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Britain Today: How we came to be here and what we can do about it

In this challenging survey of the state of Britain today, Michael Nazir-Ali describes and explains our current situation, focussing on the state of the family, the rise of home-made spiritualities and the phenomenon of scientific reductionism. In response he sets out a vision for how the church can serve the nation by reversing our amnesia about our Christian heritage (especially in education), bringing Christian values and virtues into the public sphere and the marketplace, making our worship visible, and renewing our commitment to mission and evangelism rooted in friendship and witness.

Visiting Britain today

What will a visitor to Britain today see? She will notice a well-maintained physical infrastructure with (generally) good roads and a reasonable system of public transport (even if Britons complain about it). She will also quickly become aware of a social security net which aims to prevent people falling into serious poverty and which provides a comprehensive 'cradle to the grave' health service. Even with the advent of the financial crisis, there is work available for people and the majority enjoy a decent standard of living. In spite of threats from violent extremists, the security situation is also stable.

Closer examination, however, of the society in which she finds herself will reveal other aspects of life which will cause her concern: the constant reliance on alcohol, or other stimulants, by all sections of the population, to keep going at home or work or play will be one such. The social dysfunction of the High Street or of 'clubland' at night, especially over weekends, will be characterised by excessive consumption of alcohol, street violence and crime, large numbers of young girls out on their own and young people attempting to forge relationships with very loud noise as the background and very thin social fabric to sustain them. Our visitor may well ask herself how a literate society, with a proud history and significant material and social culture, has allowed such a state of affairs to emerge and to continue.

The state of the family

One feature of the social scene which will surely strike our visitor is the state of the family. There are all the figures, of course, which she will, no doubt, come

across. For the first time since records began, by 2011, there will be more unmarried than married people of marriageable age. As the humanist philosopher, Brenda Almond, points out, whilst some relationships of cohabitation undoubtedly last for many years, on the whole they are more unstable than marriage. This is partly because, in many cases, the intention is to avoid the commitment that marriage requires. Her claim is backed up by figures: the median length for cohabitation is only two years. After that, there is either marriage or a breaking up of the relationship. Of those that do not result in marriage, most break up within ten years.

Where there is a child involved, more than half cohabiting relationships break up within five years of the birth of the child. This contrasts with only 8% of married couples parting during this period.¹ Even more worryingly, even of those who marry after cohabitation, a much higher proportion are likely to divorce than among married people who have not cohabited. This, of course, undermines one of the main reasons given for cohabitation; that it is a preparation for marriage. Almond also refers to research which shows that, except for the most extreme cases, divorce is harmful for children, even where there is significant conflict in the marriage. Once again, this contradicts the new wisdom that divorce, in situations of conflict, is good for children. This is a somewhat convenient doctrine which allows parents to get what they want and absolves them of any guilt.² Both divorce and cohabiting relationships with children which break down result in lone-parenthood and contribute to child poverty; material, social, psychological and spiritual.

Figures and facts, such as the ones above, are produced regularly in any discussion of the malaise affecting the family. What is *not* said so often is that this state of affairs is not merely an accident, a concatenation of otherwise discrete events. In fact, it is, at least partly, the result of a well-resourced social and intellectual movement, which emerged in the 1960s and is still very much in the ascendant. As I have pointed out elsewhere, Marxist philosophers such as Antonio Gramsci and Herbert Marcuse, believed that the fundamental structures of society needed to be infiltrated and undermined. Marriage and family were key targets in the cause of producing non-repressive societies which would then be ripe for revolution.³ They have had their expositors in this country and elsewhere in the West. People like Anthony Giddens have argued that the separation of sexuality from reproduction (through artificial contraception) and of reproduction from sexuality (through assisted reproduction techniques), have made sex chiefly a means to self-expression and self-fulfilment. This, in turn, has led to 'pure relationships' which are entirely subjective and do not depend on any social or legal constraints, especially in terms of how long they last. That is determined by each partner feeling that the relationship's continuance is beneficial to them.⁴ This is some of the background also to Rowan Williams' criticism, in his 1989 lecture *The Body's Grace*, of those who regard heterosexual marriage as 'absolute, exclusive and ideal'.⁵

Whilst Gramsci and Marcuse saw the undermining of vital social institutions as a prelude to political revolution, more recent critics have seen it rather as the evolution of society away from patriarchal, heterosexual norms. This has led in

1 Almond 2006; Berthoud and Gershuny 2000.
 2 Almond 2006: 142f
 3 Nazir-Ali 2008a. Online at www.standpointmag.co.uk/breaking-faith-with-britain-june

4 Giddens 1992
 5 Williams 2002:6f, online at www.igreens.org.uk/bodys_grace.htm. For a forceful critique see Taylor 2008: 102f.

this country, for example, to an end to any public doctrine of marriage and certainly to the demise of a Christian one. All relationships will increasingly be on an equal footing and no one form of the family will be privileged.⁶

In the 1990s, Cambridge University's Group for the History of Population and Social Structure and its Centre for Family Research were still presenting mounting evidence for the ubiquity and longevity of the traditional structure of the family. By 2007 this had changed to assertions that male role-models were not necessary for children and to claims that research showed that children in homosexual households were in no way disadvantaged.⁷ More and more research is showing, however, that children of both sexes need healthy relationships with male and female parents for a well-rounded upbringing. Boys, for example, relate to fathers in a quite particular way. They need fathers for the development of their identity, especially in terms of appropriate patterns of masculinity. This leads to a proper self-esteem and to being able to forge good relationships with people of the same and of the opposite gender. This is in no way to neglect or to minimise the recognition due to lone-parents who bring up children on their own. To *find* oneself a lone-parent is one thing but to *plan* for and to *legislate* for situations where a child will not ever have a father is quite another. Yet this is exactly what the trend of recent legislation and policy has been.⁸

The results of this 'liberation' can be seen everywhere: broken families with an absent parent (usually the father), the psychological trauma of fractured relationships, children without crucial bonding with one parent (often the father) and, for boys particularly, the lack of a role-model at important stages in their growing up. For children, both boys and girls, there is a vital ingredient missing which is needed in the maturing of their identities. The CIVITAS study *How Do Fathers Fit In?* shows the impact which fathers have on their children's educational progress.⁹ The Newsweek article 'The Trouble with Boys' points out that the most reliable indicator of how a boy will perform in school is whether he has a father at home.¹⁰

Because of our misguided and misleading 'gurus', a large number of boys are growing up without fathers. Is it any surprise then that they are lagging behind in school and are more and more exposed to the dangers of substance abuse and of being tempted into crime and street violence.¹¹ Dysfunctional family situations are leading to children experiencing difficulties in communication, especially across the generations, and being lonely from an early age. This itself has consequences for mental, social and spiritual well-being.

Home-made spiritualities

Alongside this rampant 'constructivism' (or perhaps we should say deconstruction?) regarding the family, there is also the increasing tendency for a home-made

6 Morgan 2002: 27f.

7 Hunt 2000; Richards 2000; Thompson 2007 (online at www.foundation.cam.ac.uk/uploads/File/CAMArticles/cam%2050/cambridge%20present.pdf)

8 Byrd 2005 (online at www.narth.com/docs/GenderComplementarityByrd.pdf); Herzog 2001; Parke 1996.

9 See www.civitas.org.uk/hwu/fathers.php.

10 See www.msnbc.msn.com/id/10965522/site/newsweek/page/4/print/1/displaymode/1098/.

11 O'Neill 2002 (online at www.civitas.org.uk/pubs/experiments.php).

spirituality. It was thought important that Christianity and the churches should be submitted to a 'hermeneutic of suspicion' so that their social role in providing stability for society could be questioned and weakened. In its place we have, however, either what Newman called 'the dreary hopeless irreligion'¹² or, on the other hand, a credulous *smorgasbord* of pick 'n' mix DIY which generally goes under the label of New Age spirituality.

Whatever its justification, the privatisation of religion since the Peace of Westphalia (1648) has had the twin effects of firstly removing the grounding for the very values – such as inalienable dignity, equality and liberty – which the Enlightenment wanted to uphold and, secondly, of encouraging an unbridled pluralism: if people's beliefs were confined to the private sphere, they could believe whatever they liked. It did not matter to the body politic. When this became allied to the nineteenth century *penchant* for Absolute Idealism and to a certain understanding of the *philosophia perennis*, as well as exposure to religions of Indian origin, it gave rise to movements like Theosophy. This last claims to embody truths basic to all religions but is inspired by fundamental Hindu ideas, especially as they relate to claims that all religions teach the same truths and are all paths to the one reality.¹³ It goes without saying that, as a movement, it is hostile to Christian claims of possessing a unique revelation.

The emergence of highly individualised spiritualities, which characterise our society today, has to be understood against this background. On the one hand, I am free to construct my own spiritual meaning and, on the other, all spiritualities are at base the same and are leading to the same goal. This is also the background to talk of 'faith communities' and the like as if 'faith' was an undifferentiated something or other which manifested itself in different religious traditions. There is much confusion between the faculty for believing and the content of what is believed, between *fides qua* and *fides quae creditur*. Naturally, in such a scheme of things it is very hard to accommodate a faith which makes universal claims (based on events which can, at least to some extent, be investigated historically) and which demands not only intellectual assent but also complete trust and a moral working out of its implications.¹⁴

Some years ago, the BBC screened a series of programmes on the spiritual situation in Britain called the *Soul of Britain*.¹⁵ My participation in the programme showed me that the eclipse of Christianity in this culture does not mean the demise of spirituality which is alive and well. It does mean, though, that people are willing to believe the most outlandish and bizarre superstitions so long as they do not affect the life-style and choices they have made for themselves. This is very far from the teaching of the Church that faith is not contrary to reason but affirms and completes it.

Both the 'long withdrawing roar' caused by the process of secularisation over three centuries and the sudden loss of Christian discourse in the 1960s have brought about a spiritual and moral vacuum in society.¹⁶ New Age and individualised spiritualities, syncretism, both overt and covert, and other phenomena have

¹² Newman 1959.

¹³ Parrinder 1957: 58; Copley 1997: 184ff.

¹⁴ See Church of England Mission Theological Advisory Group. 1996: 74ff.

¹⁵ See www.facingthechallenge.org/soul1.php.

¹⁶ On secularisation see Chadwick 1975 and on the 'sudden' loss of Christian discourse in public life see Brown 2001.

attempted to fill this vacuum but not very successfully in the sense of providing a basis for society and working for the common good. This can mean that social and political decisions are made either on the basis of crude utilitarianism, which endangers personal dignity and liberty, or on the basis of counting heads, of determining the so-called 'yuk' factor in terms of what the public will accept.

Whilst Marxism, as an ideology, is a spent force, there is another ideology which is also comprehensive in scope, purporting to prescribe for every aspect of human life, social, economic and political, on the horizon. Like Marxism, Islamism is not monochrome and has a number of versions of itself but the question is whether Britain, or the West generally, has the spiritual and moral resources to face yet another series of ideological battles.

'Nothing-But-ery'

As we have seen, there are some who want a thousand spiritualities to bloom. There are others, however, who are determinedly reductionist. They want to reduce everything to physical and chemical processes. The Apostle of such reductionism is, of course, Richard Dawkins.

Dawkins criticises past Christian arguments for the existence of God, such as the Argument from Design, as mechanistic. He claims that what appears to be design is, in fact, nothing more than natural selection acting on the random mutation of germ-line genes so that changes in the organism can be passed on to offspring and, if such changes are cumulatively advantageous in the environment, fit them better for survival, thus ensuring, of course, the perpetuation of the changes themselves. For Dawkins, God is an unnecessary hypothesis. His explanation for the survival of religion is either that it is a 'virus', which infects the mind and spreads throughout the population, or that it is a 'meme', which on analogy with the gene, replicates itself in human cultures, leaping from brain to brain.¹⁷

Alister and Joanna C. McGrath have pointed out that, apart from other objections to virus or meme-theory, there is no evidence whatsoever for the existence of such entities.¹⁸ As far as natural selection by random mutation is concerned, much turns on what is meant by 'random'. As the Cambridge palaeontologist, Simon Conway Morris, has pointed out, not everything is possible. The course of evolution is constrained not least by its physical and environmental context. That is why we see convergence in the development of organs, such as arms, legs, teeth, etc that are similar in different species and, indeed, in like species which are widely separated.¹⁹

There is also the phenomenon of complexification, noted by the great Jesuit palaeontologist, Teilhard de Chardin: at both macro and micro-level we are faced with great complexity in organisms. One of the great challenges of our day is to account for the irreducible complexity of micro-organisms, such as the cell.²⁰ Although Charles Darwin was much interested in the conflict found in nature and the struggle for survival, it is important also to note the co-operation that exists within and between species. The phenomenon of symbiosis has often been noted, where plants and animals co-operate to feed, camouflage and protect one another.

17 Dawkins 1986, 1989, 2006.

18 McGrath and McGrath 2007: 40ff.

19 Conway Morris 1998: 13ff.

20 On Teilhard's thought see Zaehner 1971a&b. For the idea of 'irreducible complexity' see Behe 1998

It is even believed that this can happen at the micro-level and may account for the structure of cells.²¹

A broadside, perhaps even more reductionist than Dawkins', has been delivered by Professor Colin Blakemore who claims that our intentions and experiences are simply an illusory commentary on what our brains have already decided to do. This is the abolition of any belief in human agency or freedom and, in the end, of any meaning to terms like 'moral'.²² Behind this 'nothing-but-ery' is the refusal to admit that different kinds of explanation may be appropriate at different levels of being or of social existence. The living then cannot be accounted for simply in terms of the material, nor can humanity be explained in terms only of the biological. The search for truth, feelings of reverence, the desire to worship or to pray, moral and spiritual values cannot just be reduced to description in terms of animal behaviour or of physico-chemical processes.

In this connection, it is perhaps interesting to note the lively correspondence between Charles Darwin and Emma, before and after their marriage. Whilst Emma acknowledged that Charles' search for truth was itself significant, she pointed out that there were other kinds of truth than just those established by scientific method and other ways to truth than just that method.²³

Reversing the amnesia

Bishop Leslie Newbigin used to say that one of the great differences between his life in India and his return to Britain was that in India there was always hope. No matter how dire the circumstances, how widespread the poverty or how endemic the disease, people could always form associations and committees to struggle against whatever was holding them back. Here he found a lack of hope that people could change their situation.²⁴

As a well-known psychiatrist said recently, he could prescribe Prozac for people's depression but he could not give them a sense of meaning and of direction for their lives. Intellectual reductionism of the sort we have just been discussing, moral relativism combined with a desire for instant gratification, the undermining and breakdown of social structures such as families, kinship groups and natural communities have all contributed to a disenchanting winterland. People desperately long to be freed from this so that they can live as rounded beings with friends and relatives around them in the context of a supportive community. Is there a way out or must we continue our progress towards a Hades of transient relationships, fatherless children, socially impoverished communities and a featureless flatland devoid of purpose and direction?

One of the basic tasks confronting us has to do with reversing the amnesia about our own origins and story which is so prevalent in British society today. As a teacher said to me, pupils are not taught their own history and certainly not what have been called its 'virtuous pages'. They have not been told that our systems of governance, the rule of law and trust in public and commercial life are all rooted in a Christian doctrine of God the Holy Trinity (where there is both a mutuality of

²¹ Mann 1991.

²² Blakemore 2009, online at www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/feb/22/genetics-religion

²³ Keynes 2001: 59ff.

²⁴ See further, Wainwright 2000: 256f.

love and an ordered relationship), in the Pauline doctrine of the godly magistrate, and in the Decalogue (as well as Our Lord's summary of it). It is these, as Joan O'Donovan has pointed out, which led to notions of God's right or God's justice. These, in turn, produced a network of divine, human and natural law as the basis for a just ordering of society and of mutual obligation.²⁵

Nor, on the whole, have people been shown that respect for the human person has arisen from, on the one hand, a Christian reading of Aristotle and, on the other, a reading of the Bible in the light of Aristotle. From the thirteenth century, the human person begins to be seen more and more as an agent but a *moral* agent. This leads to recognition of freedom (and the gradual disappearance of slavery and serfdom until the re-emergence of the former after the discovery of the 'New World'). If people are free, they can no longer be regarded merely as subjects, even in a divinely-constituted order. They must be seen, more and more, as citizens whose conscience is respected and whose consent is required in the business of government.²⁶

The Reformation also emphasised the significance of the human person and of personal freedom – 'how is a person accounted righteous in the sight of God and how can we live in holiness according to God's purposes?' – and what accountability to the Supreme Being has to do with our day-to-day behaviour. The freedom to read God's Word for themselves, and in their own language, was an aspect of such teaching. It was from this matrix of Medieval, Renaissance and Reformation thought that the language of 'natural rights' first emerged, interestingly in the context of the 'New World' where these were being threatened by European colonialists bent on exploiting and enslaving the local populations (and, later on, importing slaves from Africa). The missionary Dominican bishop, Bartolomé de Las Casas, held that authentic mission meant that people should be free to respond to the Gospel and this meant that the natural rights of 'Indian' peoples and communities had to be recognised. In doing this, Las Casas was drawing on what was happening in the University of Salamanca and particularly on the Aquinas-inspired teaching of fellow-Dominican, Francisco de Vitoria who held that indigenous people had natural rights of ownership and self-government. From Vitoria to Locke, natural rights discourse was developed by Christian thinkers who belonged to the 'natural freedom tradition' (it has to be admitted that there were also eminent Christians who held to Aristotle's 'natural slavery' position).²⁷

It is important then to recognise that the language of human rights has its origins in Christian discourse but also that it has to be held alongside Christian ideas of mutual social obligation and of a just ordering of society such that it leads to the common good. Against this, the draft of the abortive Constitution for Europe is glad to acknowledge Europe's debt to the classical civilisations of Greece and Rome but not to Christianity, to vastly unequal societies in which women and slaves were excluded from public life and where gratuitous cruelty was part of the 'bread and circuses' provided to keep the proletariat happy. As Professor E A Judge has shown, it was early Christianity which challenged the most fundamental divisions of ancient society: between men and women, slave and free, and Jew and Gentile (Gal. 3:28).

25 O'Donovan 1997.

26 On all this see further Cowling 1980; Witte and Alexander 2008.

27 On all of this see Hill 2002, especially chapter 2 by Roger Ruston ('Theologians, Humanists and Natural Rights').

As later reflection shows, for instance in the Household Codes in Ephesians, Colossians and elsewhere, this does not mean that such divisions do not exist but that they do not matter in an egalitarian community.²⁸

The public sphere and Christian values

Vigorous participation in public life must be a *sine qua non* for Christians if this collective amnesia about national origins is to be addressed. This would not just be about making an effective Christian contribution to the difficult moral issues of the day. It must also be about reminding the nation of the basis of its social and political organisation and the basic assumptions which underlie, or should underlie, moral thought and moral decision-making. The public square cannot be left to secularity. Secularity is certainly not neutral and has its own assumptions which need to be brought out into the open and subjected to the same intense scrutiny as Christian assumptions have been. A distinctively Christian contribution will remind the nation of its commitment, for example, to inalienable human dignity because all human beings are made in God's image. Such thinking will inform decisions made about the very beginnings of the person as well as about the end of a person's life on earth. It will be about the dignity of those who have lost mental capacity to one extent or another and also about the treatment of those with learning difficulties.

The commitment to equality will also be seen as grounded in the biblical teaching about the unity of the human race (e.g. Acts 17:26). The commitment to liberty is because of Christian tradition regarding the natural freedom which is the birthright of all, however different they may be from us. Contrary to Grotius' hypothesis that natural law would exist even if God did not, we have seen that fundamental values have arisen from a biblical world-view rooted in belief in divine providence. Separated from such a world-view and its nurture, it is unlikely that they will continue to flourish. They may, in fact, be replaced by authoritarian utilitarianism, on the one hand, or, on the other, by public ethics based on public opinion determined by polls, focus groups and the like.²⁹

The market and Christian virtues

Even in a market where the so-called 'amoral' forces of supply and demand, scarcity and surplus are at work, we cannot forget that we are moral agents and, therefore, responsible for our actions. The best of British business was often characterised by the values of responsibility, honesty, trust (my word is my bond) and hard work. These arose from a Christian vision of accountability before God, the sacred nature of work, however humble, and a sense of mutual obligation among all sections of society. Such values were accompanied by the promotion of both the 'natural' virtues of justice, moderation, prudence and courage and of the specifically theological virtues of faith, hope and love. It is not difficult to see how the abandonment of such values and virtues has led to the present financial crisis in which we find ourselves. Once again, the chief culprit is a highly individualistic 'me' culture in which instant self-gratification is the leading value. This leads us to

²⁸ Judge 1984 at www.tyndalehouse.com/tynbul/library/TynBull_1984_35_01_Judge_CulturalConformityPaul.pdf.

²⁹ See further Nazir-Ali 2008b.

treat others, in our professional as well as our personal lives, as simply the means to our ends which must be achieved. To a greater or lesser extent, we are all culpable. What is needed here is an acknowledgement of our culpability, a reaffirmation of the other as a person of intrinsic value and of the common good. It is this which will lead to a recreation of social capital based on trust.

Such social capital is necessary for the rebuilding and the renewal of the financial system. This must be based on a strong moral framework which is derived from the values and virtues mentioned above. This is not to deny that people of other faiths and of none can make their own contribution to such a framework. What we must never have again is a moral vacuum which allows the worst aspects of human nature to dominate. Our duty to love our neighbour must take principled form in our life together, social, economic and political.

Persuasion not coercion

The reader will have noted by now that we are *not* advocating theocracy. There is no question at all of religion having any coercive force in the public realm. Its influence is at least twofold. Firstly, it stands to remind actors in the public sphere of the formative influence and continuing importance of the Judaeo-Christian tradition in the history of this country. Secondly, it seeks to persuade, by the quality of its argument, that it is still best to ground public debate and policy in that tradition. Having said that, there must be respect for the autonomy of public authority and of public law. Religious communities, of all kinds, must be free to order their lives according to their tenets and to teach individuals, within them, also to do so. This does not mean that the religious law of any community should be recognised as part of public law. Nor does it mean that individuals and groups within any community should not have direct access to the courts for the redress of any grievances they may have.

At the same time, it is very important that legislation should have regard for conscience. This country has a fine history of respect for conscientious objection in relation to participation in armed conflict. It would be a tragedy if the conscience of religious people does not continue to be respected, particularly in areas concerning human dignity, the structure and purpose of the family and the proper use of religious premises.³⁰ Churches and Christian organisations must give priority to the strengthening of marriage and the family in terms of advocacy for due recognition in public policy but also in their own programmes for marriage preparation and parenting. Indeed, there is much opportunity here for synergy between public authorities and the churches and, indeed, other faith communities.

Education and the transmission of tradition

In an important sense, the reversing of the historical amnesia which we have identified must begin in schools and other educational institutions. This will happen not only in the teaching of history itself but in how the transmission of tradition is approached as a whole. Church schools, naturally, have a vital role to play in showing how education on Christian principles can be genuinely open both to new knowledge and to the wider community. Such schools are certainly faith schools

³⁰ Nazir-Ali 2008a.

in the sense that their vocation and inspiration is Christian but they are not faith schools in the sense that they are open to the widest possible outreach. But, of course, the agenda is too important to be left simply to church schools and other church-related institutions. Churches and Christians must bring their influence to bear wherever this is possible, whether in making suitable materials available for assemblies, in volunteers to help with assemblies and in tackling important moral issues or through Christian teachers who are called to teach in the non-church state sector. Every opportunity must be gratefully accepted. It is perhaps worth saying, at this point, that organisations of Christian teachers should be supported, in every way, as they seek to equip their members to exercise their vocation in sometimes difficult settings.

The visibility of worship

Although there are thousands of churches in this land, some of them with a high iconic value, Christian worship is curiously invisible. To some extent, this is a function of the weather but there is also a mentality to shut the doors as we gather for worship. Somehow, worship should be made more visible for outsiders whether this is by having open doors or glass doors or worshipping out of doors. It seems there is less and less Christian worship in the media. Surely, there should be strong advocacy for more Christian worship to be shown on television and aired on the radio. It is important also, in this digital age, for Christian churches and organisations to have their own arrangements for transmission and broadcasting.³¹

Salt or light?

There is a long tradition of the Church working 'with the grain' of society. This may be shown in its role in civic life, in chaplaincy or in the 'hatching, matching and dispatching' rites of passage. At times of celebration or of sorrow people turn to the Church so that their feelings may be expressed through its rituals. All of this is to be welcomed because, if it is carried out with integrity, there is always an opportunity for people to hear, see or touch something of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. In an increasingly secularising situation, however, where there can be not only indifference but hostility to the Christian faith, the Church will also have to learn how to work 'against the grain', that is, in a prophetic and not merely pastoral mode. This means that the leading metaphor changes from salt to light: instead of being the salt that seasons the whole of society, but invisibly, churches will have to be a light that cannot be hid and which draws people to itself. If churches are to move from modelling their ministries on the salt metaphor to the light metaphor, there will have to be an emphasis on teaching and on the formation of moral and spiritual character so that churches can, indeed, be strong spiritual and moral communities in a dark age that may already be upon us.³²

One of the ways in which the gospel comes alive for people is through an experience of healing. From the very beginning the work of healing with prayer and anointing with oil has been an aspect of Christian mission (Mark 6:7-13, Luke 10:9, cf. Jas. 5:13-16). Basing themselves on the eucharistic teaching of St John's Gospel (for example, John 6), many Christian traditions have followed St Ignatius

³¹ Further on this see Nazir-Ali 1995: 31ff.

³² See MacIntyre 1981: 263.

of Antioch in believing that the Holy Communion is a medicine of immortality (*pharmakon athanasias*) and a means of healing for body, soul and spirit. Much work of 'healing souls' goes on in the pastor's study. It is important here to benefit from the different ways of understanding therapeutic work which exist today but this should always be within the framework of a robustly biblical anthropology. Whether healing is physical, psychological, or in terms of relationships (sometimes it can be all three), it brings that wholeness to people which is God's will for them, opening them to the divine life and making them channels of God's love and grace.

Friendship and witness

Christians should always be willing to give an account of the hope that is in them (1 Pet. 3:15). We have seen how God has raised apologists in our midst, for example, to tackle the presuppositions of contemporary cultures and to show how the gospel can be communicated in such contexts. Others have taken on the exaggerated claims of 'scientism' which go well beyond what science can claim for itself. Yet others have shown us how the spiritual dimension remains important for people, even if they have no connection with organised religion. No apology for the faith, no reaching out, no 'fresh expressions' of the Church, however, will be effective unless accompanied by genuine friendship. Bishop Azariah of Dornakal's cry at Edinburgh 1910 – 'give us friends' – can still be heard in our households and communities. More than mission or ministry, people want friends and it is often through friendship that Christians can introduce others to the one who called his followers 'friends' (John 15:15).³³

One of the main reasons why courses like Alpha, Christianity Explored, Emmaus, and Credo have been so successful is that they are often held in the context of hospitality, around a meal where people can genuinely become friends. A warm welcome to church services and events, ease in following what is going on, and getting to know those who come all remain crucially important whether in a 'traditional' or 'fresh' expression of church. Routine visiting of people in their homes by pastoral teams, prayer-visiting and visiting people to prepare them for sacraments or the pastoral offices is also effective precisely because the interaction takes place in a personal or family context.

In thinking about the mission of the church, we have constantly to keep in mind both the aspect of *hospitality* and that of *embassy*. 'My house', said Jesus, referring to Isa. 56:7 'will be called a house of prayer for all nations'. We have to make sure that, as people come to our churches, for whatever reason, they are made to feel at home.

Mission and evangelism

Mission, of course, has also to do with going out with the good news of Jesus. That means making a difference in people's lives: the poor should find resources for living in and through our 'gospelling' in the community, the excluded should be reached by our work of mercy, marriages and families should be strengthened,

³³ Harper 2000: 209.

and broken and damaged lives should find spiritual, mental and physical healing (Isa. 6:1-2, Luke 4:18-19).³⁴

As long ago as 1989, I outlined, in an *Anvil* article, some of the important ways in which the Church engages in mission.³⁵ I noted, for example, the commitment of those from an Anglican tradition, to *presence*. This comes from both an instinctive sympathy for 'the religion of incarnation' and from the history of the parochial system which shows how the Church has been present in 'natural' communities for centuries. One question that arises now is how such presence is to work in 'new' kinds of communities whether of professional or leisure networks or, indeed, among 'natural' people-groups where the gospel has not reached. The missionary tendency here has been that of *identification*, that is, of seeking to learn the language, customs and world-view of people so that the gospel can intelligibly be shared with them. The missionary anthropologist, Charles Kraft, tells us that God speaks to particular groups of people in distinctive ways, attuned to their language and cultural forms, and, in Christ, he identifies completely with the human condition. Such 'receptor-oriented revelation' should also be a paradigm for our own mission.³⁶

This is good as far as it goes as long as the danger of any culture setting the agenda for Christian mission is avoided and so long as the Church does not simply capitulate to culture. Such an approach has also been criticised for being at ease with the *status quo* and of not equipping people to be prophetic within their culture and context.³⁷

If presence is to be effective, and if true inculturation is to take place, there must be *dialogue* between the Church and the people amongst whom it finds itself. Such dialogue must, of course, be based on God's universal purposes as they have been disclosed to us in the Bible but also on what has been revealed of the very nature of God the Holy Trinity. We recognise that each person is the bearer of God's image, that the Eternal Word, incarnate in Jesus Christ, illuminates the hearts and minds of all (John 1:9, however it is punctuated) and the Holy Spirit is the one convincing us all of God's justice, our shortcomings and how God makes us right with him through Jesus Christ (John 16:9-11, Rom. 8:14-17). This kind of dialogue then involves the Church as a community that bears the Good News of Jesus seeking the fulfilment of God's purposes for the culture in which it finds itself, affirming all that is God-given and life-giving and questioning (and even rejecting) what is not according to God's purposes for his world as these have been revealed in Jesus Christ. Dialogue is certainly about careful listening and learning but it is also about bearing witness, gently, graciously and boldly.³⁸

34 See further 'Embassy, Hospitality and Dialogue: Christians and People of Other Faiths' in Lambeth Conference 1999: 305ff and online at www.lambethconference.org/1998/documents/report-3.pdf. See also Nazir-Ali 1998: 115ff.

35 Nazir-Ali 1989: 127ff.

36 Kraft 1979: 169f, 345f.

37 Radner and Turner 2006: 2ff.

38 On the nature of dialogue see Pope Benedict's Regensburg Address (Pope Benedict XVI 2006) which is online at www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg_en.html and Ratzinger 1995, his earlier 1993 lecture to the Presidents of the Asian Bishops' Conference which is online at www.ewtn.com/library/CURIA/RATZHONG.HTM. See also Nazir-Ali 1995, 1998: 132ff.

Whilst the Church is to be attentive in dialogue and assiduous in rendering the gospel in the idiom of the people, it must ever be on its guard against simply capitulating to the surrounding cultural values and even becoming a mouthpiece for contemporary culture.³⁹ This is why the *prophetic* aspect of mission will remain important. From time to time, the Church will need to state clearly how it understands God's will for his world, whether that is in the exercise of a proper stewardship of the gifts of creation or in calling attention to the dignity of persons, at all stages of life, or on matters of human relationships. Such prophetic activity will not be popular but it is necessary, if the Church is to be faithful to the whole of its mission.

Sometimes it is necessary not simply to say something but to do something: in the early church the manumission of slaves was widely regarded as an act of mercy. The movement for the abolition of the slave-trade and, later, of slavery itself in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was also directly influenced by Christian beliefs. Today the work of apostolic figures like Caroline Cox in freeing enslaved boys and girls in the Sudan is not only an act of mercy but it is also taking on the principalities and powers responsible for their slavery. Work to free bonded labour from their debt to their employer (so that they can be free to work and to live wherever they like and so that their children are no longer condemned to the same lives as themselves) is an exercise of Christian compassion, but it is also a political act which can have costly consequences for those engaged in it.⁴⁰

Each of these aspects of mission has to be kept in mind when we think of our own situation. Evangelism, or if you prefer evangelisation (suggesting a process rather than an event), is the lynch-pin or, to change the metaphor, the cornerstone of all mission. Without it the other aspects of mission would be lame but evangelisation too needs these other aspects if it is to be credible in its concern for the whole person. Indeed, some of these other mission engagements provide our opportunity for a sensitive but clear sharing of the gospel with people.

Evangelism *reminds* people of who they are and how much they have fallen short of all that God has called them to be. In Jesus, who is the image (*eikôn*), of God (Col.1:15) and his very character (Heb. 1:3), we can see how our sin has distorted and obscured God's image in us but also how God wants to bring us to the full measure of the stature of Christ (Eph. 4:13). The proclamation of Jesus shows us how far short we have fallen of God's design for us and this leads to *repentance*, to a turning away from our wants and desires and a turning to God who has made us, loves us and wants to restore us to fellowship and friendship with him. Of course, the sharing of the gospel shows people what they need to give up if they are to be disciples of Christ. In our culture, we have seen that the root idolatry is self-worship which leads to greed, promiscuity, exploitation of those weaker than ourselves and a host of other evils. When we come to Christ these have to be given up. But coming to Christ is not just about 'giving up', it is also a celebration of all that is God-given and authentic in our lives. In particular, Christ *recapitulates* or fulfils in himself all our deepest spiritual aspirations. No doubt these have to be sifted and purified but their true nature is revealed and completed in

39 Lausanne Committee for World Evangelization 1978, at www.lausanne.org/de/willowbank-1978/lop-2.html.

40 On the early church's involvement in showing compassion see Murphy 1986; Phan 1984: 20ff.

Christ (Eph. 1:10). When we put our trust in what Christ has done in opening the way for friendship with God and reconciliation with the very source of our being, we are *reassured* about our own safety and destiny (John 6:35-40, Rom. 8:35-39). This is not about religious observance of good works but because we have put our trust in Christ's work for us. Of course, as the First Letter of John teaches, such inward assurance leads naturally to right belief, love of our brothers and sisters and right conduct. No wonder, evangelism or evangelisation is sometimes called the crown of Christian mission.

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