Biblical theology and the politics of the Centre

Francis Bridger

Theological perspectives on politics • The theses and liberalism • Liberalism: A theological evaluation • Biblical freedom • The individual and community • Corporate motifs • Left, Right, Centre? • Conclusion.

In an age of widespread political cynicism and confusion, the thoughtful Christian finds it no less difficult to know how to vote than does a sizeable proportion of the electorate. By way of introduction, therefore, I should emphasize two points.

Firstly, in what follows I shall not seek to expound detailed policies of the Centre or any other party at the time of writing. Policies, understood as programmes for government, are notoriously shifting sands subject to contingencies which may change very quickly (as the Labour Party is currently discovering). I have consequently sought to make out a case in favour of the Centre over and against the Left and the Right on the basis of fundamental philosophy and beliefs; policy references, in so far as they

occur at all, are used only to illustrate these.

The second point is that the reader will find throughout this essay the politics of the Centre referred to as liberalism. By this I do not simply mean the Liberal Party or the Liberal Democrats, but also the former SDP, all of whose philosophies may broadly be said to be liberal in their roots and fundamentals. Despite the socialist origins of the former SDP, and protestations to the contrary by some of its leaders, I would include it within this general ethos of liberalism. When I speak of liberalism, therefore, I am speaking of a phenomenon not a single party.

The starting point for political theology must be the Bible. But how does the Bible speak ethically? Although I agree with many of the opening theses which preface this book, I have serious reservations about one fundamental point. The theses appear to represent the view that biblical principles can be derived from particular verses of Scripture either individually or in aggregate. However attractive this view might seem, I believe it to be over simplistic and in danger of being misleading. I would contend that when we look closely, we find that the biblical writers arrive at conclusions about ethical matters far more by means of examples and perspectives than by abstract reasoning or appeals to free-standing principles. Put another way, the writers seem to say something like, 'Look, this is how God requires us to live. We can see what this means by considering how God acted in such and such a way at such and such a time in such and such a place.' In this manner they arrive at moral commands and obligations derived not from a system of principles but from a series of examples. In short, the obligation and historical example are interwoven in such a way that one is inseparable from the other.

I want to argue, therefore, that in taking the Bible seriously as God's word, we need to think of its ethical material in terms of examples and perspectives rather than principles. Having said this, however, I am aware that the propositional terms of the present debate have been set by the nature of the opening theses. While I would prefer to recast these along the lines of perspectives

and examples, I have attempted in this essay to address the kind of questions set out in the theses as they stand.

I want to argue, therefore, not that the Bible should be downgraded (as some might fear from what I have just said) but that in taking it seriously as God's word, we need to think of its ethical material in terms of paradigms and perspectives rather than principles. My argument, in summary, is this: firstly, the notion of biblical principles as generally used should be treated with a great deal of caution. Secondly, a more biblical way of approaching ethics is to look for paradigms and examples in relevant areas. Thirdly, although this may give rise to general moral obligations, it is not always straightforward to translate these into specific political policies. Fourthly, a much more sophisticated hermeneutic is required to engage with biblical morality than can be supplied by the appeal to biblical principles.[1]

Having addressed, therefore, the prior question of how far theses 1–19 can be used politically, it now remains for us to turn to the question of how all this applies to contemporary British politics and particularly the politics of the Centre.

Theological perspectives on politics

How and why the state should intervene in social and economic affairs is the central question of modern politics. It is, however, not a new question. The prophet Samuel warned the people of Israel that their clamour for a king would end in centralized tyranny such that 'When that day comes, you will cry out for relief from the king you have chosen' (1 Sa. 8:18). The problem of power, like the poor, has always been with us.

In theses 7–19 we have a series of answers to this question. Theses 7–12 advance a set of moral and theological propositions for political discussion. In so far as they express biblical perspectives, they speak with authority to issues of economic and social justice. But at first sight they appear simply to represent a pastiche of

proof texts in support of views which bear remarkable resemblance to late twentieth-century bourgeois democracy. The critic might be forgiven for wondering whether the Bible is being used ideologically rather than critically.

If, however, they are understood as distillation statements of biblical paradigms, it becomes possible to view the theses somewhat differently: as attempts to produce action-guiding norms which lie mid-way between highly general values such as love and justice and very specific commands such as, 'When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges . . . Leave them for the poor and the alien' (Lv. 19:9–10).

Theses 13–19, on the other hand, put forward much more specific obligations. It is here that the culturally conditioned nature of the theses becomes most evident. In every thesis, for example, the dominating ethical category is that of rights – an acutely anachronistic category from a biblical perspective. The language of rights (at least in the modern sense) is decidedly not biblical and the philosophy which underlies it in modern discussion even less so. Yet theses 13–19 have borrowed so heavily from a post-Enlightenment world-view that they exemplify precisely the problem referred to earlier of absolutizing beliefs which are culturally relative.

Of course, it is possible that this may show nothing more than that the theses are culturally conditioned. But we need to recognize that to some extent this is bound to be true: all theological beliefs and statements are in some way the product of dialogue with contemporary culture and it would be strange if political theology did not share this characteristic.

The key question, then, is whether liberalism, or rather the version of it represented by the theses, is theologically justifiable. In answering this question, our task is threefold: firstly, to examine the theses to see if they really are a form of liberalism; secondly, to evaluate liberalism from a theological standpoint; and thirdly, to assess the philosophy and policies of the Centre against contemporary Conservatism and socialism.

The theses and liberalism

The former leader of the Liberal Party, David Steel, has defined the philosophy of liberalism as:

> belief in the supreme value of the individual and the individual's freedom and rights; and a conviction that the only value of the state is to remove obstacles in the path of liberty and to create the positive conditions of freedom whereby human beings might realise their human potential to the full.[2]

He goes on to suggest that this definition entails a number of basic affirmations.

1. Government should be limited. The state is a necessary evil for the protection of the individual and the promotion of his or her well-being but it is the servant of individuals not the master.
2. The state should intervene in economic and social life to promote individual well-being but this should be kept to a minimum.
3. The purpose of the state should be to enhance and develop individual natural rights. These include the right to freedom of speech and association, the right to religious toleration, the right to trade and the rights of minorities..
4. Governments should be elected according to democratic means which reflect individual natural rights.
5. Governments must be subject to the rule of law.
6. Nations have the right to self-determination. This is analogous to the right of individuals to order their lives freely provided they do not undermine the freedoms of others.

When we compare these six characteristics with theses 1–19 we find a striking correspondence: theses 1 and 12 speak of the danger of arbitrary state power and the preference of the rule of law over the rule of personal whim. Thesis 2 speaks of the primacy of individual rights and goes on to list these in terms identical to 3 above. Thesis 7 defines freedom to trade as fundamental while thesis 12

asserts that to deny it is demonic. Thesis 2 speaks of the right of the individual to access to basic economic resources while theses 11 and 15 underline the responsibility of the state to intervene to safeguard this right and to protect those who have fallen into poverty. Theses 17–19 restate the classic liberal suspicion of centralized power by calling for a balance between centres of power such as government, businesses and trade unions in the interests of the individual consumer (a nice alliance here between historic liberal emphasis on individual freedom, and modern consumerism).

There are *prima facie* grounds, therefore, for claiming that Christian teaching as set out in the 19 theses can be closely correlated with the philosophy and goals of liberalism. Of course, the reasoning behind secular liberal philosophy and theses 1–19 is vastly different. The theses seek to ground their conclusions in theology while philosophical liberalism looks to non-theological assumptions about the nature of human beings as both individual and social creatures. Nevertheless, the political conclusions are much the same: protection of individual liberties, promotion of individual well-being within community and limited government.

Liberalism: A theological evaluation

While space does not permit a thoroughgoing analysis of liberalism, any evaluation from a theological standpoint must examine at least the twin pillars on which liberalism rests: its conception of freedom, and its conception of the individual. From these follow its philosophy of society and social justice.

Freedom, like most large ideas, is a slippery term. It is invoked by Left, Right and Centre alike, and such is its emotive power that no politician can fail to identify himself or herself with it. In the pantheon of modern values, it occupies the topmost place. What, however, does it mean? And how can we evaluate the idea theologically?

The starting point for our thinking must be the contemporary context. All across the world freedom is hailed as the paramount goal of progressive societies. As I write, the Berlin Wall is being torn down and the post-war map of Europe redrawn in the name of democratic freedom. Nearer home, the rhetoric of the Thatcher era has been full of references to freedom: freedom from state control, freedom of the individual, and freedom from stifling bureaucracy, to mention but three.[3]

We need to be aware, however, that behind the bare notion of freedom lie two distinct and divergent concepts.[4] The first can be termed 'freedom from'. A benchmark definition of this idea has been provided by Friedrich Hayek and Sir Keith Joseph.[5] Both are renowned philosophers of the New Right and both have influenced Mrs Thatcher enormously, the latter serving in Thatcher Cabinets throughout the 1980s. The definition of freedom they offer is highly significant and goes a long way towards explaining the Conservative government's policies. In their view, freedom must be equated solely with *the absence of intentional coercion*. In other words, freedom is defined negatively: individuals may be regarded as free as long as no one is intentionally forcing them to do what they do not wish. This definition has far-reaching consequences.[6]

Firstly, it enables the New Right to distinguish between freedom and ability. The poor may be unable to afford decent housing (for example) but they are not in this way subject to coercion. No one is coercing them against their will by saying, 'You are not allowed to buy the home you want'.

Secondly, it follows that while the government must secure equal liberty in the sense of ensuring that coercion is removed, it has no duty to go any further in the name of freedom. On the Hayek-Joseph thesis, freedom is facilitated by passing laws which prevent people from being coerced. Laws which enforce redistribution of wealth, however, are themselves coercive since they take by force the resources of one group to give to another. By the same token, governmental aid to developing countries

is contrary to liberty since it is likewise redistributionist. This restricted view of freedom has significant implications for social justice, as we shall see later.

The second concept of freedom may be characterized as 'freedom to'. This notion points to the self-evident fact that mere absence of coercion as understood by Joseph and Hayek is defective as a definition of true freedom. People can be just as trapped and coerced by poverty or by lack of dignity as by oppressive laws and institutions. The homeless family dependent on state benefits may be free from political tyranny but is in other no less real ways unfree, despite Sir Keith Joseph's contention that 'poverty is not unfreedom'. What such a family needs is the freedom to achieve self-worth, human dignity and participation in the ordinary life of the community. In other words, it needs *freedom from* poverty and dependence in order to find *freedom to* become fully responsible human beings. The two kinds of freedom are inextricably linked.

Biblical freedom

From the standpoint of theological ethics, freedom is much more than the mere absence of coercion. In biblical terms, the paradigm of freedom is to be found in the story of the exodus.[7] Israel's liberation from slavery presents a model of freedom to which biblical writers in both Old and New Testaments return again and again. Thus the eighth-century prophets, facing a world of rapid economic change in which the institutions established in the Pentateuch were being swept away, issued a challenge in the name of Yahweh: the economic enslavement of whole strata of society by the newly enriched nobility must cease. Israelite families must be restored to the kind of economic and social independence envisaged in the pentateuchal legislation. It was God himself who originally gave them freedom from economic and political oppression by delivering them from Egypt. New slavery such as that practised by the *nouveau riche* entrepreneurial class (who had done rather well out of Israel's economic miracle) is a breach of the divine law.[8]

The implications of this theological conception of freedom were twofold. In the first place, the redemption of the nation from its slave status required that Israelites regard themselves as fundamentally equal before God and in relation to one another. The freedom which Yahweh had given had been achieved not by human endeavour but by divine grace. All were equal in sharing in this covenant freedom. 'Hence,' as Richard Bauckham has remarked, 'in Israel freedom entailed not inequality but equality.'[9]

Secondly, 'the law and the prophets were positively concerned with maintaining the economic independence of Israelite families, consisting in their inalienable right to share in the land which God had given to all Israel.'[10] The Old Testament makes it abundantly clear that the land was a sign of God's grace and it is in this context that the notion of rights must be understood.[11] It was not simply a parcel of resources to be carved up by the most able and talented or to be allocated according to the impersonal action of the market. It was a grace-gift given equally to all members of the covenant community, and in consequence all had a grace-right to share in it fairly.

The paradigm of social and political values we are given in Israel, therefore, points to much more than the market freedom espoused by the contemporary Conservative Party. The equal access to resources enshrined in the land legislation of the Pentateuch points not to the promotion of individualistic freedoms as envisaged by Hayek and Joseph (which easily become freedoms to exploit) but to a positive conception of liberty as freedom to engage in economic activity *as a member of the community*. This kind of freedom, however, entails community recognition that individuals and families must be given access to resources in order that they might play a part in the development of the community as a whole. In modern terms, they should not simply be left to fend for themselves on grudgingly-given reduced state benefits, but rather should be positively enabled to re-enter the economic life of the nation.

What this model does *not* point to, however, is a state-controlled economy. The Bible is too realistic about the

corruptive effects of concentrations of power to lend support to a socialistic philosophy such as that practised until recently in communist countries, and to a lesser extent as advocated for much of the last decade by the Labour Party. What we seem to have in the Israel example is some kind of balance between the freedom of individuals and families to engage in economic life, and the responsibility of the community to enable them to do so. Although the modern notion of the state is foreign to biblical thinking, the implication for democratic societies is that the state, in its capacity as representative of the community, must act as the servant enabler.[12] This is precisely the role envisaged for the state by modern liberalism whether represented by the Liberal Democrats or the former SDP. It is not the kind of role envisaged by either Thatcherite Conservatism or the Labour Party for most of the 1980s. Whether, even now, the so-called 'modernized' Labour Party really believes in a decentralized, social market state is open to question. But I shall return to this point later.

In the New Testament we find the metaphor of freedom deepened and extended so that although used in a different way, it retains its force precisely because of its earlier political implications. Here it is freedom from sin and the powers and principalities which is given by God through Christ. Although it is not political freedom which Paul has in mind in Romans 6, political imagery is used to make a key point: that just as God gave liberty to the members of the covenant community of Israel, so he gives liberty in Christ to the members of the new covenant. The metaphor has not lost its power, but its context has changed.

In both the Old and New Testaments, this freedom was firmly rooted in the character and acts of God. It is highly significant that the Bible nowhere speaks of freedom as an abstraction, but always in terms of concrete, historical acts. Moreover, freedom from a biblical perspective is relational. It is a grace-gift given by God in relationship with his people and it serves to release them to live in love and service to him and to one another. It is not an abstract,

Platonic principle of the modern post-Enlightenment kind.

Before we pass to a consideration of liberalism's second great pillar, the value of the individual, we need to take the notion of positive freedom, or *freedom to*, one step further. If the role of the state is to enhance this kind of freedom, what is its theological basis? Richard Bauckham has suggested that in biblical terms, 'freedom from' (slavery in the Old Testament, sin in the New) always entails 'freedom to'. But freedom to what purpose? The answer is freedom to serve others and to love God. The love of neighbour enjoined by the levitical code and reaffirmed by Jesus is in fact a freedom for the sake of others. Freedom is a positive caring for others. He writes, 'My neighbour is not simply a restraint on my freedom but one whom I am to love as myself' (Lv. 19:18). The New Testament's understanding of freedom as not so much *from* others as *for* others is already implicit in the Old Testament sense of social responsibility.[13]

It is precisely this equation of freedom with service that is light years away from current Conservative philosophy. It does, however, lie at the heart of modern liberalism. And it is the belief that the state must intervene (albeit minimally) to ensure this positive freedom that makes liberalism coherent with a biblical perspective, and which at the same time distinguishes it from Thatcherism.

The individual and community

Discussion of freedom inevitably leads to a consideration both of the individual and of community. Here we must note two strands in the development of liberalism. The first is represented by the nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill, who argued that morally and politically the individual must be regarded as paramount.[14] Society is artificial in that it is formed by the free association of individuals who consent to put themselves under collective government for their own individual sakes. Society is not natural by virtue of being part of the natural order (in contrast to families). It is created by individual human

wills, and consequently must be subject to them. The purpose of government is to free the individual from unnecessary constraints, and to promote conditions which will enable the rational individual to make his or her own choices. Government is essentially a referee between competing individuals. On this version, society is nothing more than a collection of atomistic, autonomous individuals whose interests must take priority over any conception of the general, collective good.

This form of liberalism, as we have seen, finds expression within the present Conservative Party much more than within the parties of the Centre. This is because both the Liberal Democrats and the former SDP have adopted a contrary strand of philosophical liberalism known as *communitarian liberalism*.

Communitarian liberalism, as its name implies, rejects the atomistic assumptions of the school represented by John Stuart Mill. Instead it argues that individuals must be understood as persons-in-relation. The individual self is a 'located' self. Individuals do not exist as abstract entities but as persons whose individual identities have been formed by being in relation with others. As Michael Sandel puts it:

> I am situated from the start, embedded in a history which locates me among others, and implicates my good in the good of the communities whose stories I share.[15]

Freedom and community are thus inextricably linked within communitarian liberalism. The individual is not free to pursue his or her own interests at the expense of others. There is a corporate identity which belongs to a nation, society or community which is more than the sum of individual identities. Such an identity arises out of the complex network of beliefs, values, social meanings and relationships which go to make up the sense of oneness we call community. The notion of society as no more than a collection of self-determining individuals is thus a fallacy.

The communitarian conception stands in stark contrast to modern Conservatism with its emphasis upon the priority of individuals over and against society (even to the point of Mrs Thatcher's claim that there is no such thing as society). Because of this contrast we can see clearly how great is the gulf between the parties of the Centre and the Tory Party of the New Right. As David Owen has argued:

> What is needed is a political philosophy outside the restricted confines of much of the present polarised political debate ... which revives the concept of fellowship and community within a participatory democratic society and which sees change not as a threat but as a challenge.[16]

But how far is communitarian liberalism theologically warrantable? After all, Mrs Thatcher herself has made considerable claims for individualism in the name of the Bible and Christian theology.

Corporate motifs

Within Scripture, the relationship between the individual and the community is defined by a number of what we might call 'corporate motifs'.[17] We can only touch upon these in the barest detail but even this will enable us to see that both the radical individualism of the New Right and the traditional collectivism of the Left are theologically deficient.

a. The image of God

The statement in Genesis 1:26–27 that God made human beings in his own image is at one and the same time exhilarating and enigmatic. Theologians have long been divided as to what the image actually consists in but at the present time three suggestions lead the field.[18] Firstly, the image has been taken to refer to certain God-given characteristics such as moral capacity or rationality which set

human beings apart from the rest of creation. This interpretation was widely held among medieval scholastics and a number of modern Reformed theologians.

Secondly, it has been argued that the image refers to human dominion over creation. This view is based upon the fact that in the Genesis account, the creation of humanity takes place as the summit of God's activity. He expressly gives Adam and Eve responsibility over the created order. It is also a fact that archaeological evidence from the Middle East confirms that it was a common practice for kings to demonstrate their rule by erecting statues bearing their image. In this way, their subjects were constantly reminded of the king's dominion over them.

The third interpretation, identified with Martin Luther, locates the divine image in God's relationship to his creatures. Adam and Eve possessed the divine image by virtue of their relationship to God. The fall marred but did not utterly destroy this relationship, and hence the image is seen as continuing in Genesis 9:6.

Whichever one of these interpretations is adopted, it seems clear that the image of God is corporate. Significantly, in Genesis 1:26, God says 'Let *us* make man in *our* image', which some commentators have taken as a reference to the three persons of the Trinity. But even if this is not a Trinitarian reference, it is further significant that the image is given to man and woman together as representatives of the whole of humanity. It is this which has reinforced in Christian social theology the belief in universal human dignity.

When we turn to the New Testament we find Paul speaking in similar terms of the image of Christ. Sinful humanity is redeemed through and in Christ so as to bring into being a new humanity. But we need to note that this is not a humanity divided solely into individual units: it is a new community of persons-in-relationship. The corporate language of Genesis is reworked along Christological lines to give a picture of humanity as inherently corporate as well as individual.

b. The covenant people

We have already noted the importance of solidarity as a social and moral concept in the Old Testament. We have seen, also, how this sprang from God's redemption of Israel from Egypt and the subsequent establishment of the nation with laws embodying this decisive act of grace. What is no less important is that in Old Testament terms the nation was bound together not only by its shared experience and memory of salvation but by its covenant with God.[19] Individuals and families are understood to hold responsibility for one another by virtue of belonging to the same covenant people: the people which God himself chose and blessed, not as isolated individuals, but as his extended family.

This solidarity imposed considerable obligations upon the people of Israel. They were not allowed to sell one another into slavery, to deprive one another of their God-given land rights, or to lend money at interest.[20] Positively, the nation as a whole had a duty to care for the poor, the dispossessed and the powerless as typified by the orphans and widows. One would no more think of charging interest on a loan to a stranger or allowing a stranger to starve than allowing the same to happen to a member of one's own family. In every important social sense the stranger *was* a member of the covenant family.

Again this strong notion of corporate identity and solidarity is alien to the modern industrialized world, and particularly to the philosophy of Thatcherism. We cannot go into the complex social and historical reasons for this, but if we are to take seriously the values expressed in the covenant concept, we are forced to question whether the philosophy of individualism espoused by the New Right can reasonably be held to represent biblical perspectives.

Biblical thinking, however, is also alien to socialist collectivism, with its emphasis upon the subordination of the individual to the state and the growth of centralized state power. The biblical paradigms embody respect for personal liberty while at the same time affirming the obligation of the individual to the life of the community. The relationship is not one-sided, either in favour of the individual (as in modern Conservatism) or in favour of the state

(as in socialism). It is reciprocal (as in communitarian liberalism).

c. The body of Christ

Although the body analogy of 1 Corinthians 12 – 14 is first and foremost addressed to the church, at the same time it looks outwards to the world. It does so by serving as a model for social relationships: the church is portrayed as the bridgehead of the age to come. In the same way that Old Testament Israel embodied the values of the kingdom of God, so the church does the same. Paul's teaching on the body is therefore relevant to political as well as to church life.

John Atherton has identified interdependence as the key aspect of Paul's use of the body metaphor.[21] The members of the body are separate but united. They exist in unity by virtue of the unity which is found in Christ and which is celebrated in the Eucharist. The bread and wine remain visible signs of our oneness in Christ so that we can never forget that by God's grace we are one body serving one Lord.

This does not preclude the exercise of individual gifts and creativity. Members of the body have complementary gifts and callings which should not conflict but which should work together for the mutual upbuilding of the whole. Thus Paul strikes a balance between individuality and corporateness. Complementarity, moreover, involves the integration of unequals into a single unified whole. Different members of the body may possess different gifts and feel unequal in status but, as Paul makes clear, each contributes to the life of the body. 'All are primarily full members of the Body irrespective of the apparent or real significance of their contribution.'[22]

This leads to a third feature of complementarity: solidarity in the face of vulnerability. If a member of the body is under threat, the whole body is affected. Individual members cannot act as if others did not matter. Each is responsible for the others: 'If one part suffers, every part suffers with it' (1 Cor. 12:26).

What are the political implications of all this? It should

not be thought that Paul is talking here only about the internal relationships of the church. In Pauline theology, the church is the first-fruits of the kingdom of Christ. The life of the body of Christ is therefore a sign to the world that God's rule has arrived and is in action. This eschatological dimension of Paul's ecclesiology means that the church can never regard itself as a sect. It cannot isolate itself from the world since it is meant to be a sign of the new world.[23] Moreover, its values and practices are intended to demonstrate the goal of God's redemption: a recreated humanity in Christ.

Paul's teaching thus provides us with a number of paradigms by which to evaluate political philosophies and policies. If these contradict the goals and values revealed in Christ's purpose for his body, then they must be seriously questioned. If, however, they move towards the goal of a society which embodies the values of the kingdom then they are to be welcomed. Taking into account the nature of the body metaphor and the sense of corporate solidarity to which it points, it seems clear that Christians must be committed to a society in which the ethos of mutual care takes precedence over possessive individualism, in which the state as the protector of the weak must act to secure their basic needs and access to resources, and in which such action is seen as a welcome responsibility, not a grudging duty. On these criteria, it is hard to see how contemporary Conservatism can be regarded as truly biblical, whatever the personal piety of individual Conservatives.

d. The kingdom of God

Like the body, the kingdom is a motif for solidarity. It is also a motif for justice and righteousness. A number of recent studies have shown that the kingdom is a concept which can neither be restricted to individual interior faith nor to a state of affairs which will come solely in the future.[24] It has already burst into the life of the world. This means that the paradigm of the kingdom offered first by Israel and then by the New Testament churches must be taken seriously in contemporary politics.

To say this is not to retreat into some kind of millenarian fantasy. History is littered with examples of those.[25] Nor is it to suppose that the kingdom will be built by human endeavour independent of the gracious activity of God. Nor will it be achieved this side of the parousia. Rather it is a matter of seeking to order societies (i.e. conduct politics) in such a way that the values of the kingdom will be enacted as far as possible within a sinful world which awaits its redemption.

Foremost of these values is justice. The ruler, according to both the Old and New Testaments, is obligated to act justly to ensure the protection of the vulnerable. In this way the justice of God will be upheld.[26]

In recent years it has become increasingly difficult to see how this concept of justice can be reconciled with government policies. The policies of the Thatcher decade have produced not only unprecedented prosperity but also unprecedented inequalities coupled with record levels of poverty. Whole strata of society have been excluded from the economic processes which enable people to contribute to the common good. This has been accompanied by an official attitude towards the poor which has either denied that poverty really exists, or has deliberately reduced welfare benefits in order to cut government spending. All this has been cloaked in high sounding moral language such as 'reducing people's dependency on the state', or 'enabling people to stand on their own feet'. The truth of the matter has been that the poor have suffered the double indignity of paying the price for the so-called economic miracle of the 1980s and of being treated as outcasts. Far from seeing itself as the willing protector of the poor, the Conservative government has begrudged its role in supplying even minimal support. The question must be asked how this is supposed to fit with the values of the kingdom.

e. *The incarnation and Trinity*

The doctrines of the incarnation and the Trinity provide us with further clues as to God's purpose for human society. Together they supply a radical critique both of individualism and of collectivism.

The incarnation makes it clear that God loves the whole of his creation. By taking flesh he reaffirmed the Genesis declaration that God saw everything and it was good. Moreover, by sending his Son in the form of sinful human beings, he identified with the material nature of humanity and the world in which we live. In doing so, he showed once and for all that to be 'in Christ' is to be committed to the wholeness of the created order.

Once we realize this, we see that just as God gave himself on behalf of his creation, so we are likewise called to love what (and whom) he has made and redeemed. As Kenneth Leech has commented:

> A major consequence of taking incarnational faith seriously is that the spiritual person, far from despising , or fearing or withdrawing from the world, needs to be inflamed by a passionate and intense love for the world, seeing in the material things of the world the handiwork of God, and in the people of the world the face of Christ.[27]

The Christian, then, is committed to politics by virtue of his or her commitment to the incarnate Christ. For it is only through political action that the world of human activity, relationships and life can be loved for its own sake and people loved as God loves them. Put simply, if God loves humanity so must we.

But what political form should this love take? It is here that the doctrine of the Trinity points to a communitarian model which rules out New Right individualism *tout court*. The basis for this contention is that the Trinity in itself comprises a community of persons which in turn provides us with a paradigm of social life. Leonardo Boff identifies the characteristics of the Trinitarian relationship as dialogue, communion, reciprocity, self-giving and mutual love. The persons of the Godhead do not exist as independent persons living for themselves but rather

> the essential characteristic of each Person is to

> be *for* the others, *through* the others, *with* the others and *in* the others. They do not exist in themselves, for themselves: the 'in themselves' is 'for the others'.[28]

When we apply this to human social relationships, we are faced with a very different picture from that drawn by New Right individualists. The communion of the divine persons points to the truth that 'individuals need to remain always within a network of relationships and society needs to be a conjuncture of relationships of communion and participation'.[29] Thus, 'the Trinity can be seen as the model for any just, egalitarian (while respecting differences) social organisation'.[30] 'Communion is the first and last word about the mystery of the Trinity. Translating this truth of faith into social terms, we can say "the Trinity is our true social programme".'[31]

But if this rules out individualism, it also rules out collectivism which disregards the uniqueness and differentiation of persons. Socialist regimes fail to recognize that communion of persons within political society requires

> going through the essential process of accepting differences between persons and communities ... Bureaucratic imposition of the social dimension does not produce a society of equality within the bounds of respect for differences, but one of collectivization with elements of massification.[32]

This would seem to leave only one model which fits with a Trinitarian perspective: that of the communitarian liberal.

If anything seems clear from our discussion so far, it is that the balance between individual liberty (understood as freedom *for* others), and corporate responsibility for individual well-being, lies at the heart of theological motifs of community and biblical notions of justice. Theology which is biblical endorses neither an individualistic

free-for-all nor a regime of state control. Rather, it is concerned that, while individuals should develop a sense of personal responsibility for others, and while the state should foster this through political and economic intervention where necessary, the realities of power require that the power of the state should be limited. It is hard, on this basis, to see how the philosophy and policies of the Thatcher administrations or the collectivism of the 1980s Labour Party can be reckoned to fit best with this perspective.

Left, Right, Centre?

Where does this leave us? It will be clear by now that, in my view, the most complimentary thing that can be said about New Right Conservatism is that it is seriously defective. Its conception of freedom and the relationship of the individual to the community are fundamentally unbiblical and unwarrantable. Moreover, when we take into account the paradigm offered by the social model of the Trinity we can see the deep deficiency of New Right individualism.

When we turn to communitarian liberalism, however, we should not be naive about its philosophical or technological basis. I am not seeking to argue that it is really a disguised form of Christian theology. Nonetheless, I would argue that there is a greater congruence between its model of social life and the model provided by Christian theology than that of contemporary Conservatism or socialism. The upbuilding of the individual in community, the strengthening of individual and social relationships, the acceptance of differences between individuals, the recognition of the principle of complementarity, the enabling of people to develop complementary gifts and abilities, are all fundamentally liberal values. In so far as these values have historically found a place within Conservatism or socialism they have done so having flowed from the fountainhead of liberalism. Likewise, the liberalism I represent requires as a precondition the recognition of universal human worth and dignity, and the creation of economic

and social conditions which enhance that dignity. Put another way, the Christian belief in social justice and righteousness is mirrored in the concern of communitarian liberalism to work for just and participatory societies.

But what about the Labour Party? As I have argued above, there has been a tendency within socialist ideology and policies to mirror the individualistic imbalance of the Right with a collectivist imbalance of the Left. Moreover, the history of the Labour governments of the 1960s and 1970s has been to promote increasing concentrations of power in non-elected, extra-Parliamentary bodies such as trade unions and the bureaucracy. It is only a few years since we were faced with a Labour government paralysed by this process.

It is still too early to tell whether the policy review *Meet the Challenge, Make the Change* published by the Labour Party in 1989 does anything more than disguise the underlying collectivist nature of the party. I, for one, am suspicious. There are at least two plausible readings of Labour revisionism and it is not always clear which is the more likely.

The first reading runs something like this. Labour, under the impact of three election defeats, has returned to its true place on the Centre-Left of British politics. The period from 1980 to 1987 must be viewed as an aberration. The party was temporarily deranged by Tony Benn and co. The trauma of the SDP split in 1981 created conditions under which the Left could triumph, but now the Left are in decline as Labour tacks back towards its authentic historical position and the SDP has collapsed. The role of the policy review, on this interpretation, is twofold: to construct moderate policies which take account of the changed national and international conditions; and to signal to the world that Labour has turned its back on the Left.

But what about the second reading? This is far more sceptical. 'Is it really credible,' say suspicious people like me, 'that the Labour leadership, all of whom fought the last general election on policies diametrically opposed to

those now being espoused, have turned their backs on all they once held dear? And what about those who fought the 1983 election on a manifesto which proclaimed the virtues of nationalization, high taxation, unilateral nuclear disarmament, opposition to the Common Market and so on?' It was Denis Healey who later described this as the longest suicide note in history but it was Neil Kinnock who once proclaimed its virtues.

So my critical faculties make me wonder which is the real Labour Party and which is the authentic socialism: the party and the policies of 1983 and 1987 or the party and policies of 1989? Moreover, have those hard left MPs elected in 1987 and all those leftist constituency parties of which we heard so much evaporated overnight? My observation at the local level is that they are simply lying low in the drive for electoral success. In short, I believe in conversion but I am not sure the Labour Party's present stance is more than electorally convenient window dressing and I suspect there are many true socialist believers (some of them in positions of leadership at national and local level) who are simply biding their time.

Conclusion

I have tried to show how biblical examples and perspectives supply a critique of both the Left and the Right in British politics. I am not naive about the parties of the Centre (who could be after the experience of 1987–88?) but for the reasons I have cited above, I would argue that the theological perspectives expressed in the 19 theses are best represented by the historic tradition of communitarian liberalism than by either contemporary Conservatism or contemporary socialism.