

Diakonia and healthcare's contested social turn

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Abstract

Healthcare policy and practice is undergoing a major turn towards philosophy, the social world and responsiveness to persons. This turn opens up contested questions about what constitute goodness in healthcare. Answering these questions matters practically for understanding health-related social agency conducted by churches, ecclesial organisations and non-religious organisations. A revised understanding and practice of diakonia can speak apologetically into these matters. In this article, John N Collins' work is critically developed by interweaving the dual political and ecclesial senses of diakonia. The social authority of diakonia proceeds from its commissioned, representative nature and its eschatological, missional purposiveness. Thus conceived the duality of diakonia clarifies the conception and practice of health-related social agency and of 'service' more generally. The outcome is an Anglican political theology which avoids certain difficulties in German Protestants' concept and practice of Diakonie while addressing key issues raised in the other papers in this special issue.

Key words

diakonia, healthcare, church-state relations, government, mission, ecclesiology, service.

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§1. Introduction: A social turn in healthcare policy: recollecting ecclesiology

This paper argues that a revised understanding and practice of *diakonia* can speak with apologetic insight into certain long-term trends in healthcare. A shift in healthcare policy and practice from the clinic to the social world has been carefully charted by Alan Cribb. This shift is identified both as a ‘social turn’ⁱ and a turn to philosophy. These turns attend to the ways that clinical and ‘biomedical concerns are increasingly seen as nested within (often contentious) personal and social concerns’ⁱⁱ with the expected result that ‘the biomedical model is much less influential in defining the overall shape of healthcare.’ⁱⁱⁱ This ‘biomedical model’ is contrasted with the trend for ‘responsiveness to persons’ – a notion far more nuanced than either ‘patient autonomy’ or ‘person-centredness’. Responsiveness requires attention to persons’ “subjectivity and ‘inner life’, including their capacity for suffering; their identities, histories and social contexts”^{iv} and to the ways that “individuals and groups may choose to exercise their agency.”^v

This turns matter for political theology. Differences concerning *how* to understand these aspects of persons and communities and *how* to change healthcare practice to be appropriately responsive involve deep-rooted disagreements across society. These disagreements arise from

different readings of what can and ought to count as good for people, and these rest upon *philosophical* commitments [representing]...different answers to ontological, epistemological and ethical puzzles about the nature of persons and personal well-being, and the bases on which and confidence with which, we can make judgements about these things.^{vi}

Public debate about “the right values and visions for healthcare”^{vii} is therefore inevitable, amidst contentious trends such as the economisation, pluralisation and secularisation of health. Political theology has an opportunity to contribute to such debate in an *apologetic* mode,^{viii} speaking with an informed wisdom that meets the changes, whether cultural, demographic, technological or of some other form, that healthcare, in the variety of its institutional forms, is undergoing.

What motivates the social turn, for Cribb, is a philosophically driven movement into contested ontological, epistemological and practical terrain. First, *ontologically*, the contest is over “inherently philosophical” questions such as “what structures and relationships are constitutive of good healthcare”.^{ix} Theology is familiar with conceiving health and the care of those in ill health in social and ontological terms. If a “social turn” *seems* new then it may be that *appearance* of novelty which accompanies the recollection of a forgotten social imaginary. The biomedical model has made less thinkable and so less answerable the question of what makes for good healthcare relationships. In particular, social imagination is required if an *ecclesiological* and, specifically, *diaconal* reading of “health structures and relationships” is to bring insight.

Second, *epistemologically*, Cribb notes that “what and whose expertise help to determine” the nature of the good in healthcare is changing.^x Whereas the biomedical model narrows the range of relevant expertise down, the transition in healthcare calls for “broader conceptions and kinds of expertise and social authority”^{xi} to contribute. This summons invites enquiry into what *forms of social authority* that groups and institutions not formally associated with healthcare, such as churches, are beneficial in healthcare. It also raises the question of *what kinds of expertise*, informed by epistemologies unconstrained by biomedical rationality, such as those authoritatively informed by the Christian Scriptures, might contribute.

Third, *practically* speaking, alongside emerging contested ontologies and epistemologies in healthcare, ‘the locus of *agency* is increasingly seen as spread across the social realm’^{xii}. Such agency, focussed on health, may be held by all sorts of organisations which are not obviously authoritative on technical or scientific matters. Accordingly, this transition invites the question of how health-related agency should be recognised as socially authoritative, especially when contrasted with the apparently incomparable authority of “technicist knowledge”.^{xiii} Social authority has to be recognised by people if it is to be effective in giving reasons for their actions. But what authority should be recognised as giving *good* reasons for actions such that the social turn Cribb commends may prove beneficial?

§2. *Diakonia* in German and English ecclesiology

One such form of social authority which has been historically influential in healthcare is associated with churches and ecclesial organisations. In particular, examination of *diakonia* through the prism of healthcare offers a route to critical theological engagement with the social and philosophical turns identified by Cribb and with the papers by Ritchie, Bickley and Cribb in this present issue (§3). This section (§2) provides an interpretation of *diakonia*, focussed on understanding the nature and origins of its social authority and thus the kind of role it should have in the transitions which healthcare is undergoing.

Considering how the debate on *diakonia* has fared in the Church of England and in German Protestant churches will prove instructive on this point. Feiler describes interpretations within the German *Diakonie* which “identify diakonia with a universal, human-rights approach or a general aspect of created existence”.^{xiv} In both, “its distinctiveness in so far as it originates in an eschatological, *new* creation gets lost.”^{xv} Feiler identifies challenges which the *Diakonie* has faced, especially economisation and pluralisation, arguing that “the logic of mercy *in principle* needs to distinguish between the ‘service’ offered on the market and the diaconic service, which are not per se compatible”,^{xvi} and concluding that “if diakonia is an ‘expression of the essence of the church’, even a *nota ecclesiae*, then from the very beginning it can hardly be identified with a politics of social reform or societal, moral (even moralistic) transformation.”^{xvii} The history of the *Diakonie* is, in large part, of being uncomfortably torn between rootedness in the church’s mission of proclamation and enmeshment within the structures and logic of a marketised welfare state.

This German tradition concerning *diakonia*, with its genesis in the thought of the nineteenth century Lutheran church, has no meaningful reflection in the Church of England. Without any missional vehicle such as the *Diakonie* (with its 500,000+ employees) to sustain biblical hermeneutics and language use, official Church of England diaconal language remained for far longer in a broadly clerical frame of reference, similar to that which the German Protestant churches identified and resisted in Roman Catholicism. However, inspired by New Testament scholarship and in studied opposition to loose talk about ‘every-member ministry’, formal Church of England thinking has developed an understanding of *diakonia* which can address, critically and constructively, both the tendencies of the *Diakonie* and the social turn Cribb identifies.

The work of John N. Collins has been crucial in this matter.^{xviii} Collins’ exhaustive study of New Testament and classical sources has shifted much scholarly and some ecclesial opinion away from reading instances of the *diakon-* word group *primarily* in terms of humble service and towards the sense of ‘responsible commissioned agency’.^{xix} This commissioning is ultimately by God but commonly mediated through the church. Collins cites ‘Philippians 1:1 as a crucial text in support of his argument that the diakonos always stands in relationship with someone else, normally the episkopos.’^{xx}

Ontologically, rather than being defined in terms of humble service, a *diakonos* is primarily characterised relationally by commissioning and authorisation for specific tasks. These *may* include works of humble service but are not limited to them. On Collins' interpretation, the primary personal-relational emphasis is shifted *away* from that between a servant and someone in need of service *towards* that which subsists between a ruler and an envoy. The primary object of the diaconal gaze, whereby diaconic ethics is oriented in respect of the purpose of *diakonia*, is shifted from any beneficiaries of some humble service to the God who authorises and commissions. Anything which is constitutive of *good* organisational structures must then dependent on this pattern of relationship.

Epistemologically, the shift is from a functional view of *diakonia* in terms of benefits accruing to beneficiaries towards a teleological view whereby the source, logic and end of any benefits gain their intelligible content. What is conceptually basic to the *diakon-* word group is the 'why' – the reason for any commissioned activity – that governs the 'what' – the activity itself. The first question to ask a *diakonos* is not 'what is your ministry?' but rather 'whom do you serve, who sent you and for what purpose?' Thus the apostle Paul receives a *diakonia* from God and acts *on God's behalf*. Similarly, inasmuch as the church under God's authority commissions *diakonoi*, they act *on behalf of* the church – they are 'representatives' jointly of God and of Christ's church. Thus the nature and origin of the socially authoritative expertise concerning the nature of the good which *diakonoi* offer is explicitly theological, since the teleology concerning the interpretation of the benefits of *diakonia* begin and end with God's commission.

Practically, Collins' interpretation brings critical pressure on established forms of church language, institutional life and social agency. This is uncomfortable for ecclesial organisations whose self-understanding follows an interpretation of *diakonia* defined as service of neighbour, hallowed by generations of merciful activity and heartfelt prayer.^{xxi} For example, Collins criticises vested interests in maintaining interpretations which accord with the *Diakonie's* self-understanding, observing that

one might suspect that the philological approach of these theologians may have been different had the experiences of a nineteenth-century church not created a climate of opinion in which 'diakonia' was already equated with works of loving service.^{xxii}

It is ironic that the *Roman Catholic* Collins' careful Scriptural study should threaten forms of ecclesial self-conception to which Luther, who argued for *diakonia* as a *nota ecclesia*, was deeply wedded. Independently from Collins, Anni Hentschel's exegesis of New Testament texts is similarly at odds with the history of interpretation in the German *Diakonie*, and has similarly been hardly heeded.^{xxiii} In addition to institutional inertia, the reason for this may be disciplinary inertia within the Practical Theology influential on the *Diakonie*, dependent as it is to social scientific and psychological modes of enquiry, engendering a lacklustre reception of Collins' and Hentschel's highly focussed semantic analysis.^{xxiv}

By contrast, the Church of England has now repeatedly articulated its rather emphatic support of Collins interpretation.^{xxv} In my judgment, while there may be disagreement about the detailed ramifications of Collins' argument and precise interpretations of certain Scriptural passages, and although Collins himself has taught us to doubt even the most established scholarly consensus, there is little warrant for doubting his argument's central thrust.^{xxvi} This is of practical importance since Collins' accusation against the German exegetical tradition of 'parti pris' as regards his and Hentschel's critical work is not some academic spat but has political-theological and missiological ramifications concerning the authority with which the

church understands itself to act.^{xxvii} The Church of England's engagement with German reflection on *diakonia* and the *Diakonie* through the Meissen process gave rise to the telling lament from Bishop Martin Schindhütte that

we find that it was not uncommon for us in Germany to consider it a kind of hallmark of excellence if our diaconal ministry...were designed in a way that one could no longer perceive that we did it as Christians.^{xxviii}

While the implications of Collins' and Hentschel's findings are not yet being properly felt in the German ecclesial establishment, and while *diakonia* needs to be distinguished from menial service as Collins argues, there are nonetheless lessons for how service is conceived, to which I will return (§3).

Diakoniai – ecclesial and political commissions

But first a further argument is required concerning how the shift warranted by Collins' and Hentschel's work clarifies questions in political theology relevant not only to Bickley's and Ritchie's concerns but also to Cribb's. This argument concerns how to interrelate New Testament *diakon-* terms which concern ecclesial commissioning with the sole, and, therefore, pivotal politically oriented New Testament *diakon-* term, namely that of Romans 13:4. There it is said that the one who holds governing authority is a *diakonos*, commonly translated as 'minister' or 'servant' of God. This usage is quoted without discussion by Collins in his 1990 volume^{xxix} and makes no appearance in his 2014 volume. In two Church of England reports on mission, ministry and church leadership, both specifically drawing on Collins' findings on *diakonia*, this usage is briefly noted but barely remarked upon.^{xxx} What therefore marks both Collins' and the Church of England's recent work on *diakonia* is an underdeveloped political theology that can apply the determinative sense of *diakonia* as commissioned work to how the two forms of agency, ecclesial and governmental, are called to act in relation to each other.^{xxxi}

Two conceptual gains may be made by attending to how the use of *diakonos* in Romans 13:4 interrelates with Collins' exegesis of other New Testament *diakon-* cognates.

1. The first concerns *representation*. In drawing attention to *diakonia*'s commissioned nature Collins' exegesis sheds light on the representative work any *diakonos* undertakes, whether ecclesial or governmental. As noted, this has nothing *essentially* to do with humble service. Rather, *diakonoi* act *on behalf of* the one or the people they *represent*, by whom they are commissioned.

On the one hand, representation requires an authority which authorises the representative to act and to speak. O'Donovan has described representation's logic in terms of the authority to provide reasons for the actions and speech of those represented.^{xxxii} A Johannine Christological root for this logic may operate as an effective complement to Collins' analysis of the *diakon-* word group. Jesus in John tells how 'the Son can do nothing of his own accord, but only what he sees the Father doing. For whatever the Father does, that the Son does likewise.' (John 5:19) Or again, later in John: 'I have not spoken on my own authority, but the Father who sent me has himself given me a commandment—what to say and what to speak.' (John 12:49).^{xxxiii} This Christological revelation provides the logic for those who follow him to be similarly sent: 'as the Father has sent me so I now send you' (John 20:21), recalling the promise that those who believe 'will do even greater things than' Christ has done (John 14:12), suggesting that representation is not mere repetition but will involve innovation. In complementary vein, Jesus

informs Pilate that ‘you would have no power if it was not given you’ (John 19:11), an implicitly critical commentary on the quality of the responsible agency of this particular governing *diakonos*.

This Johannine conception, which averts a diaconal conception which wrongly defaults to John’s depiction of footwashing (John 13), is conceptually fully congruent with a *diakonos* as a commissioned, *representative* envoy, sent to act and to speak according to what he or she sees or hears. Performing a diaconal commission requires envoys’ permanent attention upon the one by whom they are sent. Accordingly, the essential mark of *diakonia* is obedient conformity to the One to whom those commissioned as agents are responsible. This is the case whether a *diakonos* is on ecclesial or governmental commission since it is the same God who commissions representative *diakonoi* in both cases, albeit to complementary tasks.

On the other hand, God’s authority both endows representative agents, whether ecclesial or governmental, with honour and requires of them humility. To those who, impressed especially by Paul’s insistence on his lowliness (e.g. 1 Corinthians 15:9), doubt Collins’ approach because it attributes honour to apostles as commissioned by God, Gooder rightly argues that the interplay of honour and humility within the ecclesial range of *diakon-* terms coheres well with Collins’ insight and may be well summarised in the paradoxical claim that the ‘most honoured are the weakest.’^{xxxiv} Similarly, a monarch’s authorised envoy carries the honour of royal authority. However, since he does not act on private initiative but on a public mission, he is a servant who is humble *in relation to* the one by whom he is sent. Thus, in substantiation of Collins’ and Gooder’s accounts, notice that people are called to render ‘fear to whom fear is due and honour to whom honour is due.’ (Romans 13:7) Conceptually congruently, though without the *diakon-* term, Peter’s account of commissioned political authority speaks of ‘governors as sent by him to punish those who do evil and to praise those who do good.’ (1 Peter 2:14) The imperative regarding such *diakonoi* is stated with economy: ‘Honour the emperor!’ (1 Peter 2:17) An overall reading of the Scriptures thus requires that the honour of governing *diakonoi* has a similar origin as the honour of ecclesial *diakanoi*. Neither are conceived as performing essentially menial service but rather both have the social authority to represent, with the honour and humility of envoys, the purposes of God who has commissioned them to their various tasks.

2. The second conceptual gain concerns the *interrelation* of the tasks of ecclesial and political *diakonoi*. This interrelation addresses directly Cribb’s challenge of healthcare’s social turn, especially the standing of social authorities alongside professional or biomedical authorities. Understanding the interrelation requires attention to the nature and purpose of their respective commissions. Both kinds of *diakonoi* are commissioned to enable certain *benefits* to accrue to certain beneficiaries. Following Collins’ reading of Acts 6, the benefits of ecclesial diaconal tasks arise from preaching the word or the relief of poverty or both.^{xxxv} As those sent out, such *diakonoi* are thus conceptually analogous to apostles though have a double authorisation; that is, they operate *on behalf of* not only God but also the apostles by whom, as Acts 6 makes clear, they are commissioned.

For the thought-world of the New Testament, the authority and purpose with which ecclesial *diakonoi* are sent out as emissaries of the kingdom of God summons a response from political *diakonoi* as to whether they will recognise and welcome the authority of such a commission. The reason why this matters politically in the changing healthcare landscape lies in the *representative* and *authorised* work of the whole people of God. For Ephesians 4:11-12, the structure of thought is most naturally that – by analogy from how the apostles commission *diakonoi* – so the apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers commission and equip

all God's people for the works they are authorised to take up *on behalf of* and *as representatives of* both God and the church. I emphasise that this 'popular' commissioning for *diakonia* must be reckoned *by analogy* with the commissioning of the apostles, and of those ordained deacons. It is not, then, the case that only those ordained formally as bishops, priests or deacons receive *diakonia* or are *diakonoi*.^{xxxvi} Nonetheless, any 'popular' commissioning depends upon there being a church within which *particular people* have already been set aside as *diakonoi*, who are commissioned with the requisite social authority to commission and equip others for *diakonia*. There can be no self-commissioned *diakonia* but only that which is commissioned under God through the church for the purpose of certain beneficial tasks.

This arrangement is good news for the church. The purposive, eschatological logic which marks the commissioning of apostles, priests and ordained *diakonoi* is, in principle, a safeguard which should preserve the same purposive logic in the commissioning of any ecclesial activity, conducted by church people, such as the German *Diakonie*, without which the lament previously noted over the failure of the *Diakonie's* witness will be repeated. In a call to end a hiddenness in Christian purposiveness, Bishop Schindhütte argued that it is "important for [people] to have experiences which lead them to ask the questions: Why are you doing this? Why are you doing it this way?"^{xxxvii} In short, any benefit arising from *diakonia* has to come with an in-built tendency to eschatological, teleological questioning concerning the hope Christians have. As Gooder says, at 'the heart of Collins's readings, therefore, lies the question of motivation – why *diakonoi* do what they do.'^{xxxviii}

Preserving an ontology and epistemology of *diakonia* which encourages the giving of evangelical reasons for *why* good works are done is then basic to both the logic and the mission of the church. In the Spirit of the gospel, all people in the church may undertake forms of social agency, commissioned by God, *analogous* to ordained deacons, and authorised through the commission of the church. This agency will naturally be of many kinds, distributed across various social loci and fitted to the needs of those – inside and outside the church – who are the commission's beneficiaries. On this analogical basis all members of the church (all saints) may be equipped for *diakonia* (responsible commissioned agency) according to the established *diakonic* pattern: commissioned by God and the church, authorised and required to be explicitly representative.

Of course, it may not be the case in practice that all will either be commissioned by the church to conduct such agency or, even if commissioned, will act in conformity with the commission.^{xxxix} Nonetheless, the logic of Scripture concerning the purposiveness of *diakonia* is that there may be analogical commissioning of all people for recognised *diakoniai*. This includes and, recalling Acts 6, is paradigmatically seen in those who interweave the ministry of the word with the relief of poverty and hunger aiming at the restoration of sufficiency and health. Accordingly, Collins allows that a kind of humble service or ministry of kindness may be one form of *diakonia*, following a usage common in the gospels.^{xl} Beneficiaries would include *existing* members of Christ's body, such as the Christian needy of Acts 6. However, the logic of evangelists equipping the people (Ephesians 4:11-12) is that Christ's body is built up by *diakonic* works benefitting people who are *on the way* to inclusion in that body – those who are not yet members of Christ.

To represent God and God's church is to be commissioned for the purposes of God's kingdom of which the church as a body is a visible sign. This is the eschatological social imaginary to be recollected. It should be realised in forms of localised, authorised and thus recognisable social agency in response to the social turn Cribb identifies. Only with this deep purposive logic may Bishop Schindhütte's lament for *Diakonie* turn to joy. As the Bishop notes, commissioned *diakonoi* such as

social workers, psychologists, counsellors and doctors involved in diaconal ministry are virtually exhilarated when they discover the deep dimensions their own professionalism acquires, as they relate to our faith and the life of our Church.^{xli}

But how does this explanation of the beneficiaries of ecclesial *diakonia* provide guidance for how the two kinds of envoys commissioned by God – the ecclesial and the political – are to *interrelate*?

The fulfilment of a *diakonia* brings good work bespeaking good news which can benefit the world. It should thus be welcomed and praised by political *diakonoi* – God’s agents who are commissioned to do the church good. Complication and tension between the commissions emerge in Feiler’s critical examination of the theological rootedness of the *Diakonie*, amidst economisation, pluralisation and its embeddedness within the German social welfare system. *Diakonia* is understood as commissioned by God *on behalf of the church* but working amidst the structures of societal provision, such as healthcare services, which are commissioned by political authorities. It raises the question of how the *diakonia* of the whole people of God, commissioned according to Ephesians 4:11-12, should proceed when bound up within the complexities of politically organised and funded societal structures.

The Christian social theory developed here holds that the two political and ecclesial *diakonoi* may *both* act as interwoven divinely commissioned agents – tasked, for example, with health-related work – but should both point beyond themselves to the purposes of the One by whom they are commissioned and authorised. On the one hand, the church is not to take orders from government *per se*. Rather it must pursue its commission according to what it has heard and seen through Christ. However, it may hope for – though not depend on – the governing authorities’ support for ecclesial *diakonia*. In Petrine terms, receiving the “praise of those who do good” is a worshipful acknowledgement of political authority’s divine commission. Similarly, by implication, where the church is failing in its commission, it is possible that a judicious political *diakonos* may find ways of pointing this out.

On the other hand, government’s necessarily more oblique witness to its honourable commission requires that it is humbly attentive to and supportive of the primary and eschatological commission of the church, seeking to understand it on its own terms with its own account of the good for persons.^{xlii} Again this is good news for both church and for government. If ecclesial *diakonia* is not *clearly* and *explicitly* working according to its own authorisation not only does a slippage towards undue compromise with any anti-theological logic operative in the state become more likely. It also becomes more probable that the state will be less conscious of its own commissioned purpose and so overestimate its capacity for responsiveness to persons in their suffering complexity, as compared to the capacity of non-state actors such as churches.

The benefits of *diakonia* for healthcare’s contested social turn

What then are the benefits of *diakonia*, thus conceived, for the trends noted by Cribb: the social turn in healthcare, the changing loci of social agency and the turn to wider sources of social authority? The diaconic commissioning capacity of the church has both the discipline and the authority to populate the emerging healthcare landscape with such loci of agency, reconfiguring health structures and relationships with a deeply, theologically rooted responsiveness to persons. This responsiveness constitutes the pro-social structure of *diakonia* which is very necessary for the social or philosophical turn which Cribb identifies. That turn is vulnerable to a corruption whereby responsiveness to persons becomes re-subordinated to a solely or predominantly biomedical interpretation of health. There is indeed no inevitable or smooth course to the transition Cribb describes and advocates. Cribb is aware of this since he

notes that the philosophical turn implies an opening to contentious disagreement about the nature of the good which, though necessary, is not straightforwardly resolvable.

Disciplined by its commission, Christian diaconic practice will join in contests opposing three core features of the emerging healthcare landscape. First, there is a deceptive economisation, whereby the proper nature and role of the diaconic task and its benefits becomes enslaved to, rather than served by, a market logic. Second, there is a dissipative welfarism, whereby a monolithic state welfare culture, in its foreclosed horizon, attenuates the diaconic eschatological logic and purposive culture of ecclesial life. In so doing, churches' distinctive capacity for sustaining a responsiveness to persons over against a biomedical rationality is hollowed out. Third, though potentially nested within each of the first two, there is a dismissive secularism, whereby the strength of theological relational ontologies are emaciated so that they ill accord with the existential flesh, blood and spirit concerns of health. Rooted in a notion of plurality that denies the authority of *diaconic* commissioning, such a secularism threatens to sap the energy and distort the benefits of commissioned *diaconic* work, which might make fruitful the social turn for which Cribb advocates.

For *diakonia* to be sustained amidst these contests, it should be understood as Christologically authorised, epistemologically revelatory and practically liberating: *authorised* in and through Christ, typically mediated through ecclesial structures; *revelatory* because the eschatological purpose of the tasks which aim at benefitting those inside or outside the church is its overriding quality, a witness *on behalf of* God and for the benefit of all concerned; and *liberating* since human agency, far from being free to go where it wishes, finds its freedom in responsible, intelligent obedience to the authoritative commission of God. As has been said, "authority is the objective correlate of freedom. It is what we encounter in the world which makes it meaningful for us to act."^{xliv} Faithful *diakonia* requires a shared recognition of the benefits God has made available – which any *diakonia* is meant to enable people to receive – most especially the reason why the benefits are sought in the way that they are, namely for the sake of the worship of God. *That* recognition requires both those commissioned and the beneficiaries of their commission to participate in the strange interweaving of humility and honour, found centrally in the person of Jesus Christ. In Feiler's terms, "the movement of thought underlying a 'diaconic Christology' is 'going through' suffering in the hope of a restored mode of existence and, again, a 'new creation'."^{xliv}

§3. Three kinds of 'service' critically considered

Equipped with this interpretation of *diakonia*, this section considers the three approaches to *diakonia* or alternatively 'service' discussed in the papers by Ritchie, Bickley and Cribb.

(i) *diakonia* and community organising

In arguing that the poorest and those in ill health should be recognised as primary agents of *diakonia* – as distinct from being recipients of charitable help, Ritchie complicates our understanding loci of social agency which are important for health. In short, he argues for *diakonia* to be vital in the transition whereby the church comes to 'conceive of itself as a Body which includes, and not merely one that serves, those in greatest need.'^{xliv} Ritchie's argument is made to counter the risk that the Church reinforces the world's social construction of reality whereby ecclesial agency lies with the rich or middle-class and not with the poor at its heart. Such observations complicate the interpretation of a term often associated with *diakonia*, namely 'compassion'. Any 'compassion' which was conditioned by a *condescension* of rich towards poor would be antithetical to the revelation of Christ and the very nature of *diakonia*. Rather, as I have argued elsewhere, compassion must be conceptualised in civic, mutually respectful and covenantal terms.^{xlvi}

In providing detailed accounts of how changed ecclesiological self-understanding led to changed practices, he both takes Cribb's identification of a 'social turn' in healthcare in a powerfully Christological direction and answers calls in political theology for a deeper and detailed attention to 'social and political pathologies' bound up with poverty and injustice.^{xlvi} In characterising the heart of the church as Christologically penurious, Ritchie signals both the commission by which Christ was authorised and the commission by which the agency of the church – whether materially poor, sufficiently supplied or rich – gains its eschatological orientation and temporal application. Indeed, as argued above, *diakonia* must be eschatologically conceived if it is to contest effectively the economising, welfarising and secularising tendencies noted above.

Ritchie's general account may be usefully compared and contrasted with that of the practice of citizen health care in which the 'idea of *citizen* refers to people becoming activated along with their neighbors and others facing similar health challenges...[as] coproducers of health for themselves and their communities.'^{xlvi} Such

Local communities must retrieve their own historical, cultural, and religious traditions of health and healing, and bring these into dialogue with contemporary health care and other community systems.^{xlvi}

Diakonia conceived and practiced as Ritchie describes, offers just such a tradition, both resisting the deceptive reduction of citizen to consumer, rejecting a destructive secularisation of health and accepting a Christological construction of reality which subverts standard expectations of professional honour by recognising the agency of the poor and those in ill health at the community's heart. Collins' radical reading of *diakonia* in terms of tasks for commissioned envoys who act and speak on behalf of God safeguards Ritchie's account from tendencies which have denied the Christological heart of such activity, reducing Christians to mere civil society volunteers. Churches' participation in community organising can be seen as part of 'a broader movement toward reclaiming health care as work by, for, and with citizens'.¹ The revelatory diaconal insight, Christological in form, is that the agency of the poorest in ecclesial public work is a commission from God. The social agency of the poor and those in ill health is thus triply representative, conducted both on behalf of God and for their neighbours as well as for themselves.

Crucially for the present argument, understanding political authority as a *diakonos* is complicated through attending to the multiple loci of social agency. The honour due to commissioned political *diakonoi* must be tempered by a consciousness both of the self-deceptiveness of political power and of the representative authority of the poor. Public 'servants' involved in healthcare need always to be held to account, especially though not exclusively by the church, and especially though not exclusively by those in ill health, as to whether they are obedient to their commission.

(ii) *diakonia* and 'resilience'

In a way which both concretizes and complexifies the duality of *diakonia* explored above, Bickley observes the distinction between the symbiotic and semiotic modes in which social action conducted by Christians commonly proceeds. With judicious criticisms of both current welfarism via Cottam and some ecclesial responses, notably that of Wells, he argues that some churches are failing to provide a 'public witness'^{li} to the eschatological significance of their work, thus failing to grow spiritual capital, 'a community's sense of morale, purpose or confidence'.^{lii} Adopting Collins' insights, Bickley argues for the semiotic mode to supervene on and even displace the symbiotic, making explicit the difference between the state and church both by pointing to the horizon of hope to which the state can never reach and indicating the

deepest sources of what he calls resilience.^{liii} What resilience requires is ‘the presence of active citizens within the community...[who] possess the skills to lead local initiatives and encourage other community members to participate’.^{liv} In light of their eschatological expectations, churches have a particular capacity to bring such encouragement, especially in intergenerationally bleak situations.

The account of *diakonia* given in §2 above develops Bickley’s claims in two ways. First, *diakonia* complicates ‘resilience’ even more than Bickley suggests. For Christian thought, ‘learning and adaption, even growth and discovery, in the face of change and difficulty’^{lv} is better construed in terms of disciples’ “perseverance”, a term which both strengthens the eschatological purposiveness which *diakonia* signals and incorporates the emphases Bickley says are essential to churches’ semiotic mode. Cribb’s thought was that a widespread social turn in health provision is required, with correlative shifts in loci of agency. If this is so, then it will require the deepening of a theological self-consciousness among those commissioned by God through churches to take up social authority to enable and perform Christian social action. A Christological reorientation of ‘resilience’ will tether it to the commissioned tasks towards which such an attitude points. A *Christian* resilience or better “perseverance” is not about just “getting through” but rather about “making way” for the Kingdom of God.

Second, the semiotic mode of social action construes the commissioned service of the state, mediated through health services (among others), as supportive of the ecclesial *diakonia* described above. Governmental failures to act in this way according to its appropriate *diaconic* mode are liable to become a threat to the perseverance of people labouring to tackle the ‘pessimism, hopelessness, powerlessness, and exclusion’^{lvi} which Bickley’s case study identifies. Accordingly, it is a standing ecclesial *diakonia* to preserve and create loci of social agency authorised from an authority other than the state.

(iii) *diakonia* and ‘service learning’

Alan Cribb’s study of service learning raises similar theological questions though for different reasons. ‘Service’ is in trouble, on Cribb’s account. Its framing in terms of outputs which will benefit the self is “seriously problematic”.^{lvii} The particular focus on National Citizen Service is intriguing. It was established by direct government action – by the commission of a particular *diakonos* in the terms of Romans 13:4.^{lviii} What Cribb objects to is first that the nature of citizenship and service are somehow overwhelmed and corrupted by an ‘economistic logic’^{lix} utilised to appeal to young citizens keen to get on in the world; and second, the correlative and interpenetrating corruption of service by the value for money measure used to assess its benefit.

How to conceive of ‘service’ in relation to *diakonia* matters both for this debate and for how churches respond to the social turn Cribb describes. Cribb speaks of damage done to ‘the goods of service, citizenship or social action’. In light of his broader argument about healthcare, what is intrinsically valuable in these goods must itself be contentious between rival philosophies and theologies. Theologically, the serious problem with notions of citizenship, service or social action unrelated to a commission from God is that the logic will inherently tend towards just the kind of corrosive self-reference which Cribb critiques.^{lx} However, the notion of fulfilment, or benefit to the self through serving is not inherently problematic for Christian thought – love and self-love *can* be integrated without toxicity to human self-understanding. However, such detoxification requires another actor to redefine benefit accruing to the self through service by referring the benefit not to the self as a kind of secure repository but to a trustworthy relationship – that between God and the one commissioned by God to a particular task.^{lxi}

That actor is Christ through whom the earlier Johannine and Christological notion of representation finds its bearings. The role of God as commissioning any particular *diakonia* is scripted out both by modern professionalism and even, as Schindhütte notes, by certain church

practices and theology. What is left are forms of service which are inarticulate *about* the Kingdom of God or are ‘sold’ to well-meaning volunteers or government as being *on behalf of* self-actualisation or *for the sake of* GDP – none of which should be satisfying to Cribb or to Christians. What is required is some therapy for the social imaginary. This is what the New Testament notion of *diakonia*, read through Collins’ reinterpretation, offers. The practice of *diakonia* may be beneficial, therefore, not only to the beneficiaries of any particular tasks commissioned by God but also to a societal understanding of ‘service’, whose economised logic Cribb laments, by referring service to the One who commissions both government and ecclesial *diakonai*. God’s call to all people is that they may be included and built up within the body of Christ and in turn receive their commission, thereby freeing them to put the logic of exchange and benefit in its place. God’s commission to government is to ensure that an economised logic is fully subservient to a relational logic founded in Christological anthropology, and reflected in the divine commission of government itself.

Indeed, Cribb invites just such a conversation in speaking of

embodiment and affect as keys to ‘getting outside’ neoliberal constructions of service learning [representing a]...valuable complement to the clues provided by work in philosophical and theological anthropology that seeks to more directly name the ethical and ontological ground of relationship.^{lxii}

Gaining freedom from a perverted self-referential logic requires an uncovering of those clues. The ‘hidden curriculum’ concerning the commission of God for the Suffering Servant – the mystery concealed for ages and generations (Colossians 1:26) – has now been made known and become available to follow through the revelation found in Christ.

This reality is articulated particularly well in the Church of England’s Collect for Peace, often said by those in diaconal office:

O God the Father, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom; Defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies; that we surely trusting in thy defence, may not fear the power of any adversaries; through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

On this account, the service which constitutes perfect freedom is a service rendered to God the Father who, through the mighty risen Christ, authors peace and concord. This stands counter to the neo-liberal versions of service and freedom as inherently productivist and which Cribb sees as threats to service. Hence the prayer that the humble servants of God – commissioned by God – require defence from assaults and adversaries. However, confident of this defence, they need not walk in fear but may rather, trusting in God, become loci of responsible, commissioned agency, sharing in co-reign with God. Thus in their own persons, Christologically reconfigured, they may turn the social turn in healthcare towards its eschatological fulfilment, with the compassion and perseverance proper to civic participation here and now and the joy proper to their citizenship in heaven.

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ⁱ Cribb, *Healthcare in Transition*, 51.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, v.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 50; see 29-30 for description of the biomedical model as reductionist in its focus on bodies rather than persons; diseases management rather than health promotion; and on scientific problem solving and clinical authority.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, 150.

^v *Ibid.*, 51.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, 151 (my italics).

^{vii} *Ibid.*, 21.

^{viii} 'One train of Christian thought that carries apologetic weight in our times is the capacity of faith to display the intelligibility of political institutions and traditions.' (O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, xiii)

^{ix} Cribb, *Healthcare in Transition*, 182.

^x *Ibid.*

^{xi} *Ibid.*, 30.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, 161 (my italics).

^{xiii} *Ibid.*, 182.

^{xiv} Feiler, 'Political Challenges to the German Diakonie'

^{xv} *Ibid.*

^{xvi} *Ibid.*

^{xvii} *Ibid.*

^{xviii} Collins, *Diakonia*; Collins, *Diakonia Studies*. For a useful survey, Gooder, P. 'Diakonia in the New Testament', pp.38-45. See also Gooder, P. 'Towards a Diaconal Church'.

^{xix} Faith and Order Commission, *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church*, 8.

^{xx} Gooder, 'Diakonia in the New Testament', 37.

^{xxi} I note that, while the focus here is on the German *Diakonie*, there is a wider, similar set of trends across the ecumenical movement which is deeply invested in a particular usage of the term *diakonia*. For example, a major ecumenical movement on diakonia notes and seemingly affirms the work of John Collins but does not acknowledge his denial of the simple equivalence of *diakonia* with caring service. Instead, the report comments that 'it makes sense to limit the use of the term diakonia to the caring ministry of the church and of Christians; the term expresses the distinctiveness of its faith-based action.' (Lutheran World Federation, ACT Alliance and World Council of Churches, *Called to Transformative Action: Ecumenical Diakonia* (2018), 47).

^{xxii} Collins, *Diakonia*, 11.

^{xxiii} Hentschel, A., *Diakonia im Neuen Testament*. Collins comments that 'Hentschel's claim will engender unease...while sections of the German Protestant theological establishment, church administration, and pastoral arm will voice a mixed chorus of incredulity, protest, and perhaps dismay before this dismantling of one of the key constructs within modern Lutheran and Reformed ecclesiology and spirituality.' (*Diakonia Studies*, 23)

^{xxiv} I acknowledge my dependence on Therese Feiler for this observation.

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- xxv Faith and Order Commission, *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church*, vii; *Senior Church Leadership*, 24 §62.
- xxvi For measured argument on this, see Faith and Order Commission, *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church*, 24-31.
- xxvii Collins, *Diakonia Studies*, 35.
- xxviii Schindhütte, 'God desires everyone to be saved', 278.
- xxix Collins, *Diakonia*, 228.
- xxx It is footnoted without discussion in the Church of England's report on *The Mission and Ministry of the Whole Church* (ch.2fn4, 165) and receives a sentence pointing to the monarch in *Senior Church Leadership* (46fn32).
- xxxi Plotting the nature of this interrelation requires an interweaving of New Testament scholarship with political theology to cut through some of the thicket of scholarship about the standing of political authority vis-à-vis the church. Inasmuch as Collins' scholarship may be taken to endorse an *authorised* role for government, it should be taken to add clarity and exegetical rationale to the so-called 'Doctrine of the two', as discussed by O'Donovan, *The Desire of the Nations*, 217-224. In that sense, it may be recruited as a further witness against Hauerwas on the point of the vocation of secular authority to obedience to Christ and the vindication of the church (ibid. 214-217).
- xxxii 'An authority is someone I depend on for showing me the reasons for acting.' (O'Donovan, *The Ways of Judgment*, 131)
- xxxiii This seems the natural gospel thread to interweave with Mark 10:45, lucidly reframed by Collins, via the epexegetical *kai* to refocus the nature of the *diakonia* Christ enacts precisely in the obedient fulfilment of the Son of Man's commissioned task to give his life as a ransom for many (Gooder, 'Diakonia in the New Testament', 41-42).
- xxxiv Ibid., 52.
- xxxv Gooder, 'Diakonia in the New Testament', 43-45.
- xxxvi As one public document of the Church of England puts it, 'The ordination of a deacon may be regarded, therefore, as an ecclesial sign – a visible sign of what is true of the Church, of its essential calling, and is carried out in many ways by all the faithful and particularly by those who are called to a recognized ministry, lay as well as ordained.' Ministry Division, Church of England, 'Discerning the Diaconate', 2.
- xxxvii Schindhütte, 'God desires everyone to be saved', 281.
- xxxviii Gooder, 'Diakonia in the New Testament', 43.
- xxxix Ibid., 54-56.
- xl Collins, *Diakonia*, 245; Gooder, 'Diakonia in the New Testament', 48.
- xli Schindhütte, 'God desires everyone to be saved', 278.
- xlii Thus O'Donovan comments that the 'service rendered by the state to the church is to facilitate its mission.' (*The Desire of the Nations*, 217)
- xliii O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 122.
- xliv Feiler, 'Political Challenges to the German Diakonie'.
- xlv Ritchie, 'Beyond help'.
- xlvi Hordern, 'Compassion in Primary and Community Care'; 'Covenant, Compassion, and Marketisation in Healthcare'.
- xlvi Matthews, 'A Social Gospel for the 21st Century', 16.
- lviii Doherty and Mendenhall, 'Citizen health care', 253-4
- lxix Doherty, Mendenhall and Berge, 'The Families and Democracy and Citizen Health Care Project', 391.
- ¹ Doherty and Mendenhall, 'Citizen health care', 255.
- li Bickley, 'Neighbourhood resilience'.
- lii Ibid.
- liii Ibid.
- liv Ibid.
- lv Ibid.
- lvi Ibid.
- lvii Cribb, 'Shaping ethical and civic identities'.
- lviii For my own discussion of David Cameron's Big Society vision at an early stage, see Hordern, *One Nation but Two Cities*, esp. 54-61.
- lix Cribb, 'Shaping ethical and civic identities'.
- lx The critique is close to the problem of a civil religion which O'Donovan critiques (*The Desire of the Nations*, 225-226).
- lxi For discussion of love and self-love, see O'Donovan, *The Problem of Self-Love in Saint Augustine*.
- lxii Cribb, 'Shaping ethical and civic identities'.