



THE GOOD SOCIETY TODAY

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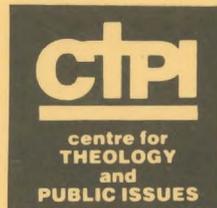
RT. REV. DAVID JENKINS

NO. 5

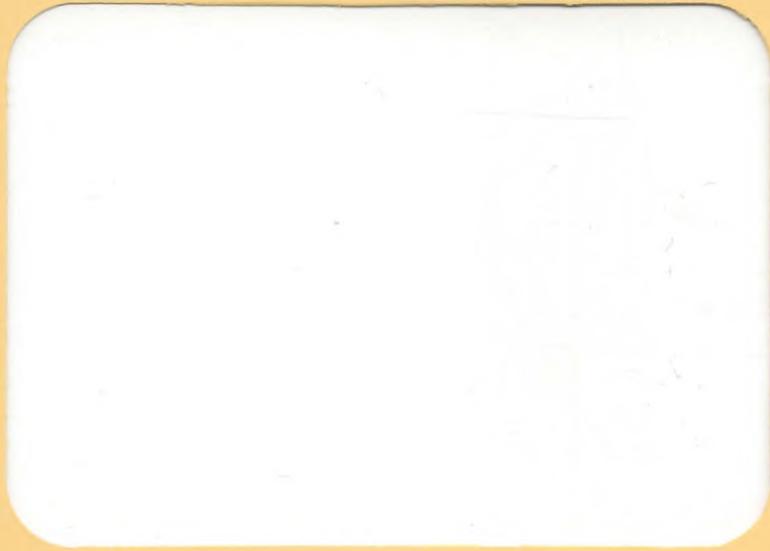
LECTURE DELIVERED FOR THE CENTRE OF THEOLOGY
AND PUBLIC ISSUES ON ITS TENTH ANNIVERSARY

ON 2nd NOVEMBER 1994

DISCUSSION PAPERS



CENTRE FOR THEOLOGY AND PUBLIC ISSUES, NEW COLLEGE,
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Lecture delivered for the Centre of Theology and Public Issues, Edinburgh by the Rt Revd David Jenkins
- 2 November 1994

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All I have for you tonight is a prospectus. There is no concluding and conclusive argument. This is making a virtue of necessity because I am myself too much in the middle of coming to grips with the issues raised to have any conclusions, including practical ones, to offer. But in any case, fortunately, it is more appropriate for a tenth anniversary of this Centre for Theology and Public Issues to offer some considered suggestions about where the Centre needs to focus its attention for the next five to ten years. So I do propose to end with a list of about seven topics, or areas of focus, which seem to me to be of critical importance for the continuing work of the Centre in contributing to where we ought to go from here.

I certainly agree that the topic of "The Common Good Today" is a crucial and appropriate rallying cry for intellectual, political, pragmatic and theological enquiry (this is what I take the Centre to be up to). The significance of this matter of the Common Good may be indicated, I believe, by the following three observations.

First. There is no commonly accepted, or acceptable, concept, vision, or project, of the Common Good today.

Secondly. It looks as if there cannot be one. There is also a serious case for saying there should not be one. This latter argument is supported by the whole situation - or rather complicates the whole situation, if it does not confound it - because there is this strongly held and propagated view that it is no business of the State to have a concern for the Common Good, or for the happiness of people as such. The State's role is to enable survival, and to mitigate evils, but not to promote goodness or the desirable in any form. In fact, once you start interfering, that way lies economic inefficiency and social tyranny.

Thirdly. It is becoming clearer and clearer to more and more people from a wide spectrum of perspectives, commitments and concerns, that we desperately need some effectively acceptable, and effectively shared, understanding of the Common Good.

So there is no Common Good; we cannot have it, we probably should not have it and we desperately need it. Meditation. Good night!

But let me give some kind of heads of argument which support my three contentions. I may say that they support my view that the only things that are worth undertaking today are the things one is almost bound to fail at - but one may open up some possibilities.

Everyone is suddenly becoming keen about civics, community, responsibility and duty. We may compare especially David Selbourne's *The Principle of Duty: An essay on the foundations of the Civic Order*. This is a very serious and powerfully argued tract for the times. He focuses on the rapidly continuing dissolution of the civic order and the dangerous demands, as he says, of the idea of duty-less rights, and the disappearance of any effective understanding of the connection between rights and duties which bind us together in a civil society, which is about the only way you can have the bond which keeps things going.

On the other hand - or at the same time - because this is all buzzing around, you get articles like the Philip Howard column in *The Times* of the fourteenth of October 1994, for instance. He was picking up the whole notion that everyone is now talking about civics. He ends up with a quite good exposition of where the word polis and politics and civics and civilization come from, but he heads it: "*When they talk about civics they are at root simply lying*". I think it interesting that in the middle of all this discussion there is a considerable doubt as to whether people are really taking up these buzz words because they see that there is a great need for working out how we understand new civics, new belonging, and therefore new civilization, new politics and so on - or whether it is just a diversion.

So you have an interest and you have a cynicism about the subject. But even in the cynicism - it is rather like hypocrisy being the tribute that vice pays to virtue - there is this interest. And it reflects some growing awareness that the Market, plus individual freedom of choice, is not enough either for the sustaining or the satisfying of our society, communities and citizens. But, as I say, I am not sure how radical this awareness is as yet. Hence this whole business of the necessity of persistently following up this, more than flicker of, interest.

The reasons for worry are obvious. We have the now, alas, customary liturgy of - on the domestic front - intractable unemployment, poverty (which of course is now much more worrying because there is insecurity among the middle and managerial classes), homelessness, crime, violence, vandalism and drugs. And on the international front there is growing

poverty too, pollution, the powerlessness and non-participation of people at large in what determines their fate, plus serious questions about limits to growth. Of course what this is bringing up are very serious questions about limits. Limits, in the sense of what you can expect - either people to do, or markets to deliver, or politicians to effect. But also, limits relating to resources as a whole. Is endless growth possible? And it is also a challenge, which is particularly relevant to any body which is concerned with Theology, Religion and Faith (and of course, there are many faiths and some of them are not necessarily religious in one sense - but there are all sorts of questions, valuings and commitments around). The facing of limits requires a certain amount of faith and realism, especially if you are not going to do it with cynicism which atrophies your power to take action. So there is a very important area here, in the matter of limits, for the Centre to explore.

Because of this convergence of threats and problems there are attempts to renew, or refurbish, viable and effective shared concepts and values of a common interest, related to something like the "common good" (something which affects us all and we ought to be bothered about), and therefore the *res publica* (the thing which is public, and shared, and everybody ought to be concerned about and can occasionally see that they have a commitment to). This revival is so that we may work together in communities to which people have a sense of belonging, and therefore a sense of shared obligation.

I think there are also questions - the resonances of which I first picked up in what you might call "high places" when I did a New Year Sermon to bankers in the City of London and suggested that whatever Adam Smith might have said, two hundred years further on we have now come to the end of the period of the effectiveness of his theories. And to my great surprise, when I got back home I received a call from the Governor of the Bank of England's office, to ask whether I would turn up to one of his Staff Meetings and explain how I knew that the two hundred years were up?! I gained the clear impression that a good many people are asking whether we can get off the tiger of global, ruthless and competitive economic growth.

So - in quite unexpected quarters at times - there is this searching for new ways of looking at things, the recovery of the Common Good, of trying to pull things together. But the difficulties are enormous. They include scale, pluralism and the practical impossibility of the emergence of some authoritatively effective shared values about living together.

To start with **scale**. As Hayek pointed out, in order to indicate the irrelevance of the Western tradition of civics, drawn from Aristotle, to our complex trading world - Aristotle held that a viable city stretched as far as a herald's cry. A rather powerful way of putting it. He also said it should be "eusynoptos", which means it can easily be overlooked. You can encompass it. And the herald's cry, of course, raises this whole question of effective communication.

I sometimes wonder - although this is a different issue - how the fact that we can now communicate about so many things, so quickly to so many people, actually means that we do not communicate anything. The burden of information is well known. It is like when I became Domestic Bursar in order to rescue my college in Oxford from general dissolution. One found that you had to get people to see what was going wrong. Therefore you had to actually take the Governing Body down to the kitchen. But that is by the way.

The values of moral face to face-ness, and of local civics, are simply not applicable in the extended order (as the phrase has it) of complex, large scale societies and markets. David Hume, of course, was clear that "so noble an affection [as generosity] instead of fitting men for large societies, is almost as contrary to them as the most narrow selfishness". Only the other day I was speaking to doctors about the Health Reforms and so on, and had to point out that insisting on clinical independence - in the sense of being over-generous with one patient and refusing to pay attention to costs - simply mucked things up for about ten other patients. There is a very serious point there.

In the extended order it is argued - I think with a great deal of plausibility and power - it cannot be neighbourliness, caring and justice that count, but the Market, which is that extended order which provides the means of survival, growth in goods and freedom of choice, and the means of extending the freedom of individuals to fulfil their wants. I shall return to that: the freedom of individuals to fulfil their wants. And Hayek writes that -

David Hume saw that the Market made it possible to do a service to another without bearing him a real kindness, or even knowing him, or to act to the advantage of the public, though it is not intended for that purpose by another, by an order in which it was in the interest even of bad men to act for the common good. Attempts to organise morally guided intervention in this order cannot improve the human lot, only impede the means of providing the material resources for doing the best open to us about the human lot, both our own and the collective one, in so far as it exists.

And all this is clear enough from the total collapse of the Socialist East.

Now this is a very far reaching and diagnostically deeply important matter, it seems to me. In order to underline it I would like to make just a couple of references to the book by Alistair McIntyre, *Whose Justice and Which Rationality?* This takes us into the whole issue of pluralism.

McIntyre says:

What on Hume's view makes reasoning about justice sound reasoning is, in key part, that it is reasoning shared by at least the vast majority of members of the community to which one belongs... So one reasons and judges in all moral and practical matters as a member both of a particular community and of a type of social order characteristic of all civilised peoples. Withdraw from human beings that reciprocity of shared responses and the consequent possibilities of shared reasoning and you withdraw also that type of social order in which the calm passions and the habits of response which express them restrain and overcome the violent passions. You thereby surrender the social order either to the superstitions of ancient barbarians or to the enthusiasms of the barbarous of modern times.

(When Hume was putting up that sort of argument, the barbarians of modern times, of course, were the Scottish Divines! So I thought I would pick up that reference).

That is really very powerful. You either surrender the social order to the superstitions of ancient barbarians. There is also a great deal of regression to barbarism and superstition in religion at the moment. Or, you surrender to the enthusiasms of the barbarous of modern times; the philistinisms on the one hand, and the pushing everything through on a certain type of cost-accounting and all the rest of it; or the whole business of way out pressure groups.

McIntyre relates that to the way in which, in our time we have come to understand -

the arenas of public choice, not as places of debate, either in terms of one dominant conception of the human good or between rival and conflicting conceptions of that good, ("rival and conflicting" conceptions, but conceptions, none the less, about which you both try to argue)

but as places where bargaining between individuals, each with their own preferences, is conducted.

He goes on to analyze the

transformation of first person expressions of desire themselves, without further qualification, into statements of a reason for action, into premises for practical reasoning. And this transformation, I want to suggest, is brought about by a

restructuring of thought and action in a way which accords with the procedures of the public realms of the market and of liberal individualist politics. In those realms the ultimate data are preferences [- both in the Market and now in politics].

(....)

My thesis is not that the procedures of the public realm of liberal individualism were cause and the psychology of the liberal individual [what I like and so on] effect, nor vice versa. What I am claiming is that each required the other and that in coming together they defined a new social and cultural artefact, "the individual". In Aristotelian practical reasoning it is the individual, *qua* citizen who reasons; in Thomistic practical reasoning it is the individual *qua* enquirer into his or her good and the good of his or her community; in Humeian practical reasoning it is the individual *qua* propertied or unpropertied participant in a society of a particular kind of mutuality and reciprocity; but in the practical reasoning of liberal modernity it is the individual *qua* individual who reasons.

There, I think, is a very important point. It is the individual *qua* individual who reasons. We are in a different sort of community and type of social order, which is not necessarily characteristic of all civilised people. So of course there can be no common good, and the corollary I should like to see followed up is: "so you cannot get any good from belonging". And therefore, in a sense, there is no such thing as society (even if Baroness Thatcher said it in an unguarded moment and did not really mean it. She might have been righter than she knew).

Supposing that one recoils from that type of diagnosis and wants to do something about it, there is still a further problem. Supposing one made some sort of purposive, collective effort to rally to people, in some way or other, to get beyond the Market - say - or find a vision of how to construct and maintain spaces within the market order, for more human and humane common efforts, for common good; where would we draw our values, common visions, inspirations and common directions from?

The world, and indeed most societies and communities in the world, especially in the West, are now too full of pluralism in cultures, religions and philosophies, and within cultures, religions and philosophies. We may compare disputes from the ultra-traditionalists to the ultra-deconstructionists. Where, in all this, is there any hope in hell of common responses to our variously perceived plights and possibilities?

All this comes down to earth with a bump in my third point about the apparent impossibility of the emergence of some authoritatively effective shared values about living together. (Why does the Church not get on the telly and support Michael Howard and make sure that everyone is in fear

of at least prison, if not of God?). But then, given what we have found out about crusades and ideologies, might not an attempt to crusade for a common good be a cure even worse than the disease? Is it not likely to lead to ideological tyranny or to religious persecution - or both?

So perhaps we are forced to the conclusion that attempts to revive pursuit of the common good are simply nostalgic dreams about a willow-the-wisp fed by that inveterate and primitive human tendency to long for tribal cosiness.

This is a cosiness and intimacy which Hayek characterises as a "craving for a micro order determined by the overview of omniscient authority". (My experience in the House of Lords bar led me to think that certain prominent Tory peers had precisely such a craving. And of course they found it by recognising in Baroness Thatcher the matron of their school years. The overview of an omniscient authority - so now we are at home and do not have to face difficult questions!).

Is it practicable, therefore, to surrender to the apparently unalterable dominance of market forces and to the apparently insuperable difficulties of finding shared ways of talking of, and promoting shared visions of, direction and shared plans of action in our immensely complex world?

I raise this issue of practicability because the system as a whole is showing signs of defects in working which threaten the eventual possibility of working at all.

The market has to grow and exploit resources. What of limits in a very finite world? Well, of course, the answer is that we shall grow increasingly clever at making do with less and less. Clearly that needs looking in to. Then financial markets are now totally global. They tend to be dominated by derivatives not directly related to primary wealth production, and are inherently and systematically increasingly turbulent and unstable. Had I the time (which I do not) I would produce ten articles I have collected from the financial pages of *The Times* lately which repeatedly underline this. And thirdly, how long will the effects of our present market operations be socially sustainable? The response of people forced into deeper poverty in the underdeveloped world, and of people forced into poverty in the developed world, are bound to produce increasing instability and unrest - are they not?

All this reasoning leads into three areas where practicability and continuing acceptability overlap. Firstly, the logic of economic talk in the newspaper commentaries and political discussions about economic and political decisions (for instance about interest rates) appears to be incoherent, inconsistent and difficult to relate with any regularity to

what is alleged to be going on, or what is proposed to be done. There is great talk, for instance, about sentiment among professional investors and whether the bond and gilt markets respond to their rational forecasts of between five and twenty years - while everyone agrees those cannot be made - or whether it is a matter of what the professional investors who operate things expect to happen in three months time. I gather that there is growing concern about the effect of hedge funds. There was a rather pathetic little article from one commentator recently saying that truth is, whatever happens you really cannot avoid risk. A fairly obvious remark one might think.

It looks as if the crucial question is not what the system systematically and regularly requires (you know - the Market is the way to obtain the right communications and the right decisions), but who has the power to influence the language and effect the positions of those who can manipulate the financial flow. It seems to me that on the whole the financial markets are not to do with producing wealth but with making money. And that is a whole other area to follow up.

This relates to who are the persistent beneficiaries of the operations of the Market? It looks as if their self-interest, as in a Humian state of, as it were, near paradise in the 18th century (and Adam Smith, I suppose; although he had a lot to say about the importance of "sympathy") - it looks as if their self-interest, no longer - as if by some hidden hand - promotes wider good, but rather reinforces the defects and instabilities of the whole system. Galbraith, for instance, (though one might say "he would, wouldn't he?") argues that the Market has already been destroyed for many bodies such as multi-nationals are outside it.

That runs into the question about how long the moral intolerability will be tolerated? Can issues of justice, exploitation and misery just be, so to speak, found below the line of the activities, apprehensions and responses of nation states and smaller communities. Here, again, I would quote quickly from Galbraith in one of his books:

We all recognise that an uncontrolled struggle for more income brings an inflation that defeats some or most of the efforts of government, and that the traditional methods of control - monetary and fiscal policy - either do not work, or work by hurting the least affluent, the least employable, those with least control over their prices and incomes.

That was originally written in 1978. I should say the evidence supporting Galbraith in this is really quite overwhelming. You may respond: But that cannot be helped. My query is how long this state of affairs will hold.

Finally, I would return to the apparently unalterable dominance of the

market as the one effective communication and transactional system which covers the whole world, and the apparently insuperable difficulties of talking together about common aims for common goods in our immensely pluralistic and complex world.

These threats and difficulties are surely confronted by the evidently growing awareness that we are one world, with one set of problems, wherein - despite all conflicts of interests, and all parochial-ness of understanding and commitment - we are all members one of another. More information technologies make more and more people more aware of this. So there may well be an opportunity matching the needs and possibilities which could measure up to the demands if we can seize the opportunities. Believers in the living reality of the God reflected in the Bible, perceived definitively by Christians in Jesus, and believed by many to be available in the Spirit, may well see the pressures of God in all this. We would also hold that those traditions of faith hold resources to be discovered and contributed by Christians, together with women and men of other faiths, and all men and women of concern and goodwill, to the revival of visions of the common good which can face the threats, complexities, troubles and needs and turn them into exciting possibilities of our times. But that, of course, is the whole prospectus and syllabus of a Centre for Theology and Public Issues and the central task of all of us who seek to reflect on, and then relate, the promised City of God to the troubled cities of human beings here and now.

So I must stop very much in the middle of things, and I wish to do so with two concluding observations.

Firstly a comment on the form in which the renewed concern with civics is mainly being expressed. There was, for example, an article by Roger Scruton in *The Times* entitled Science with no time for facts. This is an attack on economics and economists during which the author writes:

"And if "monetarism" is appealing it is not, I believe, because of its scientific credentials but because of its moral truth. Common morality tells us that prudence is a virtue and that trust should neither be exploited nor betrayed. It would have reminded the banker that the dollars which he loaned the governments that have not given the slightest evidence of their probity were not his to lend, and that he held them in trust...".

And he concludes:

We may not be able to solve the problem of unemployment but perhaps we could at least understand it were we to refuse the terms which economists recommend to us and to trust instead to the language of morality.

The plea for morality is echoed in an article discussing the problems of blacks in the inner cities of the United States. The author is John O'Sullivan and the article is entitled Victims in need of Virtue. Among other things he writes:

The British sociologist Christie Davies points out that there was a similar increase in crime, illegitimacy and social disorder in early Nineteenth Century but it was solved very differently. The Victorian elite tackled these problems successfully by gradually imbuing all classes with a morality ... which has as its central tenet the idea that each individual was morally responsible for his own behaviour.

This morality, he argues, helped to create the British working class with its ethic of respectability (he obviously had not read what Dean Inge wrote a long time ago, that respectability was one of the Seven Deadly Virtues). He ends:

There is no effective substitute for Victorian values - namely holding young blacks accountable for their actions. But how many people in the American elite have that kind of courage?

To some extent the thrust indicated here is worked out in a much more detailed way, with much more to be said for the way he does it, in David Selbourne's *The Principal of Duty* where he argues firmly that our civic society is crumbling because people believe they have unlimited rights but have no sense of duty, of belonging, of the basis of any rights in common obligations and in civic society generally. I am sure that there is an important point here, yet surely there is a very considerable social and political danger.

If we are once more to pursue the common good then of course individuals, all of us severally and together, have to recover a strong sense of common obligation and duty. But this, surely, cannot be done unless there are deep, widespread and persistent efforts to rebuild a sense of belonging, of counting and of having something to contribute to the society and community where we are given the opportunity and the responsibility of contributing to the common good. Hence it would not be possible to restore and rebuild a shared individual morality unless we, as a society, tackle the political and economic problems of belonging, of being in work, contributing and so on.

It might very well be that conversion is required. So that raises important questions as to whether there is enough commitment, enough sense of values and enough sense of openness which will enable the values to be shared, to go for so difficult and challenging a task.

Hence the pursuit of the renewal of the common good has to go along with, but cannot be confined to, attempts to restore individual morality and

appeal to an individual sense of duty and responsibility. These are essential but they cannot be developed on their own and independently of the issues of the Market and its effects which I have been discussing.

Finally, therefore, I want to conclude with a specimen list of the types of leading question which I believe any Institute, group or person who is concerned with the Common Good needs to work at and to get considered by others.

(1) It is necessary to analyze, expose and follow up on the logic of the actual arguments, discussions and proposals of the received economic pundits and of the economic decision takers in Government, as well as in finance, industry and commerce. How do they relate internally and how do they relate to life in the world at large?

(2) Is it inevitable that economics dominates politics and that the financial markets dominate economics?

(3) How is it possible to interrelate the concerns and activities which affect us human beings at the differing levels of the local, the regional, and the global? What structures and what political efforts are required for this? A notable and crucial example is to be found in the whole matter of Third World Debt and the proper development of financing to enable countries to launch into the Market in a way which benefits them and gets them going. The "Common Good and future" of our increasingly One World cannot be served by measures which add to the indebtedness of countries which are allegedly being helped, and suck monetary resources back into the countries which are supposed to be helping.

(4) How do we work politically, economically and locally to reconstruct structures and spaces wherein people can live in recognisable communities in which they can act as citizens in face to face ways; and so that they can therefore be actively aware that at that level they both belong and have the obligations and privileges which would encourage us all to have a concern for, and seek to make a contribution to, the Common Good? How to you so organise and localise so that if it is not the herald's cry it is at least some concerned community association or some such?

(5) Particularly for us Christians - how can the Church mobilise the very great resources among its membership of people involved in keeping the affairs of our complex society going so that:-

- (i) Christians are more educated in both their faith and the realities which affect our lives in society together.
- (ii) Christians can make a greater contribution to the revival of

political concern and activity which is pragmatic, informed and working from the locality upwards and outwards. (It is still in fact the case that, despite all the difficulties, there is probably more local coverage by Christians as a network in this country than any other network).

(iii) We can bring it about that Christians see it as a regular duty and opportunity to work with others at perceiving and overcoming those obstacles which exclude people from any sense of belonging to any common society so that, of course, they cannot begin to contribute to any common good.

(6) This runs into a further point that somewhere here (though I do not have time to touch on it tonight) is the revival of some sort of vision, which even if the details of it (and indeed the way it can be explained) are expressed in different ways by different classes of persons, yet relights in people the sense that there is something worth pursuing here and therefore there is something worth sacrificing for. It seems to me quite clear that no changes can be brought about unless there is some common readiness for sacrifice.

The one that touches me most nearly is the issue being looked at by the Transport Commission. If I have to give up my car or my tendency to hire taxis - I would not be here tonight. Which might be good for you but not necessarily for me. Of course we all want to cry: We cannot listen to the Transport Commission; what would I do without my car! But that is precisely the question which has to be tackled. To face these issues, some form of sacrifice will be required.

We need some vision and commitment powerful enough, not only to permit the necessary sacrifice, but to encourage more celebration about it. I myself do not believe you can bully people, even through appeals to the prudential, into a new vision of society. People have to be attracted into it by the excitement of it. You have to excite people, share with people and celebrate with people. How are we to get out of this flatness we are in, both in Church and State?

How, despite the frequent intensity which goes with commitment to faith, vision, excitement and so on, do we work out that we share in addition with "extensity" - intensity and extensity. That is to say, it looks as if deep commitment actually narrows people. It sectarianises people reducing their ability to collaborate. There is a tremendous question that needs following up here. Personally I relate it to my understanding of God. That is that He or She or It is so universal that

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