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J. A. WALTER

BRITAIN IN DECLINE: CHRISTIAN INTERPRETATIONS
OF SOCIAL CHANGE

In this timely paper Dr. Walter asks how we should attempt to evaluate the changes which are taking place in society. He reviews five approaches to the subject commonly encountered in christian circles and warns us against the danger of worshipping a mythical past rather than attempting the painful task of seeing what God has to say in our ever-changing present.

There is much talk both in the mass media and in christian circles about Britain being 'in decline'. Can we disentangle distinctively christian views of our changing society from the neatly packaged versions of the media? In this article I assume that our world and our nation in particular is undergoing some form of social, or sociological, change — and by this I mean that in various ways our society is undergoing change, not for the first or the last time. My main aim is to look at how as Christians we can evaluate this change.

We cannot even begin to describe social change without implicitly interpreting and evaluating it, so that the question of evaluation comes in at a very early stage. Evaluating change is fraught with difficulties. For example, how may we know what constitutes progress or deterioration? God made specific and general promises to Israel as a nation — promises such as the peaceful occupancy of a fruitful land untroubled by enemies. Thus, it was clear when Israel was forced into exile or when her enemies were prevailing against her that something was wrong, that things had deteriorated. By contrast, God has made no such specific promises to other nations, and so it is problematic knowing what constitutes a sign that things are in decline. In the absence of promises from God about the fortunes of society

we are likely to accept the interpretive frameworks of secular thinking uncritically. For example — and a very important example — since the industrial revolution and the days of Adam Smith and Karl Marx it has become a part of the conventional wisdom of industrial societies that economics lies at the base of everything. Hence if the economy is in bad straits, then everything else in society will suffer. If the economy is in a bad way, we suppose that the whole of society — all institutions and all groups within society — are also in a bad way. A recent example of christian thinking of this sort was the Archbishop's (1976) appeal to the nation — an economic crisis suggested to him that the nation is rotten in every area of life and needs regeneration in every area. Yet the assumption that the economy is the trigger for every aspect of society, is the root of all our evils, is a form of economic determinism. And it is a somewhat strange bedfellow of the more overt moral determinism — the idea that individual morality is the key to a healthy society — into which many evangelicals try to translate it.

Even if we do decide that economics are important, it is still highly debatable what constitutes a healthy economy — what is a healthy situation to the industrialist may be a sick situation to the trade unionist. Is an economy to be evaluated primarily by its level of consumption, its mode of production, or its distribution of goods? The following statement by Pope John XXIII at least recognises that we have to think before we automatically agree with the media about the state of the economy:

The economic prosperity of any people is to be assessed not so much from the sum total of goods and wealth possessed as from the distribution of goods according to the norms of justice.

The way in which we interpret social change is influenced by our initial feelings as to whether this change is a good or a bad thing. When we perceive things to be going smoothly for us, we tend not to seek explanations, indeed we may not even be aware that society is changing. It is only when our interests are thwarted, when our taken-for-granted world becomes problematic, that we begin to seek an explanation; only when our traditional lifestyle begins to creak do we need to think about how society works.

Thus the majority of theories of social change presuppose contemporary change to be some kind of 'decline' which needs to be stemmed. (Even apparently optimistic revolutionary theories begin by presupposing that society at present is not as it ought to be.) This at any rate seems to be the case with supposedly

christian explanations of social change. It is thus worth asking of such explanations how it is that their proponents initially come to believe that society is in decline or (in a few cases) progressing?

Having sketched out a few aspects of and difficulties in the process of interpreting social change, I will now briefly review five approaches to contemporary change (not necessarily British approaches) that Christians have claimed to be Biblical. This short survey is not meant to be comprehensive: firstly it only includes those approaches which I have recently come across, which is a rather arbitrary means of selection; secondly I identify each approach by means of specific examples and the examples chosen may not be wholly representative; and thirdly my review is not systematically critical but rather tends to note, merely, some of the more common uses, abuses and shortcomings of each approach.

(a) *Eschatology: Change as a Sign of the Times*

In this view the world is in a perilous state, and this is indicative of the imminent return of Christ. An example is given in the following from an article on violence in schools (*Spectrum*, Vol. 7:3, May 1975, p.26):

There is however...a measure of comfort perhaps in the realisation that the Bible tells of such a breakdown in the 'end times'. Paul was writing to the Thessalonians, who believed that a personal return of Jesus Christ to this world was imminent. But, Paul says, before that happens, the restraining power of God over evil will have to be removed from the world. The increase of evil will *appear to be without explanation to humanity* (my emphasis), but it will herald the personal return for which they looked. If we are in fact living in such a time, it is good to know not only that God foreknew and forewarned, but that it is the 'darkest hour before the dawn'.

This is a different kind of approach from the others to be considered in that it is not what we commonsensically today call an 'explanation', for it does not seek to make sense of an event A in terms of a prior event B and does not talk in terms of cause and effect. Rather, as the quote above says, in the last times men will be *unable* to explain the evil that is rampant.

This Biblical truth is clearly open to abuse if it is twisted round into the claim that as soon as strange and/or bad things start happening that we cannot explain, then this shows that the last days are coming. This reasoning is wrong because it assumes that just because I cannot humanly explain what is going on in society this means that no-one ever will or that other people differently situated in society cannot explain it either. Sociologists have amply documented how knowledge to some extent depends on our position within society, and historians how it depends on our intellectual heritage and traditions. Thus what may appear totally inexplicable to, say, middle class English Christians may be easily understood by a starving Indian peasant, and vice versa. Therefore the eschatologically-minded Christian should beware before absolutising his inability to explain contemporary events and going on to claim this as a sign of the times.

I do not wish to dismiss the eschatological approach, but merely to point out that it can be and has been abused. Its transcendence of cause and effect and its placing of contemporary events within the broad sweep of God's plan for us show up the fragmented and narrow way in which our rationalistic age now tries to understand historical events. How to relate an eschatological view to specific current events, however, indeed whether it *can* be related to such events at all, is problematic.

(b) Judgment: Change as a Judgment on Society

This is in some ways similar to the eschatological approach, but tends to relate current social malaise to specific past societal sins and possibly tends to look backward to these sins rather than a forward direction as does the eschatological view. This means that the judgment view is more amenable to adopting aspects of cause-and-effect reasoning, i.e. that event A (current malaise) is in some sense due to prior event B (social sin).

The approach is further different from the eschatological in that its proponents rely more on the Old Testament than on the New. In so far as reliance is on the OT, especially on the prophets, my characterisation of the approach as backward-looking is an oversimplification, for the passages in the OT in which Israel's misfortunes are proclaimed as a judgment on her sins almost always look forward to the possibility of repentance, forgiveness, and restoration. Thus the biblical concept of judgment avoids the heresies both of fatalism and of utopianism. Fatalism supposes the world to be in such a state that nothing can be done about it, and characterises the oft criticised gnosticism

of many evangelicals who have seen involvement in society as a waste of time. Utopianism is the secular belief that all social problems could be solved if only we had enough knowledge. Judgment, by contrast, claims that human suffering is brought about by ourselves and will always be a feature of our life and society here on earth, but that the effects of our sin can be considerably mitigated if we become aware of our responsibility and repent. Judgment talks not merely of decline but also of emergence into a new existence (Van Riessen pp.31-6).

Once again the judgment approach to understanding social change is open to abuse, since the singling out of one group within society whose sins are responsible for the misfortunes of the whole society has obvious attractions for the powerful and the comfortable. By scapegoating the sinning group the rest of us may rest complacently, and this can lead to the most appalling atrocities against the stigmatised group. What is impressive about many of the OT judgment passages is that either no one group is let off the hook, or else it is the ruling group at whom the finger is pointed (this was certainly the case with Jesus). In the Bible it is not possible for the powerful and comfortable to rest in complacency. When the concept of judgment is used today by preachers who name specific sins and specific sinful groups, however, this Biblical feature is too often absent. Instead we find the named groups tend to be the working class, the weak, and the deviant, while their sins are those of which the comfortable middle class congregation may rest assured it is not guilty — drink, gambling, promiscuity, and short-run hedonism generally. In this situation the preaching of judgment leads not to repentance but to complacency; if judgment must be preached at all it must be to the guilty, not to the supposedly innocent.

*(c) Sphere Sovereignty: Change as an ongoing
Process of Differentiation*

The theory of sphere sovereignty developed by the Dutch philosopher Herman Dooyeweerd claims that there are different spheres of reality which should be allowed freedom to develop according to their own nature. Thus, for example, the family and the state have different functions and proceed according to different internal dynamics, and so it was an advance in history when the state emerged as something distinct from the family, that is, when it differentiated itself from the family group. The saga of human history has on the whole been one of increasing differentiation, and this is deemed a good thing; thus contemporary attempts to recombine spheres, e.g. state take-overs of education or industry, are seen as something to be

fought against. This framework is outlined by Van Riessen (p.75), who cites the example of family and church:

Sphere sovereignty is a principle, a guidepost at the beginning of the history of humanity. It has to be brought into practice, unfolded, in the course of history. If the exegesis is correct, the text in Genesis 'In the days of Enoch men began to call upon the name of the Lord' means that an independent community of worship, the first church, freed itself from an undifferentiated family life. In the course of history different associations of society split off and become independent according to their respective natures.

Herein lies the problem though, for it is not at all clear that this particular exegesis is correct, nor is it clear quite how the theory derives from the Bible. As with secular theories of social evolution (e.g. Parsons) with which it bears some common features, the theory of sphere sovereignty does not make clear why societal differentiation is (a) so important for understanding present day social change, or (b) why it is such a good thing. Nor does it make clear how to fit the minutia of our complex world into such a wide-ranging theory.

The attractions of both secular and christian adaptations of the concept of societal differentiation are that our present world can thereby be very broadly located within a cosmic scheme, and that norms can be provided for future action (Nisbet). The schema tells us where we are going and where we have been, and this can be very reassuring. Whether it is also true is another matter.

(d) *The Secular City: change as an ongoing process of secularisation*

A rather different attempt to harness the concept of differentiation to a christian view of social change is to be found in Harvey Cox's book *The Secular City*. For primitive man, the social and natural worlds were sacred; the radical teaching of the Judaeo-Christian faith was that God is not to be identified with this world but is transcendent and so man is free to act in a demythicised world. Cox claims that this process of secularisation — the fleeing of the gods from the forest and the consequent opening up of the world to man — is thoroughly Biblical, and the emergence of pragmatism and the demise of metaphysics in contemporary urban life is thus to be welcomed. This approach is also to be found in John Wild's *Human Freedom and Social Order*,

which welcomes man's freeing of himself from cosmological thinking and from the Platonic idea that reality is to be found other than in the everyday world.

This notion of man-come-of-age has a lot in common with other theories of societal differentiation and social evolution for it sees society as having emerged from a monolithic collectivity in which religion was originally undifferentiated from social institutions. It also has much in common with the still popular idea of the early 19th century sociologist Auguste Comte that societies evolve from a religious phase through a metaphysical phase into the mature age of positive science.

Cox of course has been much criticised, and this is not the place to go into the debate in detail; it is worth outlining a few of the objections though (see Ramsey, and Hamilton) for some of these are relevant to other approaches outlined in this article. For convenience I will separate sociological and theological criticisms:

Theological criticisms. (1) Cox uses the Bible in a highly selective way (indeed he also uses sociology in the same way). Having decided that contemporary life in the secular city is a good thing, he turns to the Bible to find support. (2) If the secular is so good, it is not clear why Cox should turn to the Bible for his authority; surely there are better secular sources around? (3) He draws a very tenuous line between secularity (a consequence of the Biblical opening up of the world) which is a good thing, and secularism (a denial of the existence of a transcendental realm) which is a bad thing. Indeed, at times Cox appears to chuck God as well as metaphysical idols out of the window. And even if he does not do this, it would seem that the secular city which he so admires does.

Sociological criticisms. (1) Cox assumes that because secularisation exists it must be functional for society, and that because it is functional it must be good. Both assumptions are dubious. (2) Cox repeats a classic error of social evolutionism in seeing his own society as the peak of human civilisation. Thus he identifies the key characteristic of his society and then reinterprets the whole of human history in terms of this characteristic. (3) Cox supposes that biblical theism is the sole cause of modern science and industry. This is a common misunderstanding of Max Weber's thesis concerning the relation between the protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism; Weber saw Biblical theism as but one cause (though an important one) among many in the genesis of the modern era. Cox by contrast

commits himself to a kind of theological determinism, a monocausal explanation, which few would see as fitting the historical facts.

I have given some space to Cox because, for all his shortcomings, he is one of the few theologians who has seriously attempted to incorporate (what he sees as) sociology into a theology of social change — and a christian view of social change cannot afford to ignore sociology these days.* The challenge of Cox for us is — can we do any better?

(e) Moral Determinism: Social Change as the Result of Declining Personal Morals

According to a fifth view, perhaps epitomised in some of the statements from the Festival of Light, society is in a mess because of a loss of religious faith by its members, because of a lack of 'spiritual nerve', and because of a decline in 'moral standards'. This is a kind of reversal of economic determinism in that, instead of everything depending on economic activity, it all depends on personal faith and morals. As I have suggested earlier in the discussion of judgment, the model of moral determinism grossly distorts the Biblical treatment of social problems. In the Bible, social malaise develops not only as the result of idol worship or personal immorality, but as the result of these *together with* economic oppression and the misuse of political power. Moreover, as suggested in the discussion of secularisation, the idea of a single cause for the events of the modern world has been well and truly discredited in the aftermath of Max Weber's work. The power of this kind of argument for Christians though is considerable. A few years ago, when industrialisation and science seemed an unmitigated blessing, Christians were only too glad to take the credit by mis-quoting Weber and Tawney to the effect that these benefits were all due to our godly forebears. Now that the blessing has become somewhat tarnished, the corollary is that if only the nation would rediscover God and the old virtues then everything would be right as rain again.

From the perspective of Christians in the third world, however, this is by no means the only way of interpreting Britain's current economic situation. One does not have to dig around in the moral sphere in order to come up with an explanation of why our supposedly oh-so-precious economy is supposedly collapsing. Rather the problem is that the British

* Reinhold Niebuhr and Jacques Ellul are two others and a fuller treatment of our subject would have to look at their work in detail

have an idea that it is virtually God-ordained that they should for ever be top of the international economic and political league. Our leaders were all brought up in the age of Empire and their way of looking at things has been thoroughly moulded by the ideology that Britain rules the world, and indeed this view is present to some extent in the younger generation too. The facts that we have now lost our Empire and our sources of cheap raw materials mean that we have lost our former economic privileges and will now become like any other ordinary nation — somewhere in the middle of the league table. This need not be a problem or a crisis — it is only so if we continue to hanker after a past glory which had merely happened to be our good fortune for a century or so. This brings us back to the beginning of the article in raising the question of how we know that change means decline or progress; it may be neither, merely an economic fact of life. This fact only becomes a crisis if economics is paramount. The church's role should not be to join forces with the mass media in interpreting the economic situation as one of crisis and decline, but to be alongside people in this difficult and perplexing experience, to help them interpret it (Ellul p.69), and to help them see what new things God has in store for them. To the third world Christian who never believed in the western version of family life, it seems absurd for British Christians to claim that economic change and the possible end of civilisation is being caused by 'moral decay' and 'the decline in family life'.

There is always the temptation to hark back to the security of a past age, to invent a mythical version of the 'good old days', and to abandon the distinctively Judaic-Christian view of history that God is constantly at work. Pannenberg (p.315-6) outlines this difference by contrasting ancient Israel with her neighbours, neighbours who

could not find any meaning in that which incessantly changes as such. Human life seemed to be meaningful only insofar as it participated in a pre-temporal divine event which was reported by myth...Man saves himself from the threat of the constant change of history in the security of the changeless mythical primal reality...By way of contrast, Israel is distinguished by the fact that it experienced the reality of its God not in the shadows of a mythical primitive history, but more decisively in historical change itself.

In so far as we hanker after an idealised version of a godly and virtuous Empire, we too are worshipping a mythical past rather than attempting the painful task of seeing what God has to say in

our ever-changing present. Somehow or other, this is our task, renewed though we may be by the plethora of secular and christian models of change on the market.

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