



Biblical Truth for Today's Church

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LATIMER COMMENT 30

MRS THATCHER'S MORAL REFORMATION

The Diagnosis, the Remedy, and the Role of the Church

It is surely one of the peculiar features of government under Mrs Thatcher that it aims at bringing about a cultural revolution, a revolution in the way Britons see things and what they value, a kind of national moral conversion. This objective is the chosen solution to a preferred, two-part diagnosis of Britain's post-war decline. In line with some notable commentators of social-democratic political stripe (e.g. Anthony Sampson), Mrs Thatcher and her followers attribute Britain's economic ills in recent times in part to a snobbish disdain for commercial and industrial kinds of wealth-creation, built deep into British culture and sustained by the elitist values of a system of education riven with admiration for the aristocratic civilization of classical Athens.

The second element in the Government's diagnosis has been borrowed from the thinking of the new Right and is also cultural in nature. This is the alleged decline in individual responsibility that has been fostered by the ever-increasing readiness of government to compensate for the consequences of individual and corporate irresponsibility—for example, by guaranteeing employment regardless of 'excessive' wage-demands by trade unions and 'feeble' acquiescence by short-sighted managements. The problem here is understood in terms of a familiar domestic drama: the over-indulgent parent spoils his children by constantly protecting them from the consequences of their wilful ways. According to this account, then, a major factor in Britain's recent woes has been the 'nanny' state that has nourished the immature culture of self-indulgent dependence.

Over and against these two cultural vices, the Thatcher Government has sought to promote two counter-values: on the one hand, (commercial and industrial) wealth-creation and, on the other, the individual's readiness to take responsibility for himself. According to its own canons, however, the Government is limited in what it can do to achieve the kind of moral reformation it seeks; for if the problem is partly that society has become excessively dependent on government support and initiative, then the solution can hardly come in the form of a government-inspired, led and executed regeneration. The most that government can do is to create the conditions that are likely to stimulate such change; but, if it is to be successful, the momentum for change must come from individuals and their voluntary associations.

This is why the Thatcher Government is so keen to enlist the support of the Christian churches (and presumably of other influential religious bodies) and why front-bench Government ministers personally addressed different church bodies on at least three occasions during 1988 and 1989. For the success of its highest aspirations depends on the achievement of moral (re)formation, a task which has traditionally been high on the agenda of religious institutions and is perhaps one of their distinctive social services. Accordingly, one of the major themes of Mrs Thatcher's address to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1988 (May 21) was the modest power of government and the correlative importance of the churches as shapers of the social ethos: 'the politicians and other secular powers should strive ... to bring out the good in people and to fight down the bad: but they can't create the one or abolish the other. ... We Parliamentarians can legislate for the rule of law. You the Church can teach **the life** of faith. For, when all is said and done, a politician's role is a humble one.'

Mrs Thatcher believes, then, that the Government needs the Church. But is the ethos which the Government wishes to promote the kind of ethos that Church should support? In her speech to the General Assembly the Prime Minister argued that the two counter-values mentioned above —wealth-creation and individual responsibility— should command Christian assent. The first she commended on three grounds: first, the parable of the talents; second, that creating wealth does not necessarily involve loving money for its own sake; and third, that it is necessary to create wealth if we are to have something to be charitable with, and if we are to build civilization.

As far as they go these three grounds are largely unexceptionable. It is true that the point of the parable of the talents is not that there is a moral duty to make money grow. But the assertion that Christian discipleship is analogous to capital investment implicitly endorses the latter: as it is right to invest money profitably, so it is right to live fruitfully in anticipation of the Second Coming. Moreover, although the logical distinction between wealth-creation and avarice does need to be supplemented by the new Testament's high estimation of the power of wealth to attract the Kind of love that properly belongs only to God, in itself it is perfectly valid. Finally, Mrs Thatcher's third ground is simply common sense.

However, even if we do not judge wealth-creation to be intrinsically evil — indeed, even if we reckon it a moral duty— we could (and should) still hold it to be good only on condition that it is properly qualified by other moral duties —for eminent example, care for our poor neighbour. So it is because the Government's promotion of wealth-creation is often perceived to be monomaniacal and in virtual disregard of other social obligations that it frequently finds itself at the sharp end of Christian commentary. Church leaders are usually not slow to endorse Opposition charges that the Government is deliberately fostering a culture of private greed, of which recent scandals of fraud in the City are egregious examples. In response to this it needs to be said, first of all, that **any** current symptoms of gross avarice are unlikely to be the products simply of ten years of government policy. It is much more probable that they have their roots in decades of creeping materialism, whose growth the Church has miserably failed to stem. Further, although it might well be the case that the **effect** of the policies of the current Government has been to relax the reins on private greed, it is by no means clear that that has been the Government's **intention**. On the contrary, there is sufficient reason to believe that **Mrs Thatcher** would be delighted to preside over the emergence of a generation of philanthropic entrepreneurs, ready to invest their surplus wealth in civic institutions —universities, for example— as they were wont to in Victorian Britain and as they do so today in the United States. The ideal of the Active Citizen, which Government ministers have recently taken to promulgating, need not be seen as some late, ad hoc, politically expedient addition **to** Thatcherite philosophy, but rather as an original element only recently articulated. The Active Citizen is the individual who takes the duties of citizenship as seriously as its benefits and who takes the initiative in acting for the common good instead of expecting public servants to take care of it for him. Indeed, he is precisely one who is prepared to devote some of his 'private' time and energy to public tasks, without having to be coerced into it. He is the one who builds and mans voluntary agencies.

The Question of Responsibility

Our discussion of the first of Mrs Thatcher's counter-values (wealth-creation) has brought us to the second: the readiness of individuals to assume personal responsibility. Reflection upon a broad range of her Government's policies suggests that she means at least four things by this. First, there is the disposition of an individual not to act in the expectation that the government will shield him from the deleterious consequences of his actions — such as the jeopardizing of jobs or the collapse of a company because of demands by unionized workers for 'excessively expensive' terras of employment, or the prolongation of unemployment because of a 'wilful inflexibility' on the part of someone without work regarding the kind and location of job that he is prepared to do. Second, by 'personal responsibility' is meant the disposition to be careful *or* discriminate in the demands one makes upon limited public resources --as in the case of the consumers of health-care and higher-education. A third meaning intended is the direct responsibility of the 'private' citizen for the quality of particular dimensions of public life in which he has an investment —whether as- a parent of children at primary or secondary schools, as an elector of local government to which he pays taxes, as a consumer of

broadcast programmes to which he subscribes, or as one who wants to walk the streets *free* from the threat of violence or the fact of litter. The fourth kind of individual responsibility about which Mrs Thatcher has shown concern is that of professional people to those whom they are supposed to serve --of teachers to the parents of their pupils, of the executives of local government to those who fund it, of the managers of institutions of higher learning to the wider community (and especially, given traditional academic elitism, its commercial and industrial sections).

This analysis suggests that 'personal responsibility,' as intended by Mrs Thatcher, is not the opposite of 'social responsibility'. On the contrary, it expresses a concern to see private citizens recover a sense of direct responsibility for public life instead of regarding it as the business only of government employees. In this respect, therefore, the Chairman and Secretary of the Church of England's Board for Social Responsibility (Bishop John Yates and Prebendary John Gladwin) were rather beside the point when they criticized the Prime Minister for stressing personal responsibility without also stressing 'the essentially social character of human life' and when they saw fit to remind the Government of its moral obligation 'to pursue policies which create and encourage that sense of community and mutuality which are the hallmarks of a complete human life' (Letter to Mrs Thatcher, May 27, 193d). For Mrs Thatcher can fairly claim both that her stress on personal responsibility is precisely an attempt to persuade private citizens to accept direct responsibility for the quality of social life, and that it is precisely in seeking to promote this sense of responsibility that her Government is promoting community.

This is not the occasion on which to attempt a moral evaluation of all the Government's strategies *for* stimulating a sense of personal responsibility for the quality of social life among individual citizens. We must choose to focus either on privatization or on the introjection of market forces- or on the contraction of the provision of welfare by the government; and since the last seems to have attracted the greater part of Christian comment on Government policy, we will make it our choice.

If Nanny Withdraws, Will the Children Grow Up?

Unless we are to be cynical, we may not suppose that Mrs Thatcher intends to terminate the government's role as the guarantor of a certain basic level of welfare for all citizens; but it is clear enough that she wishes to see it reduced. The response of the two officers of the BSR becomes more telling, therefore, when it asserts that the government has 'a crucial role' to play in supplying the needs of the poor. For this several reasons could be adduced. One is the fact that the nation-wide organization of its agencies, the information that it can muster about the personal wealth of individual citizens, and the extent of the resources at its command place the government in the best position to identify those who are genuinely poor and to bring the necessary resources of the wider community to their aid. Bishop. Yates and Prebendary Gladwin alluded to this when they posed the rhetorical question, 'Is it not unrealistic to think that the needs of the poor can be met in our sort of world by individual charity alone?' But the main reason which they proposed was that to leave the poor dependent on the charity of other individuals is to threaten their dignity. This is where their criticism really does begin to bite, for it implies a description of the poor that is at odds with the one underlying some of Mrs Thatcher's convictions about personal responsibility. For here the poor are seen basically as morally equal unfortunates who deserve their poverty no more than the wealthy deserve their wealth. Therefore they should not be made to plead or beg for help as for some gratuitous favour. Rather, their wealthier and more powerful fellows should recognize their moral equality by seeing that their needs are met as of right. Mrs Thatcher, on the other hand, often seems to regard the poor as those who are personally responsible for their own plight. If society owes them anything, it owes only what responsible parents owe wayward children (according to one school of child rearing): stern discipline.

The crucial question here, then, is this: to what extent should the poor be held personally responsible for their poverty? The first thing to note is that poverty is usually something that befalls the poor: it happens to them — for example, in the form of unemployment; and they owe their current plight to the fact that they have not yet found a way out of it. In some cases, it may be that there has been no accessible exit. But in others it may be that, through lack of initiative, opportunities for escape have been missed; and in others still it may be that

through sloth (e.g., in the workplace) the poor have exacerbated their plight (e.g., through being sacked or made redundant). So it is possible that some poor may rightly be held responsible at a certain level for their predicament. However, when the roots of such lack of initiative and sloth are examined, it becomes clear that the issue of responsibility is a complex one. For it is reasonable to suppose that a prolonged experience of being subject to socio-economic conditions that permit minimal freedom for manoeuvre nourishes listlessness and fecklessness and the sullen passivity that erupts into moments of apparently irrational (because self-destructive) anger. It is true, nevertheless, that environment does not simply determine. Different people can react to virtually identical circumstances in sharply different ways. However much my environment binds me, it never predestines my response; and for that response I remain responsible. But if the conditions that hedge me about and weigh me down do

not excuse my irresponsibility, they might help to make it intelligible. They might help to make it intelligible in terms of my very human weakness in the face of those considerable forces which have tempted and demoralized me. And insofar as you know that my environment has tried me to a degree that yours has not tried you, you should be able, not only to make some sense of my irresponsibility, but also to have some sympathy for me. In such a case understanding should not lead to cheap absolution; but it should provoke compassion.

So, even if a poor person is rightly held responsible to some extent for his poverty, those of us who are wealthier (and now many of us were not virtually born into our wealth?) have no grounds for standing in judgement upon him. If we know ourselves at all well, it should not take an extraordinary effort *of* imagination for us to grasp how quickly, under the same conditions, we would probably succumb to the same vices. Moreover, if we haven't had to contend with the temptation of a heritage of poverty, many of us will have had to struggle with the temptations of a psycho-social heritage of neglect or abuse, either overt or subtle —the temptations, for example, to mistrust or to manipulate or to betray. And some of us know just how very feeble our resistance has been.

Therefore, it is because we know that all are sinful and all have sinned, rich and poor alike, and that justification is by grace *or* not at all, that we believe_ it to be wrong that the poor should be treated by the rest of society as wayward children, deserving only such favours as upright citizens choose to dispense out of the sneer goodness of their hearts. On the contrary, they should be treated as (im)moral equals whom their more fortunate fellow-citizen are called and obliged to help. In this sense, the poor have a right to aid from the rest of their community; and it is the recognition of this right that makes the provision of aid by the government necessary, for it is the government that represents the community as a whole.

More than minimal Support?

However, it is possible to argue consistently both that the poor have a right to government aid and that the government has a responsibility to provide only a level of welfare that is less than comfortable. Such an argument would only be reasonable, however, if there were a preponderance of evidence that more generous government support tends simply to confirm its beneficiaries in their listless status quo. If this were so, it could be argued that the community could only care for its poorer members properly by giving them the kind of support that does not seriously reduce their incentives for doing what they can to create a better lot for themselves. We do not respect the poor as moral equals by romanticizing them into moral heroes. *If* we would care for our poorer neighbour responsibly, then we are bound to take into account the peculiar temptations to which our caring opens him. Our aid must not hinder him from assuming responsibility for himself.

This is the most charitable rationale that can be conceived for the Government's policy of reducing the value of welfare benefits and tightening the conditions of their availability. This policy was formulated in an attempt to discourage the two kinds of personal irresponsibility that

Mrs Thatcher and her followers believe the 'Nanny State'¹ to have fostered. These two forms of irresponsibility are, first, the juvenile expectation that the state owes me a standard of living that I am quite capable of providing for myself; and second, the tendency of the immediate community to regard the support of their needy members primarily as someone else's responsibility.

The propriety of this policy obviously depends on the accuracy of its basic assumptions. So in order to assess it, we are bound to ask what evidence there is that there has in fact been a decline in personal responsibility of the kinds mentioned, and that the welfare state is to blame? Instances of the evidence that tends to be cited are these: the co-existence of high levels of unemployment and large numbers of job vacancies in the same locality; the large number of homeless people who are young enough to qualify as dependents of a family; the growing number of single-parent families that are not economically viable; and the growing number of elderly people who receive negligible care from their children. From this evidence are drawn the following conclusions: that the level of unemployment benefit has been so high as to encourage the unemployed to live comfortably either without looking for work at all or without being flexible about the kind of work that are willing to do; that many who draw unemployment benefit are already working in the black market; that the availability of housing benefit has been encouraging youngsters to leave home, and parents to relieve themselves of their natural responsibilities, prematurely; that the availability of income support for single-parent families has been encouraging young women to become mothers outside of any stable quasi-marital relationship; and that state support of elderly people in need has been encouraging their children to abandon them.

These conclusions are not inconsistent with the evidence, but nor are they required by it. Others could be drawn with equal or greater cogency. It could be the case that I should choose not to take one of the many legitimate jobs available to me because the state enables me to indulge my laziness. However, given the extent to which human self-respect (in the western world at least) depends on being productive and on being seen to be productive —i.e., having a job and belonging to a working community- it is more likely that I should refuse a legitimate job because I am caught in the poverty trap created by the inadequate coordination of the tax and benefit systems, which makes it unprofitable (even expensive) for me to work legitimately. Likewise if adolescents are leaving home prematurely, it is less likely to be primarily because public money is available to subsidize extended vacations in Brighton sea-front guest-houses than because of serious conflicts within their families. Again, if some young unmarried women choose to become mothers in order to hasten their escape from home into a council flat and an 'independent' life, the problem is likely to consist much more in the quality of family life and in prevailing sexual mores than in state support for single parents. Finally, if more and more elderly people are being virtually abandoned by their children, then the cause is much more probably the effects of 'youth' culture and of the increased mobility of the population than the assurance of adequate care of the elderly by the state.

In sum, therefore, the evidence suggests that, if there has been a decline in personal responsibility, it has been fostered by a combination of factors in which the extent of welfare provision by the state does not feature very largely. At very most it suggests that the welfare state has been put into the position of having to ameliorate the effects of certain forms of irresponsibility —of the failure of husbands and wives to love each other, of parents to care properly for their children and of adult children to care properly for their elderly parents. But it does not follow from this at all that the prospect of amelioration at the hands of the state has functioned as a major encouragement to wreak the damage in the first place. Therefore it is mistaken to suppose that the systematic contraction of state support will stimulate a recovery of relevant kinds of personal responsibility. Take away housing benefit from the 19 year—old and he is as likely to become a prostitute as to return to the emotional battlefield of his time. Remove support from single mothers and it is more likely that the abortion rate will rise than that the rate of adolescent pregnancies will decrease. Discharge mental patients from hospital and they are more likely to be found on the

streets by day and in Church Army hostels by night than in the care of relatives. Far from fostering a renewed sense of personal responsibility, the Government's policy of reducing the level and duration of welfare benefits is, in many cases, likely to have the Opposite effect of generating the criminal forms of irresponsibility to which desperation inclines.

Conclusion

Our conclusion, then, is that Mrs Thatcher's Government is vulnerable to Christian criticism, not on account of her choice of moral values to promote, but on account of her attempt to promote at least one of them by contracting the state's provision of welfare. What is in question here is not the attempt to discriminate between those who really need the state's aid from those who do not. We have no quarrel with that principle. No, what is in question is the contraction of the provision of aid to certain classes of needy person on the grounds that they are to a significant degree responsible for their plight, and that the reduction of help offered by the state would considerably bolster their motivation to take hold of available opportunities for self—improvement. We think that there is reason to doubt whether those who suffer from the contraction of state aid are necessarily responsible to a significant degree for their helplessness; and that there is more reason to doubt whether such contraction really does have a constructive effect.

Ironically, it seems that in spite of its professed modesty the Government has imagined that it is capable of doing more to provide the conditions for moral renewal than it really can. Perhaps its most constructive policy in these matters would be to give generous help to those who need it, even if they have been partly responsible for their poverty. For thereby it would allow the Christian churches in this country to devote less time and effort in trying to persuade the Government to do elementary justice, and more in coming to prophetic and pastoral grips with the prevailing lies about love and happiness and freedom that are wreaking havoc with the ways in which Britons today conduct their personal relationships —thereby adding to the burden that the welfare state must shoulder.

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See also Memoranda on 'The Truth and Significance of the Resurrection', 'The Use of Scripture', 'The Lima Report: Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry', 'The Tiller Report on the Ministry', 'The Guardians of the Faith' (Bishop of Durham Controversy), 'Sunday Trade: A Christian Perspective', 'The Voting of the Deaneries and Dioceses on BEM and ARCIC', 'Year of Decision for the Church of England', 'The Nature of Christian Belief', 'The Priesthood of the Ordained Ministry', 'Oklahoma!', 'C.S. Lewis, Twenty Years On', 'Annus Mirabilis 1966', 'The Oppression of Women', 'Salvation and the Church', 'Not Just for the Poor', 'We believe in God', 'Indulgences Today', 'Any News of what's Good for Society?', 'A Discriminating Compassion?', 'Baptismal Policy and Baptismal Doctrine' and 'The Ordination of Women: an Evangelical View'.