

American Christianity in exile?

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“We live in a time of exile. At least those of us do who hold to traditional Christian beliefs.”

[So says Carl Trueman](#) at *First Things*, making the case that the Reformed tradition will weather the “exile to cultural irrelevance” imposed by secularism and the sexual revolution better than other Christian traditions. This provocative premise touched off an online symposium on the question of which tradition is best equipped to endure this condition of exile, thanks in large part to the curiosity and generosity of the *American Conservative*’s Rod Dreher, who [invited his readers to argue](#) for their own churches. Dreher makes a compelling case for the durability of his own “incredibly weird” Orthodoxy. Nominations for the Anglican Church in North America and for Lutheranism came in as well.

Anyone who followed the discussion would have learned some worthwhile things about doctrine, theology, and the sociology of religion. (There is definitely something to Dreher’s contention that the thickness and distinction of Orthodox practice give it strength.) But there was little debate over the main, and rather drastic, premise of the conversation: that American Christianity is, in Dreher’s phrase “living through the sending of the Church into internal exile.”

This melodramatic heightening of the rhetoric of culture wars is, as far as I know, rather new and still unfocused. Trueman and Dreher are both unclear on whether the exile is coming or is already upon us, but there is apparently little debate over whether “exile” is a useful way to characterize Christianity’s relationship to the evolving American mainstream.

There should be. This is a dubious and highly troubling premise. Christians of my ilk aren’t really invited into this discussion (living, as it is believed, in unperturbed harmony with secular American culture). But the invocation of such a loaded historical and theological concept has implications for all of us.

First and foremost, exile is a real experience, and a violent and heart-wrenching one. It is trivializing to analogize this in any way to the combination of court cases, media depictions, and public sentiment with which these particular Christians concern themselves. Honest-to-God exile is a living memory for, say, European Jews, Palestinian Arabs, and any number of other groups, and it is a current reality for the Christians of the Middle East (whose plight has been extensively discussed by Dreher and others). Nothing in the experience of white American Christianity bears the slightest resemblance, and it is unlikely that anything will any time soon (despite the coming tyranny of same-sex marriage). We still enjoy a kind of wealth, prestige, institutional heft, political clout, and legal protection that would stupefy Jesus of Nazareth.

Actually, it would probably infuriate him. The second reason talk of “exile” is so inapt is that it presumes, usually implicitly, that Christianity is entitled to a quasi-official status in our country and our culture. But Jesus promises—and prepares his followers for—nothing of the sort. This year, as we march through Matthew’s Gospel on Sundays, we are periodically reminded that Christians managed to create a perfect mirror of the religious establishment Jesus castigates so furiously. Weeping over the foreseeable (though hardly certain) loss of tax-exempt status, and through our tears making the case for how our own magisterial tradition will be the best-functioning one as an armored miniature—these are not the sorts of behaviors Jesus urges on us when we encounter the world’s hostility.

The harder task is to face the fact of our lingering privilege, tarnished and dimmed though it may be, with an honest and critical heart. Harder still may be the task of reaching out to those whom we managed to drive away from the Kingdom of God all on our own, with no help from music videos or the Supreme Court.

I don’t really want to do this. I want American law and culture to bolster my beliefs and my ethics—who doesn’t? I would prefer the culture’s estrangement from my faith to be anyone’s fault but mine. But there is a reason that “exile” in Christian thought has referred not to the waning of our status but to the condition of living between the Fall and the Restoration: exile is not something we enter or escape at the will of the world.