GOVERNMENT, THE COMMON GOOD AND HUMAN DIGNITY

Politics, Religion and Society seminar

Benedict XVI Centre, St Mary's University, Twickenham

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Response by Jenny Sinclair, Director of Together for the Common Good

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This should be read with reference to the main seminar paper by Nicholas Townsend:

"Social Infrastructure: A Christian Theological View of the Role of Government",

together with the second response, by Professor Philip Booth.

My response will address three brief points around the following:

1. the Common Good and Subsidiarity
2. intermediary institutions and the role of the churches
3. why this is important now

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1. The Common Good and Subsidiarity

So there are a number of reasons why Nick's paper is helpful. First, it nails a proper understanding of Common Good.

The Common Good resonates across a number of traditions. We all think we know what it means. Of course the classic definition from Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is "the Common Good is the set of conditions in which every individual in the community can flourish." Yes – but: there are limitations to this definition - it can seem to be a woolly concept and indeed it is often a receptacle onto which people project a variety of ideas.

Nick's paper however leaves us in no doubt that the Common Good has three components: (1) it is something we create – which comes about as a result of human beings doing good things together, (2) it is a shared goal, and (3) the third component is the social conditions or infrastructure that need to be in place for the Common Good to be generated.

Calling 'the Common Good a set of conditions in which every individual in the community can thrive' can be misleading – it can lead people mistakenly to think the Common Good is a utopian ideal. We must be absolutely clear that the Common Good cannot, by definition, be imposed. Not by a state, a campaign group, a church, or by any other agency. Not by one 'enlightened' group upon another.

So here we have a second reason why Nick's paper is helpful: it helps us to understand that the Common Good is generated by people acting freely. For example, if people were forced or coerced to take part in a festival, it wouldn't be a festival at all. It would be an inhumane, Orwellian parody of a festival.

Any such authoritarian view is not the Christian vision of the Common Good. Jesus did not impose, and it is the gospel that gives us a proper Christian understanding.

Catholic Social Teaching is rooted in the gospel and is great not only as a set of tools for good judgement but also as a non-partisan recipe for a healthy civil society.

Its rejection of ideology, both individualist and collectivist, is central, as both have a tendency to dehumanise. It transcends party politics. I will come to this again later.

At Together for the Common Good, we raise awareness of the CST principles across the Christian traditions and beyond.

One of the principles is Subsidiarity – I want to highlight it as it is key to understanding the proper role of government and it is often overlooked and misunderstood.

Nick's paper states that "government as social infrastructure justifies *only such coordination as is needed* to establish the preconditions for the Common Good." Subsidiarity teaches that decisions should be taken closest to the people they will affect, wherever possible, so that all – both individuals and institutions – can freely fulfil their proper roles, according to their gifts and abilities.

The more time one spends with Catholic Social Teaching the more one understands how it is deeply empowering of people, communities, families and institutions. It is emphatically not pro-state. It's clear that utopian assumptions, i.e. that the state can *directly* bring about the good society, are contrary to the Christian vision. But - neither is it anti-state: as we've heard, the role of government is critical to *enabling* the Common Good and the Christian vision offers a principled approach to deciding what it should do and what it should not.

2. Intermediary institutions and the role of the church

I wanted to mention institutions (as I realise although he wanted to, there wasn't time and space for Nick to go into this in his paper) and, we might want to think about the role of the churches in relation to government.

Centralised power, whether in the form of a state or a big business, has a tendency to de-humanise. One of the proven ways to resist the dominance of this kind of power is to strengthen what are sometimes referred to as 'intermediary institutions', that is, those bodies that exist between the person and the state and which bind people together: families, schools, places of worship, sports clubs, businesses, book clubs, guilds, hospices, credit unions, universities, regional banks, community

land trusts, community energy projects, unions and so on.

Institutions can be providers of that essential 'social infrastructure', the conditions needed for people to generate the Common Good and thrive together – for example:

- places to meet – such as a community hall - might be provided by a church or synagogue
- access to start-up capital - might be supplied by a social impact investment provider

Lots of different kinds of institution are needed, each doing what they are supposed to do, fulfilling their particular roles according to their individual vocational responsibility. They are a civilising influence and are part of our inheritance.

When a political authority is acting for the Common Good, it enables these bodies to thrive.

But whether it does or not, churches and their people are well placed, inspired by the Christian vision, to play an important role encouraging institutions in their unique vocational responsibility. This "strange polity" as Nick described it – is markedly different from the role of political authority.

As Cavanaugh and MacIntyre have said, we are mistaken if we regard the state as the lead caretaker of the Common Good. Its sheer size precludes genuine rational deliberation (which is how the Common Good is generated); the state can only attempt this by a political elite of lawyers, lobbyists, and other professionals. We should beware, as Eliot warned, of 'systems designed to be so perfect that no one needs to be good.'

This is why the role of government needs to be secondary not primary if we are really interested in human flourishing: God's primary agency is via *us* - the community in Christ, with the power of the Holy Spirit working through us. It is our responsibility – even in a secular context - to represent what it means to be a human person.

Jeremiah 29.7 'seek the welfare of the city' comes to mind.

We can contribute according to our unique abilities and experience, build relationships with different kinds of local institution, foster mutual benefits and social bridging, linking and bonding capital. In doing so, 'vocational responsibilities' will over time become part of the conversation. Similarly, in community and in our relationships, taking an asset-based approach also fosters capacity, building on strengths rather than focusing on deficits.

This is why we at Together for the Common Good celebrate social enterprises such as House of St Barnabas, good businesses like Timpson, community initiatives like the Good Neighbours programme, church franchises across the Cinnamon Network, the Oasis network of 'hub' schools, community land trusts and so on. These and hundreds of thousands of other institutions, large and small, fulfil their vocational responsibilities, they are rooted in place, and build capacity in people, not reduce it; they foster relational approaches not transactional ones.

This is not 'the state on the cheap'. Everything they do *could* be done by the state, but they do it so much better. This understanding of the Common Good is not sentimental or woolly. It is messier and more beautifully human than any utopian solution could be.

3. Why this is important now

We are in turbulent times and as Christians we need to be clear about our centre of gravity, to be able to identify and resist the forces of ideology, so often dressed up in persuasive language.

As Nick's paper points out, the Christian vision of the role of government contains constructive challenges for the *isms* of our time.

- First: its principled rationale for upholding humanness and therefore limiting the role of the state challenges socialism, collectivism and communism: while it advocates that social infrastructure for all is required to enable people to generate the Common Good, it does not necessarily assume that the state should in fact *provide* all of that infrastructure – in some cases it would, but mainly its role – and a very significant one - is to *enable it*.

- Second: the rootedness of this vision in God's equal love for every human being brings the conception of biblical justice to bear, and in so doing, challenges the tendency to protect the status quo associated with conservatism. While the Christian view is rooted in tradition and our common inheritance, it advocates participation and responsibility to be taken by all rather than just a ruling elite.

- A third constructive challenge this vision offers is in its communitarian conception of the human good in which human beings are social beings. It challenges the individualistic aspects of liberalism – and we might note here that means both the cultural liberalism associated with the left and the economic liberalism associated with the right. While it

> requires a robust protection of human rights and liberty, its insistence on *people working together* to generate the Common Good is a bulwark against the kind of cultural individualism we are increasingly seeing, which atomises people in a battle of rights between different interest groups.

Keeping in mind Nick's phrase "the Common Good is the reason political authority exists" helps us to see how governments fall short and identify the flaws in all those *isms*. It transcends a partisan analysis, and helps us see when systems dehumanise.

In recent times we have seen many Western governments becoming managerial and technocratic, centralising power, becoming increasingly distant from the people they are supposed to represent.

The economic and cultural individualism they promote has delivered modernisation and efficiency, and prosperity - but only for some. There is deep unease about cultural change and vacuity of purpose, extreme economic and infrastructure inequality and increasingly atomised societies. It seems that the corollary of centralised power is that civil society has become weakened.

Notwithstanding the many good things government has done, such as the Localism Act, the preconditions for building the Common Good have received woefully low policy attention.

The situation is now degenerating into escalating social fragmentation and political polarisation – a very significant barrier to the Common Good.

The fractures we are seeing now show a breakdown in social trust: between young and old, educated and uneducated, 'anywheres' and 'somewheres', affluent and barely managing, between so-called 'social justice warriors' and any dissenting voices, between business and unions, social conservatives and liberal progressives, indigenous and immigrant, Brexiteers and Remainers…

To generate the Common Good, human beings need to work together, find solutions together, and to do that we need to deliberate and negotiate. We navigate the world through discussion and disagreement. Mutual suspicion and demonisation makes this all but impossible.

If governments do not recalibrate to enable preconditions for the Common Good, *things will get worse*.

A government could, for example:

- incentivise significant renewal of social infrastructure in left-behind towns;
- it could insist on rights being balanced by responsibilities;
- it would insist on free speech;
- it could develop policies centred on the dignity of human beings and mutual obligations.

Whether or not government does act like this, it is part of our calling as Christians to work as best we can within inadequate social infrastructure, to build the Common Good, no matter how imperfect, to work for reconciliation, stand in solidarity with communities who have been left behind, bridge social fractures through relationship building and to cooperate for common purpose.

Taking this Christian view of 'government as social infrastructure' provides us with constructive and principled challenges to dehumanising ideological positions, it helps us to see why social fragmentation is such a profound threat, and it clarifies responsibilities - not only of government but also for ourselves.

Jenny Sinclair is the founder/director of Together for the Common Good (T4CG), an emerging movement bringing alive the principle of the Common Good and encouraging people to work together across their differences.

Learn more at: http://www.togetherforthecommongood.co.uk

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