

LETTER

Some of the sentiments in the following letter (which appears slightly abridged) were also reflected in other correspondence. The column remains open for a further issue.

Dear Sir, thank you for the latest issue of *Evangel*, which I have just read with considerable interest. As you suggest your readers respond to the contents of the latest issue, I thought a foreign reaction to Mrs Thatcher's speech before the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and to the responses you publish might perhaps be of interest in this crucial debate.

Contrary to George Bush, whose recent Presidential campaign was characterised by an unusually strong conservative Christian stance, Mrs Thatcher's Declaration of Faith before the divines of the Church of Scotland cannot be considered as catering to a potential electoral constituency. In fact, from what I have read as to Christian responses to her speech, her unambiguous position would no doubt be electorally counter-productive. And even if 82% of British Evangelicals did vote for her – as was recently the case with President Bush – in the present de-Christianised state of Great Britain this would not amount to much electorally. The strength of Mrs Thatcher's Christian convictions was recently echoed in the passing through Parliament of an amendment to the Education Act – to which she referred in her closing remarks – reaffirming the specifically Christian character of British state education as against those who favoured a more syncretistic approach to the teaching of religion in schools. It is very significant that in this case she received more support from the Jewish and Moslem communities, who saw in the maintenance of a strong Christian position in state schools a guarantee that their own children would also be encouraged to take their own faith more seriously, than from representatives of the established churches. It is striking that not one of your respondents even mentions this very decisive aspect of the Prime Minister's speech, seemingly ignoring the vital importance, if only for the freedom of worship, that the nation keep, at least formally, its Christian character.

In the second place, Mrs Thatcher's speech before the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland led me at once to think of a former occasion when an eminent English statesman, of equally incontrovertible Christian convictions, addressed himself to the clergy of Scotland. I am, of course, thinking of Oliver Cromwell. In the frank and robust language that he was wont to use, he wrote of the Scottish clergy, some of whom had perished on the battlefield:

meddling with worldly policies, and mixtures of earthly power, to set up that which they call the Kingdom of Christ, which is neither it, nor, if it were it, would such means be found effectual to that end, and neglect, or trust not to, the Word of God, the Sword of the Spirit; which is alone powerful and able for setting up that Kingdom; and when trusted to, will be found effectually able to that end, and will also do it! (Carlyle, Vol. II, p. 194).

In more courteous terms, Mrs Thatcher reminded the Scottish divines of much the same truth, addressing them to their specific vocation, when she told them:

'But there is little hope for democracy if the hearts of men and women in democratic societies cannot be touched by a call to something greater than themselves. Political structures, state institutions, collective deals are not enough. We Parliamentarians can legislate the rule of law. You, the church, can teach the life of faith.'

And, in the last resort, the rule in any commonwealth must finally depend, as Cromwell so clearly understood, on the life of faith of its citizens. The danger inherent in the politicisation of the church's interests is as serious today as it was in seventeenth century Britain. Then, as now, the church is tempted to abandon the pure preaching of the Word of God and the works of faithful obedience and love which are its normal fruit, for political action. It is indeed striking to read Mr Shell exhorting Mrs Thatcher to listen not to the Word of God or to the faithful preaching of that Word, but to her fellow-Christians. So far has democratic rot gutted even our best Evangelical Christians!

'To the law and to the testimony: if they speak not according to this word, it is because there is no light in them.' (Isaiah 8:20)

It is high time, both in your country and mine, if we wish to begin again to see the effects of the Kingdom of God in our midst, for the churches to return to their principal tasks, the pure preaching of the Word of God, self-discipline, and works of Christian welfare.

The various responses you publish to Mrs Thatcher's speech bear ample witness to the deplorable moral state of the United Kingdom. All your respondents, with the exception of Mr Alison, seem to imagine that the British Government is chiefly responsible for this wretched state of affairs. None seem to see any kind of responsibility in the unfaithfulness of the churches and the traditional reformed and evangelical appeal to the conscience of ordinary citizens to repent from their evil and unfruitful ways seems very curiously absent from all the comments you publish. The argument seems to go as follows: the social environment is bad and produces worse results. It is time the government took the steps necessary to change the environment. If this were done things would undoubtedly take a turn for the better. I would humbly suggest that here Mrs Thatcher holds a far more biblical theology than those who contradict her.

The woes of our environment are the result of the individual sins of the population of the land and these individual sins compound in the long run to create perverse habits and institutions. For our ills are not in our institutions but in ourselves! The state is limited in its power. It cannot do more than contain evil. It has no mandate from God to create good. It cannot change men's characters and habits. Only the sword of the Spirit is in itself life-giving. Only God's Holy Spirit, applying the Word of God to individuals, can transform sinful men and women to the image of Jesus Christ; and through their daily obedience to the law in every aspect of their lives renewed men and women can bring this personal change to bear on a society and on its corrupted institutions. All this, of course, implying much thorough-going and competent reflexion and the submitting of every field of human activity to the sovereignty, not of the absolute state, but of the Lord Jesus Christ.

From what I could understand of her speech, it would seem that Mrs Thatcher is quite aware of the impotence, in the last resort, of the state and manifests, in this respect, a spiritual and theological maturity far above that of her contradicitors. It would appear that this awareness of the impotence of the state as a creative, a life-giving force, is clearly implicit in everything she said and that it seems to me that it was this sense of her incapacity as a politician confronted by social problems for which the state has no answer, which led the Prime Minister to address a *spiritual appeal* to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland and, through this august body, to the Christian church as a whole in Great Britain. For Mrs Thatcher seems keenly aware that it is only through the faithfulness of the church to her unique task that, through Christ, life and health can be brought to a dead and rotting society. For the Prime Minister the renewal of the prosperity of the nation must absolutely be accompanied by a renewal of Christian values, of Christian character, of love for one's neighbour and of a sense of service to the community. But the state is totally incompetent in all these tasks, tasks, which as Cromwell saw so clearly, only the church can achieve if it is faithful to the written and living Word of God. It is indeed very striking that, without exception, all those who responded in your journal to Mrs Thatcher's speech look exclusively to the action of the state for renewal, as the church itself, to all intents and purposes, was in fact dead.

We may well now ask: What, then, is the proper business of the state? What is one to think of a nation – I have in mind my own country, Switzerland – where every article of God's Law is broken with the implicit, and often explicit, approval of the state holding in its hands, instead of the ministry of the sword, wreaking God's vengeance to evil-doers, a trembling antinomian justice at the beck and call of the mob. Is it then surprising that God's judgment is on our nation? Let us consider some facts relating to Switzerland: the highest AIDS rate in Europe; the highest suicide rate; extremely high abortion and divorce rates; a frightening and constant growth in the number of deaths from drug abuse; a birthrate far below what is required for the reproduction of the present generation, etc. It is only too clear that before very long the Swiss nation will have disappeared from the face of the earth. For the wages of sin is death, both physically and spiritually, both collectively and culturally. And who could say that our present situation in Switzerland has no relation to what is happening today in the rest of Europe?

But there is more. The responses you publish witness to a unanimous defence of the Welfare State, more appropriately called in France *l'Etat Providence*, the Providential State. Of course, such a vision of the overweening function of the state hearkens strangely back to the theories of Thomas Hobbes, which have become part and parcel of our modern democratic absolutism. Even Mrs Thatcher (if one is to judge from the statistics put forward by Mr Alison and not from her ideological rhetoric) is, in this respect, far more socialist even than her predecessors. It is clear that Tawney was right: a people dependent for its social services on the state has indeed lost one of the vital attributes of its liberty, self-reliance. The modern Hegelian Providential State reproduces many of the characteristics of the divine monarchies of antiquity. Such empires, where force was right (i.e. total unlimited parliamentary sovereignty without the restrained hand

of a higher law or of a justice ontologically rooted in reality), is described in Scripture by the word *Beast*. The Roman Empire was of this character and biblical prophecy tells us of the latter-day revival of such bestial power. This, of course, in the tradition inaugurated by the social contract theory of Hobbes, which has been carried forward by Locke, Rousseau, Bentham, Austin, Marx, Kelsen, and so on. It has been revived in modern times by the development of a so-called *scientific* political theory, radically separated from the absolute moral values of God's commandments and the gradual domination of a positivistic conception of legislated law ontologically independent of any kind of justice, any kind of sense of the importance of a fundamentally unchangeable created order. This amoral and idealistic political and legal tradition which today has in fact been incorporated into the constitutional and juridical structures of virtually all the nations, makes it at present *in fact* impossible, adequately to relate in an organic fashion, a personal Christian faith in the overarching sovereignty of God's law over all creation to our political and legal institutions. Such a situation can only, in the long run, lead to the institutionalisation of the worst injustices and the constitutional justification of the most appalling abuses. We already see frightening examples of this, to take but two obvious examples, with regard to abortion and the manipulation of nascent human life.

Professor Torrance, in a brief but lucid analysis of these problems from the point of view of a thorough-going realism (*Juridical Law and Physical Law*, Scottish Academic Press, 1982), drew our attention to the extraordinary dangers implied by the unlimited legislative sovereignty of the Westminster Parliament. Here, a voluntary and nominalist notion of statutory law has replaced that ontologically founded search for true justice which characterised the Common Law tradition in Great Britain. From the reactions you publish to Mrs Thatcher's speech it would seem that the writings of Professor Torrance were better known on the continent than in the British Isles. Mrs Thatcher herself seems blissfully unaware of the dangers to which Professor Torrance wished to draw the attention of British politicians. Her policy of destroying the independence of the university professions by wielding the only argument to which they seem to understand – economic pressure – or her desire to restore certain standards in the educational system by wresting the schools away from the local authorities, both show that she stands firmly in the tradition of Hobbes, Bentham and Austin and, as a result, has little understanding of the importance of the practical distribution of authority and responsibility in a Christian Commonwealth. The wishes of her contradicitors to see the solutions to the nation's problems come from Westminster show that they are themselves even more deeply embedded than the Prime Minister in the tradition of worshipping the Leviathan, in looking to the initiatives of the centralised state or solutions to society's problems.

'And they worshipped the dragon, which gave power unto the beast; and they worshipped the beast, saying, Who is like unto the beast? Who is able to make war with him?' (Revelation xiii, 3)

It is clear that, as at the time of the Puritan revolution, or, for that matter, of the American insurrection, there can today be no satisfactory answer to the overweening powers of the state apart

from the proper restoration to the nation of the Christian character of its people. Only such a spiritual transformation will restore to the country the true form of self-government: the self-government: the self-government of men and women in the first place responsible for their actions before God and, as a result, capable of resisting the monolithic power of the modern state because they know their just actions to be backed by the authority of God Almighty himself. Furthermore, there can be no reduction to its proper size of the abusive Welfare Paternal State (see what Dostoevski wrote of this in *The Brothers Karamazov* under the legend of the Grand Inquisitor), without the re-establishment of that other aspect of Christian self-government, a full-fledged Christian charity of which men like Thomas Chalmers or William Booth showed so clearly the feasibility. Of course such action must go hand in hand with the restoration of Christian dedication and giving. Many churches in the United States and elsewhere are rediscovering today what in reality is meant by the works prepared by God before the foundation of the world. But as in the seventeenth century such manly resistance to the modern Leviathan, such charitable action in favour of the sick, the poor, those in need of a true education, can only come from the restoration to

the church of the pure and full-fledged preaching of the Word of God characteristic of the Calvinistic and Puritan Reformation. As Mrs Thatcher so rightly puts it, it is vital to take: '(...) together these key elements from the Old and New Testaments'.

In this sense it should be our prayer that the Prime Minister's word of exhortation to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland be heeded by all ministers of the Word of God in the kingdom. May the church thus return once again to its true vocation, that of sanctifying before the nation the name of the most holy God, of preaching the Word of God in its integrity cleansing itself from all doctrinal and moral impurity, and of manifesting, in the most concrete fashion, God's love to desperately needy modern men and women.

Thanking you for your kind attention, I remain yours very truly in Jesus Christ, King and Saviour,

Jean-Marc Berthoud
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