What a Christian View of Society says about Poverty

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// December 2011

The Children's Society

From a series of briefings by the
Contextual Theology Centre

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This paper was presented at 'Will the First be Last', a consultation on Theology, Poverty and Inequality held at St George's House, Windsor Castle in September 2011 by The Children's Society and the Contextual Theology Centre

There has been a lot of public debate recently about the Big Society and the Good Society, and the invocation of the word 'social'.

This is a fascinating juncture that we shouldn't dismiss too quickly, because seeing the primacy of the social dimension to life is a deeply Christian insight. In a sense, the church invented the social world.

In the antique world you had the familial, the tribal and the political communities. But the idea of having a space of free association – people coming together for all kinds of social purposes of organisation and running life – was only vestigially present in the antique world. It became far more common because the church itself was one enormous free association. It was also an international association, which spawned in the Middle Ages all kinds of other free associations beneath its umbrella. These took different forms after the Reformation, including the 'free' churches, leading to the way the church today is a gathering of all kinds of smaller associations.

The importance of the free association in defining society is in the way that it gives equal weight to both components of that term. It is about liberty, yes, but liberty achieved through people coming together to explore a common purpose. We don't have a significant range for our freedom if we are acting alone; we can be more free together than in isolation. Each individual low paid worker might be free to ask for higher wages, for example, but they won't get far because each is in competition with the other for a job. Yet when those individuals work together (for example, through the London Citizens Living Wage campaign) they are able to achieve a fairer wage. Being paid a living wage also gives those individuals more genuine options, and therefore more freedom, such as having more time to spend with family because they no longer need to do multiple jobs. Individual freedom is here enhanced by association and corporate action. We can be more free together than in isolation. This insight has implications far beyond both politics and economics, but is often excluded by both.

The exclusion of the social dimension by economics and politics is justified only superficially. Right-wing parties have tended to speak in the name of the economic, defending the unfettered rights of commodity exchange. Left-wing parties have tended to speak in the name of the political, arguing for the importance of a hierarchical bureaucracy designed to maximise public happiness and equality of opportunity. However, this division was always more apparent than real: both left and right agreed that the only viable public goals are the secular ones of maximising material contentment and private liberty. The Christian vision of society offers a great deal more.

The idea of the free association goes beyond economics, at least in the sense of buying and selling to pursue our individual interest. A Christian notion of the economy is as far as possible about nurturing a social or 'civil' economy, because it recognises that pursuing your own interests doesn't have to be antithetical to having a social or mutual concern.

Similarly the social goes beyond politics in the sense that the latter is about law and the minimal conditions for human flourishing. Politics alone cannot proceed beyond that in the direction of reconciliation and forgiveness and to a more concrete vision of what the good life is. This should be happening at the social level. Again, as with the economy, politics must be social too. It cannot be neutral, but will always support some version of the good life. That must come from somewhere other than political processes. If it doesn't, it tends to be a vision imposed by a rather arrogant technocratic elite.

Excluding the social has resulted in a sterile oscillation between the claims of economics on the one hand and politics on the other. By contrast, the priority of the social can once more integrate and ground both economics and politics, in terms of a new ethos and practice of mutuality.

The more that Christians have the social dimension at the heart of their vision of society, the more that they pursue a particular approach which remembers that the church is trying to be the kingdom in embryo. The church itself is the site of the true society. It is the project which brings in everything: there are no easy boundaries between the secular and the sacred. We find its transcendent reference point when gathered round the Eucharist, receiving the gifts of God and giving back the gifts of God. This models the mutuality and reciprocity necessary in community.

This other word 'reciprocity' accompanies the concept of free association. Reciprocity is about gift exchange rather than simply contracts or the imposition of laws. Charity really involves reciprocity, not the one way giving of something to somebody which we've come to see it as. In the best Christian theology, charity has always been a practice of mutuality involving constant give and take.

This kind of reciprocity – give and take within the community – happens in space. There is also a more complex form which happens across time. This is most obvious in the educational process. God is educating us, and then there is an educational process down the generations of Christians. For each person that initially involves submission, before children or students grow up and then give something back. Probably all justifiable inequality is ultimately to do with that educational process. It's justifiable because it is for the good of everybody. There is a hierarchy in medicine, for example, because if there wasn't there would be no passing on of goods, no education in medical practice, and no effective healthcare. If there was no hierarchy of healers then it would be impossible for people to be healed.

How does this affect our understanding of poverty? There is one group of Christians (like 'the religious right') who tend to think of Christianity as an exclusively spiritual matter, where we are all equal spiritually and the church community is secondary and not the primary social focus. That can sometimes translate into an individualist approach to social policy. On the other hand, there has been another tendency since the nineteenth century to hand over the incarnational mission of the church to the

state. In other words, to see the state as the more complete realisation of the church's social mission than the church itself. It is sometimes said that we can't stop at charity, and that all Christian reformers have wanted to proceed to enshrining principles and practices in law. One can see the serious point of this and in certain respects such an advance is crucial, and yet there is a profound question mark over that whole tradition which William Temple exemplified. It is a rather Hegelian tradition that tends ultimately to surrender things to the state and risks eroding both the interpersonal and the sense that people are mutually responsible for each other at the immediate social level. Anglican social thought at least has always been divided between this approach and one which stresses less state intervention, and rather more a mixture of the political and the social in the role of intermediate associations where the citizenry act more spontaneously and more for themselves in a genuinely participatory fashion. (One can mention here Headlam, Chesterton – for long an Anglican! - Figgis, Demant and today Rowan Williams.)

The Temple temptation to advocate legislation as a cure-all often means losing focus on the reality that all help comes from people assisting each other (for the state is not a *Deus ex Machina;* in the end it is only we ourselves) and losing focus on the notion that you treat recipients of charity as human beings. Keeping people's humanity central is why we accord them the dignity of demanding something from them, as Ian Hislop so brilliantly stressed in his TV series on Victorian philanthropy. The problem with the alternatives is that they are devoid of this social concern and therefore deeply impersonal. We either get the pure market theorists who think welfare will trickle down in a perfect economy and it will all sort itself out, or else you get a left-wing version of the same impersonalism where you want to redress the balance so that everyone can act equally in the same supposedly 'objective' capitalist market. Far too much time is wasted by well-meaning researchers producing statistics and interviews to prove the obvious -- for example, the LSE report's finding that last summer's rioters are 'alienated', think their parents were doing just fine, deny that they were banding together in a super-gang and profoundly distrust the police. (Though I would stress that to greet such findings ironically is by no means to excuse poverty and alienation or to exonerate the police). In response, yet more technocratic educational and monetary solutions are proposed. These may be worthy and needed in themselves, yet are clearly insufficient. This is not the way of the church, which should rather take seriously Ed Miliband's point that a 'something for nothing' neoliberal culture has impacted at all levels and irrupted with understandable fury at the base of the social pyramid.

If the church is confused about its response to poverty, then more specific confusion exists over how to approach the issue of child poverty in particular. This is undoubtedly an area of social policy where almost everyone agrees it is a priority. Yet it is not obvious why that should be, or how to go about solving it.

While adults might be culpable for their predicament, children are the blameless innocents. A child's family, and therefore the material circumstances in which they are brought up, is an accident of birth. But this can suggest to 'experts' that being born to a certain someone is unfortunate. To which Christians must respond that it is never unfortunate. If, theologically, we must celebrate every given life then we have to be wary of treating any birth as if it was a disaster. And a child's legacy – irrespective of what judgements we might make of it – is a legacy from their parents. There might be issues and implications springing from that legacy to which a response is required, but we

cannot ignore, or erase, that legacy by wishing away a child's parents.

When a child is born to parents unable or unwilling to care for them appropriately, we unthinkingly assume the state must automatically then be responsible for them. There is something worrying about that assumption. We need rather to ask searching questions about quite how much nurturing and educational responsibility over children we hand to a state that increasingly has no goals save its own economic power and no interest in the person save as an atomised cog in a well-oiled machine.

This is not to suggest that children are instead only the responsibility of their parents. They are also the responsibility of communities. Yet we are all afraid now, for reasons all too well known, of taking part in a common bringing up of our children. The sense of a shared adult responsibility for the next generation has collapsed. This is an appalling circumstance, not least as it places too much burden on bringing up children on the parents alone. Nurture is now no longer a collaborative project.

But in our churches at least it should still be so and therefore they should refuse to be terrorised by regulatory fears of leaving children under lone adult supervision, nor should churches add to these regulations. The need to guard children from abuse needs to be handled in a far more *ad hoc* manner on the basis of personal knowledge of individuals, because the Christian sense of justice has nothing to do with liberal formalist fairness. And it is the 'anarchic' approach based on personal discernment that is actually far more likely to be effective in delivering real long term protection, because a warped individual will *always* find ways to evade merely procedural safeguards.

Given the centrality of parents and community rather than primarily the state in the upbringing of children one can also question the common emphasis in recent years on specifically *child* poverty. This derives from a questionable focus on equality of opportunity, which the state is supposed to try to secure.

The main problem with this objective is that it's not radical enough. It suggests we all need fair chances in a game. That's fine, but what if you fail? Do we simply shrug and accept that's a stigma, and now you don't matter so much? The Christian attitude stands against this by holding that all matter equally in the community. This entails that all matter equally in the economy too. We just as much need people to sweep the floors and man the tills as we do to be professors and business managers. All these people need to be treated in terms of dignity of labour. The Christian priority cannot therefore be not equality of opportunity. It is not even equality of outcome, except in the terms of equality of human flourishing. There is never going to be absolute equality. Even Marx and Engels laughed at that idea in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme.* Instead we should all be flourishing and contributing and receiving rewards in terms of our ability, capacity and virtue.

The weight of Christian tradition supports that kind of view. It sounds somewhat conservative, but in reality it is radical, because when you have no notion of justifiable inequality then you get unjustifiable inequality. That leads to the rule of the talentless, the virtueless, the swaggeringly rich and ultimately the criminal. And if one thing characterises the world today it is the rise and rise of the criminalisation of both business and politics. Northern Mexico is already a completely criminal state; Russia is very close, China is replete with corruption. Our own politics, media and banking worlds have seen their fair share of near-criminal behaviour in recent years.

Focusing on child poverty might rescue a few individuals from desperate circumstances, but it won't stop those circumstances arising for future children. Doing that requires a holistic approach in which we both challenge and assist whole families and whole communities. It's a matter of Christian care for all children, not plucking a few out of poverty.

The current fashion for correcting an overall dire situation through public education and child policies is unlikely to get very far. For they capture none of the potential of working through free associations, which bear the weight of social life. At the moment we have the wrong form of paternalism; it's all top down impersonal economic and technical tinkering. We need instead the right kind of patrician legacy which promotes the growth of virtue and encourages a debate about what the good life is. Poverty alone isn't the problem. Simply giving more money to the poor – even though this is often crucial and most of the current cuts are an abomination – won't resolve the issues facing our communities. People's capacity to endure and survive poverty – their 'resilience', as some in the Labour party are now emphasising – has also declined.

As part of this, the catastrophic decline over a very long period in working class education is a cause for real concern. We have to look closely at what has been lost in communities taking some responsibility for their own education and training. For example, consider the importance of children being able to read. The child that can't has a thin chance in life to survive poverty, let alone escape it. Quite modest things like classes for parents to teach them to read to their children can make a real difference without needing to immediately transform their whole economic situation, even though that remains important. We can't deal with the children without dealing with the parents. The connections between child and parent, family and the community, are integral to any serious approach to tackling poverty. The Christian view of society holds these relationships central to our vision, and our solutions.

If you realise that the church itself is a way for the social dimension to transcend and transfigure politics and economics, then that implies a much more collaborative approach to the whole issue of poverty. Above all it means, as far as the church is concerned, something of a shift in direction away from the Temple legacy of long reports telling the Government what to do and being admired by the liberal press while the laity is secretly sceptical. We need a shift instead to a more authentic radicalism in which the church gets involved in all kinds of processes of welfare, medicine, banking, education, the arts, business, technology, ecology and more, and seeks to transform them in the joint name of reciprocity and virtue.

Again the State has a crucial role to play here in setting legal boundaries against profiteering from health, welfare and education by merely private interests, and in the continuing ensuring of a safety net and guaranteed provision for all. But to see its role as basic is actually to despair about our fundamental motivations, to deny that we can capable of acting 'socially' in the first place.

Instead, the social dimension needs once more to be the defining consideration of our common life. The church, when it is being truest to itself, is capable of embedding this concern beyond the reach of mere economics and politics. More than ever this is what the church now needs to do. And this may also prove the secret to increasing church attendance -- for proving the consequences of Eucharistic sharing will surely lead many more to share in the Eucharist itself.

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