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Poverty and the Powers Today

Stephen Timms, MP

Then and now

Dr Christopher Hays's fascinating essay shows us how the practice of the Early Church with regard to poverty shamed and subverted the powers at the time. That state, while not a 'nation state' of the kind we know today, was an imperialist Roman occupation. Our modern UK nation state is a democracy. If people dislike what the state is doing, the government can fairly readily be replaced. The aims of the state are different as a result.

Dr Hays tells us that a rudimentary form of welfare was established by the Roman government, partly under pressure from the practice of Christians. In the New Testament, we read in Acts that the Early Church in Jerusalem was able to ensure that 'there were no needy persons among them' (4.34) through those with resources sharing them with those who lacked them. That was an impressive achievement, making a big impression on observers.

Two thousand years ago, the church was a unique organization in the way it sought to alleviate the suffering of people around it. Today, in another big contrast, we have large numbers of well-developed charities who share that aim: there are in total over 160,000 registered charities in the UK.¹ The generosity of individuals and trusts, along with support from local and national government, enables them to thrive.

What should we be expecting the state to do today? It could never meet every need. Its agencies and their processes are often inflexible and its resources are limited. For example, a husband who walks out on his wife and children on a Friday night, taking all financial provision with him, would leave his family without the means to pay for basic necessities over a weekend – the state would not be equipped to respond.

However, since the work of the Labour government which followed World War II, we have assumed that the state would provide general protection against destitution.

¹ 'Charity Commission Annual Report and Accounts 2016–17', 4 (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/628747/Charity_Commission_Annual_Report_and_Accounts_2016_17_web.pdf, accessed December 2017).

That assumption is starting to be questioned. It has been the policy of governments in recent years not just to acknowledge the inevitable limitations of its reach but also to withdraw from earlier areas of support. Problems which used to be regarded as unacceptable failures by the state are increasingly regarded as not necessarily the role of the state. The Trussell Trust reports that almost 30 per cent of food bank referrals result from administrative delays in payment of benefit.² The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions for the five years before the 2015 general election – far from being punished for such delays – was reappointed after it.

Food banks are necessary, not only because of benefit delays or unexpected events, but because in the UK we have an economic system in which people can be in full-time work and still live below the poverty line. A mother can be sanctioned by the Job Centre for staying with her baby overnight in an intensive care ward. The postcode a person grew up in still has a big impact on their life expectancy.

The Resolution Foundation's Low Pay Britain 2015 Report states that the private sector accounts for 85 per cent of all low-paid jobs.³ Initiatives such as the Living Wage Campaign – the result of a largely faith-based coalition which started in East London⁴ – gives us one example of a reshaping of the economic system in a way that benefits the poorest.

While we live in a country with these characteristics, it surely remains as important a duty for the church and its members to press political parties on their policies as it is to provide vital services to those in need.

Church impact today

There is a widespread impression that the church is gently fading away. Regular reports of declining church attendance convey an impression of faith-based organizations in terminal decline. In reality, it seems to me that the opposite is the case. Certainly in London, where there are also very large non-Christian religious congregations, church attendance has been rising for some years.⁵ The Church of England is building its first new churches in London since the 1950s.⁶ I suspect we will start to see the decline in attendance going into reverse on a larger scale in the future.

² The Trussell Trust, 'Foodbank Use Remains at Record High', 15 April 2016 (<https://www.trusselltrust.org/2016/04/15/foodbank-use-remains-record-high/>, accessed November 2015).

³ Adam Corlett and Laura Gardiner, *Low Pay Britain 2015* (London: Resolution Foundation, 2015), 24, 42 (<http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2015/10/Low-Pay-Britain-2015.pdf>, accessed June 2017).

⁴ Living Wage Foundation, 'History' (<http://www.livingwage.org.uk/history>, accessed November 2015).

⁵ Diocese of London, 'Rise in Young People Attending Church in London', 7 May 2013 (<http://www.london.anglican.org/articles/rise-in-young-people-attending-church-in-london/>, accessed November 2015).

⁶ Bishop Richard Chartres, 'Bishop of London Delivers Lambeth Lecture on Church Growth in the Capital', Diocese of London, 1 October 2015 (<http://www.archbishopofcanterbury.org/articles.php/5621/bishop-of-london-delivers-lambeth-lecture-on-church-growth-in-the-capital>, accessed November 2015).

However – whatever the picture on church attendance – the impact of churches and of other faith-based organizations is today clearly on the rise. The best known example is the food bank movement. The Trussell Trust has developed an extraordinary network of 424 food banks around the country, every one of which is based on a church. Forty thousand people – by no means all church members – volunteered with them in 2016–17.⁷ I see colleagues in Parliament – like the Roman authorities – being impressed by what the churches are doing in providing for others.

If we had had a discussion ten years ago about what would happen if hundreds of thousands of people could no longer afford sufficient food, many would not have predicted that the churches would be the ones to come forward with help. But that is what has happened. It has turned out, in Britain in 2015, that it has been uniquely the churches which have had both the motivation and, perhaps more surprisingly, the capacity to take on the challenge of food poverty. No other organization or network has been able to do so on anything like this scale. And, my goodness, they have made a difference.

The relationship between the Trussell Trust and the government is interesting. The Trussell Trust should qualify as the prime example of (then) Prime Minister David Cameron's Big Society in action. It is voluntary action on an extraordinary scale. However, ministers do not celebrate its achievements. The problem for the government is that the Trussell Trust does not just hand out food. It also insists – despite enormous pressure from ministers to stop – on publishing data about how many people use food banks and the reasons why. For months, ministers refused to meet the Trussell Trust, accusing them of having a political agenda against welfare reform. Finally – answering a question I put to him in the House of Commons – David Cameron agreed to meet them in 2015. But the government remains deeply uncomfortable. The Trussell Trust and its statistics present an unsettling challenge to ministers about what the real effects of their policies are. The church is shaming the authorities. Unlike Emperor Julian,⁸ our state does not yet feel the need to change its ways in response.

My Christian understanding is that government has a responsibility to build an economic system that is just. A million visits to food banks in each of the years 2014–15, 2015–16 and 2016–17 – in many cases by people who are in work – suggest we have a long way to go.⁹ Alleviating poverty requires being proactive in tackling the drivers of poverty as well as being reactive to the effects of poverty. The rise in the national minimum wage which the government has proposed will help, but other factors in the economy will need to change too.

A new role for the church

With the state now retreating, the church has the possibility of a new role. In Mark 12, Jesus provided two commandments for his followers:

⁷ The Trussell Trust, 'End of Year Stats' (<https://www.trusselltrust.org/news-and-blog/latest-stats/end-year-stats/>, accessed February 2018).

⁸ See Christopher Hays, 'The Early Church, The Roman State and Ancient Civil Society: Whose Responsibility Are the Poor?', 172 in this book.

⁹ Trussell Trust, 'End of Year Stats'.

‘The most important one’, answered Jesus, ‘is this: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second is this: “Love your neighbour as yourself.”’ (Mk 12.29-31)

The command to love our neighbour as ourselves was not a throwaway line. It was a mandate for a mission which should be at the foundation of the Christian life. For as long as economic and social injustices exist, while some people are forgotten and have no voice, the church has a duty to seek to pick up those who have been left behind.

It is important in Christian belief that individual responsibility is maintained and not seen as being delegated to the church by the giving of money. In Matthew 25, Jesus tells the story of the sheep and the goats. Near the end he says,

‘They also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?’ He will reply, ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.’ (Mt. 25.44-45)

No matter how much money the individual gives, he or she is still called on to interact directly with the poor.

Examples of how the churches changed things in our history – particularly from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries – are well known: the abolition of slavery and the spread of education are examples. But it is happening today too, and not just through food banks.

The *Jubilee 2000* campaign – initiated in the churches and drawing most of its support from them, albeit attracting wider support too – campaigned in the years before the millennium for the cancellation of the debts owed to Britain by the poorest countries in the world. I was a minister in the Treasury at the time. The Treasury was inundated with *Jubilee 2000* postcards with £1 coins sellotaped to them, and a human chain formed around the building on one occasion. That was followed by the Make Poverty History campaign, which culminated in 2005.

Those campaigns – which were not exclusively church-based, but which drew the large majority of their support and their energy from the churches¹⁰ – changed Britain’s political culture. They delivered a cross-party consensus which survived the changes of government in 2010 and 2015, and which means that Britain is today for the first time¹¹ delivering the UN target that 0.7 per cent of our gross domestic product should be committed to overseas aid.¹² No one other than the churches could have delivered that. A more partisan campaign certainly could not have delivered it.

¹⁰ ‘Jubilee 2000’ (<http://tinyurl.com/y84suaqd>, accessed February 2018).

¹¹ Department for International Development, ‘Statistics on International Development 2015’, 3 December 2015, 6 (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/482322/SID2015c.pdf, accessed June 2017).

¹² United Nations, ‘Integrated Implementation Framework’ (<http://iif.un.org/content/official-development-assistance>, accessed November 2015).

In 1996, John Kirkby founded Christians Against Poverty (CAP). Its local projects, all based in local churches, have enabled countless people to escape from debt and provided advice to many more. There are 290 CAP debt centres and 145 job clubs that have been established. By 2021, CAP aims for 1,000 local projects.¹³

These examples show the potential impact of faith-based initiatives today. Through hard work, a clear vision and an unmatched capacity to enlist volunteers, they can succeed in changing hearts and reaching out where others have drawn a blank.

A strategic choice for the churches

The church's increased role in programmes and services across the country poses a strategic – and moral – question about the level of its involvement. Is increased involvement a positive sign of effective civic engagement, or a negative impact of abdication by the state? Is the church compromised by both taking money from local or national government while seeking to offer critique of that government's policies and actions? Should the church welcome a bigger role, or deplore the necessity for it?

There certainly is not a problem with the quality of provision that churches can offer. Youth work, debt counselling and marriage preparation are areas where churches are providing invaluable help to people with and without faith. Sometimes the issue can be raised that opportunities for direct evangelism and witness are limited in such situations, where local government provides financial support – and there is a challenge here to churches to find creative ways of engaging in direct evangelism alongside their social engagement.

The church is present in every community. Its local branches interact regularly with vast numbers of people. That gives the capacity to identify fast changing needs and to adapt to meet them. I welcome the church playing an increased role in society. It should not be merely a reactionary role. The church and faith-based organizations have a unique opportunity to see the consequences of government policy. They are in a good position to feed back to the government observations about what works and what does not. As our society takes the fight to poverty, we need to look for new ways that the different powers of today can interact and work with one another better.

Christianity has spread across the world. It is forecast that by 2030, China will have more churchgoers than the United States.¹⁴ In many cases, unlike China, Christianity is entwined in the constitution of nations, such as in the UK. Nevertheless, the church's mission and objectives, to champion the cause of the least and the lost, remain the same as 2,000 years ago.

In the UK, the churches have to tackle cynicism and scepticism. A fear by some 'secular' funders of aggressive proselytizing, or of bias in favour of faith group members,

¹³ Christians Against Poverty, 'How it All Started' (<https://capuk.org/about-us/the-cap-story>, accessed November 2015).

¹⁴ Tom Phillips, 'China on Course to Become "World's Most Christian Nation" within 15 Years', *The Telegraph*, 19 April 2014 (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/10776023/China-on-course-to-become-worlds-most-Christian-nation-within-15-years.html>, accessed November 2015).

can prevent a faith organization from being given funding to deliver a service or recognition that it deserves. In 2013, the think tank Demos undertook a study on the role of faith in British society.¹⁵ Among the case studies of faith-based providers that it examined, there was no evidence of aggressive proselytizing. The services provided were not biased in favour of believers but met the needs of people from a wide variety of backgrounds. The government – and, in particular, the local government – needs to be more confident in the potential contribution of faith-based providers.

It would be a mistake to try to drive the faith out of a faith-based organization. Quite the opposite. It is the faith of many of the volunteers and workers for these organizations which compels them to become more involved and to serve their community. The Demos report found that people who belonged to a religious organization were much more likely to volunteer than those who did not. Government should appreciate the dynamism that comes from people of faith, their enthusiasm for serving and interacting with people from different backgrounds. That contributes possibilities that the state on its own could not achieve.

I chair the All Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society. It exists to draw attention to the contribution which faith-based organizations make in their communities, to help celebrate them and – where appropriate – to help address the policy and regulatory constraints which sometimes hold them back. As a group, we have become aware of the serious tensions which seem to arise – in particular – between local authorities and faith-based organizations in their areas. We have drawn up what we call a Covenant for Engagement, the text of which is on our website,¹⁶ which is intended to be signed up to by both local authorities and faith groups in their area wanting to be commissioned to provide services. The first local authority to sign up, in 2014, was Birmingham City Council, the largest local authority in Europe. I was in Halifax in 2015 for the adoption by Calderdale Borough Council of the Covenant there.

The church and faith-based providers can shape our culture through the services they provide and the voice they present. The nature of the services being offered and the manner they are delivered in areas left by the rest of society can prompt wider action. Britain's political culture can be changed as a result.

Church and state

In a society where the eradication of poverty was a central mission, the powers of today – including national and local governments, and faith-based groups – would work together and use their strengths and abilities in tandem with each other. There would be respect for differences in beliefs and an eagerness to work across theological, political and social divides. The state would aim for an economic system in which

¹⁵ Jonathan Birdwell and Stephen Timms, MP, eds, *Exploring the Role of Faith in British Society and Politics* (London: Demos, 2013) (https://www.demos.co.uk/files/DEMOS_The_Faith_Collection_-_web_version.pdf, accessed June 2017).

¹⁶ 'Covenant for Engagement', All-Party Parliamentary Group on Faith and Society (<http://www.faithandsociety.org/covenant/>, accessed November 2015).

everyone can work – in which individuals can apply for jobs and promotions without fear of discrimination – and in which those paid least in society can still afford to live decently.

The church and faith-based providers have always been creative in addressing formidable challenges. It is important to underline that that is not just a historical observation, as we are seeing from – alongside the examples I have already mentioned – organizations like CAFOD and Traidcraft, and initiatives like Street Pastors.

Churches and church-based organizations need to be both inward- and outward-looking. They must nurture and deliver programmes to the people they already serve, while also always imagining and dreaming about better ways of serving others in need. Churches and faith-based organizations see gaps, where the state lacks the resources or is too inflexible to respond and individuals are unable to cover these gaps themselves. They can fill caring gaps and help ensure vulnerable people are cared for.

Conclusion

Poverty in Britain was driven down over centuries through the combined work of the state, churches, charities and individuals. Today, progress seems to have stalled. Our society has become increasingly unequal. The powers in Britain do have the skill, expertise and enthusiasm to ensure that poverty can be eradicated. The question is whether they will work together to make it happen. The role of the churches will – in my view – be key in determining whether we resume progress or give up.