

Two Christianities

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The opening address at the conference held in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in October 1988 based on the New Blackfriars special issue of the preceding February, 'The Church's Option for the Poor in Britain'.

It sometimes seems as though everyone loves a Christian, and everyone wants more of them. From a dangerous, persecuted sect of the first century, whose strange practices of consuming their god and indulging in a communal agape produced the sort of ignorant criticism in the Roman Empire that Moslems and Hindus receive in much of the West today, Christianity has become most popular religion, chief determinant of public morals and compulsory faith of any budding British monarch. It is now commonplace to challenge the progress of the Christian faith from a subversive branch of Judaism to a world religion. The highpoint of that progress, the success of Christianity in becoming official faith of the Roman Empire, looks very different today. Did Constantine convert to Christianity, or did Christianity convert to Constantine? The degree of self-criticism implied in that question represents a profound challenge to the churches.

I would like to suggest that there are two Christianities. The first is the faith that this government, in the form of the Bishop of London, the Prime Minister and Baroness Cox, is anxious to put onto every school curriculum. This Christianity encourages what seems to have become a vogue phrase in politics today, 'good citizenship'. It supports pride in one's national identity, respect for the institutions of state, and a type of concern for others harnessed to the sort of individual conscientiousness that volunteers for school governorships and neighbourhood watch schemes. It is the Christianity that has fully absorbed the recommendation of Romans 13—'Every person must submit to the supreme authorities. There is no authority but by act of God, and the existing authorities are instituted by him; consequently anyone who rebels against authority is resisting a divine institution, and those who so resist have themselves to thank for the punishment they will receive.' This Christianity could as easily be the faith of the British as of the Roman Empire. It is politically safe and can even be made sociologically trendy. After all, the argument that every successfully integrated state

with a concerned and responsible citizenry needs a belief in God certainly puts religion on the map in any analysis of the way in which society works.

The other Christianity is very different. It is not the religious cement ensuring that the building doesn't collapse. It is a challenge to the state, not its moral guardian. It is the Christianity not of Romans 13 but of Revelation 13. It reflects the atmosphere of faith a decade or more after Romans was written, at a time when even Tacitus, who held Christians beneath contempt, found the excesses of Nero in using them as human torches or dressing them in animal skins for wild animals to tear apart objectionable. In the Book of Revelation, Nero is the Beast and Rome the Great Harlot. The Roman authorities are not to be respected but cast down into the lake of fire, to meet their demonic fate. They share the same fate as those devils in Mark 5 who fall into the sea and who spring from the man whose name, significantly enough, was Legion, with all its connotations of Roman imperial rule. This Christianity stands firmly in the Jewish prophetic tradition. It does not tell the authorities that they are put into power by God, but challenges them with God's power. It is a Christianity that has had difficulty preserving itself. It has had to survive to some extent by sheltering within the other Christianity as a subversive memory. It has existed in texts to some extent at the margins of mainstream Christian exegesis. Its advocates come from groups on the margins of the Christian tradition—Montanism, Anabaptism, Quakerism—or from Anglicans and Catholics who to some extent dissent from their own traditions. Its subversive memory, even when located with texts and churches which would dearly like to remove it, has been strengthened by its understanding of Christ. One who was the victim of the cruellest punishment the state could devise cannot easily be transformed into one whose religious principles would uphold and strengthen the state. The last word on the relationship of religion and politics cannot easily be granted to Paul, seeing that he reminds his hearers that government, though a terror to crime, has no terrors for good behaviour, only twenty years after what is arguably the same government has tortured the founder of Paul's faith to death.

The second Christianity is not a terror to crime but to bad government. It is associated today with the theology of liberation, but the theology of liberation *brought to Britain*. The challenge to the churches here is not to approve of the theology of liberation for Nicaragua, Brazil, El Salvador and other what are called poor or third-world countries, but to approve of it for Britain. In the section of *Faith in the City* entitled 'Theological Priorities', we find it remarked that 'It is often said, and doubtless rightly, that conditions in Western Europe are not such that this kind of political liberation could ever be a comparable theological priority. Liberation theology is a development that has grown out of political and economic conditions radically different from our

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own'. This will not do. The churches cannot any longer breathe a sigh of relief with their 'liberation theologians begin at Calais' attitude. They will have to recognise that the plague has spread to their own shores.

Of course, there are perfectly legitimate reasons why the theology of liberation must, as David Jenkins has said, take different forms in different countries. The British poor are not in the same situation as the Brazilian poor. But it should not be forgotten that the reason for a British liberation theology does not lie only in the fact that there is a British poor, or what Georges Casalis calls a fourth world in the West of migrant workers, ethnic minorities and other marginalised groups. It lies also in the fact that the rich nations exist in common with the poor ones on a single planet ruled by global forces of capital. A first-world theology of liberation does not need to look for patterns of oppression in rich countries which somehow mirror patterns of oppression in the third world. The first world is already intimately involved in the patterns of oppression in the third world. The first world cannot escape the theology of liberation, not only because of the injustice which exists within its own borders, but also because of the injustice which exists globally. This is surely the justification for Tissa Balasuriya's search for what he calls a 'planetary theology'.

The second Christianity which I have referred to differs from the first in providing a challenge to the state rather than underpinning it. In making such a challenge, it must talk in terms of sinful structures and in terms of shortcomings of a global economic system. Such language is not in itself particularly revolutionary. John Paul II talks of sinful structures in his latest encyclical, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, published in honour of the twentieth anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*. Language which attacks a corrupt system is established in Christian tradition, and can be found in the New Testament itself in the vocabulary of oppressive 'principalities' and 'powers'.

Even so, it is not well established in the language of the British churches. Their approach has been well described by Charles Elliott in his book *Comfortable Compassion?*, a devastating critique of the Christian response in this country to world poverty.

Elliott accepts that there is a massive resource of 'natural pity' in this country, moved by pictures of poverty and starvation in the third world. But he asks how this natural pity can be converted into effective commitment. How does one cope with organisations like Band Aid when it is recognised that the problem is not to give more to the third world but to take less from it? In 1984 third-world countries paid about five thousand million pounds in debt repayments. What significance does a few millions in aid have beside that? The first world trumpets its giving but keeps silent about its taking.

The implication seems to be that the churches simply encourage individual giving. If they are to be effective, they must challenge the

prevailing patterns of international trade which make such giving ineffective, and even allow natural pity to be falsely mollified by the illusion that it has been translated into effective assistance. Church development agencies in the third world and their sponsors in the first may have to swallow their embarrassment and talk about the iniquities of an international economic system. The language of principalities and powers cannot be excluded any more.

But if it is possible to question the effectiveness of international aid when it is directed through the existing economic system, three terms of Conservative government are producing a similarly ineffective form of aid to the poor in Britain.

A number of analyses have been offered of that complex and perhaps over-personalised phenomenon called 'Thatcherism'. Personally I have been very impressed by Nicholas Boyle's analysis in the July/August issue of *New Blackfriars*. Boyle describes Thatcherism as a process by which all the intermediate institutions between central government and the individual citizen, institutions which frustrate the process whereby British society is integrated into global market, are cleared away. The institutions which have been weakened during the 1980's—trade unions, local authorities, even universities and the professions—are those which hold back that integration. A trade union which frustrates a multinational company like Ford, and forces it to go elsewhere by refusing single-union agreements, is not acclaimed for its stand on workers' rights in Britain. It is attacked for a lack of realism in turning down the conditions set by a foreign company for British workers to adhere to. Local authorities find themselves losing the power to put brakes upon the unfettered operation of international capital, for instance by investigating the policies of firms they might do business with on the employment of women or investment in South Africa. For all the nationalist rhetoric of the Conservative party, no other government, argues Boyle, has opened British culture to the swamping influence of an international economic order. Tyneside under Thatcherism hopes for jobs in the way a third-world country does, by offering cheap labour to a foreign multinational, in this case Nissan. Its local brewery, not admittedly a very attractive organisation, looks like being bought out by an Australian multinational which can ensure the final destruction of even partially real ale by lager, the beer that under capitalism can reach any part it likes. The market will soon ensure that first local and then national television conforms to the standards of international tackiness. The very government which on the one hand exploits prejudice against creative interaction with other cultures, for instance in its resistance to the formation of a multi-racial society, on the other hand speeds forward the submergence of Britain in the dull uniformity of international capitalism. Of course, it is communism that is supposed to be all grey conformity, slogans, restrictions on freedom and suppression of free

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thought. In reality, capitalism can do such things much more entertainingly. It's enough to make you wish that Hadrian's wall could be as effective as the one in Berlin.

For a real indication of the way things are going, you have to listen to the most effective politician of our day, Mrs Thatcher herself. No need to worry about strictures on bishops meddling in politics from her. She does far more of her own meddling in religion. Unlike the local authorities or the BBC, the churches cannot be abolished. A Prime Minister who wishes to bring them into line must go to them in all humility and speak to them of her faith.

And what will she do? She will commend a form of Christianity that is compatible with the removal of all barriers to capitalism in this country, ensuring the assimilation of Britain to what any liberation theologian, from any country, would regard as an international system of injustice. That form of Christianity is one which approaches national poverty in a way that precisely mirrors the approach to international poverty, namely one of individual giving to relieve the suffering generated by a collective system. Charity, after all, begins at home.

In her speech to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in May, the Prime Minister did not deny that social reform is inseparable from spiritual revolution. But the question is, what sort of social reform? The social reform Mrs Thatcher talked of comes not, she says, from any secular legislation passed by Parliament, but from being a Christian. A wedge is driven between secular legislation and Christian belief. Apparently, Christians are to understand the obligations of their faith in terms of helping others at a personal level, but never in terms of seeking social change that might require secular legislation in order to make it effective. It's a good job she wasn't around at the time of the factory acts or the abolition of slavery.

What is being attempted in the speech is important. Increasingly we see the ideology of individual charity, already established in the popular mind as a way of helping the poor abroad, being employed as an approach to poverty in Britain. As the economy of Britain is increasingly subordinated to the global market, so the situation of the rich and poor in Britain increasingly mirrors that of rich and poor internationally. In 1988 the dichotomy became more clearly recognised than ever in this country, through a budget marked by tax cuts for the rich and benefit cuts for the poor.

Just as the poor of the third world cannot be helped effectively by acts of individual charity, or even by grander enterprises like Band Aid, so in Britain individual charity cannot plug all the gaps in social provision. You cannot run a health service on donations from the rich.

The poor of Britain are increasingly seen as a problem minority which the government claims to be beyond its powers of assistance. Appeals have to be made to individuals, particularly those individuals

made richer in the last few years, to reach into their pockets on behalf of the poor. In the meantime the systems of social provision which previously operated to provide a public service for all citizens—the health service, education, housing, benefits—are dismantled or allowed to wither away. The national poor, like the international poor, become a helpless and powerless band dependent on sympathetic television pictures for occasional hand-outs. And I can't see them appearing all that often on Sky Network.

I believe that the most important challenge to the churches today in this context is a straightforward one. It is to accept that the economic and political structures of their communities cannot be left out of consideration. The language of 'sinful structures' and 'option for the poor' is there in the latest papal encyclical. All that is needed is for Basil Hume to heed the words of that well-known liberation theologian, John Paul II, and inform Mrs Thatcher that she cannot talk about the duties of the Christian without challenging the sinful structure of British society.

Not long ago I read the Kairos document, subtitled *Challenge to the Church*, produced by a group of South African Christians working in the townships around Soweto in 1985. The document has been highly influential both inside and outside South Africa. In the context of apartheid, it comments that 'the problem that we are dealing with in South Africa is not merely a problem of personal guilt, it is a problem of structural injustice'. It condemns what it calls 'church theology' for its lack of social analysis. It calls for a 'prophetic theology' which does not shirk such analysis, analysis which it identifies with what Jesus calls 'reading the signs of the times'. One thing that cannot be ignored by those who read it is the question of how far this manifesto of resistance to South African oppression ought to strike chords elsewhere in the world.

Should the churches, for instance, talk of capitalism as an evil system in the way that they talk of apartheid as an evil system? Are they *both* sinful structures? Can a British prophetic theology fail to challenge the existing social and political order, which in the last ten years has become the unbridled capitalism of the 80's as opposed to the bridled capitalism of the 70's?

The churches prefer to talk in terms of individual renewal rather than social criticism. They often lack the imagination and the practice of talking in terms of the morality of public provision. They may attack a particular piece of legislation, or carp at the size of a particular benefit cut, but they offer no real social analysis. The absorption of Britain into an international system guaranteed to make the British poor part of a world-wide body of victims appears to go unchallenged.

In the memory of the Christian communities who formed the texts of the New Testament was the recognition of someone whose public

career survived barely three years before he suffered a violent death at the hands of the state.

It was not felt peculiar by those communities to put words into his mouth like 'As for the man who is a cause of stumbling to one of these little ones who have faith, it is better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone round his neck'. It is noteworthy that the peasants of the Nicaraguan town of Solentiname read the references to children in the New Testament as references to the poor, since both find themselves in a situation of helpless dependence, and yet both aspire to winning independence in the future.

The memory of one who came not to bring peace but a sword, who talked of offending limbs being cut off if they frustrated obedience to God's will, hardly accords with the recollection of Jesus in the comfortable situation of the contemporary churches in Britain today. What would it mean for us as Christians in the first world to share the insults, mockery, persecution and uneasy insecurity to which he clearly challenged his disciples in his own time? What would it mean to understand the anger of Jesus, the uncompromising commitment which certainly always meant that he loved his enemies but also meant never denying that the Christian has to have enemies to love?

The second Christianity does not believe in providing the cement to hold society together. It does not accept that an ideology of reconciliation can be employed to unite the oppressor and the oppressed on any other terms than the abolition of those structures that facilitate oppression. It is a Christianity that accepts conflict, that recognises its detachment from the status quo, that has to live with a constant threat to its own identity so that it exists as a subversive memory, a termite in the woodwork of official Christianity, trying to intrude its ideas and its texts wherever it can, glad to offer an occasional unmasking of reality when it can insist that the present political order is diabolical. It does not compromise with that order; it claims that it is under judgment. Its attack can sometimes appear so extreme that to some it seems as though it is rejecting this world altogether. But it is not so. It is the form of this world, not the world itself, that it claims is passing away.

The Kairos document talks of a 'church theology' that fails to analyse the signs of the times, but instead relies on a few stock ideas derived from Christian tradition and then applies them to our situation. A favourite word is 'reconciliation'. Church theology talks attractively of the need for all South Africans to come together, for white and black to meet and resolve their differences. It treats the problem as if it were analogous to two angry and recalcitrant neighbours who refused to sort out their differences over a garden fence. What such a view fails to do, the document goes on, is to see that there is a structural dimension to the conflict, that is to say it is a conflict between rich and poor, armed and unarmed, oppressor and oppressed. In such circumstances, no

reconciliation is possible without justice.

In Britain too, the churches need to recognise the structural dimension to the conflict between rich and poor. They cannot allow their justified longing for reconciliation in a society increasingly full of crime, alienation, depression and violence to lead them to short circuit what is the condition of reconciliation, the abolition of an evil social system. This is the temptation which in her diabolical way Thatcher tempts them towards. Don't talk of the system, don't think in terms of secular legislation, concentrate on your neighbour, watch the house next door to keep the burglars away, give some of your money to the local hospital's charity appeal, don't criticise the present order but on the contrary make it work better. Such an appeal strikes chords in much of contemporary Christianity—the belief in Christian charity and benevolence towards the poor, the desire of an established church to provide a moral and spiritual dimension to the state, belief among nonconformist groups in individual effort conducted within a social vacuum. The question is, can it be effectively challenged? Can the idolatrous pretensions of the present order be seen through in the way that the pretensions of Rome were unmasked in the Book of Revelation? Or will we try to sew a bit of unshrunk cloth onto the old coat of capitalism?

To end on a note of wild fantasy. The fantasy begins when I see the Labour conference desperately filling old wineskins with its new wine by promising to manage the market economy better than the Tories. It continues when I see the communists tripping through the acid house, discovering post-Fordist variety at the moment of capitalism's greatest blandness. It ends when I read Tony Benn, at the end of a political career that has failed to persuade Labour to distance itself from the present order, reaching in the ninth annual Tawney lecture for the language of Christian socialism in order to give expression to the political commitment for which he can find at present no adequate language elsewhere. Nowhere else could he find a broad structural analysis capable of seeing a system as a whole and perceiving its demonic character. It makes me feel that even in a society which is more entitled than most to call itself secular, the subversive memory of the second Christianity provides one of the few resources through which to put what is happening in our society in perspective and to oppose it. The challenge to the churches is in part, therefore, to recognise the crucial significance of the traditions which they already possess, and through such recognition to employ them effectively in reading the signs of the times.