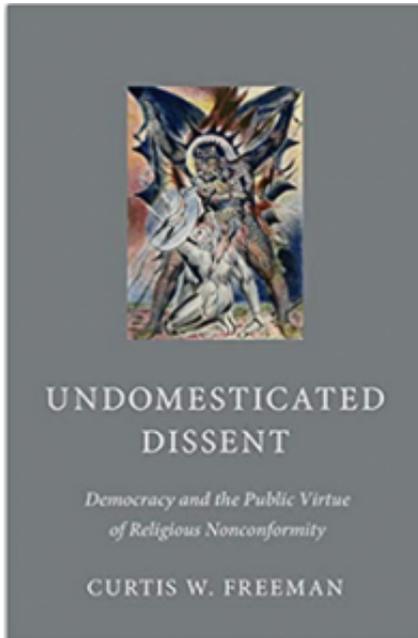


Book Review: Undomesticated Dissent by Curtis Freeman.



Curtis Freeman's book *Undomesticated Dissent*^[1] comes as a gem in the ways Christian historiography can inform the challenges of our own moment. See the author's introduction [here](#). At one level it is a rich description of three great English dissenters from the 17th and 18th centuries: John Bunyan (*Pilgrim's Progress*), Daniel Defoe (*Robinson Crusoe*) and William Blake (*Jerusalem*). At another level it presses into a critical question for Christian mission and practice across the modern West. As Freeman states near the end of this book:

The world that contemporary Christianity inhabits is dominated by empire... The empire that dominates the lives of people today and exerts sovereignty over its domain uses more subtle powers of influence. This new empire is supranational and global. It has no boundaries, neither territorial nor temporal, for this empire sees itself at the end of history... it exercises authority through market forces and imposes its policy... through internal regulation. (Page 224).

Freeman is a professor of Theology and Baptist Studies at Duke Divinity School in Durham, North Carolina. He writes in the spirit of Wendell Berry, James McClendon and William Stringfellow – a prophetic voice in the din of Euro-tribal leaders anxiously trying to fix their churches and be sure they are on the next wave of techniques and answers coming down the pipe from the Facebook and Twitter gurus.

As one who was once a Baptist minister for almost thirty years this book is a wonderfully written reminder of so much that is good and right about the Baptist heritage, indeed, of the gift this tradition once brought. In this light it is a sad reminder of what has since happened to that tradition as its focus on growth and relevance has disconnected it from its own story. Freeman almost persuades me to return to my Baptist fold (almost); it certainly reminded me of why many of my friends wear the label 'Baptist' with a sense of real significance in terms of the practice of their faith.

The theme of Freeman's book is dissent and its critical place in both the formation and thriving of democracy.[2] He focuses on three of the early pioneers of this dissent in 17th and 18th century British social life, that period of time when England was thrust into social upheaval from the enclosure laws through the Industrial Revolutions.[3] This dissent, as Freeman describes so well, was far more than a resistance toward changing societies or the ways in which those in power oppress those without such power. While these themes are certainly present, the point about dissent Freeman is making lies deeper than these issues, even though they are massively significant amidst an upheaval in which growing numbers of citizens feel uprooted from their ways of life. What continues to be so important about these dissenters is that their dissent was anchored in a religious vision of God's kingdom. Their dissent was thoroughly religious, eschatological and apocalyptic. It moves, in a way, counter to most current Western forms of dissent, that seek to frame their engagements with the unravelling of democratic societies by erasing any mention of Christian imagination as critical to human thriving. The three dissenters Freeman studies were not, first and foremost, shaped by some particular desire for social change, it was that their imaginations were doxological and eschatological; they therefore had to dissent at the forms of social, political and economic life that were defacing the imago Dei. These were dissenting protests rooted in a vision of what God was doing in the world, about the coming of God's righteous reign in an anticipated kingdom. In this sense, their dissent was not, fundamentally, about techniques for making a better world. It was shaped in Bunyan, Defoe and Blake by a different story, another city, a Jerusalem, that animated their desire to transform the societies in which they found themselves. Theirs was a vision of God's kingdom that invites us to reimagine the nature of Christian life.

The writings of these dissenters and others are challenging and bracing for Christians in the West just now. There are reasons aplenty for discouragement, for a realism that would invite us to turn in, baton-down the hatches and wait while the long winter begins (this is what Rod Dreher in his book *The Benedict Option* has been accused of doing).[4] There exists a pervasive focus among Euro-tribal churches on fixing and reforming themselves, on defining their essence and identity, on finding new techniques for becoming adaptive or agile or neighborhood-based such that the world of these dissenters is hardly heard. Several North America denominations stated in a co-document recently that they are gearing up to *reverse the trend of decline through church renewal and planting*. It all sounds robust, a great readiness to charge into the fray and fix this challenge of loss but such statements are full of the anxious need to find some way to fix the leak, staunch the bleeding. The solutions continue to remain stuck in the same old ecclesiocentric answers, basically a testimony to the reactive fear of loss rather than, as these dissenters, a powerful imagination of what God is already doing in the world. This fixing and renewing is understandable. It's largely about managing what we know inside the imaginations that we have. But, in the final analysis, this is a tragic vision because it remains stuck in the obvious and the existent, whereas Bunyan, Defoe and Blake's dissenting came from a fundamentally different place.

The late Tony Judt wrote the Introduction to the French historian, Raymond Aron's, *The Dawn of Universal History* in which he described Aron's writing as having a 'distinctly tragic vision...Aron held out no great hope for the radical transformation of the human condition...' (page xxiii).[5] But this is just the kind of dissent that is needed in the West at this time, not one more call to church renewal or another method of church planting. If it is the case that the world we

now inhabit in the West is dominated by a particular kind of empire that has been mostly internalized by the churches^[6] then what we sorely need is a fresh confrontation with the forms of dissent Freeman so eloquently presents in this book. Freeman's final summary is well worth quoting amidst all the anxious efforts of church leaders to fix themselves and their systems:

The most determinative act for a witness of dissent may then simply be to listen to the voice that calls out of the heavens – “See, I am making all things new (Rev 21:5) – and then to imagine the world through this vision as it can become when fully reconciled and renewed. For the new age is ultimately beyond the reach of human effort. It breaks into history as God’s gift. Prophetic imagination can envision it descending and call fellow pilgrims to journey toward it. Seeing what comes last in light of the new in Christ opens blind eyes to enduring realities that outlast the fragile contingencies that will not endure the ends of history. Only such a transformed vision can imagine the building of a world that gestures to life beyond. (page 226)

Finally, if you look at his brief YouTube intro to the book I wonder if he actually sells short the critical argument he is making. In the video he summarizes by saying that ‘Democracy demands Dissent and Dissent Defends Democracy’ BUT the more fundamental argument of the book is that there is really no fundamental dissent without the Christian eschatological imagination of God's kingdom. It is that which produces the vital engagements that defend and produce human thriving.

^[1] Curtis W. Freeman, *Undomesticated Dissent: Democracy and the Public Virtue of Religious Nonconformity* (Waco, TX.: Baylor University Press, 2017)

^[2] A number of books on dissent have been written in recent years about the struggle to change democratic societies in a context where bureaucracies, political, policing and intelligence, have sophisticated methods to nullify social dissent without shutting it down.

^[3] In just reading Ray William's brilliant novel *Border Country* I am reminded that these upheavals were still taking place in the UK in the 1960s (See Raymond Williams, *Border Country*, (Cardigan: Parthian, Library of Wales, 2017 edition)). Reading J. D. Vance's *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* (William Collins, 2017) suggests that these issues of how empires destroy the social fabric is neither new nor far from our experiences. The mass migrations and displacements of peoples are the direct results of empires clashing with one another.

^[4] Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option: A Strategy for Christians in a Post-Christian Nation* (Sentinel, 2017).

^[5] Tony Judt, 'Introduction' in *The Dawn of Universal History* by Raymond Aron, (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2002).

^[6] Martin Robinson and I, in our 2018 book *Practices for the Refounding of God's People*, use the language of 'modernity's wager' to designate the way this empire has colonized us in the

forms of the State, consumer capitalism and the Self.