

## A Reflection on 'Anglican Social Theology'

*Anglican Social Theology: Renewing the Vision Today* was published last month and described as a book which, 'looks to develop strong theological foundations for local social action initiatives by churches, especially for activists who are not familiar with the Church of England's tradition of social theology, developed by William Temple and others a century ago'. Revd. Canon Prof **John Atherton**, Associate Research Fellow of the William Temple Foundation, has worked with and advanced the theological developments described by the book throughout his long career as a highly respected voice on theology, economics and social change. John offers his personal reflection on the newly published volume and makes the case for an alternative approach to social theology.

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**More Religious than Social. More Churchy than Worldly. More Church of England than Anglican, Ecumenical, Inter-Faith, or Interdisciplinary. Reflections on *Anglican Social Theology* (Malcolm Brown, ed.), with some thoughts on what William Temple's *Christianity and Social Order* could look like today.**

William Temple's little classic, *Christianity and Social Order*, was written in understandable haste in 1941 in the darkest days of the Second World War. It was published as a Penguin Special in 1942, retailing at 6<sup>d</sup> (two and a half pence in today's coinage). I have a rather battered one. It's very slender (92pp), printed on cheap wartime paper, and advertises Grey's cigarettes, Jif shaving cream and 'Chappie' dog food. It could be easily shoved in your pocket

on the way to the front, as 'Books for the Forces', with instructions to 'Leave this book at a Post Office when you have read it, so that men and women in the Services may enjoy it too'. It rapidly became a bestseller with initial sales quickly reaching 150,000 because it provided the religious and ethical foundations for that radical reconstruction of Britain which Beveridge and Temple amazingly envisioned in those early dark years of war when invasion and German occupation seemed more than likely.

The nearest reasonably contemporary equivalent to Temple's classic was, I suppose, the Church of England's report, *Faith in the City* (1985, pp398, £7.50). It certainly confirmed the public importance of deprived inner cities for contemporary experiences and politics. But its appeal and influence was principally to and on the Church of England, leading to its late-in-the-day creation of the Church Urban Fund which has resourced many church and other bodies' projects in often difficult urban situations.

*Anglican Social Theology* costs £19.99 for 226 pages, and was commissioned by a group of Bishops from urban dioceses hopefully to give greater theological depth to church life in its interactions with wider society. Can it have similar wider impact on society? I'm afraid I'm not sure, as I shall explain.

There is much of merit in *Anglican Social Theology*. The book contains three important reflections on contemporary Christian theological engagements with society, sometimes set in useful (including in a rich source of footnotes) historical contexts particularly from the nineteenth century. John Hughes of Cambridge University (sadly now deceased) sketches a recent record of some of the social implications of the Church of England's theology (it's not Anglican, it's Church of England), focusing particularly on what is described as post-liberal and therefore post-Temple developments, especially as seen in the important works of the American Stanley Hauerwas and the British John Milbank. These essentially argued for a distinct and distinctive

Christian theology (successor to the Christendom Group of the 1930s-50s and its similarly reasonably unproductive pursuit of a distinctively Christian sociology, politics and economics) which necessarily stands apart from and indeed against those secular disciplines and reasoning which have so often shaped the contemporary world for the better (an odd social theology?). Such a separation then finds the alternative centred on the Church as the only ark of salvation in the midst of what are seen as the new dark ages. It's a theology which has captured many younger theologians and Bishops, not least because it offers a way out of and against the complex world of daily life and secular disciplines, seeking refuge in what may well be a highly optimistic, romantic and unrealistic view of the Church of England today. Hughes then moves on to Rowan Williams (and, to some extent, Malcolm Brown, editor of the book) as somehow holding together this post-liberal theology and the Church of England's Temple-tradition of incarnational theology (it feels like the attempted and rather forced reconciling of what is maybe irreconcilable).

Chaplin's account of evangelicalism's history and contemporary developments is important given its prominent place in the global resurgence of Christianity, and it's increasing significance in the Church of England (in the sense that in the latter it occupies a greater proportion of a rapidly diminishing pie). Its connection with Hughes' post-liberal theologies is that both share a deep rejection of the Enlightenment and its associated liberal values and histories for philosophical or scriptural reasons. That potential almost unholy alliance is reinforced by the third contribution, by the Roman Catholic Anna Rowlands, which explores Catholic Social Teaching (in some ways, flavour of the month for people who don't really know it, not least because they simplify it out of empirical existence). This is perhaps the most reflective piece – particularly on 'Anglican' and Catholic approaches to the state, again with some focus on Rowan William's work.

Rowlands' importance for this whole exercise is that she mentions, in what could appear as a diversion from the content of the whole book, Elaine Graham and Linda Woodhead, two significant members of the Church of England. Taken together their contributions probably outweigh, certainly for the emerging twenty-first century, the contribution of the late twentieth century post-liberals, including their pursuit of, say in politics, a reformulated Blue Labour and Red Tory. Graham has recently majored in a significant way on a powerful exposition of the contemporary character of public theology. Woodhead has made seminal contributions to the relationships between religion and society in the contemporary context. Interestingly, both operate from and in the North West of England, as does much of the work of the William Temple Foundation, and so they together constitute quite fundamental reminders that major contributions to Anglican social theology are certainly not to be found essentially or maybe primarily in the rarefied atmospheres of Cambridge and London. (Interestingly, and oddly for such a book claiming to represent Anglican social theology, there's no mention of another fine sociologist of religion, Robin Gill, whose magisterial three-volume sociological theology is certainly amongst the best current contributions to social theology).

In terms of present and future potential for religious engaging with emerging social contexts, it is Woodhead who begins to suggest, for Rowlands, a social theology which is both empirically and sociologically informed, and which also necessarily takes account of the views of ordinary Christians - what is now known as 'ordinary theology' and to which I have added 'ordinary church'. As Rowlands acknowledges, both 'ordinaries' are quite at variance with post-liberal views of church and theology, with what many church leaders, bishops and theologians think, and assume ordinary Christians should be thinking and doing on social matters and on theology! Bishops are important leaders but without the sheep they are quite worthless. And that's equally a robust message for Roman Catholicism. The only serious glimpse of these

increasingly informative realities for any kind of adequate social theology for the twenty-first century is therefore in Rowland's important reference to Linda Woodhead.

The other two contributions are by Suggate and Brown. The former engages with Temple's theology and its theoretical social implications by essentially reworking some of his earlier important 1987 book on Temple. The inspiration which drove Temple is sadly not always present. Brown's introduction to the exercise, including a focusing on a reworking of his PhD on MacIntyre's late twentieth century argument that we have now moved decisively beyond Enlightenment and Liberalism into a conflict of incommensurables. MacIntyre's last few pages is a return to small Benedictine-type religious communities set in and against the surrounding dark ages, and in which character, virtues and goods can once again be nurtured more effectively – the latter being important as essential recurring features of wellbeing, for example in current psychological research, but without the need for his romantic and often empirically and historically inaccurate view of religious communities and dark ages. It's worth noting that the whole book is pervaded by deep commitments to such small communities, to a revitalising, but in sometimes an unbalanced way, Temple's intermediate associations and Catholic Social Teaching on civic society. Only Rowlands really recognises the continuing and essential role of the state in promoting wellbeing and, to a much lesser extent, the market, with the book continuing the often insufficient understandings of economics which therefore profoundly misshape theologians' contributions to any adequate contemporary social theology. It's disappointing that MacIntyre's thesis of the 1970s-80s continues to influence much of the thinking in this book. Like radical orthodoxy, one is left with a very profound sense of the unfortunate datedness of much of these recurring arguments.

In other words, this book is about certain kinds of theology: rather than the social, it's about the religious, about the Church, rather than the world, and it's about particular trends in the Church of England (and not about worldwide Anglicanism) rather than about engagements with other

Christian denominations (other than Roman Catholicism) and the ecumenical movement, other faiths, and, more importantly, other disciplines.

In these wider particularly intrafaith connections it's worth remembering that Temple's *Christianity and Social Order* (1942) was twinned with George Bell's (in many ways a much better book), Penguin Special, *Christianity and World Order* (1940) with its deep engagements with the emerging ecumenical movement, including his relationships with Germany's Dietrich Bonhoeffer, killed on the orders of Hitler in 1945. It was Bell, therefore, who also spoke out against the indiscriminate blanket bombing of Dresden in 1945 in the House of Lords. Not surprisingly, therefore, he was rejected by a mean-minded Churchill as replacement Archbishop of Canterbury on Temple's sudden death in 1944.

*Anglican Social Theology* seeks to address the William Temple tradition for today. Interestingly, I am sometimes asked, including by close colleagues in the William Temple Foundation, is there a Temple tradition today? I am not sure how useful such a question is, not least because Temple's social theology was often, understandably, very context bound, his philosophy was hopelessly out of date, his grasp of economics was equally inadequate, and he often spoke from the establishment to the establishment (a problem in a profoundly inegalitarian society, including for some of today's church leadership). And yet, there's something about the man which transcends these limitations and which engaged with the world of daily life as it affected most people, including my own family whose lives were transformed by the (enlightenment and post-enlightenment) industrial and mortality revolutions, and by a welfare society. So here are three concerns I work with which have emerged from my long involvement with the William Temple Foundation, a research and development hub in Christian social thought and practice, founded in Temple's memory in 1947.

First, the task for me now is to continue working for the greater wellbeing of all nations and peoples of the world, including in and through their environments. This will include, for example, raising their standards of living and therefore and thereby continuing to reduce the number still living in great poverty; and continuing to improve the life expectancy and health of people, their education, and their ability to participate in society. It will also equally include recognising and engaging the great paradoxes of development that have invariably accompanied such major developments in wellbeing achieved only in the last two centuries. These paradoxes include, for example, addressing the profound inequalities between and then within nations, and the growing threats to our environment. Both social developments and paradoxes are consequently at the very centre of the concerns for and pursuit of greater wellbeing for all. The task is therefore to continue to increase the wellbeing of nations and peoples and to address the grave limitations accompanying such developments. It is not to focus unduly on the negatives, as so much Christian social thinking and practising has done, and which sadly taints some of *Anglican Social Theology*. The task is to address both, in that order of promoting wellbeing and addressing the paradoxes. That's social theology for today.

Importantly, it is also recognised by significant contributions in economics, psychology and sociology, that religions in general, and Christianity in particular, have important contributions to make to the pursuit of greater wellbeing for all, including for example, subjective wellbeing (what people themselves feel about and evaluate their own wellbeing – a bit like ordinary theology and church – asking the people themselves, not telling them), health and education – all key resources for human wellbeing. Understandings of why and how such Christianity has therefore made such a major contribution to greater wellbeing takes us into understandings of Christian practices, ethics and beliefs, all recognised and affirmed by secular disciplines, and, in turn, confirmed, elaborated and enriched by Christianity and its traditions. Note that it is the mix of Christian practices, ethics and beliefs that are determinative of its contributions to

wellbeing, not its theologies primarily, and running through and in all are the contributions of ordinary theology and church rightly becoming decisive contributions to the whole package.

Second, this promotion of greater wellbeing for all will inevitably mean operating at all levels, including, and particularly, at macro levels. An undue focus on the personal, the local, and small groups in civil society, though absolutely essential, is also profoundly misleading if promoted unduly at the expense of the macro level (Christians, given their rightful commitment to the person and personal, are particularly and understandably subject to this grave limitation). I therefore join the two levels macro and micro through, say, the concept of seeing the aggregate facts on the faces of particular people, a concept deeply enriched by Paul's understanding of 'The knowledge of the glory of God seen in the face of Christ' (2 Cor. 4.6). The undue focus in *Anglican Social Theology* and Catholic Social Teaching on civil society is part of this real dilemma.

Third, addressing such wellbeing in such contexts inevitably involves a series of overlapping collaborations profoundly misunderstood in so much post-liberal theology. These include:

a) As intrafaith, in Christianity's case, within and between denominations, and then including ecumenically (for Temple, the 'great new fact of our era' in 1942). Note such collaborations, though essential, must always be accompanied by a critical conversation (*Anglican Social Theology's* rightful recognition of the contributions of Evangelical and Catholic Social Teaching to social theology does not engage sufficiently and robustly with arguments say over their use of Scriptures and Traditions which promote views for family at variance with say our changing understanding of human relationships, and in particular, human sexuality).

b) As interfaith, including but increasingly moving beyond the Abrahamic Faiths to also involve Eastern religions. This latter rightly reflects the historic rebalancing of global politics and



economics with the contemporary re-emergence of China and India which together hold over a third of the world's population.

c) And finally, as interdisciplinary – as engaging with other disciplines, experiences and practices, including, again, taking proper account of affirmative and critical conversations within and between disciplines (including as religious studies, in which theology should now be located). In these collaborations theological understandings are not necessarily decisive, and do not necessarily have ultimate priority, in the pursuit of greater wellbeing. But they are absolutely essential partners. Here, I am reminded by Elaine Graham of Boenhoffer's thinking: 'In Christ we are offered the possibility of partaking in the reality of God and in the reality of the world, but not in one without the other. The reality of God discloses itself only by setting me entirely in the reality of the world'. Now that's Temple. That's what I'm arguing for – to begin with the reality of the world in its struggles for greater wellbeing, with the world of daily life – and therefore with the reality of God which this then discloses, and with the wondrous interactions between them. Is that Anglican Social Theology? Not a clue. Not particularly interested in the question. But I am interested in that pursuit of greater wellbeing and the God this discloses.

*Challenging Religious Studies: The Wealth, Wellbeing and Inequalities of Nations (SCM)* by John Atherton will be published later this year and will develop some of these arguments.