

ASHBY LECTURE 2018
Oiling the Wheels of Nations? Religion and Politics, Then and Now¹

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Dear Mr President,
Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a great honour for me to deliver this year's Ashby lecture, hosted by Clare Hall in the auditorium of its founding college. I'm not sure if the genre exists, but as this is the first lecture for me at Cambridge after accepting my election to the Lady Margaret's Professorship in Divinity, it also feels like a pre-inaugural. In this lecture, I want to pay tribute to the enormous, visionary role that Clare Hall plays in welcoming visiting scholars to Cambridge, including myself and my family now five years ago. It is therefore all the more a very great honour to be invited to deliver this year's lecture. Its topic is "*Oiling the Wheels of Nations? Religion and Politics, Then and Now*". In it I would like to reflect on the potentially positive role that religion could play in the relation between nations in the modern era. If religion would be able to exert such a positive influence that would be marvellous, because—as we may not be aware of in the so-called secular West—according to the 2010 statistics of the Edinburgh *Atlas of Global Christianity*, 88 percent of the world's population, 6 billion out of 7 billion people, belongs to a particular religion.²

As the Dutch ambassador to the Holy See related not so long ago, an example of such an influence is the use that the network of Christian monasteries in Syria provided for the assessment of the humanitarian situation when other modes of communication broke down, helping the initiatives to foster an international ceasefire for the evacuation of civilians. In this positive role religion is not alone, but similar roles are being performed by sports and culture. For instance, it seems that important progress in the relation between the Koreas was brokered during the last Winter Olympic Games. And an astonishing long-term investment in cultural diplomacy is exemplified in the consorted efforts of France and the United Arab Emirates in setting up the Louvre Abu Dhabi as an art and civilization museum (opened last November), "the Arab world's first universal museum" with the programmatic intent to "See Humanity in a new light". "Thus", according to the museum's YouTube channel, "begins a new conversation on humanity and the similarities that connect us all", "enlightening minds through art". Its collection now also contains Da Vinci's "Salvator Mundi", exhibited under its Franco-Arabic dome that symbolizes a "rain of light".

In this lecture, I want to draw attention to the positive role that religion, sport and culture can play in international relations. So the coincidence of tonight's lecture with the World Cup in Russia is a highly symbolic illustration of the relevance of tonight's topic, with, on this very day, Japan having played Poland and Senegal Colombia this afternoon, and tonight, at 7pm, Panama playing Tunisia, and England Belgium—

luckily not The Netherlands, which—as you all know—didn't qualify. What we badly need, now as ever, is the fostering of a non-political domain in which political representatives of the nations can retreat to find common ground and common perspectives. The main part of my lecture will focus on religion in particular, and especially on the emergence of the Christian religion within the Roman empire—because this is my expertise. But I intend to provide insight in what the emergence of Christianity can teach us about the relation between political and non-political domains, a knowledge that can inspire us to come to appreciate the non-political value of religion, culture and sport in the modern era. I will come back to this in my conclusions, and now start with the important role of sports in the Graeco-Roman world and directly continuing with my remarks on the birth of Christianity.

What I will propose is to reconceptualise the Olympic Games in Antiquity and emerging Christianity as examples of what we now call international NGO's, non-governmental organizations which are defined as global, universal “non-profit ... organizations independent of governments and international governmental organizations ... that are active in humanitarian, educational, health care, public policy, social, human rights, environmental, and other areas to effect changes according to their objectives. They are thus a subgroup of all organizations founded by citizens” (*Wikipedia*, “Non-governmental organization”, consulted on 19 June 2018).

Research has shown that in the Roman Empire the athletes and performers who took part in contests such as the Olympic Games indeed took the form of international non-governmental organizations. In a paper from 2006 about athletes in the Hellenistic and Roman world,³ the ancient historian Onno van Nijf has argued that whereas “associations of craftsmen had a clear local character, ... the performers and athletes maintained strong translocal links. ... the associations of athletes and performers can be best understood as a conglomerate of locally and regionally based groups of various degrees of formal organization that orbited around empire-wide and formally recognised bodies that were based in Rome. It has been pointed out—Van Nijf continues—, some time ago now, by Fergus Millar that these empire-wide associations seem to have had an independent existence, which put them on a par with such building blocks of the empire as cities and provincial *koina*” (230). In that sense thus, these associations of athletes resemble modern international NGOs.

According to Van Nijf, these associations became increasingly important in the Roman empire because they took centre stage in a world in which the political role of the cities diminished: “The Hellenistic and Roman period witnessed a 'structural transformation' of the political culture, where the 'public sphere' of the classical Greek polis, was gradually being eroded and replaced by a political culture that was—for all the differences—much more akin to the representational style of the absolutist kings of early modern Europe” (232). Testimony to this important universal role that the association of athletes took on in the Roman empire, is their use of the term “oikoumenikós”, which means “universal, global”, concerning “the whole world”. Interestingly, as Van Nijf demonstrates, it was especially in the Roman empire that the athletes used this self-designation as oecumenical, universal associations of athletes in direct competition with the Roman empire which also designated itself, in

the very same terminology, as oecumenical (233-234).⁴ There is thus a direct parallel between the oecumenical association of athletes in the Roman empire and the current IOC, the International Olympic Committee, and the FIFA, the international Football Association—they are all NGOs, non-governmental organizations alongside the political states.

Now, rather interestingly, as Van Nijf agrees, in the Graeco-Roman world, apart from “the oecumenical association of athletes” there is only one other universal, “oecumenical” NGO alongside the Roman state, and that is the Christian church, which also came to style itself as the oecumenical, universal church. As we will see in this lecture, the modern term “church” even disguises the semi-political meaning of the Greek term *ekklēsia*, which is better translated as “assembly”; it was the very same term that was used for the civic assembly of the Greek cities, and—as I will argue later—that is no coincidence. So the Christian assembly is the only universal NGO besides the Graeco-Roman forerunner of the modern IOC and FIFA. The Christian oecumenical, universal assembly was an organization of Christian citizens who were focussed on the relevance of “the good” (*to agathon*), and of “the good news” (*to euaggelion*) for society.

To put this into relief, I will now engage with an excellent recent treatment of Roman political thought, the book of the same title, authored by Jed Atkins, and recently published, in the last months, by our local press.⁵ In many ways Atkins, presently at Duke, is a Cambridge voice, as he took his MPhil here, and did his PhD under the guidance of Malcolm Schofield. I will engage with Atkins’s book to discuss the similarities and dissimilarities between the early Christian NGO, Roman political philosophy, and Roman political culture. This will enable us to put early Christianity in relief, and show how Graeco-Roman philosophy, Roman politics and early Christianity all wrestled with the same issues that occupy us here, opening a comparative and historical perspective that will enable us to reflect, I hope, with greater sensitivity on the modern-day challenges and opportunities of the relation between religion and politics.

By doing so, I will mention figures such as Polybius, Cicero, Seneca and Paul, who all have a close relation with Rome as a city. Polybius was a Greek historian taken hostage during Rome’s war against Greece in the 2nd century BC, and subsequently resident in Rome for much of his life where he wrote a history that reflected on the emergence of Rome as a political world power, with a keen eye for the separation of powers within Rome’s politics, an interest that inspired Montesquieu but, in Polybius’ own writings, did not yet involve the separation between religion and politics; it took a Jesus to voice this separation, in his well-known statement “Give to the Caesar the things that are the Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s” (Gospel of Mark 12:17)—a view that, as we shall see, was expanded upon by Paul.

The other interlocutors that will figure in my lecture do not need much introduction, as they are all well-known—the famous Roman orator Cicero, the Roman philosopher Seneca, both resident in Rome for long periods of their lives, and, in addition, Paul of Tarsus, depicted here, on this painting in one of Rome’s catacombs from c. 350 AD, as a philosopher with a basket of book scrolls besides him. Especially the last two, Seneca and Paul, hold much in common. They both lived under emperor Nero; as we shall see, they both reflected on two types of

citizenship (the civil citizenship of the Roman Empire, and another, cosmopolitan type of citizenship); and they both died under Nero, Seneca being pressed by his former pupil to commit suicide in 65 AD, one year after Paul possibly died as a victim of Nero's persecution of Christians in 64 AD. Moreover, Seneca and Paul also shared a Stoic discourse; not that Paul was a Stoic philosopher, but I'm convinced that a discourse analytical assessment of Paul's writings shows—like in a Venn-diagram⁶—that Paul has Stoic, and other ancient philosophical notions and terminology in common with his philosophical contemporaries, something which isn't strange if one takes into account that Paul's provenance was from Tarsus, an important city for Stoic education (see Strabo, *Geography* 14.5.12-15), and that, for more than a decade, he had been resident in Antioch which, according to Cicero, was "famous for liberal arts, and fertile in learned men" (*Pro A. Licinio Archia poeta oratio* 4).

In this lecture, I will focus especially on Paul's Letter to the Romans, one of his most important and influential letters, written to the heart of the Roman empire. So far, much of New Testament research either regards Paul's Letter to the Romans as an expression of Paul's disinterested and acquiescent, submissive acknowledgement of the realism of Rome's power, or, on the other end of the spectrum, views it, together with his other letters, as the expression of his subversive anti-imperial attitude towards Rome. I believe neither of these options is correct, but that Paul is deeply engaged in a contemporary discourse in which he develops a non-political universal alternative alongside the current state, just like a modern NGO works alongside nation states, not subverting their existence, but supplementing and perhaps challenging them—there may be a tension, but certainly no insurrection against the nation states is intended.⁷

To appreciate the lively atmosphere of Rome in the time of Seneca and Paul, let me offer the following description that Seneca gave of its inhabitants. According to Seneca,

They have flocked here from their townships and colonies, in short, from every part of the world; some have been drawn by ambition, some by the obligation of a public service, some by the office of envoy entrusted to them, some by luxury seeking a suitable and rich field for vice, some by desire for higher studies, some by public shows; some have been attracted by friendship, some by an appetite for work, seeing the generous scope for displaying energy; some have brought their looks for sale, some their eloquence. There is no class of person that has not swarmed into the city with its high prizes set for virtue and vice alike. Have them all summoned to answer their name and ask each one of them, "Where do you call home?": you will see that more than half of them have quit their own homes and come to this city, which is indeed of great size and beauty, but not their own. (Seneca, *Consolation to Helvia* 6)⁸

This description of the global attraction that Rome exerted helps to remind us of the multifarious background of the readers of Paul's Letter to the Romans. I will approach Paul's political philosophy that is entailed in this letter through the lens of four themes that also feature in contemporary Roman political thought and Roman politics and, for this reason, allow for a detailed comparison: the themes of (i)

“justice”; (ii) “law”; (iii) “citizenship”; and (iv) “community”. In my discussion of these four notions, I will not necessarily start from Paul’s Letter to the Romans, but may start in each of the three circles that are compared in our Venn-diagrammatic analysis.

(i) Justice

First, the notion of justice. In his *Roman Political Thought*, Atkins has a very interesting and relevant passage on the discussion of the nature of justice in Roman political philosophy, taking his starting point in the famous visit of a delegation of Greek philosophers from Athens to Rome in 155 BC. One of these philosophers, was the Greek sceptical Academic philosopher Carneades, who, by delivering two conflicting views on two consecutive days, threw doubt on the very existence of justice. On one day he argued in favour of justice, to deny its existence on the next day. Cicero, in his *Republic* (a text only uncovered in the 19th century, detected as a palimpsest under the written text of a work of Augustine), re-narrates these famous speeches by Carneades by re-distributing them among two different speakers, a sceptical speaker who believes that justice is entirely a social construct and should only serve political ends and therefore ought to be subservient to politics, and a Stoic speaker who defends justice as a virtue in its own right. According to the sceptical, proto-Machiavellian speaker, who represents the position of Carneades,

... the justice which we are investigating is a product of (civil) government, not of nature at all. (‘Carneades’ in Cicero, *Republic* 3.13)

And as, in his view, human beings differ in their definition of what is justice and injustice, the inconsistency and variation of laws show that there is no natural law, and that laws are simply the (arbitrary) product of civil governments:

... laws are imposed upon us by fear of punishment, not by our sense of justice. Therefore there is no such thing as natural justice (*nihil habet igitur naturale ius*). (‘Carneades’ in Cicero, *Republic* 3.18)

According to his Stoic opponent, however, there is a difference between natural law and the civil law as decreed by the Senate and People of Rome; the latter cannot, by their decrees, alter or undo the natural law, which is the “true law” which is universal, unchanging and everlasting and which, unlike the civil laws that differ locally and change over time, will be valid for all nations and for all times:

True law is right reason in agreement with nature (*est quidem vera lex recta ratio, naturae congruens*); it is of universal application, unchanging and everlasting It is a sin to try to alter this law, nor is it allowable to attempt to repeal any part of it, and it is impossible to abolish it entirely. We cannot be freed from its obligations by senate or people ... And there will not be different laws at Rome and at Athens, or different laws now and in the future, but one eternal and unchangeable law will be valid for all nations (*omnes gentes*) and all times, and there will be one master and ruler, that is, God, over us all, for he is the author of this law, its promulgator, and its enforcing judge. (Cicero, *Republic* 3.33)

It is this latter defence of the virtue of justice that Paul clearly sides with in his Letter to the Romans. In a sense, his entire letter argues how the importance of

unconditional divine justice has become visible in the life of Christ (Rom 1:17, 3:21-22), and how this enables all human beings to share in this virtue of justice (10:4).

This debate that was opened by Carneades in his speech in Rome, is fundamental, as Atkins acknowledges in his *Roman Political Thought*. As he summarizes it, it is “a debate on whether justice is necessary for Rome’s acquisition and maintenance of empire”. According to Carneades’ sceptical view “it is impossible for any regime to pursue justice while successfully acquiring and maintaining an empire. International relations are not matters of justice but of national interest or advantage, understood in terms of wealth, power, and rule” (Atkins, 172). The opposite view, however, as Atkins indicates, holds that “the wise administration of empire in the interests of both the rulers and ruled may be consistent with justice” (Atkins, 172-3) and that “honor and the reputation and status that accompany it are important sources of influence in international relations”, thus reaffirming “the more general Roman republican perspective that the consideration of Rome’s reputation for honor and good faith (*fides*) in international affairs should constrain the senate’s decision-making” (Atkins, 174).

In a sense, I believe that this debate about the status of justice, as subservient to political ends, or as a virtue in its own right is still relevant as ever. Only recently, the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, Boris Johnson, and the Secretary of State for International Development, Penny Mordaunt, proposed that humanitarian aid should be spent in line with national interests. This shows that the debate whether international relations are a matter of national interest, or of justice and honor is still relevant, and that the subordination of humanitarian aid to political interest may be regarded as reflecting a Carneadean approach to justice. Perhaps from a governmental position this could be justified, but at the same time this would only serve to highlight the indispensable need for non-political NGOs, which do not simply politicize, and therefore instrumentalize humanitarian aid.

(ii) Law—civil law, the law of nations, natural law, and “the living law”

With this discussion about the status of justice, and especially with the Stoic view that a divine, natural justice transcends and, at the same time informs civil laws, we have already embarked upon the notion of law. What is very relevant here, is the Stoics’ differentiation between four types of law. First there is the civil law, that contains the specific laws of a particular nation. Secondly, there is the law of nations, the comparative overview of the specific civil laws of different nations, an exercise which shows what they have in common, and what is in that sense the law of nations. But thirdly, this law of nations needs to be differentiated from the law of nature, which treats all human beings as similar, apart from their specific civil context.⁹ So, for instance, slavery is condoned in Roman civil law and appears to be common in the law of nations, but is not an institute of the natural law, as from the perspective of nature, all human beings are alike (cf. Atkins, 41). As we have seen in Cicero, it is this natural law that is closely bound up with natural justice. An impressive, and probably intuitive remarkable witness to this notion was paid last week by the First Lady of the USA, Mrs. Trump, while commenting on the segregation of the children of illegal immigrants from their parents: “We need to be a

country that follows all laws, but also a country that governs with heart", she said (see BBC <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-44515123>). Clearly, tensions can arise between the notion of natural law and that of civil law and the law of nations.

A fourth type of law is also distinguished in Cicero's writings when he talks about the way the natural law can be exhibited in the life of an extraordinary figure, the ideal ruler, putting "his own life before his fellow-citizens as law (*sed suam vitam ut legem praefert suis civibus*)" (Cicero, *Republic* 1.52)—this is the embodiment of the natural law, "the living law", the "nomos empsychos". According to Seneca it is indeed this natural law that the wise try to emulate. As he writes in his *On the Happy Life*, a writing dedicated to his brother Gallio—the very same Gallio who acquitted Paul when a lawsuit was brought against him in Corinth (Acts 18:12-16): "Nature is the guide I choose; wisdom lies in not wandering from her path and in moulding oneself in accordance with her law and example" (*On the Happy Life* 3).

In Paul's letters we seem to have the same Stoic differentiation between these various types of law. In one of his letters to the Corinthians he summarizes the challenge facing any lawyer when he states: "the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Cor 3:6), thus distinguishing, far before Montesquieu, the difference between the letter and "the spirit of the laws" (*The Spirit of the Laws*). This difference between the interpretation of the letter of the law, and a higher virtue is closely paralleled in the commendation that Seneca gives of the virtue of mercy in a treatise on the issue addressed to his pupil Nero: "Mercy has freedom to decide; not the letter of the law, but what is fair and good determines the sentence it passes (*non sub formula, sed ex aequo et bono iudicat*)" (*On Mercy* 2.7.3). In his Letter to the Romans Paul further points out the shortcomings of any civil law, both the Jewish law—which he seems to regard as the civil law of the Jews—but also (implicitly) the Roman, and any other civil law. According to Paul, civil laws rather have a contrary psychological effect on human beings by rather provoking them to transgress the laws (Rom 7:5-11), by slipping through the net of the law, using its loopholes, or working around it—rather similar to the annual temptation of filling in your tax return, which is an exercise in citizenship. This again is paralleled by Seneca's view on the matter. In his treatise on mercy addressed to Nero he suggests that "the offences regularly punished are the ones regularly committed"—in his view they are not punished because they are committed, but rather the reverse: they are committed because they are punished. Talking about patricide, he says:

Children were far less ready to perpetrate the ultimate in wickedness as long as the crime did not fall within the scope of the law. They showed the greatest wisdom, those men of lofty distinction and profound understanding of nature's ways, in electing to disregard the crime as exceeding belief and audacity rather than to punish it and so show the possibility of its being committed; accordingly, the act of killing a parent began with the law condemning it, and children were shown the way to the deed by its punishment. (Seneca, *On mercy* 1.23).

Paul and Seneca, probably on account of their shared Stoic views on law, are rather convinced of the innate shortcomings of civil laws—and I feel that of course in front of the Regius Professor of Civil Law I must apologize for their views. Paul, too, shows himself rather doubtful whether true justice can be achieved through civil laws, and instead focusses on Christ whom he regards as the embodiment of the

natural law, as the living law, the *nomos empsychos*. Just as according to the Stoics figures such as Socrates and Cato exhibited the natural law, so in Paul's view did Christ. According to Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, "Christ is the end (*telos*) of the law so that there may be justice for everyone who believes" (Rom 10:4), which seems to be a statement that makes full use of the ambiguity of the term "end". Christ is the end, in the sense of *the termination* of the *civil* laws, but he is the end, in the sense of *the purpose* of the *natural* law, which he embodies.

Both Seneca and Paul thus opt for the superiority of the natural law. As Atkins rightly reminds us, this path was inaccessible for the Roman jurists: "for the jurists human law, not natural law, was most authoritative. There is no evidence that the jurists saw nature as invalidating the provisions of Roman law (*ius civile*). Consequently, there were for the jurists no natural or human rights ..." (Atkins, 41). This is probably still the case, to some degree, for modern jurists, as nation states have primary responsibility towards their own citizens, a responsibility that needs to be balanced against the rights of all other human beings who are no citizens of these states. But perhaps it is exactly here where, besides IGOs (intergovernmental organizations), such as notably the United Nations, NGOs have an indispensable role to play. It is probably true that whereas for nation states the civil law is most authoritative, for NGOs the natural law, which considers all human beings in their natural rights, is leading.

Despite the close similarities here between Paul and Seneca in their common plea for natural laws as embodied in the lives of figures such as Socrates, Cato and Christ, there is an interesting difference. Whereas Paul emphasizes that this Christ is accessible to all, and that all can benefit from the justice that he embodies by becoming just themselves, Seneca, in a rather detached and somewhat elitist way, concedes that the Stoic sages are far and few between, and hence justice can only be attained by a few people. In his *On the Tranquility of the Mind*, Seneca tells his addressee:

But I would not instruct you to follow or to invite into your circle only a man of wisdom. For where will you discover that man whom we have been trying for so many centuries to find? As a substitute for the best man choose the least bad. You would scarcely have the chance to make a happier choice, if you were searching for good men among the Plato's and Xenophons and all that great company of Socratic stock, or if you had at your command the age of Cato, that produced very many men worthy of being born in Cato's time ...: but these days, when good men are in such scant supply, you must be less scrupulous in making your choice. (*On the Tranquility of the Mind* 7).

Paul, instead, develops a highly ambitious programme in his Letter to the Romans, and tells them, at the end of his letter, that he wants them all "to be wise in what is good" (Rom 16:19 θέλω δὲ ὑμᾶς σοφοὺς εἶναι εἰς τὸ ἀγαθόν), thus criticizing his initial identification of the Greeks as the wise, and of the barbarians as the silly, unintelligent people "without mind" (Rom 1:14), now subverting an elitist Greek self-understanding by wishing to turn the entire Christian community in Rome, with its radically diverse ethnic and social background, into a community of the wise.

(iii) Citizenship—civic and cosmopolitan

It is these different types of law that also characterize different types of citizenship, the third theme to be discussed. Whereas civil law regulates *civil citizenship*, natural law defines *cosmopolitan citizenship*. In his letters, Paul makes a clear differentiation between both types of citizenship. Apart from their civil citizenship of the Roman empire, Christians, according to Paul, also enjoy a different, heavenly, cosmic citizenship. In his letter to the Christians in the city of Philippi in Northern Greece, Paul says that “our *politeuma* (πολίτευμα), our citizenship, is in heaven” (Philipp 3:20). Paul writes this to the Christians of a city founded as a “free” Greek city within the kingdom of Philip II, Alexander the Great’s father, but subdued by the Romans and developed as a Roman colony after the defeat of Brutus and Cassius by Antony and Octavian at Philippi. Located on the Via Egnatia that connects Rome and Greece in the West with Asia in the East, this city is involved in the disturbances of political instabilities. Is it a coincidence that exactly these citizens of such a city are seen by Paul as belonging to a *politeuma*, a citizenship in heaven (3:20)?

This resembles exactly the way in which another Graeco-Roman author, the Greek orator, local politician and moralist Dio Chrysostom (c.40/50-110/120 AD), a near-contemporary of Paul, refers back, in one of his major city orations, to his visit of the people of Borysthenes, an isolated Greek city in the Black Sea area, that was threatened by its barbarian Hinterland. Just the day before it had been raided by the Scythians. It is within the heavily guarded gates of this city, in the local temple of Zeus, that Dio speaks about the citizenship of a *divine, heavenly* city, just as Paul does in the case of the Philippians. It is hard to imagine a starker contrast than that between the ideal city and earthly politics. Indeed, as Malcolm Schofield notes in his analysis of this oration:

... at the heart of the conception of the mutual society of the gods that Dio has sketched is the idea of a form of common life in which there is no internal strife nor the possibility of defeat by external forces This idea is diametrically opposed to the Borysthenes' current situation in every dimension Dio has got us to think of. No wonder they are so attracted to it. As often, the dispossessed prefer the prospect of heaven to political thought.¹⁰

But, and I am sure that Schofield would agree with me, Paul’s and Dio’s notion of a divine, cosmic, cosmopolitan citizenship is not only relevant for the dispossessed. Rather it also set in motion an entire new way of thinking about non-political forms of citizenship, which explores the possibilities of ethical behaviour independently from the political state to which one owes his or her political civil citizenship. This differentiation between two supplementary forms of citizenship, a civic and a cosmopolitan one, is, I believe, among the most important developments of political philosophy, and as I will conclude at the end of my lecture, they, in a sense, paved the way for the modern differentiation between nation states and NGOs.

Recently, an influential British historian, Niall Ferguson, in his *The Square and the Tower* (Penguin 2017) has called attention to the importance and existence of networks even before our own modern networked society, and argued that, even in the past, it was not the hierarchical power of the tower, but the horizontal power of the square that shaped history. This is illuminating, yet I would say that rather than the square and the tower, it was—so to speak—the fruitful tension between the towers, in plural, that created the space in which human beings could flourish; the

differentiation between two types of towers—the towers of parliament and town halls on the one hand, and the towers of the churches on the other hand, as the representations of two different types of citizenship.¹¹

This view is more in line with another fascinating publication, by the Oxford political philosopher Larry Siedentop who in his *Inventing the Individual: The Origins of Western Liberalism* (Penguin 2014) has argued that it was the radical equality of the individual as defined by Paul that laid the foundation of Western liberalism, because it was against the absolute power of the state, that the Christian church provided individuals with a radical equality in the sight of God, and with a freedom of conscience. This equality of the individual and this liberty of conscience were, Siedentop argues, explored and developed through the continuous tension and interplay between State and Religion.

Probably more than Siedentop I would like to point at the background of this notion of dual citizenship, of a political and a non-political form, in the thought of Plato and the Stoics. The foundational texts here are Plato's *Republic* and writings of Stoic philosophers, such as Seneca. In Plato's *Republic*, Socrates, being asked whether the wise man would take part in earthly politics, refers to the heavenly city in the politics of which the sage will participate, but not in those of his native city: "perhaps there's a model up in heaven for anyone willing to look and if he sees it, found a city in himself (ἐν οὐρανῷ ἴσως παράδειγμα ἀνάκειται τῷ βουλομένῳ ὁρᾶν καὶ ὁρῶντι ἑαυτὸν κατοικίξειν)" (Plato, *Republic* 9.592a-b; trans. LCL, including note 49). This is indeed very similar to Paul's *politeuma* in heaven, and there are indeed indications that Paul was familiar with Plato's *Republic*—nothing surprising, as his fellow-Jews Philo of Alexandria and Flavius Josephus were also acquainted with this key Platonic text.¹² And Paul's insistence, in his Letter to the Romans, that "the inner self"—the very same terminology as in Plato's *Republic*—is the place where this *politeuma* plays out in the internal politics of the individual mind follows Plato in his view that the heavenly paradigm needs to be realized in the individual.

The Stoics further explore Plato's notion of the true, heavenly, non-political cosmopolitan form of citizenship. In his *On Leisure*, Seneca develops it further, differentiating between the city "to which we have been assigned by the accident of birth" and the other city "which embraces alike gods and men" and belongs to all, and not "to some particular race of men":

Let us grasp the idea that there are two commonwealths (*Duas respublicas animo complectamur ...*)—the one, a vast and truly common state, which embraces alike gods and men, in which we look neither to this corner of earth nor to that, but measure the bounds of our citizenship by the path of the sun; the other, the one to which we have been assigned by the accident of birth. This will be the commonwealth of the Athenians or of the Carthaginians, or of any other city that belongs, not to all, but to some particular race of men. Some yield service to both commonwealths at the same time—to the greater and to the lesser—some only to the lesser, some only to the greater. (Seneca, *On Leisure* 4.1)

Human beings can thus be citizens of both cities at the same time, but do not necessarily render their service to both cities or commonwealths. Although strictly

speaking Seneca develops a doctrine of dual citizenship, his predilection for the cosmic city becomes visible in the fact that he criticizes the earthly city and states that the wise man has a problematic relationship to the cities of the earth, and this view probably reflects Seneca's own growing tensions with the absolute state power assumed by his pupil Nero:

... he [i.e., the wise man] is nowhere to find a state. Besides, no state will ever be available to the fastidious searcher. I ask you to what state should the wise man attach himself? To that of the Athenians, in which Socrates was sentenced to death, from which Aristotle fled to avoid being sentenced? In which all the virtues are crushed by envy? Surely you will say that no wise man will wish to attach himself to this state. Shall the wise man, then, attach himself to the state of the Carthaginians ... ? From this state also will he flee. If I should attempt to enumerate them one by one, I should not find a single one which could tolerate the wise man or which the wise man could tolerate. (Seneca, *On Leisure* 8.1-3).

On the basis of such passages, it becomes clear that the Stoic doctrine of dual citizenship entails, at least potentially but often also actually, a strong criticism of the earthly city, and indeed even in the present time one can detect tensions in the relations between nation states and NGOs, as was also evident a fortnight ago in the tensions surrounding the migrants on board of the rescue vessel *Aquarius*, which is run by NGOs, and member states of the EU which did not allow the vessel to dock.¹³

This discourse about two types of citizenship is fully shared and promulgated by Paul, too. But in a sense, he differentiates even more radically between these two types of citizenship, as he not only differentiates political citizenship from cosmopolitan citizenship, but also, while doing so, radically separates religion from politics. Whereas for all Romans, religion and politics were totally intertwined, Paul separates religion from the civic form of citizenship and attributes it to the non-political, cosmopolitan form of citizenship. How revolutionary this was, becomes only clear when one realizes the total lack of the separation of the powers of religion and the state in Rome. Atkins, in his *Roman Political Thought*, gives the following examples.

Not only were "Meetings of the senate, popular assemblies, and elections ... preceded by the taking of auspices, in which presiding magistrates in consultation with priests (augurs) sought to determine the will of the gods ..." (Atkins, 139), but "In addition to the augurs, there were three other colleges of priests", one of which, the college of the "fetiales advised the senate on aspects of foreign policy and, according to Livy, originally served as ambassadors, messengers, and possessed the right to declare war" (Atkins, 139). As the war was declared by priests, the outcome of the war was ensured by the gods (Atkins, 179; but cf. Christianity, 181, 183)—a view in stark contrast with the role of the Christian clergy, as defined by Augustine's teacher Ambrose, according to whom "Clergy should not participate in war, and the church as an institution lacks the authority to wage war" (Atkins, 181, cf. 183).

Furthermore, according to the Greek historian Polybius, who witnessed and advocated the emergence of Rome as a world power, Rome's religion was justly and efficiently geared towards the control of the masses, in the interest of the state (*Histories* 6.56.6-7; cf. Atkins, 21-22, 100, 137). Similarly, Cicero, too, strongly

endorsed the non-separation of religion and politics, particularly in his speech before the college of pontiffs, in which he stated that

our ancestors ... expressed their intention that the worship of the gods and the vital interests of the state should be entrusted to the direction of the same individuals, to the end that citizens of the highest distinction and the brightest fame might achieve the welfare of religion by a wise administration of the state, and of the state by a sage interpretation of religion. (Cicero, *De Domo Sua* 1; cf. Atkins, 137).

In line with this, Cicero also strongly advocated, as Atkins shows, that “popular legislation could be annulled by a priest called an augur, a power that Cicero presents as an important instrument for limiting the popular will (Cic. *Leg.* 2.31; 3.28)” (Atkins, 20, 140-41). And of course from Augustus onwards, the emperor even became the supreme head, the pontifex maximus, of Rome’s civil religion (Atkins, 142-43).

Against this background of Roman politics, where obviously religion and politics were not separated, it becomes even more clear that the Platonic-Stoic differentiation between two citizenships, the civic-political and the non-political cosmopolitan forms of citizenship, became even more fully developed within Christianity, as it was here that the civic political citizenship was freed from its religious authorization, and religion was fully put in the service of furthering the non-political, cosmopolitan form of citizenship. I am talking here first and foremost of Christianity in its formative phase in the first three centuries before the middle of the fourth century after which the majority of the Roman empire became Christian. But even after that, as the case of Augustine’s *The City of God* demonstrates, the differentiation between two forms of citizenship remained in force. This understanding of a different, non-political, cosmopolitan form of citizenship also established a different form of community—the fourth and final notion of my lecture.

(iv) Community—political and non-political

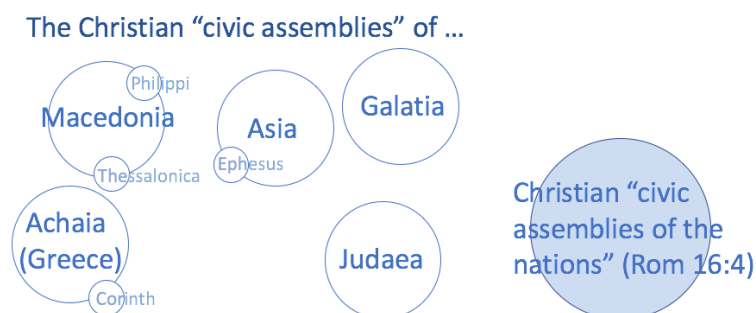
This different form of community is called the *ekklēsia* in Greek, and this term functioned as the most important self-designation of the Christians’ institute ever since. It is wrongly translated as “church”, as, significantly, the term *ekklēsia* is the normal Greek word for the political civic assembly of the Greek cities, which continued to exist right in the Roman East, of course subject to Roman approval. By designating their new institutes as “assemblies”, Christians put their communities in juxtaposition to the normal political civic assemblies of the Greek cities, and as they oriented themselves towards God, they called it “the civic assemblies of God”. In the Christian “civic assemblies”, according to Paul’s famous adage, there was no room for ethnic, social and gender differences: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Because of its non-political, cosmopolitan nature, people could be member of two civic assemblies at the same time: their own political civic assembly, and the parallel Christian civic assembly.

This is nicely illustrated in the case of Erastus, a member of Paul’s assembly in Corinth. At the end of his Letter to the Romans, written from Corinth, Paul also extends Erastus’s greetings to the community at Rome: “Gaius, who is host to me

and to the whole assembly (*ekklēsia*), greets you. Erastus, the treasurer or administrator (*oikonómos*) of the city (*polis*) greets you” (Rom 16:23). This seems to be Erastus the aedile who is otherwise known as the benefactor of the pavement around the theatre in Corinth, commemorated by the inscription: “Erastus, in return for his aedileship laid the pavement at his own expense”. An aedile, or in Greek the *agoranómos* or *oikonómos* of the city, was one of a pair of “two aediles [who] were elected annually [in Corinth]. They were charged with maintaining public property ..., managing markets and public funds, and sometimes serving as judges.”¹⁴ Erastus is thus simultaneously member of two assemblies, the civic assembly of Corinth, and the parallel Christian assembly, which gathers in the house of Gaius. As the case of Erastus, their dual member, shows, the Christian assembly is not subversive towards the political assembly, but both assemblies overlap.



According to Paul all these Christian assemblies which exist on the local level in the Greek cities, together also form a higher unity at a provincial level, and thus he speaks, for instance, of the Christian assemblies of the provinces of Galatia, Asia, Macedonia and Greece—the level of the Roman provinces of the East.¹⁵ In this way the Christian assemblies, although not subverting the existing Greek and Roman political order, neatly supplement it with this alternative, non-political form of community. This becomes particularly clear at the end of his Letter to the Romans, where Paul even speaks of the Christian communities around the world as “the assemblies of the nations (αἱ ἐκκλησίαι τῶν ἐθνῶν)” (Rom 16:4).



This universal, global yet non-political phenomenon of assemblies of the nations, was unparalleled in the Greek world and the Roman Empire, apart from the only other NGO in the Roman empire, the oecumenical association of athletes.¹⁶ Thus, it seems that Paul intended to forge an alternative, non-ethnic, global community, which takes the form of a collective of assemblies from the nations, but is independent from the normal political institutions, rather similar to the United Nations, with the difference of course that the UN is formally an IGO, and not a

NGO. But both are ultimately devoted to the peace of the nations, as the olive branches around the official UN emblem illustrate for the UN. For Paul, as he indicates in his Letter to the Romans, the key values of his assemblies of the nations are “justice, peace, and joy” (Rom 14:17).

Paul’s reference to “the assemblies of the nations” in his Letter to the Romans is somewhat provocative. Rome no longer had its “popular assembly”, the so-called “contio”, which was a Republican institute and had been abolished by Rome’s first emperor, Augustus in 14 AD (Atkins, 115-17, 124, 127). And Rome only conditionally allowed the re-establishment of civic assemblies in the Roman East. Now alongside the Roman state, which acquires more and more absolutist characteristics in the imperial period, a parallel, non-political network of Christian assemblies emerges. In this, Christians are paralleled by the Stoics. In his letters, Seneca invites his addressees to join the Stoic cosmopolitan movement: “I am summoning you,” Seneca tells his reader, “to join the Stoics who were shut out of public life and withdrew to cultivate their lives and establish rights for humanity without causing any offence to the more powerful. The wise man will not disturb the customs of the people nor attract the people’s attention” (Seneca, *Letters* 14 [Book 2.2] section 14). What Seneca and Paul understood is that it is wise to establish cosmopolitan non-political NGOs alongside the state.

To conclude. It is precisely because NGOs are non-political that they can function as oil between the wheels of nations. Hence my lecture is a plea for sportif-athletic, cultural and religious NGOs. Historically speaking, the oecumenical NGO of athletes, the cosmopolitan Stoic movement and the early Christian NGO of “civic assemblies of the nations” were the earliest examples of NGOs operating alongside the Roman State. They bring the world together outside the realm of politics, and hence function as breathing spaces from which peace can flow back to the world and transcend political differences.¹⁷ The relations between the UN, as an IGO, and the NGOs have already been fully established, and this Summer will see the 67th conference between the UN and NGOs under the programmatic title “We the peoples”. And even the conceptualization of religions as NGOs has now been researched for the first time.¹⁸ Of course, sometimes a tension will arise between the interests of the nation states and NGOs (cf. also Atkins, 85). Probably NGOs are more guided by the natural law that applies to all people whereas political states are more focussed on the civil law that protects its own citizens. But despite such minor tensions, clearly such NGOs have no intention to subvert the political states. Political states and NGOs are perhaps as indispensable for each other, as the faculties and the independent colleges here in Cambridge for the flourishing of academic life. I hope my lecture somehow contributes to a greater sensitivity for the usefulness of a co-existence of political nation states and non-political NGOs, which include sports, culture and religion and which, *dependent on* their non-political nature, can function as oil between the wheels of nations. And Cambridge, I believe, has a role to play here in uniting the nations, as it can actively stimulate, through its research and education, also in the arts, humanities and social sciences, the development of a common, supra-political narrative.

I thank you for your attention.

¹ Synopsis: This lecture offers a radical politico-ethical rereading of Paul's letter to the centre of the Roman Empire, his Letter to the Romans, written in the 50s of the first century under then emperor Nero, then still tutored and advised by the philosopher Seneca. In this letter, Paul develops the notion of Christian communities as "assemblies of the nations" that run parallel to the (imperial) state. This lecture proposes to read this fundamental letter against the background of Roman politics, in the immediate context of ancient political philosophy, issuing in reflections on the potential relevance of religion—alongside culture and sports—in modern international politics, exploring the benefits of understanding religion as an international non-governmental organization, and testing if, and in what sense it can inspire human values.

² *Atlas of Global Christianity, 1910-2010*, edited by Todd M. Johnson & Kenneth R. Ross (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

³ Onno van Nijf, "Global Players: Athletes and Performers in the Hellenistic and Roman World", in: I. Nielsen, (ed.), *Between Cult and Society: The cosmopolitan centres of the ancient Mediterranean as setting for activities of religious associations and religious communities*, Hamburg, 2006, 225-35 (Special Issue of *Hephaistos: Kritische Zeitschrift zu Theorie und Praxis der Archäologie und angrenzender Gebiete*).

⁴ Van Nijf, "Global Players", 233-4: "Finally it is useful in this context to consider the term *oikoumenikós*, which played a central role in the self-identification of these associations from the early Principate. ... What has not been picked up in the discussion, as far as I can see, is the fact that *oikoumenikós* was also a key concept in the Roman imperial ideology of the time. ... The term appears to have become particularly popular from the late Republic onwards, when it became a symbol of Rome's claims to universal hegemony. ... In the great majority of these texts the expression was part of imperial titulature ... [233] ... Imperial associations of athletes and performers, then, were unique in the intensity and tenacity with which they projected this 'global' imagery. By adopting—and sticking to—the term *oikoumenikós* the associations were giving out a clear cultural and political message. By using this politically laden term, athletes and performers positioned themselves, or were positioned, as cultural agents whose job it was to represent an oecumenical, or global, cultural policy of Roman dynasts and emperors. They [i.e., the associations of athletes and performers] were among the main agents of a process representation whereby Roman rule could be conceived of as oecumenical i.e. world-wide or global. [234]" See now also Bram Fauconnier, *Ecumenical Synods: The Associations of Athletes and Artists in the Roman Empire* (PhD thesis, University of Amsterdam).

⁵ Jed W. Atkins, *Roman Political Thought* (Key Themes in Ancient History; CUP, 2018).

⁶ I owe this insightful comparison to George Brooke (Manchester), used during his 2018 Dirk Smilde lectures in Groningen.

⁷ My re-appraisal of Paul's political philosophy runs parallel to Atkins's reappraisal of the importance of Augustine "for the cultivation of civic virtue", in contrast with "realist" and "liberal" readings of Augustine (see Atkins, 87-90).

⁸ Translations from Classical authors are taken from the Loeb Classical Library, except for the translations of Seneca, which are derived from John Davie (Oxford World's Classics, OUP), all with minor modifications where appropriate. The New Testament is quoted after the NRSV.

⁹ For this triple law understanding, Atkins, 41 also refers to Justinian's *Digest* (trans. A. Watson, *The Digest of Justinian*, Philadelphia 1985).

¹⁰ Malcolm Schofield, *The Stoic Idea of the City* (University of Chicago Press, 1999), 63. For the comparison between Paul and Dio, see George van Kooten, "Philosophical Criticism of Genealogical Claims and Stoic Depoliticization of Politics: Graeco-Roman Strategies in Paul's Allegorical Interpretation of Hagar and Sarah (Gal 4:21 -31)", in: Martin Goodman, George van Kooten, and Jacques van Ruiten (eds), *Abraham, the Nations, and the Hagarites: Jewish, Christian, and Islamic Perspectives on Kinship with Abraham* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2010), 361-85 at 381-2.

¹¹ I am grateful to Barend van Kooten for discussing this matter with me.

¹² On Paul's acquaintance with Plato's *Republic*, see Stanley Stowers, "Paul and Self-Mastery" in J.P. Sampley, *Paul in the Greco-Roman World: A Handbook* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press, 2003), 524-50 at 526-7; George van Kooten, *Paul's Anthropology in Context* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 362-3 on the Platonic notion of the inner human being from Plato's *Republic*, taken over by Paul. Points of similarity in the shared discourse between Plato's *Republic* and Paul's letters, and particularly his Letter to the Romans, include (i) the notion of "the inner man" (*Rep.* 589a-b; Rom 7:22, cf. 2 Cor 4:16); (ii) *politeia* and the quest for "the good" as being related to the inner politics of the soul; (iii) the importance of the virtue of justice; (iv) the notion of a heavenly citizenship, which needs to be realized within the individual (*Rep.* 592a-b; Philipp 3:20); (v) the assimilation to God as the ultimate end, either directly, or indirectly through Christ; and (vi) the aim of turning the community into a community of the wise (*Rep.* 428b; Rom 16:19). But differently from Plato's *Republic*, which maintains the antithesis between Greek and non-Greek (*Rep.* 469b-470e), Paul's Letter to the Romans is ethnically inclusive (1:14; cf. Gal 3:28).

¹³ See <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-44458441>.

¹⁴ Helmut Koester, *Cities of Paul: Images and Interpretations from the Harvard New Testament Archaeology Project* (CD-ROM, Fortress Press, 2005).

¹⁵ See George van Kooten, "Ἐκκλησία τοῦ θεοῦ: The 'Church of God' and the Civic Assemblies (ἐκκλησίαι) of the Greek Cities in the Roman Empire: A Response to Paul Trebilco and Richard A. Horsley", *New Testament Studies* 58 (2012), 522-48.

¹⁶ To some extent, also the Dionysiac associations form a religious NGO, cf. Atkins, 145-6.

¹⁷ In terms of modern political philosophy, my plea may be comparable with Amitai Etzioni's *The Common Good* (Polity 2004), who apart from defending the importance of a moderate nation state also champions the significance of "thick communities",

including those which run criss-cross through several nation states. I am grateful to Christoph Jedan (Groningen) for discussing this with me.

¹⁸ Jeremy Carrette & Hugh Miall (eds), *Religion, NGOs and the United Nations* (Bloomsbury, 2017).