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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 21

NOT JUST FOR THE POOR

Christian Perspectives on the Welfare State (GS 756, Church House Publishing, 1986, 146 pp. £4.95)

This is the Board of Social Responsibility's first contribution to the current public debate about the role of the state in the provision of social welfare.

Not Just For The Poor sets itself four general aims: to clarify what is meant by 'the welfare state'; to articulate those issues which are crucial in the current debate about the future of welfare services; to propose a relevant set of Christian principles; and to make some general judgements about policy in accordance with them.

CHAPTER ONE introduces us to the personal meaning of the welfare state with accounts of five different personal experiences of it. Together these bring home the fact that the welfare state is not only a matter of importance to the destitute; but that, sooner or later, each of us is likely to find ourselves in need of the assistance of some of its various services. CHAPTER FOUR continues to unravel the meaning of the welfare state with a socio-economic account of its achievements and shortcomings (in the provision of social security, health, housing, personal social services and education) and of its relations with the private and voluntary sectors of welfare provision. This account is presented against the background of recent social trends (in the age-group and racial composition of the population, in marriage and patterns of family life, in employment & unemployment, in poverty and in regional disparities) which are described in CHAPTER THREE.

CHAPTER FIVE introduces us to the crucial issues in the current debate with an analysis of four major critiques of the welfare state as it stands (Feminist, New Right, Marxist, Participationist). CHAPTER SIX concentrates on the issues of what we spend on the public provision of welfare services, how we pay for them and to whose advantage.

Although anticipated in CHAPTER ONE (1. 20-22), Christian theological-ethical principles relevant to the issues at hand wait for full exposition until CHAPTER TWO. They are reiterated in CHAPTER SEVEN (7. 25-28), just before the basic options are presented and deliberated upon.

To its credit, the theological component of Not Just for the Poor is much more substantial, systematic and determinative than that of Faith in the City. It is also more directly attentive to the witness of Scripture. From a (not inappropriately) cursory survey of the Old and New Testaments, a number of social ethical principles are elicited: that human beings have been created essentially social, and that proper individuality, independence, liberty and responsibility emerges only in a context of interdependence, only in the process of giving and receiving (2.13); that human beings share a common creaturely and sinful nature, which entails that we may not treat some as of more value than others (2.8); that community does not entail homogeneity and uniformity, but requires complementary diversity (Gen. 1:27; I Cor. 12), (2.9);

that active compassion for the poor and the vulnerable is a moral duty (2. 23-31); that, in a fallen world where sin has assumed corporate and structural form and where one cannot rely on natural altruism to move rich individuals to care adequately for the poor, such compassion must seek to express itself in a striving for public justice (2. 34, 35); that such striving may take organised (e.g. Paul's 'collection' in II Cor. 8,9) and legal (e.g. the law of Jubilee in Lev. 25:8ff) form (2. 23, 30); and that it is as likely to lead to conflict with the Powers That Be as to steady (liberal) progress (2. 44).

Not only are these principles constructed in a manner faithful to the Bible, but they do actually proceed to shape, through more specific rules, the particular political judgements at which Not Just for the Poor arrives. For example, it asserts, first, that a person may not be used as a means to a political end, even if that end is an ideal social state of affairs (e.g. socialism); and that, therefore, the Marxist tendency to dismiss welfare services which currently aid poor persons as mere distractions from the genuine political business of changing the capitalist system, is unacceptable (5. 47). Second, that the New Right's faith in the altruism of the rich to provide adequate welfare for the poor is simply misplaced (5. 37, 7. 33). Third, that a welfare system that fosters a class of dependents who are treated as second-class citizens and are not able to contribute fully to public life is deficient; and therefore that state provision of a minimal 'safety-net' is inadequate, since "services which are directed solely to the poor are almost invariably poor services" (7. 36). Fourth, that a welfare system which does not enable subordinate bodies (e.g. family, private and voluntary organisations) to assume such responsibility as is within their competence is deficient; and therefore that provision of welfare services exclusively by the state is unacceptable (7. 43). Fifth, that a welfare system in which the state is either the major funder or the major provider —ie. a mixed welfare economy— is best (7. 48, 49).

In its analysis of the welfare state and of the current debate Not Just for the Poor is judicious. It is careful, for example, to laud the achievements of the welfare state since 1945 as well as to list its failings. Also, while affirming the need for a certain devolution of power from professionals to users, it acknowledges that the large-scale organisation of welfare services is quite necessary, that small can easily be as stifling or as helpless as it can be beautiful, and that participation often militates against efficiency (5. 57; 7. 9,10; 7.19). Further, it insists that neither current public welfare institutions nor the free market should be regarded as sacred cows (7.29).

Further still, the Report modestly and wisely restrains itself from pretending to resolve the debate about the effects of public expenditure on welfare upon the long-term growth of the economy and the production of wealth (6. 2, 55). Moreover, it denies that policy decisions about the provision of welfare must or can afford to wait for the economic debate to issue conclusions that command wide assent (6. 55-58). It contends that economic and welfare policy can virtually be decoupled. This contention is cogent since, although there is controversy among economists over the effects upon general economic performance of high levels of both income tax and social security benefits, no one claims that these effects are in any way crucial. So much for the good news about Not Just for the Poor. Now for the bad. The major failing of this report from the Social Policy Committee of the BSR is that it is too preoccupied with policy. As a consequence it entirely neglects that dimension of politics of whose reality and importance the Christian Church is most fitted to remind society at large: that of spirituality. Not Just for the Poor recognises that, because the Kingdom is 'not yet', we cannot expect absolute success or final solutions in politics (or in anything else). But it does not then exhort us to keep before our minds the severe limits attending our control of the outcome of our actions by confessing in prayer our dependence, even and especially in politics, upon divine providence. Quite to the contrary, the Foreword tells us that the Kingdom "is about deciding what we think is most important and taking decisive action in obedience to what we believe is true" (p. v). Taken by itself, this is not untrue; but as the very first thing that we are told in a document which continues in the same vein, it suffers all the ambiguities of a half-truth. Whatever Not Just for the Poor says about the Kingdom, it is not that we must pray for it; and whatever else the Christian Church ought to say about the Kingdom, it is primarily that. This point is not just a fastidious theological or religious one. It has political significance. Those who engage in politics without daily praying "Thy Kingdom Come" are susceptible to the illusion that political perfection is possible, and that it is their duty and calling to make it happen now. Politics without prayer, therefore, becomes impatient of hindrances and intolerant of opposition. It becomes prone to tyranny and vulnerable to despair. It becomes activist, lacking both charity and stamina.

Not Just for the Poor should have given us at least a strong assurance that it is aware that policy is not the place for the Church to begin a consideration of the welfare state. Certainly, policy is necessary; but it is perhaps one

of the peculiar duties of the Christian church to remind us all that policy is not sufficient. Further still, the Report should have been more circumspect in differentiating between the authority commanded by general principles and rules and that commanded by particular judgements. Some would argue that the Church should restrict itself to articulating the former, while leaving the making of the latter entirely to secular bodies. Much hangs here on the capacity in which the Church is acting at a given moment. On the one hand, if it is proclaiming the Good News of the incipient presence of God's Kingdom, it should be extremely careful not to tie the dignity of the Gospel to the fortunes of a particular policy. It will want to indicate the general moral limits within which permissible policy may be found, lest it be imagined that the Gospel transcends political affairs altogether; but it will be candid about the fact that within those limits several policies may usually be found. On the other hand, when the Church is playing pastor it may well wish to make a provisional judgement about which of several permissible policies would be best, and to offer this judgement as counsel. But it must not fail to distinguish counsel from kerygma.

But, it might be objected, surely these two roles are seldom, if ever, separate. Surely, the preacher can no more avoid giving counsel from the pulpit, than the pastor can avoid proclaiming the Good News in his study. Of course. What is important is not that the two roles be kept separate, but that when the Church moves from one to the other it does so quite consciously and explicitly, so that its audience does not confuse the authority of an informed suggestion about policy with that of the Gospel itself. Not Just for the Poor moves from one to the other without so much as blinking.

Fortunately, this Report is considerably more modest, circumspect and general in its recommendations for policy than Faith in the City. For example, although it tends to associate means-testing with social discrimination (7. 21), it reserves its condemnation for the latter (7. 48). Thus it avoids committing its religious and moral weight against the targeting of benefits according to means that are assessed on the basis of information supplied to the offices of the Inland Revenue (see A.W. Dilnot, J. A. Kay and C.N. Morris, The Reform of Social Security [Oxford: OUP, 1984], pp. 5, 115-17, 141).

Not Just for the Poor not only fails to distinguish kerygma clearly from counsel; it also fails to appeal to the kerygma as a source of moral and political motivation. It rightly recognises that the problems of welfare in this country are such as to require "great energy and determination, and a refusal to be complacent" in the search for solutions(7. 6). It is aware of the need for "passion" in refusing to accept injustice as tolerable or inevitable (7. 58). But whence does it exhort us to draw such energy and passion? The remembrance of the mercy and compassion and remittance of debts that we have enjoyed at the hands of a gracious God? The recollection that "our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that by his poverty we might become rich" (adapted from II Cor. 8:9)? The appropriation of our freedom in Christ; freedom from anxiety about material security and for the generous service of our neighbour? The affirmation of our identity as Christians?

No, Not Just for the Poor expects us in "comfortable Britain" to draw our political passion from first-hand encounter with "the painful consequences of our present social structures and social policies", from ceasing to keep our consciences happy through selective ignorance, from acknowledging our responsibility (7.59-61). None of this is inappropriate; but it is appropriate only as a second moment in the process of conversion from complacency to compassion. The primary moment must be that of our being moved by gratitude toward and by confidence in the God who has shown himself in Jesus Christ to be on our miserable side. For how else can we be liberated from the self-obsessed fear that drives us to avert our eyes from those social facts that make moral claims upon us, our emotions, our time, our attention, and our money? Primary appeals to horror, to guilt and to our sense of duty are just as likely to make us run away as they are to open our eyes. They are appeals to the Law, not to the Gospel. And even if they do drive us in what appears to be the desired direction, then our political passion will be warped by the frantic desire as much to justify ourselves, to placate our guilty consciences, as to uplift others; it will carry within it the seeds of a neurotic activism.

It is, of course, true that conversion of the heart is not a purely spiritual affair; it does not occur in abstraction from the concrete experiences, relationships and daily fabric of our lives. Conversion to compassion will certainly require us to take deliberate, penitential steps to turn around and face discomfiting social facts. But it is important that we are not so moved predominantly by guilt or by a sheer commitment to duty or even by an enthusiastic determination to banish evil from the world. And it is vitally important that we are so moved predominantly by the desire to respond in love to the God who first loved us, and so by the desire to answer the

calling and obey the commands of this God.

The preoccupation with policy and the tendency to moralistic exhortation together explain the absence of any pastoral section in Not Just for the Poor, a section devoted to providing some general but practical indications as to what we workaday members of the "comfortable" Church might actually do in the hope of reforming our hearts and minds with regard to the problems of welfare provision. If the Roman Catholic bishops in the U.S. could end their Pastoral Letter on War, Armaments and Peace (1982) with a section devoted to such things as "The Formation of Conscience," "Prayer," and "Penance" and addressed to specific groups of people (priests, educators, parents, youth, persons in the armed services and defence industries, scientists, media personnel, public officials and Catholics as citizens), why could the Social Policy Committee of the BSR not do likewise with regard to welfare?

One might be inclined to attribute much of the problem with Not Just for the Poor to uncertainty about whom it intends to address. But, then, the fact that it does pay serious attention to the biblical witness and to theological principles, and that it does so before it formulates and applies ethical principles and rules, indicates that the primary audience of the Report is intended to be the Church. This is confirmed by the Foreword, which describes the Report as "a contribution to enable the Church to consider the issues" (p. v). Which is as it should be. But, if that is the case, why no pastoral exhortation? Why no spiritual counsel?

Finally, Not Just for the Poor correctly points out that Christian discipleship entails conflict with the entrenched powers-that-be (2. 43). Who these powers might be today, it does not specify. The most natural contender, of course, is the Government; though the Report would have done well to remind us that such powers are sometimes to be found in strange places e. g. in the homes of the comfortable and employed, in the offices of trades unions. The Establishment is not of a single party political, or even social, colour.

But, more important, in rightly warning us that discipleship might entail confrontation and in exhorting us to go beyond mere reasonableness to passion, Not Just for the Poor ought to have given us some idea of how the Church is to become passionate and con-frontative without simply adding to the clamour of self-righteous indignation and militancy that tends to prevail in the political arena today. In particular, it should have gone beyond Luther and Reinhold Niebuhr (2. 34) in suggesting in what subtle ways Christian faith and charity may decisively qualify the pursuit of public justice. Thus we would have been assured that the Church is not being exhorted simply to add its voice (late) to an alien chorus.

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