

revelation' (page 111). There have to be 'points of contact', and they are not 'arbitrary'. On the contrary, the contexts in which we need to look for hints in exploring the meaning of specifically Christian beliefs and practices would include: 'conscience, nature, birth, death, relations between men and women' (page 112). Frei's typology seems pervaded by the idea that it is with some metaphysical system that theologians first have to come to terms, whether by submission, rejection or critical accommodation. But it is surely not with any world-view or conceptual system that Christian theology primarily interacts but with *life*.

## Christianity and the Welfare State

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This article looks at a fundamental area of social and political concern in Britain today, that is to say the Welfare State. It sets out initially to elicit some of the different arguments about this 'institution', contrasting what is necessarily now, after several years of one political party holding power, to be seen as 'the Government's view', with alternative opinions. It then seeks to analyse these contrasting views in terms of a dialectic between individual and state responsibility, which can be analysed in theological terms. It argues that this dialectic, which in the past has appeared to be threatened by a denial of individual responsibility, is nowadays threatened by a denial of state responsibility. It does not, therefore, seek to go into detail about the various aspects of the Welfare State, analysing what they have achieved or where their inadequacies lie. Rather it concentrates more generally upon the theoretical basis of the system, from the point of view of both its supporters and its detractors.

It is worthwhile initially to consider the term 'Welfare State' itself. It appears according to most polls to be very popular, but what is it? It is noteworthy that people refer most commonly to a welfare 'state' rather

than 'system', as if they were thinking less in terms of a particular set of institutions than in terms of a particular idea of society as a whole, namely that it be organised for the welfare or benefit of its citizens. Hardly a contentious notion, but what is significant about the term is its all-embracing character. It recognises that once a society is committed to universal public education, universal health care and the universal provision of housing, invalidity benefit and a minimum standard of living for those who cannot find employment, then it becomes a particular kind of society. These things are not unrelated; they reflect a concept of what sort of state we choose to live in. They place the welfare of individuals firmly in the context of the state, a collective entity. The happiness of individual men and women is declared inseparable from a particular set of social and political arrangements.

In the broadest sense, it is this inseparability which came to be challenged in recent years in Britain. The challenge comes in two forms, pragmatic and principled. Each will be considered in turn.

The pragmatic challenge argues that the Welfare State, however desirable in principle, cannot be afforded in practice. This argument has in fact been around for decades, but it receives a sharper focus in these days of recession. Take the Health Service, for instance. One hears every day about spiralling costs of health care, whether because of the increasing number of people over 65 or the technical complexities of modern medicine. Sustaining the service 'at present levels' means in reality spending considerably more on it. Similar arguments are used in other areas of the Welfare State. We hear, for instance, that schools built during a period of expansion during the sixties, and expected to last a generation, are reaching the end of their shelf-life, creating an impossible level of demand for school repairs. It is a familiar lament that high levels of unemployment create high levels of unemployment benefit. More recently a link has been drawn between the growth in the number of single parents and the costs of welfare benefits. Each new argument, produced at a time when people are acutely conscious of a general economic recession, is designed to point out that what has traditionally been seen as the range of provision offered by a Welfare State cannot be afforded. By such arguments we are invited to see in the Welfare State a monster growing out of control, daily consuming more and more of the national purse at a time of shrinking resources.

But the 'pragmatic' challenge is not the only one. More important is the 'principled' attack. Indeed opponents of the government would argue that the former is to some extent designed to soften us up for the latter. We are encouraged first of all to see the Welfare State as an intolerable burden. We wonder how on earth we are to pay for it. The

dilemma is intolerable — but then at this point comes our apparent salvation. What we cannot afford as a nation, we apparently do not need as a nation - indeed we even suffer as a nation from having it.

For to the material burden of the Welfare State is added by the 'principled' challenge a supposedly spiritual one. In essence this challenge argues that the Welfare State encourages 'dependency', replacing the Christian spirit of charity with a helpless and amoral reliance upon 'the state' to give assistance to the poor. Rather than talking of the state in positive terms, as the 'welfare' state, this view presents it in negative terms as a burden, something that crushes individual enterprise not only in an economic but also in a social and spiritual sense.

It is in this context that critics of the government would place the recent debate about single parents and welfare benefits. On the face of it, this was a very dangerous line for the government to take, not least because one or two of its own leading lights appeared to have made a personal contribution to the number of single parents! The point of the government's argument, however, is that it seeks to establish the idea that the Welfare State is a threat to the social and spiritual health of the nation. By providing for those who are badly off, the Welfare State encourages them to be so. A grant for single parents encourages marriages to break up (though once again the government's critics would say that it is hard to imagine many volunteering for the distress of broken relationships and the burden of single parenthood for a relatively slight financial 'reward'). In similar ways we have heard about how unemployment benefit 'encourages' unemployment, and, the more caustic critics of the present regime might suggest, it may not be long before someone manages to suggest that the existence of hospitals encourages illness. There is a very clear reversal of the usual relation of cause and effect here. Rather than the remedy — or at least the amelioration - curing or relieving the disease, the existence of the remedy is said to encourage the disease. The more benefits there are, the more people will 'want to' benefit, and the less they will strive to be healthy, independent individuals. In effect, we shall produce the 'nanny' state.

The 'principled' challenge to the Welfare State is crucial because its attackers must occupy not only the position of financial responsibility but also the moral high ground. It must be shown that those who fought for the establishment and extension of the Welfare State were not simply benefiting from the opportunities afforded by a period of relative economic prosperity. They were setting up something up that would undermine not only the wealth but also the soul of the nation. It is not

only a necessity, it is the duty of Christians to dismantle those barriers to personal goodness and individual piety that go by the name of 'social welfare payments'. It is clear that a number of government ministers, such as Michael Portillo, feel this very strongly, and that they couch their arguments against the Welfare State in strongly moral rather than economic terms. Indeed they make a strong appeal to what they see as Christian principles. Their commitment to the 'Back to Basics' campaign reflect a belief that 'family' and 'moral' values can only be supported by removing the restraining hand of the Welfare State from individual charity and responsibility.

When we come to look at criticisms of this negative approach to the Welfare State, the crucial thing is to see that such criticisms bring a dialectic of individual responsibility and social influence into play. Take the controversial matter of single parents. Critics of the government would say that when unemployment is high more marriages break up — from greater poverty, from the stigma of unemployment, and from loss of the 'safety valve' provided through a work environment to add to the home environment. They would argue that unemployment creates illness — through increasing stress and recourse to drugs, particularly the relatively cheap and legal ones, tobacco and alcohol. They would also claim that high unemployment increases crime levels. In other words, they would say that it is the social environment of worklessness, rather than the welfare system seeking to relieve its worst effects, that creates a 'dependency culture'. They would point out that these are all influences of society upon the individual, and that these are precisely the influences which those who attack the Welfare State cannot accept. For its attackers, everything must be seen exclusively in terms of individual rather than social influences.

The defenders of the Welfare State claim that they do not deny the dialectic of individual and state responsibility. They do not deny that people should make individual decisions not to smoke, not to commit crimes or to preserve as far as possible their marriages. Their point is that it is the attack on the Welfare State, not its defence, which loses this dialectic. The attack is committed to an exclusively individual responsibility, and it paints its opponents as if they believed in an exclusively state responsibility. Defenders of the Welfare State claim that this is in effect capitalism feeding off the carcass of communism in order to justify pure individualism as the only alternative to the supposed pure statism of its opponents. But statist philosophies, to the extent that they ever existed in a pure form, are dead. A dialectical relationship between the individual and the state is the only feasible position.

It does indeed appear that some of the statements made by government ministers represent a significant loss of this dialectical balance. At times the challenges to the Welfare State take on an almost anarchistic form, so hard do its opponents try to shelter the individual from undesirable social influences. In a recent speech the government minister Michael Portillo commented that:

“It’s hard to be responsible within our families if we are told that the state should educate our children, teach them right and wrong and for that matter care for our elderly relatives”

One wonders what his colleagues in education made of the first part of this remark. It is, of course, a perfectly logical expression of his philosophy that children should not go to school but be educated in the home, just as elderly relatives should be looked after there and not shunted off to ‘state institutions’. But is such a position remotely acceptable? It is certainly odd, for instance, that a government that seems determined to reduce levels of truancy in practice should apparently be encouraging it as a way of removing the burdensome power of the state on the individual! But it could be argued that Portillo represents the logical conclusion of the government’s position, however much it might feel obliged in practice to admit some kind of necessary social provision in areas like education and health.

The interesting development in British politics in the 1990s appears to be a slow but sure reversal of public perceptions. In the 1980s, as statist governments fell all over Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union, the balance between social provision and individual responsibility was seen to lie with the right-wing governments which dominated Western Europe. In the 1990s that view is changing. The Right is sounding much more as if it would like to break free of that balance in terms of a pure individualism, whilst the left is making sure, for instance, that when it talks about unemployment influencing crime levels it doesn’t fail to demand that individuals do not choose the path of crime and are punished if they do.

If this development is indeed to be observed in the 1990s, then the position of Christians trying to assess the relationship of this secular debate to the social doctrines of their faith is focussed in a different way in the new decade. Liberation Theology has been reminded that the dialectic of individual responsibility and social provision cannot forget the first part of this dialectical relationship. The Kingdom doesn’t come on earth just because the state is providing literacy campaigns, health clinics and price controls. The position now appears to be that the

dialectic needs equally to be reaffirmed against a rightwing attempt to deny the efficacy of social provision.

If the dialectical position is correct, then moral obligation must be understood in terms not only of private giving but also of public service. When the disadvantaged child is assisted by state education, the sick are given back their health by nurses and doctors, or the elderly relative cared for by his or her relatives taken into care, these are activities which do the very opposite of denying individuality. They encourage and release it.

Private giving, of course, can be expressed in terms of donations to charity or to individuals; public service cannot. It can only be organised through a system of taxation to release funds for public spending. We cannot go round with a red nose rattling a tin every time someone needs an operation. Taxes are a means by which fifty million people in a sophisticated, twentieth century culture express their commitment to a Welfare State. If there is a proper dialectic between individual and state responsibility, then there must be a dialectic between the income of both which means that there must be a system of taxation. That wealth passes from the individual to the state - and back again - is a natural reflection of this relationship between the individual and the state; it does not represent the state 'stealing' our money, but a free choice to use 'our' money in order to set up state institutions which work for our benefit.

The 'Welfare State' is easily presented as a dull if worthy concept reflecting something we 'should help if we can'. It is much more than that; it is a battleground for future political debate - debate in part released by the disappearance of examples of rigid state control East of the Iron Curtain. The Welfare State is what it says it is - a concept of the state, the state as beneficial to individuals, the state as a means by which individual talent is released and encouraged to grow. It is for this reason - not because it is expensive or wasteful - that it is dangerous to Britain's present government.

There are Christians who stand on the side of pure individualism. They see the gospels much as an address to individuals by a Messiah who makes it crystal clear that everything's in their hands. Either they personally accept the gospel or they don't. If they are like Zacchaeus, and surrender half their goods to charity, there is much rejoicing in heaven. But if charity is rendered unnecessary by the state, then the moral commitment of a Zacchaeus becomes impossible. What he was meant to learn to learn for himself is imposed on him from above; the lessons of life - be they generosity, responsibility or concern for others - can no longer be acquired.

This approach cannot be laughed off. If nothing else, a great deal of

the dramatic power of the New Testament lies in the powerful sense of individual moral choice and its supreme significance for life or death. Jesus is constantly confronting individuals with a choice, and asking for their personal response. It is very easy to travel from this to the Tory government's emphasis upon individuals making clear moral decisions to help the poor, and to see a perfect harmony between the two.

But the point about the view is its partiality - a partiality which increasingly looks quaint, as if it has been lifted from one of the more unfortunate film portraits of the life of Christ. It is very clear that the New Testament is increasingly concentrated upon the social and even political side of the dialectic - the ingrained hypocrisy of the Pharisaic system, the financial system represented by the money-changers in the Temple, the political system which, through a difficult relationship between Roman overlordship and partial Jewish autonomy, leads to the death of Christ, and the repressive reality of the Empire itself, within which the early Christians sought to spread their faith. These are all systems, and they are systems whose influence on the individuals who are at the same time challenged to take responsibility in altering them is undeniable.

Twenty years ago Christians and Communists were engaged in energetic debate about social control and individual freedom. In those twenty years, more has changed than anyone is capable of comprehending, let alone coping with. Yet in some ways the debate remains the same. Christians still struggle to maintain a dialectic, and their opponents still appear to be edging towards an over-simplistic view. But the simplicities have changed; now all-powerful states that create heaven on earth for their inhabitants have been replaced by benevolent giants who freely walk the earth dispensing charity to their neighbours and revelling in the spiritual power of freedom. The notion of a 'Welfare State', quietly intruding itself upon the scene in terms of a few basic items of social provision that should be uncontroversial, has in fact the opportunity to be much more than that - to restore the role of the state in the dialectic of individual and corporate responsibility. The 1990s may yet see the economic anarchy of capitalism challenged as strongly as the 1980s saw the authoritarianism of communism challenged. It is arguable that Christian social teaching should make sure that it can be as well-placed to embrace the later challenge as it was to take up the former.