

The Common Good – Who and what is it good for?

Over recent years one of the dominant themes in faith based approaches to social policy has been the theology of the “Common Good”. In casual references and keynote speeches on Christian social the phrase is uttered with monotonous regularity, and appears to have few if any competitors as a guiding principle for approaching the economic and social crises of our times. The term which was coined over a century ago in a Papal encyclical (Pope Leo XIII (Rerum Novarum, 1891): has theological roots in Thomas Aquinas and before that in Aristotle, while for some Protestants it has resonance with John Calvin's doctrine of common grace. Over the years academic theologians too numerous to mention especially in the Roman Catholic world, have developed the theology of the common good in helpful directions while recent contributions from political theologians such as Luke Bretherton have covered similar ground. Most recently it has been widely taken up by political thinkers such as Blue Labour Maurice Glasman, and Red Tory Philip Blond and by theologians and religious leaders as diverse as Tim Keller, Jim Wallis and Anna Rowlands. And in September 2013 it was the theme of a significant conference on Christian social thought held in Liverpool, “Together for the Common Good”. And in November 2013 at the Church Urban Fund conference both the Archbishop of Canterbury and Glasman gave keynote addresses in which the theme was prominent.

There is much good to be said of it and much good practice that derives from such theology. However as an active Evangelical, Christian, social activist in a poverty stricken multicultural city in the North of England I find many aspects of the common good train of thought as currently presented unconvincing. So as a discussion starter I offer this paper. With colleagues at the William Temple Foundation I have been involved in discussions around the theme, and we have come to the conclusion that before we accept it as the only orthodox Christian approach to the social world some questions need to be answered. It is impossible of course to speculate how William Temple himself might have tackled these issues were he alive today, though I suspect that as a radical, Christian socialist, committed to an incarnational theology, an interdisciplinary scholarly approach and a broad ecumenical fellowship he would have wanted to join in the critical discussion. One would love to be able to bring him into the same room for a conversation with Pope Francis, who judging from the statements, and actions of the first few months of his papacy is seeking to move the thinking of the church in a more radical direction that may transcend the traditions of the common good theology.

The Attractions of the Common Good

So what is good about the common good?

It is Communitarian – giving all citizens both rights and responsibilities.

It is democratic - and advocates working through debates and pragmatic compromises

It advocates subsidiarity – dealing with each problem at the smallest possible local social level.

It is pluralist – recognising that no single tribe in society can dominate or overrule the rest.

It builds broad alliances and coalitions – suggesting that co-operation and working together produces better solutions to problems.

It is benevolent – concerned with the well-being of the poor and vulnerable in the community

It seeks the welfare – shalom of the whole city / polis /society often citing Jeremiah 29 v 7

It is better than most current political alternatives such as unrestrained global free market neo-liberalism, or the deeply flawed and unlikely to be revived dictatorship of the proletariat.

It is humanist in the best sense - recognising that all people made in the image of God have inherent dignity and are worthy of respect, yet are more than autonomous individuals, or biologically determined machines.

It recognizes, implicitly at least, that growing inequality is bad for all, and that in a strange way it would be good for the rich to share more of their resources, good for their conscience, good for their well-being, and good for their long term sustainability as flourishing human beings.

Indeed I find these aspects so attractive, if not seductive that I often find myself operating in such ways and advocating for them, for example in building partnerships of churches, faith-based community groups and the statutory sector agencies to mitigate the affects of food poverty, or the scourge of unemployment, and the increasingly harsh benefits regime, where what was once referred to as social security has become the policy of making people destitute by withdrawing welfare payments.

Some discontents with the Common Good.

So why am I ill at ease with this theology? Well these are the questions that I would like answered?

Who is talking about the common good?

Liberation theology has taught us to be ideologically suspicious and to examine whose voices are represented in discourse about society and politics. It seems to me that the vast majority of those who are talking this way are white, male, powerful academics, church leaders or politicians. The ideas may well resonate widely across society, but I don't think I am hearing many marginalised, ethnic minority, poor, disabled or global south voices articulating this theology. What I detect in their voices when I hear them is a discourse of rights, and a tone of anger and cynicism about politicians of all parties that the little they have is being taken away and that the filthy rich are getting richer. In simple terms it is sheer hypocrisy to say "we are all in this together". It will not be easy to make space to allow such dissident voices to be widely and clearly heard, and they may come over as chaotic cacophony, but we all should be listening more carefully and more widely.

Is it theologically well grounded in scripture and the teaching of Jesus?

The prophetic voices in scripture, even though they may attest to a single universal truth, do seem to sing in a range of different keys, often speaking into particular historical and social realities. ([Brueggamman – Disruptive Grace](#) is insightful on this). But within the chorus of the prophets there is an oft repeated theme of the bringing down of the mighty, and the raising up of the poor. From the liberation of the Exodus and the tidal surge that overwhelmed Pharaoh, to the fall of Babylon rehearsed in the apocalyptic chapters of Daniel and Revelation there is a warning of judgement and the hope of a revolutionary new realm of God. The magnificat, prefigured in Hannah's song on the birth of Samuel, and turned by the church into a beautiful choir piece for cathedral evensong, speaks of the tearing down of the mighty from their thrones. Jesus himself speaks in apocalyptic terms on numerous occasions and can be interpreted as subversive of both religious and state authority. Uncomfortable as it is, there is a challenge to the establishment "church theology" of the common good. Is it imaginative or radical enough to meet the needs of the kairos moment?

Is it really for the good of the most vulnerable... or just the good of the many?

Will a politics based on the common good meet the reality of the social and economic divisions of our time. In the age of Temple and Beveridge society in Britain could be seen as class based, with a minority of rich capitalists, a relatively small middle class of professionals and managers and a huge class of manual workers in industry, agriculture and commerce. Today we see a different pattern with a tiny super-rich elite, who are powerful, greedy and often brutal, a large majority of the "squeezed middle" who are only one wage slip away from poverty and accustomed to unaffordable, debt financed patterns of consumption. Below this in the class hierarchy are a relative small minority of

the extremely vulnerable, dropping into and out of low paid work, often with few marketable skills or physical strength who may need to rely on state benefits – but who are routinely stereotyped as feckless scroungers, blameworthy for their own fate, or as bogus asylum seekers and benefit tourist migrants. Life chances are further fragmented by characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, geographical location, age and health status. While a politics of the common good may appeal to the masses in the middle, it is questionable whether it can serve the interests of the marginalised. There is a prospect that it will be majoritarian rather than pluralistic, and in our deficient democracy where parties fight over the middle ground for the votes of a tiny cohort of swing voters in marginal constituencies in middle England, the interests of the poorest can be easily ignored.

Is it naïve – papering over intrinsic conflicts... saying Peace, peace where there is no peace?

If the Faith in the City report of 1985 was unfairly dismissed by one of Thatcher's ministers as “naïve Marxism” when it was merely the last hurrah of the Butskillist Welfare State consensus, I fear the political theology of the common good is simply “naïve centrism” combining the blandness of the New Labour Third Way with the oxymoronic notion of “compassionate conservatism”. In a society which is rapidly changing driven by seismic economic and technological change, a sociology based on functionalism and a consensus that accepts the status quo is hardly viable. Throughout history and particularly in times of rapid change conflicts between interest groups will always emerge. It should be the task of both religion and politics not to paper over the cracks after the earthquake and carry on as if nothing was different, but with one hand to bring in relief supplies, to use every diplomatic method to prevent the escalation of conflict into looting, violence and warfare, and to plan and begin to build the reconstruction that is needed. In some respects the achievement of Temple and Beveridge in the post war settlement in the UK was to succeed substantially in such a reassembling of the fragments blown apart by war. However, if the changes of the early years of the 21st Century are as radical as some commentators claim it is unlikely that a theology of the common good will be adequate.

Is it internationalist enough for the present global crisis?.

Most of the discussion of the common good is framed in the context of the politics of the nation state, to be specific within the framework of western liberal democracies. In an increasingly globalised world one needs to question whether this is adequate to address global issues and global injustice. Other powerful states operate under different political systems, often in less benign ways than ours. But everywhere the rapid growth of democratic communications technology (albeit shaped by the capitalism of the free market) are in tension with the control imperative of national security states, as evidenced by the suppression of the hopes raised by the Arab spring, the great internet firewall of China, or the routine electronic eavesdropping of Western intelligence agencies. Globalisation and north south inequalities also drive the movements of migration and associated human trafficking. And global capitalism inadequately regulated bears much responsibility for environmental degradation, carbon emissions and global climate change which may well contain the seeds of the destruction of civilisation as we know it. Unless the vision of the common good can expand to encompass these sort of issues it is unlikely to be sufficient for “such a time as this”.

These are just a few questions for those who advocate a political theology of the common good. In many ways I would love it if they could come up with convincing answers that address these points. Because in all honesty I am not sure if there are any better answers short of the Kingdom which is to come. Furthermore it is difficult to envisage a political theology which might command as wide a consensus of support as the doctrine of the common good. But I fear that the theology and political theory is deficient and inadequate for our times. – and if that is the case we need some better earthed and brighter brains to get to work pretty soon.

Some further reading..

Jonathan Friedland on Pope Francis as a standard bearer of the left...

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/nov/15/atheists-pope-francis-obama-liberal-voice-change>

Archbishop Justin Welby at the CUF conference November 2013 <http://www.cuf.org.uk/blog/2013-11-14/seeking-justice-absolutely-central-christian-faith-says-archbishop>

Catholic Bishop's 1996 statement

<http://www.catholic-ew.org.uk/Catholic-News-Media-Library/Archive-Media-Assets/Files/CBCEW-Publications/The-Common-Good-and-the-Catholic-Church-s-Social-Teaching>

Jim Wallis <http://stocki.typepad.com/soulsurmise/2013/08/the-gospel-for-the-common-good-jim-wallis-in-belfast-fitzroy-august-28th-730.html>

Together for the common good conference papers

<http://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/conference/t4cg-conference-sessions.html>

Anna Rowlands <http://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/files/images/conference%20speakers%20texts/ROWLANDS%20Together%20for%20the%20Common%20Good%20KEYNOTE%20FINAL.pdf>

Lord Maurice Glasman (this is pretty much the same material as given at the CUF conference – November 2013)

<http://togetherforthecommongood.co.uk/files/images/conference%20speakers%20texts/T4CG%20MAURICE%20GLASMAN%20transcribed%20speech%207SEP13.pdf>

Andy Crouch in Christianity Today <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/november/whats-so-great-about-common-good.html>

Tim Keller at Lausanne Movement's Cape Town Conference

<http://timkeller.info/articles/what-is-gods-global-urban-mission/>