

Post-liberal Politics – Concepts and Ideas:

23-24 June 2014 University of Kent, Canterbury

16.45 – 18.00 **Plenary Session 4:**

Post-liberalism and post-secularism:

Chair: Caroline Julian; Speakers: Luca Mavelli, John Milbank, Jenny Sinclair, Tim Stacey

I grew up in a household where **faith and politics weren't separated**, they were the meat and drink of our kitchen table. My father was the Anglican Bishop David Sheppard, the former test cricketer and driving force behind *Faith in the City*. I was a bit of a rebel in my teens, left the church and to be honest I preferred the Liverpool club scene. I never had a proper career so I'm honoured to be among such eminent company! To my surprise I felt drawn into the Catholic Church 25 years ago and then assumed my faith would be a private thing - until 3 years ago when I found myself starting what is now called *Together for the Common Good*.

We know people in the churches are uncomfortable with a **politics of disillusionment** and division, a politics of fear where a centralised state reduces people to statistics, where decisions are reduced to the context of the market. They are uncomfortable that the polarised nature of our politics generates mutual demonisation - it paralyses good people. But both the laity and many church leaders (with the notable exception of Archbishop Justin) are finding it hard to articulate what's happening. Their language is inadequate to describe the injustice they see and they feel powerless.

We see a new way through in **the practice of the Common Good**. We recognise it is an ancient idea expressed in different traditions in a variety of ways. We draw on the combined resource of all the Christian social traditions, but particularly on the rigorous methodology within the body of Catholic social thought - intended for 'all people of goodwill', it's not perfect but it's a rich resource. The Common Good is something that comes about as a result of a creative process. It is a practice that leads to **the set of conditions that allows all to flourish without exception**.

Together for the Common Good is inspired by the legacy of **the partnership** between my father and his Catholic counterpart Archbishop Derek Worlock. For 22 years in Liverpool they worked together across their differences, encouraging mutual welfare and strengthening civil society in a divided and deprived city. In the context of a polarised politics they were **bridge builders between the estranged interests** of: communities and local and national government; business leaders, workers and unions; faith and secular groups. Mistakenly branded statist by the right and as traitors by the left, they navigated a careful path. The stance they took was of its time but was nevertheless prescient.

We're a mixed group - Catholic, Anglican and Free Church, independent and not attached to any particular institution; many organisations across different church traditions have coalesced around us. Our view is that there is an opportunity now for **an alliance for the Common Good** to be built between the Christian denominations, fellow faith traditions and secular allies, to strengthen civil society.

From where I stand **the secular expectation that religion will simply fade away is a fantasy** although I understand their irritation. Largely by self-inflicted injuries but also by media ignorance, Christian morality has been reduced to issues of sexuality. But Christian conviction is in fact about everything to do with human dignity - and we are refocusing our tradition.

And when we speak of 'the Church' we are thinking not just about the buildings and C of E bishops; we are thinking about *all* the Christian traditions and the hundreds of thousands of **ordinary lay people of goodwill**. Even though numbers may be in decline in some areas, the quality of commitment is greater than before, there is less duty and more conviction – it's a holistic way of life and it's about serving others.

The Common Good is like **a new kind of conciliatory conversation** that goes beyond political polarisation and also beyond the secular agenda. Each of us will need to be careful and respectful about the language we use in the public square while at the same time keeping our integrity.

On **the Churches' role within political debate**, the Jesuit Professor Frank Turner affirms secularity: *'the responsibility for justice in public life which the state cannot delegate'* and Benedict XVI made it clear in his address to the British Parliament in 2010 that *'the Church is not competent to propose 'concrete political solutions' and it does not wish to impose its faith upon those who don't share it'*.

But, **through its people, the Churches' body of thinking** can shed light on the application of reason, through rational argument and spiritual awareness, and help to guard against ethical blindness brought about by the dazzling effect of power and special interests.

So we can see a potential for all Christians, at every level of society, by virtue of their desire to serve others, to be **agents of reconciliation** - between left and right, rich and poor, secular and faith, business and unions, educated and uneducated, men and women, local and national, old and young.

There is however within all the Churches a prevailing fundamental strain of 'right on' liberalism which easily **disenfranchises significant groups** who can contribute. Some of the social justice campaigning within faith-based NGOs - resolutely still holding a torch for the big state - alienates good people, the majority, who want to help.

But we are discovering a new way to work for a just society: where we **discern solutions in mutuality with each other** in our own communities and local institutions, where less often we will expect the state to provide what we ourselves could do so much better.

The relationship between the churches and the nation at neighbourhood level is currently expressed in a fast developing scene of church-based social action across multiple networks - patient, unglamorous genuinely transformational work in a deep encounter with families, and struggling communities. The models are varied – from social entrepreneurial, to traditional charitable - the scale of what's going on would be surprising if the total activity across *all* the Christian denominations were mapped.

And there are resources of **spiritual energy yet to be harnessed**. We can see the enthusiasm in foodbank volunteering but people are questioning how long they will have to do it. So a

radicalisation through exposure to the reality of poverty and exclusion may be a trigger to consciousness raising. It is as if they are moving from a passive listening in Church to deep conviction motivating them to go out and bring about change. We are finding people are receptive to the idea of the Common Good because it's more palatable than the old left right divide, more compatible with reconciliation which is integral to their faith.

They have been telling us **they want a language of hope** to counter the divisive negative narrative. We are responding by bringing people together in conversation and talking about the Common Good.

Our stepping stones are in the form of **relationship building**. We held a major conference last year and are now bringing together some of the leading thinkers on the Common Good to produce a book to be published before the election. We've done some research into ecumenical social action, we're collaborating with other Common Good initiatives, faith-based and secular, and we're holding cross-party cross-denomination conversations in Parliament.

We're devising ways of generating a **vocabulary of the Common Good** - developing a Common Good Conversation model bringing together ordinary people of estranged positions to facilitate discussion on live topics like housing, work and money. We're sharing the Common Good as a method and a practice that has specific steps, that can help discern solutions that enable all to flourish. It is in conversation that we will work out the Common Good together.

So this is how we frame it: **our position on the Common Good is rooted in the gospel**: the language of the Common Good sees human beings as having a worth greater than their rights. So we are moving from a paradigm focusing on rights, where individuals are in opposition to one another, to one driven by virtue, vocation, conscience and relationships, which stresses our interdependence and our corporate nature.

All the Abrahamic faith traditions come from the deep conviction that every human being is of equal value and is loved by God. And if you are a child of God then you belong to a family and a community. The clichéd Christian stereotype is '*Love thy neighbour*', but the life of Jesus Christ (whatever your view on him) went much further: introducing a radical new way for human beings to live. We are charged with the obligation to '*Love our enemies*' - to **honour the sacredness of the other** and negotiate with those with whom we disagree.

So we say that through our combined networks and shared commitment to human dignity, different **Christian denominations working together are well-placed to be agents of change** for the Common Good, along with fellow faith traditions and secular allies. Not only to be engaged in social action alongside vulnerable communities, but also to be supporting the negotiation necessary between estranged interests to bring forth new structural solutions that work for all. This is the Common Good in practice. It is about reconciliation: loving our enemies and loving our neighbour go hand in hand.