

# The Church of England and Politics<sup>1</sup>

RACHEL TINGLE

## **Preface**

The subject of this paper is one which should be of significant concern to all Evangelicals. But in order to avoid any possible confusion and misunderstanding I would like to make two points clear before I begin. The first is that when I talk about Church involvement in politics, I am referring to the involvement of the Church *as an institution*. I am not referring to the responsible involvement of Christians as individuals in political processes, since I hope we would agree that this is part of good citizenship in a democracy and, as such, is something which should be encouraged. The second point I want to make is that, although I am referring to the Church of England's involvement in politics, the Church of England is by no means unique in this—most of the 'main-line' Christian denominations, both in this country and also in many other parts of the world, are displaying similar tendencies to those which I shall be highlighting. These are important points to bear in mind.

## **A Strained Relationship**

In the last few years, much attention has been drawn in the media to the Church of England's involvement in politics. This takes the form of statements from the bishops or reports from General Synod which are newsworthy even to secular journalists, particularly as they appear to place the Church in opposition to the present Conservative Government.

Numerous examples can be quoted. In 1982, there was, for instance, the Synod's controversial *Church and the Bomb* report with its advocacy of phased unilateral nuclear disarmament. In 1984 there was a major row over one of the Bishop of Durham's sermons which attacked the Government's handling of the miners' strike and criticized its economic policies in general—criticisms which were subsequently echoed by the Archbishop of Canterbury who described the Government's economic policies as leading to unemployment, poverty and despair. Then there was the 1985 *Faith in the City* report which contained little in the way of theology but a great many recommendations of a secular political nature which were supposed to improve the material lot of people living in urban priority areas. These were dismissed by many Conservatives because they were similar to policies adopted in the past which were now thought to

have actually *contributed* to much of the economic distress and dependency of people in our inner cities.

Then there have been rows about welfare provision—these include the Bishop of Durham's Easter 1988 denunciation of the Government's social policy as 'wicked' and the Archbishop of Canterbury's speech to the Free Church Federal Council in March 1988 in which he expressed strong support for the (then) existing form of the welfare state. And, of course, other examples could be mentioned, including the more recent comments of Dr. Runcie's in the October 1989 issue of *The Director* magazine about present day 'pharisees'—much publicized by the press since they were taken to be a veiled attack on Thatcherite Britain.

Perhaps more significant, however, is the Church's attitude to South Africa. Having very recently visited that country where I was fortunate enough to speak to many Church leaders and people involved in politics right across the political spectrum, I can testify both to the very necessary political changes now taking place and to the enormous complexities of the situation. I was particularly impressed by leaders whom I met in Churches as varied as the black independent churches; the Rhema pentecostal churches; the Church of England in South Africa and also the Dutch Reformed Church (where very significant changes have taken place in the last few years), whose main concern is to preach the Gospel of salvation through Jesus Christ to all people and to act as agents of reconciliation between the various racial groups. Against that background, I have to say that I am greatly concerned that by and large the leadership of the Church of England here seems to be lending its support only to the more radical elements in that country.

I refer not only to the Tutu mission to Birmingham and the events surrounding it, but also to Synod's 1982 decision to support economic sanctions against South Africa, and more pertinently the support which the Church of England is lending to the new Southern Africa Coalition (launched September 1989) which is a campaign which 'will seek to secure a fundamental change in British policy towards Southern Africa' by calling for substantially increased sanctions.

Now sanctions, surely are not an article of faith of the Church of England. It is a policy with the objective of trying to bring about political change in South Africa—but it is a very controversial policy particularly as it is black people themselves who are at present suffering most as a result of the sanctions campaign.<sup>2</sup> Bearing this in mind, it is hardly surprising that a poll conducted on behalf of *The Independent Television News* in March 1989<sup>3</sup> showed that a majority of black South Africans oppose sanctions; a conclusion confirmed by an extensive Gallup poll undertaken within South Africa at about the same time. But some senior Anglican clergymen seem unwilling or unable to believe this. As *Times* columnist, Barbara Amiel, reported

in April 1989, when two bishops from the South African black independent churches came to Britain specifically to put the case against sanctions and held a meeting with various British church officials, including the Bishop of Coventry (as chairman of the International Affairs Division of the Synod's Board of Social Responsibility) the British churchmen simply refused to take the African bishops' views seriously. Witness also the almost surrealistic episode at the 1989 Conservative Party Conference when the Anglican and Roman Catholic Bishops of Liverpool, speaking at an evening fringe meeting of the Southern Africa Coalition, called for sanctions against South Africa implying that this was what all black South Africans wanted, apparently oblivious of the fact that many people present had spent their lunchtime listening to Gatsha Buthelezi, Chief of six million Zulus, arguing passionately against sanctions!

All the examples I have quoted illustrated the fact that, not only are Church leaders involving themselves more in matters of politics, but that they show a marked preference for left-of-centre policies.

This was a point made in a 1984 report 'The Kindness that Kills' in which a group of 'new right' intellectuals analyzed a series of Church reports and came to the scathing conclusion that they were 'sloppy, ill-thought out, ignorant, one-sided, and addicted to secular fashions.'<sup>4</sup> A similar conclusion was reached by Dr. George Moyser who, in an Economic and Social Research Council study on the rôle of the Church of England in politics stated that 'the Church of England as a whole, and its corporate leadership in particular, has indisputably shifted its political gravity to the left . . .'<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, however, as the Church has spoken out more in secular political matters, what we might call '*cultural*' conservatives (and they, of course, are to be found in all political parties and none) have been upset by what the Church of England has *not* said publicly in matters of faith and Christian morality. Many members of the House of Lords were surprised, for instance, that when Clause 28 of the Local Government Bill—which sought to prohibit the use of public money to promote homosexuality—was debated in committee in the House of Lords in February 1988, more bishops voted against it than in favour of it. Similarly, it seemed strange that when Baroness Cox and other peers were seeking to amend the Education Reform Bill last year so that schools' religious education should be 'predominantly Christian' and that the Act of Worship should be 'Christian' these moves received little initial support from the bench of bishops.

A measure of the concern at these tendencies was the quite unprecedented three and a half hour debate in the House of Commons in February 1989 which 'called on all sections of the Church, including that by law established to fulfil their leading rôle in the promotion of moral values.' This was initiated by the Conserva-

tive M.P. Sir Hal Miller who spoke of his growing perception that Church spokesmen are 'speaking with a great deal of certainty in the realm of politics but with increasing uncertainty in the realm of the things of the Spirit'. He and other politicians spoke of their concern that clerical spokesmen can deny the basic beliefs of the creed and fail to denounce the rising divorce rate, fornication, homosexual practice, and selfishness.

To summarize, we seem to have an increasingly strained relationship between the present leaders of the Church of England and the present leaders of the State.

I want now to ask three questions:

1. Is this a new phenomenon?
2. How did it come about?
3. What, if any, are the dangers to Church and State?

### **Is This a New Phenomenon?**

Some of those clergy who have been most involved in the process have maintained that Church involvement in politics and, more particularly, its preference for left-wing policies is not only fully justified but it is also nothing new. For instance, the Revd. Kenneth Leech, (who for many years worked as a race relations officer for the General Synod's Board for Social Responsibility) argued in the February 1986 issue of *Marxism Today* that there is a long and distinguished Anglican socialist tradition of which, he says, right-wing critics of the Church are largely unaware, and he maintains that the Church of England was probably more involved in the social and political arena from the 1870s to the death of Archbishop Temple than it is today.

I have to say that I think this argument is put up largely as an attempt to diffuse criticism of the present position of the Church of England and that it is quite wrong. For one thing, whilst it is true that Archbishop William Temple wrote profusely on political matters, and has indeed been hailed as a pioneer of the welfare state, he never claimed that his views constituted a political programme which the Church as a whole ought to endorse (which is what seems to be happening at present). In fact, Temple went to great pains to draw a distinction between individual Christian political action and engagement by the Church *as an institution* in politics. Indeed, speaking of his own proposals for what he considered to be an ideal welfare state, he declared to a meeting of the convocation of York:

If any member be so ill-advised as to table a resolution that these proposals be adopted as a political programme of the Church, I should as Archbishop resist that proposal with all my force, and should probably as President of the convocation rule it out of order. The Church is committed to the everlasting Gospel and to the Creeds which

formulate it; it must never commit itself to an ephemeral programme of detailed action.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike Leech, then, I would argue that the present attitude of the Church towards politics is a relatively new phenomenon. If you look at the reports issued by the Synod, for example, this increasing preoccupation with secular politics seems to have developed in this way since about the mid-1970s following a trend developing internationally in the 1960s and to which the Revd. Dr. Edward Norman called attention in his 1978 Reith Lectures when he declared that Christianity today:

has increasingly borrowed its political outlook and vocabulary, the issues it regards as most urgently requiring attention, and even its test of moral virtue, from the progressive thinking of the surrounding secular culture.<sup>7</sup>

Furthermore, Dr. Norman called attention to what he called the 'politicisation' of the Church. This is more than just an active Church interest in secular political issues. By this term Norman meant

the internal transformation of the faith itself, so that it comes to be defined in terms of political values—it becomes essentially concerned with social morality rather than with the ethereal qualities of immortality.<sup>8</sup>

### **How did this come about?**

To some extent this process has been facilitated by Synodical structures since, as I explained in my booklet *Another Gospel?*,<sup>9</sup> it seems relatively easy for a small group of Synod officials to dominate Anglican thinking on political matters. Take too the example of the Southern Africa Coalition which I mentioned earlier. The General Synod of the Church of England is listed as a member of this group, which is presumably a major contributory factor in the Coalition's claim to represent 'more than ten million people in Britain'. Membership of or support for the Coalition was, however, never voted upon or even discussed by Synod itself. Indeed, from the enquiries which I have made, it seems that the only place this matter might have been discussed at all was within the International Affairs Committee of the Board of Social Responsibility. This means that a sub-committee of the Synod made a decision which appeared to commit the whole Church of England to supporting a controversial secular political policy. So much for the appearance of democracy within the Church of England!

### **The Influence of Theology**

Of even more importance is the influence of theological trends. It is obvious that some in leadership positions in the Church of England doubt the essentials of Christianity. In such cases it is, of course,

easier to talk about secular political matters than to give spiritual or moral guidance—either to those in the Church or the nation generally.

But much more significant in this context is, I believe, the fact that the Church of England is showing clear signs of being influenced by liberation theology. Since this was a point I made in *Another Gospel?*, I was interested to see Clifford Longley make the same point in *The Times* recently. He stated:

It is already true that liberation theology, as a style or language . . . has thoroughly infiltrated British Christian thought. It is one of the main reasons, for instance, why many churchmen believe they are bound on religious grounds to oppose the philosophy of the present Government.<sup>10</sup>

Let me say something, then, about liberation theology or rather, the theologies of liberation—for there are many. Let us be clear, these do not start with a study of the Bible or (in Roman Catholic terms) the traditions and historic teaching of the Church at all. Rather, using an essentially Marxist approach, they assume some experience of oppression followed by political action (which may or may not be revolutionary) designed to overcome that oppression. This *praxis* as it is called is the 'first act' of theology. The 'second act' is then to reflect on that *praxis* in the light of the Bible or teaching of the Church. The whole approach (or Action-Reflection), or even the first act alone, is referred to as 'doing theology'.

I have mentioned that there are *theologies* of liberation, not one theology. This is because, in this scheme of things, since the action (or *praxis*) taken and the corresponding reflection upon it, will vary from situation to situation, so the 'theology' will also vary. For this reason theology is said to be 'contextual' and you have as many theologies as you have contexts. Hence there is liberation theology in situations of generalized oppression, as in South America; black theology in the U.S.A. and South Africa where black people are oppressed by whites; feminist theology wherever women are considered to be oppressed by men; Minjung, or people's theology in Korea, and so on. In the British context, since God is considered to be 'on the side of' the poor in inner cities, a truly indigenous British liberation theology is considered to be urban theology and people like Dr. John Vincent, this year's President of the Methodist Conference, runs courses at his Urban Theology Unit in Sheffield in exactly that.

But we have to understand what this approach means in terms of how we view Scripture.

First, the liberation theologies clearly reject the important Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura*. As the first conference of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians held in Dar es Salaam in August 1976 stated:

We are prepared for a radical break in epistemology which makes commitment the first act of theology and engages in critical reflection on the praxis of the reality of the Third World.<sup>11</sup>

Secondly, the *reflection* part of the liberation theology package usually results in a highly selective reading of the Bible by which themes like the Exodus or the Magnificat are given mainly political interpretations and used to present a God not for all men but, rather, one who takes sides with the oppressed in their struggle for freedom. Liberation theologians like the Chilean priest Estoban Torres dismiss any objective reading of the Bible as 'bourgeois' and he argues that the only legitimate way of reading the Bible is to opt for the oppressed classes before you start.<sup>12</sup> According to the Portuguese theologian, Fernando Belo, when someone 'opts for the oppressed classes' he receives a new understanding of, for example, the whole Gospel of Mark as a 'report concerning the practice of radical subversion'<sup>13</sup>.

Hence you hear talk of 'God's preferential option for the poor' or 'God being on the side of the poor'. Worse still, some liberation theologians seem actually to reduce God to the poor—there is no God but the poor themselves. Also, although the theologies of liberation talk much about political liberation, there is little reference to the essence of real Christian liberation—that is the liberation from sin and the reconciliation with God offered to every man by Christ's death upon the Cross. Listen to this notorious statement about salvation from a World Council of Churches conference on World Mission and Evangelism:

It can be said, for example, that salvation is the peace of the people in Vietnam, independence in Angola, justice and reconciliation in Northern Ireland, and release from the captivity of power in the North Atlantic community . . .<sup>14</sup>

Whilst liberation theology itself was first developed in the late 1960s by politically active Roman Catholic priests and theologians in South America, its ideas have been spread by international organizations like the World Council of Churches and the Ecumenical Association of Third World theologians and have begun to influence the mainline Protestant denominations, including the Church of England.

I will mention just three examples as an indication of this:

1. A consultation organized by the Race Pluralism and Community Group of the Church of England's Board for Social Responsibility at Balsall Heath in 1986 recommended 'the generation of a Theology of Liberation grounded in the experience of Black/Third World people in Britain' and the establishment of a Black Anglican Training Unit which, amongst other things, would 'provide a resource and library for the study of Black Theology.'<sup>15</sup> Reports about the new Simon of

Cyrene Theological Institute being set up in Wandsworth, largely with Anglican funding, make it clear that the intention is that this should provide such a base for the study and development of black theology.<sup>16</sup>

2. The Archbishop of Canterbury, in declaring in his opening address to the 1988 Lambeth Conference that 'Christian leaders cannot escape specific political questions' went on immediately to state that 'the older Churches can learn much by sharing in the debate of the younger Churches about liberation theology'.<sup>17</sup> Taken together with the invitation to the foremost liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez, to address the Conference, this looked pretty much like an official Anglican endorsement of liberation theology.

3. Also of great interest in this respect is chapter three of the 1985 report *Faith in the City*. This argues that since Western theology has relied not only on divine revelation but also on human reason and study, and therefore favours those of above average literacy and intellectual ability, it is inappropriate to inner city environments and goes on to state:

To all of us, the example of Liberation Theology opens up the possibility that new priorities, as well as new methods, can restore to us a theology that is truly relevant to the needs and aspirations of people today.<sup>18</sup>

This seems to suggest, quite wrongly, that the Christian faith means something different in the inner city than in the suburbs or the country.

It is important to realize that the theologies of liberation represent a dramatic shift in the understanding of the purpose of the Church. The focus has very clearly shifted from doing something about man's relationship with God; to doing something about man's material condition here on Earth. If you like, in theological terms, the emphasis has shifted from the Cross to the Kingdom, but it is a Kingdom here on Earth which will be brought in by some sort of (left-wing) political activity.

Whilst the concept of the Kingdom (used in this way) is important in liberation theology, it has also become something of a buzz-word in certain Evangelical circles. Whilst, unlike the liberation theologians, radical evangelicals continue to insist upon the need for personal salvation, in addition they argue that the Kingdom can also in some way be extended in the secular order in the here and now, not *via* the Cross, but by political action to transform the social order. Such 'Kingdom theology' was, for instance, implicit in much of the 'Salt and Light' Consultation on Evangelical Social Action held at Swanwick in Autumn 1988.

This approach pays at least as much (if not more) attention to 'structural sin'—or the idea that structures of society are inherently



evil—as it does to the need to save individuals from personal sin. Note, for example, this statement from Preb. John Gladwin (again an evangelical) who until recently was secretary of the Synod Board of Social Responsibility:

Kingdom thinking is about more than simply following the example of Jesus in His acts of mercy for the needy . . . It is concerned with the structures of society, their inability to reform themselves and the need, therefore, for confrontation with them . . . Kingdom patterns remind the church that . . . it is concerned with the radical transformation of the social order.<sup>19</sup>

In similar vein, the Revd. Michael Williams, director of the Northern Ordination Course, stating in a paper delivered at the Spring 1989 Anglican Evangelical Assembly that 'it is clear that a liberationist model of the Church is capable of promoting social transformation' argued therefore that the current challenge to Evangelicalism is to take part in the construction of a liberationist ecclesiology.

## **Dangers**

There are, I believe, a number of clear dangers to the Church and State arising from the processes which I have outlined.

1. Political statements by bishops or in Church reports are, by their nature, vested with a certain amount of authority—but do they really deserve it? This claim to authority really derives from their authority as teachers of the Christian faith and of the Bible—but although the Bible contains general principles which are relevant to politics it contains little, if anything, in the nature of detailed policy prescriptions relating to problems like inner-city poverty, South Africa and so on. There is no reason to suppose that Church leaders will know how to solve these problems better than anyone else and indeed one of the most distressing aspects of so many Church reports on political issues in recent years has been their striking lack of intellectual rigour. This can prove a source of embarrassment to the better informed Christian laity, as well as undermining the Church's spiritual authority in the wider world.

2. Equally important is the fact that this preoccupation with politics has, to use the jargon of economic theory, an 'opportunity cost' in that it diverts time and energy from the Church's primary mission of proclaiming the Christian gospel—surely something which is desperately needed in Britain today.

3. Turning specifically to the theologies of liberation and their growing influence on the Church of England, evangelicals in particular should be aware that although they have political implications, their profoundest implication is for the Christian Church. By so redefining Christianity as to empty it of the heart of the Christian gospel of salvation, they pose a fundamental threat to the Church itself.

For such reasons, I greatly applaud the action of the Church Society in issuing a statement after its Spring 1989 conference at Swanwick which rejected false liberation and Kingdom theologies and stressed that evangelism must be 'the priority in the Church and the means of extending the Kingdom of God'. I know of no other British church organization which has taken such a clear and unequivocal stand. It is not a popular stand to take, but it is a vitally necessary one. The real issue then, is not whether the Church is critical of the Government or not; or seems to support one or other political party or not. These are essentially side issues. The real issue is whether the Church is true to herself in her preaching and teaching of the Christian Gospel.

**RACHEL TINGLE** is a specialist writer in the sphere of politics and Christianity.

#### NOTES

- 1 An address given to Church Society's Public Meeting held in London on 18 November 1989 at Central Hall, Westminster.
- 2 According to a study carried out by Ronald Bethlehem (see *Economics in a Revolutionary Society: Sanctions and the Transformation of South Africa*) sanctions such as those currently applied by the United States and European governments will cost some two million South African jobs by the year 2000—the majority being lost by blacks. Bethlehem asserts that without sanctions blacks could expect to receive roughly 35% of the total income of South Africa by the year 2000, but with sanctions, only about 25%.
- 3 *The Independent*, 20 March 1989.
- 4 Digby Anderson (ed.), *The Kindness that Kills: The Churches' Simplistic Response to Complex Social Issues* (S.P.C.K., London 1984), p.2.
- 5 George Moyser (ed.) *Church and Politics Today: The Role of the Church of England in Contemporary Politics* (T. & T. Clark Ltd., Edinburgh 1985), p.22.
- 6 Temple, *Christianity and the Social Order*, pp.40–41.
- 7 Edward Norman, *Christianity and the World Order* (Oxford University Press, 1979), p.15.
- 8 *Ibid.* p.2.
- 9 Rachel Tingle, *Another Gospel? An account of the growing involvement of the Anglican Church in secular politics.* (Christian Studies Centre, 1988).
- 10 *The Times*, 4 November 1989.
- 11 Sergio Torres and Virginia Fabella (edd.), *The Emergent Gospel: Theology from The Developing World* (Geoffrey Chapman, London), p.269.
- 12 Cited by Bonaventura Kloppenburg, *Die Neue Volkskirche* (Aschaffenburg, 1981), p.80.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 *Bangkok Assembly* (World Council of Churches, 1973), p.90.

- 15 *Anglicans and Racism: The Balsall Heath Consultation 1986* (Race, Pluralism and Community Group of the Board for Social Responsibility of the Church of England, 1986), pp.39, 44.
- 16 *The Times*, 22 April 1989; *The Church Times*, 14 April 1989.
- 17 *The Truth Shall Make You Free: The Lambeth Conference 1988* (Anglican Consultative Council/Church House Publishing, 1988), p.22.
- 18 *Faith in the City* (Church House Publishing, 1985), p.64.
- 19 'Christian Social Involvement' in *Towards a New Social Revolution* (Frontier Youth Trust).