

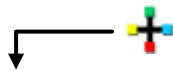


Politics and the Covenant

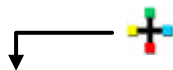
J.E. Lesslie Newbigin

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Until a few years ago William Temple's place among the angels seemed secure. It is perhaps providential that we celebrate his centenary at a time when things he stood for are under attack. The welfare state which he did so much to make possible has lost in the public mind its pristine brightness. Much of what he fought for has been achieved; much of the rest belongs to unmapped territory to the left of Tony Berm into which few ecclesiastics enter with relish. And Temple has been criticized in the writings of Edward Norman on the ground that his politics were the product of broadly liberal sympathies rather than the demonstrable implications of an orthodox Christian faith. While I dissent profoundly both from the politics of Edward Norman and from his interpretation of the Christian faith, I think that he has correctly identified a weakness in the linkage which contemporary Christians try to make between their theology and their politics. Before turning to that (in my judgment) central question, I must ask how far the situation has changed since Temple wrote on *Christian Faith & the Common Life* (1937) and *Christianity & Social Order* (1941).



Temple could not have foreseen the gigantic and unprecedented expansion of the world economy in the 25 years following the end of the war. This made possible the illusion that economic growth was such that poverty could be eliminated painlessly without having to attack the rich. The cake would go on growing ad infinitum so that even the smallest slice would be enough to feed the hungry. We who now look back on that era of growth see things in a very different light. For example:

(a) Though absolute wealth has increased enormously poverty remains; it becomes a more acute problem if we agree that 'poverty is the lack of resources necessary to permit participation in the activities, customs and diets commonly approved by society' (Townsend, *Poverty in the UK*, p. 88).

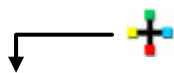
(b) The 'developed' societies, such as the UK, stand over against the poverty-and in many places the destitution-of most of the world. For multitudes in the poorer countries Marxism remains the only credible analysis of their experience.

(c) The explosion of economic activity in the three decades since Bretton Woods has created a sudden awareness of the limits beyond which natural resources and the free spaces of air and ocean cannot be safely exploited. The possibility of ecological disaster, of which Temple and his contemporaries had no reason to be aware, has suddenly become one of the dominant factors in politics.

(d) There is a widespread nausea among the rich beneficiaries of this affluence. One of the graffiti of the Paris students in 1968 put the point: 'We reject equally death by starvation and death by boredom.' The sense that personal responsibility is diminished, that we are tending towards a 'pocket money economy', that individuals are powerless to change anything but are simply replaceable parts in a vast bureaucracy-these all help to fuel the feelings of revolt which are not far below the surface of 'modern' societies.

(e) On the other hand the feeling (which most human beings have had through most of history) that one has to accept many things as given and (in the short term) unalterable is much weaker, and the feeling that everything is (or ought to be) a matter for the individual's personal choice, is much stronger than when Temple wrote. Mobility weakens the sense of the local community as the given context of life. Inflation robs money of its solidity. The family is no longer a given fact (so very basic for Temple); partners can be changed almost as easily as cars. The sense that the organs of the state have an inherent majesty is much weaker. (I doubt whether Temple ever wondered whether Britain was governable.)

(f) And yet expectations of what the State can and should deliver to its people are higher than they ever were. There is a great development of 'single-issue' groups campaigning for the 'rights' of this or that sector of society, but much less interest in considering what sort of institutions of government would be capable of guaranteeing these rights-conflicting as they often are. We are still living on the illusions generated by the years of affluence.

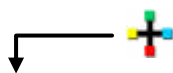


Turning to the changes in the theological climate, one is struck by the absence in Temple of the eschatological note which is so pervasive in modern theology. Temple made much use of natural law; modern writers on political theology are more at home in the language of apocalypse. The danger in the use of natural law as a model for politics is that it tends to sacralize particular political structures. Niebuhr, who also made much use of natural law, was more explicit (I think) than Temple in drawing attention to this danger. Contemporary political theology makes little use of natural law and much use of the biblical theme of liberation. The criteria by which a situation is judged are drawn not from natural law but from the promise of the Gospel that the prisoners shall be set free (Luke 4.18) and the whole creation enjoy the liberty of God's children (Rom. 8.21). The danger in this model is that it sacralizes a political utopia in such a way as to destabilize all existing and all possible political structures upon which people must depend for security. Temple was clear that, while the State must seek justice, its first duty is to provide security. Contemporary political theology tends to forget this.

Neither Temple nor Niebuhr (so far as I know) made use of the Pauline language about the 'powers'. The work of H. Berkhof and others following him on this subject has provided, I believe, a sounder framework for dealing with the question of political structures. The 'powers', in this interpretation, stand for the given structures within which human life is lived-natural, political, economic, ethical, religious, intellectual etc. They have been created in Christ and for Christ, and are part of God's good provision for the secure ordering of human life. Their role is necessary but provisional. When they claim absolute authority they become demonic-agents of the 'ruler of this world'. Their confrontation with the actual presence of God in Jesus Christ has

resulted in their being 'disarmed', though not destroyed (e.g. Col. 2.15 and I Cor. 2.8). If they had been destroyed we should have had to become anarchists; because they have been disarmed we can become revolutionaries but constructive and hopeful revolutionaries. In other words we can recognize and respect the structures which provide some measure of order and security, while recognizing at the same time that all of them have been judged in the event of the Cross, that none can claim divine authority (not even 'natural law'), but that all must be subject to change in the light of the consummation in which Christ alone will be seen and recognized as the one who has authority over all. The way in which Paul handles the issue of slavery in the letter to Philemon, read in the context of the letter to Colosse, is an example of this way of understanding the structures with which politics has to deal.

Temple's way of moving from the Christian tradition to specific political decisions was by way of 'principles'. In *Christianity & Social Order* he defines as 'primary principles' God's kingdom and man's dignity, tragedy and destiny, and from these he moves to three 'derivative principles' – freedom, fellowship and service. In order to establish priority among these principles he relies upon natural law, primarily interpreted as what 'a fair-minded man' would consider just.



Contemporary political theology (if one may risk a very rough generalization) moves in a quite different way from the Bible to politics. It sees as the central theme of the Bible 'God's option for the poor and against the powerful'. The model by which the whole is most frequently interpreted is the Exodus story. It is a sharply dualistic model. On one side stand Pharaoh and with him all the established complex of politico-economic power which rules the world. On the other side stand the oppressed. God is unambiguously on the side of the oppressed. The Gospel is the promise that Pharaoh will be overthrown and the oppressed set free.

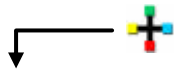
It is easy to see that both positions rest on commitments made apart from the Bible. Andre Dumas (Political Theology in the Life of the Church) calls the two approaches 'metaphysical' and 'metahistorical'. The former rests on the belief in a world of timeless principles which endure through all political change and provide the criteria for judging any political order. The latter rests upon belief in a new order beyond history in which the violence which characterizes all human history will have been eliminated. It is a vision to which both Biblical and Marxist eschatologies have contributed in varying proportions.

In contrast to both of these, Dumas pleads for what he calls a 'metatextual' approach, governed neither by alleged principles nor by a hoped-for utopia, but by living from day to day with the text of Scripture. (I am not sure that I understand Dumas, but I would like to take his suggestion as a starting point for exploration.)

(1) If the biblical story forms the framework of our living and the models by which we try to understand our experience (experience-of course-both of the private and of the public worlds), then we can begin by recognizing that it is neither necessary nor proper to interpose 'principles' between the text and daily experience. Our European culture (with its very large non-biblical component) predisposes us to think of the biblical stories primarily as illustrative of principles which can be grasped conceptually and which enable us to remain in orbit after the supporting illustrations have been jettisoned. To live with the Bible, however, means to recognize that it is the story which is primary and irreplaceable, a story of which we and our contemporaries are a part, and that the 'principles' are not the enduring realities behind the story but rather the time-conditioned attempts of people at particular moments in the story to grasp its meaning. It is in fact usually very easy, even a generation after the 'principle' was formulated, to detect the influence of local and temporary factors and vested interests upon its formulation. To live with the Bible means that we recognize ourselves to be pilgrims who live in temporary camp-sites not fortified cities, who have not yet seen the promised land though we have many dreams about it, who

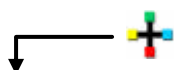
accept it as a fact of life that a camp-site does not and cannot have the amenities of a city, but that if the party stays too long in the camp-site it becomes a slum.

(2) But if we do not need 'principles' we do need some idea of the direction of the journey, some way of grasping the theme of the story. It seems to me that the central theme of the Bible is the covenant faithfulness of God. The



Bible is an interpretation of the whole human and cosmic story in terms of the faithfulness of God expressed in the covenant with which he has bound himself to the whole creation and to the whole human family. When the covenant is renewed with Abraham and the patriarchs, and again with Israel at the Exodus, it is with a view to the fulfilment of the original covenant with the whole of humankind. And the 'new covenant', sealed by the blood of Jesus, brings into being a universal community, transcending nationality, which is to be a pledge and sign and foretaste of God's intention to bring all humankind and all nature into a unity which has Christ as its head. This picture of the source and goal of the human story relativizes such timeless principles as justice, freedom and human rights. They have, indeed, in this model a very important negative and critical function; when they are being denied the covenant is being violated. But they do not and cannot provide the positive principle and motives for action. The concept of human rights dominates much of contemporary Christian political thought. Clearly it is not a biblical concept. It derives from another view of what it is to be human, a view which takes autonomy to be fundamental and sees any kind of heteronomy as incompatible with human dignity. The biblical story, on the other hand, sees the human person always and only in a relationship either of faith and obedience or of unbelief and disobedience to God who is the author and sustainer of the covenant. Autonomy, on this view, is the denial of humanity.

(3) The covenant relation with God has from the beginning as its necessary implication covenant relations among men and women with one another. Dumas points out how central and pervasive throughout the Bible is the theme of mutual relations between brothers-Cain and Abel, Esau and Jacob, Joseph and his brothers, Absalom and Amnon, Judah and Israel, and finally-Jesus and those whom (after the resurrection) he called 'my brothers' (John 20.17). The theme is sounded loud and clear at the very beginning of the story when the eldest son of the first human pair murders his younger brother because of jealousy and denies that he is responsible for him. Sometimes the story ends in death and disaster. Sometimes there is reconciliation, but that is always a costly and difficult task calling for time, patience and restraint-as the stories of Jacob and Esau, and of Joseph and his brothers remind us. Even in the story of the liberation from Egypt this theme plays an important part, for it is the rejection of Moses' attempt to establish justice between quarrelling brothers that causes him to flee from Egypt and take refuge among the Midianites. This incident is picked up in the speech of Stephen as an example of the disobedient spirit which refuses God's gift of justice (Ex. 2.11-15, Acts 23-29, 51-53). This is in line with the strand of biblical teaching which sees just rule as an instrument of God for establishing a just peace among brothers (e.g. Judg. 21.25, 2 Sam. 23.1-9, Ps. 72, Isa. 11.1-9), a theme which deserves at least as much attention as does the theme of unjust and oppressive rule.



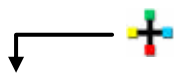
(4) It seems to me that the biblical story teaches us to see this theme of mutual responsibility between brothers resting upon the covenant faithfulness of God as providing the point of view from which questions of freedom and justice can be handled rightly. It is a commonplace of political debate that the demand for justice (normally and rightly defined in terms of equality) is in tension with the demand for freedom. In Hannah Arendt's classical study

of revolution (*On Revolution*, 1963) the dynamics of this conflict are vividly exposed. But what are the criteria by which we could judge whether or not a right balance has been achieved between equality and freedom? If equality and freedom are regarded as ultimate principles, it is difficult to see how either can give way to the other. There seems to be no escape from the kind of polarization into which our society is drifting under the influence of the ideological obsessions of the present government: those who have more than their fair share shout for freedom and those who have less shout for justice, and both demands are suffused with the passion that belongs to religion rather than to politics. 'Principles' can easily become demonic.

I would like to suggest that the biblical theme to which I have referred is capable of providing not merely a mediating position from which the rival claims of justice and freedom could be adjudicated, but a perspective in which both claims are re-defined. It is said that 'fraternity' was added as an after-thought to 'liberty' and 'equality' in the French revolutionary triad. I do not know whether this is so, but it has certainly played a minor role in subsequent revolutionary thinking compared with the other two. And this is no accident, for whereas freedom and equality can be defined in terms which accord with the Enlightenment ideal of human autonomy, brotherhood can not. Brotherhood cannot be acknowledged without recognizing mutual bonds and mutual responsibilities as constitutive of human nature.

I am not suggesting that 'brotherhood' conceived as a principle derived from the Christian faith will provide the criteria for political judgment. This, I take it, was what was intended when Temple named 'fellowship' as one of the three 'derivative principles'. If I understand Dumas correctly, a somewhat different move is being suggested. We in contemporary society, British society locked in a thousand ways with world society, are part of a story which has its origin in the faithfulness of the Creator who has established a covenant of blessing for the whole creation, and its goal in the unity of all things and all peoples in Christ. We are born, we are nurtured, we exist as human beings only in the network of mutual relationships which rest upon this primal covenant. We constantly tear these ligatures which make our humanity possible, and the result is injustice and unfreedom. But in Christ we have received healing of these ruptures and we are made part of a healing community – a community called and enabled for the difficult, delicate and often long-drawn-out tasks of restoring and extending the network of mutual responsibility and mutual relatedness.

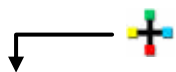
This involves seeking both justice and freedom, but it provides a positive



content without which these terms become deceptive and destructive slogans, sacralizing the demonic power of egotism, the clap-trap of every dictator. Justice has been defined as giving to each his due; our problem is that it is part of our fallen human nature to over-estimate what is due to ourselves and under-estimate what is due to others. Where can we find the 'fair-minded man' who can adjudicate these claims without the bias which is always created by that very status and security which qualifies him to be the judge. The simple solution-equal shares for all-is unworkable because the initial natural endowments of each are different. And these very differences are – as Paul's analogy of the body teaches – indispensable to the unity of humankind. A bag-full of identical noses is not a body. Yet in his development of this analogy, Paul invokes the principle of equal justice precisely for the sake of unity: 'God has combined the various parts of the body, giving special honour to the humbler parts, so that there might be no sense of division in the body but that all its organs might feel the same concern for one another' (1 Cor. 12.24f). The 'differentials' are designed to create equality of mutual care. Equality, which cannot function in isolation as a principle of social order, has an indispensable function as an aspect of mutual responsibility. If justice means giving to each his due, we must say that what is equally due to every human being is the possibility (it can be no more) of playing a responsible part in the network of mutual relations which make us human. This, surely, is the essential truth in the

famous cry of Colonel Rainsboro in the debate with Cromwell and Ireton of 1627: 'I think the poorest he that is in England hath a life to live as the richest he'. A human life is not truly lived unless it is a participation in the give and take of mutual responsibility. This, rather than a mathematical equality of goods and amenities, is the core of true equality. But this claim is effectively denied: (a) if disparities of wealth are so great as to create poverty as defined in the Townsend survey quoted above; (b) if the conduct of industrial life, in which the greater part of most people's time is invested, excludes this participation; (c) if political discussion is reduced to the level of a single mass-meeting of the nation watching its television screens, a discussion whose terms are set by those who control the media. The poorest he can only have a say if there is a continuous discussion of political issues going on in groups small enough for every one to voice his opinion. Democracy, as A. D. Lindsay has urged, is not government by consent but government by discussion (*Essentials of Democracy*, 1929). In this sense England today is a less democratic country than some third-world countries.

(5) Like justice, freedom can only function rightly as a guide to policy if it is auxiliary to the creating and sustaining of mutual responsibility among brothers. It is not just that my freedom is limited by the need to respect the freedom of others. It is that I am not free if I am autonomous, because the ego is the most tyrannical of rulers; it is that freedom is a possibility only within the covenant relationship created by a faithful God and binding me into a relationship of mutual responsibility with my brother. The greatest



tract on freedom in the New Testament, the letter to the Galatians, celebrates the freedom given by God as freedom to become 'servants one of another' (Gal. 5.13). Freedom sought as an end in itself is an illusion. Freedom becomes a reality within the covenant relation which binds us in love and obedience to God and in mutual responsibility for one another. But- once again- this freedom is negated: (a) when there are disparities of resource so great as to make mutuality impossible; (b) when the neighbour is represented only by an impersonal bureaucracy. Freedom, like justice, requires real meeting between people, for both depend upon the covenant relation of mutual responsibility.

(6) The reader will recognize that I am simply attempting (following Dumas) to explore a way towards a political theology which does not depend upon metaphysical or utopian assumptions but tries to live out the biblical story of A COVENANT RELATION SEEKING WIDER AND DEEPER REALIZATIONS, acknowledging that all our political constructs can only be temporary camp sites on the way and that the city we seek is a gift from above. One obvious implication may serve as conclusion. The pre-supposition of any contribution which the Church might make along these lines towards the birth of coherent and realistic political hopes is that it should undertake much more resolutely to order its own life in such a way that it can offer a sign of the kind of mutual responsibility, and therefore justice and freedom, which is God's intention for all.

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