

BIBLICAL ECONOMICS TODAY

Vol. XI, No. 5

©ICE, 1988

Aug./Sept., 1988

CHRISTIANITY AND WEALTH*

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Perhaps it would be best if I began by speaking personally as a Christian, as well as a politician, about the way I see things.

Reading recently, I came across the starkly simple phrase: "Christianity is about spiritual redemption, not social reform." Sometimes the debate on these matters has become too polarised and gives the impression that the two are quite separate. Most Christians would regard it as their personal Christian duty to help their fellow men and women. They would regard the lives of children as a precious trust. These duties come not from any secular legislation passed by Parliament, but from being a Christian.

But there are a number of people who are not Christians who would also accept those responsibilities. What then are the distinctive marks of Christianity? They stem not from the social but from the spiritual side of our lives. I would identify three beliefs in particular:

First, that from the beginning, man has been endowed by God with the fundamental right to choose between good and evil. Second, that we were made in God's own image and therefore we are expected to use all our own power of thought and judgement in exercising that choice; and further, if we open our hearts to God, he has promised to work within us. And third, that Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, when faced with his terrible choice and lonely vigil, chose to lay down his life that our sins may be forgiven. I remember very well a sermon on an Armistice Sunday when our preacher said: "No one took away the life of Jesus, he chose to lay it down."

I think back to many discussions in my early life when we all agreed that if you try to take the fruits of Christianity without its roots, the fruits will wither. And they will not come again unless you nurture the roots. But we must not profess the Christian faith and go to Church simply because we want social reforms and benefits or a better standard of behaviour – but because we accept the sanctity of life, the responsibility that comes with freedom and the supreme sacrifice of Christ expressed so well in the hymn: "When I survey the wondrous Cross/On which the Prince of glory died/My richest gain I count but loss/And pour contempt on all my pride."

May I also say a few words about my personal belief in the relevance of Christianity to public policy – to the things that are Caesar's? The Old Testament lays down in Exodus the Ten Commandments as given to Moses, the injunction in Leviticus to love our neighbour as ourselves, and generally the importance of observing a strict code of law.

The New Testament is a record of the Incarnation, the teachings of Christ, and the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Again we have the emphasis on loving our neighbour

hour as ourselves and to "Do-as-you-would-be-done-by."

I believe that by taking together these key elements from the Old and New Testaments, we gain a view of the universe, a proper attitude to work and principles to shape economic and social life.

We are told we must work and use our talents to create wealth. "If a man will not work he shall not eat," wrote St. Paul to the Thessalonians. Indeed, abundance rather than poverty has a legitimacy which derives from the very nature of Creation.

Nevertheless, the Tenth Commandment – Thou shalt not covet – recognises that making money and owning things could become selfish activities. But it is not the creation of wealth that is wrong, but love of money for its own sake.

The spiritual dimension comes in deciding what one does with the wealth. How could we respond to the many calls for help, or invest for the future, or support the wonderful artists and craftsmen whose work also glorifies God, unless we had first worked hard and used our talents to create the necessary wealth? And remember the women with the alabaster jar of ointment.

I confess that I always had difficulty with interpreting the Biblical precept to love our neighbors "as ourselves" until I read some of the words of C. S. Lewis. He pointed out that we don't exactly love ourselves when we fall below the standards and beliefs we have accepted. Indeed we might even hate ourselves for some unworthy deed.

None of this, of course, tells us exactly what kind of political and social institutions we should have. On this point, Christians will very often genuinely disagree, though it is a mark of Christian manners that they will do so with courtesy and mutual respect.

What is certain, however, is that any set of social and economic arrangements which is not founded on the acceptance of individual responsibility will do nothing but harm. We are all responsible for our own actions. We cannot blame society if we disobey the law. We simply cannot delegate the exercise of mercy and generosity to others.

The politicians and other secular powers should strive by their measures to bring out the good in people and to fight down the bad: but they can't create the one or abolish the other. They can only see that the laws encourage the best instincts and convictions of the people, instincts and convictions which I am convinced are far more deeply rooted than is often supposed.

Nowhere is this more evident than the basic ties of the family which are at the heart of our society and are the very nursery of civic virtue. It is on the family that we in government build our own policies for welfare, education and care. You recall that Timothy was warned by St. Paul that anyone who neglects to provide for his own house (meaning his own family) has disowned the faith and is "worse than an infidel."

*A speech delivered to the assembly of the Church of Scotland by the British Prime Minister, May 21, 1988 in deference to British sensibilities, I have retained British spelling.

We must recognise that modern society is infinitely more complex than that of Biblical times, and of course new occasions teach new duties. In our generation, the only way we can ensure that no-one is left without sustenance, help or opportunity, is to have laws to provide for health and education, pensions for the elderly, succour for the sick and disabled.

But intervention by the State must never become so great that it effectively removes personal responsibility. The same applies to taxation, for while you and I would work extremely hard whatever the circumstances, there are undoubtedly some who would not unless the incentive was there. And we need their efforts too.

Recently there have been great debates about religious education. I believe politicians must see that religious education has a proper place in the school curriculum. The Christian religion – which, of course, embodies many of the great spiritual and moral truths of Judaism – is a fundamental part of our national heritage. For centuries it has been our very lifeblood. Indeed we are a nation whose ideals are founded on the Bible. Also, it is quite impossible to understand our history or literature without grasping this fact.

That is the strong practical case for ensuring that children at school are given adequate instruction in the part which the Judaic-Christian tradition has played in moulding our laws, manners and institutions. How can you make sense of Shakespeare and Sir Walter Scott, or of the constitutional conflicts of the seventeenth century in both Scotland and England, without some such knowledge?

But I go further than this. The truths of the Judaic-Christian tradition are infinitely precious, not only, as I believe because they are true, but also because they provide the moral impulse which alone can lead to that peace, in the true meaning of the word, for which we all long.

To assert absolute moral values is not to claim perfection for ourselves. No true Christian could do that. What is more, one of the great principles of our Judaic-Christian inheritance is tolerance. People with other faiths and cultures have always been welcomed in our land, assured of equality under the law, of proper respect and of open friends. There is absolutely nothing incompatible between

this and our desire to maintain the essence of our own identity. There is no place for racial or religious intolerance in our creed.

When Abraham Lincoln spoke in his famous Gettysburg speech of 1863 of "government of the people, by the people, and for the people," he gave the world a neat definition of democracy which has since been widely and enthusiastically adopted. But what he enunciated as a form of government was not in itself especially Christian, for nowhere in the Bible is the word democracy mentioned.

Ideally, when Christians meet, as Christians, to take counsel together, their purpose is not (or should not be) to ascertain what is the mind of the majority but what is the mind of the Holy Spirit – something which may be quite different.

Nevertheless I am an enthusiast for democracy. And I take that position, not because I believe majority opinion is inevitably right or true – indeed no majority can take away God-given human rights – but because I believe it most effectively safeguards the value of the individual, and, more than any other system, restrains the abuse of power by the few. And that is a Christian concept.

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 ideals are not enough. We parliamentarians can legislate for the rule of law. You the Church can teach the life of faith. When all is said and done, a politician's role is a humble one. I always think that the whole debate about the Church and the State has never yielded anything comparable in insight to that beautiful hymn "1 vow to thee my country". It begins with a triumphant assertion of what might be described as secular patriotism, a noble thing indeed in a country like ours: "1 vow to thee my country all earthly things above; entire, whole and perfect the service of my love." It goes on to speak of "another country I heard of long ago" whose King cannot be seen and whose armies cannot be counted, but "(soul by soul and silently her shining bounds increase)".

Not group by group or party by party or even church by church – but soul by soul – and each one counts.

MRS. THATCHER'S OFFENSE

I was in England during the week following Mrs. Thatcher's speech to the Church of Scotland. The BBC featured videotape clips of members of the Labor Party (yes, Labor – none of this needless adding of "U's" at every opportunity) who attacked Mrs. Thatcher with a vindictiveness that we are not used to in political debate in the United States. The BBC also featured one-on-one exchanges between Conservative and Labor spokesmen, moderated by television news personalities with the same leftward ideology (but less hair) that we are used to on American television.

When you read Mrs. Thatcher's address, what is striking is the mildness of her remarks. This is the Iron Lady of Britain – indeed, of the Western world – but the worldview she announced at the Scottish Church assembly is decidedly conciliatory. "In our generation, the only way we can ensure that no-one is left without sustenance, help or opportunity, is to have laws to provide for health and education, pensions for the elderly, succour for the sick and disabled." No smashing of the welfare State here!

You would not have known this from the intensity of the remarks from the opposition. Mr. Neil Kinnock, head

of the Labor Party, saw that there was political hay to be made. "Labour has seized with glee on the moral debate started by Mrs Thatcher's speech," reported (May 25). (This testifies to the existence of considerable wood, hay, and stubble in the British electorate.) He thundered that Mrs. Thatcher was comparable to Pontius Pilate in washing her hands of the poor. He asked her on the floor of the House of Commons if she intended now to unfreeze child benefit payments. She had referred in the speech to children as "our precious trust," but would she put these words into practice? "By their fruits ye shall know them," he remarked.

Her reply was that she does not believe that one can discharge his duties by casting them off to the State. Whereupon Mr. Kinnock asked if she had a biblical injunction for her decision to cut off free lunches to schoolchildren.

Obviously, either the biblical knowledge of British voters has plummeted to unspeakable depths or else Labor politicians are so thoroughly indoctrinated with liberal theology that they perceived themselves to be firmly positioned on the moral high ground. (I suspect both statements are true.) Mr. Roy Hughes characterized her posi-

tion as "thee creed of greed."

As if one Roy were not enough, Mr. Roy Hattersly, deputy leader of the Labor Party, described Mrs. Thatcher as the modern prophet of ruthless individualism, saying that her speech was as "intellectually demeaning as it was morally bankrupt." He denied that any spiritual dimension is involved in deciding what to do with wealth. (The May 25.) He said that she gave the speech "on the advice of public relations consultants, media advisers and opinion analysts." (He may have had in mind free market economist Brian Griffiths, the head of Mrs. Thatcher's Policy Unit, a devout evangelical, author of

and *Wealth* formerly professor of banking and international finance at the City University of London, and presently a professor of ethics at Gresham College. The Labor Party despises him.)

Mrs. Thatcher has forfeited a considerable portion of her salary since 1979, refusing to accept over 11,000 pounds per year, totalling almost 100,000 pounds (or about \$150,000). When she referred to this on the floor of Commons as evidence of her responsible attitude toward wealth, she was greeted with "roars of laughter from the Labour benches" (May 25). Personal economic sacrifice does not impress Labor politicians, apparently; compulsory wealth distribution of other people's money in the name of high morality, coupled with comfortable paychecks for elected politicians, alone impresses them as Christianity in action.

A Conservative Also Protests

Criticism of Mrs. Thatcher was not limited to political opponents. Into the fray stepped the famous (many would say infamous) retired Member of Parliament Enoch Powell, who is now 76 years old. He resigned his position in the early 1970's as a protest against his own party's support of open immigration from Commonwealth nations (immigrants immediately received the franchise and the dole), and also because he opposed Britain's entry into the Common Market, which he viewed as a needless surrender of British national political sovereignty. (He was correct; Britain could simply have dropped all tariffs, not just on imports from Common Market nations.)

Powell remains one of the most articulate speakers alive. I have said for two decades that he is the only public speaker I would drive a hundred miles to listen to. He is also a formidable debater. Hillsdale College in Michigan sells an audiotape of his mid-1970's debate with Gardiner Ackley, who served as Chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors under President Lyndon Johnson, and whose upper division level textbook on Keynesian economics was widely used in the late 1960's, in which Powell, a self-taught economist, took Ackley apart piece by delicious piece.

A former professor of classics, Powell is a thoroughgoing secularist. His critical remarks appeared in the (May 25).

Politicians, the Prime Minister told the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, "can only see that the laws encourage the best instincts and convictions of the people," which she was "convinced are far more deeply rooted than is often supposed." She seemed to be on the verge of recognizing, but not quite able to do so, that man is a social being, and that his interpretation of good and evil is determined by the society he belongs to. This left her facing a conundrum in defining what she called "the spiritual dimension which comes in deciding what one does with wealth",

"Alas," Powell added, "the paradox defeated her." He cited her statement that the State must provide some emergency services. Then he cited her equally strong statement that "intervention by the state must never become so great

that it effectively removes personal responsibility." Finally, he added with debater's flourish: "Who – or what – decides where the line is to be drawn?" He then asked rhetorically: "Surely the collective sanction of society?"

The reader of the might have been tempted to conclude from all this that poor (intellectually speaking) Mrs. Thatcher had stumbled unprepared into the deepest jungle of paradox, as if she had been naively unaware of the tangled vines and briars that awaited her. On the contrary, Mrs. Thatcher knows as well as Mr. Powell that every civil government in the history of man has confronted this same difficult paradox. Men have debated for millennia over the role of State intervention into the economy as a means of providing security. They have asked: When does the very provision of tax-financed social security programs endanger the fabric of society because price-conscious individuals will eventually attempt to pass on their economic responsibilities to State agencies? When, in short, does the very presence of a State-guaranteed security system sap the moral and economic foundations of security, namely, personal and family concepts of inescapable responsibility, which in turn encourage people to increase their economic output for the sake of dealing with an inherently uncertain future?

Powell knows all too well that economists, even his beloved "University of Chicago School" economists, have found no Intellectually acceptable solution to this ancient dilemma. (He also knows that even if they could come up with the solution, with or without the appropriate mathematical formulas, it is highly unlikely that they could persuade the voting public to accept it until the Adam Smith Institute could find some way to sell it to the voters as part of a new high-profit privatization investment package.)

Why limit the dilemma to economics? What about military strategy? When does the arms control process, adopted in the name of providing national and international security, increase the likelihood of war? Mr. Churchill asked that question repeatedly in the late 1930's, but no one in power even listened, let alone answered it. On the other hand, when does the rush to increase armaments also increase the likelihood of war? The pacifist movement from 1890 to 1914 asked that one, and no one in power answered. When, in short, does the quest for State-guaranteed security produce national insecurity? This is not a problem strictly limited to political economy (an unfortunately obsolete term), but is in fact the ultimate dilemma facing civil governments throughout history. Ignoring all this, Powell continued, skilled debater that he is:

Sometimes the Prime Minister can be amazingly unconscious of the implications of what she is saying. "The Christian religion is a fundamental part of our national heritage." What does "national heritage" mean and what does "fundamental" mean, if not that a society is defined and its members actuated by common beliefs, rituals, habits and modes of thought?

He then charged her with a kind of intellectual schizophrenia. He said that her view of Christian culture, "which is Tory has never been satisfactorily integrated by the Prime Minister with the individualist assumptions that underlie such assertions as 'we are all responsible for our own actions'." That the relationship between the two is profoundly problematic is something which her natural bent of mind disinclines her to admit. "

Powell, ever the debater, knows as well as anyone that a speech by a political leader before an assembly of Church officials is under some remarkable constraints. I have in mind such constraints as: 1) time, 2) acceptable etiquette and demeanor, given the peculiar circumstances, 3) considerations about what national television commentators will do with carefully edited snippets of the speech,

4) considerations regarding what the political opposition will say in print and the evening news three days later, 5) considerations regarding what the Church's resident theologians will say for the next five years; and perhaps most important 6) the inability of today's Church leaders – yes, even the once-legendary Scots – to follow complex chains of theological reasoning under any circumstances, and certainly not during a half-hour speech.

There is no doubt that there is both philosophical and operational tension between this so-called "Tory" view of national religious traditions and the free market's ideology of individual personal responsibility. But why place the burden of that intriguing paradox on Mrs. Thatcher's unbending shoulders? That same paradox has confronted the theologian and the politician alike since at least the era in which the seven fat years were followed by seven lean. The people of Egypt in Joseph's day, not being burdened with a heavy sense of personal responsibility, allowed the Egyptian State for seven years to collect 20 percent of the land's output and place it in the Pharaoh's storehouse. When the famine appeared as prophesied, they had to sell themselves and their land into perpetual slavery to him in order to purchase this formerly surplus grain (Gen. 47:18-20). They saved their lives, but at a high price: perpetual acceptance of an income tax of 20%. (To reach this level of what was once regarded as tyrannical taxation, the modern tax burden would have to be cut by at least half in every Western nation.) And it was not Aesop but Solomon who proclaimed:

Go to the ant, thou sluggard; consider her ways, and be wise: Which having no guide, overseer, or ruler, Provideth her meat in the summer, and gathereth her food in the harvest. **How long wilt thou sleep, O sluggard? When wilt thou arise out of thy sleep? Yet a little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to sleep: So shall thy poverty come as one that travaileth, and thy want as an armed man (Prov. 6:6-11).**

(Can you imagine what the Right Honorable Mr. Kinnock would have had to say to the BBC had Mrs. Thatcher reminded the assembled clerics in Scotland of Solomon's warning? Even better, can you imagine Mr. Kinnock's confrontation with Solomon, had the former been elected from, say, the borough of Beersheba? Best of all, imagine Solomon's response to Mr. Kinnock, intellectually or otherwise.)

Mr. Powell was disturbed by Mrs. Thatcher's insistence that "We simply cannot delegate the exercise of mercy to others." He responded, "But that is exactly what we do." We delegate this function, he insisted, to "a particular organ of that society, specifically endowed for the purpose with a representative character."

Mrs. Thatcher's speech made it clear what she meant. We dare not as individuals delegate all our morally required labors of mercy, as well as the financial support of the specialized representative laborers, to the impersonal bureaucratic morass known as the State. What Mrs. Thatcher reminded the clerics directly, not to mention reminding Mr. Kinnock by way of the Sunday morning tabloids, was that the State cannot by itself overcome poverty, that poverty can be overcome only through the personal responsibility, hard work, and thrift of the presently poor, as well as by private voluntary aid from individuals to those less fortunate souls who were once characterized by the appropriate but presently ideologically indelicate phrase, the "deserving poor."

(It was not that they somehow deserved to be poor; it was that they were to be distinguished morally and institutionally from those other poor people whose own lifestyles had led directly to their impoverished condition, i.e., the "undeserving [of charity] poor," who deserved no charity precisely because their own choices had brought on the poverty they so richly deserved. The reason why the phrase "deserving poor" is no longer familiar or acceptable is that those who establish the etiquette of discourse are appalled by the phrase's obvious implication, namely, that there is moral cause and effect in the economic affairs of mankind, and that long-term poverty over several generations is in fact a visible testimony to the moral rebellion of those so afflicted. They are indeed afflicted, not by some impersonal evolutionary process, but by the built-in system of rewards and punishments that God has providentially ordained for the affairs of mankind: Deuteronomy, chapter 28.)

It is here that both Mr. Kinnock and Mr. Powell join forces against Mrs. Thatcher, for they both perceive what she is implying by her distinctly theological defense of the foundations of wealth and personal responsibility. They see that she is exactly what she says that she is: a **providentialist**. She is not intellectually burdened by the **Darwinism** of this age. She understands that economic cause and effect is ultimately moral rather than technological, personal rather than impersonal, providential rather than random. She has verbally challenged the reigning myth of our age, the myth that the moral decisions of men, both individually and as judicial representatives, are determined by essentially impersonal forces, whether economic (Mr. Kinnock's view) or cultural (Mr. Powell's view).

Mr. Powell does not like what he has read in Mrs. Thatcher's speech. He wants politicians to avoid all references to the realm of theological discourse. In this, he shares the reigning political myth of this age (one that follows from the original Darwinian myth of cosmic impersonalism): that the affairs of State should be forever separated from the affairs of the spirit. "Whatever his personal inclinations are, the politician will be little enlightened or assisted in his work by what philosophers and saints, theologians and scientists, attempt or are achieving in **higher spheres**." This, from the man who wrote these words in 1967:

So what I am saying is that a nation lives by its myths. What those myths are, matters immensely to its happiness or unhappiness, success or failure. The greatest task of the statesman therefore is to offer his people good myths and so to save them from harmful myths; and I make no apology if Plato happens to have said just that in *The Reality*, p. 245.)

Mr. Powell would be wise to give more consideration, at age 76, to the affairs of the spirit. He should at the very least recognize that Mrs. Thatcher is doing the statesman's job, and doing it well. She is calling a nation back to its religious roots. Perhaps what disturbs Mr. Powell is that these roots are not mythical, like those he studied as a young classical scholar, but cosmic and eternal. They are truths that God requires men to believe, for which they will be held personally accountable in eternity, and also personally and representatively accountable in history. Mrs. Thatcher probably has a better grasp of what theology is all about than the Scottish clerics she addressed, and surely better than the theological insights of either Mr. Kinnock or Mr. Powell.