

The Reith Lectures:

some confusions and dilemmas

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Christianity is being politicized by modern theology and by the leaders of the churches. At least, that is what Dr Edward Norman—last year's Reith lecturer¹—would have us believe. In this politicization the eternal and changeless Christ is being identified with transient and secular politics, especially with liberal-humanist and Marxist politics. The masses who are looking to the church to give them the spiritual and transcendent realities are instead being fed with western liberal humanism under the guise of a politicized gospel.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Dr Norman, having tarred everyone with this dreadful brush, should be received so enthusiastically by many concerned to preserve the apostolic faith in the modern church (especially those who do not want the political and social *status quo* disturbed). Nothing could be more tempting for the orthodox and the conservative than Dr Norman's seemingly plausible thesis.

It is one thing—and quite a proper thing—to engage in serious criticism of much modern theology in relation to politics. It is also quite proper, and very necessary, to remind ourselves of the transcendent character of the gospel which forbids easy identifications of Christianity with particular solutions. It is quite another, however, to suggest that any and every attempt by theologians and church leaders to speak to politics in a serious and practical manner is an act of politicizing the faith and betraying the gospel by adopting worldly, transient, and secular values. There are, of course, two exceptions in Dr Norman's lectures. There is Bishop David Pyches, who spoke up in favour of the end of Allende in Chile and of the military takeover. (As a result Dr Norman thinks that the whole Anglican Church in Chile is *pro* the regime.) And there is Dr Norman himself who, unlike all others, has managed to escape this dreadful fate of politicizing the gospel in conformity with contemporary social and political attitudes. Perhaps, however, Dr Norman has made a trap for himself and fallen into it, for he appears to baptize the contemporary mood of disenchantment with politics and especially with the politics of the left. It would be tempting to 'do a Dr Norman' on Dr Norman, but time and space forbid. There are more serious things to say about this whole issue.

Dr Norman claims that there is a relationship between Christian faith and its social consequences. What that relationship is, how it operates, and what its impact is on particular issues of deep concern to us today, is not at all clear. Even after the last lecture, which alone attempted to be positive, I am still at a loss to see how Christians caught up in a highly political world are to relate their faith in Christ to the decisions demanded of them in politics. Instead, Dr Norman goes at political theology like a bull in a china shop—indiscriminately charging into any and every attempt at working out the relationship. In his popularizing of themes, he gives sufficient plausibility to carry popular support as he misrepresents theological positions, the reasoning of church leaders, and especially the reasoning at stake in the work of bodies like the WCC. For all the necessity of serious criticism, it just will not do to lump all these things together in some simplistic way and accuse them all, without reserve, of adopting liberal-humanist and secular assumptions. Dr Norman has got to take seriously the possibility that some of this work is done in response to a genuine commitment to the gospel and to reasoning out the implications of Christian truth.

Language and thought forms

In his enthusiasm to show how all and sundry in the church have adopted liberal assumptions every time they speak to political issues, Dr Norman has erroneously assumed that the use of secular language means a commitment to secular values. A good example of this mistake is found in the opening lecture when he takes the Archbishop of Canterbury to task:

Here is another example: at the Caxton Hall conference on religious education, in February 1978, the Archbishop of Canterbury asked, 'Do we want to indoctrinate children into our own beliefs?' He answered, 'God forbid'. [*Christianity and the World Order* (OUP 1979) p 8]

Whatever we may think of the particular views of Dr Coggan on religious education, the fact that he sought to work on the significance of the Christian response to the RE issue in state education in terms which rejected the idea that indoctrination was appropriate, cannot necessarily be made to mean that Dr Coggan had adopted liberal assumptions. Yet that is what Dr Norman accuses the Archbishop of doing, for he continues:

What the Archbishop's words actually convey is approval of the contemporary belief that society should consist of a balanced pluralism of moral opinion, and that people should be free to select their own values. [p8]

That Dr Coggan is seeking to come to terms with the pluralist *context* for Christian life and witness today does not mean to say that he is *baptizing* the social order. This is but one of many examples in these lectures of conclusions that do not necessarily follow from

statements made. Indeed, it is intellectually irresponsible for Dr Norman to seek to tar the Archbishop in this sort of a way.

In the previous section Dr Norman criticizes the Bishop of Worcester for using the language of 'tolerance', 'flexibility' and 'compassion'—apparently none of these words is Christian. I cannot understand why the use of this language necessarily means an adoption of secular thinking. It is just possible that talk of this sort can convey something which fits in with an honest working out of Christ and belief in a particular social context.

I wonder just how far Dr Norman is ready to take this method of his. Are we to assume that, in the history of the church, every time the church used the language of its day to convey the Christian message that it was 'secularizing' the gospel or adopting pagan thought-forms? If that is the case, Dr Norman would lose many of the standard doctrinal definitions of the church. Why it is all right to adopt this procedure when the church defines the doctrine of the Trinity, but not acceptable when it seeks to understand Christian obedience in politics today, I cannot follow.

The facts of human life leave us no alternative. We live in a particular historical and social setting with its own language and culture. As such, we have a responsibility of speaking and living the gospel within that setting. If every time we do that we are accused of adopting the intellectual and philosophical roots of culture without question and in opposition to Christ, then our missionary responsibility is effectively cut off. Politics is of very great importance to our modern world and its life. Christians working within politics have to think through the significance of their convictions within that context.

The problem of historical relativity

Dr Norman is afraid that the gospel will be identified with the relativities of history. There are times in the lectures when he gives the impression that because eternal issues and the changeless Christ are the sole business of the church, it ought not to dirty its hands in the passing world of politics. If the church seeks to identify particular issues of moral concern, it will run the risk of identifying the gospel with 'this-worldly' and passing matters. Further, in these modern times such activity is likely to be tainted with the secular and pagan philosophies of a liberal-humanist world:

In their pilgrimage through the world, Christians who are wise in their time always return from the fading enthusiasms of unfulfilled improvements to a more perceptive understanding of the inward nature of spirituality. [p 77]

The joining of the eternal and the worldly was brief and served to confirm our intimations of immortality. Christ came to direct us away from the preoccupations of human society and, presumably, towards

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the inward spiritual journey. There are other times, however, in the lectures when Dr Norman reveals that he needs to be able to say more than this. In the first lecture he says:

This is not to say that the actual social and political ideals adopted by Christians are in themselves untrue, *or are not in correspondence with a legitimate understanding of the faith*. It is to suggest that they are far too relative to be regarded as central in the definition of Christianity itself. [pp 12-13, my italics]

Apart from the fact that Dr Norman gives us no indication as to what social and political ideals are in line with a legitimate understanding of the faith, he really cannot have his bun and his penny in the matter. Either the point of the Incarnation is to take us away from our preoccupations with the affairs of this world and towards the spiritual journey of the soul, or the Incarnation—together with the rest of Christian belief—has something about it of concern to the formation of our social and political ideals. In the way in which Dr Norman sets up the theological issues, it is not possible to put these options together at all. It is not possible to believe that the heart of Christianity is a sort of spiritual monasticism and yet to want the faith to help in the forming of social and political ideals.

The fact that Christian comment on the nature of obedience in the political context is relative, must not be made to rule it out of order. These relativities are necessary for at least two reasons. One concerns our own fallibility and limited apprehension of the faith. The other concerns the changing character of history. Neither of these makes the forging of the link between Christianity and politics an illegitimate task. What such understanding suggests is that Christians need to recognize the limits of their work and to adopt a proper humility in it. Moreover, the changing and relative character of history does not so much question the validity of Christian political comment as that sort of political comment which refuses to come to terms with *contemporary* reality. It is repetition which is questionable—the continual holding to a politics of an age already past. Indeed, had Dr Norman really wanted to criticize the church's performance today, he might have dwelt on the way in which its comment and action is so often too late and, therefore, inappropriate in the contemporary context.

To look at Christian political responses and notice how closely they relate to the issues and concerns of the day is not necessarily to call them into question. Such observation might lead us to conclude that Christians are taking their contemporary political context seriously and are seeking to work out the appropriate moral responses. When, in a context of severe economic and political oppression, Christians find a good deal of common cause with some Marxists, there is no need for us to conclude, as Dr Norman seems to do time and again, that they are simply adopting secular and humanist ideals. It could be

the appropriate shape of compassion demanded of the disciples of Jesus Christ. The authentic and apostolic note of Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, can indeed run through such political responses. When, in the outworking of history, the political situation changes and Christian thinking about obedience changes with it, there is no need to look back on past responses of Christians and invalidate them because they are no longer appropriate in the present. Christian responses are not without need of sharp criticism and are always in need of the continued enlightenment of the gospel. That does not mean, however, that they should not be made to be particular in a context and allowed to change as need arises. Relativity doesn't rule out serious and effective Christian reasoning in politics in a secular environment.

Church in danger!

In mood as well as in content at certain points, Dr Norman reflects the old Oxford Movement cry in a time of uncertainty: 'the church in danger'. He says that Christians take their political and social values from the prevailing culture. This, apparently, is acceptable in a sacral culture but not in a secular one. It is the secularization of modern culture which Dr Norman thinks cuts Christians off from relating faith to modern politics. If Christian political values are adopted from the prevailing culture and that culture is 'frankly secular', then the faith is secularized whenever we pretend that our comments are in any way Christian in character. Political and social uncertainty sometimes drives Christians to fretful and fearful responses. We must get back to the better paths of the past, or retreat into the life of the church, or foster the inward spiritual path.

Dr Norman's picture of the church is interesting. He clearly warms to the Orthodox Church in Russia. For the Orthodox, 'the performance of the Sacred Liturgy is not just a corporate expression of belief: it unfolds the very essence of the unchanging mysteries of transcendence. ... Western Christianity has so redefined its meaning in terms of social activism that it cannot comprehend a Church which is satisfied with the mere performance of worship. But the Russian Orthodox church is satisfied.' (p 36) Yet Dr Norman may have hit on one of the severest criticisms that can be made of this mystical view of the gospel. After all, perhaps generations of oppression in Russia by the Tsars and by the Leninists might have been more effectively curbed had the church seen the necessary relationship between the gospel and our responsibility to our neighbour as he suffers under the political abuse of power. It is Dr Norman's view of the gospel which leaves oppression effectively unchallenged at its sinful root. It really will not do for the church to batten down the hatches and pray that the storm will pass, and hope that it will remain unscathed in the pro-

cess. The gospel imperative to love our neighbour cannot live with fearful responses. The retreat into the church and/or into the mystical journey makes an uneasy bedfellow with the second great commandment.

Times of social and political uncertainty always encourage this sort of fearful and conservative response from some Christians. In the 1830s, amidst the turmoil of the age of the Reform Bill and of the granting of equal rights to Dissenters and Catholics, the Tractarians cried 'church in danger' and sought to take us all back to a golden primitive or medieval past. For a time evangelicals were tempted to go along with the enterprise. Now Dr Norman wants us all to return to a golden past in which his picture of the church and world is one in which the priest in the sanctuary speaks to people of the evidences of the unseen world amidst the rubble of this present one. Yet evangelical Christianity, at its heart, has a vision of the gospel carried forth into the midst of the world's life; calling the world to a life of repentance and faith, to share in the transforming power of the risen Christ and to work for and witness to his kingdom in all the human and structural relationships of our living. We must watch out lest we are conned, once again!

A brief encounter of a close kind

According to Dr Norman, at the Incarnation 'The visible and unseen world were briefly joined, and the supervening force of the divine flowed down upon the earth.' Here lies the basic theological error underlying his approach. Dr Norman manages to combine a fear of the modern 'secular' age with a misunderstanding of one of the basic Christian doctrines. The Incarnation is the supreme and central act of God—at the heart of all his self-revelation—showing to us that when God and man are joined by the grace of God they cannot be torn apart. The sort of spaceship theology which talks of brief encounters cannot do justice to the great biblical themes which the Incarnation so wonderfully brings to the fore. God did not make a one-off sortie into the world of a brief and passing kind. Rather, the Incarnation is at the apex of the total work of God in human history and represents God's intention of bringing man and the world into an unbreakable union with Christ.

In this encounter of man with Christ, life is transformed and renewed. We learn here that the stuff of our life and of our world is loved by God in Christ. In him there is a new world and a new life which catches up and transforms what we are and the relationships which we have. So the gospel brings hope to man and to the world—a hope which will have its fulfilment and completion in the full resurrection day as yet to come. It is true that there are some ways of doing liberation theology which appear to destroy the paradox between the kingdom which is present and working its way in the world's life and

history, and the kingdom still to come. Dr Norman has so misrepresented the Incarnation as to tear that paradox completely apart. For him this world is rubble and God is not doing anything with it in its own history. Rather, God calls men to abandon the world and its history as a place of Christian work and obedience. We are rather to seek the eternal and the unseen and to venture on to the path of the inward road to immortality.

For Dr Norman, the Incarnation tells us nothing about the character of God as one who loves the world and as the one who meets us in history and calls us to obedience in the present business of human relationships and commitments. Instead, he gives the impression of one who would emasculate the doctrine of the Incarnation to a matter of mere convenience. God is not really one who joins man in his history to His purposes in Christ. Yet in the Incarnation we see God as the one who made us and the world of which we are a part; a God who is the sovereign Lord of human history, and one who renews, redeems, and transforms his own creation which has been spoilt and abused as a result of human sin. So Christians are not called to set their faces against the concerns of our history and of our material life in the world but rather to set their faces against the corruption and abuse of the world. It is this distinction which Dr Norman continually loses sight of.

In Jesus Christ we do not learn that God has abandoned the world to its rubble. We learn that he so loved it as to share in its decay and rottenness to the point of carrying its guilt and judgement. It is God who has turned the decay and rubble of the world towards the potential of resurrection in hope. Christian political concern ought not to be a politics of futility and despair but of hope and of possibilities. It must be a politics ready to live with the tension of the 'now' in faith in Jesus Christ, and the 'not yet' of its fulfilment in history and experience.

Such a statement of Christian theology—which sets a necessary and unavoidable relationship between our convictions about God and his work, and our obedience in all our personal and social commitments—must not allow itself to be misrepresented as something new which has strayed from the well-worn paths of the true apostolic faith. It must represent itself faithfully as the historic apostolic understanding of the faith in conformity with the biblical understanding of God and in line with the historic development of theology in the church. It is Dr Norman who runs the risk of undermining apostolic Christianity. Evangelical people must not be misled by him out of a sympathy with the inherently conservative character of Dr Norman's comments and out of a desire to see liberation theology and radical politics put in their place. It is apostolic Christianity which gives the church a deep concern and commitment to the present condition of human life and to the way in which, at every level of life,

the gospel seeks to transform our experience in personal and in social living.

In conclusion

For all these reasons, the failure of these lectures to engage in a serious probing of Christian obedience in the face of contemporary political dilemmas is both disappointing and disturbing. To take but one example: Dr Norman's comments on South Africa. The best that he can do here is to describe the policies pursued by the Nationalist Government as 'mistaken' (p 63). He seems to believe the Afrikaaner rationale for its own policies of separate development. Apparently these are not about white supremacy at all. No mention is made of the facts of the policies adopted: of the gross imbalance in land distribution; of the inevitable political weakness of the 'homelands'; of the massive injustice in the distribution of resources for welfare, education, housing, and wages between black and coloured on the one hand and white on the other. None of these things could possibly be construed as indicating a policy of white supremacy and of an unshakeable Afrikaaner grip on political power. No mention is made of the brutal treatment of all who oppose the government's basic policies, of the beatings and murders, of prejudice in the courts and among the white police forces. There is no talk here of the fact that it is the whites in general, and the Nationalists in particular, who seem to think that they have a right to make decisions for everyone without any just procedures of participation. Incredibly, Dr Norman makes no critique of the theology of the Dutch Reformed Church in South Africa—in which divine justification is sought for these crude policies of oppression and division. None of these things gets a mention in a Christian lecture which includes a large section about South Africa!

South Africa is a moral issue for the churches. It is not the only one of this kind—that is true—but it is a very important one. In his eagerness to label all Christian comment on these problems as having adopted liberal-humanist assumptions, Dr Norman has shut the door on the possibility that Christians can and do make their severe criticisms of the immoral policies of the South African Government on the basis of a genuine understanding of the meaning of the gospel and of what it teaches us about God in our own contemporary context. It is the same problem with which we started out: Dr Norman's indiscriminate and uncritical attack on any and every effort by Christians to work out their obedience in politics.

The Christian church is required to address itself to the moral dilemmas facing Christians and others in the modern world. A conviction about the character of God as Creator and Redeemer leads on to earthed and practical comment about the nature and content of

these choices. In the Old Testament, the law is an expression of the meaning of what God is and what he has done for daily living. The prophets follow in the same tradition. They will not have the knowledge of God and social commitments torn apart. Jesus continues in this tradition and so does the early church as it struggled to help its members with the actual dilemmas of their moral living. Many of the dilemmas facing Christians in the world today are political in character. The church has a responsibility to these and ought to seek to fulfil it in faith and in humility.

The task must be done and needs sympathetic help from the world of theology. That help is not given by those who think that standing on the terraces enables them to understand the game better than those who have to play it. Abuse from the crowd may be satisfying for those who want to get it all off their chests. It contributes nothing to the development of the game and is of no help to those who have to play it. I am told that when Dr Norman was asked to name someone who, in his opinion, had made a significant contribution to Christian theology in relation to politics, he was unable to name anyone. Sadly, if that is the case (and I am not convinced that it is), these lectures offer no serious hope that the omission is on the way to being put right.

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NOTE

- 1 The Reith Lectures were given by Dr Edward R. Norman on BBC Radio in the autumn of 1978. They have been published in 1979 by Oxford University Press under the title *Christianity and the World Order* (105pp).

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