

Most Unholy Alliance : Conservative Attitudes to Christianity in East and West

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It is now nearly a decade since Edward Norman's controversial Reith lectures, subsequently published as *Christianity and World Order*¹, helped to generate a great deal of debate about the appropriate sphere of Christian moral concern.

Dr Norman's view is clear:

...the teachings of the Saviour clearly describe
a personal rather than a social morality.²

Any attempt to outline a Christian social morality—to 'involve the Church in politics'—means compromising the proper concern of Christians with what is transcendent. It entails sanctifying whatever prevailing political world-view is current at the time. Among Western nations, Norman argues, this means supporting what he calls a 'Human Rights Ideology'. The Human Rights movement 'has elevated Western liberalism to the apparent authority of eternal truth'. As a consequence, '... the Churches now see Human Rights as the essence of the Christian message'.⁴ Christians in politics are engaged, then, in a process of absolutising a relative (Human Rights), identifying the essence of Christianity, which must be changeless, with a prevailing political ideology which represents only the view of a liberal twentieth century establishment in the West. In doing so, they obscure the truly changeless essence of Christianity, which lies in eternal values, values which by definition cannot be political.

Criticisms of Norman's thesis have been numerous, and the arguments on both sides are now well-rehearsed.⁵ Any attempt to outline a Christian personal morality, no less than a Christian social morality, involves the apparent compromise of associating with current secular ideologies, it has been pointed out. Indeed, it is difficult to see how Christianity could say anything significant about any moral question whatsoever without doing so. Secondly, critics have argued repeatedly that Dr. Norman fails to recognise the 'logic of the Incarnation'. On this view, Christianity is a religion which, rather than regarding relative human values as something with which the 'absolute values' of the

Christian should have nothing to do, sees them as sanctified through the belief in God's own endorsement of a particular personal and social morality. This endorsement is seen in the witness of Jesus of Nazareth. By identifying a particular human way of life as the life of God (or as a life blessed by God, depending upon one's Christological assumptions) the Christian is led to see the particular social and personal morality expressed through the life of Christ, both as formal teaching and as practised in his ministry, as indeed the essence of Christianity. Thus Norman's views on the Church's involvement with human rights are frequently discerned as lacking a basic theological insight, a predictable problem perhaps for the church historian attempting to outline a general theology.

Given the well-rehearsed nature of these arguments, it might appear that there is no room for any further comment. However, there is one somewhat ironic aspect to Dr Norman's thesis which has not been highlighted as much as it might have been, and which could throw some new light upon the question of Christian engagement with politics. It can be seen most clearly by recalling the possibly rather surprising views of Dr. Norman on religion in the Soviet Union. These are outlined in the chapter of *Christianity and the World Order* devoted to what he calls 'a new commandment: Human Rights'⁶. It is worth considering what he says.

The position of the Church in the Soviet Union, Norman points out, is a combination of theoretical liberty and practical restriction. The former is guaranteed through a decree of 1918 which affirmed the freedom to profess or not to profess a religious faith. Article 52 of the New Constitution of the Soviet Union, promulgated in 1977, defined this freedom more precisely. It referred to the right of individuals 'to conduct religious worship or atheistic propaganda', a statement which illustrated, Norman argues, the sense in which the Soviet Union understands religious liberty virtually exclusively in terms of freedom of worship.

Then there are the practical restrictions. Churches must be registered and give the state lists of their members, information which obviously provides the state with the opportunity for discrimination against believers. There is no religious education of children, although parents can give private instruction within the home. There can be no religious activity outside church buildings, and no church-based social work, since the state sees itself as providing adequate welfare facilities. In effect, Norman concludes, religious liberty in the Soviet Union means a right of public worship.

But what does Dr. Norman make of this highly restricted understanding of religious freedom which operates in the USSR? He begins by reminding us that the right of public worship is not peripheral to the lives of Soviet Christians, or at least to the majority who are from

the Russian Orthodox tradition, because for them:

... the performance of the Sacred Liturgy is not just a corporate expression of belief: it unfolds the very essence of the unchanging mysteries of transcendence—it is the disclosure of celestial truth, the very nature of Christianity itself.⁷

Indeed, the sort of controls over the exercise of religious freedom exercised by the contemporary Soviet government, which are in any case consistent with those previously exercised over the church by the Tsarist government, are not such as unduly bother the Orthodox hierarchy. They bother, Norman argues, only those Western Christians imbued with the desire to involve the church in social and political affairs, rather than keep it confined to what he describes as ‘celestial truth’ and the ‘unchanging mysteries of transcendence’:

Western Christianity has so redefined its meaning in terms of social activism that it cannot comprehend a Church which is satisfied with the mere performance of worship. But the Russian Orthodox Church is satisfied.⁸

‘The Russian Orthodox Church is satisfied’. This may be news to groups like Keston College, the Centre for the Study of Religion and Communism under the directorship of Michael Bourdeaux,⁹ or indeed to groups, like Amnesty International, monitoring political prisoners in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. These groups, however, tend to be inspired by the ‘human rights ideology’ of Western liberalism, and cannot entirely be trusted. Nor does Dr. Norman trust them entirely. In a number of ways he comes to the defence of the Soviet Union against the criticisms of the ‘human rights ideologies’. On the massive closure of churches in the 1960’s under Kruschev, he suggests that this may have been inspired by no more than a natural decline in church attendance, matching that which was taking place at the time in the West.¹⁰ On the question of prohibitions of bibles imported into the Soviet Union, he comments that this was done at the request of the Patriarch of Moscow (he quotes Radio Moscow as his source for this insight) on the grounds that these Bibles did not correspond to the canonical version allowed by the Orthodox Church¹¹. Of underground material produced in the Soviet Union, the so-called ‘samizdat’ literature, Dr. Norman reminds us that it is unreliable, and that religious opposition is often merely an expression of nationalistic feeling (as in Catholic Lithuania) or of anti-scientific prejudice, as in some of the ‘samizdat’ literature which attacks the ideas of Darwin¹². Finally, he points out that some of the dissidents have views which would entitle them to be persecuted in any country, citing as an example the ‘All-Russian Social Christian Alliance for the Liberation of the People’, which Norman describes as a group of anti-semitic believers in white supremacy¹³.

None of this is to suggest that Dr. Norman denies there to be any grievances against the state on the part of Orthodox Christians in the Soviet Union. Nor is it to deny that there are other religious groups, like Baptist Christians or Jews, who suffer a disproportionately higher degree of persecution than do Orthodox Christians. But to say that the Russian Orthodox church has not simply exercised what Trevor Beeson terms 'discretion'¹⁴ in its relations with the State, but is actually 'satisfied', seems to be claiming something more, and it reveals something heavily ironic about Edward Norman's understanding of the relations of church and state.

That irony lies in the fact that the church in Russia appears to be less a compromise with political realities, for Dr. Norman, than an ideal of the proper nature of relations between the temporal and spiritual worlds and the institutions that embody them. The communist state in the Soviet Union believes that it is fully competent to determine the ethical basis of society according to the principles of historical materialism. Religion is tolerated so long as it confines itself to liturgical worship and does not attempt to challenge that ethical basis of society from the perspective of a Christian social morality. No one, however, is a greater opponent of the idea of a 'social morality' than Dr. Norman himself. Unsurprisingly, then, this right-wing cleric shows himself to be sympathetic towards the policy of the Soviet Union in ensuring that the Church should concern itself only with 'celestial truth'. At the very least, he is quite convinced that Soviet Orthodox Church leaders are happy with their relation to the state, and sincere in their denials that official treatment of their Church violates human rights.

The treatment of the Soviet Union in *Christianity and the World Order* illustrates that conservative attitudes in East and West can feed off each other. Dr. Norman, who wants to keep the Christian Churches from providing a critique of capitalism, finds support in the policy towards religion of the Soviet Union, which wants to keep the Churches from providing a critique of communism. Both feel safe with each other, united in their common policy of keeping the church out of politics. Both reflect a common discomfort with the ethical bases of the societies which they are committed to maintaining. Both, one suspects, find religion more subversive and dangerous than they are prepared to admit. Furthermore, each can understand the other's view. Any Soviet commentator reading Dr. Norman's account of the essence of religion, concerned with the 'unchanging mysteries of transcendence', would find his or her understanding of religion immediately confirmed. What could be closer to the 'opium of the people' than this consorting with the supernatural? What could confirm the Marxist doctrine of alienation more aptly than Norman's conception of 'celestial truth'?

Although Norman represents 'involvement with politics' almost as

if it were a passing fad of the church in liberal Western society, it is arguable that the *absence* of such involvement is just as capable of being represented as a temporary fashion. Viewed from the perspective of the two-thousand year history of Christianity, it might appear that belief that the political realm lies outside the proper concern of Christian ethics is untraditional. It is clear enough that the church in medieval society involved itself in what would today be called economic matters as much as in matters of personal morality. It sought to determine rules governing usury and a just price which reflected the realisation that human economic activity, no less than sexual activity, was an area of moral concern.¹⁵ Nor could one say that exclusion of the economic and political realm from Christian ethical consideration was established at the Reformation¹⁶ A glance at the history of the churches in nineteenth-century Britain, for instance, would reveal a wide range of social and political issues on which a number of Christians felt compelled by their faith to pronounce, most notably factory reform and abolition of the slave trade. In the debates over the churches' attitudes to nineteenth-century social issues one finds a similar disagreement over the proper sphere of Christian moral concern to that which is found today. The idea that the church should be involved in politics is hardly a twentieth century heresy. If it is a heresy at all, it is a long-established one.

It would appear, moreover, that the churches in Britain are increasingly prepared to make a contribution to political and economic debate in the country, whether or not in doing so they invite criticism for going outside their remit. Reports like *The Church and the Bomb*¹⁷ and, most recently, *Faith in the City*¹⁸, the report of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Commission on Urban Priority Areas, demonstrate a commitment to tackling important social and political issues from a Christian perspective. By their radicalism, moreover, such reports illustrate just why governments like the present British one would like the churches to keep out of politics altogether. The first report favoured unilateral nuclear disarmament by Britain (this policy was not endorsed by the General Synod of the Church of England), while the second contained some very specific recommendations on practical policy, such as an increase in child benefit, an expanded public housing programme and greater resources devoted to the rate support grant¹⁹. These are both examples of the Church of England's policy, but other churches have shown a similar involvement.

On the other hand, it is clear that there are considerable doubts on the part of some Christians about the political concern of the churches. To some extent, these doubts are reflected in the present controversy over the theology of liberation, particularly within the Roman Catholic Church. However, it should not be supposed that concern about liberation theology can be identified with the opposition to Christian

involvement in politics. Certainly the Vatican document produced by the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, 'Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation', contains much that a supporter of Dr. Norman would find highly congenial. It warns against a tendency to 'sacralise politics'²⁰, for instance, and argues that social change will only be achieved by an appeal to the 'moral potential' of individuals and to 'interior conversion'²¹. However, the document nowhere endorses Norman's idea that the Gospel concerns a 'personal rather than a social morality'. Even highly conservative Catholic documents have to admit that the 'social teaching of the church' must be given its proper value²², and make reference to human rights ('the doctrine of the rights of man'), recalling a number of important encyclicals produced by the Roman Catholic Church on social issues²³. The Vatican document may contain many of the arguments used by those who would like to see the church keep out of politics altogether, but in the end it is arguing more for the avoidance of a particular form of political involvement, one which it interprets as Marxist and atheist.

Nearly a decade on from *Christianity and the World Order*, it is arguable that in one crucial respect Dr. Norman's argument has not proved very successful. It has not managed to restrict the boundaries of Christian moral concern, and limit them to a 'personal' morality. The attempt to 'privatise' religion (Norman accepts this description of his outlook²⁴) has not succeeded. Although there have been differences as to the content of a Christian social morality, the churches have shown themselves to be increasingly prepared to attempt one. Of course, as the opponents of Christian involvement in politics frequently point out, such efforts can prove divisive and demand considerable technical competence. However, most Christians recognise that exactly the same could be said of their efforts to outline a 'personal' morality. Few subjects are more technically difficult than that of in vitro fertilisation, and few more divisive than abortion. But the churches accept that this cannot prevent them speaking out on these issues. It would seem reasonable, then, to suppose that potential divisiveness or the complexity of issues can no more prevent the churches from speaking out on issues of 'social' morality.

Indeed, the very distinction between 'social' and 'personal' morality is a questionable one. An issue in the area of 'personal' morality will almost certainly have a social dimension to it. It would be difficult to discuss a subject such as abortion, contraception or pornography, all of which are accepted by Christians as being within the scope of their moral concern, without discussing the nature of society as a whole, the values which it adopts and, indeed, the commercial pressures which encourage forms of sexual exploitation. Issues which are often discussed as matters of 'personal' morality are clearly equally as much matters of 'social'

morality. The distinction between them reflects the artificiality of the boundaries which some people wish to draw around Christian moral concern.

Of course, to justify a Christian involvement in politics is not to begin to tackle the problem of what form that involvement should take. Indeed, the evidence from the United States, and the success there of broadly fundamentalist groups comprising the so-called 'Moral Majority', would suggest that some of the most effective involvement in recent years has come from the political right, which does not necessarily have to adopt the rather Olympian attitude towards politics which one associates with Dr. Norman.

Moreover, the history of Christian engagement with the social order in the past provides no particularly worthy record. The misuse of power during a period of history when Western civilisation and Christianity were closely 'linked reinforces the concern of all the proponents of Christian involvement in politics to deny that they espouse belief in a 'new Christendom', a Christian theocracy within which rules of civil government are laid down by the Church. Alfredo Fierro makes a very important distinction when he remarks (quoting Helmut Gollwitzer):

There is no Christian politics, just as there is no Christian medicine; there are simply Christians in politics.²⁵

'Political theology', Fierro argues, is not concerned with seeking a takeover of important centres of power within society by Christians. Rather, it is concerned with the participation by Christians in political activity. Their faith leads them, not into the formation of particular 'Christian' trade unions or 'Christian' political parties, but into alignment with existing political organisations—or into the formation of new ones which are not specifically understood as 'Christian'. Fierro is not arguing that Christian teaching is equally compatible with any political party. Clearly he believes that a Christian social morality is compatible with socialism rather than capitalism. His point is that the Christian does not attempt to realise that social morality in the form of a 'Christian' organisation which puts political activity under the authority of the church, but by participation in appropriate organisations which are free of ecclesiastical interference, even though they may be modified by the insights of Christian social teaching. In this way, the call for Christians to be involved in politics distances itself from the 'Christian politics' espoused by those who possess a romantic ideal of medieval Christendom.

Indeed, the objections against past involvement and some forms of present Christian involvement in politics only reinforce the necessity of developing further a contemporary Christian morality which does not arbitrarily confine itself to what is 'personal' rather than 'social'. The Christian is bound to continue the search for a realisation of Christ's

teaching in the common life of men and women.

In *Christianity and the World Order* there is a highly revealing phrase used by Dr. Norman. He speaks of 'Christ's own sense of the worthlessness of human values'²⁶. Most Christians would probably argue quite the opposite, namely, that God's condescension to the world in the Incarnation of His Son represented a profound commitment to human values. Yet this is not to deny that those values have often been betrayed in the forms of social and political organisation which human beings have constructed. The reproach in the title of Reinhold Niebuhr's book, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, remains appropriate. The failure to realise a commitment to the value and dignity of human beings in their political life should encourage Christians to greater involvement in politics, not less. The truth is not that Christ's teaching was about individuals and not society, but that forms of society are constantly frustrating the realisation of Christ's teaching by the effect which they are having upon individuals.

Our conclusion must be that Edward Norman's desire to restrict the sphere of Christian morality to what is 'personal', rather than social, represents a false distinction, one without justification either in Christian practice or theology. But Norman's vision of the Christian Church is revealingly illuminated, we have argued, in the way that he interprets the relations of church and state in the Soviet Union. It may be communist rather than capitalist politics from which Christians are excluded in the USSR, but it is still politics. Although the churches fare differently in different communist countries, it is virtually universal that they are not able to bring their own teaching to bear upon the structures of society. Christians in Cuba, for instance, have rights of assembly, charitable work, religious education and publication which would not be tolerated in the Soviet Union, and there is a recognition of the role which some Christians played in the overthrow of the Batista regime which one would not find told in Soviet histories of the Russian revolution. But there is little evidence of a Christian-Marxist dialogue, such as that which began in different parts of Europe in the 1960's, and which might admit of a real Christian participation in politics²⁷. The same, as recent events in Poland have showed, appears to be the case in Eastern Europe.

One clear exception, however, appears to be the Sandinista regime in Nicaragua, where Christians are not only allowed to belong to the ruling party but participate in the government. Arguably this country provides a particular challenge and example to other nations. It challenges communist countries with the notion of a Christian form of communism, and capitalist countries with the notion of a communist form of Christianity. It shows the two most powerful systems of thought in the world discovering some common ideals and a common analysis of society. It is hardly surprising that such an irresistible combination,

however loose, gives Nicaragua a significance disproportionate to its size, and invites persecution from outside. To many Christians, however, it is a source of hope in their search for the realisation of a society which supports rather than frustrates human dignity.

- 1 The lectures, given on BBC Radio 4 in 1978, were published by OUP in 1979.
- 2 Ibid., p. 80.
- 3 Ibid., p. 30.
- 4 Ibid., pp. 31—2.
- 5 See the collection of essays *Christian Faith and Political Hopes: A Reply to E.R. Norman*, Epworth Press, 1979.
- 6 Norman, op. cit., pp. 29 — 43.
- 7 Ibid., p. 36.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 See e.g. *May One Believe — in Russia?* ed. Michael Bourdeaux and Michael Rowe, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1980, which examines evidence for violations of religious liberty in the Soviet Union, and which contains a warning that seems particularly apposite in the light of Norman's comments:
'There is a danger, however, that the splendour of a public display of ritual ... may blind world opinion to the realities behind this appearance.' (p. 18).
- 10 Norman, op. cit., p. 37.
- 11 Ibid., p. 37.
- 12 Ibid., p. 34.
- 13 Ibid., p. 35.
- 14 See his *Discretion and Valour: Religious Conditions in Russia and Eastern Europe*, London 1974.
- 15 See the classic work by R.H. Tawney, *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism*, London 1926. 'There is no place in medieval economic theory', he writes, 'for economic activity which is not related to a moral end' (Pelican ed., p. 44), and compares economic motives with other 'strong passions' which society must carefully control.
- 16 Tawney himself challenges this thesis, pointing to the rigour with which the Protestant Reformers themselves denounce usury. The exclusion of Christian ethics from the economic realm was a slower, subtler and never completely successful process.
- 17 Hodder and Stoughton, 1982.
- 18 Church House Publishing, 1985.
- 19 Ibid., pp 364—366.
- 20 Catholic Truth Society, 1984. Reference to sacralizing politics is on page 34 (XI:17).
- 21 Ibid., p. 31 (XI:8).
- 22 Ibid., p. 33 (XI:12).
- 23 Ibid., p. 13 (V:4). To see that the document is not opposed to the idea of a political dimension to the Gospel, unlike Edward Norman, see the remark on page 27 (X:5):
'The mistake here is not in bringing attention to a political dimension of the readings of Scripture, but in making of this one dimension the principal or exclusive component'.
- 24 Norman, op. cit., p. 80.
- 25 Alfredo Fierro, *The Militant Gospel*, SCM 1977, p. 72. Chapter 2 of the book, 'The Rejection of Christendom', is important for an understanding of political theology.
- 26 Norman, op. cit., p. 82.
- 27 On Christians in Cuba, see *Castro's Cuba in the 1970's*, ed. Lester A. Sobel, Facts on File, New York, 1978 esp. pp. 220—227 on the church in Cuba.