but also generates a certain ambivalence towards any such domination. However, there are also strains in liberal political experience that implicate the ecological, the non-human, if only negatively. Exploring tensions in the themes of the liberal construal of self and the liberal understanding of reason as informing concerns about GM crops, I try to discern why the *populus* of a liberal society (here, Britain) hesitates when confronted by the issue of GM crops.⁸

8. It would be interesting to know whether other sorts of experiences – traffic congestion and pollution, poor school environments, inadequate health and safety measures, poor quality and unsafe food – are at least as important as the more 'theoretical' issues that I discuss here.

At this point, I turn to the theme of the roots of Christian political experience. Drawing on the work of Rowan Williams and Peter Hodgson, I argue that the roots of Christian political experience are to be found in the worship of the triune God. Moreover, the revolution in sociality that is the resurrection of Jesus Christ is a properly political act. Not least, the actuality of nature is involved in the revolution of the resurrection. Furthermore, I argue that the work of the Holy Spirit is emphatically political: as interruptive and transgressive the Spirit demands and resources a political order which emerges out of the new and the unexpected. 'While they were eating, he took a loaf of bread.... Then he took a cup...he gave it to them, and all of them drank from it' (Mk 14.22-23, and parallels at Mt. 26.26-27 and Lk. 22.17-19; also Jn 6.51); 'For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them' (Mt. 18.20). This is a rioting order that is premised neither on the domination of non-human nature nor on the suppression of the political. In such fashion, I propose an account of political authority in Christian tradition.

In the final section, I return to my lead question: Is the Labour government's decision to approve the growing of ChardonLL GM maize a legitimate one? Through an analysis of human action, which leans heavily on the work of Hannah Arendt, I try to show that the acts of 'political' authority in a liberal society are not properly political at all. That is, politics in a liberal society, such as Britain under the second term of a Labour government, has become a matter of efficient administration and effective delivery (Wright 2003). Politics – that is, acts based in a plurality of persons acting in concert in new and unexpected ways – has been subsumed in the 'domestication' of British politics.

I conclude that a comprehensive account of resistance to the 'anti-rule' of the present UK Labour government may be sourced to the rioting of God's Spirit in which the fullness of political authority is founded. In that the decision to permit the growing of a GM crop avoids the matter of natural contingencies and is not governed by the liberty of disinterestedness, I question the legitimacy of the decision. I come, then, to a different – perhaps anarchistic – conclusion: any decision to approve or disapprove the growing of a GM crop must situate itself within the rioting of the Spirit of God. This 'no-rule' enjoys some overlaps with the political commitments of a liberal society but raises fundamental questions concerning the current exercise of the Labour government's 'anti-rule'.

2. Foundations of Liberal Society

The decision of a *populus* to reject a technological innovation does not drop down from heaven. It emerges out of the popular imagination that

is, in turn, born in a particular culture. Perhaps what is surprising about the refusal of GM foods across the EU's liberal societies is precisely the failure of a liberal nerve. That is, if a liberal polity treats technology 'as an essentially *uninteresting* if powerful tool, *neutral* in relation to its cultural values and *subservient* to political goals' (Borgmann 1984: 35, italics added), it is not easy to see how the phenomenon of GM foods contradicts these commitments. Or, at least, it is not clear in what ways the alteration of genes strikes people as being neither uninteresting, neutral nor subservient. In this section, and the next, I explore the sources of this liberal reaction and note a divergence between popular reactions to GM foods and GM medical therapies. I conclude that there is ambivalence in liberal society regarding non-human nature.

I begin by introducing a recent presentation of lay reactions to genetic manipulation. Deane-Drummond, Szerszynski and Grove-White (2003: 22-29) suggest through their presentation of English lay voices on the topic of genetic manipulation that emerging through popular discussion are different 'ontologies of the person'. That is, what is at stake for the popular imagination are different construals of the 'essence' of the human, including its capacities and natural relations. However, on my reading, their presentation more directly suggests a lay scepticism about political process and its claim to authority, rather than hesitations as regards the technology itself. Even the concerns about genetic manipulation itself seem to relate to issues to do with abstraction from contingencies and equality rather than worries about the technology.

On this reading, people regard GM foods as remarkable, partisan and domineering on account of their suspicions regarding the transparency of the political process, the robustness of regulatory frameworks and the nearness of commercial interests that accompany this new technology. On first reading, these suspicions do not seem opposed to the sympathies of a liberal society. After all, running deep in varieties of liberalism – whether constitutional, *laissez-faire*/classical economic, or welfare – is a scepticism concerning the powers and prerogatives of the state. If these lay reactions do not appear to be opposed to liberalism (indeed, they might be examples of it), what are among the chief characteristics of a liberal society? And what is the epistemological location of these lay hesitations regarding GM crops within a liberal society?

Generalizing from the varieties of liberalism, Robert Song has argued (1997: 40-48) for a number of family resemblances between liberalisms. Set out as a list, these are: the conception of the human agent; the centrality of the fact/value distinction in meta-ethical enquiry; a mode of thinking that is individualist, universalist and abstract; a specific conception of reason; and, finally, a progressive account of history. Of these

commitments 'to some interpretation of which, when taken together, a liberal must subscribe' (Song 1997: 40) to qualify as liberal. From these five features of the liberal physiognomy, we can begin to discern how the technology of GM foods could be understood as calling into question some of the central commitments of a liberal society. How? To answer this question, I discuss the issues of the self and reason in liberalism.

First, with regard to the liberal conception of the self, we may follow Song in noting that the liberal 'self is fundamentally detached from contingencies, being related to them (if at all) through choice or consent: ... individuals are taken to be sovereign choosers, free to revise their ends as they wish, bound by nothing to which they have not consented, the ultimate authorities on how they should lead their lives' (Song 1997: 40). A strong rendering of this feature could, I suppose, be dubbed 'self creation': meaning in life can only be secured by the individual for the individual in and through his/her relationship with him/herself.⁹ What is less clear is how such a contingency-free understanding of the self includes natural relations. Perhaps some of the concern in face of GM foods is that through the use of GM technologies the liberal self fears that natural contingencies cannot be kept at a distance. On this view, technologies operating 'at a distance' are unobjectionable but if GM technologies raise the issue of the uncontrollable and the unrecalable then it may not be possible to keep such breakouts at a distance. GM technology thereby raises the question of natural contingencies and their control.

Whether or not a fear of natural contingencies is constitutive of liberalism is debated. John Zvesper argues that 'Modern liberals suffer from an advanced case of *physiphobia*, an unreasonable fear of nature' (1993: 4). This is not quite a call for the importing of ecological considerations into liberalism. Rather, Zvesper is seeking to reinvigorate the discussion of natural right within liberalism. That is, liberalism should 'pay attention to what human beings are naturally like... what is by nature right, based on insights into what is by nature human' (Zvesper 1993: 4). While this may be of limited use as an ecological position, the reference to natural right does raise the issue of natural standards: Zvesper invites liberalism to take a position in relation to these standards. To fail to make this move, Zvesper argues, is either to refuse natural standards or propose a social conventionalism to which natural standards are irrelevant.

If Zvesper is correct in his judgement about *physiphobia* in liberalism, one way that a lay group might incorporate such *physiphobia* into its reactions to GM foods is by sensing that the conventional autonomy of

9. Within liberalism there remains the danger of solipsism, and its epistemological counterpart, methodological individualism.

the liberal self is somehow being compromised in this technology. Thus what we are being presented with in the lay reactions discussed by Deane–Drummond *et al* is a sense that a (liberal) ontology of the person is here under threat. That is, instead of a clear demarcation or contrast between the human and the natural, the separatist ontology of the liberal person is about to be undermined by the mixing of human artifice with a ‘pure’ nature. If the contrast between the human and the natural is reduced by the genetic manipulation of crops then it becomes unclear which nature the liberal is ordinarily fearful of. And if the liberal should, differently, affirm the matter of natural standards, how can such standards be maintained if through genetic manipulation the human is mixed with nature and the natural rendered unnatural thereby? If ecological concerns are forcing the liberal self either to overcome its fear of nature or draw strength from natural standards, the genetic manipulation of crops undermines the required conception of nature. In other words, what is required is the maintenance of the meaning of nature *as other*. However, genetic manipulation of the non-human abolishes that otherness.

Second, the matter of reason: Song argues that there are two aspects of the liberal conception of reason, the deliberative attempt to discover truth and the ‘calculation of individual advantage...that is, the maximisation of individual utility’ (Song 1997: 42). These two understandings are divergent, Song notes, producing a genuine tension within liberalism: is moral value to be founded in reason or the individual moral agent?

Of course, a standard criticism of the liberal position on reason concerns its alleged optimism that turns upon—so runs the critique—a deeply abstract rendering: according to the liberal position, the deliberations of reason come ‘society-free’, so to speak, and without contingency. This is despite the fact that the liberal period has been interrupted by revolutions and totalitarianisms that have drawn upon the passions as much as reason.

In addition, the liberal society of late-modernity, so Oliver O’Donovan argues, has come to lose trust in the competencies of an impartial reason: ‘Because the normal content of political communication, furthermore, has come to be the conflict of competing wills, speech has lost its orientation to deliberation on the common good and has come to serve the assertion of competing interests’ (O’Donovan 1996: 282). If speech now serves competing interests, it remains unclear how reason might survive through such a process. Rapidly, an electorate will lose trust in the reasonableness of political communication and the rationality of scientific pronouncements that are recruited to support political positions. Suspicion—at least in the popular mind—abounds therefore.

One way of approaching lay reservations concerning the growing of GM foods might be to address these difficulties to the liberal conception of reason. If reason is held to be the proper arbiter of political disputes and at the same time is considered to be infected by political powers or suborned by commercial interests, appeals to 'reasonableness' will fail to persuade. Thus when the cabinet discussion reported earlier claims that any decision other than approving the growing of ChardonLL GM maize would be 'an irrational way for the government to proceed' what is missing is an acknowledgement that the very meaning of reason is being altered. Once an electorate loses confidence in appeals to a deliberative reason a suspicion grows that appeals to reason are claims to power.

So far, I have sought to offer some reasons why a liberal society might have reservations about GM crops. At first sight it is not clear why this might be so. After all, liberal society has hosted – indeed welcomed – a legion of new technologies and has not objected to the domination of the non-human by the human. Indeed, there is opinion poll evidence that suggests that citizens of the EU expect and hope for the continuing domination of nature by technological tools (Pepper 1993: 34). However, despite such enthusiasm I have offered some suggestions – the breaching of the self's autonomy, the abuse of reason – as to why GM crops might make even hardened technophiles a little queasy.

3. *The Roots of Political Experience*

Nonetheless, even if the analysis ventured in the previous section could be substantiated, it would not explain divergent reactions to GM technologies. For example, why is the *populus* much less opposed to *medical* therapies based upon genetic manipulation when compared with GM crops?¹⁰ Which approach is truer to liberal self-understanding? And what is the crucial difference for public opinion between GM medical therapies and GM crops/foods? These questions are part of a larger issue: the roots of political experience in a liberal society. If politics is

10. The PABE final report led by Brian Wynne confirms that there is a difference in popular reactions to GM foods and GM medical therapies in some EU countries. However, the report disputes that the principal reason for the greater acceptance of GM medical therapies is 'personal benefit'. Rather, the final report argues that the difference is traceable to a perceived sense among the *populus* that the regulation of medical therapies is more rigorous than that of GM crops, that the information concerning the former is more reliable than that governing the latter, etc. (Wynne [ed.] 2002: 52-56). Indeed, the PABE final report acknowledges that in the popular reaction an ideal view of the regime governing GM medical therapies is presented. This article seeks to explore the roots of such idealism.

concerned with the organization of bodies, human and non-human, in time and space, how do people in a liberal society experience such organization? And if some account could be given of the roots of political experience in liberal society, how does that experience illuminate the issue of the discrepancy between the general welcome given to GM-based medical therapies and the popular refusal of GM crops?

It was Karl Marx who pointed out (1990: 270-74) that in a society dominated by the realities of ownership one way in which people might understand themselves is as owners of their capacity for work; workers have their 'labour power' to sell. This may indeed be different from previous ways that society has been understood. I propose to explore the characterization of our society as a 'society of competitive consumers'. By this means I hope to approach the matter of why EU societies might refuse GM foods without refusing all GM technology.

As consumers, people compete for consumer 'goods' and services; indeed, advertising and other ways of promoting goods and services often turn upon claims to scarcity or competitiveness: 'Only two left in stock!' 'Win a free...!' Yet that is not the most important part of the competition. Consumers are job-holders and thereby compete for paid employment; this latter is a condition for consuming. People may also compete for the best preparation for that employment, for example, through education. As well as competing for income/wealth and thereby access to the practice and goods of consumerism, sections of a society of competitive consumers also compete for social recognition.

Some sections also compete for the state's attention to assist with the overcoming of injustices and thereby raise the issue of the distribution of goods and services. More and more, issues to do with redistribution and the overcoming of suffering are being seen on the meliorist grounds of consumerism: 'delivery' of social goods and particular liberties has become the mantra in Britain. 'The Blair government...initially seemed to believe that they could micro-manage everything from the centre, setting targets, controlling funds, and imposing disciplines. However, they soon discovered that this was far more difficult in practice than they had allowed for; and the emphasis began to switch to developing 'strategic capacity' at more local levels, with 'earned autonomy' for organizations which could demonstrate good management and delivery' (Wright 2003: 60). Through properly managed processes of delivery is the quasi-redemption of society.

What is especially interesting at this point is the way in which 'the consumer' displaces 'the citizen' (here I am drawing on Soper 2004: 111-16). That is, in the distribution of goods in a meritocracy, a person is considered to be a consumer and to make no connection between such

consuming and their role as a citizen.¹¹ After all, *citizens* might have questions concerning, for example, the sustainability of certain sorts of consumption or the treatment of workers tasked with operating new systems of delivery or the implicit anthropology operative in the regular academic testing at school of young children. The *electorate* is not invited to ask these questions so making more difficult the weaving of connections between citizenship and consumption.

The theme of redemption emerges most clearly in the overcoming of human embodied suffering, that is, the suffering that is subject to possible treatment by medical therapies. Oliver O'Donovan argues that medicine is part of the contemporary effort to render suffering intelligible. In that there has been a 'reorientation of society to individual wants' then the role of society in justifying suffering has been undermined. We therefore develop compassion, which is 'the determination to oppose' rather than accept suffering. O'Donovan concludes: 'Armed with technical prowess, compassion has been a world-transforming force in the reshaping of twentieth-century medicine' (O'Donovan 1996: 276-77). This interest in medicine is intelligible from the perspective of a liberal society: the illness of an individual is a restriction in the exercise of a contingency-free liberty. Such liberty is often considered under the sign of the negative: as freedom *from*.... Therefore, if present society 'sees the body as something which is to be transcended, to be manipulated in accordance with desire' (Song 2002: 127), then ill-health is a recurring reminder of the difficulty of effecting such transcendence. Ill health, and the potential for ill health, is a persistent reminder of our status as embodied and cuts against the equality of liberty. As the great corrector, medicine is, as I have argued elsewhere, theodicy for agnostics (Scott 2004: 206).

We are now able to venture a reason why GM-based medical therapies encounter less opposition than GM crops. Medicine is the great adjuster: when life deals out unfair cards in regard to the health of the individual, then medicine supplies the corrective. In this perspective, ill health is dis-ordered and medicine functions as the re-orderer that, if successful, restores the individual to the full exercise of liberty.

11. British Prime Minister Tony Blair has tried to make a political virtue of this distinction by arguing that consumers are not concerned with the *system of delivery* of public services but only with their *quality* at the point of delivery. Such a view assumes that the public votes in elections *as consumers* in judgement on politicians. Thus issues of redistribution, recognition, fairness, etc., are reinvented in terms of the distribution of commodities. And the electorate is asked to pose as a group of consumers for the election night cameras.

However, the notion of 'order' functions differently in appreciations of GM foods. According to Deane-Drummond *et al.*, lay responses raised the issue of 'order': does not the genetic manipulation of food alter a natural order that should not be changed? The source of such a worry in a liberal society may be discerned. If it remains unclear to a liberal society *how* natural standards relate to human standards, then altering non-human nature creates anxieties. After all, might not alteration of non-human nature impinge upon some standards that should be operative in human society? Perhaps we might treat these natural standards only negatively. However, to alter nature would then mean that we could not treat these standards even negatively. Of course, we could try a different approach and reject all natural standards. However, in the face of an announced ecological crisis that seems an equally risky move. After all, is not an ecological crisis a feedback loop by which breaches in natural standards are being communicated to us?

On this view, the differing reactions to GM therapies and GM foods can be explained. In a situation of competition in which supermarket shelves are crowded with food products, and in which the genetic manipulation of non-human nature raises the issue of natural standards, a case can be made for saying that GM crops do not extend the exercise of liberty. These GM crops then can be refused. However, medical therapies operate in favour of good health and can be seen as part of the effort to secure the potential for the individual's exercise of liberty. The contingencies of ill health do not serve the interests of happiness and may therefore be overcome as part of the refusal to accept bodily suffering.

Through two sections I have tried to show why at the levels of theoretical engagement and reflective experience a liberal society might have reservations about GM crops. That a liberal society proves itself to be hospitable to GM-medical therapies also suggests that such a society remains deeply supportive of technological developments. Moreover, these two reactions seem to turn upon different appreciations of nature: the nature of the human body and the nature of organic non-human nature. Thus, while not logically contradictory, the differing appreciations of two genetically-based technologies appear to be inconsistent. The rejection of GM crops therefore has a whiff of arbitrariness about it or, at least, embodies an uncertainty. Because of this arbitrariness or uncertainty, it remains unclear how far this analysis takes us in ascertaining whether or not the decision to permit the growing of ChardonLL GM maize in Britain is authorized or not. After all, it is not clear whether a liberal society's approval of GM-based medical therapies or its hesitation at GM crops is truer to liberal self-understanding.

It is time to start over by attending to the sources of Christian political experience. There are, in my view, important overlaps between the sources of Christian political experience and the political experience of a liberal society. However, there are also important differences, not least as given by the fact that Christian political experience renders an account of non-human nature. Through the next two sections I offer an account of the sources of Christian political experience and an analysis of the structure of political authority generated thereby.

4. Sources of Christian Political Experience

If politics concerns the organization of bodies in time and space, at the heart of Christianity is a type of polity: the communal worship of God is certainly a specific communal act of organization. To participate in the liturgy is therefore to participate in a 'political' act, in the loosest sense. In worship, there is the threefold engagement with the One who creates, liberates and riots, and is revealed thereby as triune. This is the primary source of Christian political experience: participation in a practice and orientation that requires the organization of bodies and is committed to learning, and learning about learning, of the triune God. Scripture is the witness to this political event, provides evidence of that learning and recommends such learning to Christian communities. If there is a Scriptural narrative, it is 'completed' by the worshipping community. As William Stacy Johnson argues: '...there is no such thing as "narrative" – whether unified or otherwise – apart from the contingent theological wisdom of those who are doing the narrating. The narrative is not just a given but must be constructed and reconstructed in the life of the community of faith over time' (Johnson 2003: 109-11).

How is the 'political' event of Christian worship structured? What is the nature and orientation of this worshipping practice?

First, the act of worship is focused on the Christ who was crucified and is now resurrected, that is, present to the Christian community. The event of resurrection itself is the action of a trinitarian God and is best grasped within a trinitarian structure. That is, as Rowan Williams has argued, there can be no entering into the dynamic of resurrection without attention also being paid to the level of universal questioning that the resurrection of Jesus initiates. Here the matter of Christian community is presented: a community that on-the-one-hand acknowledges no limits apart from its Lord, and yet on-the-other-hand is thrown into confusion by this acknowledgement. In other words, if there are no 'limits' except through such acknowledgement, then how are we to live? In the revolution in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth is the invitation to the

community to acknowledge the referring of all matters to the boundlessly generative creativity of the Father, and the creativity in dependence and obedience of the Son. It is, above all, an invitation in the Spirit to enter into this creativity: a 'following after' in response to the call of Christ: an invitation to live a life for others in response to the 'creativity' of Gethsemane, Calvary and the road to Emmaus. In short, 'God invites us into his "world" ...the primary order of all things, the creative liberty of God' (Williams 1986: 208). Worship of the triune God is thereby to be grasped as a 'political' event: to be a community organized in time and space and through worship called into the creative liberty of God. One part of that participation is to ask questions about how the community itself should be organized.

If this seems an abstracted description, it is important to grasp that such an account is rooted in the practice of a worshipping community as it gathers to praise the triune God. Indeed, the worshipping community exemplifies the account of action proposed by Hannah Arendt in *The Human Condition* (1958/1998). As Arendt writes, '...the smallest act in the most limited circumstances bears the seed of the same boundlessness, because one deed, and sometimes one word, suffices to change every constellation' (Arendt 1958/1998: 190). Although the direction of Arendt's thought tends to secularize, her description of the boundless nature of the act does not preclude a claim that the author of an act is a divine agent.¹² Hence, although outside Arendt's argument, the resurrection may be understood as a specific, localized act with boundless consequences. It requires a plurality of divine identities and issues in the plurality of the coming together of worshipping actors.

Furthermore, 'Action, moreover, no matter what its specific content, always establishes relationships and therefore has an inherent tendency to force open all limitations and cut across all boundaries' (Arendt 1958/1998: 190). Thus it is that in making space in the world the Word is also the creator of community: as James Alison argues, the disciples/first apostles experience the presence of the resurrected Jesus as gratuitous forgiveness, as the offer and actuality of renewed relationships, of betrayers and fallers-away being greeted as friends. 'The resurrection is forgiveness', writes Alison (1993: 16), 'not a decree of forgiveness, but the presence of gratuity as a person'. The source of this human plurality, experienced as forgiveness, is the triune – that is, plural – God.

Differently from Arendt, I would argue that the two-fold character of action in equality and distinction is not simply a condition of action but

12. In a fuller treatment, I would want to show that Arendt's accounts of the act of forgiveness and promise are convincing finally only in theological perspective.

rather is to be located in the source of all creaturely action: the regard of God who 'sees' impartially and yet loves passionately and particularly. So in human action, human distinctiveness rests not on 'beginning something new on our own initiative' but starting anew in the 'beginning again' that is the resurrection of Jesus Christ: to receive a gift, to be forgiven, to be welcomed as a friend of God, to be tasked with a mission. In this theological perspective, 'to set something in motion' is to participate in that which is already a revolution: the triune life of God.¹³ And that mode of participation is, as we shall see in the next section, the life and gift of the Spirit of God: the insurrectionary act. The rioting acts of the worshipping community are therefore to be understood as the representation of the revolutionary life of God in the world: the resurrection of the crucified Christ, the rioting of the lively Spirit.

Second, we may note the historical or practical character of the engagement. Even if we admit that the level of disorder initiated by Christ is perhaps most evident in the early Church, the structure of appropriating the resurrection does not change. To enter into the resurrection is still to ascribe 'normative focus' to the testimony to Jesus; it is to refer this focus to the creative liberty of the Father; it is to enquire as to the form of community in the Spirit that is 'ruled' by the creative liberty of the Son from the Father (Williams 1986). If resurrection is an act of grace and a referring of Jesus back to the world, it is an invitation to enter this liberty, and enact it (or share it). This then is the historical character of the inquiry: given this invitation, how shall we live? Given this call, how shall we undertake the difficult task of conversion (of ourselves and of others)? We are justified, but what is the form of the sanctification that can only take the narrow way from Gethsemane to Calvary? Worship is to be understood as a 'political' event a second time: because the liberty of God is the liberty of the Creator, the community is additionally obliged to ask itself questions about its relations to wider society, and the quality of that wider society as it also relates to the creator God.

A trinitarian interpretation of resurrection – an event which might be understood as God's gracious invitation to human beings to share in and share God's liberty – thus suggests that the resurrection is about the conversion of a 'community without limits' away from idolatrous practices and towards the liberty of God. Although the Word creates space for itself in the world and the Spirit strengthens a community, yet the worshipping act is a movement between human actors who are encountered by the rioting Spirit of God.

13. It will be obvious here that I am working with an account of the convergence, but not identity, of the economic and immanent Trinities.

At one level the resurrection is the transformation of *Jesus'* immediate relationships. Jürgen Moltmann has argued in such fashion: '...Jesus lived in mutual relationships with the poor and the sick, sinners, and the men and women who had been thrust out of society. It was in these relationships that he spread his gospel' (Moltmann 1990: 145-46). Here we are referred in the first instance to *Jesus'* relationships with other people, such as his immediate group of followers.¹⁴

The resurrection is certainly this, yet also more. Resurrection is the transcendence of the limit of death, a limit that is a general characteristic of social humanity. Resurrection maintains that death is not the victory of 'the individual' over the social. If a crucial limit of embodiment is death, then resurrection reconstitutes this limit: the revolutionising or transformation of a particular limit, death, of the social nature of humanity. Thus if resurrection is a transformation of a limit of human being, then this is a 'social' limit and so reconstructs the social basis of human life against its closure in death.

Thus resurrection invites a 'new mode of living together' (Eagleton 1970: 47) in the face of the reconstitution of death. It is a returning of human beings to their social history – the latter now to be understood differently. Death, then, in the perspective of the resurrection, is not to be interpreted as the denial of the social basis of human life. Not even death – at least for the Christian – is the denial of the social character of human living.

Furthermore, the social character of human living always encompasses the ecological. A 'new mode of living together' is always the renewal or transformation of ecological living. This judgement may also be sourced to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. If we follow Peter Hodgson on involuntary or necessary nature (1994: 201), we may note that the limit experience of anticipated death is not the only natural feature of human existence. Other necessary features of our natural existence include: birth, genetics, the unconscious, growth, and maturation. Human creatureliness always invokes such natural, necessary features.

These necessary features are also included in this post-resurrection 'new mode of living together' because all are required to give an account of human 'living together'. If the resurrection of this Christ is a revolution in the body of this Christ, then it is a revolution also in the natural aspects of embodiment: birth, genetic history, growth and maturation. It is thereby a revolution in natural relations: of all that is required to produce and sustain this birth, genetic history, growth and maturation.

14. Here I am reprising and extending the argument developed in Scott 1994: 184-88.

The resurrection of Christ is thereby a revolution in our understanding of history, place and environment; it is a revolution in the world, and in our understanding of the world.

What are the sources of Christian political experience? I have argued that the sources are participation in the three-fold life of God in worship. To participate in Christian community is to be invited into God's world of liberty by way of a revolution in human life, both social and ecological. What is authorized by way of participation in the creative liberty of God is a new mode of living together that is both social and ecological.

5. The Spirit of God: Eschatological, Rioting Action

The Spirit rises up: as we have seen, this new mode of living together is by way of the Spirit; it is the gift of the Spirit through struggle and questioning. As Elizabeth Johnson recommends, the Spirit may be understood as eschatological movement in and towards the openness of creaturely reality: '...the Spirit characteristically sets up bonds of kinship among all creatures, human and non-human alike, all of whom are energized by this one Source' (Johnson 1993: 44). The actions of the Spirit are eschatological: directed towards the reconstruction of livelihoods through struggle and questioning by reference to the creative liberty of God.

The political dynamic of this reconstruction cannot be overlooked; or, it can only be overlooked if the actions of the Spirit are misunderstood or misconstrued. Recall that the revelation of the triune God issues in an invitation in the Spirit to enter into divine creativity: a 'following after' in response to the call of Christ; an invitation to live a sacrificial life for others in response to the 'creativity' of Gethsemane, Calvary and the road to Emmaus. I have already suggested that such entering is by way of an ecological reading of human social circumstance: the reconstruction of death through resurrection presents the human in its ecological relationships. Entering into the riotous actions of the Spirit of God is thereby a reconstructive and ecological action.

How shall we think of this rioting action? What more can be said about it? First, the life of this God is always consistent: that is, it consistently amplifies the body of Jesus Christ, which is the content of God's relationship to the world.¹⁵ Thus the Spirit always inaugurates a social and ecological movement. In other words, the movement of the Spirit is towards eschatological peace and the building of community, of 'bonds of kinship among all creatures, human and non-human alike'.

15. The trinitarian doctrine of creation required by this position is set out in Scott 2003: 173-75.

However, there can be no magical translation to this state, no appeal for harmony as a substitute for the struggle towards social and ecological peace. The Spirit of God engenders a riot by providing a way of participating in the revolution that is the resurrection of the Christ. Neither church, world nor theology can 'master' the resurrection of Christ. Instead, all three are invited to start again in attempting to work out the implications of that resurrection. The work of the Spirit at Pentecost—the paradigmatic revelation of the Spirit's agency—records no achievement but is instead an invitation to a political action, not the achievement of translation but a glimpse of the plurality of God's kin-dom,¹⁶ not a state of affairs but the offer of a renewal that has been guaranteed by Christ. In that the kin-dom is re-inaugurated in Christ, the Church is invited to begin again in working out what that re-inauguration might mean politically. It is not that the Church starts afresh each time as if there were no direction or advance in Christian living. However, any renewal is always a political act founded in the plurality of actors in which something new is begun (Arendt 1958/1998: 7-9, 175-81).

In this reading of Christianity, any renewal is founded in and resourced by the starting over that is the resurrection of Jesus Christ. In this manner Scripture is read and tradition renewed; the Spirit-led life of God is a rioting that funds fresh action in word and deed by human creatures; such action is always thereby a beginning again in a specific situation and so in turn requires attentiveness to practical circumstance.

Second, such riotous action creates confusion by its invitation into the creative liberty of God. To participate in this action of the Spirit is thereby to participate in an insurrectionist act that is *interruptive* and *transgressive*. In such fashion is human action in this rioting of God to be understood as liberating human action.

Such action is *interruptive* in the sense that political action is sourced when a plurality of persons acts differently and outwardly. The infinite possibility of life in the Godhead arises in creation, Daniel Hardy argues, as 'ex-centric': '...the right use of our freedom is ex-centric, outward turning, conferring the benefits of our particularity upon those with whom we are interwoven. Our freedom confers freedom through our love'. Again, 'The sign of the blessing which God confers is in our conferral of such blessing on others, with all the natural and social modifications that may require, and even the creativity to fashion new and more humane contextual interweavings' (Hardy 1996: 83, 84). Liberation occurs in and through our contextuality as agents seek to practice a more humane life in the in-between of nature: '...the principal means by

16. The term 'kin-dom' is from Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz (1998).

which God reconciles is to be interwoven in the lives of those most 'decontextualized', those most diminished in their contextuality, providing new life for them in their abandonment...' (Hardy 1996: 87). These are locations of interruption.

Furthermore, such action of the Spirit of God is *transgressive*, in the sense that in the actions of the Spirit is the distribution of God's goodness through the freedoms of humanity and nature. Newness here takes on a new meaning: differently from the meaning of technological newness, the core action here is beginning (again), not finishing. Pneumatological action aims at blessing and hospitality. By contrast, technological action is without terminus yet it aims at completion: it seeks to alter, correct, and improve. It aims to overcome deficiencies, unproductivities and is governed by the generalization of commerce. Technological action projects many futures, many possibilities but only one theme: the satisfying of desiring based upon restlessness. As Wendell Berry notes: 'In the circle of the human we are weary with striving, and are without rest' (cited in Hauerwas and Shuman 1997: 58).

Pneumatological action is different. It too aims at newness but this is the newness of blessing and hospitality. The aim here is 'starting over' in which a future is received, not projected. A new conception of nature is at stake here but not one that is worked out from technology's leading edge but through the political act of rioting: a joyous, lively, interruptive, movement that blesses and overcomes exclusion, that levels and recognizes, that understands that through the political act social-being-that-is-natural-being is renewed.

The insurgency of the Spirit, I have argued, is directed towards the reconstruction of livelihoods. The action of the Spirit finds and redirects us in our contextuality. Such action is interruptive and transgressive. A political act is an authorized act when it begins in human community, affirms the non-human as the continuing co-condition of the development of humanity, and is dedicated towards the dispersal of God's goodness through the contingencies of human-nature relations.

6. Political Authority and GM Crops

Authorized political actions in Christianity are those that participate in the life of this three-fold God by way of the Spirit of God. Political authority in Christianity is not derivable from the narrative of Scripture in a deductive logic of revelation but is instead practised in interaction with the world that Scripture opens up. The basic dynamic operative here, I have argued, is interruptive and transgressive: the rioting action of God resources further rioting by which the political acts of a community

engage with its (social and natural) context and struggle to establish the re-doubling of the blessing of God by the persistent effort to begin again, to start over; in short, a pedagogy of permanent insurrection.

Clearly, there are some similarities with this account and the identifying features of a liberal society. First, we may note the Christian account of political authority proposed here will always be troubled by the power of the state. Liberalism shares this concern: an abiding theme in liberalism seeks to establish precisely in what ways the state contributes to the extension of liberty (Song 1997: 43-44). For both, the tendency of the state to reduce persons to administrative entities for their easier management remains a concern.

Second, both accounts stress the importance of liberty. However, their interpretations of the substance of liberty are different. Liberal thinkers have proposed the extension of freedom in all parts of society. Song, following Hobhouse, lists the following: 'civil liberty, fiscal liberty, personal liberty, social liberty, economic liberty, domestic liberty, local, racial and national liberty, international liberty, and political liberty' (Song 1997: 46). Yet, as Song notes, the list is somewhat misleading as liberal thought tends to interpret these varieties of liberty negatively, as freedom *from*: 'as a private space of free action in which non-interference by the state or others is guaranteed' (Song 1997: 46). However, the Christian construal of liberty presented above stresses participation rather than non-interference: the fullness of freedom is a gift of God in and through which God offers a world of liberty into which creatures are invited by way of the rioting actions of the Spirit.

Additionally, the freedom identified in this account is a freedom of dependence and obedience: the freedom of the crucified and resurrected Son. The liberty of the unencumbered self is thereby replaced by the sacrificial freedom of the One who seeks the re-doubling of the lively life of others before and from the 'Father'. On this view, the authority of the political act relates to the quality of participation and the extension of the freedom of others; reference is persistently made to insurrectionist acts that begin again in the attempt to renew such participation and freedom.

Differences now emerge. First, a liberal concern over the deployment of social goods in support of the development of an individual's autonomy is emphatically answered in the Christian position being developed here. For liberal thought, it can be seen as a contradiction that the autonomous self-development of the individual requires the mobilisation of social resources. No such hesitation is identified in the theological position being developed here. For this theological position, the development of the self is always communal, the employment of freedom is

properly ex-centric, and the orientation of human action is outward towards the conferral of blessing on others.

Second, the creative liberty of God, as understood here, is not an invitation into a world without nature. The contingencies of the self include natural contingencies. The return of this Christ from death is not the cancellation of his embodiment; rather his bodiliness is the means of his identification by his followers. The political act, and political authority, is associated in this theological perspective with the natural contingency of embodiment. We are thereby referred to the necessary features of our natural embodiment. In that human embodiment is invoked, the plurality of human action includes nature in the sense that human action is always embodied, earthy, action. To start over in political action is thereby always an ecological, as well as a social, event.

Third, in opposing the marginalization of nature, the subsumption of the political under the social is also opposed. That is, following a distinction made by Hannah Arendt (1958/98: 22-50), there persists a tendency in our society to understand government in terms of administration rather than politics. (Consumers may need protection; competition may need regulation; opportunities for advancement may need to be made generally available.) We have already seen one view of the activities of the present Labour government in Britain: its desire to micro-manage, its assertion that it does not matter how services are funded or delivered as long as they are of good quality, its desire to exact conformity to standards set centrally, the imposition of context-less targets. This is the administration of the social, in Arendt's terms.

Although the watchwords of this discourse are delivery, efficiency, value, and consistency, the unspoken value is 'utility', the greatest happiness for all. Yet, this is a deeply abstract way of considering the worth of the growing of GM crops: What is happiness in this context? Should the 'all' include future generations? How does non-human, non-sentient nature feature in an argument based on happiness? Not least, there is no way that the individual may disassociate him/herself from the growing of such crops when GM materials are let loose in the agricultural environment, beyond recall.¹⁷

Fourth, nor can desire to make money out of the new GM technology – 'If we do not pursue this technology, we shall be left behind' – be offered as a valid reason. For, yet again, we are dealing with an abstraction: some version of the 'national will' (decided by whom?) is being offered to us before which all other considerations must give way. By this means, moral scruples are reduced to insignificance in the face of

17. See Bronislaw Szerszynski, pp. 57-75 this issue.

appeal to 'the national interest'. It is no surprise at this point that the appeal to reason often goes unheeded. For the *populus* now considers that this is not the dispassionate reason beloved of liberal tradition dedicated to the resolution of disputes without coercion but instead reason's bastard progeny, deployed either by commercial interests or by the state in support of effective administration and efficient order.

According to Soper (2004: 114), New Labour's construal of the self as consumer may also make a contribution here in that the 'ignorance' of public opinion is pitted against the 'knowledge' of the experts. 'Science is here being used to justify short-term commercial gains at the cost of the longer term wisdom and sensibility represented by the GM opponents' (Soper 2004: 114). The GM opponents do have legitimate concerns, argues Soper: 'reservations about private property in nature and other ethical concerns [are] at the heart of public antipathy to GM'. These are, in Soper's terms, the concerns of *citizens*. To have these concerns trumped by scientific knowledge – recall that any other response than yes would be 'an irrational way for the government to proceed' – means that the issue of GM crops is presented only in terms of the viewpoint of the consumer. And what privilege can consumers have in determining which products are brought to market? In truth, as Soper points out, what needs to be questioned is the scientists' own scepticism concerning the 'social responsibility of the public' in the case of popular resistance to GM crops. No wonder that in turn the *populus* remains deeply sceptical about appeals to reason.

The restrictive aspect of the government's decision to permit the growing of GM Bayer maize requires comment at this point. Recall that the British government's decision has a restrictive as well as a permissive aspect. What is interesting about the restrictive aspect is that it is not concerned with the interests of the *populus* as citizens. That is, the citizenry's queries regarding the wisdom of growing GM foods are not addressed in the restrictive aspect. Instead, the government notes dangers for itself as the regulatory authority and builds these into the restrictive aspect of its decision: the GM polluter must pay. Notwithstanding the complexity of the decision, at no point is the *electorate* permitted to step out of its role as *consumer*. In practice, it may be unlikely in the near future that GM Bayer maize will be grown commercially in Britain. However, the rationale for that decision concedes not one inch to the concerns of GM's opponents. Therefore, although opponents of GM crops may appreciate the practical outworking of the restrictive aspect (*viz.*, no commercial growing of GM crops), the rationale for the restrictive aspect cannot be welcomed. For the restrictive aspect still refuses to acknowledge the concerns of citizens *qua* citizens regarding GM.

So this article's question returns: Is the new, permissive GM order in the UK vested with authority? The government's decision suggests an appeal to certain liberal traits: the unencumbered self, the marginalizing of nature and the administration of society, the appeal to reason. However, in the perspective of the theological case being made here, these appeals are open to serious questioning.¹⁸ Despite some important similarities with liberal tradition, discussed above, participation in the revolution of Christ's resurrection by way of the insurrectionist acts of the rioting Spirit of God is to enter an ecological, as well as a social, action; the direction of such an event is always political, sourced in the action of members of a worshipping community; and participation is by way of struggle and questioning in which the community tests the holiness (or otherwise) of limits.

It is not clear which decision participants in such pedagogy of insurrection might arrive at regarding the farming of GM crops. However, it is clear that such a community would find troubling a decision taken for administrative reasons, without reference to nature, and employing 'reason' in coercive fashion. Indeed, it might be argued that in operating with such an 'administered authoritarianism', the UK government operates within the law but against 'rule': a realm of anti-rule and disorderliness. In theological perspective, Christian worshipping communities seek a more enacted form of authority: the political act is always a plural act of rioting, an act of blessing which is within the law but beyond 'rule': a realm of disorder and no-rule.

It is a mark of how impaired our political vision has become that we do not immediately see that the GM order imposed by this government is a shambles without authority and that a Christian account of authority offers a way towards a beginning which affirms the plurality of humans and non-humans alike. Perhaps we shall know of the recovery of Christian vision when, in response to riots, the present British government will declare, 'Let us be rid of this turbulent Church'.

Acknowledgement

Warm thanks to Celia Deane-Drummond and Bronislaw Szerszynski who responded with stringent yet sympathetic criticism to an earlier (and rather different) version of this paper (given at the conference 'Fabricated Natures?', University College Chester, July 2004). Additional

18. Only political authorization may serve as a warrant for the development of GM crops. The views of scientists or governments are not in and of themselves political actions invested with authority.

thanks to Bronislaw Szerszynski for a set of comments, both appreciative and bracing, on the re-worked version; responding to these criticisms has greatly improved the piece. Any remaining errors and failings are mine.

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