

A Christian perspective on the current crisis

Many years ago, Michael Heseltine crossed swords at the Oxford Union with Lord Soper, the Methodist peer. Mr Heseltine (as he then was) suggested that his opponent should confine himself to 'spiritual' matters, venturing to quote (as I recall) St Paul's famous hymn about love in the New Testament. Lord Soper retorted by quoting another verse from the same chapter (1 Corinthians 13): 'When I was a child, I spoke like a child....'. Christian faith never has, and never should, confine itself merely to spiritual matters, whatever they might be. So here I ask a few basic questions in the light of the current economic crisis:

- What is a government for?
- Does our economic system need to be reviewed and reformed?
- What should we be aiming for?
- *Are* we all in this together?
- What difference does belief in God make in all of this?

What is a government for?

Government matters. In the Christian view, government is a good thing, though that doesn't mean *any* government is a good thing. It's there to maintain order and to establish justice, and that means rather more than stopping people speeding on the A49 or dropping litter in Castle Square.

'Justice' means giving everyone their due. That's the business of government, both local and central. People's 'due' can't be measured simply by how much they contribute, although Christian faith emphasizes living responsibly in the world as far as we can. But Christian faith also insists that people in power have a God-given responsibility for the poor and the vulnerable. Whether we call this responsibility 'social democracy' or 'one-nation Conservatism' is not as important as the practical outcomes. On this principle, no-one should be in sub-standard housing; no-one should experience the kind of financial hardship which prevents them from sleeping at night or from feeding themselves and their children properly. It's the job of government to try to ensure that there isn't anyone in predicaments like these. The buck stops at Number 10, whichever party – or parties – is in power. That's the Christian view, and also the measure of a humane civilised society.

We've a long way to go. As the CTAL review *Ludlow under pressure* argues, inequality in Britain is increasing, not decreasing. *The spirit level: why equality is better*, a book published in 2009, shows that countries with greater equality enjoy greater social cohesion and wellbeing, including higher standards of mental and physical health and educational achievement, lower levels of crime, and less social disorder. On this scale Scandinavian countries and Japan come out better than the UK and the US.

Another book, *The cost of inequality* by Stewart Lansley, highlights the economic consequences of the inequality which has been growing in the UK since the 1970s. Leaders of corporate Britain are now sitting on huge surpluses which are not being invested, whilst UK consumers have £100 billion less now than if the national 'cake' was shared now as it was in the late 1970s. The gap between rich and poor in Britain continues to increase.

Is government really responsible for the poor and needy? We can readily imagine three objections.

The first objector might say: 'A nanny-state creates dependency, and the unscrupulous abuse the system.' A minority do abuse the system, but not as many as some newspapers which, interestingly, are owned by the very wealthy, allege. Politicians, too, can have their reasons for emphasising benefit fraud. Such abuse needs to be stopped, but just getting angry and punitive about it will not be the best way of solving the problem. In fact, most people do not want to be idle or to feel unwanted and of no use to society. They want to stand on their own two feet if they can, earning their living and providing for themselves, and, in most cases, for their families. This is a fact of human nature, a matter of dignity and self-esteem. There are exceptions, and benefit fraud needs to be dealt with, as does tax avoidance – of which there is far more. The Exchequer loses much more money through big companies avoiding tax than through benefit fraud.

The second objector might say: 'People should take more responsibility for their own lives, instead of relying on the government or the welfare system.' Granted, this is a desirable aim. Most parents want that kind of independence, eventually, for their children. But some are more able than others to take responsibility for their own lives, including finding work for themselves. Life and society are not level playing-fields, and government policy, central and local, must reckon with this. So taking responsibility for others, especially the neediest, is right – it is the mark of a good society. A government which encourages people to take more responsibility for themselves and for others does not thereby create a nation of loafers and dependents.

The third objector might say: 'The country simply cannot afford to look after all those who cannot look after themselves.' Granted, the government may not be able to provide services and resources as it has in the past, and the national deficit must be paid off, (though whether as rapidly as we are being told is more doubtful). But the moral imperative, for government and for individuals, still stands: to look after the poor. That may mean hard choices for us as a nation – like giving up Trident, and other vanity projects. It may mean abandoning national aspirations to 'punch above our weight' on the international stage; to do so at the expense of the poor at home cannot be right. But it is simply not true to say that we cannot afford to make provision for the neediest in our midst. It is a question of priorities. That is an entirely different debate, and for such a debate we need courageous political leadership and a more balanced, responsible press. We also need a mature debate throughout the country about how to achieve a civilised, humane society in which even the poorest receive their due – as human beings, rather than as tax-payers.

There are no simple solutions or easy answers. Modern societies and modern economies are complex. But, in the Christian view, two things are crystal clear. A decent society must look out for the needy. And at present, the poorest and the most vulnerable are bearing the brunt of the consequences of the economic crisis. That is morally unacceptable – and remedying it is the responsibility of government.

Does our economic system need to be reviewed and reformed?

The short answer is 'yes' and 'yes'. A critique of our economic system is urgently needed. Of course, people have to earn their living, and a society has to generate wealth in order to provide basic services. But in most developed countries today production doesn't just meet people's needs, it actually creates wants (for example, through TV adverts, 365 days a year). So the market isn't just meeting our needs, it's making us want things, some of which we need, but many of which we don't.

So who is serving whom? Are producers at the service of the consumer? Or are consumers sucked into a spiral of aspiration and consumption which fuels production and profit? Our economic life is built on the premise of growth: a cycle of increasing production, increasing consumption, and increasing demand. But, as planet earth shows increasing signs of stress, it should be obvious that resources for development and growth are not infinite, and members of the UN need to talk urgently with each other about sustainable growth.

One symptom of our skewed thinking in matters economic is our tendency, reflected in newspaper headlines, to regard a rise in house prices as good. But good for whom? Certainly not for the increasing numbers – mainly the young and the less-well-off – who do not own a place of their own and cannot aspire to buy one. The housing situation in our country is now desperate, if not to say obscene. As our report *Ludlow under pressure* shows, there is a dire shortage of social and affordable housing. Our economic system nor our democracy are functioning as they should – that is, for the benefit of all.

The view setting out this argument amounts neither to socialism nor to 'the politics of envy' (a gibe which is easy for 'the haves' to make against 'the have-nots'). The premises of the argument are Christian. Justice means giving each person their due as as a human being, or (in more theological language) as a child of God. That includes, amongst other things, a decent home and adequate food. One-nation Conservatism, as expounded recently in the *Times* by William Waldegrave, is a programme a Christian can vote for with a good conscience. But the bleaker forms of what has come to be known as Thatcherism, and many of the policies of the present government, are another matter altogether.

Returning to the question of creating a humane society, we can see that these days economic and social objectives easily pull us in different directions. For example, many would welcome the kind of community where people feel they belong, and to which they can contribute. But today economic pressures conspire to separate and divide people. Many work harder and longer, or work alone, where once they might have had colleagues. Many aspire to buy their own home, but the pressures involved put strains on health, marriages and families. Wealth-creation, we are often told, is vital. But what does that mean in practice, and, crucially, *who* is the wealth for, and *what* is it for?

It would be wrong to blame only 'the system', whether we call it 'the market' or 'modern capitalism'. We human beings must accept our share of responsibility. We are by nature restless and insatiable. That is our strength and our weakness. If we weren't restless, we wouldn't have progressed as we have, nor would the planet be showing signs of severe strain. Modern pressures (advertising, peer pressure, increased opportunities and – for many – increased income, together with a greater awareness of the life-styles of those

better-off than ourselves) stoke up the restlessness and dissatisfaction especially in societies with glaring inequalities of wealth and poverty. So critiquing our economic system includes taking a hard look at ourselves as well. Modern capitalism assumes we are insatiable, and encourages us to be so.

Economic problems will not be solved by economic means alone. If the western world is currently in decline – and there are many signs that it is – the root causes are not economic, but spiritual. I return to what that means in the final section.

What should we be aiming for?

We frequently hear the words 'progress' and 'growth'. Is that our aim? And what do those words mean anyway?

'Progress' tends to mean an increase in our standard of living. 'Growth' usually means 'economic growth'. Progress and growth of this kind, especially since the 1960s, has been greater than ever before in human history, and no serious person would wish to put the clock back. But the scientific and ecological evidence that there are limits to growth is now overwhelming. And what will happen to the planet when not only China, India and Brazil 'go for growth', but, as is already happening, a growing number of African countries? In the Christian view, we have a responsibility before our Creator for the well-being of the planet, and a duty to love not only our present neighbours, but future generations who will have to live with the results of our extravagance.

So what are legitimate human aspirations? Certainly to earn a living, for those able to do so, and to earn it, if possible, in a way that is creative and satisfying, not mind-numbingly boring or tediously repetitive. To provide for one's family when that is necessary, and to live without the financial constraints which cause anxiety and hardship. It is also natural and desirable to want to live in a decent comfortable home. Our country tends to make a fetish of owning your own place, but what matters most is that the natural human aspiration to live somewhere which can be made individual, comfortable and attractive should be attainable both for those who are owner-occupiers and for those who rent.

As well as these basic material aspirations, we need to recall what contemporary research, as we noted earlier, is increasingly finding: above the line of reasonable comfort, better goods and services tend to contribute little to a sense of well-being. So why do we continue to conduct our political and economic life as if they do? Let's ask: what are those things which really enable human beings to flourish? How can we live in a way that expresses the conviction that 'we are all in this – this country, this planet, this life – together'? Far more than money is involved. The answer is to do with spiritual, moral and social values.

This is now the moral and spiritual challenge of our age. A nation which privileges economic concerns at the expense of spiritual, moral and social ones, is in danger of losing its way, and even, if the rot is not recognised and remedied, of falling apart.

Are we all in this together?

A 'big society' where we are 'all in it together' has much to be said for it – provided that no-one's needs are neglected or forgotten, and provided there is a transparently fair distribution of rewards for work well done. But a human society won't happen automatically, even if living standards begin to rise again. We need to ask a deeper question: what is the most human community we can create together? 'Without a vision, the people perish'.

One essential mark of a really human, healthy society is the quality of its relationships – not only in marriages and families, but also between people of different races and religions, young and old, rich and poor, and employer and employee. The list could go on, to include, for example, government and governed. Relationships built on honesty, justice and trust are crucial at all levels. That, in turn, means living responsibly. If trust is to grow, for example, people have to be trustworthy – eg by being truthful and doing their job well. A good society, like a good marriage, has to be worked at; like a friendship, it has to be kept in good repair. *Economic measures alone will not suffice.*

So here is an agenda – a human agenda – for people of all faiths or none. It is an agenda which has local, national and international dimensions. Internationally, all people of goodwill can work together to alleviate hunger, combat climate change, and prevent the human race from self-destructing.

What difference does belief in God make to all of this?

Where is the Church in all this? Answers will vary, and so will perceptions. Churches vary; some, sadly, are too introverted, too immersed in their own 'religious' world, to merit the name 'Christian church'. But many are not, and things are not always what they appear to be. Many a small elderly congregation is engaged in more volunteering and community outreach than one might expect. In London alone a remarkable number of churches use their premises to provide accommodation for homeless people.

It is all too easy for churches, like many other organisations, to become concerned with in-house things, like making ends meet and making sure the church roof doesn't leak. But there is another agenda, a *human* one, since the founder of Christianity is, in the Christian view, the real example of what being human is about. This is why churches are committed to creating a more human society. For example, poverty tends to dehumanize people, even though some poor people are extraordinarily resilient and generous-spirited. But it is not easy to be outgoing if you are wondering where your next meal is coming from. The humanity of people living in poverty needs to be supported.

I said earlier that humankind's deepest problem is spiritual. But 'spiritual' must not be taken to mean only, or primarily, 'moral'. Our deepest need is to recover faith in God. This can mean different things to different people. I take 'faith in God' to mean, in the first place, the wondering recognition that the universe is a mystery; why is there something rather than nothing? The Christian faith, as shown by Jesus Christ, teaches that the 'ultimate reality' behind the mystery is a 'You' rather than an 'It', though no words are really adequate for talking about the mystery.

The word 'God' is a problem, and always has been. 'Gods' have been the cause of many wars and much violence in the history of humanity. Nor are religious people and Christian churches always the best advert for God. So Richard Dawkins has a point. But this doesn't end the debate, as a simple analogy or two will show. The abuse of sex doesn't somehow invalidate human sexuality, any more than a broken or dysfunctional political system invalidates politics. In the same way, dysfunctional religion (and there is a lot of it about) does not 'prove' that there is no God.

But we need immediately to add: many people who claim to believe in or to know God may well be deluding themselves. From the Christian point of view, there is a simple criterion. A belief in God which does not make people more compassionate and generous is likely to be a form of self-delusion. Belief in God does not turn people overnight into saints – far from it. But it should make a difference – and an increasing difference as the years go by.

The Christian faith, the Jewish faith out of which Christianity sprang, and, indeed, other world faiths, have always taught: 'Love your neighbour as yourself'. In an increasingly globalized world that neighbour' could be anywhere. Because our actions, values, attitudes and policies have an increasingly global reach, the command 'Love your neighbour' is both local and global.

That may be familiar enough. Less familiar, but equally urgent, is the connection between belief in God and hope. Real belief in God is an important antidote to despair, because such belief has a way of transforming attitudes and expectations, of discovering new possibilities and realizing new resources and potentialities. Recovering such transforming belief remains the most urgent task of our time.

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CTAL Chair, November 2012