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Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 24

ANY NEWS OF WHAT'S GOOD FOR SOCIETY?

The Church exists for the sake of the world. Its raison d'etre is to love the world and seek its highest good. Therefore, it must enter into the life of the world in all its complexity and ambiguity. Where its Lord has gone, the Church is called to follow

It is fitting then, that the latest publication of the Church of England's Board of Social Responsibility, Changing Britain (Church House Publishing, 1987, 70pp, £3.50), should have chosen to grapple with a crucial problem that besets British society and does not lend itself to easy resolution: that of moral pluralism. Not that moral pluralism is simply a problem; for when different ethics meet they may indeed illuminate each other. But if encounter sometimes yields light, it often lets fly sparks. Moral pluralism is a problem because it kindles social and political conflict, and so threatens the social cohesion of the national community.

Social cohesion and moral pluralism: it might seem from its subtitle, "Social Diversity and Moral Unity," that Changing Britain's discussion proceeds in exactly the opposite terms. But only apparently so. For social diversity only presents a problem when it engenders social or political conflict; and this study claims to find the roots of such conflict at the level of moral values (Preface, 21). So the diversity or pluralism which poses a problem is fundamentally moral, rather than social; and it poses a problem because it threatens social cohesion. The task, then, is to build social cohesion in a morally pluralist society; and the solution proposed is that the Christian Church, among others, should first recognise that there is in fact a far greater degree of moral unity than is usually supposed, and then use its resources to confirm and promote it. Moral pluralism is the problem; social cohesion, the goal; and the confirmation of already existing moral unity, the solution.

Changing Britain rightly believes that the social cohesion of Britain is a good about which the Christian Church should be concerned, and in whose promotion the Church has a special role to play. Judging by the study itself, part of this special role consists in the distinctive manner in which the problem of moral pluralism is approached. Changing Britain is exemplary in its refusal to adopt either romantic or cynical tones when assessing the current state and prospects of the nation. It clearly cares enough not to criticize without discerning signs of hope; and yet, having given due credit, to criticize nonetheless. Changing Britain plays prophet to its own people, not to someone else's.

Equally exemplary is the manner in which this study strives to hold together poles that are commonly, and unthinkingly, opposed: the individual and society, competition and cooperation, conviction and tolerance. Even though it seldom proceeds beyond the bland affirmation of these polarities to explain how they are possible, such an affirmation in itself is not worthless.

In Changing Britain, then, the Christian Church cares for the world by setting itself to find a way of promoting the good of social cohesion in the midst of moral pluralism; and by choosing a way which seeks to inspire hope as well as repentance, and avoids the simplistic dichotomies on which political ideologies flourish. It also expresses its care by taking pains to make its counsel intelligible. It takes this to mean, however, that the Church must eschew the use both of specifically Christian language and of arguments from peculiarly Christian grounds; for it judges that this would be to impose upon the world alien criteria and insights and values. Instead,

Changing Britain supposes that the Church must argue on 'rational' grounds; that is, according to the highest moral wisdom familiar to society at large (179,181,185)- Such an approach, it contends, is justified by the weighty Christian tradition of natural law, according to which "the human mind, unaided by special revelation, is at least in principle capable of attaining to the basic principles of a human morality such as are to be found in the Judaeo-Christian Decalogue" (183).

Changing Britain is surely right to suppose that a Church which cares for the world will make efforts to avoid using theological or religious jargon; it will take no pleasure in blinding the uninitiated with theological science. When what needs to be said can be said in ordinary words, the Church will gladly spell out its specialist shorthand. But should it renounce its own language altogether?

The authors of Changing Britain appear to be among those who think that a language is a quite discrete and closed system; and that, in order to communicate with a foreigner, I must leave my system and enter his. What this account precludes, however, is the possibility of my learning from the foreigner or he from me. For to learn is to add something new to a given stock of understanding; and I can receive nothing new unless I have been permitted to encounter something different. And I can never encounter anything different, if everything I meet addresses me in entirely familiar terms. If I am to learn, I must be permitted to suffer the 'imposition' of something alien; I must be allowed to hear something foreign. Not absolutely foreign, to be sure; for what I hear must be sufficiently familiar for me to recognise it as different. But it must still be different.

If, then, the Christian Church were to speak to the world entirely in its own language, it could have nothing different to say, no light to shed, and so no help to offer. Therefore, if the Church must speak to the world in sufficiently familiar terms to be understood, it must use those terms in unfamiliar ways. It must use the world's language in order to abuse it, in order to break it open to what is not the world. It must speak in ways familiar — strange — in parables, for example.

Now, to be fair, we must acknowledge that Changing Britain presents itself as trying to avoid only Christian "in-language," and as rejecting the exclusive use of Christian language and argumentation (179,185). With such a declared policy we would pick no quarrel. But Changing Britain goes further in practice. It goes further when it chooses to approach the problem of moral pluralism "with criteria and insights which belong to the best of our society, rather than ones imposed upon it from outside" (181), appeals (only) to "generally held values" and argues (only) for moral insights that are not exclusive to the Christian tradition (179). In practice, Changing Britain seeks to avoid, not merely Christian jargon, but anything in Christian language that does not find an exact equivalent in secular speech. Here, the Church is permitted to speak only in confirmation, not in criticism; only to second, not to propose. The Church may proclaim more loudly the good that the world already knows; but not the good that comes to the world as news.

Changing Britain does not think that the world needs to hear news. Although it is right to describe the Christian tradition of natural law as ascribing to the human mind, apart from the grace of special revelation, a capacity for the knowledge of basic moral norms in principle (183); it proceeds as if man has such a capacity in fact. With the sinful disorientation of human loves and the consequent distortion of man's moral understanding, it reckons not at all. Ordinary Britons, regardless of their religious or philosophical persuasion, the study claims, generally agree on basic moral principles such as fairness, justice, concern for others and, above all, the value of the individual person (52); that is, they share "a common frame of moral reference" (48). Changing Britain regards this moral consensus as adequate in substance, and as requiring only a clearer articulation and a stronger basis (51). To this it is the Church's task to add only its support.

That the Church may expect to find features of common moral sense of which it should wish to approve is beyond question. The doctrine of creation gives us ground for such expectation in principle; expectation that has been borne out in the fact of correlation between Christian and non-Christian ethics throughout history, a fact attested by the New Testament, Thomas Aquinas, John Calvin and, yes, even Karl Barth. What is not beyond question, however, is that the Church may expect to find only correlation. The doctrine of sin should predispose the Christian community to examine common moral sense critically; the doctrines of special revelation and of Christ should incline it to formulate its primary criteria through the Christocentric interpretation of Scripture; and the doctrine of the Church should move it to conduct contemporary interpretation by the lamp of those traditions of interpretation recognised as authoritative by the Christian community in the past.

According to Changing Britain, however, the application of such criteria to secular moral wisdom would be unwarranted 'imposition' (181).

The consequences of the study's refusal to allow the Church to play critic may be seen in its handling of the concept of koinonia (fellowship). Changing Britain first of all identifies this as a fertile New Testament theme, but then proceeds to explain it in such a way as to expel its distinctively Christian theological import to the margins of its meaning. Basically, what it means, we are told, is a relation between persons resulting from their "having something in common." What it is that is held in common may range from material possessions, to a sharing of the body of Christ and in his Spirit, to participation in the very being of God (62). But, when all is said and done, the object of the focus that creates community is to be treated as quite secondary to the sheer fact of community --in this case, a specific kind of community where individual freedom is respected. The operative definition of koinonia in Changing Britain turns out to be "individuals-in-community" (63); and it is this concept that is offered as the Church's peculiar intellectual contribution to the solution of the problem of moral pluralism. But notice what has happened: we began with a theological concept; we redefined it so that its theological baggage is expendable; we shed the expendable baggage; and we now offer the secularized remains to the world as a normative model of society.

This secularizing procedure makes plain one of the decisive assumptions of Changing Britain; that the worship of God in Christ is not necessary for social health. This assumption would certainly seem to receive support from the fact that the adherents of a wide variety of religious and philosophical beliefs appear to be able to endorse a common framework of moral reference. Accordingly, Changing Britain takes this fact to imply that the function of such beliefs is that of providing different religious and philosophical communities each with their own preferred rationale and their peculiar motives for endorsing a common moral base. Christian belief, therefore, provides one approach --the approach Christians prefer- to the common frame of moral reference (48); it provides "a mode of access to it and a means of interpreting it" (58). But it makes no difference to its substance.

Indeed, Christian theology cannot be allowed to try to make a difference to the substance of ethics; because, if it were, the common ethic would disintegrate under the pressure of theological strife. Britons of all shades may generally agree on the second Table of the Decalogue, but not on the first (51). Changing Britain is haunted by the liberal's nightmare of the dissolution of civil society into religious war. However, although the good of social cohesion seems to forbid Christian theology to make special claims upon ethical content, it invites Christian belief and practice --along with any others - to reinforce adherence to the common ethic with its own peculiar motives; that is, to commit its resources to bolstering the de facto authoritativeness of an autonomous ethical consensus.

This account of the role of Christian belief and practice in relation to public ethics may be challenged simply as a description by pointing out that ethics cannot operate in theologically or philosophically neutral territory. It may be, as Changing Britain argues, that both Christians and humanists can agree that every person is valuable, the former on the ground of man's bearing the divine image, the latter on the ground of his rationality (51). But the moment that one broaches the question of who qualifies as a person, the consensus dissolves, with (at least some) Christians arguing that the pre-cerebrate human embryo is also made in God's image, and humanists arguing that what lacks a brain cannot be rational and therefore a person. Theological and philosophical belief not only leads to the common framework of moral reference; it also shapes our interpretation --our specification-- of it to diverse effect. Therefore it calls into question the worth of a putatively common framework of moral reference whose vagueness apparently covers a multitude of conflicts, some of them not at all trivial.

But, quite apart from the issue of its accuracy, Changing Britain's description of the relation of Christian theology to ethics begs some fundamental theological questions. Is the Christian Church not bound to regard the worship of God as essential to human, and therefore social, good? And not just the worship of any god, but of God in Christ? How, then, is it to regard the proposal to build social cohesion in a manner that makes such worship a matter of personal preference, not public necessity? How can the Church accept the privatisation of its theological belief and religious practice? How can it regard the separation of theology and social ethics, religious practice and public morality with equanimity? Need the assertion of Christian claims upon public ethics be socially divisive? And, supposing that at least on occasions it must be, might it not be that the Church is then being called to bear witness to the social good at the expense of social cohesion? In sum, how does the exercise of tolerance relate to the Christian's duty to declare and promote what he believes to be true and good?

Changing Britain is addressed to the nation, not just to the Church, with the intention of helping to stimulate a national debate about moral pluralism and social cohesion. In the event, however, it would be far better if it were only to provoke debate within the Church about the fundamental questions that it begs. For Changing Britain's most significant contribution is to make clear how much more theological thinking the Church has yet to do, if it cares enough to say something, not only intelligible, but new and therefore helpful, about what is good for pluralist Britain.

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