The Challenge of the Contemporary Context to Social Christianity and the Churches[1]

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To take seriously developments in English society is an indispensable part of the continuing task of reformulating what the church's ministry should be in and to modern societies. It was a lesson learned in the emergence of social Christianity as the church's response to industrialization and urbanization in the later nineteenth century in England and the United States[2]. It is a lesson which needs to be learned in each generation including, and maybe especially, by our own.

Recent reports like *Faith in the City*[3] have provided the churches with important sociological data to assist in this task of understanding society as an integral part of modern mission. But that is only a beginning, because the data selected and, more importantly, how they are interpreted, reveal underlying presuppositions. It is in this wider task of interpreting the context, of reading the signs of the times, that this brief and hesitant contribution is made. Expressing the task in such cautious terms is necessary precisely because of the great changes our society may be undergoing. For example, the speed and extent of change measured over a generation from 1950 to 1980 illustrate the comprehensive nature of change and its impact on both church and society. Indeed, my own work has concentrated on change in only the last decade and has come to the same conclusion.

Faced with that degree of turbulence one comes to realize that unequivocal judgments are often unhelpful not least because they contain too much inaccuracy. For example, the evidence does not support the view, often heard in church circles, that beneficial collective provision has collapsed in the face of an unacceptable individualism. How can it, when we still spend on such services over forty per cent of our gross national product?

I am also personally hesitant in my judgments in the face of such rapid and comprehensive change because even in a period of only ten years, I have found it necessary to change significantly on three occasions my own interpretations of what is going on in society. It is no longer easy to predict the likely outcome of change on the basis of

clear convictions about the exact nature of contemporary change. Such reserve is also an appropriate response to living in the midst of what could be described as a hinge period, linking the collectivist consensus era of relative economic decline of the post-war years and whatever is emerging in the final decade of this century. For I, for one, am no longer convinced that the changed society which is beginning to emerge can be described adequately as *Thatcherism*. Nor do I believe it can be attributed simply or essentially to the efforts of the New Right. (In saying this, I am parting company with a growing number of Christian commentators who almost daily produce theological critiques of Thatcherism[4]. Apart from their being 'much of a muchness' they do represent the propensity of Christians to fly to the morally obvious and therefore invariably getting it morally wrong). In other words, I have come to see increasingly that Thatcherism and the New Right are at least as much symptoms as cause of a post-imperial and post-industrial society coming to terms at last with an increasingly international and competitive world context. Of course, the Thatcher reforms may well turn out to be ephemeral in character, although I doubt it. Yet this should not distract attention from underlying trends. These do appear to be running in favour of more market-oriented economies and societies in both western and eastern blocs. For whether we consider the market as a pivotally important economic mechanism for the production and allocation of scarce resources, with its associated properties of self-interest, incentives, inequalities, profit and competition, or whether we recognize the market as the basis of a highly determinist *laissez-faire* ideology, the market now occupies a central place in the governing of Britain[5]. Indeed, its influence is equally dominant in western Europe and now even in the Soviet bloc, given the market-led reforms of the Gorbachev era. This commanding rôle of the market is likely to continue into the 1990s, beyond and indeed encouraged by, the single European Act of 1992, and affecting an increasingly wide range of human affairs from the social policies of welfare states to the most intimate of human relationships.

What should such changes and such trends mean for the ministry of the Christian churches? The nature of the changes themselves suggest answers, for since changing contexts both have influenced and should influence the formation of the Christian message, then the task is presumably to engage in the reformulation of social Christianity, and since the changes are so fast and unpredictable, then that reformulation needs to be undertaken with an appropriate reserve. These responses warrant further examination.

First, the changes in our context question the churches' tendency to revert to well-tried social understandings and policies. They suggest the need to move well beyond traditional restatements to the reformulation of tradition. For the mainstream liberal position of social Christianity[6]

still dominates the social pronouncements and policies of the official churches (their synods), their social action curias (their Boards of Social Responsibility) and their leaders (including the Bishops, President of the Methodist Conference and the Moderator of the Church of Scotland). This position is shaped essentially by the historic criticism of the market as *laissez-faire* ideology in general and as competition in particular. (The Christian Social Union, whose centenary is celebrated this year, played a major part in so realigning the official churches in the early part of this century.) It is a criticism supported by the churches' pastoral awareness of the social casualties of free market economies, from Charles Kingsley's *Cheap Clothes and Nasty*[7] in the mid-nineteenth century, to the Bishops of Liverpool and Durham in the late twentieth century. The pastoral critique of market economies has also been complemented by the churches' propensity to support collectivist interventionist policies. Christian commitment to organic views of society as the common good of all not surprisingly developed into firm support of its manifestation as the Welfare State and the redistributive policies of post-1945 governments.

All these explanations of social Christianity's criticism of market economies are reflected in the contemporary pronouncements on social affairs of the official churches, their social action curias, and their leaders. All suggest a reversion to, or a restatement of, the classic well-tried mainstream liberal position of social Christianity. Yet there is a growing unease that such reactions do not match up to the changes our context is now undergoing. These changes may be suggesting instead a reformulation of the churches' response to and ministry in contemporary society. And such a reformulation is not simply beyond the reach of much in the mainstream liberal tradition. It lies equally outside the current contributions of evangelical social thought and liberation theology. These drive one to John Bennett's reworked aphorism that 'neither personal virtue nor sincere piety [nor liberationist praxis] are any guarantee of social wisdom'.[8] The ways forward for the task of reformulation may be found rather in the works of Preston in the United Kingdom and Wogaman in the United States[9] although they have never capitalized on them, committed as they are, to restating the mainstream liberal position. These signs of development include recognizing the legitimacy of, although not necessarily expressing a preference for, the democratic, or social market, capitalist option as well as the democratic or market, socialist option. They also include taking seriously the importance of the market as mechanism with its associated properties of self-interest, incentives, inequalities, profit and competition.

It is interesting to note how socialists are engaging in the task of reformulation in a market-oriented context more urgently and seriously than the churches in general and the mainstream liberal

position of social Christianity in particular. So the Communist Party in Britain recently published a discussion document *Facing up to the Future*[10] which is in effect a reformulation of communism as democratic socialism. The Labour Party's Policy Review Programme is also a clear and welcome sign of the acceptance of the democratic principle and the market mechanism as essential parts of any reformulated socialist alternative to democratic capitalism. Along with the latter, they represent clear and legitimate options for Christian and church opinion as it seeks to come to terms with the market in the 1990s. They encourage the church to embark on the same road of reformulation rather than simply restatement.

Secondly, rapid changes and the market-led trends suggest not only the need to reformulate the church's social case, but also that some caution is needed in performing that task. A rapidly and greatly changing society therefore suggests the need to develop purposeful yet provisional senses of direction in relation to tentative yet clear boundary posts. I have argued elsewhere[11] that the former suggests a participating and reciprocal society as the English version of the World Council of Churches' goal of justice, peace and the integrity of creation. The latter, the boundary posts, are suggested by the guiding principles of democracy, plurality and the market as mechanism. In other words, the legitimacy of democratic capitalism and socialism as options for church and Christian discipleship is tested by their capacity to deliver a participating and reciprocal society which recognizes the individual and social rights necessary for all to participate in society, and the responsibilities of all to contribute to society. The participating and reciprocal society therefore acts as criterion for judging the existing social order as what I have described as an exclusive society, marginalizing millions from proper participation in it. Yet it also acts as guideline for reconstructing or 'Christianizing' the existing social order.[12] However, these necessary formulations should not be regarded as a return to the comprehensive *Weltanschauung* so beloved of churches and Christians committed to the mainstream liberalism of social Christianity. Rapid and extensive change rather requires a purposeful provisionality of any reformulation of social Christianity. It suggests the digging deep into significant but particular entry points rather than the broad general survey. It is out of what F.D. Maurice[13] called 'theological grubbing' into issues like the market that more realistic and hopeful Christian overviews are more likely to emerge.

In this task of cautious but nonetheless decisive reformulation, one is reminded of William Temple writing in 1939[14] and also recognizing the modesty now required of those engaged in reformulating the Christian case in contemporary society. Looking to the future, he notes:

> We must dig the foundations deeper than we did in pre-war years, or in the inter-war years when we developed our post-war thoughts. And we must be content with less imposing structures. One day theology will take up again its larger and serener task, and offer to a new Christendom its Christian map of life . . . But that day can barely dawn while any who are now already concerned with theology are still alive.

One senses that the day may be close when such a reformulation of social Christianity can be attempted for the early years of the twenty first century.

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NOTES

1 A paper given at the national consultation of Anglican voluntary societies and general synod bodies, London Colney, January, 1989. It was in response to a lecture by Elaine Storkey.
2 Social Christianity emerged out of Christian socialism in England and the social gospel movement in the United States of America. These two strands fed into the ecumenical conferences from Stockholm (1925) to Geneva (1966). They continue to dominate Christian social thought in the United States and in the United Kingdom, particularly in its more 'official' forms. See my forthcoming reader *Social Christianity: Christian Socialism, and the Social Gospel to Christian Social Ethics*, S.P.C.K., London, 1993.
3 *Faith in the City*, Church Information Office, London, 1985.
4 For example, the better ones include: Ronald Preston, *The Future of Christian Ethics*. S.C.M. Press, London, 1987, chapter 8; Alan Suggate, 'The New Right', *Crucible*, Oct.–Dec., 1988; Mostyn Davies, 'The New Conservatism', *William Temple Foundation, occasional paper 16*, 1989.
5 See my '*Christianity and the Market in the 1990s*', Industrial Christian Fellowship annual lecture, 1988.
6 The mainstream liberal tradition is defined by J.P. Wogaman in his '*Christian Perspectives on Politics*', S.C.M. Press, London, 1988. It includes various Christian traditions, from evangelical to modernist, because it relates to the content of moral judgments on social affairs as much as to method. These are essentially of a liberal *Guardian* and *Independent* type.
7 Charles Kingsley, *Cheap Clothes and Nasty*, London, 1850.
8 John Bennett, *Christians and the State*, Scribner's Sons, 1958, p.296.
9 See R.H. Preston, *Church and Society in the Late Twentieth Century*, S.C.M. Press, London, 1983, and J.P. Wogaman, *Christians and the Great Economic Debate*, S.C.M. Press, London, 1977.
10 '*Facing up to the Future*', Communist Party, 1988.
11 See my *Faith in the Nation, A Christian Vision for Britain*, S.P.C.K., London, 1988.
12 The concept was developed especially by Walter Rauschenbusch in his *Christianising the Social Order*, 1912.
13 F. Maurice (editor), *The Life of Frederick Denison Maurice*, Vol.II, Macmillan, 1885, p.295, (letter from F.D.Maurice to Charles Kingsley).
14 William Temple, 'Theology Today', in *Theology*, 1939, reprinted in William Temple, *Thoughts in Wartime*, Macmillan, 1940, pp.94–103.
15 My contribution to this task is due to be published by S.P.C.K., London, in 1992 under the title of *Christianity and the Market; the Reformulation of Social Christianity for the 1990s*.