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This edition of Studies in Christian Ethics is devoted to papers from a colloquium held to mark the ninetieth anniversary of the birth of Ronald Preston at the University of Manchester in March 2003, and entitled ‘The Future of Christian Social Ethics’. Preston was one of the foremost Christian social thinkers of the twentieth century, the first incumbent of the Samuel Ferguson chair in Social and Pastoral Theology at the University, a leading member of the Society for the Study of Christian Ethics and a frequent contributor to this journal. The articles in this volume therefore represent the fruits of a unique gathering of many of those who held Preston’s work in high regard, as former students, protagonists, international collaborators and conversation partners.

Yet, while the colloquium was called, in part, to celebrate and evaluate Preston’s own life and work, it also set about considering how far his legacy and the particular tradition of Christian social ethics within which he stood might fare into the twenty-first century. As Duncan Forrester argued in the lecture which opened the colloquium, Preston’s own theological and intellectual formation was rooted in the Fabian Christian socialism of R. H. Tawney and liberal incarnationalist social theology of F. D. Maurice and William Temple, traditions subsequently regarded by their critics as inadequate in the face of the eclipse of the post-war social democratic consensus and the decline of

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I would like to express my gratitude to the trustees of the Samuel Ferguson Benevolent Fund for their financial assistance in the preparation of the colloquium, and for their continuing support for public events at the University of Manchester in the field of social and pastoral theology.
mainstream liberal Christianity. Yet in other ways, any evaluation of someone like Preston needs to revisit long-standing assumptions with a view to sharpening our critical understanding; so it is with Wendy Dackson’s contribution here, which makes the case for questioning Preston’s complete identification with the legacy of William Temple.

Nevertheless, when we think of Preston’s enduring influence, we think in particular of his insistence upon the essentially dialogical nature of Christian social ethics: that is, that it entails mutually critical and reconstructive engagement between sources and norms of Christian tradition on the one hand, such as Bible and moral theology, and relevant authorities in the social and human sciences. Preston’s own training in economics necessarily meant that this was the chief focus of his work, but his primary commitment lay in enshrining at the core of Christian moral reasoning and theological method a respect for the autonomy of ‘secular’ expertise.

This characteristic emphasis of Preston’s thought is well-represented in this volume. Carl-Henric Grenholm argues that both secular and religious evaluations of the morality of economics rest on implicit concepts of justice. In acknowledging its own value-commitments, Christian social ethics can contribute to a wider debate about the role of normative assumptions which extend beyond preferences for the functioning of the market to embrace value-commitments on the nature of right distribution, human flourishing and equity. Grenholm’s own work at the University of Uppsala embodies the interdisciplinarity he identifies in Preston’s own work, emerging as it does from a shared research project in theology, philosophy and economic theory.

Yet the viability of shared moral consensus, upon which Preston’s dialogical model was based, has been subject to sustained criticism. Malcolm Brown explores the differing perspectives of Preston and Alasdair MacIntyre, for whom the dissolution of a common language of liberal discourse demanded a return to Aristotelian virtue ethics as practised by intentional communities of tradition in whom enduring narratives of hope and obligation might survive a new ‘dark ages’. Michael Northcott reflects the break with theological liberalism within Christian social thought represented by writers such as Stephen Long and John Milbank. Their eschewal of the dialogical approach in Preston’s theological method rests on the grounds that it constitutes too ready an accommodation to secular modernity — as Long puts it, an approach too much in thrall to ‘the ruling definition of the social’ to meet his criteria of Christian orthodoxy. Preston himself rejected the proposed alternative of a radical ecclesiological ontology of peace, insisting on the granting of autonomy to economics precisely on theological grounds, while exercising the right to challenge the fact/value distinction beloved of many economists.

Michael Taylor’s article considers whether the twin forces of globalisation and pluralism, and the accompanying fragmentation
of civil discourse and erosion of liberal consensus politics, have invalidated two of Preston’s perennial concepts, namely the ‘common good’ and the use of middle axioms, and whether any part of this tradition can be usefully retrieved as a model of democratic engagement. He concludes that while part of Preston’s legacy is to be found wanting, elements of consensus endure, albeit conceived as a more pragmatic, procedural process. Taylor cites examples of locally-based grassroots campaigns in which the particularities and differences of faith-based movements are not effaced or neutralised but rather held in tension, such that strategic alliances can be sustained in pursuit of a ‘pragmatic but not unprincipled’ vision of the common good. Similarly, Kenneth Medhurst and James Sweeney draw on first-hand interview material to demonstrate that, despite the impact of cultural pluralism in Europe, many people still stress the significance of shared values as well-springs of community participation and active citizenship.

In different ways, William Storrar, Peter Sedgwick, John Atherton, Normunds Kamergrauzis and Mark Chapman offer analyses of the role of church-related engagement with public debate on such issues as trade justice, the nature of civil society, Scottish national identity and welfare policy. All conclude that despite the changing context, such groups continue to operate in such public arenas in ways which broadly bear out the efficacy of a ‘public theology’ founded upon a middle axiom, dialogical model. Preston often argued that he had abandoned middle axioms, but nevertheless many of these articles testify to the endurance of his characteristic commitment to an inclusive and pluralistic approach to moral and political debate.

Some of the contributors to this volume consider aspects of Christian social ethics which were either not anticipated by Preston, or which constitute significant omissions from his own work. As Helen Stanton argues, despite the fact that matters of gender — particularly the question of feminism — featured prominently as a decisive and contentious question for Church and society during Preston’s lifetime, his work never addressed the implications of this for social ethics. Stanton concludes that Preston’s eschewal of any kind of autobiographical style in his writing may, in part, explain this silence; and that in retrospect, the feminist and liberationist convention of writing ‘theologies of experience’ is something that Preston was never prepared to assimilate.

Debates about globalisation and a shift from a predominantly production-based economy to one founded on consumption and the values of consumerism, were very much in their infancy during Preston’s life. Starting, as Preston often did, with economic analysis and moving into theological-ethical analysis, Ian Steedman considers how economics can still be subjected to questions of value in relation to the ethics of advertising. Insofar as Steedman is asking what, as a consumerist culture, Western societies choose to elevate as their objects
of worship, he continues a valuable tradition of subjecting mainstream culture to an important religious and theological critique.

A central question at the heart of many of the papers in this volume is therefore the extent to which Preston’s work offers contemporary Christian social ethics the resources by which it can address the challenges of an altogether more fragmented world which is simultaneously ‘post-Christian’ yet also, arguably, ‘post-secular’ in the global irruptions of what Forrester terms ‘furious religion’, and in which the lucrative manipulations of the human genome by biotechnology corporations may prove more decisive in determining the welfare of the world’s population than the fortunes of the market economy. In general, however, these articles conclude that there is much in Preston’s work that still provides significant inspiration for Christian social ethics in the twenty-first century; and that many of Preston’s core preoccupations, such as the nature of Christian moral reasoning, the possibilities for a ‘public theology’ in a plural society, and the vital importance of political economy for a credible Christian witness, still remain as vital and relevant today.
Abstract
This article examines the changing scope and method of ecumenical public theology from the World Missionary Conference of 1910 until the present. Most changes were made in response to the changing ideological and political contexts. The collapse of liberalism and the social gospel was followed by a type of confessional ethics which arose directly out of the German Church Struggle. In opposition to this there emerged a realist ecumenical social ethics, much indebted to Reinhold Niebuhr, and of Ronald Preston. This type of public theology and its distinctive ‘middle axiom’ method are examined and contrasted with the more recent public theologies which were influenced by liberation theology and grassroots movements. It is suggested that the ending of the Cold War and the fundamental changes that have taken place since September 11 2001 present a radically new kind of challenge to public theology.

Ronald Preston was an influential figure in Christian ethics and what today we call public theology, not only in Britain but throughout the ecumenical movement. He was a modest Christian man with an unusually sharp intellect and a great capacity for friendship. He produced a considerable body of constructive and critical work, and he was passionate about the integrity of public theology. He was the very epitome of the public theologian. It is good for us to honour his memory.

What Is Public Theology?
I do not intend to answer this question by adopting David Tracy’s understanding of public theology, or indeed anyone else’s. I am not even going to attempt a precise definition of my own. Instead I will
content myself with an account of public theology as theology which is not primarily concerned with individual subjectivity, or with the internal discourse of the Church about doctrine and its clarification, important as these things are. Public theology, as I understand it, is not primarily and directly evangelical theology which addresses the Gospel to the world in the hope of repentance and conversion. Rather, it is theology which seeks the welfare of the city before protecting the interests of the Church, or its proper liberty to preach the Gospel and celebrate the sacraments. Accordingly, public theology often takes ‘the world’s agenda’, or parts of it, as its own agenda, and seeks to offer distinctive and constructive insights from the treasury of faith to help in the building of a decent society, the restraint of evil, the curbing of violence, nation-building, and reconciliation in the public arena, and so forth. It strives to offer something that is distinctive, and that is gospel, rather than simply adding the voice of theology to what everyone is saying already. Thus it seeks to deploy theology in public debate, rather than a vague and optimistic idealism which tends to disintegrate in the face of radical evil.

Public theology is necessarily always contextual. It responds to situations, theories and issues which change over time, while endeavouring to hold fast to a tradition which has a constant core. This is not simply to repeat the slogan of the 1960s, ‘The world sets the agenda’. Public theology must often have different priorities from ‘the world’, or from the political and economic issues which seem most pressing at a particular moment. In endeavouring to deal with things sub specie aeternitatis it puts the questions of the moment in a distinct frame, and in seeking to ‘discern the signs of the times’ it hopes at least occasionally to anticipate the issues which will be important in days to come.

Public theology responds to challenges, but some of these challenges are not generally recognised as being on the public agenda; indeed public theology sometimes challenges that agenda and its priorities. Through wrestling with particular situations, public theology hopes at least from time to time to come up with theological insights which are recognised as ‘public truth’ not just in the situation or context in which they were conceived, but more generally as well. Other forms of public theology may well have a relevance narrowly circumscribed by the original context, or throw up the isolated insight that is powerful for a time, but then disappears, or becomes redundant.

The situation is complicated by the fact that some public theologies, or more generally systems of religious symbols, which seem to be challengingly relevant for a time may not disappear so much as go into hibernation and awake centuries later and once more present themselves as guides for construing the world and for action. The process that Austin Farrer referred to as The Rebirth of Images in the title of his study of the Book of Revelation is strikingly relevant today, with the sudden resurgence of apocalyptic imagery and symbolic structures, particularly in Christianity and Islam.
Using this very general understanding of public theology, I intend to look at the changing shape, content and scope of ecumenical public theology from the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910 to the confusing situation of today, after the ecumenical social ethics with which Ronald Preston identified, after liberation theology, and after September 11 2001.

The Origins of Ecumenical Public Theology

The embryonic ecumenical movement that emerged from the World Missionary Conference at Edinburgh 1910 brought a new and broader understanding of what it is to be ‘Church’, which gradually gained influence. As different ecclesial traditions slowly learned what it is to be accountable to one another and responsible for one another, and that the various traditions could be hugely enriched by learning from one another, increasingly theology became less narrowly confessional and more rooted in the ecumenical Church which was ever so gradually taking shape. In public theology, as elsewhere, ecumenism was ‘the great new fact of the age’, to use William Temple’s phrase. The progress of the process I am discussing was gradual, if fairly steady.

For a long time this emergent ecumenical public theology lived quite happily at peace with liberalism and with the social gospel as developed particularly in America. Ecumenism could be understood as easing the progress from Church to Kingdom, a movement which was developmental and more or less steady, with an inbuilt optimism about the human condition and the historical process. But the First World War, and in particular the horrors of trench warfare, dealt a body blow to liberal theology and the social gospel in as far as liberal theology had offered a rather sunny and optimistic view of human possibilities and of the human condition.

Karl Barth was profoundly shocked when most of his theological teachers signed a statement giving unqualified support to the Kaiser in his pursuit of the war. Something must be deeply wrong, he felt, with a theology which allowed such things to happen. Things were little different on the other side, of course. The Bishop of London called on every able-bodied man to fight for God and country, and wrote to the Guardian in 1915 proclaiming that it was the Church’s duty ‘to mobilise the nation for a holy war’. In a notorious Advent sermon he called on British soldiers in the field ‘to kill the good as well as the bad, to kill the young men as well as the old’.\(^1\) The nascent ecumenical Church conceived in Edinburgh in 1910 seemed now to be still-born. There was no such thing as ecumenical public theology, only theologies that purported to be Christian but offered themselves as the unquestioning servants of national interests and chauvinism.

The rise of, first, Bolshevism, and then Nazism, presented new and very direct challenges to public theology. Bolshevism was to many Christian theologians in some ways attractive, even if ultimately seen as a Christian heresy, while the Nazis both endeavoured with much success to enlist the Churches and theology, and also subtly eroded Christian belief. Before the Nazi takeover of power in Germany, Barth and others were already exploring ‘the strange new world of the Bible’, and looking for a new and more resilient post-liberal theology, but it was in the context of the German Church Struggle that Barth, Bonhoeffer and many others felt the necessity to dig deep into the tradition to find resources adequate to the challenges of the new era.

Barth with his right hand wrote up the Church Dogmatics ‘as if nothing had happened’, while with his left hand he produced a steady stream of tracts for the times, confessional statements, and calls to action against the idolatrous forces of Nazism and anti-Semitism. The debate concerned not only the integrity and freedom of the Church — although that was of fundamental significance — but what was happening in the world, particularly in the Holocaust and the other bloodbaths caused by the Nazis. Barth issued calls to arms, for only so, he believed, could Hitlerism be crushed. And the Barmen Declaration of 1934, which Barth himself drafted, indicated his belief that the Christian contribution to public life and public debate should be firmly rooted in the heart of the Christian faith, that it should be confessional, a way of proclaiming the Gospel, rather than a commentary on current affairs from a Christian standpoint.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer early on recognised that the German Church Struggle would be a decisive stage in the development of the ecumenical movement and would to a large extent determine its future. He was also one of the first to recognise that the primary issue in that struggle was not the organisational freedom of the Church, or even its ability to resist successfully the ‘Aryan Clause’ which prohibited the ordination of ministers of Jewish descent, but rather the onslaught on the Jews and other vulnerable minorities which culminated in the Holocaust. What happened in and to the German Church was of vital concern to the whole oikoumene, and other churches could not but involve themselves in the struggle. Even to decide to stand aloof and take no side was to make a powerful theological and moral statement, a declaration about what it was to be ‘church’. Ecumenical leaders from around the world recognised that in the struggle of the Confessing Church the integrity of the Christian faith and the Christian Church was deeply implicated, and that ‘the struggle has been brought to a head and undergone by the Confessing Church vicariously for all Christianity, and particularly for Western Christianity’.2


solidarity among churches opposed to Nazism in the ecumenical movement a fresh awareness of what it meant to be the oikoumene emerged. This involved a lively sense of mutual accountability. Bonhoeffer wrote:

In this encounter the ecumenical movement and the Confessing Church ask each other the reason for their existence. The ecumenical movement must vindicate itself before the Confessing Church and the Confessing Church must vindicate itself before the ecumenical movement, and just as the ecumenical movement is led to a serious inward concern and crisis by the Confessing Church, so too the Confessing Church is led to a serious inward concern and crisis by the ecumenical movement. The reciprocal questioning must now be developed.  

The Confessing Church confronted the ecumenical movement in the first place with the confession, with the doctrinal stance they have been forced to take, like Luther declaring ‘Here I stand. I can do no other. So help me, God.’ The ethical positions are not so much consequences which flow from the confession, or implications of the confession, as integral to the doctrinal stance. Here doctrine is ethics, and ethical action is inseparable from doctrinal confession. Neutrality or equivocation are impossible; one has to say yes or no. Whichever choice one makes one is taking a stand which is both ethical and doctrinal, and on both counts unambiguously public. And in affirming the confession one is declaring those who reject it to be in heresy.

The Confessing Church was not to be a ghetto, isolated from the life of the nations. Its theology was to be public rather than private. God loved the nation, even the German nation in the grip of Nazism, and called it also to serve God’s purposes. Bonhoeffer and his colleagues were German theological patriots in the truest sense, and knew that God cared for the German people. Their faithfulness as Christians and the faithfulness of the Confessing Church was the best and truest service of the German people and the German nation in their time of crisis. And Bonhoeffer is steadily insistent that even in a sinful world Christians and the Church can learn from God through the world and worldly activity of truth and justice and the nature of community.

Alongside Barth and Bonhoeffer at the heart of post-war ecumenical social ethics was the movement in the United States led for decades by Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr was schooled in the early years of the Depression while a minister in Detroit in the human suffering caused by capitalism, and in his early writing he took up a virtually Marxist position. His mature development of what became known as Christian realism showed a sophisticated awareness of the complexities and

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3 Bonhoeffer, No Rusty Swords, pp. 328–29.
ambiguities of political and economic choices. Niebuhr moved rapidly away from a rather utopian liberalism which dealt in moral absolutes and which argued that Christians must needs be pacifists. He became widely respected by American politicians and social scientists, particularly in the field of international relations, where an influential group became known as ‘Atheists for Niebuhr’.

Like Barth, Niebuhr rejected liberalism and the social gospel as too simplistic and naïve, and he was often labelled ‘neo-orthodox’. Stanley Hauerwas is probably right in speaking of the ‘absence of the church in Niebuhr’s theology’. Certainly the Church plays very little part in Niebuhr’s theology for his dominant concern is with the central stress of public theology on the welfare of the broader community and its relation to God’s reign rather than the role of the Church as an agent of God’s purposes. Ronald Preston, like a raft of other British theologians, was more influenced by Niebuhr than by Barth, and found congenial Niebuhr’s sophisticated and realistic understanding of the complexities of politics and economics, and reverence for the facts of the case. But Preston was undoubtedly a more ecclesial theologian than Niebuhr.

The Emergence of ‘Ecumenical Social Ethics’

The aftermath of the Second World War was a time of some euphoria for the Churches and for theology. It was as if the truth of the Gospel had triumphed against falsehood, the true Führer had destroyed the false Führer, with his idolatrous claims, and the true ecumenical Church was emerging out of the turmoil of the past. A confident, if sometimes rather simplistic, ‘biblical theology’ emerged, and quickly became dominant. It affirmed the authority, unity and distinctiveness of the Bible, and produced books such as the influential series of Studies in Biblical Theology, or the Ecumenical Biblical Studies with titles such as The Biblical Doctrine of Man in Society, The Biblical Doctrine of Justice and Law and The Biblical Doctrine of Work. Public theology was now often seen, in the light of the German Church Struggle, as confession or proclamation of the Gospel rather than as ethics, grappling with complex and often ambiguous details. The ecumenical movement quickly took effective shape as the World Council of Churches, in many people’s eyes the emerging ecumenical Church in which particular churches were to be accountable to one another, responsible for one another, and when necessary challenging one another.

7 Note the definite articles!
World Council of Churches Assemblies, and especially the conferences and other activities of the Church and Society Department and the Commission of the Churches on International Affairs provided the milestones in the development of what became known as ‘ecumenical social ethics’. Here the issues which topped the agenda were questions of post-war reconstruction, the welfare state, decolonisation and nation-building, and gradually questions of war and peace, particularly nuclear deterrence and the Cold War.

In India, Christian leaders such as M. M. Thomas or P. D. Devanandan were not only world ecumenical figures of great significance, but encouraged the Indian Churches, like the German Confessing Church, representing a tiny minority of the nation, to concern themselves with Christian contributions to the welfare of the broader national community. But in most Western nations in the post-war period there was still the assumption that they were Christian societies, and it was clear that a goodly proportion of the intelligentsia and the national leadership still identified themselves as Christians. Statistics for church-going were high. In a variety of ways, many Christian leaders and theologians saw the task as restoring ‘Christendom’, or rebuilding ‘Christian civilisation’ after the awful interlude of the first half of the twentieth century. Influential books appeared, such as T. S. Eliot’s *The Idea of a Christian Society* or John Baillie’s *What is Christian Civilisation?* These saw the task as largely one of restoration, and resisted the notion that there had been a seismic shift eroding the foundations of faith and older expressions of Christian ordering of society.

A positive effect of the continuing Christian consensus was that prominent social scientists and intellectuals eagerly involved themselves in the development of Christian public theology. One fascinating example is the detailed and encouraging assessment of William Temple’s *Christianity and Social Order* by John Maynard Keynes; another is the circle of leading intellectuals called ‘The Moot’, gathered by J. H. Oldham, which met regularly for a decade from 1936, to discuss the Church’s voice in public debate, and which deeply influenced the thought of many of its participants. This engagement with social scientists and social theorists encouraged a move away from generalities, and indeed confessional statements, towards a more rigorous engagement with the details of public issues with all their ambiguities and complexities. Particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world the agenda of public theology gave attention to details, and there was an attempt to define the respective spheres and responsibilities of the

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10 I cite this in my *Christianity and the Future of Welfare* (London: Epworth, 1985), p. 35.
the theologian, the social scientist, and the politician. At its best this led to a proper modesty on the part of the theologian, and an awareness of limits to the theologian’s competence. But it also allowed undue deference to be paid not infrequently to the authority of the social scientists.

At the heart of ecumenical social ethics was what is not entirely helpfully called the ‘middle axiom’ approach.\(^\text{12}\) This boils down to a procedure for handling ethical issues, and a logic of the proper relationship of theology and public policy. Public theology, it is held, is too important a matter to be left to the theologians. Theologians need to be involved, but only alongside other people with varied and relevant skills and experience for dealing with the specific matters under consideration. Along with theologians, we need to have people who have inside knowledge of the situation being considered. J. H. Oldham emphasised the need to include experts and people with the responsibility for taking decisions because ‘seen from the inside a problem has many aspects that are concealed from an outside view’.\(^\text{13}\)

Decision-makers certainly know the problems from the inside in one sense — they are aware that the room for manoeuvre is limited, that compromises are usually necessary, and that the options on offer are likely to a greater or lesser extent to be morally ambiguous. Such perspectives are of the greatest importance, particularly for curbing any naïve idealism through ‘earthing’ the discussion in the realities and possibilities of the situation.

This is certainly an advance on the assumption that theologians or church leaders on their own are capable of deriving ‘Christian solutions’ to complex issues; they need help from others who approach the matter from a different angle, and bring a different kind of experience to bear. But theologians, experts and decision-makers all come from the ranks of the powerful and the privileged. They are also sinners, they have their interests which may cloud their vision and distort their judgment. They are not the enlightened Guardians of Plato’s Republic. They are significant participants in the discussion, but they should not necessarily have the last word. They were all educated middle-class people whose expertise and experience, while a vitally important contribution to the discussion, were also partial and sometimes distorted by class or individual interest. It is dangerous to believe that people from the academy, from the civil service and from the educated elite are able to read the Christian tradition with objectivity, and decide what is good for other people.

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\(^{12}\) This discussion of middle axioms follows the line of my argument in Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), ch. 2. Ronald Preston’s major defence of middle axioms is in his Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century: The Economic and Political Task (London: SCM Press, 1983), pp. 141–56 (Appendix 2).

Those who are more often the recipients of policy rather than its makers, those who may well be the victims of well-intentioned policies that went wrong, should have a voice in the discussion. And it is not always easy to ensure that they are heard, and that in fact they play a significant role in the process.¹⁴ But in the 1960s and 1970s the pressure to include such people became intense, as the ecumenical movement became more radical and Western white male academics became a minority. This, of course, resulted in tensions, and problems of communication between the old-style ecumenists and the new. The new entrants accused the old of having an agenda dominated by the problems of the powerful; the old ecumenists thought increasingly strongly that the new entrants advocated simplistic and absolutist solutions to complex and deep-seated problems.

Oldham’s associates, and even Ronald Preston himself, were accused of having a simplistic understanding of the objectivity of social science, and its capacity to generate discussions which floated above ideology and were capable of producing solutions which were in reality value free.¹⁵ Commonly social science was understood as a more or less value-free and ideologically pure form of social analysis. Increasingly Marxism now commended itself to many public theologians as a quasi-scientific way of unveiling the realities of social processes, and with the rise of liberation theology the influence of Marxism in public theology became world-wide. At least Oldham and his associates did not dismiss secular social theory as heretical and incapable of effective truthfulness! They found by experience that social scientists, particularly if they shared a generally Christian orientation to life, were capable of illuminating the issue under consideration. The theological contribution ranged from a vague and general affirmation of a consensus which was believed in some broad sense to be Christian¹⁶ to a shrewdly balanced mixture of the classical and the contextual in theology.¹⁷ Only so will the results go beyond being well-informed and genial, and be capable of being in some sense an expression of the Christian gospel. But, crucially, the middle axiom people shared William Temple’s view that ‘The Church


¹⁵ This criticism was effectively presented by Charles Elliot, ‘Vision and Utopia’, Theology 81 (1978), pp. 172–79.

¹⁶ See, for example, the criticism of the Anglican report, Changing Britain in my Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), ch. 3, and Oliver O’Donovan’s criticism of the report on divorce, Putting Asunder, in his Principles in the Public Realm: The Dilemma of Christian Moral Witness (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984): he cites the authors’ remark: ‘any advice that the church tenders to the State must rest, not on doctrines that only Christians accept, but upon premises which enjoy wide acknowledgement in the nation as a whole’ (p. 9).

must denounce Christian Utopianism’ and confine its attention to ‘realistic possibilities’.  

The Waning of Ecumenical Social Ethics

Middle axioms and the Oldham approach that Ronald Preston espoused were dominant in ecumenical social thinking for several decades, but from the 1960s they were increasingly effectively challenged by new radical and utopian movements among which the most prominent was liberation theology. These were centrally concerned for the prophetic distinctiveness of the Christian contribution to public debate. They tended to look back to the confessional tradition represented by the Barmen Theological Declaration of 1934 and later confessional statements, particularly in South Africa. This new public theology was unabashedly utopian. It involved an active and confident seeking of the fulfillment of God’s promises. It was this kind of utopianism that sustained Bonhoeffer both in his resistance to Hitler, and in his martyrdom. He wrote just before his arrest:

There are people who regard it as frivolous, as some Christians think it impious for anyone to hope and prepare for a better earthly future. They think that the meaning of present events is chaos, disorder, and catastrophe; and in resignation or pious escapism they surrender all responsibility for reconstruction and for future generations. It may be that the day of judgment will dawn tomorrow; in that case, we shall gladly stop working for a better future, but not before.

This kind of hope keeps people going when all around seems hopeless.

Hope is a way of envisioning the future. Theology’s concern with vision and with hope reminds us that it does not deal only with particular problems and policies and ethical conundrums, any more than it is concerned exclusively for the past or with the present. It is at least as concerned with the visions that provide the horizon of meaning within which a society exists, policies are formulated, and actions are taken. Vision is not theory, although most theories have an element of vision latent in them. Visions generate and sustain goals; they keep alive the hope of utopia, if you prefer that language. And as Rubem Alves has suggested, ‘Where utopias are not imagined, ethics is reduced to solving problems within the established system.’

The task of public theology was now understood as announcing the Gospel and denouncing the forces of injustice and oppression. There was as part of the stress on distinctiveness a tendency to move quite directly from doctrinal or biblical premises to political and economic conclusions — a development of which Ronald Preston and others who stood more in the Reinhold Niebuhr tradition were acutely suspicious.

The older ecumenical social ethics that Ronald Preston defended was directed primarily at assisting the policy-makers and the implementers of policy. It did this by initiating a dialogue of the powerful primarily about the responsibilities of power. It sought with academic rigour to establish the ‘facts of the case’ and was particularly sensitive to the ambiguities of ethical decision-making. The new public theology is far more concerned with the grassroots, with giving a voice to the voiceless, and with questions of empowerment — and it is hard to empower people without taking power away from others. Its impatience with complexities, and its tendency to simplify complex issues sometimes goes to the heart of the matter, and sometimes is just plain naive. The older ethics believed in its own objectivity, and tended to see theology as rather like a secular discipline, following with rigour the rules of detached study which are generally recognised in the academy. But theology is far more than that, and the narrowly academic model is not adequate. The older ecumenical social ethics insisted that there is no direct way of moving from faith positions or biblical statements to ethical conclusions. But the arguments against slavery, against Nazism, against apartheid were just that. And there is a strong case, presented by Ulrich Duchrow and others, that the global economic order today is such a confessional issue, because it impinges directly on the substance of the faith.

Perhaps one of the greatest successes of the new ecumenical social ethics was perhaps the most controversial ethical move of the World Council of Churches (WCC) since its establishment — the Programme to Combat Racism (PCR). This unashamedly took sides, and declared that supporters of apartheid were in a state of heresy, while recognising that no political movement is blameless. Ronald Preston said that apartheid was an unusually straightforward ethical issue. Only at the time it didn’t seem that way to many people, and the PCR stirred up a hornet’s nest of criticism. This was partly because the WCC went beyond making pronouncements to actually doing something. And that something, however small, was a powerful symbol of solidarity and support and encouragement. The controversy was for many deeply educative, as were the Church campaigns against buying South African products or investing in South Africa. And the PCR episode also underlined the fact that the task of ecumenical social

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ethics goes beyond making pronouncements directed at government; the Church must show in action and in the way it structures its own life the validity of the courses it commends to governments and to the nation.

Ronald Preston was correct to associate the developments which we have been discussing and which on the whole he deplored with the ‘ecumenical paradigm shift’ which Konrad Raiser, the General Secretary of the WCC, discussed in his Ecumenism in Transition: A Paradigm Shift in the Ecumenical Movement? Raiser did not so much advocate as discern the paradigm shift. The older ecumenism, according to Raiser, was very much ecclesiology from above, a top-down operation, deeply shaped by universalistic claims. What we need now, he says, is an ecumenism which will speak more of liberation than of Lordship, will embrace diversity in theology and in forms of being the Church, and will have an open dialogical relationship to other faiths and secular ideologies. The confident theological certainties of the 1950s do seem to have dissolved, and in the new and greatly changed situation a range of excitingly fresh ethical and theological possibilities have emerged, and are being greeted with enthusiasm particularly in third world countries, and in situations such as that of South Africa.

Public Theology in an Age of Terror

The events of September 11 2001 transformed everything in a moment. The pressing issue is now no longer how to present the claims of contemporary Christian theology to a hearing in the secular public arenas of the North Atlantic countries, or how to gain and sustain a constructive Christian theological presence in the Western public sphere. It is now the urgent life-and-death question of how to understand, discipline, channel and criticise the powerful forces of religion which today dominate the global political scene, for better and for worse. These voices have for the most part been excluded from and unheard in the public forum in the liberal West. What we now need is not so much a forum for more academic and good-mannered discourse about conflicting truth claims, but an arena in which rage, frustration, hatred and fear as well as reason are in play, and are attended to, and, one hopes, are healed.

Whether we allow them or not, or like them or not, religious reasons are hugely significant in global politics today. As John Gray has written: ‘Al-Qaeda did more than demolish a familiar landmark and kill thousands of civilians. It shattered an entire view of the world.’ He continues:

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24 See especially Preston’s Confusions in Christian Social Ethics.

If progressives are aghast at the turn of events, they are not alone. The Western intelligentsia as a whole is more confused and marginal than it has been for generations. [In the past Marx, Keynes, Dewey, Popper or Hayek gave] illumination. None of these thinkers has anything of interest to say about the circumstances we face today. All of them subscribed to the Enlightenment faith that as societies became more modern, they became more alike, accepting the same secular values and the same view of the world. That faith was always questionable. Today it is incredible. If now we reach to our shelves for books that can help us to understand what happened on 11 September, we find almost nothing.\(^{26}\)

But perhaps, if the book we reach down to consult is the Revelation of St John the Divine, or the thirteenth chapter of the Gospel of St Mark, or the Book of Daniel, we may find more enlightenment and help! This type of apocalyptic writing is particularly hard for most modern Westerners to understand, respond and relate to. But theologians and believers should perhaps be able to mediate and relate to living apocalyptic in the modern world. Certainly they should be able to suggest some reasons why it is so influential in the modern world, and perhaps enter into dialogue with those for whom apocalyptic is alive today.

There was a great deal of unabashedly and irreducibly religious language used about the events of 11 September, on both sides. The hijackers received a kind of perverse spiritual discipline as they prepared for what they understood as martyrdom, a way of witnessing with one’s life to the truth. Bin Laden’s broadcasts and statements reflected a characteristically apocalyptic dualism between absolute good and absolute evil, and an extraordinary confidence that supernatural agency would ensure the rapid destruction of America. And on the other side the language of a war against absolute evil, a crusade, and ‘God bless America’ was on the lips of President Bush and many others. The influence of very conservative Christian theologies, particularly forms of Dispensationalism, on the present US Administration seems well demonstrated, particularly in relation to policies towards Israel.

And then there was also the deeply moving language of love, spoken through mobile phones by people about to die. Rowan Williams points to the contrast between the two kinds of language:

The religious words are, in the cold light of day, the words that murderers are saying to themselves to make a martyr’s drama out of a crime, the non-religious words are testimony to what religious language is supposed to be about — the triumph of pointless, gratuitous love, the affirming of faithfulness even when there is nothing to be done or salvaged.\(^{27}\)

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We now see huge religious movements — not only Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden — whose world-view and activity is dominated by the powerful symbols of Jerusalem, the holy city, that claims to be the mother of us all, and Babylon, the city of injustice and oppression that is doomed to destruction. This may be dangerous territory, full of mines and traps and unpredictable hazards. But it has to be traversed by a public theology that is to have any relevance today.

We should, perhaps, have seen it coming long before. The collapse of the communist states of Eastern Europe had signalled the end of at least one brand of socialism, and had taught many people to distrust ideology, often used as a cover for exploitation, oppression and injustice. Again, the vaguely Christian consensus that had survived in many Western nations, and which was a presupposition of much public theology, disintegrated rapidly after the 1960s, and these societies became increasingly fragmented and secular. The ecumenical movement seemed to have lost its way, or at least its impetus. What had captured the imagination of several generations of Christians seemed now a shadow of its former self, scarcely able to generate any longer an effective ecumenical public theology. All round the world, in varying contexts, the Churches felt that they were living in a cold climate and devoted their energies to institutional survival, or justifying to the secular gatekeepers theology’s claim to a place in the public forum, rather than seeking the good of the broader community in which they found themselves. It seemed perhaps that ecumenism had diverted attention from inter-religious relations, and from understanding and responding to the powerful and illiberal forces of religion which were gaining strength around the world.

Great issues, events that ‘cut history in two like a knife’, turning points and encounters with radical evil or with authentic holiness in history seem to demand religious symbols and religious, even apocalyptic, language for their adequate interpretation and description. More conventional language tools seem quite inadequate for handling such portentous matters, for here we are pressing against the limits of humanity’s ability to comprehend and order the world; we are moving into new and uncharted territory. Our modern maps often seem inadequate; we turn perforce to older charts. People return, sometimes instinctively, sometimes in desperation or in anger, to the ancient symbolic systems of religion, and long for the rebirth of religious images which have for long lain dormant and forgotten.

But these ancient systems of interpretation and ‘discerning the signs of the times’ also carry with them risks of which we should be aware. The straining for the recovery of old keys for the interpretation of what is radically new and threatening has its dangers, of course. A turning to religious language and religious symbols may indicate a recognition that the issues are grave, and unusual resources are needed to cope with them, but it does not guarantee that these matters will be handled wisely. Religious symbols may inflame rather than illumine,
and religious rhetoric excite rather than clarify. Such religious rhetoric may be a powerful agency for recruitment. Osama bin Laden, to point to the most striking example, constantly uses an apocalyptic rhetoric to justify his outrages and place them in a particular apocalyptic frame.

This is precisely the point at which a major theological responsibility comes into view: theologians are, or ought to be, people trained in the disciplined and critical investigation of religious symbolic structures, and the careful and responsible use of religious language — skills much needed today, with the new explosion of religious rhetoric and religious language around the world. But academic theologians have their problems too. It is not easy for them to analyse and describe such ‘bizarre’ religious symbolic structures, or understand why and how people inhabit such structures, and allow them to shape their faith and life, for good or ill.

We live in a world in which secular liberal rationalists are a small minority, and huge numbers of people understand their world in the light of religious symbolic structures that sometimes seem bizarre to others, and find in religion their public and political motivation and solace. There is a pressing task to understand why a young Muslim should kill himself and cause the death of thousands of innocent people, after receiving ‘spiritual guidance’ about his deportment in the last minutes before the disaster, his last words as recorded on the black box being ‘Allah Akbar’. It can all be dismissed as pathological fanaticism, or the manipulation of religion and religious people for sordid political ends. But the task of understanding is the precondition for intelligent and effective response. And so far the efforts at understanding have not been particularly impressive or illuminating.

An immediate danger is that the events of September 11 2001 and their aftermath will simply confirm the common Western secular assumption that religion, and especially ‘fundamentalist’ or apocalyptic religion, is pathological, divisive, dangerous and irrational. This attitude, of course, bypasses the imperative of understanding.

This is the world that public theology has to address in the early twenty-first century. It is a world which is at the same time very new and very old. And a theology which can bring out of its treasury things new and old is equipped to understand, interpret and respond to a world that is full of ‘furious religion’ — and also the world that God loved so much that he gave his only Son.

The agenda before public theology today is thus urgent and demanding. But a public theology which takes up this agenda seriously is capable of making a difference.

Abstract

Reflections on contemporary national and global change, including its implications for marginalisation, are developed through an appreciation of Manchester as a fulcrum of such processes, and in critical conversation with Ronald Preston’s social theology. The reflections also suggest key features of a contemporary public theology. These are elaborated in the second part of the article with references to an emerging substantive public theology agenda through reflections on a bias for inclusivity, the nature of the human, and the procedures for religious interventions in the public square. The article concludes with a brief consideration of Manchester’s central role in developing such a public theology, and the latter’s emerging character as promoting connections.

I t is a privilege to be asked to give a Ferguson Lecture in this University of Manchester, not least because it immediately takes us into important aspects of the marginalisation problematic in terms of the manufacturing, wealth-creating Fergusons and their links to Nonconformity and Manchester. It was a conversation between Engels and a business colleague on Deansgate in the centre of Manchester in the mid-nineteenth century, which necessarily takes that connection further. Commenting on the appalling conditions in many of the mills, Engels was sharply reminded that they also created the wealth of Manchester, and indeed of Britain, and, not least, funded Engels’ and Marx’s great endeavours in addressing marginalisation through a reformulated political economy.

These stories immediately illustrate how I value being located at the heart of north-west England. It is an experience paralleled by Ackroyd’s review of Duffy’s account of the village of Morebath in
south-west England, through the great religious and social changes of the sixteenth century, when he reminds us of the continuing ‘genius of place’ which ‘survives within this narrative … and proves the assertion that the great forces of the world can best be understood in terms of their local effects’. Interestingly, in this I am departing from the teaching and experience of Ronald Preston. He loved Manchester’s University and Cathedral, but you will find little sense of my excitement inhabiting such a historic and contemporary fulcrum of change. He is much more part of the mid-twentieth century rational tradition of universalising particular experiences, essentially disconnected from particular narratives and experiences, emphasising commonalities at the expense of difference. And that, of course, is to miss a major theme running through contemporary discourses, to which I will frequently return.

It is all these connections I want to explore in two stages: first, by reflecting on Manchester as a fulcrum of change and marginalisation. It is an astonishing story of economic and social transformations that is now part of my very being. Yet it is only one such fulcrum, but it reminds us of the importance of location in the formation of identity, including the stances we take on a variety of increasingly global problematics. My second objective is to explore through that context the public task of theology today. And, because Ronald Preston was such an intimate part of that context and my life, I will explore these themes in conversation with him.

Manchester as a Fulcrum of Change and Marginalisation

I first met Ronald Preston in 1970 at the Cathedral in the middle of Manchester, and visited him in hospital three days before he died at the end of 2001. The intervening years span an astonishing generation of change of unparalleled speed and extent which have transformed Manchester and the world, and contributed, among other things, to the processes of marginalisation. Indeed, as I survey these changes from the new millennium quarter of Manchester, with the Cathedral at its heart, I become even more aware of one of the great journeys through history, from an industrial society of mills, mines and factories, to a post-industrial society of the Urbis technological theme park, and the biggest Marks & Spencer in the world. These are changes deeply affecting every area of life from family and personal relationships to the practice of politics and an increasingly postmodern culture.

As if these changes were not enough, it is their location in the much wider and dramatic new context of global change which now becomes decisive. It is reminder that Manchester has moved from being a unique globalising city, the shock city of Cottonopolis transforming the

world through its manufacturing and free trade, to a *globalised city*, no longer in the first rank of cities, for the Manchester geographer Dicken now ‘tightly integrated in to the global economic system’. Reflecting on that global context reveals a rate and extent of change since 1948, when Preston came to Manchester, probably unparalleled in history, generating what R. H. Tawney earlier described as a phenomenon, now applied to globalisation, ‘differing not merely in degree but in kind from the social order preceding it’. It represented a series of changes Preston found difficult to embrace. In his words, he had seen it all before, from the 1930s to the 1960s. Yet he had not. For as I gradually unpacked these changes — for example the emergence of the global economy as new capitalism and of information and bio-technologies — I regularly encountered the judgment that change in this historic generation was often greater than in all previous history. So Kennedy observes how ‘the global economy grew more since 1945 than in all world history prior to World War Two’. Marquez similarly notes how much ecological degradation of atmosphere, croplands, rainforests and species could ensure that ‘What nature created in the course of millions of years will be destroyed by us in little more than forty years’. It is that failure to understand contemporary change in a global context which deeply flawed not just Preston’s work but also major Church reports such as *Faith in the City* (1985) and *Unemployment and the Future of Work* (1997).

As important, in terms of my current research programme, is the recognition that every major area of global change also contributed, among other things, to marginalisation processes. For example, in the global economy, foreign direct investment, a life-blood for developing productive and technological capacities, essentially flows within the rich North, with a minority flowing from North to South, principally to China, with only 2.2% to Sub-Saharan Africa, the poorest region on earth. Likewise, the dynamic instant interconnections of information technologies are transforming the global economy and the role of capital within it. Yet that digital revolution is also digital divide, with Sub-Saharan Africa described by Castells as one of the ‘black holes of informational capitalism’. It is that technological erosion of time and

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space, and their transformation into dynamic space of flows which resonates across a series of experiences from our understanding of human development to our experience of cities, including Manchester as it moves from Cottonopolis to Ideopolis. And yet, once again, that creative and dynamic force is also intimately related to new forms of marginalisation. For, in the new global economy, the rich get richer and more quickly and easily through speculation in new technologically instantaneous financial markets, and as a result are increasingly distanced from the poor. For the sociologist Bauman, ‘New fortunes are born, sprout and flourish in the virtual reality, tightly isolated from the rough-and-ready realities of the poor . . . The new rich do not need the poor any more’.8 They are no longer tied, unlike the poor, to the obligations of place.

Manchester’s significance results not simply from connections to national and global change, but also from its historical and contemporary embodiment of these marginalisation processes. So the Government’s current *Indices of Multiple Deprivation* (2000), using over thirty indices including income, health and education, have clinically identified the most deprived wards in England. As a result, 36% of wards in the diocese of Manchester, essentially the conurbation, are numbered in the most deprived 10% nationally. They include Wythenshawe, the poorest ward in England; for Hall, ‘England’s third Garden City’.9 It is these wild facts of relative deprivation which link to the processes of global marginalisation between nations, illustrated by the overlap of measurement systems between Britain’s Indices of Multiple Deprivation, and the United Nations’ Human Development Index. For the marginalised communities of Manchester, as Davey rightly recognises, are ‘not just pockets of deprivation within national societies, they are fault lines along which the Third World rubs up against the First’.10

And, of course, these contemporary Manchester exclusion zones are also historic phenomena, often identified by Engels in his 1845 *Condition of the Working Class in England*, confirmed by the Salford study of Robert Roberts’ *Classic Slum*, relating to the earlier twentieth century, and then by the William Temple Foundation research in Ordsall in the late 1970s, splendidly entitled, ‘Engels Knew a Slum When He Saw One’.11 More importantly, these experiences as global and local, contemporary and historic point to three layers of explanation of marginalisation, as economic growth, governance

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and modernisation, illustrating the multilayered, multifaceted and multicausal nature of global change and problematics. Again, Manchester’s story illustrates such explanatory phenomena, a key basis for a praxis-oriented theology.

First, economic growth is essential for resourcing people’s capabilities to function effectively in contemporary societies. Without it, people face grave disadvantage. So Britain, and particularly Manchester, lay at the heart of the astonishing emergence of a virtuous cycle of economic growth in the nineteenth century, a combination of market size and demand, allowing divisions of labour; delivering communications; promoting new technologies; encouraging investment capacity and good government; and fostering supportive cultures. Together, they generated greater productivity in goods and services, leading to increasing income per capita, and thereby breaking through into ever-increasing patterns of self-sustaining economic growth. The Malthusian nightmare was never realised because the fourfold population increase in Britain in the nineteenth century was outpaced by the fourteenfold increase in gross national product. The inability to achieve that surplus is a fundamental reason why many underdeveloped economies are unlikely to break out of the vicious cycle of poverty and into effective participation in the global economy. Indeed, in an increasingly competitive global economy, the most developed economies are increasingly accelerating away from the least developed. They are increasingly favoured by emerging patterns of change and economic growth which in turn further exclude the poorest.

The second area explaining marginalisation and how to overcome it relates to the growing recognition, by key international institutions such as the World Bank and by governments like our own, of the importance of good governance. Earlier acknowledged by Adam Smith at the beginning of modernisation processes, this has gained new significance with the dramatic growth of population and the complexity of managing contemporary economic and social support systems. The presence of marginalisation is therefore particularly reinforced by conflicts and systemic corruption which both corrode the capacity of nations to develop strong economies and supportive health and educational systems, and thereby exacerbate the plight of the poorest. Yet good governance now goes way beyond the basic requirements of peace and socio-economic resources to now include the provision of participatory democratic politics. At its most foundational lies Sen’s remarkable observation that ‘political freedom in the form of democratic arrangements’ help guard against ‘famine mortality’. At its most advanced, it is a recognition that majoritarian democracy contributes to the effective exclusion of groups from effective participation in society. The pressure then is for a more inclusive democracy.

Yet I have become more and more convinced that the lack of economic growth and good governance are necessary but not sufficient explanations of contemporary marginalisation. For example, there is an understandable growing suspicion that modernisation processes themselves generate not simply economic growth but also marginalisation. For debates in the early nineteenth century, provoked by the experience of Manchester, began to circle around the question whether, for Winch, ‘the emerging manufacturing system was the solution or merely expression of a deeper problem’. De Tocqueville, commenting on his visit to the shock city of Manchester in 1835, expressed the paradox much more pithily, that from the ‘filthy sewer’ of Manchester ‘pure gold’ flowed. The remarkable statistical correlation between economic growth and increasing marginalisation from the early nineteenth century to the present confirms that likely connection, a connection only exacerbated by the rapid acceleration of these divisions since the 1960s, the period witnessing the emergence of the global economy itself. Interestingly, it is a relationship confirmed by feminist analysis. So for the American lay theologian and economist Julie Nelson, the problem lies in neoclassical economics, at the heart of the global economy, and its treatment of women and nature as ‘passive exploitable resources’. For her, this is not just ‘coincidental, or incidental to neoclassical analysis. Such thinking is part of a broader cultural way of viewing the world, with roots going back in history’. In other words, it is the problem of modernisation itself. And, that problem is further exacerbated by a dimension of structural injustice, by the recognition, so powerfully expressed by R. H. Tawney, first WEA (Workers’ Educational Association) tutor organiser, and based in Manchester. In 1912, in his research on low pay, funded by an Indian steel magnate, he notes ‘there is a unity underlying the individual cases of poverty … they are connected with social institutions, specimens of a type, pieces of a system’. And that takes us into the processes of oppression and marginalisation, including in terms of the division of labour itself (again, cause for concern for Adam Smith at the beginnings of industrialisation), and now globally manifested as the growing gulf between decision-makers and implementers, a gulf reflected, for example, in the ratio of rewards going to American Chief Executives as against factory workers rising from 44:1 in 1965 to 326:1 in 1996. Indeed, it is manifested even more in the norms, habits, symbols and assumptions underlying institutional behaviour. It is an explanation of marginalisation which goes beyond the distributional justice of Rawls’s Difference Principle,

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to recognise with Iris Young, American political philosopher, that ‘the predominant approaches to justice tend to presuppose and uncritically accept the relations of production that define an economic system’. We now also focus on ‘the more central question of the best way to control the process to realise social needs and the full potentialities of human beings’.\(^{17}\) We are driven into the wider processes of social justice which begin to address such foundational structural matters. And this will take us into the substantive reform of modernisation, of economic growth and democratic politics. For Young rightly asserts that despite all criticisms, we cannot start again. I believe she is right, so we will reject the radical alternatives symbolised say by radical orthodoxy, essentially returning to pre-industrial Christendom models. We should regard these as cul-de-sacs, however creative, in Rorty’s telling phrase, as ‘terminal wistfulness’.\(^{18}\) (In passing, I have recognised their actual and potential value in what I call the heterocritical tradition, the development of alternatives to mainstream economics and theology.\(^{19}\) Preston would not have been amused!) The task, therefore, as Habermas observes, is rather the necessary regulatory correction of essential forces. It leads to the robust promoting of both pro-poor and environment economic growth, and forms of inclusive democracy, including empowerment programmes with marginalised groups and communities.

Running alongside these local and global experiences of marginalisation is the story of marginalised churches in Manchester. A gradual decline of most mainstream churches through the twentieth century, suddenly accelerated dramatically, again in that historic generation from the 1960s to the present. It has left many churches in Manchester facing great difficulties, including questions of survival. So just as communities facing severe difficulties can be identified through the Index of Multiple Deprivation, so local churches facing severe difficulties can be identified empirically. Indeed, what is particularly informative is the profound overlap between them: two-thirds of these churches fall within the most deprived 10\% of wards.\(^{20}\) It is what I have come to call the double whammy of marginalisation, using John Major’s vote-winning slogan for the 1992 general election.\(^{21}\) It suggests linkages between the most marginalised churches in the most marginalised communities, in a nation deeply divided by such processes, and a Church and Christianity increasingly disconnected from public as well as private relevance. Addressing that problematic occupies the rest of this article.

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\(^{19}\) Atherton, *Marginalization*, pp. 172–78.

\(^{20}\) Atherton, *Marginalization*, ch. 4.

Manchester and the Task of Public Theology Today

This brief sketch of Manchester as a fulcrum of change and marginalisation is more than an account of a particular location’s connection to wider processes. It also contains justification for and functions of a public theology, including some of its major features. In other words, the profound disconnections represented by marginalisation processes, including the marginalisation of Christianity, allows us to begin the process of reconnecting the marginalised as peoples and churches to effective participatory involvement in society. Theologically, that will require developing a Christian social thought and practice with a fully public character able to proactively address the dimensions and character of such public matters as marginalisation processes. Reflections on Manchester as a fulcrum of such changes also begins to suggest some of the key features for such a public theology which I will simply now produce as a checklist. For example, it will be:

- **Problematic based and contextually located**: for we begin with the marginalisation problematic, located in, and indeed forcefully required by, damaging contextual change. It is in response to this, that critical theories can best be developed. So, like Karen Lebacqz: ‘In order to understand the meaning of justice we need to listen to the experiences of those who are suffering injustice.’

- **Interdisciplinary**: for given the nature of problematics in contemporary contexts, we are invariably engaging multifaceted, multidimensional and multicausal phenomena. That surely requires a response which engages with a variety of experiences, unequivocally people-centred, but spilling out into involvement with a variety of disciplines, and evolving into programmatic responses involving a variety of partners, including from public, private and voluntary sectors.

- **Praxis-oriented** and therefore profoundly performative: for to begin with contemporary problematics in terms of experience or analysis is to assert the importance of praxis for the theological task; when that involves a critique of marginalisation, and therefore the commitment to promote more inclusive societies and churches, then that is to assert, as Elaine Graham has recognised, the character of such theology as a profoundly performative discipline. And that then involves a linkage to

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appropriate effective measurement systems to identify progress made in promoting an inclusive human development.\textsuperscript{25}

- Last, but certainly not least, such a public theology will be \textit{tradition-based and earthed}: for given the increasingly plural nature of Manchester, national and global contexts, clarity over and commitment to identity, including religious, becomes particularly important. For Christianity, this continues to involve the elaboration and development of faith stories and communities as they demonstrably connect to the complexities of such problematics as marginalisation.

Now it is such features of a public theology which should centrally inform Forrester’s valuable definition of it as ‘talk about God, which claims to point to publicly accessible truth, to contribute to public discussion by witnessing to a truth which is relevant to what is going on in the world and the pressing issues facing people and societies today’.\textsuperscript{26} So it will take public squares seriously, for example by addressing such global problematics as marginalisation. The brief sketch of Manchester as a particular entry point into such wider processes therefore also contributes to identifying the substantive scope of such a theology, informed by such features listed above. It therefore becomes a profoundly interactive theology, or as Preston described it, reciprocal theology, which both reflects that context and in turn questions it, and at times decisively, as we shall see. For marginalisation as an essentially social construct is profoundly challenged by Judaeo-Christian tradition. In Tawney’s words, in \textit{Religion and the Rise of Capitalism}, referring to the Christian gospel imperatives, there is ‘no touchstone, except the treatment of childhood, which reveals the true character of a social philosophy more clearly than the spirit in which it regards the misfortune of those of its members who fall by the way’.\textsuperscript{27} My use of Tawney recognises how central was the case for a public theology to Preston’s contribution. Taught and influenced for life by Tawney at the LSE (London School of Economics), Preston pursued the central concern of political economy for the last twenty-five years of his life with a series of pathfinding books addressing the problematic of Christianity’s relationship to capitalism. It was a journey initiated by Tawney and his \textit{Religion and the Rise of Capitalism} in 1926 (itself a critical response to Weber’s \textit{The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism}, 1904–1905), then challenged by Demant thirty years later with his \textit{Religion and the Decline of Capitalism} (1952), and then Preston’s dialectical synthesis that the blessed animal was refusing to die, as his

\textsuperscript{25} Atherton, \textit{Marginalization}, ch. 6.
\textsuperscript{26} D. Forrester, \textit{Truthful Action: Explorations in Practical Theology} (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), p. 127.
Religion and the Persistence of Capitalism was to demonstrate in 1979. It is that theological engagement with political economy, in relation to marginalisation, which informs my current research programme.

Let me illustrate further how addressing the marginalisation problematic informs and is informed by the scope of such a public theology, with reference to theology as regulatory principle, a Christian anthropology, theological procedures, and the role of Manchester in public theology.

First, the theologian must begin with something like a bias for inclusivity, with a foundational theological principle which focuses on the marginalisation problematic but usefully located necessarily in a wider social context. If something like this regulative principle is not developed then marginalisation in church and society will never be seriously eroded. Protestations of politicians, economists and church leaders assuming otherwise are hardly worth the paper on which they are written. Yet the bias for inclusivity is equally a critique of much radical posturing. This can give the impression that a bias to the poor, as poor society and church, will solve everything. It will not. To ignore the value and necessity of economic growth is as imbalanced as ignoring structural inequalities. For as already acknowledged, we do not have the feasible option of starting again, despite the fundamental problems of the contemporary social order. The task of an adequate public theology is therefore to affirm, with Young, that ‘A model of a transformed society must begin from the material structures that are given to us at this time in history’. A bias for inclusivity requires and allows that. For it will recognise the contribution of economic resourcing to overcoming marginalisation (for how else can effective education, health and nutritional security be delivered to three billion deprived people?), and therefore of the development of the global economy, but it will acknowledge both the economic reality and the moral imperative, as the United Nation’s Development Programme (UNDP) has, by promoting pro-poor economic growth. For the bias for inclusivity therefore expresses commitment to an inclusive society and world by a particular commitment to enable the marginalised to become full and effective members of that society and world. Like Forrester, it is an understanding inspired by the Pauline development of the body of Christ as both model for Church and paradigm for civil society. At first sight, the seminal image of church as body of Christ appears to make the commonplace assertion that an effectively functioning whole relies on contributions of its different parts. Yet Paul takes ‘an idea common in the culture of his day and reshapes it radically to make it serve a new purpose’. For the image was


29 Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference, p. 234.
commonly used in Greek society ‘to suggest that some parts were superior to others, that some were made to rule and others to obey’. For Paul, as for members of the body of Christ, ‘Diversity of gifts and functions does not lead to diversity of worth, esteem or status’.30 He rather affirms difference in terms of individual gifts and needs, including capabilities, but all equally and fully members of one body, with the vulnerable particularly acknowledged because ‘those parts of the body that seem weaker are indispensable’ (1 Cor. 12:22). It is the theological assertion of Young’s contemporary exposition of justice theory, that ‘A politics of difference argues . . . that equality as the participation and inclusion of all groups sometimes requires different treatment for oppressed or disadvantaged groups’.31 It is therefore a powerful theological ethic bearing on and interacting with both marginalisation problematic and important relevant secular discourses. And it is clearly performative-laden, as the American theologian Hicks has demonstrated, with his development of the UNDP Human Development Index into an Inequality Adjusted Human Development Index, as a way of measuring performance to reduce marginalisation and promote human development within as well as between nations, including with reference to particular vulnerable social groups.32 The formulation of this theological principle addresses what the American Jesuit theologian Hollenbach has rightly identified, in his latest book, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, as ‘the central moral and cultural problem of our times’. It is the task of how to embrace two kinds of commitment, ‘the universal dignity of all and cultural and religious differences among them’.33 It is a problem recurring through this article, yet which Preston never really came to terms with because his commitment to solidarity in the end overrode the challenge of difference. The theological principle of a bias for inclusivity creatively and constructively engages that dichotomy.

A second area of concern which reflects the scope and nature of a public theology relates to the foundational understanding of what it means to be human. For marginalisation vividly illustrates the distorting restrictions placed on human development and, in turn, what must therefore be done to promote it. Engagement with the UNDP’s work since 1990 is particularly important in this regard. It is a most powerful and timely reminder that the work of the UN as the foremost institution of global governance extends beyond the Security Council to embrace the gradual working away at underlying causes of dislocation through its agencies such as the Development Programme.

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31 Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, p. 158.
33 Hollenbach, *The Common Good and Christian Ethics*, p. 239.
It is a reminder to Bush and Blair that September 11 2001, and its aftermath today are intimately linked to marginalisation processes and therefore to their solution. Now the UNDP interprets human development as the capability to function effectively, to have the capabilities to be and to do, to freely pursue one’s self-chosen purposes. It is a profoundly process-oriented view of the human, yet in strong conversation with more traditional and structured understandings of human functionings. It is the anthropological equivalent of Castell’s process-oriented promotion of the new urban as the space of flows as against flows between spaces. As important, it allows us also to engage in critical conversation with Amartya Sen, Nobel Prize winner for his seminal work on development economics. He rightly takes us beyond Rawls’s interpretation of human development through basic primary goods equally distributed, to the recognition that their translation into effective human functionings is significantly dependent on the capabilities of each individual person. It is a profound acknowledgement of the human as sharing a common set of predicaments, and yet equally reflecting the profound differences of individuality. It therefore combines Hollenbach’s commonalities and difference, not least because, as Alkire rightly observes, it identifies shared sets of capabilities (like material well-being and literacy), yet equally recognises the importance of local groups participating in the interpreting and embodying of such general capabilities into local experiences. As important for policy-making, it also translates into programmatic measurement systems, again developed by the UNDP as the Human Development Index. The Index’s value lies significantly in its engagement with the complexities of marginalisation and their implications for interpreting and developing our understanding of human development in the emerging global context. For it acknowledges their multifaceted nature, in terms of identifying human capabilities to function as certainly including economic resourcing but also education and healthcare. Equally, it addresses its multidimensional nature by measuring global and national progress in human development.

Clearly, this feeds directly into the necessarily performative character of a praxis-oriented public theology. More importantly, it encourages that theology to elaborate a Christian anthropology which emphasises the profound equality of the human in creative interplay with the recognition of the uniqueness of each individual person. It is a vital corrective to Preston’s thinking which, for good reasons in the 1980s, placed greater weight on the priority of what we share in common as human beings over any differences. That relationship

36 Atherton, Marginalization, chs 3 and 6.
now needs reformulating in the light of Hollenbach’s commitments
to universal and difference. The promotion of the human as the
capabilities to be and to do provides a way of doing that is informed
by this theological anthropology. As important, it then flows into the
debate over what kind of social arrangements are needed to support
such understandings of human development. It represents the
movement from and profound linkage between the human as Sen’s
self-development and the human as Young’s self-determination. It
therefore takes us into a consideration of the necessary movement
from a majoritarian to an inclusive democracy, into empowerment
strategies, and so into justice theories.

A third area central to defining a contemporary public theology
continues these reflections on human development in terms of the
process as procedures for the involvement of faith communities in
the public square. In increasingly plural societies, the task is not
simply to justify Christian involvement in such public problematics
as marginalisation, but also to define how such a contribution to the
public good can be made by a particular religious community and
tradition. Addressing these procedural matters are likely to become
increasingly urgent, and should be regarded as contributing to the
fleshing out of public theology, in Thiemann’s words as ‘faith seeking
to understand the relation between Christian communities and
the broader social and cultural context within which the Christian
community lives’. Promoting public theology involves developing
such connections. Central to these reformulations will be the issue of
how to express such religiously informed convictions in increasingly
plural public contexts in terms of rethinking process on the one hand
and on the other, the common good.

Take the procedures for making public statements in theology today.
This is an indispensable issue for public theologians, particularly
in liberal democracies, not least because of Rawl’s questioning,
as leading political philosopher of the twentieth century, of such
religious interventions. These legitimate concerns can be addressed
by recognising that it is not whether religious arguments qualify
for such a public role, but what kind of arguments qualify. In this
regard much help can be gained by promoting conversation between
two American theologians from different traditions, Thiemann
and Schreiter. Elaborating such criteria for evaluating religious
contributions to the public sphere also reveals their relevance for other
religious, philosophical and economic theories. For example, religious
contributions should be:

1. Broadly accessible to the public arena, requiring theology to
   translate its understandings into publicly accessible discourse.

37 R. Thiemann, *Constructing a Public Theology: The Church in a Pluralistic Culture*
So the arguments of academic theology, but equally other disciplines, must be open to public examination.

2. Promote mutual respect, since disagreements in plural contexts will be inevitable. This moves beyond tolerance, because it calls for the recognition of the moral agency of those from whom we differ. It therefore involves freedom of speech, including a condition for Young of ‘similar freedom for others and which prohibits activities that wrongfully harm others’.  

3. Acknowledge moral integrity, including as consistency of speech and action (particularly relevant to church and political life), and space for dissent. For the Other, whether as opponent or as marginalised minority, continues to have basic rights, even where disagreements are profound and unresolved.

It is at this point that Schreiter provides further creative elaboration, particularly relevant to interfaith dialogue. His reflections on intercultural hermeneutics address the problem of how to speak and understand across diverse cultural boundaries where a common world is not shared. Successful communication therefore occurs when the speaker feels his or her speech has lodged with the hearer in ways recognisable to the speaker. Appropriate communication therefore seeks to avoid violating the hearer’s cultural codes.

The second procedural matter for developing public theology relates to the concept of the common good. This has figured large in public theologies, for example, the Roman Catholic Bishops of England and Wales’ statement on the Common Good in 1996, and the earlier Anglican report, Faith in the City in 1985. But it has equally been promoted by public theologians such as Preston, and currently by Hollenbach. And, of course, the possibility never mind desirability of establishing a common good has been severely challenged by the influential argument, particularly of MacIntyre, that our plural context is now dominated by competing narratives, increasingly irreconcilable if not incommensurable. Yet reflecting on such problematics as marginalisation in a global changing context suggests that both common good and incommensurable diversities are unable to provide adequate bases for public theologies for global contexts, the former because it cannot cope with diversity, the latter because it cannot promote the collaboration of differences. Essentially, both are unable to engage differences constructively, if for very different reasons. And that is the great task, in an inevitably and irreversibly

plural world, given the common threat of global problematics. A more adequate way forward, therefore, is to recognise that common threat by the necessary commitment to solidarity, to the whole body politic, but yet also to acknowledge the necessity and virtue of difference, and to find ways of combining the two, using for example Young’s concept of differentiated solidarity in critical conversation with for example Rawls’s overlapping consensuses. Again, as with understandings of the body, and of human development, it offers ways of addressing Hollenbach’s two commitments, of the universal and of difference. Interestingly, in terms of the procedures for developing public theologies which connect difference and inclusion, Christian social ethics can now make a particular valued contribution. Preston’s continued advocacy of the common good is probably unsustainable. Yet his development of middle axioms should not now share the same fate, because they offer a process for arriving at moral judgments which respects the competing pressures a differentiated solidarity identifies and reconciles, and also comply with Thiemann’s three criteria. For middle axioms have traditionally offered an intermediate level of moral guidelines between general moral principles arising from a Christian system of belief (or from any other faith or theory bases) and detailed policy recommendations in a particular context. They consequently provide an agreed sense of direction, translated into participative procedures, for facing up to a chosen problematic in a particular time and place thereby ensuring their provisional character. They therefore connect the UN and Sen’s development of human capabilities as sets of capabilities which require particular local elaboration to be effective. Equally useful, their emergence out of ecumenical Christian social ethics, enabling different denominations, nations, histories and cultures to collaborate, can now be extended to provide the same procedural facility for the collaboration of faiths and other belief systems. Their deficiencies are well-known and must be addressed, but their reconnecting to contemporary problems and debates is confirmed by current adoption in South East Asia, as a tool for enabling a minority Christianity to participate in a multicultural public context, and to a post-revolutionary and plural South Africa as a useful tool for public theology in a period of reconstruction.

Finally, delivering such a public theology requires institutional embodiment. Here, I return to Manchester as a location of marginalisation and the struggle against it, and so its appropriateness for such a public theology base. I was privileged to be supervised in two research degrees by Ronald Preston through the 1970s, and then became a colleague in the Department of Social and Pastoral Theology from 1975. On his retirement in 1980, that tradition of Manchester public theology lost some momentum. It is with great joy that I see its re-emergence into what is likely to be a new excellence, under the leadership of Elaine Graham. For a number of forces are coming together to create a critical mass for promoting public theology, maybe to be facilitated by the creation of a Centre for Contextual or Public Theology, based in Manchester’s Department of Religions and Theology, now with the addition of the Lincoln Theological Institute, and bringing together the resources of such ecumenical bodies as the William Temple Foundation and the Partnership for Theological Education, and denominational bodies like the Cathedral. Hopefully this would also have international links including the emerging collaboration with the University of Uppsala. Manchester is therefore set to become an even more significant fulcrum for developing this strategic relationship between theology and public realm.

Reflecting on all these agendas, it is as though the answer is in the problem. For in addressing the marginalisation problematic, which so divides peoples and religion from each other, the way forward surely becomes a process of reconnecting them. The more I have entered into this enquire, the more I have been driven to use words like linkages and connections. Given the analysis of the changing contexts of marginalisation, and their links into Manchester, the task has repeatedly required linking politics and economics as a new Christian political economy, linking engineering and ethical economics in a critical broadening of neoclassical economics, linking praxis and theological reflection in an interactive way, developing human capabilities into functions, reflected in the appropriate measurement systems, constructing a bias for the marginalised which is also for inclusivity, and recognising the foundational connection of differences and commonality as differentiated solidarity. Now it is that theme of making connections which therefore becomes central to the development of a public theology for such problematics in such contexts. And that is not least because it takes us into the nature of God, which, in the interactive mode, then feeds back into informing that context. It is as though, for Boff, a ‘new paradigm … is coming to birth — that of connectedness’. And that, as he rightly concludes, takes us into understandings of God, Christ and Church as profoundly and irretrievably dialogic. Indeed, it is as though ‘The logic of the universe

44 The Manchester Centre for Public Theology was launched on 10 May 2004 with a conference on ‘Religious Capital in Declining Communities’.

is dialogical, everything interacts with everything’. The ancient Greeks expressed this as perichoresis, meaning circularity and the inclusion of all relationships and beings. Strikingly, in Christian tradition, it points to the relationship of ‘mutual presence and inter penetration between God and the universe or between the three Divine Persons among themselves and with creation’. It is that dialogic and perichoretic logic, linking divine and ecological realities, which takes us into contemporary change, into the great marginalisation problematic, and therefore into the reconnecting of Christianity with that total context. It is about the scope of an emerging public theology.

45 L. Boff, Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), pp. xii, 24.
Abstract
Ronald Preston defended the middle axiom approach to doing Christian social ethics developed by J. H. Oldham for the 1937 ‘Life and Work’ conference. Preston argued that middle axioms continue to offer the churches a relevant ecumenical method. Middle axioms has since been subject to fundamental criticism by ethicists such as Duncan Forrester. It will be argued that a case study of the Church of Scotland’s contribution to the devolution debate, as part of Scottish civil society, supports Preston’s defence of the middle axiom approach as a relevant form of political engagement in the new context of local-global politics.

The work of Ronald Preston in ecumenical social ethics is notable for its advocacy of middle axioms. I wish to consider the role played by such a middle axiom approach in key Scottish church pronouncements on devolution; and argue that this case study supports Ronald Preston’s spirited defence of a contested and, for many, now discredited method in Christian social ethics. In particular, I shall argue that the relationship between the churches and Scottish civil society on issues of Scottish nationhood in the later twentieth century ensured the continuing relevance and effectiveness of the middle axiom method of addressing public issues. I shall conclude by interpreting this local case study of civil society and devolution in terms of the globalisation debate and argue that this wider perspective also offers fresh support for middle axioms from perhaps surprising theological and geographical quarters.¹

¹ Parts of this article appear in my closing contribution to the Festschrift for Duncan B. Forrester, ‘Where the Local and the Global Meet: Duncan Forrester’s Glocal Public Theology and Scottish Political Context’, in William F. Storrar and Andrew R. Morton
Ronald Preston was a consistent champion of middle axioms, although he did not particularly like the term itself. The underlying approach which he favoured was first named and expounded by the ecumenical pioneer J. H. Oldham in the preparatory volume he wrote with Willem Visser ’t Hooft for the 1937 Oxford Conference of the Life and Work movement on ‘Church, Community and State’. In The Church and its Function in Society, Oldham described middle axioms for the first time in a brief brushstroke of a definition:

. . . between purely general statements of the ethical demands of the gospel and the decisions that have to be made in concrete situations there is need for what may be described as middle axioms. It is these that give relevance and point to the Christian ethic. They are attempts to define the directions in which, in a particular state of society, Christian faith must express itself. They are not binding for all time, but are provisional definitions of the type of behaviour of Christians in a given period and given circumstances.

In a short article in the journal Crucible in 1971, reprinted in his collection of essays published in 1981 as Explorations in Theology 9, and expanded in an appendix to his 1983 study of Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century, Preston made the case for middle axioms as an ecumenical approach to addressing social issues that avoided ‘harmless generalities on the one side, or the endorsing of very particular and often highly disputable policies on the other’. For Preston, formulating middle axioms offered the churches a way ‘to arrive at some middle ground between general statements and detailed policies’ in their pronouncements on public issues. Middle axioms are mediating moral directives that have a key function in Christian moral reasoning in the critical middle ground between the shared beliefs and related ethical principles of Christianity, and the very specific decisions and judgments that Christians as policy-makers, practitioners, citizens and voters must be free to make on often complex economic, social and political matters. Preston argued, with


Visser ’t Hooft and Oldham, pp. 206ff., quoted in Preston, Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century, p. 144.

Oldham and the first generations of ecumenical social thinkers in the World Council of Churches, that such middle axioms must be rooted in fundamental theological and ethical convictions but evolve as highly contextual and provisional norms guiding Churches and Christians in particular societies as they engage with particular social problems. Such middle axioms were to be developed through ecumenical and interdisciplinary study of public issues that sought to establish a consensus of view on how the relevant empirical evidence and Christian theological and ethical perspectives should be interpreted in relation to the matter in hand.

Preston believed that this approach was the best one available to ecumenical social ethics, for reasons he stated, and was highly critical of its abandonment by the World Council of Churches from the 1970s onwards. However, he was also responsive to the growing criticisms made of this method by contemporary theologians such as Duncan Forrester. Such critics were not unsympathetic to the collaborative and interdisciplinary procedures favoured by the middle axiom exponents but questioned a deductive logic that minimised and even compromised the theological and narrative character of Christian ethics, and a \textit{modus operandi} that excluded the voice of the poor and marginalised in favour of expert opinion by socially insulated elites. Above all, the pluralism of post-Christian Western society, and the post-colonial experience of the non-Western world no longer allowed for the consensual agreement that was essential for the middle axiom method to operate. Preston did not accept such criticisms and argued to the contrary that middle axioms were not based on deductive logic but on what we might term, with Jeffrey Stout in \textit{Ethics After Babel}, a creative \textit{bricolage} of Christian moral reasoning that took theological reflection on socially and historically located experience seriously and welcomed the contextual insights of the poor alongside those of the professional in social analysis. Furthermore he did not see the pluralism of contemporary society as undermining the consensual element in middle axiom thinking. Oldham and others developed the middle axiom approach in the full awareness of the ideological divisions of their day and Preston himself argued on theological grounds that pluralism did not mean an inevitable incommensurability of moral outlook that made consensus on middle-ground contextual norms impossible. But was Preston right to defend middle axioms in this way against such charges? We turn to a case study of Scottish civil society and devolution to attempt a favourable answer.

\footnote{6 See, for example, Forrester’s critique of middle axioms in his book, \textit{Beliefs, Values and Policies: Conviction Politics in a Secular Age} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), ch. 2.}
\footnote{7 Jeffery Stout, \textit{Ethics After Babel: The Languages of Morals and their Discontents} (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988).}

The Church of Scotland was an early advocate of the middle axiom method after 1937. During the Second World War the Church of Scotland conducted a remarkable collaborative venture in public theology: a ‘Commission for the Interpretation of God’s Will in the Present Crisis’. It was chaired by a theologian, Professor John Baillie of New College, Edinburgh University, and its wide-ranging work bears the mark of his original and socially progressive mind and formative involvement in the inter-war ecumenical movement. This Commission on post-war reconstruction adopted the middle axiom method in Christian social ethics first advocated by J. H. Oldham at the Oxford ‘Life and Work’ Conference held in 1937. The Baillie Commission understood middle axioms to be:

. . . secondary and more specialised principles which exhibit the relevance of the ruling principles to the particular field of action in which guidance is needed . . . [These] are not such as to be appropriate in every time and place and situation, but they are offered as legitimate and necessary applications of the Christian rule of faith and life to the special circumstances in which we now stand.

For the Baillie Commission, one such relevant but provisional and contextual middle axiom for post-war Britain, with its memories of massive unemployment in the interwar years, was support for ‘a far greater measure of public control of capital resources and means of production’, in the common interest. I wish to argue that in the late 1980s and the 1990s, the Church of Scotland returned to this middle axiom approach as it developed a theological argument and contribution to the constitutional debate then being conducted. What was its contribution and how does it bear on questions of method for public theology in the twenty-first century?

As noted above, after 1945 the national Church of Scotland advocated the devolution of parliamentary decision-making over Scottish affairs to Scotland itself, within the framework of the United Kingdom. It based its support on a claim to represent the higher interests of the Scottish people and a growing consensus of Scottish opinion. This

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10 God’s Will for Church and Nation, p. 156.

11 Ibid., p. 157.
claim proved a house built on sand in 1979, in the months leading up to the first referendum on setting up a devolved Scottish Assembly. The growing unpopularity of the governing party sponsoring devolution led to ebbing support for its constitutional proposals. In these circumstances, anti-devolution voices in the Kirk silenced the General Assembly’s ‘Church and Nation Committee’ from reminding worshippers through a pulpit letter of its long-standing support for devolution, on the grounds that this was presuming to tell church members how to vote. Without the rock of theological conviction to resist these pressures, the Kirk did indeed fall silent in the referendum campaign. After 1979, a younger generation of secular and Christian Scots learned from this experience of collapsing support for devolution in church and nation. In the 1980s and 1990s a broad, cross-party and civic movement for constitutional change, including the churches, ensured the resounding success of the ‘Yes campaign’ for a Scottish Parliament in the 1997 referendum. And in that same period, the 1989 Church of Scotland General Assembly adopted a report on the government of Scotland that analysed the British constitutional situation in terms of a Reformed and ecumenical understanding of power and limited and popular sovereignty under God, drawing on medieval Catholic and post-Reformation Presbyterian theological and political arguments.

The 1989 Church and Nation report drew a careful distinction between the political ethical principle of limited sovereignty and the various constitutional policy options that were compatible with that principle, which it left open to personal judgment and preference in an election or referendum vote: recognising the legitimacy of a vote for a devolved assembly, a federal settlement, or outright independence, whether within or outwith the European Union. Between these two levels of a theologically grounded political principle and the personal


13 For an account of the churches’ role in this broad civic constitutional movement, see N. Shanks, ‘Constitutions, Conventions and Values: The Scottish Churches and the Constitutional Debate’, Scottish Affairs 16 (Summer 1996), pp. 18–35. For a perceptive analysis of the broader civic movement for self-government, see Jonathan Hearn, National Identity and Liberal Culture (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2000), chs 1–4.

judgment of electoral preference, the report supported what was in fact, if not in name, a middle axiom: it called for democratic control of Scottish affairs through self-government. The exact form of that self-government was to be decided in a national referendum on the range of constitutional options. This is a middle axiom because it clearly stands as a provisional directive stance, mediating between a Reformed understanding of Christian faith, with its derived political principle of limited sovereignty, and particular electoral decisions about the shape and form of constitutional change. The fact that this middle axiom was linked to theology and political ethical principle is recognised by secular and academic commentators.

Lindsay Paterson is one of the leading analysts of contemporary Scottish politics. In surveying the communitarian values and practices in Scottish civil society that undergirded support for a Scottish Parliament in the closing decades of the twentieth century, against the neoliberal individualism espoused by Margaret Thatcher, Paterson notes the theological contribution to Scottish communitarian political thought:

The same kinds of communitarian principles were generalised in the debates on the constitutional question from 1988 onwards. One of the striking features of these discussions, compared with the 1970s, was the interest in sovereignty and the emerging conclusion that Scottish ideas about legitimate government rested on the principle of popular sovereignty. Again the religious origins are unmistakable, and indeed Church of Scotland theologians in particular were eloquent in their contribution to the debate, modernising the Knoxian idea that the people have the right to overthrow unjust rulers. Sovereignty, they argued, is intrinsically limited. Federalism is not just a way of organising a constitution, but a principle based on human fallibility. Because we have a duty to respect our fellow human beings, governments should seek to share power, not to monopolise it. Once again, similar conclusions were reached by Catholic thinkers, drawing also on the European tradition of subsidiarity, which entered Scottish debates through discussions about the character of the European Union.15

The dynamic behind Scottish constitutional politics in this period was the particular interaction of local, theologically informed communitarian values and institutional practices with globalising movements in support of participatory democracy, accountability and solidarity, against the dominant counter-force of global market systems and consumer values. At what Gregory Baum has called a kairos moment of historic opportunity, when social justice and democratic renewal are real possibilities for a nation, Scotland became a political site of what Roland Robertson has termed ‘glocalisation’,

where the local and the global interacted and intermingled, and created a new democratic political institution and process. By adopting a middle axiom approach, the Church of Scotland was able to respond effectively to this Scottish experience of nationalism as glocalisation.

As the Scottish sociologist of nationalism, David McCrone, has expressed it, addressing the postmodern Scottish political situation: ‘State-based societies become heavily porous. Globalisation carries with it an implication for locality; the global and the local become part of the same dialectic. We enter a world not of standardisation and homogenisation, but of difference and unpredictability . . . a global-local nexus emerges, a process of relocalisation . . .’ The middle axiom of support for the democratic control of Scottish affairs through political autonomy in an increasingly interdependent world allowed the Church of Scotland to be heard and heeded in that local-global nexus of Scottish constitutional politics. Together with its fellow churches in the cross-party and civic Scottish Constitutional Convention in the late 1980s, which developed an agreed scheme for a Scottish Parliament, the Church of Scotland was able to develop a consensual middle axiom approach in a political context where achieving consensus in Scottish civil society, and among the home-rule parties, was widely recognised as critical to the success of the devolution campaign. In other words, even in the highly pluralist and post-Christian Scottish society of the late twentieth century, consensus-building on public issues was clearly possible and therefore a middle axiom approach still viable, relevant and effective.

But note the way in which this middle axiom was developed. It was not done deductively, as a critic like Forrester would think of middle axioms. It was the experience of failed support for devolution in the 1979 referendum that prompted some Scottish Christians to revisit the basis of the Church of Scotland’s support for Scottish self-government. This reflection led them to see the urgent need for the critical retrieval of their own Reformed tradition of theological reflection on power, and

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18 See Forrester, Beliefs, Values and Policies, ch. 2, for this charge that the middle axiom approach moves deductively in one direction from general Christian belief and ethical principle to specific decisions, via such intermediate directives; and Preston, Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century, Appendix 2, and Explorations in Theology 9, ch. 3, for an earlier counter-argument that denies the deductive nature of middle axioms. I write below of revised middle axioms, to stress their interactive rather than deductive nature and operation: i.e. they are formed out of the two-way and mutually influential catalytic interaction of theological belief and ethical principle with concrete political experience and decisions.
its relevance to their particular constitutional dilemmas. What emerged in that Scottish political context was a revised middle axiom that was interactive rather than simply deductive in its operation: with the concrete experience of constitutional politics leading to the retrieved ethical principle and theological tradition of limited sovereignty, which together acted as the catalytic elements in recreating the middle axiom of support for a greater democratic control of Scottish affairs in an explicitly local-global context. Given that this was a middle axiom that was also fiercely debated and finally endorsed in the Church of Scotland’s 1989 General Assembly, after careful consideration in the collaborative processes of policy deliberation and formation in the Assembly’s Church and Nation Committee, and public scrutiny in the media, it can hardly be accused of the deductive and elitist faults that Forrester finds with this method in ecumenical social ethics.\footnote{Forrester, \textit{Beliefs, Values and Policies}, p. 20.}

This Scottish case study of a revised, interactive middle axiom approach, which proved fruitful in a period of national reconstruction in the context of globalisation, does not stand alone in the late twentieth-century political world. When Charles Villa-Vicencio considered appropriate methods for developing a theology of reconstruction in post-apartheid South Africa, linking this activity of local nation-building with the relevance of global human rights, he turned his attention to the potential of middle axioms.\footnote{Charles Villa-Vicencio, \textit{A Theology of Reconstruction: Nation-Building and Human Rights} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).} He offers a nuanced case for their contemporary relevance to a country like South Africa that is worth quoting at some length:

> The immediate task of an ethic of reconstruction involves placing certain values and structures in position to begin the process of social renewal. A neglected ethical device designed to serve this need emerged from the work of J. H. Oldham in 1937, as he faced the social crisis that ultimately engulfed the world in war. Speaking at the Oxford Conference on Life and Work, he referred to the urgent need for the creation of ‘middle axioms’ to facilitate social construction. He saw these axioms as ‘not binding for all time’, but rather as ‘provisional definitions’ of the kind of society required to meet the challenges of the time. John Bennett suggested that they constitute ‘the next steps that our own generation must take’ . . . It is at the same time always important to locate the ‘middle axioms’ of society under the renewing power of the gospel which demands more than a society can deliver at a particular time. To fail to do so could result in a form of civil religion which is sometimes used merely to legitimate the existing social order. Concerned to emphasise the tentative and changing nature of ‘middle axioms’ Oldham saw them to be less rigid than fixed laws or moral codes. They were for him evolving principles. Constantly being reshaped by the eschatological vision of the gospel, middle axioms function as a lure, drawing society beyond values to which it holds at any particular time of its history,
while specifically addressing the challenges of the time. As such they constituted a theological incentive to a society in perpetual growth, while seeking to provide specific content for a specific context.²¹

Villa-Vicencio recognises the force of Forrester’s criticisms of middle axioms, including the difficulty today of establishing the consensus in church and society that they require to be effective, and the weakness of abstract principles compared with the power of the Christian narrative to offer a compelling theological and ethical account of life.²² But for Villa-Vicencio, while recognising that ‘Story, tradition and biblical teaching are important’, they are not sufficient for a theology of reconstruction in a South African context: ‘Ultimately . . . if the church is to share creatively in the reconstruction process it is obliged to translate this heritage into concrete proposals.’²³ For Villa-Vicencio, this means developing middle axioms that are not seen as abstract, deductive principles but as a conceptual and contextual device ‘that integrates the contextual and transcendental demands of the gospel’.²⁴ I agree with his argument at this crucial point: offering theological fragments from the Christian narrative, as advocated by Forrester, is a necessary but not a sufficient step in developing a public theology which can help generate concrete proposals for social reconstruction. The story must be translated into such concrete proposals, with all the risk and guarding of the Christian narrative’s integrity against ideological co-option that this requires. In my view, the Scottish case study of constitutional politics adds weight to this South African analysis in support of an interactive middle axiom approach as one effective way to realise public theology’s constructive contribution to public life in a pluralist society.

In closing, I turn to Robert Schreiter’s reflections about the nature of ‘theology between the global and the local’, in his seminal book for understanding public theology’s twentieth-century legacy and twenty-first-century agenda, The New Catholicity. That new catholicity for Schreiter will be found in the glocal interaction of global theological flows such as twentieth-century liberation theology with the new local political contexts that Christians and others find themselves inhabiting in the twenty-first century. In these new political localities of a global era, such as Scotland or South Africa, Schreiter argues that emancipatory public theologies such as liberation theology must embrace a repertoire of approaches to public engagement, from their founding stances of resistance, denunciation and critique to more recent challenges to embrace advocacy and reconstruction. And, Schreiter concludes, if a theology of reconstruction is the appropriate response in a local context, then two theological tasks become paramount — the

²¹ Ibid., pp. 9–10.
²² Ibid., pp. 280–83.
²³ Ibid., p. 283.
²⁴ Ibid., p. 281.
development of appropriate middle axioms and the adoption of an interdisciplinary way of working. Schreiter defines such middle axioms as ‘provisional definitions of the human and of a just society to which the message of the Gospel can contribute’. And he envisages such middle axioms being found ‘in the values of community and solidarity present in civil society’.25 The Scottish political case study outlined above, in which the Church of Scotland contributed its theologically grounded communitarian political principles and middle axiom of support for democratic renewal through a Scottish Parliament, to a wider movement in Scottish civil society for constitutional change, is a late-twentieth-century example of the middle axiom approach which Robert Schreiter is commending for public theology in the twenty-first century. But middle axioms for a glocal era can only offer provisional definitions of the human and of the just society, as he reminds us.

The Scottish Christians who advocated such a middle axiom of support for constitutional change in Scotland knew this very well, as they set it within the dual horizons of an emerging local-global world and the coming of God’s reign over all things:

We do not identify any ‘programme’ with the coming of God’s kingdom, and recognise the provisional nature of all attempts to speak and act for good in human society. Yet in [these constitutional proposals] we see a concern for what will bring Scotland peace in the fuller biblical sense of justice and right relationships; and we recognise a timely opportunity to work out proposals which will allow the people and not any one party to decide Scotland’s future. Subject to the claim of Christ over all life, we welcome this claim of right for Scotland, with its positive implications for our partnership with other nations in Britain and Europe.26

It is this meeting of the provisional and the possible within the eschatological horizon of an authentic Christian public praxis that makes the middle axiom method so appropriate in our own time, as a way of offering provisional and contextual directives for concrete action in situations of societal reconstruction.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I think these local case studies of nation-building in Scotland and South Africa, and this theological interpretation of globalisation as the meeting of the local and the global, all make a new case for the continuing relevance of the middle axiom method in Christian social ethics in the twenty-first century. I hope Ronald Preston would be pleased but not surprised.

Abstract

Within Christian social ethics different conceptions of market economy are related to different theories of justice. In this article the understanding of justice in the economic ethics of Ronald Preston will be analysed. Here will also be discussed some conceptions of justice which are developed within a Swedish research project on ethics and economics. Justice is often treated in terms of equal distribution, but there are different ideas about what objects can be distributed equally.

As a social ethicist, Ronald Preston was impressive with his great insights both in theology and economics. His conviction was that social theology should learn from and relate to economic research and theory. In the very beginning of his book on *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism*, Ronald Preston writes:

> All my adult life, one of my main concerns has been that Christian social theology should deal more effectively with the economic problems which loom large in human life and are so important for human well-being. A key aim of this book is to make a reasoned plea for a greater Christian competence in tackling these issues. This means bringing the basic themes of Christian theology alongside a competent analysis of the economic issues of our day and letting the one illuminate the other in a reciprocal relationship.¹

At Uppsala University we are a team of researchers in theology, philosophy and economics, who share this interest in the relationship


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between ethics and economics. During five years, we have been working with a research project on 'Ethical Reflection in Economic Theory and Practice'. One purpose is to uncover and clarify the ethical values and principles which are implied within neoclassical economic theory. Another purpose is to study those moral norms and values which are involved in economic practice. A basic assumption within the project is that a mutual learning process is fruitful for both economic and ethical discourses.\(^2\)

In this article my focus will be on the relationship between Christian social ethics and economics. My intention is to discuss some important ideas in the economic ethics of Ronald Preston, and to present some findings of our research project in Uppsala. Three questions will be dealt with: (1) How should market economy be evaluated in Christian social ethics? (2) How should Christian social ethics evaluate the ethical assumptions in mainstream economic theory? (3) If justice is a basic normative criterion in economic ethics, what is the meaning of a just distribution?

**Market Economy in Christian Ethics**

One common interest for economics and Christian social ethics is an analysis and evaluation of market economies. The analysis and theory of the market is of course of crucial importance within mainstream economic theory. However, Christian social ethicists have also been involved in a critical evaluation of market economies from different perspectives. In his book *Christianity and the Market*, John Atherton has given a clarifying analysis of different Christian responses to market economies. His thesis is that they differ both in theological method and in their understanding of economic research and theory.\(^3\)

Within Christian social ethics we can find at least four different conceptions on market economy and the organisation of the economic system. It is quite obvious that these positions differ in the way they relate to economic theory and empirical economic research. However, my thesis is that they also differ in ethical theory and in their understanding of reason and revelation as sources to moral insight. These positions are combined with quite different conceptions of justice. They are also combined with different positions concerning the particular Christian contribution to social ethics.

The first position is a *Christian social conservatism*. According to this position Christian ethics should accept a capitalist system with market economy and private ownership of the means of production. This system is regarded to be a means to promote individual freedom

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and responsibility, justice and satisfaction of human needs. However, pure capitalism is too individualistic a system. It does not give sufficient scope for the individual’s responsibility for the common good. Therefore it has to be revised in such a way that the capital owners respect the dignity of the workers. A market economy should be accepted, but the market should not be completely free and unregulated. The state has a responsibility to intervene in order to promote justice and the common good.4

A Christian social conservatism is combined with a particular conception of justice. A just distribution of the good ought to take into account that all human beings have the same value, but it should also take into account the differences between human beings. In fact humans differ in kind and function, and this difference is relevant for the distribution of the good. This means that a just distribution of power and welfare is not an equal distribution. There should be a hierarchical distribution of power and responsibility within the state and the economic order.5

This conception of justice is combined with a social ethical theory which is based on the Christian doctrine of creation. God’s will is encountered in the divine orders of creation, which act as a criterion for a right political act. The political and economic orders are given by God in creation, and God’s will is that there should be a hierarchical distribution of welfare and power within these orders. The Christian ideal of love, which is clarified through the revelation in Christ, is not at all relevant within social ethics.6

The second position is a Christian neoliberalism. This is a defence of a capitalist society with a pure market economy and a private ownership of the means of production. According to this position the state should have a very limited role in the economic sphere. State intervention and extension of political power is regarded to be a threat against individual freedom and economic efficiency. An unregulated market economy promotes increased economic growth and welfare, and thereby it will also make possible economic justice.7

A Christian neoliberalism is combined with the idea that justice is an equal distribution of individual liberty and autonomy. As an image of God, every human being is regarded to have a dignity,

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which is respected by promoting his or her freedom and creativity. Humans have equal rights to liberty and autonomy, and these rights are respected if the economic market is independent of the state and the political power.\(^8\)

This conception of justice is combined with a theory of natural law. Every human being has an opportunity to understand what is right, independent of the Revelation in Christ. This means that there is no particular Christian contribution to economic ethics. The Christian ideal of love, which is clarified in the stories about Jesus Christ, is not relevant in our evaluation of the market economy.\(^9\)

The third position is a Christian socialism. Political and liberation theologians argue in favour of a democratic socialism, that is, a society with political and economic democracy. They critique a capitalist society, with a pure market economy and no common ownership of the means of production. Such a capitalist society is seen to imply an unjust distribution of social welfare. The global market economy promotes economic growth in industrial countries and poverty in developing countries. Thereby, it makes possible global injustice.\(^10\)

Christian socialists understand justice in a different way than Christian conservatists and neoliberals. Justice is not understood as a hierarchical order, and it is not only regarded to be an equal distribution of liberty. In liberation theology, justice is considered to be a liberation from oppression. Those who are oppressed in the present society can best understand what justice implies. From their perspective, justice is seen as a radical change of social institutions which makes possible an equal distribution of welfare and power.

This conception of justice is related to a social ethical theory, which is based on Christology and eschatology. The stories about Christ and the vision of the future Kingdom of God is combined with an egalitarian ideal. This means that the Christian ideal of love is regarded to be relevant also for social ethics. It is interpreted as an egalitarian ideal, according to which justice is an equal distribution of all social values and a liberation from all kinds of oppression.\(^11\)

The fourth position is a Christian social liberalism. According to this position, we should strive for neither a laissez-faire capitalism, nor a socialist society. The market economy is necessary in order to generate economic growth and to allocate scarce resources. However, the state has also got an economic responsibility, in order to promote social


welfare and justice. A political regulation of the market is desirable, as a means to promote democratic participation in economic decisions.\textsuperscript{12}

This position is related to a liberal and egalitarian conception of justice. We should strive for an equal distribution of welfare and power, or at least equal opportunities to attain social values. Justice is here regarded to be an expression of the Christian ideal of love, which is clarified in the life and teaching of Jesus. However, justice is only an approximation to love, which means that the Christian ideal should be modified according to what is possible to attain in the political and economic spheres.\textsuperscript{13}

Much more can be said about these four conceptions on market economy within Christian social ethics. However, my thesis in this article is that they are combined with different theories of justice. A Christian social conservatism is combined with a non-egalitarian position, which is related to a social ethical theory based on the doctrine of creation. The alternative positions are combined with egalitarian conceptions of justice, but they differ in their opinion concerning what should be distributed equally. A Christian neoliberalism maintains that liberty should be equally distributed, while Christian socialism and social liberalism argue that justice is an equal distribution of welfare and power. A Christian social ethics based on natural law and the doctrine of Creation is combined with an acceptance of market economies. The criticism of market economy seems to be sharper when the conception of justice is related to eschatology and the Christian ideal of love.

\textit{Ronald Preston on Economic Ethics}

Ronald Preston is one of those Christian social ethicists who have made a thorough analysis and evaluation of market economy. His position is what I have called a Christian social liberalism. As Normunds Kamergrauzis has shown in his dissertation, Ronald Preston objects to both an affirmative response and a rejective response to market economy. Instead he argues in favour of a regulated market economy, which promotes both the freedom of the individual and social justice. He accepts market economy as an ideal, but at the same time the state has a responsibility to promote a just distribution of income and wealth.\textsuperscript{14}

According to Preston, markets are a highly efficient way of getting economic decisions made in accordance with the freedom of choice

expressed by consumers. Market economy is the ideal way of solving the problem of choosing between relatively scarce resources. On the other hand, left to themselves market economies lead to great inequalities of income and wealth. These inequalities distort the market by drawing the relatively scarce resources to what the wealthy want and away from the necessities of the poor.\textsuperscript{15}

In his analysis of the ambiguities of capitalism, Ronald Preston argues that the only alternatives are not a free market economy and a central, planned economy. Instead, his thesis is that we can learn from both the model of a social market economy in Western Europe and the model of a democratic socialist economy. These are models which seek to promote not only equality and social justice, but also liberty and political democracy.\textsuperscript{16}

Ronald Preston delivers a critique of what I have called a Christian neoliberalism. A \textit{laissez-faire} market economy leads to social injustice and a treatment of humans as things, not as human persons. Therefore it is necessary to combine market economy with a firm framework to prevent abuses and ensure a proper status for each citizen. This will involve (a) harnessing self-interest to the common good, (b) providing a strong welfare state, (c) ensuring that private centres of economic power do not become more powerful than the government, and (d) taking participation in decision-making seriously.\textsuperscript{17}

At the same time Ronald Preston delivers a critique of what I have called a Christian socialism and a socialist planned economy. He writes:

The conclusion of this discussion appears to be that the pure theory of \textit{laisser-faire} is indeed an un-Christian view of human relations, because it treats persons as things. Nevertheless, the market is a creative human invention, superior to any alternative economic system in terms of life-expectancy and positive economic freedom for humans.\textsuperscript{18}

This evaluation of market economy is related to a social ethical theory where justice is a basic normative criterion. According to Ronald Preston, a radical understanding of love, \textit{agape}, is the fundamental value in Christian ethics. This understanding of love corresponds to an egalitarian conception of justice. Love and justice must be distinguished from one another, but they are not opposites. Preston argues that they are closely related. He writes:

There can be no love without justice; love can never require less than justice, it can never make ‘acts of charity’ a substitute for justice. . . . On the other hand there is no justice without an element of love, because justice involves affirming other persons in their otherness and not

\textsuperscript{15} Preston, \textit{Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism}, pp. 21f., 28, 74.
\textsuperscript{17} Preston, \textit{Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism}, p. 65.
\textsuperscript{18} Preston, \textit{Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism}, p. 46.
merely because of their function. So love is the principle of justice, and justice both prepares for love and partially expresses it.\(^\text{19}\)

This understanding of justice as an expression of love means that Ronald Preston takes an egalitarian position. Justice can be interpreted as a principle of equality, which demands that we should strive for an equal distribution of such values as freedom and fellowship.\(^\text{20}\)

According to Preston, justice involves giving every human person his or her due (\textit{suum cuique}), and this means not only a distribution according to existing rights and according to merits. The best reflection of the Christian ideal of love is the view that justice means a distribution according to need, which corresponds to a model of society which stresses altruistic and collaborative relationships between citizens.\(^\text{21}\)

The economic ethics of Ronald Preston is based upon a particular conception of reason and revelation as sources to moral insight. The sources of Christian ethics are not only the Bible and Christian doctrinal tradition, but also human experience and moral reasoning in a contemporary context. An adequate Christian ethical model must be rooted in the Bible and the Christian tradition, but it must also be related to human experience, empirical knowledge and philosophical arguments. This means that Christian ethics is based upon both the doctrine of creation and the doctrines of Christology and eschatology.\(^\text{22}\)

Within this model for economic ethics it is important to learn from economic research and theory. Christian social ethics should always relate to empirical knowledge, and economic ethics presupposes a competent economic analysis. Economic research can give an understanding of different economic policies and their consequences, and economic theory is necessary for an adequate evaluation of market economy. One of Ronald Preston’s objections against a Christian socialism is that it is too uncritical about Marxism, which according to him is not adequate as an economic model and theory.\(^\text{23}\)

**Ethics in Economic Theory**

We have seen that different conceptions of market economy in Christian social ethics are combined with different theories of justice. We have also seen that justice is a basic normative criterion in the economic


\(^\text{20}\) Kamergrauzis, op. cit., pp. 104ff., 177.


ethics of Ronald Preston. In order to make an evaluation of market economies, it is not enough to elaborate a social ethical theory. As Ronald Preston has shown, it is also necessary to learn from economic theory and research. However, a problem might be that economic theory is not free from values and normative assumptions. Therefore, an important question is if the ethical assumptions of economic theory are possible to accept if you regard justice to be a basic normative principle in economic ethics.

A main problem within our research project on ‘Ethical Reflection in Economic Theory and Practice’ has to do with ethical considerations which are assumed in mainstream economic theory. What are the ethical assumptions which are implied in neoclassical economic theory? Several economists would deny that there are any ethical assumptions in economic research and theory. Milton Friedman, the main representative of the Chicago school, describes his field as ‘positive economics’, which is an objective science in the sense that it does not presuppose any moral values and norms. According to him, economics describes what is the case, not what ought to be the case. Therefore, it is an objective science in precisely the same sense as any of the physical sciences.24

However, the position that economic theory does not imply any ethical assumptions seems to be difficult to defend. Neoclassical economics is often involved in a study of individual markets and a study of individual decisions at the economic market. Models of consumer choice and the behaviour of producers are developed, in which we are regarded to be rational individuals, seeking to promote our own preference satisfaction. In these models are often presupposed some moral norms and some ideas on what is good or valuable.25

In his doctoral dissertation, the philosopher Gert Helgesson, who is a researcher within our project on ethics and economics, has made a careful analysis of explicit and implicit values and norms in neoclassical economic theory. His focus is on two central concepts in neoclassical microeconomics, namely stability and efficiency. In mainstream economics, an economy is typically regarded to be efficient if it is impossible to make someone better off without making someone else worse off. This means that efficiency concerns welfare, and welfare is most often understood in terms of preferences. According to this preference interpretation of welfare, you are better off with outcome A than with outcome B if you prefer A to B. There is a necessary connection between preference satisfaction and welfare.26

Within mainstream economics is often assumed that all kinds of preferences count, which means that there are no irrelevant kinds of preferences. It is not necessary that the preferences are well-informed, considered, and related to a moral point of view. However, there are some limitations. Only those preferences which are expressed by individuals are relevant. Furthermore, only those preferences which are expressed on a kind of market should be considered. All preferences are treated on the same level and are given the same importance, but present preferences are given more weight than future preferences. A basic assumption is of course that more is better than less, that is, that more preference satisfaction is desirable.27

This understanding of efficiency in neoclassical economics presupposes assumptions on what is good or valuable. There seems to be similarities between these assumptions and a kind of preference utilitarianism. A decision on a market is better than another decision, if the consequences are more preference satisfaction for the individual. We should try to find the efficient solution in actual or hypothetical choices on the market, and efficiency is most often interpreted as Pareto optimality. This criterion for economic efficiency is described by Amartya Sen in the following way:

A social state is described as Pareto optimal if and only if no-one’s utility can be raised without reducing the utility of someone else. This is a very limited kind of success, and in itself may or may not guarantee much. A state can be Pareto optimal with some people in extreme misery and others rolling in luxury, so long as the miserable cannot be made better off without cutting into the luxury of the rich.28

According to the Pareto principle, an alternative A is better than another alternative B, if A is better than B for at least one individual, and A is at least as good as B for all individuals.29 This principle is, according to most economists, rather uncontroversial. No one would dispute that we exclude an alternative, if there is another alternative that is better for some and not worse for anyone. However, the controversial issue is what is regarded to be better for an individual. Roland Granqvist, who is an economist and a researcher within our project, has shown that there are two different interpretations of the Pareto principle in economic tradition. One is the welfare interpretation, according to


which an alternative is better for an individual if it promotes his or her welfare. Another is the *choice* interpretation, according to which an alternative is better for an individual if he or she strictly prefers this alternative. The distinction between these two interpretations is not always made in the economic literature, since social welfare is often understood in terms of preference satisfaction.  

In traditional welfare economics the Pareto principle was obviously related to classical utilitarianism, according to which pleasure or welfare is the only intrinsic value. Amartya Sen describes this traditional utilitarianism as a combination of three requirements. One is *welfarism*, requiring that the goodness of a state of affairs be a function only of the utility information regarding that state. The second requirement is *sum-ranking*, requiring that utility information regarding any state be assessed by looking only at the sum-total of all utilities in that state. The third requirement is *consequentialism*, according to which every choice of actions or institutions should be ultimately determined by the goodness of the consequent states of affairs. Utility is here understood in terms of welfare.

Today, many economists would argue in favour of the *choice* interpretation of the Pareto principle. This is an interpretation which is related to a kind of preference utilitarianism, which maintains that an alternative $x$ is better than another alternative $y$, if the individual person prefers $x$ before $y$. According to this position, all preferences which are expressed by an individual person should be taken into account. The preference of an individual is simply what the individual would choose, if he or she would have to make a choice between two alternatives. However, the difference between the two interpretations is sometimes confused, since many economists seem to presuppose that we most often prefer those alternatives which promote our utility or welfare.

This means that there are ethical assumptions in neoclassical economic theory. The model of human behaviour on the market, as well as the Pareto principle, is related to a kind of utilitarianism. Welfare economics has been related to a classical utilitarianism, according to which welfare or pleasure is the intrinsic value. More important today is a kind of preference utilitarianism, according to which we should choose those alternatives which have the best outcome in terms of preference satisfaction.

How should we evaluate the ethical assumptions in mainstream economic theory? Are they possible to accept if we regard justice to be a main criterion in economic ethics? A preference utilitarianism can be criticised in many ways. One objection is that intrinsic values do not always coincide with our preferences. It is not even possible to

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defend the idea that there is a necessary connection between preference satisfaction and welfare. As Gert Helgesson has shown in his study, there are preferences the satisfaction of which does not increase welfare. It is also quite obvious that not only preference satisfaction is relevant to a person’s welfare.\(^{33}\)

Another objection is that mainstream economic theory does not pay attention to the problem of distribution of social values. Preference utilitarianism is typically not combined with any principle of justice, and justice is not a theme within mainstream economics. Competitive market theory is not troubled by the income distribution which is the result of decisions at the economic market. This might be seen as a problem from a moral point of view.\(^{34}\) A similar problem is connected with the Pareto principle as a criterion of efficiency. As Amartya Sen maintains, a state can be Pareto optimal even if some persons live in extreme misery and others are rolling in luxury. Pareto optimality deals exclusively with efficiency in the space of utilities, paying no attention to the distribution of social values.\(^{35}\)

The kind of utilitarianism, which is often implicit in neoclassical economic theory, should in my opinion be supplemented by a theory of justice. We should not ignore the consequences when we evaluate our choices on the economic market, but a pure consequentialism is not enough. It is also necessary to take into consideration the issue concerning distribution of the good. Therefore, consequentialism should be supplemented by a theory of justice. According to such a theory it would be possible to maintain that a change from one allocation to another, where the extremely well off are even better off in the new situation while everyone else is as well off as before, is a change for the worse since the inequality increases.\(^{36}\)

**Justice as Equal Distribution**

In this article so far, I have defended two ideas. The first one is that different conceptions of market economy in Christian social ethics are combined with different theories of justice. In Christian social ethics justice is regarded to be a basic normative criterion, but different opinions on what should be distributed equally are related to different evaluations of market economies. The second thesis is that justice is a normative criterion which is relevant also for a critical evaluation of


ethical assumptions in mainstream economic theory. In neoclassical economic theory a kind of preference utilitarianism is often implicit, which should be supplemented by a theory of justice.

If we agree that justice is a criterion for a critical evaluation of both market economy and mainstream economic theory, we need to reflect on what theory of justice might be relevant within Christian economic ethics. In recent political philosophy several different theories of justice have been elaborated. One disagreement concerns the problem of justification of principles of justice. The contract theory, proposed by John Rawls, has been criticised by several philosophers such as Alasdair MacIntyre and Michael Walzer. This disagreement between liberal and communitarianism is mainly a disagreement between ethical universalism and ethical contextualism on an epistemological level.

However, there is also a disagreement concerning the meaning of justice. As Amartya Sen has shown in his book *Inequality Reexamined*, most political philosophers seem to be egalitarians, in the sense that they demand equality of something. However, they have different conceptions of equality. The debate in recent political philosophy deals primarily with the question ‘Equality of what?’ Most philosophers agree that justice is an equal distribution, but they have different opinions concerning what objects should be equally distributed. There are a lot of different proposals, such as freedom, power, welfare, opportunities for welfare, resources, and capabilities.37

Sven Ove Hansson, who is a philosopher and researcher in our project on ethics and economics, has developed this thesis and given a most interesting analysis of different forms of egalitarianism. He uses value-theoretical tools to characterise the difference between egalitarians and non-egalitarians. His thesis is that egalitarians differ from proponents of non-egalitarian justice, not in advocating equal distributions, but in the choice of objects for equal distributions. Non-egalitarians tend to advocate equal opportunities, while egalitarians promote equal shares of social resources. Hanson also shows that egalitarians differ among themselves in their view of what is valuable and in their degree of paternalism.38

This is a discussion which is quite similar to the discourse on justice within Christian social ethics. As we have seen, different conceptions of market economy are related to different kinds of egalitarianism. However, theologians also disagree in their choice of objects for equal distribution. Some of them propose freedom, while others propose welfare and power. Some theologians would propose an equal

distribution of opportunities for welfare, which can be regarded to be a non-egalitarian position.

This means that Christian social ethicists who would like to make an evaluation of market economy and economic theory need to elaborate a precise theory of justice. One main issue is whether we should be egalitarians or non-egalitarians. In Christian tradition the idea that all humans are created in the image of God gives a strong support in favour of an egalitarian position. Another issue is what kind of egalitarianism we should propose. This is mainly an issue concerning what objects should be equally distributed. Should these objects be welfare, power, liberty, money, education, or maybe opportunities to social resources?

An interesting answer to this question is given by the feminist philosopher Martha Nussbaum in her book *Women and Human Development*. In her defence of universal values her focus is on human capabilities, that is, what people are actually able to do and to be. Justice is here understood as an equal distribution of some capabilities for truly human functioning. According to Nussbaum, there are some central capabilities which should be secured to each and every person. She also presents a list of the capabilities, which includes life, bodily health, bodily integrity, emotions, practical reason, and affiliation.

The capabilities approach of Martha Nussbaum gives a most fruitful understanding of justice. This is an Aristotelian approach, which entails a deeper understanding of intrinsic values than preference utilitarianism. The idea that capabilities are social goals, which should be distributed equally, presuppose that there are some universal values. At the same time, this ethical universalism seems to be a limitation of Nussbaum’s approach. Even if we have some common functional capabilities, our understanding of justice seems to be influenced by our different social positions and experiences. Therefore, a more contextualistic approach to justice might be appropriate.

The idea that our understanding of justice is dependent of our social position is elaborated in both liberation theology and Christian feminist ethics. Justice in liberation theology and feminist ethics is often understood as liberation from oppression. This means that persons who have experiences of oppression — women, blacks, persons suffering from poverty and exploitation — have a deep understanding of what justice implies. From the perspective of the oppressed we can learn a lot about the meaning of economic justice.

The American ethicist Karen Lebacqz has defended this idea that justice is a liberation from oppression. In order to understand what

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justice means, we have to understand the meaning of oppression in its various forms: the subordination of women, the marginalisation of blacks, lack of political participation, and economic inequality. These different forms of injustice feed each other, and the result is a dehumanisation of people.\(^{41}\)

If justice is liberation from oppression, we have to take the perspectives of the oppressed in order to understand what justice means. Justice is to correct injustices, which means that an adequate conception of justice should be based upon the stories of persons who are oppressed. Karen Lebacqz writes:

No option for the poor is a genuine option for the poor unless it includes the epistemological privilege of the poor. Social programs designed for the poor must be judged and assessed from the perspective of the poor. Similarly, they must be designed \textit{by} as well as \textit{for} the poor. Ironically, then, oppressors may have to take responsibility by stepping aside as power is taken by the oppressed.\(^{42}\)

Iris Marion Young is a political philosopher who has developed this perspective in a most interesting way. In her book \textit{Justice and the Politics of Difference}, she maintains that justice refers not only to a distribution of social goods, but also to the institutional conditions necessary for the development of individual capacities and collective cooperation. According to Young, there are two values that constitute the good life. One is self-development, that is, developing and exercising one’s capacities. The other one is self-determination, that is, participating in determining one’s action. Justice is the institutional conditions necessary to realise these two values.\(^{43}\)

This means that justice means a liberation from two forms of disabling constraints, oppression and domination. According to Young, domination consists of institutional conditions which inhibit or prevent people from participation in determining their actions or the conditions of their actions. Oppression consists of systematic institutional processes, which prevent people from developing their capabilities and expressing their needs. Iris Marion Young is writing about five faces of oppression, which describe what injustice means. They are exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and systematic violence.\(^{44}\)

This is a conception of justice which seems to be fruitful also within Christian social ethics. It takes seriously the idea that the meaning of justice has to be understood from the perspectives of those who are

oppressed. Justice as liberation from dominion and oppression is a normative criterion both for an evaluation of market economies and mainstream economic theory. It is also fruitful for an evaluation of the international global market economy. The globalisation processes today seem to be associated not only with accelerating inequalities but also exploitation, powerlessness and marginalisation.45

**Conclusion**

In this article I have shown that different conceptions on market economy in Christian social ethics are combined with different theories of justice. This is true also in the social ethics of Ronald Preston. According to him, justice is a basic normative criterion in economic ethics, but Christian social theology must also learn from economic theory and research in order to make an adequate evaluation of market economy.

However, there are ethical assumptions in mainstream economic theory. One thesis in this article has been that Christian economic ethics should make a critical evaluation of these assumptions. In neoclassical economic theory a kind of preference utilitarianism is often implicit, which should be supplemented by a theory of justice. This means that justice is a normative criterion which is relevant for a critical evaluation of both market economy and mainstream economic theory.

In this article I have also discussed the meaning of justice as a normative criterion in economic ethics. Justice can be regarded to be an equal distribution, but there are different opinions concerning what objects should be equally distributed. One interesting theory is that justice is an equal distribution of some capabilities for truly human functioning. However, justice refers not only to a distribution of social goods, but also to the institutional conditions necessary for the development of individual capacities and collective cooperation. This means that justice is a liberation from oppression and domination.

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Abstract

In the light of the possibilities and the limitations of theological realism as exemplified by the contribution of Ronald Preston, and given an increasingly global context and pluralist agenda, an argument is developed that proceeds to clarify and promote the contribution of Christian ethics to public debate and policy. It is proposed that Christian ethics has a particular contribution to make to contemporary debate, in clarifying the procedure and content of moral decision-making. The argument shows how different conceptions of the relationship between ethics and a religious, in this case specifically Christian, system of belief influence both the assessment of human moral possibilities and the scope for engagement beyond the confines of one’s own social context and tradition. More importantly, it is then argued that such engagement is to be conducted in dialogue and solidarity with those who are excluded from participation in the interpretation of justice and the distribution of power.

Ronald Preston’s lifelong contribution to interpreting economics and politics from a Christian perspective reflects the development of Christian ethics in interaction with a changing context, interprets it, and contributes to its further shaping. Preston has also related Christian ethics to moral philosophy and social science, in order to engage with the ambiguities of the modern world. His competence and ambition in dealing with social ethics in the context of an interaction between a Christian view of life and a secular analysis arose out of his

1 For an explicit enquiry into Preston’s theology and ethics see Normunds Kamergrauzis, The Persistence of Christian Realism: A Study of the Social Ethics of Ronald H. Preston (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2001). This article summarises the conclusions of my research.

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early training in economics, and the challenges set by the theological realism of Reinhold Niebuhr, John Bennett and William Temple. Preston’s legacy to the development of Christian ethics in the twentieth century also includes a theological method for designing a strategy for churches to provide realistic guidance on Christian engagement with the public sphere. In this sense, realism implies engaging with the public domain on the basis of knowledge derived from practical experience, and doing so in ways that have a genuine likelihood of proving effective. The question is whether or not this sort of realism is sustainable. It is in the light of Preston’s contribution, and in interaction with some of the major criticisms of his thinking, that I shall elaborate a constructive proposal for a basis for Christian ethics today.

The Doctrine of Trinity for Ethical Reflection

Let me begin with the presupposition, increasingly recognised in theological discourse, that an authentic interpretation of Christian ethics needs to be based on the full spectrum of the doctrine of Trinity, since God himself is, according to Christian belief, trinitarian. So understood, the doctrines of Creation, Christology and eschatology, taken together, have profound implications for the content of ethical theory.

From Preston’s perspective, the full spectrum of the doctrine of Trinity, in terms of creator and enabler God, is of core significance for ethical reflection. But even if one agrees with Preston that all human beings therefore have a given capacity for insight into what is morally good and right, reservations arise in relation to the assessment of the human possibility for universal moral discourse, since human experience suggests that human ethical insights are intimately linked to the narrative framework in which they are developed. From this standpoint, and given the increasing plurality of the contemporary context, it is no longer tenable that any widely held narrative about what is a good human life is universally accessible. Preston’s belief in the human possibility of a broad moral consensus is no longer convincing when one considers the actual particularities of context, tradition and location, and recognises that ethical insights are constructed from such particular social and cultural contexts and traditions.

Christian ethics is developed within the particularity of Christian faith, and therefore it is the revelation in Christ from which, among other aspects of Christian belief, Christian ethics takes its content. The doctrines of Christology and eschatology are unique bases for a Christian system of belief, and they form distinctive sources for ethical reflection within the Christian tradition. In addressing this, Preston maintains that Christian ethics has its distinctive starting point in the life and ministry of Jesus Christ, but then, he emphasises, the Christian contribution to morality becomes a further development
and deepening of ethical insights already available within general human moral enquiry about what is good and right. Preston’s approach, however, presupposes too readily that persons belonging to different life and faith traditions could encounter those ethical insights which derive from a Christian view of life without sharing Christian faith itself. It therefore does not give a satisfactory account of the relationship between human moral enquiry and Christian ethics. Yet, the principal question in this regard appears to be whether or not belief in God makes a difference to ethical reflection. If it does, then what precisely is this difference? Tackling this question not only illuminates the potential contribution of Christian ethics to morality, but also demarks a line about how far it is possible or desirable to cooperate with those who do not share a Christian view of life.

One should not take for granted that Christian ethics must differ fundamentally in some respects from common human moral enquiry. This is highlighted in Knud E. Lögstrup’s ethics, according to which what is good for human beings is made manifest in a life of love, trust, care, fidelity, mutuality and spontaneity; and the realisation of these is the universal ethical commitment. For Lögstrup these values are already given in creation and their realisation is what he sees as an ethical demand. From this perspective, it is human experience and considerations that are of importance for ethical insight about what is right and good; not simply the revelation of Christ.

Lögstrup offers an interesting account of the relationship between human moral enquiry and Christian ethics, albeit an unsatisfactory one for an authentic interpretation of Christian ethics. If Christian ethics is to be authentic to a Christian system of belief, it must give consideration to the contributions of Christology and eschatology to ethical reflection, which Lögstrup’s approach, in its reduction of Christian ethics to common human moral enquiry, does not do. In short, if Christology and eschatology do not contribute to ethical reflection within a Christian tradition, then it is misleading to talk about ‘Christian’ ethics.

A contrasting approach takes the view that Christian ethics should be based entirely on revelation in Christ. However, so interpreted, Christian ethics becomes so much at variance with common human moral enquiry that it does not have sufficient resource within itself to engage with the issue of stewardship of creation, which is wider than the world of one’s own faith community. Nonetheless, such a revelation-based viewpoint is adopted by Karl Barth and it does have relevance to contemporary debate. According to Barth, it is only through revelation in Christ that human beings can receive ethical insight about what is right and good. From this perspective, common human experience and considerations do not contribute any insights

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about what is good for human beings. So understood, the content of Christian ethics is fundamentally different from the content of common human moral enquiry and there might be no point at which they overlap.\(^3\)

If, as Michael Ramsey points out, the contribution of Barth was not initially decisive for ethical reflection in England, and at the time very few Anglicans were impressed by it, it is important to mention the relevance of the position for Anglicanism today.\(^4\) Michael Banner, among others, has adopted the Barthian approach to ethics within the contemporary Anglican ethical scene.\(^5\) When Banner deals with a particular moral issue his position appears more flexible and nuanced than Barth’s own, yet, on the question of the difference between common human moral enquiry and Christian ethics, he simply adopts Barth’s presuppositions without any criticism of them.\(^6\) Banner stands for a dogmatic ethics which is designed to be suspicious of any insights that derive from human experience and consideration. According to Banner, quoting Barth, ‘the general conception of ethics coincides exactly with the conception of sin’, where human beings themselves seem to be the problem. Banner, quoting Barth again, writes:

Theological ethics issues no such invitation. If dogmatics, if the doctrine of God, is ethics, this means necessarily and decisively that it is the attestation of that divine ethics, the attestation of the good of the command issued to Jesus Christ and fulfilled by Him.\(^7\)

If an adequate Christian ethics cannot be based on the presupposition that creation itself gives an entire vision of what a good life consists of and where creation itself becomes the ultimate source of authority for ethical reflection, then serious problems also confront the opposite position that claims that Christian ethics should be based entirely upon the revelation of Christ. Views about the relationship between common human moral enquiry and Christian ethics differ according to what role is assigned to human experience and considerations as well as

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\(^5\) Michael Banner, *Christian Ethics and Contemporary Moral Problems* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). According to Hauerwas, whose words are printed on the cover, ‘Michael Banner is one of the brightest and most interesting young people doing ethics on the scene today. He is a first-rate theologian who promises to be a new and longstanding voice not only in England but in America. This is a good book and one that I believe will be widely read.’

\(^6\) It is interesting to mention that Banner also rigidly supports Barth’s criticism of Brunner’s approach to ethics. Brunner argues for revelation-based individual ethics, and Creation-based social ethics, by which the Orders of Creation reveal structures for human life. Cf. Michael Banner, op. cit., pp. 281ff.

\(^7\) Michael Banner, op. cit., p. 6; original italics.
to revelation in Christ. Differences also exist about what aspects of
a Christian system of belief are the bases for ethics, and how these
aspects are related to one another.

From the argument that an authentic and reasonable Christian
ethical theory should be based on all three aspects of a Christian
system of belief, it is unsatisfactory if the basis of Christian ethics
is just the doctrine of Creation or just the doctrine of Christology
or eschatology. But, if ethics is indeed based on all three aspects of
a Christian system of belief, one reaches a different position about
the variance in content between common human moral enquiry and
Christian ethics.

The doctrine of Creation lays emphasis on those human experiences
and considerations that belong to common human moral enquiry. Yet,
as Carl-Henric Grenholm writes:

These experiences and considerations are not ‘common’ in the sense
that they are generally conceived and encountered in all human
beings. Among human beings who belong to different traditions and
cultural contexts, there are differences both as regards experiences and
fundamental moral views. However, these experiences and reflections
are ‘common’ in the sense that they are independent of a philosophy
of life.  

This presupposition gives for ethics a broad human basis, upon which
rational arguments can be constructed about ethics in relation to other
discourse. Yet, Preston’s supposition that ‘Christians should believe
that a broad basic moral consensus is realisable among humans, and
that even adumbrations of the theological virtues of faith, hope and
love can be discerned among them and should be looked for’ does
not grant a sufficient recognition of the plural nature of the moral
world and of the particularity of the Christian tradition. The reason
for this is that revelation makes a difference to the content of ethics
and, so understood, it contributes to morality an interpretation of
the disclosure of God’s love as the fundamental value for Christian
ethics, in the way that it involves ethical implications deriving from
and dependent upon a Christian view of life. The issue that remains is
not that human moral enquiry does not encounter certain views about
faith, hope and love, but is, rather, that clarification is necessary about
faith in whom, hope for what, and what sort of love is at stake. Yet, the
answers to these questions that one finds reflected from a Christian
view of life, dependent on a Christian faith, are not the same as the
answers to the same questions when they are addressed from common
human moral enquiry not deriving from a religious source.

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So understood, from a trinitarian and dialogical understanding of God, and therefore exemplified in the dialogical importance of Creation, Christology and eschatology for ethics, there come both motivation for dialogue as a form of human coexistence and the transcedent dimension of human moral achievement that reflects the difference that belief in God makes for ethical reflection. Both Christology and eschatology provide critical tools for the appraisal of moral achievement in history. Yet, the Christian encounter with the public sphere and wider social realities is supposed not only to interpret a changing context but also to engage with it in social responsibility exemplified in the principle of stewardship. From this perspective, it is the interactive tension between faith convictions and empirical reality that helps to keep alive theological humility when facing internal and external challenges to established convictions of moral belief.

Theological Humility and External Challenges

The doctrine of the Trinity provides a theological framework for ethics within the Christian tradition. However, as Preston has shown, this doctrine alone is not a sufficient source for ethical reflection. Theological realism as a tradition has been particularly concerned with the practicalities of how to move from a Christian system of belief to addressing any particular set of circumstances. The dilemma inherent in this is exemplified in Preston’s acknowledgement:

The heart of the matter is whether it is acknowledged that it is not possible to move from biblical texts (or doctrinal affirmations for that matter), to a detailed conclusion on an ethical issue today without some intermediate step which depends on empirical evidence not obtainable from the Bible (or doctrine). Such evidence is in principle contestable, both as to its accuracy and adequacy, and the evaluation and interpretation placed on it, even though in practice this may not on occasion be seriously contested.\(^\text{10}\)

The clash of Preston’s premises with certain contemporary theological perspectives is informative. For example, I have briefly dealt with the Barthian approach of Banner, partly because of the consideration given by Anglicans to these positions and partly because the positions themselves, while offering a sharp criticism of Preston’s approach, give rise to serious doubts about their own presuppositions. The postmodern Christendom approach of John Milbank, exemplifying the stance of radical orthodoxy, is another such theory that claims to catch the true and distinctive nature of Christian ethics.

Milbank, in his *Theology and Social Theory* and his *The Word Made Strange*,\(^ {11}\) raises the question of whether an external challenge has any relevance at all for Christian ethical reflection. According to Milbank, we live in a moral world that is characterised by incompatible truth claims and conceptions of morality. Milbank represents the post-modern Christendom in which a reality can only be out-narrated by the true Christian narrative. For Milbank this narrative also outrages all other ways of approaching faith. Finally, Christian narrative as interpreted by Milbank is claimed not only to be the true narrative but also to become the only true social theory. It is what Milbank calls the word made strange because ‘Christian morality is so strange, that it must be declared immoral or amoral according to all other human norms and codes of morality’.\(^ {12}\)

According to these presuppositions there is no common basis of society available; not merely with regard to ethical rationality and moral behaviour but furthermore in respect of the empirical analysis of what is going on in the public sphere:

There is no independently available ‘real world’ against which we must test our Christian convictions, because these convictions are the most final, and at the same time the most basic, seeing of what the world is.\(^ {13}\)

For Milbank, morality that is based on secular reason diminishes the consequences of evil and sin, and this is exemplified in accepting death and scarcity in the world. In contrast, Christian morality is based on a vision of the peaceful Kingdom, associated with the ontology of peace, in opposition to an ontology of violence exemplified in the reality of sin.\(^ {14}\) It is a vision that Milbank calls true realism, as opposed to the poverty of Niebuhrianism. In response to Niebuhr’s dialectical interpretation of ‘impossible possibility’, human moral possibilities and formulation of Christian social thought, Milbank writes:

Moreover, because the Cross and resurrection reveal to us that this pattern is recovered precisely at the point of suffering and despair, no ‘ethical limitations’ can ever be ultimate for the Christian. We start reading reality (and remember that this is in itself a blank page before our act of engaging with it and speaking of it) under the signs of the Cross.\(^ {15}\)

The strengths of this theological position appear to be that it offers insights into the reality of moral plurality and emphasises the primacy


\(^{13}\) Ibid., p. 250.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., p. 229.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., p. 251.
of a particular tradition intimately linked to communities of ethical reflection and moral practice. This approach is exemplified by the great attention given to the role of the Christian community embodied in the persuasive Church. Yet, leaving aside for a moment Milbank’s romantic and often naïve view of Christian community, his theological and ethical approach is insufficient to engage with the changes and ambiguities of the political and economic sphere which, as I have argued, is part of what the principle of stewardship implies.

This presupposition leads Milbank to develop a Christian economics characterised by gift exchanges within one’s own community, which freely receives and freely gives in response to the ultimate reality of God’s grace. However, Milbank’s supposition of exclusive economics within the community appears to be no more than a sociological fiction which not only ignores interactive relationships with regard to economics, but also bears no applicability to the actual experiences among Christian communities themselves. As Malcolm Brown argues with reference to Nicholas Lash:

In an interesting comment on Milbank, Nicholas Lash argues that it is insufficient to locate theology (as Milbank does) ‘on the far side of the Cross’. Rather, this ‘is a construal, requiring, for its own integrity, the continual corrective pressure of another reading, a reading which would place us still … on this side of the Cross; a reading which demands appropriate engagement with destructive violence, the strenuous exercise of a kind of power set to the service of a kind of politics’. In other words, exactly the kind of awareness of the theology of the interim which could enable a theological engagement with economic understandings of scarcity to take place.16

If a Christian ethical theory is to be based on the whole spectrum of Christian belief, to be authentic Christian ethics has to deal with the reality of both sides of the Cross. Milbank’s emphasis on the other side of the cross has to be balanced by the recognition that on this side of the cross humanity is confronted by the reality of sin, power struggles and conflicts of interest. It is also on this side of the cross that human beings exercise their responsibility of participating in the continuous work of creation, accompanied by an understanding of stewardship and social responsibility. It is on this side of the cross that distributive justice is to be addressed, and the consequences of how this is done reflect the human possibility of exercising participation and stewardship, which obviously is a wider vocation than a task within a single narrative community.

In other words, as Preston has shown, Christian social ethics derived purely from the doctrine of Trinity is insufficient to engage with the

economic and political sphere. To develop an adequate Christian social ethics means to embody a certain theological humility which leaves room for recognition not only of the possibilities of, but also of the limits of, theological sources themselves. So understood, to exercise the vocation of participation and stewardship also means to understand what is the fundamental problem of economics. Yet, an economic theory is not a source for Christian ethics, but rather, from sources of Christian ethics itself comes the requirement to engage with external challenges in order to recognise one’s own partiality: ‘Our sinfulness and finitude inevitably means our insights are partial at best, and thereby require complementing and correcting by the insights of others.’

However, the finite nature of things and recognition of this worldly finitude are closely related to the concept of scarcity. An understanding of scarcity, as Preston has shown, leads to the fundamental economic problem of how to allocate scarce resources between alternative possible uses. Yet scarcity leads not only to a recognition of the limitation of human needs and wishes, but also to the question of distributive justice in this world that injustice has made so strange. However, the concept of stewardship and its consequent social responsibility are related to an engagement with distributive justice outside and beyond the world made strange. Therefore Milbank’s approach of out-narration seriously poses the question of whether his view can be combined with an adequate interpretation of Christian ethics.

**On the Both Sides of the Cross**

In addressing the problem of what Christian ethics can contribute if it observes both sides of the cross, the issue of who is a moral subject and who an object of Christian social ethics remains. If Christian ethics is to engage with both sides of the cross, then on the side where earthly human life is lived, we are faced with confronting the changes and ambiguities of the economic and political sphere. The persistence of theological realism, with varying degrees of success and limitation, illuminates continuing efforts to address the changing context and engage with it. Yet, it is the implications of this approach that its critics have reacted so strongly against. Even if those theologians who represent emerging theological challenges to Preston’s approach have different ideas about interpreting Christian ethics, the conviction common to all of them is the understanding that the Church itself provides social ethics for living together in a pluralist society. As Stanley Hauerwas says, both Banner and Milbank would agree that:

We must be faithful in our own way, even if the world understands such faithfulness as disloyalty. But the first task of the church is not to supply theories of governmental legitimacy or even to suggest strategies for social betterment. The first task of the church is to exhibit in our common life the kind of community possible when trust, and not fear, rules our lives.\textsuperscript{19}

Hauerwas points out the danger of the Church imitating in its own social life a political tradition of liberalism, rather than living out its own distinctive narrative. So understood, the Christian community is a community whose main task is praxis of its own narrative. This approach to ethics shows one way of engaging with moral plurality while remaining intimately linked to the distinctiveness of one’s own tradition. From this perspective the primacy of ecclesiology for ethical reflection is emphasised.

This challenges Preston’s approach in relation to engagement with the actual moral plurality, because of the existence of a considerable moral consensus that appears to contradict much of what we find convincing today. Yet, it has been argued, though Preston is clear about the distinctiveness of the Christian community as exemplified in worship, this presupposition does not sufficiently elaborate its particularity unless belief in God does make a difference, not only for the motivation but also for the content of ethics. It is a dynamic transcendence of every moral achievement in the light of a disclosure of God’s love that continuously gives a new and different understanding of ethical implications, illuminated in a disclosure of God’s love and its relationship to the interpretation of justice. My reservation is whether one can fully share this if one does not share the same sources of reflection.

Therefore, within a reasonable and authentic interpretation, a moral objective for Christian ethics is not, as Stephen Long has criticised, to provide ‘a common morality for a pluralist society, one that lacks any Christian distinctiveness’.\textsuperscript{20} Rather, Christian ethics has resources within itself to be committed to engagement with the public sphere, without presupposing a broad moral consensus, but accepting moral plurality with its various ethical perspectives, and thence establishing grounds for tolerance in engagement beyond one’s own social context and tradition.

Neither a development of Barthianism nor radical orthodoxy is capable of being sufficiently dialogical outside its own community. My objection to these approaches, however, is not levelled at their deep awareness of the distinctiveness of the Christian narrative and the importance of the Church for ethical reflection illuminating actual moral plurality, but rather at a particular interpretation of Christian


\textsuperscript{20} Long, \textit{Divine Economy}, p. 57.
narrative and community. There is an almost unbridgeable gap between the reality of the Church as it is and the Church as it should be. Christian triumphalism is reflected in a romantic picture of the Christian community as not only representing the truth but also having epistemological privilege to interpret it. The interpretation of the Christian community and its practice as expressed in the peaceable Kingdom in the writings of Hauerwas, or the practice of ontology of peace in the writings of Milbank, are the only available alternatives, and are at the same time completely dissociated from other approaches to interpreting Christian ethics. Paradoxically, this Church is also dissociated from the actual experience of the wide plurality of Christian communities which live with the reality of both sides of the cross. Rather, the lived experience of the Church is itself ambivalent. Christians are confronted not only by peace as opposed to violence and trust as opposed to fear, but their entire human lives as members of the Christian community are confronted by the realities of sin, power struggles and conflicts of interest. It is on this side of the cross that human beings are engaged with the ambiguities of human life; and in this engagement the presumed radicalism of these emerging theological approaches seems largely irrelevant. Within this line of argument, Elaine Graham writes:

And for that reason, I would refute the neo-Barthianism of Hauerwas and the post-modern Christendom of Milbank, simply because, as well as being insufficiently dialogical in theological terms, these models are sociological fictions and fantasies which bear no resemblance to the lived experience of Church and culture in Britain today.21

It is the lived experience of the Church as a community of believers that illuminates the gap between a wholly human life as revealed in Jesus Christ and the actual life of the Christian community. The gap between the ‘ideal type’ of the Church in Hauerwas and Milbank and the actual reality of the Church is too wide to permit the supposition that the Church itself could be social ethics. At the very least, it is doubtful that it could be an adequate social ethics when there is such divergence between theoretical convictions and their applicability. From this perspective, this position cannot be either a reasonable or an authentic interpretation.

For the same reasons, it must be questioned whether the Church is to provide social ethics for the public sphere in the sense that, as Preston maintains, ‘what should be held true in the church should be the ultimate criterion’. So understood, neither is the Church itself social ethics, nor can it contribute criteria for public life. Rather, we are

led to recognise that the Church has a social ethics for the Christian community, with profound implications for public life. It is not that the Church is a closed community with its distinctive economics, but rather that it is located in this world and has distinctive sources for ethical reflection and moral practice. Members of the Church participate as moral agents in public life and are dependent on various interactions both outside and inside their own particularity. This, in turn, leads to an acknowledgement of the relevance of faith when Christians are in interaction in the public sphere, both with one another and also with those from other faiths and ideologies. From this perspective, to grapple with the changes and ambiguities of the political and economic sphere is one aspect of the profound ethical implications of Christian faith.

However, even though the Church cannot itself be a social ethics or provide the ultimate criteria for the public sphere, it has a significant and necessary contribution to offer. What is sketched here for Christian social ethics in the public sphere is in agreement, therefore, with what Duncan Forrester calls the ‘theological fragments’ of ethical insight:

Perhaps we should learn from Foucault and other post-modernists that systematic discourse is often exclusive and coercive. Perhaps the task today is not to present a sustained theory or a comprehensive account of the human condition, as much as to confess the faith in the public realm by offering ‘theological fragments’ of insight, in the hope that some of them may be recognised as true, and interest may be aroused as to the quarry from whence they came. And fragments, modestly presented, can indeed provide illumination in the public realm.22

I shall therefore proceed to discuss and elaborate three illuminations from Christian faith which carry profound ethical implications for the public sphere. These concern the ambivalence of human nature, the relationship between love and justice in the public sphere, and the practicability of moral judgment. When this standpoint is adopted, ethics articulates the distinctive motivation and content of the Christian strand, while also incorporating openness for dialogue, both within and outside its own context, location and tradition.

The Ambivalence of Human Nature

The interpretation of human nature and moral possibilities has profound implications for any ethical theory. Different ethical theories within Christian ethics are each related to their own particular anthropology, which reflects the particular assessment of which

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aspects of a Christian system of belief the ethics is based upon. These differences also imply consequent differences about the content of the ethical theory.\textsuperscript{23} For this reason, a view of human nature is of prime importance for ethical reflection.\textsuperscript{24} Yet, which interpretation best fulfils the demand for authenticity and reasonableness for an adequate Christian ethical theory?

In the realistic view of human nature, and the consequent assessment of human moral possibilities as exemplified by Niebuhr and further developed in the theology and ethics of Bennett and Preston, one sees insights which contribute to shape ongoing ethical reflection from already established moral convictions.

The roots of a realistic view of human beings go back to the biblical story of Creation which describes human persons as being created in the image of God as well as being sinners.\textsuperscript{25} Explicit analysis of this view is found in Niebuhr’s study \textit{The Nature and Destiny of Man}. To address what Niebuhr describes as humanity’s ‘own most vexing problem’ means to acknowledge that basic human reality is characterised by freedom to choose the good and right, while this original freedom of choice is limited by the reality of original sin which in its deeper content consists of rebellion against God.\textsuperscript{26} This view takes into consideration both the possibilities and the limitations of human reality. So understood, as Preston emphasises, human nature is characterised by a disposition towards both original righteousness and original sin:

On the other hand Original Righteousness is just as much a fact of human life as Original Sin. There are no fixed bounds to human achievements under God, and to the quest for social justice which love motivates. Nor, of course, are there guarantees that the achievements of one generation will be maintained by future ones.\textsuperscript{27}

\textsuperscript{23} The content of any social ethical theory is largely determined by the anthropology adopted. With particular reference to work and economic ethics within Christian ethics, Grenholm has shown that different options within economic ethics are related to different views of human beings. These different assessments of human moral possibilities, in return, also reflect differences in content of social ethical theory. Cf. Grenholm, \textit{Protestant Work Ethics}, pp. 118ff. and 152ff.

\textsuperscript{24} Seven theories of human nature and their ethical implications are analysed in Leslie Stevenson, \textit{Seven Theories of Human Nature} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974). In a similar argument for the prime importance of one’s view of human nature for ethical reflection, Stevenson writes: ‘What is man? This is surely one of the most important questions of all. For so much else depends on our view of human nature. The meaning and purpose of human life, what we ought to do, and what we can hope to achieve — all these are fundamentally affected by whatever we think is the “real” or “true” nature of man. But there are many conflicting views about what human nature really is.’ Stevenson, op. cit., p. 3.

\textsuperscript{25} See Genesis 1 and 3.


\textsuperscript{27} Preston, \textit{Confusions in Christian Social Ethics}, p. 126.
This recognition of the ambivalence of human nature also implies that human moral possibilities are ambivalent. On the one hand, there is a commitment to the concern for others that, as defined by the Golden Rule to love one’s neighbour, means that one must take into consideration the interests of others as much as one’s own. On the other hand, there is a tendency towards egoism which is exemplified, among other things, in the pervasive rule of self-interest accompanied by the use of power to promote one’s own relatively best interests, disregarding or downplaying the equally valid claims of others.

However, in this interpretation, the realities of both righteousness and sin become part of the invariable reality of human life. Yet, research into the biology of evolution indicates that every being tries to maximise its reproductive success and that all behaviour is adapted towards the means of survival. Richard Alexander has argued that human social behaviour has adapted similarly; implying that both individual and political acts are calculated in terms of one’s own best interest, presupposing gain in return, either from the recipient of beneficence, or from some other person. From this perspective, as well as from the physiological research of Erik Erikson which contributed to Niebuhr’s work, there is little cause to be over sanguine about human moral possibilities: traits of original sin appear to have a stronger impact on human beings than does whatever remains of original righteousness. Yet, this is still part of the ambivalence that human nature comprises.

Taking both these realities into account, theological realism provided a clear alternative to the anthropology of liberal theology, which, as exemplified by the Social Gospel, had a sentimental belief in moral evolution and progress, according to which sin was avoidable and human nature changeable. This belief could not survive the economic depression following the Wall Street Crash nor the totalitarian challenge of the 1930s. The very belief in the possibility of changing people in order to change society into the Kingdom of God was utopian. In contrast, the ambivalent view of human nature and moral possibilities is substantially adequate as a bulwark against a too soft presupposition of human moral possibilities for a contemporary approach to Christian ethics.

However, in current ethical debate there are several attempts, particularly exemplified within the liberation approach and feminist perspectives, to keep alive a more or less explicitly formulated utopian view of history, which is usually accompanied by an optimistic

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28 According to Alexander, ’Moral systems are systems of indirect reciprocity. They exist because confluences of interest within groups are used to deal with conflicts of interest between groups.’ Richard D. Alexander, *The Biology of Moral Systems* (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1987), p. 77.
anthropology, particularly of the oppressed.\textsuperscript{29} This position within social ethics is taken by, among others, Beverly Harrison who acknowledges that the radical freedom to do good or evil exists within human moral possibilities, while at the same time claiming that it is within human power to overcome sin and evil in order to live in radical love.\textsuperscript{30} Partly this seems to be a pastoral approach to encourage a struggle against the phenomenon of oppression, but at the same time it fails to take into consideration the fact that those who are oppressed would quite possibly be oppressors themselves in a different context and location, and, no less importantly, that oppressed people might well be simultaneously practising the oppression of others.\textsuperscript{31} The problem with this position is that it inspires propaganda for change in revolutionary contexts, but is hopelessly sentimental in everyday life. It appears that while a group of oppressors exists, they would be white, middle-class, heterosexual men or women; and utopian hopes to overcome oppression and to create everlasting right relationships are aiming to inspire oppressed people to liberate themselves from their perceived oppressors and from the structures that contribute to maintaining their oppressed position. However, this approach to social ethics exemplifies an unequivocal over-simplification, which illustrates ‘the dangers of tying theology too closely and unambiguously to one particular form of ideology, theory or social analysis’.\textsuperscript{32}

The strengths of a realistic anthropology are that it characterises human beings as in constant tension between possibilities and limitations, reflecting the ambivalence of human nature. The assessment of

\textsuperscript{29} The utopian view of history within liberation theology is based on the Marxist theory for political change and its approach to economics. Cf. Gustavo Gutierrez, \textit{A Theology of Liberation} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1973), pp. 26ff. ‘Only a radical break from the status quo, that is, a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution that would break this dependency would allow for the change to a new society, a socialist society — or at least allow that such a society might be possible.’

\textsuperscript{30} Beverly W. Harrison, \textit{Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics}, C. S. Robb (ed.) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985), p. 20. Jarl’s study gives a reasonable interpretation of Harrison’s social ethics where, among other results, the author states: ‘Harrison maintains that within history there is a possibility to right the wrong. Human nature is at the core of this dispute and Harrison argues that what is inherent in human nature is, above all, the capacity to love and to create right relations.’ Ann-Cathrin Jarl, \textit{Women and Economic Justice: Ethics in Feminist Liberation Theology and Feminist Economics} (Uppsala: Acta Universitatis Upsaliensis, 2000), pp. 136ff.

\textsuperscript{31} See Elizabeth V. Spelman, ‘The Virtue of Feeling and the Feeling of Virtue’, in C. Card (ed.), \textit{Feminist Ethics} (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991), p. 213. In this article Spelman questions human anthropology within feminism itself. She writes: ‘We cannot be said to have taken women seriously until we explore how women have treated each other. But that means, too, how we have mistreated each other. The history of women, including the history of feminism and feminists, is hardly free of some women doing violence to others, of some women miserably failing other women in need.’

human moral possibilities from this perspective offers illuminating insights and provides criticism of utopian hopes and sentimentalism while it stands beyond entire pessimism and resignation. What remains is a recognition of the enduring tension between a tendency towards concern for others and a disregard for the claims of the other, thus exploring and engaging with human ambivalence rather than reducing or ignoring it. It is at precisely this point that Christian faith gives a profound understanding of human nature and destiny, coming to terms with both the inevitability of sin and redemption in Christ, which transcends not only human moral achievement but also history itself.

**God’s Love and Human Justice**

The disclosure of God’s love is of authentic significance not only for Christian theology but also for Christian ethics. The biblical narratives illuminate the particular nature of God’s unconditional love towards humankind, revealed in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. He not only lives but is crucified in love and compassion for every human person. So understood, Jesus sacrifices himself to promote what is good for others.

However, the self-sacrifice of Jesus Christ does not presuppose the value of self-sacrifice *per se*, but rather self-sacrifice illuminates what love might imply in obedience to God. The historical misinterpretation of linking the crucifixion of Jesus to defending self-sacrifice as valuable for its own sake has been used to justify different kinds of human humiliation. Yet, one can understand but not justify reduction of the disclosure of God’s love to an image of reciprocity, even if this takes into consideration concern for the other. Even if mutuality can be interpreted as love in its deepest radicality in the actual state of human affairs, the embodiment of God’s love as revealed in stories and images about Jesus goes beyond that.

The disclosure of God’s love in history illuminates both particular motivations and content. Ethical implications drawn from it clarify that human action is to be motivated by what love of our neighbour implies, in consistent scrutiny of the disclosure of God’s love, which may be in conflict with our own partiality. This is the radical ethical demand of Christian love, illuminating the perspective of the Kingdom of God rather than the finite reality of human existence in which we are dependent on various interests, and participate in different power relationships and struggles. So understood, it is not only in relationships between various groups but also in the most

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intimate relationship with another that power is at stake. Yet, even though power itself is to be understood as essentially neutral, the implementation of power is very likely to be misused. From this perspective, we are left with a disclosure of God’s love and more or less fragmented expressions of it in our actions, both towards those near to us and towards complete strangers.

Nevertheless, there are two sides of the cross, both of which have implications for ethics. There is both the perspective of eternity and the perspective of finitude. It is what Niebuhr so clearly describes as the reality of divine goodness and human partiality:

It is impossible to symbolise the divine goodness in history in any other way than by complete powerlessness, or rather by a consistent refusal to use power in the rivalries of history. For there is no self in history or society, no matter how impartial its perspective upon the competitions of life, which can rise to the position of a disinterested participation in those rivalries and competitions. It can symbolise disinterested love only by a refusal to participate in the rivalries.

These different perspectives on power illuminate a tension that is an irreducible part of Christian ethics. Yet, this irreducible tension illuminates the transcendent reality of Christian faith. It is not the gap between ideal and reality that is at stake, but rather that, in the light of the disclosure of God’s love, there is always present the challenge for transcendence of every human moral achievement and of history itself. The disclosure of God’s love becomes relevant not only for individual acts, but also for any political action.

The struggle for justice becomes the irrepressible implication of Christian love because, as Niebuhr has shown, there can be no approximation of justice without love. As Christian ethics is to be based on the whole spectrum of a Christian system of belief, it reflects on the traditional contingent character of a particular account of justice. If it is Christian love that provides an external perspective from which every achievement of justice can be evaluated, how should justice be understood?

35 Niebuhr overestimated this, at least in his early reflections, presupposing that ‘love is fully effective only in intimate and personal relations’. Cf. Reinhold Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960), p. 266.

36 According to Morriss, ‘Frequently we value power simply because it enables us to do things we want to do: to have more control over our own lives.’ Yet it is not power itself but ‘what we want to do’ with it that is the core of the problem, because of the human inclination to give one’s own claims priority over those of the other. Peter Morriss, Power: A Philosophical Analysis (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), p. 33.


38 According to Niebuhr, ‘Love is both the fulfillment and the negation of all achievements of justice in history.’ Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man, II, p. 246.
The theological approaches emerging from the advancement of Barthianism and the radical orthodoxy have very little if anything to contribute to a discourse about justice as the necessary ground for interaction between various traditions. Yet Preston’s emphasis on the finite nature of things, closely related to the concept of scarcity, highlights that, because human resources are scarce, their distribution is the fundamental problem not only of economics but also of social justice. Preston has shown that one level for discourse of justice is distribution, combining the principle of equality with the principle of need as the expression of the ethical implications of Christian faith. The way that relatively scarce resources are distributed is the prerequisite for the possibility of an equality of consideration for participation in a continuing discourse of justice, reflecting what Niebuhr describes as ‘an ascending scale of moral possibilities’. Nevertheless this concept illuminates the eschatological perspective as an instrument for social and political criticism. The struggle for justice also makes a specific contribution towards the shaping of its historical interpretation. Elaborating on the biblical question ‘What does the Lord require of you?’, Forrester gives a convincing interpretation of understanding justice from a Christian perspective:

Justice is given its distinctive content in this passage by being linked with hesed, steadfast love or loving kindness, and with humble walking with the God of justice and of love. Justice here is something to be done, not simply or primarily a matter for reflection. In the Beatitudes in their Matthean version, the frail band of disciples hear that those who hunger and thirst after justice (dikaiosuné) are blessed, and will be satisfied. Justice here is something about which we should be passionate, something for which we should hunger and thirst. And those people who are passionate about justice are seldom those who live in ‘the culture of contentment’, but rather the victims, the oppressed, the forgotten and the excluded — the poor and the poor in spirit as well, those who are persecuted for justice’s sake, and those who take their stand alongside those who suffer from injustice.39

The difference that belief in God makes to interpreting justice is the supposition that justice is best understood by confronting an understanding of the disclosure of God’s love and of the misuse of human power that results in the oppression of some for the sake of privileging others. From this perspective, one is confronted by the reality of injustice rather than justice. Therefore it is from the lived reality of the oppressed, those who are exploited, marginalised and powerless, faced with cultural imperialism and violence, that a discourse of justice should begin, by identifying injustice.40 So

40 An illuminating analysis of oppression is given in Iris Marion Young, Justice and the Politics of Difference (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), pp. 48ff. Young has formulated five criteria for determination of oppression: exploitation,
understood, it is not a precise definition of what constitutes justice that is paramount, but rather, what is important is the conviction that justice is always partial, being limited by the persistence of competing interests and different power relationships.

Niebuhr has made us aware of the ever-present variety of interests at stake and the hidden human assumptions underpinning any discourse of justice. Niebuhr, like Preston, has been primarily concerned with those who hold and exercise the responsibilities of power; yet, for Christian ethics to be able sufficiently to engage with economic and political issues, an equally emphatic attention must be given to those who are powerless. However, it is not the epistemological privilege of knowing what justice is on the basis of experiencing injustice within a particular social context that is determinative, but rather it is the process of increasing the power of the disempowered in order that they themselves might be able fully to represent their own interests, that is of importance in the discourse of justice. As Karen Lebacqz argues:

Justice is not ‘to each according to need’. Nor is it ‘benefit the least advantaged’. Nor is it ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’. Because justice emerges out of protest against injustice, justice is not so much a state of being as a struggle and a constant process. It is the process of correcting what is unjust. It is the process of providing new beginnings, not an ideal state of distribution.41

This approach to justice, however, does not exclude the importance of distribution of relatively scarce resources from the commitment to ensuring that there is sufficient power in the hands of those who are at present oppressed. Meeting the needs of oppressed people is understood not only in terms of distributive justice, but rather is interpreted in a wider framework in terms of liberation from those very oppressive structures that are used to fulfil the definitions of justice provided by the privileged few in order to protect their own advantaged positions.42

Such a Christian approach to justice provides critique of the present discourses on justice by offering illuminating theological insights for the reconsideration of existing normative assumptions by deconstructing...

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marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence. According to Young, justice as liberation of oppression is more central than distributive justice. However, oppression may well be linked to distribution of resources, while justice as liberation of oppression seems to be a wider and more complex issue. Cf. Young, op. cit., pp. 33ff.


them, and providing motivation for a struggle for justice in the light of the disclosure of God’s love. Nevertheless, a struggle for justice from this perspective is not primarily motivated by the search for the best possible compromise between different conflicting interests but rather serves to encourage us to reach new and better approximations of love, constrained by the inevitability of sin.

\textit{The Practicality of Moral Judgment}

The different conceptions of the relationship between ethics and a Christian system of belief influence any assessment of engagement beyond one’s own social context and tradition. My argument is that if ethics is based on the nature of God as Creation, Christology and eschatology it has resources within itself to be sufficient to engage with the political and economic sphere in solidarity with those who are excluded from participation in the interpretation of justice and the distribution of power.

So understood, the emphasis in the doctrine of Creation that human beings are made in the image of God is accompanied by a recognition that fundamental and inalienable human dignity is the grounding for insights into human interrelatedness and the vocation of persons for their stewardship of creation, which is linked to the exercise of social responsibility in engagement with the economic and political sphere. This emphasis characterises the story of social theology; yet it is not that a broad moral consensus should be striven for, but rather that the plural nature of the moral world should be acknowledged. However, there is considerable disagreement about the motivation and content of ethics. It is the recognition of the intimate linkage of ethical reflection to a particular context and tradition of thought that gives perspective to the motivation and content of ethics.

Within this line of argument, the concept of solidarity, and its content, as originating in Christian tradition, is related to the disclosure of God’s love as the fundamental value in Christian ethics. Even if it is not evident in the actual morality of those sharing the Christian faith, a Christian view of life, related to human experience and divine revelation, embodies the revealed insights into what love implies about what should be striven for. From this perspective I interpret solidarity, its content and motivation, as works of love.\textsuperscript{43}

What is entailed by solidarity derives profound ethical implications from Christology and eschatology, which illuminate a particular way of living and being. John Rawls claims that, in rational discourse, the least harmful interpretation of justice is the supposition that it is based on the human governing self-interest for survival and people’s fear of

\textsuperscript{43} As Ann-Cathrin Jarl writes, ‘. . . solidarity is love at work. It is the fruit of your work that determines if love is the driving force in what you do’. Jarl, \textit{Women and Economic Justice}, p. 134.

what might happen to them if they were to end up in the position of the most disempowered. In contrast with this, the discourse of justice must begin with solidarity with those who are disempowered.

Yet, as Forrester has emphasised, the people most involved in pressing for solidarity in society are, in practice, seldom the more comfortably off, ‘but rather the victims, the oppressed, the forgotten and the excluded’, striving for the cause of improvement of the situations in which they have ended up recognising in their own experience what it means to be worse off. However, people’s perspectives can change, depending on their social context and location, as well as with what and with whom they identify themselves. So understood, the objective of change might not always be a genuine stand for the principle of solidarity, but merely a stand purely for furthering one’s own relatively best interests.

What I mean by solidarity as the work of love is to take a stand alongside those who, at the time in question, are in the position of being the worst off, not mainly because one shares the same social location and economic circumstances, but rather because of the difference which belief in God makes for ethical reflection. From this perspective, it is the intimate relationship between God and human, expressed in the mystery of faith, that leads to the commitment to the cause of those who are disempowered as the driving-force for living and being in identity with those whom Jesus called ‘the least among you’. It is ‘something about which we should be passionate, something for which we should hunger and thirst’, because of the ethical implications of faith.

This appears to be an inconvenient challenge to the actual moral practice of the Church, identified as it is, at least in the Western context, with the relatively comfortable and established members of the middle and upper social classes. Their positions of power, their human pride and their own economic interest are unlikely to be the same as those of people at the other end of the scale, those at present disempowered. Therefore their passions, hunger and thirst may be different. However, the transcendent challenge of divine revelation continues to sustain the radical nature of Christian faith, and its implications give sharp illumination to the Church and its members in the light of the Christian view of life, from which solidarity is interpreted as the work of love that shapes our interpretation of ourselves and the world around us.

So interpreted, solidarity not only has profound implications for Christian faith in the motivation and content of ethics, but also illuminates what Christian ethics implies about one’s engagement, as a Christian but in a wider context than one’s own framework of belief, when responding to the voices of those who are excluded from participation in the interpretation of justice and the distribution of power. Solidarity, as shaping the way of being, emerges as the basis for a model of Christian engagement with the public sphere. Indeed, this kind of solidarity that goes beyond one’s own social context and tradition
has resources within itself to relate and engage, in ‘the solidarity of the shaken’, with those who are excluded from participation in the interpretation of justice and the distribution of power.

‘The solidarity of the shaken’, as developed by Jan Patocka, historically reflects the struggle of the Czech movement, Charter 77, gathering together people with a shared commitment to freedom of speech in order to establish the social conditions that would enable them to express and meet their own needs. The concept arises out of the necessity for interaction and dialogue accompanied by a shared commitment to recognise and engage with the actual state of moral plurality. As Andrew Shanks has shown when dealing with the interpretation of this kind of solidarity, it is the common history of experience illuminating ‘a shared pragmatic response to the specificity of a common historical predicament’, rather than the narrative on which a view of life is based, which unites the solidarity of the shaken and in turn leads one to rethink one’s own life story in the light of the experience of shakenness. Shanks gives illuminating interpretation of the meaning of being shaken, and of shakenness, when he writes:

. . . those who have been shaken, especially by the experience of great historic trauma, out of life ‘within a lie’ — or, in general, out of the unquestioned prejudices of their culture — into a genuinely open-minded thoughtfulness. This is not the thoughtfulness of scholarly expertise; but, rather, that other sort of thoughtfulness (to be found at all different levels of scholarly sophistication or articulacy) which may also be described as a fundamental openness to transcendence. To be among the shaken is to have responded to grimly disturbing experiences, not by retreating into mental anaesthesia, but on the contrary by a determined attempt to rethink one’s whole moral attitude to the world, as it is called into question by those experiences, and to reconstruct one’s life accordingly.

In this interaction, Christian solidarity, in relating to and engaging itself with ‘the solidarity of the shaken’, emphasises openness beyond a particular tradition, in the sense that to engage with the public sphere means to exercise social creativity and responsibility. So understood,

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45 Shanks, op. cit., pp. 115ff.

neither distinctive economics nor distinctive politics are called for, but rather there is a plurality of tradition and a wide framework of human interaction. Yet, solidarity as a sensitive response to what is going on not only presupposes openness in public engagement but also promotes a process of learning from encounters with other traditions. This learning also contributes to an acknowledgement of the limitation of one’s own perspective, revealed through engagement and dialogue with others. So understood, engagement implies a recognition of the plural nature of the moral world while also illuminating the distinctiveness of one’s own tradition. In this line of argument, Atherton writes:

Again, the necessary struggle to hold such opposites together is the classic task of reconciliation, confirmation and extension of the historical task of the early Church Fathers with their attempt to re-formulate our understanding of God as Trinity by trying to reconcile oneness and plurality.47

In my view, this interpretation of solidarity as the Christian trait of being and as the way for Christian engagement with the public sphere has profound ethical implications, reflecting its distinctive motivation and content derived from Christian faith. This in turn illuminates the distinctive character of its interpretation from a Christian system of belief, on which the Christian view of life is based and which has the resources within itself to relate to and interact with the solidarity of the shaken as ‘a shared pragmatic response to the specificity of a common historical predicament’. The interpretation of the disclosure of God’s love as a fundamental value for Christian ethics and the approximation of love in solidarity with the shaken implies striving for a participatory discourse of justice. This discourse of justice is related to the empowering of those who are disempowered, in order to enable them to meet their needs by participating in the interpretation of justice and the distribution of power.

Concluding Remarks

The persistence of social theology with varying degrees of success indicates that to engage with what is at stake at any one time is to relate faith to a changing context. This demands both the process of learning from the cultural and social expressions of the time and the commitment to challenging them in the light of a Christian view of life. From this perspective, the God-given vocation for the stewardship of creation is linked to the exercise of social responsibility in engagement with the economic and political sphere. According to Niebuhr, the practicality of moral judgment illuminates an assessment of Christian social thought:

Karl Barth will of course be properly scornful of any attempt to judge his theology by its political fruits; he would have it judged by its adequacy in interpreting ‘the Word of God’. But let us be Scriptural and follow the axiom, ‘By their fruits shall ye know them’, remembering that political justice and wisdom must be one of the fruits by which any system of thought is to be judged.  

Yet, in relation to Preston’s approach I have argued that the plural nature of the moral world calls into question the presupposition of a broad moral consensus. It is the challenge of living faith in a changing context that makes it necessary to go beyond this presupposition in order to develop Christian social ethics in interaction between its own distinctive sources and the plural nature of the moral world. The considerable disagreement so exposed about the motivation and content of ethics becomes a framework in which the authentic nature of one’s own narrative is to be interpreted, and engagement beyond one’s own social context and tradition is to be worked out.

The primacy of a tradition for ethical reflection has been emphasised in developments in furtherance of Barthianism and the radical orthodoxy. Both stress the distinctive moral practice of the Christian community. They offer one way of approaching Christian ethics in a framework of moral plurality which, as has been shown, is inadequate in relating a whole spectrum of Christian belief to ethics while entertaining simple and romantic images of a single Christian community. Yet, the emphasis on Christian distinctiveness is important in the search for authentic and reasonable Christian ethics. However, radical orthodoxy in particular does not go beyond the borders of its own community, which does not have resources within itself to respond to the vocation for stewardship of creation linked to the exercise of social responsibility in engagement with the economic and political sphere. Further, this draws attention to the potential danger of a narrow confessionalism when, from being a purely theoretical construct, it is put into practice.

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49 The danger of a narrow confessionalism is shown in Shanks, *Civil Society, Civil Religion*, pp. 78ff. In relation to Barth, Shanks has argued that his stance during the Second World War illuminates the ethical implications of his theological position. According to Shanks, ‘The Barthian approach dictates that the theologian is chiefly in dialogue with his or her fellow church members, and only very secondary, or incidentally, in dialogue with any part of the outside world.’ Shanks, op. cit., p. 83. So understood, Barth had strong arguments for the independence of the Church from the pressure of Hitler, while he was silent about the suffering of those beyond his own tradition. Shanks exemplifies this with the execution of the Jews who were not Christians. The sharp differences between Barth’s silence and Bonhoeffer’s solidarity with the victims of Hitler’s regime, as Shanks has shown, illuminates that different conceptions of the relationship between ethics and a Christian system of belief resolve into different approaches to Christian engagement beyond one’s own community.
In my own proposal for the basis of Christian ethics in the public sphere, I have argued that the particularity of Christian ethics demands questioning if the insights derived from Christian faith could be attained without reference to a wide framework of interpretation of their origins. In contrast, if Christian ethics is based on God as Creation, Christology and eschatology, it has resources within itself to engage with political and economic issues and to face the considerable diversity of ethical insights and moral practice in the modern world. From this perspective, the plural nature of the moral world is acknowledged, and leads to a commitment to solidarity with those who are disempowered. So interpreted, solidarity not only illuminates a profound implication of Christian faith for the motivation and content of social ethics, but also highlights the fact that Christian ethics implies engagement, on one’s own premises but outside one’s own framework of belief, in response to the voices of those who are excluded from participating in the interpretation of justice and the distribution of power.

Preston, perhaps more clearly than any other Christian ethicist of our time, has clarified that, when we engage with the economic and political sphere, we are confronted by a paucity of resources arising out of the finite nature of our world. Finitude, in turn, draws attention to human boundaries and leads us into having to make choices about the deployment of these relatively scarce resources. The choices that we are left with reveal the ambiguity of moral judgment, not only concerning the public sphere but about the wider reality of human existence. How these choices have in actuality been made reflects Niebuhr’s resigned conclusion that in the final analysis ‘Man’s story is not a success story’. From this perspective Christian faith provides a sharp criticism of utopian hopes for everlasting right relationships between human beings, while also standing in refutation of ultimate pessimism, not only recognising the inevitability of sin but also emphasising the nature of Christian hope. What we are left with is a sense of the tragic yet the presence of hope. We are left with the task of facing the reality of human conditions, and shaping this reality in the light of a living Christian faith in the changing context.

IDOLATRY, LOST ICONS AND CONSUMER PREFERENCES*

Ian Steedman

Abstract
Advertising, with its effects on both individual wants and the general ethos of ‘consumerism’, is a matter of concern to both economists and spiritual commentators on the state of society: it thus falls well within Ronald Preston’s range of interests. The article will consider both the economists’ approach to advertising and wider concerns about its influence in society, before posing a number of questions about the good and bad aspects of advertising and what, if anything, can and should be ‘done about it’.

Ronald Preston was much concerned with the social implications of Christian morality and considered that bridges needed to be built with the thinking of social scientists, not least because Church pronouncements on matters of social concern could sometimes appear to be simple-minded. More specifically, while there is often an ill-concealed tendency for theological and religious thought to be hostile towards economic activity, economic theory and economists, Preston was no simple anti-market thinker; he insisted that one try to see clearly both the strengths and the weaknesses of economic impulses and economic institutions. It may not be inappropriate, then, to reflect here on a set of issues relating directly to certain aspects of economic activity, economic theory and theologically informed social criticism; to ponder, that is, some of the relations between consumer desires, advertising and other marketing behaviour, the way in which economic theory treats consumer preferences (and advertising), and spiritually

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informed resistance to consumerism, undue emphasis on marketable goods, and so on. We shall first recall what economic theorists have to say about consumer preferences and how they treat them as the basis for welfare assessments. It will then be considered what economists say about advertising, and how this relates to their preference-based welfare theory. (We have not the space to touch on advertising and growth, full employment, etc.) The following section will turn to wider objections to consumerism, to advertising and to the economists’ approach to such matters. It will then be asked whether such objections can actually generate significant suggestions for policy or whether they must simply remain ‘objections’, complaints crying in the wilderness. In conclusion, the reader will be asked to answer a number of questions raised by our discussion. (Some readers might find it helpful to run through these questions before reading the rest of the article.)

Economic Theory, Preferences and Welfare Assessment

Much, but not all, economic theory supposes that consumers have ‘exogenously given’ preferences over goods and services. ‘Exogenously given’ means here that those preferences do not depend on the outputs, prices, hours of work, etc. explained within economic theory. (In the opposite case, preferences are ‘endogenous’.) It does not mean that preferences are constant over time, or that they cannot be open to any form of explanation (e.g. anthropological, sociological or psychological). Economists often — rightly or wrongly — simply take it not to be their business to explain consumer preferences. It is also to be noted that ‘preferences over goods and services’ can include preferences over leisure; over food, clothing, for one’s children; over donations to Oxfam, to Amnesty International, and so on. Any suggestion that basic economic theory can only be concerned with narrowly selfish, purely egoistic materialism is, quite simply, a misunderstanding. (And when greed is allowed for, it should be both recognised that spiritual reading and attendance at retreats may be included in a given consumer’s preferences and asked whether greed and obsessive consumption are impossible in these dimensions. Note too that public provision of, say, health and education may well feature within a consumer’s preferences; can there be no such thing as greed with respect to them? Those who affect to disdain desires for personal consumption sometimes give the impression that ‘we’ could never have or demand too much education and health care!)

Thus much (not all) economic theory does not ask why consumers have the preferences they do; it does not enquire into the reasons, the beliefs, the values, the aesthetic judgments that underlie them but simply takes them, without further ado, to be whatever they are. Consumers are then taken to choose, to decide, to act (not behave) in ways intended to fulfil those preferences as far as is possible in the face of the unavoidable constraints of incomes, prices, and so on. Consumer
rationality in such a scheme of thought relates to fulfilling preferences as well as possible and no discussion re the rationality of preferences is entered into. Such theory, it might be said, adopts the Humean stance that reason merely serves the passions.

It is easy — trivially easy? — to be critical of the standard approach in economic theory and it may be right to be so. One should nevertheless take seriously two possible defences of it. One putative defence, on the explanatory side, might insist that recognising the possibility in principle of explaining preferences is one thing but that actually providing a convincing explanation of them is quite another. If we do not in fact have a theory of preference formation then perhaps making the ‘exogeneity assumption’ is the least bad approach we have? (Note, for example, that while Rowan Williams’s Lost Icons is replete with — perhaps plausible — suggestions about how and why certain attitudes and motivations have become prominent in our society, precious little evidence is adduced to convince anyone sceptical about those suggestions.)¹ A second, now normative, defence turns on the fear that any move away from the exogeneity assumption will open wide the door to paternalistic prescription of what consumers’ preferences ought to be. One need not subscribe unconditionally to the economists’ traditional anti-paternalism in order to recognise that it raises a fully legitimate concern. (More broadly, if consumers’ preferences are to be criticised, who is entitled to make such criticism? And what bases of criticism will be legitimate? What will legitimate them? Those who reject the economists’ abstemiousness in this regard are themselves embarking upon an ambitious project! What follows will have some bearing on the likely retort that the abstemious economists are simply giving implicit, unacknowledged answers to the questions just raised.)

As was implied above, not all economic theory takes preferences to be exogenously given. There are discussions both of consumer learning and habit formation, on the one hand, and of mutual interdependence between the preferences and consumption activities of different consumers, on the other; it is nevertheless true that these discussions provide the exceptions to test the rule and certainly do not constitute it. To recognise this is not, however, to endorse the simple-minded misunderstanding that the economic theory of individual action presupposes an intrinsically asocial, ‘atomistic’ picture of the economic agent. As I have argued at some length, even the explicitly ‘methodological individualist’ theorist can have a strongly social picture of the agent.² That article sought to show the ‘intrinsically

¹ R. Williams, Lost Icons: Reflections on Cultural Bereavement (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000).

non-autonomous’ nature of the consumer’s ‘beliefs and preferences’. The argument was, in brief, that one cannot want what one does not know of and cannot describe, that the relevant knowing and describing take place within language and that the language(s) and relevant experience cannot be independent of the child’s/teenager’s/adult’s experience of economic products (goods and services). It was thus argued that a consumer’s preferences cannot be independent of what the economy has produced and is producing, or of the consumer’s past experience. Analogous claims have recently been forcefully made in *Lost Icons*. Rowan Williams writes, for example, that ‘the self itself is learned or evolved, not a given, fixed system of needs and desires’, that we *learn to choose*, that ‘I am changed by my choice’, and that ‘Nothing is more fatuous here than talk about purely “natural” desires, instincts or reactions . . . We learn what we are in language and culture . . . What I feel is structured by how I have learned to talk’.⁴(Note that it would be most unusual for an economist to speak of ‘natural’ desires, instincts or reactions in relation to consumer preferences. This should be borne in mind when considering Williams’s assertion that ‘The “timeless” self is, of course, much the same as the consuming self we looked at in the first chapter [of *Lost Icons*]’).⁵

It is to be noted, with reference to the following sections, that our (1989) argument explicitly excluded any reference to advertising and other ‘selling’ activities. If beliefs and preferences are intrinsically social then that has nothing whatever to do with modern ‘consumerist’ culture. If it is true ‘now’ both that my preferences are learned and social and that I am changed by my choices then these are ‘permanent’ truths — they have no particular connection with capitalism, with markets, with ‘materialism’, or with advertising. (Williams appears to suggest that the possibility of thinking, the need to think about such matters ‘becomes more and more elusive the more all areas of experience . . . are colonised by the sovereignty of images to do with marketing and purchasing’.⁶ Is that really true? Perhaps the society without overt attempts to influence desires would be the one in which these matters were *hardest* to notice? By contrast, perhaps our type of society almost forces these issues before our attention? Was Rowan Williams getting carried away by the force of his own rhetoric at this point?)

In order to consider the significance of the above for conventional economic assessments of welfare and of (un)desirable policy changes, we must first recall, briefly, the nature of ‘Paretian Welfare Economics’ (named after the economist Vilfredo Pareto, 1848–1923). Taking consumer preferences to be exogenously given, this type of welfare economics stipulates that an allocation of resources and pattern of

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3 Williams, *Lost Icons*, pp. 6, 27, 32 and 141 respectively.
4 Williams, *Lost Icons*, p. 111.
5 Williams, *Lost Icons*, p. 94.
output is ‘efficient’ (this is a term of art) if and only if it is not possible to satisfy any agent’s preferences more fully without satisfying at least one other agent’s preferences less fully. Under various assumptions, ‘Pareto efficiency’ can then be shown to be related in various ways to the state of ‘perfect competition’ (another term of art). It may be true that, as Andrew Britton said in the first Wickham Lecture (1997), ‘the assumptions on which [conventional welfare economics] rests cannot possibly be reconciled with a Christian understanding of human nature and destiny. Economists judge everything in terms of outcomes. [But the gospel] judges relationships for what they are, most of all for the love which runs through them’.6 Our concern here, though, is a more formal, or technical one. How can consumer preferences be used as the basis for assessing the desirability of a pattern of output if those preferences themselves are shaped by what is produced? ‘If an archer shot an arrow into a large white wall and if the arrow were then used as the centre around which a target was drawn, few would treat that target as a “criterion” for assessing the archer’s skill’.7 In reply to this it could perhaps be said that even if preferences now depend on what was produced in the past, they still constitute a relevant criterion of assessment for the output produced in the near future. While this reply must be taken seriously, it would not seem entirely adequate, not least with respect to those components of output that change slowly. (For those that change rapidly — and for new products — other problems arise in connection with consumer beliefs and preferences.)

McPherson, who notes in passing that both John Stuart Mill and Alfred Marshall were more willing to criticise consumers’ preferences than are most modern economists, argues that ‘endogenous preferences … suggest the need to move away from the strictly “want-regarding” moral systems that underlie most neoclassical welfare economics … procedural issues about how preferences are formed may be recognised as morally important’.8 McPherson concludes by noting that these issues ‘were well known to Plato and Aristotle, and were recognised by them as central issues for social theory … the problems have remained central and largely unresolved for twenty-five hundred years’.9 This might suggest that criticising the shortcomings of conventional welfare economics, however justified, may be somewhat easier than overcoming them! And Ronald Preston might have agreed that theologians will not always be the last people who need to notice this.

It is to be noted that economics itself contains a venerable and respected alternative approach to the assessment of an economic

system. The ‘classical liberal’ tradition does not much concern itself with ‘Pareto efficiency’ but argues for (broadly) market-oriented systems and policies largely in terms of freedom. Criticism of this alternative approach naturally has to proceed along correspondingly different lines.

**Economic Theory and Selling Costs**

The incessant witless repetition of moron-fodder has become so much a part of life that if we are not careful, we forget to be insulted by it.

*The Times*, 1886

It is commonly (not always) assumed in economic theory that capitalist firms (aim to) maximise profits. Clearly, a firm with that objective can be right in deciding to incur advertising and other selling costs only if it is true that such costs have a positive effect on the demand for its products. Yet the traditional Pareitian welfare economics supposes, as we have seen, that consumers’ preferences are independent of all economic activities. The assumptions of profit maximising and exogenous preferences, when combined with the observed fact of heavy advertising, do not make a comfortable combination! The distinguished economist Sir John Hicks was thus able to refer to ‘the Welfarist incomprehension of the role of advertisement. To the Welfarist, advertisement appears as sheer waste’. But he went on to say that, ‘although the abuses to which it is liable would of course be admitted, freedom of advertisement is the opposite number to freedom of the press. It is the hall-mark of economic freedom, just as the other is of political’. Such a defence of advertising belongs of course to the ‘classical liberal’ tradition rather than to the Pareitian welfare economics tradition; equally clearly, Hicks could have gone on — though he does not — to ask whether the ‘economic freedom’ to advertise can properly be subjected to any limitations (cf. the prohibition of incitement to racial hatred as a qualification to the freedoms of the press and of speech). Sir John returned to the positive case for advertising two years later, arguing that in a rapidly changing economic world with a stream of improved or quite new goods and services consumers need considerable help in knowing what best suits them and that advertisement can be seen as the relevant form of education. ‘When advertisement is considered in this light, it is seen to have a more active social (and economic) function than economists have always been prepared to allow to it.’ Biting the bullet, Hicks argued that, to be effective in its ‘educational’ role, advertising ‘has to

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12 Hicks, *Wealth and Welfare*, p. 140.

be attractive and (let us not be afraid to say) persuasive’.14 (This claim may make some uneasy — so they should take it seriously and argue with it, not just wave it aside.) Hicks, of course, was no paid apologist for the advertising industry and noted clearly that, while there is a natural link between the producer of an article and the provider of information about it (the producer knows the article well), such a link inevitably introduces a bias, both in terms of what information is provided and with respect to the volume of advertising.15

If Hicks referred in genteel fashion to the economists’ traditional reluctance to allow a very positive function to advertising, Schmalensee has been more forthright. ‘Perhaps reflecting the traditional distaste for advertising in the intellectual community, most early discussions of advertising by economists were generally critical, describing it as wasteful, manipulative, and anti-competitive. Its main redeeming feature was that it provided a source of revenue for the press.’16 While we know that ‘the ratio of advertising to sales varies dramatically among industries, even if attention is limited to industries selling consumer goods and services’, we know ‘relatively little about how advertising affects consumer behaviour’.17 Schmalensee nevertheless suggests that ‘advertising does not emerge from the empirical literature on consumer demand as an important determinant of consumer behaviour. [Why the enormous expenditure on it then? I.S.] Some have argued that advertising has fostered the long-run growth of materialism, but nobody has offered anything like a rigorous test of this proposition. Most practitioners contend that advertising follows rather than leads cultural trends, in part because most advertisers are reluctant to appear out of step with society’.18 Asking pertinently what might be the alternative source(s) of information if advertising were banned — and the provision of information is costly — Schmalensee argues that, ‘Advertisers have every incentive to present information effectively, though they rarely have any incentive to present all information that might affect decisions. Advertising, like democracy, is terrible in principle but better than any known alternative in practice.’19

Before concluding this section by considering an economic argument that a tax on advertising might increase welfare, we may usefully take note of some thoughts on advertising presented by a practitioner of that ‘art’. Weilbacher states bluntly that ‘advertising intends to make people behave or believe in a particular way, and no amount of verbal beating about the bush can make that basic fact go away’.20 Thus

14 Hicks, *Wealth and Welfare*, p. 140.
15 Hicks, *Wealth and Welfare*, p. 141; see further below.
17 Schmalensee, ‘Advertising’, p. 34
18 Schmalensee, ‘Advertising’, p. 34; we shall return to this below.
either the huge effort put into advertising completely fails to achieve its intended purpose — and firms are not profit maximisers — or the welfare economics assumption of exogenously given preferences is deeply flawed; which alternative holds good? The ‘art of advertising is to find a way with words and images to make the commonplace or straightforward product, company, or idea seem more attractive and desirable’ and ‘advertising will inevitably be designed to be persuasive’.21 Weilbacher recognises that it is unlikely that advertising will tell ‘the whole truth’ but adds that, ‘Advertisements cannot contain, realistically, all of the information that every consumer could conceivably want to know to make a completely informed decision’.22 (This claim, which seems plausible, is not considered by, for example, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications — the PCSC hereafter — when it states that ‘it is a fundamental principle that advertising may not deliberately seek to deceive … by what it fails to say’ and that ‘the content of what is communicated [must] be true and … complete’.)23 In the words of another author, quoted by Weilbacher, ‘advertising almost always appears as a one-sided presentation — the virtues of the product are emphasised; its faults, if any, are (like the uncle who was hanged as a horse thief) never mentioned!’24

Weilbacher is not persuaded that consumers are either defenceless in the face of, or corrupted by, the advertising fraternity; rather, he sees the consumer as critical of and sceptical about the claims made in advertisements.25 He recognises, however, that it is not only the content of any specific advertisement that may be objected to. Under the rubric of ‘Advertising as an Environmental Pollutant’, he discusses ‘the rather substantial evidence … that it is the sheer bulk of advertising … that causes overall consumer resentment toward advertising’.26 And he acknowledges that ‘the denominator that advertising strives to reach is a common one, not an elevated one … Advertising is designed to increase the probability that masses of people will behave or believe as the advertiser wishes. Advertising is directed at masses of people; it is not high culture and it cannot be judged in high cultural terms. If one is to communicate in a way that is easily understood by almost everyone, he may slip into what some consider to be vulgarity’.27

A thoughtful defender of advertising, then, sees a number of ‘problems’ with it — but does nothing whatever to support the assumption of ‘exogenous preferences’.

21 Weilbacher, Advertising, p. 570.
22 Weilbacher, Advertising, pp. 568 and 570 respectively.
24 Weilbacher, Advertising, p. 570.
25 Weilbacher, Advertising, pp. 572–75.
26 Weilbacher, Advertising, p. 571.
27 Weilbacher, Advertising, p. 567.
If, as noted by the economist Hicks, there is a bias in producer-provided advertising towards an excessive amount of it and if, as accepted by the practitioner Weibacher, consumer resentment of advertising is largely provoked by its overall volume and ubiquity, is there a case for restricting its overall level? Buxton and Driver have argued that there is. They accept that informative and truthful advertising can benefit consumers, and that it can actually lower prices and assist the new entry of firms into an industry; they acknowledge too that product branding can signal the producer’s commitment to consistent product quality. (We shall not pursue these more technical arguments here.) They nevertheless insist both that producers censor the content of their advertisements and that the greater the volume of advertising in general, the more difficult it will be for any specific advertisement to make any significant impact. (In the economists’ jargon, ‘there is a definite negative externality associated with advertising’.) They deduce that ‘the persuasive content of advertising will have a tendency to increase relative to the informative content as the volume of advertising grows. There is, therefore, a case for restricting advertising in order to minimise this’.

In operational terms they ‘propose the imposition of a substantial additional tax on advertising activity … If it is possible to define advertising in a way that makes avoidance difficult, the best option would probably be to adopt a special higher VAT rate for the advertising industry’.

This would not be the place to pursue Buxton and Driver’s proposal in any detail. But it can still alert one to the fact that any critic of advertising who would like it to be reduced in volume has an obligation both to suggest, in broad terms, how that might be brought about and to recognise, as Buxton and Driver do, that many legal and technical problems may need to be resolved before the broad-brush suggestion becomes a serious and responsible policy proposal. Critics, even vociferous critics, of advertising will achieve precisely nothing if they are not both willing and able to come forward with implementable, enforceable policies that will do more good than harm.

Wider/Deeper Objections to the Advertising Culture

Advertising treats all products with the reverence and the seriousness due to sacraments.

Thomas Merton, 1968

It has already been noticed that above and beyond the type of criticism that objects, say, to the exaggerated claims or to the appeal to envy found in some specific advertisement, there is the broader — or

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29 Buxton and Driver, ‘Legal, Decent, Necessary and Excessive?’, p. 174.
30 Buxton and Driver, ‘Legal, Decent, Necessary and Excessive?’, p. 174.
perhaps deeper — criticism that the whole business of advertising, marketing, and so on creates, or at the very least strengthens a culture of ‘consumerism’, of ‘materialism’, of narrowly egoistic concern with an apparently asocial, apolitical ‘self’. It would seem that such broader concerns about advertising, and so on could continue to flourish even in a world in which every particular advertisement might be deemed truthful, tasteful, non-manipulative and decent — and for the purposes of this section we may suppose that such a world has been achieved. It will be important to bear in mind throughout that, if the broader criticism still has force, it will be criticism of an effect (or effects) that no individual advertiser need have had any intention to bring about. It will, perhaps, be the criticism of (a) quite unintended consequence(s).

We may begin by considering an eloquent statement of a strong version of this type of criticism, a version explicitly linked to a vision of the spiritual life — the version provided by Aldous Huxley in his 1944 anthology of writings from many traditions, *The Perennial Philosophy*. In the course of his own commentary Huxley claimed that, ‘The popular philosophy of life . . . is now moulded by the writers of advertising copy, whose one idea is to persuade everybody to be as extraverted [sic] and uninhibitedly greedy as possible, since of course it is only the possessive, the restless, the distracted who spend money on the things that advertisers want to sell.’

For Huxley, the reason this is so pernicious is that ‘the cause of pain and evil is craving for separative, ego-centred existence, with its corollary that there can be no deliverance from evil, whether personal or collective, except by getting rid of such craving and obsession of “I”, “me”, “mine”, whereas advertising constantly reinforces such craving.

The twentieth century is, among other things, the Age of Noise. Physical noise, mental noise and noise of desire . . . all the resources of our almost miraculous technology have been thrown into the current assault against silence. [Remember that this was written before television, massive sound amplification, mobile telephones, etc.! I.S.] . . . the noise is carried from the ears, through the realms of phantasy, knowledge and feeling to the ego’s central core of wish and desire . . . all advertising copy has but one purpose — to prevent the will from ever achieving silence. Desirelessness is the condition of deliverance and illumination. The condition of an expanding and technologically progressive system of mass production is universal craving. Advertising is the organised effort to extend and intensify craving — to extend and intensify, that is to say, the workings of that force, which (as all the saints and teachers of all the higher religions have always taught) is the principal cause of suffering and wrong-doing and the greatest obstacle between the human soul and its divine Ground.

Huxley’s case against advertising, then, goes a little beyond the complaint that it contains too much exaggeration or images of some too-scantily-clad ladies! He takes its whole thrust to be deeply inimical to the attainment of our central purpose in life. While we should be striving for ever greater spiritual freedom, and thus freedom from the ego and its demands, the effect of all selling efforts is to support and even to strengthen the ego and its cravings. Note that it is the effects of advertising, and so on that matter here, even if Huxley somewhat slips (as it is so easy to do) into writing as if it is the conscious purpose of each individual advertiser to increase craving and noise in general. Even if few or indeed any advertisers have such a grandiose purpose, the overall result of their activities may still be as Huxley suggests.

Keeping in mind Schmalensee’s claim that ‘nobody has offered anything like a rigorous test of [the] proposition that advertising has fostered the long-run growth of materialism’, we may note a few more confident assertions of such a proposition. Two economists, Petrick and Sheehan, have written recently that ‘the sum of advertising and marketing efforts of business [has] acted as educational material which trained people to want to want and become active consumers; and it changed the values of society, where the previously perceived vices of vanity, greed, indulgence and excess became virtues of the consumer society’. For them ‘the propaganda of consumption had a number of unintended consequences. Undoubtedly it produced a culture of narcissism, vanity, self-indulgence and excess — commonly referred to as the “me generation” — where acts previously regarded as private vices were perceived as virtues’. (Would it not be more prudent to write, for example, that, ‘Undoubtedly it has not counteracted the culture of narcissism . . .’?)

The language of Rowan Williams in *Lost Icons* is only a little more measured and certainly points in the same direction as that of Huxley and of Petrick and Sheehan. Thus he asks: ‘what can we say about a marketing culture that so openly feeds and colludes with obsession? What picture of the acting or choosing self is being promoted?’ Part of the ‘picture’ he suggests is that ‘the rhetoric of consumerism (the arts of advertising) necessarily softens the elements of commitment and risk. It is important to suggest that gain may be had with the minimum of loss. All advertising tends to treat its public as children — tends, that is, to suggest that decisions can be made without cost or risk. This is in the nature of the enterprise (people are seldom attracted by being told about cost or risk).’ Unlike Huxley, Williams stresses the

34 Schmalensee, ‘Advertising’, p. 34, slightly rearranged.
36 Petrick and Sheehan, *Short History of Abundant Consumption*, p. 17.
38 Williams, *Lost Icons*, p. 23.
heterogeneous nature of the society within which advertising operates, noting that ‘the pervasive images of consumerism [commonly] sit side by side [with] material poverty’.\(^{39}\) For Williams, the deeper influence of advertising relates not only to Huxley’s lack of ‘silence’ but has also a political aspect: ‘we are going to be very tempted by the flattened landscapes of “consumer” choice. It fits well into a political landscape where responsibility for the interest of the other is consistently obscured’ and a ‘world of timeless consuming egos, adopting and discarding styles of self-presentation and self-assertion, is a social as well as a philosophical shambles’.\(^{40}\) The incessant stimulation of egoism not only destroys inner peace but inhibits our sense of interdependence and mutual responsibility. (Presumably Rowan Williams would accept that political, group choices and decisions can also be very ‘selfish’.) For Williams, ‘Our (North Atlantic) culture fosters, even in some senses rewards, a privileging of the reactive over the active in our relations with the world. We become used to the pressure of stimuli that are calculatedly and habitually addressed to the more transient kinds of emotion, hunger for rapid gratification’ (there is no overt reference to advertising at this point but presumably the ‘stimuli’ referred to here are those produced by the marketing culture).\(^{41}\) As presented by Rowan Williams, then, advertising, and so on fosters immature, selfish, asocial, unstable and superficial attitudes and dispositions and is by no stretch of the imagination conducive to spiritual freedom.

We may consider just one more assertion of the (possible) bad overall influence of advertising, the Vatican’s *Ethics in Advertising* (PCSC, 1977). This is written in ‘diplomatic’ language and bends over backwards to speak of the benefits of advertising as well as of its costs. With respect to these latter, however, it is stated that commercial advertising gives ‘the almost inevitable impression … that an abundance of possessions leads to happiness and fulfilment’ (section 3).\(^{42}\) It is suggested that ‘consumerist attitudes and values are transmitted by … advertising to developing countries’ (section 10; see also section 12). More generally, ‘Advertising that reduces human progress to acquiring material goods and cultivating a lavish life style expresses a false, destructive vision of the human person harmful to individuals and society alike’ (section 17).

Taken together, the sources considered in this section make a powerful, even impassioned *claim* that the cumulative, overall effect of advertising is pernicious and inimical to those attitudes and dispositions generally fostered by religious and spiritual traditions. (The implication, moreover, is that this would be so even if every single advertisement were ‘legal, decent and truthful’.)

\(^{39}\) Williams, *Lost Icons*, p. 28, slightly rearranged.

\(^{40}\) Williams, *Lost Icons*, pp. 48 and 49, but see also p. 137.

\(^{41}\) Williams, *Lost Icons*, p. 140.

\(^{42}\) PCSC, *Ethics in Advertising*, section 15.
Is that claim true?
This question needs to be taken seriously, not least by those to whom the answer is ‘self-evidently’ yes! Recall Schmalensee’s statement that the claim has never been rigorously tested and the apparently plausible practitioners’ argument that, ‘We follow social trends, we do not lead them. After all, we aim to attract attention and sympathetic interest and we will not do that by using images and ideas that are perceived as either way-out-of-date, or outré, or wildly futuristic.’ The PCSC document responds directly to this last argument:

We disagree with the assertion that advertising simply mirrors the attitudes and values of the surrounding culture. No doubt advertising ... does act as a mirror. But ... it is a mirror that helps shape the reality it reflects, and sometimes it presents a distorted image of reality. Advertisers are selective about the values and attitudes to be fostered and encouraged, promoting some while ignoring others. This selectivity gives the lie to the notion that advertising does no more than reflect the surrounding culture.43

This response would seem to be a good one; while advertisers probably do need to remain within socially determined limits if their advertisements are to work effectively, they can and do still select within those limits and thereby perhaps reinforce particular social trends.

Even if this be true, however, the question remains: ‘How big a role does advertising play in shaping an overall tendency to “materialism”, “consumerism”, narrow self-concern, etc.?’. Even if there is such a tendency, perhaps advertising plays only a small causal role, being just one — highly visible — aspect of deeper social and cultural currents? Whatever the truth of the matter, it is not enough simply to assume, or merely to assert that advertising has such dramatic consequences — that, if true, needs to be shown. Of course, if it is indeed a truth then it is clearly an important one — and that is precisely why assumption and assertion will not suffice!

Surveys of attitudes towards advertising commonly yield such responses as, ‘Advertising certainly works and it has a big effect on what people want and on what they buy. But it doesn’t influence me.’ If everyone were to say this it would be self-contradictory, obviously enough. Can it nevertheless be said truly by a significant number of people? If so, who are they and why are they immune when ‘others’ are not? Are you, the reader, a selfish, utterly materialistic victim of the marketing culture? Has the tide of advertising deprived you of your spiritual freedom? Of your love and concern for others? Are you left bereft of any capacity for self-reflection, unable to think about your ends and purposes? You aren’t? Well and good. But now, do you assume that others are such deprived, bereft victims? If not, is the

43 PCSC, Ethics in Advertising, section 3.

marketing culture quite as pernicious as it is sometimes said to be? If ‘yes’, what is it that makes you different? Your superior personality? Your superior culture? Your superior education? Your superior spiritual life? There has to be some explanation of the difference. On the other hand, if you say that you are a victim, with imposed, non-autonomous goals and values, are you being fully consistent? Would not your ability to acknowledge this mean, ipso facto, that it is not completely true?

The above questions are not intended to rule out nuanced answers, answers recognising both elements of undue influence and elements of autonomy. They are intended only as a rejection of bland, unthinking assertions about the overwhelming influence of advertising on ‘them’, whoever they may be. Just as we saw that Weilbacher questioned whether consumers are helpless dupes with respect to specific advertisements and products, so we should at least question any unproven assertion about the overall effect of advertising on general cultural attitudes and dispositions. In a seminar at Liverpool Hope University, February 2001, Rupert Hoare pointed out that undiscussed ends can slip into being ultimate ends and hence idols. It may be that the marketing culture fosters an idolatry of consumption, possession and so on; if so, this can only be a matter of great concern. But there is also the possibility of setting up our own bêtes noires as idols, of — for example — coming to ‘worship’ our ‘profound insight’ into the culture-moulding force of advertising, without troubling ourselves with the task of establishing that it really is such a powerful force. There is more than one form of idolatry.

Policy

If all is not well in the world of advertising, what ought to be done in order to improve matters? There is only limited value to ‘complaining without recommending’. We have already noted that Buxton and Driver advocate a tax on advertising outlays; is this proposal to be supported? Should different kinds of advertising be taxed differentially? Could the corresponding legislation be made enforceable or, at least, difficult to circumvent? The PCSC publication makes some recommendations but they hardly have the (potential) bite of the Buxton and Driver proposal. Advertisers are called upon to act responsibly and have sensitive consciences; both voluntary ethical codes and public pressure are endorsed. But what does this amount to when we read that, ‘On the one hand, government should not seek to control and dictate policy to the advertising industry … On the other hand, the regulation of advertising content and practice … can and should extend beyond banning false advertising, narrowly defined … For example, government regulations should address such questions as the

44 PCSC, Ethics in Advertising, sections 18–23.
quantity of advertising ... as well as the content of advertising directed
at groups particularly vulnerable to exploitation, such as children and
old people? Pretty thin, this, even for such a ‘diplomatic’ document. Nor
is it very telling to suggest that, ‘Advertisers ... have a serious
duty to express and foster an authentic vision of human development
in its material, cultural and spiritual dimensions’. How often can
an ordinary commercial advertisement for a specific good or service
‘foster an authentic vision of human development’? To demand that
advertisers do what cannot be done is, at best, futile (and, at worst,
brings criticism of advertising into disrepute).

While it would not be difficult to make fun of the feeble nature of the
PCSC recommendations, it might be more useful to ask whether that
feebleness might not reflect a genuine difficulty in seeing how any bad
effects of the marketing culture can be mitigated without destroying
the useful role of advertising. Critics of advertising should perhaps
begin to devote a much higher proportion of their energies to putting
forward specific policy proposals.

Some Questions

We shall not conclude by revealing the truth, even the incomplete
truth, about idolatry, advertising and economic theory; that would
leave our readers feeling that they had nothing to contribute. Rather,
we present a list of questions, some of them raised overtly above and
others that were lurking just below the surface, confident that our
readers will be both willing and able to answer them in all their factual
and ethical complexity.

1. Can consumer preferences actually be explained to any significant
degree? How?

2. Is it wrong for welfare economists to look at outcomes and at
consumers' preferences? Or only wrong for them to restrict their
attention to these things?

3. How disruptive is it for Paretian welfare economics if what
consumers want is influenced by (among other things) what is
produced and sold? By advertisements?

4. How disruptive is it for Paretian welfare economics if there is
advertising and some consumers, at least, have a preference for
advertisement-free streets, buses, taxis, and so on?

5. Can greed be at work in the desire for spiritual reading, weeks
on retreat, public health provision, a peaceful countryside?

6. Can advertising sell any old product, however poor? How does
it come about that so many new products fail to ‘take off’?

45 PCSC, Ethics in Advertising, section 20.
46 PCSC, Ethics in Advertising, section 17.
7. If some consumers have some undesirable preferences (see below), who is really responsible for them — those consumers? Advertisers? ‘Society’? And since no one can make a profit by producing something that nobody buys (or subsidises), who is responsible for the existence of undesirable and unsubsidised products — their producers or their consumers?

8. What specific policy changes re the regulation, taxing or banning of some or all advertising would you advocate — and why would those changes do more good than harm?

9. What is your attitude to advertisements that may encourage good child care? Or giving to charities? Or famine relief? That support public health campaigns, or ‘Don’t drink and drive’ campaigns? Are they allowed to be persuasive, or must they be chastely ‘informative’?

10. Is it really meaningful to demand that an advertisement must tell the ‘whole’ truth? Could that conceivably be done? If only the whole of the ‘relevant’ truth must be provided, who is to determine what is relevant?

11. Is there much wrong with advertising that is actively sought out by some consumers and that is seen only by them — for example, advertisements appearing in specialised car magazines, hi-fi magazines, rock-climbing monthlies, and so on?

12. Is not at least some information concerning improved or new products valuable to at least some consumers? If it is not to be provided by advertising, what would be the superior alternative? Who would supply such information and where would they obtain it? Who would pay for these alternative channels of information? Is producer-provided advertising the ‘least bad’ alternative?

13. How would newspapers and magazines (which still take at least half of advertisers’ outlay) be financed in the absence of producer-provided advertising?

14. Could mass commercial advertising ever be uniformly pleasing to the intellectually, morally and aesthetically sensitive? How?

15. Is any specific commercial advertisement ever placed with the conscious intention of promoting a complete cultural, social mind set? Could an individual advertiser meaningfully pursue such an objective?

16. Is it possible to say more than that advertising, in aggregate, probably both follows and somewhat influences social trends?

17. How far can the freedom to advertise be defended, in broad terms, as an aspect of the freedom of speech? Can such a general defence properly be qualified with respect to certain products, certain target audiences, and so on? Would a full ban...
on advertising be consistent with (sincere) support for freedom of speech?

18. If the (unintended) consequence of aggregate advertising is to increase ‘craving’, (how) can that be demonstrated?

19. If the individual self has always and everywhere been a ‘social product’, can advertising be so powerful an influence on desires, dispositions and values relative to the family, education, general culture, and so on? If McPherson is right about the two millennia pedigree of related questions, can it really be that easy to provide an answer?

20. Does the marketing culture really make it harder to reflect on our desires and preferences? Or does it perhaps make the need for such reflection more obvious? In the former case, how does it come about that some find it obvious that these matters need to be considered and find it easy enough to discuss them at length?

21. Does advertising distort and damage your spiritual life? If so, how? If not, (why) do you suppose that it harms others?

22. By whom and on what authority can/should consumer preferences be criticised? Who should say which advertising images are acceptable and what should replace ‘unacceptable stereotypes’ in advertising? Is ‘paternalism’ here just a non-problem? If not, how is it to be avoided by those who take upon themselves (or have thrust upon them) the tasks just referred to?

We look forward to hearing your answers!

Michael S. Northcott

Abstract
The European post-Marxist work Empire by Hardt and Negri points to the theological/metaphysical underpinnings of modernity and global capitalism in the medieval shift from Trinitarian orthodoxy to nominalism. Though Hardt and Negri reject religious or transcendental approaches to the social, their work shows remarkable resemblances with the ontological critique of modernity and economism mounted by John Milbank and Stephen Long among others. By contrast the considerable oeuvre of Ronald Preston on capitalism lacks a deep ontological critique. The return of ontology to theological economics in recent contributions from Gorringe, Long, Milbank and Northcott marks a significant recovery of a more theological orthodoxy, but also a more thoroughgoing critique of economism whether in capitalist or socialist guise. It is moreover a critique which highlights the significance of the economic actions of churches and Christians.

Ronald Preston had a great sense of humour, and a sharp mind. He was also deeply formed by the Christian, and especially Anglican, tradition of worship and spirituality. My last meeting with him was with a group of friends in a restaurant above Waverley Station in Edinburgh. It was a characteristically bright and cold winter’s day in the capital and Ronald was on form. I particularly remember his noting my approving review of a book he had earlier read as an examiner in the form of a doctoral thesis. He clearly thought I had been too kind! Having many years before had a piece of my own work appraised by a scorching Preston critique in his Manchester study, I could well imagine the question and answer session the author must have endured in the viva! No doubt he would subject the following to an equally fierce critique since it is so manifestly out of sympathy with his espousal of Christian realism. But I hope lack

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of sympathy for his views will not be taken as lack of admiration for the man. It is partly the clarity of his many works on economic and social thought which makes it possible to discern the problems that Christian realism presents for a Christian account of human flourishing. In this paper I suggest that there is a need for a closer relationship between the worship that Preston faithfully practised and the practices of economics, and in particular to argue that as a system of the ascription of value, market economics is in conflict with the system of value to which Christians subscribe when they worship the God who is in Jesus Christ.

_Preston’s Theological Realism and the Theology of the Market_

For Ronald Preston, the laws of the market, as defined by modern economists, are empirical rules that Christians and the Church have no business attempting to critique or debunk. While he believed that the free market could not work in all areas of human life, he nonetheless held to the view that the free market was the best mechanism available for the ‘allocation of scarce resources’, which he takes to be the basic economic problem.\(^1\) The ‘play of consumer’s demands and producer’s supplies’ is what economics deals with and the market provides the best device for individuals to choose to allocate resources between alternative ends. The market is ‘an impersonal mechanism which ensures that what people as consumers want to spend their relatively scarce resources on gets produced’ and consequently the market produces a situation in which ‘the consumer is sovereign’.\(^2\) And Preston suggests the same device can even be applied to religion as for example ‘the division of my time between prayer and action’.\(^3\)

Preston also argues that the market encapsulates a fundamental value which Christians can affirm and this is ‘efficiency; that is to say the avoidance of waste in using the relatively scarce resources which have alternative uses’.\(^4\) The economist is then someone who has much to contribute to human flourishing because the economist understands ‘the basic problems of production, distribution, saving and investment which any society has to solve’.\(^5\) These problems, like the problem of relative scarcity, are the same everywhere and it is the capacity of the market to resolve them through the mobilisation of the self-interest of the individual by the institutions of private property, legal contract and

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\(^2\) Preston, _Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism_, pp. 21–22.

\(^3\) Preston, _Church and Society_, p. 35.

\(^4\) Preston, _Church and Society_, p. 35.

\(^5\) Preston, _Church and Society_, p. 38.
the laws of supply and demand which explains the growing appeal of the market in the late twentieth century.

But Preston does not leave things there, which we might say is just as well. He argues that there are things that markets don’t do well, such as allocating scarce resources to the poor, or to health care, and that the market relies upon moral virtues and patterns of behaviour which competitive and possessive individualism do not in themselves sustain. Therefore markets only work in the midst of strong political frameworks which give them moral direction. Christians are called to encourage politicians and the State to do the kinds of things of which Preston approves, such as restraining the spread of the market into all areas of life, and redistributing wealth.

The reader may well ask though, what are Christians for? Does the Church exist to provide religious warrant to an economic and political order which reflects values and priorities which Christians cannot share? As a devout priest who said the Office every day Preston would surely have said no for, as he asserted in his last monograph, worship is the church’s most fundamental activity. But given Preston’s reliance on Max Weber’s sociology, and given his critique of the attempts of medieval Christians to think about economic practices in spiritual terms, it would seem that although the Church exists for worship, nonetheless its societal role is not about worship so much as bolstering, and occasionally attempting to guide, an economic and political system whose ends and structures are defined empirically and independently of the story of the God whom Christians worship.

In a pamphlet Preston wrote with Michael Novak he suggested that the reason why worship is not much earthly use is because Christians are so caught up in the hope of the Kingdom to come, and the end of the world, that their worship contains ‘no thought of social change, or the remedy of social evils’ and he also claimed that ‘an understanding of social justice plays no part in public worship’. Christians, Preston believes, have been committed in their worship to the status quo, to social stasis rather than to the social changes that the creative processes of capitalism and technology require for humans to move forward. It was therefore inevitable that the sciences should break away from the influence of the Christian tradition, and that political economy was the first to do so in the late medieval era with the gradual abandonment of the Church’s traditional prohibition on usury.

For Preston, worship is primarily about enabling individual Christians to turn their inner lives to God because Christian worshipping communities do not express a social ethic or share a vision of social

justice in their worship which is capable of advancing the Kingdom of God in the world. And neither for Preston can the Kingdom be advanced through attempts to meld together Christian beliefs and socialist ideals, such as those of Christian socialists. Rather it can only be advanced through the cooperation of individual Christians ‘with all men and women of good will’ in the pursuit of a common morality which, while critical of the excessive individualism of the market society, nonetheless upholds the fundamental freedom of the human person ‘from unnecessary restrictions’ and ‘for creative relationships’. The Church does this by sharing its ‘koinonia ethic’ with civil society in such a way as to emphasise the inter-dependence of persons, over against excessive market individualism, and the value of cooperation alongside competition as means to a ‘better balance of power rooted in justice’.

On this view though it is not at all clear what moral or political significance we can give to the fact that Christians form worshipping communities. It is as if Preston is happy to acquiesce in the relegation of spirituality and religion to the private sphere in liberal polities. This relegation means that for Preston all that is left for the Church as a political and social body is to assist market-oriented liberal polities with the business of managing the radical social changes that capitalism constantly requires.

Preston’s position is of course neither unique nor startling in the context of mid-twentieth-century Anglo-American liberal Protestantism. The underlying presuppositions of this tradition are revealed most clearly by Preston’s frequent use of the pronoun ‘we’. ‘We’ for Preston means we who live in liberal democratic cultures and participate in market exchanges. For Preston, solidarity with the modern, largely secular, multitude is the right stance for Christian social ethics. Through such solidarity the Church is enabled to encourage the world to become better. The idea that Christians as the people of God, formed and called out of the multitude, to confess Jesus Christ as Lord, might as a people embody a vision of social justice, and a political ethic in their own worship and community life, is one that, if Preston ever considered it, and I have not found a place in his writings where he does, he must have dismissed as unrealistic, perfectionist and sectarian.

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8 Preston is consistently critical of Christian socialism from its origins in the thought of F. D. Maurice (and John Ruskin and William Morris) to its contemporary forms, such as the collection of essays on Christian socialism edited by Chris Bryant entitled Reclaiming the Ground (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993) which Preston dialogues with in Christian Capitalism, pp. 26–30: the collection included essays by Tony Blair and Paul Boateng, now in government in Britain.

9 Novak and Preston, Christian Capitalism, p. 35.

10 Novak and Preston, Christian Capitalism, p. 35.

The problem with liberal social ethics of the kind Preston stood for, as Stanley Hauerwas is fond of pointing out, is the assumption that it is possible to create a good society without making people good. Preston does note that the market society requires virtues which it does not create and is in danger of corrupting, but he is chary of suggesting that the Church can foster such virtues or that such virtues might be the source of social practices — including economic practices — which do not rely, like the market and the state, on selfishness and sin as their raison d’être.

Preston’s reluctance to acknowledge the capacity of the Church to shape people as disciples, and to form communities which in the shape and character of their common life express a polity and an ethic, is indicative of a theological position, which he shares with Reinhold Niebuhr, that Christians are first and foremost Christians as individuals and not as groups. For Preston, like Niebuhr, whose work he much admired, believed that the Gospel is addressed not to groups or societies but to ‘persons one by one’ because ‘a person has a moral centre in a way in which a group has not’. For Preston, as for Niebuhr, the social is the heart of the problematique of sin.

Now this is fascinating because it reveals how extensive is Preston’s identification with European modernity and the Enlightenment. And of course the fundamental assumption which he shares with moderns — that the individual is the locus of ultimate value — arises precisely in the nominalist theology of the late medieval Church, whose economic practices and values Preston dismisses as of no relevance to modernity. For Preston, modernity is borne out of the end of the medieval in the Reformation assertion of the standing of the individual before God, and the demise of the influence of theological visions of human relationships over the social and in particular over mechanisms of economic exchange. Economics in the modern era is a project which operates according to quasi-scientific laws which carry no theological baggage, which are theologically neutral and do not need theological underpinning or even critique.

**Economic Reason and the Attack on Transcendence**

Against Preston’s position that economic reason just describes the facts of human exchange in a way which is theologically neutral, political philosophers, and most clearly Michael Hardt and Antonio

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13 Preston, *Church and Society*, p. 34.
Negri in their neo-Marxist deconstruction of the global market, *Empire*, acknowledge that economic reason is not a-theological but on the contrary arises out of important shifts in medieval scholastic theology.¹⁵ Like John Milbank in *Theology and Social Theory*, and Gillian Rose in *Dialectic of Nihilism*,¹⁶ Hart and Negri suggest that the writings of John Duns Scotus did much to shape the political theory and practices which the late Middle Ages bequeathed to modernity, for it was Scotus who made the revolutionary break with patristic Christian ontology when he affirmed the powers of *this* world, the discovery of the plane of immanence, and posited the univocity of being under which ‘every entity has a single essence’.¹⁷ This affirmation dispensed with the Christian conception of the relational or analogical duality of being, according to which every being had traditionally been said to have one foot in this world and one in the next.

Scotus’s innovation was highly influential in both theological and political thought in the late Middle Ages because it focused attention on the powers of singular, univocal being in material existence, which, as Dante recognised at the time, was the origin of the drive to ‘realise all the powers of the possible intellect’, whose first fruit was the Renaissance.¹⁸ The influence of transcendence in human affairs is thereby undermined, and humans become ‘masters of their own lives, producers of cities and history, and inventors of heavens’.¹⁹ This new focus on immanence paved the way for the assertion of monarchic power as the only true transcendent, with the gradual monopolisation of armed force, fiscal authority and land by sovereign kings and their vassals. The multivocal loci of economic and political power in feudal estates, independent cities, trade guilds and monastic foundations, are forced through a long history of violent struggle and vicious wars at the close of the Middle Ages to cede power and authority to univocal monarchic forms which ultimately achieve their legitimacy in the birth of nation states, and subsequently of national parliaments. As Hardt and Negri put it, by the time of Spinoza ‘the horizon of immanence coincides with the horizon of the democratic political order’ and in the absence of any external mediation we find that ‘the singular is presented as the multitude’.²⁰

The nation state comes to be identified in the modern age with ‘the people’, a deceptively unitary concept that is the product of the nation state, and which gives it legitimacy: both national and popular

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¹⁹ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 70.
²⁰ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 73.
sovereignty are ‘products of spiritual construction, that is, a construction of identity’. And of course both concepts are ultimately drawn into the ineluctable transformation of European sovereignty into capitalist sovereignty, which is ‘a form of command that overdetermines the relationship between individuality and universality as a function of the development of capital’. The singularity of being towards which Duns Scotus’s original intuition drew European society in the medieval period reaches its fullest flowering in the present emergence of a global market which is turning in effect into a new empire and which supersedes the modern ideology of nation state sovereignty and the sovereignty of peoples.

At this point Hart and Negri with their anti-theological reading of human history are more accurate readers of economic history from the medieval era to the global market than Preston, for Preston’s account can give us no explanation for why market relations tend to subvert both the worship of God as Trinity, and the nation state and popular sovereignty. Nor can Preston’s account tell us what kinds of things Christians need to believe or to do in order to resist the destruction of virtue and the subversion of worship which the transcendent sovereignty of the global market seems to involve in its local manifestations. Indeed it does not seem that beliefs about God, or biblical stories about the cross and resurrection of Christ or the Spirit who transforms the lives of believers, play any part in Preston’s account of human political economy: on the contrary Preston frequently expresses impatience with those who would try to move from biblical narratives or Christian doctrines directly to describe Christian action in society. Such direct moves between belief and social structure are not possible for Preston without the mediation of what he called ‘middle axioms’. Christians have no business expecting society at large to conform to the Christian perfectionist ethic of love or to the worshipping of God as Father, Son and Spirit. They may though legitimately insinuate middle-order values — such as the value of limited wealth redistribution in a market economy for the sustaining of democratic culture — into secular debate.

Preston argues that theologians, and Christians, must simply accept the facts of economic reason and the instruments it devises to resolve them, as if they hold no theological or moral import. Preston wishes to treat economic reason as if it is a self-subsistent realm of discourse and theory about human relations. But if we accept recent philosophical accounts of its origins in medieval nominalism then we see that in fact it has deeply theological and spiritual as well as ethical implications for human life and society. As Hart and Negri demonstrate, economic

22 Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, p. 87.
reason and the growth of an increasingly global market rest upon an attack on transcendence, and the rejection of the Christian account of God as Trinity, who is revealed in the cross and resurrection of Christ as engaged and committed to the redemption of human history in all its tragic and sinful unfoldings. There is in other words something fundamentally inimical to the Christian project, to the worship of God as Trinity, in the growing colonisation of human life by the market principle.

Preston dismisses the idea of enmity between God and the market as an illusion of a Christian socialist imagination. For Preston, market relations are simply natural norms for governing human behaviour in a world characterised by relative scarcity and, provided they are contained or held in check, they represent no intrinsic threat to Christian ethics or Christian virtues. The device for holding them in check is the nation state whose coercive and regulatory powers are necessary to constrain the competitiveness of individual economic actors in their pursuit of their own interests which the condition of sin indicates will always be the tendency of humans when they are engaged in contractual relations in society. However, according to Hardt and Negri, and of course they are not alone in this judgement, we are now living in a period of economic history in which the nation state is increasingly being undermined by the increasingly global nature of economic relations as the market itself becomes the focus of the singular sovereignty which was the bequest of medieval nominalism to modernity.

The Dismal Science and the Ordering of Love in Community

Ronald Preston is described by his friends as pursuing the ‘middle way’ in economics between a fully marketised society and a socialist command economy. The question I want to ask in the third part of this essay is whether the choice between market and command economics is truly the fundamental choice which Christians face when they would construct a social ethic for living in the emergent empire of an American-dominated global economy. In his recent book Common Objects of Love, Oliver O’Donovan suggests that for Augustine a view of politics as a choice between two kinds of economic distribution systems would have been a choice between two different roads to hell. Christians in Augustine’s City of God, written towards the close of the world hegemony of the Roman Empire, have a more fundamental

24 Preston, Church and Society, p. 34.
choice to make in their lives concerning what it is that they love: either they love God above self or the self above God. It is what people love which indicates the city, heavenly or earthly, in which they dwell. And in those communities which tend to love self above God we find love and attachment to material goods as final goals, while those who would love God above self ‘treat those material goods as mediations of spiritual realities’. Communities acquire their coherence through those things which they manifestly love. Thus ancient Israel loved the Sabbath, the land and the temple and when the Psalmists lamented their exile they lamented the loss of these things and the difficulty of singing the Lord’s song in a strange land where these things were no longer available.

Prominent among the mediating signs of the global market in modern consumer Britain are the economic barometers which are taken as measures of human flourishing such as house prices, consumer spending, new car sales, and the number of foreign holidays sold. However a recent study, Changing Britain, Changing Lives, indicates that despite rising levels of affluence, as measured in such terms, peoples’ reported states of happiness have actually been reducing in the last four decades in the UK. Now Preston might contend that it is not part of his economic credo to argue that collective commitment to growth in the exchange of such signifiers could necessarily contribute to a rise in human happiness. And yet it is just the case that those who argue for the rationality of the pursuit of economic growth and the related growth of consumer choice as primary arbiters of social goods in a market economy, albeit with a modicum of social regulation, do expect rising levels of monetary exchange and choice satisfaction to correlate naturally with rising levels of experienced welfare or happiness. These same people then have difficulties when it turns out that empirically this is not the case.

The problem for Preston’s approach to these matters is his contention that what Christians value above all things and express in their worship — the love and praise of God — has no intrinsic ramifications for their account of how humans in general, and Christians in particular, are to exchange and treat created things or material goods. For Preston, economics is a science which simply describes those aspects of social

27 O’Donovan, Common Objects, p. 23.
existence concerned with the distribution of material resources. But of course in making this judgment, Preston relies upon the post-Enlightenment assumption that it is possible to describe the social world in ways which are independent of ascriptions of value. Preston would have us believe that it is possible for Christians to dwell in, and help to sustain, a political economy as described and ordered by social science without any threat to their ultimate call to love God above all things, even though such an economy is one which tends to commit its citizens to attachment to material objects as mediators of human flourishing.

O'Donovan argues that despairing individualism of the ‘Christian realist’ sort which locates moral value only in individuals, is the consequence of the modern division of labour between the social sciences and ‘normative philosophy’ for ‘as soon as we hand over the understanding of our social existence to the purely descriptive sciences and adopt the position of disinterested observers, we abandon the hope that society may disclose a loving knowledge of the world to us’. Such a ‘loving knowledge of the world’ was precisely what the early Church mediated to its members and converts as the Spirit-inspired social of the body of Christ. It was the capacity of the early Church to treat material goods, and public rank and distinction, in spiritual terms which was central to the new social reality which the first Christians constructed, and which led the writer of the book of Acts to describe these first communities as ‘turning the world upside down’. Through the worship and common life of the Body of Christ, the early Christians found that their desires were trained towards the love of God and of their co-worshippers. It was this love which was the source of their assurance that they had ‘passed from death to life’ (1 John 3:14). It was this love which motivated those among them who had ‘the world’s goods’ to share them with those in need (1 John 3:17). And it was this love which occasioned their persecution by the world (1 John 3:13). The worship and community of the first Christians was of such a kind as to represent a public challenge, and be perceived as expressing public resistance, to the dominant idolatries of Rome.

Publicity is a central feature of our modern media-saturated society where knowledge of public ‘celebrities’ such as footballers and film stars is a form of social competence. These celebrities in their turn play a vital role in the promotion of those social goods which the market society identifies as signifiers of human flourishing: a celebrity such as Madonna, with homes in London, the Scottish Highlands and Beverly Hills, is seen as an exemplar of the value which the populus in

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30 For a more extensive critique of the fact-value distinction see Northcott, The Environment and Christian Ethics, pp. 243–56.
32 O’Donovan, Common Objects, p. 59.
general are encouraged to find in the high prices and relative scarcity of houses in Britain, even though such celebrities might be said to contribute to the inability of many less well-known citizens to actually obtain affordable housing. The category ‘publicity’ was born in the public relations revolution of the mid-twentieth century, the primary purpose of which was to entice recalcitrant post-war consumers out of their traditional customs of thrift, re-use and repair into the fashion-driven expendability of a consumer-led economic ‘miracle’. The rise of publicity and advertising was a direct consequence of the satiety which American, and then European, consumers experienced in the first flush of industry-led mass consumerism in the 1950s. Producers were finding that markets for their products were not expanding to keep pace with production once most households had acquired a car, a fridge and a television. The advertising revolution which in turn drove the media revolution of our now image-saturated culture was born out of the necessity of the dominant economic description of human flourishing as consumer choice. Consumers had to be encouraged en masse into a process of constant upgrading and enhancement of their possessions if industry was to continue to provide the engine of economic growth. As Vance Packard showed in his classic *Hidden Persuaders*, the birth of publicity was the birth of a project involving the mass manipulation of desire so that individuals could be directed by the images which saturate their consciousness to love those objects of desire without which modern culture indicates they cannot truly find fulfilment, and without which they may be judged as less than achieved human beings.33

Preston does not seem able to imagine that the market society might have as its logical terminus *ad quo* the celebrity/shopping fixations which are the daily currency of popular culture in Britain today and as a consequence of which Christians find themselves inhabiting a ‘perverse cultural script’ with severely limited vision.34 Ethics for Preston is the account of what Christians do in the midst of empirical structures which have no ends. As Milbank argues, this approach to ethics, while purporting to be realist and practical, in fact involves a complete rejection of the Aristotelian and Thomist understanding of ethics as *practical* intelligence. For Aquinas, the primary ethical end is the worship of God made possible in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as mediated through the sacramental life of the Church. The return of creature to creator, of caused to uncaused, provides the orienting goal which gives all other actions, including questions about property and economic exchange, a teleological framework of meaning. The ultimacy of this final goal undermines the tendency of

34 Milbank, ‘Poverty of Niebuhrianism’, p. 239.
other activities — and not least the acquisition of property and material goods — to become overarching goals which in their dominance over other moral goods subvert true human flourishing. Aquinas never imagined that any action or structure of actions did not already contain willed intentions and goals. The question for Thomas was what is the right goal? Once the answer to this question is known then other moral priorities and judgements of consequence fall into place.

A Thomist critique of the market society can help to explain the fundamental conundrum which defenders of the market, including Michael Novak as well as Preston, have noted, which is the tendency of the market society to undermine those virtues of trust, thrift, fidelity, commitment and truthfulness without which families and local communities begin to break down and even capitalism cannot be indefinitely sustained. For Thomas, the orienting virtue which directs persons to flourishing is the theological or cardinal virtue of love. The other virtues flow from this first and orienting virtue, for by the grace-infused love of God humans are enabled to recover the inner direction of their nature towards love which though not erased is shrouded and disoriented by sin. Thomist ethics involves then a narrative about human origins and human purposes which encapsulates humanity’s past, present and future, which encompasses both fallen and redeemed existence, both individual and social life. For the Thomist there is no distinction between description and evaluation of individual (moral) actions and (social) structures of action, such as the institutions of the market society. To describe or narrate economic exchange as characterised by intrinsic competition between individual consumers and producers is already to imagine, to envision modalities of human relationship which are inimical to virtues such as fidelity, trust and love. It is just not possible to describe and construct institutions after such a narration and then truthfully hold that these institutions do not involve by their very self-description a conflict with the values of Christians.

This is not to say that as Christians we do not share in the larger drama which is the publicity of the market-driven consumer/celebrity society. To the extent that we encounter and use its language, we already participate in aspects of its construction and maintenance. But as Christians we also recognise that it is a false description of the human story and that its absolutist claims to ultimacy are exposed by a redescription of human existence in terms of the narratives of the New Testament. This means that Christians, and Christian ethicists, have a particular and ongoing responsibility to be suspicious of the claims to fealty of all social structures which refuse the Christian story

35 ‘The commercial virtues are not, then, sufficient to their own defence. A commercial system needs taming and correction by a moral-cultural system independent of commerce. At critical points, it also requires taming and correction by the political system and the state’. Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: American Enterprise Institute/Simon Schuster, 1982), p. 121.

36 Milbank, ‘Poverty of Niebuhrianism’, p. 249.
of the non-violent overcoming of evil by goodness, of the ‘poverty which makes us rich’, which is the story of the cross and resurrection of Christ. It means also that Christians need not be surprised when the purportedly value-free market economy can be turned so easily into an instrument of invasive levels of technological surveillance and control, or of state and corporate-sponsored trade in weapons of death and inter-state violence.

For Christians, the most ‘common object of love’ which they have placed in their churches, and with which they have marked their cities and landscapes, is the cross. The cross is a public sign which signifies the alternative publicity of the Cross of Christ which both judges and potentially redeems those falsely structured realities in the midst of which Christians still dwell. The cross was a public and a political event which inaugurated a new reality, a new metaphysics, in which the multitude were no longer coerced into servitude of the imperium but rather invited to become a people, and peoples, gathered from every tribe and nation, into spiritual communities of worship and holiness.\footnote{Milbank, ‘Poverty of Niebuhrianism’, p. 251.} It is this transcendent reality which the Church sustains and which still calls into question the performances of other realities, the invitations to devotion to other objects of love, which Christians, along with their neighbours, daily encounter in the workplace, or when they read newspapers or watch television. Christians find resources for resistance in the midst of the other calls on their loyalty in the worship and community of the Church, in the narratives of scriptures, and in their own prayers, families and friendships.

The role of Christian worship and community in empowering our resistance to market relations and consumerism, and in re-educating our desires, was brought home to me by a conversation over lunch with friends one Sunday after the Eucharist at our local Episcopal church of St James’ Leith. Our friends had been driving home from a visit to the Scottish Borders when they passed a Landrover dealership offering a second-hand Landrover for sale. Dreams of travels across France and Spain rapidly came to mind, and of secure and comfortable transport across rural roads in Scotland to a new and distant work placement, and desire translated rapidly to thoughts of purchase, and of the necessary bank loan to enable it. As we talked over lunch, and I pointed out the disadvantages of driving jeep-like vehicles — vibration, spinal problems, excess fuel consumption, poor secondary safety, danger to other road users – our friends began to move away from their near decision to purchase this object of their desire. Before they left, they called up the dealership and cancelled their follow-up visit. This I guess was a moment where our community as Christians, established in our common sharing of the Eucharist as well as our subsequent lunch, provided an occasion for the reframing of a consumerist urge which had earlier seemed both attractive and rational.
A more detailed account of the way in which Church, friendship, neighbourhood and community sustain alternatives for Christians who dwell in market societies is given by David McCarthy in his book *Sex and Love in the Home*. In the midst of an eroticised and individualised publicity, McCarthy suggests that gift exchange between neighbours is a form of social exchange which denies the economic account of exchange as intrinsically self-interested and other denying.38 When neighbours help one another with the trash or the snow or child supervision they exchange gifts of time and skill which reveal and name ‘the social as a gift’. Family life and Christian marriage are similarly forms of self-other mutuality which are vital to human psychological and biological flourishing and at the same time evidence of the divine giftedness of the social as ‘marriage, along with parenthood, represents the basis of civilisation (i.e. the humanisation of the world); therefore, marital love is the conceptual basis of all authentic social contracts’.39

For Preston, the social is irredeemable and only individuals are perfectible, though he certainly knew of the joys of marriage and family. But this theoretical view of the social is fundamentally in conflict both with the Christian account of sanctification as that which takes place in the lives of Christians who perform the liturgy together and with anthropological descriptions of the gift relation and familial networks on which McCarthy, like Milbank, relies. Of course all such networks stand under the sign of the cross and are in need of redemption but they remain as pointers within created order of the divine economy of gift which is set into the structure of being and which finds its supreme expression in the Eucharist. The market economy is in systematic conflict with the structures of life of the planet, supplanting abundance with scarcity, and gift-relations with coerced exchanges of the kind that required already impoverished Bolivians in Cochabamamba to buy their rainwater back from a French public utility company in 2001.40 Against this, Christians can only repeat the words of worship of the Psalmist when he calls for God to gift the social with God’s justice, and so sustain also the giftedness of creation:

Give the king your justice, O God
And your righteousness to the king’s son;

That he may rule the people righteously
And the poor with justice;

He shall come down like rain upon the mown field
Like showers that water the earth

(Psalm 72:1, 2 and 6)


Michael S. Northcott

Abstract

The European post-Marxist work Empire by Hardt and Negri points to the theological/metaphysical underpinnings of modernity and global capitalism in the medieval shift from Trinitarian orthodoxy to nominalism. Though Hardt and Negri reject religious or transcendental approaches to the social, their work shows remarkable resemblances with the ontological critique of modernity and economism mounted by John Milbank and Stephen Long among others. By contrast the considerable oeuvre of Ronald Preston on capitalism lacks a deep ontological critique. The return of ontology to theological economics in recent contributions from Gorringe, Long, Milbank and Northcott marks a significant recovery of a more theological orthodoxy, but also a more thoroughgoing critique of economism whether in capitalist or socialist guise. It is moreover a critique which highlights the significance of the economic actions of churches and Christians.

Ronald Preston had a great sense of humour, and a sharp mind. He was also deeply formed by the Christian, and especially Anglican, tradition of worship and spirituality. My last meeting with him was with a group of friends in a restaurant above Waverley Station in Edinburgh. It was a characteristically bright and cold winter’s day in the capital and Ronald was on form. I particularly remember his noting my approving review of a book he had earlier read as an examiner in the form of a doctoral thesis. He clearly thought I had been too kind! Having many years before had a piece of my own work appraised by a scorching Preston critique in his Manchester study, I could well imagine the question and answer session the author must have endured in the viva! No doubt he would subject the following to an equally fierce critique since it is so manifestly out of sympathy with his espousal of Christian realism. But I hope lack
of sympathy for his views will not be taken as lack of admiration for the man. It is partly the clarity of his many works on economic and social thought which makes it possible to discern the problems that Christian realism presents for a Christian account of human flourishing. In this paper I suggest that there is a need for a closer relationship between the worship that Preston faithfully practised and the practices of economics, and in particular to argue that as a system of the ascription of value, market economics is in conflict with the system of value to which Christians subscribe when they worship the God who is in Jesus Christ.

Preston’s Theological Realism and the Theology of the Market

For Ronald Preston, the laws of the market, as defined by modern economists, are empirical rules that Christians and the Church have no business attempting to critique or debunk. While he believed that the free market could not work in all areas of human life, he nonetheless held to the view that the free market was the best mechanism available for the ‘allocation of scarce resources’, which he takes to be the basic economic problem. The ‘play of consumer’s demands and producer’s supplies’ is what economics deals with and the market provides the best device for individuals to choose to allocate resources between alternative ends. The market is ‘an impersonal mechanism which ensures that what people as consumers want to spend their relatively scarce resources on gets produced’ and consequently the market produces a situation in which ‘the consumer is sovereign’. And Preston suggests the same device can even be applied to religion as for example ‘the division of my time between prayer and action’.

Preston also argues that the market encapsulates a fundamental value which Christians can affirm and this is ‘efficiency; that is to say the avoidance of waste in using the relatively scarce resources which have alternative uses’. The economist is then someone who has much to contribute to human flourishing because the economist understands ‘the basic problems of production, distribution, saving and investment which any society has to solve’. These problems, like the problem of relative scarcity, are the same everywhere and it is the capacity of the market to resolve them through the mobilisation of the self-interest of the individual by the institutions of private property, legal contract and

3 Preston, *Church and Society*, p. 35.
4 Preston, *Church and Society*, p. 35.
5 Preston, *Church and Society*, p. 38.
the laws of supply and demand which explains the growing appeal of the market in the late twentieth century.

But Preston does not leave things there, which we might say is just as well. He argues that there are things that markets don’t do well, such as allocating scarce resources to the poor, or to health care, and that the market relies upon moral virtues and patterns of behaviour which competitive and possessive individualism do not in themselves sustain. Therefore markets only work in the midst of strong political frameworks which give them moral direction. Christians are called to encourage politicians and the State to do the kinds of things of which Preston approves, such as restraining the spread of the market into all areas of life, and redistributing wealth.

The reader may well ask though, what are Christians for? Does the Church exist to provide religious warrant to an economic and political order which reflects values and priorities which Christians cannot share? As a devout priest who said the Office every day Preston would surely have said no for, as he asserted in his last monograph, worship is the church’s most fundamental activity. But given Preston’s reliance on Max Weber’s sociology, and given his critique of the attempts of medieval Christians to think about economic practices in spiritual terms, it would seem that although the Church exists for worship, nonetheless its societal role is not about worship so much as bolstering, and occasionally attempting to guide, an economic and political system whose ends and structures are defined empirically and independently of the story of the God whom Christians worship.

In a pamphlet Preston wrote with Michael Novak he suggested that the reason why worship is not much earthly use is because Christians are so caught up in the hope of the Kingdom to come, and the end of the world, that their worship contains ‘no thought of social change, or the remedy of social evils’ and he also claimed that ‘an understanding of social justice plays no part in public worship’. Christians, Preston believes, have been committed in their worship to the status quo, to social stasis rather than to the social changes that the creative processes of capitalism and technology require for humans to move forward. It was therefore inevitable that the sciences should break away from the influence of the Christian tradition, and that political economy was the first to do so in the late medieval era with the gradual abandonment of the Church’s traditional prohibition on usury.

For Preston, worship is primarily about enabling individual Christians to turn their inner lives to God because Christian worshipping communities do not express a social ethic or share a vision of social

justice in their worship which is capable of advancing the Kingdom of God in the world. And neither for Preston can the Kingdom be advanced through attempts to meld together Christian beliefs and socialist ideals, such as those of Christian socialists. Rather it can only be advanced through the cooperation of individual Christians ‘with all men and women of good will’ in the pursuit of a common morality which, while critical of the excessive individualism of the market society, nonetheless upholds the fundamental freedom of the human person ‘from unnecessary restrictions’ and ‘for creative relationships’. The Church does this by sharing its ‘koinonia ethic’ with civil society in such a way as to emphasise the inter-dependence of persons, over against excessive market individualism, and the value of cooperation alongside competition as means to a ‘better balance of power rooted in justice’.

On this view though it is not at all clear what moral or political significance we can give to the fact that Christians form worshipping communities. It is as if Preston is happy to acquiesce in the relegation of spirituality and religion to the private sphere in liberal polities. This relegation means that for Preston all that is left for the Church as a political and social body is to assist market-oriented liberal polities with the business of managing the radical social changes that capitalism constantly requires.

Preston’s position is of course neither unique nor startling in the context of mid-twentieth-century Anglo-American liberal Protestantism. The underlying presuppositions of this tradition are revealed most clearly by Preston’s frequent use of the pronoun ‘we’. ‘We’ for Preston means we who live in liberal democratic cultures and participate in market exchanges. For Preston, solidarity with the modern, largely secular, multitude is the right stance for Christian social ethics. Through such solidarity the Church is enabled to encourage the world to become better. The idea that Christians as the people of God, formed and called out of the multitude, to confess Jesus Christ as Lord, might as a people embody a vision of social justice, and a political ethic in their own worship and community life, is one that, if Preston ever considered it, and I have not found a place in his writings where he does, he must have dismissed as unrealistic, perfectionist and sectarian.

8 Preston is consistently critical of Christian socialism from its origins in the thought of F. D. Maurice (and John Ruskin and William Morris) to its contemporary forms, such as the collection of essays on Christian socialism edited by Chris Bryant entitled Reclaiming the Ground (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1993) which Preston dialogues with in Christian Capitalism, pp. 26–30: the collection included essays by Tony Blair and Paul Boateng, now in government in Britain.
9 Novak and Preston, Christian Capitalism, p. 35.
10 Novak and Preston, Christian Capitalism, p. 35.
The problem with liberal social ethics of the kind Preston stood for, as Stanley Hauerwas is fond of pointing out, is the assumption that it is possible to create a good society without making people good. Preston does note that the market society requires virtues which it does not create and is in danger of corrupting, but he is chary of suggesting that the Church can foster such virtues or that such virtues might be the source of social practices — including economic practices — which do not rely, like the market and the state, on selfishness and sin as their raison d’être.

Preston’s reluctance to acknowledge the capacity of the Church to shape people as disciples, and to form communities which in the shape and character of their common life express a polity and an ethic, is indicative of a theological position, which he shares with Reinhold Niebuhr, that Christians are first and foremost Christians as individuals and not as groups. For Preston, like Niebuhr, whose work he much admired, believed that the Gospel is addressed not to groups or societies but to ‘persons one by one’ because ‘a person has a moral centre in a way in which a group has not’. For Preston, as for Niebuhr, the social is the heart of the problematic of sin.

Now this is fascinating because it reveals how extensive is Preston’s identification with European modernity and the Enlightenment. And of course the fundamental assumption which he shares with moderns — that the individual is the locus of ultimate value — arises precisely in the nominalist theology of the late medieval Church, whose economic practices and values Preston dismisses as of no relevance to modernity. For Preston, modernity is borne out of the end of the medieval in the Reformation assertion of the standing of the individual before God, and the demise of the influence of theological visions of human relationships over the social and in particular over mechanisms of economic exchange. Economics in the modern era is a project which operates according to quasi-scientific laws which carry no theological baggage, which are theologically neutral and do not need theological underpinning or even critique.

Economic Reason and the Attack on Transcendence

Against Preston’s position that economic reason just describes the facts of human exchange in a way which is theologically neutral, political philosophers, and most clearly Michael Hardt and Antonio

13 Preston, Church and Society, p. 34.
14 Preston, Church and Society, p. 117. This is the view of the human condition propounded in Reinhold Niebuhr’s Moral Man and Immoral Society (New York: Scribners, 1932), a book which John Atherton indicates Preston was one of the first people in Britain to read: see John Atherton, ‘Profile: Ronald Preston, Ecumenical Theologian of the Modern World’, Epworth Review 22 (1995), pp. 22–32 (25).
Negri in their neo-Marxist deconstruction of the global market, \emph{Empire}, acknowledge that economic reason is not a-theological but on the contrary arises out of important shifts in medieval scholastic theology.\footnote{Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, \textit{Empire} (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000).} Like John Milbank in \textit{Theology and Social Theory}, and Gillian Rose in \textit{Dialectic of Nihilism},\footnote{John Milbank, \textit{Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason} (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 302–303, and Gillian Rose, \textit{Dialectic of Nihilism: Post-Structuralism and Law} (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), pp. 104–107.} Hart and Negri suggest that the writings of John Duns Scotus did much to shape the political theory and practices which the late Middle Ages bequeathed to modernity, for it was Scotus who made the revolutionary break with patristic Christian ontology when he affirmed the powers of \textit{this} world, the discovery of the plane of immanence, and posited the univocity of being under which ‘every entity has a single essence’\footnote{Hardt and Negri, \textit{Empire}, p. 71.}. This affirmation dispensed with the Christian conception of the relational or analogical duality of being, according to which every being had traditionally been said to have one foot in this world and one in the next.

Scotus’s innovation was highly influential in both theological and political thought in the late Middle Ages because it focused attention on the powers of singular, univocal being in material existence, which, as Dante recognised at the time, was the origin of the drive to ‘realise all the powers of the possible intellect’, whose first fruit was the Renaissance.\footnote{Hardt and Negri, \textit{Empire}, p. 71.} The influence of transcendence in human affairs is thereby undermined, and humans become ‘masters of their own lives, producers of cities and history, and inventors of heavens’.\footnote{Hardt and Negri, \textit{Empire}, p. 70.} This new focus on immanence paved the way for the assertion of monarchic power as the only true transcendent, with the gradual monopolisation of armed force, fiscal authority and land by sovereign kings and their vassals. The multivocal loci of economic and political power in feudal estates, independent cities, trade guilds and monastic foundations, are forced through a long history of violent struggle and vicious wars at the close of the Middle Ages to cede power and authority to univocal monarchic forms which ultimately achieve their legitimacy in the birth of nation states, and subsequently of national parliaments. As Hardt and Negri put it, by the time of Spinoza ‘the horizon of immanence coincides with the horizon of the democratic political order’ and in the absence of any external mediation we find that ‘the singular is presented as the multitude’.\footnote{Hardt and Negri, \textit{Empire}, p. 73.}

The nation state comes to be identified in the modern age with ‘the people’, a deceptively unitary concept that is the product of the nation state, and which gives it legitimacy: both national and popular
sovereignty are ‘products of spiritual construction, that is, a construction of identity’. And of course both concepts are ultimately drawn into the ineluctable transformation of European sovereignty into capitalist sovereignty, which is ‘a form of command that overdetermines the relationship between individuality and universality as a function of the development of capital’. The singularity of being towards which Duns Scotus’s original intuition drew European society in the medieval period reaches its fullest flowering in the present emergence of a global market which is turning in effect into a new empire and which supersedes the modern ideology of nation state sovereignty and the sovereignty of peoples.

At this point Hart and Negri with their anti-theological reading of human history are more accurate readers of economic history from the medieval era to the global market than Preston, for Preston’s account can give us no explanation for why market relations tend to subvert both the worship of God as Trinity, and the nation state and popular sovereignty. Nor can Preston’s account tell us what kinds of things Christians need to believe or to do in order to resist the destruction of virtue and the subversion of worship which the transcendent sovereignty of the global market seems to involve in its local manifestations. Indeed it does not seem that beliefs about God, or biblical stories about the cross and resurrection of Christ or the Spirit who transforms the lives of believers, play any part in Preston’s account of human political economy: on the contrary Preston frequently expresses impatience with those who would try to move from biblical narratives or Christian doctrines directly to describe Christian action in society. Such direct moves between belief and social structure are not possible for Preston without the mediation of what he called ‘middle axioms’. Christians have no business expecting society at large to conform to the Christian perfectionist ethic of love or to the worshipping of God as Father, Son and Spirit. They may though legitimately insinuate middle-order values — such as the value of limited wealth redistribution in a market economy for the sustaining of democratic culture — into secular debate.

Preston argues that theologians, and Christians, must simply accept the facts of economic reason and the instruments it devises to resolve them, as if they hold no theological or moral import. Preston wishes to treat economic reason as if it is a self-subsistent realm of discourse and theory about human relations. But if we accept recent philosophical accounts of its origins in medieval nominalism then we see that in fact it has deeply theological and spiritual as well as ethical implications for human life and society. As Hart and Negri demonstrate, economic

21 Hardt and Negri, Empire, p. 104.
22 Hardt and Negri, Empire, p. 87.

reason and the growth of an increasingly global market rest upon an attack on transcendence, and the rejection of the Christian account of God as Trinity, who is revealed in the cross and resurrection of Christ as engaged and committed to the redemption of human history in all its tragic and sinful unfoldings. There is in other words something fundamentally inimical to the Christian project, to the worship of God as Trinity, in the growing colonisation of human life by the market principle.

Preston dismisses the idea of enmity between God and the market as an illusion of a Christian socialist imagination. For Preston, market relations are simply natural norms for governing human behaviour in a world characterised by relative scarcity and, provided they are contained or held in check, they represent no intrinsic threat to Christian ethics or Christian virtues. The device for holding them in check is the nation state whose coercive and regulatory powers are necessary to constrain the competitiveness of individual economic actors in their pursuit of their own interests which the condition of sin indicates will always be the tendency of humans when they are engaged in contractual relations in society. However, according to Hardt and Negri, and of course they are not alone in this judgement, we are now living in a period of economic history in which the nation state is increasingly being undermined by the increasingly global nature of economic relations as the market itself becomes the locus of the singular sovereignty which was the bequest of medieval nominalism to modernity.

The Dismal Science and the Ordering of Love in Community

Ronald Preston is described by his friends as pursuing the ‘middle way’ in economics between a fully marketised society and a socialist command economy. The question I want to ask in the third part of this essay is whether the choice between market and command economics is truly the fundamental choice which Christians face when they would construct a social ethic for living in the emergent empire of an American-dominated global economy. In his recent book Common Objects of Love, Oliver O’Donovan suggests that for Augustine a view of politics as a choice between two kinds of economic distribution systems would have been a choice between two different roads to hell. Christians in Augustine’s City of God, written towards the close of the world hegemony of the Roman Empire, have a more fundamental

24 Preston, Church and Society, p. 34.
choice to make in their lives concerning what it is that they love: either they love God above self or the self above God. It is what people love which indicates the city, heavenly or earthly, in which they dwell. And in those communities which tend to love self above God we find love and attachment to material goods as final goals, while those who would love God above self ‘treat those material goods as mediations of spiritual realities’. Communities acquire their coherence through those things which they manifestly love. Thus ancient Israel loved the Sabbath, the land and the temple and when the Psalmists lamented their exile they lamented the loss of these things and the difficulty of singing the Lord’s song in a strange land where these things were no longer available.

Prominent among the mediating signs of the global market in modern consumer Britain are the economic barometers which are taken as measures of human flourishing such as house prices, consumer spending, new car sales, and the number of foreign holidays sold. However a recent study, Changing Britain, Changing Lives, indicates that despite rising levels of affluence, as measured in such terms, peoples’ reported states of happiness have actually been reducing in the last four decades in the UK. Now Preston might contend that it is not part of his economic credo to argue that collective commitment to growth in the exchange of such signifiers could necessarily contribute to a rise in human happiness. And yet it is just the case that those who argue for the rationality of the pursuit of economic growth and the related growth of consumer choice as primary arbiters of social goods in a market economy, albeit with a modicum of social regulation, do expect rising levels of monetary exchange and choice satisfaction to correlate naturally with rising levels of experienced welfare or happiness. These same people then have difficulties when it turns out that empirically this is not the case.

The problem for Preston’s approach to these matters is his contention that what Christians value above all things and express in their worship — the love and praise of God — has no intrinsic ramifications for their account of how humans in general, and Christians in particular, are to exchange and treat created things or material goods. For Preston, economics is a science which simply describes those aspects of social

27 O’Donovan, Common Objects, p. 23.

existence concerned with the distribution of material resources. But of course in making this judgment, Preston relies upon the post-Enlightenment assumption that it is possible to describe the social world in ways which are independent of ascriptions of value. Preston would have us believe that it is possible for Christians to dwell in, and help to sustain, a political economy as described and ordered by social science without any threat to their ultimate call to love God above all things, even though such an economy is one which tends to commit its citizens to attachment to material objects as mediators of human flourishing.

O’Donovan argues that despairing individualism of the ‘Christian realist’ sort which locates moral value only in individuals, is the consequence of the modern division of labour between the social sciences and ‘normative philosophy’ for ‘as soon as we hand over the understanding of our social existence to the purely descriptive sciences and adopt the position of disinterested observers, we abandon the hope that society may disclose a loving knowledge of the world to us’. Such a ‘loving knowledge of the world’ was precisely what the early Church mediated to its members and converts as the Spirit-inspired social of the body of Christ. It was the capacity of the early Church to treat material goods, and public rank and distinction, in spiritual terms which was central to the new social reality which the first Christians constructed, and which led the writer of the book of Acts to describe these first communities as ‘turning the world upside down’. Through the worship and common life of the Body of Christ, the early Christians found that their desires were trained towards the love of God and of their co-worshippers. It was this love which was the source of their assurance that they had ‘passed from death to life’ (1 John 3:14). It was this love which motivated those among them who had ‘the world’s goods’ to share them with those in need (1 John 3:17). And it was this love which occasioned their persecution by the world (1 John 3:13). The worship and community of the first Christians was of such a kind as to represent a public challenge, and be perceived as expressing public resistance, to the dominant idolatries of Rome.

Publicity is a central feature of our modern media-saturated society where knowledge of public ‘celebrities’ such as footballers and film stars is a form of social competence. These celebrities in their turn play a vital role in the promotion of those social goods which the market society identifies as signifiers of human flourishing: a celebrity such as Madonna, with homes in London, the Scottish Highlands and Beverly Hills, is seen as an exemplar of the value which the populus in

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30 For a more extensive critique of the fact-value distinction see Northcott, The Environment and Christian Ethics, pp. 243–56.
32 O’Donovan, Common Objects, p. 59.
general are encouraged to find in the high prices and relative scarcity of houses in Britain, even though such celebrities might be said to contribute to the inability of many less well-known citizens to actually obtain affordable housing. The category ‘publicity’ was born in the public relations revolution of the mid-twentieth century, the primary purpose of which was to entice recalcitrant post-war consumers out of their traditional customs of thrift, re-use and repair into the fashion-driven expendability of a consumer-led economic ‘miracle’. The rise of publicity and advertising was a direct consequence of the satiety which American, and then European, consumers experienced in the first flush of industry-led mass consumerism in the 1950s. Producers were finding that markets for their products were not expanding to keep pace with production once most households had acquired a car, a fridge and a television. The advertising revolution which in turn drove the media revolution of our now image-saturated culture was born out of the necessity of the dominant economic description of human flourishing as consumer choice. Consumers had to be encouraged en masse into a process of constant upgrading and enhancement of their possessions if industry was to continue to provide the engine of economic growth. As Vance Packard showed in his classic Hidden Persuaders, the birth of publicity was the birth of a project involving the mass manipulation of desire so that individuals could be directed by the images which saturate their consciousness to love those objects of desire without which modern culture indicates they cannot truly find fulfilment, and without which they may be judged as less than achieved human beings.33

Preston does not seem able to imagine that the market society might have as its logical terminus ad quod the celebrity/shopping fixations which are the daily currency of popular culture in Britain today and as a consequence of which Christians find themselves inhabiting a ‘perverse cultural script’ with severely limited vision.34 Ethics for Preston is the account of what Christians do in the midst of empirical structures which have no ends. As Milbank argues, this approach to ethics, while purporting to be realist and practical, in fact involves a complete rejection of the Aristotelian and Thomist understanding of ethics as practical intelligence. For Aquinas, the primary ethical end is the worship of God made possible in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as mediated through the sacramental life of the Church. The return of creature to creator, of caused to uncaused, provides the orienting goal which gives all other actions, including questions about property and economic exchange, a teleological framework of meaning. The ultimacy of this final goal undermines the tendency of


34 Milbank, ‘Poverty of Niebuhrianism’, p. 239.
other activities — and not least the acquisition of property and material goods — to become overarching goals which in their dominance over other moral goods subvert true human flourishing. Aquinas never imagined that any action or structure of actions did not already contain willed intentions and goals. The question for Thomas was what is the right goal? Once the answer to this question is known then other moral priorities and judgements of consequence fall into place.

A Thomist critique of the market society can help to explain the fundamental conundrum which defenders of the market, including Michael Novak as well as Preston, have noted, which is the tendency of the market society to undermine those virtues of trust, thrift, fidelity, commitment and truthfulness without which families and local communities begin to break down and even capitalism cannot be indefinitely sustained.\(^{35}\) For Thomas, the orienting virtue which directs persons to flourishing is the theological or cardinal virtue of love. The other virtues flow from this first and orienting virtue, for by the grace-infused love of God humans are enabled to recover the inner direction of their nature towards love which though not erased is shrouded and disoriented by sin. Thomist ethics involves then a narrative about human origins and human purposes which encapsulates humanity’s past, present and future, which encompasses both fallen and redeemed existence, both individual and social life. For the Thomist there is no distinction between description and evaluation of individual (moral) actions and (social) structures of action, such as the institutions of the market society. To describe or narrate economic exchange as characterised by intrinsic competition between individual consumers and producers is already to imagine, to envision modalities of human relationship which are inimical to virtues such as fidelity, trust and love. It is just not possible to describe and construct institutions after such a narration and then truthfully hold that these institutions do not involve by their very self-description a conflict with the values of Christians.

This is not to say that as Christians we do not share in the larger drama which is the publicity of the market-driven consumer/celebrity society. To the extent that we encounter and use its language, we already participate in aspects of its construction and maintenance. But as Christians we also recognise that it is a false description of the human story and that its absolutist claims to ultimacy are exposed by a redescription of human existence in terms of the narratives of the New Testament.\(^{36}\) This means that Christians, and Christian ethicists, have a particular and ongoing responsibility to be suspicious of the claims to fealty of all social structures which refuse the Christian story

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\(^{35}\) ‘The commercial virtues are not, then, sufficient to their own defence. A commercial system needs taming and correction by a moral-cultural system independent of commerce. At critical points, it also requires taming and correction by the political system and the state’. Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: American Enterprise Institute/Simon Schuster, 1982), p. 121.

\(^{36}\) Milbank, ‘Poverty of Niebuhrianism’, p. 249.
of the non-violent overcoming of evil by goodness, of the ‘poverty which makes us rich’, which is the story of the cross and resurrection of Christ. It means also that Christians need not be surprised when the purportedly value-free market economy can be turned so easily into an instrument of invasive levels of technological surveillance and control, or of state and corporate-sponsored trade in weapons of death and inter-state violence.

For Christians, the most ‘common object of love’ which they have placed in their churches, and with which they have marked their cities and landscapes, is the cross. The cross is a public sign which signifies the alternative publicity of the Cross of Christ which both judges and potentially redeems those falsely structured realities in the midst of which Christians still dwell. The cross was a public and a political event which inaugurated a new reality, a new metaphysics, in which the multitude were no longer coerced into servitude of the imperium but rather invited to become a people, and peoples, gathered from every tribe and nation, into spiritual communities of worship and holiness.\textsuperscript{37} It is this transcendent reality which the Church sustains and which still calls into question the performances of other realities, the invitations to devotion to other objects of love, which Christians, along with their neighbours, daily encounter in the workplace, or when they read newspapers or watch television. Christians find resources for resistance in the midst of the other calls on their loyalty in the worship and community of the Church, in the narratives of scriptures, and in their own prayers, families and friendships.

The role of Christian worship and community in empowering our resistance to market relations and consumerism, and in re-educating our desires, was brought home to me by a conversation over lunch with friends one Sunday after the Eucharist at our local Episcopal church of St James’ Leith. Our friends had been driving home from a visit to the Scottish Borders when they passed a Landrover dealership offering a second-hand Landrover for sale. Dreams of travels across France and Spain rapidly came to mind, and of secure and comfortable transport across rural roads in Scotland to a new and distant work placement, and desire translated rapidly to thoughts of purchase, and of the necessary bank loan to enable it. As we talked over lunch, and I pointed out the disadvantages of driving jeep-like vehicles — vibration, spinal problems, excess fuel consumption, poor secondary safety, danger to other road users – our friends began to move away from their near decision to purchase this object of their desire. Before they left, they called up the dealership and cancelled their follow-up visit. This I guess was a moment where our community as Christians, established in our common sharing of the Eucharist as well as our subsequent lunch, provided an occasion for the reframing of a consumerist urge which had earlier seemed both attractive and rational.

\textsuperscript{37} Milbank, ‘Poverty of Niebuhrianism’, p. 251.
A more detailed account of the way in which Church, friendship, neighbourhood and community sustain alternatives for Christians who dwell in market societies is given by David McCarthy in his book *Sex and Love in the Home*. In the midst of an eroticised and individualised publicity, McCarthy suggests that gift exchange between neighbours is a form of social exchange which denies the economic account of exchange as intrinsically self-interested and other denying.\(^{38}\) When neighbours help one another with the trash or the snow or child supervision they exchange gifts of time and skill which reveal and name ‘the social as a gift’. Family life and Christian marriage are similarly forms of self-other mutuality which are vital to human psychological and biological flourishing and at the same time evidence of the divine giftedness of the social as ‘marriage, along with parenthood, represents the basis of civilisation (i.e. the humanisation of the world); therefore, marital love is the conceptual basis of all authentic social contracts’.\(^{39}\)

For Preston, the social is irredeemable and only individuals are perfectible, though he certainly knew of the joys of marriage and family. But this theoretical view of the social is fundamentally in conflict both with the Christian account of sanctification as that which takes place in the lives of Christians who perform the liturgy together and with anthropological descriptions of the gift relation and familial networks on which McCarthy, like Milbank, relies. Of course all such networks stand under the sign of the cross and are in need of redemption but they remain as pointers within created order of the divine economy of gift which is set into the structure of being and which finds its supreme expression in the Eucharist. The market economy is in systematic conflict with the structures of life of the planet, supplanting abundance with scarcity, and gift-relations with coerced exchanges of the kind that required already impoverished Bolivians in Cochababamba to buy their rainwater back from a French public utility company in 2001.\(^{40}\) Against this, Christians can only repeat the words of worship of the Psalmist when he calls for God to gift the social with God’s justice, and so sustain also the giftedness of creation:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Give the king your justice, O God} \\
\text{And your righteousness to the king’s son;} \\
\text{That he may rule the people righteously} \\
\text{And the poor with justice;} \\
\text{He shall come down like rain upon the mown field} \\
\text{Like showers that water the earth}
\end{align*}
\]

(Psalm 72:1, 2 and 6)


\(^{39}\) McCarthy, *Sex and Love*, p. 119.

Public Theology and Changing Social Values

Kenneth Medhurst and James Sweeney

Abstract

On the basis of interviews conducted in Bradford, Glasgow and Rotterdam, this article seeks to explore the issue of changing social values as they are affected by or affect the capacity (or incapacity) to participate in community and/or political life. The issue explored is in the context of globalisation and its impact on the communities in question. The aim is to offer some empirical basis for a theological reflection upon the nature and scope of value change and the opportunities and challenges thus posed for publicly engaged Christians.

A key feature of Ronald Preston’s work was its basis in and dialogue with empirical research. He constantly stressed the need for ethical debates to be grounded in careful well-informed assessments of observable realities, and he tended to be impatient of those who seemed to be neglectful of such considerations. This article is offered in a similar spirit. It derives from an empirical study which is intended to inform theological reflection.

The study is concerned to cast some light on the changing nature of values as they are shaped by or help to shape shifting social contexts. The particular focus is on communities characterised by significant deprivation and social exclusion. A special emphasis is placed upon those values which facilitate or inhibit participation in communal or political life. The data is provided by interviews conducted in selected neighbourhoods within Bradford, Glasgow and Rotterdam. In all these cases we have been mindful of the impact of globalisation and the new realities this presents.
The Global Context

As Ronald Preston himself acknowledged, his intellectual formation mainly occurred against the background of depression, fascism, the Second World War and the post-war Welfare State and the mixed, Keynesian-driven economy. Amongst the great intellectual or theological influences to impact upon him were the works of R. H. Tawney and, in different mode, Reinhold Neibuhr. He lived to see much of this legacy challenged by that neoliberalism associated with ‘Thatcherism’ and by that fracturing of the post-war consensus which was a feature of the ‘Thatcherite’ experiment. At most points along the way, however, he tended to see the classic nation state as a primary point of reference. Obviously enough there is still much life left in that ‘old dog’, but its significance needs reinterpreting in the light of still unfolding realities. Certainly, in approaching our modest enterprise we feel that even at the most local of levels it is unwise to ignore those phenomena summed up under the banner headline of ‘globalisation’ and the impact of such phenomena upon the state and society (as conventionally understood).

Globalisation can be presented in essentially ideological terms designed to affirm existing realities and to convey the ostensibly ineluctable nature of such realities. Alternatively the concept may be an attempt to describe observable processes. In practice it may sometimes be difficult to disentangle the two. We seek to describe and to query the wholly ineluctable nature of the relevant processes and, in the light of research, to question some of the attendant conventional wisdom. Equally, albeit in more obviously speculative fashion, we seek to read ‘the signs of the times’ and to discern what such signs may have to say about continuing ethical debates.

Globalisation as generally understood (whether normatively or not) points to the historically novel extent to which the world is now one inter-dependent market place. It is a market place within which massive trans-global flows of trade, capital and investment occur in response to impersonal market forces and/or at the behest of financial institutions or multinational corporations with a global outreach. In practice this globalised system tends to exacerbate entrenched irregularities between regions or states and within states. It systematically works to the advantage of the already rich and powerful. Equally, it tends to drain power away from the nation state and quite substantially to diminish the freedom of manoeuvre of national political elites. Not least, the constant quest for international economic competitiveness seems to set certain limits on the capacity of individual states to provide for the social welfare of their citizens. Popular expectations generated within an earlier post-war context now seem incapable of being satisfactorily met. This latter difficulty is perhaps compounded by the extent to which largely untamed market forces have been responsible for the disruption of once-established
forms of economic life and, in many instances, the accompanying destruction of old solidarities or communities. Rhetoric concerning the need to ‘restructure’ or ‘modernise’ masks the extent to which communities and individual lives may be thrown into the melting pot, often with economically impoverishing and psychologically disorientating consequences.

Disorientation may also be associated with the historically unprecedented migratory flows of population that have accompanied the emergence of the new globalised economy. Such flows from the poorer to the richer parts of the globe may be due to a mixture of push and pull factors. The push comes from the attempt to escape repression and, more commonly, poverty. The pull is the prospect of more materially rewarding lives. The net effect has been the emergence of unprecedentedly large religious, ethnic or cultural minorities within developed countries — minorities seeming to pose major challenges to the cohesion of the receiving societies.

The anxieties seemingly generated in the wake of all the above may be further exacerbated by more direct threats to security (perceived or all too real), seemingly characteristic of the world into which we are entering. Such threats extend from international terrorist movements beyond the control of individual states to rising rates of localised crime attendant upon the apparent atomisation or decomposition of pre-existing communities. Taken together they seem to underline the extent to which contemporary governments not only have a diminished capacity to provide for the economic welfare of their citizens but also have a diminished capacity to discharge the most basic of government functions, namely the effective maintenance of public order. It is a trend to which modern technology may contribute. On the one hand is the ability of the state’s enemies to communicate trans-globally and destructively to deploy technology. On the other hand is a media-soaked international environment which opens governments to constant contestation and leaves their position exposed to incessant intimations of crisis.

It seems very likely that this draining of power away from the state, and the increasing irrelevance of state frontiers helps substantially to explain the disenchantment with conventional politics and established political elites that seems such a feature of contemporary western liberal democracies. That disenchantment, measurable in terms of low electoral turnouts and declining party memberships, testifies to a waning of public trust that may have complex roots but which, in significant measure, can be explained by the changed contexts within which governments and elites are constrained to function. Such a withholding of trust is observable across Europe and further afield. Chile, post-Pinochet, is just one example born, in that case, out of personal experience. Not least, such withdrawal of trust has underlain recent manifestations of opposition to the war in Iraq.
All the above provides essential background to our particular investigation. It is to be initially presumed that the massively changed environment, particularly as it impacts locally, will have huge implications for the ways in which inherited values may be tested, transformed or transmitted. The sheer scope and speed of the changes involved points to the possibility of much confusion, if not anomie. Equally, there may be an implication that the traditional generators and carriers of value are being tested almost to destruction. Not least, there might be an implication that we are confronting irresistible and irreversible processes. The triumph of the market may seem so complete as to suggest no obvious alternative way forward. All of this will be the subject of critical assessment in the light of the evidence we have garnered. Likewise, that assessment will be the springboard for a subsequent reflection.

**Social Values**

The *Values & Participation* project investigated the part that changing social values play in inhibiting, or contributing to, participation in community and civic and political life. It is a narrowly focused study, not intended to yield a comprehensive picture of value patterns but an exploratory interpretation based on empirical data. We start from the assumption that changing personal, social and moral values — of which there is ample evidence — impact upon and are connected in some way with problems of participation. However, the exact nature of the links and its consequences are matters for empirical enquiry.

Participation is itself a value-laden term. It involves a move beyond preoccupation with the self to an engagement with the ‘other’, whether family and friends or the wider ‘other’ of society. Such participation depends crucially on a particular kind of motivation, a willingness to invest oneself in the other. What, we ask, are the sources of that commitment? What are its grounds?

**A Phenomenology of Values**

We need to say something about what we mean by values, what we are looking for. The concept is often left surprisingly undefined in the values literature, where value is used in a generic way and different types of value are referred to, as are various characteristics attributed to values by different schools of thought, but what precisely is under discussion remains elusively understated. What, then, is a value? What are its trace elements? How do we define it operationally?

At the start we formulated a preliminary definition:

1 *Values & Participation* project, undertaken at the Von Hügel Institute, St Edmund’s College, Cambridge, UK.

We intend by ‘values’ to refer to those socially constructed sets of beliefs, assumptions and widely accepted standards in terms of which individuals and/or groups assess what it is that makes for human welfare or fulfilment.

This could do with closer specification. The key point is that values thus defined are notions or ideas which human beings deploy for the purpose of assessing their own and others’ actions in relation to goals of individual and communal wellbeing. Values, in these terms, are actual operational standards, specific orientations guiding and guarding daily action. We are not talking about philosophical constructs but what might be called factual values, as found in day-to-day life.

Factual values are part of our human conscious relatedness to the world. They are not simply beliefs — what we profess to believe — which may be no more than a personal ideology masking something quite different. Nor are they simply ideals — related to a future that is desired but not necessarily attained — although they are closely related to ideals. Nor do we mean by values the attitudes we strike, or stances we adopt, or reactions to the world and to people and circumstances (positive–negative, energetic–lethargic, enthusiastic–apathetic, proactive–passive, determined–defeatist, sympathetic–hostile, caring–distant, committed–uninvolved, generous–selfish).

We use all the above categories when describing human behaviour and in order to identify how people relate to the world, as well as to say something about the persons themselves; but this does not yet identify their values, because the same behaviour and similar attitudes may spring from or express different values. For example, Erik Schindler rescuing Jews from the concentration camps and a convent of nuns providing them with a hiding place were behaving the same way, had the same attitude of horror at the persecution, and an indistinguishable motivation of reaching out to fellow human beings — but their values were clearly different. This is not simply a matter of having different ideological justifications for action or different beliefs; it is a matter of different ways of relating to the world.

One way of expressing it is that our attitudes drive us forward, our values draw us on. Our attitudes structure our motives, our values structure our intentions. Factual values can be likened to hopes or wishes or ideals which urge to action and achievement. They are the motives of the heart — social, psychological and spiritual imperatives at the roots of human action and making demands on the person.

Values thus defined need to be examined phenomenologically. They are taken for granted in day-to-day life, entwined in the dynamics of human living and not in the first instance items of self-conscious theoretical reflection. Once we move to critical reflection and formulate values as philosophical propositions for the purposes of theoretical justification we have shifted to a second-level activity. Value shifts,
Attitudinal shifts, occur in situ not theoretically, under the force and pressure of daily living. For example, supplanting the set of attitudes and values which embody the work ethic and which rest on a sense of the self as producer by a new leisure-focused orientation based on the self as consumer is less a matter of rational critique and choice than a socio-psychological process restructuring social perceptions of what is desirable and of the nature of human fulfilment. This does not happen by some spontaneous process of cultural change, but under pressure from economic influences which are abroad in society and reflected in political and institutional forces.

The phenomenology of values is concerned to chart the factual values of individuals and social groups, without in the first instance raising normative (or ethical) questions about their coherence, their consistency with human wellbeing, or their ranking into higher and lower, primary and secondary. Phenomenology simply portrays values as dynamic social factors — operational, embedded in the social process and constantly shifting.

To sum up: factual values are ideas/notions/wishes/hopes which guard and guide specific orientations to the world. They make human action purposive and give it positive direction. They are what lead people on, drawing them forwards in their engagement with the world.

But why try to isolate and identify factual values? What is the point? Is it not behaviour that matters? Our assumption is that true social participation is dependent upon values, and one key value in particular — commitment to the other. Participative behaviour may spring from diverse motives, but genuine participation implies something other than calculative behaviour; it means an investment of oneself in the community. While human motives are always mixed, and instances of ‘pure participation’ might be empirically rare, to speak of participation is already to enter the realm of values. The contemporary challenges to social participation, then, require an analysis of value structures. Behavioural strategies can easily be tainted by manipulation or coercion. It is only by going in depth to the embedded values that we can hope to understand the problem and promote a new commitment. What this research seeks to identify in the lives of individuals is the spark that inspires.

Social Values — Changes and Continuities

Our interviews were with activists — therefore with ‘participators’ rather than the alienated (see appendix for details) — working in disadvantaged neighbourhoods in three cities — Thornbury in Bradford, Gorbals and Drumchapel in Glasgow and Oude Weste in Rotterdam. We also interviewed local government politicians and policy professionals. In this article we concentrate on the activists. They were fascinating in their individuality. They came across as self-
possessed personalities, even if as might be expected some confusions in self-identity were apparent (in a few cases relatively strongly). Reflecting on the interviews, we developed the practice of giving each one a nickname to capture what seemed their special individual characteristic and as a pointer to their key values. Approaching this material, we have four questions in mind. (1) What values were to be found? (2) How are values changing? (3) What sources do these values come from? (4) How are these values maintained and transmitted?

We can make a start with sketches or pen-portraits of three of the interviewees.

*The Adventurer/Seeker* is a remarkable woman in her 30s, British, married with children, a project development officer and self-reporting as Christian/Church of England. What is remarkable about her is her independence of spirit. She comes from a rural background which she talked about with great enthusiasm as a time of freedom, adventure and exploration of the world of nature. She went to university where she was politically radicalised, although later, as she settled into marriage and family life, that faded; indeed she became rather disillusioned with politics. Her two great passions are her children and her work introducing people from a disadvantaged community to learning and reading. She is very strongly motivated with rather clearcut values — a very definite ‘spark’. However, she has not been at all influenced by any religious tradition; nor, unusually, do her parents loom large as influences. As already said, political ideology eventually let her down. Her values seem to arise from within, from her own experience, and have been forged independently.

*The Great Escaper* reinforces the point. Like *The Adventurer/Seeker* she is a woman in her 30s, British, with children, a youth worker — but from a troubled social background. Her husband, from whom she separated, died young. She has no religion. She says she was totally unmotivated and in an aimless existence on the housing estate where she was brought up, until she experienced an ‘awakening’ when a neighbour persuaded her to get involved in community activities. She was then befriended by a project worker who spotted her potential, and she got a job on the project and became deeply involved in local issues. She is now about to take advantage of a link-up scheme with the local university to study for a degree. She is tough, streetwise, her own person. Her passion is threefold: her children, to escape the estate to better circumstances, and education — a real *Educating Rita*!

*The Committed Community-oriented Activist* is a young man in his 20s, British, single, a youth worker, a Christian/Roman Catholic. He lives in the neighbourhood where he was brought up and identifies deeply and strongly with it, despite its many social problems and troubled history. He had been working with a well-known retail firm and been sent for advanced management training — so he had good prospects. But he decided quite abruptly that he didn’t want to spend his life ‘selling things’. He wanted to work with people. So he resigned, to the management’s annoyance, got a job on a local project, at a much reduced
salary, and committed himself to the neighbourhood where he feels he
belongs. He had been to university for a year and intends to go back.
What shaped him and gave him his spark were his parents and family,
and the Catholic schools he went to.

What shines out clearly in each of these instances is precisely the
individual spark that inspires. Our Adventurer/Seeker has a passion for
life and for family, whose roots are clearly traceable to childhood
experiences. The Great Escaper lives with a new born passion for
the better things she has glimpsed within her reach through the
opportunity to develop her innate talent by education. Our Committed
Community-oriented Activist burns with a quiet passion, and serious
commitment, for the people and community he knows as his own.

What is this ‘spark’? The Matriarch, an older women from a
traditional working-class background, was galvanised into action
by a sense of outrage at a local government proposal to take over
land for development which the community used for recreation. She
discovered within herself previously hidden gifts for community
leadership. The Clear-headed Activist is a professional project worker
with a clear eye to what is required in his community and a sharply
critical, even acerbic, view of its politics and institutions. The Very
Modern Muslim, a young man working as a project leader, is both quite
clear about his background and Muslim identity and very independent
and open minded; he has the personal confidence to assert how he
intends to express his identity, even if it means going against parental
wishes (e.g. as regards marriage). Clearly there are psychological and
personality factors involved, but these individuals exhibit a sense of
having something to achieve in life, not just in a self-regarding way
but in relation to the society of which they are part.

A minority of interviewees exhibited a certain defensiveness. The
Empire Nostalgic was marked by his wartime experiences and was a
curious mix of rigid political traditionalism and openness to cultural
diversity. The Muslim under Threat is an immigrant who, while being
only minimally observant religiously, was very concerned about
the course of modern society and its lack of norms. The Concerned
Mother is rooted in her community, believes firmly in family values
(for the sake of her children and despite — perhaps because of — her
marriage breakdown), is practical and religiously open, and yet takes a
pessimistic view of society today — again perhaps due to her personal
experiences.

The spark inspires in different ways. It can be seen in attitudes such
as the openness-defensiveness described above. It reveals itself in
the ideals for which these individuals implicitly or explicitly strive.
And we can also see the part that beliefs — such as those of Christian
or Muslim provenance — play. But is there also a factor identifiable
as values? Values in the sense we are using the term — as factual
value, guarding and guiding orientations to the world — require
some combination of attitude, ideal and belief. An ideal to strive for, openness to the other, and a belief in that which makes the effort worthwhile constitute the grounds of the value-added element that is \textit{the spark which inspires}. To identify this element as ‘spark’ puts it in psychological terms; it makes value synonymous with \textit{charisma}. But charisma has both a subjective reference (personal qualities of energy, dynamism) and an objective reference — not only to that which is valued and sought, but a reference to that \textit{by reason of which} it is valued and sought. Factual values express and embody peoples’ \textit{existential reasons for commitment}.

The Christian who reaches out works in a multi-ethnic community relations project and, while firmly Christian, he holds to the fundamental value of humanity (which Christianity itself validates); he is therefore driven to dialogue with others. \textit{The Discerning Activist} tells the story of the industrial dispute in which he was under pressure to lead resistance, with the consequence of likely losing his job; he didn’t want to take the risk, and one Sunday prayed to be ‘let off’ — until he ‘heard a voice’ saying ‘If not you — then who?’; and he knew that he was best placed, so he faced up to the struggle for justice. \textit{The Cosmopolitan Muslim} is a young university-educated woman who married a fellow Muslim from a different background and was shocked by the ‘woman’s role’ his family expected her to fulfil; she left him, but later returned out of a sense of religious duty to work through the conflict creatively. \textit{Do unto Others} is a middle-aged, working-class man of no religious background who became unemployed at an early age and was left without aim in life; his life was turned around as the result of a chance meeting with an acquaintance after he had become homeless due to a family dispute; his friend persuaded him to talk about his obvious worries, and then said there was a spare room in his house which he could have for as long as he needed it. ‘It was the first time I’d ever known someone to do something out of pure goodness. And I thought to myself: if he can do that for me, I could do the same for others.’ He discovered the golden rule — without the help of a preacher.

Openness to humanity, struggle for justice, the duty to foster family relationships, do unto others as you would have then do unto you — these are traditional values, but re-discovered and re-forged in the crucible of experience. They are all positive in nature, of course, not negative or anti-values. For the moment, we can leave that issue aside as well as the question of how values are changing. First, we need to examine the sources of these values. Where, empirically, do they come from?

It is not easy to penetrate this mystery, which is the basic epistemological problem of our study. People will happily tell you ‘their story’, but talk to them about their values and you stun them into silence! The values factor is elusive, weaved into the story rather than free-standing. Value sparks are deeply embedded. Even in the case of
interviewees who could trace their sense of values to upbringing or religion and whose values were rooted in some public tradition, the way they came alive was deeply personal, and typically it was tied up with the influence of another person — an ordinary person, not some paragon. This all suggests something rather spontaneous in value formation, a kind of ‘spontaneous value combustion’, as clearly was the case with *The Great Escaper*.

The sources of values overlap with how they are maintained and transmitted. We identified three fields — comprising six individual factors: (1) Neighbourhood and Community; (2) Personal Experience and Family Life; (3) Religion and Tradition.

Strong attachments to the local neighbourhood were expressed in varying degrees. Loyalty came across as strongest in the Gorbals, a long-established inner-city neighbourhood of Glasgow, while a more ambivalent loyalty was evident in Thornbury in Bradford, an area of mixed British-Asian population (possibly because of that factor). Drumchapel — a post-war housing estate on the periphery of Glasgow, now much diminished in job opportunities and size (from 40,000 inhabitants to 16,000) — attracted least loyalty, although some still thought it ‘a great place’ which they would not want to leave. Oude Weste in Rotterdam is close to the city centre, mixed in population (Dutch and immigrant) and quite well provided with services and housing. A major political battle some years ago succeeded in preserving the area from falling into the hands of developers, and this was a source of local pride.

*Triumph in Adversity* is an older woman whose life was darkened by great personal challenges but she has remained positive and resilient; she lived abroad for a long time but returned to her own neighbourhood to which she has a deep affection despite its impoverishment. *The Holder of the Memory* is the archetypical local person, rooted in her neighbourhood where she has lived all her days; she remembers how life was ‘in the old days’ and has been deeply involved in all its transformations. *The Community Protector* is a middle-aged woman, highly intelligent and independent minded; she is much involved with local agencies and is deeply concerned about the effects of crime, drug use and poor housing on the neighbourhood. *The Endurer*, on the other hand, after the long struggle of a childhood spent in care and ensuring the best for her children’s education, wants to move to more congenial surroundings where she can ‘have time for myself’.

Of our group of twenty-seven interviewees, thirteen were married, two in partnership, two divorced, two separated, eight single or widowed. Family life and particularly the care of children were a very strong focus of commitment. In most cases upbringing and the influence of parents had been significant in forming their own attitudes and values. The institution of marriage was still strongly supported (or at least not contested), even when there had been breakdown, as we saw in the case of *The Concerned Mother*. We have already met *The
Adventurer/Seeker, someone who brings all her passion for life to the upbringing of her own children. The True Religious Believer, a woman with a deep religious faith, is above all else a mother, while also deeply involved in the local community. The Young Modern-minded Muslim comes from a traditional background and has a devout attachment to her faith; she had caring parents and a protected upbringing, and is in turn committed to bringing up her own children, although she left her husband when he turned out ‘to be no good’.

Five interviewees stated that they had no religious affiliation, six were Muslim and sixteen Christians of various denominations, although not all of them fully observant. Religion was clearly an influence for most, both in their upbringing and currently, and as a medium for articulating values and a force to maintain them. Religious teaching and rituals lay at the root of the social commitment of many interviewees, as we have seen in the case of The True Religious Believer and The Discerning Activist. Some, like The Clear-headed Activist, had moved away from the religion they were brought up in, but retained respect for the values it propagated. Belief in Action is an eminent figure in his own field, deeply involved through his church in the problems of poverty and community disadvantage and clearly influenced by religious tradition, while expressing serious difficulties with its doctrines.

The ‘secular’ group had little contact with or view about religion. The Christians divided into two kinds: those strong in a faith expressed in social practice, and the ‘disengaged’ who may have criticisms about institutional religion but are still in tune with its values (we uncovered no antagonism to religion). It was the Muslims who seemed most at ease in their religion, even when they hung loose from some of its prescriptions. They were all second- or third-generation immigrants and made reference to the Koran and Islam as the basis of their view of the world and sense of values. At the same time, they were in varying degrees of accommodation between the traditional ways of their parents and grandparents and the modern ways of the West, especially in relation to marriage, as we have seen in the case of The Young Modern-minded Muslim and The Very Modern Muslim. Education makes the difference. The Socially Concerned Muslim is a social worker whose good education broadened his perspectives and enabled him to grapple with the tensions between traditional Muslim (and rural) culture and the West; and it was education which helped The Cosmopolitan Muslim, married to a Muslim from a quite different tradition and background, to grapple with diversities between Muslim cultures.

A word needs to be said about the social context of the Netherlands where ‘values’ has become a major item of public discourse in the political ferment associated with the rise of the Pim Fortuyn party, his assassination and the subsequent disarray into which the party fell. Questions about the values of Dutch society — what they are, whether they have been well maintained, specifically in the political
sphere, and how they might be under threat due to the presence of immigrant groups — have become hotly debated topics in this most open of European societies. The ‘integration’ of Dutch society, where all sectors have had carefully defined space (pillarisation), is felt to be under strain. The shift in social values which occurred widely in the 1960s was perhaps more marked there than anywhere else, and established social and religious norms were relaxed in favour of openness, tolerance and pluralism. Is the Pim Fortuyn phenomenon a shift back? No one we spoke to thought so. A correction perhaps, a new set of challenges, but not a return to the past.

So, have values changed? Our data only permits us to give a limited response to this question. We have not yet managed to interview those in the neighbourhoods who are not participators, the alienated (a difficult research task), so we have not charted comparable evidence of a lack or loss of values, what arises when values associated with participation wane. Some interviewees had lived a transition from anomie, or indifference, to purposiveness (Do Unto Others, The Great Escaper, The Matriarch), but the majority had fairly consistent value development within their personal narrative. The Traditionalist held old-fashioned views and epistomised ‘the fine upstanding citizen’; he spoke in a different code from a younger generation (as did The Empire Nostalgic), but their fundamental values — service, concern for the less well off, Christian charity — were not different.

It may well be that ‘what people value’ has changed; we may, for example, have become more materialistic; but what people value is not the same as the deeper reality of existential or factual values which we are seeking to elucidate. What does appear to have changed are the processes of value formation. The penetration of consumer ‘values’ may well have weakened the deeper dynamic of existential value formation, with the result that individuals are more liable to be caught in value confusion or a values wasteland — although it is worth repeating that, in general, our interviewees showed a certain consistency in their values. What does appear to be the case, however, is that greater stress is laid on personal experience in the formation of values. This varies with age, and the younger generations were more trustful of their own experience. The Bridge Builder is a young project worker, a people person, oriented to community and family, and yet very individualistic and mildly iconoclastic. The Responsible Young Man is a volunteer youth leader with a full-time professional job, well educated and committed to his neighbourhood, but he has discarded the value-forming religious traditions of his upbringing. Of course older people also ‘follow their own star’. The Old Socialist is above all a doer; he has travelled to different countries for work, and makes up his own mind about issues — and holds the ‘new politics’ suspect.

In relation to how values have changed, therefore, we conclude that the shift to trust in personal experience is the most significant feature.
This, rather than simple reception of values through education or from tradition, has become dominant in how peoples’ values form and develop. What is also significant, however, is that traditional value influences — neighbourhood and community, family life and marriage, religion and tradition — are not thereby displaced, but are rather re-focused through the prism of personal experience. They are still players in the field — but playing in new positions.

There is a second shift that we noted which seems of great significance in relation to value formation. In the British samples (the Netherlands, as we have seen, is a different case) our interviewees were, virtually without exception, quite alienated from organised mainline politics. They were deeply sceptical about the political process, distrustful of politicians, and considered political and administrative structures — both city and national — more an obstacle than a help in their work. This is all the more remarkable given that these were not disengaged people, but participators, involved in their communities, well motivated, and doing creative work. Some had previously been political activists. The fact that they are now dissociated from politics cannot be read as mere individualism or social privatism. The problem would appear to be a lack of fit between persons and social institutions; not that people have turned away from participation, but that institutions are failing to enable and capitalise on participation.

That, as a conclusion, is grounds for hope. What it seems we are facing is not some catastrophic collapse of values, but a crisis of institutions. This is confirmed by the elements of continuity we observed. It was from listening to the individual stories and noticing the comparisons and contrasts between neighbourhoods that we identified neighbourhood and community, personal experience and family life, religion and tradition as influential in value formation. Their influence is all the more striking since, apart from personal experience, they are rather widely discounted today as lacking significance for shaping people’s lives. In the postmodern world locale, marriage and religion are all thought to have been set aside. We do not claim to have disproved that. What we suggest, however, is that it is probably an over-statement to claim — as is often done — that a privatised, atomised individualistic existence now reigns supreme. The human person is ‘hard-wired’ to values; there are deep values embedded in the human heart; and they always find a way to reappear.

A Theological Reflection

All of this leaves largely open the underlying theological significance, from a Christian viewpoint, of our evidence and of its possible interpretation. What ‘theological fragments’ may be yielded up? Alternatively, what may be ‘the signs of the times’ that could perhaps
be discerned amidst the realities with which we have sought to grapple?

Amidst a myriad of possibilities we tentatively point to two major considerations. First, we suggest a contemporary re-enactment of the perennial tension, within the Christian tradition, between the claims of the universal and of the particular. In particular, we are reminded of that ‘scandal of particularity’ whereby it is in and through the historically and locally specific that meaning may be most clearly glimpsed. On the one hand, we have here an ostensibly triumphant and universal capitalism which, at first blush, seems to ride largely roughshod over communities and even whole nations. On the other hand, there are indications of resistance to the forces apparently at work. It is a resistance which may sometimes be of a largely defensive kind but which may also be positive and creative in character. Albeit on a somewhat ‘bitty’ or apparently piecemeal basis, there are indications of countervailing tendencies, cutting across national and cultural boundaries, both of attempts to re-create communities on fresh bases and of struggles to re-articulate apparently discredited values in redefined ways. It is striking how, amidst much uncertainty and confusion, those remaining in the local vanguard have been formed by those traditional agencies of family, community and religion which can be so easily overlooked in contemporary interpretations of globalisation. It is equally striking that values handed on through such ‘carriers’ have been appropriated in perhaps novel ways. Not least, it is striking how, in the dialectical relationship between globalised forces and local realities, the ‘local’ provides space within which to articulate visions of the future seeking to challenge the ‘imperatives’ of the global market place. Arguably, a possible need for such taming or challenging is most clearly perceived at the level of the local where the shoe is liable to pinch most painfully. It is at this level, for example, that we hear the call explicitly to recognise the interdependence of human beings, which is implicitly present within the global market place. Put in other terms, the Gospel’s universal claims and implications may be most clearly perceived at the most local of levels. Preoccupation with the local can, of course, degenerate into a myopic parochialism. Alternatively, it is perhaps from this level that most effective witness can initially be made to those values upon which, in the very long run, the future of the whole planet may depend. We refer, for example, to the recovery of trust amidst or between disparate groups and to the re-discovery of a well-grounded sense of ‘a common good’ — a common good that, in the last resort, needs to be understood globally.

Secondly, and harking back to the notion of inherited values being appropriated or articulated in fresh ways, we tentatively pinpoint a tension between the claims of authority, as traditionally understood, and of personal choice. Emphasis upon the latter is deemed to be one defining feature of a postmodern culture within which all meta-
narratives have lost their former significance and moral relativism tends to be the order of the day. Our evidence tempts us to place at least a small question mark against such an interpretation. Our admittedly small and distinctive sample of interviewees suggest the existence of limits to the ‘free for all’ approach suggested above. Rather, it is a matter of personal choice but of choice within limits and subject to the influence of traditional value carriers. What does seem to be the case is a shift from the acceptance of values on the basis of attachment to established authority to an acceptance born out of relatively considered choice and in the light of experience. Such a view seems consistent with what we know about the contemporary crisis of major institutions but also suggests that amongst some limited yet significant portions of our societies moral confusion is much less of an issue than some might suppose. Those local activists we have identified, across national and cultural boundaries, might, from a theological point of view, be regarded as portents of fruitful new growth or signs of the Kingdom being called into fresh life. From this perspective it is not least striking how much those concerned appear to owe to values of Christian provenance, even when the original Christian roots lie unacknowledged.

For the churches, and for all concerned with social ethics of Christian inspiration, this could conceivably present some food for thought. It suggests the possibility that the contemporary relevance of the Gospel is, in the first place, most likely to be apprehended at the most local of levels. The further challenge is how, at the national, supra-national and global levels those insights may be translated into appropriate ethically informed institutional arrangements. Our ‘new’ globalised world points towards the underlying spiritual truth that we are all ultimately members of one another. At the local level there may be stirrings pointing us towards the ways in which this over-riding truth may become more firmly grasped by those responsible for the affairs of the nations.

Appendix: Values and Participation Study

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Male 15 Female 12
## Public Theology and Changing Social Values

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Abstract

Between 1993 and 1998 I served as magazine editor and then publications officer for the Christian Socialist Movement. The article reflects on this experience and in particular the attempt to relate theological ideas to political activity. It is argued that theological ideas were less important than political allegiances. This said, theological ideas did help motivate people to become involved in politics and offer general ideological direction especially through the notion of an eschatological vision. This type of theological reflection tended to support those who were critical of the New Labour project. What seemed to be lacking was a theology of governance and so in the final section some consideration is given to the issues for this type of theology.

From late 1993 until 1998 I worked part-time and voluntarily as magazine editor and then publications officer for the Christian Socialist Movement (CSM). This article is a reflection upon that experience and in particular the attempts to utilise theological ideas to inform CSM’s major political discussions. It is based upon my recollections of CSM’s executive meetings, publication committee meetings and private conversations. There is of course every danger that my recollections are selective, biased and would, I am sure, be contested by other participants. The difficulty is that formal records, such as minutes, fail to portray adequately the *dramatis personae*, events, partisan loyalties and alliances which underpinned the most interesting disagreements and which are important for this discussion.

The first thing to say is that during a period of intense political division theological ideas were remarkably uncontroversial. CSM’s
executive prided itself on its ecumenical nature and yet never in my memory argued about doctrine. There are, I think, two sets of reasons which explain this.

(1) The most important divisions were political. Within CSM there existed a politics of identity, replicating that within the Labour Party, whereby people belonged either to the Left or the Right, or, as it is now, Old and New Labour. This explains the otherwise remarkable homogeneity of political positions adopted by people within the two factions over a range of questions. For example, between 1993 and 1998 Old Labour resisted the move to limit the trade union block vote, known as one member one vote; supported Margaret Beckett in the leadership campaign following John Smith’s death; defended the traditional wording of Clause IV; and rebelled against the decision to adopt Conservative spending plans for the first two years of a Labour Government. The Right of the Party supported Blair of course, as well as one member one vote, a new social democratic Clause IV, and tight fiscal restrictions. What is noteworthy is that the CSM executive mirrored these divisions precisely. There was no theological proposition, or analysis, which could generate a consensus around one side or offer an alternative which transcended internal party divisions. And I have to say that these questions were debated seriously and intensely.

Furthermore, if people from different ecclesial traditions agreed politically, but not theologically, then the political took precedence. This does not mean we should generate a picture of suppressed theological controversy within political alliances as often alliances were formed within ecclesial-political cultural associations. But these were by no means exclusive, so an Anglo-Catholic such as Ken Leech could be cited favourably by evangelical Methodists because of his political views.

(2) Alongside the prioritising of the political there was a fundamental consensus about the role and purpose of theology in politics. Partly this was a negative consensus, a problem of relevance; there was simply no reason to discuss the ecclesiological, soteriological and missiological ideas about which there would undoubtedly have been disagreement. But mainly it was a positive consensus. Theological ideas functioned as a personal motivation for involvement in political affairs and provided a general ideological direction, in CSM’s case to the Left of course. A central tool, which combined motivation and ideology, was the idea of eschatological vision, the heavenly city. Executive members interpreted their discipleship as either working towards or sharing in the work of building the reign of God on earth. The nature of God’s reign, or the content of the vision, provided an analytical starting point for critical

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1 To my knowledge the executive contained those whose ecclesial tradition was ‘Primitive Methodist’ and those who subscribed to the views of the Sea of Faith.
engagement with contemporary political affairs. There was virtually no controversy about the nature of the heavenly city but deep and fundamental divisions about its practical expression.

The points I am making about the place and role of theological ideas in political activity have previously been made by others, notably Raymond Plant. Plant is an academic political scientist, theological thinker and, most interestingly for this discussion, an active Labour Party member becoming shadow home affairs spokesperson in the Lords. In a 1985 essay Plant complained that the churches lacked a political theology to match the detail and sophistication of contemporary political theory. The problem manifested itself in two significant and related ways: (1) political positions were adopted for reasons other than theological inquiry, so that theology merely supported political decisions made for non-theological reasons and, (2) theological statements were too general and vacuous. Up to a point Plant supported Preston’s attempt to address the problem of vacuity by developing middle axioms. But, as Plant argued, when middle axioms are sufficiently specific to be of use to the political practitioner then they tend to be contentious and lose the ecclesial consensus which ensures them their authority. Middle axioms suffer from being either theological, and not relevant to political decisions, political in a general sense, and thereby unable to resolve practical disputes because all sides agree with their sentiments, or specific enough to inform policy decisions but consequently rejected by those who disagree with the axioms.

What is interesting about the way theological ideas functioned within CSM’s executive is that it suited those on the Left far more than the New Labourites, especially once Blair was Prime Minister. The version of Augustinianism so far described, however seriously it takes temporal affairs, legitimises a theology of protest not of governance. The same can be said of theological realism, and of course liberation

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3 Plant states: ‘It is not clear what the Church is adding, for example, to a theory of redistributive justice of its own, and one is left with the despair of feeling that one is looking for the odd bit of theological backing for one’s political preferences which are held on quite other grounds. And, of course, it would be open to the conservative to do the same. In addition, one has to recognise that such secular political theories as one suggests for theological endorsement, are not themselves capable of being held as ultimate and objective truths about political life.’ Ibid., p. 329.

4 Ibid., p. 322. Plant states that ‘There seems to be a genuine need for this [middle axioms]. Too often the Church’s political pronouncements connect together the understandings of a particular policy or attitude and a very vague and general principle and assume that the connection between the two is clear. More often than not it is far from clear and one does need to know the intermediate principles which connect the general and the particular.’ Ibid., p. 322.
theology. The Eusebian heresy, the danger of aligning the will of God with a specific political programme, means that the theological voice is always that of an outsider, an observer or commentator, never a participant, a loyal party activist even. Duncan Forrester illustrates the point when he argues that the role of theology is to disturb and challenge policymakers, citizens and the churches with the plight of the poor.\(^5\) And it is of course very important that political theologians offer critical commentary on the priorities of politicians. But this is not the same as offering a detailed constructive political theology, of the sort Plant seems to want. Rowan Williams also illustrates the point in a very interesting essay about the role of Church in politics.\(^6\) Williams is seeking an alternative to liberal individualism and communitarianism and so advocates political discussions about the ‘common good’ in which the Christian role is to ‘speak of and enact the patterns of self-displacing and self-risking invited by the story of the self-displacing God’. For Williams, such self-questioning is the alternative to individual, tribal and probably bloody conflicts between competing wills-to-power, He is explicit about the limits of the Church’s political participation, ‘This assembly [the Church] exists not to make political policy or to witness to an abstract universal justice or emancipation.’ Later in the article he states that ‘It is relatively easy to mortgage the Church to partnership in a rather bland global ethic, a set of uncontroversial endorsements of justice and tolerance’, but the problem is that this ‘gives no account of how exactly a Christian politics emerges from the specifics of Christian narrative, tending to assume that such a narrative is a sort of illustrative gloss on fairly obvious ideals of universal kinship’.\(^8\) It is difficult to disagree with Williams that political life would benefit enormously from self-reflexive debate. But it is equally easy to imagine that Plant would be exasperated with Williams, finding little to inform his immediate policy decisions. Williams, unlike Plant in 1985 or Blair now, is in the privileged position of being able to imagine an alternative polity, but in doing so he leaves the current political order theologically bereft. And Plant is not alone. There are plenty of Christians in government

\(^5\) D. Forrester, *On Human Worth: A Christian Vindication of Equality* (London: SCM Press, 2001), see esp. p. 72. ‘If we put the Munuswamys of this world at the centre, it is in the first place to them that theology should seek to render service. Only thereafter, and as a consequence of serving Munuswamy, theology needs to address the policymakers, and the citizenry, and the church with a message that is often disturbing and challenging. Theology has a responsibility to represent Munuswamy to the intellectual and political “powers”, to speak for him in situations where his voice is not heard, where he cannot speak for himself. Munuswamy should haunt these powers as he haunts me. This kind of theology is rooted in the real world and its issues and its suffering. It is intended to arouse conviction and lead to action.’

\(^6\) R. Williams, ‘Beyond Liberalism’, *Political Theology* 3.1 (Nov. 2001), pp. 64–73.

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 71.

\(^8\) Ibid., p. 71.
who could well be exasperated when they hear in reply to the question, ‘how do we govern?’, the answer ‘not like that’.

What seems to be lacking, and it is to the detriment of all political theology, is a theology for the loyal activist whose party is in power, a governmental political theology, dare I say a new Eusebianism. Political theology attains the necessary detail, sophistication and relevance once it has addressed the issues and questions of the governor, the influential political operative. What might such a political theology look like? I am not sure, and there is not space to reflect properly on all the issues now, but I would like to make three initial, and in fact contradictory, comments. (1) Political theologians need to reflect in more depth on the nature of political life. Politicians are influenced by the analysis and opinions of experts, including political theologians. However, they also belong to parties, they form factions, develop political loyalties and alliances, have careers, and they need to get elected. Politicians become part of a political-cultural group that informs and directs their behaviour and opinions, a group which talks in corridors and dines in restaurants. Furthermore, politicians compromise their principles for the sake of long-term goals or what they perceive as greater goods; they employ political strategies. We can of course seek to wish this polity away; alternatively we can reflect theologically on these dynamics. (2) The middle axioms dilemma remains, namely how to relate theological ideas and detailed policy decisions. Plant is clear, as is Duncan Forrester, that if political theologians wish to influence government policy then detail is very important. *Faith in the City* and *Unemployment and the Future of Work* were two Church reports which contained admirable amounts of policy detail; however, it is a recognised weakness of both documents that theological reflection was minimal and separated from policy discussions.

Furthermore, and this combines my first two points, both reports suggested an increase in income tax to fund higher levels of public spending. None of the major political parties adopted this policy as suggested and only the Liberal Democrats chose a revised, limited version of it. The Conservative and Labour Parties considered the policy an electoral liability. But, since the last election, the government has increased public spending as a result of increased National Insurance payments. The problem for the churches is that a desired policy shift occurred primarily as a result of internal Labour Party politics of which they were sidelined, some would say irrelevant, observers.

This leads my third, most difficult, and contradictory point. (3) Political theologians have to ask whether their primary function is to offer policy advice to politicians, including citing critical social and economic commentary about problems such as poverty and unemployment. We are entering what may be the religious century; certainly internationally politicians are being remarkably theological in their language. It is becoming increasingly important to generate theological discussion out of the political-theological rhetoric of our
governors for the sake of intelligent public discussion. A series of cultural-religious assumptions underpin much political discussion and there is a place for those skilled in the discourse to reflect back to politicians what they are articulating. I think political theologians missed an opportunity for this during the Thatcher era.

There have been recent important and significant discussions about the methodological problems confronting political theologians. They continue, in new circumstances, the discussions initiated by Oldham, Temple and Ronald Preston. It is not clear that we have reached a good stopping place in these discussions at the moment. In my mind we should think more about a new, and critical, Eusebianism, for the sake of all types of political theology. This would be a type of contextual theology of government, a theology starting with the politician’s questions and issues. In some instances this is of course critical of political priorities; it is about making difficult choices between political programmes. In other cases it is about recognising how politicians serve the needs of the poorest in society. It is also about identifying political comment as theological text and utilising analytical tools to understand the significance of a politician’s religious cultural heritage.
Ronald Preston did not write much about feminism, though he was a strong supporter of the Movement for the Ordination of Women and used feminine images for God when he routinely led intercessions at Manchester Cathedral. In his writings, however, he refers but sparingly to the work of women generally, apart from Gro Harlem Brundtland, and even Margaret Thatcher receives scant attention.

1 The Revd Canon Albert Radcliffe, one of Preston’s colleagues at Manchester Cathedral, disclosed this information at the Ronald Preston Colloquium on 16 March 2003.
There are very few even passing references and footnotes relating to the work of women theologians in his oeuvre, though he regards women theology students very highly. It must be noted that feminists have not written much about Preston either — I’ve been unable to find anything. Yet Preston’s work had much in common with that of Christian feminist ethicists, not only because, certainly in his later writings, they were engaging with the same intellectual milieu, but also because feminism would have found sympathetic Preston’s commitment to social rather than individualist ethics, to a hermeneutic of suspicion, and to the significance of an a priori commitment to promoting the poor, oppressed and marginalised in ethical thinking. There are also some significant areas with which much feminist analysis would have parted company with Preston, not least his privileging of reason, his tendency to universalise, and his attempt to establish an ethics based on common experience and common consensus. It is to these areas of fundamental sympathy and acute disagreement that most of this article is dedicated, but I begin with an outline of what Preston made of feminism per se.

The Challenge of Feminism

Preston was willing to acknowledge the oppression that women had undergone both in society and church. For example, he refers to ‘... that one of the two sexes oppressed by the other — women’, and ‘Women usually occupy the space left to them by men’. Quite casually, on occasion, Preston sometimes, but not always, adopts inclusive language, referring to ‘chairs’ of committees and bracketing ‘[sic.]’ next to The Alternative Service Book’s reference to men. Preston only really engages with Christian feminism, however, and that very briefly, in Confusions in Christian Social Ethics. In his chapter ‘Where We Are Today’, he discusses technology, humanity and the environment, and in a section on humanity’s place within the natural world, he turns to feminism for under a thousand words. Preston’s starting point is nature:

the men who are accused of oppressing nature are also accused of oppressing women, as much in the churches as in secularly society. Hence the rise of the feminist movement and of feminist theology. Hence the suspicion by women of many aspects of dynamic, technological cultures.


6 This idea is explored further later in this article.


8 Preston, Confusions, p. 109.


Preston’s linking of the oppressions of nature and women reflects one of the classic critiques of patriarchal dualisms, with which very many feminists would agree. However, Preston’s conclusion that women are, therefore, suspicious of technology indicates a limited reading of feminism, where technophobia may be a key feature of ‘romantic’ feminism, but is not a significant feature of other types of feminism.\(^{11}\)

In this section of *Confusions*, Preston recognises three forms of feminism. He recognises liberal feminism, which he understands as a movement working for political and legal reform; cultural feminism which stresses complementarity between the sexes, and which resembles ‘romantic’ feminism, a term more commonly used in feminist discourse.\(^{12}\) Finally, Preston identifies radical feminism as dismissing all but reproductive differences, but calling for ‘nothing less than a dramatic change in economic and political power structures’.\(^{13}\) In relation to this final category, I would argue that the minimising of difference more properly, and more commonly, belongs within liberal feminism. The call for dramatic change, however, is more or less present in all types of feminism — even reformist liberal feminism recognises significant change is required.

As might be expected from such a committed ecumenist, Preston sets his discussion within the context of the WCC Sheffield Consultation of 1981 ‘The Community of Men and Women in the Church’, though interestingly he does not expand his discussion to take account of ‘The Ecumenical Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women’. Within this ecumenical framework, Preston highlights one of the key debates within feminism, namely — though he does not use the term — that raised by womanism, which emphasises the triple jeopardy of oppression through race, class or poverty, and gender. Noting that this linkage puts feminism ‘within the ambit of liberation theology’, Preston strangely fails to acknowledge that this is precisely where many feminist theologians would unashamedly locate themselves.\(^{14}\)

Preston’s understanding of the issues of this debate is acute. Womanists, and others, argue that it is overly simplistic to consider gender oppression in isolation, while some feminists ask whether womanist stances may not blur the sharpness of the challenge to gender oppression. They suggest that, in order to achieve change for women, it is vital to keep separate the undoubtedly important issues of race and class. Preston clearly allies himself with the latter argument, and is critical of a movement seeking to address *all*

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\(^{11}\) That radically dualistic and essentialist movement within feminism where what is traditionally seen as ‘feminine’ is privileged.


\(^{13}\) Preston, *Confusions*, p. 109.

forms of domination ... linked together in a demonic symphony of oppression'. In allying itself with liberation theology, in this and other ways, feminism also falls foul of Preston’s broad critique of that movement, one which he sees as significantly undermined by the decline of communism.

Preston’s other evaluations of feminism might easily be applied to womanism also: first, he affirms feminist methodology in drawing upon ‘music, art, poetry, story-telling and socio-biography’ as correcting what he sees as an ‘imbalance’, but he is scathingly critical of what he calls the ‘fancy’ of a pre-patriarchal, matriarchal society, which plays some part in romantic and some forms of radical feminism.

A Liberal Radical?

As might be expected, Preston, the liberal, feels most at ease with liberal feminism, but he also shares a number of stances in common with more radical feminism, and I shall briefly touch on three.

First, Preston shares a common critical Marxist heritage with Christian feminism, and so it is not surprising to identify a hermeneutic of suspicion emerging in his work. In some form or another, in many of his essays, the question is asked, for example, of theology ‘In whose interests is it taught? What are the interests of those who teach it? Who consumes it and what are their interests?’ However, Preston thinks this hermeneutic of suspicion can go too far: ‘Yet to carry such questions too far is to cut off the bough on which one is sitting’, seeming to imply that too radical or profound a questioning might undermine the whole ethical enterprise. Feminism’s response might be to ask who is the ‘one’ referred to in this assertion, and to argue that the bough needs to be cut off, so that another sort of tree can grow, or another construction be made for the social ethicist to inhabit. Nonetheless, in this context, Preston also refers with approval to the ‘continuing indigenisation of moral theology’, where wider experience is drawn upon ‘than in the past which has been dominated by white, male, middle class theologians’, and he notes the need for the inclusion in moral theology of the experience of non-Western churches and women and Western working-class voices. His own work, apart from engaging in a highly critical way with liberation theology, does not choose to draw upon the experience and writing of these wider groups. And

15 Preston, Confusions, p. 109.
16 Preston, Confusions, p. 119.
18 Preston, ‘Christianity and Political and Economic Issues’, p. 211.
when referring to his own background, he significantly ignores the issue of gender.

Second, characteristic of Christian feminist ethics is a critique of individualism, and an emphasis upon social ethics and the significance of the community of struggle. As Sharon Welch puts it, referring to Paule Marshall’s *The Chosen Place, the Timeless People*, ‘She [the heroine] describes the type of communal action that can lead to long-lasting, fundamental social change. At the heart of this alternative ethic is a deep sense of community.’

I hardly need refer to Preston’s social, as opposed to individual, emphasis. It is everywhere in his writing, for example, ‘The person does not take priority over the community’. As John Elford puts it, in his Introduction to *The Middle Way*, Preston, ‘relates … to social structures and to questions raised by the exercise of power in society’. The analysis of power is, of course, another key link with feminism.

But if Preston does not write much of communities of struggle, he equally does not believe theology or ethics is an individualistic occupation. In his discussion of John Paul II’s *Laborens Exercens*, Preston comments, ‘as a personal *tour de force* it warrants our careful reflection; as official teaching it would have benefited from widespread group work prior to publication’. The role of the group of experts is a vital component for Preston of the doing of ethics. Although such groups are hardly the consciousness-raising or support groups of feminism, nor the bible study groups of the base ecclesial communities, he questions the validity of the lone commentator, even if that commentator is the Pope.

Third, like feminism, with its *a priori* commitment to improving conditions for women, Preston recognises *a priori* claims, derived from Christian revelation, as crucial for ethical thinking and outcomes. The image of God in all humanity, ‘a certain creative recklessness at critical points’, which Jesus, the ‘radical teacher of subversive wisdom’, calls for, echoes or pre-echoes Christian feminist discourse, and there is even something of Sharon Welch’s ethic of risk in his work, in which he acknowledges the realities of uncertainty and confusion. In addition, and again on the basis of revelation, Preston is prepared to embrace a very particular *a priori* stance. Although highly critical of what he regards as liberation theology’s uncritical and wholesale use

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of Marxism, he is clearly convinced by the idea of God’s preferential option for the poor. ‘Indeed’, he writes, ‘it was in fulfilling this Old Testament tradition that Jesus showed himself particularly concerned for all society’s rejects, and not only the economically poor.’ This argument is one deployed by most Christian feminists, pace Daphne Hampson, to explain Jesus’ failure to explicitly ‘name and shame’ gender oppression. Normunds Kamergrauzis has pointed out, however, in The Persistence of Christian Realism, that Preston’s preferential option for the poor does not extend to privileging the epistemology of poor communities, but rather, Preston argues that improving the life of all marginal people is a litmus test of appropriate ethical thinking and political policy.

More radical forms of Christian feminism, and liberation theology, would argue, by contrast, that God’s preferential option for the poor might indeed privilege certain ways of knowing. They would also question the hegemony of reason which has served patriarchy so well, and which is such a significant ground of Preston’s thinking. Romantic feminism endeavours even to privilege esoteric forms of knowledge which emerge from what it would describe as women’s inherent intuition and affinity with nature, something which it typifies in marked contrast with the rational and scientific and technological knowledge of men. Other radical feminists, while taking a less essentialist view, would, nonetheless, seek to privilege ways of knowing which emerge from reflection upon women’s experience, of oppression and empowerment.

So far I have described Preston’s work as broadly sympathetic to key feminist themes. There are, however, significant areas in which feminism would find Preston far less comfortable. I shall look, very briefly, at two.

**Universals and Visions**

First, and this overlaps with a previous discussion, Preston’s work depends to a very large extent on the possibility of a common consensus in church and society, something highly problematic in an increasingly diverse world. This is, clearly, an area of interest within feminism and an area about which feminists reach very different conclusions. This is true especially where womanism has fundamentally challenged the legitimacy of white Western women who claim to speak on behalf of all women, and consequently has challenged the concept of a universal sisterhood. In recent years, avoiding the pretence of a common feminist voice has become a criterion of authenticity, as has a willingness to privilege the ever more marginal voices of poor and black women.

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Feminist ethics continually celebrate difference and, for the most part, is suspicious of universal solutions.

Second, Preston argues for a position of ‘eschatological realism’ which ‘envisages the possibility of attaining, even if only in part, a new heaven and a new earth’. He eschews the utopian, however:

We are told that the task of Christian ethics is the liberation of the imagination, so that it can build utopias different from all current models of society, and therefore be capable of contemplating the liberation of the world. It is said that if utopias are not imagined we are shut up in the established systems of the present …

This is dubious doctrine. Rather we need a Politics of Hope which can take on board all that is negatively relevant in the Politics of Imperfection, and then go further in the search for creative change.

Now much feminist thought would agreed with Preston: the deconstruction of the Christian tradition, and the deployment of a hermeneutic of suspicion within feminist theology and theological ethics, makes clear a willingness to take on board what is ‘negatively relevant’. However, to counteract the depth of patriarchal negativity about women, a vibrant utopianism has been developed to keep hope alive, a phenomenon which has become significant across a wide spectrum of feminism.

Mary Daly, for example, in her wild post-patriarchal vision of *biophilia* in *Quintessence* provides a vision of hope for women exhausted by the patriarchal religion and society of the twentieth century. This vision may have its drawbacks, however. For Daly’s triumphant wild women, though joyously liberated, also enjoy an invulnerability, an absolute security, which other feminists, such as Welch and McFague, relate to the warmongering of powerful states. Perhaps Preston would have found a more satisfactory realistic eschatology in the work of Sharon Welch:

Many African American women call us, the Euro-American middle class, to an ethic of accountability, to an acknowledgement of the costs of our attempts to do good. They also call us to an ethic of risk, realising that the victories are always partial, their value resident in the matrix of possibilities created.

**Conclusion**

I hope that I have demonstrated, albeit briefly, that Preston had much in common with Christian feminist approaches to ethics, though

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everywhere feminism would challenge Preston to a more radical approach. He was, of course, a man of his age, but the question remains why, when the changing position of women, not least economically, was a hugely significant feature, possibly the most significant feature, of the twentieth century, did Preston not engage with it more extensively.
Abstract

The purpose of this article is to examine and challenge the assumption that the theological legacy of Archbishop William Temple is best continued in the work of Ronald Preston. Preston’s concerns in the areas of social ethics and ecumenical relations, as well as his championing of middle axioms, demonstrate his indebtedness to Temple’s influence. However, a closer examination of the doctrinal foundations of Preston’s social and ecumenical thought did not display a deep understanding of Temple’s thought. This is most noticeable in the area of ecclesiology. If Preston had not dismissed Temple’s earlier works in favour of the 1942 *Christianity and Social Order*, he might have avoided developing a theory of the church whose being does not support the tasks Preston requires it to do.

Ronald Preston posed the question, ‘Who are the heirs of [R.H.] Tawney and [William] Temple?’ I wish to raise the question of whether Ronald Preston should be seen as a successor to William Temple, and if so, to what extent.

Is it even worth asking? No doubt, Preston’s enduring concern for inter-Christian relations was due, at least in part, to his encounter with Temple at the 1937 Oxford Conference, and strengthened by a personal correspondence which continued until the end of Temple’s life. Preston’s concern for ecumenical relations, insistence that theology engage expert knowledge from other fields, and use of middle axioms, make him an obvious heir to Temple’s concerns.

However, Preston’s own twilight observation concerning this acquaintance is as follows: ‘I realise with hindsight that I cannot

possibly at that age have known him as well as I thought I did.\textsuperscript{2} I do not lightly dismiss how influential even a scant correspondence can be in such a situation. But especially in terms of theology, he did not know Temple’s thought as well as he had believed earlier. Preston almost entirely confined himself to the 1942 *Christianity and Social Order*, which he said best expressed Temple’s legacy to social theology.\textsuperscript{3} Unfortunately, Preston did not examine the whole of Temple’s work, having dismissed *Mens Creatrix* and *Christus Veritas* as ‘almost unreadable’. He hardly referenced any book other than *Christianity and Social Order*, nor did he mention any of Temple’s numerous articles, sermons or editorials in his work. So, if Preston was Temple’s heir at all, it seems to be by way of a joke legacy, a bequest by which the inheritor is unlikely to become rich.\textsuperscript{4}

This is especially evident in his ecclesiology, stemming from what is perhaps Temple’s best-known statement about the Church and its work:

> Nine-tenths of the work of the Church in the world is done by Christian people fulfilling responsibilities and performing tasks which in themselves are not part of the official system of the Church at all.\textsuperscript{5}

There is nothing wrong with this. The most significant Christian influence on the life of any nation will not come from sermons or synods. It will arise from the enacted beliefs of men and women with a Christian vision of the dignity of persons in community. The visible structures of ordained ministry and Church governance will have little impact on society. That was why Temple assigned them only one-tenth of the Church’s work. However, without that vital portion, the other 90\% of the Church will be frustrated in any effort to influence the world.

Ronald Preston focused on the work of individual Christians (especially the laity),\textsuperscript{6} charging them with almost the entire work of


\textsuperscript{3} Preston, ‘William Temple’, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{4} The idea of a ‘joke legacy’ is borrowed from Robertson Davies’s novel *The Manticore*. The main character receives a ‘joke legacy’ of 500 acres of presumably worthless land in northern Ontario, which he is advised to dispose of at $100 per acre. After travelling to this parcel of land, he notices that people are searching for oil or minerals, and sells it to a mining company at ten times the price for which he had been advised to settle, thus making himself a well-off young man, which was not the intent of his grandfather’s gift.


\textsuperscript{6} Preston emphasised this need often, but an especially good summary is his *Crucible* article in memory of Bishop Leslie Hunter (‘A Bishop Ahead of his Church’) and echoed throughout in his praise of the 1937 Oxford Conference (‘Fifty Years on from the Oxford
the Church. Christians were supposed to bring secular expertise to bear on their individual and corporate decision-making in the public sphere. This creates a void of leadership and guidance from the official structures of ministry and governance in the Church. The result is no more than a group of like-minded individuals who lack expert knowledge concerning Christian history and theology to carry out overwhelming tasks for the betterment of society.

In this treatment, I will outline some tasks Preston assigned his Church in the world. Next I will describe the Church which must carry out these tasks, and illustrate the problem of Preston’s ecclesiology regarding the use of his favoured ‘middle axioms’ method of ethical reflection. Following this, I will propose how reclaiming even one small aspect of Temple’s work would enrich Preston’s vision of the Church significantly, and points to the need for understanding and using Temple’s work more fully. I will conclude with some reflections about the image of the Church in a plural, post-Christian society (realising that I am influenced by my North American context), and how a clearer and more complete vision of the Church as a living entity is needed.

Ronald Preston’s Ecclesiology

The ‘Doing’ of the Church

Although a discussion of ‘being’ usually precedes one of ‘doing’, I have reversed this order. Preston said much about what the Church must do, but less about what the Church must be if it is to carry out the tasks assigned to it.

It is almost impossible to give an exhaustive list of all the things Preston said the Church must do. However, any examination of the Church’s doing can be divided into two main categories. These are the tasks the Church does for itself and its members, and those it does for the sake of the larger world.

Again, I will begin with Preston’s own emphasis: the Church’s responsibility to the world outside its own walls. Although there are only two main tasks, an enormous amount of subsidiary work is encompassed by them. First, the Church is to take part in ‘encouraging and deepening the understanding of a common morality’. This is part of Preston’s pluralist emphasis that all people are first human, and secondarily part of a specific religious tradition. This is why he claimed that this common vision of the good


Preston, Church and Society, p. 106; Elford and Markham, The Middle Way, p. 235.
requires some public consensus on a reasonable doctrine of the good. It cannot be based solely on Christian doctrine ... Christians should believe that a broad basic moral consensus is realisable among humans, and that even adumbrations of the theological virtues of faith, hope and love can be discerned among them and should be looked for.\(^8\)

Secondly, Preston claimed that the Church must challenge, rather than support, the *status quo*,\(^9\) and especially to offer a critique of what he frequently referred to as ‘possessive individualism’.\(^10\) Preston levelled many criticisms of the Western world’s tendency to promote the ideal of maximum independence and autonomy for individuals. Instead, he pointed to a notion of persons-in-community who give to, and receive more or less from, others according to their ability or need.\(^11\) He recognised the potential of education as an under-utilised means to the end of sustainable growth and the alleviation of poverty.\(^12\) Under this heading, I would also place his frequent call for full utilisation of the talents of all society’s members.\(^13\) It made sense to see ‘all society′s rejects as being a particular concern of Jesus’.\(^14\) This, for Preston, was part of the Church’s task of doing the work of God for the world, ‘to humanise it; to make it a sphere where true humanity flourishes’.\(^15\)

By looking at the broadest structures of this functional ecclesiology, it seems a reasonable assessment to say that yes, Ronald Preston assigned the same major tasks to the Church that Temple did. If one wished to see Preston as Temple’s theological heir, one could hardly ask for a better commission for the nine-tenths of the work of the Church than Preston has laid out in these major areas of its work in the world.

It is also necessary to look at what the Church must do for itself. Preston described three main tasks internal to the Church. The first is related to the critique of the *status quo* — the Church must exercise a critical self-assessment because it is ‘always searching for, but never fully achieving, expression of the Gospel’.\(^16\) The Church must, then, *know* the Gospel, both in terms of the ideal it strives to achieve, and

\(^8\) Elford and Markham, *The Middle Way*, p. 216.
\(^10\) Preston, *Church and Society*, pp. 10, 67.
\(^11\) Preston, *Church and Society*, p. 54.
\(^12\) Preston, *Confusions*, ch. 6.
\(^13\) Preston, *Church and Society*, pp. 52–53.
the ways in which it is falling short. Preston claimed that the Church should never be at ease in any social order.

The second task the Church must do for its members is to form Christian character. The Church, or more pointedly, the Christian faith, ‘gives us an understanding of human life and destiny’. The aim is that each ‘Christian layman is himself a “lay theologian”, not in the sense of having degrees and diplomas, but in the sense of so understanding his faith that he will think theologically about his work and the world.

The third inwardly directed task is to form a ‘worshipping community whose members will corporately and permanently bear witness to the gospel faith and ethics’. Preston saw the principal locus of Christian character formation in worship. Discernment, or ‘the use of a disciplined imagination’, and ‘growth in the art of moral judgment’, happened primarily by assimilation of what one experienced in worship. Temple said many similar things. However, for Preston, it is not the church who educates Christians to ‘make more responsible and informed … decisions’, but Christians do this themselves.

In some ways, here as well, Preston followed Temple’s line very closely. This is especially evident in the emphasis both give to the worshipping community as the place where Christian conscience is formed, and from which ethical reflection may then proceed. As well, Preston, like Temple before him, encouraged the understanding that the Church is always becoming what it is meant to be, and is not itself the completed and perfected kingdom of God realised on earth.

The ‘Being’ of the Church

A satisfactory ecclesiology would articulate a vision of the Church whose being enables it to carry out its commission. I question whether Preston’s ontological ecclesiology adequately supported the activities in which he said the Church must engage.

I do not think Preston envisioned the Church as anything more than the sum of its members. He stressed the individual Christian in the world, and minimised the idea of a church that transcends a collection of individual believers on earth at any time and place. Even what he called the ‘great church’ was little more than those who adhered to the various Christian confessions. Although he called this Church a ‘significant social institution’, Preston had little to say as to how this

17 Preston, *Church and Society*, p. 103.
18 Elford and Markham, *The Middle Way*, p. 93.
19 Preston, *Church and Society*, p. 118.
21 Preston, *Church and Society*, p. 133.
23 Preston, *Church and Society*, p. 54.
entity functioned as something more than the actions of the individual members. He did not describe any sort of structure to enable the Church’s continuity beyond the life or activity, or an authority beyond the personal opinion of, any given Christian.

There are three things Preston required the Church to be. The first has already been indicated: a worshipping community. John Elford, in his introduction to The Middle Way, indicates how important this was to Preston personally, describing his ‘ecclesiastical journey as one from Liberal Protestant Modernism to a radical Liberal Catholicism’, because of the way in which he ‘came to value the worship and witness of the church’.

For Preston, as for Temple before him, the worship of the Church was where Christians would encounter and respond to the ‘good news of God made known to us through Jesus Christ and the Church which resulted from his ministry’. This in turn ‘takes us out of ourselves and sets us within larger horizons and deeper visions of goodness’, which ‘challenge us to express them in our lives’, pointing out the discrepancies between lived experience in the world and the vision encountered in the Christian narrative and community. Continued encounter with this vision helps individuals to develop ‘habits, or virtues, or a character’, which result in Christian action in the public sphere. Any worship that is unrelated to the ‘many hours we are not worshipping together’ was, in Preston’s words, ‘an abomination’. In worship (and the connected corporate and personal reflection on scripture), right motivation and sensitivity is fostered. According to Preston, churches are ‘primarily organised for worship’.

However, for all practical purposes, Preston was silent on the issue of who is to lead worship, provide pastoral care, or give guidance concerning what is and is not consistent with the Christian vision. The emphasis on the laity, and a more mutual model of pastoral care, were occasions for celebration. I cannot argue with a model of Christian community which encourages ‘efforts to foster the mutual growth of every member to their full stature in Christ’. However, problems arise. Preston continually called for engagement with experts from secular fields when making theological statements related to those endeavours. He seemed to assume that the laity was competent in ‘thinking in Christian categories but [do] not express them[elves] in technical theological vocabulary’ — and that such imprecision was acceptable.

24 Preston, Church and Society, p. 135.
26 Preston, Confusions, pp. 73–74.
27 Preston, Confusions, p. 74.
28 Preston, Confusions, p. 78.
30 Preston, Confusions, p. 75.
However, when it came to ‘professional theologians’, the reverse was not true. According to Preston, the expert in Christian theology was ‘at home’ thinking in such categories, ‘but may not think about the world with any great precision or assurance’. This was condemned as ‘silliness’. Although Preston hoped that ‘ideally, everyone would be equally competent to begin at either end [from formal theology or the current empirical situation]’ he also admitted that each person had his or her area of expertise. However, Preston did not acknowledge the need for expertise in Christian faith as such. This greatly curtails the formation of Christian conscience and discernment, which in turn hinders the influence of individual Christians, which is the work of the ‘great church’ in the world. Preston admitted that adequate Christian formation required ‘cooperative work between pastors, moral theologians, and those earning their living in industry’. Yet, he never demanded that those outside formal ministerial structures acquire theological learning equivalent to what he required Church leaders to gain in other disciplines. Furthermore, if Preston was serious about the Christian faith being a ‘reinforcement of motivators to action, not a blueprint for it’, one needs persons competent to interpret the narratives and parables in a way that they may be used as something other than direct commands or literal accounts of history. Without expert leadership, this kind of mutual encouragement and insightful interpretation cannot happen.

The Church, according to Preston, is also to be the ‘self-conscious agent of the Kingdom of God’. This is a group of persons, each of whom has the privilege of a deeper knowledge of God’s gracious purposes for mankind than those who are not Christians, but… is working everywhere for the good of the human beings made in his image, and it is the Christian task to discern the signs of his working and to further it.

It is important to note that the Church is not the community of the saved, but of those working to further God’s purposes for all. It is a group set within the world, looking for ways to bring creation (especially the structures of human life) into greater harmony with a Christian vision of human good and flourishing.

Finally, the Church, ‘however brokenly’, must be a ‘sign of what the plural society should express in its structures’. This ‘concerns the

31 Preston, Explorations, p. 30.
33 Preston, Explorations, p. 29.
34 Preston, Explorations, p. 141.
36 Preston, Church and Society, p. 101.
37 Preston, Religion and the Persistence of Capitalism, p. 63.
existence of a new community transcending all the barriers human beings erect against one another — personal, economic and political ...

This breaks down further, indicating how the Church’s internal existence and the way the Church interacts with the world which is ‘not-church’.

Preston called for wide latitude for difference of opinion in the Church. Such diversity is to be celebrated, as there are ‘many sides to the gospel’, and that Christians must ‘encourage and learn from one another in the context of our common praise’. This helps Christians appropriate a ‘rich intellectual history, thought out against diverse cultural backgrounds, and ... in a variety of situations’. A great opportunity for the Church is to welcome the insights of historically under-represented persons: the poor, those from non-Western cultures, people of colour, and women.

‘Listening to the positions of Christians who have a different commitment’ helps ‘foster a sense of proportion which is needed to diminish the element of fanaticism’ faced by adherents of any creed or ideology.

Preston also claimed that the Church must have an open stance toward the wider society. As the Church is only an agent of the Kingdom of God, he called for cooperation between it and other groups in fostering common insights for fuller human flourishing. He was both optimistic and cautious about the distinctiveness of Christian witness and insight. At one point, he claimed that Christians should not be concerned that ‘what they say is so distinctively Christian that no one else could have thought of it’. Yet he also believed that ‘distinctive Christian insights can contribute to the more just and humane working of the structures of life in which Christians and others live together’.

There is a strong recognition that history, and even the Christian narrative, is not solely concerned with the ‘people of God’.

There is an undercurrent of individualism throughout Preston’s ecclesiology, and it hinders the Church’s ‘corporate and permanent witness’ to the Gospel, mentioned earlier as one of its important external tasks. Such assertions that the ‘gospel is addressed to persons one by one’, even though persons are acknowledged to be formed in community, pose difficulties, because it is not only individual salvation, but the restructuring of society, which is at stake. Furthermore, claims that ‘in the last resort everyone has the

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38 Preston, Church and Society, p. 119.
39 Preston, Explorations, p. 129.
40 Preston, Confusions, p. 74.
41 Preston, Confusions, p. 124.
42 Preston, Explorations, p. 161.
44 Preston, Confusions, p. 148.
45 Preston, Explorations, p. 155.
46 Preston, Church and Society, p. 117.
responsibility for living his own life\textsuperscript{47} diminish the potential for the mutual pastoral care and guidance, for which Preston makes such strong claims. This undermines the already weak corporate nature of the Church, leaving it as individuals loosely bound together — and the question of ‘by what?’ cannot be ignored, or answered adequately.

The Problem of ‘Middle Axioms’

It is almost impossible to read Preston’s work, and not encounter a discussion of middle axioms. The middle axiom approach leaves much to the ordinary Christian to use his or her expertise to help form policy that moves society in a direction which is congruent with Christian belief. This is sort of a ‘halfway house between generalities and details of policy’, bringing

those from different experiences working together on an issue, about the general direction in which Christian opinion should try to influence change, without going into details of policy on the best way to bring it about.\textsuperscript{48}

The use of middle axioms keeps the Church from making specific policy statements on issues where it lacks expertise, and requires that any such statements be made only after ‘careful and trained reasoning on the basis of specialised knowledge . . .’\textsuperscript{49}

The middle axiom method raises questions which Preston addressed inadequately. The first is the problem of teaching and leadership in the Church. Without proper recognition of Christian faith as an area of expertise, it is difficult to see how any pronouncement, even at an intermediate level, can have an authentic and consistent Christian character. A Church statement should give some guidance as to what is and is not consistent with even the most generous conception of Christian thought. A stronger teaching and leadership function is needed to avoid this pitfall.

A related difficulty arises when one attempts to describe who or what this Church is which speaks. Does every Christian speak authoritatively for the Church when he or she explains action in the light of faith? If so, it becomes all too easy for Christian individuals and groups to do precisely that against which Preston warned: taking a small portion of tradition and moving directly to a statement of policy (and there may yet be conflicts between equally authentic Christian positions arrived at this way). There is also the possibility of ‘pronouncements’ based on uninformed sentimentality, or even serious misreading of Christian theology.

These two difficulties indicate an important inconsistency between Preston’s functional and ontological ecclesiologies. The ‘nine-tenths’

\textsuperscript{47} Preston, \textit{Explorations}, p. 147.
\textsuperscript{48} Preston, \textit{Church and Society}, p. 107.
\textsuperscript{49} Preston, \textit{Confusions}, p. 71.
Church cannot use middle axioms. The one-tenth of the Church in the form of its official structures of ministry, teaching and worship, is still vitally important. Otherwise the Church lacks the direction, vision and support needed to point believers in a Christian direction for society, and thus to bear that corporate and permanent witness to the gospel ethic Preston demanded. It also lacks connection to Christ, the head of the Church, and the presumed motivator for Christian action.

Temple’s Fuller Legacy

Preston’s ecclesiology, derived from Temple’s most famous (but far from only) statement about the Church, is insufficient. Preston did indeed inherit his vision of the Church from Temple, but it is a far poorer ecclesiology than he might have had, and thus a joke legacy.

William Temple left much more to anyone who wished to claim it. I will focus on only one metaphor from Temple which could enrich Preston’s concept of the Church, but this one indicates many more useful ideas for developing an adequate ecclesiology for an increasingly plural world.

I indicated that there is a need for the Church to relate in explicit ways to the person of Christ; otherwise, it could hardly be called Christian. Preston’s ecclesiology would benefit from this connection in two ways. First, the Church would have a stronger and more unified basis from which to speak and act in the world, while still allowing for a plurality of gifts and viewpoints. Secondly, a vision of the Church with a greater continuity across time and place would be a far more accurate model of and for the plural society than Preston described.

Preston himself acknowledged that there were a number of questions that needed to be addressed when the Church’s role in society was under discussion: ‘(i) what kind of society do we want? and (ii) what kind of people are needed to create such a society? [But] It omitted a third question, What kind of structures are needed to provide the kind of people we need?’ He claimed it was ‘inconceivable’ that Temple would not have addressed all three questions, and thus it seems reasonable to look to Temple’s thought on a vital question that Preston raised but did not answer.

Preston was right in saying that the Church needs to be deeply engaged with the increasingly post-Christian, plural world. Examining Temple’s ecclesiology yields a description of a Church that lives in the world, but has the life of the transcendent God at its centre. Central to this is Temple’s idea of the Church as a continuation of the incarnation.

William Temple had a view of the Church that was far more than the sum of its individual members. An example of this is the following:


We always have to distinguish these two functions of the Christian society in the world. First, the witness of the Church as a corporate society in its own name ... Secondly, it is the function of the Christian citizen (and the Church must always urge this on its members) to exercise his own judgment how the principles of the Gospel may in fact most effectively be applied to the circumstances of our time.51

Here are both aspects of the Church’s work: the activity and witness of a corporate society, as well as that of individuals using their faith and expertise in secular vocations for the furthering of the Christian vision of human wellbeing. Temple’s primary image of the institutional Church is the New Testament metaphor of ‘Body of Christ’. This implies an organic relation between Christ as the head, the members as doing the work of Christ in the world, and the Church’s structures as enabling that work. The structures are particularly important because they connect the head to the members. Temple extended this analogy of ‘body’ to explain how the structures of the Church were to accomplish this:

The Church ought not to have to think about its principle of Order any more than a healthy man thinks about his spine. He knows he has one, but does not think about it until something is wrong. There is life to be lived and work to be done.52

The sum of individual believers should not have to think about how the Church’s common life is ordered. But the Church has to provide a structure of support and energy to facilitate that common life and the work that is supposed to issue from it. The metaphorical relationship of the spine to the (human) body makes it apparent that Temple himself actually gave a great deal of thought to how a healthy spine for the Body of Christ would function.

The spine consists of two components. The first part is a system of principal nerves carrying sensation to, and directing the movement of, the various members of the body. The second, equally important part of the spine, is a system of bone, cartilage and connective tissue, providing a strong and flexible structure to the body. This second component also holds the body upright, and determines its orientation to the world. It is this structural component which is subject to the greatest abuse, and which, if damaged, hinders the functioning of the entire body.

With good reason, Christians today are wary of undue emphasis on the official structures of the Church. However, Temple’s metaphor can help correct the poorly-directed Church described by Preston. Using


the analogy of the spine within the body, there is a sense of proportion between the Church and its structures. There is no excessive claim that the official structures are the Church; neither does it leave the Church without direction and guidance. It also helps by allowing the rest of the Church to say when those structures function in unhealthy ways for the rest of the body. Temple’s thought also yields a measure of fluidity between the ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ Church, because it is not so much persons, but the activities in which they are engaged, which determines the formal structures and work-in-the-world.

One who acts on his or her own volition (even if it is a good volition), apart from the channels appropriate to the Church, can hardly be more than a severed member. At best, severed from the systems keeping body and head connected, there is only residual impulse and motion; the ability to sustain authentically Christian action is, at best, in doubt:

The Church is the Body of Christ, the organism which moves spontaneously in obedience to His will; so far as that is not true of us, we are failing to be the Church. If that failure became complete, there would be no Church — no body of Christ — at all, but only a mass of paralysed limbs, only a heap of branches severed from the vine and ready for burning.

In this case, the death of the severed member is likely; however, the body as a whole is also damaged. The connection between head and members needs to be clear and unbroken, and the regeneration of members across time and place needs to be articulated. Preston did not do this. Instead, the Church he described lacked this corporate dimension, with its differentiation, distinction and continuity, and thus, I think, was inhibited in its ability to function authentically as church in a plural society.

A stronger concept of the Church as the Body of Christ would also facilitate, rather than hinder, Preston’s desire for a church able to serve as a model for the plural society. True plurality requires an acknowledgement of difference, and the Church must know itself (and be known) as other than that which is not a part of itself. Any body has boundaries. A body creates both the possibility of individuation and relationship, since without some degree of difference it is hard to imagine an actual relationship. Particularity, individuality and separateness seem to be prerequisites of relationship. The Church’s boundaries are less physical, but are rather a matter of what it holds true.

54 For example, it is easier to imagine the relationship of a stone to the soil in which it rests, than the ‘relationship’ between one drop among many contained in a glass of water. The stone has a definite difference of texture and shape from the surrounding soil, but one drop of water merges indistinguishably from the others in the glass.
Some Closing Observations: A Church for a Plural Society

I have no doubt that what Ronald Preston said the Church must do, and even what he said it should be is appropriate for the twenty-first century. However, I have raised two questions. The first is whether or not Preston should be seen as William Temple’s heir. In terms of his ethical and ecumenical views, I think this is a fair assessment. I do not think, however, that Preston claimed much of an inheritance at all from Temple theologically, even though it was readily available. The negative answer to my second question, whether or not Preston’s view of the Church is adequate for a plural society, illustrates why I think he should not be seen in this light. The most significant difficulty I have found in Preston’s ecclesiology is that it lacks both a corporate dimension and adequate leadership, which hinder the ‘corporate and permanent witness to the gospel ethic’ which Preston himself said were important ecclesial tasks. Without correcting these weaknesses, Christian witness can deteriorate into sentimental, individual (although perhaps popularly held) opinion.

What would be an adequate vision of the Church for a plural context? In my own setting of North America (particularly the United States, but also having lived in Canada as an undergraduate), an established Church has not been taken for granted. I would therefore like to offer some observations about the Church in the plural society, both as I have experienced it, and would like to see it.

Preston’s claim that the Church should be a model for the plural society (always trying to move forward in that direction) is one I think Christians should endorse. However, I think he is a bit too plural, a bit too apologetic about Christian distinctiveness. On this point, I see a retrieval of the Pauline metaphor so richly developed by Temple as useful. Living bodies interact with others, influence and are influenced by others — yet do so without losing their identity. A stronger Christian distinctiveness — yet one that respects and cooperates with others unless bound by conscience to do otherwise — is perhaps something the twenty-first-century Church should strive to express. Preston’s plurality is too close to the American idea of a cultural ‘melting pot’ (which, in the end, destroys rather than protects plurality). Temple represents (in my view) the more truly plural Canadian image of a ‘mosaic’ of cultures and beliefs, existing together, each with its own integrity, but joining to form something larger than the individual parts.

Appropriate leadership and structure is also essential. Who is authorised to speak for the Church, and by what process of selection and training? In the US context, a plethora of views are expressed in the public forum. Individuals, without some sanction from a larger body, remain mere individuals. Christians, acting only as nine-tenths of the Church, are no different than those of other religions, or no religion at all. Temple’s image of a spine is again a valuable one for
this purpose. Those official structures should not call a great deal of attention to themselves (and probably need correction when they do), but they should give strength to the rest of the body, direct impulses, and point to a particular vision of human wellbeing. Only by having this uniting principle can ‘church’ pronouncement be more than individual opinion.

I began by asking Preston’s own question, ‘Who are the heirs of Tawney and Temple?’ I think Preston claimed what was not meant to be a joke legacy from Temple, and did not take the best of the inheritance that he might have done. It is the task of those who admire both, to claim the full legacy left to us and to invest it well and wisely. Preston did not work out the ecclesiological foundations of his social ethics. The result was a theory of the Church’s being which could not support its prescribed tasks. He accepted the easy and obvious part of Temple’s legacy, taking the nine-tenths, but ignoring the one-tenth which would have produced a Church whose being and doing were in greater harmony.
Ronald Preston and the Importance of the Social

It is difficult to categorise Ronald Preston’s political thought — he was undoubtedly too much of a Niebuhrian realist to classify as a straightforward Christian socialist, at least in the incarnationalist mould stemming from F. D. Maurice and the Christian Social Union of Henry Scott Holland and Charles Gore, and yet he undoubtedly held many radical opinions which he shared with both Christian and secular socialists.1 Similarly, while he was a passionate advocate of

overcoming the economic divide between North and South and while he promoted greater equality,2 he was nevertheless frequently critical of Christian socialists principally for what he considered their lack of understanding of economic theory. He felt that they had failed to distinguish ‘competitive individualism, which they have been right to criticize as a false philosophy, from the market as a useful device for dealing with a range of basic economic problems’.3 Often, he claimed, they had adopted naïve theories: this was especially true of what he regarded as the patent stupidity of Henry George’s Single Tax and Major Douglas’s Social Credit, both of which had been adopted as universal panaceas at different points in the evolution of Christian socialism by leaders who, he thought, really should have known better.4 Against what he thought were ‘jejune’ solutions, including those maintained by more recent Christian socialists,5 Preston was a firm (though not uncritical) advocate of the importance of technical expertise and the distinctive contributions of the different academic disciplines to informed ethical debate; and most crucially he had a very high regard for proficiency in economics: there was little point in theologians and church leaders adopting voguish slogans unless these were accompanied by an in-depth study of the social sciences. Thus he wrote:

My own view is that the basic point of political theology is the realisation that theological thought is inescapably political, in that it does not take place in an intellectual vacuum of pure, disinterested, reasoning, but in a political context in which social, economic and cultural factors are powerful in conditioning that thought . . . Most academic and popular theology ignores this, and to the extent that it does so, it is flawed.6

Although he admitted that ideological presuppositions might well be drawn in to social-scientific discussion, and that there was

undoubtedly no such thing as value-free science, he nevertheless regarded it as quite wrong to assume that ‘Christians can by-pass [knowledge of the social sciences]. Economics is frequently treated in this way by Christians.’ Indeed this was the basis of Preston’s criticism of John Milbank’s project in Theology and Social Theory with its dismissal of social sciences as inevitably tainted with secularity:

It is one thing to point out that practitioners in various disciplines, for instance in the social sciences, often bring in ideological considerations which are not inherent in the discipline; it is quite another to deny altogether any legitimate autonomy to them. This is indeed theological hubris.

Preston felt that notions of a common humanity and the common quest for truth were at the heart of the acceptance of the findings of the social sciences by Christians. To object to this was ‘a denial that there is a common human experience on which religion can comment and endeavour to illuminate’. Consequently, he suggested, ‘I think Milbank’s position is very dangerous as the basis of a Christian social theology’. To prevent such a hubristic tendency (which admittedly usually lacks the sophistication and pretentiousness of a Milbank), Preston developed a form of Christian realism which derived in part from his understanding of economic theory: there were inevitable economic and social constraints on human behaviour, which the Christian ignored at his or her peril. This meant that the Christendom project of both past and present, with its hostility to secular science, was doomed to failure. Economic realism, however, raises equally serious issues for Christian political thinking, as will be discussed below.

_Preston and Temple_

In his own constructive approach to political and economic ethics, Preston saw himself as following in the footsteps of William Temple,

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10 Preston, ‘A Theological Response to Sociology’, p. 56. For an earlier critique of Milbank, see ‘Christian Socialism Becalmed’, in Eliford and Markham, _The Middle Way_, pp. 91–99 — but see n. 5.
11 See, for instance, Preston, ‘Not Out of the Wood Yet’; _Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism_, chs 1 and 2, esp. pp. 30–34; _Church and Society_, ch. 2.
13 John Atherton (in _Public Theology for Changing Times_ [London: SPCK, 2000], p. 79) describes this ‘almost as an apostolic succession’. 

especially his later work after the 1937 Oxford Conference on *Church, Community and State*, which Preston had attended and which proved a crucial event in his theological formation.  

It was Temple, influenced by Christian realism who, Preston claimed, stood for ‘critical but co-operative interdisciplinary activity between theology, philosophy, literary studies and the natural and social sciences’. From 1969, Preston published a number of essays (sometimes very similar) on Temple’s contribution to social ethics, particularly as represented in *Christianity and Social Order*, which Temple wrote in his last months as Archbishop of York, and which was published as a Penguin Special in 1942.

Although he is not without the occasional modest criticism, Preston enthusiastically admires Temple’s ‘realism’, particularly his famous claim that ‘the art of Government in fact is the art of so ordering life that self-interest prompts what justice demands’. For Preston, Temple is ‘that rare phenomenon, a prophet with the sense of the possible’. Indeed on this interpretation, Temple becomes something of a model prophet, since ‘prophecy is a more complex phenomenon than just transferring the concept from the Old Testament to the present day . . . Since New Testament times we have been engaged in working out a doctrine of God’s Kingdom in Christ and how it relates to the kingdoms of this world; a ‘two kingdoms’ context. That requires understanding of one’s present day world’. Temple’s efforts to understand the present thus qualified him in Preston’s eyes as the realist master prophet of the twentieth century (with the possible exception of Reinhold Niebuhr).

Such a stress on a moderate ‘two kingdoms’ realism means that Preston downplays the earlier more utopian writings of the younger Temple in favour of the mature (and more realist) writing of the

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18 See, for example, ‘Do We Need a New William Temple?’, p. 103; ‘William Temple: The Man and his Impact in Church and Society’, p. 11.

19 *Christianity and Social Order*, p. 42. This passage is cited in nearly all of Preston’s essays on Temple.


22 Preston, ‘Thirty-five Years Later’, p. 90; ‘Do We Need a New William Temple?’, p. 100; ‘William Temple: After Twenty-five Years’, p. 115.
archbishop who, like Preston, was deeply involved in ecumenism and also profoundly indebted to Niebuhr.\textsuperscript{23} This meant that, according to Preston, Temple moved beyond the earlier forms of Christian socialism towards a more realistic and more profound awareness of the complexities of the modern world, even if, on Preston’s view, he never quite mastered the intricacies of economic theory.\textsuperscript{24} The importance of this more realist strain in Temple’s thinking, which moderates his earlier emphasis on the Common Good of the natural law tradition, as well as his earlier naïve socialism, meant that he was able to develop ethical guidelines which did not succumb to simplistic economic solutions, but which left them to the expertise of the practitioner.\textsuperscript{25}

Preston saw such realism as capable of being ‘eschatologically radical’\textsuperscript{26} since no practical solution would be able to bring any ethical principles to a full realisation. According to Preston, such a methodologically critical approach placed Temple ‘provisionally on the left politically’,\textsuperscript{27} although he notes that it was a highly circumscribed form of socialism that Temple maintained at the end of his career. It is also important to remember that whereas in 1908 Temple had described socialism as the opposite of heresy, by 1941 he could say: ‘I do not simply advocate socialism or common ownership’, suggesting instead the need to find a proper balance between individualism and socialism, although he did admit that ‘in one sense we are committed to Socialism already’.\textsuperscript{28}

On Preston’s reading of Temple, realism acts as a buffer to radical utopianism, providing a necessary corrective for the Christian statesman: it prevents excessive separatism or sectarianism, forcing the Christian to engage instead in the rough and ready of the real world, listening to others where necessary but still maintaining an eschatological vision of the guiding ethical truths. For Preston, then, Temple’s radically critical yet constructive stance made him into something of a socialist\textsuperscript{29} which, he feels, makes David Nicholls’s critique of Temple’s elevation of the planned economy and the paternalism of the welfare state quite misguided since Temple never absolutised any one system.\textsuperscript{30} Preston maintains that although in the end Temple might have adopted a mildly left of centre Statism, this should not blind the critic to the constant potency of his theological system which is methodologically critical and which therefore

\textsuperscript{23} Preston, ‘Do We Need a New William Temple?’, p. 102.
\textsuperscript{24} Preston, ‘Do We Need a New William Temple?’, p. 103.
\textsuperscript{25} Temple, Christianity and Social Order, p. 35.
\textsuperscript{26} Preston, ‘Do We Need a New William Temple?’, p. 107.
\textsuperscript{28} Temple, Christianity and Social Order, p. 75.
\textsuperscript{29} Preston, ‘Thirty-five Years Later’, p. 90.
challenges the ‘natural law’ tradition, however important that law might be in constraining behaviour.31

This means that the very principles which are to be applied to society can never be absolute but will always vary according to place and time as the Christian attempts to make ethical judgements for the present. It is at this point that Preston emphasises Temple’s (and J. H. Oldham’s) famous, though elusive, ‘middle axioms’.32 These, Preston wrote, ‘are a help to the formation of the mind of a Christian, and it is at this level that most of the ecumenical social study, which has been such a notable feature of the last fifty years, has for the most part operated’.33 Moral reflection did not admit of easy solutions, but it could at least provide ethical guidelines which could be translated into principles for action. The general moral principles which Temple maintains derive from the primary theological premise that human beings are children of God and destined for fellowship with him.34 From this basis emerge the values of freedom, social fellowship and service, which in turn provide the basis for concrete policy decisions.35 In this method of moving from the general to the specific, suggests Preston:

Temple’s general attitude seems right. The very root of the matter is that the very substance of his faith should make the Christian ask radical questions about his society, whereas throughout Christian history Christians have tended to accept the political and economic conditions as they found them unreflectively, or else explicitly identify them with the will of God.36

Preston came to similar conclusions in his last published work on Temple: ‘With his critical and constructive social theology in mind, we can look back after another fifty years with great thankfulness for what he was, what he taught, and what he did.’37

In his own work Preston moves in a similar direction to Temple, adopting what he termed a sense of constructive criticism or ‘critical solidarity’,38 but one always rooted in the need for expert knowledge of the social and economic conditions which prevents naïve attempts

31 Preston, ‘William Temple: The Man and his Impact in Church and Society’, p. 13. In Christianity and Social Order, however, Temple uses the Natural Law tradition to provide a critique for the autonomy of economics and the inevitability of capitalism (pp. 57–59). For Temple, Natural Law becomes a cipher for the middle axiom approach which holds together the ideal and the real in ‘combination’.
33 Preston, ‘Thirty-five Years Later’, p. 77.
34 Temple, Christianity and Social Order, p. 54.
35 Temple, Christianity and Social Order, pp. 44–54.
38 Preston, Church and Society, p. 136. The phrase was Giles Ecclestone’s.
to move too directly from Christian social theology to concrete policy objectives. Preston’s criticism of the Christendom group (which, he notes, almost misled Temple) leads him to proclaim that although ‘the expert may be prejudiced, or speak beyond his competence … if one wants to be in a position to confute him one must have undergone the discipline of mastering his expertise’.  

Although in *Christianity and Social Order* Temple spends some time talking of intermediate organisations in which to realise his ideals of social fellowship, and also offering a model for some form of industrial democracy, the lasting impact of his book was in providing the basis for a rights-based universal welfare system. Temple clamoured for a balance between the social whole and the demands of the personality, which was to be fully realised only in relation to society. Indeed intermediate institutions like the ‘family’, schools, and youth organisations were perceived to function as bearers of community, as upholders of the values of fellowship, on which human life was established.

Preston moves beyond some of Temple’s vaguer language of fellowship but retains a similar understanding of inevitability of intermediate structures of socialisation embodied most universally in the ‘state’, a term which he prefers to Temple’s ‘nation’ as a more definite concept and less susceptible to nationalist distortion. In both Temple and Preston, however, there is little by way of a critique of the institution of the state and the legitimacy of its authority. The state, which acknowledges the universality of citizenship without discrimination, becomes one of those structures of human life (along with family, work, political authority and culture) which, as Preston puts it, ‘surround us and bear down upon us from pregnancy and infancy to old age. The structures vary enormously in their empirical features, and can range from the benevolent to the tyrannous, but they are always there’. Like Temple, Preston sees such structures as fundamental for all Christian ethics, even suggesting that, while Temple ‘does not give any theological support for this … he could have aptly done so by referring to the Reformation doctrine of the “Orders of Creation”’. Consequently, although the structures of the state can be modified in a more or less ethical direction shaped by middle axioms, the very necessity of the political entity itself is never questioned. Indeed, writes Preston, ‘structures need to express man’s freedom in fellowship without romanticising him, so that his selfishness is both

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40 See esp. the Appendix, pp. 75–90.
42 Preston, *Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism*, p. 79.

Although it was crucial that structures should be changed to achieve the best possible set of conditions, this was all that was possible; social structures could be gradually re-shaped but never abolished or completely transformed.

For Temple, the net result of this sort of analysis was the egalitarianism of the ‘national community’ of the ‘welfare state’. And to organise the welfare state, planning was to be undertaken at a national level through something akin to what became established as quangos in later years. Indeed, Temple claimed in *Christianity and Social Order*: ‘No one doubts that in the post-war world our economic life must be “planned” in a way and to an extent that Mr Gladstone (for example) would have regarded, and condemned, as socialistic. The question is how the planning authority is to be constituted and through what channels it is to operate.’

Here, however, objections might be raised. There is, to my mind at least, the niggling doubt that, by maintaining the notion of social structure of the state as an ‘order’ of creation, both Preston and Temple have unwittingly absolutized the transient entity of the nation state: indeed, at one point, Temple could write (admittedly as a very young man) that ‘a man has no right to have his talents developed apart from his intention to devote them to the state ... Man is essentially and before all else a member of the state.’ A welfare state might be a benevolent kind of state, at least when compared to the ‘power state’ which, on Temple’s analysis, had been responsible for the First World War, but it was still a state determining its citizens’ welfare (even if, on Temple’s model, it was always a servant of its members). In the end, however, this means that there are few limits on the legitimacy of the state’s sovereignty which is elevated into an order of creation and thereby becomes a necessary law of nature: all the Christian can do is to ensure that the state act morally.

A second question emerges from the method adopted by both Temple and Preston in their efforts to ensure that the state act morally and to introduce political reform. For them both, ethics is reserved for the intermediate sphere between the injunctions of the Gospel and the practicalities of policies themselves. Execution of political decisions becomes the preserve of the expert. Consequently churches and other voluntary groups are thus not the primary agents of welfare but simply more or less prophetic institutions helping to shape public policy: where they interfere directly with the functioning of economics they are usually seriously misguided or hopelessly naive. This means a virtually complete separation of the realm of political morality from the

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45 Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order*, p. 75.
sphere of practical expertise. At the same time, however, the autonomy of the social sciences and economics as disciplines undertaken and understood only by experts, which contain laws that constrain the sphere of practical activity, means that the scope for political morality is increasingly reduced. In such a situation there is less and less scope for the moral and political regulation of the practical. At least with the grandiose claims of the Christendom group and its heirs and successors, everything could be regarded as political; but if economic and social theory were unreformable and guided by necessary laws which could merely be nudged a little by the rough and ready principles of the middle axiom, what then was the sphere that was left for politics and morality? Was Government policy to be simply a technical rationality devoid of ethical content? The sphere of the technical solutions of the economist could become so elevated that there was simply no space left for the moral and political. It is important to note, as the next section will briefly discuss, that the cult of the expert can easily slide over into the absolutisation of the economic and managerial. This, I will suggest, can have dire consequences for the future of politics.

There Is No Alternative: Redefining the Political

It is sometimes not difficult for politicians to redefine the sphere of the political: Margaret Thatcher’s famous statement of May 1980 that there was no alternative to control of the money supply in economic policy meant that the space left for political morality was severely reduced. The social effects of such a policy were necessary evils and consequently were removed from ethics altogether. There was simply nothing else that could be done. Her simple statement helped reshape political discourse; to use a term borrowed from W. H. Riker, it was ‘heresthetic’. Something similar can be seen in more recent political rhetoric, and in some of the actions of the New Labour Government. For example, one of its first acts was to hand over interest-rate policy to the ‘experts’ of the Monetary Policy Committee, which meant that at a stroke the sphere of the political was severely reduced. The goals of economic efficiency were regarded as too important to be subjected to political control and were consequently handed over to the professionals.

Similarly Tony Blair has sometimes spoken as if economics is too powerful and too important to be shaped by politicians, whose only option is simply to manage the inevitable as best and as efficiently as they can. In his speech in the summer of 2000 to Hans Küng’s Global Ethics Foundation, for instance, Blair interestingly redefined the boundaries of political action:

The change is fast and fierce, replete with opportunities and dangers. The issue is: do we shape it or does it shape us? Do we master it, or do we let it overwhelm us? That’s the sole key to politics in the modern world: how to manage change. Resist it: futile; let it happen: dangerous. So — the third way — manage it. But it can’t be managed unless there are rules of management, value judgments as to how and why we are managing it in a particular way.\textsuperscript{49}

It is thus futile to resist responsible and careful management since these are the only areas left for the modern politician.

In more concrete terms this has led in recent years to the massive growth in the number of managerial executive agencies and other quangos which aim at efficient and responsible management over vast areas of social policy. The Government’s only role is in target setting, benchmarking and ensuring efficient economic implementation through constant audit. Moral rationality and the traditional socialist language of liberty, fraternity and equality make way for technical expertise.\textsuperscript{50} Management becomes an autonomous science reduced solely to the goals of economic efficiency and virtually devoid of morality. In such a situation managerial audit directed from above has become the universal experience of public servants, even when they work in organisations, such as universities, which have traditionally been upheld by quite different and unquantifiable sets of moral ideals and goals (such as the pursuit of truth).\textsuperscript{51}

\textit{Temple, Preston and the Cult of the Expert}

Finally, let me ask: what would William Temple and Ronald Preston have to say about this situation? The answer, alas, is probably not very much. This is partly, no doubt, because the situation is relatively new, but also partly because of the inherent problem of ‘middle axioms’ which tend to leave the nitty-gritty of policy-making to the experts: the latent tendency of the loose language of middle axioms is towards the kind of managerialism and cult of the expert outlined above. Moreover, a few often grand-sounding guidelines will be of little help when there is very little space at all for any middle ground: there is simply no alternative to the economic, understood as a sphere virtually devoid of ethics and politics.\textsuperscript{52} Yet where there is no middle ground, and indeed little by way of moral vision at all, the sphere of the practical is all that is left, and that is one in which there is no room

\textsuperscript{49} Tony Blair, ‘Values and the Power of Community’. Speech to the Global Ethics Foundation, Tübingen University, 30 June 2000.
for political morality, middle or not. Indeed, it might even be suggested that ‘middle axioms’ have become little more than the quantifiable targets of the managerial regime of the auditors. There is simply no space for political morality.

The redundancy of middle axiom language can be seen in one of the few concrete examples Preston gives: ‘private centres of economic power,’ he notes, ‘should not be stronger than the government’. However, it is hard to know whether this, or indeed anything of the kind, has much space in contemporary political rhetoric, where government power has been deliberately displaced by the economic managers. It is sometimes very difficult to know precisely what ‘government power’ now is. Furthermore, in Preston’s system, there is such a strong dose of economic realism that it can easily be used as the moral basis for this kind of governmental policy. Expertise in economic theory becomes the justification for an ever-expanding realm for the politically and morally neutral necessity of law-governed activity devoid of any moral input: the sphere in which ‘there is no alternative’ grows exponentially with the cult of the expert manager and auditor.

It is precisely at this point that it becomes crucial for Christians to re-establish a proper sphere for political morality. Indeed, it is not difficult to claim that unless Christians are active in the supposedly neutral, depoliticised and consequently de-ethicised sphere, then there will simply be no Christian input into politics (since in the long run there will be no politics). In turn, this might mean that Christians will be forced to argue for the very possibility of political morality, against economic and managerial reductionism. It seems to me that the main duty for contemporary Christians, some of whom may wish to call themselves socialists, is the repoliticisation and remoralisation of economic and social life against rule by supposedly depoliticised quangos and the reduction of ethical activity solely to the politically ineffectual realm of civil society. It may well be that talk of the ‘civil society’ and all the vague ‘community’ language that goes along with it is little more than a mask for the unquestioning acceptance of the ‘inevitability’ of a de-ethicised economics in the political sphere. In short, the contemporary cult of the expert does not bode well for the long-term survival of political morality.

54 Preston, Religion and the Ambiguities of Capitalism, ch. 2.

‘YOU TAKE ALASDAIR MACINTYRE MUCH TOO SERIOUSLY’ (RONALD PRESTON) — BUT DO PRESTON OR MACINTYRE TAKE THE GLOBAL ECONOMY SERIOUSLY ENOUGH?

Malcolm Brown

Abstract

Ronald Preston found Alasdair MacIntyre’s analysis of plurality and incommensurability unconvincing, holding that, ultimately, a common rationality enabled disparate perspectives to achieve shared positions. This commitment made Preston sceptical of theologies which drew on MacIntyre to deny the possibility of meaningful dialogue with economics but he ignored the argument that shared liberal roots might constrain his own critique of market institutions. Preston’s theological conversation with economics assumes a state-based capitalism, political dominance over economics and a thin plurality. Globalisation challenges such foundations severely but MacIntyre’s focus on communities of tradition offers only a weak challenge to global economic power. Preston’s understanding of the significance of finitude in economics and MacIntyre’s focus on the problems of plurality and the communitarian response are both important in any response to contemporary globalisation. This article explores whether the respective virtues of Preston’s and MacIntyre’s approaches can coalesce in a theology adequate to the global era.

In ‘Returning Friendly Fire’, Duncan Forrester takes Ronald Preston to task for failing to appreciate the misleadingly universalist assumptions of his preferred theological method.1 The ‘Oldham Method’ — exemplified in the work of J. H. Oldham, William Temple and Ronald — was, in Forrester’s judgment, inadequate to working with the profoundly different, and often passionate, perspectives of those excluded from the polite, dispassionate, academic consensus.2


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Preston’s methodological emphasis on ‘facts’ was untenable now that the very concept of objective fact was questioned by the experience of plurality.

Forrester’s argument resonated with my own interest in the theological implications of MacIntyre’s work in, and since, *After Virtue.* MacIntyre’s account of interminable arguments and incommensurate moral narratives seemed to me to be very significant for the predicament of the churches’ social witness and public theology, not least in the context of the 1997 *Unemployment and the Future of Work* report. Ronald’s response to my interest was just a little snippy: ‘You take Alasdair MacIntyre far too seriously’, he admonished, adding, ‘Of course, I knew him when he was seventeen...’ But Ronald’s objections were not simply those of the established craftsman upstaged by the former apprentice. As Ronald’s contribution to the theological symposium on the Unemployment Report showed, he remained convinced that, even in the face of profound plurality, sufficient common reason would, given time and attention, bring about workable, if compromised, consensus. MacIntyre was simply wrong to assert that we have nothing more than interminable, irresolvable, moral civil war drawing unwittingly on the fragments of disparate and misunderstood moral traditions.

In this adherence to the existence and efficacy of shared human reason, Preston can be located very firmly within that spectrum of positions which are labelled ‘liberal’. He was an unashamed ‘Enlightenment Man’. And this, perhaps, goes some way to explaining the perceived lack of theology (as opposed to reflective Christian methodology) in his work, and the underdeveloped ecclesiology which is addressed in Wendy Dackson’s paper in this volume. For the classic liberal focus on universality inevitably diminishes the striking particularity of faith narratives and the tradition-formed communities which bear them.

Toward the end of Ronald’s life the focus of Christian engagement with economics became dominated by the image and the (disputed) reality of globalisation. It would be anachronistic and unfair to criticise Ronald for not giving globalisation the prominence we would now give it. His economics, and his Christian response, were forged in the

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5 Preston, *A Comment on Method*.
6 Preston’s own contribution to R. John Elford and Ian S. Markham’s *The Middle Way: Theology, Politics and Economics in the Later Thought of R. H. Preston* (London: SCM Press, 2000), explains that the theological grounding of his work lay in unpublished lectures, etc. and why this was so (see p. 267). Nevertheless, the peripheral theological content of most of Ronald’s published work suggests that bringing theology centre-stage was not one of his stronger priorities.

era when the economy was a function of the nation state and politics was understood to precede economics rather than the other way around. The question is, can Ronald’s critique of economics help us to deal with the global market today?

It is, I think, very telling to turn to the little IEA book, *Christian Capitalism or Christian Socialism?*, of 1994; keynote conference papers by the Catholic apologist for democratic capitalism Michael Novak, and Ronald. The two protagonists spend a surprising amount of time agreeing with, and speaking quite warmly of, the other. This is more than academic politeness. Both criticise the other for getting the balances wrong (between individual and community, between freedom and social constraint) but both are working with the same basic framework of thought. Both are consciously working within a fallen world, alert to the persistence of sin. And, significantly, both set out to test politico/economic structures and ideologies in the light of Christian thinking rather than arguing more deductively from a Christian anthropology, or from Christian motifs like the Trinity or soteriology, to a perspective on economic issues. That deductive approach had been tried by Nigel Biggar and Donald Hay as a conscious response to Ronald’s work in an attempt to derive principles of welfare economics directly from scripture. But Preston and Novak were both committed instead to starting with experience (although they interpreted experience differently), and then seeking resonances with the Christian story (again, interpreted differently). Both eschewed the idea that there could be such a thing as a Christian economics. This approach is one hallmark of the liberal tradition in social theology. Indeed, Novak gives a nuanced account of the linkages between the New Right (as it then was), libertarianism and the classic liberal tradition. He accuses Ronald, not of liberalism which, after all, they share, but for holding a romanticised and theologically untenable view of ‘community’, and one is hard put to find, in Ronald’s work, a sufficiently rich and workable construction of ‘community’ to rebut Novak’s charges. And this too, I would submit, is because Ronald is, at a very profound level, committed to the universal rationality and, ultimately, to the universalised ethic, which is at the heart of that Enlightenment Project which gave birth to the market economy with its intrinsic globalising tendencies. Thicker versions of ‘community’, which must perforce deal with particular, non-universal narratives and traditions are hard to defend from within the broad liberal consensus, whether it led to the right or to the left politically.

One might argue, slightly mischievously, that Ronald’s defence of community in the face of market economics would have been stronger

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had he taken MacIntyre more seriously himself. In MacIntyre, of course, we have a rich historico-philosophical account of tradition-constituted (and -constitutive) communities and their centrality to the generation of the ethical conversation. In a short article, there is no space to give an analysis of the subtleties of MacIntyre’s developing thesis in After Virtue and his later work. But it has become commonplace to remark on the tantalising ending to After Virtue in which he appears to pit ‘local forms of community’, sustaining within them civility and the moral life, over against the morally incoherent barbarians of modernity who have ‘already been governing us for quite some time’.9 MacIntyre is not of course suggesting a fight for the future between local stories and hegemonic processes (suggesting, rather, cells of endurance in a continuing Dark Age) but it is fair to ask whether his conception of local, narrative-formed conversations about tradition and practice is at all adequate as a response to the imperial ambitions of a globalised economy. Does MacIntyre convince when he suggests that such tradition-constituted communities would make a serious difference to the kinds of trend we are currently experiencing or offer genuinely hopeful points of resistance? Indeed, does MacIntyre recognise the force of Preston’s conviction that there is much that is appropriate to the human condition in the way markets themselves are conceived and operate?10

A crucial question here is whether a focus on local communities can also generate a strong enough account of how disparate traditions encounter each other. As Jeffrey Stout notes, MacIntyre’s claim that the Enlightenment Project has left us locked in ‘civil war by other means’12 neglects the extent to which civil war in the old, bloody mode has been moderated by a commitment to the goal of a universalised rationality and ethic.13 Although plenty of blood has continued to be shed throughout modern times, and the pretensions of an American-led global economy seem to be drawing the world into American-led culture wars, is it not possible that MacIntyre’s prescriptions for the recovery of tradition and the virtues of community would only escalate the slide into incomprehension that leads to crusades and jihad?

I would want to argue (but not here) that especially in Whose Justice? Which Rationality?,13 MacIntyre gives an account of the collision between

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9 MacIntyre, After Virtue, p. 263.
11 MacIntyre, After Virtue, p. 253.
13 A. MacIntyre, Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (London: Duckworth, 1988). MacIntyre’s conception of an Epistemological Crisis in one tradition being resolved in an ‘enlarged narrative’ drawing upon other traditions which are, in specific but not overwhelming ways, more adequate, allows us to conceive of how the liberal approach to social theology exemplified by Preston might develop a richer strain of
communities of tradition which is reflective enough to lead to growth and learning rather than wars of extermination. Even in After Virtue he describes a tradition in good order as an ongoing conversation about what it means to belong within that tradition. The practices of community are not only tradition-constituted, they are tradition-constitutive too. It is at least possible to make the case for MacIntyre in this regard. But it must also be recognised that MacIntyre’s thinking has been deployed by practitioners of many disciplines, including theology, in ways that are far less subtle. MacIntyre has offered to theologians an attractive way back to the securities of Christendom: to a postmodern reconstruction of a pre-modern, pre-liberal, church-dominated conception of human community in which the God who has been on the defensive throughout modern times can at last (through the church) start flexing muscles once more.

Ronald was a staunch critic of Christendom theology, whether manifested by Demant or resurrected by Milbank.14 The Christendom ideal, being in so many respects backward-looking, seems to have problems giving the kind of contemporary historico-philosophical account of itself that MacIntyre would require, for the mercantile age which ushered in — even necessitated — the Enlightenment Project of common, reason-based, ethics cannot be undiscovered and has, indeed, been intensified by the communications revolution of the last 200 years. (How to maintain local forms of community in an information age is a fascinating question to which there are a number of possible answers.)

I would contend that the Christendom theologies which, in their contemporary guise, draw heavily on MacIntyre do, to a degree, misinterpret him, although MacIntyre’s position is at times ambiguous enough to give them ammunition.15 Preston’s argument against the Christendom theologians, however, was primarily that they neglect the seriousness and autonomy of economics. A recurrent theme in his work throughout his life was that, while economics is a human science in which the moral perspectives of men and women are significant functions, it is nonetheless a discipline which deals in verifiable

15 John Milbank claims that his project is to ‘radicalise MacIntyre’. See Theology and Social Theory (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), p. 327.

data and material relationships which are not simply subjective or particular to specific ethical narratives. So to assert, as do theologians like Meeks or Hauerwas or, more recently, Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, that scarcity, that fundamental building block of economic theory, is merely a human culturally-conditioned construct and nothing more is to misunderstand grievously what an economist actually means by scarcity. Relative scarcity, as Ronald and serious economists always point out, is not the same thing as not having enough to go around, let alone any notion of rationing. Rather, scarcity is concerned with the finitude of things. A good may be employed in a number of possible ways, but using it for one precludes its use for another. It is, indeed, through the related concept of the opportunity cost — the cost of the use forgone — that an understanding of the value of a good can be grasped. But Ronald’s point is that, at least this side of the eschaton, finitude is part of the created order and cannot, in its economic sense, be overcome by different distributional solutions. To be sure, conceptions of distributive justice are among the moral questions which properly enter the thinking of the economist as for the theologian, but the problems of distributive justice are quite distinct from the question about scarcity and cannot be solved by redefining scarcity as a human concept in defiance of the finitude of things in the world as it is.

In my view, this observation about scarcity is one of Ronald’s strongest contributions to theological reflection on economics, although he generally framed it in the language of the economist (the language of his first discipline) and its theological significance needs unpacking. But a moment’s thought shows the extent of his challenge to Christendom thinkers such as Milbank. Ronald insists that the economists’ understanding of scarcity reflects an objective reality and a theological reality — this is how the world has been made by God. The Kingdom of Heaven may be infinite but for now the world is all we have. This reveals as a sleight of hand Milbank’s declaration that proper theology — the kind Milbank recognises — is done ‘on the far side of the cross’.

While one recognises in Milbank’s work the authentic Christian insight that the logic of the created world is not the final word and that the Kingdom of God is inaugurated in Christ and prefigured in some characteristics of the church, nevertheless, in a world in which sin persists, the manner in which God’s Kingdom transcends the limitations of human logic remains opaque to us. It


18 Milbank, Theology and Social Theory, p. 433.
is all too easy to project a very understandable desire to escape the bounds of finitude onto one’s picture of the world, and indeed the church, in the here-and-now. And if, with Milbank, we place theology exclusively on the far side of the cross, reflection upon the nature of God and God’s relation in Christ to the world is indeed freed up to be the exclusive narrative of the church, but at the expense of any connected relationship to the created order as it is experienced on this side of the cross — the location where we properly believe Christ to be still soteriologically active. This is not an attempt to reduce theology to a conversation about observable and measurable human experience but, as Nicholas Lash puts it in response to Milbank, theology on the far side of the cross:

is a construal requiring, for its own integrity, the continuing corrective pressure of another reading . . . which would place us still . . . on this side of the cross, set in Gethsemane; a reading which demands the strenuous exercise of a kind of power set to the service of a kind of politics.¹⁹

— and indeed, an engagement with finitude, the inescapable nature of which leads, in some respects, to the necessity for politics and power.

Ronald’s focus on finitude is important, not just as a serious challenge to the theology of Milbank with its very MacIntyrean insistence on the incommensurability of Christian and other narratives, including those of sociologists and economists. The focus on finitude also helps to expose the unsustainable pretensions of the global economy, fascinatingly revealing the extent to which current globalising trends are forgetful of the classic economic roots from which they spring.

Capitalism (at least in its contemporary manifestations) is predicated, as George Monbiot has pointed out, on ‘neverending growth,’ yet we live in a world with finite resources.²⁰ And in an argument reminiscent of Ronald’s rebuttal of Christendom’s naïve view of scarcity, Monbiot notes that this is not something that could be negated by the discovery of a few new oil fields. ‘The laws of thermodynamics impose inherent limits upon biological production. Even the repayment of debt, the pre-requisite of capitalism, is mathematically possible only in the short term.’²¹

However seriously one takes MacIntyre’s account of incommensurable moral positions, mathematical axioms, and the theorems which derive from them, remain aspects of a shared, or even universal,

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²⁰ Cf. Graham Ward’s comment in his City of God (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) that the city has moved from being a place of ‘Eternal aspiration’ to one of ‘Everlasting desire’.
²² Ibid.
logic which offer a basis from which shared moral understandings might ensue, however attenuated they are compared to the natural theologies of old, as Ian Markham and others have argued.\textsuperscript{23}

As the world waits anxiously to discover the outcome of unilateral American economic, foreign and military policies, it is also worth reflecting upon the claim that empires have played a key role in maintaining the myth of local exemption from finitude. The exploitation of other continents’ resources — whether of gold, spices, labour or oil — allows the illusion of infinitude to flourish. And even as the new American empire takes one last push toward the mirage of petrochemical infinitude, capitalism in general, says Monbiot, has ‘moved its frontiers from space to time: seizing resources from an infinite future’.\textsuperscript{24}

To sum up: it is as if, one way or another, the very different positions of Preston and MacIntyre can be coopted to give succour to the apologists for a global economy which neither Ronald nor MacIntyre would dream of endorsing. Ronald’s essentially liberal, universalist assumptions share too much ground with liberal market ideologies to allow his corrective of ‘community’ to achieve the depth and resonance it needs to counter the depredations of markets in practice. And MacIntyre’s rich vocabulary of community is founded so strongly on a rejection of Enlightenment universalist ambitions that theological MacIntyreans are too easily tempted to dream of God’s transcendence of finitude in ways which defy the manner in which sinful (but redeemed) lives are actually lived, and may, incidentally, make rather light of the Incarnation (although that is another story). And it is precisely the desire to transcend finitude which powers the imperial and unsustainable engineroom of the contemporary global economy.

But for both Preston and MacIntyre, their weaknesses may be the shadow side of their strengths. Through MacIntyre we discern the centrality of a rich practice of community (and face-to-face and in correspondence MacIntyre’s conception of community is a lot more modest and realisable than is apparent in his books)\textsuperscript{25} — a notion of community which might be a more substantial bulwark than Ronald was able to erect against the barbarians who have been governing us.

But from Ronald we take the insistence on economics being the study of the way things work under God in a world after Pentecost but before the parousia — as a conversation about universals as well as about human moral constructs. Again and again, Ronald helps us

\textsuperscript{23} Ian Markham, \textit{Truth and the Reality of God} (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).
\textsuperscript{24} Monbiot, ‘Our Quality of Life Peaked in 1974’.
\textsuperscript{25} See A. MacIntyre, ‘I’m Not a Communitarian, But . . .’, \textit{The Responsive Community} 1.3 (1991). Also, MacIntyre’s contributions to a seminar ‘Whose Community? Which Communitarianism?’ at Manchester University, 28 April 2001.
focus on finitude as the key to a theology which takes this side of the cross as seriously as the other. And it is the persistence of finitude which offers the strongest case against hegemonic and unsustainable globalisation — a case framed in precisely the universalist logic that capitalism itself purports to deal in.

Ronald might, perhaps, have taken MacIntyre more seriously, but a MacIntyrean needs the corrective of a substantial dose of Preston. And, to take political realities as seriously as Ronald taught us to do, it must be accepted that MacIntyre today has rather more imitators and disciples than Preston. If God’s world is to be defended against the depredations of the global economy — indeed, if the creation is to survive to worship God at all — we need them both. 26 Invest in Prestons, at least until they find parity with MacIntyres.

26 The unresolved nature of ‘both-and’, implied here, is in some ways characteristic of Ronald’s own insistence that ambiguity is unavoidable in a theological interim (between Pentecost and the parousia) in which the Kingdom of God is both now and not yet, and is echoed in Lash’s comments about maintaining a focus on both sides of the cross.
Abstract

This article considers the nature of global governance, and the response of the churches to global governance, looking especially at international relations and the economy, and issues of social justice and equity.

Ronald Preston was an English, Anglican theologian who was the first Professor of Social and Pastoral Theology at Manchester University. In his long life, from 1913–2001, he took part in the debates about fascism and social reconstruction in the 1930s and participated in the extensive discussions about the British mixed economy from the 1960s to the 1980s. He wrote many books, mainly after his retirement in 1978. He remains a significant theologian in social ethics because of his theological method and his commitment to social justice. In his theological method he espoused the importance of inter-disciplinary work, and in particular he believed that it was possible to express this dialogue in the form of middle axioms. It is not so clear that this particular contribution will outlast him, and there has been much debate about this which Preston took part in with great

However, the continued relevance of an inter-disciplinary method, and a commitment to dialogue with empirical data, remain at the heart of his social ethics. There are alternatives to this which have been espoused in England by Michael Banner and Oliver O’Donovan but Preston’s theology was not convinced by such a critical approach to modern culture.

However, one must be careful in saying that Preston did not wish to take a critical approach to modern culture. It was certainly not the case that Preston believed that all was well with contemporary society. His other passionate commitment was to social justice. Preston was very aware of the complexity of this term and wrestled with both the conceptual expression of it and the embodiment of justice in the situations with which he concerned himself. He remained all his life convinced that the gap between rich and poor in the global context needed to be narrowed, and while he was never for a moment a Marxist he saw that the appeal of Marxism lay in the discrepancy between the living standards of rich and poor worldwide.

There is, however, one respect in which Preston’s thought now appears very much of its time. There is a huge debate among missiologists and sociologists of religion as to the importance of Pentecostalism in the continents of Africa, Asia and South America, to say nothing of its influence in Western Christianity in the last four decades. Preston said little about this. He was brought up a member of the Church of England and never went far beyond its fairly sober expression in worship. He was keenly interested in ecumenism, but it was the ecumenical dialogue with the Lutheran, Reformed and Roman Catholic traditions that excited him. His commitment to ecumenical dialogue did not embrace Pentecostalism and in this respect he seems very much a European theologian of the mid-twentieth century.

In this article Preston’s understanding of inter-disciplinary dialogue is explored as the foundation of his theological method. Different theories of justice are then discussed, although it is important to note that Preston himself would have been cautious of too easy a definition of justice in terms of its context. This leads into the necessity of economic and political justice. Finally, the debate about Pentecostalism shows where Preston’s thought is in need of challenge, because the global religious context is now so different. Equally the growth of the global economy also places Preston’s thought in a changed world. What is needed is to apply Preston’s theological method to the very different situation of a new century.

2 Preston, *Church and Society*, pp. 141–57. His main opponent was Duncan Forrester.
Globalisation presents the Christian theologian with a formidable challenge. It is a topic which has become one of the standard topics of Christian social ethics in a way that marks conferences, collections of essays and even the speeches of church leaders. However, it is also important to stand back and assess the topic dispassionately. This does not simply mean asking what the topic might mean, relying on a few definitions. This is the standard approach. Look at any of the copious articles or books by theologians on the topic in the last five or ten years and there in the first chapter a definition (or several) will be offered of the topic. Some empirical evidence will be offered, and a number of theologians or political theorists are cited. But Preston knew that this was an insufficiently rigorous approach. Instead a rigorous definition will look at the academic debates which have taken place on the subject, charting the gradual emergence of some clarity about the topic. As well as a definition, or analysis, of a concept there had to be a history of the recent debates about the topic or concept. This, for Preston, was the lifeblood of intellectual history in a modern society, embracing universities, think tanks, high quality journalism and the reception of ideas into the life of the nation. It was, in many ways, a defence of Coleridge’s ‘clerisy’ who handed on the thinking life of the nation. Theology ignored this process at its peril. Bishops and other church leaders always ran the risk of preferring the life of the church to the secular debates of the world, not because the life of the church was more holy but because they feared the secular world which they did not understand.5 In this approach Preston was deeply influenced both by his experience of SCM (the Student Christian Movement) in the 1930s but also by the abiding impact of Reinhold Niebuhr.6 SCM stood for an immersion in the intellectual life of the world, while Niebuhr lambasted the inability to respond to tragedy and realism in the utterances of church leaders, both in the USA and Europe.

This approach to defining a topic by listening to debates in other secular disciplines was one which was second nature to Ronald Preston. It was not simply that he was an economist and knew the complexities of the subject very well. He also had an instinctive grasp of how debates would go on within some of those disciplines with which he would enter into dialogue. Thus in political economy, applied economics and in contemporary political debate he had a feel for where the debate had progressed, so that the unwary student who cited a past text from political thought or economics would be told not that it was wrong but that the text had to be situated in its

5 See his comments on Bishop Leslie Hunter as a rare exception to this rule in Preston, ‘A Bishop Ahead of his Church’, in Elford and Markham, The Middle Way, pp. 21–30.

context, and could only be understood as a response to a previously held argument, both yielding to criticism in its turn but also perhaps yielding ongoing validity. Such validity may be overlooked in future debates, and need to be rediscovered, or perhaps remain a feature of the debate.

It is impossible to read or understand Preston without seeing him in the context of the London School of Economics (LSE), and the debates between the great John Maynard Keynes and the Chicago school of neo-classical economics as it gradually permeated the English economic debate. Such a debate was undertaken on many levels, between economists in technical papers, in the economics columns of the quality broadsheets (few theologians today read the financial pages of *The Guardian* or the *Financial Times*), the think tanks such as the Adam Smith Institute (which nests under Church House Westminster, renting its offices from the church building which it opposes as embodying bureaucratic social welfare thought in a nicely ironic gesture), and ultimately in the debates between politicians, unionists and business leaders. These debates were real to Ronald Preston and he met unionists, theorists and politicians both as a member of church working parties and as a distinguished university academic. His writings are full of descriptions of these debates. In *Religion and the Persistence of Capitalism* he gives twenty pages to analysing the thought of Milton Friedman, F. A. von Hayek, Fred Hirsch and the advocates of state socialism. All this was two years before the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 made such theorists well known in British life.\(^7\) Preston was, however, well aware of their influence many years before, and he pursued the matter in his 1985 Scott Holland Lectures, *Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century: The Economic and Political Task*. This book contained a much deeper analysis of the ‘radical right’, including the political views of Robert Nozick and the spirituality of evangelical Christians who felt riches were a divine blessing.

He knew too that the end product of these debates could be disastrous economic policies which could wreck a city, industry or region in a few years, bringing unemployment and misery to thousands of those who did not understand for a moment the complexities, for instance, of endogenous growth theory but who knew all too well the impact of redundancy notices on their lives.

Here then is where we must turn to understand globalisation. What debates have been held about it in British intellectual life in the last decade, and what influences from abroad have been paramount?


Preston himself began to write about it in the last few essays which he wrote but it is the method which he leaves us of describing debates rather than the content of his writings. It is arguable that unless a theologian has been trained in another subject from the outset before he or she turns to theology it will be difficult to appreciate intuitively the nature of the internal debates within it. Perhaps that puts it too strongly but certainly Preston returned continuously to his training at the LSE in the 1930s in economics. Other examples of this approach would be Lord Habgood’s training in physiology or the contemporary interest in other disciplines such as anthropology or demography in the recent volume Anglicanism: The Answer to Modernity?8

The debates about globalisation in the past decade encompass at least four disciplines of urban theory, economics, political thought and cultural theory. Each of these has witnessed a profound debate where globalisation has been asserted as a concept, refuted and then attempted as a synthesis. Each of these debates has influenced the other as well. So at the simplest level, a theologian who writes about globalisation is in fact engaging in at least one of these four debates (others could be cited) both as that debate progresses and as it interacts with the others. Theology in turn enters into a dialogue, perhaps by the model of middle axioms, perhaps not, and some theological statement about modernity and globalisation is then asserted. What is all too obvious is that Preston’s self-awareness about the debates which he entered into is not recognised by many theologians who have written about globalisation.

Urban theory is best surveyed in Andrew Davey’s book Urban Christianity and Global Order,9 which contains important summaries of the thought of Saskia Sassen, Leonie Sandercock and Manuel Castells. What is important about their writings is that they chart the way in which cities are strategic sites in the global economy through which the migratory poor infiltrate into the nation states of the affluent West. The importance of such vibrant social networks was never recognised by Marxism since it argued that capital has commodified culture. Instead of Marxism what we now see emerging as shaping the developing world is a locally based politics of culture, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, environmental issues and gender. Such patterns are found in every major city of the world, and they create a series of movements across continents which speak powerfully of a popular culture that resists easy analysis.

There are equally profound debates in economics, politics and culture. The literature on globalisation is familiar enough, including such recent best sellers as Noreena Hertz’s The Silent Takeover, but there are also

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profound disagreements between economists. The best exploration of the economic issues is given by Joseph Stiglitz in his *Globalization and its Discontents*.¹⁰ What matters is that Preston’s interdisciplinary method is applied to such arguments and that when writing about globalisation theologians take account of the complexity of the issues.¹¹

**Justice in its Local Context**

One major contribution which Preston made to the study of economics and politics was his highly developed account of justice. This is a constant theme in all his writings. In *The Future of Christian Ethics* he discusses the relationship of justice to love. The teaching of Jesus is focused on the radical and inexhaustible love of God, transcending realisation in any social structure. However, there is also the concern for the outcast shown by Jesus. Preston has no difficulty showing that the love of God can be the basis for a social ethic which transcends self-interest. Justice and love are to be distinguished but also related. Love can never require less than justice for justice provides for the common good in society. However, justice requires love since justice affirms other persons in their otherness, and not simply for their functional usefulness. This affirmation is rooted in love, as the principle of justice, and justice both prepares for love and partially expresses it. Distributive justice embodies these theoretical concepts, and Preston spent much time using distributive justice to illuminate the problems of global development.¹²

Preston’s huge strength is his passionate commitment to better conditions of life for humanity, both materially and intellectually. Again and again in his writings the echoes of poverty, bad working conditions and intellectual stultification can be heard. He was a theologian who was deeply aware of social realities, and he met daily with those who ministered in areas of poverty and economic deprivation. Preston in his writings did not refer directly to ‘the poor’, and his restrained style of prose avoided descriptions of acute poverty. He would not have thought it necessary to interview those who were poor and record their struggles in his articles. This did not mean that he was unfamiliar with hardship, and his experience as a curate during the war in Sheffield showed him hardship enough. Certainly he was a familiar participant with trade unionists, councillors and others representing local tenants groups.

In one of his earliest collections of essays, *Perspectives on Strikes*, published in 1974, Preston brings together hard-headed realism and


a commitment to social justice. He recognises that Britain is certainly an affluent society so strikes should not be about simply higher wages with the aim of greater consumption but rather about social justice or protests about boring conditions of work. However, when inflation runs at 20% which was the case in the 1970s then industrial power is used to stay ahead of anticipated price rises, while those with less industrial power fight hard not to lose ground and those without industrial power (such as pensioners) are squeezed and suffer injustice.

Preston developed his ethic of justice out of these concrete instances of industrial relationships, asking if it was possible to have an ethic of a just strike. The concluding chapter of the book is written by Michael Taylor but contains the shared reflections of the staff at the Department of Social Theology at Manchester University. Preston certainly concurred with the view that establishing a just cause in strike action was the most important. The complexities of justice were intertwined with political and third party issues. It was not the case that a political strike was automatically unjust for it may be that the issues are already entangled in the particular industry in which the dispute happened.

A later study was entitled Not Just for the Poor and published by the Social Policy Committee of the Board for Social Responsibility (of the Church of England) in 1986. Preston acted as the Christian social ethicist to the working party which produced the report. The report considered the future of the welfare state at a time when it was under enormous pressure from a Government that was convinced that welfare in Britain had become too indiscriminate. Preston argued in the second chapter, ‘Welfare in the Light of Christian Belief’, that it was important to emphasise the biblical concern for justice and the poor. The attacks of the prophets, such as Amos and Jeremiah, upon the luxury of the rich while the poor were abandoned in their need, were biblical passages that needed to be remembered today. As always, Preston made his point with great subtlety. Britain was not a nation in a special covenant relationship with God, for this nation contained a pluralist culture and there would be different social groups within it. ‘We ought not to hide behind biblical models of practice in order to avoid the difficult task of devising structures for welfare provision which fit our own circumstances.’ However, the value of the Bible is its witness to the character of God, and the implication of this for our understanding of social life. Justice and compassion remain of abiding importance to the discussions of contemporary welfare.

Another passionate concern of Preston’s was that of inequality. There is a particularly fine example of this when Preston is discussing

R. H. Tawney, who was an influential social theorist and historian in Preston’s youth. Preston was especially influenced by Tawney’s *Equality* published in 1931 and reprinted many times since. Preston argued in his essay on ‘R. H. Tawney as a Christian Socialist’ that inequality remained a major problem in Britain in 1977. 50% of private property was owned by 2% of the population, although when Preston wrote this he was actually at the end of a long period of diminishing inequality from the 1930s to the 1970s. The reason inequality is unacceptable is because it distorts valuable public goods such as education which Preston sums up as a ‘legacy of parsimony and injustice … while the privileged sector flourishes like the psalmist’s green bay tree’.15

Perhaps the greatest concern of Preston’s writings was the endemic poverty that resulted in the oppression of large areas of South America. Preston had an ambiguous relationship with liberation theology, feeling that it was of little help to the Christian social ethicist but at the same time acutely aware that it challenged the church as part of the structures of oppression. Marxism was always an ideology which Preston was deeply suspicious of. It was inadequate in dealing with feminism, ecological issues or nationalism. It was also seriously deficient in its economic analysis.16

One of the few places in Preston’s writings where he considers practical involvement with poverty is when he discusses the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield ‘which sets out to be a British example of identification with the poor’. However, yet again the characteristic note of Preston’s re-emerges. Certainly there is poverty in the inner city and suburban churches do not identify with this. Nevertheless the issue of poverty is complex. Ethnic minorities may settle in the inner city and then the more enterprising families will move on. Those remaining, often the poor white families, are less enterprising and part of the ‘submerged tenth’. Preston argues that identification with this group is a Christian necessity but it is fanciful to say with John Vincent that a British revolution may begin from such groups. Preston feels that Vincent’s claim that it is important to be sectarian and Christ-centred in one’s politics was wholly wrong. With typical restraint Preston describes this as ‘unfortunate’. Poverty involves a national response and the churches must get involved with government in a sense of ‘critical solidarity’. Preston here quotes Giles Ecclestone who was for many years the Secretary of the Church of England’s Board for Social Responsibility.17

So what do we make of Preston’s commitment to the poor, and to economic and social justice? In many ways he moved very little from the position adopted by his teacher and mentor R. H. Tawney

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17 Preston, *Church and Society*, pp. 134–35.

in the 1930s when Preston studied economics under him at the London School of Economics. Tawney served on many Government working parties, including the 1919 Sankey Commission on the coal industry; the Consultative Committee of the Board of Education; and many Christian conferences. Preston saw his role and expressed his commitment in similar terms. He was for three years from 1935–38 the Industrial Secretary of the then enormously influential Student Christian Movement [SCM]. ‘His concern was to understand the economic and political chaos that had overtaken the developed world’ is how the obituary by Albert Radcliffe puts it on the Manchester Cathedral website.\(^{18}\) He served for many years on the Church of England Board for Social Responsibility, wrote many articles for its journal *Crucible* and organised countless consultations and conferences. Preston did not get involved in party politics, so far as I know, and felt that involvement with government working parties was not his true forte. Rather he expressed his deep commitment by writing, teaching and enabling the churches to move to a more compassionate and involved position. This was not anti-capitalist and here Preston departs considerably from Tawney who felt that since capitalism appealed to greed and self-interest it must be unchristian. Preston was always more measured than this and felt with William Temple that governments must harness the power of self-interest to the common good.

Preston knew that international economic life was the product of centuries of an unequal relationship between what he called the ‘north’ and the ‘south’. His awareness of unequal trading patterns, indebtedness, aid and environmental concerns was great. Out of this came the stark fact that each year millions died of hunger which could be prevented. At the same time his careful analysis knew that some countries had been able to eliminate chronic hunger almost totally while others had not. Trade would be the most important way out of this dependency, combined with well-targeted aid. Ultimately Preston turned back to the need to harness the self-interest of nations to the good of the global community. His concern was how international bodies and national governments could cooperate to promote world development.\(^{19}\)

\*Ecclesiology and Mission in the Global Context\*

This is where the greatest difference in discussions about globalisation appears from the writings of Ronald Preston. Preston was an Anglican who had spent years working at the very heart of industrial cities such as Sheffield and Manchester. His great admiration was for Bishop Leslie Hunter who was Bishop of Sheffield from 1939–62. Preston knew


\(^{19}\) Preston, *Ambiguities*, pp. 111–27.
inside out both the Ecumenical Movement and Industrial Mission, and these developments from the 1930s to the 1970s shaped his world-view. These movements would in Preston’s view reinvigorate the traditional Anglican parish system and help it to respond to the modern urban world in which Preston lived.

This now appears to be a dubious judgment, however much Preston was typical of his generation in coming to this conclusion. Specialist chaplaincies focusing on the world of work are increasingly rare in European churches, and the trade union movement which was the great ally of Industrial Mission has also declined in recent decades with the demise of heavy industry. The Ecumenical Movement also faces difficulties. While ecumenical dialogue certainly clarifies theological controversies, and may in a few cases unite denominations, in most cases the interest in formal, institutional schemes of union has been replaced by a looser, unstructured cooperation between churches and congregations. This is sometimes described as ‘reconciled diversity’. Above all such movements are products of a European and North American Christianity. The emphasis has now shifted to the rest of the globe.

What now appears to many observers of the global future of Christianity is that the future lies with urban Pentecostal Christianity which has a strong doctrine of personal salvation and mission, allied in some cases to a political and economic role for its followers. It is amazing that in his volume on ecclesiology in the global context, Confusions in Christian Social Ethics: Problems for Geneva and Rome, written in 1994, there is no reference to Pentecostalism in the index at all. It is as if the developments across Asia, Africa and the Americas (North and South) did not impinge on his thought.

The great debate in missiology and the sociology of religion over the last fifteen years is about the rise of Pentecostalism. The main exponents of this view in English theology have been Grace Davie and David Martin. Grace Davie writes in Europe: The Exceptional Case: ‘There is a common agreement amongst those who are working in or commenting upon the religious field in Latin America that a profound transformation is taking place, namely the extraordinarily rapid expansion of Pentecostal forms of Protestantism.’ The shift which takes 10% of the Latin American population to describe themselves as Protestant is extraordinary. Davie relies on Martin’s analysis which sees Pentecostalism as providing a haven in which disadvantaged


people can find a sense of self worth and mutual support (individually and collectively) as members of a redeemed community.22 At the same time Pentecostalism is also seen as representative of modernity, global connections and economic modernity. In addition, the effect on family, relationships is profound. Traditional male behaviour is controlled and responsibility, leadership and affection is provided for the entire family. This is not just a domestic issue for the economy also grows as well as a result of Pentecostal teaching on the family. This is not a direct application of Max Weber’s thesis but it certainly shows that what Davie calls ‘networks of reciprocity, trust and community values’ form around groups of families with economic consequences. There are now several studies of evangelicals and politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America. Perhaps the widest ranging is Freston’s recent study of evangelicals and politics in these three continents. It argues that there is no tidy analysis of evangelical thought, though its attitude to economic analysis is generally conservative.23

Several points should be made about this growth of Pentecostalism. First the cautionary warning of Ian T. Douglas should be noted. Douglas is Professor of Missiology at Episcopal Divinity School, Harvard, and has constantly argued that the diversity of African, Asian and Latin American Christianity cannot be reduced to a uniformly charismatic and fundamentalist voice. He is deeply critical of Philip Jenkins’s study of Pentecostalism The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity.24 So any attempt to oppose the work of Preston to an emerging fundamentalist Pentecostalism in the developing world is too simple. Rather there will be a great diversity of values inside Christianity, and especially in developing countries. Freston also emphasises the sheer diversity of evangelicalism and Pentecostalism.

A second point is made by Friedrich Graf in his theoretical study of religion and globalisation. Graf argues that capitalistic modernisation has always engendered high social costs. Religious belief enables communities to compensate for rapid social change. ‘[T]he more one uses the symbolism of religious languages to cultivate a sensibility for the pathologies of modernisation, the more attractive religious communities will be that propagate a lifestyle in accord with “creation”. The quicker the change and the greater the erosion of old

cultural traditions and institutions caused by global capitalism, the more weight many people will attach to commemorating the past and mourning the loss of cultural treasures using the symbolic language and liturgies of old religious traditions’. Capitalism will, Graf believes, continue to give rise to the renaissance of many religious movements. Interestingly Graf also sees a challenge to Christianity in social ethics. On the one hand churches will ‘always insist on social duties and corrections of the distribution of income and opportunities generated by the market. Yet, like other religious communities, they must also develop an ethic that goes beyond the understandable concern for the weak and highlights, much more than in the past, the constructive and affluence-promoting effects of capitalistic expansion’.25

Preston’s last collection of essays was edited by R. John Elford and Ian Markham. *The Middle Way* appeared in 2000 shortly before his death. In one of these essays Preston is concerned with the growth of base communities in Latin America, and the continuing tension between liberation theology and the conservatism evident in recent Vatican pronouncements such as *VeritatisSplendor*. He remained acute in his comments on the World Council of Churches, and was deeply worried about the development of theologies of creation that seemed to him unbalanced. However, his last engagement with the global economy in *Religion and the Ambiguities of Creation* published in 1991 was primarily about aid, debt and trade. It is a good survey of the 1980s but it speaks of this decade as a ‘lost decade’. The rising affluence of the Asian ‘tiger economies’ is not mentioned, and his final complete book *Confusions in Christian Social Ethics* in 1994 is a discussion of GATT and sustainability. Once again the emphasis is on degrees of growth and poverty reduction. There is no mention of the rapid growth in some Asian and South American economies, nor of the effect of deregulation (for good or ill) in financial markets that has caused an explosion in financial transactions.

This suggests that there is indeed a new development in social ethics which has gone beyond Preston’s thought. The enormous growth in prosperity in Asian economies, such as China, South Korea and even now India, marks the global economic order, even allowing for the collapse across that region in the late 1990s. Pentecostalism is the response to such economic change, just as in Africa and Latin America the extraordinary polarisation of rich and poor is increasingly handled less by liberation theologians and more by evangelical groups. This requires a careful discussion of these religious movements but it is striking that at the moment such discussion is led by sociologists and missiologists (Martin, Davie, Douglas, Freston), rather than by ethicists. One of the few books which engages with this new reality


from an ethical dimension is by the English urban theologian Andrew Davey. He argues that the local church must find a way of engaging with the difficult issues of asylum seekers, housing and poverty. These are the complex problems which press on English inner-city parishes and neighbourhoods, and what unites them with the rest of the world is the economic and social realities which catch up whole communities in the reality of global transactions. What also unites them is increasingly the shared Pentecostal or evangelical faith which poor communities across the globe will share. This may be in the affluent West or the developing societies across the globe, or indeed in the increasingly marginalised nations of much of Africa. This is a very different world from the one which Preston knew. It may well be that we are at only the start of such global inter-connectedness and that the twenty-first century will contain both economic growth in continents such as Asia and dire poverty in other continents.

Conclusion

Preston’s theology offered the most sophisticated account of theology, economics and politics in British theology for many decades. There are permanent contributions to Christian social ethics which will long outlast his life. Chief among these are his commitment to an inter-disciplinary method and his keen awareness of the importance of analysing economic and political debates ‘from the inside’, with an appreciation of why economists and political theorists wrote in the particular way that each had adopted. This familiarity with several disciplines is common enough among studies of the Bible in recent decades, but paradoxically it has become much less common in political and social theology. Only in the scientific field, where such knowledge is obviously essential, does Christian ethics display this sense of being at ease in different disciplines. Nevertheless it is crucial that such knowledge is displayed when analysing such a complex phenomenon as globalisation.

A second contribution was his understanding of the concept of justice. Preston returned to this concept in virtually every book, approaching it both from the contribution of such thinkers as John Rawls and from biblical understandings of the term. Some of Preston’s first writings were actually in the New Testament in the late 1940s and while he would have scoffed at the idea that he was a biblical scholar he never lost his insistence that the Christian understanding of justice was derived from biblical roots. It is important that any future debates on the concept of justice, including those inspired by Michael Walzer’s writings, return to Preston’s writings. In particular

this understanding was deeply embedded in concrete particularity, whether in his understanding of the relationship of injustice to strike action, or in his writing on poverty both in Britain and in the developing world. Equally he was not someone who would identify in a simplistic way with the poor and launch a crusade to remedy some evil. His strictures on liberation theology and on the Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield are worth pondering.

These are the considerable legacies which he leaves to the Christian social ethicist. However, the world has changed very rapidly in the last two decades, and in some ways his writings from the 1960s and 1970s on English industrial and church life seem to come from a vanished era. It is not merely that industries have declined and church life has moved on. Instead the whole relationship of church and society has been transformed. Nowhere is this more so than in the worldwide growth of Pentecostalism, and its complex and ambiguous relationship to the global market. This is where Davey’s book is so important for he cites many urban theorists to demonstrate clearly that it is cultural life in enormous global patterns of migration which supports Pentecostalism. How the social ethicist is to come to terms with this religious revolution is not clear. Douglas is surely correct to warn against too easy a stereotyping of this phenomena as fundamentalist and essentially conservative. Nevertheless Graf is correct to argue that the ethical questions cannot be ignored. How the many thousands of local churches which make up Pentecostalism will respond to the global economy remains uncertain.

Pentecostalism is one great change. The other is the explosion in the global economy and the hegemony of neo-classical theory in economic thought in a way that would have surprised Preston, however much he explored the writings of Hayek and Friedman. There are developments which are hard to foresee at present, including the growth of both India and China as major economic players, and the collapse of much of sub-Saharan Africa into economic decline. The commitment of the British Labour Government since 1997 to what amounts to essentially the pursuit of North American labour markets and supply side economics shows how far the hegemony of neo-classical monetarism is all pervasive in modern economies. This is not to say that the alternative planned European economic model does not still have its supporters, but intellectual justifications are far rarer. Preston wrote his major studies of economics in a very different world where Keynes was the greatest theoretical influence. It was also the case that Preston largely was involved in national economic life, even if it must also be conceded that he was deeply aware of the GATT trade negotiations. The marginalisation of regional economic life, and even the openness of national economic policies to the global market of international finance, has been a feature of the last decade and it increases with ever greater speed. This was not the world Preston was familiar with: as late as 1985 he

was asserting the importance of a ‘wages and prices policy’ to solve economic problems.\textsuperscript{28}

This is no more to say that a theologian born in 1913 and who was shaped by the Great Depression of the 1930s inevitably will cease to be directly applicable to contemporary economic life. Much of Preston’s work, however, has a theoretical coherence which makes it of enormous importance to any study of the global market. The main difficulty will be the need to come to terms with the changes in religious life worldwide, and especially the need for theologians to understand Pentecostalism. Preston wrote about religious traditions of great sophistication in their theoretical pronouncements. These will not disappear but increasingly there will be an alternative grassroots, popular Christianity, to say nothing of its interaction with other faiths. This is the future of global studies in theology and any attempt to speak about economic issues must reckon with this change. Whether there can also be a contextual understanding of justice remains to be seen, but it is certain that Freston’s comment will remain true: ‘The political future of Third World Protestantism cannot be deduced from … a typology of ecclesiastical organisation.’\textsuperscript{29} Preston leaves to the social ethicist a rich legacy of understanding the interaction of religion and economic life which must be applied in a new way to the very different worlds of the twenty-first century.

\textsuperscript{28} Preston, \textit{Church and Society}, p. 54 defends a mixed economy and state involvement in wages and prices policy, despite the huge difficulties of the task.

\textsuperscript{29} Freston, \textit{Church and Society}, p. 303.
Abstract

This article raises the issue of confidence in the global system, especially in its ability to deliver the goods: both material and moral. It reflects our concern, and Ronald Preston’s concern, that faith insights should be incorporated into the substance of our economic policies. In response, two discrete but inter-related strategies are pursued. The first is called ‘radical participation seeking consensus’. The second is the constant effort at many levels to balance and counterbalance power. Without the one we shall not draw out the wisdom we require. Without the other, before we even seek that wisdom, we shall demonstrate that we are not wise.

My title is ambiguous. Clearly it raises the issue of confidence in the global system, especially in its ability to deliver the goods: both material and moral. Have we got any faith in it? A recent study in twenty-four countries suggests that the world’s poor have little confidence that the system will ever work for them. Members of Western governments, including our own, publicly committed to reducing world poverty, disagree. They point to some improving statistics. They declare that poor countries need more economic globalisation, not less, and can trade their way out of poverty. Despite Enron and September 11th and volatile financial markets, the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund still proclaims the resilience of the capitalist system, while the World Bank insists that the Poverty Reduction Strategies of the poorest countries must conform to existing macro economic and structural adjustment policies if they are to be funded and if they are to succeed. Opinion remains divided, with opposition amounting to fury at one extreme (where
some Christians have described the system as heresy) and commitment amounting to evangelical fervour at the other.

I shall return briefly to this issue of confidence at the end of my article. My ambiguous title also reflects a concern which dominated so much of Ronald Preston’s life and work. He wanted to ensure that our Christian faith not only motivated and supported us in our efforts to create an economic order that worked for everyone, but also played its part in shaping and informing the substance of our economic policies; that they were not devoid of the insights of faith; that not only Christian people but Christian convictions, both theological and ethical, were ‘inside’ or an integral part of the system. It was this concern which led Preston, as we all know, to search the Scriptures and Tradition; to reject any over-direct moves from doctrine to economic policy; to worry about the limits to what the church as church could say; to respect empirical data; to talk (and then to stop talking!) about middle axioms; to acknowledge the autonomy of other disciplines and the need to work with them; and to believe that principled policy agreements could be reached across differences because of our shared human experience and rationality.

Preston’s approach has given rise to a number of criticisms and I want to take one of them as my point of departure, but not before registering, along with many others here, my gratitude and respect for what he taught me and what he achieved.

Preston was well aware of the complexities involved in getting faith into the social and economic orders, or doing social theology. He has been criticised, however — though here he may have been no more than a child of his time — for underestimating plurality. He failed, it is said, to recognise fully the great gulf fixed between different moral systems rooted as they are in the different stories or narratives we tell in our communities as we attempt to understand our lives. He was insufficiently aware of his own partiality and his tendency to universalise the rational or reasonable Christian tradition in which he stood. He underestimated the competence or ‘expertise’ of unsophisticated witnesses and the need to deal seriously with their divergent views. He overestimated the extent of the fundamental human experience which all of us share despite our differences and its potential when searching for agreement.

Preston was quite capable of replying to his critics whom he regarded as taking postmodernism a step too far, even a dangerous step if plurality finally meant that since we virtually inhabit different worlds there is no point in talking morality to each other or even talking to each other at all — a conclusion which argumentative pluralists and postmodernists thankfully seem reluctant to reach.

Plurality, however, remains the ever-present context in which many of us have to work, including those like me who work in poverty reduction and human development and try to incorporate the insights of religious faith into social and economic policy and practice. I want
first to underline some familiar features of plurality and then suggest how we should respond to it and describe the nature of any agreements we might reach.

Three Features of Plurality

First, three features of plurality. They are not the only ones but they have become important to me. First, it is multi-faith. Almost all of Ronald Preston’s endeavours in the field of social theology can be classed as ‘Christian’ social theology (which is not to say he was unaware of other faith traditions). But in contemporary debates about poverty and development, if we are going to talk about faith in the fora that matter, we can no longer bring only one faith to the table. For example, with the Millennium Development Goals in mind we ask about the nature of human development where all the emphasis seems to be on economic development to the neglect of its social and cultural aspects. We try to engage with current issues such as the World Bank’s World Development Report 2004 (WDR 2004) on ‘Making Services [like education and health care] Work for Poor People’.¹ We try to reshape or moderate the global economy in favour of a more equitable distribution of resources and opportunities and benefits. We work for debt cancellation and poverty reduction in some of the world’s poorest (HIPC — Heavily Indebted Poor Countries) countries. In all of this we try to argue and act as people of faith bringing that faith to bear on the issues; but since the issues are global we can no longer act simply as Christians or assume that, once we have contributed our Christian insights, the work of faith is done. Our Christian insights have to engage with those of other faiths before conclusions can be reached. The result is a plurality scarcely touched on in a great deal of Christian social thinking. Even if we are prepared to dismiss their validity, we cannot dismiss the existence of other faiths and their influence. They are players that have to be reckoned with. And it is not just a matter of the plurality of faiths: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Hinduism, Sikhism and so forth. It is also a matter of plurality within each faith tradition brought home to me, for example, yet again in February of this year when I met not only with Sunnis and Shiites in Albania but with Becktashi, a fascinating Islamic sect with strong Christian elements dating from the days of the Ottoman empire, together with angrier Muslim influences coming in and financed by Saudi Arabia; and finding in Ghana that the various expressions of Islam were almost as numerous as those of Christianity. How do all these ‘faiths’ get into the economic system?

A second feature of contemporary plurality can be highlighted by referring to two current arguments within the development community, a community which includes huge agencies such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID), alongside non-governmental organisations (NGOs) such as Christian Aid and Islamic Relief, civil society and faith communities such as churches, mosques and temples. The World Bank and the IMF are frequently accused of peddling a ‘one size fits all’ solution to the economic ills of poor communities (though the draft WDR 2004 speaks of ‘12 sizes’). Structural adjustment policies (SAPs) are one example and the macro-economic policies, to which Poverty Reduction Strategies are expected to conform, are another. They are regarded by many as the same old SAPs by any other name. They require poor countries to open up their markets to the outside world; to lower trade barriers; to give a more significant role to the private sector in providing social services such as water and sanitation; and generally to reduce the role of the state. It is an all-encompassing global economic view from above.

The language of DFID (UK Department for International Development) takes on a similar flavour when it talks about ‘the big picture’. It has grown impatient with relatively small-scale, unrelated and unstrategic development projects and the NGOs which have funded them. It is strongly biased in favour of turning around weak, corrupt and ineffective governments so that they can deliver coordinated programmes of education and health care on the massive scale required.

These grand scenarios involving global policies and government-to-government actions certainly have their place. But they tend to be dismissive of much more untidy realities on the ground which world banks and governments are not always well placed to deal with. In one East African country, for example, government programmes don’t reach outlying villages, and no one reports the fact, because District Officers will never travel further afield than a day’s return journey. In one Asian country health education programmes make little progress because of the traditional cultural relations between men and women. HIV/AIDS, on the other hand, makes rapid progress for similar reasons. In many societies handouts to your own people, far from being seen as corrupt practice, are only to be expected of upright leaders of communities where extended family loyalties come first. Women in an African village broke the pumps that delivered water to their doorsteps because they resented being robbed of the time it took to fetch and carry water together: their only chance to talk and sing. Sitting recently with IMF officials I heard reports from leaders of faith communities in Malawi as to how and why their people were short of food. The evidence was in contrast to the statistical overview put forward by the World Food Programme. Their reports were described and also dismissed as ‘anecdotal’.
This is but a tiny sampling of the myriad, untidy grassroots realities which refuse to fit easily into the ‘big picture’ or respond to universal solutions. In this sense the world is stubbornly plural rather than singular.

Ronald Preston got into more than one tetchy argument during his long and distinguished career. One was with the World Council of Churches and one aspect of it was his scepticism of the increasing respect being shown to what ‘the people’ rather than ‘the experts’ had to say. It was a swing away from what some ecumenical pundits at the time regarded as the elitist approach of more traditional ecumenical social thinking to which Preston had contributed so much. It was not for Westerners with their oppressive rationalism and their expertise to presume to know best or better than ordinary, everyday people on the ground. Characteristically, Preston does not dismiss the point entirely. Everyday people, ‘lay people’ and poor people have of course a right to be heard and have much of value to contribute. But, like the post-modernists, he judged that the new ecumenists were in danger of going too far. There was now too much respect for what the people had to say and a romantic reluctance to admit that they could be as wrong as anybody else: their relative ignorance on the technical front for example was not necessarily bliss. More interesting for my present purpose was Preston’s insistence that it was misleading to refer to what ‘the people’ said because ‘the people’, including the poor and oppressed, who were of such central importance to the liberation theologians, were not a homogenous group. They didn’t say the same thing. Like the experts they were often disagreeing among themselves.

Here then is a second, for me, striking feature of contemporary plurality. The first is the plurality of faiths, varied amongst and within themselves. The second is the untidy plurality of particular places, communities, cultures and peoples on the ground with their differences and idiosyncrasies which can be so frustrating for the would-be architects of the global economic order.

The third feature is, for me, the undeniable and inescapable conditionality of the myriad points of view that are heard in all debates, including the insights which faiths bring to the debate about the global economy and seek to incorporate in policy and practice. By ‘conditionality’ I mean that under different conditions different things would be said. Among these variable conditions are our personalities as individuals and groups, our historical development and current circumstances, our social status, our age and gender and our religious upbringings. Two of them stand out. One is the knowledge we happen to possess. It is limited or partial. If we knew more or we knew something else we would think differently. If we knew it all our views would probably change altogether. The other is what we perceive to be our self-interest. It may lead us to preserve the status quo, adjust it, challenge it or change it, and in each case adorn our actions with moral and religious justifications.
Let me make four comments on this third feature of plurality before I move on. First, although it highlights the differences between us, it does not remove our commonality understood in a certain way. Ronald Preston certainly understood the point about conditionality including the role of self-interest in shaping our opinions. He recognised the need to ask who was advancing a particular point of view and why. He practised the hermeneutics of suspicion. Where he was open to criticism was in overestimating our shared human experience as a basis for reaching agreement: that in the end the destitute Ethiopian farmer and the Muslim rice grower in Bangladesh were more or less like middle-class Western academics and would see the point!

But if Preston is accused of overestimating what we have in common there are countless examples of people of faith and no faith who insist it should not be underestimated. Here are three recent ones of mine. An Orthodox Archbishop and theologian insisted to me in conversation that we can often agree on common values where we differ over dogma. It was an interesting rebuke to those who over-identify ethics with stories or narratives or different world-views and so drive our moralities apart. It was also an interesting re-run of the old ecumenical tag that doctrine divides but service unites. Again, a Peruvian economist has written recently about the common ground between Gutierrez the liberation theologian and Amartya Sen the avowedly secular or a-religious developmentalist. The Satsung Foundation in India has just published a book dealing with the essential unity of all religions. There are no surprises here and these sorts of examples, as we know, can be multiplied.

My own understanding of commonality is what Preston might have called a ‘thin’ one. It does not assume a wealth of shared experience though it does not need to deny it: ‘if you prick me, do I not bleed?’ It does not rest heavily on normative definitions of human nature such as their rationality or moral capacity, they themselves being subject to conditionality. For me it is the simple assumption, based on experience, that it is worth talking to other people; and here I have in mind talking to villagers and community leaders in India and Rwanda and to the congregation of the central mosque in Birmingham. We are unlikely to completely understand or always reach common ground. Commonality, however, means acting as if it makes sense to talk.

Second, if we recognise conditionality and that it cannot be avoided, since even the agreements which may to some extent rise above it are themselves conditioned, the choice between realism and prescriptivism in ethics, between whether moral values are part of some real, objective world out there waiting to be described or are made up and imposed on it by human beings, seems somewhat unreal. Even if there are objective, given, moral values structured into the nature of things, our grasp of them can only be conditioned and, where we absolutise them,
it can only be fideistic. They are not absolutes. We only believe them to be absolute and for our own conditioned reasons. Claims to ‘revelation’ and to ‘authority’ do not represent privileged or immediate access to unconditioned truth. I mention this only to confess how strongly I perceive the world to be plural.

Third, conditionality is the close bosom friend of relativism. I am happy to use the word in one sense but not in another. The views we bring to debates about the economic order including those inspired by our religious faiths, are related to and affected by all the factors we have mentioned. Take the Christian teaching on usury, for example, which Ronald Preston expounded more than once and which has surfaced again in the Jubilee Debt Campaign, and the ways in which it has changed almost out of recognition under the weight of historical circumstances and the pressure of opportunism. Some degree of so-called ‘flexibility’ can also be discerned in Islamic teaching on loans and interest rates. But to acknowledge relativism in this sense is not to fall into relativism in another sense and regard moral debate as a free-for-all where anything goes and everything is equally justifiable and moral seriousness is dismissed with the cynical observation that ‘it’s all relative’. We can be serious in our search for the good and put our thinking to the test while acknowledging that those who do the searching are always subject to conditionality.

Fourth, ‘conditionality’ and ‘relativism’ are too often cast in only a negative light. They only make difficulties for us. They warn us how difficult it is to get at the truth. They point up the distances between human beings. They encourage us to distrust what other people have to say and to focus on the motive for saying it rather than the substance of what is said, and so on. Without denying these realities ‘conditionality’ and ‘relativism’ should also be seen in a much more positive light. They could be renamed: ‘complementarity’. They point us not just to limitations but to sources of enrichment. All of us are inescapably conditioned but fortunately we are conditioned in different ways. Our knowledge and vantage points are partial but fortunately they are partial in different ways. Encounters between conditioned people can therefore become corrective and complementary so that the end result is a richer harvest of human understanding and insight than if any of us stay within our own limitations and attempt to universalise our moral prescriptions from there. Our conditionality has a great deal of potential for our good.

Radical Participation and the Common Good

Having looked at three features of plurality: the diversity of faiths, the untidiness of life on the ground, and our inescapable conditionality, we must now ask how best to respond to it? In stating my own preference I am not all that interested in completely dismissing those of others. In the spirit of what we have just said they can be complementary
and not merely contradictory. One obvious example is Hans Küng’s search for a Global Ethic which runs through all or most of the main religious traditions and which can provide us with a strong moral base for, amongst other things, global economic policies and practice. There is no room to do it justice here beyond saying on the positive side that it can help to mark out common ground and build confidence as a basis for cooperation: Küng refers to it as a declaration of peace between the world’s religions. A global ethic can also provide strong ethical criteria against which to measure emerging and established policies. Human rights, not dissimilar to a global ethic, can function in the same way. So can the six fundamental principles of Catholic social teaching including: Solidarity, Subsidiarity and the Preferential Option for the Poor. It should also be said that Küng’s approach is more nuanced and aware of the issues raised by plurality than his critics sometimes suggest. On the more negative side a Global Ethic can sound like generalisations which are not a great deal of help when it comes to policy-making (where, for example, we are not arguing about whether or not to love our neighbour but what might turn out to be a loving economic policy that actually did our neighbour some good; and we are not debating the merits of distributive justice but how to distribute the wealth we create). It can also lose sight of the distinctive bite of a faith tradition.

My own preferred response to plurality is to promote ‘radical participation’ in policy-making and practice. It moves beyond the debate which Preston and others pursued at one time with the World Council of Churches where rational Western expertise could seem to be on one side and the popular opinions of poor and marginalised people on the other. Radical or thoroughgoing participation is a ‘both–and’ not an ‘either-or’ strategy. When it comes to incorporating the insights of religious faith into economic policy and practice that will mean all faiths and all the diversity of views within them. Thoroughgoing participation will retain the respect for autonomous disciplines shown by Preston but be equally open to the insights not of ‘amateurs’ and ‘lay people’ as against ‘experts’, but people with different kinds of expertise culled from their day-to-day experience on the ground and in the field. (I have heard them referred to as ‘experts from poor communities’.) Thoroughgoing participation will also take care to embrace the different social strata, men and women, young and old, the different estates or sectors of society, together with the so-called ‘big picture’ as seen by governments and the ‘snapshots’ taken by local groups and communities.

Obviously this kind of participation in policy-making is extremely difficult to manage and impossible to achieve. For one thing it has no logical boundaries. But we can err on the side of it. We can act, as J. Philip Wogaman might have said, with a presumption in favour of inclusiveness, believing that only in this way can we maximise the wisdom we need and harvest the wisdom that is available.
To turn from the abstract to the particular, the ‘Jubilee’ campaign to cancel the debts of the poorest (HIPC) countries, which Preston criticised for mistakenly transferring an old biblical concept into a modern and alien environment, constantly ran up against the debate about another kind of ‘conditionality’. On what conditions should these debts be cancelled since it is no good freeing up money that was being spent on debt repayments to build schools and hospitals if it goes instead into the pockets of corrupt government officials or to buy arms to fight wars. The answer was that each country should draw up and publish a Poverty Reduction Strategy setting out its plans in detail right down to which schools and hospitals would be built where and in what order of priority. Without such a strategy (referred to in the jargon as a PRSP: Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper) no debts would be cancelled and no further concessional loans be made available. There was, however, a second equally important ‘condition’ and that was that the PRSPs should be drawn up by way of a more participatory process. One of the criticisms of the loans to poor countries which gave rise to the debt crisis in the first place was that they were largely the result of private, not to say covert, bi-lateral deals between the government of a poor country and donors such as the World Bank and its G8 backers. The general population had no say in them. It did not know what had been agreed let alone endorse it; but when things went badly wrong, it suffered the consequences. The PRSP process is now required to bring those people in. The result in many countries has been an interesting approximation to the thoroughgoing or ‘radical participation’ preferred as the proper response to plurality. The most frequent criticism of it has come where the process has not been participatory enough.

PRSPs include governments with their ‘big pictures’. They include expert economists, civil servants, agriculturalists and so forth. They have been criticised for not including sufficiently the private sector, a curious state of affairs since the privatisation of services and the role of the private sector is much talked about and looked on with considerable favour by some and disfavour by others. The World Bank and the IMF insist that they are not involved in these participatory proceedings and that the result is the strategy of the government of Uganda, for example, or Malawi, not of the Bank. That is clearly misleading since if the strategy does not take account of the macro-economic policies pursued by the Bank and the IMF it is unlikely to find favour or funding.

The most significant step towards wider participation, however, has been the inclusion of civil society. In most poor countries that has meant the NGO (non-governmental organisations) community, some members of which are indigenous but many of which are linked to international organisations such as the OXFAMs of this world and the United Nations. Added to this are the ‘faith communities’. In
theory they should be distinguished from faith-based NGOs, such as Christian Aid or Islamic Relief, though in practice they are not so easily separated. Sometimes faith communities distance themselves from civil society in an effort to maintain their own identity and not be seen as NGOs. Nevertheless they are, or can be, part of the participatory process. Churches and mosques, for example, with their long history of providing education and health care, and with their presence in almost every local community, have much to contribute and can have a seat at the table along with everybody else. Here then is a significant step towards radical participation and, for me, there is a presumption in its favour. In principle we should support it as an appropriate response to plurality.

The consensus which emerges from a process like this — for example, in the case of the PRSP process it will be a strategy for poverty reduction and human development in a particular country and tied into its budget — this consensus is the only understanding of the ‘common good’ that I can make much sense of beyond the intention to seek the good of everyone.

If there is an objective, existing common good, we cannot know it objectively. It is not a fundamental a priori moral agreement underlying all our differences. It is not derived or deduced from a common understanding of human nature. It is more pragmatic than principled. It cannot assume a commonality of interest or shared context; rather it looks for it. It is not a single good but the satisfaction of different goods or a ‘plurality of ends’. It is not decided by some, in Kantian style, as ‘good’ because they are prepared to universalise it rather patronisingly as good for everyone. It is not a global good by universal application but only insofar as it commands universal agreement. The common good is an ad hoc, limited agreement reached on particular matters in a particular context: in this case an economic social strategy for a poor country where those involved, taking account of their different insights and interests, agree on what seems good for all of them for the time being. They may agree for different reasons. They may arrive at agreement by different routes. They nevertheless come to recognise common ground on which everyone has a better chance to flourish. The common good is not what some, however wise, well-meaning and morally impressive, say is the common good or is the good for somebody else whether rich or poor. The common good is what all involved agree is their common good.

Principled, Distinctive and Valid

Having voted in favour of ‘radical participation’ and striving for consensus or the common good of those involved, a number of comments and qualifications need to be made. One should certainly be about the immense challenge to those who believe in it to learn better how to manage it so that it becomes equitable as a process, productive
and decisive; but I leave all that, important as it is, on one side. I have four comments I wish to make.

First, I described the outcome of a radically participatory process searching for consensus as ‘pragmatic rather than principled’. The outcome is a practical course of action, such as a Poverty Reduction Strategy or a fair trade agreement, about which all come to agree but not necessarily (though the possibility should not be excluded) for the same principled reasons. So-called fair trade may be attractive to one party as an expression of justice but to another as being good for public relations and therefore good for business and wealth creation. If the outcome is pragmatic in that sense, it is not however unprincipled. The fact that it has become a common good only because in practice all have agreed to it does not rule out the possibility that all may have agreed to it for principled, though different, reasons. The participants in the search may not justify the outcome on the same moral or faith grounds but that does not mean that they have not in their different ways approached the search and adopted the outcome with a high degree of moral seriousness. An unavoidable plurality of moral and theological principles does not mean that people do not have any; or that they jettison them in reaching a consensus. It is conceivable that they might even improve on them.

My second comment could be regarded as a different version of the first. Some approaches to social ethics or social theology and their attempts to incorporate faith into social and economic policies have been criticised for losing sight of the distinctiveness of their faith traditions in favour of what everyone appears to have in common. The risk would seem particularly high when it comes to the kind of pragmatic, *ad hoc* consensus-seeking under discussion. The criticism might be levelled at an approach such as that of Global Ethics where a host of religious insights seem to be levelled out into a collection of golden rules to which few can be opposed. The same might be said for all methodologies which distil general principles out of particular stories, texts and doctrines and lose all their interesting but unmanageable idiosyncrasies in the process. The appeal to reason or common sense or shared human experience could be another example.

This tendency to lose sight of the distinctiveness of Christianity and therefore to sell it short, and presumably any social policy put forward in its name, is another of the criticisms levelled at Ronald Preston. One example cited is the way he talks about justice in terms of fairness and distribution whereas in the biblical tradition justice has to do with solidarity with the poor and the constant struggle against all forms of oppression. In the Bible it has more of a ‘liberating’ than a ‘liberal’ flavour.

The argument that the distinctiveness of Christianity should not be lost is perhaps seen at its most extreme in the writings of what I believe are called the New Orthodox. They seem to echo some of Barth’s sayings of old with his over-direct moves from dogma to social
policy. They not only insist that social teaching be firmly rooted in distinct doctrinal teaching but come close to suggesting that where the outcome is not distinctive it is not Christian.

For me the ‘common good’ cannot by definition be ‘distinctive’ in relation to any one religious faith. Indeed it should not be so. There are several reasons for this. One is that in a plural world, as we are seeing, if one religion is too prominent in the public realm and policies are over-identified with its teachings, it leads to perceptions of dominance and so to conflict. Secularism and the privatisation of religion are often rightly condemned for abandoning the public for the private; but they may have had something to commend them as attempts to avoid religion playing an unhelpful role by being over-prominent or visible in public life. A second reason why the ‘common good’ cannot be distinctive in relation to any one religion arises from its own conditionality. Recognising its own limitations, which of course many religions and their adherence do not, a religious tradition will be open to correction and completion by others in the participatory process and the search for common ground. Of course that does not rule out the possibility that distinctive features of one faith tradition may come to be appreciated and therefore adopted by all.

Just as a pragmatic consensus is not an unprincipled consensus, so consensus which does not necessarily hold fast to or ‘parade’ the distinctive character of a religious tradition should not be regarded as a bad compromise, in the sense that that tradition has reneged on or ignored what it believes. It need not sell its soul and it should certainly draw quite firmly and doggedly on its own distinctive insights, such as the priority of the poor as a key feature of God’s justice or righteousness, as it argues its way through. Indeed this distinctiveness or difference is a major part of what a religious tradition has to bring to the dialogue. Its partiality can be seen negatively but also, as we have said, more positively as its potential to awaken interest and enrich the process. One great lesson of interfaith dialogue is not to play down difference but to play it up provided there is mutual respect for difference and the arguments that believers build on it are transparent.

To come to a third comment, some will object that the outcome of the kind of participatory process I have opted for could be something far worse than an unprincipled, morally bland, pragmatic consensus. It could simply be wrong. Not a common good; not even a lowest common denominator; but a common bad. We are left with a general agreement that is dangerously mistaken (as some would say of course of the current global economic order: triumphant and without an alternative but profoundly wrong). So how is consensus or this common good to be validated?

If the question looks for an answer in terms of an independent, authoritative court of appeal, we know that an essentially plural and conditioned human community cannot have it. The only validation
available to us is the agreement of those involved who give their consent to the outcome for their own good reasons. That is my understanding of the common good: good which those involved come to agree they have in common; the good that they judge will do them all good. That is not, however, the end of the story. For one thing dissent will come eventually from within, as further experience and reflection reveal the holes in an agreed policy and practice; or dissent will come from without as those not party to the consensus will raise their own voices. Added to this, growing maturity will accept that all common goods are to some extent provisional and will marry the necessary decisiveness and commitment, in relation to a Poverty Reduction Strategy in a poor country for example, to a proper modesty and scepticism. Dissenting voices from within and without will therefore be given a hearing and wrong-headedness will be exposed to critical and corrective voices. Dissenting voices however cannot simply overrule consensus but must win their points in an ongoing and widening participatory process that eventually arrives at a better one.

**Middle Axioms**

My fourth comment has to do with middle axioms: a methodological device in Christian social theology for doing exactly what we are talking about: getting faith into the social and economic orders. It dates back to earlier, headier days of ecumenical social ethics. It was a prominent feature of Ronald Preston’s work. I was brought up on the concept myself.

I have thought about middle axioms as a practitioner in aid and development, and in particular contexts where getting faith into policies is never easy and the need for it not often appreciated. Drawing up Poverty Reduction Strategies is one of them. The World Bank’s WDR 2004 is another. Its title will be *Making Services Work for Poor People.* The services referred to are health care, primary education, water and sanitation. They are closely related to the Millennium Development Goals for 2015 which include cutting the worst of poverty in half. The aim of the WDR 2004 is to highlight and promote policies and practices which actually work. The process of writing it is at least consultative and at best participatory, though some would say that, when it speaks of the poor as ‘clients’ and of making services work for them rather than of working with them, it is not participatory enough. I myself am involved with a modest attempt to put together a contribution to it from the perspectives of the world’s faith communities. It is a specific attempt to put faith into an important aspect of the global economic order and to be part of an inclusive effort to find consensus and promote the common good: that is, policies and practices which all the parties involved (including the not-so poor) agree will benefit them and bring them the education they want for their children, the health care they need for young and old alike, and the water and sanitation
which will be the cause of good health instead of multiplying disease. The debate leading to the final report is based on successive drafts made public by the World Bank.

Clearly this discussion draws heavily on what Preston and others would have referred to as the autonomous disciplines with their expertise: for example, in economics, engineering, social science and development. Islamic scholars refer to them as the ‘scientific disciplines’. It is also drawing on local knowledge and experience which insists that, because of history, geography and culture, what might work in one place will not necessarily work in another. One size does not fit all. Plurality cannot be ignored.

In addition there are the ideological or theological debates which can provoke faith communities into speaking about their faiths and values. One such debate, which will surprise no one, focuses on the issue of the privatisation of services such as education, health care, water and sanitation. The World Bank and the authors of the draft WDR 2004 are already suspected of an ideological bias in favour of privatisation and against the state which reflects their commitment to, not to say quasi-religious belief in, the free market as the source of human good. To be fair the later drafts were not obviously biased in that way. They seemed more ready to say: that privatisation works better in some circumstances than others; that there are no universal answers; that careful distinctions need to be made between responsibility for the provision of services and the actual means of delivering them. Nevertheless there is the strong flavour of theological debate in the contributions from faith communities who can sometimes map out fairly direct routes from privatisation through the market place to what they see as denials of God’s ownership, say, of water and the right of every human being to have access to it and their fundamental calling to share and cooperate with each other rather than compete. We are dealing with resources, not commodities; for sharing, not for profit.

The attempt to find consensus on Making Services Work for Poor People involves therefore the exact heady mix of theological or ideological insights, the expertise of autonomous disciplines and the data from empirical observation and experience with which Preston was so familiar. I nevertheless find most aspects of the debate about middle axioms, to which he contributed right to the end of his life, curiously tangential to what we might call ‘radical participation seeking consensus’ as a methodological response to plurality; and I say that with these two practical examples in mind: the participatory processes leading to Poverty Reduction Strategies and to the WDR 2004 on Making Services Work for Poor People.

To be more specific, what seems tangential or even irrelevant is the deliberate attempt to arrive at middle axioms or, if we are to avoid the term, ‘general directives in less than general situations’ (such as ‘globalisation’ or a HIPC country) as a stage (if not a strictly
logical step) in getting faith into policies or relating faith to social and economic issues. I am wondering why.

As far as I can tell, besides wanting to find a plausible way of involving faith in public policy-making, there are four things which Preston particularly sought to uphold in adopting the middle axiom approach.

1. One was to be clear about the proper limits to the church’s competence. It is competent to expound its own teaching and it is competent to go halfway in spelling out the broad implications of that teaching in particular situations. It is not competent to make detailed proposals. The reasons given are: the detailed proposals are too uncertain with so many factors involved; they are the responsibility of lay people; and, if the church does put them forward as church, they are in danger of being over-identified with the Gospel that always transcends them. There is no denying that Christians need to go all the way and make detailed proposals, but the church as church should not.

There is a kind of protectiveness here that seems unreal certainly in the arenas I have in mind. Two comments occur to me. First, whether the church is competent or not, does it not have an obligation to go beyond the middle ground to more detailed commitments? The individual Christian certainly does. Why not the church in solidarity with its members and with society especially where they are extremely poor? Second, if competence is the issue then it is not a matter of whether the church has it but a matter of which competence it is exercising: competence, for example, to expound its own teaching or, on another occasion, competence to draw on the wisdom available to it to make proposals for public policy. There can be competence in each case and in each case it will come with the vulnerability born of the conditional nature of its doctrine, its ethical principles and its detailed proposals, calling all along for commitment but also for scepticism. Even Preston seems to accept that the difference between the middle ground and the detailed proposal is a difference of degree rather than of kind. (I will resist a third comment here which might have wondered what we mean by ‘the church’? Is it, for example, Rowan Williams when he approves of detention centres for asylum-seekers?)

2. In promoting middle axioms, Preston also wanted to reduce disagreements among Christians and so strengthen the unity of the church. If that was a political tactic, which I doubt, I understand it. We cannot of course be against agreement. If we are to act together for the common good we must work for consensus. But radical participation will not seek consensus at this particular middle point but at the point of specific agreements on policies to reduce poverty and make services work for poor people. Indeed, as we have said, the parties to those agreements may arrive at them by different routes and for different reasons including different mediating principles or middle axioms.
(3) In promoting middle axioms Preston also sought to uphold a certain pastoral concern to offer wisdom and guidance to individual Christians on the general direction in which they should be going. The example he used more than once, from another generation, is that Christians should generally work for full employment (as against leaving job levels to market forces) though the Church cannot give much guidance as to how exactly this is to be achieved. In the settings I have in mind it is not clear that directives of this sort would add much useful guidance to the more general principles of, say, Catholic Social Teaching, so confidently deployed in a recent Catholic response (unpublished) to the draft of WDR 2004 and its proposals on water supplies. And before middle axioms can guide they have to be painstakingly worked out.

(4) The only added value I can think of is that middle axioms come blessed with Preston’s fourth and final concern in promoting them and that is that they come with a degree of authority. They are more than just another opinion. They shift the burden of proof on to those who disagree with them. If you ask, however, about the source of this authority there are certainly hints that it lies in the close relation between middle axioms and the doctrinal and ethical teachings of the church, but there are more definite indications that it stems from the fact that middle axioms are less relative and, as Preston says, ‘more probable’. This, however, is exactly the authority that radical participation tries to establish but not at some middle level. By allowing partial perceptions, conditioned in all sorts of ways, to complement and criticise and correct each other the consensus reached on particular, detailed strategies and policies for poverty reduction are themselves ‘less relative’ and therefore more ‘authoritative’ and ‘probable’ and entitled to our confidence.

Radical participation seeking consensus as a response to plurality implies for me therefore a less structured methodology than the middle axiom approach. It is serious about its moral principles and its religious beliefs but it does not think first about establishing general directives and then moving through them to particular conclusions, and it is not concerned about the status and competence of official religious institutions. The goal is consensus as to what should be done and how, and as faith communities take part in arriving at it they will contribute their special insights and what illumination they can to the debate at whatever level and at every turn. They will win their way only by the perceived merit of their argument.

My hesitations about middle axioms do not exclude the possibility that consensus takes the form of a ‘rule of thumb’; for example, in handling privatisation, that the more basic the need being met (like water) the greater the bias against the purer forms of private provision; a rule of thumb which arises out of Christianity and other faiths, and from empirical observation.
A final concern arises from at least two considerations. One is the fear that we can sometimes make too much of a meal of getting faith into the economic order by thinking more highly of our methodological debates than we ought to think. I say this probably after a good going over by colleagues in highly intelligent, highly committed Christian circles (such as Christian Aid) who are willing to go so far with theology but not much further. They are all for taking care of the weak and the vulnerable; they are all for reasonable opportunities for all to make a living; they are all for respecting the poorest as having a contribution to make and a right to make it; they are all for holistic understandings of human development; they are all for taking care of the created order; they are all for subsidiarity and other similar principles. They can connect much of this with a righteous God who creates us to live not for bread alone, to reflect God’s image and to share the resources of God’s world. And they can shape and test policies according to these and similar principles. By doing so they put their faith into their campaigning and into their policy-making and practice in aid and development. A good half of me will go along with that. The other half will test the arguments about methodology which I have been happily pursuing and the time and energy we spend on them by asking whether or not they open up ways to more fruitful policies and practices for the sake of the poorest. I believe that radical participation carries no guarantee but probably does.

But my final concern arises from a second consideration as well. ‘Radical participation seeking consensus’ is crucially important because we need all the wisdom and insights we can get from all quarters if poverty is to be reduced and many more human beings are to have a chance to flourish. It assumes, however, a great deal of goodwill. It assumes that very different people actually want to get together and, by way of often long and difficult encounters, seek each other’s good and not just their own. This massive assumption should not be discounted (as Ronald Preston recognised when he upheld the doctrine of original righteousness) but neither can it ignore one factor that may be more significant than anything else in shaping the plurality of views round the negotiating table, and that is the various interests of the parties involved together with their tendency to promote and protect those interests and their ability or inability to do so because of their power in the situation or lack of it.

In the present debates about the privatisation of services, including the supply of water, it is a very real fear that such strategies are advanced mainly because they serve the interests not of ideologues but of large companies eager to see service provision included in the General Agreement on Trade and Services and so excluded from present constraints on market forces. Any hopes we may put on radical participation as an appropriate response to plurality, including the
plurality of faiths, may come to nothing if we do not take account of the only real difference between rich and poor besides the disparity of their resources. The difference is not one of virtue, or morality, or intelligence, or dependence, or diligence, or self-interest. It is the huge disparity of opportunity to pursue and protect self-interest. In other words there is a huge disparity of power.

Power must be balanced and counter-balanced for negative and positive reasons: negatively to prevent the more powerful in every community, whether global, national or local, from putting the weak at a disadvantage; positively to put everyone in a position to make their contribution and further their cause. This means including them not in gesture consultations but in radically participative processes which at the moment, for example, the World Trade Organisation and some PRSP processes like that in Albania are not, and of which all talk of partnership with the South by Northern governments and NGOs is a caricature for as long as they remained locked together in an ‘ideology of superiority’.

To its credit the draft overview, WDR 2004, recognises that ‘power’ is an issue. It has some nice, if somewhat hackneyed, illustrations of what can be done at the local level. If education services in remote areas of poor countries are to work for poor people, for example, then parents and families might be given a central role in hiring and firing the school teachers and in regularly monitoring their work and attendance. In this and other such ways the report speaks of the need for ‘restoring people’s power in service delivery’ (para. 15) and in client-provider relationships. Elsewhere it recognises the need ‘to strengthen poor people’s ability to influence policy-makers’ through advisory groups and coalitions as well as the electoral process (paras 28 and 29). In general the report concludes that many of the changes needed to make services work for poor people: ‘involve fundamental shifts in power’ (para. 69).

Since we are talking about incorporating the insights of faith into social and economic policy and practice, we should note that the principle of counterbalancing power, long upheld in the traditions of Christian social theology, is of course deeply rooted in Christian belief and its realistic analysis of human nature which recognises our potential to be both creative and destructive given the opportunity. It is a principle that must accompany all attempts at policy-making if they are not to come to grief. It raises a whole host of issues most of them familiar but often sadly neglected by sentimental believers and do-gooders. We can but mention some of them here. They include issues within the participatory processes themselves, such as access to information and the use of language. They include devices for giving power to poor people like the one just quoted but also, for example, decentralised government and the more local, internalised economies which offer not independence from global economic forces but some ability to moderate and resist their effects. They include strategies

which recognise that those who have power rarely cede power and that it has to be taken in various ways by those who have little or no power. They include democratic instruments of global governance and institutions of international law based on Human Rights by which the powerful are held to account. They include looking at arguments about the merits of cooperation and competition in the economic order as arguments about power as well as about the nature and destiny of human beings. Finally, though not exhaustively, they include educating self-interest. Power will be exercised according to the perceived interest of the powerful. They will not easily cede that power. They may act differently if they understand their self-interest in a different light and come to believe, for example, that in a terrifying, conflictual, environmentally damaged world, their self-interest lies in more distributive and sustainable economic and social policies.

In conclusion, let me return to the ambiguity of my title: ‘Faith in the Global Economic System’. It reflects our concern, and Ronald Preston’s concern, that faith insights should be incorporated into the substance of our economic policies. Hence the discussion about methodology. But it also raises the question as to whether we have much faith or confidence in the global economic system and its ability in particular to deliver a better life for the poor of the earth. On that issue, opinion remains deeply divided. For my part, confidence will grow insofar as two discrete but inter-related strategies are pursued at the same time. The first I have called: ‘radical participation seeking consensus’. The second is the constant effort at many levels to balance and counterbalance power. Without the one we shall not draw out the wisdom we require. Without the other, before we even seek that wisdom, we shall demonstrate that we are not wise.