

REVIEW: THE FUTURE OF WELFARE

Richard Holloway

Andrew Morton (ed.) (1997), **The Future of Welfare**, Edinburgh: The Centre for Theology and Public Issues, The University of Edinburgh, pb, £14, ISBN 1870126378, 156pp.

The fascinating thing about this interesting volume of essays is the way it shows that the various interpretations of the Christian doctrine of human nature are back at the centre of political discussion. I have put it like that, emphasising the variety of interpretations, because the Christian understanding of humanity is much more subtle than single-minded exponents of any particular version of the doctrine are likely to allow. It is often said, for example, that political conservatism is solidly based on the doctrine of original sin. This angle on Christian teaching holds that humanity is intrinsically unruly and selfish, fallen by nature. The biblical myth of Adam, Eve and the fruit of the forbidden tree is usually cited, either as metaphor or history, to explain the disordered and disobedient nature of humanity. If this is your basic insight on human nature, it is argued, then you realise the folly of trying to appeal to the good in human beings, their altruism. Humanity is incurably self-centred, so wise leaders will base their policies on self-interest, will build incentives into social structures, as well as providing protections against lawlessness by means of police forces and standing armies. The function of the state is simply to guarantee the negative freedoms of the individual, by providing necessary protection against unwarranted interference. Liberated in this way, ambitious and self-interested people will generate wealth that will benefit all, not excluding those at the bottom of the social pyramid, who will receive the scraps that trickle down from the tables of the rich. One of the implications of the theory was that if you were at the bottom of the pyramid it was your own responsibility. The full Darwinian power of this theory has not been seen at work in Britain for some time, but there was a determined effort to re-visit it during the Thatcher years.

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An angle on the original sin theory that was rarely expressed, however, was the application of the doctrine of the fall to those whose freedom won them power and wealth. One of Marx's greatest diagnostic insights was that those in power always develop theories that provide moral, philosophical or even theological justification for their privileges. If humanity is corrupt, then the theory that it is best to leave self-interest unfettered is itself likely to be suspect. But it was not intellectual speculation, it was exposure to the consequences of unfettered power that shocked the complacent into action. One of the interesting points made by Stephen Sykes in his essay in this book is that it was the novels of Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell that opened the eyes of a generation to the social consequences of a system they had been taught to think of as divinely ordained.

The Christian Left, working from the same theological insight as the Right, derived completely different lessons from it. The Right focused on the individual, while the Left focused on systems and structures. Systemic evil was more powerful and sweeping in its effects than any individual, and for the Left the causes of poverty lay in social and economic structures and not in the character or behaviour of the poor people themselves. Alan Deacon quotes Beveridge's classic phrase that unemployment was a problem of industry not of individuals. But the Left was never really the party of original sin, however re-interpreted. They placed more emphasis on the flip side of human nature, its capacity for righteousness or altruism, its desire to seek the good. Reinhold Niebuhr neatly captured both sides of the paradox when he said that our capacity for justice made democracy possible, while our capacity for injustice made it essential. The project of the Left, including the Christian Left, was so to re-order the structures and redesign the systems that they would no longer cause poverty and deprivation. While the Christian Left based its critique of power on one side of the doctrine of humanity, the Fall, its policy of social reconstruction was energised by its commitment to the other side, the idea of Original Righteousness or Blessing. There can be no social ethics without at least a touch of utopianism and this was the ideal behind the Christian Left's great project of a state that would provide for the welfare of all, particularly the poor.

This dialectic between theology and social policy is well rehearsed in these essays, particularly those by Stephen Sykes, Raymond Plant, Alan Deacon and Duncan Forrester. But the ghost at this feast is Frank Field. One of the problems that every contributor to the book acknowledges is that the welfare system is in crisis. In his response to Alan Deacon's essay, Field points out that the social security budget is not only by far the largest government programme, but its growth is progressively destabilising public finances.

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Then he revisits original sin. He is a man of the Centre Left, but he claims that self-interest is the most powerful motivating force in each of us. He says,

The denial of this basic force, and the substitution of altruism, have undermined welfare's appeal on two fronts. First, if a universal system is to prevail, welfare has to appeal to the majority. Altruism suggests a concentration on other people rather than on ourselves. Second, concentrating on the poor - all too often by way of means-tests - results in an undermining of civil society. Means-tests attack work, savings and honesty. A selective policy towards the poor, therefore, far from limiting the welfare budget, is one reason for its explosion.

He goes on to point out that the age of the passive taxpayer is coming to an end; yet more, not less money needs to be spent on welfare. He believes that this particular circle can only be squared by offering stakeholder status where individuals are contributing to their own individual accounts. He says that a fundamental element of the new scheme will be the consideration of how the poor can be accorded equal status. Appeals to the altruism of the stakeholders may generate contributions for the least well off, but they are likely to be made conditional on behaviour which taxpayers want to see rewarded.

Though most of the essays in this book were generated for a conference in Edinburgh two months before the General Election, it could serve as a primer on the debate that is going on in the Labour Government about how best to reform the Welfare State. The main players in the debate could all be described as Christian Socialists, and it is obvious that their thinking has been influenced by different sides of the paradox of human nature as understood within the Christian tradition. Interestingly, Frank Field almost returns to a politics of original sin in his argument, observing that the poor are no more exempt from it than the rest of us, so that welfare policies should have rigour as well as compassion. Now the debate is on, uncomfortably for many on the traditional Left. In his essay, Paul Wilding quotes Keynes, who once said that the real difficulty for the intellectual and for the politician lies not so much in developing new ideas as in escaping from old ones. As we think and plan our way through current dilemmas, we are clearly and painfully going to have to abandon approaches that no longer do the job that has to be done. Even so, I hope that we won't altogether lose the element of idealism that created the welfare state in the first place.

February 1998