The Welfare State: A Christian Perspective

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I shall not begin by apologizing for using a Christian pulpit to speak about a burning political issue, for I reject – as Charles Gore certainly rejected – the domesticated version of Christianity which supposes that the lordship of Christ is not licensed to operate in the public life of nations. On the other hand I am emboldened to speak of a Christian perspective on the welfare state by the fact that Christian thinking contributed much to its conception and development in this country. I believe that there are Christian insights about human nature which are significant for the present debate, and therefore I venture to speak about these insights – knowing how vast and complex are the technical issues into which I have not the competence to enter.

Two mutually contradictory principles

If one spends a lot of time, as I do, in the decaying areas of a city like Birmingham, one is moved not just to cool analysis but to hot anger – anger that so much squalor can exist side by side with so much affluence, anger that men and women rot and machinery rusts while so much that they could do to provide a decent physical basis for life remains undone. There is a proper place for anger, but I shall try in this lecture to concentrate on analysis. Reduced to bare outline, my thesis is this: our society is trying to operate on two mutually contradictory principles – an economy based on the idea that wants create rights and a welfare system based on the idea that *needs* create rights: further, that we have no publicly accepted doctrine of human nature and destiny which could enable us to adjudicate between them, granted the assumptions which have governed our society since the Enlightenment; and finally that the Christian dogma offers an understanding of human nature and destiny which puts the debate in a new perspective.

One might take the 1834 Poor Law as marking the point at which the ideology of laissez-faire capitalism took control of poor law administration, finally severing the connections it had

formerly had with the traditional Christian understanding of the mutual obligations which bind human communities together. The miseries which followed in the succeeding decades of the 19th century are familiar. The wealth of nations was built on the misery of people.

The impact of competition from newly industrialized nations forced governments to recognize the necessity for public provision of sanitation, education and some measure of security for all. Three major wars served at least temporarily to open the eyes of the comfortable to the misery of the rest. From the first decade of this century there were moves to provide a measure of security against sickness, unemployment and homelessness. And, after the war of 1939-45, there was the great body of legislation which we associate with the names of Butler, Beveridge and Bevan. These legislative acts, epochmaking as they were, had of course limited goals. In particular, the Beveridge plan for a single comprehensive system of social insurance did not aim to do more than provide a safety-net at the minimum level of subsistence for the victims of the free market. But, in the glow of these achievements, with Keynesian economics as the new consensus, the techniques of demand management to keep the free market on a steady course, full employment as the assumed norm and unlimited cheap oil to fuel the economy until kingdom come, it looked as if the miseries of the 19th century were forever behind us - at least for the rich nations of the North. What we now call the Third World was beyond the welfare horizon.

Forty years later this consensus no longer exists. The welfare state is contested. No one denies that it has achieved much. Not even its severest critics want to go back to the society of 1900. But it is under attack from both ends of the political spectrum. I shall examine the ideological bases for these two distinct attacks separately, but first there are some hard facts which no one can ignore. They can be grouped under two headings, referring respectively to the total effect and to the distributive effect of welfare legislation.

Two charges

Expenditure on the social services rose from roughly 4% of GNP in 1910 to 2396 in 1970.[1] The proportion is lower than that in the other member states of the European Community. It is asked whether the increase in real welfare over this period is commensurate with the increase in expenditure. Expenditure on the Health Service as a proportion of GNP grew by 50% in the 16 years from 1959 to 1975, but that period saw no decrease in sickness as measured either by the number of days absent from work through sickness or the number of claims for sick benefit.[2] A growth in expenditure on education in the same period of about 45% in real terms did not raise the proportion of literacy among 11-year old children.[3] It is asked, to put it crudely, whether the organization of welfare provision is cost-effective.

A second, perhaps more serious charge is that the inequalities in society have not been significantly reduced. The rich have benefited as much or more from the provisions of the welfare state as have the poor. In spite of what can be shown on paper as a re-distribution of wealth, through taxation on the one hand and benefits on the other, there remain huge inequalities in real welfare.

A large and growing section of the population has become locked in a 'poverty trap' created by the operation of means-tested benefits. Even in respect of the Health Service, where the most universalist principles have operated, the result is still unequal. The 'morbidity gradient', i.e. the rate at which morbidity increases as one goes down the social scale, has not been reduced since the introduction of the NHS.[4] Similar comments could be made regarding education. The

disparity between the education available to the rich and that available to the poor is still enormous, and it can be argued that it is increasing. The same is true of housing. In spite of all the housing programmes of successive governments, a walk through any of our cities will quickly demonstrate the gulf that divides the housing of the affluent suburbs from that of the inner cities.

On both grounds, therefore, the welfare state is faulted: that it has not been cost-effective in its overall working, and that it has not brought about an acceptable level of social justice. No doubt there is much to be said in explanation. Many of the assumptions made 40 years ago no longer hold. Family structures and age-distribution have changed in ways that were mot then foreseen. Medical technology has developed with explosive' force, causing a vast escalation of costs. The end of the cheap oil bonanza, combined with other more obscure factors, has triggered a collapse in the world economy. Successive governments have tried to shore up a system designed to be simple and universal with a succession of means-tested benefits which are more and more expensive to operate and difficult to understand, so that nearly one third of those entitled to them do not claim them. The centralizing of all decision making, which is such a notable feature of our national life, causes the working of the welfare state to appear remote, bureaucratic and impersonal – and this in spite of the devotion and skill which – as many of us would want to testify – thousands of men and women in the teaching, healing and caring professions give day after day to their work.

There are proposals on offer for reforming the whole administration of' welfare to cope comprehensively with these defects, such as those recently put forward by the National Consumers' Council. Whatever may be the merits or demerits of these and other proposals for reform, they do not touch the more fundamental debate which is raised by those who are attacking the very basic principles which led people like Temple, Tawney and Beveridge to see the creation of the welfare state as the proper social expression of the Christian faith.

The attack from the Right

The most powerful attack at present comes from what is usually called the New Right, deriving its main intellectual armament from F.A. Hayek and Milton Friedman. They and their disciples, faithful heirs of the Enlightenment, stand for the right of every individual to life, liberty and the

pursuit of happiness. This liberty is for them fundamental and nonnegotiable. 'Liberty', says Hayek, 'is that condition of men in which coercion of some by others is reduced to a minimum'. Coercion, he goes on, 'occurs when one man's actions are made to serve another man's will'. Each individual has the right not only to pursue happiness but to define happiness as he will. No body of other persons, calling themselves the State, has the right to define for him what is happiness and to impose that definition upon him. Even if such a right were admitted, no body of human beings has the all embracing knowledge which would enable them to make this definition. The individual knows what happiness means for him, and no state official has the right to tell him. The competing, conflicting and co-operating actions of individuals, each pursuing happiness as each conceives it, will work towards the general good through a process in which each will have to bear the consequences and reap the fruits of his actions. Any drive to impose equality will destroy liberty and undermine the personal initiative without which society cannot be healthy.

The welfare state is the creation of well-intentioned, good-hearted but softheaded people who thought that they could produce a measure of equality without having to accept the centralized command economy of full-blooded socialism. It is, in other words, a compromise between capitalism and socialism which has the weaknesses of both and the merits of neither. It has undermined the effectiveness of the free market by reducing the rewards for excellence and the penalties for failure. It encourages minimum performance and makes the citizen dependent on the ever-growing managerial bureaucracy. In their well-meant attempts to create equality, the

advocates of the welfare state have, to quote the title of Hayek's best-known book, led us down the road to serfdom.

The attack from the Left

At the other end of the ideological spectrum we have the arguments of the left which offer a contrary diagnosis of the failures of the welfare state. The welfare state has, it is claimed, failed to create equality because it is an attempt by government action to modify the malign effects of a free-market economy instead of replacing it by something else. If all economic activity is governed by the principles of the free market, you can not build upon that foundation a society governed by the opposite principle. However you may define justice, it is not compatible with the enormous disparities of wealth which laissez-faire capitalism always creates. And any system which is perceived as totally unjust loses the legitimacy without which government by consent is impossible. It is a cruel joke to talk about equality of opportunity among those who begin from the huge differences in wealth – and so in education, health and security – which capitalism creates. The actual development of capitalist economies shows conclusively that they cannot meet the claim upon which their advocates rely – the equal right of every person to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.

Capitalism in its actual working, this argument suggests, extinguishes the right on which it bases its claim to acceptance. In effect, the only right which it secures is the right of the wealthy to satisfy their wants. Since human desires, unlike human needs, are infinite, the means of production are devoted to the satisfying of more and more desires, and the techniques of persuasion are harnessed to the stimulation of new *wants* among the minority who have the means to satisfy them, while the basic *needs* of the majority are unmet. Industries are created for the manufacture of luxuries, while basic necessities – such as housing, sanitation and health-care – are in short supply. The working of the system depends – in fact – upon the unremitting stimulation of what the New Testament calls covetousness, an appetite which grows with what it feeds on. Continually increasing consumption, aided by the sophisticated techniques of advertising, packaging and 'built-in obsolescence', is necessary to keep the process of production going. The economic system is no longer directed to meeting needs. In an advanced capitalist economy, manufacturing industry does not exist to meet the needs of people; on the contrary, wants are manufactured to meet the needs of industry. Its growth, therefore, far from being a sign of health maybe essentially cancerous – the multiplication of cells as an end in itself. A soaring GNP may, in fact, be better described as a galloping cancer. And so, the argument from the left proceeds, the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness can only be secured if *needs*, not wants, are taken as the basis of rights. And that, in turn, can only be secured if the state, which alone can assess the needs of all citizens, takes control of the economy itself.

Wants, needs and rights

The two parties in this debate, both accepting the assumptions of the Enlightenment, agree in attacking the welfare state as an unsuccessful compromise between two conflicting principles. The critics on the right attack it because it undermines the efficient working of the free market; the critics on the left attribute its failures to the fact that it *depends upon* this free market. Both sides use the language of rights. But on one side rights are defined in terms of wants, on the other in terms of needs. Hayek and his disciples affirm the right of every person to make his or her own decisions about what he or she wants, to say 'This is happiness for me', to pursue that happiness and to enjoy the fruits of that pursuit. The needs of A do not confer on him any right to the fruits of B's legitimate labour. B, therefore, cannot be coerced by the State into handing over the results of his honest toil to A.

The critics of the left, on the other hand, affirm the right of every person to have basic human needs met, with the corollary that a society which fails to meet these basic needs is an unjust society and that the government of such a society has forfeited its legitimacy.

The first point to notice about this debate is that both sides take for granted the equal right of every individual to the pursuit of happiness. Both claim to be defending human rights. The immediately obvious difference between them concerns the roles assigned to wants and needs in the definition of rights. What is at stake in this difference? Peter *wants* a packet of cigaretts, but Paul (his doctor) thinks that he *needs* to give up smoking. If Peter wins the day, the GNP will rise, Hayek and Friedmann will be happy, and the economy will be pronounced healthy even if Peter is not. If, on the other hand, he decides to consult his doctor, the cost of the NHS will go up and with it the Public Sector Borrowing Requirement, thus causing gloom and despondency on the right. But what gives the doctor the right to decide on behalf of Peter what his needs really are?

Let us take a different case. The Birmingham City Council judges that the houses in the Winson Green area need to be pulled down and re-built for the sake of public health and urban amenity. The natives want to remain where they are. How are the two claims to be adjudicated? What, exactly, is the difference between needs and wants? How can wants be weighed against needs, and who holds the scales?

It would, of course, be a mere verbal trick to say that wants are subjective while needs are objective. Only God, surely, can have that kind of objectivity, and even city councils and doctors should not play God, even when they are tempted to do so. A better way of clarifying the issue would be to say that needs are what a rational person would want if he knew all the facts, including all the consequences of his choices. A rational person would want what brings real happiness. But in order to want it, he would need to know what real happiness is - in other words, to know what it is for which human beings are really made, what is their true end. Needs can only be asserted against wants by someone who knows more about the whole enterprise of being human than does the dedicated smoker or the domesticated 'Brummie'. We might perhaps credit the doctor and the city councillor with some superior knowledge, though this is debatable. But who knows what is in fact the ultimate meaning and destiny of human life? It is a basic axiom of our post-Enlightenment society that there is no acknowledged public truth about whit the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Assembly called the chief end of man. To claim such an authority would be to invoke dogma, and – as we all know – since the Enlightenment any stigma is good enough to beat a dogma. In this area, in contrast to the world of natural science, there is no acknowledged public truth. There is only personal opinion. Each of us has the right not only to pursue happiness, but to define happiness for oneself. In such a society it is in strict logic impossible to use the concept of needs to over-ride wants – impossible because there is no publicly accepted truth by which needs, as distinct from wants, can be defined.

Two irreducible needs?

Defenders of the welfare state have tried to meet this difficulty by the following argument. Granted that the definition of needs in the fullest sense must depend upon some ultimate moral or religious belief, there are – nevertheless – two needs which must be acknowledged universally because they have to be met if any other need is to be met: these irreducible needs are survival and autonomy. A person cannot pursue any purpose unless these two needs are met; he or she must be alive and must be capable of making choices. These needs, therefore, are in all circumstances to be acknowledged, and there is an inexpungable right for them to be met.[5]

But this does not help us in dealing with our problem. No one can deny what is being affirmed. (In fact 'survival' and 'autonomy' would seem to be other words for the first two of the American trilogy – life and liberty). But this does not lead to any helpful conclusion. It is obvious that a person who does not exist does not have either needs or rights. But it is not obvious that, for example, a man of 95 has a right to indefinite survival. And total autonomy is really another name for idiocy. Granted that survival and the power to make decisions are the minimum needs for a human life, it is still true that any definition of needs which is such that 'needs', so defined, can be shown to have priority over 'wants', must depend upon some doctrine of the ultimate good for human beings. And both parties to the dispute agree that in our plural, secular, post-Enlightenment society there can be no doctrine of the chief end of man which forms part of public truth, normative for society as a whole. There is therefore no ground upon which needs can be shown to take precedence over wants. In so far as this is so, it is not surprising that in the contemporary ideological battle the old Left does not succeed in routing the battalions of the new Right.

The concept of minimal needs is open to further objection. These minimal needs are in fact those we share with the animals. To be human is to have needs of a different kind; it is to need respect, honour, love. Without these we may exist biologically but we are not living a properly human life. And these needs are precisely those which cannot be made the basis of a demand fur rights. Love cannot be claimed as a right – a fact which King Lear learned at terrible cost when he was brought down to the level of bare animal survival, beaten by the storm and on the edge of madness. The needs which are proper to our human being are needs related to what we are – as parents, children, neighbours, members in an organic network of relationships. It is possible – all too possible – to develop a welfare system designed to meet basic biological needs which yet fails to meet the most fundamental of human needs, the need to be respected, honoured, loved as more than one among millions of specimens of the human species. Yet to claim this as a right is to destroy the possibility of having it met. These things do not exist except as they are freely given.[6]

What basis for rights?

Before turning back to consider the ideological armament on the other side, there is another question which must be put to both. What logical step leads from either wants or needs to rights? The concept of human rights has become so much part of our pattern of thought that it often escapes critical examination. Let us ask of both parties to the debate how they justify the belief that either needs or wants create rights. For obviously to speak of rights is vacuous unless there is an accepted juridical framework in terms of which rights are established and defined, unless there are people and institutions which have a socially acknowledged duty to supply what is claimed as a right. Otherwise to speak of human rights is as useful as it would be to write a cheque on a non-existent bank account. The writing of the cheque might express both needs and wants, but there would be no corresponding right. If one believes that the universe is sustained by a righteous God, then there is meaning indeed in the cry of sufferers from job onward for their rights. But if there is no such belief accepted as public truth one has to ask in respect of every claim for rights: who are the persons responsible for meeting this claim as a matter of duty? If there are no such persons, there is no right.

The ideologists of the New Right have their answer to this problem, and can even quote Scripture to support them. 'Who plants a vineyard', asks St Paul, 'without eating any of its fruit? Who tends a flock without getting some of the milk?'.[7] Those who work have the right to the product. But here, as so often, the subtler nuances of Scripture are overlooked. St Paul, in line with the Old Testament, only says that the farmer is entitled to some of the crop. He does not forget the Old Testament instruction that some of it must go to the poor. But for the supporters of the new right it is obvious that the work of the farmer, or of the entrepreneur of any kind, gives

him a total entitlement to the product and the right to use it freely in accordance with his wishes. No one has the right to take from him what he has lawfully earned by the sweat of his brow and the skill of his hand and brain. It is true that this means that there will always be inequalities. Some will be rich and some poor. But this is simply a fact of nature, not the result of injustice. It provides opportunities for private charity, but in no way provides ground for an appeal to justice.

Now, surely, there is an element of truth here. Let us take an illustration familiar to anyone who lives in an area like Winson Green. Two men in one street, each with a small backyard. A. puts a lot of hard work and skill into his little patch and produces a crop of beans and tomatoes. B. leaves his to the nettles and the tins cans. At harvest time, before A. has time to gather his harvest, B. climbs over the fence by night and takes it. B.'s need may well be greater than A. 's; it probably is. And both A. and B. are undoubtedly sinners in the sight of God. But it would be hard to deny that A. and not B. has the right to enjoy the crop. Unless we acknowledge that, we shall he in the world of make-believe.

But of course this is not the whole truth. Paul says that the farmer is entitled to some of the crop, not to the whole of it. For he could not grow a single grain if it had not been for a whole world of supporting and sustaining realities – including the society which bore him, sustains him, taught him the skills of husbandry and provided him with the possibility of a secure and stable existence. There is no one, and can never be any one, who can claim exclusive entitlement to the fruit of his labours. A model of human behaviour is fundamentally false which starts with the solitary individual and tries to calculate his rights and entitlements over against the rest. That is to put myth in place of reality. Whatever else may have to be said about the pursuit of happiness, this point must be made: that happiness for the self pursued apart from the happiness of all is a mirage, the pursuit of which can only lead into the wasteland. Adam Smith's famous invisible hand, which mysteriously over-ruled human activity in such a way that the selfish pursuit of individual happiness would automatically lead to the welfare of all, must be accounted one of the most malignant of the idols, the no-gods, the vanities against which the Bible so consistently warns us. We have enough experience of the actual working of laissez-faire capitalism to know that this is so.

Rights, duties and charity

If we now turn back to the other side of the political spectrum and examine the claim that it is needs which create rights, we meet another set of difficulties beyond the difficulty of determining who is authorized to define needs in distinction from wants. Let us accept that, whatever one's philosophy or religion may be, the need to survive is the most obvious of all needs. But does it confer a right? When Sir Philip Sydney gave the cup of water to his companion, both of them dying, the other soldier certainly needed the water to survive, but did that need give, him a right to it? And did Sydney have a corresponding duty to give it? Most of us would at once say that it was not a matter of rights and duties but of love, of that which the Christian tradition holds to be the greatest of all realities – charity. And we would be right. But charity has become a word of contempt. To claim rights is held to be a mark of dignity, whereas to accept charity is to lose dignity, to suffer stigma. (Like charity, stigma is a word which has come down in the world. Its earliest uses ill English, so far as I know, refer to the marks of circumcision and to the scars of the cross – both outward signs of divine election). The meaning which such words acquire is a function of the total world-view in which they are used. There are societies in which wealth is concealed and the beggar is honoured. The mendicant going from door to door in an Indian village does not have to thank the donors; he and they know that he is conferring a favour on them. Everything depends upon your overall view of human nature and destiny.

If to be a truly human person is to be an autonomous individual, depending on no charity but demanding and defending one's rights, then to receive charity is indeed to lose dignity. But there are other possible views of human

nature and destiny. And even if one were to accept this view of human nature, two problems remain. Firstly, granted that in this view of things, to depend on charity is to suffer stigma, no proof has been given that needs create rights, unless indeed there is a just ruler of the universe: but in that case one would have to enquire about his purposes for the human person which would in turn determine what real needs are. But that would bring us into the realm of dogma. And secondly, as has already been pointed out, to claim a right is futile unless the claim is addressed to someone who has a recognized duty to meet the claim. Rights are worthless except in a society which acknowledges corresponding duties. Without such a recognition, the belief that needs create rights can only tear society to pieces, for it allows selfishness to operate unchecked under a mask of moral indignation. If I am not mistaken, it is the growing perception of this simple fact that is eroding confidence in what one might call the Old Left and weakening its capacity to mount an effective counter-attack against the New Right.

Assumptions about human nature

Where does this leave the much battered welfare state? I began by saying that the crisis which confronts the welfare state arises from the fact that it is an attempt to found a social order based on the satisfaction of needs upon an economic order based on the satisfaction of wants. It is attacked from the right on the ground that the superstructure of welfare legislation crushes the economic infrastructure and renders it ineffective; it is attacked from the left on the ground that the working of the economic order creates such injustices that no welfare provisions can set them right. In a recent TV programme Mr Norman Tebbit said that the Good Samaritan was only able to be a good neighbour because he had cash in his wallet, no doubt earned from legitimate business. If a spokesman from the left had been at hand to comment he would, no doubt, have said that the men who robbed the traveller only did it because their wallets were empty – presumably because they were unemployed. On these terms the debate continues and there is no end to it. Both sides are arguing from premisses on which there can be no conclusion. If human nature is as, since the Enlightenment, we have assumed it to be; if every human being is an autonomous individual with the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness in what ever way he chooses to define happiness; and if there is no publicly accepted truth about the end for which human beings exist, but only a multitude of private opinions on the matter; then it follows – firstly – that there is no way of adjudicating between wants and needs, and – secondly – that there is no way of logically grounding rights either in needs or in wants.

But another way of understanding human nature and destiny is possible. It is that for which the Church exists as sign and witness. It is entrusted to the Church not as one among a variety of options for the private cultivation of the religious life, but as publicly revealed truth for which Jesus Christ bore witness before Pontius Pilate, public truth, truth for all, the reality against which all

other claims to truth have to be tested. It is that human beings are created in love and for love, created for fellowship with one another in a mutual love which is the free gift of God whose inner life is the perfect mutuality of love – Father Son and Spirit; that happiness consists in participation in this love which is the being of God; and that participation in it is made possible

and is offered as a gift to sinful men and women by the justifying work of Christ and the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit. In the light of this given reality, all projects for the pursuit of happiness as the separate right of each individual human being are exposed as self-destructive folly, and all definitions whether of want or of need are to be tested in the light of this – the one thing needful, which is to be along with one's brothers and sisters on the way which does actually lead to the end for which all things were created and in which all human beings can find their blessedness.

Politics, dogma and truth

In saying these things do I give the impression of having left live politics for dead theology? Let me ask for a few further moments of indulgence. It is exactly 50 years since a group of churchmen in Germany issued what is now known as the Barmen Declaration. It was a piece of pure dogmatic theology. But it had immense political consequences. It spoke of justification and sanctification in Christ and then went on: 'We repudiate the false teaching that there are areas of life which do not belong to Jesus Christ but to other lords, areas in which we do not need justification and sanctification through him.' Everyone knew at that moment what was being referred to. Is the Church in Britain today prepared to use the same language to those who claim that politics and economics are governed by laws with which theology has nothing to do, who denounce Christian bishops when they speak a word of testimony to the truth as it is in Jesus in the context of contemporary economic and political events? Or have we been so seduced by the ideology of the Enlightenment, which claims total autonomy for economics and regards Christianity as merely one among a series of optional programmes for the cultivation of the inner life, that we are no longer able to use such language?

That question has to be put to the Left as well as to the Right. To drive a wedge between the public ethics of politics and economics and the private ethics of the home and the personal life is disastrous whichever way the accent falls. To suppose that you can have collective justice without personal integrity is folly. What God has set forth in Jesus Christ is the reality by which all human life, public and private, is to be tested. We justly earn contempt if we use the language of Amps and Isaiah to denounce irresponsibility in the ordering of public life, but are unwilling to challenge with equal clarity tile irresponsibility of contemporary sexual ethics, the slaughter of unborn infants for mere convenience, and the easy dissolution of the most sacred bonds of marital fidelity, parental authority and filial obedience which are the very stuff of true human community.

Economic man in question

If we can and must bear witness to the truth about human nature and destiny against the falsehood which corrupts both public and private life, what are the implications for the current debate about the principles of the welfare state? First and foremost surely this: that the concept of human nature which has been taken as axiomatic for capitalist economics since Adam Smith is false. It was said (I believe by Nathan Soderblom) of a certain portrait of Archbishop Lang that it had brilliantly captured the devil's intention for him, to which he piously added: 'But let us thank God that the intention was not realized'. Economic man as assumed in the text-books of economics which I studied as an undergraduate represents the devil's intention for man, and we are not in a position to thank God that it has not been realized. Economic man is assumed to have one purpose: to secure as much gain for himself as possible with the least possible expenditure of effort. Once this is accepted, the rest of classical economics follows. Work is not a shared participation in the creative activity of God; it is a cost item in a profit and loss account. Work (as Hannah Arendt has pointed out8) is absorbed into labour, and labour was correctly described by Marx as man's metabolism with nature. It has no purpose except production and consumption. It has become purely cyclical and therefore meaningless. From this all else follows – from time-and-

motion study to built-in obsolescence to the absurd tyranny of the so-called Gross National Product as a measure of welfare.

Thus far the devil's intention. The truth as it is given to us in the Christian dogma is otherwise. Man, male and female, is made in the image of God in love and for love, and nothing short of the infinite love of God will satisfy his heart. Drawn onwards by desires which only infinity can satisfy, tempted and terrified by the vast adventure of love, he falls into self-love and makes himself the centre of the world. But even fallen man knows that he finds his real joy in love, in sharing with others in a common purpose, in seeking a blessedness which is always beyond his finite grasp. Even fallen man knows that hardship, pain, danger and privation are small things when they are the price of real comradeship in a great adventure, and that death itself, so far from being the negation of human life, can be its glorious consummation.

To take as the primary human need the need to survive, and so to make biology the basis of rights is to miss the glory of human being. Realism about fallen human nature does indeed require us to recognize that men and women are frequently selfish, greedy and lazy. Like any clever caricature, the devil's portrait of economic man does capture part of the truth. But the Church must bear witness that it is a caricature, not a true likeness. The Church must affirm as public truth the real nature and destiny of man, that human life is to be lived in and for the love of God and the love of the neighbour whom God gives as his representative in every situation, and that the concept of economic man which is central to the ideology of capitalism is false.

More particularly we have to point out that the present capitalist system is only kept going by the ceaseless stimulation of covetousness among those whose basic needs are already met, and that covetousness – as the apostle has taught us – is idolatry, the substituting of a finite good for that infinite joy which only God can give, and for which nevertheless every human being longs. It is one of the saddest facts in our situation that this corruption has so deeply infected those who would have been, a generation ago, the staunch champions of the Left. Both the Conservative and Labour parties have strong Christian elements in their older traditions. The sad fact is that in both cases these have been almost destroyed by the cancer of consumerism.

There is, of course, room for a great deal of discussion at a pragmatic level of the relative roles of the individual entrepreneur, co-operative bodies and local and national governments in the working of the economy. But the ideology of capitalism must be rejected as false. Equally false however is the idea that the evil can be exorcised by putting all management in the hands of the state. The essential point is surely this: a welfare state operating on the principle that I am my brother's keeper can not be permanently maintained on the basis of an economy operating on the principle that I am not. The question of the future of the welfare state cannot be separated from the question of the future ordering of our economic life. And that is not primarily a question of who owns, or even of who manages, but a question of the principles on which it operates, the question whether economic activity is seen as a co-operative enterprise in which all concerned have fully shared rights and responsibilities, the question whether the profit and loss accounts of our great enterprises are realistic in taking account of human and social gains and losses, the question whether national prosperity is measured in terms of the total life of communities and families, or only in terms of those transactions which appear in the market place where money passes.

Love and justice

I have talked about love. What about that other great biblical word – justice? What shall we say to the oft-repeated cry: 'Don't offer me charity; give me justice'? To enquire into the relation between the justice of God and the love of God is to enter the deepest questions in theology, questions which lead us to the foot of the cross where God's justice is set forth and God's love is

poured out in one single act, where none of us dare ask for justice and all of us can only ask for and thankfully receive the everlasting mercy. In the actual presence of God none of us can claim rights, not because God over-rules us with his power, but because he does not. God's love is holy, righteous love. Human love is corrupted – or may be – by the love of power, even in that basic human community where love is learned – the family. Even here, therefore, we have to speak of justice – of fair shares. And justice between human beings and communities requires a rough equality of power. Yet if justice is taken out of its true context in the holy love of God as the law of

human being and placed within the Enlightenment view of the human person as an autonomous individual, the result can only be disaster. Justice means giving to each what is due, but it is of the essence of the fallen-ness of human nature that I over-estimate what is due to me and under-estimate what is due to others. And so we fight one another for justice with all the fervour of a moral crusade, and it eludes us while we tear the fabric of society to shreds.

But if what is really due to each person is to be loved and honoured as made in God's image and for God's love, then the struggle for justice (which is always necessary among sinful human beings) is protected from that demonic power which always takes over when I identify justice for me with the justice of God. We struggle for more justice in a world where absolute justice cannot be, but we live by grace as debtors to the charity of God. And the stigma has been borne by another.

Blessed are the poor

I come to my last point which is the most difficult but which cannot be omitted. What did Jesus mean when he said: 'Blessed are you poor, for yours is the kingdom of God'? When I used to spend time with people in the slums of Madras or the beggars' home in Madurai, I always felt that I understood those words and needed no further explanation. I knew that these words of Jesus were true. Mother Theresa knows that they are true and will not let us forget it. There is a kind of richness in a place like that, and a kind of poverty in our so affluent suburbs. Is not Jesus saying that these have an actual share now in the blessedness of God's reign, a share which the rich have missed? It is hard to see otherwise what these words mean. And the practical outcome must be companionship: we who are rich must share the bread and so share the blessing.

Human beings were not made for affluence but for God. The poor are not given to us as those who have to be encouraged to join us in the race after futility. They are surely given to us to remind us that we are off the track, that we are lost. It is we, the affluent, who are in desperate need. We have been seduced by the ideology of the Enlightenment into the vain pursuit of happiness as the goal of human life, rather than the reign of God, and we are reminded by the poor that we have lost the way. We are in a wasteland, a desert where we are ceaselessly summoned by all the apparatus of capitalism to go on chasing a mirage.

I do not think that there can be a true welfare state without radical change in the ordering of our economic, industrial and commercial affairs on the basis of a different view of human nature and destiny from the capitalist ideology which has ruled our thinking since the Enlightenment. I think that the Church has to declare publicly and unequivocally that human nature and destiny are as they are seen in the Christian dogma and that our society has to accept the

need for corporate and personal repentance, for a recognition that we have been pursuing vanities.

Without that radical renunciation of a false and delusive view of human nature and destiny I do not see how we can begin to re-order our economy in such a way that it serves the welfare of all. Without it, I do not see that there can be a worthy future for the kind of society that we have created in the western world in the past three centuries. And, of course, we dare not talk of welfare as though it were a matter simply of these islands off the coast of the Eurasian continent. We are part of one world. Welfare as Christians think of it can only be the welfare of the whole human family.

We should not, as churchmen, try to soothe people with false hopes. Whether God will give us time, even yet, for repentance, or whether we have to learn our folly through the breakdown of our way of life, I do not know. That is in God's hands. Our business is to bear witness to the truth.

Notes

1. J. F. Sleeman: *The Welfare State* (1973) p.106.
2. R. Hadley & S. Hatch: *Social Welfare & the Failure of the State* (1981) p.39.
3. *ibid* pp.34-38.
4. Graham Room: *The Sociology of Welfare* (1979) pp. 154-157.
5. R. Plant, H. Lesser & P. Taylor-Gooby: *Political Philosophy & Social Welfare* (1980) pp.37-43.
6. See the profound study *The Needs of Strangers* by Michael Ignatieff, especially pp.27-53.
7. I Corinthians 9:7.
8. Hannah Arendt: *The Human Condition* (1958).