

HOW FAR OUGHT THE CHURCH TO BE POLITICISED?

Recently, there has been a growing criticism of the way the Churches, or at least some groups within the Churches including many of the official representative bodies, have become involved with social, economic and political issues of our day. Most trenchant of these was Edward Norman's Reith Lectures¹ in the autumn of 1978 which we are told has generated more debate than even *Honest to God* in 1963. But these lectures only represent a major example of what has now become fairly commonplace. For example, we find Patrick Jenkin, Minister of Health and Social Security, questioning the propriety of Church leaders becoming involved in the campaign for improved family benefits and child poverty action.² There have, of course, been such criticisms coming from the right for many years. From within the Church there have been those who have questioned the involvement with, for example, the W.C.C.'s Programme to Combat Racism,³ ranging from anxiety to violent rejection.

This somewhat disconcerting development comes at a time, and may be said to be part, of a general alignment of British social consciousness. The hopes and concerns of the sixties and seventies have been shattered by the apparent failure of much reforming zeal to try to eradicate inequality and poverty, and political and economic changes have forced a desire to find an alternative political style. It is a time of re-appraisal that includes a recovery of attitudes and expectations of previous times, emphasising the need for economic retrenchment, dependence on private enterprise and a desire to encourage personal freedom and achievement. So such a swing should not cause surprise. In the circumstances latent feelings naturally come to the surface. The question is what attitude should the Churches and those Christians now finding themselves under attack take?

An interesting and important fact to note is that this is not, as it is sometimes portrayed, simply a rejection of the so called "secular theology" of the mid-sixties that sold itself out to social action as an escape from theological bankruptcy. Two recent developments in this country belie this. The first is the emergence of a new vigour among the Anglo-Catholic wing of the Church of England, notably exemplified in the Jubilee Group, whose central concern is the Church's critique of social issues.⁴ Secondly, we find a surprising upsurge of interest in this area among conservative evangelicals who have added the dimension of social structures and responsibility for them to the usual personalist ethical concern. This is perhaps more notable in the United States,⁵ but is clearly represented here in, for instance, the journal *The Third Way*.⁶ Both these cases represent, too, a revival of longstanding traditions from the nineteenth century and earlier, to which appeal is consciously made. Thus the reaction we have noted in the present time coincides not only with the slowing of impetus of the movement from the sixties, but paradoxically with an upsurge of interest within other traditions within British Christianity.

Furthermore the events in the Catholic Church cannot be ignored. While perhaps not so apparent in this country Vatican II represented both the culmination and a stimulus to further developments. Not least has this been true in Latin America which has produced its own forms of Christian analysis and action in relation to a conscious Marxist influence in Liberation Theology. While this has direct appeal to more radical Christian elements in this country its influence is undoubtedly and increasingly widespread.⁷

Any discussion of the critique of Christian involvement in political matters must start with an analysis of what is in fact being said. There are clearly several strands intertwined and which are used to support each other. Any reaction that is going to be useful has to distinguish between and evaluate them. There is no use in a blanket rejection from either side, even though there may be real sticking points.

The first of these strands is seldom heard here in absolute terms though it can be detected beneath the surface. In other parts of the world it is clearly articulated. It is a political statement: the Church has no place in the affairs of the state. In countries which reject Christianity or effective religious freedom Christianity is a purely private affair which can be tolerated so long as it does not appear to meddle in matters over which the state has authority. This has been the position of all régimes that assume absolute power. But in less than absolute states the same argument can be heard in terms of autonomous spheres for various aspects of human endeavour. So, for instance, the laws of the market place are not subject to theological critique but are absolute in their working. Such a position will be endorsed where there is a rigid doctrine of the two kingdoms: the Church and the magisterial powers, or where religion is confined to the inward personal sphere. It is further reinforced where there is a certain doctrine of natural law which, in various forms, declares that each area of existence has to live by its own inherent laws. This is strongest where it is assumed that a certain style of scientific thinking, typical of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, of inexorable natural laws of cause and effect, are carried over into the working of human society.

Here it would seem that Christian theology has to make a two-fold stand. It is surely necessary to assert the sovereignty of God over all spheres of existence and that all human reality is under judgement. Thus while the Church cannot, and does not claim to, have a monopoly of truth or controlling power, it does have the theological necessity to challenge the absolute pretensions of the state or any other area of human activity. In the midst of the continuous outworking of history, there has to be proclaimed the judgement and mercy of God that questions and relativises all social existence. Alongside that there must be the re-examination, both theologically and in terms of the various disciplines, of the notion of autonomous spheres. The notion arose from the legitimate rejection of the hegemony of comprehensive

theology. But the opposite is equally untrue since all knowledge and action must eventually interlock. And in the event what happens is that one or other sphere in fact takes over as sovereign.⁸

A second line of criticism is close to the first. It is argued that it is not the task of the Church or of the nature of the Gospel to become involved in social and political issues.

On one hand it is asserted that Christianity is primarily a personal matter; the Christian has personal faith, and is transformed within himself. It is from this that the social implications of the Gospel are worked out. Changed people will produce a changed world.⁹

The arguments against this are familiar. Man is not a simple individual; corporate structures create the conditions of life; sin is both personal and institutional; social entities have a life of their own. Perhaps, however, there is a truth in this position which has been obscured by much enthusiasm for redeeming the structures of society. There is need to pay attention to the quality of person, for systems are empty without people of integrity and quality to run them. Social structures of themselves will not produce goodness for they are always open to becoming demonic. There is need for real spirituality. One of the gains from the new interest in spirituality has been the refocussing of attention on the inner life and the need for Christian maturity. The danger is that the pendulum will swing too violently, to the neglect of the necessary and proper concern with society and structures. Both extremes are too simplistic. In a desire to minister to the whole of society all aspects of human experience must be included.

On the other hand there is the argument that the nature of the Gospel is such that it is never directly related to day-to-day living. It stands over against us in terms of an absolute demand and final grace. It acts as a frame of reference but can never be lived out because in the sordid reality of history there is always compromise and sin. The great ethical statements of the Gospels are, therefore, words of idealism and judgement.¹⁰ It is to misunderstand the nature of Christianity to assume that it is possible to deduce guidelines for political and social action.

Once again the reply to this is well known. It makes the Gospel essentially a Docetic reality. There is no actual contact with flesh and blood, only an appearance which allows us to have a glimpse of what is otherwise unknown. But if the Gospel is the Gospel of incarnation then it can only be spelled out in terms of particular times and places. If it is to speak to our condition then there must be the word that meets us where we are. However, this too points to a reality, however obscurely, which should not be dismissed out of hand. It is too easy to forget that the word of God stands over against us. In our eagerness to apply the Christian insights we can handle them flippantly and without due caution. The Gospel can become domesticated. There is a distance between the

truth of the Gospel and the world that is not easy to bridge. Or which we bridge with our own favourite bits. If we are to be true to the faith then it is necessary to stand naked and open before that which is ineffable where we can only veil our faces and cry for mercy.

The third way in which the political involvement of the Church is criticised is to suggest that this has resulted in or been caused by loss of nerve. That is, in an age of the "Death of God", the attack on metaphysics and on belief in the supernatural, the Christian response has been to seek salvation in the causes of mankind. This may have been supported by various forms of secular or existentialist theology but in effect it was a denial of the belief in the reality of God. So the Gospel of salvation is not preached except in terms of the seeking of the new society. The result was a denial of the distinctive Christian proclamation with the emphasis on service, which really meant dissolving traditional ideas of mission as proclamation, with the result that winning disciples disappeared from so much Christianity. No wonder that when people want to hear the word of God they have nowhere to turn.¹¹

The reasons for this development are complex and probably the actuality is exaggerated. It is not helpful to put the blame for the decline of the Churches on to the lack of sound theology. There is always more to it than simple cause and effect. There are, also, always gains and losses. From this style of action and concern have come new forms of ministry, insights into the nature of mission, important gains in the Christian involvement with the real issues of development, the poor, racialism, technology - though there are also the losses of direction that many found. Perhaps it was a necessary phase and later generations may find it a significant turning point in the life of the Church. The fundamental concern, surely, has to be asserted and retained. God is Lord of the whole world and his Spirit can be found at work in any place. The Gospel is not a calling out of the world but into it in love and service. The Church is not the body of the saved but those who, for the whole, name the name of Christ as "the true light that lightens everyman". The aim of Christian witness is not to separate people out but to move towards fullness of life, to humanisation.

Yet the warning must be heeded. There was often a naive optimism abroad and too often it was not possible to see where the Christian was and why. He got swallowed up in the mass. There is surely some real point for evangelism, that is to proclaim the Gospel in order to win people to acknowledge Christ's lordship. The Church does have a proper and distinctive role to play as the witness to the Gospel. The recent rediscovery of confidence in being a Christian is surely basically to be welcomed. Yet it is a pity that this is so often seen in terms of polarisation - a choice that has to be made. There is a tension clearly between the calling into the Church and the calling into service in the world. While ideally the two should be complementary and eschatologically the one will be the other, in present experience part

of the contradiction of fallen nature is that neither is perfect and both demand their own loyalties. Yet it is necessary for the Christian to find his identity both in his distinctiveness and in his identity with humanity as such.

The fourth area of criticism is that which urges that it is too easy for the Christian community to become identified with a particular ideology and to be used by those who find it as a useful tool. This is a perennial danger. It is also liable to be an accusation from those who question a particular alliance. Historically, we can point to the way the Church became identified with Roman imperial power or the Russian Czarist state. In our time the Church is variously accused of being the religious arm of colonial imperialism or western capitalism or Russian communism or of social liberalism, or Marxist ideology.¹²

When these are set side by side, it becomes obvious that such an accusation cannot be made in a simplistic way. It cannot be true that the so called politicisation of the Church is to be equated with a swing to the left. Indeed such a blanket generalisation is in any case open to refutation on the basis of empirical historical examination. Even where there seems to be a common tendency the variety of forms and self understanding is such as to question whether there is a single phenomenon at work.

What has rather to be said is that the Church cannot, in any social context, be absolutely separated from the cultural environment. All Christians live in the historical reality where they find themselves and will participate in the forms and ways, the hopes and fears, the ideological assumptions of their nation, class and family. In any case an institution or a body of people has to live and work in the space given to it by the surrounding society. It is false to say that the Church is politically involved when advocating one policy and not when being socially inactive or only concerned with limited interests. There is truth in the dictum that there is no political neutrality; there is either acquiescent or critical political participation.¹³ In any case it is somewhat confusing when the Churches are simultaneously, and sometimes in the same situation, accused of being crypto-communist and imperialist lackeys.

What has often induced the accusation is that the Churches and Christians have been seen to move away from the traditional spheres of interest, such as personal morality, the family, drink, into new areas such as economic justice, race or de-colonialisation. But in fact such a shift itself represents a response to the awareness of the complexity of social and political issues provided by the social sciences, and to the increased involvement and responsibility of the state in every level of life. More and more clearly all life is obviously politics. The private sphere is ever diminishing.

Yet there is a proper concern in the criticism of politicisation, which is also expressed in the growing demand for a more distinctively Christian critique of society and affirmation of Christian values. That is the way in which religion

can be used simply to endorse conclusions reached on other grounds, a sacralising process. Too often recent Church statements appear to do just this. There is a dilemma here because on the one hand Christian social ethics must, if it is to be true to the belief that all knowledge and insight is in some way God given and if it is to speak realistically to the actual situation, use all the tools available to make its assessment. It is going to ask which of these alternatives "fits" the Christian understanding of human existence, which will move the situation towards a more Christianly acceptable form. Yet the weakness is still there. On the other hand, especially at the levels of ideological critique, the belief in God as creator and saviour, with all that that implies, should provide a critical stance by which to examine the situation independently. Yet Christian faith is not in the full sense an ideology and it is also modified by the critical encounter with modern thought and different world views.¹⁴

The only way forward is, once again, to recognise and affirm the dialectical nature of the situation. There has to be constant re-examination of what is happening. The prophetic voice or critical assertion has to be listened to in all seriousness. The Church or any part of it, while holding on to the truth as they see it, must not allow itself to become trapped into a false ideological dead-end. This applies equally to the institutional freedom of the Church and also to life within it as much as to the intellectual sphere. Thus the Christian lives between his commitment to the world and service in the world and his overriding loyalty to Christ as Lord which frees him from all other commitments as absolute. But this is a loyalty that will drive him back into the world.

Another similar fear is expressed by the traditional British suspicion of Christian political parties. Such a close link between the Church and particular social patterns or sections of society can lead to a simplistic identification between Christianity and limited interests or views. The Church thus gets locked into the inevitable power struggles of politics and economics. It can lead to the fanaticism of a kind of "divine right" to authority or of a crusade for particular ends. It can also lead to the discrediting of the Church's authority when policies are seen to fail or its power used for private ends.

There is a good reason for rejecting such an identification. History is littered with unhappy examples and contemporary experience is no less disconcerting. Moreover this is reinforced by the Islamic revolutions we are now witnessing on one hand, and the events in Communist Socialist countries on the other. It is dangerous for human society to be chained down to a metaphysic that claims absolute sovereignty.¹⁵

The alternative must be some form of "open society" capable of change and evolution in the light of progressive understanding and new needs, able to respond to the challenges of the need to balance power and search for justice. There cannot be a completely value-free social structure in which all opinions and life styles are equally valid. Such a

society would collapse. There would have to be some common values to give reasonable cohesion but these can include the assumption that it is right to maximise freedom and facilitate continual improvement.

At once it should be clear that within such a society the Christian community has the right not only to exist but to participate in the common life. Indeed that is a necessity because it is of the nature of the "open society" for constant dialogue to go on and for social policy to arise from free exchange and persuasion. The Church, therefore, finds itself as one body within society both living according to the rules and pressing its own insights onto the wider community. Indeed the Gospel presses the Christian to "seek the peace of the city" and to be on the side of the poor and the dispossessed. Thus it will not be surprising to find that the Church will tend to advocate political, economic and social actions that have some kind of political consistency if she is to be true to the Gospel.

Perhaps, however, the most important consideration is the pastoral one. One of the reasons for anxiety about the Church's apparent trend to so called politicisation is that many Christians have felt themselves marginalised because they see things differently from the way of those who speak and act publicly. This is illustrated by the correspondent in *The Guardian* who remarked that the Church is no longer the Tory Party at prayer but the Labour Party at prayer. After recent developments, however, that may have to be amended to the Social Democratic Party at prayer!

We are not concerned here so much with those whose convictions can only conceive of a single Christian possibility in politics. There are indeed those of the right and left who would claim that all thinking Christians must agree with them and would, by implication, condemn any deviation. These, of course, do not condemn the Church for being politically concerned, but only for not being, as they see it, true to the Gospel and backing their particular line. Indeed the usual cry would be against the so called apathy of the Churches.

There are, however, many Christians who have sought to give public service in various ways or who have taken a real interest in social issues who find themselves at variance with the line that seems to be taken by those who appear to speak for the Church. This can cause considerable distress, not least in that it would appear that they are not receiving the support and recognition that could be expected from those who are pastorally charged. It may even appear as an attack on their integrity and faith.

This is a very serious matter, one which may be very much more widespread than would at first appear. It raises a number of important issues.

First there is the need to recognise the pluralism within the Church. Inevitably the Church includes a great variety of people, with different concerns and perspectives, who are going to express these in many ways. At certain points de-

cisions have to be made as to how best to carry out or promote what is seen as one's Christian duty and at such points differences harden into disputes. In politics in this country it means choosing which party machine to use, which voluntary bodies to support, how to cast a vote or where to give money and time. But this is not only to be expected but really to be welcomed as part of the nature of the life of the Church. If the People of God are both a pilgrim people and servants of the world in the Gospel, then we are going to be constantly exploring how to exercise this ministry. There has to be variety in service, constant dialogue and even conflict. Yet all the time also, people have to say: "Here I stand, I can do no other". We have to speak and act as Christians, as the Church, today in the way that seems right now. But we also have to accept that we only see things darkly, we may be wrong, things may turn out differently. With God's help and forgiveness we will be given the courage to learn afresh and to be open to new possibilities.

This puts a tremendous strain on the fellowship of faith, not least in the local congregation. The easy way out is to avoid conflict, to declare politics and social issues as taboo (or more usually to limit them to accepted areas). Or for there to develop divisions along such lines so that certain traditions or congregations become identified with certain strands. Perhaps there have to be organisations, people, groups, congregations that stress certain deepfelt commitments, but these must never become schisms, rents in the Body of Christ. Their task is to be signs in the Church and the world of the diversity that is comprehended in the wholeness of Christ.

In pastoral work these are very real tensions. Too often we all want the minister, as the representative of the Church, to confirm us in our own opinion. But that is not his task, nor of the Church as such. Rather there has to be a caring that is both supportive and challenging, that enables growth towards Christian maturity, to that freedom that acts in faith yet with humility, open to the coming of the Kingdom. And the Church, in the local fellowship and at large, has to allow space for that freedom to be exercised while offering critical support and understanding in maintaining the community of faith.

There are many ways in which the Church becomes involved in the social and political life of the world. Not least is it through the lives of individual Christians and groups. That does not mean that there is not a proper way for the Church (or Churches) as institutions to become overtly involved in these issues. This, however, would seem to be the contentious question. It is important, therefore, to be sure that it is fairly clear what this means. It is first of all a matter of authority.

There are very few, if any, examples of mandatory authority. The most obvious example is the Papal authority, but even that is strictly speaking only absolute when the Pope speaks dogmatically "ex cathedra". However, an encyclical addressed to

a certain issue, such as birth control, if specific in its wording, is taken as having, if not final, full authority. More generally, however, Papal encyclicals offer general guide-lines, as on world poverty, indicating the directions the Church and individual Christians should be facing. And it is not only the Roman Catholic Church that can so influence the lives of its people.

More usually, the influence of the Church is due to its moral impact, such as the Pope has in the world at large. This moral influence is accorded because of a mixture of several factors. First there is the authority of the body making, for example, a pronouncement. The word of an individual depends on his position. Different bodies have different mandates. The Baptist Union assembly can be said to be representative of Baptist opinion but has no further authority. The British Council of Churches is charged by its members to perform certain functions but its deliberations are only commendations. The Methodist Conference would seem to be more authoritative within Methodism but hardly wields absolute power in the area of social responsibility. Secondly, there is the integrity of the persons involved and the processes of consultation. In point of fact in most cases great care is taken to use the expertise and skills of a large number of people. Reports, for example, from the World Council of Churches are the result of a long series of meetings drawing on people from all over the world. Submissions to Government from the British Churches come out of a serious study of the issues concerned. Indeed on some matters the Churches are automatically consulted. Thirdly, it should be recognised that the normal objective of much of the study done by such bodies is educative. That is, it has become obvious that certain major issues are important in the life of the nation - race relations, industrial disputes, unemployment - and the Christian community, if it is to be responsible to the nation, must become aware of what is at stake, be better informed and helped towards thinking the matter through in the light of Christian principles. So the report of the working party is not so much a directive as a contribution to the debate which has the authority of its own intrinsic worth.¹⁶

It is, however, not always easy to realise just what it means when the Church, in the persons of its leaders or through its institutions, appears to be mixing in politics. It can be controversial, especially when the matter is quite specific (e.g. the Maze Prison protests) and it seems to go against Government policy or popular opinion. It can be popularly welcomed as when Archbishops Coggan and Blanche made their appeal to the nation. Sometimes it may appear bland and ineffectual, drawn up in too general terms. But always it is playing with fire (and no less for the personal action of the individual or the pioneering work of this or that group). One can never win. All that can be done is to try faithfully to carry out the task of ministry and witness under the Gospel in and to the world.

The attempt has been made here to try to suggest that in the clash that is to be found in the life of the Church today between those who see the social responsibility of the Christian community in apparently contradictory ways there is need and room for dialogue. Those of us who feel that the Churches are right to be drawn into the affairs of the life of the nation and the world in radical ways and who believe that the Gospel demands a commitment to the poor, the oppressed, the forgotten, which can only be exercised in some politically relevant way, must listen to our critics. They are often pointing to truths which can easily be forgotten or are difficult to accept. On the other hand they too should try to understand the theological conviction that stimulates such concerns. Above all it is important to accept the theological plurality in which we find ourselves, not as a form of confusion, but as an opportunity, under God, to test the spirits and to discern even more deeply his Word for our time. The one thing that cannot be cast aside is the task that the Church and each Christian has, to witness to the reality of the Kingdom, as judgement and mercy, not only in our own lives but in every human relationship and all society.

NOTES

- 1 Published as *Christianity and the World Order* (Oxford, 1979). Part of the discussion will not only be of theoretical views but of the facts and how they should be interpreted. For a reply to Norman, see Haddon Wilmer *et al.*, *Christian Faith and Political Hopes* (Epworth, 1979) and a refutation of the facts by Paul Abrecht in *Anticipation*, July 1980 (W.C.C., Geneva).
- 2 In *Credo* on 11.5.1980 by London Weekend Television whose transcript was to hand.
- 3 Reaction to the P.C.R. can be found in Barbara Rogers, *Race - no peace without justice* (W.C.C., 1981). Also the report, *Our Response to Racism* (B.C.C., 1980) of a conference of Church Leaders at Cumberland Lodge, July 26-7, 1978. This was part of a series of world-wide conferences assessing the P.C.R., culminating in a World Conference in Amsterdam, May 1980.
- 4 See e.g. Kenneth Leech, *The Social God* (Sheldon, 1981).
- 5 Cf.: *The Chicago Declaration* (Creation House, 1974); R. J. Sider, *Rich Christians in an age of Hunger* (IVP, 1979); the journal *Sojourners* from Washington, D.C.
- 6 Cf. also *The Changing World* ed. Bruce Kaye (Fount, 1976); J. Gladwin, *God's People in God's World* (IVP, 1979).
- 7 Cf.: Rex Ambler and David Haslam, *Agenda for Prophets* (Bowerdean, 1980) for an attempt to find a British political theology; J. Andrew Kirk, *Theology Encounters Revolution* (Inter-Varsity, 1980) for a conservative evangelical assessment; also the spate of publications from Latin America and elsewhere.
- 8 This was the debate under Nazi Germany and the response of the Confessing Church (cf. E. H. Robertson, *Christians Against Hitler*, S.C.M., 1962); also E. Brunner, *Christianity and Civilisation*,

- (Nisbet, 1948); Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, (S.C.M., 1963); *The Churches Survey Their Task* (Allen and Unwin, 1937) - report of the Oxford Conference on Life and Work, with other material is still worth perusing.
- 9 This is basic, e.g. to the work of D. McGavran, *Understanding Church Growth* (Eerdmans, 1970), an influential figure in evangelical thinking.
 - 10 Cf. Enoch Powell, *No Easy Answers* (Sheldon, 1973).
 - 11 So, for example, this is a strand in the writings of Francis Shaeffer and others, and can be found in much criticism of the W.C.C. Cf. H. T. Hoekstra, *Evangelism in Eclipse* (Paternoster, 1979).
 - 12 See especially the debate about the use of Marxian analysis in Liberation theology; cf. a defence in J. M. Bonino, *Revolutionary Theology Comes of Age* (S.P.C.K., 1975) and discussions in (e.g.) *International Review of Mission* passim. Also E. Norman, *op.cit.*
 - 13 Cf. J. Moltmann, "Political Theology", in *The Experiment Hope* (S.C.M., 1975); A. Kee, *A Reader in Political Theology* (S.C.M., 1974); H. Wilmer, *op.cit.*
 - 14 A plea for "Christian thinking" can be found in the writings of H. Blamires and E. L. Mascall, and also in conservative evangelical authors such as F. Shaeffer.
 - 15 Cf. Karl Popper, *The Open Society and its Enemies* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962) and for a Christian argument, Denys Munby, *The Idea of the Secular Society* (O.U.P., 1963); not that Munby disavows an interest in the Church's legitimate concern for socio-economic concerns or in a Christian critique of society (e.g. his *God and the Rich Society* O.U.P., 1961).
 - 16 Cf. G. S. Ecclestone, *The Church of England and Politics* (C.I.O., 1981) for a defence of a particular Church's record, especially at Synod level. The B.C.C.'s Division of Community Affairs is currently working on this issue, which is no new concern, as can be seen by reference to the recent re-issue of William Temple's *Christianity and the Social Order* (S.P.C.K., 1976).

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