

FAITH AND THOUGHT

VOLUME 113 ● NUMBER 2 ● OCTOBER 1987

*A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the
Christian Revelation and modern research*

GENERAL EDITOR: Dr. A. B. Robins



Published for
THE VICTORIA INSTITUTE



by
THE PATERNOSTER PRESS

C. H. Hill

Christians—Prophets or Politicians?

Christians have generally been ambivalent in their attitude to political involvement largely because religion is in essence a statement of eternal principles which does not fit easily into the transient world of political manifestos. When Jesus said 'I came not to destroy the law but to fulfil it' he was in one sense exemplifying this dilemma. A study of the prayer 'Peace, justice and freedom for all men' may help to put this ambivalence into perspective. The prayer has an honoured place in Christian liturgy and has been adopted by political and protest groups as the goal towards which the organization of society should be aiming. In many societies these attributes are more notable for their absence than their achievement. What can and should Christian organizations and individuals do in order to promote them?

Perhaps the first realistic step is to stop using the phrase altogether. As commonly understood by those who are neither professional philosophers nor theologians the concepts of peace, justice and freedom are mutually incompatible. The words have become debased. For example, in popular thought, peace is today identified primarily with the concept of nuclear disarmament. At a more informed level it is equated with pacifism, whether the conflict is organized by governments or by revolutionaries. In another dimension it is seen as an absence of war. These concepts are passive in the sense that good will be achieved by giving up or refraining from something rather than by imposing it or aggressively seeking it.

Justice is commonly understood in at least three ways: fairness as between individuals or groups; the administration of the law; or a form of society in which, in some general but unspecified way, all men are equal. The understanding of justice varies from retribution to inevitable if not immediate forgiveness—'to understand all is to forgive all'. All of these concepts imply an ultimate ability of some authority to impose justice by force whether that force be moral or physical. Justice therefore is an active concept, since it operates within the concept of an ordered and not an anarchical society.

Freedom is an equally ambiguous term. The understanding of it varies from anarchy, through freedom under the law, to freedom from what is perceived as oppression whether by individuals, organizations or governments. It is essentially an active concept, although in

modern usage it is often associated with aggression, as in the phrase 'freedom fighter'.

There is misunderstanding and contradiction within each term so it is scarcely surprising that the incorporation of all three into a shared vision of a Kingdom of God has yet to be achieved.

What is the starting point?

Since the new Utopia is unlikely to arrive within the life span of today's newly-born baby, the ordinary Christian must be clear as to why the journey towards it should be undertaken at all. History suggests that the quest is never ending and that the signposts along the way are constantly being changed.

Professor Keith Ward suggests that it is in the understanding of others, of their concepts, ideas and aspirations, even though we may not identify ourselves with those aspirations, that we find ourselves.¹ The Christian life, he says, is not one of self-renunciation or of self-realization, but of self-transcendence—an echo of the words of Jesus 'He that seeks his life shall lose it, but he that loses his life for my sake and the gospel's shall find it.' Only thus, says Professor Ward, shall we see that we are parts one of another and therefore all related to God at the centre. By self-transcendence I take Professor Ward also to mean the removal of those hindrances which inhibit the transcendental God who is within us from communicating with that same God who is also around us. A recognition that it is not so much God knocking at the door and asking to be let in, but asking to be let out.

This is a religious view of life which it would be irrelevant to incorporate in a party manifesto. It does not say that in some mysterious way through the activity of some political organization the world will be persuaded to act on the assumption of the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man, but it does suggest that if we really believe that we only become fulfilled through self-transcendence, then this will also be true of others. In this case we should begin to work for a world in which self-transcendence is given a greater opportunity than self-realization or self-renunciation. As soon as we accept this, we are committed to some form of political involvement, since such changes will only come about through secular intervention in the legal framework of society. But intervention presupposes an elite, a sort of priesthood, to whom alone the detailed knowledge of the desirable end has been given. Since only they know the end it follows that they alone can determine the means. Theirs may well be

1. Prof. K. Ward. Address to Wesley Memorial Church, Oxford, 1985.

a largely selfless approach. It would be wrong to suppose that all who seek or assume power do so in order to improve their material lot, even though the improvement may be an inevitable by-product of that power. But the Christian remains highly sceptical both of the infallibility of the knowledge and the incorruptibility of the powerful.

Obstacles to realism

There are perhaps three great obstacles to the development of realistic involvement of the western Christian in the political scene, whether on the international, national or local scale. The first is the sense of generalized guilt which arises from being part of the society in which he lives. He is led to believe not only that the society is immoral but amongst the primary causes of its current immoralities are the sins of the forefathers. In the western world these are typified as imperialism and industrialization.

The response to this sense of guilt takes many extreme forms from 'dropping out' to a belief that evil began in Europe some time in the sixteenth century, is still largely the monopoly of the western nations and what corruption has spread to other races is attributable mainly to the west. The first step to realism is an understanding that all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, and the second is to claim and to operate within that freedom which comes from a knowledge of sins forgiven. To deny the evils that have been and are the by-products of the spread of western capitalism and imperialism would be as foolish as to deny the great benefits which have also been their by-products. History provides few examples of societies which have notably and consistently promoted peace, justice and freedom simultaneously and even fewer which have not been susceptible to corruption or tempted to imperialism during their development. To attempt to measure the overall effect would be to stretch the limits of cost-benefit analysis way beyond all bounds of credibility. But to conclude or to imply that western imperialism is the primary cause of the absence of peace, justice and freedom throughout the world is, to say the least, a very unscriptural view of the nature of man.

The second obstacle to realistic involvement is the belief that any problem can be solved by a combination of money and technology. Since most money and technology originates in the western world this re-inforces the sense of generalized and collective guilt and leads to suggestions for action which are often impracticable and which, even if they were not, would be unlikely to achieve the desired ends. It may be desirable, for many reasons, that we should give up eating meat. But it certainly does not follow that, if we did so,

world wide famine would be eliminated within a few years. It may be desirable, indeed it could scarcely be argued otherwise, that the world should spend much less on armaments but from this it does not follow that sophisticated health centres and hospitals would spring up in a few short years all over the third world, neither does it follow that even if they did the third world would be notably better off. Man does not live by bread alone, even though he cannot live without it. In order to achieve peace, justice and freedom, the third world, just as much as the developed world, desperately needs a spiritual dimension which money and technology make no claim to supply.

But the third and greatest obstacle to realistic Christian involvement is the belief that there is a relatively short term solution to the achievement of these aims and that, once achieved, the solution or the mechanism for maintaining them will be perpetually acceptable. Such a simplistic belief denies God all opportunity for change and eliminates dynamism from the earthly kingdom.

Future shock is nothing new

It is fashionable to assume that the most discussed problems of today such as inflation, unemployment, the welfare state, war, rapid technological change, ecological pollution, and so on, are new and peculiar to this generation. Even if it is grudgingly accepted that history provides some examples of each, it is argued that the rate of change and the scale of problems are now so vastly different that only totally new approaches can solve them. One difficulty is the dearth of totally new approaches, for there are few forms of intervention which have not been tried and found wanting throughout the long history of mankind. One such approach was forcefully enunciated by Marx in his view that there was an inevitable progress from capitalism through communism to the ultimate withering away of the state. Since this was the destiny of mankind anything which impeded the rapid arrival of this destiny was not only counterproductive but also doomed to failure. As societies had to die in order to be resurrected in a higher form then the duty of the truly enlightened was to hasten that resurrection rather than to postpone it by alleviating the sufferings of this present world. In this view mankind can either accelerate or retard the arrival of Utopia, but cannot prevent it.

The second extreme approach is that Utopia arises not through death and resurrection but by logical, controlled progress towards the desired end. This might be called the genetic engineering approach. Given that we know the desired end we so manage the conditions of development that natural forces will thenceforth bring it

about. In this view Utopia can only arrive through the consciously directed efforts of mankind and God can only work through those who proclaim themselves to be His chosen people, since they alone understand his purpose.

A third approach, which equally illustrates the triumph of hope over experience is that mankind in seeking first his own good will, automatically maximizes the good of others.

It is scarcely surprising that echoes of Judaic/Christian thought are to be found in most political theories whether hierarchical or anarchical since, in the end, both religion and politics are profoundly concerned with the relationship of one man to another and hence with the organization of society. History demonstrates that, both in religious and political thought, the greater the intensity of the vision of the 'best' form of society the greater the dehumanization of that society and the greater the degree of intolerance within it.

The majesty of God and the ingenuity of man

The temptation which faces the Christian, justifiably angry and bewildered in a world in which the strong appear to get stronger and the weak weaker (which is perhaps a more accurate and realistic way of expressing the widening gap between the powerful and the powerless than to say that the rich get richer while the poor get poorer) is to assume that an unjust society can be made just simply by altering the power structure. There is little historic justification for believing that a capitalist or a socialist state *per se* is a just state in any meaningful sense, nor in believing that either is, or must become, more just than the other. Neither is there evidence to support the view that a 'religious' state is more just than a secular one. There is grave danger in believing that all of the troubles of this world can be attributed to capitalists or communists, to landlords or multi-national companies or trades unions, or to resistance fighters. From this, it is a small step to argue that—in the name of peace, justice and freedom—the offending category should be eliminated. 'If thine eye offend thee pluck it out'—as Hitler did with the Jews, Stalin did with the Kulaks, the Church has done with heretics.

We all stand in danger of being seduced by the apocalyptic approach. It is so terrifyingly easy. Yet, by its nature, it can only exacerbate the problems which it is supposed to solve. There is no way in which it can be made compatible with peace, justice or freedom. The Christian must begin from a different base. As the Revd. Edward Rogers in 'A Christian Commentary on Communism' writes:-

"The Social Gospel is not a special sub-division for ecclesiastical amateur politicians, nor is it a humanly planned political programme on which a few carefully chosen New Testament texts nestle with the decorative irrelevance of parsley on boiled cod . . . It would be fatally easy to simplify and distort the demand laid upon us . . . by so emphasizing the "this worldly" aspect as to present faith as though it were a reasonable secularism. (Christianity) is indeed, in its wholeness, the alternative to Communism as it is to every plan to restore society without God; but always, to be true to itself, it must depend upon the majesty of God and not the ingenuity of men. For that reason it is not likely to be rapidly accepted.

The world which is frightened of Communism wants a rival short cut to paradise and wants a programme that can be amended . . . to suit local conveniences and prejudices. The Christian can offer no such programme . . . (He) therefore has to walk the razor edge between waiting on God and serving the present age . . . he is a realist who does not expect too much of sinful men. He is aware of the urgent necessity of social reform, is not thrown off balance by disappointment and is more clearly aware of the tangled complexity of the situation. He knows that to work for the second best whilst proclaiming with equal conviction the attainable reality of the best demands a well informed loving kindness . . . he will learn to sympathise with the politician who cannot wait till all are redeemed but must work now with the materials, good or bad, that lie to hand.²

In essence, then, the individual Christian has to try to understand the political and economic realities which underlie the particular problem he is trying to address, he must try to appreciate what motivates those who do not share his view of how a specific problem might be solved and he must have some idea of how his own views appear to those who differ from him. Humility—not deference—is the key note. The arrogance of those who proclaim that no true Christian can possibly oppose the particular party or cause for which they stand is scarcely a helpful starting point.

From rhetoric to realism

Humility is unlikely to be acquired unless one begins to grasp the complexity of any problem. William Blake's assertion that 'he who would do good to another must do it in minute particulars' is often the start of the long march from rhetoric to realism. The taunt so often levelled at the pietistic—that they are so heavenly-minded that they are no earthly-good—can often be equally applied in its obverse to those who claim that the essence of Christianity is the gospel of a

2. Rev. E. Rogers. *A Christian Commentary on Communism*. Wyvern Books. 213, (1959).

heaven on earth. They become so earthly-minded that they equate the Kingdom of God with a political system.

The Revd. Tom Stacey in refuting a view that religious and political leaders have singularly failed to offer the youth of this country something worthwhile to live for says 'politics is not about inspirational leadership . . . it is about arranging things so that the rest of us can get on with our lives together, inspired or otherwise, with a reasonable measure of order. Religion is not, in the first place, about moral uplift and acts of charity. It is about man's relationship with God.'³ He then quotes the NEB version of Proverbs 29:18 'Where no one is in authority the people break loose' and suggests this as a salutary text for both politicians and senior clerics.

If religion is primarily about man's relationship with God, and 'the true aim and purpose of man is to know God and to enjoy Him for ever' then the Christian's involvement in the political process will be directed towards developing a society in which individuals or groups are unlikely to be penalized socially or economically if in their daily lives they try to demonstrate the attributes of the God they are striving to know. Since no two people are likely to have the same understanding of those attributes, any detailed plan for that society is likely to be suspect. Most would agree that the greatness of a nation, in the religious rather than the economic sense, is a reflection of the extent to which its people are both responsible and compassionate, attributes of individuals, not of political institutions. The paradox of trying to legislate for responsibility and compassion by substituting the corporate for the personal is that the legislation tends to create a significant number of irresponsible and selfish people; what is everyone's business rapidly becomes nobody's responsibility.

Peace, justice and freedom are sensitive plants which can suffer as much from well-intentioned intervention as from unrestrained competition. They are only likely to survive in a society in which people neither seek privilege nor envy it, recognise happiness but do not consciously pursue it, do not clamour for rights in greater proportion than they are prepared to accept offsetting responsibilities, are proud of their heritage but humble about their future and recognize that neither the individual nor the institution or organization which they support is an island. The responsible Christian will not create expectations which have no hope of fulfilment, he will be realistic (but not necessarily conservative) in his assessment of what is possible and do his job as effectively as possible with the means which become available to him. Stewardship of natural resources involves

3. Rev. T. Stacey. Letter to the Times, July 10th 1985.

conservation of time and manpower as well as not squandering other natural resources. As a political programme the foregoing, once its implications are understood, is unlikely to win an election, but some form of involvement in the political process does seem to be necessary.

The options in a democracy

Peace, justice and freedom are not conditions but processes and as such they have no final solutions, but it is reasonable to assume that these processes cannot continue in any form of dynamic balance unless certain pre-conditions are met. Not least of these is a consensus that the processes are interdependent, set within finite limits of material abundance and are all desirable as means to the end of knowing God and enjoying him forever. The striving of individuals towards these ends should not be diminished by the view that we are all subordinate to vast collective currents of world affairs. Individuals are, of course, shaped by 'the mysterious currents which move humanity', but equally these collective movements derive their power from the strength or the acquiescence of people within them. F. H. Bradley once wrote 'Personal morality and political and social institutions cannot exist apart. In general, the better the one the better the other.'⁴ So what do we do?

The individual Christian seems to have three choices, each of which appears equally valid and one of which has to be taken if only by default. These choices are not, of course, exclusive to Christians.

First, he may consistently support one political party or pressure group and adhere to it faithfully, whatever he may feel about particular aspects of the way in which it performs, on the grounds that on average it is likely to produce a better balance of peace, justice and freedom than any other. Second, he may say that no group deserves his continuing and unquestioning loyalty; he will support it on some issues but not on others. He may vote differently at each election according as his judgement on past performance and future promises dictates, but within the democratic political system of which he is a part he will lose no chance of urging strongly his views on particular issues. Third, he may say that because politics is about power, because power is corrupting and there are few issues which remain pure once they are taken up by pressure groups, he wants no part in them.

Some side effects of these choices are interesting. In a relatively

4. F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies*, O.U.P. 188, 1927.

evenly balanced party political system, the greater the number of people who take the first choice the less important they become. For if the three parties in the UK, for example, could each count on a solid 30% of the electorate whatever happened, the uncommitted 10% would hold the power. Desirable or not such a state of affairs hardly corresponds with the popular conception of democracy. If the second course is taken, a sufficiently strong pressure group can cause a government to take an unjustifiable step simply in order to remain in power. The third choice, in its attempt to maintain personal purity through non-participation can hasten the corruption of society through failure to protest against the irresponsible use of power.

In practice, most people probably opt for different courses at particular times rather than adhering rigidly to one or another irrespective of circumstance. Rigid adherence can always claim the blessing of consistency and principle—as no doubt did the Pharisees and the inquisitors in the fifteenth century, while those who opt for different courses at different times can claim the blessings of pragmatism and existentialism—as no doubt did Mr Worldly Wise in *Pilgrims Progress* (or would have done if he had had sufficient foresight to coin the word 'existential'.)

Summary and conclusion

At this point we must draw together the three threads of this exposition.

1. The Christian life is one of self-transcendence. (Prof. Ward)
2. To be true to itself, Christianity must depend upon the majesty of God and not the ingenuity of man. (Rev. Edward Rogers)
3. Religion is not . . . about moral uplift and acts of charity but about man's relationship to God. Politics is not about inspirational leadership but . . . (about) arranging a reasonable measure of order.

None of these quotations imply, nor have their authors suggested, that Christians can or should evade involvement in the political process. But it may be fairly inferred that such involvement is conditional, as in any secular activity.

The question to be faced is not how can the Christian put the world to rights but how can he approach, and bring others to approach, the Lord and stoop before God on high? It was the prophet Micah who raised this problem, for if God is transcendent, beyond the range of human experience or reason, it becomes somewhat presumptuous to assume or to infer that our particular blue-print for Utopia is the only

one acceptable to Him. As God said to Job 'Who is this whose ignorant words cloud my design in darkness?' Job can only reply 'I have spoken of things too wonderful for me to know, of great things which I have not understood. I knew Thee then only by report, but now I see Thee with my own eyes. Therefore I melt away. I repent in dust and ashes.'⁵

The danger with our current pre-occupation with the Christian involvement with secular issues—whether they be party politics, nuclear disarmament, liberation movements, anti-communism, animal rights or other causes—is that we lose sight of the majesty of God. In His place we set up an altar to the cause which we have put above all else. It is this danger which is reflected in the words of Shakespeare 'But Man, proud Man, dresst in a brief authority, most ignorant of what he's most assured . . . performs such fantastic deeds before high heaven as make the angels weep.'⁶ A deep consciousness of the majesty of God will call us to walk very humbly in His presence, thereby fulfilling one of Micah's conditions for the approach to Him. We shall see that in the scale of God's assessment our own ingenuity is not necessarily immeasurably higher than that of others who have carefully thought their way through to a different solution. In considering their case we shall have followed the second of Micah's precepts—to deal justly.

Given these two precepts it is difficult for the Christian to adopt any role other than that of an agent of reconciliation. Reconciliation is not a passive concept. It brings differences out into the open. It maintains communication between the opposing sides. It is positive in that it recognizes that there is a problem but also that problems have solutions—often costly ones, seldom final ones, but at least solutions. Confrontation on the other hand is negative since it lessens communication, disguises the true nature of the problem and ultimately leads to conflict from which no solution is possible short of further conflict until the positive course of reconciliation is sought once more. Reconciliation should be the watchword of the Christian's involvement in the bodies which wield social and political power. This is perhaps his hardest task. As Prof. Macquarrie argues, most of these bodies seek to increase polarization as a means of achieving their ends.⁷ Legitimate differences of opinion become hardened into impersonal conflicts as the group becomes swayed by self-interest and seeks to perpetuate itself with a ruthlessness that generally goes far beyond that of individuals acting on their own. It is so much less

5. Job. 38 v.1 (NEB).

6. Shakespeare. *Measure for Measure, Act 2, sc2*.

7. Prof. J. Macquarrie. *The Concept of Peace*. SCM Press, 79, 1973.

spectacular to engage humbly and steadily in pursuit of a solution which will ultimately require reconciliation of opposing views than in joining demonstrations which so often seem designed to provoke confrontation. The unfortunate reality of our time is that party politics and pressure groups are often characterized by carefully contrived intolerance and hatred. It is within that awesome context that a Christian accepts that the price of continuing involvement will almost certainly require endorsement of views and participation in actions which are contrary to his principles.

Micah's third condition for approaching God is to love mercy. The over zealous Christian, faced with a world in which there are so many instances of the lack of peace, justice and freedom, and eager for the social and political change which he sees might remedy this can so easily fall into the same trap as an earlier prophet. Jonah, once he had overcome his initial reluctance to become involved at all, was vastly upset when his target audience listened to his words and repented. God's mercy had put him out of a job and he was furious ('mortally angry' as the NEB puts it). The cause, and his part in it, had become an end in itself. Because he considered his views to be unalterable truth in a rapidly changing world he debarred himself from approaching God on high. No longer did he deal justly, love mercy or walk humbly before his God. He had totally failed to see that time had made ancient good uncouth.

To some this exploration may seem a passive if not a negative approach. But the reality is otherwise. Such an approach requires a rigorous spiritual, intellectual and emotional discipline, evolved for a fast moving spiritual battle in which the targets are seldom those which are apparently so easy to identify and in any case are constantly moving. The Christian must indeed learn, as he intervenes in the worldly structures around him, to be as wise as a serpent and as innocent as a dove in the midst of a perverse and crooked generation. But learn he must for he cannot opt out.