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A Kingdom not of this World

BRIAN GRIFFITHS

Dr Edward Norman's 1978 Reith Lectures¹ on the subject of Christianity and the World Order are a refreshing change from the statements and writings of many contemporary theologians and churchmen on these issues. They are a courageous attempt to challenge prevailing orthodoxy, and their success as iconoclasm is already clear from the controversy which they have created. While I do not agree with everything which Dr Norman says, I believe that evangelical Christians should be in sympathy with his central theme, namely, that in the field of politics, Christian thinking is becoming so conformed to the prevailing humanist and collectivist culture of the world in which we live, that by being redefined in corporate and earthly terms the gospel is emptied of its supernatural content, which is its very essence. I would applaud in particular the centrality of the Incarnation to Norman's way of thinking: 'At the centre of the Christian religion, Christ remains unchanging in a world of perpetual social change and mutating values.'²The Reith lectures are not, as is sometimes supposed, a call for Christians to withdraw from society; but rather to reinstate spirituality to its proper place. The first lecture was a statement of the basic theme of politicization; the next four lectures attempted to explore that theme in relation to the role of the World Council of Churches, Human Rights and the Soviet Union, Latin America and Southern Africa; and the last lecture on 'The Indwelling Christ' gave us something of Norman's personal view of spirituality and the task to which we as Christians are called.

The theme of the lectures

From the various editorials, articles and radio programmes which have appeared regarding the lectures, it is astounding how much their argument seems to have been misunderstood. I should like, therefore, to be clear as to what I understand Dr Norman to be saying. It can be put in four propositions:

- 1) that Christianity in the western world, along with much else of our lives, has become increasingly politicized so that the Christian gospel is not just being restated in terms of contemporary political values but transmuted in the process as well;

- 2) that the form which such politicization takes is the restatement of the gospel in terms of the ideals of either western liberalism or Marxism;
- 3) that the weakness of such a procedure is that it identifies the ultimate purposes of God with the shifting values of contemporary society, and
- 4) that the most urgent task of Christians is to rediscover the historical relativism of political values and allow them to be judged by the Lord of history.

It is important to be clear about a number of points in this thesis. Although Dr Norman regards Christianity as being primarily concerned with the relationship of the soul to eternity and therefore the cultivation of personal spirituality rather than the design of social morality, political involvement by Christians is for him nevertheless not only legitimate but mandatory. In the final lecture, after using statements from the WCC and the Anglican Consultative Council to support his case, he makes his position perfectly clear: 'This is not to deny that biblical teachings have social consequences: they obviously do.'³ In a radio programme following the series, he elaborated at some length his own position:

In my judgement, there is a great distinction between what I call sociologists politicizing religion, and the political involvement and participation by Christians and the churches in the actual world, with all its needs, problems and resources.

My contention in the Reith Lectures was that there are really no grounds for politicizing religion and reinterpreting the essence and nature of Christianity as it was given by Christ as a social, political or, indeed, socially moral blueprint for the real societies of our day. Political involvement, on the other hand, I see as necessary from the injunction of Christ to look after the poor and be concerned about the fate of man. My judgement about the churches is that they have confused these two categories, and too easily act in the real world of politics from points of view which have reconvered the centre and meaning of Christianity to be itself political activism.⁴

Dr Norman, therefore, is not advocating a return to the kind of pietism which demands withdrawal from the world, but the adoption by Christians of a faith which is Christo-centric.

Another point is that although the Reith Lectures were critical of both liberalism and Marxism, they are by no means a defence of conservatism. They are an attack on all political programmes invoking as their basis the Christian faith. This was made very clear in the first lecture:

To those who are sceptical of all versions of Christian politics, including conservative ones—and this is my own position—the present identification of Christianity with western bourgeois liberalism seems an unnecessary consecration of a highly relative and unstable set of values.⁵

Various conservative thinkers and newspapers who have hailed the Reith Lectures as a much needed change of emphasis in current debate, need to be careful because, to the extent that their conservative philosophy is specifically derived from their Christian worldview, they are likely to fall into precisely the same trap as the liberals and the Marxists whom Dr Norman is attacking in that they too are guilty of consecrating 'a highly relative and unstable set of values'! In the final lecture this was stated even more clearly:

Conservatives fall into the same error as the progressive, whose politicized Christianity they dislike for political reasons, if they seek to protect a social order of their own preference, of the present or of the past.⁶

Is Christianity being politicized?

Dr Norman's basic contention in these lectures, regarding the politicization of Christianity in today's world, is ultimately a question of fact. Either he is correct in his observations or he is not. Much of his evidence is taken from statements of the World Council of Churches, though he also supports his case by reference to statements from the British Council of Churches, the Lambeth Conference, the Anglican Consultation Council, various Roman Catholic Councils of bishops (especially from Latin America) and a host of individuals and pressure groups. I find his evidence convincing and I believe that anyone would be hard put to challenge him on this point. They may not agree with the conclusions which he seeks to draw ultimately from the evidence; but that the evidence honestly describes the politicization of Christianity is in my mind beyond doubt.

In this respect I was interested in Douglas Brown's review of the lectures in the *Church Times*. Brown was for many years the BBC's religious affairs correspondent and his observation is to be respected.

From my own fairly lengthy experience of reporting the World Council of Churches, the British Council of Churches, the old Church Assembly of the Church of England giving way to the General Synod, to say nothing of the governing bodies of some of the Free Churches and some of the commissions of the Roman Catholic Church, I cannot in all honesty fault Dr Norman on the facts.⁷

I would venture to go further and suggest that if Dr Norman had wished to rest his case on the writings of the evangelicals, he would have had just as little difficulty in finding evidence for his thesis.

How political is the Christian faith?

This question gets to the very heart of what the Reith Lectures are about. In view of Norman's subtlety in presenting his argument and the fact that the basic issue is in any case complex, it is necessary to take some care in developing the position.

In Norman's terms, the starting point for any Christian in thinking

about the whole issue is the fact of the Incarnation. In Jesus Christ, God becomes man, and in his person inaugurates a kingdom whose constitution, power and standards are in marked contrast to all the political kingdoms of history. People enter this kingdom as individuals through the process of regeneration. Citizenship implies a new relationship with God in which sin is forgiven, a new life in Christ with access to the resources of the risen Lord himself, and a hope which will be realized finally only when the King returns. The heart of the Christian gospel is that on confession of sin and repentance all can know the love of God in Christ and experience this new life. The fact that both the kingdom and the church are collectivities means that the gospel should never be conceived of in purely individualistic terms, though the fact that people only enter the kingdom as individuals implies a concern and great respect for the individual.

Following the example of our Lord's life, and acknowledging his teaching, makes it incumbent for all who are members of this kingdom to be practically concerned with the needs of other people, both spiritually and materially. I accept, therefore, that love to, and responsibility for, our neighbours is a necessary aspect of Christ's teaching and that the motivation for such involvement is not simply derivative from the Great Commission. In this respect I very much welcome John Stott's emphasis in claiming that the proper relationship between evangelism and social concern is one of partnership.

Having acknowledged this, however, in what sense can we say that the gospel is political? If we mean that the very fact of taking the cup of cold water may involve us in arguing for a change in political and economic structures, which is by definition political activity in the broadest sense of the term, then the gospel may legitimately be said to have political implications.

But the problem which arises even here is—what if the change in structures which helps some, injures others? After all, politics is concerned with the problem, Who, Whom. Some Christians may judge the change to be desirable, others not. How much guidance does the gospel give in evaluating transfers of income and socio-economic structures? I believe Norman is correct in stating that the gospel is concerned primarily with personal rather than social morality. This does not mean that the Bible has nothing to say on structures. The Pentateuch has a good deal to tell us about certain landmarks of a Christian social order. But once these are accepted, I believe that it is difficult *as a Christian* to be dogmatic about many of the contemporary issues of world politics, such as, for example, the role of the multi-national corporation, the imposition of sanctions against governments in Southern Africa, the new international economic order and so on, principally because political programmes dealing with these issues necessitate judgements on which the Christian *qua* Christian has little if anything to say. It is precisely the

baptism of certain political means by Christians which does such a disservice to the gospel.

Take, for example, the role of multi-national companies in the modern world. They are sometimes viewed as instruments of oppression and exploitation, extracting valuable resources from less developed countries and transferring them to already rich developed countries, acting usually in conjunction with corrupt governments and as servants of an imperialistic foreign policy. On the other hand, they can be viewed as creating wealth and employment in the Third World and of benefit in the international transfer of know-how and capital investment. As an economist, I have my own views on these issues which are primarily professional and political judgements. But, given the facts, I find it impossible to make a judgement which is specifically and authentically Christian.

The fact, therefore, that the gospel is primarily concerned with personal, not social, morality has one very important implication. For it means that political involvement in society for the Christian is something personal rather than corporate. While the Christian involvement in carrying out the Great Commandment is both personal and corporate, the Christian involvement in politics must of necessity be personal rather than corporate, simply because Christian social morality does not allow us to form a distinctively Christian position in thinking about many contemporary political issues.

Dr Norman's critique of politicized Christianity is also a warning to us that even though politics has a legitimacy it must be placed in perspective. Our Lord's mission was not political. The central fact about his kingdom was that it was independent of, and transcended, the kingdoms of this world. The early church was not a crusade to change the political structures of the Roman world, and the letters of Paul make it very clear that the creation of a better society was in no sense the mainspring of the life of the New Testament church. For the early church, the Christian was a pilgrim in this world. As they journeyed through life, those early Christians waited eagerly for the second coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. I cannot help feeling that the current emphasis on political activism is a far remove from their world. Those early Christians turned the world upside down precisely because they refused to think about their problems in earthly terms. But through their commitment to Christ, in evangelism and good works, resources were unleashed which overwhelmed the pagan culture of which they refused to be part. I would wish to question both the extent to which concern with social activism, even among evangelicals, is blunting our proclamation of the gospel, and the expectation of a more just world is leading us to neglect the crucial fact of our Lord's return.

'The indwelling Christ'

In arguing that contemporary Christianity has become politicized and

that we need to reassert the importance of true spirituality, I find the Reith Lectures convincing. I have great sympathy, in particular, for Dr Norman's impatience with the WCC and its espousal of Marxism as a basis for analysing the world economic order. Where, however, I find his argument less convincing is its attempt to divorce Christian principles from the political order by asserting that 'morality is not the essence of Christianity, which is about the evocation of the unearthly'⁸ and thereby retreating into a form of mysticism which almost seems a denial of the Incarnation which is so central to his argument.

This is due to the fact that the Incarnation seems unconnected with the doctrine of creation. If this is God's world, then it is a moral order. Even though the Christian faith does not provide a blueprint for society, it does point to various landmarks such as the family, property rights and the freedom to worship—which are important in thinking about world order. The great weakness of Norman's theology is not that he makes too much of the Incarnation but that he seems to neglect the Old Testament, which has a good deal to say on the matter of social order. His failure to develop this is potentially quite serious, as he is left with very little basis for mounting a strong attack on Marxism. Unless his concept of 'the indwelling Christ' can be related to the life and moral teaching of our Lord, and the latter to the framework of the order and law given in the Old Testament—which regrettably is not only not done but not even hinted at in the lectures—the Christ who indwells us is but a pale reflection of the Christ of the Gospels. In this sense, his theological framework is not dissimilar to those of Enoch Powell and Malcolm Muggeridge.

My own conclusion, therefore, is that although there are some weaknesses in the theology underlying the Reith Lectures, I nevertheless welcome their major thesis and congratulate Norman on his courage in being so outspoken against the current attempts to re-create Christ as a political figure.

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NOTES

- 1 The Reith Lectures were given by Dr Edward R. Norman on BBC Radio in the autumn of 1978. They have been published in 1979 by Oxford University Press under the title *Christianity and the World Order* (105pp).
- 2 E. R. Norman, *op. cit.* p 77.
- 3 *ibid.* p 74.
- 4 BBC Radio 3, 'Religion and Politics', 18 March 1979.
- 5 E. R. Norman, *op. cit.* p 7.
- 6 *ibid.* p 79.
- 7 *Church Times*, London, 8 December 1978.
- 8 E. R. Norman, *op. cit.* p 79.